

The Roman fort at Yotvata: a foundation under Valens?

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Introduction

From 2003 to 2007, the present authors¹ conducted excavations in the Late Roman fort at Yotvata in Israel's southern Arava. It lies c.40 km north of Eilat/Aqaba (*Aila*) at the edge of the largest oasis in the area (fig. 1),² and is visible as a low mound next to the main road, crowned today by a small police station of the British Mandate era. Here, as a follow-up to our earlier report on the 2003 season (*JRA* 17 [2004] 405-12), we present a summary of our findings,³ including the discovery that the fort was established some 60 years later than previously supposed. We also suggest the possible historical circumstances surrounding the fort's construction and occupation.

The site was badly damaged in 1958, when a large trench for an oil pipeline was dug through the middle of it. Although Z. Meshel (Tel Aviv University) conducted soundings at the fort in 1975-76, the most important discovery

was made accidentally in 1985, when a water pipe on the E side of the site burst, bringing to light a monumental Latin inscription.⁴ This stone block (not found in position but lying near the East Gate, from which perhaps it tumbled), refers to a Tetrarchic fort established by Priscus, *praeses of Palaestina*, who is also known from an inscription at Caesarea Maritima.⁵ Since that discovery, scholars have assumed that the fort at Yotvata was built when Diocletian transferred *Legio X Fretensis* from Jerusalem to Aila in the last decade of the 3rd c.⁶ Instead, we suggest that the fort was established no earlier than the mid-4th c., and most likely during the reign of Valens (364-78).

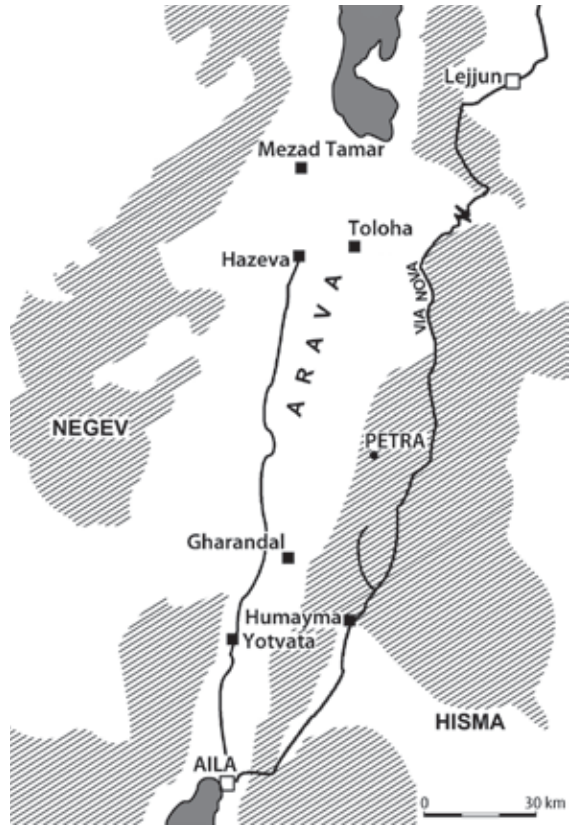


Fig. 1. The location of Yotvata (del. E. Stegmaier).

1 Uzi Avner (Arava Institute for Environmental Studies), the co-director in 2003-4, will publish his own material elsewhere.

2 For an overview of the site and its setting, see Avner, Davies, and Magness 2004a.

3 For preliminary reports on the 2003-7 excavations, see Avner, Davies, and Magness 2004a, 2004b; Davies and Magness 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a and 2008b.

4 Meshel 1989, 229 and 238; Roll 1989; Eck 1992.

5 Lehmann and Holum 2000, 49 and 51-52.

6 See Meshel 1993; Kennedy 2004, 221-22. All dates in this article refer to the Common Era.