

Trade, Frontiers and the Limes Palestinae

In the year 291, in the Gallic Roman City of Trier, the tetrarchic Augustus Maximian celebrated his birthday by, among other things, hearing the customary panegyric in his honour. This speech, which survives in the corpus of Latin Panegyrics, tells us very little-by comparison with others of its type-about contemporary events. One significant event that it does mention is a campaign conducted by Diocletian against the Saracens. I quote the recent translation of Barbara Saylor Rodgers:

“I pass by Sarmatia’s devastation and the Saracen subdued by the bonds of captivity...” (Pan. Lat 3 (11) 3.4, 7.1; Nixon and Rodgers 1994: 89).

That is it. It is hardly a substantive reference. It has been filled out slightly by T.D. Barnes’ study of Diocletian’s whereabouts at any given time as revealed by the prefaces to imperial laws and other similar evidence. This study has disclosed that Diocletian was at Emesa on May 10th 290, a fact which gives some circumstantial support to the orator’s otherwise bare and unadorned claim. Thomas Parker has argued that Diocletian’s presence indicates that the campaign against the Saracens attested here was a major undertaking rather than a mere police action (Parker 1986: 136; 1987: 45; see also Kennedy 2000: 38). Looked at more closely, the sources do not support such a claim. Diocletian was certainly in Emesa on May 10th, but only just. He had been in Antioch on May sixth, and two weeks after this, was in Laodicea on May 25th. Another five weeks later, he was in distant Sirmium (Barnes 1982: 51; Graf 1989: 346f). Whatever his reason for visiting, it certainly cannot have been the conduct of a major campaign against the Saracens.

There were, of course, many demands upon Diocletian’s time. He was a busy and interventionist emperor. The trip to Emesa must have been of sufficient importance to divert him from the work of renovation which he had been pursuing in Sirmium. Moreover, the panegyric discloses an important detail. Its use of the name *Sar-*

aceni is, as far as I know, the first employment of this as a geopolitical term.¹ That certainly implies that something of a new phenomenon had arisen on Rome’s friable eastern edge, which needed to be comprehended and dealt with. Diocletian’s journey to Emesa may well have been diplomatic rather than military. The panegyrist’s terse grandiloquence does not compel the conclusion that Diocletian crushed the Saracens. Far from it. Such an achievement would, by normal tetrarchic convention, have been celebrated with a victory title (Barnes 1976: 175f; also Brennan 1984). That lack of any such suggests that Diocletian negotiated an accommodation with them instead.

Diocletian’s most probable interlocutors were a confederation of Arab tribes, the Tanukh. They had migrated to the northern Syrian Desert earlier in the third century and had allied with Aurelian in his campaign against Palmyra. (Bowersock 1983: 132-137; cf. Millar 1993: 432-435). Renewal of the alliance was a useful *pro tem* solution to the problem of the neglected eastern edge of the Empire. A more lasting solution emerged a few years later with Diocletian’s devolution of the dyarchy of 286-293 into a tetrarchy. Both Diocletian and Maximian gained the loyal assistance of two gifted generals and administrators: Constantius in the west, and Galerius in the east. Despite the testimony of most ancient sources, it is now recognised that the regions in which Galerius spent most of his time between 293 and 299 were Egypt and Arabia. I have argued, both in conference papers and in print, that Galerius was despatched to these provinces to oversee a grand renovation of the frontier from Egypt to Syria (Leadbetter 2000, forthcoming).

Galerius was in Egypt at the end of 293 and remained there until the beginning of 295. The focus of his activity was the Thebaid where he needed to quell the revolt of the towns of Coptus and Boreasis. While the revolt of the towns focussed attention on Egypt, directing imperial attention to it as a priority, the principal purpose of Galer-

¹ Ptolemy’s *Geography* (5.16), written in Greek, mentions *Sarakene* as a geographical region and (6.7) *Sarakenoi* as a group of people

dwelling in the Arabian peninsula, but the earliest mention of *Saraceni* is in the Panegyrics (Graf 1978: 14-15; Millar 1993: 177).

ius' mission was more directed towards the renovation of physical and administrative infrastructure than the simple performance of a police action. In particular, attention was paid to the regarrisoning and fortification of the route through the eastern desert from the Nile valley to the Red Sea ports of Berenike and Myos Hormos, the former in particular (Sidebotham 1997; Leadbetter 2000: 85). The Coptus-Berenike road passed porphyry quarries, emerald mines and gold mines. Coptus itself held a place as an important centre of Roman trade. Its wealth was reflected in great buildings and embellishments.² It had also been the home to a garrison. Troops from the III Cyrenaica had been permanently stationed there until they took their expertise in desert patrols to Arabia Petraea (Kennedy 2000: 42; for a summary of the evidence, Alston 1995: 163f). They were replaced by a unit of Palmyrene horse archers (*SB* V 8810; Alston 1995: 188). The destruction of Palmyra by Aurelian had removed even that garrison.

There is an important clue here in the role of the Palmyrenes in Egypt. Palmyrene troops had long had a role in the protection of desert convoys. These are well attested by the Dura military papyri, which provide detailed information on the quotidian duties of these frontier troops. (See, for example the morning reports preserved in *P. Dura* 82, 89; Fink 1971: nos. 47, 50). Many such convoys were either bound for Palmyra or financed by the far-flung diaspora of Palmyrene merchants. There were communities of these at Coptus and Berenike, as there were also in Mesopotamia and southern Arabia. Such merchants ensured the safety of the caravans, which tried to cross the Syrian Desert from Mesopotamia and Antioch. (Matthews 1984: 164 - 168; on the Palmyrene garrisoning of the Syrian desert, see Millar 1993: 134f; and at Dura-Europus, Hopkins 1979: 200; on far-flung Palmyrenes, see Graf 1989b: 146f). Once the protective penumbra of Palmyra was withdrawn, traders had to shift for themselves or find alternative routes.

By the time Galerius arrived in Egypt, Palmyra had been in ruins for twenty years. Nothing had taken its place. There had been no investment by Rome in the protection of the trade routes in Egypt or Arabia. To the contrary, during the course of the third century defeat and recession had seen an increasing preference on the part of Rome for the Palmyrenes to police the desert routes in Egypt and Arabia. When Palmyra came to its bad end, there was nothing to take its place. Its destruction left a vacuum, thus encouraging brigandage and discouraging long-distance trade.

There are a few firm dates for tetrarchic activity in the east between the end of this Egyptian campaign and the

outbreak of the Persian War. On May 1st, 295, an Edict on Marriage was issued from Damascus (*Mos. et Rom. legum collatio* 6.4 = *CJ* 5.4.17). In the course of the following year, war with Persia broke out (for the date, Barnes 1976: 182). The gaps can only be filled by supposition and inference. Unless new and decisive evidence is brought to light, any account of these years is necessarily tentative. A number of clues do assist here, however. The first is a heavily scrutinised inscription from Qaşr al-Azraq which attests detachments from the IV Flavia, the VII Claudia and the XI Claudia engaged in roadworks on the Strata Diocletiana. (Kennedy and MacAdam 1985: 100-104; Speidel 1987: 213-221; MacAdam 1989: 295-309; Lewin 1990: 152f). Vexillations from the same legions are attested at Oxyrhynchus in January 295 (*P. Oxy* 43. *recto*; Ensslin 1952: 163-178; Bowman 1978: 27f; Rea *et al.* 1985: 108) and the appearance of these vexillations in two adjacent locations within a few years of each other cannot be simple coincidence. The likelihood is that these were the same units, and that they belong to Galerius' mobile field army.

The inscription from Qaşr al-Azraq attests works on a network of roads between centres on the edge of Roman Palestine. From Azraq, roads ran north and west into Roman territory. From there also ran a long and important road through the Wādi Sirhān to Dumata (modern Jawf). From there, this road continued on to the Persian Gulf, and was used in antiquity as both a military road and a trade route (Speidel 1987: 213). Moreover, the Azraq text only reflects a fraction of the massive makeover which occurred at this time. Little had been done for years and there was much to accomplish. While milestones have been recorded which identify roadworks in the area before 293 (between Palmyra and Edessa, *CIL* III, 6267; between 'Ammān and Petra, 14152. 48a; near Gerasa 14382; between Palmyra and Emesa *AE* 34.262; near Bostra 77.833; otherwise, (see Littmann *et al.* 1921: xx-xii, xxiv, xxvi-vii), the bulk of epigraphic material, however, is tetrarchic. These roadworks were complemented by the construction or renovation of a significant number of fortified points. Dedicatory inscriptions from completed fortifications at Qaşr Bshir and Yotvata belong to the first tetrarchy (293 - 305), and that at Dār al-Kahf belongs to the second (305 - 306) (for Qaşr Bshir *CIL* III 14149; for Dār al-Kahf, *CIL* III. 14380; also Kennedy 2000: 69, 141; for Yotvata, Roll 1989). A new legion, the IV Martia, was raised and stationed at the new and very large fortress at Bethorus - modern Lajjūn (Speidel 1977: 699; on Lajjūn, see Parker 1986: 136f; Kennedy 2000: 146 - 150). Nearby a subsidiary fort was constructed at Khirbat al-Fityān. On

² Bernand (1984) catalogues 47 inscriptions from Coptus dating from the Roman imperial period. While these are mostly dedications to gods, five record building: 68 (a bridge built by Domitian); 73 (a restoration of two walls of the peribolos of the sanctuary of Har-

pocrates); 79 (a restoration of an altar and statue); 87 (a chapel built by Valerius Apollinarius "prefect of the mountain"); and 103 (the restoration of an entrance and three gates by some Palmyrenes).

the basis of the extant pottery, a discrete tetrarchic fort has been identified at Umm al-Jimāl, and a large cavalry fort at Da'ajānīyah (for Umm al-Jimāl, Kennedy 2000: 83; for Da'ajānīyah, Kennedy 2000: 162). Tetrarchic milestones are to be found on the roads running between Phaeno and Damascus (*CIL* III 197); Philippopolis and Petra (*CIL* III 14149, 34, 36, 54b), and Damascus (*AE* 34.262). In addition, milestones from the period of the First Tetrarchy have been identified at Umm al-Quṭṭayn and tetrarchic dates can be inferred for the fortifications at Qaṣr al-Maquaz, Rujm Banī Yāsser, Udhrūḥ, Khirbat al-Khalde and Avdat (Kennedy 2000: 79 [Umm al-Quṭṭayn]; 142 [Qaṣr al-Maquaz]; 152 [Rujm Banī Yāsser]; 168 - 70 [Udhrūḥ]; 189 [Khirbat al-Khalde]; 212 [Avdat]). The fortress at Palmyra was probably completed during this period (*CIL* III. 6661). Fortifications were also built and refurbished on the road from Damascus to Palmyra and, at some stage, on the roads from Palmyra and Sura. From the evidence of the milestones and the Palmyrene inscription of Hierocles, it most likely occurred at this time.³

Further evidence of the renovation of the eastern frontier at this time comes from nomenclature. Less than one hundred kilometres north of Qaṣr al-Azraq lies ancient Saccaeum. During the Tetrarchic period it was elevated to the status of a city and renamed Maximianopolis (*SEG* VII 1927: 1055; Millar 1993: 184, 543f). As in Egypt with Kainopolis, Galerius took an opportunity to stamp his own name upon the geography of the Empire, thereby creating a memorial of sorts of his own contribution to Diocletian's greater work (Leadbetter 2000: 85). Indeed, a third place also bears Galerius' name Capharcotna in the Jezreel Valley, the settlement which had accumulated around the sometime camp of the VI Ferrata, also took the name of Maximianopolis (*It. Burd.* 586.3; Avi-Yonah 1976: 170; Isaac 1992: 432f).

The result of all of this work was a web of roads and fortresses from the Red Sea to the Euphrates. Damascus was the key. It linked the limes of the south with those that ran to the Euphrates, which apprehended the great threat from Rome's imperial rival. According to Malalas, Diocletian established an arms factory there (Malalas, *Chron.* 306). As already noted, Diocletian was in Damascus on May 1st 295. The likely context for such a visit was a consultation between Augustus and Caesar. The two had not met since Galerius left for Egypt in the later part of 293. It is reasonable to suppose that Galerius would be asked to report in person to his Augustus. Such consultations featured in Diocletian's relationship with

Maximian during the period of the dyarchy. The panegyrics attest at least two such "summit conferences".⁴ He had much to report and discuss. He had overseen a program of renewal from Egypt to Syria which firmly re-established Roman power in the region for the next three hundred years.

The scale of this vast undertaking leads to the inevitable issue of intent. Who was this mighty chain of roads and fortresses designed to deter or repel? This is an old question and one, which has been fought over tenaciously by scholars, especially in the last twenty years or so. The conventional wisdom has always been that the frontier was a line in the sand which was externally oriented. It would, moreover, be simply naïve to suggest that desert nomads did not pose a significant problem which required a military response. Evidence exists to support such a view. In 334 AD, a protector, Vincentius, constructed a reservoir at Khirbat Umm al-Manāra for the use of *agrarienses* because many of them had been ambushed and killed by Saracens while fetching water for themselves (*AE* 1948, 146; Kennedy 1982: 184; Speidel 1987: 217; Kennedy 2000: 67). The statement of the panegyrist which commenced this paper might also be invoked. Although the panegyrist's comment celebrates a diplomatic arrangement, the alliance, which it celebrates, is clearly directed at policing the desert against those labeled *Saraceni*.

On the other hand, there has been vigorous argument that has preferred to understand the focus of these fortifications as internal rather than external. These great lines of forts and roads are the source of Rome's imperial mastery over the desert peoples of the east. Their intention was to police the Empire, which the Romans had won, rather than to protect it from those beyond the reach of conquest. Scholarly controversy, which has shed both heat and light, has raged over this question, especially since the publication of the first edition of Ben Isaac's *The Limits of Empire* in 1990.

It is of course quite plausible and probable for both responses to be in some measure true. They are not mutually exclusive and there is plenty of evidence from the Roman East, from Egypt and, indeed from other parts of the Empire that local revolts-especially on the imperial fringes-were a possibility. Revolts and invasions, when they occurred, were signal phenomena, which made their way into the written record. Was this vast investment in soldiers, horses, camels, food, fodder, water, roads and weapons merely intended for such events? If so, then the daily life of the soldier who walked the walls or rode along the

³ This is an inference from the fact that in 303, Hierocles was *ex vicario* and *praeses* of Bithynia (*Lact. de mort. pers.* 16.4). The dedication in all probability predates 300. Further, it is reasonable to assume that work ceased on the *limes* during the Persian War when troops were more urgently required to meet the threat of Persia, and later, the revolt in Egypt. Therefore, the dedication at the fortress of

Palmyra should be dated to the period 293-6.

⁴ *Pan. Lat.* 2: 9.1 speaks of a conference with Maximian at an unknown location, perhaps in Rhaetia. *Pan. Lat.* 3: 8.1 speaks in grander terms of the better known conference between the two in Mediolanum.

newly surfaced roads must have been full of very little except looking at the horizon.

But we know from the record of the daily round at Dura that soldiers did have critical duties to perform in terms of the escort of caravans (*P. Dura* 82. col. 11. 5 refers to an escort for *hordiatores*; see here Fink 1971: 186; also Davies 1989: 62f). This was the task, which could no longer be underwritten by the vanished merchants of Palmyra. If the Empire wished to guarantee the maintenance of important commercial links, it had to do it itself. If we take the work of Galerius in the east as a whole, then the economic aspect becomes apparent. The situation in this region was as vulnerable and important as that on the Red Sea coast. Both regions carried considerable long-range caravan traffic; both regions lacked a strong military presence to ensure the safe conduct of trade. The *limes Palaestinae* was hardly going to be an invasion highway for a Sassanid army. Soldiers stationed in the fortified centres were not the first line of defense against the ancient enemy, but guardians and peacekeepers in a different and irresolvable conflict.

Curiously, it is Eusebius who gives the most important clue to this. One certain result of the reorganisation of the *limes Palaestinae* was the transfer of the legion X Fretensis from Jerusalem to Ayla (modern 'Aqaba) at the head of the Red Sea. In noting its presence there, Eusebius stated of Ayla:

"Ailam at the far bounds of Palestine, by the southern desert and the Red Sea, which is sailed by those coming from Egypt and India".⁵

Eusebius' observation illustrates the economic significance of the southern route and the need to protect it is curiously echoed by a panegyrist of Constantius who, in 297 linked the suppression of revolt in Egypt to the apprehension of Rome amongst distant foreigners:

dent veniam trophaea Niliaca sub quibus Aethiops et Indus intremuit

("May the Nile trophies under which the Ethiopian and Indian quaked pardon me").⁶

Whether such distant folk did indeed shake in their sandals is neither here nor there. What was certainly there, in Ayla, was a full legionary base. Although the size of the legion had been somewhat attenuated by the time of Diocletian, it was a considerable investment in this particular port which, as Parker has observed, is not served by an extensive agricultural hinterland but must import the bulk of its food (Kennedy 2000: 197). Such places

could only survive and flourish through the regular operation of trade, and long-distance trade at that. Such trade was important. Studies of long-distance trade tend to concentrate upon luxury items like silk. Silk was certainly carried a long way-perhaps the furthest of all. Yet other items flowed into the Empire of a less luxurious and more quotidian nature. Table spices, and pepper in particular, were imported in greater bulk. The site of Berenike, which has been well investigated over the last decade reveals much of the detritus of trade with India, including ceramics, sorghum, rice and peppercorns (Sidebotham and Wendrich 1996: 319 - 324). The traders themselves are also partially discernible in the epigraphic record. At Berenike, there are graffiti and ostraca in Aramaic, Aksumite and even Tamil (Sidebotham and Wendrich 1998: 304-312).

Diocletian's eagerness to control and regulate this trade is made clear by the course of the negotiations between Rome and Persia in 299. After a war in which Galerius had won a most decisive defeat of the Persians-the most decisive to date-in which a Roman army had marched unopposed down the left bank of the Tigris and in the course of which the entire household of the Great King had been captured (including his Queen) Diocletian successfully demanded the cession of territory and a number of economic terms. The only one at which the Persians balked, in a peace which was essentially dictated, was Diocletian's demand that the town of Nisibis be the sole point of commercial contact between the two empires. The intent of this condition is plain-to ensuring the control of all trading contacts. This was as much a revenue raising measure as one designed to regulate the trade itself. There were of course other points of entry further south. These were those patrolled and controlled by the garrison of the *limes Palaestinae* and the Egyptian desert.

Diocletian's investment in the region was fruitful. Economic life resumed, and indeed burgeoned in the fourth and fifth centuries. In Egypt, Berenike, likewise flourished. Evidence from Arikamedu in India also indicates a renewal of the maritime trade from the fourth century onwards (Begley 1993). This was the daily concern of the vast majority of the Empire's people. Very few were concerned with conscious cultural assertions or political separatism. Most people simply concentrated upon the daily demands of making a living. For them the maintenance of secure trading networks was essential, and very much the duty of their rulers. Any analysis of the nature and func-

⁵ Eusebius, *Onomastikon* (E. Klostermann, ed.), p. 6; on the date of the *Onomastikon*, see Barnes 1981: 106-111, a dating most recently accepted by Fergus Millar 1993: 175f. Röll 1989: 239-299, prefers a Constantinian date for the transfer of the legion based on the absence on inscriptional evidence from the Tetrarchic period. He does not, however, challenge Barnes' earlier dating for the *Onomastikon*, now

well accepted.

⁶ *Pan. Lat.* 4.5.2. The translation is that of C.E.V. Nixon (1994). Nixon's identification of "Aethiops et Indus" with the peoples of southern Egypt (1994: 116) overlooks the role of the Thebaid as an economic link with both India and the Horn of Africa.

tion of vast works like this *limes* system must take this into account—that its regular function was an economic one. Its large and dispersed garrison beat the bounds, escorted caravans, extracted tariffs and collected fodder. These were its daily duties. Only occasionally was it called upon to go further than these and also keep the Emperor's peace.

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