

# Palmyra

Michal Gawlikowski

**T**he finest Classical mosaic ever excavated in Palmyra has just come to light. The mosaic is virtually complete except round the fringes, and appears to tell a story that can be pinned down to a very precise moment in the history of the Roman Empire. To understand the subject of this pavement, we must first take a look at the history of the 3rd century AD in the East, and indeed at Palmyra itself.

Palmyra is essentially an oasis in the desert, half way between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates, approximately 200km from each. As such, it came to play a major role in the caravan trade between the Roman Empire and the East, and grew to an opulent city exposed to the influence of

both Rome and Iran. Since it was annexed under Tiberius (AD 14-37) to the Roman province of Syria, Palmyra remained, however, a loyal subject of the Empire, though home to a distinct variety of civilisation with its own style in sculpture, its own fashions, and its own dialect of Aramaic language profusely used in inscriptions alongside the Greek.

Everything went well until the mid-third century. Attacked on all frontiers, the Roman Empire balanced on the verge of collapse. In the East, the feeble Parthian kings of Iran were replaced in AD 224 by the new dynasty of the Sasanians, who gave new vigour and strength to the only other empire within the Roman horizon. Thus in 252 the Sasanians under their great king Shahpuhr (Sapor for the Romans) overran



Palmyra, a fertile oasis in the middle of the desert - view taken from the Arab castle on the west of the city. The colonnaded street runs through the centre of the town with the main street layout to the left: the mosaic building is just visible in the lower centre. On the right of the colonnade is the Agora and other public buildings. The big mass in the background, below the green patch of the oasis, is the Bel sanctuary.

Syria, destroying in one battle most of the Roman forces in the East. The Persians plundered at will, taking one city after another, including the great Antioch, the capital of the province of Syria. Many inhabitants were marched into exile to be set up in a new city, called 'Better Antioch of Shahpuhr'. A few years later, in 259, Rome suffered the ultimate disgrace, when the Emperor Valerian was captured and held captive till he died without being claimed by his son Gallienus.

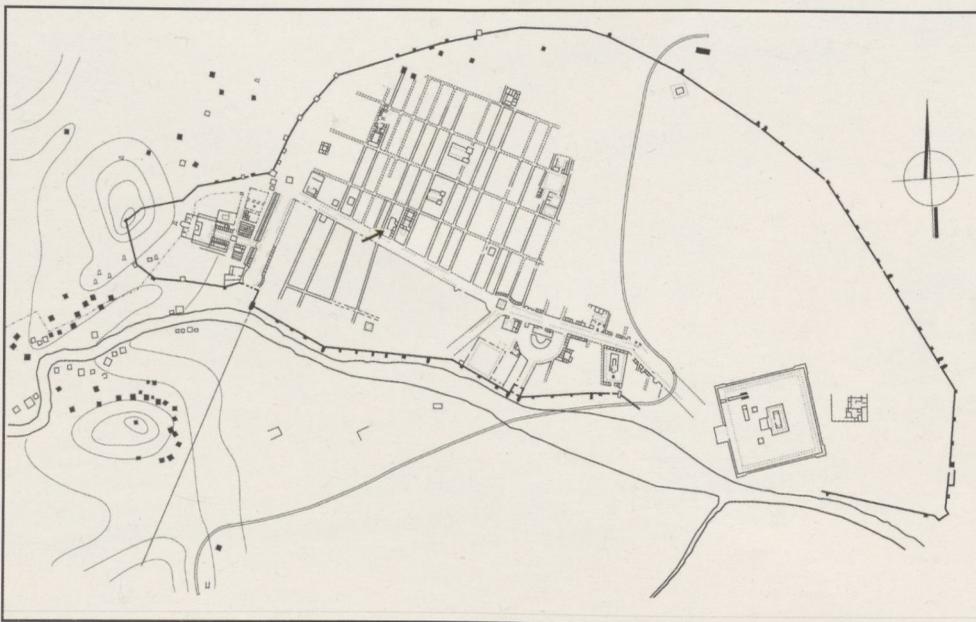
In this litany of disasters, the ruler of Palmyra, one Odainat, saw his opportunity. He managed to beat the marauding Persians and obtain from Gallienus the appointment as 'Corrector of the Whole East', meaning probably that he was given command of what was left of the Roman forces

in the region. Odainat was already a Roman senator and once an honorary consul, - though most probably he had never visited Rome - but at the same time he was celebrated at home as 'chief of Palmyra' together with his son called Hairan or Herodian. Having defeated the Persians, Odainat proclaimed himself King of Kings and bestowed the same title on his son in the course of a ceremony somewhere on the river Orontes. The event was commemorated by statues set up in AD 260 in a triple arch at Palmyra which still stands at the eastern end of the great colonnade. According to one (unreliable) source, Shahpuhr's concubines were captured, and Odainat presented them to his son to satisfy his penchant for 'Persian luxury'.





**Above** Overall view of the excavation. Note that the mosaic is fitted into the corner of the room. To the right is a wide portico - for the diners? Note on the far side three column bases.



**Left** Plan of the town with an arrow at the centre pointing to the site of the mosaic.

Soon after, both father and son pursued Shahpuhr up to the walls of his capital Ktesiphon, but were unable to take the city. In 267 Odainat was killed, together with Herodian. Following this murder, his wife Zenobia, who became famed as being 'another Cleopatra', succeeded him, ruling jointly with a younger son. Shortly, she gained control of Egypt and Asia Minor, and claimed the imperial purple, but her rule ended in swift disaster. A new emperor, Aurelian, restored the Empire and, turning his attention to the East, defeated the Palmyrene army in a series of hard fought battles. Zenobia was captured and brought back to Rome to be paraded in Aurelian's triumph, – though according to some she was then not put to death but pensioned off in a magnificent villa in Tibur (now Tivoli).

The epic combats of Odainat recently found a striking illustration in a find made in Palmyra itself. In May and June 2003 a very impressive mosaic pavement was unearthed by a Polish Mission which has been working in Palmyra for more than 40 years and is now headed by the author. The pavement had once adorned a room right behind the great colonnade, the main thoroughfare of the city - the position is marked by an arrow on the plan. The floor measures slightly over 9m

by 5.5m but was found within walls marking a room significantly larger. It could be that benches had been installed there as in a dining room. Indeed several subjects represented on the floor suggest that the hall may have been used for banqueting. At the far end there are four column bases suggesting a short portico. Was this the entrance to the hall?

The composition of the mosaic follows a strict symmetrical pattern. Around two central pictures, surrounded by a rich vegetal frame including six little faces peeking out and small animals running, there are on each side three rectangular panels, each framed with decorated bands linked between them all around the pavement, as in a table game. Each panel represents a figurative subject on white background: birds, fish, animals, and other motifs.

**Below** Over all view of the mosaic: note that many of the features appear to be placed in a strange sequence. If visitors enter from the left, the Bellerophon mosaic would be facing them. However, they would then have to walk round the bottom of the mosaic to view the other central 'tiger' mosaic, but the two central flanking mosaics, top and bottom then appear to be upside down. However they would be the right way up if viewed from the portico (dining area?) at the top.





**Above** This charming mosaic of two goats browsing from a tree forms one of the corner panels of the mosaic.

**Below right** One of the central flanking mosaics showing two tigers drinking from a bowl.

**Opposite page** The 'Bellerophon' mosaic, showing Bellerophon riding on the winged horse, Pegasus, and fighting the three headed monster, the Chimera. Though the general layout is a classical motif, Bellerophon is shown wearing the tunic and trousers of the Palmyran nobility. This must represent Odainat fighting the Persian barbarians on behalf of the Romans.

fish and fruit. One shows a couple of panthers each side of a drinking vessel, the other two, winged griffins with a bull's head. In the four corners are charming little pictures of goats picking from trees. All these images find parallels in other pavements of dining rooms throughout the Roman Empire. They were not made separately in a workshop, but in place as one complex composition.

The two central panels face in different directions, one being portrait, the other landscape. The same is true of the smaller pictures around them. As the original entrance to the hall is not preserved, it is difficult to imagine the movement around the room and the reason behind the direction of each

panel. However, if we admit the banqueting function, the pictures naturally faced revelers sitting around three sides of the room.

The two central panels are especially fine. The standing one is a portrayal of Bellerophon riding the winged Pegasus and slaying the Chimaera. The ancient Greek myth tended to be ignored by the earlier Roman painters and sculptors, but in the third century it was revived. Dozens of late Roman pavements representing Bellerophon are known from the Western provinces but this is the only one found in the Near East. Soon the model would be borrowed by Christian painters to show St George slaying the Dragon.

Here the winged horse - splendidly realistic apart from the somewhat unconvincing wings - is shown flying over the monster whose three heads (lion, goat and snake) are spitting fire at the attacker. The hero has already thrown a javelin which has pierced the hind leg of the Chimaera, and is aiming at it with a lance.

While all these details conform to the classical tradition, our Bellerophon differs sharply from all other known representations by wearing a Persian dress. He has trousers and an embroidered tunic, both amply attested by the sculpture of Palmyra, and an open coat with long sleeves which is sometimes worn by the more distinguished members of the local aristocracy. On his head Bellerophon wears a wide-rimmed Roman helmet with a long flyer while right and left two eagles approach him bringing wreaths of victory.

The other picture (see overleaf) shows a horseman shooting his bow at a tiger. The animal, already wounded, stands on its hind legs while a smaller, probably female, tiger is lying on the ground under the hooves of the horse. The characteristic pattern of stripes allow us to identify it as a Hyrcanian tiger - a species that lived until recently on the Persian shores of the Caspian sea. The dress of the hunter is exactly the same Persian dress as that of Bellerophon, but his movement makes the coat fly behind him showing the quiver and bow sheath attached to the saddle. There is only room for just one eagle in the sky, with a wreath in its beak. Within the curve of the bow is an inscription, but this is clearly secondary, being a very poor illiterate rendering of a cursive text giving the name of the artisan who tampered with the mosaic at some later date.







The other central mosaic, the 'Tiger Mosaic', is based on the Persian motif of a tiger hunt with one tiger lying dead on the ground and the other about to be shot by the warrior. Again the warrior presumably represents Odainat slaying the Persian invaders and about to be crowned with victory by the eagle flying above him, top left. The inscription within the bow frame is probably secondary, a poor, illiterate rendering of a cursive text.

The tiger hunt is obviously copied from one of the splendid silver plates the Sasanian Kings commissioned and used to send out as gifts. Hyrcanian tigers, famed in antiquity for their fierce savagery, could be a fitting symbol of the Persian enemy. The fire-spitting Chimaera could also stand for the Persians, playing perhaps on the homonymy of the Greek word *iobolos*, meaning either "venom spitting" or "arrow

shooting": the Persian expertise in archery is commonplace in Classical literature. Both the horsemen wear the usual dress of Persian and Palmyrene aristocracy and both are crowned by Roman eagles. I think that we have here the symbolic depiction of the Persian victory of Odainat and his son Herodian, celebrated in 260 on the banks of the Orontes and in Palmyra itself by the dedication of an arch. The name of the Triumphal Arch, sometimes given to this monument by the moderns, is perhaps not entirely false. ■

Michał Gawlikowski  
 Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology  
 Warsaw University  
 Nowy Świat 4, 00-497 Warsaw, Poland.  
 Email: [director.pcma@uw.edu.pl](mailto:director.pcma@uw.edu.pl)