

THE CENTRAL LIMES ARABICUS PROJECT: THE 1980 CAMPAIGN

by
Thomas Parker

I. Introduction

In 1976 the first comprehensive survey of the Roman fortified frontier in Jordan (the *Limes Arabicus*) was conducted. This survey indicated that a major military buildup occurred ca. A.D. 300.¹ This significant strengthening of the frontier included the construction of many new fortifications; most of these new posts were built in the central sector of the frontier, roughly the area east of the Dead Sea. This sector of the Arabian frontier remained well fortified for about two centuries. Then, in the late 5th and 6th centuries, most of these forts were abandoned (see figs. 1 and 2 for the frontier ca. 300; figs. 3 and 4 for frontier ca. 550). The purpose of the Central Limes Arabicus Project is to understand the nature and cause of both the massive military buildup of ca. 300 and the apparent withdrawal about two centuries later. Five biennial campaigns are planned between 1980 and 1988. The first campaign consisted of full scale excavations at the Roman legionary camp at el-Lejjūn, limited soundings of two ancillary fortifications (the *castellum* of Khirbet el-Fityan and the watchtowers at Rujm Beni Yasser), local survey of the area surrounding Lejjūn, and a regional survey of the desert region beyond the frontier (east of al-Qatrana).

¹ S. Thomas Parker, "Archaeological Survey of Limes Arabicus: A Preliminary Report," *ADAJ* 21 (1976) 19-31; "Towards a History of the Limes Arabicus," in W. S. Hanson and L. J. F. Neppie (eds.), *Roman Frontier Studies 1979* (Oxford: British Archae-

The project received the institutional sponsorship of the American Schools of Oriental Research and was aided by its affiliate in Amman, the American Center of Oriental Research. A permit was kindly granted by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. The author wishes to thank Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Director of the Department, and Dr. James A. Sauer, Director of A.C.O.R., for their cooperation and assistance. Major funding for the initial season was generously provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Other funds were obtained from junior staff camp fees and several private donors. The author is grateful to all for their support. A staff of ca. 30 and ca. 50 workmen conducted a six week season in 1980, from July 7 to August 17. Senior field staff included S. Thomas Parker as director, Bert DeVries as architect, Frank L. Koucky as geologist and director of the survey, Vincent A. Clark as Semitic epigrapher and leader of the desert survey team, Scott Rolston as human osteologist and photographer, Michael Toplyn as faunal osteologist, and Faul M. McDermott as classical epigrapher. Area supervisors were Anne S. Haeckl (Area A, the Lejjūn *principia*), Jennifer Groot (Area B, the Lejjūn barracks), Charles Blake Wilson (Area C, the Lejjūn enclosure wall), Suzanne Richard (Area D, Khir-

ological Reports, 1980) 865-878. The final report on the survey, *The Historical Development of the Limes Arabicus*, has been completed and will be published by the American Schools of Oriental Research.

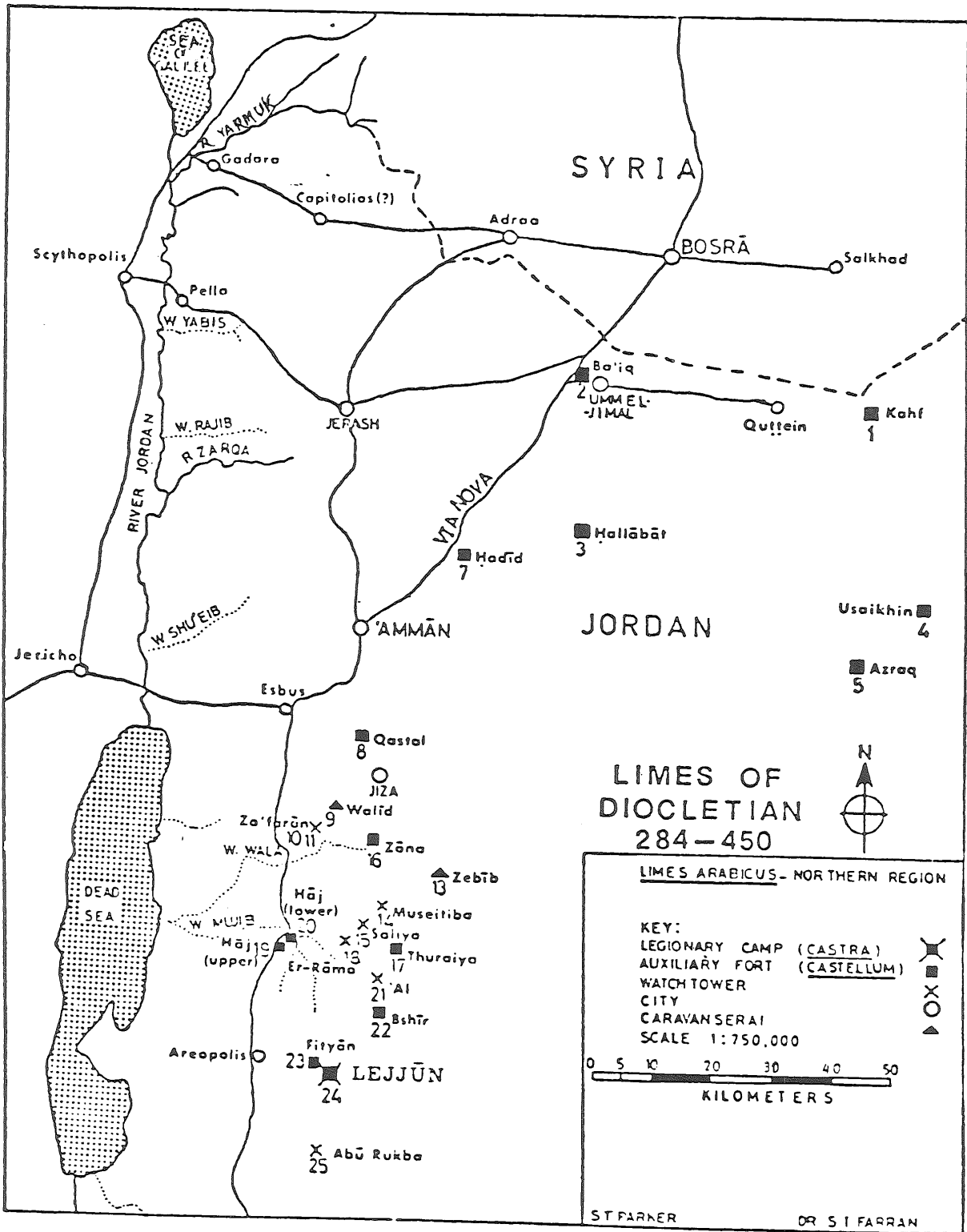


Fig. 1

bet el-Fityān), Joanne Bloom (Area E, Rujm Beni Yasser), and Scott Rolston (Area F, the cemetery).² Nabil Beqa'in served as the representative of the Department of Antiquities.

II. Results

Three areas were opened within the legionary camp of Lejjūn, probably the base of *legio IV Martia*. Area A, consisting of three large squares within the *principia* or headquarters building of the legion, was designed to elucidate the architectural plan of this large structure (64 x 41 m.). An impressive subsidiary entrance through the southern wall of the *principia* was excavated in square A.1. To the west of this entrance two of the three apses noted by Brünnow and von Domaszewski were uncovered in A.1. and A.2. These apses, which were floored by a flagstone pavement, may have served as *scholae* or officers' clubs. In A.3 a portion of the *aedes* or shrine of the legionary standards was excavated, including the ca. 3 m. wide doorway. The threshold block was cut by eight cup-like depressions (four at either end of the threshold), most of which were filled with iron and lead fittings, perhaps the remnant of a barred iron gate or grill. All three squares provided evidence of a Late Byzantine I-II (ca. 500-550) occupation of the *principia*, characterized by slipshod architectural alterations, beaten earth surfaces, ash pits, and numerous animal bones. This suggests that the latest use of the building was a domestic squatter occupation following the withdrawal or disappearance of the legion.

The purpose of Area B was to investigate one of the major barracks blocks in the eastern sector of the camp. Block B consists of a central spine wall with 18 pairs of rooms along either side. Squares B.1, B.2, B.3, and B.4 were laid out to include four pairs of rooms south of the spine wall. The best stratified occupational evidence came from B.1, which may have served as the quarters of a centurion. The northern room of B.1 was roofed originally by a series of three limestone arches connected by long basalt slabs. The collapse of two of these arches was followed by the laying of a thick fill of *huwwar* and dung which averaged 0.75 m. in depth. This fill served as leveling for a *huwwar* floor. Resting on this floor was a vast amount of Late Byzantine I-II pottery (early 6th century); large storage jars were the predominate form. Four whole lamps were also found in this room, which apparently served as a storeroom in the final phase of the camp's occupation. The collapse of the third arch about the middle of the 6th century, perhaps as the result of an earthquake, effectively sealed this material. The discovery of a small hoard of seven bronze coins from the fill beneath the floor should provide more refined dating for the beginning of this occupational phase.

Area C was an 8 x 2 m. trench through the main enclosure wall of the camp. The purpose of this trench was to reveal the method of construction of this wall and to recover dating evidence for the erection of the enclosure wall and thus for the camp as a whole. Squares C.1 and C.2 reached the foundations of the wall on both its north and south faces. The wall proved to be 2.40 m. in thickness and was preserved to a Fenske, Joy McCorriston, Robert Schick, Jennifer Shalinsky, Laurie Tiede, and several part-time staff members.

² Junior Staff included Julian Bowsher, Aline Carriere, Danielle Chouet, Ian Cowan, Laurette DeVeaux, Susan Downey, Janis Fukuhara-Dyke, Mary

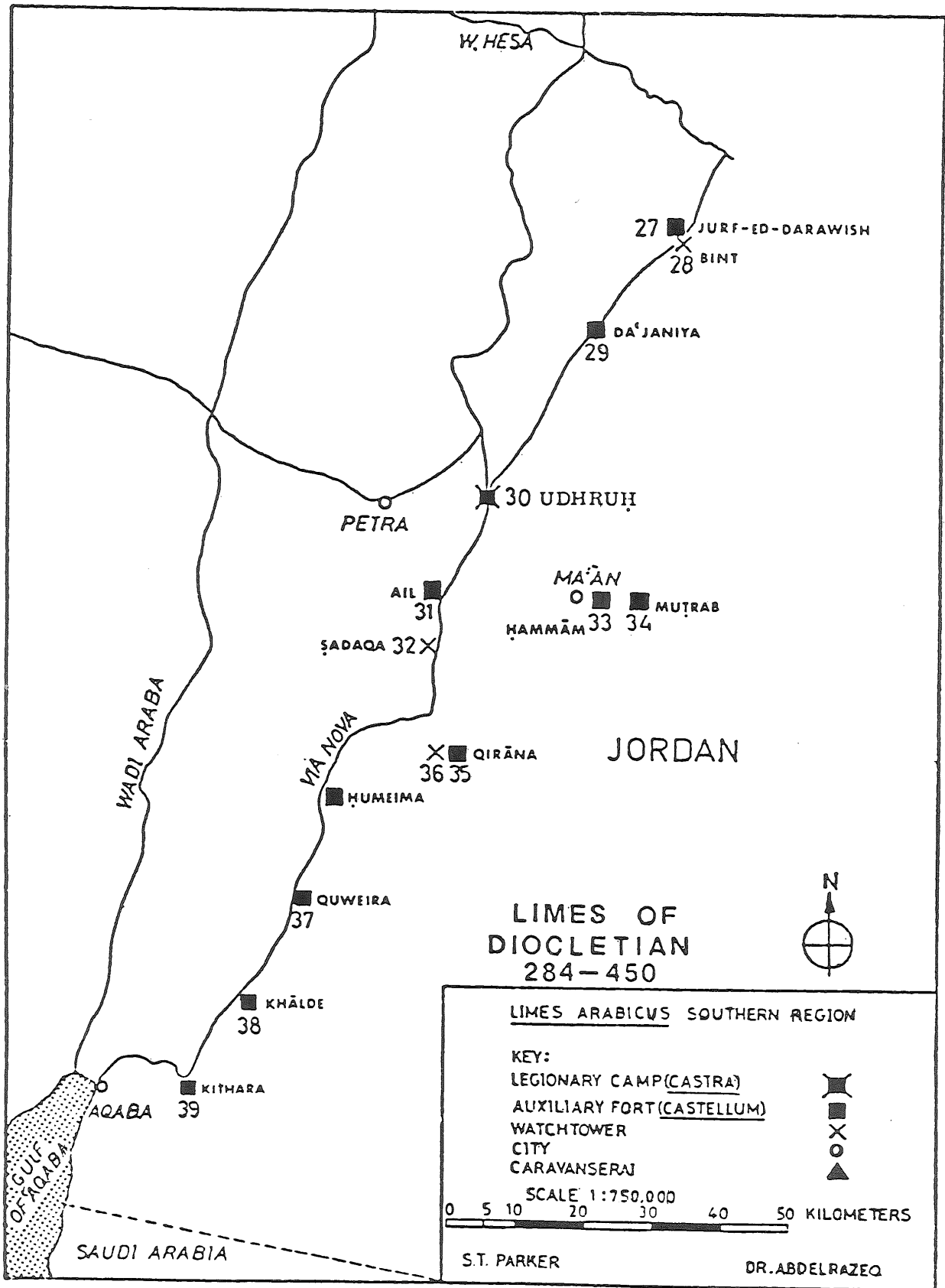


Fig. 2

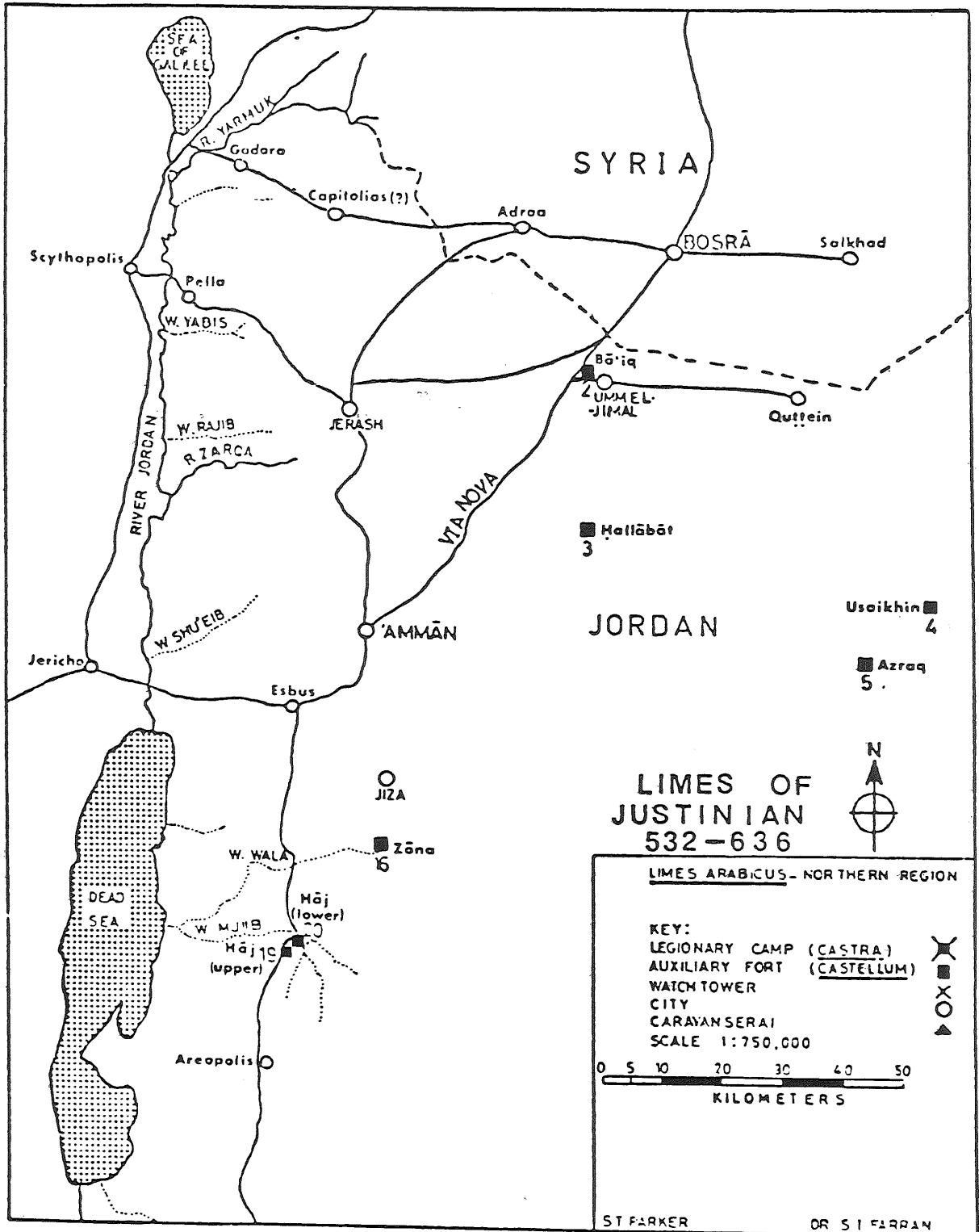


Fig. 3

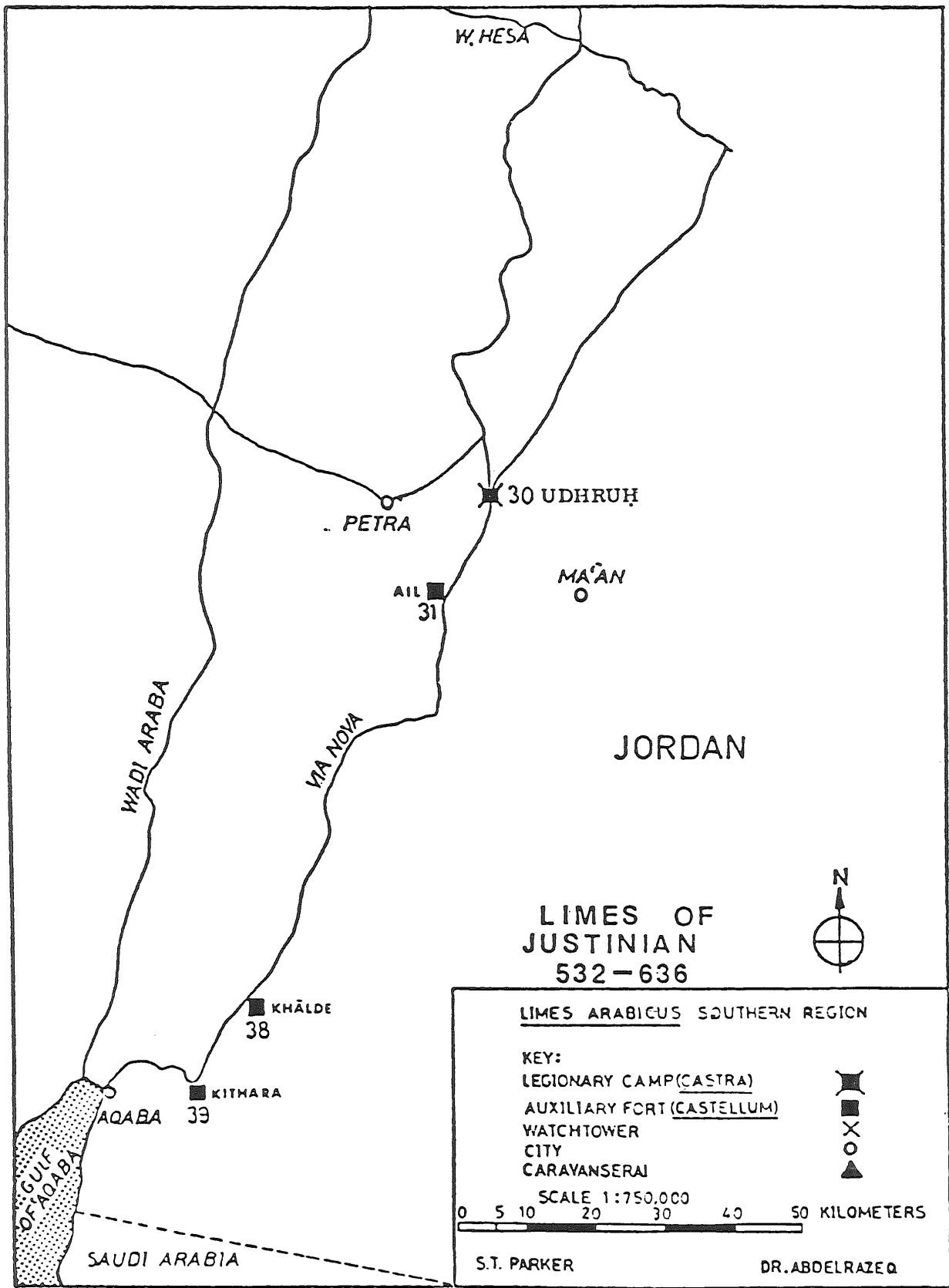


Fig. 4
 — 176 —

height of five courses. Beneath the coursed masonry was a massive foundation of smaller, more roughly cut blocks another two m. in depth. This foundation was laid into a very narrow trench cut into sterile soil. After the foundations were exposed the wall itself was dismantled and yielded significant amounts of pottery and glass. Preliminary analysis of the pottery suggests a Late Roman IV date (ca. A.D. 300) for the construction of the enclosure wall.

Soundings at Khirbet el-Fityān (Area D), a *castellum* ca. 75 m. square located two kms. northwest of Lejjun, confirmed that the principal occupation of this site was contemporary with the main legionary camp. Square D.1 unearthed the main gateway, flanked by twin projecting towers, on the north wall. The western tower contained a staircase leading to an upper story. Smaller postern gates, not noticed by earlier investigators, were located in both the east and west walls. Squares D.2 and D.3 revealed two rooms of a barracks block within the fort. The walls of the rooms rested upon a Late Roman IV floor and are probably of the same date. The barracks continued to be occupied into the Early Byzantine period (ca. 325-500), but no trace of Late Byzantine occupation was found.

A series of soundings was also conducted at Rujm Beni Yasser (Area E). This site, located atop a hill 1½ kms. east of the main camp, served as the hub of a complex signaling and observation system that extended towards the desert to the east. The site consists of two watch towers on the eastern and western ends of the hill, connected by an enclosure wall. Ranges of rooms are located along both the north and south walls. The towers and walls thus sur-

round an interior courtyard. Excavation established that the eastern tower and the rooms along the southern enclosure wall are of Early Roman (Nabatean) date. The western tower seems to have been built in the Late Roman IV period when the main camp was built in the valley below. Occupation of the complex continued into the Early Byzantine period but, like Khirbet el-Fityān, there was no evidence of Late Byzantine occupation.

Area F was opened on a gypsum hill southeast of the camp in order to find an ancient cemetery contemporaneous with the legionary camp. Several shaft tombs were located. The pottery from this area was exclusively Late Roman and Early Byzantine, but no undisturbed tombs were found due to the presence of later bedouin graves.

Survey of the vicinity of Lejjūn revealed traces of two water channels that connected the spring in the Wadi Lejjūn with the main camp. Further to the east, along the northern bank of the wadi, a series of three mills and a well preserved masonry dam were found. These mills and the dam are connected by a well preserved roadway and are probably contemporary with the legionary camp.

The survey of the desert region east of Qatrana was designed to locate any outlying posts east of the *limes* and to recover some evidence about the nomadic opponents of the Romans. The survey team, working under the direction of Vincent Clark in late April and early May, located some 50 sites in all. Most of these seem to have been campsites although several outlying watchtowers were found. Many of these sites were occupied in the Early Roman

and Early Byzantine periods but there was practically no trace of Late Roman occupation in this region.

III. Conclusion

In general it seems that the historical conclusions drawn from the 1976 survey regarding the archaeological history of Lejjūn and its environs have been confirmed. The legionary camp and the fort of Khirbet el-Fityān both seem to have been constructed about A.D. 300. The watchtower complex at Rujm Beni Yasser, originally a Nabatean foundation, was reoccupied and the western tower was added about this time. All three sites were probably garrisoned by troops of *legio IV Martia* and remained occupied into the Early Byzantine period. By 500 both Fityan and Yasser were permanently abandoned. An early 6th century squatter occupation of portions of the main camp suggests that the legion itself may have been disbanded or with-

drawn, perhaps as a result of Justinian's reduction of the eastern frontier forces following the conclusion of the Eternal Peace with Persia in 532.³ A mid 6th century earthquake may have ended this lingering occupation. The site lay abandoned until the Late Ottoman settlement was established just prior to the First World War, perhaps about 1910.

The second season of the Central Limes Arabicus Project is planned for 1982. Work will continue in the *principia* and barracks. A major building in the *vicus*, or civilian settlement outside the walls of the camp, will be examined. Soundings of ancillary sites will continue: the primary objective in 1982 will be Qaşr Bshīr, a well preserved *castellum* ca. 10 kms. northeast of Lejjūn, securely dated to A.D. 306 on the basis of a Latin building inscription still *in situ*. Survey of the desert area east of the frontier will also continue.

S. Thomas Parker
North Carolina State University

³ Procopius, *Secret History*, 24.12ff.