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THE CUSTOMS-OFFICER AT THE NABATAEAN PORT OF LEUKE KOMÉ
(*PERIPLUS MARIS ERYTHRAEI* 19)

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THE CUSTOMS-OFFICER AT THE NABATAEAN PORT OF LEUKE KOMÉ
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The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* is a document of vital importance in the study of the Roman Red Sea trade with Arabia, India and Africa, which gives us a rich source of information on the trading routes and practices of Roman merchants in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean at the beginning of our era.¹ In the course of his description of the Arabian trade, the author of the *Periplus* gives passing mention to the port of Leuke Kome, from which goods were transported to the Nabataean capital of Petra. In the course of this description, an intriguing reference is made to the presence at Leuke Kome of a customs-officer of the τετάρτη (a 25% tax on incoming goods) and a centurion. The text is as follows:

...ὃ λέγεται Λευκὴ κόμη, δι' ἧς ἐστὶν εἰς Πέτραν πρὸς Μαλίχαν, βασιλέα Ναβαταίων, ἀνάβασις. ἔχει δὲ ἐμπορίου τινὰ καὶ αὐτὴ τάξιν τοῖς ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀραβίας ἐξαπιζομένοις εἰς αὐτὴν πλοίοις οὐ μεγάλοις. διὸ καὶ παραφυλακῆς χάριν καὶ εἰς αὐτὴν παραλήπτῃς τῆς τετάρτης τῶν εἰσφερομένων φορτίων καὶ ἑκατοντάρχης μετὰ στρατεύματος ἀποστελλεται (*Periplus* 19).

The debate concerning this passage has centred, for the most part, on whether or not the officers concerned should be considered to be Nabataean or Roman, and whether or not Leuke Kome was a part of the Roman Empire or of the Nabataean kingdom at the time.²

According to Strabo, Leuke Kome was a part of the Nabataean kingdom at the time Aelius Gallus' expedition to Arabia Felix arrived there in 25 B.C., and was at that time a substantial market and port for the incoming incense trade from southern Arabia (Strabo *Geogr.* 16.4.23). In later years, however, it would seem that this trade died off to some extent (*Geogr.* 16.4.24), although the citation from the *Periplus* above clearly indicates that trade continued to pass through Leuke Kome in the middle of the first century A.D., the time that the *Periplus* was written.

The presence of an apparently Roman officer (i.e. a centurion) at this port by the mid first century has might cause one to assume that Leuke Kome had been made a part of the Roman Empire at the time of Gallus' expedition or some time afterward. However, there is no evidence from any literary source that this is the case, and such a post, located at the mouth of the Gulf of 'Aqaba, would be far from the centres of Roman authority and of very limited strategic value. Others have pointed out that the term *centurio*, transliterated to the Nabataean QNTRYN', is attested as a rank in the Nabataean army in tomb inscriptions at the Nabataean military outpost at Medain Saleh in Saudi Arabia:³ thus, the officers may be considered to be Nabataeans rather than Romans. From this, we would assume that the Nabataeans charged a 25% tax upon incoming goods in the same way that we know the Romans did. Such a tax is attested for Egypt: *P.Vindob.* G 40822, an agreement concerning the transporting of a shipment of goods from India from the Red Sea overland to Coptos and thence to Alexandria,⁴ mentions the levying

¹ For the text of the *Periplus* see W. Schoff, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (London 1912); H. Frisk, *Le Périphe de la mer Érythrée* (Göteborg 1927); L. Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton 1989). The *Periplus* is now generally agreed to have been written at about the middle of the first century A.D. See M. G. Raschke, *New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East*, *ANRW* 2.9.2 (1978), 979–981; Casson (1989), 6–7.

² For the bibliography of this debate up until 1978 see Raschke, 982. Since then, G. W. Bowersock (*Roman Arabia* [Cambridge, Mass. 1983], 70) and Casson (1989, 145) have supported the view that the officers were Nabataean while S. E. Sidebotham (*Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa* [Leiden 1986], 106–107) states that they could be either Nabataean or Roman.

³ *CIS* 2.1.217. For this argument see Bowersock, 70; Sidebotham, 107.

⁴ For the text of *P.Vindob.* G 40822, see H. Harrauer & P. Sijpesteijn, *Ein neues Dokument zu Roms Indienhandel*, *P. Vindob. G 40822, Anzeiger der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Kl. 122 [1985], 124–155 emended in G. Thür, *Hypotheken-Urkunde eines Seedarlehens für eine Reise nach Muziris und Apographe für die Tetarte in*

of this tax, the τετάρτη, in a public warehouse at Alexandria. Similarly, an inscription of A.D. 161 from Palmyra in Syria attests to the collection of the τετάρτη in Syria also: it commemorates one Marcus Aemilius Asclepiades, collector of the τετάρτη and councillor of Antioch,⁵ making it at least likely that the levy in this case was collected at Antioch. The presence of a collector of the τετάρτη at Leuke Kome would thus seem to indicate, if these officers were indeed Nabataean, that the Nabataean kingdom collected this tax also.

This, however, would seem to provide an insuperable difficulty. If the merchants had to pay a 25% duty on their imports at Leuke Kome upon entering the Nabataean 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 Alexandria.⁶ Thus, for the Nabataean kingdom to have charged the τετάρτη at all would seem to have been economically suicidal, as it would in time result in the trade ceasing altogether. For this reason, therefore, we should reject the notion that the Nabataean kingdom charged incoming goods a 25% tax, and that the customs-collector and centurion at Leuke Kome were Nabataean.

But if these officers at Leuke Kome were Roman, what were they doing there? An answer has been suggested by M. G. Raschke, who proposed that the officers were there to prevent the evasion of the τετάρτη by ships which would otherwise have docked at Myos Hormos or Berenike in Egypt.⁷ Citing other examples of Roman troops located within the territory of client states,⁸ Raschke suggested that the customs collector and centurion had been stationed on the territory of the Nabataean king in order to collect the import duty from merchants who might have been hoping to avoid the guarded journey from the Red Sea to Alexandria, where the τετάρτη was paid.⁹ If they had been able to land at Leuke Kome without paying the tax, they could have sent their merchandise on the overland route to Gaza, thereby avoiding Alexandria (and the τετάρτη) altogether. This theory is attractive, and would account for the presence of Roman troops and officials so far from the areas of Roman authority in the first century A.D.

I would suggest that this interpretation is strengthened by the use of the term παραφυλακή in *Periplus* 19 to describe the customs-collector. We might ordinarily expect this term to be used of the centurion and his soldiers, but the author of the *Periplus* clearly used it to describe the customs officer. What then could the customs officer be thought of as guarding? If we accept Raschke's interpretation, I believe the answer is provided: the customs officer was intended as a 'guard', or 'safeguard' against the evasion of the τετάρτη by ships arriving in the Red Sea after their trip from India.

However, if the τετάρτη were imposed at Gaza, why would there need to be a Roman garrison at faraway Leuke Kome? Even if ships did succeed in offloading their cargoes at Leuke Kome without paying tax, they would then have to be conveyed to Gaza overland where the τετάρτη would presumably be imposed. However, in order to understand this we need to examine the passage in Pliny where

Alexandreia (zu P. Vindob. G. 40.822), *Tyche* 2 (1987), 229–245, and L. Casson, *New Light on Maritime Loans: P. Vindob. G 40822* *ZPE* 84 (1990), 195–206. On the nature of the agreement see L. Casson, *P. Vindob. G 40822 and the Shipping of Goods from India*, *BASP* 23 (1986), 73–79; G. Thür, *Zum Seedarlehen κατὰ Μουζέριον P. Vindob. G 40822*, *Tyche* 3 (1988), 229–233; and Casson (1990) above.

⁵ J. Cantineau et al., *Inventaire des inscriptions palmyreniens* [Beirut 1931-] 10. 29

⁶ *P. Vindob. G 40822* recto, col. 2, line 8

⁷ Raschke, 664.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 983.

⁹ *P. Vindob. G 40822* describes the transport of the goods from the Red Sea to Coptos and then to Alexandria under tight security: the goods were conveyed under guard and were impounded in public customs-houses in both Coptos and Alexandria until the relevant taxes had been paid. Much of this security was no doubt designed to prevent merchants selling their goods until they had paid the τετάρτη and any other *portoria* due.

he speaks of the imposition of taxes at Gaza, in the context of describing the conveyance of Arabian frankincense overland from southern Arabia:

euehi non potest nisi per Gebbanitas, itaque et horum regi penditur uectigal. caput eorum Thomna abest a Gaza nostri litoris in Iudaea oppido $\overline{\text{LXIV}} \mid \overline{\text{LXXXVII}}$ D p., quod diuiditur in mansiones camelorum LXV. sunt et quae sacerdotibus dantur portiones scribisque regum certae, sed praeter hos et custodes satellitesque et ostiarii et ministri populantur: iam quacumque iter est aliubi pro aqua aliubi pro pabulo aut pro mansionibus uariisque portoriis pendunt, ut sumptus in singulas camelos \times DCLXXXVIII ad nostrum litus colligat, iterumque imperii nostri publicanis penditur (Pliny *NH* 12.32).

It should be here noted that nowhere does Pliny state that the charges levied at Gaza were in fact the τετάρτη. It is certain that *portoria* of some sort were levied at Gaza, but there is no evidence to assume that this was the τετάρτη unless it is specifically stated, which it is not. Thus, if it were the case that the taxes levied at Gaza were *not* the τετάρτη, it would have been perfectly possible for a shipmaster to offload his cargo at Leuke Kome and convey it into the Empire without ever paying the 25% duty, if there had not been a Roman customs official at Leuke Kome. It was for this reason, therefore, that the Romans despatched a customs officer, a centurion and some soldiers to this port within the territory of the Nabataean kingdom some time in the first century A.D.

What then of the loads of frankincense and myrrh which, as we have seen, Pliny describes as entering the Empire at Gaza? Where did *these* goods pay the τετάρτη? It may in fact be a mistake that we assume that these goods paid the levy at all. Today, we tend to think of the incenses from Arabia such as frankincense and myrrh in the same category with the ‘luxury’ goods such as silk, jewels and perfumes which were brought from India, but there is good reason to think that the Romans thought otherwise. Incenses such as frankincense and myrrh were used in religious and funerary rituals, and may well have been thought of as a completely different category of goods than the ‘luxury’ imports from India and further afield.¹⁰ Thus, the reason that there was no collector of the τετάρτη at Gaza may be that the Arabian incenses which were conveyed by that route were not considered to be ‘luxuries’ and were not required to pay the duty of 25%. The τετάρτη itself, then, would in this hypothesis be a duty which was only levied on goods entering the Empire from India and further east, whether they entered by Egypt or Syria: it was not levied on other goods which came from nearer the Empire, and which might well have been viewed by the Romans more as necessities than luxuries.¹¹

The customs-collector and centurion at Leuke Kome mentioned in *Periplus* 19 would thus appear to have been Roman. The main reason that they were placed at Leuke Kome would then be to prevent the evasion of the τετάρτη, which would normally be paid at Alexandria (or at Antioch in the case of goods coming through Mesopotamia and Syria). If they had not been there, the tax could easily have been evaded by shipmasters calling at Leuke Kome instead of Myos Hormos or Berenike in Egypt. These arrangements, however, did not affect the trade in incenses which continued to pass through this port and on the overland route through Petra to Gaza, because this trade consisted of goods not thought of as ‘luxuries’ by Romans: among these goods it would appear were numbered the incenses of Arabia such as frankincense and myrrh.

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¹⁰ See Sidebotham, 15 for a list of ancient citations showing that Arabian incenses such as frankincense and myrrh were used for religious and funerary purposes, which would have caused them to be viewed as necessities (albeit expensive ones) rather than genuine luxury goods.

¹¹ In support of this it should be noted that in the two instances we have (apart from *Periplus* 19) which mention the τετάρτη, in both cases it would seem that it is goods from India which are being taxed. *P. Vindob.* G 40822 refers to loan agreements at Muziris in India, at the start of the voyage (see Casson 1986, 73–79); while *Inv.* 10.29 refers to a caravan to Charax at the head of the Persian Gulf, to which goods from Northern India were conveyed by ship.