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Philorhômaios kai philhellèn

Hommage à Jean-Louis Ferrary

DROZ

The Nabataeans under Augustus

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When I reflect on the many decades of my friendship with Jean-Louis Ferrary and my admiration for his scholarly work this inevitably takes me through many projects of my own that occupied me during those long years. My earliest work was devoted to Augustus and his world,[1] and although I have moved into far later epochs and cultures it is always a special privilege when a new document casts a totally unexpected light upon a history that had once seemed firmly anchored.

I have chosen to honor Jean-Louis by opening up a moment in Augustan foreign policy that now looks very different from the way it appeared half a century ago. Since Jean-Louis has never lost his interest in the Augustan dispensation, which remained the foundation for imperial Rome, I offer this reconsideration of the Nabataean kingdom in the formative phase under its long-lived king Aretas (*ḥrtt*) IV (9 BC – AD 40), the king who was regularly described in inscriptions as one "who loves his people (*rḥm ʿmh*)." The Nabataean realm ultimately became, early in the reign of Trajan, in AD 106, annexed to the Roman empire as its province of Arabia, to which I devoted a study in 1983. It was in that work[2] that I expanded upon fragmentary material in my book of 1965. In offering to Jean-Louis the present exposition I feel as if I were extending my hand to him across the many decades in which he and I have grown together as scholars and as friends.

1. G. W. Bowersock, *Augustus and the Greek World*, Oxford, 1965.
2. G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Cambridge (MA), London, 1983.

The great Augustan poet Horace seems to leave little doubt that early in the Principate Augustus had set his sights on capturing the riches accruing from the trade in incense and spices from the Sabaeans in southwestern Arabia:[3]

Icci, beatis nunc Arabum invides
gazis et acrem militiam paras?
non ante devictis Sabaeae
regibus horribilique Medo

nectis catenas?

It was this ambition that brought Augustus into direct contact with the Nabataeans, whose kingdom, with its capital at Petra, lay to the north in southern Transjordan. These people, who were ethnic Arabs with roots in the Ḥijāz, notably at Hegra (Madā'in Ṣaliḥ),[4] had the resources to help the Romans in any effort to profit from trade in the Arabian peninsula. Accordingly when Augustus turned to his Prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, to conduct an expedition into the Sabaean territory of Yemen, Gallus turned for help to the powerful Nabataean courtier Syllaeus (Nab. ŠLY) to advise him on his campaign, which involved 1,000 Nabataeans and half as many Jews. All this happened, most probably, in 25-24 BC,[5] and because the geographer Strabo was a friend of Aelius Gallus and presumably well informed about this enterprise we know more about it than we do, for example, of the nearly contemporaneous mission of another Egyptian prefect, P. Petronius, into Ethiopia.

Strabo famously depicts the movement of troops across the Red Sea and into Arabia by way of Leuke Kome (possibly modern Aynuna), as the beginning of a disastrous operation, for which the Nabataean advisor Syllaeus was held responsible. It was long thought that Strabo's antipathy towards Syllaeus was connected with Strabo's personal friendship with Gallus and his embarrassment over his friend's failure. But Augustus himself, in his *Res Gestae*, had provided powerful testimony against this

3. Hor., *Carm*., 1.29.1-5. Cf. Prop. 2.10.16.
4. See the extensive epigraphy from this site as compiled and copiously annotated by J. F. Healey, *The Nabataean Tomb Inscriptions of Mada'in Salih*, Oxford, 1993.
5. For the date, see the compelling remarks of John Scheid (against the slightly earlier dating proposed by S. Jameson): *Res Gestae Divi Augusti. Hauts faits du divin Auguste*, Paris, 2007, p. 72.

commonly accepted view of Gallus' campaign. In chapter 26.5 he had proclaimed:

> *Meo iussu et auspicio ducti sunt [duo] exercitus eodem fere tempore in Aethiopiam et in Ar[a]biam, quae appel[latur] Eudaemon, [maxim]aeque host[t]ium gentis utriusqe cop[iae] caesae sunt in acie et [c]om[plur]a oppida capta… In Arabiam usque in fines Sabaeorum pro[cess]it exercitus ad oppidum Mariba*.

Beginning with the arguments of Steven Sidebotham in 1986,[6] historians have become increasingly convinced that Gallus' invasion was not a failure, as represented by Strabo, but a success or, at the very least, widely perceived as a success. Consequently the venomous account of Syllaeus in Strabo calls for some kind of explanation, and David Graf has reasonably seen this in the tumultuous visit of Syllaeus to Rome at the time of the accession of Aretas IV in 9 BC.[7] Syllaeus tried and almost succeeded in persuading Augustus not to accept Aretas as the new king, as he did not come from the royal line and, for unknown reasons, was an enemy of Syllaeus. Epigraphic attestations of Syllaeus' presence at Miletus and Delos,[8] as well as his ultimately unsuccessful efforts to block Aretas in Rome itself, betray self-interested political machinations that are likely to have been known to Strabo, either directly or through the writings of Nicolaus of Damascus, whose reports come to us through Josephus.

Augustus' support for the installation of Aretas was due in the end to advocacy from Herod, the King of Judaea, through the personal intercession of Nicolaus. Syllaeus who returned to Rome, after the accession of Aretas, for adjudication of his earlier conduct by the emperor himself was condemned and executed. Strabo, who was very probably in Rome

6. S. Sidebotham, *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa*, Leiden, 1986, pp. 120–130, republishing his article "Aelius Gallus and Arabia," *Latomus*, 45 (1986), pp. 590–602.
7. D. F. Graf, "The Saga of Syllaeus Revisited," in *Studies on the Nabataean Culture II*, Nabil Khairy (ed.), Amman, 2016, pp. 127–163.
8. For the bilingual inscriptions at Miletus and Delos, see J. Cantineau, *Le nabatéen*, II, Paris, 1932, p. 122 and P. Bruneau, *Recherches sur les cultes de Délos*, Paris, 1970, p. 244. The bilingual inscription that survives in two fragments from the Capitoline in Rome with mention of a Nabataean king must be another document of the diplomatic activity surrounding the accesssion of Aretas and the visits of Syllaeus: G. W. Bowersock, "Nabataeans on the Capitoline," *Hyperboreus*, 3 (1997), pp. 347–352.

throughout all these upheavals, would have seen this drama unfold. Neither he nor anyone else has asked, or been able to suggest, why Syllaeus returned to Rome to be judged by Augustus and his *concilium principis*. But it is quite possible that he foolishly imagined, like most desperate intriguers, that he was influential enough to reverse the imperial decision away from the Nabataean nominee that Herod had favored.

In any case it now seems clear that whatever the reasons for Strabo's assault on Syllaeus' character these must be firmly detached from the Arabian expedition of Aelius Gallus, of which Augustus was so proud. It took Roman forces, supported by a substantial contingent of Nabataeans, to reach as far as Ma'rib, and the one inscription from the region at this date, a Greek-Latin bilingual commemoration of a certain P. Cornelius, an *eques*, may be our only record of this army on its way to Ma'rib. The stone was found at Barāqish (Athroula or Athloula).[9] But after Gallus' expedition withdrew, presumably about 24 BC, there was no testimony, until very recently, for either a Roman or a Nabataean presence in southwestern Arabia. Now an astonishing new bilingual document in Nabataean and Sabaic, which still awaits a complete and definitive publication, has dramatically altered the situation by revealing a Nabataean contingent at the Sabaean temple of the god Al-maqah in Ṣirwāḥ, to the west of Ma'rib. The date is unambiguously given as 7/6 BC by reference to the third year of the rule of Aretas IV.[10] This documentary evidence is accordingly almost two decades later than the expedition of Aelius Gallus, and one has to ask, as no one has ever thought to ask before, what might have happened in Arabia during the interval.

Norbert Nebes announced in 2006 and 2009 the discovery of the Ṣirwāḥ inscription by a team from the German Archaeological Institute in 2004.[11] He published a reasonable photograph of the right part of the stone, containing the Nabataean text, and some of the left, which contained the Sabaic text, from which it can clearly be seen that the Sabaic

9. Cf. M. A. Speidel, "Almaqah in Rom? Zu den Beziehungen zwischen dem kaiserzeitlichen Imperium Romanum und Südarabien im Spiegel der dokumentarischen überlieferung," *ZPE*, 194 (2015), pp. 241–258, with text and photo on p. 243.
10. See *ibid*., p. 247, but with an erroneous description of the find-spot as east, rather than west, of Ma'rib.
11. N. Nebes, "Eine datierte nabatäisch-sabäische Inschrift (Bilingue) aus Sirwah / Jemen," *Antike Welt*, 40 (2009), p. 52-53, resuming *Jemen-Report*, 37 (2006), p. 10. The photograph provided herewith was taken from the publication in *Antike Welt*.

was not exactly a rendering of the Nabataean. The first line of the Sabaic text begins with the name of Taymu, whereas the Nabataean begins "This is the stele and the base…" The Nabataean part had been inscribed in handsome letters of the late first century BC, which recorded a dedication to the chief Nabataean divinity Dushara and a date by the regnal year of the Nabataean king. A certain Taymu, son of Kushay, son of Taymu, set up the stele "for Dushara in Ṣirwāḥ in the month Ṭebet in the third year of Ḥāritat (i.e. Aretas), king of the Nabataeans, who loves his people (lines 2-4: LDWŠR' BṢRWḤ / [BY]RḤ ṬBT ŠNT TLT LḤRTT MLK / [NB]ṬW RḤM 'MH). I have read this text from the photograph that Nebes has published.

The new bilingual inscription suddenly reveals that the Nabataeans were sufficiently installed in South Arabia in 7/6 BC not only to set up a dedication to their national divinity in this distant and foreign land but to do so in the sanctuary of an indigenous god, the Sabaean Al-maqah. Furthermore, the Nabataeans inscribed their stone in a language that presumably the indigenous population could not read and with a dating formula according to the reign of an alien king. The Nabataean text is incised as scrupulously as any text of similar date from areas in the Nabataean kingdom, and parallels can easily be found in the Petra region or indeed among the Nabataean tombs at Madā'in Ṣaliḥ. The conjunction of this inscription with a comparably elegant script in the local language, Sabaic, suggests that the Nabataeans were well established at Ṣirwāḥ and on good terms with the local population.

We have to wonder how three years into the reign of Aretas IV such a situation could have come into existence, and there is no obvious answer. But it looks very much as if the Nabataeans were there with the acceptance or agreement of the Sabaeans. There is no explicit indication of a prior conquest or forcible occupation, although both are possible explanations of what we now see. One point is incontestable: The Nabataeans' influence extended at this date deep into the Arabia peninsula, and at a site that was important in the line of communication between Ma'rib and Zafār to the west.

The accession of Aretas IV was troubled, as we can tell from the initial opposition of Augustus and the intercession of Herod through Nicolaus, and so it is conceivable that the new ruler undertook to strengthen his position by sending troops into Arabia to protect trade with the

Nabataeans from the Ḥadramawt, but if he launched this initiative it must have been with the approval of Augustus himself, as well as his advocate Herod. The active support of the Princeps, who later boasted of his expedition to Ma'rib, is more than likely in the case of an obviously expansionist operation on the part of his newly appointed client king. And this inclines me to re-open an issue that I broached more than thirty years ago in a chapter of *Roman Arabia*.

I had observed that Aretas IV, who minted coins assiduously throughout most of his reign, ceased the production of coins in any metal for three years, from 3-1 BC.[12] The excellent Ya'akov Meshorer, whose study of the Nabataean coinage is still our most precious resource for this area of numismatics, duly registers the strange interruption in Aretas' production, by way of commenting on the coinage that followed the interruption: "After an interval of three years Aretas IV struck the most interesting coins in the entire range of Nabataean numismatics."[13] When I first pondered the oddity of this break in Aretas' coinage, I had wondered whether or not his kingdom had been been briefly annexed by Augustus and then subsequently returned to him. As I wrote, "Cases of kingdoms annexed and then returned are by no means unexampled in Roman imperial history." I mentioned Commagene, which was twice annexed and returned in the first century AD.[14]

In view of the new testimony for Nabataean occupation at Ṣirwāḥ without any trace of hostility, I should like to reconsider my case for the strange break in Aretas' coinage. It coincides precisely with the date of the *expeditio Arabica* of Augustus' grandson, and son by adoption, Gaius Caesar, who broke off his expedition during his consulate in AD 1 in order to meet the Parthian king on the Euphrates and to settle arrangements in Armenia. The Armenian solution misfired: Gaius was wounded in a battle at Artagira and died in AD 4 at Limyra in Lycia. His mission to the East seems to have been a general effort to organize not only Arabia but Armenia in the interest of Augustus.

The preparation for Gaius' Arabian expedition had been entrusted to the erudite Juba of Mauretania, who had written a treatise to edify the

12. G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, *op. cit.* n. 2, pp. 55–56.
13. Y. Meshorer, *Nabataean Coins*, Jerusalem, 1975, p. 49.
14. G. W Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, *op. cit.* n. 2, p. 54.

young prince (*scriptis voluminibus de eadem expeditione Arabica*).[15] This Arabian campaign, according to the elder Pliny,[16] reached at least as far as the Gulf of ʻAqaba (*usque in Arabicum sinum*) but Gaius did not penetrate farther south (*prospexit tantum Arabiam*). If his expedition had been part of a plan to organize Nabataea as a province immediately before addressing the reorganization of Armenia, the gap in the Nabataean coinage would become easily explicable. In addition we now know from the new inscription that the Nabataeans themselves had already moved into the southwestern peninsula before this time, and so the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom might have naturally included, in Augustus' mind, not only the old kingdom in Transjordan but the part of the peninsula into which he had formerly dispatched Aelius Gallus.

Suddenly, with our new information, a puzzling remark in Book 16 of Strabo's *Geography* becomes transparent and comprehensible: Πρῶτοι δ' ὑπὲρ τῆς Συρίας Ναβαταῖοι καὶ Σαβαῖοι τὴν εὐδαίμονα Ἀραβίαν νέμονται.[17] These words can be easily assigned to the last decade of the first century BC, when we know that Strabo was still making additions and adjustments to his work. Here he is naming the people who lived to the south of Syria,[18] and he specifies the Nabataeans and the Sabaeans as dwelling in Arabia Felix, which is the peninsula of Arabia. It was never obvious why Strabo wrote that both Nabataeans and Sabaeans were in Arabia, because until the new inscription turned up we had no indication at all that Nabataeans were settled there. My edition of Strabo contains a handwritten marginal note I wrote fifty years ago to ask whether we should try to correct the text by deleting some of the surprising words. Now it is apparent that Strabo's text is a faithful mirror of a situation that obtained at the end of the first century BC.

15. Plin., *NH*, 6.141.
16. Plin, *NH*, 2.168 and 6.160. Cf. F. E. Romer, "Gaius Caesar's Military Diplomacy in the East," *TAPA*, 109 (1979), pp. 199–214. Cf. the great inscription from Gaius' cenotaph in Lycian Limyra, *ILS* 140, referring to Gaius' extraterritorial wars (*ultra fines extremas populi Romani*).
17. Str. 16.4.21.
18. For the sense of ὑπέρ geographically in the sense of "to the south," cf. G. W. Bowersock, "The East-West Orientation of Mediterranean Studies and the Meaning of North and South in Antiquity," in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, W. V. Harris (ed.), Oxford, 2005, pp. 167-178, esp. p. 176.

An inscription at Aphrodisias in Turkey, two unusual coins from Arabia itself, and two graffiti in the area of Najran may have some relevance to the Augustan presence in Arabia together with the Nabataeans. First, a relief from the north portico of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias built in honor of the Roman emperors in the Julio-Claudian period included among the various peoples subjugated to Rome a figure, now lost, representing Arabs, as the surviving inscription on the base makes clear: [ἔ]θνους [Ἀρα]βῶν.[19] Whether this is a reference to Gallus' expedition or to later activity at the end of the century in conjunction with the Nabataeans is beyond telling. But coins in silver and gold with the name of the god Al-maqah depict an image on the obverse that is very likely to be a portrait of Augustus,[20] and Daniel Potts has shown that coins of the so-called Class B at San'ā' also depict Augustus.[21] This numismatic testimony complements the epigraphic record from Aphrodisias in preserving traces of Augustan intervention in the southwestern Arabian peninsula at a date and under circumstances that both remain unclear.

It has to be said that we know far too little about two tantalizing graffiti at Najran that make reference to NBṬ, but it is not impossible that these are further traces of Nabataean presence in the region.[22] Yet from such scraps emerge a shadowy picture of the Augustan impact on Arabia, of which the aged Princeps was so proud when he wrote his *Res Gestae*. In any event once Gaius Caesar's Arabian expedition had been aborted, any annexation would have seemed not only premature but inadvisable. We should not be surprised therefore if Augustus chose to restore Nabataea to its relatively new king, who immediately resumed his coinage with the unprecedented intensity that is apparent in his coinage after 1 BC. By the time that Aretas was minting again, Gaius was much distracted by his diplomacy with the Parthian king and the war in Armenia.

19. R. R. R. Smith, "*Simulacra Gentium*: The Ethne from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias," *JRS*, 78 (1988), pp. 50–77, particularly p. 55.
20. M. Huth, *Coinage of the Caravan Kingdoms: Ancient Arabian Coins from the Collection of Martin Huth*, New York, 2010, pp. 100-101, nos. 292 and 293.
21. D. T. Potts, "Augustus, Aelius Gallus and the Periplus: A Re-Interpretation of the Coinage of San'â Class B," in *Arabia Felix: Beiträge zur Sprache und Kultur des vorislamischen Arabien. Festschrift W. W. Müller*, N. Nebes (ed.), Wiesbaden, 1994, pp. 212–222.
22. H. St. J. B. Philby and A. S. Tritton, *Journ. Royal Asiatic Soc.*, 76 (1944), pp. 119–129. See nos. 103 and 135a.

There is, of course, not a trace of these events in Strabo, who had been so prolix about Gallus, but it is important to remember that Strabo evidently ceased working on his *Geography* at the end of the century and only took it up again later in the reign of Tiberius. By then he had established himself at the court of Queen Pythodoris of Pontus.[23] The late insertions into the *Geography* are not retrospective and end with the reference to the death of Juba of Mauretania in AD 23.

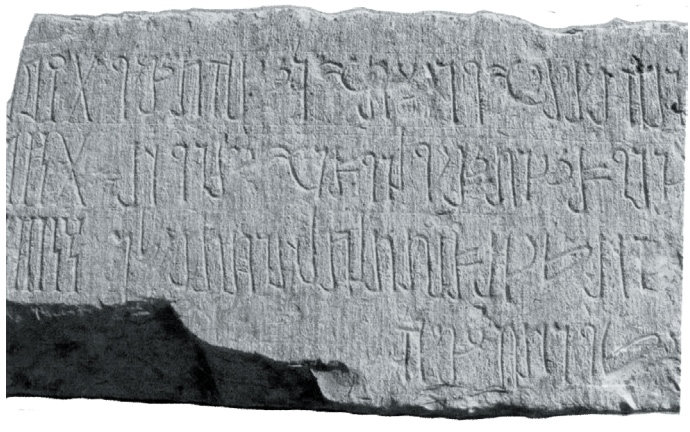

Fig. 1.—The Ṣirwāḥ inscription, as published in *Antike Welt*, 40 (2009), p. 53.

Fig. 2.—The coin of Al-maqah with a presumed image of Augustus, from Huth (n. 20 above).

23. G. W. Bowersock, "La patria di Strabone," in *Strabone e l'Asia Minore*, A. M. Biraschi and G. Salmeri (ed.), Perugia, 2000, pp. 15–23, and Id., "Strabo and the Memory of Mithridates Eupator," in *Monumentum Gregorianum*, Moscow, 2013, pp. 378–387. D. Dueck, H. Lindsay, S. Pothecary (eds.), *Strabo's Cultural Geography. the Making of a Kolossourgia*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 198 and p. 206.