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# Two Safaitic Inscriptions in Comparison to Geographical and Historical Sources about the Arabian Expedition of Aelius Gallus

Adalberto Magnelli - Giuseppe Petrantoni \*

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ABSTRACT – The aim of this work is to analyse the critical *crucis* about some geographical locations in reference to the western coast and the inland parts of the South Arabian and Nabataean area. In detail, the purpose of this research is to investigate the probable location of the port of Leuke Kome through a comparison between an epigraphic source written in Safaitic and some indication in Strabo's account of the expedition of Aelius Gallus to Arabia Felix. In addition, a new reading of another Safaitic inscription mentioning a curious *S<sup>ly</sup>* (Silleus?) could help to better understand some details of the Roman Arabian campaign too.

KEYWORDS – Aelius Gallus; ancient Arabian geography; Leuke Kome; Marib; Semitic inscriptions – Elio Gallo; geografia dell'Arabia antica; iscrizioni semitiche; Leuke Kome; Marib.

The military expedition led, in 25-24 BC, by the Roman prefect of Egypt Aelius Gallus to Arabia Felix, under orders of Augustus, is to be rated among the historical events that have influenced the political and institutional developments of the South Arabian states and, more in general, of the entire Arabian Peninsula.

Classical sources, like Strabo <sup>1</sup>, Pliny the Elder <sup>2</sup>, Josephus <sup>3</sup> or Cassius Dio <sup>4</sup>, report with a wealth of details the military developments and the stages of the Roman legionaries in Arabia to reach the south of the

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\* The analysis of the Semitic texts is by Giuseppe Petrantoni; the historic comment on the Classical sources is by Adalberto Magnelli.

<sup>1</sup> Strab. *Geogr.* XVI 4, 22-24. Cf. also the version of the *Res gestae divi Augusti* 26, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Plin. *NH* VI 32, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph. *AJ* XV 317.

<sup>4</sup> Cass. Dio *Hist.* LIII 29.

Peninsula<sup>5</sup>, where the so-called *Arabia Eudaimon* (*Arabia Felix*) was situated; it was also known as the country of the incense.

We do not report here the whole analysis of the narration about the deeds of Aelius Gallus<sup>6</sup>, but we will intend to linger over the critical *cruces*, partly solved by the commentators, about some geographical locations in reference to the eastern coast and the inland parts of the South Arabian and Nabataean area. Our focus is the coastal location of Leuke Kome<sup>7</sup> and the traces of this military expedition found in the South Arabian and Nabataean epigraphic sources<sup>8</sup>.

## 1. THE PROBABLE LOCATION OF LEUKE KOMÉ

Classical sources, Strabo (XVI 4, 23) and *Periplus maris Erythraei* (19) indicate the presence of two main Nabataean ports overlooking the Red Sea.

The first one is Aila, today West-Aqaba<sup>9</sup>. Aila is part of the Southern Negev Desert, at the southern end of the Arabah, adjacent to the Egyptian resort city of Taba to the south, the Jordanian port city of Aqaba to the east. Archaeologists have found many traces of this settlement and its identification is certain<sup>10</sup>.

The other Nabataean port is Leuke Kome, situated further south than Aila, in the Arabian coast of the Red Sea. According to some scholars it may have been in the vicinity of a location currently called Aynuna<sup>11</sup>, near the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba. Recently the scholarship has re-

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<sup>5</sup> According to the modern critique the reason of the expedition were mainly of economic character: Sidebotham 1986a, 592; 1986b, 121. Buschmann 1991, 85-93 suggests that the aim was to impede the increasing of the Ḥimyarite power, whereas Marek 1993, 121-156 points out that the purpose was to avert the Parthian expansion. Probably there were several reasons: Speidel 2015, 83-128.

<sup>6</sup> On the expedition see Pirenne 1961; Dihle 1965, 80 ff.; Jameson 1968, 71 ff.; Simon 2002, 309 ff.; Sánchez Sanz 2014; Arbach - Schiettecatte 2017, 677 ff.; Bowersock 2019, 225 ff.

<sup>7</sup> For the location of the site at Aynuna see Kirwan 1979; Ingraham *et al.* 1981, 76-78; Gatier - Salles 1988, 186-187; Casson 1989, 144; Young 2001, 85-87; Cuvigny 2003, 28-29; Tomber 2008, 68; Gawlikowski 2019; Gawlikowski - Juchniewicz - al-Zahrani 2021. Nappo 2010 proposes instead the location at al-Wajh, while Fiema *et al.* 2020 near al-Wajh (in al-Qusayr). Buschmann (1991, 86-88) locates the port at Yanbu.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Arbach - Schiettecatte 2017.

<sup>9</sup> For the site of Aila (West-Aqaba) see Parker 1998; 2000; 2002; 2003; Dolinka 2003; Retzliff 2003, 45 ff.; Parker 2009.

<sup>10</sup> All archaeological data in Parker 1998; 2000; 2002; 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Juchniewicz 2017; Gawlikowski 2020.

examined the archaeological and topographical data of this area, and has claimed that Leuke Kome is probably located at al-Wajh<sup>12</sup>, a coastal city in north-western Saudi Arabia, situated on the coast of the Red Sea.

Strabo's narration of Aelius Gallus' expedition in 25 BC is rich in detail on the early stages. The author had friendly ties with Aelius Gallus and probably knew by him about all the stages of his expedition<sup>13</sup>. For this reason, we state that Strabo's account contains sure and reliable information. It is narrated that the Roman fleet left from the Egyptian port of Cleopatris<sup>14</sup>; after a hard navigation, because of the northern Red Sea regime of winds, the Roman fleet landed at Leuke Kome. Here, the Roman army asked for Nabataean and Judaeon reinforcements and later marched for 30 days on the South crossing all the Nabataean territory<sup>15</sup>.

If Leuke Kome is placed in the settlement of current Aynuna, the track of the days of march to cross the area under Nabataean control makes sense. In fact, the Nabataean territory extended further south than this settlement<sup>16</sup>, and considering the difficulties of marching caused by heat and diseases, the journey would as last long as the sources attest.

If the port, reached by the army of Aelius Gallus, is placed at al-Wajh, and so Leuke Kome at the same site, it would locate on the edge of the Nabataean territory, on the borders of the Arabian area; so, it is improbable that the army took so long to cross the territory of a certain Aretas, who was a relative of the Nabataean king Obodas, despite the weather conditions and the difficulties due to desert area.

We can't exclude a mistake of Strabo, but now his work is considered a source of accurate information and the closer to the events. In addition, the anonymous author of the *periplus* of the Red Sea indicates that Leuke Kome is vaguely placed in front of Myous Hormos, in Egypt, east of the same position<sup>17</sup>. The text of the 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD does not give us specific coordinates even if today we locate the Egyptian port on the western bank

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<sup>12</sup> Nappo 2010, 335-341; 2018, 34-36.

<sup>13</sup> On Strabo's use of the same Gallus as his source Biffi 2002, 14-22. See also Sánchez Sanz 2014, 4 ff.

<sup>14</sup> Mayerson 1995, 18 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Strab. *Geogr* XVI 4, 24: [*sc.* Ael. Gallus] ... **τριάκοντα γούν ἡμέραις διήλθεν αὐτήν**, ζειὰς καὶ φοίνικας ὀλίγους παρέχουσιν καὶ βούτυρον ἀντ' ἐλαίου, διὰ τὰς ἀνοδίας. The expression of Strabo διήλθεν αὐτήν shows that the Roman army crossed only the territory under Aretas' control, so it is not possible that the fleet reached the Southern borders of the Nabataean land.

<sup>16</sup> Nappo 2010, 336 f.

<sup>17</sup> *Periplus mari Erythraei* 19.

of the Red Sea<sup>18</sup>, further south than a previous identification; probably Leuke Kome was simply east of Myous Hormos.

For the Nabataeans the port of Leuke Kome was an important terminal for the trade of the spices with the West; a caravan route left Petra arriving in this port<sup>19</sup>. This fact is sufficient to think that Leuke Kome could be located in the area of Aynuna, exactly along the caravan route that led to Petra.

The archaeological searches at the site of al-Wajh, where no archaeological excavation has been completed<sup>20</sup>, show that the area would have hosted a smaller port<sup>21</sup>. It is improbable that it could be the port of call for the big boats wanted by Aelius Gallus for his expedition.

Beyond these general considerations, we can maybe add a further epigraphic source suggesting that Leuke Kome was placed at Aynuna and not at al-Wajh. It is a text written in Safaitic characters, a rock drawing discovered in the el-Khderi region that is located in the North-Eastern Jordanian *Bādīyah*. According to the editors, the text dates back to the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BC<sup>22</sup>.

The editors give the following reading and translation<sup>23</sup>:

*l hbl bn wdm w ngy b-b-sfnt f'qd m-'bhrnltln snt*

By *hbl* son of *wdm*, and he escaped with the ship, then clung to the seas for thirty years.

This inscription refers to a person that left Hauran for thirty years, probably for trading, travelling by the Red Sea. The Safaitic inscriptions were indeed carved mostly in the Syro-Jordanian Harrah, a basalt desert stretching from southern Syria to northwestern Saudi Arabia<sup>24</sup>.

The interpretation of the text presents difficulties; in particular, the broken plural, read by the authors<sup>25</sup>, *'bhrn* «seas» is an *unicum* in Safaitic,

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<sup>18</sup> On the probable location of Myous Hormos at Qusayr al-Qadim cf. Ptol. IV 5, 14-15 (about the *Leukos limen* just south the town). See esp. Blue 2007. On the contrary: Cuvigny 2003; Nappo 2010, 339 ff.

<sup>19</sup> *Periplus maris Erythraei* 21. For Roman-Nabataean trade connections: De Romanis 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Old Saudi excavations at al-Qusayr to the South discovered only a small Nabataean shrine (of which architectural elements are exhibited at Riyadh National Museum). For the intensive survey of the whole site, see Fiema *et al.* 2020.

<sup>21</sup> On the site evidences see Musil 1926, 299-301, followed by Kirwan 1979, identified the site with the port of Egra. On the contrary Nappo 2010, 340-342.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Salameen *et al.* 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Salameen *et al.* 2018, 208.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Jallad 2019, 342.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Salameen *et al.* 2018, 209 state that: «The word is attested here for the first time in Safaitic, and the present form finds no parallels in Classical Arabic».

whereas in Arabic we have the forms *biḥār* and *buhūr*. Presumably it is a Safaitic broken plural with the final *-n*.

The picture of the inscription, provided in the first edition<sup>26</sup>, shows that there is a vast space between the initial' of the plural «seas» and the following *b*. This is not comprehensible given the way how the author wrote the text<sup>27</sup>.

Therefore, we suppose to read inside this space a further letter of the shape of *l*. This letter is the determinative article (')*l*-, well attested in Safaitic next to the traditional form *h*-<sup>28</sup>; this *l*- is prefixed to the sequence *bḥrn*. The final *-n* indicates the regular suffix of the dual form, as it is attested in Safaitic<sup>29</sup> and also in Arabic. So, we will read and translate the inscription as follows:

*l bbl bn wdm w ngy b-b-sfnt f'qd m 'l-bḥrn ultn snt*

By *bbl* son of *wdm*, and he escaped with the ship, then he was held (by contract) **by the two branches of sea** (by the two seas?) for thirty years

The root '*qd*, Arabic '*aqada*, means «to knit, to tie», «to put together, to join», «to contract», in the passive form '*uqida* «to became engaged to»<sup>30</sup>.

The trader coming from Hawran probably ran through the maritime route that linked the Nabataean territory, where Safaitic was spoken, to the ports of the Red Sea, and presumably the Mediterranean Sea.

Probably, the author of the inscription used one of the ports of Nabataea for his trade by his ship that was drawn over the text<sup>31</sup>. Maybe it was a safe port well known to the author and also by his interlocutors. We may imagine a port placed between two seas, or better, two sea branches in Aynuna that is located in the entrance of the Gulf of Aqaba and in the Arab coast of the Red Sea; the former is the first sea branch, the latter is the second sea branch.

For this reason, given that we have only two main trade ports of Nabataea, Aynuna could be identified as the landing of Leuke Kome, where the army of Aelius Gallus arrived in Arabia Felix in 25 BC.

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<sup>26</sup> Al-Salameen *et al.* 2018, 207, fig. 2.

<sup>27</sup> The author of the inscription does not leave much space between the letters.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Jallad 2015, 74.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Jallad 2019, 349 reports the word *bkrtn* «two she-camels».

<sup>30</sup> See Lane 1863, 2104.

<sup>31</sup> See the drawing in Al-Salameen *et al.* 2018, 208, fig. 3.

## 2. THE EXPEDITION OF AELIUS GALLUS AND THE EPIGRAPHIC SOURCES

The expedition to Arabia Felix turned to be a complete failure<sup>32</sup>. This account is probably mentioned also in some Ancient Arabian epigraphic pieces of evidence. In particular, two Safaitic inscriptions and some Sabaean texts are useful to better understand the context<sup>33</sup>.

In 2016 N. Al-Rawabdeh and S. Abbadi showed two Ancient North Arabian inscriptions in Safaitic alphabet found in Wadi al-Hašad<sup>34</sup>, situated about 45 km north-east of the village of al-Safawi in Jordan. The authors labelled the two inscriptions *AbNSJ 1* and 2.

They are two identical inscriptions engraved on a reddish rock typical of this area, frequented by Greek-Nabataean and North Arabic speakers since the Hellenistic period. The stone, found in 1997, was photographed and its text was entirely transcribed but not published<sup>35</sup>. Later the stone has been damaged on the top-right corner and the last line of the text is lacking. Finally, in 2016 the authors published the inscription. Here we present only the transcription and the translation of much complete *AbNSJ 1* proposed in the last edition<sup>36</sup>:

*l tm bn ms<sup>1</sup>k bn qtl bn brd bn hmt bn ġlmt bn mr bn  
'fty bn gml w wgm 'l- ġyr w 'l- mlt w 'l- qtl s<sup>1</sup>nt ngy  
s<sup>1</sup>l[y] mn rm w hr{s} b- s<sup>1</sup>nt f b b<sup>1</sup>ls<sup>1</sup>mn ġw{t} {w}  
{s<sup>1</sup>}{l}{m} {w} {q}{b}{l}{l} {l-} {d} {'}{h}{b}*

By Tm son of Ms<sup>1</sup>k son of Qtl son of Brd son of Hmt son of Ġlmt son of Mr son of 'fty son of Gml and he grieved for Ġyr and for Mł and for Qtl the year {S<sup>1</sup>ly} fled from Rm and {he kept watch} this year and so O B<sup>1</sup>ls<sup>1</sup>mn [grant] {help} {and} {security}{and} [show] {benevolence} {for} {whoever} {'h}{b}.

This inscription is made up of a simple text, maybe an invocation to a deity or deities by nomads roaming with their cattle from an oasis to another. Deities should have ensured the rain<sup>37</sup>, helpful for the essential water supply to their communities. As we know thanks to the texts edited in the different Ancient North Arabian *corpora*, this kind of inscription presents

<sup>32</sup> Recently Robin 2019 suggested that Aelius Gallus' expedition was a sort of military success.

<sup>33</sup> For the Sabaic graffiti see Arbach - Schiettecatte 2017, 688-690.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Rawabdeh - Abbadi 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Rawabdeh - Abbadi 2016, 34, fig. 2 and n. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Rawabdeh - Abbadi 2016, 35.

<sup>37</sup> For this kind of invocation, see Al-Jallad 2015, 9 ff.



sometimes chronological indication mentioning the year during which the action takes place<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, we will linger over the expression:

*s<sup>l</sup>nt ngy s<sup>l</sup>ly] mn rm*

the year {S<sup>l</sup>y} fled from Rm.

The personal name *s<sup>l</sup>ly]*, with the last letter easily restored, refers to Silleus, well attested in the Nabataean onomastics<sup>39</sup>. It seems that this name was written on purpose because it is linked to an important historical event; otherwise it would not have been cited to define a specific year. The editors identified this person with Silleus, the minister of the Nabataean king Obodas III, who went with Aelius Gallus to the expedition to Arabia in 25 BC.

The verb, here employed, is *ngy* meaning «to escape» in Safaitic, according to some scholars<sup>40</sup>. In Arabic the same root, *nġy*, means «to get away from», «to escape», «to be saved, rescued». There is not a parallel root in other Semitic languages with this meaning<sup>41</sup>. The expressed action is marked by the preposition *mn* «from» followed by a probable toponym.

The place-name *Rm*, found in Ancient North Arabian texts, not always refers to the Romans or the Roman world<sup>42</sup>. It is not easy to link this information to the events that would have characterized the political and diplomatic career of the Nabataean minister. Silleus went to Rome, but we have no information on his flight from the city<sup>43</sup>.

Two South Arabic inscriptions, dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BC, probably report the expedition of Silleus and the Romans to the city of Ma'rib, located in modern Yemen. They are a Qatabanic inscription (T.02.B22) and a Sabaic one (JA 772)<sup>44</sup>; the Qatabanic text mentions an expedition led by the Romans, whereas the Sabaic inscription reports an expedition

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<sup>38</sup> Al-Jallad 2015, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Cantineau 1932, II, 150; Negev 1991, no. 1137; Petrantoni 2020, 93. This name appears in Nabataean inscription as *šly*. A possible vocalization is given by the Greek forms of the name, Σολλεος, Συλλαιος, occurring in two bilingual Nabataean-Greek inscriptions found in Jordan and at Miletus: for details and bibliography, see Petrantoni 2021, nos. 16 and 49. In these texts Silleus was called «the king's brother», according to a formal Nabataean titulature, which could lack in Safaitic private inscriptions. For further historical details, see Graf 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Al-Jallad 2015, 331.

<sup>41</sup> DNWSI 1995, 714-715 reports only the Official Aramaic root *ngy* «district, region», parallel to Akkadian *nagû* with the same meaning (Von Soden 1972, 712).

<sup>42</sup> See Arbach - Schiettecatte 2017, 689 state that *RMN* in Sabaic language indicates a valley in Yemen, a deity or the Romans.

<sup>43</sup> On Silleus' diplomatic career see Anderson 2009. See Abbadi 2001 for another possible epigraphic source mentioning him.

<sup>44</sup> Arbach - Schiettecatte 2017, 686 ff.

against the Romans, identified as invaders coming from the North<sup>45</sup>. Both texts name the enemies as *Rmn* referred to the Roman army. Presumably the expedition of Aelius Gallus, with Silleus, was a well-known event in the Arabian area in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

Turning back to the interpretation of the former Safaitic inscription, the question arose: is it possible to interpret the sequence at issue differently?

According to the photograph of the epigraph<sup>46</sup>, we notice that between the initial *m* of the preposition *mn* and the following place-name there is a wide space not present in other parts of the whole text. The editors read a *n* in order to reconstruct the preposition *mn*; but, according to other Safaitic inscriptions this preposition is written only with *m*<sup>47</sup>. In fact, the first transcription of the text, in 1997, reported only *m*<sup>48</sup>.

In this space the line read by the editors as *n* is not vertical, but it has a rounded shape; in addition, we easily find that the bevelled line tends to close toward the left, forming a little circle that seems to be the letter 'ayn. If this reading is right we may reconstruct the root 'rm, that is a different place-name.

The root 'rm could be the Arabic word 'arim, a *hapax legomenon* occurring in the Qur'ān<sup>49</sup> in Sura 34 (*Saba'* - Sheba), Aya 16 which reads:

*fa-a'raḍu fa-arsalnā 'alayhim sayla l-'arimi wa-baddalnāhum bi-ḡannatayhim ḡannatayni dawatay ukulin ḥamṭin wa-atlin wa-ṣay'in min sidrin ḡalīl.*

But they turned away [refusing], so We sent upon them the flood of **the dam**, and We replaced their two [fields of] gardens with gardens of bitter fruit, tamarisks and something of sparse lote trees. (Sahih International)

So, the term is employed to indicate a dam or something that is prone to be flooded or of causing a flood. Sura 34 talks about a flood (*sayl*) sent as a retribution for Biblical Sheba's disobedience (*la-qad kāna li-Saba'in*, Aya 15). Specifically, this *sayl al-'arim* happened on Sabaeen territory (*fī maskanihim*, Aya 15) referring to a memorable flood of the important dam at the Sabaeen city of Marib (Ma'rib).

Although the root 'rm is well attested in the North-West Semitic languages and also in Arabic<sup>50</sup>, some scholars state that this word is an

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<sup>45</sup> The Sabaic text reports at line 4: ...]S' mt w-Rm(n) w-[... See Arbach - Schiettecatte 2017, 688.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Rawabdeh - Abbadi 2016, 35 figs. 3 and 4.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Jallad 2015, 150.

<sup>48</sup> Al-Rawabdeh - Abbadi 2016, 34 n. 1.

<sup>49</sup> See Elmaz 2016.

<sup>50</sup> In Arabic it means «to collect, to heap»; in Biblical Hebrew «to be heaped up» (Brown - Driver - Briggs 2020, 790); in Syriac «to incite, to be collected» (Sokoloff 2009, 1140).

Ancient South Arabian borrowing, in fact it occurs in Sabaic<sup>51</sup> inscriptions meaning «dam» as a noun, or rather a specific part of a dam.

The expression that indicates the chronology of the events could be the following:

*s'nt ngy s'l[ly] m 'rm*

It specifies the year in which Silleus, with the Roman army, left the dam of Marib to withdraw from the region to reach the Nabataean territory. In conclusion there might be an accurate indication of the southern border reached by Aelius Gallus and the disastrous Roman expedition to Arabia Felix, even if in *Res gestae divi Augusti* this expedition is recorded as a significant Roman success in South Arabian territory<sup>52</sup>. If this supposition is right, we could have another interesting element.

The great dam of Marib<sup>53</sup>, numbered among the wonderful buildings as a masterpiece of engineering, is located to the west of the city; it could prove that the Roman army came from the north-west, namely from the coastal zone.

In this way we can suppose that the return journey as far as the Nabataean settlement of Hegra took place along a stretch, parallel the western coast of Arabia.

The location of Hegra<sup>54</sup> is not far from the coast and not too distant from Leuke Kome that is the port left by the Roman army to go back to base in Egypt.

ADALBERTO MAGNELLI  
*Università degli Studi di Firenze*  
adalberto.magnelli@unifi.it

GIUSEPPE PETRANTONI  
*Università degli Studi di Enna «Kore»*  
giuseppe.petrantoni@unikore.it

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<sup>51</sup> See inscription Ja 547, line 4: *Trym w-k-ms'rw b-'rm Mrb* «Trym, when they raised the dam of Mrb» in reference to the dam of Marib (Müller 2010, 120-121).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Div. Aug. *Res gestae* 26, 5: *Meo iussu et auspicio ducti sunt duo exercitus eodem fere tempore in Aethiopiam et in Arabiam quae appellatur Eudaemon, magnaue hostium gentis utriusque copiae caesae sunt in acie et complura oppida capta ... in Arabiam usque in fines Sabaeorum processit exercitus ad oppidum Mariba.*

<sup>53</sup> On the Marib dam see: Francaviglia 2000; Robin - Dridi 2004; Darles 2013, esp. 12 ff.; Maraqtan 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *supra*, n. 18. Nehmé - Al-Talhi - Villeneuve 2008 and Nappo 2010, 340 identify Strabo's Egra (Hegra) with Mada'in Salih in the interior, where Gallus would stop during his withdrawal from southern Arabia.

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