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REINVENTING "THE INVENTION OF TRADITION"?
INDIGENOUS PASTS AND THE ROMAN PRESENT



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BUSCH AND MIGUEL JOHN VERSLUYS

REINVENTING “THE INVENTION OF TRADITION”?

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Roman Present

WILHELM FINK

GEFÖRDERT VOM



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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS – ZENOBIA AND 'ORIENTALISM'*

Zenobia, who ruled over most of the Roman eastern provinces from Palmyra in the early 270s AD, became the focal point of two diverging narratives. In the Arabo-Persian tradition, she became an Arab warrior queen, known as al-Zabba, entangled in the tribal conflicts of the pre-Islamic period. In the west, her name became connected to an 'oriental' rebellion against Roman rule; in this tradition, Zenobia is made an exotic desert queen who challenges the empire and its ruler. This paper traces back both invented traditions to their origins and to the historical settings that gave rise to such contradictory narratives.

1. INTRODUCTION

To most people, in Europe at least, antiquity is 'classical' antiquity. The fact that there are other 'antiquities', which were neither Greek nor Roman, is often ignored. Underneath the Roman empire's political umbrella, there were countless other 'presences', all with their own traditions, narratives and identities, which were, to some extent, absorbed into the 'classical' meta-narrative. One such presence was the Aramaic-speaking east, where the oasis city of Palmyra became, for a short moment in his-

* This is the slightly revised version of my paper given at the Cologne conference. I am grateful to Alexandra Busch and Miguel John Versluys as well as the Internationales Kolleg Morphomata for their hospitality and the intellectual stimulus of discussing invented traditions in a most friendly atmosphere.

tory, a political centre in its own right. The protagonist of this process was Zenobia, who succeeded her husband Odaenathus in a monarchic role unique in the Roman world. From a Roman point of view, Zenobia and her son Vaballathus were mere usurpers, who challenged the emperor's authority. But from a local perspective, they defended their birthright against centralist infringement.

The difference in perspective has given rise to radically differing narratives in west and east. In both worlds, the historical Zenobia has given way to invented characters playing their roles in invented traditions. In the west, Zenobia appears as the wildly exotic desert queen defying the mighty Roman empire and its ruler, the emperor Aurelian (AD 270–275); in the east, she became a key-player in an inner-Arab strife for power. Both traditions approach the historical twilight of the late antique Near East from a different angle: while the western tradition emphasises the growing political and cultural gap between the empire and its eastern fringe, the eastern tradition looks at hostilities between the Arab tribal confederations emerging in the Romano-Persian frontier zone from the 4th century AD onwards. The western Zenobia neatly fits into a broader narrative that was first developed in the 5th century BC – in classical Greece – and saw various revivals in the Roman period¹: the construction of a supposedly insurmountable rift between 'East' and 'West', a 'clash of civilisations' inescapably resulting in hostility and conflict. As in other historical settings too, such an invented tradition emphasising alterity serves as a building block for constructing and reassuring identity: Zenobia is the oriental 'alter' against which the western 'ego' of the later Roman empire is silhouetted.

2. AL-ZABBA AND ZENOBIA

Al-Zabba, the 'hairy one', was beautiful, warlike, cunning and in the bondage of luxury. She was the daughter of a king, Umar ben Darb, the ruler of Tadmur and all the Arabs of Northern Syria. When fighting his enemy Jadhima al-Abrash, the King of the Tanukh at al-Hira, he could count on an army composed of several tribes from the Syrian Desert. Yet, finally, he was defeated and killed by Jadhima: al-Zabba inherited

¹ For instance the defamation, under Augustus, of Mark Antony and Cleopatra as 'Oriental despots'.

a troubled kingdom. She prepared for war, but was persuaded by her sister, Zubayba, that Jadhima could only be overcome by insidiousness. Al-Zabba sent a messenger to Jadhima offering marriage. Despite the warnings of his friend Qasir, the King of the Tanukh agreed and came to Tadmur, where al-Zabba greeted him. When she lifted her skirt showing her plaited pubic hair (hence her name), she exclaimed: "O Jadhima, do you see the concern of a bride?" Now Jadhima realised that he had been tricked. Al-Zabba had him filled with wine until he became intoxicated. Then she let him bleed to death.

Jadhima's nephew Umar ben Adi refused to take revenge, arguing that al-Zabba was invincible: "How can I fight al-Zabba, when she is stronger than an eagle?" But infallibly, Qasir's revenge came upon the Queen of Tadmur. The faithful friend came to al-Zabba pretending that he had escaped from Umar ben Addi. He offered to go back to Hira with a caravan in order to reclaim his possessions. Twice, Qasir arrived at Tadmur with precious merchandise from the east – silk, perfumes and jewellery. But when he returned for the third time, the caravan was loaded with soldiers who, after nightfall, jumped from their boxes and massacred al-Zabba's guards. The queen hastily swallowed the poison she had kept in her ring and died before she could be taken prisoner.

This is the version of Zenobia's history from the Persian historian at-Tabari.² It contains many typical elements of an invented tradition, a myth³: a genealogy explaining al-Zabba's family roots is hinted at; actors take refuge in deceitfulness – in the case of Qasir, similarities to the story of the Trojan Horse seem too obvious to be accidental; the episode serves to explain al-Zabba's name; finally, it explores the roots of the rise of al-Hira, which was later to become the urban centre of the Sasanian-sponsored tribe of the Lakhmids.⁴ In a way, at-Tabari's version of the story of Zenobia, who is none other than al-Zabba, is a charter myth for the Lakhmid tribal confederacy, which had its origins in the 260s and 270s, and which was to become a major player in the Roman-Persian antagonism of the 4th to 6th centuries.

² At-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul*, vol. 1, 364–365; 450. A similar account is included in Ibn Khaldun's *Book of Lessons* (vol. 2, 260–261). Cf. Zahran 2003, 67–75.

³ The definition of myth here being based upon Assmann 1997, 52: "Mythos ist eine fundierende Geschichte, eine Geschichte, die erzählt wird, um eine Gegenwart vom Ursprung her zu erhellen."

⁴ Cf. now Fisher 2011, 49–70, esp. 65–69.

Unmistakably, al-Zabba is Zenobia and Tadmur is Palmyra. The setting is the Syrian desert, al-Zabba is a warlike queen, beautiful and ruthless, much like the Zenobia we know from Roman texts. Yet the story feels utterly unfamiliar when read through a western lens. Zenobia, the daughter of a king? Where is Odaenathus, who was made, by the Roman emperor Gallienus, ruler of the whole east (*corrector totius orientis*), and who fought back the Persian king Shapur after the Roman Valerian's, Gallienus' father's, defeat in the battle of Edessa in AD 260? Where is Vaballathus, Odaenathus' son from Zenobia and her co-ruler? And where is Aurelian, whom we are used to see as Zenobia's great antagonist? The Roman emperor, who conquered Palmyra in 272 and re-united the eastern provinces with Rome, is totally absent from ad-Tabari's narrative – as are the Romans altogether. In western tradition, on the other hand, Zenobia is immortalised as the exotic desert queen who defied the Roman empire.

3. ZENOBIA

We encounter a lively reflection of this tradition in Tommaso Albinoni's opera in four acts, *Zenobia, regina de Palmireni*, first performed in Venice on 13 November 1693. The libretto, written by the relative unknown author Antonio Marchi, comes up with an impressive array of stereotypes about Zenobia, Palmyra and the Near East in general. The story is unsurprisingly hair-raising: Aureliano, the Roman emperor, has defeated Zenobia at Emesa and is about to attack Palmyra. The emperor is visited in his camp by Ormonte, the *governatore* of Palmyra, whom Zenobia had sent in order to negotiate a peace. At Emesa, Aureliano had become infatuated with Ormonte's daughter Filidea, who is engaged with a Greek prince. The treacherous Ormonte promises Filidea to Aureliano and, at night, opens the gates for Aureliano, who invades Palmyra. Having captured her city, Aureliano falls in love with Zenobia, thus breaking the agreement with Ormonte. The infuriated *governatore* now suggests to Zenobia to plot against Aureliano, which she rejects, enraged. An impressed Aureliano hands Palmyra back to Zenobia, whom he places 'sul trono dell'Oriente'.⁵

⁵ Selfridge-Field 2007, 209.

Like ad-Tabari's narrative, this story is saturated with stereotypes. Unlike al-Zabba, the opera's Zenobia is a noble character, who, in the end, will be rewarded for her loyalty. But like her counterpart from the Persian tradition, she is, as the introduction to the libretto points out, a *Regina Guerriera*, who would have stripped her enemy of the entire Orient "with her valour". By turning western gender roles upside down, Zenobia is the representative of a counter-world, an archetypal alter juxtaposed to the European ego incarnated by Aurelian. The treacherous element inherent in the oriental 'character' is represented by Ormonte, who betrays two allies in a row. In putting together an exotic setting with a fictional love story and a selection of rather randomly combined elements from the classical tradition, *Zenobia, regina de Palmireni* is a typical *dramma per musica* of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, very similar to Purcell's *Dido & Aeneas*, Vivaldi's *L'incoronazione di Dario* and even Mozart's *Mitridate, re di Ponto*, which was based on a drama by Racine.

Albinoni's opera is rarely performed today, though curiously, in 2008, *Zenobia, regina de Palmireni* was staged in Syria, with a European ensemble of musicians specialised in baroque opera performing. It is not altogether surprising that present-day Arab nationalists such as Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad prefer the western tradition over the eastern one, as far as Zenobia is concerned. While al-Zabba epitomises inner-Arab rivalry and is, in the scope of her actions, restricted to the Syrian-Mesopotamian theatre, the western Zenobia has much more to offer to those who are concerned about Arab identity and the politico-cultural gap between the Occident and the Orient. Hence up until the present day, Zenobia has played a prominent role in the Ba'ath party's nationalist propaganda: hotels, streets and squares are named after her, she is the heroine of TV dramas, and until recently her portrait adorned the 500 pounds note, the second highest, of the Bank of Syria.⁶ Like Arminius in 19th century Germany, the Arab Zenobia has become the

⁶ On Zenobia's reception in the Arab world Hartmann 2001, 475. Evidence for the use of Zenobia for the construction of Arab nationalist narratives is also provided by Zahran 2003 itself, which falls short of a scholarly work in more than one respect.

focal point of a national charter myth.⁷ The irony lies in the fact that the tradition used for the myth has been invented in the West.⁸

4. ZENOBIA AND ROMAN ORIENTALISM

Where did this invented tradition originate? How and when was Zenobia, the ruler of Palmyra, transformed into Zenobia, the oriental desert queen? How was the narrative handed down – and why did it become so prominent in western tradition in the first place? There is no single point of reference for the western tradition: the oldest narratives dealing with Zenobia and her family are in the books *Gallieni duo*, *Tyranni triginta*, *Divus Claudius*, and *Divus Aurelianus* of the *Historia Augusta*, but Byzantine historians of the 6th to 12th centuries – Zosimos, Iohannes Malalas, Petros Patrikios, Iohannes of Antioch, Agathias, Georgios Synkellos, Photios, and Iohannes Zonaras – could still use sources from the 4th and possibly even the 3rd century and thus add a few details otherwise unknown to us. Perhaps not surprisingly, all these texts are largely in agreement about Zenobia and her role in the events of the 270s.⁹

This is not the place to engage in the debate about single vs. multiple authorship of the *Historia Augusta*, nor indeed about the likewise complicated issues of its chronological setting and political tendencies;¹⁰ it is suffice to say that the *Historia Augusta* reflects a political reality in which (a) the Roman-Sasanian dualism in the East ranked highly on the agenda of Roman policy-makers, and (b) the presence of tribal confederations of Arab origin had become a prime factor in the desert triangle between the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia.¹¹ We should further assume that any author would view Zenobia and the events unfolding in the 270s against the background of the political conditions from his own period.

⁷ On Arminius and the construction of a ‘German’ prehistory see Dreyer 2009, 225–247; Wolters 2008, 174–201.

⁸ On the importance of narratives of the past for the construction of (national) identities see Anderson 1996, 187–206. For classical, in particular Greek, antiquity, the role of *mythos* – ‘intentional history’ in the rise of collective identities has been highlighted by Gehrke 1994; Gehrke 2003a; Gehrke 2003b; Gehrke 2004.

⁹ Hartmann 2001, 17–44.

¹⁰ For further scholarship see Meißner 1997.

¹¹ For the historical background see Fisher 2011, 72–127.

What we should expect from a historical narrative about the earlier history of the empire is material that foreshadows the situation in which the author(s) and the readers of the 4th century find themselves – a history from which we learn why the nomadic populations of the Syrian Desert pose such a lethal threat to the west. Into such a history a culturally and politically alien desert queen actively promoting the Roman empire's dismantling fits a lot better than a Zenobia who usurped power from within this empire. What needs to be established for this purpose is the protagonist's utter alien-ness as seen from a Greek or Roman point of view. In the *Historia Augusta's Vita Gallienorum duorum*, Zenobia is briefly introduced as a woman who “ruled for a long time, not in feminine fashion or with the ways of a woman, but surpassing in courage and skill not merely Gallienus, than whom any girl could have ruled more successfully, but also many an emperor” (13, 3). In the same paragraph, it is pointed out that Zenobia “was ruling Palmyra and most of the East with the vigour of a man” (13, 5). Here, Zenobia is used to discredit Gallienus who acts more cowardly than a woman. The *Vita divi Claudii*, on the other hand, looks at Zenobia through the eyes of the Roman senators, who, in a religious ceremony, implore the emperor Claudius to “set us free from Zenobia” (4, 4). Claudius is reported to have written a letter to the senate in which he complains about the desolate state of the empire, vast portions of which are controlled by Tetricus, the Gallic emperor, and – “I blush to say it” (7, 5) – Zenobia. Here, Zenobia's exceptional skills as a ruler are not praised, but perceived as a threat to the empire. The empire must be truly in a poor shape if it is brought to knees by a woman!

By far the most detailed accounts are given in the lives of *Divus Aurelianus* and the *Tyranni triginta*. The story in the former develops from the point of view of Aurelian, who, after having defeated Germanic tribes in the Balkans, was free to settle old scores. Through Asia Minor and across the Syrian Gates he marched against Zenobia, who, “in the name of her sons [*filiorum nomine*] held an imperium over the East [*orientale tenebat imperium*]” (22, 1). Aurelian captures Tyana in Cappadocia and Antioch, and then defeats the Palmyrene forces near Emesa. All this is described in a matter-of-fact style, with hardly any details. The narrative gets denser when Aurelian puts Palmyra under siege. Fictional letters (from Aurelian to the officer Mucapor, from Aurelian to Zenobia and back from Zenobia to Aurelian) are exchanged in which the events are highlighted from subjective, individual perspectives: to Mucapor, Aurelian describes the stresses and strains his army endures while fighting a

fierce, well-prepared enemy. “She fears like a woman, and fights as one who fears punishment” (26, 5), he writes about Zenobia. In his letter to Zenobia, the “Emperor or the Roman world and recoverer of the East” explains his terms of surrender: Zenobia will be spared, the rights of the Palmyrenes preserved; but Zenobia will be his prisoner, her possessions – “your jewels, gold, silver, silks, horses, camels” (26, 9) – will be handed over to the Roman treasury.

To this, Zenobia replied “with more pride and insolence than befitted her fortunes” (27, 1). According to the letter she sent to Aurelian, *Persae, Saraceni, Armeni*, and *latrones Syriae* were fighting the Romans along the Palmyrenians. Explicitly, Zenobia compares herself to another female, ‘oriental’ ruler: Cleopatra, who “preferred to die a Queen rather than remain alive” (27, 3). On an interesting side note, the author mentions that she dictated her letter in “the Syrian tongue” (27, 6) to a certain Nicomachus, who then translated it into Greek.

Zenobia’s letter enrages Aurelian who, without further ado, conquers Palmyra and captures the queen. The emperor then had Zenobia, who had tried to escape on camels, put in chains, and he rounded up the Persians, Armenians, and Saracens and gathered Zenobia’s valuables. The soldiers demanded that Zenobia be executed, but Aurelian, “deeming it improper that a woman should be put to death” (30, 2), denied their request. Finally, in order to explain Palmyra’s revolt in the subsequent year, the author takes refuge in an ethnic stereotype: “It is a rare thing, or rather, a difficult thing, for the Syrians to keep faith” (31, 1). Little is said about Zenobia in this narrative other than the fact that, by turning down Aurelian’s peace offer, she overplayed her hand.

So far, Zenobia is merely used as a dramaturgical tool to expose the respective Roman rulers as cowards (Gallienus) or heroes (Aurelian). Quite a different Zenobia appears in the section of the *Tyranni triginta* dedicated to the desert queen, not by accident the longest of the entire book. In this text, Zenobia is more than a ‘mirror’ reflecting the behaviour of Roman rulers, but a historical protagonist in her own right, who incorporates the tensions and dynamic changes of the period. The narrative proceeds from Zenobia coming to power (*imperavit*, 30, 2) upon her husband Odaenathus’ death to a letter allegedly written by Aurelian, in which the emperor draws a lively portrayal of his enemy, and finally to a collection of anecdotes that further characterise Zenobia. The queen is introduced as a woman and a foreigner, who, as a ruler, outclasses Gallienus. Several times she is presented as a worthy successor to Cleo-

patra¹²: she claims to be her descendent (30, 2); she uses Cleopatra's tableware and jewels (30, 19); she speaks Egyptian (30, 21) and she is well versed in the history of "Alexandria and the Orient" (30, 22). Both by Aurelian in his letter and in the author's narrative, Zenobia is presented as a wise ruler who, despite challenging the Roman emperors' authority, acted in the best interest of the Romans by holding the empire's enemies at bay. While she gives an example of chastity as a woman, she stands her man in public: she rides horses, uses a chariot, marches with soldiers, takes part in hunting, and drinks with her officers and even with the enemy. When she addresses her soldiers, she wears a helmet "in the manner of a Roman emperor" (30, 14) and speaks with a clear, manly voice. In appearance and habitus she is most exotic: her face is dark, the eyes black, the teeth white and her beauty beyond belief. According to circumstances, she can be stern or clement; generous or mean. She is fluent in Greek and well-versed in Latin, which she orders taught to her sons. Finally, her luxurious lifestyle is a recurrent theme of the narrative.

A similar, yet much more prosaic version of the story is told by the late antique historiographer Zosimos, who wrote in the early 6th century AD. Zosimos introduces Zenobia as "the wife of Odonathus [sic]", who, however, "had the courage of a man" and thus "took upon her the administration of affairs" after Odaenathus' death (1, 39, 5). Zosimos largely abstains from direct comments on, and valuations of, Zenobia's personality, but she emerges from his narrative as a vigorous and courageous ruler, who leads her army efficiently and plans her political actions wisely. In Zosimos' account, Zenobia attempts to escape from Palmyra with the intention to call the Persians for assistance. Like Zosimos, the later Byzantine historians follow the narrative of the *Historia Augusta* in most details, with the exception of her death: the *Historia Augusta* claims that Zenobia, deported to Rome, spent her days in a Villa at Tibur, while Zosimos reports that she died en route to Rome, either from a disease or from starving herself to death. Zonaras leaves the choice between the two versions to his readers. As a character, Zenobia remains relatively bland in all texts except the *Historia Augusta*.

Taken together, the *Historia Augusta*'s various accounts contain most of the elements from which the later stories are woven together: Zenobia is a warrior queen who takes on formidable enemies; in her strife for power, she acts like a man; yet she is chaste and beautiful like a

¹² Hartmann 2000, 498.

woman. Depending on perspective, she can be viewed as a deadly menace or as a ruler with a legitimate cause – or indeed even as a champion of the Roman cause in the Near East. Conspicuously absent from all these accounts are the circumstances that brought Zenobia to power. In the *Vita Gallienorum duorum* and in Zosimos' account, it is insinuated that, after Odaenathus' sudden death, Zenobia took affairs into her own hands. The *Vita* of Aurelian attributes to her the fantasy title of "Queen of the East" (27, 2). The same text and the *Tyranni triginta* call her authority over the east an *imperium*.

Despite using this Roman term, the *Historia Augusta* introduces Zenobia as a disturbingly foreign element to the political playground of the Roman Near East. Women are dangerous beings anyway, as had repeatedly been pointed out by Roman historians before, from Tacitus to Herodian; not in the least it had been emphasised by the poet Juvenal, whom, as Diederik Burgersdijk has recently demonstrated, the author of the *Historia Augusta's* Zenobia section knew and held in great esteem. It is indeed true that the Zenobia we encounter here represents the full array of threatening qualities Juvenal finds in women.¹³

Yet the narrative function of Zenobia and the Palmyra episode goes a lot further than this, I think. No woman except Cleopatra, with whom Zenobia is repeatedly associated here, ever wielded power in her own right. Not even Iulia Domna, Septimius Severus' wife, whom Cassius Dio (78, 10, 4) and Herodian (3, 15, 6; 4, 3, 5; 5, 3, 2) describe as exceptionally influential, comes anywhere near this formidable warrior queen. With Cleopatra, Zenobia shares the quality of intrinsic alien-ness when seen from a Roman point of view. Cleopatra seduced Mark Antony and turned him into an external enemy – according to Augustus who unified Italy against this foreign menace. No male ruler ever epitomised the profound otherness of the 'Orient' better than Cleopatra – and Zenobia, who precisely because of the *virtus* she possesses represents an anti-Rome that is alien and threatening, effeminate, yet lethally dangerous.¹⁴

This 'Orient' stands indeed for everything that Rome is not. In the Orient, women decide, fight, and dominate; in Rome they do not; in the Orient the face of power is seductive, in Rome it is not; in the Orient, the rulers accumulate wealth and luxury beyond belief; in Rome they do

¹³ Burgersdijk 2004–2005, 141–142.

¹⁴ Schäfer 2006; Strootman 2010.

not.¹⁵ Zenobia may be an enemy not without honour, but an enemy she still is, and a dangerous one at that. As Cleopatra did with Mark Antony, she mercilessly exposes the weaknesses of Rome's political class. Aurelian defeats her with the utmost effort; Claudius is too busy in the west to tackle her; Gallienus stands no chance against her. Zenobia's *imperium* is the writing on the wall that Rome's rule in the east may indeed come to an end one day.

5. HERALDING THE CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS: ZENOBIA AS HISTORY

Finally: Zenobia foreshadows an age in which the Roman empire no longer deals with isolated, fragmented enemies along its eastern frontier. Zenobia's rule may initially have been beneficial for Rome; in the end, when she is under attack from Aurelian, she teams up with Rome's enemies in the region: *Persae, Saraceni, Armeni*, and *latrones Syriae*. This is roughly the coalition the empire faces after Julian's catastrophic defeat in 363: Sasanians, Sasanian-controlled Armenia, Arab tribes, and internal troublemakers.

The *Historia Augusta's* Zenobia is a herald of the east vs. west antagonism that dominated most of the 4th century AD. The episode of which she is the protagonist is a powerful narrative constructing the 'Orient' as an essentially alien sphere against which Rome can only bear up when it is united under a strong leadership (Aurelian) determined to defeat the enemy at all costs. It is a tale about weaknesses and strengths: cowards like Gallienus will get the short end of the stick. The discourse about the 'Orient' serves a veritable domestic cause: Rome cannot afford to be ruled by emperors like Gallienus, neither in the 3rd nor in the 4th century.

Like most invented traditions, the one of Zenobia, the "Queen of the East", is eminently political. It tells its audience a great deal about what Rome is – and even more about how it should be, according to the empire's culturally conservative intellectual elite. The pivotal Roman value is *virtus*, and Rome should be ruled by a man who embodies that *virtus* like how Zenobia, a woman, does for the 'Orient'. The powerhouses of Rome's empire are Italy and the west, and it is Aurelian's mission to pro-

15 On Graeco-Roman stereotypes concerning the Orient's addiction to luxury and the effeminate habitus of 'Orientals' Icks 2011, 105; Kuefler 2001, 47. See also Gruen 2011, 71–72 on the 'infiltration of luxury' from the east in Herodotus.

tect them. Alterity is the complement of identity, and hence the alterity surfacing in the invented tradition about the ‘Orient’ accentuates a Roman imperial identity that for centuries, even after Augustus’ creation of the principate, had remained elusive. Seeking the historical personality behind the *Historia Augusta*’s Zenobia is a pointless undertaking; what we should seek instead in that absorbing story is the perpetual construction site that was Roman identity.

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