

ZENO THE TRIBUNE

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In the second season of the 'Aqaba-Ma'ah-Survey, January-February 1981, the following Nabataean inscription was discovered at Heideb el Fala (Fig. 1)¹ :

ŠLM ZYNWN BR QYMT KLYRK' BṬB L'LM

"Greetings, Zeno son of Qymt, chiliarch, in/with the good for ever".

Given the use of Greek and Roman military terms like chiliarch, and centurion (QNTRYN²) under the Nabataean kingdom² and the extensive Hellenising of its culture, this man Zeno might well have been an officer in the army of Arethas IV or Rabbel II during the first century of the Christian era. However, such an interpretation must be questioned after the discovery last season in the Ḥisma of a Greek inscription which seems likely to have been a record left concerning the same officer (Fig. 2, Pl. 1):

ΡΩΜΕΟΙ ΑΕΙ ΝΙΚΩΣΙΝ ΛΑΥΠΙΚΙΟΣ
ΕΓΡΑΦΑ ΧΑΙΡΕ ΖΗΝΩΝ

Topographically the site itself is interesting in that this inscription is cut into rock at the base of a steep hill directly above a low oblong rock platform which stands on the inside edge of a small level plateau which faces NE towards the Ḥisma caravan route. It is tempting to see this rock platform as the improvised *tribunal* or *suggestus* of a temporary encampment used by Roman soldiers. Considering the commanding view and the availability of spring water for men and horses a few hundred yards north and at El Ghal a further kilometre NNE, it may well mark a seasonal outpost used regularly over a number of years by patrols operating in the Ḥisma. It would be reasonable, though not essential, to conclude that such units would have been based on the Roman fort at Kh. el-Kithara (Praesidio).

The actual Greek inscription represents a superior graffito. Epigraphically unusual, it is actually a piece of rather good bookhand on stone. The dots after ΝΙΚΩΣΙΝ represent a not uncommon treatment of the MS *colon* where Greek scribes in antiquity did not follow the regular later Byzantine convention copied by Aldus and all subsequent western printers³. The curious mark like the Roman numeral I beneath the last *nu* of the word cited is almost certainly the *paragraphos* in a form rather more usual in Latin than Greek MSS. Its use here seems entirely regular, and is obviously meant to show that ΑΑΥΠΙΚΙΟΣ belongs with the next line rather than the foregoing military boast. The lengthening of the downstroke of the *lambda* is moreover characteristic of the Greek technique for indicating a new paragraph by an enlarged first letter which Romans, mediaeval scribes and our printers till recent days have also followed.

The inscription is a semi-official occasional document - a piece perhaps of that *adrogantia* which Tacitus implies was normally expected of a Roman officer among newly subjugated tribes⁴ - not in any sense an official record or proclamation. Further, located as it is overlooking the trade route through the *Ḥisma* at some distance, it may have been directed to Roman morale as well as having been meant for propaganda to influence caravan parties going to the springs nearby. As it is inscribed on a hard (and seemingly dressed) rock surface, it probably required the skill of a legionary accustomed to cutting milestone inscriptions on a road construction party.

The translation of the Greek is open to two viewpoints:

1) The most simple and probable version depends on the confusion of nominative and vocative endings of -ων type nouns which was a consequence of that phonetic assimilation of *omega* to *omicron* from the first century AD which always prevails in modern Greek⁵. So we may construe ΖΗΝΩΝ as a vocative as readily as treating it as a nominative.

The most obvious translation is therefore:

Romans always conquer.

I, Lauricius, wrote "Greetings/Hail Zeno".

The word χαίρει often has the sense of "Welcome" or "Greetings" in classical Greek, as in Aristophanes' pun on the name of Charon put into the mouth of Dionysus in *Frogs* 184: Χαίρει ὁ Χάρων. Its use here is really colloquial, and might be expressed as "Well done, Zenol!", in

received southern English, or as "Jolly good show, Zeno!" or again, in Australian colloquial it might be rendered "Good on you, Zeno!"

2) The possibility remains that it is nominative. Normal Greek word order is against this; but the tendency in Nabataean inscriptions to write ŠLM (Salaam aleikum) with the well-wisher in the nominative cannot be ignored⁶. In this event ΔΑΥΠΙΚΙΟΣ would become a *cognomen* of a clearly Romanized Zeno. Certainly this is a possibility. Indeed Dessau lists the *cognomen* Lauricius only once, as occurring in an inscription of AD 359 referring to Bassidius Lauricius, *comes* and *praeses* of Isauria⁷.

So viewed the text presents a convoluted word order characteristic of Tacitean Latin. On the other hand this text cannot predate the official annexation of Arabia in 111 AD, when Tacitus was already far into his *Annals*. Besides the inscription does suggest a literary bookhand, and exhibits a Latin type *paragraphos* under the final *nu* of *νίκωσιν*.

This less probable version would read:

Romans always conquer.

I, Zeno Lauricius wrote, "Greetings!"

It is of interest that the name recorded for his father in the Nabataean text already published is attested in Nabataean inscriptions from Madā'in Sālih of the second century AD. These Cantineau was disposed to date to the second century of our era, but recent work has dated many of the monuments there to the first century⁸. Significantly too Waddington cites a Greek inscription from Taymā regarding the ownership of a structure by a certain Γαδύος Καταμαθού⁹, of which the second word is a genitive of paternity which renders perfectly into Greek the Nabataean phrase BR QYMT. Again, the very common Greek name Zeno is widely attested in Syria, Sinai and Palestine, being transliterated into Nabataean directly as ZYNWN, just as our text presents it¹⁰. So it is not to be considered evidence for Greek ethnicity. Nabataeans named Zeno are no more a subject for comment than was the Latin name Avidius Cassius of the famous Syrian of the second century.

The dating of the Greek inscription cannot be positively determined. The spelling ΡΩΜΕΟΙ for 'Ρωμαῖοι cannot help us. Though it exhibits the modern Greek pronunciation of ε and αι as the same sound, this spelling confusion has already become irritatingly common in Egyptian Greek papyri from the first century BC, offering us forms like δέχεσθε where the text clearly requires the meaning of δέχεσθαι¹¹. Again, the epigraphic forms of *lambda* λ,

omega ω, and *sigma* σ cut into this stone are already apparent in texts from Augustan times; whilst the rounded *epsilon* ε actually occurs in a roughly cut Attic inscription of the fourth century BC¹². However the lettering in general resembles a good uncial bookhand of the middle second century AD or later. Relevant examples are the Hawara Homer of second century and the Ambrosian Homer of the third. Resemblance is also strong with cursive Greek hands of the second and third centuries¹³.

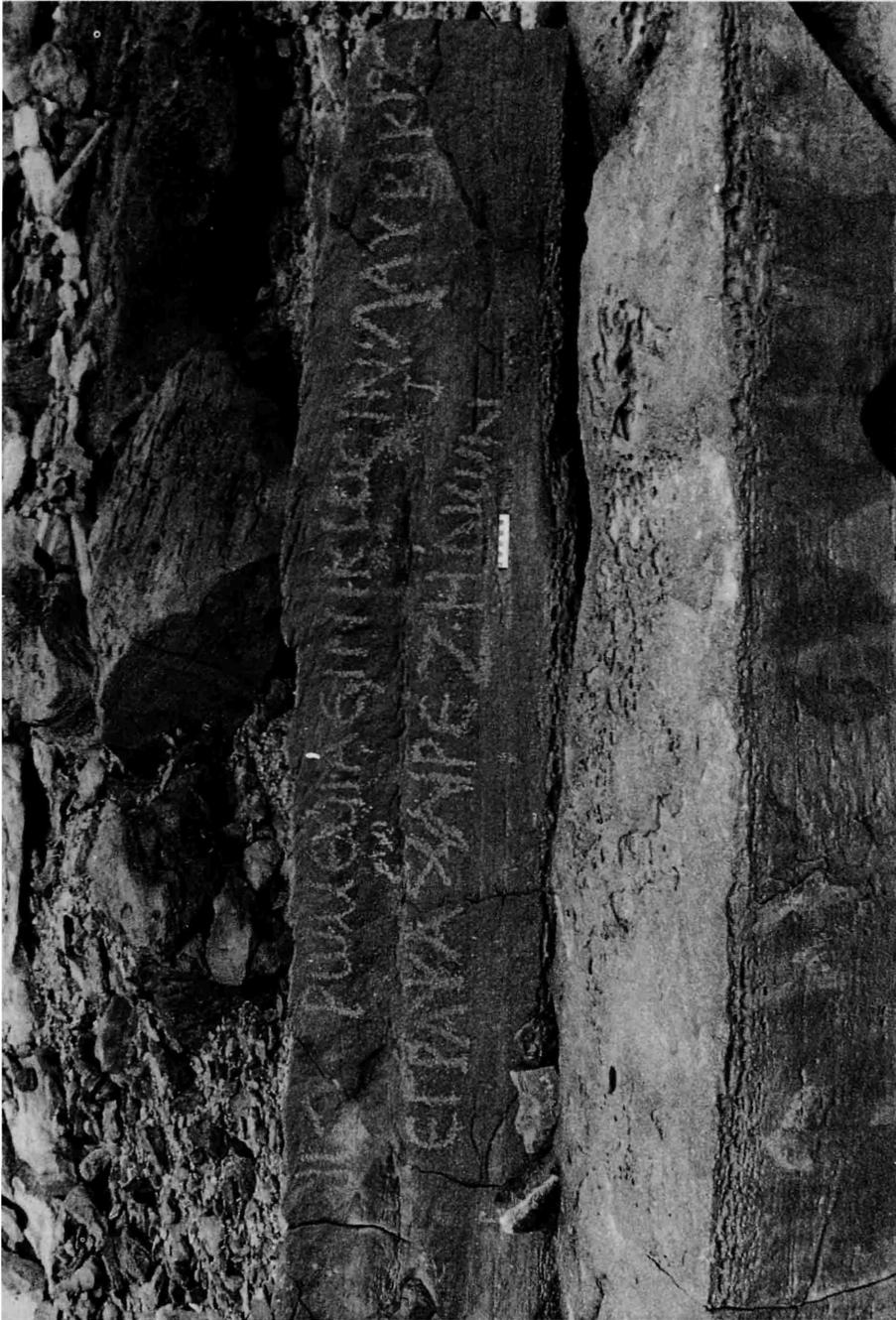
Historically all Roman operations in this region have a *terminus post quem* in Trajan's forward policy of occupying the Nabataean kingdom in AD 106¹⁴. However, as no milestone were cut on the Via Traiana Nova till AD 111, the year of the first commemorative coins, it is perhaps improbable that our inscription can be earlier than that year¹⁵. Bowersock points out the immediate employment of Nabataean auxiliaries in the early days of the province¹⁶, but it seems a little early for Nabataean officers to boast of being Romans before the date of Hadrian's Eastern Tour and visit to Arabia in AD 130. Then also the Jewish War of 132-5 may have been prompted some Arab tribes outside the Roman province to attempt an incursion which Zeno then repelled and recorded in this boast of victory in what may have been a relatively minor engagement. Of course our *terminus ante quem* is a harder problem. The apparent good order of the province during the revolt of Avidius Cassius in AD 171 need not preclude raids into the Ḥisma by tribes linked with his conspiracy; and the same consideration must apply to possible raids into this region during Septimius Severus' war against Parthia and his reorganisation of the East between 193 and 201 AD. On the other hand, the rising importance of the Lakhmid kings in Arabia and their hostility to Palmyra render large tribal forays into the Ḥisma unlikely after the captivity of Valerian in 259 AD¹⁷. So on strategic and epigraphic grounds any date between AD 111 and AD 260 seems possible. But if one wished to link Zeno with Madāʿin Sālih and the first century tombs of its Nabataean military families who would be prime candidates for early Roman enfranchisement, then a Hadrianic date in the time of the Jewish War would seem a seductive suggestion. The question remains open.

1 W.J. Jobling, 'Aqaba-Maʿan Survey, January-February 1981 : ADAJ, 26 (1982), 203, plate LVIII,5.

2 G.W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Harvard U.P. 1983, 71.

3 Sir E. Maunde Thompson, *Handbook of Greek and Latin Palaeography*, London 1901, 67-71.

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- 4 Tacitus, *Agricola*, 9.
 - 5 J.H. Moulton-W.F. Howard, *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 2, Edinburgh 1919-29, 43-44 and 134-35.
 - 6 W.J. Jobling, *The Fifth Season on the 'Aqaba-Ma'an Survey 1984*: ADAJ, 28 (1984), 195, plate XLI, 2.
 - 7 Dessau, ILS, 740. Cf. A.H.M. Jones-J.R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Cambridge 1971, vol. I, 497.
 - 8 J. Cantineau, *Le Nabatéen*, Paris 1930, vol. II, 141. But see G.W. Bowersock, *op.cit.*, 57.
 - 9 W.H. Waddington, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, Roma 1968, n°2202.
 - 10 W.H. Waddington, *op.cit.*, nos 1999, 2092, 2558.
 - 11 M. David-B.A. von Groningen, *Papyrological Primer*, Leiden 1965, 17.
 - 12 A.G. Woodhead, *The Study of Greek Inscriptions*, Cambridge 1981, 64-65.
 - 13 Sir E. Maunde Thompson, *Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography*, Oxford 1912, 192-93 and 199.
 - 14 G.W. Bowersock, *op.cit.*, 79, n. 12.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 83.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 157.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 138-42.



Pl. 1
Greek Inscription from the Hisma.

AR
DEI

Bay

Handwritten Nabatean script tracing, consisting of a single line of characters.

Qmibna

Fig. 1
Tracing of Nabatean Inscription from Hedeib el Fala.

ΡΥΜΕΘΙΑΕΙΝΙΚΛΩΣΙΝ·ΤΑΥΡΙΚΙΣ
 ΕΤΡΑΥΑΧΑΥΡΕΖΗΝΩΝ

Fig. 2
 Tracing of Greek Inscription from the Hisma.