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Double-Crossing Jordan: Strabo's Portrait of Syllaeus and the Imagining of Nabataea

Syllaeus, the Nabataean administrator, emerges from ancient historical accounts as a true villain, masterminding myriad intrigues during his engagements with the house of Herod the Great and Caesar Augustus. According to the principle literary sources that document his career, he was responsible for two poisonings, four attempted coups, a revolt, embezzlement, harboring brigands and the betrayal of several thousand Roman soldiers. A man of few apparent scruples, he was an equal-opportunity scoundrel, contriving plots not only against the Judeans and Romans, but also his own people.

Surviving texts are universal in their disdain for Syllaeus. He is mentioned in the Geography of Strabo and both the Antiquities and Jewish War of Josephus. 1 Both brand him as 'invidious' and 'base' on numerous occasions. Indeed, Strabo seems to take such delight in lambasting Syllaeus that he employs the full arsenal of his vocabulary in the course of his invective, using no fewer than seven synonyms for 'treacherous' to describe him.² Strabo's outrage is centered on Syllaeus' intentional misleading of a Roman expedition to Arabia headed by Gaius Aelius Gallus, the prefect of Egypt and Strabo's personal patron. To be sure, the vilification of Syllaeus is in no small part a reflection of Gallus' proximity to Strabo, for by painting him in such harsh terms, he is able to exculpate Gallus from responsibility for the heavy loss of life sustained on the expedition.

Strabo's bias against Syllaeus and his probable exaggeration of events has long been noted, but to date it has been understood simply in terms of the patron-client relationship (Bowersock 1983: 47; Lawlor 1974: 94-96). While there is certainly merit to this reading, I contend that there is a second factor that contributes to Strabo's treatment of Syllaeus. When considered in the context of the *Geography* as a whole, it is clear that Syllaeus fulfills an important literary function for Strabo. Syllaeus' actions fit a little *too* neatly within the metatextual organization of the work, suggesting that he has been carefully shaped as an intentional moral caricature, a cautionary counter to Strabo's otherwise positive picture of Arabia. I suggest that Syllaeus represents the dark underbelly of Arabia, a land at the edge of the *oikoumene* and a fitting opposition to Rome.

Syllaeus

Owing either to noble standing or sheer political acumen. Syllaeus had risen to a prominent position in Nabataea by about 30BC. According to Josephus, he held the reins of power in the later years of Obodas III's reign, for Obodas was seen as a weak and infirm king.3 During the following two decades, Syllaeus was the major agent of Nabataea's foreign policy, acting as mediator with Herod's court and Rome herself. It is impossible to generate any sort of balanced account of his reign, for our only sources (beyond a few dedicatory inscriptions he left behind on his way to Rome) are the invective-laden accounts of authors writing within the Roman tradition.⁴ The reports of his activities generally center around his involvement with the Romans and Judeans, and are marked by a burning

¹ The latter borrows heavily from the now fragmentary history of Nicolaus of Damascus, a contemporary of Syllaeus. For discussion, see Wacholder (1962).

² His actions are described as *ex epiboulos* (by treachery), twice as *dolos* 'cunning, contrivance, and treachery', once as *prodosia* (treason) and once as *mochtheros* (villainous). His guiding is also called *phaulos*, worthless, and *kakos*, base. Overall, his actions

paint him as poneroswicked.

³ Antiq. 16.293-300 See discussion in Starcky (1955: 94).

⁴ On the inscriptions, see Clermont-Ganneau (1906: 310-2, 28); Clermont-Ganneau (1924): pl. 6, *CIS* II.351; Meshorer (1975): 62; Cantineau (1932): 8-9. A Safaitic inscription commemorating Syllaeus' return from Rome is published by Abbadi (2001).

desire for personal advancement.

Repeated intrigues with Herod the Great ultimately led to a hostile relationship between the two, spurred by Herod's refusal to allow Syllaeus to wed his sister unless he converted to Judaism. The passing of Obodas III (r. 30-9BC) after twenty-one years of rule left the succession of Nabataea's kingship in dispute, as Aretas IV and Syllaeus vied for control. According to Josephus, Aretas assumed the throne without first acquiring the consent of the Roman emperor Augustus, who was severely displeased that his presumed authority in the kingdom's affairs had been usurped.⁵ (While the kingdom of Nabataea was not officially a subject of the Roman Empire, Rome's presence and influence was nevertheless clearly felt in the region). Syllaeus, seizing upon Augustus' displeasure, attempted through bribes and embassies to have Aretas removed and himself installed, but was unsuccessful in convincing Rome to take his side. Aretas likewise sought to find favor in Rome, sending a lengthy epistle and costly gifts in an attempt to mollify the emperor. However, Augustus' anger was apparently too great, with the result that he turned his back on the entire situation and left the parties to settle amongst themselves. Syllaeus continued in intrigues for a few years, but his enmity with Herod the Great caused him to be sent to Rome for trial (on numerous charges), and he is reported to have been executed in 6BC.

The Roman Expedition

The instance under investigation here took place early in Syllaeus' public career, well before his conflicts with Aretas and Herod. In 25BC the Roman army, under the leadership of Gallus, launched an ill-fated campaign into Arabia. Strabo notes that Augustus sent Gallus to Arabia in order to reconnoitre it, to determine whether it would be better to conquer or ally with the local tribes. The riches Arabia acquired via the lucrative incense trade were legendary in Rome, and Augustus expected either to "deal with wealthy friends or master wealthy enemies." (16.4.22) A large force was ferried over from Egypt (eighty boats were used) and, having been promised assistance from the Nabataeans, Gallus must have felt confident about the expedition. The Arabians were not regarded as great warriors, and their scattered tribes would be no match for the overwhelming force of a disciplined Roman detachment. However, things quickly went awry. The campaign is described at some length in the *Geography*:

"Gallus set out on the expedition; but he was deceived by the Nabataean administrator, Syllaeus, who, although he had promised to be guide on the march and to supply all the needs and to co-operate with him, acted treacherously in all things, and pointed out neither a safe voyage along the coast nor a safe journey by land, misguiding him through places that had no roads and by circuitous routes and through regions destitute of everything... After many experiences and hardships Gallus arrived in fourteen days at Leuce Come in the land of the Nabataeans, a large emporium, although he had lost many of his boats, some of these being lost, crews and all, on account of difficult sailing, but not on account of any enemy. This was caused by the treachery of Syllaeus, who said that there was no way for an army to go to Leuce Come by land; and yet 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... Gallus moved his army from Leuce Come and marched through regions of such a kind that water had to be carried by camels, because of the baseness of the guides; and therefore it took many days to arrive at the land of Aretas, a kinsman of Obodas. Now Aretas received him in a friendly way and offered him gifts, but the treason of Syllaeus made difficult the journey through that country too; at any rate, it took thirty days to traverse the country, which afforded only zeia, a few palm trees, and butter instead of oil, because they passed through parts that had no roads. The next country which he traversed belonged to nomads and most of it was truly desert... [At Negrana] the barbarians joined battle with the Romans, and about ten thousand of them fell, but only two Romans; for they used their weapons in an inexperienced manner, being utterly unfit for war... Thence he carried his army across the Myus Harbour within eleven days, and marched by land over to Coptus, and, with all who had

⁵ Josephus, *Antiq*. 16.293-299.

been fortunate enough to survive, landed at Alexandria. The rest he had lost, not in wars, but from sickness and fatigue and hunger and bad roads; for only seven men perished in war. For these reasons, also this expedition did not profit us to a great extent in our knowledge of those regions, but still it made a slight contribution. But the man who was responsible for this failure, I mean Syllaeus, paid the penalty at Rome, since, although he pretend friendship, he was convicted, in addition to his rascality in this matter, of other offences too, and was beheaded."6

The description of the campaign is undoubtedly Gallus' firsthand account, and the dichotomy of heroic (if unlucky) Gallus and duplicitous Syllaeus has often been observed as exaggeration. Eager to please his benefactor, Strabo takes great pains to portray Syllaeus in the worst possible light, repeatedly referring to his treachery and wickedness. He explicitly refers to Syllaeus as 'the man who was responsible for the failure of the expedition'. The arid landscape had ravaged the Roman army (indeed only seven men were lost in battles), but in Strabo's version this was an eminently avoidable problem. Syllaeus intentionally misled the Roman troops into roadless and waterless places, using the landscape as a very effective weapon. In doing so, he had much to gain; Strabo explains to the reader that if the Romans weakened the local tribes but were then themselves destroyed, Syllaeus would be able to swoop into the vacuum as 'lord of all'.

The same expedition is briefly recounted in Dio Cassius' *Roman History*, but in a decidedly different tone:

"At first [Gallus] encountered no one, yet he did not proceed without difficulty; for the desert, the sun, and the water (which had some peculiar nature), all caused his men great distress, so that the larger part of the army perished. The malady proved to be unlike any of the common complaints, but attacked the head and caused it to become parched, killing forthwith most of those who were attacked, but in the case of those who survived this stage it descended to the legs, skipping all the

intervening parts of the body, and caused dire injury to them.... In the midst of this trouble the barbarians also fell upon them. For hitherto they had been defeated whenever they joined battle, and had even been losing some places; but now, with the disease as their ally, they not only won back their own possessions, but also drove the survivors of the expedition out of the country."

Syllaeus is conspicuously absent. The failure of the expedition is attributed first to the environment, and second to a concerted nomad attack. There is no hint of intrigue, no treachery. Dio, writing sometime after 229AD, is far removed from the events, and has no particular allegiance to Gallus. His primary source is doubtless Strabo, whose works were then well known. But Dio clearly had other materials at hand as well, for his account of the waterborne disease and its treatment has details lacking in Strabo. In the introduction to his history, Dio states that he compiles his sources in an attempt to present the "essential facts", telling the reader that he includes only those details he views as "fit to select" (1.1.1-2) Clearly Dio does not validate Strabo's account of Syllaeus; unsafe water is admitted as essential and fit, but a treacherous and invidious guide is not.

Josephus also had access to Strabo's testimony.8 Like Dio, he mentions Gallus' expedition but not Syllaeus' involvement.⁹ This is remarkable in context, for Josephus took great pleasure in lambasting Syllaeus. It is in the Antiquities and Jewish War that we learn the rest of the details of Syllaeus' career, and Josephus has nothing positive to report about him. He undertakes no praiseworthy or even neutral deed-everything is shameful, treacherous and underhanded. He is loyal neither to his emperor, his king, or his people, but seeks in every instance to advance himself and destroy his opponents.10 The fact that Josephus includes so many of Syllaeus' other intrigues (poisonings, affairs, larceny, etc.) makes his silence here all the more noteworthy, and casts serious doubts on the veracity of Strabo's account. 11 Josephus would not pass up a chance to turn on one of his favorite targets without good reason, and in this case it seems that

⁶ Geog. 16.4.23-24, (tr. H.L. Jones, Loeb Classical Library).

Hist. Rom. 53.29.3 (tr. E. Carey, H. Foster, Loeb Classical Library).

For discussion, see Shahar (2005).

⁹ Antiq. 15.317.

¹⁰ See e.g., Antiq. 16.220-228, 282-299, 320-355, 17.10, 54-57, 61-

^{63,} etc.

¹¹ Josephus delighted in lambasting Syllaeus, and indeed nearly all of our information on the rest of Syllaeus' career is found in the *Antiquities* and *Jewish War*. For a similar argument about the silence of the sources on the death of Caligula's sister Drusilla, see Wood (1995: 459 n.16).

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he too found Strabo's invective to be exaggerated beyond his comfort level.

Finally, the Romans did not punish Nabataea following the campaign, as might have been expected in a case of such high treason against the Roman army (Bowersock 1983: 49) Indeed, Syllaeus re-emerges in the following decade as a powerful and popular figure in Rome, with considerable influence over Augustus. Despite Strabo's claim that Syllaeus' execution was in part the result of his treachery during Gallus' campaign, the cause reported by Josephus (following Nicolaus of Damascus' personal account) was Syllaeus' refusal to repay a debt of five hundred talents to Herod and his harboring of brigands who had been raiding Judea and Syria. As Augustus, who passed judgment upon him, was outraged that he had betrayed and undermined Herod, would he not have taken a direct affront to Rome even more seriously?

It seems to be the case, therefore, that Strabo's account is highly suspect and closely linked to his desire to please his patron. There is no corroborating evidence from any other ancient source, not even in cases where we would expect it. It seems safe to assume that Strabo is exaggerating Syllaeus' role. But we short-change Strabo's vision if we read it only as panegyric in praise of Gallus. There is a second level at work, one that corresponds with the nature of the text itself. If we interpret Syllaeus as a representation of Nabataea (or, more widely, Arabia), the parallels with Strabo's broader approach to the geography of the oikoumene are clear. There is a structural intentionality to this portrayal, one that illustrates the complex character of Nabataea as a landscape full of contradictions.

Strabo on Nabataea

Oddly, Strabo's damning account of Syllaeus follows hard on the heels of his praise of Nabataea's excellent government. In the previous section of the *Geography*, he notes that Nabataea is 'exceedingly well-governed' (*sphodra d' eunometai*) and that his source Athenodoros of Tarsus had marveled at the Nabataeans' restraint from litigiousness and their generally peaceful demeanor. ¹² Athenodorus visited Petra sometime between 85-63BC. (Graf, this volume) His account is therefore a generation out of date by the time of the campaign, but Strabo

nevertheless passes it on to us in the present tense, as if describing the contemporary setting. Following a brief aside, Strabo returns to Nabataea a few sections later, calling the Nabataeans a 'sensible people' (sophronoi), even if plagued by avarice.¹³ They respect their neighbors, hold lavish parties and live quite comfortably. The king is hailed as democratic, giving public account of his rule and allowing for audits of his lifestyle.

How then, do we reconcile the dark and troublesome figure of Syllaeus with the generally positive portrayal of Nabataea? On the surface, it seems that he is simply a black sheep, a rogue and a scoundrel who is an exception to the good government and positive conduct otherwise observed in Nabataea. Straightforward as such a reading may be, it is unsatisfactory. Careful analysis of the structure of the chapter shows that Strabo's treatment of Nabataea is in fact much more ambivalent than it first appears, and that there is a definite dark underbelly to the desert kingdom. TABLE 1 serves as a reference for the description that follows.

TABLE 1. Organization of Strabo's Account.

Section	Subject
16.4.18-20	Arabia
16.4.21	Nabataea
16.4.22-24	Gallus' Campaign
16.4.25	Arabia
16.4.26	Nabataea

Strabo's account of Arabia follows his characterization of the Troglodytes of the Egyptian Red Sea coast. The Troglodytes are nomadic, and employ many of the strange customs characteristic of nomads: they eat flesh, drink milk mixed with blood, share wives and children, and generally behave as primitives. ¹⁴ Using Artemidorus' account as a framework, Strabo then moves across the Red Sea into Arabia. His initial description (16.4.18-20) is a rushed overview of the entire region, from Palestine to Yemen. He offers brief remarks on most of the groups encountered, and in general these

¹² Geog. 4.16.21.

¹³ Geog. 4.161.26.

¹⁴ For discussion of classical biases against nomads, see Shaw (1983).

fall into the usual nomadic stereotypes. Finally he reaches Nabataea (16.4.21), where he offers the first comments on its excellent rule and peaceful inhabitants. But his commentary on them is interrupted rather haphazardly by the campaign of Gallus, which is presented as a device meant to "reveal the special characteristics" of Arabia (16.4.22-24). As the passage excerpted above illustrates, the heartland of Arabia is savage and wild, occupied by nomads whom he terms *barbaroi*. Like the Gauls, another favorite target of Strabo, they fight with reckless abandon: ten thousand fell, but only two Romans.

Once the campaign narrative is over, Strabo does not return immediately to Petra. Rather, he stays in Arabia, offering a second broad overview. In this section he summarizes general observations about the lifestyle of its inhabitants (16.4.25). The aromatics trade is discussed, as well as the division of Arabia into five interrelated and unnamed kingdoms, and finally the bizarre and incestuous intermarriage practiced by its inhabitants. "One woman is wife for all, and he who first enters the house before any other has sex with her... All children are brothers. They also have sex with their mothers, and the penalty for adultery is death...". The salacious details would certainly resonate in Rome, which was in Strabo's day in the midst of moral and sexual reform, initiated by the legislation of Augustus. 16 The Arabians, in comparison with the Romans, were clearly uncivilized and barbaric, failing to observe even the basic tenets of marriage and legitimate family which lay at the heart of Augustus' dynastic propaganda (Zanker 1988: 156-166).

Immediately after this passage, and without skipping a beat, Strabo returns to the Nabataeans and offers the rest of his comments on their way of life, as described above. Safrai (2005) understands this in terms of Strabo's somewhat haphazard conflation of numerous sources, with the first Nabataean account reflecting the contemporary setting and the second drawing from an older report of their pre-sedentary activities. ¹⁷ One such account, that of Hieronymus of Cardia, is preserved in Diodorus Siculus 19.94-100. While there are marked differences between Strabo and Diodorus, Safrai's temporal division offers a plausible explanation

for why Chapter 26 appears so jumbled. However, his line of thinking deprives Strabo of any greater vision, for it reduces him to a simple (and rather sloppy) compiler.

While Strabo's sources may indeed come from a range of periods, I contend that there is a definite logic behind the structure of his treatment of Nabataea. By inserting the Gallus campaign and the account of Arabia Felix into the midst of his narrative of Nabataea, he has effectively bracketed the worst of Arabia within it. He blurs the boundary of what is specifically Nabataean with the behavior of the Arabians as a whole, creating a relationship between the sedentary inhabitants of Petra and their nomadic relatives to the south and east. It is surely significant that whilst on his disastrous campaign, Gallus and his men meet Aretas, a kinsman (suggenos) of the Nabatean king who held sway somewhere in the vicinity of Leuce Come.

This casual blending of Nabataean and Arabian is critical to the understanding of Chapter 25. Having previously stated that the Nabataeans dwell in Arabia Felix (16.4.21) and derive from nomadic stock, the description in Chapter 25 is a general account of Arabia Felix as a whole. There is no mention of particular groups, and Strabo makes no attempt to exclude the Nabataeans when he reports how people in Arabia Felix behave. Indeed, in his other comments on the Nabataeans he makes no mention of marriage or family, implying perhaps that they participate in the same practices as the rest of the Arabians. For all the apparent civility and culture seen at Petra, the Nabataeans are inseparably linked with the barbaroi to the south. Almagor (2005) makes a strong case that Strabo does not believe in degrees of barbarity; one is either a barbarian or not. The Nabataeans, therefore, are not viewed with uniform positivity; their ties to the nomads inject them with a certain degree of unpredictability and primitivism. By organizing the chapter as he does, Strabo shows that the external civility of the Nabataeans is but a veneer, and that within they are still dangerous and unpredictable.

Strabo's *Geography* is not simply a travelogue or ethnographic narrative; at its heart it is an excursus on the nature of the *oikoumene*. ¹⁸ According to Dueck (2000: 115), while Strabo saw the subject

 ¹⁵ On Strabo and barbarians, see Almagor (2005), Thollard (1987).
16 For discussion, see Bauman (1992; esp. 105-108).

¹⁷ On the issue of contemporanity in Strabo, see Pothecary (1997).

¹⁸ For discussion of the aim of the *Geography* and Strabo's role as an author, see Clarke (1997).

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lands as (by and large) worthy of recognition in their own right, he was firmly convinced of Rome's justification to rule over them. Throughout the seventeen books of the Geography, comparisons are continually drawn between insiders and outsiders, civilized and uncivilized. His treatment of the Nabataeans is by no means unique in this regard, and it serves as yet another cautionary reinforcement of his underlying argument.

Syllaeus and Arabia

Bearing this reading of Nabataea in mind, the similarities to Strabo's account of Syllaeus are striking. He too appears to be civilized and trustworthy, but deep down he is corrupt and treacherous. As shown above, there is clear evidence that Strabo has intentionally manipulated the portrait of Syllaeus. I suggest that the vilification of Syllaeus owes as much to the need to paint a portrait of a forbidding and uncivilized Arabia as it does to celebrate the heroic perseverance of his powerful patron, Gaius Aelius Gallus. Syllaeus' character is preserved as a means of typecasting the Nabataeans, creating a tangible representation of the other against which Rome can be compared.

He, the public face of Nabataea, undermines its apparent virtues. While Nabataea may be 'exceedingly well-governed', it is inherently unstable and problematic. Treachery lurks beneath the surface, and if left unchecked it will inevitably throw the region into disarray. Nabataea needs Rome to survive its own frailties — it is a land of promise, but unable to manage itself. Nabataea must be pacified and controlled. Syllaeus serves to illustrate this point, the justification for its eventual inclusion within the *oikoumene* of the empire. He fulfills Strabo's grand vision of the *Geography*, linking his ethnographic exploration to a justification of Rome's imperial expansion.

To be sure, Syllaeus was no saint. A figure of his prominence demands a degree of historical accuracy, for otherwise a knowledgeable audience will reject the account as a false caricature. Some of what Syllaeus was charged with must have taken place, such as his embassy to Augustus and his involvement with the Herodian court, both of which are recorded by Josephus. Indeed, Strabo may well have projected his later crimes backward in time in order to explain the failure of the campaign. He was clearly aware of the later stages of Syllaeus' career, as his triumphant comment about his execu-

tion illustrates. I suggest that Strabo has borrowed a notorious figure and reinserted him into a narrative describing the 'special characteristics of Arabia'. Syllaeus is used as shorthand for everything that Nabataea represents, both Petraean and Arabian. Like Nabataea, he is wealthy, powerful and (at least initially) promising. But he is also a very dangerous man, liable to undermine any power structure he comes across. His behavior is unpredictable, wily and self-serving. In this regard, he is a convenient and well-placed embodiment of the unpredictable and dangerous nature of the semi-nomadic desert dwellers who inhabited Arabia. In this reading, he is more than a Nabataean. He is Nabataea itself.

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