

THE VIA NOVA TRAIANA IN NORTHERN JORDAN: A CULTURAL RESOURCE UNDER THREAT

by
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“The road from the 13th to the 18th milestone is exceptionally well preserved, indeed it is the most perfect section of a Roman road that I have ever seen.” (*PES* III.A.2, Appendix, p. x).

Introduction

Sadly, that view may no longer be the case. The section of road in question is falling victim to the rapid development of northern Jordan and, if steps are not taken soon, could largely disappear during the next few years. Fortunately, the establishment of a Cultural Resource Management (CRM) programme may offer the framework within which this splendid section of road can be rescued.

The great strategic Roman highway which runs from Bostra in southern Syria, just 20 km from the modern frontier, passes through or close by the ancient cities of Philadelphia (‘Ammān) and Petra to the Red Sea at Ayla (‘Aqaba), a distance of some 350 km. For part of its length it seems to have followed the ancient King’s Highway, but, in the north in particular, the road was probably a new alignment or following a simple desert route. Its ancient name is unknown; in recent times it has become known as the *Via Nova Traiana*, a name derived from the extended text cut on a number of the milestones: *redact[a] in f[ormam] provincia [Arabia viam] novam [a f]in[ibus] Syriae us[que] ad M[are] Rubrum aperuit et stravit* (stone of the Emperor Trajan [98-117 AD] at mile 14 - this one dated to 114: *PES* III.A. App. p. xvii-xviii). The earliest dated milestones are of 111-114 AD but there were frequent repairs in the following centuries, many marked by the cutting of new inscriptions on existing

stones or by setting up new milestones.

In the post-Roman period the road - or at least the route it marked out - remained in use along much of its length; indeed, travellers’ reports of the 19th and early 20th century reveal it still in use in places as the route of the Ḥajj pilgrims (e.g. Robinson Lees 1895: 11-15)

Exploration of the *Via Nova Traiana*

The passage quoted at the beginning of this article referred to 1905 when most of the northernmost section of the Roman road, from Bostra to ‘Ammān was examined by Howard Crosby Butler and his colleagues of the Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria (*PES* I: 32-34). Much of it had been explored before - notably by Germer-Durand (1904: 3-43) and by Brünnow and von Domaszewski (1905 II: 221-227; 312-323).

Butler’s journey of 1905 took him from the West Gate of Bostra, where the milestone enumeration began, as far as the 21st milestone (shortly before the road ascends into the hills at Thughrat al-Jubb [mile 22] - described by Robinson Lees [1895: 14-17] who called it al-Hab). The Expedition of 1909 followed the road from ‘Ammān (52 Roman miles from Bostra) northwards to Khirbat as-Samra, at milestone 31, but were unable to trace it beyond that point (*PES* I: 84-5).

Even a century ago for several miles north of ‘Ammān the pavement of the road was seldom traceable although thereafter stretches were found in various places (Brünnow and von Domaszewski 1905 II: 221-227). In practice, the course of the road was often followed in this sector by locating the milestones. After passing al-Zarqā’,

the pavement and milestones could be seen more often. Further north, from Khirbat as-Samra to Thughrat al-Jubb, the road passed through hills and it was not until quite recently that the section between milestones 24 and 21 was explored. Now even the mile-stations beyond (22 and 23) have been located too (Kennedy 1976; 1981: 144-8). Most recently of all, Thomas Bauzou has explored the entire road between 'Ammān and Bostra including all of this last and previously little-known section (1985: 142-143; 1986; 1989; 1990; forthcoming).

The *Via Nova Traiana* between Milestones 12 and 22

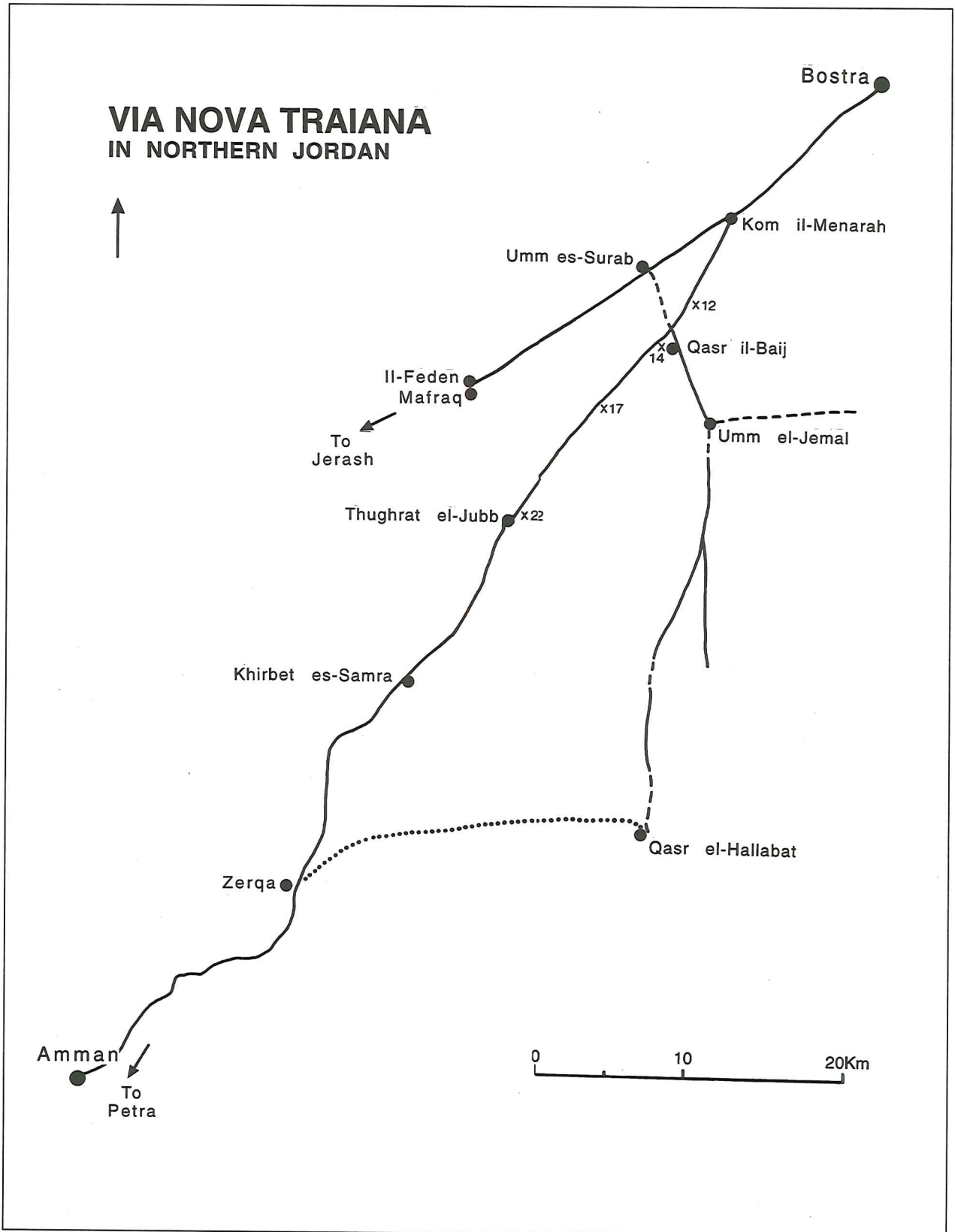
From milestone 21 north-eastwards the road runs through what Butler describes as "desert" as far as milestone 12. There began the cultivation which even in Butler's time was generally continuous as far as Bostra. In fact, the desert extends south-westwards of milestone 21 - which was simply where the Princeton Expedition turned aside - to beyond where milestone 22 has now been located (Kennedy 1976; 1982: 144-148). For present purposes, it is this "desert" section of some 10 or 11 Roman miles, from near milestone 12 just north of Qaṣr il-Baij to beyond milestone 22 where it leaves the plain and enters the hills at Thughrat al-Jubb which I would like to discuss (Fig.1).

As the quotation at the head of this article notes, this desert section was an exceptionally well-preserved stretch of Roman road. Indeed, Butler used this section to describe and reconstruct the character of the *Via Nova Traiana* in general. The explanation for the quality of preservation - including some 33 whole or fragmentary milestones at the eleven milestations (12 to 22 inclusive) and a number of road towers (*PES* III.A - App. p. ix; Bauzou 1989: 217-218; 1990) - is partly attributable to the desert climatic conditions and partly to the unattractiveness of "desert" to cultivators.

Perhaps more importantly, it is explained by Butler's attractive suggestion that in the post-Roman period the Ḥajj Road coming down from Bostra avoided the open desert by forking at Kom il-Menarah (milestone 7) onto the old Roman road to Jarash which passed through what is today Mafraq. Its precise route around Mafraq is unknown but fragments of several milestones were long ago reported as having been built into the walls of the Abassid fort at Il-Feden (Dussaud and Macler 1903: nos 145-50; Germer-Durand 1904: 12-14; Bauzou 1990 and Kennedy *et al.* forthcoming).

The latter lies on the western edge of Mafraq just beside the station of the Ḥijāz Railway around which the modern settlement grew. The suggestion is that in the post-Roman period, pilgrims avoided the desert section of the *Via Nova* by turning further west at milestone 7 towards Il-Feden thence southwards to rejoin the *Via Nova* just north of Khirbat as-Samra (milestone 24) (*PES* III. A - App. p. xi). As a consequence, the road across the desert between milestones 7 and 24 was not used much, its pavement survived well and many of its milestones remained buried and unknown till recorded by Germer-Durand and then by the Princeton Expedition in 1905.

As late as the 1970s and early 1980s, preservation of this stretch remained excellent. There were few traces of cultivation anywhere between milestations 13 and 21. What little cultivation there was seemed opportunistic cereal growing by beduin whose tents could be seen beside some of the small fields. Here and there could be seen crude stone-built sheep corrals also noted by Butler (*PES* III.A - App. p. xi). The road itself was paralleled closely throughout its length from at least milestations 13 to 18 by a well-travelled but unsurfaced motor track. After milestation 18, south of the modern surfaced Baghdad Highway, the modern track is much less well used and the



1. Map of the *Via Nova Traiana* in Northern Jordan.

Via Nova more obscured though again at least one road tower could still be seen (at milestation 21).

Until very recently, this region of "desert" presented little threat to the preservation of the *Via Nova Traiana* which crossed it. The occasional opportunistic cultivation was on a small scale and such wheeled traffic as used the route had every incentive to avoid the rocky surface of the Roman road in favour of the parallel track. The number and location of the milestones were probably little changed since Butler viewed them. Since the limitation to development was not the fertility of the soil but the low rainfall, increases in population were modest and confined to the villages clustered around such ancient settlements as Umm al-Jimāl, Baij and Umm as-Surab in the north. In the last decade, however, that has all changed.

Deep drilling has tapped water which is now being pumped out at regular points across the entire area. In place of small scale dry farming dependent on modest and unreliable rainfall, cultivation is now geared to irrigation. The entire region is today being intensively farmed with fields of

tomatoes, melons and maize. New property boundaries have appeared, with a network of new roads and tracks, including a number of surfaced roads throughout the area.

In 1994 the *Via Nova Traiana* could still be followed without a break throughout most of its length from milestone 12 almost as far as milestone 23. Everywhere, however, fields lapped right up to its edges (Fig. 2). Between milestones 16 and 18 a surfaced road has replaced the dirt track parallel to the Roman road and the Roman surface is being eroded away in the fields which extend up to it.

From there to milestone 22 there is again a surfaced road which likewise runs cheek by jowl with the Roman surface. Milestones can still be seen but increasingly scattered and, it is my impression, more fragmentary and fewer in number than a decade ago. Happily the clearly inscribed milestone of Caracalla at milestation 16 (Fig. 3) has been laid out behind a water pumping station and may survive better than most. Elsewhere one can see the pieces scattered now rather as an earlier section of the road appeared to Butler in 1905 when he described the first few miles of the road



2. Irrigated field in 1994 reaching up to the edge of the *Via Nova Traiana* west of Umm al-Jimāl. Looking south near milestation 13.

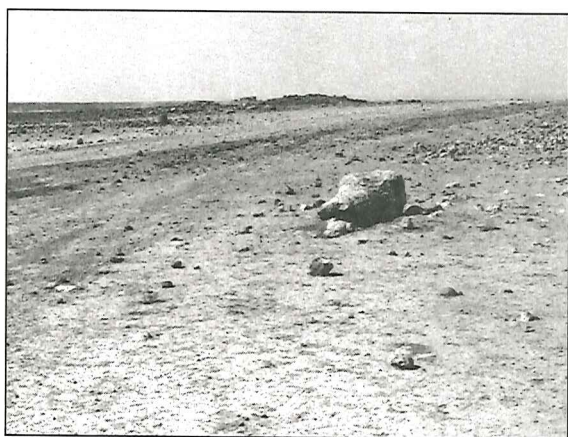


3. The same view of the *Via Nova Traiana* west of Umm al-Jimāl in 1978. NB ploughing was far less encroaching.

out of Bostra. There he saw no traces of milestones for five miles beyond the city.

At milestone 5 only his familiarity with well-preserved examples further south enabled him to recognize a "cubical limestone base-block" as the base of a milestone. "At the end of the 6th mile there is another base-block with a few fragments of limestone scattered about it. At the end of the 7th there are only some mutilated bits of a cylindrical shaft which was once a milestone." (*PES III.A.2 - App. p. vii-viii*).

As for the road stations, the one reported by Butler at milestone 14 and so clear to



4. Looking south of the Roman tower at milestation 14 in 1978, The *Via Nova* and a milestone lie in the foreground.

visitors until the mid-1980s (Kennedy 1981: pl. XXXVb) is no longer to be seen. At the appropriate location the surface on either side of the road had been scraped bare, and a modern building has been erected on the eastern side just where the foundations were once so evident (Fig. 4). Fragments of milestone were visible in the walls of the adjacent animal pen and the fragment of a drum bearing the numeral XIV (*PES III.A.2 - App. p. xviii, no. III*) was found in the wadi-bed nearby.

The situation threatening what remains of the Roman road is already serious. A classic section of Roman road complete with many well-preserved milestones has suffered more in the past decade than in the preceding eighty years - perhaps the preceding 800. No one can deny the need to exploit the land fully in a country with limited agricultural resources. On the other hand, there is an urgent need to record the remains which can still be seen, trace earlier records, collect, mark and safeguard the drums and fragments of milestone before they are inevitably mutilated and broken up, scattered and separated from their mile-stations and lost.

Since the precise distances between mile-stations are not exact (Kennedy 1981: 149-152; Bauzou 1990: 295-296), it is already difficult to locate the ancient position of some where the stones have been scattered. Perhaps the stones might be collected and fenced in at each milestation or, if moved to safekeeping, a concrete marker erected at the spot the precise location of which has been recorded. Likewise, the road towers might be fenced in - such as that which can still be seen at milestone 17 some 100 metres beyond the road in the midst of a ploughed field or even the probable example which does survive at milestation 14 (Fig. 5), but on the other side of the road to the better known and larger example which has now been lost.



5. Looking west in 1994 towards the modern farm building and animal pens overlying the Roman tower at milestation 14. The *Via Nova* lies out of sight beyond the farm.

The transformation in this area is astonishing. Happily, the research of Thomas Bauzou as well as the field survey work of Bert De Vries' team working at Umm al-Jimāl have rescued many of the details of the road and its installations. The *Via Nova Traiana* is, however, a structure of international importance and merits close attention. No one who has worked in Jordan would underestimate the demands made on the hard-pressed Department of Antiquities

– perhaps in this situation it might call upon the assistance of the various foreign institutes.

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