

The Function of the Roman Army in Southern Arabia Petraea

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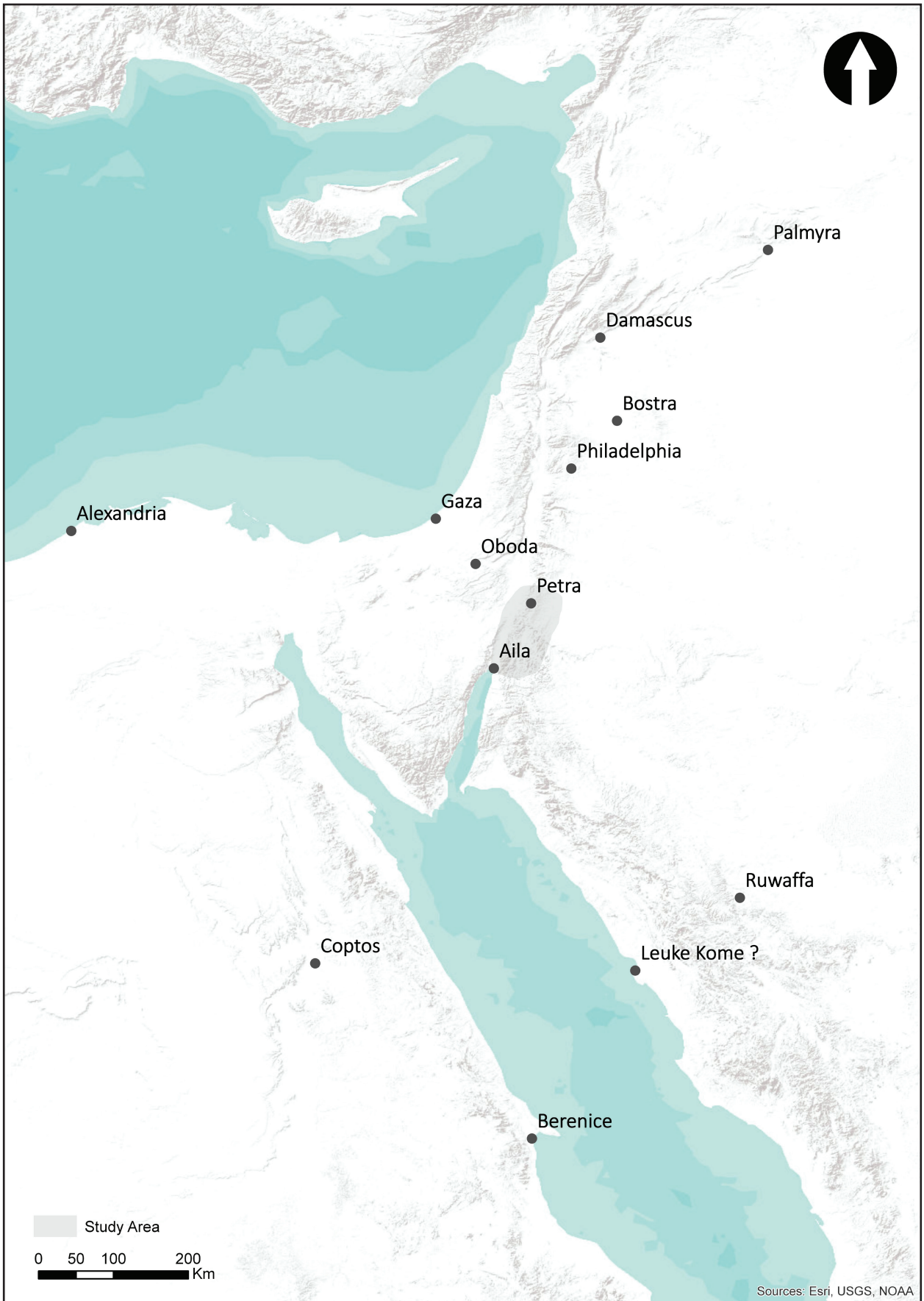


Figure 1. Main sites mentioned in the text, showing the study-area considered in this publication.

Glossary

Ayn = spring.

Bir = well.

Birkeh = pool, cistern.

Jebel = mountain.

Khirbet = ruins.

Qasr = fort/castellum.

Rujm = tower.

Umm = mother.

Wadi = canyon/valley, water course.

Archaeological periods and dates

Nabataean Period	63 BC–AD 106
Roman Period	AD 106–324
Late Roman	AD 284–324
Byzantine Period	AD 324–640

Preface

The publication of a text initially conceived as a master's dissertation, such as the one being presented, must come with its own set of warnings and expectations. At the time of submission, I had to respect several formatting rules (including a word count) and a rigid time limit. As a result, many points were left implied, whereas others unstated. I did not alter a significant amount of the original version I delivered to the Examination Schools after a night of nervous sleep deprivation, but I tried to consider the comments made by my examiners, peers, and professors in the aftermath of my submission. I have added content to the discussion and have procured more recent literature on the topic, although this, I should say, was a challenge.

The topic at hand—the function of the Roman army in Arabia—was a boiling topic in the 1980s and 1990s, yet due to the lack of hard evidence, especially excavation data, archaeological inquiries in Roman Arabia were forced to change their focus. These days, most survey work in the region explores land use in ancient times, especially that related to settlements and military sites. Projects such as these are now producing great quantities of data and will certainly serve as invaluable platforms for the study of Roman Arabia in the near future. Using these contributions, my attempt was to revert attention to the important military aspect of Roman occupation in the region using computer techniques that were not applied in previous discussions. I have come to believe, after reading Appian's preface, that a better understanding of the military will shed light on the functioning and priorities of the Roman empire as a whole.

I hope my minor contribution is conceived in light of its original format and that any inaccuracies can be dutifully criticised in the name of academic progress. My main purpose has been to follow M. I. Finley's call to action concerning the use of analytical models in ancient history: 'The familiar fear of a *priorism* is misplaced: any hypothesis can be modified, adjusted or discarded when necessary. Without one, however, there can be no explanation.'¹

I am most grateful to my mentors at the University of Oxford, Prof. Andrew Wilson and John Pouncett, for their unfailing support during my master's degree. I should also like to thank Professor David Kennedy and Dr. Robert Bewley at the APAAME and EAMENA projects, as their contributions were vital to the completion of this work. My dissertation also could not have been written without the generosity of Mica Ertegun and the people at the Ertegun Graduate Scholarship in the Humanities. Finally, I must thank all those who have charitably read and commented on earlier drafts of this text, particularly my family and peers.

¹ Finley (1985), 66.

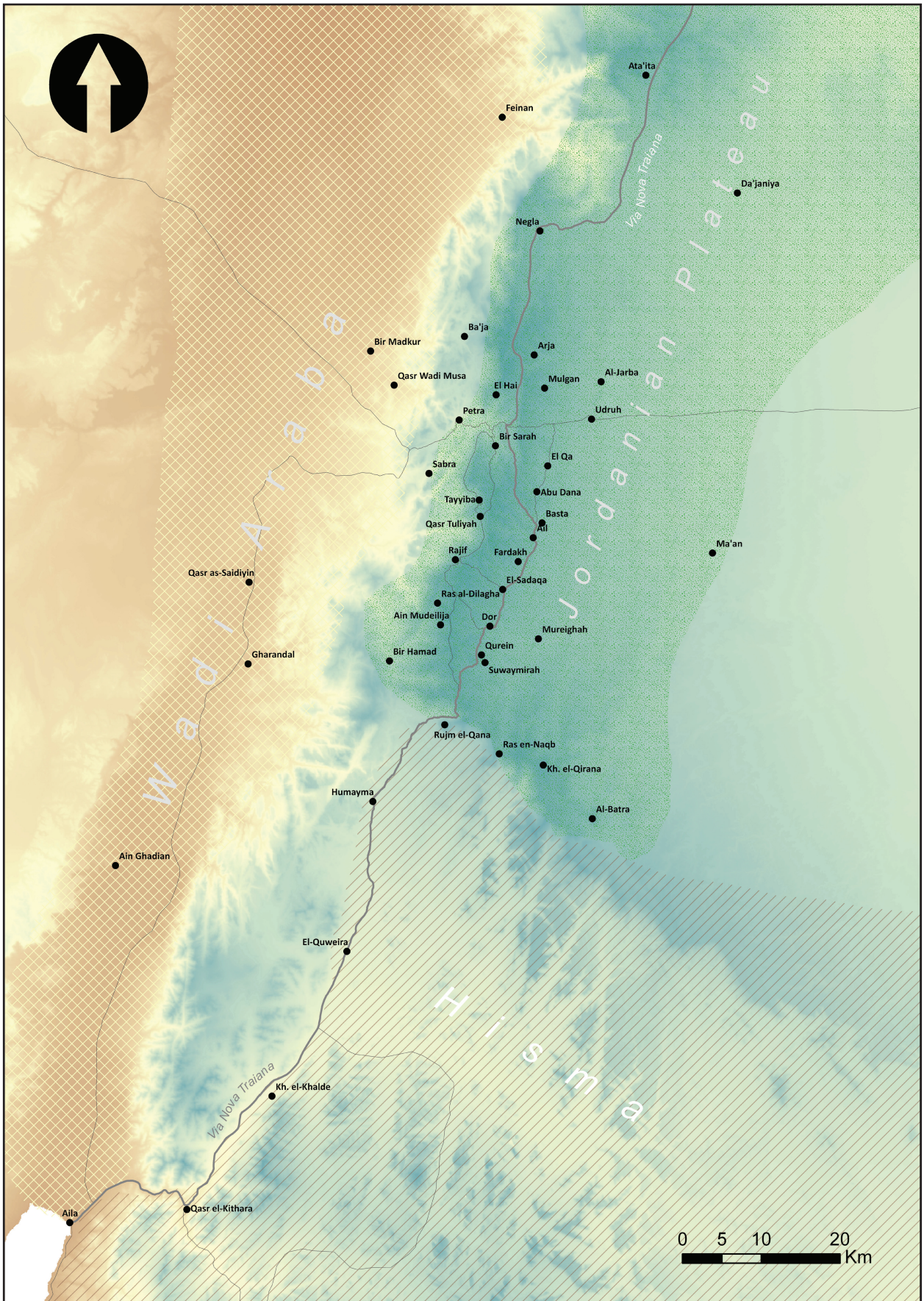


Figure 2. Study Area (southern Arabian frontier) considered in this publication, showing the main sites mentioned and geographical zones.

I. Introduction: Aims and Scope

The purpose of this research is better to understand the role of the Roman army in the southernmost sector of the Arabian frontier of the Empire between Petra and Aila (Aqaba) from the creation of the province to the end of the Byzantine period (AD 106–640). The author attempts to balance the opposing arguments put forth by Roman scholars such as Benjamin Isaac, Charles R. Whittaker, David Graf, and Thomas Parker, whose views polarise the function of the army and fortified structures along the Arabian frontier. This work argues that there is enough evidence to suggest that the eastern Roman frontier was an open but not unguarded border, demarcated by a system of roads, forts, and posts built not only to defend the empire against inward and outward threats, but also to secure the province, provide shelter, and control movement and trade in the desert. This study also proposes—unlike other analyses of the Roman military in the region—that the functions of the army changed according to period and geographical location.

This research aims to understand the purpose of the Roman military presence in the area by developing a large-scale and *longue durée* perspective of the frontier system in the south (Figure 2). Compared with the northern sections, the southernmost part of Rome’s eastern frontier, extending from Petra to Aila, has only been analysed at a site or regional scale, and no serious attempts have been made to go past its typological and architectural dimensions before or since Al-Khouri’s *Il Limes Arabicus*.² A new evaluation of the debate from a landscape perspective is warranted, and so the approach used here is based on spatial analyses of visibility and distance, and supported by the extant archaeological and historical evidence in the Roman east.³

The arguments made here consider the most up-to-date survey and excavation data along the ancient roads connecting Petra and Aqaba. All pertinent archaeological sites from AD 106 to Justinian are considered, but it must be acknowledged that most concrete evidence is concentrated in the third and fourth centuries.⁴ For the purpose of clarity, all dates are AD unless specified. The spelling of modern and ancient place names is consistent, as much as possible, with the most recent reports. Alternative spellings are given only when they are so different as to be potentially misleading (e.g. Ail/Ayyil, not to be confused with Aila).

This work can be an important contribution to the discussions about the Roman eastern frontier. First, it provides an unprecedented focus on the relationship between the Roman military and Arabian settlements in the region between Petra and Aqaba, including the Wadi Araba. Previous studies have only focused on limited sections of this region. Second, this is, to my knowledge, the first time anyone has applied a landscape analysis using Geographical Information Systems better to understand the dynamics of the whole region.⁵ In the process, I have been working closely with two Oxford-based projects—the Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East (APAAME) and the Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa project (EAMENA)—reporting on the condition of sites from aerial and satellite imagery. Since the reports of the later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century surveys, many sites have wholly or partially disappeared. This study can thus also be a useful tool for educators, heritage management, and conservation professionals who wish to know more about the classical landscape in southern Jordan.

Chapter Two of this study summarises previous archaeological research in southern Nabataea—especially that focused on Roman occupation, frontier studies, and military presence—and the ancient primary sources that discuss these same topics. The Roman and current meanings of ‘frontier’ (*limes*) and its relation to the Roman army are also discussed here. Some considerations about the geography, climate

² Al-Khouri (2003); Wheeler (2007), 236. See the ‘Methodology’ Section for an explanation of the choice of the study-area.

³ Using ArcMap 10.5 (GIS); c.f. landscape approach used in Kouki (2012), 22.

⁴ Parker (1991), 498; Gregory (1997), 2.

⁵ At a smaller scale see: Findlater (2004) at Dana; Cook (2004) at Humayma; Ynnilä (2006) at Jabel Harun.

and topography of the *Limes Arabicus* are provided, followed by a summary of the military build-up in the region. The last section of Chapter Two discusses the deployment of legions in East, particularly in relation to the potential functions of the Roman military in the newly-established province of Arabia. Chapter Three offers a critical appraisal of each opposing view about the role of the Roman army in Arabia and the evidence supporting or refuting them. These are the defence of the frontier against the 'Nomadic threat;' the policing and administration of the province; and the maintenance of the incense trade routes. Chapter Four applies spatial analyses to the southern section of *Limes Arabicus* with the aim of revising the current debate in eastern frontier studies where 'there has never been enough evidence to prove conclusively or to disprove any of these theories.'⁶

⁶ Gregory (1997), 3.