

Roman Monumental Arches in the Near East. Monuments of Civic Representation or Custom Toll Stations?

The monumental arch is one of the most striking architectural features of the Roman Empire (FIG. 1).¹ Developed during the reign of Augustus, rooting in Italian city gate architecture, this specific type of monumental ar-



1. Monumental arch at Beneventum, Italy, dating to the reign of Emperor Trajan. (Photo by the author).

chitecture was not limited to the Italian peninsula but distributed all over the Empire during the first three centuries after the birth of Christ. Thus, the monumental arches have also been adopted in the oriental provinces.

Two examples have been excavated in recent years in Gadara of the Decapolis, modern Umm Qays (FIG. 2).² The reconstructions of the excavated Gadarene structures revealed them as free standing city-gate shaped monuments with barrel-vaulted passageways flanked by towers of circular or horseshoe-shaped plans (FIG. 3). They were located at some distance in front of the urban fortification line not being connected to any wall but raising as solitary street monuments within the ancient cemeteries of the city. Furthermore, these arches marked important traffic points within the street network between the Mediterranean littoral and the fertile plains of southern Syria. An important ancient communication line can be traced running in east-west direction from the harbours of Caesarea Maritima and Akkon to Sepphoris and Tiberias, then following the southern shore of the Galilean lake, crossing the rivers Jordan and Yarmuk west of Gadara. From there, the road follows the northern foothills of the 'Ajlūn mountain range leading to Buṣrā, the administrative center of the Roman Provincia Arabia within the heart of the Ḥawrān plain.

In antiquity, a traveller got acquainted with various those solitary tower-flanked arches in front of the cities: Monuments very similar to those in Gadara have been excavated in the cemeteries of Tyre (FIG. 4)³, and in the southern environs of Tiberias (FIG. 5).⁴ Approaching to Gadara on the road from this Galilean city, one was im-

¹ This paper is based on several public lectures held at the Universities of Mayence and Greifswald, Germany, and at the German Archaeological Institute Damascus in December 9th, 1998. A German version of this article is forwarded for the forthcoming volume of the Saalburg-Jahrbuch (1999).

On the topic of the Roman monumental arches in general s. F. S. Kleiner, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 2, 1989, 185 ff.; H. von Hesberg, in: *Die römische Stadt im 2. Jh. n. Chr. Kolloquium Xanten* (1992) 277 ff.; for the monumental arches in the oriental Provinces: I. Kader, *Propylon und Bogentor*, *Damaszener Forschungen*

VII (1996); C. Arnould, *Les arcs Romains de Jerusalem*, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus XXXV* (1997) 244 ff.

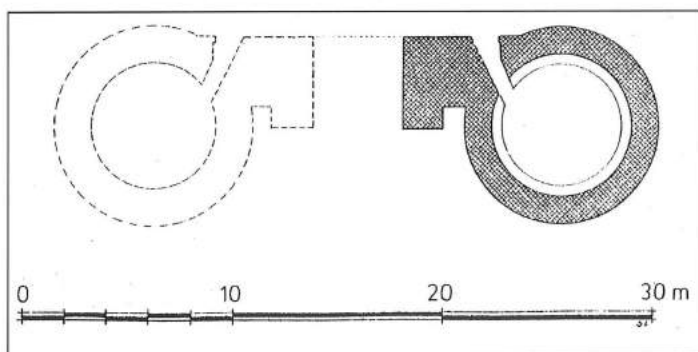
² Th. Weber, *ADAJ* 34, 1990, 325; P. C. Bol - A. Hoffmann - Th. Weber, *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 1990, 204 ff.; 216ff. For the location of the city walls cf. A. Hoffmann, *Nürnberger Blätter zur Archäologie* 12, 1995/96, 34.

³ M. Chéhab, *Bull. Musée Beyrouth* 33, 1983; Kader loc. cit. 165f. with note 1088 (further references).

⁴ Kader loc. cit. 164 with note 1083 (with further references); Arnould loc. cit. 239 ff.



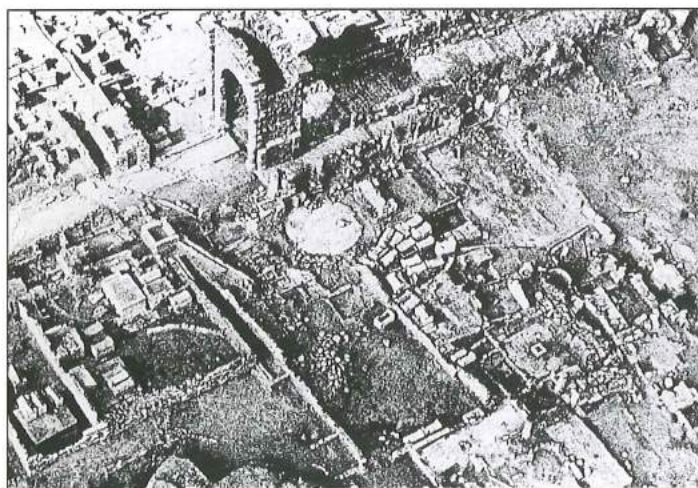
2. Monumental arch at Gadara/ Umm Qays - Jordan. (Photo by the author).



3. Reconstructed plan of the older monumental arch at Gadara/ Umm Qays ("Tiberiade gate"). [After I. Kader, *Propylon und Bogentor* (1996) Fig. 87: 5].



5. Monumental arch with cylindrical towers at Tiberias, Galilee. [After G. Foe, *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (1978) 1174, s.v. Tibrias].



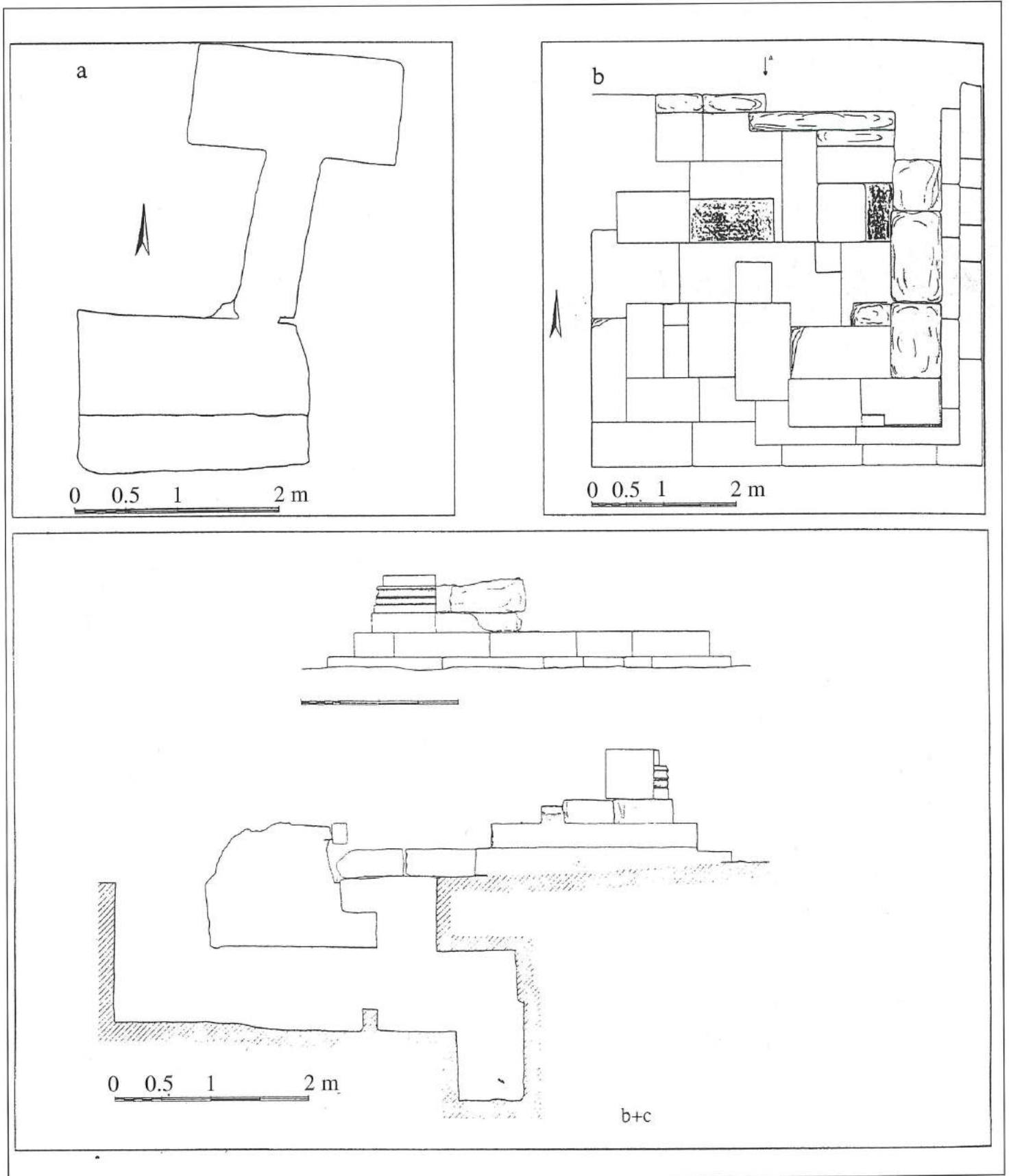
4. Monumental arch with cylindrical towers at Tyre. [After N. Jidejian, *Tyre through the Ages* (1969) Fig. 84].

pressed by the towered arches before entering the fortified settlement quarters. At the eastern border of the territory of Gadara, at the location of al-Manāra, a small tomb monument close to the ancient road was recently uncovered by the Department of Antiquities (FIG. 6).⁵ In the immediate vicinity of this "rujm al-Manāra" richly decorated rounded limestone blocks (FIG. 7) indicate the presence of another city monument consisting of rounded towers.⁶ The Arabic toponym "manāra" means "watch tower" and points to an urban control installation at the eastern frontier of the Gadarene lands. Further east along the same road was probably another monument with round towers. In the western necropolis of Buṣrā the

with the columns and capitals, above which run a cornice and an architrave, would render it probable that we have here either the remains of a small temple or else a watch-tower at the frontier for the collection of toll".

⁵ T. Weber and U. Hübner, *ADAJ* 43, 1998, 452f. Abb. 9a-c.

⁶ G. Schumacher, *Northern Ajlun - within the Decapolis* (1890) 103 f.: "Rujm Menāra - A small square ruined tower on the Roman high road from Umm Keis to the Haurān, situated near Ibdar. Its elevated position, its extraordinary large and well hewn building stones,



6. Al-Manāra, ground plan and elevation of the Rujm. [After O. Hammuri and U. Denis, *ADAJ* 42 (1998) 454 Fig. 9 a-c].



7. Al-Manāra, rujm: Rounded ornamented block belonging to an older circular monument. (Photo by the author).

Princeton University Expedition reported an isolated cylindrical tower (FIG. 8),⁷ which has recently been identified as a part of a Roman arch by Ingeborg Kader.⁸

Free standing gate monuments are testified also in other cities east of Jordan, such as the Hadrianic arch in the southern outskirts of Gerasa,⁹ spanning over the ancient road leading to Philadelphia. Here again, the presence of two accessible flanking pavillons is remarkable: They could not have any military purpose due to the lack of walls and to their well decorated facades. Reviewing the examples at Gadara, Tiberias, Tyre and Gerasa, such flanking towers are characteristic for the oriental arches giving them an impressive appearance. Regarding this specific architectural feature one may raise the question of the function of those towered monuments within the ancient urban community.

An interpretation of the peculiar phenomenon of “decorative” towers was first proposed by Paul Zanker.¹⁰ He was puzzled by the fact that many Italian cities rebuilt their fortifications during the first decades of the principate of Emperor Augustus, during a period when peace, the Pax Romana, was officially proclaimed in the political propaganda. Although there was no actual threat by internal or foreign enemies, these cities often received considerable funds by the imperial house in order to renovate their enclosure walls. In this period, especially the richly decorated city gates were enforced by towers which were no more dedicated to military purposes. The Porta Palatina (FIG. 9)¹¹ of north-Italian Torino was erected in 28 BC. Reinforced by high polygonal towers in brick masonry it gives the impression of military strength while the

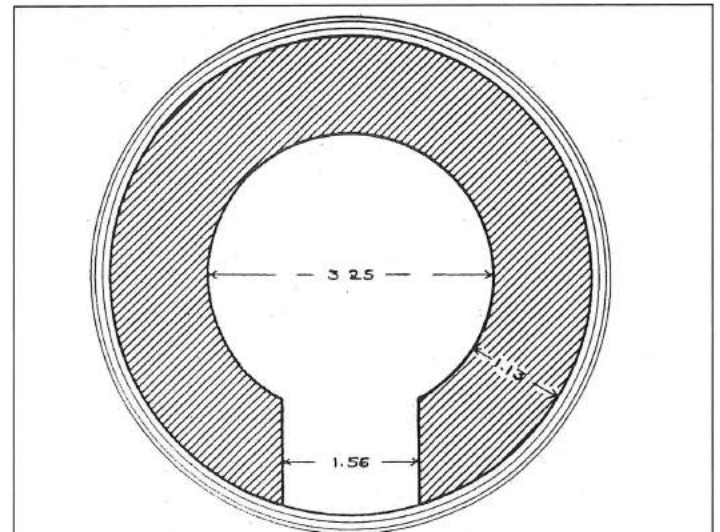
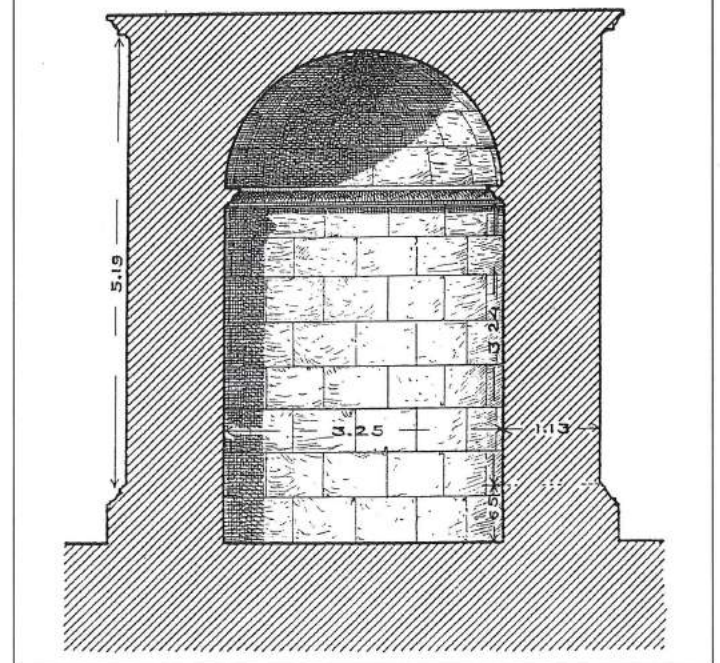


Fig. 867. Bosrā: Grabturm — Grundriß.



8. Buṣrā, western necropolis, rounded tower. [After R. Brünnow and A. von Domszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia* III (1909) 3f.].

passages with their double-storeyed window galleries have a more palace-shaped appearance. The Augustean gate of Nîmes in southern France (FIG. 10)¹² has entirely lost its military character introducing a colonnaded architecture at both facades. Zanker assumed that these representative towered gates served for the civic self-representation. In this consequence, he saw the towered city gates as docu-

⁷ R. Brünnow and A. v. Domszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia* III (1909) 3 f.; H. C. Butler, in: *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1904-1905, and 1909*, Sect. A 4 (1914) 277 f. Fig. 244-245.

⁸ Kader loc. cit. (note 1) 163 note 1071.

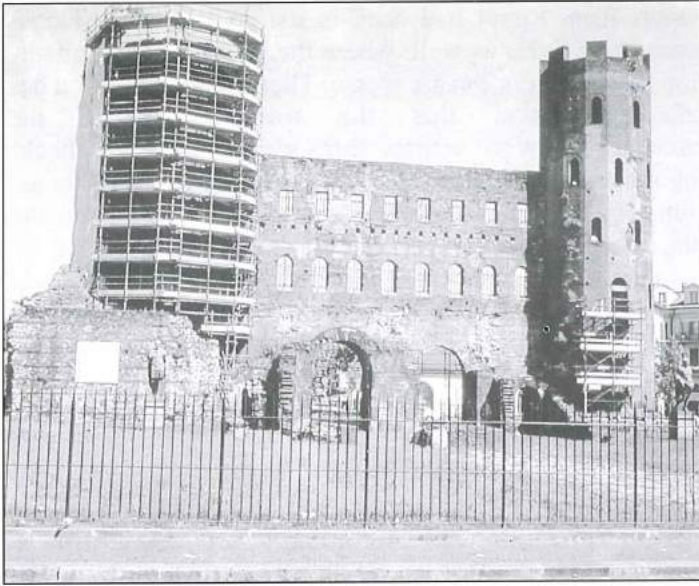
⁹ A. H. Detweiler, in: C. Kraeling, *Gerasa - City of the Decapolis*

(1938) 73 ff. esp. 81 ff.; R. G. Khouri, *Jerash - a Frontier City of the Roman East* (1986) 46f.

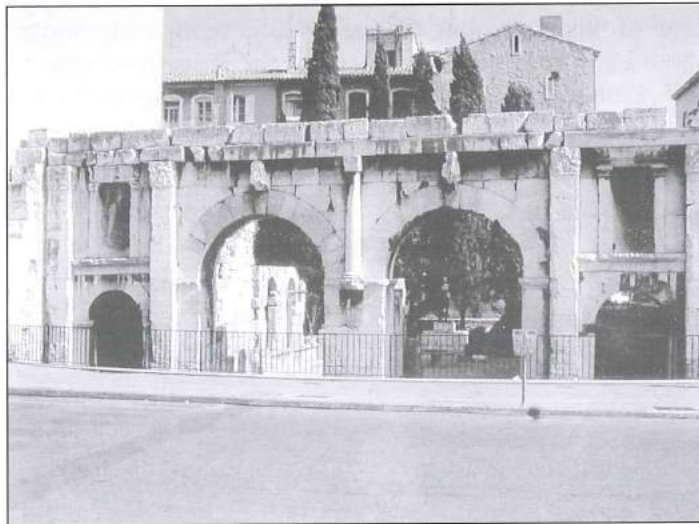
¹⁰ *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder* (1990) 323 f.

¹¹ H. Kaehler, *Jahrb. Deutsches Arch. Institut* 57, 1942, 5 Fig. 1; 101f.

¹² Kaehler loc. cit. 70 f. Fig. 60-61; 96 ff.



9. Torino, Porta Palatina. (Photo by V. Hübner).



10. Nîmes, Porte d'Auguste. (Photo by author).

ments of a revived political confidence of the urban community. In the western provinces of the Empire the towered gates were symbols to indicate the urban character of the settlement. Following Zanker's interpretation, Ingeborg Kader¹³ evaluated the oriental example of the Roman arch monuments as indicators of the process of Romanization which started after the occupation of Pompey, reaching its first peak in the years of Herod and Augustus. According to her view, the towered arches of the Decapolis are to be taken as allegoric emblems of a "new urban quality achieved during the reign of Augustus". In a recent study, C. Arnould¹⁴ attributed to the towers of the

arches no more than "valeur symbolique" resulting from an "acte de prestige".

Against this point of view, one could argue that the passages of arches and the towers certainly served for a specific purpose in everyday life. In the interiors of the towers, staircases give access to upper storages, possibly to the attic of the monument where statues of the Emperor or of urban notables were shown. Further, the doors of the towers have thresholds with traces of lockable wings. The central and lateral passageways of the Hadriatic arch in Gerasa preserve hinges in the door-cases (FIG. 11).¹⁵ Peculiar enough, not only the towers but also the passages of the solitary monument could be closed for passenger and car traffic. How can this fact be explained?

A possible solution for the problem is gained by papyrology: The dry sands of Egypt preserved some hundreds of custom receipts (FIG. 12)¹⁶ referring to the taxation during the transport of merchandise goods. All these paper bills start with the hand-written Greek formula "τελω-νεῖται δια πύλης" which indicated that customs had to be paid while passing through the gate. Always, following this formula the location of the toll post is named. Further, the carrier is mentioned, the type of taxation, the medium of transport (carriage, animal) and the article of merchandise. Reference is made on these papers if the goods are for export or import and to which amount they were cleared. At the end of the receipt the custom clearance is dated and signed by an official stamp. Also in ancient Palestine, customs had to be declared at gates since relevant references are to be found in the literary tradition (II Reg



11. Gerasa, Hadriatic arch, detail of the door-hinges in the passage-ways. (Photo by Th. Reiss).

¹³ Kader loc. cit. (note 1) 174 ff.

¹⁴ ZDPV 114, 1998. 181.

¹⁵ Detweiler loc. cit. (note 9) 79 f.

¹⁶ P. J. Sijpestejin, *Custom Duties in Greco-Roman Egypt* (1987); W. Habermann, *Münsterische Beiträge zur antiken Handelsgeschichte* 9, 1990, 50 ff. note 1 (further references).



12. Custom receipt from Soknupaios Nesos, Egypt. Aberdeen, University Library. [After P. J. Sijpesteijn, *Customs Duties in Greco-Roman Egypt* (1987)].

7, 1; Midrasch Psalm 118, 18).¹⁷ The interpretation of the solitary arches in the orient as custom stations is further supported by a reference of the Arab author al-Maqriz (1364-1442 AD) to a monument at Ayla/ al-‘Aqaba:

وكانت حد مملكة الروم في الزمن الغابر وعلى ميل منها باب معقود لقيسر قد كان فيه مسلحته يأخذون المكس.
 “And it (scil.: Ayla) was located in ancient times at the borders of the Roman Empire, and one mile in front of it there is an arched gate for the (Roman) Emperor, where his garrison collected the customs”.¹⁸

Solitary custom arches were also known beyond the borders of the Roman Empire: Pliny¹⁹ refers to such a gate at Sabota (today Shabwa), the ancient capital of south Arabian Ḥaḍramawt. Incense traders were obliged to pass through with their goods in order to be taxed. Such a taxation at check-points in extra-urban gates seems to be a traditional oriental practice already testified in Iron Age by literary sources or, archaeologically, by the free standing market-gate in front of Tall Ashtara in southwest Syria.²⁰

There can be little doubt that receipts similar to those

papyri from Egypt had been in use in Palestine, Transjordan and Syria as well, where the environmental conditions for preservation are worse. There is no need for a detailed explanation that the towers flanking the passageways of the solitary gates were suitable for checking the arriving or departing traffic. If one follows this assumption, the flanking tower gates could have been the places where the official customs papers were issued by publicans. The wide area around the monuments could easily be used for parking and loading the carriages which would cause traffic problems in the crowded streets within the city. The receipts themselves make sense only when they are presented at check-points at territory borders or important traffic junctions.

Only the main gate of Dura Europos (FIG. 13) is epigraphically related to a custom tolls being part of the city’s fortification wall. According to a Greek graffito at this gate, one of the merchants gave thanks to the urban Tyche for a lucky passing through “τέλος πόρτα”²¹, a gate for the customs clearance. Due to the private character of this inscription the graeco-latin term τέλος πόρτα should not necessarily be linked to the Palmyrene gate itself. Probably it is referring to the free standing arch 1800 m in front of the city which had been erected after the glorious campaign of Trajan against the Parthians in 115/16 AD.²²



13. Dura Europos, Palmyrene gate. (Photo by the author).

¹⁷ Cf. Z. Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine* (1994) 36; Z. Herzog, *Das Stadttor in Israel und in den Nachbarländern* (1986) 163, 165; E. Otto, in: Meilenstein, Festschrift H. Donner, *Ägypten und Altes Testament* XXX (1995) 188 ff.

¹⁸ Taqiaddin Ahmad b. ‘Ali al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawa’iz wal-i tibar fi dikr al-Hitat wal atar*, ed. Bulaq 1270H, I 184. I owe thanks to R. Schick (Jerusalem) who drew my attention to this reference, and to C.-P. Hase (Copenhagen) for the translation of this text.

¹⁹ Nat. Hist. XII 63.

²⁰ A. Abou Assaf, *Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes* 18,

1968, 103ff. Fig. 2.

²¹ J. Johnson, in: *The Excavations at Doura Europos, Preliminary Reports* II (1931) 126 ff. Nr. 41 Figs. 12-13; SEG VII 570; cf. F. Herrenbrück, *Jesus und die Zöllner. Historische und neutestamentlich-exegetische Untersuchungen. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 2. Reihe XLI (1990) 177 with note 50.

²² S. Gould and A. B. Hatch, in: *The Excavations at Doura Europos, Preliminary Reports* IV (1933) 56ff.; R. O. Fink, *The Excavations at Doura Europos* VI (1936) 480ff.