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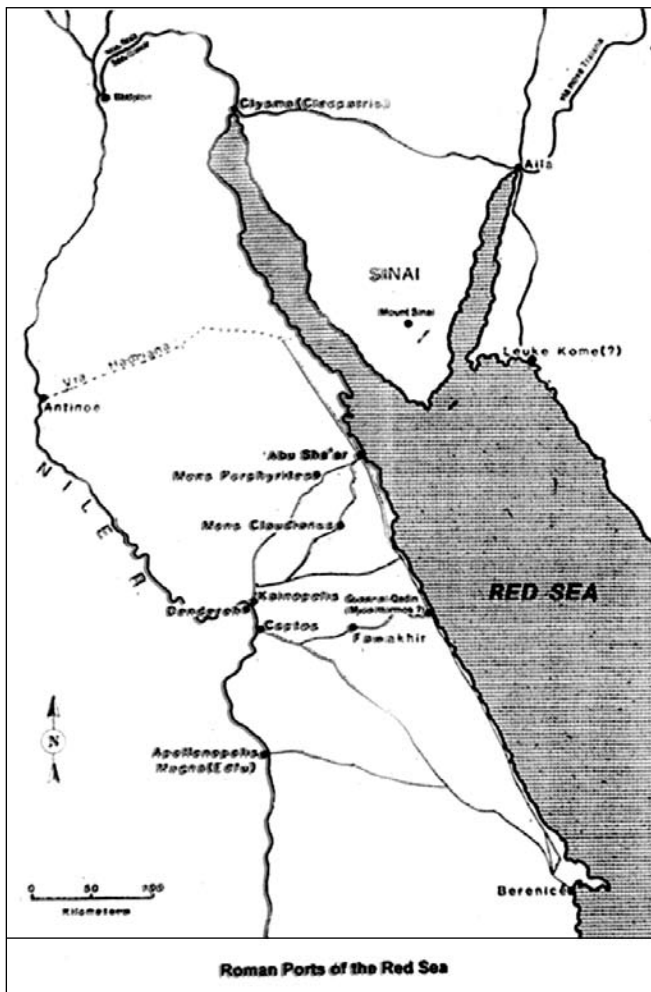# The Foundation of Ayla: A Nabataean Port on the Red Sea

Why did the Nabataeans establish Ayla (modern 'Aqaba) as a port on the Red Sea? This paper will put forward a historical scenario that might explain Aila's foundation, i.e. that the Nabataean King Obodas III founded Ayla early in his reign (30-9BC). This action was a direct response to the threat posed to Nabataean commerce by the Roman annexation of Egypt in 30BC and their subsequent develop-

1. Map of northern Red Sea.

ment of ports on the Egyptian Red Sea coast, such as Myos Hormos and Berenike (FIG. 1).

Human settlement at the northern end of the Gulf of 'Aqaba is well documented from at least late prehistoric times (Parker 1997), but the immediate predecessor to Ayla appears to have been Tall al-Khalīfah, a site now on the modern Israeli - Jordanian border and now *ca.* 500m. from the modern shoreline. The excavator suggested that the Iron Age II settlement continued well into the Persian period, i.e. into the fifth or even fourth century BC (Glueck 1965; Pratico 1993). Small-scale soundings by the late Mary-Louise Mussell unfortunately remain unpublished, but a recent intensive surface survey by the Roman 'Aqaba Project also yielded some Persian period pottery. Both our survey and Pratico each recovered a single Rhodian stamped amphora handle, dated to *ca.* 200BC (Pratico 1993: 62; Parker 1998: 376), but these appear to reflect little more than transient use of the site in the Hellenistic period. The complete absence of Nabataean pottery suggests that Tall al-Khalīfah was abandoned before the appearance of Nabataean pottery by the late second century BC.

A *terminus ante quem* for the foundation of Ayla is provided by Strabo (*Geography* 16.2.30, 16.4.4) who mentions a *polis* called Ayla no later than early in the reign of Tiberius (AD 14 - 37). It is notable that earlier writers, such as Diodorus Siculus (late first century BC), who in turn relied on earlier (primarily second century BC) Hellenistic sources, describe the "many inhabited villages of Arabs who are known as Nabataeans" (3.43.4) around the Gulf of 'Aqaba but fail to mention any city in this region. Therefore, documentary sources suggest that Ayla was founded sometime between the late second century BC and early first century AD.

Recent excavations by the Roman 'Aqaba Proj-

ect (1994 - 2003) have yielded more precise chronological evidence for Aila's foundation (Parker 2003, with earlier references). Although the excavations revealed no *stratified* evidence earlier than the mid-first century AD, significant quantities of residual artifacts point to a foundation in the late first century BC.

We begin with the numismatic evidence. It is notable that there are no Hellenistic coins among more than the 1,000 identified coins from the site. This is in sharp contrast to Petra and Nabataean sites along the Petra - Gaza road, where Hellenistic (especially Ptolemaic) coins are well attested. The excavation did recover 264 Nabataean coins, but of these only 46 were closely datable. Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of these coins by ruler (TABLE 1). Although the earliest coins are three issues of Aretas III (85 - 62BC), obviously these are not necessarily contemporary with the earliest occupation of the site. It is well known that Nabataean coins often remained in circulation well after their initial minting. Nevertheless, the coins could support an occupation beginning in the first century BC.

The ceramic evidence is more compelling[1]. Again, there was no Hellenistic pottery among the more than 600,000 sherds recovered from the excavation. A similar picture emerges from the imported fine wares, specifically Eastern Sigillata A (ESA). Among the *ca*. 2,000 sherds of ESA from the excavation, some 332 could be assigned to the Hayes typology (Hayes 1985). Table 2 illustrates the breakdown of the ESA by form and period (TABLE 2). The earliest ESA vessel commonly imported to Ayla is Hayes Form 4B, dated to the Augustan era (30BC-14 AD). There are admittedly a few examples — five, to be precise — of Hayes Form 22, more broadly dated from the late second century BC to *ca*. AD 10. All the remaining early examples of ESA recovered at Ayla (Hayes Forms 23, 26, 28 and 29) date to the Augustan era. Earlier ESA forms, dated to the Hellenistic period, which

Nabatean King	No. of Coins	% of Coins
ARETAS III [85-62 BC]	3	6.5%
MALICHUS I [62-30 BC]	3	6.5%
OBODAS III [30-9 BC]	7	15.2%
ARETAS IV [9 BC-AD 40]	24	52.2%
MALICHUS II [AD 40-70]	4	8.7%
RABBEL II [AD 70-106]	5	10.9%

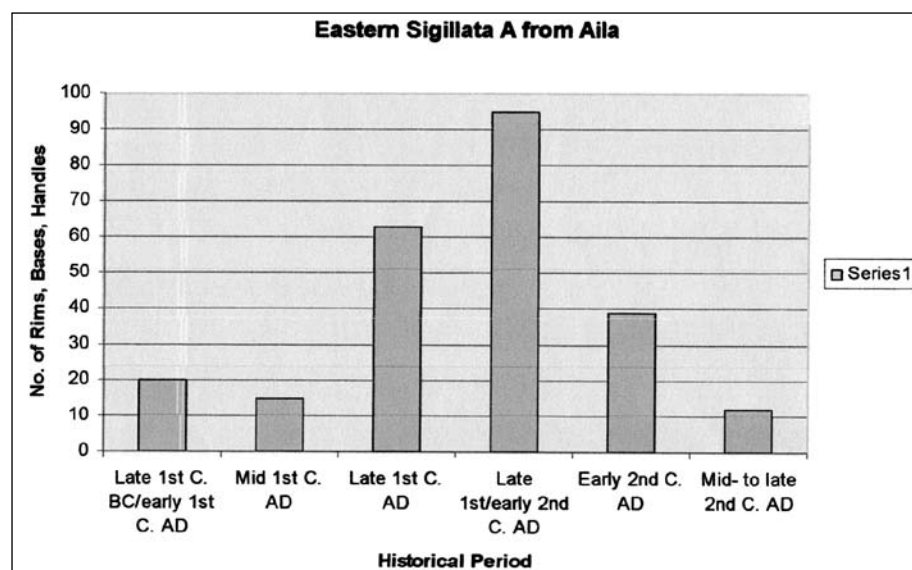**TABLE 1.** Closely dated Nabataean coins from the excavation at Aila.

TABLE 2. Closely dated Eastern Sigillata A from the excavation at Aila.

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[1] The following analysis of the ceramics from the Roman 'Aqaba Project derives from the project database. This material is still undergoing analysis, although a preliminary report on the Early Roman/Nabataean pottery from the site has already appeared (Dolinka 2003).

are common at other sites in the Levant are noticeably absent at Aila. In short, the Eastern Sigillata A suggests a foundation date in the late first century BC.

Finally, we must consider the most abundant type of tightly dated ceramic evidence: Nabataean painted fine ware. Thanks to the Swiss excavations at az-Zanṭūr in Petra, we have a workable typology of these fine wares that permit close dating (Schmid 1996). Analysis of the pottery from stratified sequences at 'Aqaba strongly suggests that the Swiss typology works well at sites far from Petra. The excavations at 'Aqaba yielded thousands of sherds of Nabataean painted fine ware, but not a single piece of Schmid's Dekorphase 1, dated to *ca*. 150-50BC. There were a mere handful of Dekorphase 2a sherds, dated to *ca*. 50 - 30/20BC. The first significant number of Nabataean painted fine ware sherds at Ayla were Dekorphase 2b, dated *ca*. 30 / 20 - 1BC.

To sum up the archaeological evidence, the earliest coins, imported terra sigillata and Nabataean painted fine ware all support a foundation in the first century BC. Both types of imported fine wares suggest a foundation late in that century, most likely in its last third. In the absence of explicit documentary evidence, it seems doubtful that material culture alone can take us any further. But now that we have narrowed the chronological parameters, let us turn to the broader historical context to construct the scenario that may explain the foundation of Ayla as a coastal urban center.

For the purposes of this paper, we must avoid the vexed question of Nabataean origins. Suffice it to say that by the late fourth century BC the Nabataeans had already grown sufficiently wealthy and prominent to attract the attention of Hellenistic generals. As we learn more about Hellenistic Petra, it seems clear that the lucrative caravan traffic in luxury goods was already well established, utilizing overland routes from southern Arabia. The main threat to Nabataean control of this trade during the Hellenistic period was the Ptolemies, who established ports such as Berenike on the Egyptian Red Sea coast in the third century BC. This offered an alternative sea route with which to compete with the established overland caravan route up the Arabian peninsula. This competition to Nabataean commercial interests was further threatened by the discovery that the monsoon winds permitted direct navigation from the Red Sea coast directly to southern Arabia and thence to India.

The initial Nabataean response to the development of sea transport seems to have been piracy, but an effective Ptolemaic naval response seems to have ended this threat (Diodorus 3.43.5; Strabo 16.4.8). The Nabataeans next founded the port of Leuke Kome somewhere on the Arabian side of the Red Sea. The location of Leuke Kome remains a mystery. The suggestion of the modern site of Aynuna in Saudi Arabia, just east of the southern outlet of the Gulf of 'Aqaba, remains attractive but unproven (Kirwan 1984). Wherever its exact location along the northern coast of the Arabian peninsula, Leuke Kome was already well established by the late first century BC, when the army of Aelius Gallus used it as a transit base for the invasion of southern Arabia in 26 BC. Strabo, in this context, calls it a "large emporium" and notes that from here camel caravans headed north to Petra (*Geography* 16.4.23). But in the same passage he also claims that the bulk of the traffic had already been diverted to Egypt via the port of Myos Hormos on the Red Sea, thence overland to the Nile at Coptos (the shortest route between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley) and finally down the Nile to Alexandria.

Although there are some scraps of evidence to suggest occupation at Myos Hormos in the Ptolemaic period, recent excavations by both American and British teams have shown that the port only really developed after the Roman annexation of Egypt in 30BC (Johnson and Whitcomb 1979, 1982; Peacock *et al.* 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003). The late first century BC and early first century AD seem to have been a period of particular prosperity, confirming the assertion of Strabo. Yet, it must also be stressed that Myos Hormos was an artificial creation by an imperial power. All water, for example, had to be transported to the site from some distance away. Its sole *raison d'etre* was to serve as a transfer point between ships and caravans in order to exploit the shortest distance between the Red Sea and the Nile. A similar picture is emerging from recent excavations at the port of Berenike, where the original Ptolemaic port experienced a great intensification of activity in the Augustan era (Sidebotham and Wendrich 2007, with earlier bibliography).

In short, it would seem that after the Roman failure to gain direct control of southern Arabia and its lucrative commerce by direct conquest in 26 / 25BC, Augustus fell back on the next viable option. He planned to seize control of the trade from

south Arabia by developing Red Sea ports on the Egyptian coast to divert the traffic from the Nabataeans and their overland route through Arabia. The explosive growth of Myos Hormos and Berenike, and the extraordinary quantities of imported goods dating to this period at both sites, along with the testimony of Strabo, would seem to suggest that this policy enjoyed some success.

What was the Nabataean response? Malichus II died in 30BC, the very year of the Roman conquest of Egypt, and was succeeded by Obodas III who ruled for over twenty years, until 9BC. The Nabataeans, of course, already had an established port on their side of the Red Sea, at Leuke Kome. A passage in the *Periplus of the Red Sea*, usually dated to the mid-first century AD, clearly shows that this port, which included a fort, garrison, and customs officials, continued to serve as a transfer point between ships from Arabia and caravans traveling north to Petra (*Periplus* 19). But the mere foundation of Ayla in the late first century BC, most likely in the reign of Obodas III, suggests that Leuke Kome alone was deemed insufficient by the Nabataeans. Just as the Romans decided that they needed several ports on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea (Berenike, Myos Hormos and Clysma / Arsinoe [near modern Suez]), so too did the Nabataeans.

The obvious advantage of Ayla over Leuke Kome was that its location at the north end of the Gulf of 'Aqaba offered a much shorter overland passage to Petra and the Mediterranean. Assuming that the identification of Leuke Kome with modern Aynuna is correct, the distance between the Red Sea and Petra was shortened by over 200 kilometres as the crow flies, and much more by the actual route via the wadis east of the Gulf of 'Aqaba. If, in fact, Leuke Kome lay farther south along the Arabian Red Sea coast, i.e. south of Aynuna, then the advantage of Ayla would correspondingly have been much greater. As a coastal oasis, Ayla also offered abundant potable water and a relatively easy route north to Petra via Wādī 'Araba.

On the other hand, the disadvantages of Ayla should also be emphasized, *viz.* the prevailing northerly winds in the narrow Gulf of 'Aqaba and the treacherous, narrow opening — the Strait of Tiran — that connects the gulf with the Red Sea. The latter appears in Diodorus as a navigational hazard (3.44.1-2) as early as the first century BC. The prevailing northerly winds in the gulf remained a

sufficient navigational hazard to merit mention in British naval handbooks of the 20th century.

Yet, whatever the disadvantages of this site at the head of the narrow gulf, Ayla was indeed founded by the Nabataeans in the late first century BC. Leuke Kome alone was judged insufficient to compete against the revitalized Egyptian ports under direct Roman control across the Red Sea. Some suggest that Ayla was not really a seaport under Nabataean rule, but a mere caravan station for the overland traffic between Leuke Kome and Petra (Young 2001). However, the fact that Strabo had already refered to Ayla as a "*polis*" by the early first century AD suggests that Ayla was already a settlement of some size, and not merely a caravan station. In fact, the recent excavations suggest a sprawling site of considerable size (FIG. 2) by the first century AD (Dolinka 2003; Parker 2003, with earlier references; Retzleff 2003).

If the above scenario for the foundation of Ayla is correct, how successful was the Nabataean response to this Roman threat to their vital commercial interests? Although this is a separate question that would require another paper, I would venture to suggest that the judgment of Obodas III proved sound. Ayla went on to prosper and soon became the key port on the Arabian side of the northern Red Sea, whereas Leuke Kome eventually sunk into obscurity. Surely, much of the prosperity enjoyed by the Nabataean kingdom in the first century AD resulted, in part, from their retention of a significant portion of the luxury traffic from south Arabia. Much of this traffic undoubtedly passed through the new Nabataean port of Aila.

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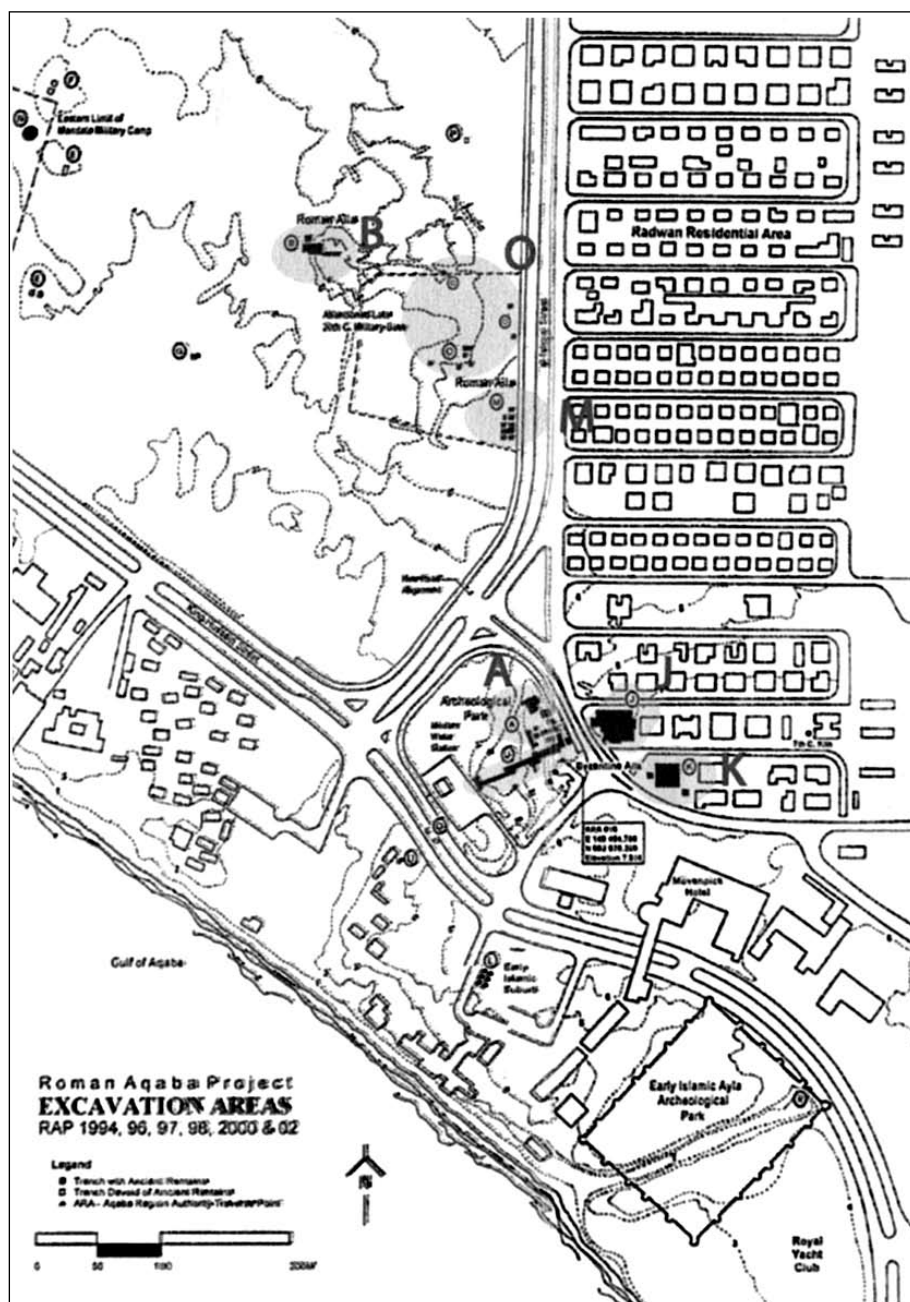
2. Site plan of the excavation areas of the Roman 'Aqaba Project; highlighted areas have yielded stratified evidence of the early Roman / Nabataean period.

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