Mark Antony and the Raid on Palmyra: Reflections on Appian, Bella Civilia V, 9 (*)

The passage is well-known. As one of the few literary sources on pre-Roman Palmyra, scholars working on Palmyra have used it extensively. Similarly, historians focussing on Mark Antony’s Eastern military policy in the triumviral period have drawn far-reaching conclusions from the episode. But texts are rarely unambiguous, and this passage is no exception. The aim of the present

(*) Many thanks to Luke Pitcher for his comments on a draft of this paper, and for providing us with useful references.

contribution is twofold. Firstly, we set out to demonstrate that neither of the above-mentioned applications of the passage is unproblematic: the passage is sometimes incompatible with external sources, sometimes sole support for a claim, and in general not as strong evidence as assumed. Secondly, it will be argued that looking at the passage in both its literary and historical context not only highlights some of these very problems, but may also explain them.

The passage and modern historiography: Palmyra. — The main conclusions that scholars have drawn from this passage about the pre-Roman history of Palmyra are that the place was rich enough in 41 BC to attract the attention of potential pillagers, and that Palmyra must therefore have been a relatively prosperous ‘caravan’ city by this early date (2). In addition, the passage has sometimes been connected with an alleged ‘nomadic’ nature of the inhabitants of Palmyra in the mid-first century BC (3). Our further evidence, however, does not


(3) G. K. Young, Rome’s Eastern Trade. International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC - AD 305, London - New York, 2001, p. 136: ‘In these early years it appears that the inhabitants of the oasis were still semi-nomadic, as Appian states that they were able to remove all their material wealth across the Euphrates when Antony attacked them in 42 (sic) BC’. Cf. Will, Les Palmyréniens [n. 2], p. 36: ‘quelque chose encore comme un campement de Bédouins’; Isaac, Limits of Empire [n. 2], p. 142: ‘the Palmyrene response to the Roman attack was still that of nomads facing a force of superior strength’; Savino, Città di frontiera [n. 2], p. 52: ‘ancora prossimi allo stato nomade’. But see now
allow us to speak with much certainty about the pre-Roman period. Polybius (V,79,8) mentions a commander over ‘the Arabs and neighbouring tribes’ (‘Ἄραβες δὲ καὶ τινὲς τῶν τούτων προσχώρων) in Antiochus III’s army at the battle of Raphia, who has a typically Palmyrene name, Zabdibelus, but this does not necessarily suggest that Palmyra as a place was of great importance in the pre-Roman period (4). Josephus argues that Solomon built Palmyra ‘with very strong walls’, but in doing so he follows 2 Chronicles 8,4, where the original ‘Tamar in the desert’ (as used in 1 Kings 9, 18) is interpreted as ‘Tadmor in the desert’. The statement by Josephus should therefore not be taken at face value (5). His near-contemporary Pliny, who appears to give a geographical description of Palmyra and its surroundings in the mid-first century AD (HN V,88), provides a notional perception of what an oasis ought to be like, rather than factual information based on first-hand knowledge, and in any case does not tell us anything about the late Republic (6).

We are not suggesting that there was not some sort of permanent settlement in 41 BC, regardless of whether Appian’s word choice (πόλις) is adequate. The earliest dated inscription from Palmyra, written in the local Aramaic (Palmyrenean) dialect, records the erection of a statue in 44 BC by the priesthood of Bel, which was to become one of the most prominent institutions in Palmyrene society until the city’s capture in AD 272 (7). It is also well known that the temple of Bel as it is still standing nowadays was preceded by an earlier structure, or earlier structures, and recent but still unpublished soundings in the temenos by Syrian archaeologists may have revealed the first archaeological

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remains of the so-called Hellenistic temple of Bel (8). Furthermore, the present archaeological project south of the wadi seems to confirm that this large and now empty area had been the centre of early-Roman (‘pre-Colonnade’) and possibly Hellenistic Palmyra (9). But this is as much as archaeological material can indicate at present. Small finds from the third and second millennium BC are insufficient to prove a cultural continuum from the Bronze Age onwards (10). The remaining walls are by themselves difficult to date, and any conclusions drawn from them are highly debatable (11). External evidence, therefore, does not contradict the information provided by Appian, but it certainly does not prove him right either.

There are even more serious problems within the passage itself. If the Palmyrenes were so rich, than how could they have carried everything away? According to the story, Antony’s horsemen found the city empty (κενός). But Appian only talks about ‘essentials’ (τά ἄναγκαια) being carried away. How empty is a city after essentials are carried away? Were essentials only the

(8) On the temple of Bel, see KAIZER, Religious Life [n. 7], p. 67-79. The Syrian soundings are referred to by E. WILL, Les salles de banquet de Palmyre et d'autres lieux in Topoi 7, 1997, p. 873-87. See now also M. AL-MAQDISI, Note sur les sondages réalisés par Robert du Mesnil du Buisson dans la cour du sanctuaire de Bêl à Palmyre in Syria 77, 2000, p. 137-158, a recent re-examination of the excavations made in the temenos in the 1960s.

(9) A. SCHMIDT-COLINET / KH. AL-AS’AD, Zur Urbanistik des hellenistischen Palmyra. Ein Vorbericht (with contributions of H. BECKER, CH. ROMER and M. STEPHANI) in Damassener Mitteilungen 12, 2000, p. 61-93. The graves behind the temple of Baal-Shamin have been dated to the 2nd century BC and seem to have been in use throughout the first century BC. Cf. R. FELLMANN, Le sanctuaire de Baal-Shamin à Palmyre 5. Die Grabenanlage, Neuchâtel, 1970.

(10) On some recent finds, see D. BIELIŃSKA, Small Finds from Pre-classical Palmyra in Studia Palmyrenskie 10, 1997, p. 19-22. Cf. SCHRARR, in SCHUOL, Grenzüberschreitungen [n. 3], on tablets from Mari and elsewhere.

(11) Some scholars have argued that the original walls of Palmyra ought to have post-dated 41 BC precisely because of the passage in Appian. They assume that the attempt by Antony’s horsemen to plunder the place implies the lack of a proper enclosure. See e.g. RICHMOND in JRS 53, 1963 [n. 2], p. 48: ‘considering what relatively modest defences will stop a cavalry force, this must surely be accepted as true’, and D. VAN BERCHEM, Le premier rempart de Palmyre in CRAI, 1970, p. 234, referring to Appian’s story as providing a terminus post quem and to Palmyra in 41 therefore as ‘une ville ouverte’. Most recently the same connection is made by DEGEORGE, Palmyre [n. 2], p. 298 n. 94. This is methodologically incorrect. Cf. MATTHEWS in JRS 74, 1984 [n. 2], p. 160; MILLAR, Roman Near East [n. 5], p. 321. For various opinions on the development of the walls of Palmyra: M. GAWLIKOWSKI, Le temple palmyrénien, Warsaw, 1973, p. 12-20; id, Les défenses de Palmyre in Syria 51, 1974, p. 231-242; D. P. CROUCH, The Ramparts of Palmyra in Studia Palmyrenskie 6, 1975, p. 6-44 (with brief remarks made by Gawlikowski, ibid., p. 45-46).
valuables? How much can one, logistically, carry in flight anyhow? Events become even more confusing when we read where the Palmyrenes went. According to Appian, they went ‘to the other side of the river and to the river-bank’. This implies that the Euphrates was reasonably nearby, whereas in reality it is some 200 km away. Introducing Palmyra as not far from the river (οὗ μαχαράν ούσαν ἀπὸ Εὐφράτου), the author’s topographical knowledge does not seem to be entirely accurate (12). It should also be noted that Appian does not write that Palmyra was a caravan city in Antony’s time. He explicitly uses the present tense: ἐμπόροι ... ὄντες κομίζουσι... (13). As we will suggest below, this may well be significant.

The passage and modern historiography: Antony and the East. — Using the passage to analyse pre-Roman Palmyra has proved highly problematic. Could it still have ramifications for Antony’s Eastern policy in the post-Philippi period? That policy is, of course, of substantial importance for our understanding of the struggle for power between Octavian and Antony, and of the eventual East-West dichotomy that so characterised the events and found reflections in so many of our sources. Antony’s raid on Palmyra has indeed been perceived in this context, although leading to divergent conclusions. Some authors have argued strongly that by mounting an attack on Palmyra, Antony was trying to establish control over the surrounding area as a whole, possibly to prepare the ground for a Parthian campaign (14). But Appian’s passage has also been invoked to ‘prove’ the opposite point of view. The raid on Palmyra then serves as an attempt by Antony to establish a ‘buffer-zone’ to limit the effects of an almost inevitable Parthian


(13) Already ISAAC, Limits of Empire [n. 2], p. 141; MILLAR, Roman Near East [n. 5], p. 321.

offensive (15). Alternatively, one could even see Antony’s action against Palmyra in the context of his normal military activities as governor (16). If a passage can be used in defence of several opposite viewpoints, it does not prove any of them. In short, one needs to be cautious when drawing any conclusions from this passage.

**Literary and historical context of the passage.** — From the sack of Palmyra, Appian continues his narrative by recounting further details on the outbreak of the Parthian War (BC 5,10), before he returns to Octavian in Italy (BC 5,12ff.). This seems to strengthen the case for those who want to emphasise the importance of the raid on Palmyra in Antony’s Eastern policy (17). Yet, cannot literary considerations, more than Antony’s perceived goals, have influenced Appian in his writing? In what follows, we aim to show that taking into account both literary *topoi* and Appian’s bias can further clarify the passage. Let us, with this in mind, first look at what instantly *precedes* the sack of Palmyra in Appian’s account:

«So straight away the attention that Antony had until now devoted to every matter was completely blunted, and whatever Cleopatra commanded was done, without consideration of what was right in the eyes of man or god. On Antony’s orders her sister Arsinoe, who had taken refuge as a suppliant at the temple of Artemis Leukophryene in Miletus, was put to death, and he ordered the Tyrians to surrender Serapion to her, who as her commander in Cyprus had supported Cassius but was now a suppliant in Tyre. He instructed the people of Aradus to hand over another suppliant, some man whom they were harbouring and making out to be Ptolemy, after the disappearance of Cleopatra’s brother Ptolemy in the naval battle against


Caesar on the Nile. He also ordered the priest of Artemis at Ephesus, whom they call Megabyzus, to be brought before him, because he had once welcomed Arsinoe as queen, but released him when the Ephesians pleaded with Cleopatra herself. So swiftly was Antony transformed, and this passion was the beginning and the end of evils that afterwards befell him (οὗτο μὲν ὁ 'Αντώνιος ἐνήλλακτο ταχέως, καὶ τὸ πάθος αὐτῷ τοῦτο ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλος τῶν ἐπειτα κακῶν ἐγένετο) (18).

Appian, it appears, recounts the sack of Palmyra as the beginning of the evils that afterwards befell Antony. In other words, the fruitless attack on Palmyra, which resulted in nothing and antagonised the Parthians, can be seen as one of those examples of changes in fortune that ancient historiography was so fond of. A similar event takes place in Plutarch, Life of Crassus 17. In 54 BC, at the outset of what would turn out to be such a disastrous Eastern campaign, Crassus is said to have excessively celebrated his victory over the insignificant town of Zenodotia. This, Plutarch writes, ‘was very ill thought of, and it looked as if he despaired a nobler achievement, that he made so much of this little success’. Quite a change from the ‘good fortune’ and ‘excellent generalship’ that Crassus had showed in his campaign against Spartacus (19). Needless attacking a city becomes even more a metaphor of a reversal of fortune when it is counterbalanced by an effective siege on an important city by one’s greatest opponent. The easy, irrelevant and ultimately unsuccessful sack of Palmyra took place just a year before Octavian’s difficult but important fight at Perugia in BC 41. In his extensive description of that battle, Appian is noticeably more positive towards Octavian than other ancient authors (20).

But it is, more than anything else, Cleopatra’s influence over Antony that dominates this part of the Bella Civilia. Not that Appian is alone in this. References to the evil foreign queen, who corrupted the good Roman Antony, are

(18) Appian, BC V, 9. Translation from Carter, Civil Wars [n. 1], with H. White, LCL.
(19) Plutarch, Crass. XI. Appian’s distaste for Antony’s insufficiently motivated aggression against Palmyra is also typical of the author’s disapproval for wars without some sort of legitimacy. Cf. Appian’s version of the treatment of Crassus’ campaign against the Parthians at BC II, 18 and his disapproval of Lucullus’ behaviour in Spain (Iber. 51).
(20) Appian, BC V, 33-49. Cf. Suetonius, Aug. 14-15; Dio 48, 14. But note Velleius Paterculus II, 74, 4. It may be relevant that by not intervening in the siege of Perugia, Antony effectively left his brother Lucius at Octavian’s mercy. Note also that Appian conspicuously underplays the activities of the third triumvir in the same period: he does not e.g. mention Lepidus’ triumph of the last day of 43 BC: Velleius Paterculus II, 67, 3-4, who refers to mocking chants by Lepidus’ soldiers. Cf. R. D. Weigel, Lepidus. The Tarnished Triumvir, London - New York, 1992, p. 75. Also p. 80-81 on Lepidus’ activities in 41 BC.
galore in Roman literature (21). Plutarch is prime example of this (22). Of course, he had his own reasons to depict Cleopatra (and Antony) quite negatively. In the Life of Antony, which is often particularly moralistic, the origins of the battle of Actium are described through placing emphasis on the dichotomy between Octavia and Cleopatra: the good Roman matron versus the wicked witch of the East (23). Perhaps this was under influence of the Life of Demetrios: ‘The necessity of making Antonius’ eroticism correspond to that of Demetrios may have encouraged Plutarch to accept and embellish the Augustan propaganda which made Antonius the tipsy paramour of the Egyptian queen’ (24). On the whole the Life of Antony (like that of Demetrios) appears to be a negative exemplum, as Plutarch himself (Comp. Demetr. Ant. 3.1) implies: ‘Both were insolent in prosperity, and abandoned themselves to luxury and enjoyment’. A wicked witch of the East would fit the structure well (25). Others followed suit (26). As the importance of the queen was well advertised, this is not in the least surprising (27). Appian’s Cleopatra therefore need not strike us as exceptional, and neither should his statement that Antony’s infatuation with the queen heralds the beginning of the end. This change in Antony’s behaviour is also emphasised by his impious treatment of the supplicants in the passage quoted above: anything that Cleopatra ordained was done, notwithstanding Roman mores. Only supplication to, and acceptance by, the queen herself decided the course of action taken.

(22) Plutarch, Ant. XXVII, 1-2; LIII, 6-10; Comp. Dem. Ant. III, 1-3.
(26) E.g. Dio XLIX, 34, 1; 41, 1; L, 5, 1; 24, 3; 24, 7; 25, 1-4; 27, 1-5. On Dio’s version of Octavian’s pre-Actium speech, and the emphasis on the danger from the East: M. Reinhold, From Republic to Principate. An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio’s Roman History. Book 49-52 (36-29 B.C.), Atlanta, 1988, p. 84.
(27) Wallmann, Triumviri [n. 25], p. 252. Famously, Cleopatra is described as the ‘Queen of Kings’ (Cleopatra Reginae Regum) on a coin-type of Mark Antony; Crawford, RRC, I, no. 543.1.
Indeed, the very first lines of book five are illustrative for the weight that Appian places on Antony’s corruption by his love for Cleopatra:

«After the death of Cassius and Brutus Octavian returned to Italy, but Antony proceeded to Asia, where he met Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, and succumbed to her charms at first sight. This passion brought ruin upon them and upon all Egypt (ἐξ ὁλιγήν Ἀιγύπτων) besides (BC 5.1,1)».

For the Alexandrian Appian, the fate of Egypt was of the utmost importance. And it turned on the change in Antony’s behaviour that followed his affair with Cleopatra (28). The raid on Palmyra is put forward when Appian illustrates that specific change. Moreover, the seemingly irrelevant attack not only has precedents in earlier historiography, but it may also find an echo in the relevant sack of Perugia by his opponent – Rome’s first emperor.

Contemporary context of the passage. — Why was Appian interested in Palmyra in the first place? Why did he pay attention to the attack by Antony’s bowmen when other classical authors did not? As noted above, Appian seems somewhat topographically challenged in his description of the distance between Palmyra and the Euphrates (29). This could prove a telling slip. Both river and city are already mentioned in the Proem of the Historia Romana (30). More importantly even, at Proem 1,4 Appian states that the Euphrates forms an Eastern boundary to the Empire. Naturally, scholars have recognised this as a terminus ante quem for his work (31). But this statement has wider implications than purely chronological ones. The explicit emphasis on the Euphrates as a border could have ideological connotations (32). Hadrian, on his accession, abandoned Trajan’s recently acquired territories beyond the Euphrates (33). This controversial retreat may well have

(28) Of course, Appian’s Antony is not unambiguously a ‘good Roman’ even before Cleopatra (e.g. BC III, 98), and not entirely evil afterwards either (e.g. BC V, 66 ; V, 136).
(29) See supra, n. 12.
(30) APPIAN, Proem 2.
(31) Appian, after all, wrote about the Euphrates as a border in apparent ignorance of Lucius Verus’ Parthian campaigns of 165 (on which see A. R. Birley, Hadrian to the Antonines in CAH 111, 2000, p. 160-165). See especially GABBA, Appiano [n. 1], p. ix-xi, VANDEERLEEST in AHB 3, 1989 [n. 12], p. 132, and K. BRODERSEN, Appian und sein Werk in ANRW II.34.1, 1993, p. 353, who argue for a date around AD 160. Luke Pitcher, however, kindly points out to us that there seems to be no a priori reason to exclude a date as early as the late 140s. Essentially the same point is made by G. S. BUCHER, The Origins, Program, and Composition of Appian’s Roman History in TAPA 130, 2000, p. 411-58 ; 415-429.
(32) This is, indeed, reaffirmed when Appian describes the division of the empire by the triumvirs (29, 65).
(33) On Trajan’s conquests, see MILLAR, Roman Near East [n. 5], p. 90-111 ; J. BENNETT, Trajan Optimus Princeps, London – New York, 20012, p. 183-204. On Hadrian’s provincial policy, see now C. ANDO, Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty
made an impact on the young Alexandrian, who had just arrived in Rome (34). Is this the reason why the Euphrates figures so prominently in the description of an otherwise unknown event? The river, in Appian’s perception, was the limit of the civilised world. It is unlikely that the inhabitants of Palmyra would flee over 200 kilometres, with all their possessions (or in any case their essentials), to hide behind a river, but the point was that they retreated beyond the boundary of Roman power. For Appian, to cross the Euphrates was to leave the empire.

Outside that empire, so Appian writes, the Palmyrenes were ‘preparing themselves with bows in case anyone would attack them’. The historian emphasises that ‘they are by nature excellent’ with that weapon (πρὸς ἀπεφύκασιν ἔξαιρο-δέτως). But Antony’s men never came. According to the story, they ‘turned around’ from Palmyra, ‘not having met anyone, not having taken anything’. So why this emphasis on bowmen then? It may be worth pointing out that only individual Palmyrenes had served as archers in the imperial forces from at least Trajan’s reign onwards, and that there were no regular Palmyrene auxiliary units in the Roman army until long after Appian wrote his work, probably not before the early third century AD (35). It was, of course, the Parthians who were reputed bowmen in Roman times (36). Taking into account that Appian not only describes Palmyra as being situated outside the Empire proper (despite Pompey’s creation of the provincia Syria in 64 BC), but also links the attack by Antony’s troops to an indignant reaction from the part of the Parthians, it is not in the least surprising that he portrays the Palmyrenes with primarily Parthian skills.

Notwithstanding this original ‘near-Parthian’ reputation of Palmyra, by the time of Appian the city had become very much part of the Roman world. Auxiliary units were certainly based at the oasis in the direct aftermath of Lucius Verus’ Parthian war, and possibly before (37). The city, long adhering to the organisation of the standard ‘Greek city’, had even been visited by the Roman


(34) For the dating of Appian’s arrival in Rome, see Gowing, Triumviral Narratives [n. 12], p. 16.

(35) A number of diplomata record the grant of citizenship to such soldiers in the early years of Hadrian: CIL XVI, 68; M. M. ROXAN, Roman Military Diplomas 1954-1977, London, 1978, 17, 27-28: Palmyrenis Sagittariis. See also ISAAC, Limits of Empire [n. 2], p. 144. There is no evidence for Palmyrene archers at Dura in the Parthian period, as has been suggested. See now Dirven, Palmyrenes [n. 2], p. 34, with references. Bowmen are attested at Dura in AD 168-171: Dirven, Palmyrenes [n. 2], p. 233-235.

(36) See e.g. O. KURZ, The Cambridge History of Iran 3 (1), Cambridge, 1983, p. 561, on the dreaded mobility of the Parthian mounted archers, and especially the so-called ‘Parthian shot’.

(37) For further references, see J.-P. REY-COQUAIS, Syrie romaine, de Pompée à Dioclétien in JRS 68, 1978, p. 68, and MILLAR, Roman Near East [n. 5], p. 108.
emperor himself (38). For Palmyra, this *adventus* must have been a major event, which found reflection in the addition of ‘Hadriane’ to its name (39). Whether the imperial visit was also advertised in Rome is of course another matter. But Hadrian’s reign is precisely the period in which the provinces and their inhabitants were more than before acknowledged as an inherent part of the Empire (40). It may not be entirely accidental that the list of those inscriptions from Palmyra, which refer to the city’s long-distance trade, shows a noticeable concentration in the first half of the second century (41).

Recently, Appian has been described as an Antonine historian (42). He, as every author, saw the world in the context of his own time. This went beyond simple political adherence to the ruling dynasty. Perceptions are influenced by a variety of incentives. Indeed, the ‘critic’s task must be first and foremost to seek reasons’ for the choice of composition and details in Appian’s writing (43). With the observations made in the present contribution, we hope to have shown how contemporary opinions and events helped to shape Appian’s description of Antony’s raid on Palmyra in 41 BC. They thus continue to influence our perceptions of an important episode of Roman history.


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(38) See *PAT* 0305 (AD 131), which records the erection of a statue for a Palmyrene who had provided oil for citizens and accommodation for the army ‘during the visit of (our lord) the divine Hadrian’. The double-structured organisation of a *boulê* and a *dēmos* is first attested at Palmyra in AD 74, see J. CANTINEAU, *Tadmorea in Syria* 14, 1933, p. 174, no 2b, although the assembly on its own appears already precisely fifty years earlier, see *PAT* 1352. The famous tax law from AD 137 gives a whole series of offices typical of a ‘Greeck city’, see *PAT* 0259.

(39) The tax law (*PAT* 0259) gives the new name in Palmyrenean only (hdryn’ tdmr), but an inscription from six years earlier refers to its honouree as [*Αδριανοῦ Παλμυρινόν*], see *PAT* 1374 (AD 131). See now also BOATWRIGHT, *Hadrian* [n. 33], p. 104-5.

(40) The process has been highlighted recently by ANDO, *Imperial Ideology* [n. 33], p. 330-5, and BOATWRIGHT, *Hadrian* [n. 33], esp. p. 204-9.


(42) GOWING, *Triumviral Narratives* [n. 12], p. 273-287.

(43) GOWING, *Triumviral Narratives* [n. 12], p. 277.