

# The Roman fort at Yotvata: interim report (2003)

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## Introduction

The Roman fort at Yotvata lies in the southern Arabah c.40 km north of Aqaba (*Aila*) (fig. 1). It lies at the edge of the largest oasis in the area, c.350 m west of the main spring, which produced pools of surface water until the 1960s. The Hebrew name of the site is based on its suggested identification with Biblical Jotbathah (Deut. 10:7), where the Israelites encamped during their desert wanderings. The Arabic name of the site, Ein Ghadian, may preserve the Roman name *Ad Dianam*.<sup>1</sup> *Ad Dianam* appears on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, where it is marked by a monumental temple that was presumably dedicated to Diana. However, whereas the map places *Ad Dianam* at a distance of 16 Roman miles north of Aila, the Roman fort at Yotvata lies 26 miles north of Aila: either there is a scribal error on the map or the Roman fort at Yotvata is not *Ad Dianam*.<sup>2</sup>

Because the Roman fort is clearly visible as a low mound next to the Arabah road, it has long been known to scholars. T. E. Lawrence was the first to describe the fort but dated it to the Byzantine period. In the 1930s, the fort was identified by F. Frank as a Roman *castellum* and by N. Glueck as a Nabataean khan.<sup>3</sup> A small police station constructed of stone under the British Mandate in 1938 still sits atop the mound (fig. 2). The site was badly damaged in 1958, when a large trench for an oil pipeline was dug through the middle of it. In 1975-76, Z. Meshel (Tel Aviv University) conducted a number of soundings at the fort.<sup>4</sup> The most important discovery was made in 1985 when a water-pipe on the E side of the site burst, exposing a monumental Latin inscription. The stone block bearing the inscription had presumably been set above the fort's main gateway. The inscription identifies it as a Tetrarchic foundation established by Priscus, a *praeses* of Palaestina also known from an inscription from Caesarea Maritima.<sup>5</sup> The identity of the *ala* garrisoned here is uncertain. Line 6 of the inscription indicates that the name of the

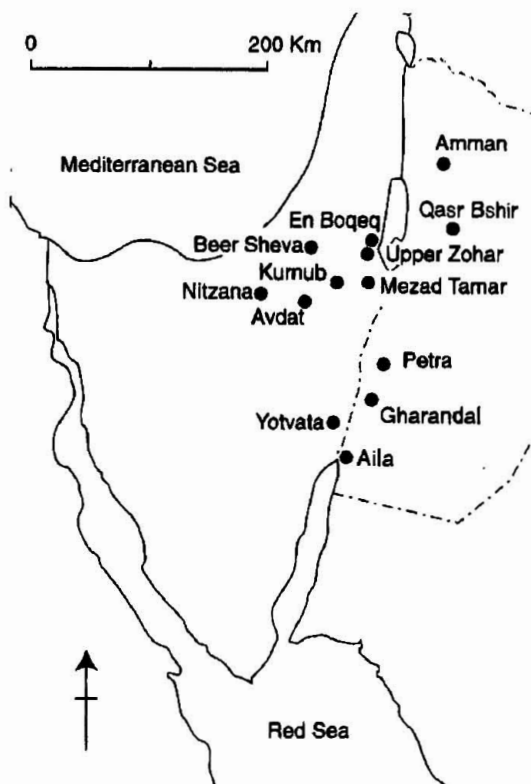


Fig. 1. Map showing location of Yotvata.

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- 1 Alternatively, the name may derive from Arabic *Ghadha*, a local plant (*Haloxylon persicum* or White Saxaul).
- 2 See D. F. Graf, "The *Via Nova Traiana* in Arabia Petraea," in J. H. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East* (Ann Arbor 1995) 262-63. The former possibility is suggested by other scribal errors on the map. For the temple of Diana, see below.
- 3 Z. Meshel, "Yotvata," in E. Stern (ed.), *NEAEHL* vol. 4 (New York 1993) 1517.
- 4 For preliminary reports, see Z. Meshel, "A fort at Yotvata from the time of Diocletian," *IEJ* 39 (1989) 228-38; id. (supra n.3); A. Kindler, "The numismatic finds from the Roman fort at Yotvata," *IEJ* 39 (1989) 261-66.
- 5 M. Gichon, "The strategic conception and the tactical functioning of the *Limes Palaestinae* after the Diocletian reorganization," in W. Groenman-van Waateringe et al. (edd.), *Roman frontier studies 1995* (Oxford 1997) 25-31.