

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON A SURVEY
OF NABATEAN-ROMAN MILITARY
SITES IN SOUTHERN JORDAN

by
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Although S. Thomas Parker's recent survey of the *limes Arabicus* has provided a valuable overview of the major Roman/Byzantine military structures in Jordan, our knowledge of the southern sector of the defensive system remains quite rudimentary.¹ Archaeological investigations of this region have focused basically only on the string of forts and guard posts along the *via nova Traiana* at Khirbet al-Kithara, Khirbet al-Khāalde, Quweira, Humeima, and Šadaqa.² However, in the region east of this main artery, in the Hisma desert, a number of other ancient military structures have been observed which may have possibly constituted part of the *limes* system.³ Since the Trajanic road was buttressed by an advanced eastern militarized zone of some

depth elsewhere in the province an investigation of the occupational history of these sites for evidence of their utilization during the Roman/Byzantine period was both promising and needed.

In this interest an archaeological survey of southern Jordan was organized in 1978 with the approval and assistance of the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and its director, Dr. Adnan Hadidi. The project was also granted affiliation with the American Schools of Oriental Research and received the full cooperation and support of its Amman institute, the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR). Financial assistance was provided for by a grant from the Zion Research Foundation and

1. S. Thomas Parker, "Archaeological Survey of the *Limes Arabicus*: A Preliminary Report," *ADAJ* 21 (1976) 19-31.

2. R. Brünnow's fundamental investigation of the *limes* system did not embrace the southern sector; however, earlier accounts of explorations in this region were included in his major studies. See his "Die Kastelle des arabischen Limes," *Florilegium ou Recueil de travaux d'érudition dédiés à Monsieur le marquis Melchior de Vogüé* (Paris, 1909) 65-77 and *Die Provincia Arabia*, 3 vols. (Strassburg, 1904 - 09) which was co-authored with A. von Domaszewski. The most significant early work for this sector was done by A. Musil, *Arabia Petraea*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1907-08) and *The Northern Hegaz* (New York, 1926). F. Frank, "Aus der Araba I: Reiseberichte," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palaes-*
'Araba II: Römische Kastelle und Strassen,

" *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palaestina-Vereins* 58 (1935 1-59 and "Der südliche Endabschnitt der römischen Strasse von Bostra nach Aila," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palaestina-Vereins* 59 (1936) 92-111 provide the basic discussion of the fortified *via nova* in the south. All of the forts outlined by them were included in Parker's survey with the exception of Humeima.

3. N. Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine II*, *AASOR* 14-15 (1934-35) and *Exploration in Eastern Palestine III*, *AASOR* 18-19 (1937-39), and later, A. Kirkbride and G. L. Harding, "Hasma," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 79 (1947) 7-26, made reference in their surveys to several Nabatean or Roman forts and watchtowers east of the *via nova* which were not included in the earlier work on the *limes* system or by subsequent investigators.

several substantial contributions from interested friends. To all of these organizations and individuals I would like to express my thanks.

The actual survey took place from June 4 to 10, 1978, with myself as the director; additional staff consisted of Mohammed A. Darwish, the official representative of the Department of Antiquities, and James A. Armstrong of the University of Chicago as associate and driver. Dr. James A. Sauer, director of ACOR, served as the ceramic typologist and was of immeasurable aid in making preparation for the survey, for which I am deeply indebted. In addition, G. Lankester Harding and the American Ambassador, Thomas R. Pickering, gave helpful and illuminating counsel on several matters. Finally, grateful recognition must be made of the Department of Antiquities' staff at Petra and the camel corps at the Wadi Ram police post for their generous hospitality during our stay there.

Description of the Project

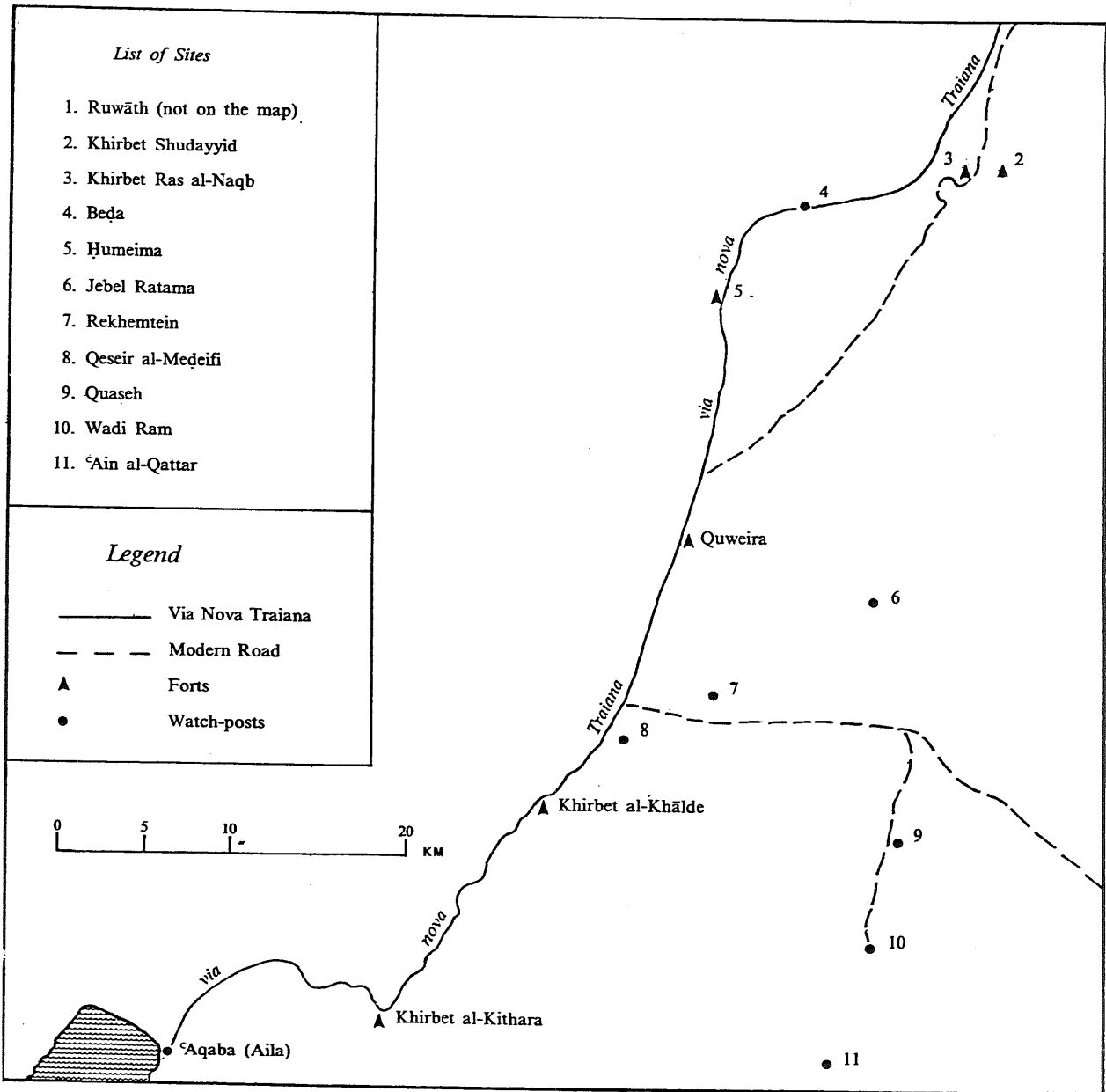
With the exception of Ruwāth all of the sites selected for the survey were in the Hisma desert. This area extends from the al-Shera escarpment in the north to the borders of Saudi Arabia in the south, and stretches west to the Wadi 'Arabah and east as far as al-Mudawwara. An excellent and breathtaking view of the region can be gained from the heights of Ras al-Naqb, where the extensive sandy plains and mud-flats some 2,000 feet beneath can be seen for miles, broken up only by majestic outcrops of reddish-brown and yellowish-white sandstone mountains, marked by centuries of weathering and erosion. Precipitation in this area averages

4.G. L. Harding, *Some Thamudic inscriptions from the Hashimite Kingdom of the Jordan* (Leiden, 1952).

less than 100 mm. per annum and at Wadi Ram less than 40 mm. As a consequence, agriculture is drastically restricted, although bedouin could be seen working in the fields in a number of places during our visit.

The procedure in the examination of the sites was fourfold. The architectural and physical features of each military structure were first studied and carefully recorded. Secondly, ceramic and surface finds were collected for analysis later in Amman at ACOR. Some 1,113 sherds were taken from 11 different sites with approximately a hundred of these being retained for their diagnostic value. The number of sherds collected from each site depended on the circumstances. From those rich in surface finds like Humeima, only a sample was taken; at other sites like 'Ain al-Qattar and Quaseh in the Wadi Ram, where lengthy combing of the area yielded only a few sherds, every piece was carefully kept. Thirdly, a topographical analysis was made of the environs of each site to determine the sources of water supply for the settlement as well as the strategical relationship the structure may have had to adjacent forts and watchtowers in the *limes* system. Finally, a search was made among the ruins, nearby boulders, and the mountain sides of the vicinity for any inscriptions or drawings which might provide additional evidence of the occupants of the site. Of primary interest were the pre-Islamic Thamudic graffiti, several hundred of which G. Lankester Harding had copied in exemplary and meticulous fashion from the soft sandstone surfaces of the mountains in Wadi Ram and elsewhere in the Hisma more than thirty years ago.⁴ Although these are generally

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interpreted as the product of caravans and cameleers engaged in commercial traffic, the Thamudic tribes are also known to have served as auxiliary forces in the Roman army from the third century into Byzantine times.⁵ Traces of their graffiti in proximity to any of the military structures in this region may then be understood as possible evidence that they had garrisoned the watchposts which guarded the routes and valleys which intersected the *via nova*.

The purpose of this report is to summarize briefly the results of the survey and make some tentative historical observations of their importance for our knowledge of the Nabatean/Roman/Byzantine pattern of defense in southern Jordan. A later publication will present in detail the ceramic evidence and surface finds of each site with a complete analysis of the related literary and documentary material. It should also be stressed that a fully comprehensive survey of the Hismā is a still needed, a study similar to that produced for the Wadi Ram in recent years.⁶ It is hoped that this survey, far from exhaustive, may serve as the stimulus for such an enterprise in the near future.

Catalogue of the Sites

5. See my study of "The Saracens and the Defense of the Arabian Frontier," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 299 (1978) 1-26.

6. Besides the survey of Kirbride and Harding, there have been a number of other investigations of the Wadi Ram. See Diana Kirkbride, "Le temple Nabatéen de Ramm. Son évolution architecturale," *Revue Biblique* 67 (1960) 65-92 and "Chronique archéologique," 230-239; N. P. Stanley Price and A. N. Garrard, "A Prehistoric Site in the Rum Area of the Hisma," *ADAJ* 20 (1975) 91-93; and E. Borzatti von Löwenstern and G. Pinna, *Wadi Rum* (Milan, 1977). In spite of these efforts, mostly

Listed below are the sites included in the survey with a brief description of the nature of the ruins, a tabulation of the ceramic and surface finds, and occasionally a few explanatory comments and remarks. The abbreviations used are as follows: E - early; L - late; UD - undetermined; B - Bronze; Ir - Iron I; Ir² - Iron II; Nab - Nabatean; R - Roman; Byz - Byzantine; Mam - Mamluk. As much as possible, the system of Parker has been retained for the sake of convenience and comparison.

1. *Ruwāth*. These ruins were in a jumbled state, encroached upon by the modern settlement. Ceramic sample 105; tabulation - 8 EB, 1 UD perhaps Ir¹⁻², 1 Nab, 14 Byz, 38 Mam. This site is located about 20 km. north of Shobak on the road to Tafila and just about 3 km. southeast of Buseirah (ancient Bosra, the capital of the Edomites). Although not in the Hisma, the site was included in the survey because of its proposal as the location of Robatha, an unidentified garrison of *Palestina salutaris* or *tertia* known from Byzantine sources.⁷ It was of interest also because of the similarity of the ancient and modern names with the Thamudic tribe, Rubatu/Robathoi.⁸ Although some Byzantine directed towards pre-historic and pre-Roman remains, it may still be said that "The Roman desert patrol is more clearly visible in the north than in the south" of the province, as was observed by G.W. Bowersock in his important study, "A Report on Arabia Provincia," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971) 219-242, at 241.

7. As suggested by R. Hartmann, "Materialien zur historischen Topographie der Palaestina tertia," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palaestina-Vereins* 36 (1913) 100-112 and 180-198 at 183-184.

8. See Graf, *BASOR* 229 (1978) 10 for the references and bibliography.

pottery was found, the results must be regarded as inconclusive.

2. *Khirbet Shudayyid*. A badly ruined fort previously surveyed by Glueck. Ceramic sample 92; tabulation - 17 UD perhaps Ir¹⁻², 6Ir², 23 Nab, 2 UD; hills below fort to the south - 19 UD perhaps Ir¹⁻², 3 Ir², 15 Nab, 2 LR, 1 Modern, 4 UD, and 1 broken flint.

3. *Khirbet Ras al-Naqb*. A settlement just west of Shudayyid which was designated by Glueck as Fuweilah. Ceramic sample 87; tabulation - 19 Nab. Most of this settlement was destroyed by British road work during World War II; the old fort, once located near the modern rest station, was used as a stone quarry during the same operations, and nothing remains.

4. *Beda*. A settlement just west of Qa' al-Naqb on the desert track leading to Humeima; the broken milestones and stretches of the pavement of the old Roman road are still visible, (Pl. XLV) although the aqueduct leading from 'Ain al-Qana to the valley area observed by Musil and Frank was not sighted. Ceramic finds 50; tabulation - 12 Nab.

5. *Humeima*. The ruins of the military camp and settlement are still clearly visible; large reservoirs are located both inside and outside the walls of the fort. (Pl. XLVI,1). Ceramic sample 357, tabulation - 78 Nab, 34 LR, 49 Byz. A small fragmented piece of the base of a Roman glass bottle and traces of a badly deteriorated and indecipherable inscription were found inside the fort walls. (Pl. XLVI,2).

6. *Jebel Ratama*. A small caravan post located about 10 km. east of Quweira; no

9. R. Savignac and G. Horsfield, "Le Temple de Ramm," *Revue Biblique* 44 (1935) 245-278, esp. 258-261, discovered a Latin inscription and a Roman bronze coin in the temple area, perhaps to be dated

traces were found of the makeshift observation post observed by Harding. Ceramic finds 13; tabulation - 1 UD perhaps Ir¹⁻², Ir², 11 Nab.

7. *Rekhemtein*. A small watchpost located just north of several small mountains with a clear view of the plain leading to Quweirah. Ceramic sample 79; tabulation - 29 Nab. Thamudic inscriptions have been recorded at nearby Hadbet al-Hamra, but only some (Thamudic?) animal drawings appear at Rekhemtein.

8. *Qeseir al-Medeifi*. Two small watchposts were observed by Harding at the junction of the Wadi Mersed and Wadi Yitm; the one in the plain was not located and the ruins of the other have been used in a new structure on the small hill at the junction. Ceramic sample 117; tabulation - 31 Nab, 2 LR.

9. *Quaseh*. A small watchpost located near the old rest house in the Wadi Ram. Ceramic finds 15; tabulation 14 Ir², 1 Nab.

10. *Wadi Ram*. An ancient settlement located just west of the modern police post; previous excavations at the site had revealed Roman remains and perhaps some Byzantine pottery.⁹ Ceramic sample 191; tabulation - 1 Ir², 63 Nab. The area abounds in Thamudic inscriptions, most of which have been recorded by Harding.

11. *Ain al-Qattar*. The small watchpost referred to by Harding at the southern end of the valley was not discernible in a determined search of the area although a circle of stones, one of which with strange markings, was discovered nearby. Ceramic finds 2; tabulation - 2 Nab.

to the time of Marcus Aurelius in the second century. For possible Late Roman/Byzantine sherds from Wadi Ram, see Kirkbride, *Revue Biblique* 67 (1960) 71-73.

Historical Observations

The following sketch of the occupational history and developments in the Hisma during the Roman period must be considered provisional as any conclusions based mostly on surface evidence are somewhat precarious and hazardous. Just how misleading arguments from silence can be is well illustrated by the results of two sites of the survey where literary and epigraphic evidence confute the ceramic finds. The first is Humeima, familiar from later Arabic sources as an Abassid center, where no Islamic sherds were picked up from the extensive settlement. The other is Wadi Ram, where the pottery finds which indicate the absence of any Roman presence are belied by the evidence of previous excavations at the site. Although these words of caution about the interpretation of any gaps in occupation cannot be emphasized too strongly, there are certain positive implications about the survey which can be highlighted.

During the period of Nabatean control of the Hisma, a number of forts and watchposts appear to have been constructed to protect the settlements in the region and caravan traffic coming from North Arabia and 'Aqaba to the center of the kingdom at Petra. The occupation of this desert area is a tribute to Nabatean ingenuity and engineering skill in conserving the small amount of rainfall and water which exists in the region, but is perhaps also attributable to their predecessors in southern Jordan. At least the small amounts of Iron II Edomite ware found at Wadi Ram, Quaseh, and Jebel Ratama suggest that the desert tracks leading to the plateau were previously utilized if not settled. At any rate, by the end of the first century the Nabateans had established a somewhat loose but

impressive defensive system in the Hisma which would later form the basis for the Roman *limes* along the southeastern frontier of the empire.

After the annexation of Arabia in 106, a major road was constructed called the *via nova Traiana* which connected the important port of Aila on the gulf of 'Aqaba with the capital of the new province at Bosra near the borders of Syria. In the Hisma, this route joined together a number of the Nabatean fortified settlements and caravanseries into roadstations, each separated by about 20 km. In addition to Khirbet al-Kithara, Khirbet al-Khaldé, and Quweira, all of which Parker's survey indicated were occupied early in the second century, Humeima and the small watchpost at Qeseir al-Medeifi may now be added to the Nabatean sites incorporated into the defensive system. On the other hand, the more remote and outlying Nabatean outposts at Rekhemtein and in the Wadi Ram do not appear to have ever been garrisoned by the Roman military. What is significant about these results is that there is then no evidence of any later effort to extend or expand the frontier defense into the desert east of the Trajanic road. In contrast to the north of the province, the military reforms of Diocletian and Constantine did not even witness the construction of any new forts in the area. Throughout Roman and Byzantine times the fortified posts along the *via nova* apparently constituted the essential framework of the *limes* system in the Hisma.

This does not preclude the control of the desert east of the Trajanic road by the Nabateans themselves, perhaps even as regular *auxilia* of the Roman army. It seems increasingly clear that they played such a role in the caravan traffic through the desert regions

of the Sinai and Egypt in the second and third centuries.¹⁰ Since our understanding of the chronology and development of Nabatean pottery is also still in its elementary stages, it is possible that some of the Nabatean sherds collected in the vicinity of Wadi Ram, Rekhemtein and Jebel Ratama may represent similar activity in the Hisma during the same period.¹¹ In addition, if the conclusions drawn from the Thamudic graffiti scattered along these routes is correct, the Arab tribes of the Hejaz gradually replaced the Nabateans as the guardians and protectors of caravan traffic in this area during the third century.

This utilization of indigenous forces for the defense of the more desolate regions of the frontier was the characteristic pattern elsewhere along the desert borders of the empire in North Africa and the Near East. Nevertheless, it may still be argued that outlying posts in the Hisma east of the *via nova* existed in Roman and Byzantine times. Although this is in my opinion less likely, neither view can be substantiated until the region has been subjected to a more thorough and comprehensive investigation than it has thusfar received.

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10. For Egypt see E. Littmann and D. Meredith, "Nabatean Inscriptions from Egypt," *London University, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 15 (1953) 1-28 and 16 (1954) 24-46. Although caravan traffic, mining activities, pastoral migrations and pilgrimages may explain the majority of the Nabatean inscription in the Sinai, some may have been produced by Nabatean soldiers in the Roman army on service in the area. See G. W. Ahlström, "A Nabatean inscription from Wadi Makatteb, Sinai," in *Ex orbe religionum, studia Geo Widengren, part i; Studies in the History of Religion* vol. 21 (Leiden, 1972) 323-331 and A. Negev, *The Inscriptions of Wadi Haggag, Sinai*, in *Qedem, Monographs of the Institute of Archaeology* 6 (Jerusalem, 1977), esp.

62-67

11. For recent treatments of the sequence of Nabatean pottery see P. J. Parr, "A sequence of pottery from Petra," *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. J. A. Sanders (Garden City, New York, 1970) 348-381; Philips C. Hammond, "Pottery from Petra," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 105 (1973) 27-49; and A. Negev and R. Sivan, "The Pottery of the Nabatean Necropolis at Mafsis," in *Rei Cretariae Romanae Fautorum Acta XVII XVIII* (1977) 109-131. A general discussion is provided by K. Schmitt-Korte, "Die bemalte nabatäische Keramik: Verbreitung, Typologie und Chronologie," in *Petra und das Königreich der Nabatäer*, ed. M. Lindner (Nürnberg, 1974) 70-93.