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Roman Provincial Borders Across Jordan[1]

Abstract
By 400 AD Jordan was divided amongst four Roman provinces: *Palaestina Prima* in the southern Jordan Valley, *Palaestina Secunda* over most of north-west Jordan, *Palaestina Tertia* south of the Wādī al-Mūjib and *Arabia* over the rest. However, as in the rest of the Roman Empire, we are uncertain as to where some, or all, of the actual border lines ran. That the border was known in antiquity is clear from the evidence of toponyms, cadestration, tax records and pilgrims' accounts. That the border had some meaning is also clear — on principal borders a customs duty was imposed which distorted the trade in locally produced ceramics. This distortion is particularly clear in the southern Levant, and provides a tool to develop an archaeological methodology to detect provincial borders in a way not available to historians. The Borders of Arabia and Palaestina project is examining the area around Wādī ar-Rayyān in northern Jordan as a case-study, and the preliminary results of the first season of field work are presented.

The glue holding the Roman Empire together for over 800 years was its system of administration. The provinces were the basis of this system[2]. Their extent reflected varying economic, social and political factors. However, not one ancient source discusses the basis on which provinces were changed (Roueché 1999).

By 400AD there were approximately one hundred provinces in the Roman Empire, double the number a century beforehand (Jones 1964: 42-43 and 280-283). An understanding of the position, nature and function of the borders between each province is fundamental to any study of the administration of the Empire. Such an understanding is hampered by the fact that, nearly one hundred years after Mommsen published *The Provinces of the Roman Empire* (1909), we still do not know exactly where the internal borders ran. It appears that part of the problem is the attitude that we more or less know which territories belong to which province, and that this rough knowledge is sufficient for historical studies (Millar 1993: 31 and 535-544). The result of such an approach can be illustrated by the maps from a study of Roman provincial administration in the Danubian provinces (Dise 1999), although it should be stressed that this is merely a convenient example, and by no means the worst. Dise argued that Roman administration in newly conquered territories was an agent of Romanisation, and contrasted settlement patterns in neighbouring provinces. Maps of Noricum and Pannonia were published separately on adjacent pages in Dise's work. These provinces shared a border, but when the modern maps are overlaid it is clear that the line of the shared border was drawn differently on each map and these lines diverge for their entire length. The discrepancy represents a distance of up to 2 days journey in antiquity — large enough to have had a serious impact on the administration of a province[3]

[1] This paper is based on fieldwork conducted as part of the *Drawing the line: the archaeology of Roman provincial borders in Late Antique Palaestina and Arabia (AD250 – 650)* project (short title: *Borders of Palaestina and Arabia* / BAP), directed by the author and funded by the Australian Research Council 2006-2010 (DP0666110) and the University of Sydney. **Project website:** www.acl.arts.usyd.edu.au/bap

[2] There is no modern survey replacing the works of Arnold (1906) and Stevenson (1939), although the collection of Brunt's articles (1990) contains some pertinant studies, as do several contributions to the *Cambridge Ancient History*[2], volumes 10 to 14 and Mann's article in *ANRW* "Frontiers of the Principate" (1974).

[3] It is irrelevant who was responsible for the failure to check the maps, be it the author or the editor; it is simply an example that such information is seen as unimportant.

In the area of modern Jordan, there are abundant examples of maps with more or less arbitrary lines (e.g. Jones 1964; Avi-Yonah 1977). The Barrington Atlas maps of provinces carry the disclaimer that "Provincial boundaries are approximate and in many cases, very uncertain" (Talbert (ed.) 2000; Elliott and Barckhaus 2003).

It is clear from the history of border changes in *Palaestina* and *Arabia* alone that territorial changes occurred both before and after Diocletian, the traditional reformer (*Palaestina*: Mayerson 1988; Barnes 1982, 214; Tsafrir *et al*. 1994: 16; *Syria*: Bowersock 1983: 92; *Arabia* Bowersock 1983: 143). Provincial rearrangements were not a single event, but represented changing requirements within a changing Empire. The complexities of territorial change can be seen through the separate transfers of up to seven parcels of land along the northern border of Arabia between 188 and the end of the third century AD (Kettenhofen 1981).

By 400AD Jordan was crossed by several Roman provincial borders: *Palaestina Prima* extended into the southern Jordan Valley and east of the Dead Sea, *Palaestina Secunda* occupied an important part of north-west Jordan, *Palaestina Tertia* lay south of the Wādī al-Mūjib and *Arabia* over the rest.

Based on historical information, what do we know already? We know that Roman law was sophisticated enough to distinguish conceptually between the *finis* (limit) and *limes* (boundary) of land, and between land delineated by a natural feature and land measured out (Dilke 1971). We know that the measuring out of the *limites* of a colony was a solemn ritual event, worth illustrating on coinage[4]. Other religious aspects of boundaries include the general position of Terminus in Roman religion, and the specific activities of the Terminalia on the last day of the year (February 13) where landowners garlanded their joint boundary stones (Rose and Scheid 2003; Piccaluga 1974).

We know that land surveyors erected boundary stones marking a variety of territories, such as the Imperial forest in Phoenice (Breton 1980) and a series of markers in the Golan / southern Syria. There, approximately 40 Tetrarchic inscriptions have been collected by Millar (1993: 535-544) and the publishers of the Rafid survey (Urman 2006) and, by the variance in their formulae, have added considerably to the understanding of borders in this area (Graf 1992; Ma'oz 2006)[5].

We know from extant land deeds that boundaries of individual properties were known (Kraemer 1958), and that owners were permitted to move the boundary stones in order to sell a portion of their property.

Since provinces were mainly defined by the combination of cities, their dependent towns and villages, and all their associated territories, the extent of these territories defined the provincial border (Avi-Yonah 1977; Mann 1974). This edge was known to the relevant authorities, not least because of land taxes, but that information has not been very well preserved for us today. Although not consistent across the Empire, modern knowledge of which localities were assigned to which province is based on a wide range of data including boundary markers (Schlumberger 1939; Seigne 1997), milestones on interprovincial roads (Mittmann 1970; Isaac 1978), place names, historical documents, literary efforts and church council attendance lists[6]. There is a general modern assumption that between (or around) these few known points, the border followed topographic features (Avi-Yonah 1977; Bowersock 1983, 90-103) — not forgetting, as Kennedy has argued, watersheds (1998: 50-52) and, especially, rivers (Braund 1996). After the early 4th century AD much of this fades away, leaving traditional history without evidence.

To What Then Can We Turn?

Distribution patterns of locally produced ceramics are significant indicators of local economic activity (da Costa 2001 ; Shaw 1995; de Ligt 1993; Peacock 1982; Howard and Morris 1981). The different classes of ceramics seem to be showing similar uneven distribution patterns, e.g. cooking pots such as Galilean ware (Adan-Bayewitz 1993), fine table wares such as Jarash bowls (Watson 1989),

[4] E.g. Trajan founding Sarmizegethusa, sestertius, 104-107AD, RIC II 568; Hadrian founding Aelia Capitolina: AE22, 136AD, Meshorer Aelia 2.

[5] Graf believes that these boundary markers relate to surveys of imperial estates, rather than general land surveys. For the arguments presented in this paper, that difference may be irrelevant — their existence and the use of known survey points is the critical issue. Nonetheless, I wish to record my thanks to David Graf for his discussions with me about this paper during the conference, and his generosity and kindness in sharing his extensive knowledge and understanding of the material.

[6] Toponyms: *Ad Fines* in Bosnia lies on the border line of Savia / Dalmatia (Talbert (ed.) 2000, Map 20E5); Historical documents: e.g. the Bordeaux Pilgrim's itinerary (Geyer and Cuntz 1965); Eusebius' *Onomasticon*; Literary efforts: e.g. Ammianus Marcellinus' geographic digressions in Books XIV-XXVI.

ceramic lamps (da Costa 2001), recent work in the Golan (Hartal 2003) and on Levantine amphorae (Reynolds 2005).

In the case of early Byzantine Pella (3rd-5th centuries), Watson (1992) has shown that bulk importation of ceramics from an important production centre, Jarash, did not occur. Jarash ceramics only appeared at Pella in quantity from the end of the 6th century. The cities are, however, relatively close and linked by a major Roman road. Before the late 6th century, some other factor clearly acted as a barrier to local trade.

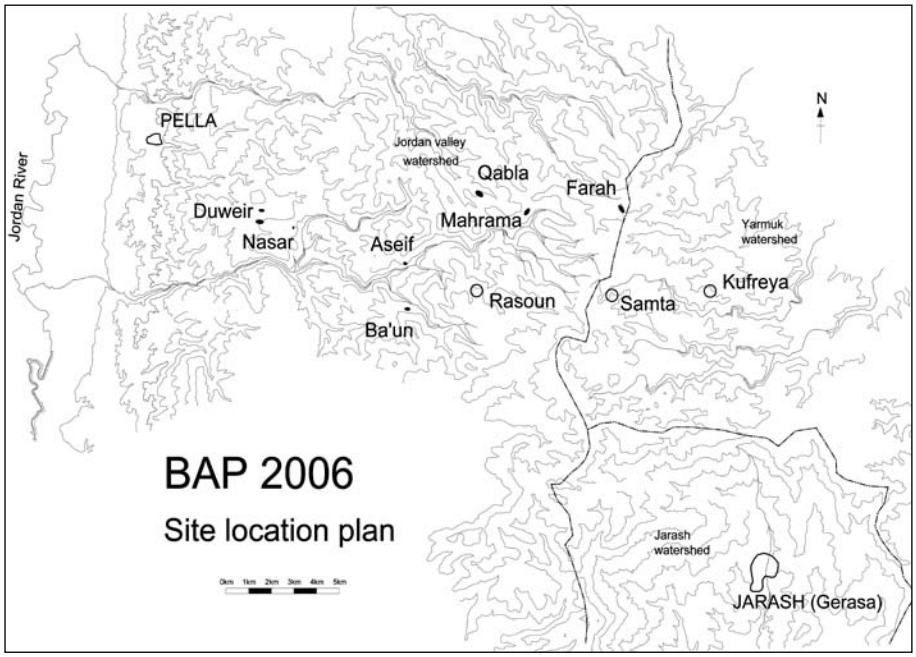
The patterns cannot be adequately explained by either topographic features or by simple distance from the production centre. They seem bounded by the approximate line of provincial borders, in the few places where these can be reasonably reconstructed. But why?

Our knowledge of a related issue, the collection of indirect taxes, is equally patchy (Delmaire 1989; Hopkins 1980; Goffart 1974; Jones 1974). Of these, customs duty, *portorium*, was levied on the Imperial frontiers, at 12.5% or 25%, and also within the Empire, where the rate is not certain but was probably 2.5% to 5% (Jones 1964: 429 and 825; Sijpestejin 1987). De Laet, in the major study of *portorium* (1975), was unable to comment on customs duty after Diocletian owing to a lack of written evidence. Our information, while heavily biased towards Egypt and the early Empire, shows that taxes, tolls and levies had a conspicuous effect on small-scale economics and local trade.

It seems clear that the customs duty on major borders, i.e. that between *Arabia* and *Palaestina*, rather than the internal borders of *Palaestina*, remained in place until the late 6th century and, by making it uneconomical to import local ceramics from neighbouring provinces, distorted trade patterns. This distortion can be utilised to map the location of the unknown sections of the provincial borders.

The Borders of Arabia and Palaestina project, based on a case-study in an area overlapping part of the border between *Palaestina Secunda* and *Arabia*, is developing an archaeological methodology to allow a more precise definition of provincial territory (FIG. 1). It seemed most efficient to test the methodology in an area where the leeway was most restricted, but could still contribute to solving a problem of political geography.

As it happens, the borders of *Palaestina Secunda* are amongst the best known in the Roman Empire. The evidence from Eusebius's *Onomasticon* is vital, although Isaac's reassessment of Eusebius's sources (1996) means that Avi-Yonah's interpretations, used for mapping in his historical geography (1976, 1977), will have to be reappraised. The south-east corner is less certain, but here the principal of ceramic evidence can be put into use. Dohelah has produced a corpus of lamps which seems much more like the range of lamps present at sites in *Palaestina* than Arabian lamps



1. Sites sampled during the 2006 BAP season 2006, with Pella and Jarash. Open circles indicate sites with incomplete site plans. Watersheds are represented by dotted lines (plan by H. Barnes).

(Sari 1991, 1992).

The project plans to collect ceramics of the 3rd to 7th centuries from sites in the area of the supposed border. The overall corpus from each site can then be categorised by reference to the known corpora from Pella ('*Palestinian'*) and Jarash ('*Arabian'*). The border ought to lie between the '*Palestinian'* and '*Arabian'* sites.

The first field season was carried out in November / December 2006. Cataloguing is incomplete, but ceramics were collected from 11 sites, mainly in the western part of the survey area. We targeted sites that had already been identified, mainly by Mittmann (1970) and the Wādī al-Yābis survey, and are aiming to recover about 3000 sherds per site. Some sites, like Bā'ūn, have enormous quantities of pottery. In other cases even more sherds than this will need to be collected, as there can be extensive Islamic occupation which reduces the proportion of Late Roman and Byzantine pottery as, for example, at Kh. Maḥrama. Additionally, part of the team acts as a documentary unit, planning as much possible of the visible part of the site and, especially, documenting the extensive evidence for underground housing and industrial installations we came across at several sites.

Preliminary observations, aided substantially by the expertise of Ina Kehrberg, suggest that sites south of the Wādī ar-Rayyān / al-Yābis do indeed have ceramics similar to the Jarash corpus. Sites to the north seem to have pottery more like that of Pella.

As we move east, away from the clear line of the river into the region where the line of the border is poorly understood, we have some difficulties. The change settlement pattern east of the main watershed is noticeable. There are fewer sites with material of the relevant time period and, of those, several lie almost entirely under modern villages. However, the material already published from Dohelah helps to fill in the gaps, as will the material from Ya'amūn (el-Najjar *et al*. 2001). ArchGIS modelling will help confirm our preliminary interpretations, adding some to subjective pottery cataloguing. In particular, it will be possible to compare the cost of travel between the various sites, which should clearly demonstrate that transport costs were not a limiting factor in the distribution of provincial ceramics.

We are therefore confident that we will be able to plot the route of the border far more accurately than has hitherto been the case, confirming the use of the Wādī ar-Rayyān itself as a boundary, rather than its northern or southern watersheds, and that the south-east corner of the province also had a wadi, possibly the Wādī al-Wārid, as its limit.

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