

# Aelius Gallus at Cleopatris (Suez) and on the Red Sea

*Philip Mayerson*

THE MILITARY EXPEDITION of Aelius Gallus to Arabia in 26/25 B.C.<sup>1</sup> has attracted considerable scholarly comment on his campaign regarding its chronology, the political and economic reasons behind it, the identification of Arabian sites mentioned in the sources, Gallus' misadventures caused by the duplicity of his Nabataean guide Syllaueus or by his own miscalculations, and his inglorious retreat to Egypt. Arabia has been the focal point of interest, understandably so since little was known of Rome's relationship with this exotic region at the end of, or prior to, the first century B.C. The mounting of the amphibious operation at Cleopatris, on the other hand, has been generally ignored, perhaps because Strabo 16.4.23 is its only source, whereas Pliny the Elder (*HN* 6.160ff), Josephus (*AJ* 15.317), Cassius Dio (53.29.3-8), and the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (5.26) supplement Strabo's account of Gallus' campaign in Arabia (16.4.23f). Be that as it may, the early phase of the expedition bears upon the factors that led to Gallus' failure in Arabia. It also raises questions regarding the historicity of certain details in Strabo's account.

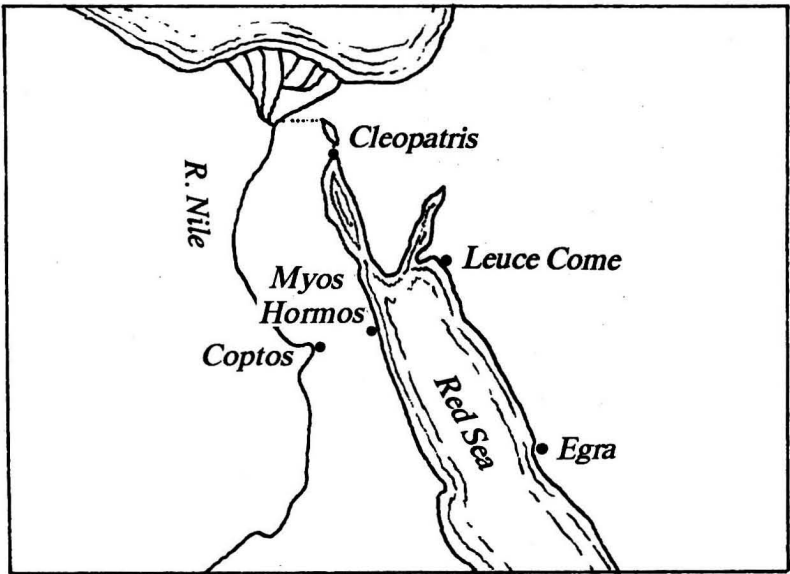
Strabo tells us that Gallus "built not less than eighty boats, biremes and triremes and light boats, at Cleopatris, which is near the old canal (πρὸς τῇ παλαιᾷ διώρυγι) that extends from the Nile (to the Gulf of Suez)." When Gallus realized that Syllaueus had deceived him into thinking he was to be opposed by an Arabian navy, "he built one hundred and thirty transport vessels, on which he set sail with about 10,000 infantrymen (πεζοὺς)...."

The issue at hand, apart from Syllaueus' double dealing, is whether the campaign was properly mounted at Cleopatris shortly after Augustus became master of Egypt. Was the site

<sup>1</sup> Adopting the chronology of S. Jameson, "Chronology of the Campaigns of Aelius Gallus and C. Petronius," *JRS* 58 (1968) 71-84.

suitable as a shipyard for the construction of a fleet of naval vessels and for the maintenance of a large military force? What military and naval intelligence dictated the selection of Cleopatris? How reliable is Strabo's information on this early phase of Gallus' campaign?

In his discussion of the celebrated canal that Ptolemy II successfully completed, linking the Nile with Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea, Strabo (17.1.25), citing Artemidorus, informs us that its outlet was near the city of Arsinoe "which some call Cleopatris." This artery must be "the old canal" cited at 16.4.23. Another name, Clysma, crops up in post-Augustan sources in association with a canal that bears the name "Trajan's River" or "Trajan's Canal." Clysma is identified with, or situated near, Ptolemaic Arsinoe.<sup>2</sup> Cleopatris/Arsinoe/Clysma was situated at the head of the Gulf of Suez, near the present-day city of Suez.



<sup>2</sup> See P. Mayerson, "The Port of Clysma (Suez) in Transition from Roman to Arab Rule," *JNES*, forthcoming; P. J. Sijpesteijn, "Der ΠΟΤΑΜΟΣ ΤΡΑΙΑΝΟΣ," *Aegyptus* 46 (1963) 70-83. An excavation was conducted 1930-32 at the supposed site of Clysma by B. Bruyère and published as *Fouilles Clysma-Qolzoum (Suez)* (Cairo 1966). The results of this limited excavation were inconclusive, leading me to believe that more of Ptolemaic Arsinoe had been unearthed than of Clysma.

For a city, a port, or a naval station, the site of Cleopatra/Arsinoe/Clysma was not a promising one. It lay on a treeless, sandy plain that is arid in the extreme, receiving barely an inch of rain during the year and lacking a perennial supply of water in the form of a spring or a well. Its chief source of potable water was at the oasis of 'Ayun Musa in Sinai, a few miles southeast of the city and a mile inland. The oasis continued to serve the city and shipping well into the nineteenth century with the exception of those several times in history when a "sweet water canal" connected the Nile with an outlet near Cleopatra/Arsinoe/Clysma.<sup>3</sup> Without the availability of a fresh water canal, the maintenance of a sizable population engaged in ship-building and other occupations concerned with a military and naval operation is hardly possible.

In 26 B.C., when Gallus was organizing his expedition, the old (Ptolemaic) canal had undoubtedly silted up and fallen into disuse. If it had been cleaned out, or another put in place, the deed would have been celebrated by the name of the responsible person, as it was with the royal names associated with the Ptolemaic canal, and in the case of "Trajan's Canal," or when, in 641, the Umayyad Caliph 'Umar ordered the governor of Egypt to clean the silt and debris from Trajan's Canal.<sup>4</sup>

The likelihood—if not the proof—that a Nile-Red Sea canal was not in operation shortly before the time of Gallus' campaign is to be found in Plutarch's description of Cleopatra's attempt to shift her Mediterranean fleet of sixty ships to the Red Sea. He relates (*Ant.* 69.3) that, in order to escape inevitable defeat in the Mediterranean by the Romans, Cleopatra undertook to dry-haul her ships over the isthmus of Suez (300 stadia of desert) and then launch them in the Arabian Gulf (Gulf of Suez). After the first few ships on land were burned by Nabataeans, and then persuaded by Antony that all was not lost, she abandoned the attempt.

In re-editing *P. Oxy.* XXXVII 2820, N. Lewis viewed the document as relating to the prefecture of Aelius Gallus rather than Cornelius Gallus. He suggested as a possibility that lines

<sup>3</sup> See *Western Arabia and the Red Sea* (=Geographical Handbooks Series, Naval Intelligence Division [Oxford, June 1946]); E. Honigmann and R. Y. Ebied, "al-Kulzum," *Encyclopedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup> V (Leiden 1986) 368.

<sup>4</sup> Mayerson (*supra* n.2); A. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt* (Oxford 1902) 345ff; S. Lane-Poole, *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages* (repr. London 1968) 20.

5–11 (“and he refitted Cleopatra’s [Mediterranean] fleet, which had—understandably—been neglected after her death....”) referred to Aelius’ use of the ships for his expedition to Arabia Felix by way of a canal between the Nile and Cleopatriis.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear from Plutarch’s account, however, that a canal, at least a navigable canal, was not available for Cleopatra when she put her plan into operation. If there had been, she certainly would not have resorted to a desperate maneuver over desert terrain.<sup>6</sup> As for Gallus, though lacking a navigable canal, he may have had a sufficient supply of fresh water if the old Ptolemaic canal continued to drain water from Nile to its outlet near Cleopatriis. It does not appear likely that he had either on two accounts: the rapid silting of the canal required constant removal of sand and debris; and if Nile water flowed into a partially silted canal, the river would have to be at high flood.

There are further considerations. The construction of over two hundred vessels would have required a huge amount of men and material that, in the absence of a navigable canal, would have to be transported over the desert to Cleopatriis. Timber suitable for boatbuilding was not native to Egypt.<sup>7</sup> One would

<sup>5</sup> “*P. Oxy. 2820: Whose Preparations?*” *GRBS* 16 (1975) 295–303. This fragmentary document has raised considerable comment without arriving at any consensus as to whom it refers and what it is all about. See H. Hauben, “Gallus Apostata. Encore Le POXY. 2820,” *P. Congr. XVII* (1984) III 1085–97; N. Lewis, “*P. Oxy. 2820: Gallus.... Vous dites Gallus?*” *ChrEg* 62 (1987) 219–22.

<sup>6</sup> Diodorus Siculus (1.33), after describing (in the past tense) Ptolemy’s successful completion of the Nile-Red Sea canal and the clever lock devised to keep the two waters in balance, shifts to the present tense and states: “The river which flows through this canal is named Ptolemy, after the builder of it, and has its mouth at the city called Arsinoe.” In view of Cleopatra’s experience—and she, if anybody, would have known if the old canal was in operation—Diodorus must be citing an old tradition. There is the possibility, if the old canal was not silted up, that a low Nile flood made it impossible for Cleopatra’s ships to make their way to the Gulf of Suez and the Red Sea. It should be noted, however, that in Bruyère’s excavation (*supra* n.2: 90–95), no Roman coins before the time of Hadrian were recovered; most were dated between 260 and 340. If Bruyère had continued his work and proceeded along the lines of modern archaeological methodology, we might have had firm evidence whether a substantial first-century site existed at Cleopatriis, and further whether the canal was in operation during the period of Cleopatra’s and Gallus’ activities.

<sup>7</sup> See G. F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton 1951) 89ff; L. Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton 1971) 4, 212f.

have to assume that a supply of wood and other naval supplies were on hand in Egypt or had to be brought in from abroad.

The complexity of an operation this size is reflected during early years of the Arab occupation of Egypt when the Umayyad caliphs diverted the Roman grain tax (ἐμβολή) to Mecca in place of Constantinople. Trajan's canal was cleared of silt and debris so as to make the waterway suitable for navigation between Babylon and Clysma. From the meticulously maintained registers and accounts of the pagarchy of Aphrodito and requests from the Arab governor of Egypt, we learn of the bustling activity that was needed to fashion a fleet of grain-carrying transports. *P.Lond.* IV alone has eighty-four references to Clysma covering specialized craftsmen, laborers, supplies and equipment, sailors and marines, ships, provisions, travel expenses, and various odds and ends.<sup>8</sup>

If we accept Jameson's chronology of the expedition (*supra* n.1: 77), it began in the spring or summer of 26 B.C. and ended in autumn (October or November) of 25. Fourteen days after departing Cleoptris, Gallus arrived at Leuce Come where, before continuing his campaign, he rested his troops for a period of six months (from August/September of 26 to March/April of 25). If this is a reasonable assessment of the evidence, Gallus spent about four months, from April to August of 26, mounting the expedition and building eighty warships and 103 transport vessels under the most trying conditions. Unless Jameson's chronology is inaccurate, a shipbuilding operation of this size does not seem possible within that period of time, given that there was no dire emergency to compel him to proceed under forced-draft.

The advisability of selecting Cleoptris as the site from which to launch the campaign and sail to Leuce Come must also be called into question. It is true that the prevailing northerly winds would facilitate sailing out of the Gulf of Suez into the Red Sea, but heading east-north-east in the Red Sea toward Leuce Come ('Aynunah), near the southern entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba, would be loaded with dangers. It would mean sailing around the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, in the vicinity of Ras Muhammad, where there is a meeting of strong northerly winds coming from the two gulfs. Arabian navigators

<sup>8</sup> "Κλύσμα" in S. Daris, ed., *Dizionario dei nomi geografici dell' Egitto greco-romano* III (Milan 1978) 127; Mayerson (*supra* n.2).

especially feared sailing in these water of the Red Sea,<sup>9</sup> as Gallus found to his regret. Strabo, in describing this part of the campaign, reports (16.4.23) that he arrived at Leuce Come having “lost many of his boats, some of these being lost, crews and all, on account of difficult sailing, but not on account of any enemy.” Gallus’ traumatic experience in the northern waters of the Red Sea must have necessitated resting and regrouping his exhausted men for six months at Leuce Come before continuing his march into Arabia Felix.

Steve Sidebotham offers a different view of the suitability of Cleopatris for the initial phase of the campaign. He holds that the determining factors in selecting Cleopatris over ports further south were that timber necessary for shipbuilding was more readily available at Cleopatris, and that the site could more easily shelter, water, and feed an extra 10,000 men than at one of the other Red Sea ports. Rather than transport supplies across the Eastern Desert, Cleopatris, relatively close to the Nile and the Delta, made that task less burdensome. He also maintains that prevailing northerly winds in the Gulf of Suez facilitated sailing to Leuce Come, but departing from Berenice, Leukos Limen, or Myos Hormos, which might have made more military sense, meant having to beat against unfavorable winds.<sup>10</sup>

Sidebotham’s position regarding the availability of water and shipbuilding material runs contrary to conditions at Cleopatris during the last quarter of the first century B.C. As stated above, the isthmus of Suez was harsh desert devoid of vegetation and water; limited amounts of water were available at a distance, at ‘Ayun Musa in Sinai.<sup>11</sup> As for sailing conditions, whatever advantages the prevailing northerlies gave Gallus’ fleet in the Gulf of Suez were lost once they passed into the Red Sea. Having to head north-north-east toward Leuce Come, the ships faced the strong northerly winds pouring out of the Gulf of ‘Aqaba, which meant that they had to be rowed rather than

<sup>9</sup> C. H. Becker and C. F. Beckingham, “Bahr al-Kulzum,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup> I (Leiden 1960) 931. For a summary of the evidence for siting Leuce Come at ‘Aynunah, see L. Casson, *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton 1989) 143f.

<sup>10</sup> *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa, 30 B.C.–A.D. 217* (Leiden 1986) 122f.

<sup>11</sup> Mayerson (*supra* n.2); *Western Arabia* (*supra* n.3). Later Arab sources (Honigsmann and Ebied [*supra* n.3]) mention the well at al-Suways (=Suez) that yielded only a scanty supply of brackish water.

sailed to their destination. Strabo has adequately described the disastrous outcome of the fourteen days that Gallus and his men endured on the Cleopatra-Leuce Come leg of the journey. In hindsight, Gallus might have been wiser to have started out at one of the Red Sea ports, Myos Hormos for example, and to have sailed eastward to the coast of Arabia and then to row, if necessary, northward along the coast to Leuce Come. At a later period, Muslim pilgrims preferred travelling through the desert to 'Aydhab on the Red Sea and then go by sea to Jidda rather than face the rigors of a long journey over wind-swept waters and dangerous shoals.<sup>12</sup>

To sum up, it is not enough to say that Gallus was an easy tool in the hands of Sylla, or that Strabo was using the latter's duplicity to cover up the inadequacies of his friend. Much of this may be true, but what the expedition needed, before complying with Augustus' orders to explore Arabia, was good military intelligence. Strabo attributes to Sylla's treachery his saying that there was no way to go to Leuce Come by land when in fact great numbers of men and camels went there with ease and safety. Had Gallus, or his officers, gathered information from Egyptian and Nabataean traders in Egypt concerning movement to Leuce Come, he might have opted for another means of reaching his objective. A simple inquiry as to the terrain in Arabia should also have dissuaded him from taking infantry men (πεζούς) for the expedition.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, we have only Strabo's account of the early phase of Gallus' campaign, but, unless the chronology is far off, it is evident that Gallus could not have built and equipped over 200 ships in a period of four or even six months. It is further evident that he undertook the expedition without seeking information regarding alternative routes, both by land and sea, and the nature of the terrain in Arabia.<sup>14</sup> Bungling and naive he may

<sup>12</sup> Hourani (*supra* n.7) 82.

<sup>13</sup> It appears that Gallus had far better military intelligence for his return to Egypt, for he debarked his troops at Egra, sailed to Myos Hormos, marched over the desert to Coptos on the Nile, and landed at Alexandria (Strabo 16.4.24).

<sup>14</sup> Aelius could have profited from the disastrous experience of Crassus, who fought against the Parthians without knowledge of the enemy's military tactics and the character of the Mesopotamian desert, and who was taken in, as had Aelius, by a duplicitous Arab. See Plut. *Crass.* 22ff. According to W. W. Tarn (*CAH IX* 607), "Crassus had not the least idea of what he was going to

have been, but the likelihood is that he lacked military experience in the field (as his brief résumé in *RE* seems to indicate). As for Strabo's account of events at Cleopatra and on the Red Sea, there is a deeper subtext to it than use of Sylla's duplicity as the cause of a friend's misfortune; but lacking confirmation in other sources, it has to be considered as a questionable part of an ill-conceived and poorly executed military operation.

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

*June, 1995*

---

meet; but many Greeks must have known, and the most serious count against him is his neglect of Greek sources of information."