

AURELIAN, CLUBS, AND HERODOTUS.  
THE WEAPONS OF TROOPS FROM PALESTINE IN THE BATTLE  
OF EMESA (272 AD)

By

ROBERT SUSKI

ABSTRACT: In 272 AD at Emesa there was a decisive battle between the forces of Zenobia and Aurelian. According to Zosimus the Romans owed this victory to a counter-attack of the infantry recruited from among the Palestinians, who fought with staves shod with iron and clubs (*Historia Nova* I 52, 4; 53, 2). The present author believes that in this passage Zosimus did not recount real events but when writing his account he relied upon Herodotus, according to whom the inhabitants of Syria (including the Palestinians) used such weapons. In several other passages of Zosimus' work one can discern a similar method applied when describing the past. This historian (or his source) used *topoi* and literary texts when building his narration.

During the campaign conducted by Aurelian against the rebellion of Vaballathus and Zenobia in 272 AD the Romans claimed two significant victories. One of these battles took place near Emesa and had decisive impact on the Roman reconquest of the East. After this clash Zenobia's army was no longer able to actively combat Aurelian's forces<sup>1</sup>.

According to Zosimus' *Historia Nova*, our main source for the events that took place in the course of this battle, Zenobia's army numbered as many as 70 thousand soldiers. This figure is most certainly implausible. The Palmyrene queen's forces must have been much smaller. Zosimus does not mention the manpower of the Roman army, which included Dalmatian and Mauretanian cavalry, Moesians, Pannonians, Noricians and Rhaetians (troops from legions stationed in these provinces), praetorians and troops recruited in Asia Minor

---

<sup>1</sup> Aurelian's campaign against Zenobia has not yet received a monographic treatment (which is no surprise, as not much is known about it). The most recent discussions are: Starcky, Gawlikowski 1985: 62–67; Saunders 1992: 204–241; Stoneman 1993: 155–180; Cizek 1994: 105–114; Kotula 1997: 125–140; Watson 1999: 70–88; Hartmann 2001: 364–394; Southern 2001: 116–118; Potter 2004: 270–272. Commentaries on the account of Aurelian's campaign against Zenobia in Zosimus' work: Paschoud 1971: 164–169; Ridley 1982: 146; Wipszycka 1993: 261 ff.; and in the *Historia Augusta*: Paschoud 1996: 133–157.