

West meets East: At the Borders of the *Oikoumenē* and Beyond

Lecture 18 – Rome and Arabia

CLAH6007

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Understanding the History of Arabia

- Early civilisations, but no written language prior to first millennium BC.
- No pre-Islamic literary texts, but over 10,000 inscriptions from Yemen – no clear dating by eras until 2nd century AD.
- Mountainous terrain of southern Arabia impedes formation of a single state entity.
- Saba' (Sheba) – worship of 'Almaqah - Saba' and the union.



“When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the Lord, she came to test Solomon with hard questions. Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the Lord, she was overwhelmed.” – ***First Kings 10.1-5.***

Eudaimôn Arabia / Arabia Felix

- Theophrastus of Eresus (372-287 BC) and Eratosthenes of Cyrene (c. 284-202 BC) – the Minaeans, the Sabaean, the Qatabanians, and the Hadramites.
- Peoples located around the Sayhad desert losing ground to upland tribes.



He [Aelius Gallus] says that the most numerous of these tribes are the Homeritae [people of Himyar] and the Minaei that their lands are fruitful in palms and shrubs, and that their chief wealth is centred in their flocks... the Sabaei are the richest of all in the great abundance of their spice-bearing groves, their mines of gold, their streams for irrigation, and their ample produce of honey and wax... they are the richest nations in the world, seeing that such vast wealth flows in upon them from both the Roman and the Parthian Empires; for they sell the produce of the sea or of their forests, while they purchase nothing whatever in return.” – **Pliny NH 6.32.161-162.**

The Invasion of Aelius Gallus (26-25 BC)

Motives for the Campaign

- Motives, according to Strabo – geographic exploration and the acquisition of wealth.

“He was sent by Augustus Caesar to explore the tribes and the places, not only in Arabia, but also in Ethiopia... Another consideration was the report, which had prevailed from all time, that they were very wealthy, and that they sold aromatics and the most valuable stones for gold and silver, but never expended with outsiders any part of what they received in exchange; for he expected either to deal with wealthy friends or to master wealthy enemies.” – **Strabo *Geography* 16.4.22.**

A Bad Start

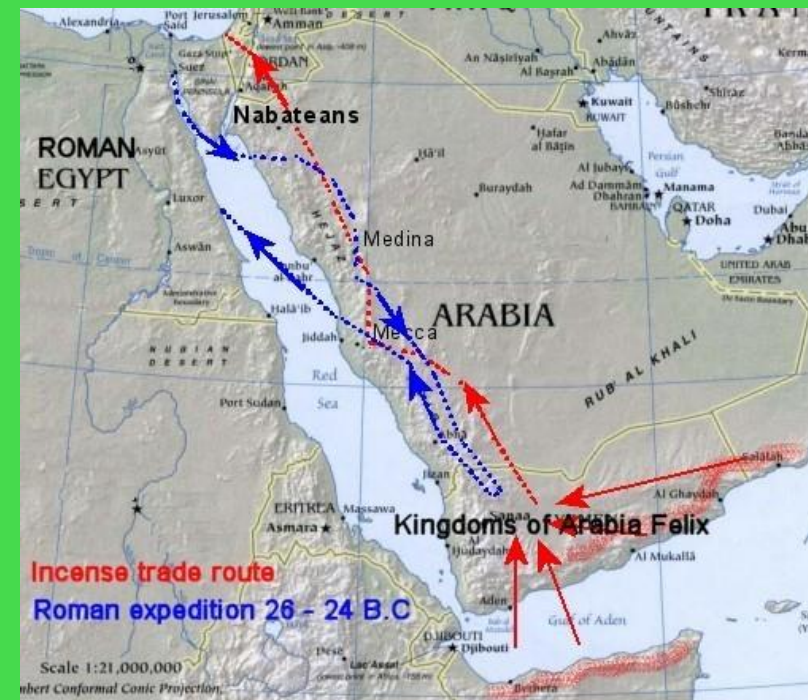
- Apparent treachery of the Nabataean Syllaeus.
- 80 unnecessary biremes and triremes built.
- Number of ships with their crews lost while sailing to Leukê Kômê.
- Purported desire of Syllaeus to take over the region.
- Paralysis and illness of the troops.

“...he built one hundred and thirty vessels of burden, on which he set sail with about ten thousand infantry, consisting of Romans in Egypt, as also of Roman allies, among whom were five hundred Jews and one thousand Nabataeans under Syllaeus...” – **Strabo**
***Geography* 16.4.23.**

The Expedition Continues

- Sixth months spent marching to Marib, but return journey took only 60 days.
- Forced to desist from siege of Marib due to lack of water.
- Many losses from sickness, fatigue and hunger.

“In his expedition, Gallus destroyed the following towns, the names of which are not given by the authors who had written before his time, Negrana, Nestum, Nesca, Masugum, Caminacum, Labecia, and Mariva above- mentioned, six miles in circumference, as also Caripeta, the furthest point of his expedition.” – **Pliny NH 6.32.160.**



Benefits to Rome?

“By my order and auspices two armies were led at about the same time into Ethiopia and into that part of Arabia which is called Happy, and the troops of each nation of enemies were slaughtered in battle and many towns captured. They penetrated into Ethiopia all the way to the town Nabata, which is near to Meroe; and into Arabia all the way to the border of the Sabaei, advancing to the town Mariba.” – ***Res Gestae Divi Augusti 26.***

“Nine days further inland is Saphat, the metropolis, residence of Charibaêl, legitimate king of the two nations, the Homerite and the one, lying next to it, called Sabaean; he is a friend of the emperors, thanks to the continuous embassies and gifts.” – ***PME 23.***

The ambassadors who in my time have come to Rome from Arabia, have made all these matters more uncertain, even, than they were before; a thing at which we may justly be surprised, seeing that some sprigs even of the incense-tree have been brought among us, from which we have some reason to conclude that the parent tree is round and tapering, and that it puts forth its shoots from a trunk that is entirely free from knots.” – **Pliny *NH* 12.31.57.**

The Sack of Aden?

“Aelius Gallus, a member of the Equestrian order, is the sole person who has hitherto carried the Roman arms into these lands, for Gaius Caesar, the [adopted] son of Augustus [biological grandson], only had a distant view of Arabia.” – **Pliny NH 6.32.160.**

“These were the first of the Romans [led by Aelius Gallus], and, I believe, the only ones, to traverse so much of this part of Arabia for the purpose of making war; for they advanced as far as the place called Athlula, a famous locality.” – **Cassius Dio 53.29.8.**

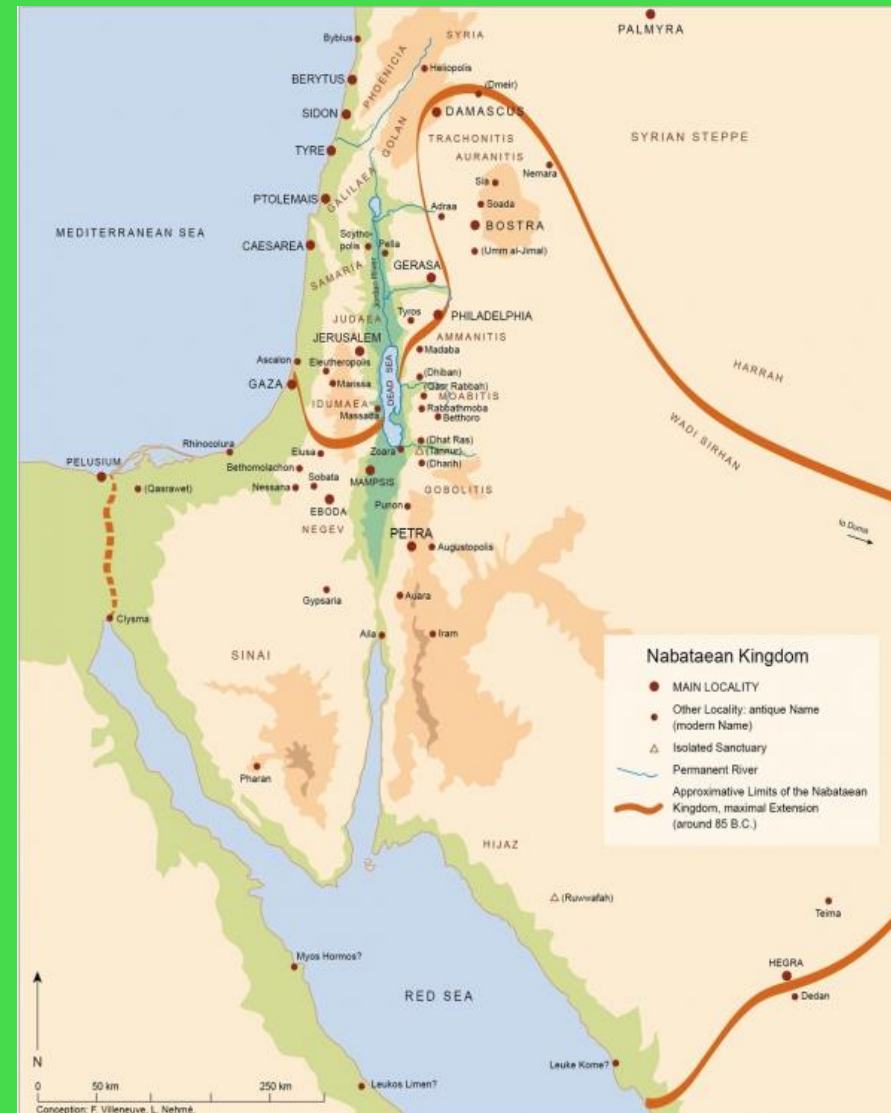
“Eudaimôn Arabia [prosperous Arabia], a full-fledged city in earlier days, was called Eudaimôn when, since vessels from India did not go on to Egypt and those from Egypt did not dare sail to the places further on but came only this far, it used to receive cargoes from both, just as Alexandria receives cargoes from overseas as well as from Egypt. And now, not long before our time, Caesar sacked it.” – **PME 26.**



Land Route vs. Sea Route

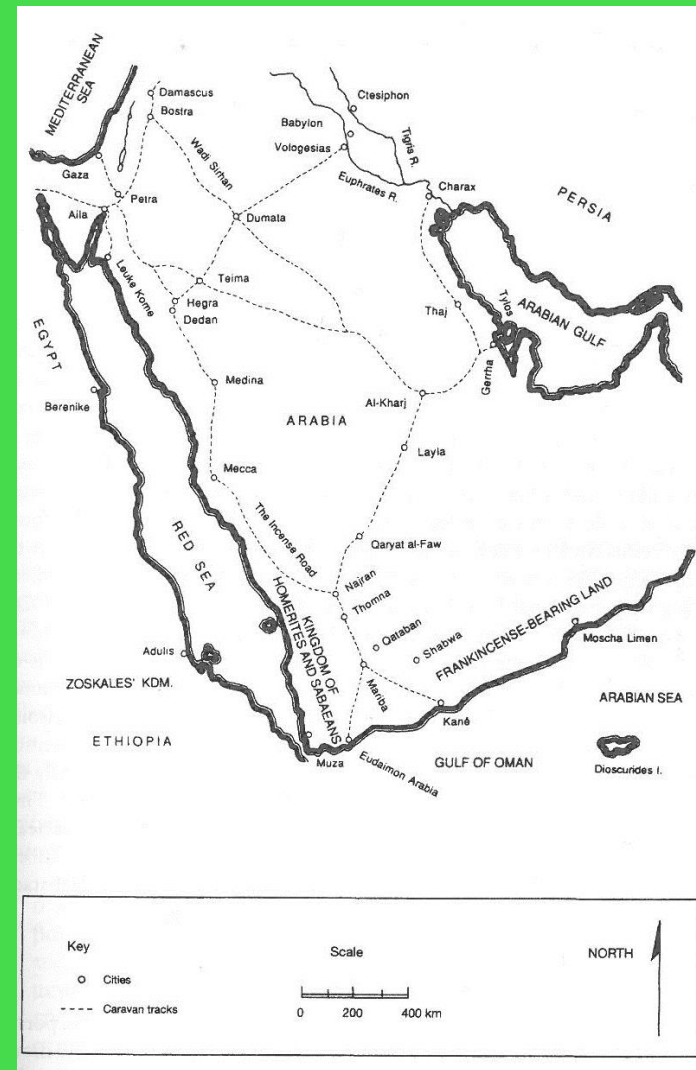
Nabataean Arabia

“While there are many Arabian tribes who use the desert as pasture, the Nabataeans far surpass the others in wealth although they are not much more than ten thousand in number; for not a few of them are accustomed to bring down to the sea frankincense and myrrh and the most valuable kinds of spices, which they procure from those who convey them from what is called Arabia Eudaemon. They are exceptionally fond of freedom; and, whenever a strong force of enemies comes near, they take refuge in the desert, using this as a fortress; for it lacks water and cannot be crossed by others, but to them alone, since they have prepared subterranean reservoirs lined with stucco, it furnishes safety...”
— **Diod. Sic. 19.94.4-6.**



“The Incense Road”

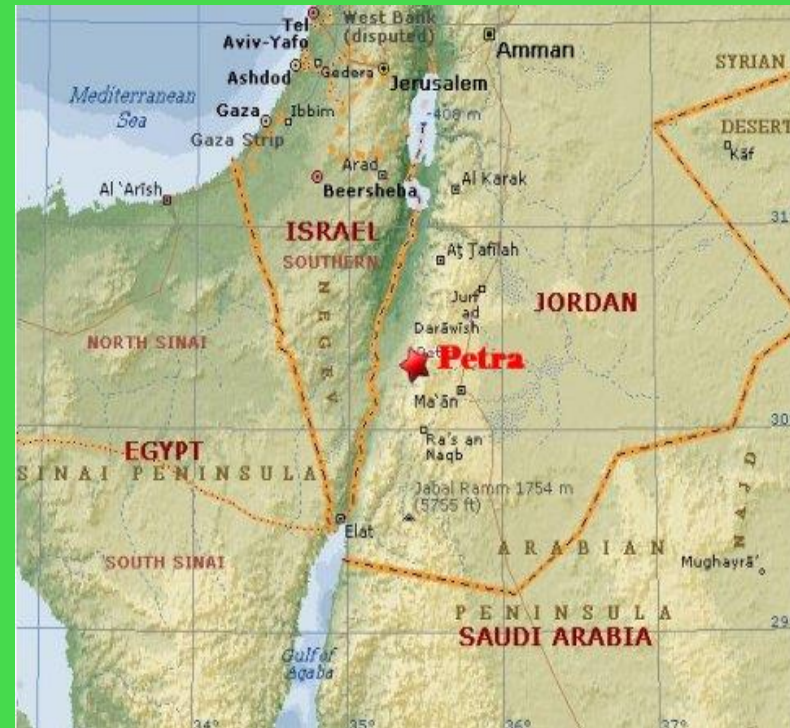
- Pliny *NH* 12.32.63-65 – camels travel to Sabota (Shabwah), deviation punishable by death.
- 10th part taken for the god, Sabis.
- Incense can only be exported through the country of the Gebanitae – tax paid to their king.
- Thomna (Timna) is 1487½ Roman miles [2250 km] or 65 days journey by camel to Gaza.
- 688 denarii per camel cost by time the incense reaches the Mediterranean.
- Best frankincense sells at six denarii, the second quality five, and the third three per libra (329 grams).



Leukê Kômê

“Now to the left of Berenike, sailing for two or three days from Myos Hormos eastward across the adjacent gulf, there is another harbour and fortified place, which is called Leukê Kômê, from which there is a road to Petra, which is subject to Malichas, King of the Nabataeans. It holds the position of a market-town for the small vessels sent there from Arabia; and so a centurion is stationed there as a collector of one-fourth of the merchandise imported, with an armed force, as a garrison.” – **PME 19.**

“Leukê Kômê in the land of the Nabataeans, a large emporium... camel-traders travel back and forth from Petra to this place in safety and ease, and in such numbers of men and camels that they differ in no respect from an army.” – **Strabo Geography 16.4.23.**



The Incense Ports of Southern Arabia

- Departure in October, to Gulf of Aden - return around December to February - use fair winds to reach 20° N.
- Frankincense at these ports in November/December as a result of the first harvest, while the second harvest was available in February/March.
- Large number of boulders from Aden and Qana' have been found at the Red Sea ports.
- All ballast boulders from Berenike originate from Qana' and at Myos Hormos 45 (70%) can be attributed to Qana' and 19 (30%) to Aden.



Decline of Nabataean Prosperity?

Supporting Evidence

- Shift from Leukê Kômê to Myos Hormos - Strabo *Geog.* 16.4.24.
- Decline and destruction in the Negev at Oboda and Mampsis.
- Decline in purity of silver coinage until it reaches 20% under the latter part of the reign of Malchus II [r. AD 40-70] and that of the entire reign of Rabbel II [r. AD 70-106].
- Agricultural intensification in the Hauran c. AD 70-106.

Contrary Evidence

- Major military post at Hegra in the Hejaz – tombs dating from AD 1 to 75.
- Continued use of Petra to Gaza routes - Moje 'Awad, Horbat Qasra, Mesad Neqarot.
- Greater use of gold vessels?
- Impressive monuments built in Petra in first century AD.
- Supporting stations around al-Barid, Wadi Sleisel and Sabra.

Roman Annexation of Nabataea

- Annexed under Trajan in AD 106 – possibly after death of Rabbel II.
- Province organised into a territory with a senatorial legate and a garrison of a single legion.
- Motives for annexation not made clear from the literary sources – upcoming Parthian campaign or internal instability?

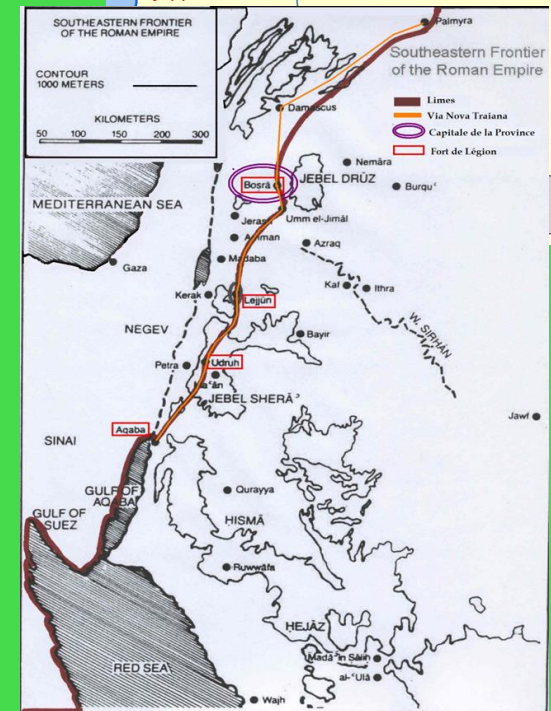


“And around the same time Palma, the governor of Syria, subdued Arabia about Petra and made it subject to the Romans.”
– **Cassius Dio 68.14.5.**

Arabian Culture

The Cities of Nabatae

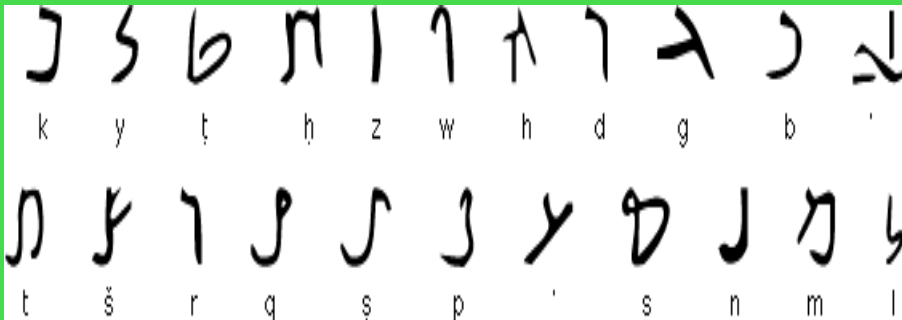
- Petra royal capital of Nabataean in first centuries BC and AD – defensible and at limits of fertile zone.
- Cultural difference between Greek cities of the Decapolis and the Nabataean zone of their south and east? – indications of Nabataean influence, e.g. bilingual inscriptions, coins, material culture.
- Cult-centre of Baal Shamin at Sia'.
- Bostra and Petra as Greek cities (“Nea Traianē Bostra” and “Hadrianē Petra”) and later Roman *coloniae*.
- The advancement of Graeco-Roman culture and city life?
- Mass of inscriptions written in a Greek in the Hauran area (modern SW Syria).
- Influence of peoples known as *Saraceni* (Saracens) from the unsettled zone of the Sinai and beyond the “desert frontier” - *Limes Arabicus*.



Language

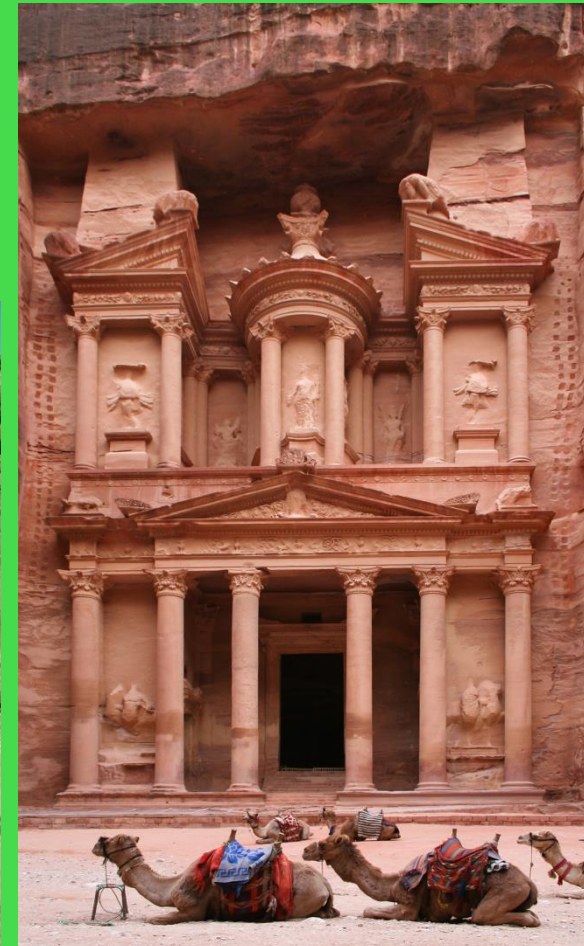
- Greek to Nabataean coins – inscriptions “kings of the Nabataeans”.
- Nabataea not merely an official language of documents.
- Related to Aramaic.
- Also presence of “Safaitic” graffiti.
- Rock cut inscription at city of Oboda (Advat).

“This is the tomb and two funeral monuments above it, which Abdobodat the governor made for Itaybel the governor, his father, and for Itaybel the camp commandant who is in Luhitu and Abarta, son of this Abdobodat the governor; in the territory of their rule, which they exercised twice for thirty-six years during the time of Aretas, king of the Nabataeans, lover of his people. And the above work was executed in the forty-sixth year.” – J. F. Healy 2003.



Petra

- Largely built in the period of the kingdom – particularly end of first century BC.
- Shift to Bostra by reign of Rabbel II (AD 70-106).



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