

Aynuna on the Red Sea

Abstract

A new Saudi-Polish project started in 2014 at Aynuna, at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba. The site was a Nabataean port linked by a caravan road with Petra, and was most likely identical to Leuke Kome of the Periplus and other ancient sources.

While the port itself on Aynuna Bay lies beneath a modern settlement, there are two more sites some 2 miles inland along Wadi Aynuna. One is a small town atop a fossil coral reef, the other a complex of storehouses on a terrace above the wadi. Excavations have confirmed so far the Nabataean date of both and their continuance at least in the 4th century AD.

Introduction

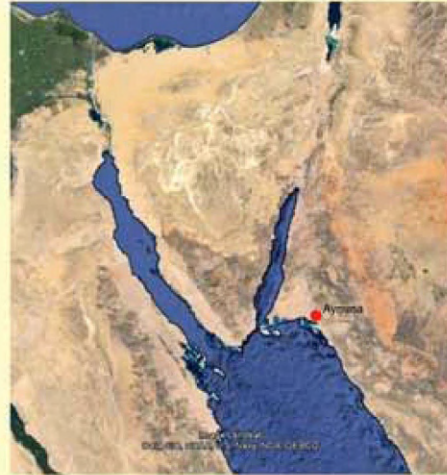
Saudi - Polish Archaeological Mission to Aynuna is a new project of Polish Centre of the Mediterranean Archaeology and Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage. Main objective is to explore the functioning of far-reaching sea trade in the Red Sea in Roman period, and to examine its infrastructure on the basis of archaeological remains in Wadi Aynuna.

Leuke Kome – port of Petra

The Nabataean kingdom existed since the 3rd century BC up to AD 106 in what is now Jordan and parts of Saudi Arabia. Nabataean caravans provided wares from South Arabia, mostly frankincense, to the Mediterranean. We know from Strabo that a caravan track led from the capital Petra to the port of Leuke Kome where a customs house protected by a military post dealt with sea imports. Aynuna fits to the majority of topographical hints given both by Periplus and Strabo when describing Leuke Kome. True or not, we can be sure to have there an important Nabataean port. It yields valuable new information about the ancient international trade and fills a blank spot on the archaeological map of the region.



LIDAR image of Wadi Aynuna



Location of Aynuna



Plan of Lower Aynuna (emporion) [J. Kaniszewski]



Aerial photo of Lower Aynuna (emporion) [M. Truszkowski]

Aynuna - emporion and frouion

"To the left of Berenicē, after a voyage of two or three runs eastward from Myos Hormos past the gulf lying alongside, there is another harbor with a fort (frouion) called Leukē Kōmē, through which there is a way inland up to Petra, to Malichus, king of the Nabataeans. This harbor also serves in a way the function of a port of trade (emporion) for the craft, none large, that come to it loaded with freight from Arabia."

(Lionel Casson "The Periplus Maris Erythraei. Text, translation and commentary", Princeton 1989, 61-63)

The site of Aynuna is located in the north-western Saudi Arabia, in Tabuk Province. Excavated ruins lay approximately 3 km inland from a small fishing port of Khoraiha.

The site occupies a stony terrace some 10 m above Wadi Aynuna which passes through a narrow breach in a limestone ridge called Jabal al-Safra. As can be seen on the aerial photographs, it features a square building (36 m to a side) with a courtyard and rooms arranged along two opposite walls. There are also visible remains of four similar buildings less well preserved, some of which seem to be older and go under the clear outline of the main khan. It seems reasonable to identify the place as emporion, obviously linked to the harbour nearby. High above this, on top of Jabal al-Safra, there is a completely different site. It is a densely built settlement within a defense wall, with a street pattern and outlines of houses clearly to be seen. Its natural topographical situation, internal organization and defensive features perfectly fits to the definition of frouion.

We don't know much about relationship of the coastal area with the oasis of Tabuk and the rest of Arabia, the issue which is extremely interesting by itself. Connection between Petra and Aynuna seems to be rather obvious, however. It is approximately 300 km of relatively good road through Wadi 'Ifal to Aqaba and later along the Wadi Arabah to Petra. The route through Wadi 'Ifal was also used in Islamic period as so-called "Egyptian Pilgrim Route" to Holy Cities. It goes through the mountains but is relatively easy and short. There were resting places with water in Haql, Al Sharaf, Al Bad and in Wadi Aynuna. From Aqaba the route was well known and used by Roman army – Via Nova Traiana. Assuming that fully loaded camel can make 50 km per day it gives 6-7 days for caravan to reach Petra, without any risk.



Plan of Upper Aynuna (frouion) [J. Kaniszewski]



Aynuna – Petra trade route



Aerial photo of Aynuna archaeological site [M. Truszkowski]



Aerial photo of Upper Aynuna (frouion) [M. Truszkowski]