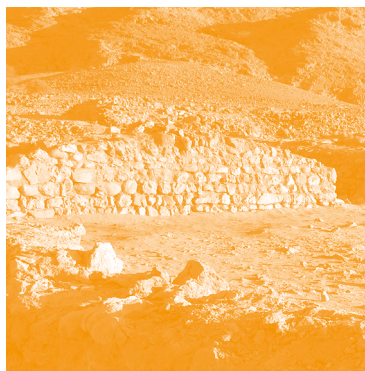


Aynuna on the Red Sea



Abstract: Aynuna was excavated by a Saudi-Polish team between 2014 and 2018. It is a Nabataean port dated to the 1st century BC, with later occupation in the 4th century AD and with some Islamic presence. It is composed of two sites: a commercial factory and a fortified settlement. It is identified with Leuke Kome mentioned in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* and by Strabo in connection with the expedition of Aelius Gallus to Arabia.

Keywords: Aynuna, Aelius Gallus, Nabataean port, Red Sea

This project was started on the initiative of Professor Ali al-Ghabban in 2015 and was financed from grant UMO 2014/14/M/HS3/00795 of the Polish National Science Centre. For three consecutive winters the team, directed by Dr. Abdullah al-Zahrani and the author, was at work on the site of Aynuna, located about 3 km from the seashore and the small village of Khurayba [Fig. 1 inset].¹ Khurayba was one of the stations of the Egyptian Hajj and so came to the attention of Ali al-Ghabban who still had the opportunity to see the eponymous source, now dried up, and the oasis around it.² The ancient site was noted by several travellers such as Richard Burton (1878: 140–142), Alois Musil (1926: 124–127), and Harry St John B. Philby (1957: 230–233). A short survey by M.L. Ingra-

1 The full report is in preparation (Gawlikowski, Juchniewicz, and Al-Zahrani forthcoming); for current results see Gawlikowski 2018; 2019; Gawlikowski, Juchniewicz, and Al-Zahrani 2020.

2 'Ayn Una (Onne in Ptolemy). The modern name is 'Ayn al-Qasab (Al-Ghabban 2011/1: 182–183).

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ham in 1981 resulted in a sketch plan and some general observations (Ingraham et al. 1981: 62–79).

Sir Lawrence Kirwan (1984) first proposed, in 1979, to identify the site with the Leuke Kome mentioned by the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* and by Strabo. The *Peri-*

plus (19) says that Leuke Kome is a port for small vessels, a garrison, and a customs house levying a quarter tax on imported wares. A road leads from there to “King Malichus of the Nabataeans”. Indeed, a caravan track through Wadi Ifal links Aynuna with Aqaba, and farther north with Petra. The question whether the garrison was Roman or Nabataean is open, but the quarter tax was of course a Roman imposition.

The same *Periplus* also stated that Leuke Kome was situated east of Myos Hormos, “alongside a gulf”. The gulf in question can only be the Gulf of Aqaba, while Myos Hormos is now safely identified with Qusayr al-Qadim (Whitcomb 1996; Peacock and Blue 2006), which puts Aynuna northeast of it. For this reason, Kirwan’s identification was recently rejected (Nappo 2010; among others, Fiema 2020, in this volume). However, the text of the *Periplus* gives directions to the cardinal points, never intermediate ones.

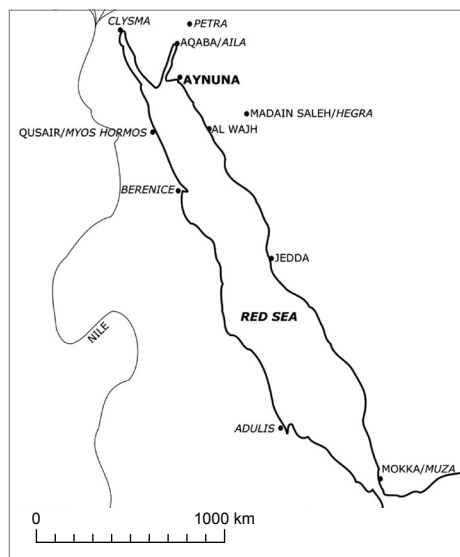


Fig. 1. The locality of Khurayba seen across the bay of Aynuna; inset, location of Aynuna on the Red Sea (PCMA UW Aynuna Project | photo M. Gawlikowski; map M. Truszkowski)

More importantly, Strabo (XVI 4. 22–24) reported that the Roman governor of Egypt Aelius Gallus sailed to Leuke Kome in 25 BC and spent a winter there before invading South Arabia. The Bay of Aynuna is the only large and well-protected harbour on the Hijaz coast, capable of receiving a large fleet and supplying troops via a caravan track [Fig. 1]. Other proposed locations do not meet these requirements. To my mind, Aynuna is Leuke Kome.

There are in fact two main sites at Aynuna. Wadi Aynuna cuts through a fossil coral reef, forming a spectacular breach [Fig. 2]. A dense settlement lies on a small plateau above the breach, with precipitous cliffs on three sides. This settlement is referred to as Upper Aynuna. It has been

mapped, but it is yet to be excavated [Fig. 3].

Lower Aynuna lies on a stony plateau about 30 m lower than the upper settlement and 10 m above the wadi bed. It consists of several large buildings [Fig. 4]. Five of these have been investigated and dubbed khans owing to the apparent resemblance between these structures and medieval caravan inns. Rows of rooms opening on courtyards form square buildings that could not have been residential in nature. They are interpreted as storage facilities. Much remains to be uncovered, though, and the precise plan of some of these buildings is still not clear.

The huge heap of stones called by Ingraham a “truncated pyramid” appears to be a square tower, collapsed but still showing sections of straight walls.

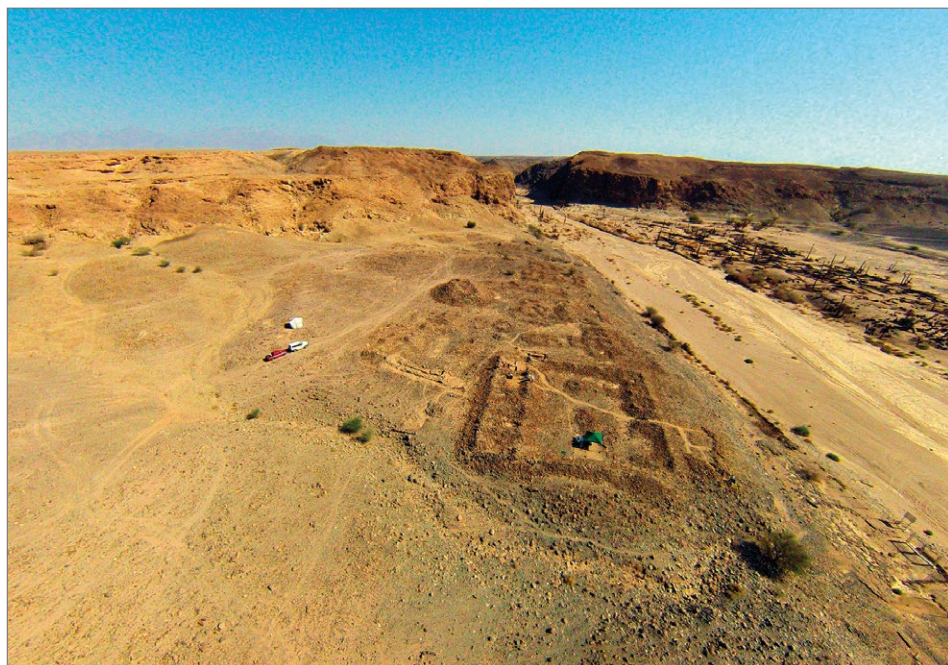


Fig. 2. Lower Aynuna from the air, looking northeast toward the wadi breaching the fossil coral reef barrier; Upper Aynuna is on a small plateau to the left of the wadi, above the breach (PCMA UW Aynuna Project | photo J. Kaniszewski)

The site could have served as a reloading station for goods brought by ship to the harbour just a few kilometers away. They were safer here from a seaborne incursion, and the tower could have served as a lookout for incoming ships. The goods could have waited there for camel caravans to arrive from Aila or Petra to take them further. This is of course speculation, but it seems consistent with the character of the buildings.

The chronology of the site needs further study, but it is already clear that the only fully preserved building, Khan 1, is more recent than the others. This is confirmed by such pottery that can be dated. There are some fragments of painted Nabataean “eggshell” bowls of the 1st century AD and some later amphora fragments up to the 4th century, found mostly in buildings 2 to 5. Most of the pottery, however, is locally made (including wasters) and

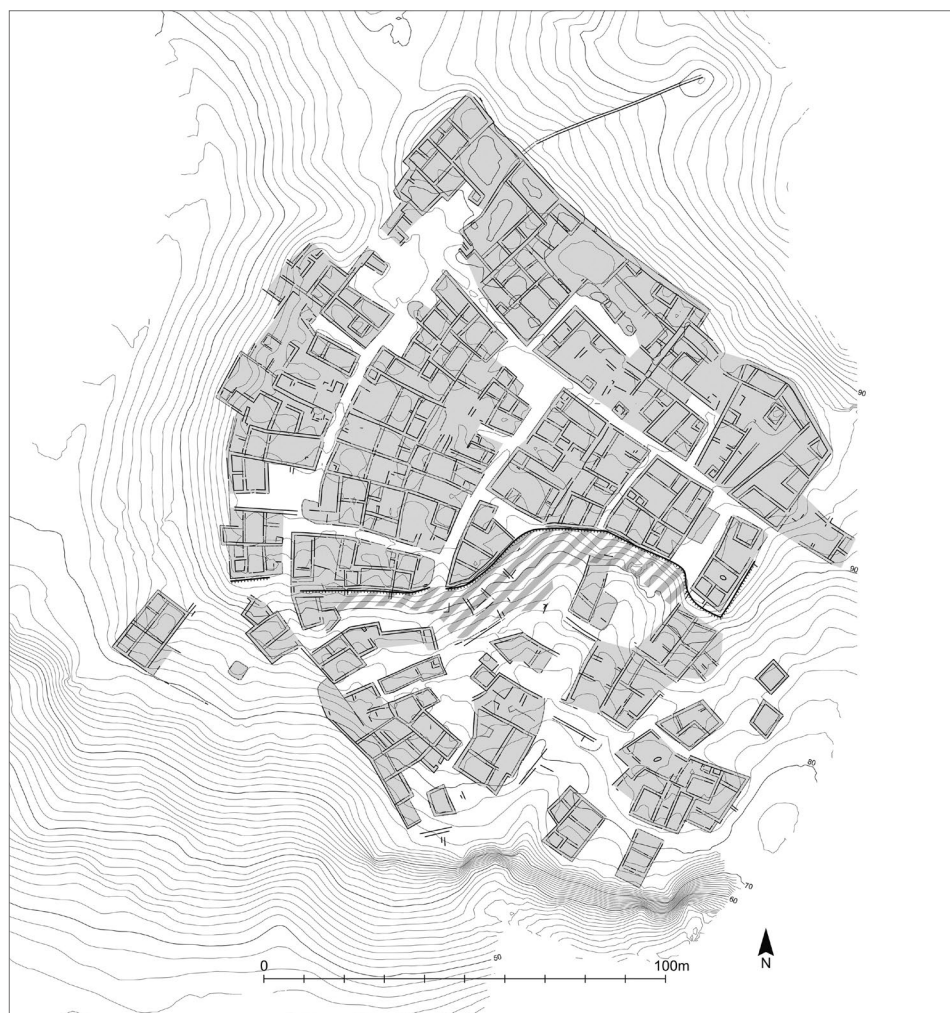


Fig. 3. Plan of the Upper Aynuna settlement (PCMA UW Aynuna Project | mapping J. Kaniszewski)

cannot be independently dated as yet. This time horizon is confirmed by such samples as have been radiocarbon-dated so far.

Matters are different with Khan 1, which is the only structure to be fully excavated to date. The walls, made of coral heads and granite boulders collected from the surface, all bonded in mud, are preserved up to 1 m in height [Fig. 5]. Contained within the square outline of the walls are two rows of rooms on facing

sides. The one opposite the gate (which opens onto the wadi), had five identical square rooms. They were found practically empty. The rubble and in one case the structure of a still-standing wall yielded three Roman coins, all three of Constantine II as Caesar, so before the death of Constantine the Great in AD 337. The building date does not seem to be earlier than the *terminus* given by these coins. Coming from the same context are five

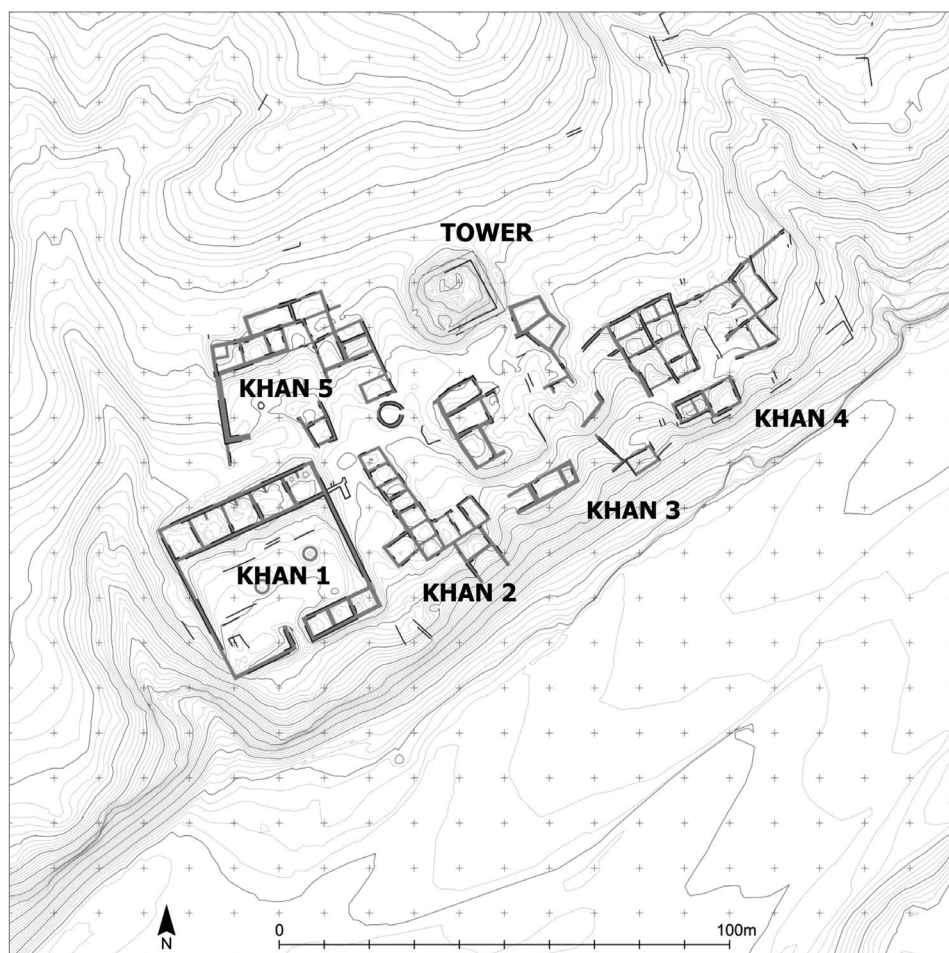


Fig. 4. Plan of Lower Aynuna identifying the individual khans (PCMA UW Aynuna Project | drawing J. Kaniszewski)



Fig. 5. Courtyard of Khan 1 (PCMA UW Aynuna Project | photo M. Gawlikowski)



Fig. 6. One of the rooms of Khan 2 overlooking the slope (PCMA UW Aynuna Project | photo M. Gawlikowski)

bronze, early Nabataean coins from the 1st century BC (Barkay 2011). However, radiocarbon dating and also some objects indicate that the khan was used as late as the 7th–8th centuries.

The stratigraphic situation is much obscured by the fact that the walls of Khan 1, built without foundations on ground level, stand immediately above the levelled foundations of an earlier building, made of natural boulders. These foundations followed a different plan, although with the same orientation, and appeared under some of the rooms and the courtyard. The associated layers were disturbed, making the evidence of the associated pottery unreliable. This earlier stage must be further investigated.

In the middle of the courtyard there were two cairns which turned out to be burial markers. No objects were associated with them and there was no dating material. The probable Islamic date of these remains led the team to leave the bones undisturbed and to cover them with clean sand. These tombs appear to have been installed when the khan was already in ruins. The courtyard was frequented in Islamic times, as indicated by period glass, broken smoking pipes and two coins of the Ottoman sultans Selim II and Abdul Mejid, dated respectively 1220/1806 and 1255/1840.

The excavation of the other khans is not advanced enough to enable a more informed discussion. A large room (7 m



Fig. 7. Excavation of a tomb located on the plateau behind the site (PCMA UW Aynuna Project | photo K. Ochnio)

by 6 m) was uncovered in Khan 2 [Fig. 6]. It is paved with square slabs, one of which was once set upright as a door-frame and bears a Thamudic D inscription. The associated pottery is from the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. The room overlooked a passage, 2.50 m wide, climbing up from the wadi and still in use in the early Islamic period.

Finally, some tombs scattered on the stony plateau north and northwest of the surviving structures were also investigated. Each had a square outline, set off with boulders and filled inside with stones [Fig. 7]. The superstructures are

hardly raised above the ground. When excavated, they were all found to be robbed. No precise dating seems possible.

The next challenge shall be the Upper Aynuna site. Judging by the surface pottery, it should be contemporary with the lower site. The two must have interacted: a settlement and a commercial factory. Furthermore, traces of the Roman winter camp of Aelius Gallus would constitute a major discovery (see Sidebotham 1986). An informed guess at this point is that it could have been situated on the other side of the wadi, opposite the Lower Aynuna site.

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