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Jotabe and Leuke Kome: Customs gates from Byzantine to Roman time

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(Article begins on next page)

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SOMMARIO

5 Abstracts

Saggi

- 9 ALFONSO MELE, Eforo e le colonie d'Occidente I
53 GIORGIA PROIETTI, Gli epigrammi ateniesi, la Stoa *Poikile* ed Erodoto
81 VITTORIO SALDUTTI, Sul demagogo e la demagogia in età classica. Una sintesi critica

Note

- 111 MARCELLO LUPI, Tucidide tassiarco?
121 MARCELLO VALENTE, Nicia *oikonomos*. Politica e *oikonomia* nell'Atene del V secolo
139 MORRIS SILVER, 'Living apart', *apeleutheroi* and *paramone*-clause. A Response to Canevaro and Lewis
163 DARIO NAPPO, Jotabe and Leuke Kome. Customs gates from Byzantine to Roman time

Rassegne

- 181 ALESSANDRA AVAGLIANO, Immaginare Pompei. La percezione delle antichità vesuviane a partire da tre volumi recenti

Recensioni

- 191 *Eforo di Cuma nella storia della storiografia greca*, a cura di P. de Fidio e C. Talamo, con la collaborazione di L. Vecchio (Amedeo Visconti)
197 *Donum Mycenologicum. Mycenaean Studies in Honour of Francisco Aura Jorro*, edited by A. Bernabé, E.R. Luján (Matilde Civitillo)
203 Federica Fontana, *Tra autonomia e dinamiche regionali. Storia di Fliunte dall'VIII al IV secolo a.C.* (Anna Smeragliuolo Perrotta)

- 207 Léopold Migeotte, *Les finances des cités grecques aux périodes classique et hellénistique* (Bianca Borrelli)
- 210 Carmine Pisano, *Hermes, lo scettro, l'ariete. Configurazioni mitiche della regalità nella Grecia antica* (Luigi Spina)
- 213 Damiana Baldassarra, *Dal Saronico all'Adriatico: iscrizioni greche su ceramica del Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Adria* (Giulia Tozzi)

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JOTABE AND LEUKE KOME
Customs gates from Byzantine to Roman time

The subject of trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean in antiquity has become very popular among scholars over the last few decades. Despite the abundance of scholarly works on the matter, the majority tends to completely overlook the early Byzantine era, focusing mainly on the Roman imperial age. Such a gap leaves the post-Constantine period as a generally uncharted phase of intense trade between the two worlds¹. This is the consequence of a somewhat distorted contemporary perception of the ancient trade, one that is still bound to an outdated interpretation of the late Roman-early Byzantine economy of a major decline in trade in comparison to the early imperial period². Most scholars have argued that, after the so-called third century crisis, the level of trade between the Mediterranean world and the Indian Ocean never returned to the early Roman level³. While such an assumption is largely based on outdated and incomplete evidence, it is instead becoming more and more evident that the early Byzantine Empire was a huge importer and consumer of eastern goods⁴, although its

¹ There are some exceptions to such an attitude. See, for instance, Pigulevskaya 1969; Christides 1994 and 2013.

² Such a generalising interpretation dates back to the first works dealing with the subject, such as Warmington 1928, but is still operating in much later studies, such as Sidebotham 1986; De Romanis 1996; Young 2001; Tomber 2008; McLaughlin 2014.

³ For an analysis of the impact of the crisis on international trade, see Nappo 2012.

⁴ For a recent overview of the economic characteristics of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period, see now Banaji 2015.

trade with the Indian Ocean was managed and directed in a different way compared to the early centuries AD⁵. I believe that the only way to come to a full understanding of this exchange and interaction is to consider the Early Imperial and Byzantine phases as closely interconnected, as two moments of a coherent tale, following a gradual evolution.

I would then like to try to contribute to the development of such an approach, by showing how the study of the Byzantine policy in the Red Sea during the fifth and the sixth centuries AD can also help to understand some aspects of the Roman administration, which are still unclear to us.

1. The object from which I would like to start is the analysis of the island of Jotabe. From the fifth century AD, we have evidence of the crucial role played by this island located in the Gulf of Aqaba. Unfortunately, it is impossible at present to determine when and how the history of this settlement started. There is in fact scant data available on Jotabe in the literary sources, but this can still help us to draw synthetically a part of its history.

The first issue is to determine the exact position of the island. The only source that seems to provide some information about this is Procopius, who, in the first book of his *Bella*, observes that the island lays some 1.000 *stadia* from Aila: [...] ἐς τὴν Ἰοτάβην καλουμένην νῆσον, Αἰλᾶ πόλεως σταδίουσ οὐχ ἦσσον ἢ χιλίους διέχουσσαν⁶.

On the account of this text alone, and the absence of any archaeological evidence, some scholars identified Jotabe with the present day island of Tirān, located at the entrance of the Gulf of Aqaba, roughly 1.000 *stadia* from Aila. On that ground, some archaeological investigations were carried on Tirān (between 1956 and 1957), but they yielded no evidence of an ancient human presence on the island; beyond that, the island has a hostile environment for human habitation, by being scarcely provided with water and constantly blown by strong winds⁷.

Later on, a new hypothesis was put forward, identifying Jotabe with the island of Ġeziret Fira'un, which showed an archaeological record seemingly compatible with the chronology of Jotabe⁸. But this hypothesis also turned out to be not viable: first of all, Ġeziret Fira'un is about 17 km away from Aila; aside from this, the only archaeological evidence available from the site is dated to either the Mamluk or Crusader periods. For all these reasons,

⁵ See Power 2012.

⁶ Procop. *Pers.* I 19,3.

⁷ Rothenberg, Aharoni 1961, 162.

⁸ See Rothenberg, Aharoni 1961, 80-86; Solzbacher 1989, 178-181; Mayerson 1992, 3.

the identification with Ğeziret Fira‘un also has to be ruled out⁹, and the exact location of Jotabe remains unknown to date.

A second, not less puzzling question to address is how long the island was in fact under the control of the Empire. Our sources mention it exclusively for the period between AD 451 and 536¹⁰. This does not rule out, of course, the possibility that it was part of the Empire before and after these dates: simply, we currently have no records to assess it.

All our sources agree on defining the island as a customs gate, through which merchandise coming from India would first be taxed and then distributed onto a number of secondary ports¹¹.

The first author to write about Jotabe is Malchus from Philadelphia. He angrily polemised with the emperor Leo over his overconciliating attitude towards the foreign enemies of the State and reports that, in AD 473, the Arab chieftain Amorkesos was able to seize Jotabe from the control of Constantinople:

ἐν δὲ τοῖς Πέρσαις ἦν ὁ Ἀμόρκεσος τοῦ Νομαλίου γένους· καὶ εἴτε τιμῆς οὐ τυγχάνων ἐν τῇ Περσίδι γῆ ἢ ἄλλως τὴν Ῥωμαίων χώραν βελτίω νενομικῶς, ἐκλιπὼν τὴν Περσίδα εἰς τὴν γείτονα Πέρσαις Ἀραβίαν ἐλαύνει, κἀντεῦθεν ὀρμώμενος προνομὰς ἐποιεῖτο καὶ πολέμους Ῥωμαίων μὲν οὐδενί, τοῖς δὲ ἀεὶ ἐν ποσὶν εὐρισκομένοις Σαρακηνοῖς· ἀφ’ ὧν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν αὖξων προῆει κατὰ μικρόν. μίαν δὲ τῶν Ῥωμαίων παρεσπάσα τὸ νῆσον Ἰοτάβην ὄνομα, καὶ τοὺς δεκατελόγους ἐκβαλὼν τῶν Ῥωμαίων αὐτὸς ἔσχε τὴν νῆσον, καὶ τὰ τέλη ταύτης λαμβάνων χρημάτων εὐπόρησεν οὐκ ὀλίγων ἐντεῦθεν. ὁ αὐτὸς Ἀμόρκεσος τῶν πλησίον ἀφελόμενος κωμῶν ἐπεθύμει Ῥωμαίοις ὑπόσπονδος γενέσθαι καὶ φύλαρχος τῶν ὑπὸ Πετραίαν ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίοις ὄντων Σαρακηνῶν¹².

Among the Persians, there was Amorkesos, of the *genos* of Nomalios: he left Persia and travelled to that part of Arabia adjacent to Persia. Setting out from there, he made forays and attacks not upon any Romans, but upon the Saracens whom he encountered. He seized one of the islands belonging to the Romans, which was named Jotabe and, ejecting the Roman tax collectors, held the island himself and amassed considerable wealth through collecting taxes. When he had

⁹ Mayerson, 1992, 3. See also Mayerson 1995. Here the author goes through all the available evidence, to conclude that Jotabe was not an island, but rather a town in the mainland, probably on a peninsula somewhere in the Red Sea.

¹⁰ Abel 1938, 533-534: the two dates that encompass this period are the year of the Council of Chalcedon (451) and the Synod of Jerusalem (536), both attended by a «bishop from Jotabe».

¹¹ Malch. fr. 1 Blockley; Theoph. *Chronogr.* p. 141,15-18 De Boor; Choric. *Laud. Arat. et Steph.* 65,22-23; 67,17-19 Foerster - Richtsteig.

¹² Malch. fr. 1,7-19 Blockley.

seized other villages nearby, Amorkesos wished to become an ally of the Romans and phylarch of the Saracens under Roman rule on the borders of Arabia Petraea.

Amorkesos' behaviour seems to be somehow contradictory: he first chose to side with Constantinople, and then he seized one of the islands belonging to the Empire. His real aim was, as Malchus explains, γενέσθαι καὶ φύλαρχος τῶν ὑπὸ Πετραίαν ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίοις ὄντων Σαρακηνῶν¹³. To this end, Amorkesos sent Peter, the bishop of his tribe, to put his case to the Emperor Leo, who invited Amorkesos to Constantinople, where he was presented to the senate and awarded the title of *patricius*. The deal between the emperor and Amorkesos was sealed under the condition that the latter converted to Christianity, much to the disdain of Malchus himself, recalling the story¹⁴. In conclusion, Amorkesos' bet won him the title of φύλαρχος¹⁵.

An interesting detail, emerging from Malchus' account, is that at the moment Amorkesos set foot on Jotabe, there were some people on the island whom Malchus calls δεκατελόγοι. Such a word, along with others with the same stem, such as δεκατευτήριον, δεκατευτής, or the verb δεκατεύειν, is mainly attested in texts from the fifth and sixth centuries AD¹⁶. They all refer to the collection of customs duties, and we can safely understand it as a synonym for «customs officers». Indeed, despite the stem referring to an original 10% value, the word has no connection with the specific amount levied on cargoes¹⁷.

It is therefore safe to assume that in Jotabe there was a customs gate, where officers (called δεκατολόγοι) would levy taxes upon all the merchandise arriving there from outside the Empire. Later on, Amorkesos expelled those officers, when he seized the island, taking possession also of the customs revenues, as told explicitly by Malchus: καὶ τὰ τέλη ταύτης λαμβάνων χρημάτων εὐπόρησεν οὐκ ὀλίγων ἐντεῦθεν.

¹³ Malch. fr. 1,17-19 Blockley.

¹⁴ Malch. fr. 1,33-44 Blockley. Despite Malchus' disapproval, the story shows how Constantinople used Christianization as a mean to control border territories and win local groups. See Cameron 2012, 175.

¹⁵ On the Arab Amorkesos and on the significance of his enterprise in the contemporary context, see Letsios 1989. For an interesting discussion on the meaning of the title φύλαρχος during the early Byzantine age, see Mayerson 1991.

¹⁶ See Antoniadis-Bibicou 1963, 75-95.

¹⁷ On this subject, Antoniadis-Bibicou 1963 (92-95) is still the most important work. According to her, in this period the tax on the incoming goods was 1/8 of the overall value of the cargo, and the officers in charge of the taxation were consequently named *octavarii*. See also the interpretation provided by Mayerson 1992, 3, who does not make any reference to the work of Antoniadis-Bibicou: «The word [...] has no connection with the specific amount levied on cargoes coming into the port. [...] During this period, customs duties on imports and exports were charged at the rate of 12,5% - an eight (*octava*) of the value of the merchandise received or shipped».

Therefore, on the account of what Malchus relates, we can assess some key points: first, we can affirm that, before AD 473, the island definitely was within the borders of the Eastern Roman Empire, from which officers called δεκατολόγοι would levy taxes on the incoming goods.

Later on, starting from AD 473, the island instead became the possession of an Arab φύλαρχος, which does not mean that the island fell completely out of the political influence of the Empire, but, what is more important, however, is that Jotabe (being now under the rule of Amorkesos) stopped delivering its revenues to Constantinople.

The name of Jotabe shows up again in our sources some 25 years later, around AD 498, when, by the will of the emperor Anastasius, the island was retaken by Romanus, the *dux* of Palestine. Theophanes the Confessor describes the event in a passage of his *Chronographia*: Romanus set out a campaign against some Arab chieftains (Σκηνιτοί, in the original text), who had made a number of raids in his province¹⁸. His campaign was successful and Theophanes makes very clear that one of its best outcomes was the retaking of Jotabe:

τότε καὶ τὴν νῆσον Ἰοτάβην, κειμένην ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τῆς ἐρυθρᾶς θαλάσσης καὶ ὑποτελῆ φόροις οὐκ ὀλίγοις ὑπάρχουσαν βασιλεῖ Ῥωμαίων, κατασχεθεῖσαν δὲ μεταξὺ ὑπὸ τῶν Σκηνιτῶν Ἀράβων, μάχαις ἰσχυραῖς ὁ Ῥωμανὸς ἠλευθέρωσεν, αὐθις τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις πραγματευταῖς δούς αὐτονόμως οἰκεῖν τὴν νῆσον καὶ τὰ ἐξ Ἰνδῶν ἐκπορεύεσθαι φορτία, καὶ τὸν τεταγμένον βασιλεῖ φόρον εἰσάγειν¹⁹.

A correct translation of the word πραγματευτής is essential to understand the actual meaning of this text. This can be translated as a generic «trader», or «long-distance trader»²⁰. Nevertheless, the context here would suggest a different translation of the word, for which a comparison with the available documentary evidence can be extremely useful. The word πραγματευτής is indeed often used in connection with trading activities²¹, as a Greek translation of the Latin *actor*²², with the meaning of officer, or agent, often involved in the process of collecting tributes or taxes. The papyrological evidence

¹⁸ Theoph. *Chronogr.* p. 141,1-11 De Boor. Raids by Arabs in Mesopotamia, Phoenicia and Palestine area were also referred to by John of Nikiu (*Chron.* 89,33 Charles), Cyrill of Scytopolis (*Vita Abraami* 244 Schwartz), and Evagrius (*Hist. eccl.* III 36), who relates that the Scenites were defied by the commanders of each province, but does not explicitly mention Jotabe.

¹⁹ Theoph. *Chronogr.* p. 141,12-17 De Boor.

²⁰ Safrai 1994, 189; Laiou 2002, 708-710.

²¹ Rozenfeld 2005, 127-136.

²² Harper 2011, 120-125.

shows many examples of this last meaning²³, although some documents seem to record a very specific use of the word *πραγματευτής* as a specific term for «tax collector»: *BGUI* 356²⁴, *P.Kell.* I 15, *P.Lips.* I 64, and *O.Kell.* 25²⁵, and finally *P.Oxy.* XLII 3041. In this context, such an interpretation seems much more sensible: the word *πραγματευτής* would be equivalent to Malchus' *δεκατελόγοι*.

If we accept that Theophanes uses the word with this very meaning, we can interpret his text in a much more effective way. I would suggest a translation as follows:

The island of Jotabe, which is placed in the gulf of the Red Sea and under the control of the Roman emperor for not small tributes, and had been meanwhile occupied by Scenite Arabs, was cleared with violent campaigns by Romanus. He then allowed the Roman agents to again live autonomously on the island, to export merchandise from India, and to pay to the Emperor the established tribute.

Theophanes seems to be very clear about the fact that for the Empire the main advantage deriving from the island's recapture was to be back in possession of an important source of revenues (*φόροις οὐκ ὀλίγοις*). After the re-establishment of the imperial authority over the island, it was handed to Roman agents (*Ῥωμαίοις πραγματευταῖς*), who would live there in a status of semi-independence (*αὐτονόμως*), and trade with India.

Further information is available from the texts of Procopius of Caesarea and Choricus of Gaza, which also is the latest available to date. Both authors refer to events occurring under the reign of Justinian I (AD 527-565). Procopius, in an *excursus* briefly describing the geography of the Red Sea, provides us with the already cited information about the location of the island²⁶, and then he adds: *ἔνθα Ἑβραῖοι αὐτόνομοι μὲν ἐκ παλαιοῦ ὄκηντο, ἐπὶ τοῦ δὲ Ἰουστινιανοῦ βασιλεύοντος κατήκοοι Ῥωμαίων γεγέννηται*²⁷. Therefore, according to Procopius, a community of Jews had settled on the island a long time ago (*ἐκ παλαιοῦ*), living autonomously. This situation lasted until the Empire managed to bring them back under Roman rule during the reign of Justinian²⁸. It is not just a coincidence, therefore, that Procopius

²³ See, for example: *P.Mich. Inv.* 3275; 3778; 6185; 6902; *O.Mich. Inv.* 4267; *P.Corn. Inv.* I 80.

²⁴ It records a *πραγματευτής* *πύλης Φιλαδελφίας* («agent of the toll-gate of Philadelphia»).

²⁵ They all record a *πραγματευτής χρυσαργύρου*.

²⁶ Procop. *Pers.* I 19,3.

²⁷ Procop. *Pers.* I 19,4.

²⁸ An inscription found in the Sinai Peninsula confirms the presence of a Jewish community at Jotabe. It mentions: «Akrabos, son of Samuel of Maqna, of the 'son of Sadia', from Jotabe». See Rothenberg, Aharoni 1961, 181.

uses almost the same word as Theophanes, to describe the special status of the Jews in Jotabe (αὐτόνομοι – αὐτονόμως).

These Jewish traders are likely to be the Ῥωμαῖοι πραγματευταί mentioned by Theophanes, to whom Romanus had handed the island. Such people probably exploited their status of αὐτόνομοι and, as assessed by Choricus from Gaza, revolted against Constantinople, allegedly for religious reasons. In order to end this period of turmoil, Aratius, *dux* of Palaestina, had to intervene to restore the Roman rule over the island, following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Romanus²⁹.

While recalling the events, Choricus provides us with a short description of the island, which as usual highlights the importance of the revenues collected there, deriving from the trade with India: νῆσός ἐστιν ὄνομα μὲν Ἰοτάβη, τὸ δὲ ἔργον αὐτῆς ὑποδοχὴ φορτίων τῶν Ἰνδικῶν, ὧν μέγας φόρος τὰ τέλη. After that, he moves on to tell us how the Jews revolted against the emperor and took possession of the huge customs duties levied in the island that were supposedly destined for Constantinople. Finally, after a long panegyric of Aratius and the description of the war activities, Choricus comes to the conclusion of the whole affair: once more, the island returns into the hands of the Empire. Aratius hands it to trustworthy men, to collect taxes there, on behalf of the emperor (παραδέδωκας ἀνδράσι πιστοῖς τὸ χωρίον ἀργυρολογεῖν βασιλεῖ τεταγμένοις). Also Choricus, like Theophanes, makes it clearer still with the word βασιλεῖ who took advantage the most from the new situation³⁰. After this last event, Jotabe simply disappears from our sources.

Summarizing this, we might say that the Byzantine administration shows overall a rather consistent attitude towards the somehow difficult management of this frontier zone: the policy of the Byzantine rulers seems to prefer to divide two aspects of the control of the island. The control of the revenues is in the hands of local communities, possibly defined ethnically, who have permission to levy taxes upon the Eastern merchandise. On the other hand, the Empire seems also to reserve the military control of the area for itself. The terms of the agreement implied that the local administrators still had to pass the revenues on to the Empire. When, in exceptional circumstances, the Empire loses its grip on the island, then it deploys troops to retake control of it, mainly for economic (fiscal) reasons.

²⁹ Choric. *Laud. Arat. et Steph.* 67-75 Foerster - Richtsteig.

³⁰ It is probably worth pointing out that two emperors sought to retake Jotabe: Anastasius, a very careful administrator of the Empire, tried to do so in the same year in which he abolished the *collatio lustralis*; and Justinian, who engaged in very expensive military campaigns and was, therefore, always eager to raise more money.

2. I would now like to compare Jotabe to a different, but similar case, dating back to the early imperial age. In chapter 19 of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, the anonymous author, writing about the ports on the Arabian side of the Red Sea, describes the Nabataean harbour of Leuke Kome, highlighting its great importance for international trade. From here, in fact, seabourne merchandise coming from the southern Arabian Peninsula were carried up to Petra, the capital city of the Nabataean Kingdom³¹.

In his text, the author adds that in the port there was an officer who was in charge of levying a 25% tax on the incoming goods (παραλήπτης τῆς τετάρτης τῶν εἰσφερομένων φορτίων), and a centurion (ἐκατοντάρχης), appointed to control the customs. For both of them, the *Periplus* says that they were there at Leuke Kome διὸ καὶ παραφυλακῆς χάριν:

ὄρμος ἐστὶν ἕτερος καὶ φρούριον, ὃ λέγεται Λευκὴ Κώμη, δι' ἧς ἐστὶν εἰς Πέτραν πρὸς Μαλίχαν, βασιλέα Ναβαταίων, ἀνάβασις. ἔχει δὲ ἐμπορίου τινὰ καὶ αὐτὴ τάξιν τοῖς ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀραβίας ἐξαρτιζομένοις εἰς αὐτὴν πλοίοις οὐ μεγάλοις. διὸ καὶ παραφυλακῆς χάριν καὶ εἰς αὐτὴν παραλήπτης τῆς τετάρτης τῶν εἰσφερομένων φορτίων καὶ ἐκατοντάρχης μετὰ στρατεύματος ἀποστέλλεται³².

There is another harbour with a fort called Leuke Kome (= «white village»), through which there is a way inland up to Petra, to Malichus, king of the Nabataeans. This harbour also serves, in a way, the function of a port of trade for the craft, none of which are large, that come to it loaded with freight from Arabia. For that reason, as a safeguard there is dispatched for duty in it a customs officer to deal with the (duty of a) fourth on incoming merchandise as well as a centurion with a detachment of soldiers³³.

All the scholars who have dealt with this text have focused on the analysis of a crucial point: to assess whether the παραλήπτης and the ἐκατοντάρχης mentioned in the text were Roman or Nabataean officers. In other terms, to understand whether Leuke Kome was part of the Roman Empire or of the Nabataean Kingdom, at the time when the anonymous author wrote his book. This is the same point from which I would like to start this part of my analysis.

Strabo claims that in 25 BC (the year of the unfortunate military expedition of Aelius Gallus towards Arabia Felix), the port of Leuke Kome was part of the Nabataean Kingdom. Here ships loaded with Arabian frankincense

³¹ From Petra the trade route continued up to Rhinokolura, a port on the Palestinian Mediterranean coast, as noted by Strab. XVI 4,24.

³² *PME* 19.

³³ Translation by Casson 1989, 63.

would come on a regular basis from South Arabia³⁴. The *Periplus* describes the same commercial scenario: yet in the first century AD, Leuke Kome was a port to which ‘not big’ ships unloaded their cargoes of south-arabian spices. Still, the *Periplus* refers to the presence of two officers, a παραλήπτης and an ἑκατοντάρχης, the latter of whom seems to conceal in his name (a calque from the Latin word *centurio*)³⁵ a direct dependence of the town from the Roman administration.

The first scholar to deal with the problem of the ‘nationality’ of the παραλήπτης and the ἑκατοντάρχης was Glen W. Bowersock³⁶. This was his opinion on the matter:

He (*scil.* the author of the *Periplus*) notes further that there was a customs station at the port of Leuke Kome on the coast of the Ḥeǰāz, with a centurion (ἑκατοντάρχης) in charge of the city. With the great Nabatean settlement inland at Madā’ in Ṣāliḥ, as well as other Nabatean installations in the Ḥeǰāz, it is inconceivable that the port of Leuke Kome was being administrated by Roman officials. The customs officer, collecting a tax of twenty-five per cent, must have been a Nabatean official, employing rates that can be paralleled in the customs regulations at Palmyra. The presence of a centurion is no indication of a member of the Roman army. On the contrary, it is clear from the Nabatean terminology for military officers that “centurion” had been taken over by the Nabateans as a title, so that a Nabatean *qntryn*’ at Leuke Kome would make perfect sense³⁷.

Bowersock’s conclusion is neat and reasonable. For him, the two officers were surely Nabataeans, for two reasons: first, it would be impossible to imagine Leuke Kome being administrated by Roman officers, with it being part of the Kingdom of Nabataea³⁸. Secondly, Bowersock highlights a detail of paramount importance to any understanding of the text, namely that the Nabataean army was accustomed to use Latin or Greek words to name the military ranks³⁹. Later scholars who had interest in such a topic generally accepted such an interpretation. For instance, both Lionel Casson in his edition of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*⁴⁰ and Federico De Romanis in his seminal book on the Red Sea trade⁴¹ follow this interpretation.

³⁴ Strab. XVI 4,23.

³⁵ See Mason 1974, 41-42.

³⁶ Raschke 1978, 982.

³⁷ Bowersock 1983, 70-71.

³⁸ Bowersock 1983, 75, compared the management of Leuke Kome to other customs gates, such as Hegra. He claimed that Hegra was administrated by Nabataean, not Roman military officers.

³⁹ As attested by *CIS* II 217, referring to a Nabataean QNTRYN’ in Madā’ in Ṣāliḥ.

⁴⁰ Casson 1989, 145.

⁴¹ De Romanis 1996, 193.

Nevertheless, I would like to raise at least two objections to such a reconstruction. First, the existence of Roman military posts outside the ‘official boundaries’ of the Empire, with a strategic role, is indeed documented by the evidence⁴². Just to pick an example from the Red Sea region, we might point out the well-known case of the *vexillatio* of the *Legio II Traiana Fortis* being stationed on the Farasan archipelago during the second century AD⁴³.

On the other hand, it is indeed true that the Nabataeans had the habit of using Roman loan words to designate officers of their army. However, I would like to make a different point here. As far as we can be sure with regards the anonymous author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, he would have been a Greek-speaking resident in Egypt, and not a Nabataean⁴⁴. Therefore, his insight derived from being a subject of the Roman Empire, but from an area of Greek culture, hence we cannot rule out the hypothesis that when using the Greek word *ἐκατοντάρχης* he actually meant it in its original sense, i.e. a Greek translation of an official name of a Roman officer, *centurio*.

A few years after Bowersock, Steven E. Sidebotham returned to the subject. He advocated a much more cautious hypothesis, claiming that it is impossible to determine whether the *παραλήπτης* and the *ἐκατοντάρχης* were Roman or Nabataean officers. Although perfectly aware of the Nabataean custom of referring to the ranks in their army with Roman words, Sidebotham reiterated the point that it was also common practice for the Romans to deploy troops and custom-officers in their client kingdoms⁴⁵.

Subsequently, Gary K. Young also revisited the issue, and completely turned Bowersock’s thesis around. Starting from the assumption that Romans would always levy a tax of 25% on the value of the merchandise coming from East (as attested by *P. Vindob. G. 40.822* for Egypt⁴⁶ and by some Palmyrene inscriptions)⁴⁷, Young denied the possibility that the two officers could be Nabataeans. He first put into discussion a passage from Pliny the Elder in which he states that all the merchandise coming into the Empire from Arabia

⁴² As Raschke 1978, 982-983, nn. 1351-1352, pointed out, this is indeed a very well attested custom.

⁴³ Villeneuve 2004; Villeneuve, Facey, Philipps 2004a and 2004b; Villeneuve 2007.

⁴⁴ Casson 1989, 7-9. See now Arnaud 2012.

⁴⁵ Sidebotham 1986, 106-107.

⁴⁶ Also known as the ‘Muziris papyrus’, a twofold document containing two incomplete texts, one on its *recto* and the other on its *verso*, written in separate hands, both datable to the mid second century AD. On the *recto* is one column, missing its left edge, with the end of a contract relating to a maritime loan for a trading voyage from Alexandria to Muziris. On the *verso* are the end of a line and the last column of an account of the value of a shipload of goods imported from India. It was first edited by Harrauer, Sijpesteijn 1985. See also Casson 1986; Thür 1987 and 1988; Casson 1990; Foraboschi, Gara 1989; De Romanis 1996, 183-196; Purpura 1996; De Romanis 1998; Rathbone 2000 and 2002; Morelli 2011; De Romanis 2012.

⁴⁷ *AE* 1947, nrr. 179 and 180.

would be convoyed to Gaza⁴⁸. Hence, if the Romans were not levying any tax in Leuke Kome, then Gaza had to be the place for the τετάρτη to be paid. Such a hypothesis would lead to a very unlikely scenario:

If the merchants had to pay a 25% duty on their imports at Leuke Kome upon entering the Nabatean Kingdom, and then *again* on entering Roman territory (possibly at Gaza, Pliny *NH* 12.32), this would seem to amount to a total of 50%, not counting other imposts and *portoria* which were no doubt considerable. It would clearly be foolish for merchants to send their wares to Leuke Kome rather than to the Egyptian Red Sea ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike, where they would only have to pay the τετάρτη once, at Alexandria⁴⁹.

This is, in my opinion, an interesting point. Imagining the 25% tax to be paid twice in Leuke Kome and then again in the Roman Empire in fact makes no sense⁵⁰. So, what sort of scenario should we imagine operating in the area, to conciliate the different points made by the aforementioned scholars? I would suggest that a suitable answer might come from the comparison of the two case studies presented in this work, aiming to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how the customs system worked over the centuries, and indeed how the solutions adopted by the Roman and Byzantine power in the area are consistent over time.

Before further engaging with this explanation, I ought to clarify why I deem the two case studies to be comparable, provided the relevant chronological distance between the eras in which each of them took place. Leuke Kome was a Nabataean port of the Red Sea, whose exact location is still unknown⁵¹, but certainly belonged to the Arabian side of the Red Sea. As far as we can infer from our sources, it was the only customs gate on the Arabian side of the Red Sea, at least during the first century AD. Furthermore, it seems plausible that most vessels reaching the harbour were of a small size, coming from south Arabia⁵².

⁴⁸ Plin. *Nat. hist.* XII 32.

⁴⁹ Young 1997, 267.

⁵⁰ Strabo (XVII 1,13), talking about the Indian merchandise in Egypt, claims τὰ τέλη διπλάσια συνάγεται τὰ μὲν εἰσαγωγικά τὰ δὲ ἐξαγωγικά. Some scholars (see De Romanis 1998, for instance) interpret this as «double taxes on the merchandise, when they enter and when they exit (province)», which would allow the possibility of a double taxation on the eastern goods in all the Red Sea area. I would rather translate the text as follows: «a double amount of custom is collected, arising from imports on the one hand, and from exports on the other». This translation is more consistent with both the context (Strabo talks about ships going back and forth between Egypt and India), and with the evidence available from Berenike, assessing the existence of a toll-gate in the town, for items going outside the Empire (see Bagnall, Helms, Vehoogt 2000 and 2005).

⁵¹ See Nappo 2010.

⁵² As we can infer from the aforementioned *PME* 19.

After this period, we do not know what came of the port, but it is likely to have fallen out of use some time after the second century AD, along with its ‘brother’ port on the Egyptian shores, Myos Hormos⁵³. All this would have opened a gap in the Roman organisation of the area, missing a customs gate on the Arabian side of the Red Sea. From this point of view, it would be intriguing to speculate that the aforementioned island of Farasan, occupied at some point during the second century AD, inherited some of the duties of Leuke Kome, but at the current stage such assumption cannot be proven.

What seems to be more clear is that from the third century AD, there was a shift in the geography of the Red Sea: the southern harbours such as Leuke Kome and Myos Hormos decline, whereas the northern settlements (previously out of the major international routes) start to become preeminent in the region⁵⁴. In this context, we can assume that the northern ports became the terminal of the internal route of the Red Sea⁵⁵, so that Jotabe played the role of toll-gate that had once belonged to Leuke Kome⁵⁶.

It is worthwhile recalling that such a scenario might have been put in place much earlier, but we have no evidence to assess when in fact Jotabe assumed such a role. In addition, it is important to underline once more that our sources only talk about the island when it was involved in political and military turmoil, between the age of Leo and Justinian.

3. Therefore, in conclusion, I deem it highly likely that, in the context of the overall management of Red Sea trade, the role of Leuke Kome passed over to Jotabe. The latter was, as far as it is possible to understand, administered by communities who were granted some degree of autonomy, as long as they provided the Empire with regular revenues, coming from the eastern trade. It seems that the Empire is content with merely gaining from the taxes levied on Jotabe, and with keeping the general military control of the island. Only if trouble occurred did the emperor then make moves to retake control of Jotabe. If we imagine that such a general settlement was operating during

⁵³ On the chronology of Myos Hormos, see Peacock, Blue 2006.

⁵⁴ See De Romanis 2002.

⁵⁵ Nappo 2009.

⁵⁶ From this point of view, it is very interesting the information available from *Martyrium Arethae* (in *Acta Sanctorum, Octobris, X 747*), referring to a military campaign promoted by Justin I against the people of south Arabia. The emperor assembled a military fleet with ships coming from different ports in the Red Sea, in which Jotabe seems now to have a leading role: “Ετυχηνη δὲ πρῶτῃ τὸν θεράποντα τοῦ Θεοῦ Ἐλεσβαδὸν συνάξει ἐκ πάσης βασιλείας αὐτοῦ καὶ ἄλλων ἔθνων, πληθος χιλιάδων ἑκατὸν εἴκοσι. καὶ κατ’ οἰκονομίαν τοῦ σωτήρος, εἰσῆλθεν πλοῖα τῶν ἐμπόρων Ῥωμαίων καὶ Περσῶν καὶ Αἰθιοπῶν, καὶ ἐκτῶν νήσων Φαρσάν, ἐξήκοντα· οὕτως, ἀπὸ μὲν Ἀειλὰ τῆς πόλεως πλοῖα δεκαπέντε, ἀπὸ τοῦ Κλύσματος εἴκοσι, ἀπὸ Ἰοταβῆς ἑπτὰ, ἀπὸ Βερωνίκης δύο, ἀπὸ τῆς Φαρσάν ἑπτὰ, ἀπὸ Ἰνδίας ἑννέα.

the Early Empire in a similar frontier zone, the situation of Leuke Kome becomes far more understandable. From this point of view, it is not relevant whether the officer in charge of the customs in Leuke Kome was Roman or Nabataean. The crucial point is that the παραλήπτης (regardless of his ethnicity) had to pay his fair share of taxes to the Roman fisc, the same way the δεκατελόγοι/πραγματευταῖ from the Byzantine period would.

I believe such reconstruction is sound, as suggested by two different points. The first one builds upon the argument put forward by Young according to whom, had the tax been a Nabataean one, this would have meant that the items entering the Empire through Nabataea would have to pay twice the tax of 25%, which would have made this route very inconvenient for traders.

The second reason comes from the comparative analysis of the case of Jotabe. For Jotabe, too, we have a semi-independent community living on the island autonomously (as the Nabataeans had), but forced to integrate into the Byzantine economic system. Any time that such an agreement is put under discussion, the response of the emperor is to again enforce the power on the island, but always granting the autonomous status to the local community. Such a habit consistently showed by the Byzantine rulers would have had its origin in the Roman Imperial period, during the phase of the client kingdoms in the East. Despite the changes in the overall political map of the area over time, this general policy was still considered appropriate, which explains why we find it in place centuries later.

Such continuity is identifiable in many aspects and the general policy displayed by the Roman and the Byzantine rulers in the Red Sea, and it is a subject worth further investigation to allow us to understand more fully the management of the area and the relevant aspects of continuity between the Roman and the Byzantine Empire in the Red Sea.

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