



In this article I will shed some light onto a person you might have never heard of, or read about. This might even be so, if you have a good basic knowledge about Petra and the Nabataean history, and could name even a few kings and their achievements.

During my research on the Near and Middle East history in the last few years I came across some interesting details, I want to share with you today. Great personalities even in antiquity always produce the basis for interesting stories and even some fascinating myths.

And this historic character is no different, as the Arabian Peninsula is full of mysteries and many remarkable and very telling stories. Possibly one of the most intriguing figures in Near East politics 2,000 years ago was actually not one of the normal suspects such as a king of a regional super power, but the second in command after the king.

And guess, which kingdom might have been allowing such dominant role to be played by the number two in a state. First of all only a very self assured king with full trust in his right hand man would tolerate one of his subordinates to get such

high international exposure and handle the most difficult tasks.

We also have to remember, that managing a vast empire without any means of communication and no infrastructure other than ships and horseback transport, forces the king's key subordinates in the field or on missions to take decisions themselves.

Often they are not able to check their actions and orders given with the ruler first, if a different approach is needed. Let's assume, these men were well briefed before leaving, but in the case of Syllaenus it seemed to have been different.

He certainly had the king's full trust and might have earned this by being his key advisor. And in addition over time he certainly proved to be a valuable expert on the difficult and ever changing regional political environment.

Plus his advice on actions to be taken must have been

very beneficial to the state of Nabataea.

Nabataean Government

We also have to remember, that Nabataea was different to the other kingdoms in the region. It was a well governed community with a king residing in Petra and appointed state representatives, let's call them governors, in other cities.

We also know, that the Nabataean rulers were looking up to the Hellenistic empire as it's ideal. So it is no surprise to hear, that certain historians and archaeologists suggest, that Nabataea was actually not a true kingdom.

But that this state was run by a kind of cabinet, let's call it the council of Skeikhs, and Syllaenus might have been the head man or speaker of this council.

We already know from previous articles, that in other regional kingdoms such as Palmyra for example, which were deriving their main income and power from long distance trade, the heads of important trading families and clans played an important role in politics and even became kings.

This title was not carried by most and given to those ancient





rulers by archaeologists for better describing their position in a context we best understand today. The Nabataean head of state was actually an egalitarian king ruling by popular approval.

It was reported by ancient Greek historians such as Strabo, that the Nabataean king was more a chairman and used to serve his people food and drinks, rather than being served at festivities.

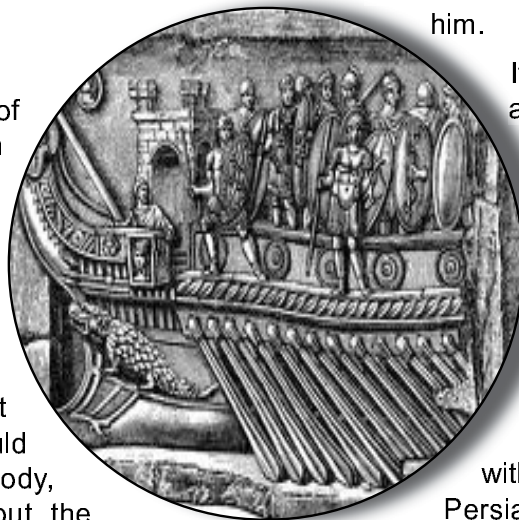
Think about that more closely, in today's environment he would be judged as a caring leader and this is, where the Greek epitaphs linked to his name came from. Aretas IV. used two Greek words as name additive, Philpatris or Philodemos meaning "lover of his people" or "loving guardian of his people".

Nabataean Law

To add another piece of information to the Nabataean picture it is interesting that their daily life was governed by laws, which were controlled by various officials and administrators.

But remarkably Nabataeans did actually not need any laws, as they would never litigate against any body, they solved problems without the help of law. Only foreigners living in Petra such as Romans and Greek went to court against Nabataeans or other foreigners. Strabo also mentioned regular symposia or meetings being held with thirteen participants and official dining banquets attended by the thirteen.

For this regular activity, assumed to be done to honor the deceased buried in tombs close by, 120 triclinia or banqueting halls were built at Petra. This Latin word proves that Nabataeans dined like Greeks and Romans on benches in a lying position and not seated like we take our meals today.



Syllaeus & his King

Let's look a bit closer at the king Syllaeus served to understand their relationship and the political challenges they faced during their time. Syllaeus was an advisor to Obodas III. who ruled for 20 years from 30 to 9 BC. Obodas was the son of Malichus I. and was underage, when he was appointed after the death of his father.

Here already is a clear indication, why Syllaeus, Syllaio or Shullay as he was called in certain records, was actually needed and could have assumed such a dominating role. Some experts even say that he was co-regent. This is also the reason, why we know so little about Obodas III.

as there are very few ancient references to him.

If we take a step back and look at the reign of his farther and the regional political environment and economical situation of Nabataea and interesting picture emerges. His father went to war in 55 BC against his most important trading partner the mighty and powerful Rome.

For this he had to join forces with another powerful empire, the Persians. A Nabataean neighbor the Hasmonian kingdom was their arch rival for regional control over a long period with changing success for both sides.

Relationship with Hasmonians

The most skirmishes and battles the Nabataeans were fighting, were against these Hasmonians. Their king Herod was a vassal of Rome and supported by a resident Roman army.

Unfortunately Malichus lost this battle and became a vassal to mighty Rome, which was delegated to Herod to manage. And as usual the



Nabataeans had to pay a major fine or war compensation in silver ingots, possibly a couple of tons. And the region became Roman controlled after 37 BC. Nevertheless Nabataean trading relations with Rome intensified as their demand for valued frankincense and other goods such as spices ever increased.

Now this is the environment the young Obodas inherited and why he needed a clever advisor and governor of state affairs. Remember the prime aim of Nabataean politics was to stay independent, expand sourcing areas for trading goods, increase trade volumes and maximize income. Sounds familiar and can be found in any mission statement of modern day multinational corporations.

Historic Lessons

Let me give you another good example about what we have,

or have not learned in the last 2,000 years. In 55 BC Roman Cicero said: *"The budget should be balanced, the treasury should be refilled, public debt should be reduced, the arrogance of officialdom should be tempered and controlled, and the assistance to foreign lands should be curtailed lest Rome become bankrupt. People must again learn to work, instead of living on public assistance."*

Looking at the present day economical scenario I am sorry to have to say, that we have evidently learned nothing from history.

Expedition Arabia Felix

This is really a good story and another historic lesson to learn from. What do you do, if your biggest client wants to take over your main business? If you can not beat them, join them! This modern business saying

might be coming right out of the Nabataean history books. Here is the situation the Nabataeans found themselves in.

The Romans were planning an expedition to Arabia Felix how they called the area of the Yemeni kingdoms and producers of the highly valued frankincense, to take control of the ever growing trade volumes the Nabataeans provided to Rome.

At this time Nabataea controlled over 25% of all Roman trade, this was certainly too much for almighty Rome. Therefore in 24 BC Roman Emperor Augustus wanting full control over Nabataean trade routes sent the Roman prefect in Egypt Aelius Gallus and a 10,000 strong army to explore the way to Arabia Felix and a Roman expedition to the southern part of the Arabian Peninsular was prepared.



King Obodas offered to support this venture with 1,000 camel mounted warriors. It must have been Syllaues, who devised an extraordinary plan for not losing their most important trade secrets and valuable income. He convinced the Roman army leader Aelius Gallus, that there was no land route for the first stage of this expedition from Petra to Madain Saleh.

The result was that all the parts needed to build a fleet of 130 transport ships had to be transported by camel overland from the Mediterranean port of Alexandria to the Egyptian port of Cleopatris close to Suez.

Secondly the Romans believed Syllaues, that the 80 available war ships were useless for this purpose. Especially when you plan to return with a rich booty of frankincense and other highly priced goods such as pepper, which carried a higher price than gold at the time.

So after losing valuable time for transport and ship building, finally the Roman army started with their heavy transport ships to sail south. What the Romans did not know was, that their typical Roman square sails were not suitable to manage the dangerous cross winds in the Red Sea area.

In addition the purposely faulty Nabataean navigation resulted soon in the loss of many ships. Added to this the well planned supply of bad food forced the Roman army to spend the whole summer and next winter in the

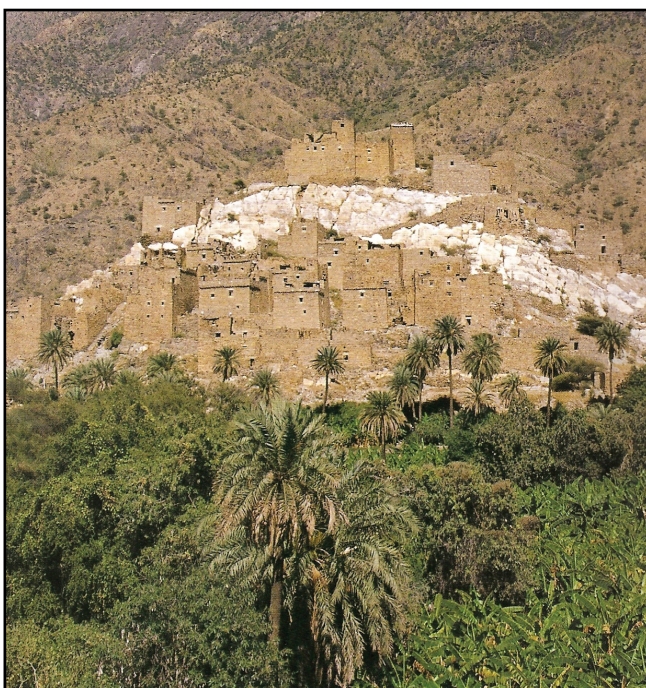
Nabataean port of Ainouna also called Leuke Kome to recover from food poisoning.

In spring of the next year Syllaues led the Roman army in a zig zag course around various mountains deep into the Saudi desert. Reason being to circumvent any important trading center such as Yathrib today's Madinah and not to cross the Nabataean trade routes with their secret water cisterns. Imagine for the normal two months long caravan trip from Yemen to Gaza, Syllaues was misleading the Romans in the desert for over six months.

No wonder a very depleted and totally exhausted and unfit to fight Roman army finally arrived in Marib, capital of the Kingdom of Saba also called Sheba in Yemen. In this condition the Roman army was not able to conquer Marib, so they had to return without any booty of gold, silver and frankincense. It is surprising that the Roman commander was not executed on his return, a standard Roman procedure for lack of success.

Other Interesting Stories

In another source Syllaues was reported to have given exile to 40 Judaeen rebel leaders and therefore Hasmonian King Herod destroyed Nabataean regional trading center Raeptha about 100 kilometers north of Petra. Later he also attacked Ajlun castle north of Gerasa today's Jerash and killed Nabataean warriors plus their commander Naqib. Unfortunately nothing





is known about the precise Nabataean counter attack to revenge these killings.

Reason being that Nabataeans were very secretive and did not record any of their activities. All our sources on Nabataean history are therefore non Nabataean.

And Herod for example reported only on his successes, but rather not on his misfortunes. It was also common practice for ancient rulers to overstate their successes. This was already done by the Egyptian pharaohs and therefore ancient reports have to be taken with certain reservations.

Early Money Lending

Despite all this regular fighting and political power play and positioning in a highly volatile regional environment and with all players trying to increase their empire and area of control and fortunes, some interesting business still was done on the side lines.

For example, with the help of Syllaesus, his master Obodas III.

borrowed 60 silver talents from King Herod. This was quite a sizable amount and was equal to 300 tons of silver and must have been transported by a huge caravan of over 1,000 camels. This clearly indicates, that the economic fortunes of Nabataea at the time must have been declining.

But because of renewed hostilities between Herod and Nabataeans, he demanded immediate repayment. So Herod, still being a Roman vassal, asked for help from the two Roman regional representatives in Syria Saturnius and Voluminus.

The idea behind this was to better enforce his demand with the help of the only authority Nabataeans really respected,

the Romans. They ordered the repayment of the full amount within 30 days.

When so much money was involved and used to purchase big Roman orders of frankincense, it was worth a try. So Syllaesus went to Rome and intrigued against King Herod. Unfortunately this backfired and finally Syllaesus was sentenced to death in 6 AD.

The End of Syllaesus

But history does never stop. It might be possible, that this was the reason that Obodas III. was poisoned. As he did not have a son as possible successor, Aeneas a relative of Malichus I. was declared king and became known under the royal name Aretas IV. It is also possible that Syllaesus played a part in the coup, if not even being the puppet master.

It can be further assumed, that might have been co-regent with Aretas at first. This all happened before Syllaesus went to Rome and might have been another reason for the Romans to execute him.

