Construction of a road in Nabataea (CIL III, 14149) [1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Milestone  
Original Location/Place: Via Nova Traiana, Nabataea  
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Last located on the Eastern shore of the Dead Sea, more or less corresponding to Ein Gedi, Jordan  
Date: 111 CE  
Physical Characteristics: Milestone of local stone, inscribed on one side.  
Material: Stone.  
Measurements: Unknown.  
Language: Latin  
Category: Roman

Publications:  
CIL III, 14149, 42

Commentary: The above inscription is found on a Roman milestone from the province of Arabia (now this spot is located in modern Jordan). It records the construction of a ‘new road’ (viaem novam) that was laid out across the territorial expanse between the port town of Aqaba and on the Red Sea and the region of Trachonitis in Syria (modern Lajat), following Trajan’s annexation of the kingdom of Nabataea in 106 CE. One of many such examples discovered from the area covered by the road, this milestone records the final provincialisation of Arabia, with the distances referred to in the inscription indicative of the important trade route that Rome now controlled. It is also an interesting example for Trajan’s continued expansion of Rome’s frontiers; unlike his efforts in Dacia and Parthia, the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom represents the ‘peaceful’ addition of new territory without the political, military and financial burdens of war. As the following discussion shall illustrate, the construction of the Via Nova Traiana affirmed the permanent presence of Rome in the region as well as creating a new, visible border between Roman and non-Roman territory; it assisted in policing the region whilst also taking control of a trade route previously capitalised upon only by local groups.

Unlike the campaigns in Dacia, which were also concluded in 106 CE, Arabia “came to Rome as part of a logical expansion of her hegemony rather than through forced acquisition for reasons of security” (Bennett, Trajan, p. 172). ‘Arabia’ was principally comprised of the Nabataean kingdom – roughly modern Jordan – which ruled as far as Sinai and the Negev in the north-west and the al-Hijaz mountains, the Hisma and an-Nafud deserts in the south-east; the Nabataeans were originally pastoral nomads of Semitic origin, whose principal centre – Petra – came to the attention of the Greeks in 312 BCE, when they attempted (and failed) to take control of it and its trade in frankincense and myrrh (for the origins of the Nabataeans, see Healey, “Were the Nabataeans Arabs?,” p. 38-44. For the attack by the Greeks, see Diodorus Siculus, Historical Library XIX.94-98). A settled population had been established by the 1st century BCE, with a king at its head, whose lives in Petra were prosperous and luxurious owing to their position at the crossroads of the most important trade route in the region; situated between Africa, Mesopotamia, Arabia and the Mediterranean, the Nabataeans were well placed to benefit from the exchange of goods across the Levant (Bennett, Trajan, p. 173. For an overview of the trans-Levantine trade routes, see Kennedy, Archaeological Explorations, p. 140-142). In 62 BCE the Nabataeans appear to have entered into a client-relationship with Rome, following Pompey Magnus’s annexation of Syria two years earlier. Pompey’s deputy, Aemilius Scarrus, had attempted to seize Nabataean territory too but had been unable to overwhelm them and eventually sought peace terms (see Plutarch, Life of Pompey, 45). Augustus had officially ratified the new king Aretas IV Philopatris in 9 BCE, and five years later briefly incorporated the region during the troubled period that followed the death of King Herod in Judea; Julian Bennett has interpreted these latter two events as evidence that the Nabataeans were firmly established as a Roman client state by the reign of Augustus, and that it was only Tiberius’s reluctance to further expand Rome’s boundaries that prevented its annexation (Bennett, Trajan, p. 175). It is not clear exactly what motivated Trajan to move to annex the territory in 106 CE; some scholarship has suggested that it was deliberate and part of Trajan’s expansionist policy (Parker, Romans and Saracens, p. 123; Bowersock, Roman Arabia, p. 82), whilst others have preferred to cite an economic motivation and Trajan’s personal ambition (see Al-Otaibi, From Nabataea to Roman Arabia, p. 48-59 for full discussion). The economic motive certainly holds some weight; Rome’s resources had been depleted following the renewed campaigns in Dacia and the vast building programme initiated by Trajan in Rome certainly required additional funding, which may explain the speed with which taxes were imposed upon goods carried across formerly Nabataean territory (Al-
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Otaibi, From Nabataea to Roman Arabia, p. 61). Irrespective of the motive for annexing Nabataea into a province, the process by which it occurred is alluded to somewhat opaquey on the milestone; it states that Arabia was ‘turned into a province’ (redacta in formam / provinciae Arabia), suggesting a ‘peaceful’ transition of power that was at odds with Trajan’s experience of expansion and conquest elsewhere. Indeed, it is perhaps worthy of note that the coinage that celebrated Arabia as a new province of Rome bore the legend ARABIA ADQVISITA (‘Arabia gained (for the empire)’), rather than the more typical CAPTA or VICTA associated with new provinces; the implication was certainly one of easy transformation rather than outright conquest.

As there is so little evidence for Trajan’s motivation for annexing the province, nor its early organisation, much attention has necessarily fallen on the via Nova Traiana, which provides the best link with the province’s early Roman history. The construction of the road was clearly an enormous endeavour and one that is representative of the region’s importance to Rome. The milestone under discussion here and the many similar examples excavated from different parts of the route, indicate the date of construction to be between 111 and 114 CE, due to the titles with which Trajan is described. As the milestone states the road was overseen by the pro-praetorian legate, Caius Claudius Severus, who was acting as first governor of the province. The name of the road – the ‘New Trajanic Way’ – would appear to suggest the presence of an ‘old’ road, whose route was formalised and capitalised upon by Rome, perhaps by following an existing Nabataean caravan trail (Graf, “The ‘Via Militaris’ in Arabia,” p. 32; Bowersock, Roman Arabia, p. 91). Karen Borstad, however, has argued that to have built the road along a known pathway was “incompatible” with the text of the milestone inscriptions, which state that a new road was opened and paved (“History from Geography,” p. 55). In either case, it is the function of the road that is of most interest; Julian Bennett noted that to pave a road of this size and distance was unlikely to have been planned solely for everyday trade and communication, as the paving stones would have provided an unnatural surface for the camels used for transporting goods to walk. He also noted that a road dedicated to speedy communication would have been much better served along the comparatively level bottom of the Wadi Araba crossing, where the modern road is found (Trajan, p. 177). It is, therefore, rather suggested that the road was intended as a kind of informal border, marking the eastern limit of settled occupation; the road permitted the Romans easy control of the nomadic groups and seasonal pastoralists, who migrated annually, as well as a means to police movement – of people and goods – in and out of Roman territory. The presence of military installations along the road would appear to confirm this suggestion, with the via Nova then providing the “effective limes to the province…from the first it was intended to provide the baseline for an outer shield of military activity, mainly concerned with police activities” (Bennett, Trajan, p. 178; Isaac, The limits of empire: the Roman army in the East, p. 120-135). This may, then, clarify Trajan’s decision to annexe the Nabataean kingdom; as a client kingdom, it is possible that the defensive line it presented was not considered secure, and that Rome’s military and administrative presence was required in order to maintain Roman hegemony in the wider region. The construction of a road – one of better infrastructure and visibility than its nomadic predecessor – was one way of asserting Rome’s hold over the new province; trade, communication and policing were all improved by its presence, with the frequent placement of milestones commemorating the emperor under whose authority it had been built serving as a permanent reminder of Rome’s power.

Keywords in the original language:

- Traianus [2]
- Dacicus [3]
- redactus [4]
- provincia [5]
- Arabia [6]
- Via Traiana Nova [7]
- finis [8]
- Syria [9]
- maris ruber [10]
- legatus pro praetore [11]

Thematic keywords:

- Trajan [12]
- Arabia [13]
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Syria [14]  
Arabia Nabataeae [15]  
province [16]  
road [17]  
commerce [18]  
construction [19]  
frontier [20]  
boundary [21]  
annexation [22]

Bibliographical references:  
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Parker, Samuel T., Romans and Saracens: A history of the Arabian Frontier [34] (American Schools of Oriental Research; Winona Lake: Distributed by Eisenbrauns, 1986)  

Other sources connected with this document:  
Inscription

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