

## AELIUS GALLUS' CAMPAIGN AND THE ARAB TRADE IN THE AUGUSTAN AGE

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*Ladislao Várady quinto septuagesimo*

The paper throws fresh light on an important aspect of Augustus' Oriental policy. It is a reassessment of his attitude towards the role the South-Arabian States played in the East–West trade circuit on the one hand, and of his attempts to develop an independent Roman seaborne trade with India on the other. In order to understand the perspective of this undertaking, one has to analyse the far-reaching changes which took place in South Arabia just at that time. The earlier “caravan-kingdoms” had been in a state of decline and have gradually been replaced by the rule of tribal confederations and States of the Highlands. Aelius Gallus' campaign was a total failure showing that the Roman Oriental trade should not be based on military conquest and on a rather expensive direct control of the middlemen.

*Key words:* source problems, Syllaeus and the Nabataeans, changes in South Arabia in the Augustan times; peaceful trade or military control.

Aelius Gallus' campaign, if not for other reasons, is of special importance being a fixed chronological point for South-Arabian history. It is a well-known fact that the South-Arabian inscriptions discovered in the last decades in greater number, could be used for relative dating at the most. The campaign of the Prefect of Egypt belongs certainly to those chronological bases which make a first orientation in South-Arabian history easier (the first date is provided by Assyrian sources for dating the Sabaean Krb'ēl to 714 or 685 B.C., the second one is Aelius Gallus' expedition, then we have the data of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* which have given rise to much controversy and, finally, there is the inscription of 328 A.D. from an-Namārā). Quite understandably, even the negative lessons of this expedition are more important, than fixing its exact chronology.

Aelius Gallus' campaign, being a peculiar episode of Augustan Rome and no less of South-Arabian history, may not be considered a badly neglected historical event, especially after the specialists of ancient South Arabia have taken sides with Roman historians (stressing the achievements, among other, of Hermann Wissmann

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and Jacqueline Pirenne).<sup>1</sup> One cannot, however, say that every problem has satisfactorily been solved. On the contrary, if we examine more thoroughly the sources and their scholarly analyses, we are tempted to say that there are more unsolved problems than indisputable explanations.

To mention but a few problems: there is the peculiar relation of our basic sources (Strabo, Pliny the Elder and Dio Cassius) to each other; the true nature of the Nabataean participation with the role and motivations of Syllaeus (Sullai bar Taimu) are not convincingly explained; Augustus' intentions are considered by the historians in rather different ways (was the campaign a predatory expedition or may it be regarded as an ill-considered conquering attempt which would hardly be reconcilable with the cautious expansionist policy of the Emperor, or was this expedition an economic colonialist endeavour furthering the direct Indian trading?). In addition, there are a number of uncertainties regarding the development of Roman trade after the campaign itself, and how it was linked up with the trading activity of the Arabs, the Indians and the Abyssinians. This last problem raises a further question which concerns the date as well as the spread of the discovery of monsoon attributed to Hippalus which revolutionised the seafaring to India. And last but not least we know almost nothing about Augustus' changing federative policy towards the peoples of this region, first of all, towards the South-Arabian States (Ḥaḍramawt, Saba' and the Ḥimyarite confederation playing a more and more dominant role in South Arabia). This last issue is closely connected with other important problems, viz. how the upward trend of Roman navigation modified the proportion of seaborne and overland transport within the Arab and Indian trade?

A part of our difficulties results from the contradictory pieces of information of the sources.<sup>2</sup> Beside important matters of detail the aims of the campaign itself and its outcome are rather diversely appreciated by them. Augustus himself in his *Res gestae* stylised it to an unquestionable victory ("Meo iussu et auspicio ducti sunt duo exercitus eodem fere tempore in Aethiopiam et in Arabiam quae appellatur Eudæmon, maximaeque hostium gentis utriusque copiae caesae sunt in acie et complura oppida capta ... in Arabiam usque in fines Sabaeorum processit exercitus ad oppidum Mariba" – 26. 5). Strabo, an intimate friend of Gallus (cf. II, 5. 12.: *philos hēmin kai hetairos*) had a first-hand knowledge of the campaign by his friend's personal account. He furnished with the most detailed report of the expedition but, being prepossessed towards Aelius Gallus, he had done it one-sidedly, trying to find excuses for his friend. He states, e.g., without any proof, that the Sabaeans became the subjects of the Romans (*Rhomaiois eisin hypēkooi*) (Strabo XVI. 779), and remarks:

<sup>1</sup> From the previous research see: Tkač (1920), §4 (1343–1383); up to the end of the sixties see: Raschke (1978), II. 9. 2., p. 871, Anm. 901. See further: Hennig (1944), Vol. I, pp. 301–308; O' Leary (1927), pp. 75–79; Pirenne (1961), pp. 93–124; Wissmann (1976), II. 9. 1.; Sidebotham (1986), pp. 120–130; Sidebotham (1992), pp. 12–38; Bowersock (1983), pp. 45–58; Scheck (1995), pp. 51–60; Robin (1996), pp. 1131 sq; Breton (1998), pp. 207–210.

<sup>2</sup> See mainly: *Res gestae divi Augusti* 26.5 (Mommsen's edition); Strabo XVI. 22–24 (English transl.: Jones 1961); Josephus, *AJ* XV. 317 (English transl.: Thackeray–Marcus 1966); Plinius VI, 32, 158–162 (English transl.: Rackham 1969); Cassius Dio, LIII, 29. 3–8 (English transl.: Cary 1961).

“indeed, if Syllaesus had not betrayed him, he would have subdued the whole of Arabia Felix” (*ei dē mē ho Syllaios auton prodidou, kan katestrepsato tēn Eudaimona pasan* – XIII, 1. 54). A part of the research harboured the suspicion that as a consequence of the ominous news about the protracted campaign it became manifest for Augustus himself that Aelius Gallus was unsuitable for such a hard task, and in order to avoid greater disaster he summoned him to give up the siege of Marsiaba (Ma’rib?) and return with the remnants of his army. The unexpected and baffling interruption of the campaign would more easily be interpreted by this recalling than by the attrition caused by the scarcity of water and the unknown and dreadful diseases (see Jameson 1968, pp. 76 sq; Sidebotham 1986, p. 127). Even the data of war losses given by Strabo are fabulous and incredible, so is his information about the arms of the Arabs and their tactics showing that he had no adequate knowledge of reality. After having left the city of Negrana (Najrān), he says, at a river “the Barbarians joined battle with the Romans, and about ten thousand of them fell, but only two Romans.” The Arabs would have been “utterly unfit for war, using ... slings (*sphendonais*) ... and double-edged axe (*amphistomois pelekesin*)” (Strabo XVI. 782). However, it is a well-known fact that the Arab tactics usually avoided the direct clash in close formation against a well-disciplined army. They preferred to disrupt supply and reserves (by poisoning the wells and devastating the cropland) and they gave preference to sudden raids.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, they seldom used a double-edged axe.

We have a more reliable report of the real circumstances by Pliny the Elder and Dio Cassius who instead of Strabo’s account used some contemporary sources in which – far from being prepossessed toward Aelius Gallus – there is no mention of Syllaesus’ treachery (see Dihle 1964, pp. 80–84). Dio Cassius states as a blunt fact that “the desert, the sun, and the water (which had some peculiar nature) (*hydata physin tina atopon ekhonta*) all caused his men great distress, so that the larger part of the army perished (*to pleion tou stratou phtharēnai*)”.<sup>4</sup> An epidemic broke out “killing forthwith (*autika apollye*) most of those who were attacked”. Dio Cassius gives a more exact account of the renewed raids of the Arabs (*kai hoi barbaroi sphisi prosepethento*). Finally, he says, they “drove the survivors of the expedition out of the country (*kai ekeinon tous perilephthentas enelasan ek tēs khōras*)”.

On the basis of all these accounts the campaign may be characterised as a total failure and, indeed, a part of the research does not refrain from negative characterisations.<sup>5</sup> Another part, however, though not denying the military failure of the cam-

<sup>3</sup> See the epigraphic data given by Beeston (1976, pp. 36, 40, 48, 51, 54). On the South Arabian military organisation, armament and war strength see Schippmann (1998, pp. 91–96).

<sup>4</sup> Cassius Dio LIII. 29. 4. It was Mommsen who already noticed: “Die Araber hinderten ihn nicht, aber wohl Arabien” (*Römische Geschichte*, V. Band. *Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian*. Berlin, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1886<sup>3</sup>, p. 610).

<sup>5</sup> See already Mommsen’s characterisation (V: 608): “das Unternehmen schlug vollständig fehl, und zwar durch die Unfähigkeit des Führers, des damaligen Statthalters von Aegypten Gaius Aelius Gallus” (to his blunders see his pertinent remarks *loc. cit.* n. 2). In his review of Mommsen’s work, Theodor Nöldeke also shares Mommsen’s opinion and he stresses the total ignorance of the Romans about the Arabian peninsula. According to Hennig (1944, p. 306): “Er wurde einer der bö-

paign, puts forward the assumption that from the Roman point of view the expedition had positive consequences, too, which are not to be neglected (see e.g. Sidebotham 1986, p. 127). This approach, without doubt, deserves attention, though this supposition had been considerably influenced by later events which had no direct connection with the campaign. We may think of the growth of the direct trade with India characterised by the *Periplus*. In connection with this problem, we would like to adumbrate two ideas. One of them concerns the new relationship between Rome and the South-Arabian States which will mark the first century A.D., while the other thought refers to Augustus' Oriental trading policy.

Though – not to mention some contestable data – there is no South-Arabian epigraphical or other record which would have answered to this peculiar challenge,<sup>6</sup> the changes occurring from the first decades of the new millennium justified a part, if not the whole, of Augustus' expectations. Indeed Roman seafaring on the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, compared to late Ptolemaic age (we refer only to the often quoted *loci* of Strabo<sup>7</sup>) had grown in an unprecedented way. It developed the direct trade with India<sup>8</sup> (its beginnings, of course, depend on the dating of Hippalus' discovery) and though the military subjugation of the South-Arabian States could not have succeeded, nevertheless in the first century A.D. with Ḥaḍramawt and the Ḥimyarites a mutually advantageous partnership could be developed<sup>9</sup> which was, compared to late Republic times, far more favourable for Roman trade. All these advantages, however, had been realised some decades after the campaign and their dating is more than problematic.

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sesten Fehlschläge, den die Kriegsgeschichte des Imperiums kennt." Bowersock similarly describes the campaign: "The whole was ignominious for the invaders" (1983, p. 49).

<sup>6</sup> See Breton (1998, p. 210), Costa (1977, pp. 69–72) published a fragmentary Greek–Latin inscription which is unique in its kind. Its findspot is today's Barāqish, the ancient Yathil which is called Athrulla by Strabo. The inscription (its Latin part is more complete, its Greek text is more fragmentary) gives the name of P. Cornelius *equus* and it is presumably the tombstone of a soldier of the smaller military troop which was left behind by Aelius Gallus. Thus, it may be completed by *hic situs est* and *enthade keitai*. The campaign or the new Arab–Roman relationship in the wake of it, might eventually play a certain role in the South-Arabian minting, too, because after the expedition on some coins Augustus' head is appearing, see Doe (1971, p. 119).

<sup>7</sup> Strabo II. 5. 12: "When Gallus was prefect of Egypt ... I learned that as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India (*hekatōn kai eikosi nēes pleoien ek Myoshormou pros tēn Indikēn*), whereas formerly, under the Ptolemies, only a very few ventured to undertake the voyage and to carry on traffic in Indian merchandise." And see especially XVII, 1. 13: "In earlier times, at least, not so many as twenty vessels would dare to traverse the Arabian Gulf far enough to get a peep outside the straits (*oud' eikosi ploia etharreiton Arabion kolpon diaperan, hōste exō tōn stenōn hyperkyptein*), but at the present time even large fleets are despatched as far as India and the extremities of Aethiopia, from which the most valuable cargoes are brought to Egypt." Cf. Romanis–Tchernia (eds) (1997, pp. 83 sq).

<sup>8</sup> See already Mommsen (1886, pp. 616–619) and Friedlaender (1910<sup>8</sup>, pp. 69–72). See further Charlesworth (1924, [1974], pp. 57–73); Warmington (1928, pp. 6–18, 35–83); Raschke (1978, pp. 6588 sq, with the respective notes 1211 sq.); Puskás (1987, pp. 141–156).

<sup>9</sup> See in *Periplus 23* the allusion to Kharibaēl, king of Homerites and Sabaeans: "he is a friend of the emperors, thanks to continuous embassies and gifts" (we use Casson's commented edition, 1989). For identifying this frequent name of South-Arabian kings there is an unsettled debate in the research, see Raschke (1978, pp. 958 sq., n. 1223) and Casson (1989, pp. 150 sq).

To the historical context of this process the knowledge of the history of Arabia Felix is indispensable. A partial and temporary fulfilment of this requirement has been made possible by the recent discoveries and their scholarly treatment carried out in the last few decades. (See especially Robin 1991, pp. 52 sq; Chelod 1984, pp. 208–216; Breton 1998, pp. 199–204; Schippmann 1998, pp. 60 sqq.) According to this research just in the second half of the 1st century B.C. or in its last decades, in South-Arabian history far-reaching changes took place which radically rearranged the power relations. The so-called “caravan-kingdoms” emerging from the 8th century onwards had been in a state of decline and have been replaced by the rule of tribal confederations and States of the Highland. This process lasting for two or two and a half centuries, reshaped the balance of power and aimed at a new rearrangement of earlier South-Arabian geopolitics. Ancient power centres came to an end (Maʿīn and Sabaʿ with Qarnaw and Maʿrib) and a new power structure was established. This process started when the Ḥimyarites gradually gained ground at the end of 2nd century B.C., it accelerated at the end of the 1st century B.C. and was accomplished at the end of the 3rd century A.D. when the Lords of *Dhū* Raydān and Ḥimyar annexed the millennium-old Sabaʿ then Ḥaḍramawt and under the leadership of Shammār Yuharīsh they expelled the Abyssinians from the southwestern part of Yaman. Earlier, the “caravan-kingdoms” set up their centres in the huge *wādīs* opening on the desert areas (in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt, Wādī Markhā, Wādī Bayhān, Wādī Dhana, Jawf) and although they had not neglected the seaborne trade, they developed basically the overland long-distance trade by camel caravans directed towards Mesopotamia and Syria. In this period every South-Arabian kingdom took advantage of the trade either as producer (like Ḥaḍramawt) or as middlemen (like Sabaʿ and particularly Maʿīn and Qaṭabān). The precondition of this long-lasting state was that the Mediterranean side of this trade had no direct contact with the producers and for this disadvantageous position they had to pay an exorbitant price.<sup>10</sup> The problems commenced with the development of the direct Roman trade with India. By doing so, the Roman traders could save the costs of the expensive and not always friendly middlemen.

This change contributed to a great extent to the decline of the South-Arabian States dealing with intermediate trade. First, Maʿīn fell victim to the changes. The Nabataeans and the Sabaeans both rivalled it in heritage and it was the former who got hold of the Minaean colony of Dēdan (this situation makes understandable the responsive participation of Nabataeans in Aelius Gallus' campaign). The hostility

<sup>10</sup> See Plinius, *NH* XII, 32, 64–65: “The journey is divided into 65 stages with halts for camels. Fixed portions of the frankincense are also given to the priests and the king's secretaries, but beside these the guards and their attendants and the gate-keepers and servants also have their pickings: indeed, all along the route they keep on paying, at one place for water, at another for fodder, or the charges for lodging at the halts, and various octrois; so that expenses amount up to 688 denarii per camel before the Mediterranean coast is reached; and then again payment is made to the customs officers of our empire. Consequently the price of the best frankincense is 6, of the second best 5, the third best 3 denarii a pound.” On the cost of myrrh see Casson (1989, pp. 118–120).

between the Nabataeans and the Sabaeans undermined to a great extent the trade of the incense road and its earlier importance.

When after the conquest of Egypt the Romans as the heirs of the Ptolemaic claims appeared on the scene they soon recognised that they could get rid of the troublesome overland intermediate trade replacing it by seaborne trade organised by themselves. By doing this, they had to reckon with the Sabaeans and the Ḥimyarites. The former controlled Bāb al-Mandab, while the latter held sway over °Aden. Moreover, both of them regarded the Parthians as their allies. Thus, Augustus objectively (we do not know whether he was aware of the historical context in Arabia Felix) had chosen a favourable moment for his objects. The Nabataeans were in an advantageous position in the part of the incense-road reaching to al-Ḥijr, the Sabaeans kept growing weaker and weaker and the Ḥimyarites had not become yet serious rivals. This ensued when first in 175 A.D. Qaṭabān was being deprived of its independence, then around 275 A.D. in league with Ḥaḍramawt they defeated the Sabaeans and after 20 years they turned against Ḥaḍramawt annexing their territory, too. To their supremacy it greatly contributed that they put up a cavalry first in South Arabia and, by doing this, they could develop a new technique of warfare.

Thus, the power relations in South Arabia underwent a thoroughgoing transformation and the new states relying on the tribes of the Highland just started to establish their new power structures. This meant that, indeed, Aelius Gallus (let us recall Mommsen's characterisation) was not defeated by the Arabs but by the unknown and inclement Arabia. At the same time, however, the new South-Arabian power relations made possible, without any military confrontation, a cautious co-operation with the Roman empire, the new great power, because the caravan trade and the importance of the incense road had decreased.

At this point one may ask, that parallel with these changes how the seaborne trade developed and how it modified the participative proportion of the earlier and the new partners, the Romans, Arabs, Abyssinians and Indians? According to Rostovtzeff, expressing the opinion of the majority of Roman historians, after Hippalus' discovery and the direct trade with India, the Arab ports would have lost their earlier importance (Rostovtzeff 1929, I. p. 82). Is this statement historically well-established? If we take into account only the data of *Periplus*, we see that it is not supported by the facts. E.g. Muza<sup>11</sup> and Kanē<sup>12</sup> functioned as many-sided export–import centres but Okēlis, too, played an important role – “if not so much a port of trade (*emporion*) as a harbour (*hormos*), watering station (*hydreuma*), and the first place to put in for those selling on.”<sup>13</sup> No doubt, Arabia Eudaimōn and °Aden have lost their earlier importance (cf. 26. 8. 27–30), but Ḥaḍramawt could make good use of the new situation. They set up, using colonists from Shabwa, on the southeastern coast a new harbour called Moscha Limēn (today: Khōr Rūrī) for exporting the Sachalite

<sup>11</sup> *Periplus* 24 (“The best time for sailing to this place is around the month of September”).

<sup>12</sup> *Periplus* 28 (“The time to set sail for this place is about the same as for Muza, but earlier”).

<sup>13</sup> *Periplus* 25. 18–20.

frankincense,<sup>14</sup> built up their own merchant fleet and they controlled also the island of Soqatra which was at that time a real "Port of Trade" full of Greek, Indian, and Arab traders. It is not by chance that at the beginning of the 1st century A.D. one of their kings used the title of *muqarrib*, and tried to intervene in the affairs of the neighbouring states. Moreover, Rhapta, the East-African trading centre (the favourite *entrepôt* of the Alexandrian merchants) which played an important role in the East–West trade, was under Arab authority. It was ruled by the merchants of Muza.<sup>15</sup>

About the relation of the Arab and Roman navigation another important fact should be mentioned. It was observed by G. F. Hourani in his almost classical work on Arab seafaring.<sup>16</sup> He discovered and rightly stressed that Arab navigation did not coincide even after Hippalus' discovery with the itinerary and timing of the Roman ships. One of the main causes was the peculiar construction of Arab ships. It is a well-known fact that even in the times of Classical Islam no nail was used for shipbuilding but, interestingly enough, the Arabs would sew the different elements of the ships with stitches of coconut and palm-tree fiber. For this reason, the Arab ships could not stand the big waves and stormy weather, so they either coasted as far as they could or they used the northeast monsoon instead of the southwest one. If they incidentally used the latter, then they waited till August or the beginning of September when the wind was not stormy. Thus, their itinerary did not clash with that of the solidly built Roman ships. This practice could greatly contribute to the diminishing of the conflicts.

The other idea about Augustus' trading policy refers to an important theoretical problem, namely how should his military attempt aiming at establishing a direct trade with India be assessed? To discuss this question would require another paper, hence we put forward only some thoughts.

One need not be a "Polányist" to accept the conspicuous role of the Ports of Trade, especially if they facilitated the commercial intercourse between two great powers being in irreconcilable conflict with each other. From the Phoenician port towns of Sidon and Tyre to Hongkong we find a number of convincing examples. The point is, what avails more a given great power? Is it better to organise and monopolise with huge costs by direct presence an activity the technical arrangement, personal contacts and professional "know-how" of which are much better known to the middlemen who were long ago specialists in this occupation and have the knack of doing this? Moreover, this state-run commercial activity must be covered by permanent garrisons, military navies and eventually by punitive expeditions. Or (and this is the other alternative) is it not more advantageous to avail itself of the services of the middlemen and to pay for them? In addition, in the case of the former alternative, the interventionist state courts the disapproval of the other great power and its unavoidable countermoves which result in uninterrupted escalation of the cost and troubles.

<sup>14</sup> *Periplus* 32. 10. Cf. Casson (1989, pp. 141 sq); Breton (1998, p. 2113).

<sup>15</sup> *Periplus* 16. Cf. Casson (1989, pp. 141 sq). To its location see Raschke (1978, p. 933, n. 1139).

<sup>16</sup> Hourani (1951, pp. 27 sq); cf. Casson (1989, pp. 290 sq, 1962 sq). See *Periplus* 27 and 57. 1–2. To the different types of Arab ships see Tibbetts (1971, pp. 47–58).

Augustus' Oriental trading policy is being judged in extremely different ways. From Mommsen onwards (Mommsen 1886, V: 607 sq). the research unanimously stressed the unconcealed commercial interests bound up in direct conquest (as Tkač expressed it: "skrupellose Finanzspekulation und verblendeter Imperialismus", 1920, p. 1347). Rostovtzeff, too, contrasted Augustus' Oriental policy with that of Pompeius, who during his military expedition in Syria and Palestine in 64/63 B.C. left wisely the self-government of the caravan-cities (like Petra) untouched and, by so doing, he assured their loyalty towards the Roman interests. Caligula and Nero, too, returned to this policy and it is perhaps not by chance that the Indian trade flourished in their times. Augustus and Tiberius, however, seem to have been the partisans of direct control, says Rostovtzeff (1932, pp. 29–32). Though recently some specialists<sup>17</sup> reject this interpretation, the arguments of the previous standpoint could not unequivocally be refuted, hence it has its supporters today, too.<sup>18</sup> Strabo's wording ("he expected either to deal with wealthy friends or to master wealthy enemies" – XVI. 22.) makes possible both interpretations. However, from the contemporary secondary sources (e.g. from Horatius' allusions<sup>19</sup>) we may come to the conclusion that Augustus' main purpose was the conquest of Arabia Felix and its plunder. The trading practice of the next decades was far wiser than the original intention: Augustus did not take over the Ptolemaic State monopoly, he left the organisation of the trade in private hands and he laid claim in form of different customs to only one quarter of the profit.

Is it possible that the total military failure of Aelius Gallus' campaign (and with it the frustration of Augustus' original intention) served in the long run the interests of the Roman Oriental trade?

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<sup>17</sup> See Casson (1989, pp. 35 sq) referring to the earlier research.

<sup>18</sup> See Sidebotham (1986, p. 121). ("The expedition was economically motivated"), cf. Breton (1998, p. 62).

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Horatius, *Carminum liber I*. 29, 1–4:  
*Icci, beatis nunc Arabum invides*  
*gazis et acrem militiam paras*  
*non ante devictis Sabaeae*  
*regibus...*



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