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Procopius on the Palm Grove¹

ABSTRACT: This paper examines Procopius' discussion of the Palm Grove presented in his two works: *Wars* and *Buildings* – a topic that has received only passing attention in the scholarship. Based on a closer look at Procopius' language (he mostly uses a singular form of φοινικῶν); broader contextual questions (Abu Karib); the archaeobotanical history of selected sites in the Hijāz; a consideration of comparative textual sources like Non-nosus; and an assessment of the potential distance between the Roman Empire and the Palm Grove, I argue that the most likely modern location of this place is Madā'in Salīh or, somewhat more likely, Taymā, both in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

KEYWORDS: Abu Karib, Arabs, Byzantine history, Hijāz, Justinian, Madā'in Salīh, Palm Grove, Pre-Islamic Arabia, Procopius, Roman history, Saudi Arabia, Taymā

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1. Introduction

Most research on the 6th century historian Procopius has concentrated on what he has to say about big issues, like the practice of historiography, war in Africa, Italy, or against Persia, the reign of Justinian, or the life of Theodora.² Little – admittedly for good reason – has concentrated on small things. In this paper I focus on one little detail, and in particular a place, that Procopius includes in two of his three works, the identification of the Palm Grove,³ a mysterious geographic region found in the Arabian Peninsula. While this is a topic that has received some attention, there is no consensus on where, exactly, Procopius locates the place in question when he refers to the Palm Grove. Here, I intend to add to those discussions: with new research appearing on excavations in Saudia Arabia as well as the publication of some new material (Petra Papyri), the time is right for a reconsideration of the Palm Grove’s location.

2. Procopius on the Palm Grove and Environs

As I implied, research on the Palm Grove has been limited. One of the earliest treatments comes from Smith’s wide-ranging paper on events in Arabia in the 6th century AD. Shahîd provided the most detailed discussion in the course of his vast study of Arabs and Byzantium, particularly in the context of his analysis of Abu Karib.⁴ Robin touches on the location a few times in passing, especially in a paper on Arabs, Persians, Romans, and Himyar.⁵ Most recently, in a monumental commentary on Procopius, Greatrex presents some of the theories about the Palm Grove’s location, when the term appears in Procopius’ *Persian*

² On the wars, see Whitby 2021, on Justinian, see Sarris 2023, on Theodora, see Potter 2015, and on Belisarius and Antonina, see Parnell 2023. On Procopius and historiography, see Brodka 2022 and Greatrex 2022.

³ In this paper, I capitalise ‘Palm Grove’ whenever it is being used to refer to a specific place; I keep it lowercase whenever it refers to a generic palm grove.

⁴ Shahîd 1995a; Shahîd 1995b.

⁵ Robin 2008.

Wars.⁶ Beyond these sources, there is very little additional scholarship on this topic.⁷

Procopius primarily refers to the Palm Grove in three passages. Two of the three are found in the *Wars*, close together in book one, while the third passage comes in book five of the *Buildings*. They are worth quoting in full:

This coast immediately beyond the boundaries of Palestine is held by Saracens, who have of old been settled in the Palm Grove. This grove is in the interior, extending over a great tract of land, and absolutely nothing else grows there except palm trees. The emperor Justinian had received these palm groves as a present from Abu Karib, the ruler of the Saracens there, who was appointed by the emperor as tribal leader over the Saracens in Palestine.⁸

The second passage is only a few lines later, and like the first one it mentions Abu Karib:

Formally, therefore, the emperor holds the Palm Grove, but it is altogether impossible for him really to take possession of any of the country there. For a land completely destitute of human presence and absolutely dry lies in between, extending to the distance of a ten days' journey; moreover, the Palm Grove itself is not worth anything: Abu Karib only gave the form of a gift...⁹

⁶ Greatrex 2022.

⁷ Cameron 1985: 122, for one, calls Procopius' comments on the significance of this location 'naïve'.

⁸ Procop. *Wars* 1.19.7–10. Ταύτην δὴ τὴν ἡϊόνα εὐθὺς μὲν ὄρους τοὺς Παλαιστίνης ὑπερβάντι Σαρακηνοὶ ἔχουσιν, οἱ ἐν τῷ φοινικῶνι ἐκ παλαιοῦ ἴδρυνται. ἔστι δὲ ὁ φοινικῶν ἐν τῇ μεσογειᾷ ἐς χώραν κατατείνων πολλήν, ἔνθα δὴ ἄλλο τὸ παράπαν οὐδὲν ὅτι μὴ φοίνικες φύονται μόνοι. τούτῳ τῷ φοινικῶνι βασιλεῖα Ἰουστινιανὸν Αβοχάραβος ἔδωρήσατο, ὁ τῶν ἐκείνῃ Σαρακηνῶν ἄρχων, καὶ αὐτὸν βασιλεὺς φύλαρχον τῶν ἐν Παλαιστίνῃ Σαρακηνῶν κατεστήσατο. All translations are from Dewing, sometimes slightly modified.

⁹ Procop. *Wars* 1.19.12–13. τῷ μὲν οὖν λόγῳ τὸν φοινικῶνα βασιλεὺς ἔχει, μετεῖναι δὲ αὐτῷ τῶν ταύτη χωρίων οὐδ' ὀπωσιοῦν δυνατὰ ἔστι. γῆ τε γὰρ ἀνθρώπων παντελῶς ἔρημος καὶ ἀτεχνῶς ἀνυδρος ἐν μέσῳ οὔσα ἐς δέκα ἡμερῶν ὁδὸν διήκει, καὶ αὐτὸς

I now turn to the third passage. In this one, Procopius provides a little more detail about the Palm Grove and the region:

In what was formerly called Arabia and is now known as "Third Palestine," a barren land extends for a great distance, unwatered and producing neither crops nor any useful thing. A precipitous and terribly wild mountain, Sina by name, rears its height close to the Red Sea, as it is called. There is no need at this point in my account to write a description of that region because everything has been set forth in the books on the wars, where I gave a full description of the Red Sea and what is called the Arabian Gulf... At that point I shewed also in what manner the Emperor Justinian added the Palm Grove to the Roman Empire.¹⁰

There is one other, much shorter, notice. At 2.3.41 in the *Buildings*, Procopius notes: "More than this he has made the Homeritae his possession and the Red Sea, and he is adding the Palm Grove to the Roman dominion."

Those are the places where Procopius identifies a palm grove. Now it is worth looking more closely at his grammar. In all but one of those cases where he uses a word for a "palm grove," he writes a form of the word in the singular. In the passages from 1.19 of the *Wars*, the first case he uses φοινικῶνι (*Wars* 1.19.8), dative singular; in the second, φοινικῶνα (*Wars* 1.19.12), accusative singular; and in the third, φοινικῶν (*Wars* 1.19.13), nominative singular.¹¹ In the one case from the *Buildings*, he uses, φοινικῶνα (5.8.2), accusative singular, which he also writes in the solo, brief passage from the *Wars*, φοινικῶνα

λόγου ὁτουοῦν ἄξιος ὁ φοινικῶν οὐδαμῆ ἐστιν, ἀλλ' ὄνομα δώρου ὃ τε Ἀβοχάραβος ἔδωκε μόνον καὶ βασιλεὺς εὖ εἰδῶς ἔλαβε.

¹⁰ Procop. *Buildings* 5.8.1–2. Ἐν δὲ τῇ πάλαι μὲν Ἀραβία, νῦν δὲ Παλαιστίνη τρίτη καλουμένη, χώρα μὲν ἔρημος ἐπὶ μακρὸν κατατείνει, καρπῶν τε καὶ ὑδάτων καὶ πάντων ἀγαθῶν ἄφορος. καὶ ὄρος ἀπότομόν τε καὶ δεινῶς ἄγριον ἀποκρέματα ἀγχιστά τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς καλουμένης θαλάσσης, Σινὰ ὄνομα. 2 οὐδὲν δέ μοι ἀμφὶ τοῖς ἐκείνῃ χωρίοις ἀναγράψασθαι ἀναγκαῖον ἐνταῦθα τοῦ λόγου, ἐπεὶ ἅπαντά μοι τὰ τε κατὰ τὴν Ἐρυθρὰν θάλασσαν καὶ τὸν Ἀραβικὸν καλούμενον κόλπον... ἵνα δὴ καὶ τοῦτό μοι διδιήγηται, ὄντινα τρόπον Ἰουστινιανὸς βασιλεὺς τὸν Φοινικῶνα προσεποίησε τῇ Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῇ.

¹¹ The word φοινικῶν could also be the masculine genitive plural of Φοῖνιξ, but Procopius is not discussing Phoenicians here.

(2.3.41). The one plural usage comes in the form of φοίνικες (*Wars* 1.19.9), nominative plural. In sum, when Procopius refers to the palm grove, he usually calls it that – palm grove, not palm groves, singular not plural. We will keep this in mind as we proceed.

The passages where he specifically names the palm grove are only part of the story, for there are places where he touches on similar, relevant, details, like other neighbouring locations and important persons. Indeed, he mentions Arabia and Palestine in passing, in some spots in the *Wars*, and even in the *Secret History*.¹² Procopius touches, if indirectly, on Nabataean history, noting that the country beyond Aila (Aqaba) “extends from here to the limits of the city of Gaza used in ancient times to be called Arabia, as the king of the Arabs had his palace in early times in the city of Petra.”¹³ A bit earlier in the text where he refers to the Palm Grove twice, he also discusses Aila (modern Aqaba):

And there is a city called Aila on its shore, where the sea comes to an end, as I said, and becomes a narrow gulf. As one sails into the sea from there, the Egyptian mountains lie on the right, extending toward the south; on the other side a country deserted by men extends northward to an indefinite distance; and the land on both sides is visible as one sails along as far as the island called Iotabe, not less than one thousand stades distant from the city of Aila.¹⁴

Another relevant detail concerning the question of the palm grove relates to the person of Abu Karib, who was the focal point in Shahîd’s discussion of the location of the Palm Grove. Indeed, Greatrex notes that some have tried to locate it by establishing the Arab phylarch’s

¹² Procop. *Secret History* 17.16–18, 22.33–34.

¹³ Procop. *Wars* 1.19.19–21.

¹⁴ Procop. *Wars* 1.19.3. αὕτη δὲ ἡ θάλασσα ἐξ Ἰνδῶν ἀρχομένη ἐνταῦθα τελευτᾷ τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς. καὶ πόλις Αἰλάς καλουμένη πρὸς τῇ ταύτης ἡτόνι ἐστίν, ἔνθα ἡ θάλασσα, ὥσπερ μοι εἰρηται, ἀπολήγουσα πορθμός τις ἐς ἄγαν στενὸς γίνεται. καὶ αὐτὸν ἐνθὲνδε ἐσπλέοντι ἐν δεξιᾷ μὲν ὄρη τὰ Αἰγυπτίων πρὸς νότον ἄνεμον τετραμμένα ἐστίν, ἐπὶ θάτερα δὲ χώρα ἔρημος ἀνθρώπων ἐπὶ πλείστον διήκει πρὸς βορρᾶν ἄνεμον, ἢ τε γῆ αὕτη τῷ ἐσπλέοντι ἐκατέρωθεν ὄρατὴ γίνεται, μέχρι ἐς τὴν Ἰωτάβην καλουμένην νῆσον, Αἰλᾶ πόλεως σταδίουσ οὐχ ἦσσαν ἢ χιλίουσ διέχουσαν.

territory.¹⁵ As we saw, Procopius said that the palm grove belonged to the phylarch, who gave it to the emperor (Justinian) as a gift, owing in part to the title Justinian bestowed on the Arab chieftain. Abu Karib ibn Jabala was the brother of a better documented Jafnid/Ghassanid ruler, al-Harith, Procopius' Arethas. That brother, al-Harith, has been the subject of a great deal of scholarship.¹⁶

Even if we do not know a lot about Abu Karib, it is not nothing.¹⁷ Shahîd notes that Abu Karib is mentioned in a Syriac manuscript where he plays a key role in the history of the Monophysites.¹⁸ He also appears in a Sabaic inscription from South Arabia.¹⁹ One document Shahîd did not have access to is a papyrus from Petra, which names the phylarch. This papyrus, dated to the 8th of August 574 AD, which was a settlement of a dispute by arbitration between a Theodoros and a Stephanos, reads: "Above all, as I accused together with my father, when he was still alive, and after his death, that when the phylarch Abu Cherebos determined that (he) should take the vineyard, he agreed for the sake of the good will and gratification of the last-mentioned to pay two solidi."²⁰ These potted pieces of evidence give us some idea of the authority of Abu Karib and his place in the Roman Empire, but little clear idea of the scope of his power, territorially speaking.

In Procopius' corpus we have a few passages where he says something about the palm grove and how it was controlled. On a few occasions, he gets into some of the wider history and geography. There may not be as much detail as we might like, but there is some detail there to work with.

¹⁵ Greatrex 2022: 275.

¹⁶ Sartre 1982; Shahîd 1995a; Zwettler 2000; Robin 2008; Robin 2012; Fisher 2011; Fisher 2020; Fisher 2015; Whittow 2015; Greatrex 2022: 275–276.

¹⁷ Shahîd 1995a: 124–130.

¹⁸ Shahîd 1995b: 845–850.

¹⁹ Shahîd 1995b: 846–847. For a more detailed discussion, see Robin 2015: 164–166.

²⁰ P. Petra 4.39.

3. The Archaeobotanical History of the Hijāz Oases and Beyond

Next, it is time to direct our attention to potential palm groves in areas adjacent to the southeast corner of the Roman Empire. Shahîd raised a few of the possibilities in the context of a wider discussion of Abu Karib, before ultimately concluding that the Palm Grove must have been in the northern Hijāz.²¹ Greatrex is even more forceful, and, with Shahîd, presents the following possibilities: Dūmat al-Jandal, Tabūk, al-'Ulā, and Madā' in Salīh. Of these, Shahîd preferred Tabūk.²² Tabūk features prominently in some well-known journeys from further south in the Arabian Peninsula to the north, like in the expedition led by Muhammad against the city in the 630s' AD, which appears in the later *Futuh al-Buldan* by al-Baladhuri. There, we read: "Tabūk in the land of Syria."²³ By some reckoning, it was the southernmost point in Roman Arabia, whether directly under Roman control or indirectly under Ghassanid authority.²⁴ Tabūk is certainly a reasonable possibility, though only one of many.²⁵

But let us get back to what Shahîd and Greatrex have argued, namely that the most likely location of the Palm Grove is in the Hijāz, somewhere in northwestern (broadly speaking) Saudi Arabia.²⁶ One of those possibilities is Dūmat al-Jandal, located in northern Saudi Arabia. The town has an old pedigree, for its famed castle had origins in the 1st century AD and continued to be occupied well into the Islamic era.²⁷ Indeed, there are various Nabataean features throughout the settlement, including the presence of a Nabataean triclinium.²⁸ It may even have

²¹ Shahîd 1995a: 128–129. See too Greatrex 2022: 274–275.

²² Shahîd 2009: 19. See too Shahîd 1995a: 128.

²³ al-Baladhuri 12 (Kennedy 2022: 75).

²⁴ Shahîd 1995a: 128–129, n. 341.

²⁵ Exactly why Shahîd chose Tabūk, however, is less clear.

²⁶ In this section I have focused on the relatively well-studied sites of Dumat al-Jandal, Madā' in Sālīh, and Taymā, three good potential sites which have also attracted some scholarly attention regarding their archaeobotanical history.

²⁷ Fisher 2015: 385–388; Loreto 2018.

²⁸ Charloux et al. 2016.

been the target of a Roman expedition early in the 2nd century AD.²⁹ Sometime later, this town experienced a demonstrable Roman presence, with a Roman soldier, Flavius Dionysius, from the *Legio III Cyrenaica* attested, perhaps late in the 3rd century or, better, early in the 4th century.³⁰ According to some arguments, it was in the 4th century that Roman control shifted away, and the region fell under Arab (likely Ma'add) control.³¹ This argument would seem to be based on the relative absence of clear documentary evidence, which comes in the context of the reorganization of the province of Arabia.³² Also of use to this discussion, the agricultural area of the city has received some attention. Archaeologists have identified forty wells in the settlement's industrial area.³³ They have also found a series of underground *qanawāt* in the area of the palm grove, though they might be dated to the Islamic era, so slightly beyond the time frame of this paper.³⁴

What, if anything, does this tell us about its possible identification with Procopius' palm grove? Not as much as we might like, admittedly. We know it was inhabited at the time Procopius was writing, and the place was known to the Romans at least up to the 4th century, though seemingly also for some time after. There are traces of a settlement from the end of antiquity, though these are not usually associated with any particular palm grove.³⁵ That said, it was an important part of local trade networks, another potential means of connecting the site to Procopius' palm grove.³⁶

Another prospective site of Procopius' palm grove is located at Madā'in Sālih in Saudi Arabia, Roman Hegra. The place has attracted a lot of attention the past few years owing, in part, to its designation as a UNESCO world heritage site. The Nabataean settlement included

²⁹ Fradley et al. 2023.

³⁰ *L'Année épigraphique* 1979; *L'Année épigraphique* 2001. On the name Flavius, see Keenan 1973.

³¹ For an overview of some of the inscriptions from Dumat al-Jandal composed in a variety of ancient North Arabian languages, see Norris 2018.

³² Loreto 2018: 155.

³³ Loreto 2018: 158.

³⁴ Thomas, Testa, Courbon 2013; Loreto 2018: 158.

³⁵ See al-Sudairī 1995: 36–37, 57.

³⁶ Loreto 2018: 162.

111 monumental tombs, and 2000 or so non-monumental ones.³⁷ There are also over 100 wells and many hundreds of known inscriptions in a wide range of languages: Dadanitic, Hismaic, Minaic, Nabataean, Safaitic, and Thamudic. A few were in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin too, though they are far outnumbered by the other ones. The Nabataeans took possession of Madā' in Sālih in the first half of the 1st century AD, and a number of the monumental tombs belonged to officers from the Nabataean military.³⁸ They seem to have taken the site and surrounding territory from the Lihyanites. When the Romans took over the Nabataean kingdom between 106 and 112 AD, their new acquisition included possession of this southernmost part of the territory, which became a portion of the province. Though excavations are only in an early stage, archaeologists have started to uncover parts of the site's Roman fort, and a handful of inscriptions, from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, have been published, identifying Roman soldiers present at the site, in some capacity or other. As at Dūmat al.-Jandal, they are mostly soldiers from the *Legio III Cyrenaica*.³⁹

Besides this research on the Roman fort, there has been quite a lot of work recently concerning the ancient inhabitants' cultivation of various agricultural products. We know the region was an oasis in antiquity too, characterised by limited rainfall (about 50 mm annual rainfall) and a wide range of assorted plants.⁴⁰ There is a lot of physical, archaeobotanical, evidence of date palms, like seeds and rachis. Furthermore, the palms were used for a wide range of activities. Besides these, there were figs, pomegranates, grapes, olives, and lentils. In fact, there were

³⁷ Nehmé 2005.

³⁸ Healey 1993: 206 (n. 31): This is the tomb which Sa'dallahi the centurion, son of Zabda, made (for himself and for... and for) their children and for whoever comes from (the children of Sa'dallahi and produces in his hand a document to the effect that)? he may be buried in it, and for the children of Hannah... song of Huru... (And no)body will have the right... to sell or buy or give it in pledge or to lease it. (And whoever) does other than what is written above shall be liable for double the price of this whole burial-place and for the curse of Dushara and Manotu. In the month of Nisan... the year of Haretat, King of the Nabataeans, lover of his people. And anyone who draws up for himself (a document) regarding this tomb or alters anything of what is above will be liable to Dushara in the sum of a thousand Haretite sel's. Aftah made it.

³⁹ Fiema et al. 2020.

⁴⁰ Bouchaud 2013.

even peaches and plums. Another important component to the local agriculture industry was cotton. Seeds, textiles, and tools were found all over Hegra.⁴¹ Collectively, this makes Madā' in Salīh a good possibility as the location of Procopius' palm grove.

One option that Greatrex and Shahīd did not discuss was Taymā.⁴² Taymā, like the others, is also a known oasis, and a number of inscriptions from the site have been published.⁴³ Most of these are too early, going back at least as far as the Neo-Babylonian era. Indeed, for ten years Taymā was the residence of the last such king, Nabonidus.⁴⁴ Others inscriptions are too late, from early in the Islamic era, with nothing that I know of hailing from the 6th century AD.

That said, Taymā features in a few 6th century anecdotes connected to the famous Arab poet Imru' al-Qais. During his flight following the death of his father, along with a few family members, on the advice of a chieftain, he sought out Samuel ibn 'Adiya in Taymā, at Qasr al-Ab-laq, the Jewish poet's castle.⁴⁵ Samuel gave Amru a letter of introduction to the Ghassanid leader, al-Harith, in the hopes of giving him an audience with Justinian, or so the story goes. While only one of these characters features in Procopius' work as we saw above (al-Harith), this story does point to the relative vitality of Taymā in the 6th century.

But, there have also been some detailed studies of the site's past vegetation and water management.⁴⁶ Cultivation at Taymā started close to 3300 years ago.⁴⁷ Earlier, pre-historic, petroglyphs suggest that the area used to have a savannah-like environment, with giraffes, leopards, lions, and ostriches, but that was some time before the period covered here.⁴⁸ This eventually gave way to the desert conditions found there today, and seemingly in late antiquity. Indeed, Taymā's paleolake is well attested. What is more, Taymā's sabkha was significant enough

⁴¹ Bouchaud et al. 2011; Bouchaud et al. 2019.

⁴² Though see Smith 1954 and the comments of Shahīd 1995a: 129, n. 341.

⁴³ MacDonald 2021.

⁴⁴ Schaudig 2021: 3–13.

⁴⁵ van Gelder 2013: 362, n. 170. For the story, see Mumayiz 2005: 142–143.

⁴⁶ Dinies, Neef, Kürschner 2018; Engel et al. 2018; Kürschner, Neef 2018; Wellbrock et al. 2018.

⁴⁷ Dinies, Neef, Kürschner 2018: 138.

⁴⁸ Kürschner, Neef 2018: 104.

to negate the need for a wall on parts of the settlement, abutting it in the site's past.⁴⁹ At one point, walls enclosed not just the urban area but the oasis too. The site was occupied throughout late antiquity until the early Islamic era.⁵⁰ While its character and how some buildings were used changed, there does not seem to have been any drastic adjustment to the size of the settlement. In fact, metallurgy increased, with some of the goods needed to make bronze imported from further afield.

All this is to say that Taymā may not be a bad choice as a potential candidate for Procopius' palm grove. Although the inscriptions date to the wrong centuries, there is plenty of physical evidence that points to significant agricultural activity at Taymā in late antiquity, not to mention the story involving Imru al-Qais.

4. Locating the Palm Grove: Comparative Literary Evidence

We have now seen what Procopius has to say about the Palm Grove. While I have indicated the leading candidates as possible locations, it is still not clear which one is the best fit. This is not surprising, given Procopius' classicizing (even classical or post-classical) language obfuscates more than it illuminates, at least for this topic. Perhaps there are more clues in what other references we have to the Palm Grove.

One of the earliest references to the Palm Grove comes from Strabo. He talks about some of the first people to live in Arabia Felix, the metropolis of the Nabataeans (Petra), and Hiericus (Jericho). The latter (Jericho), as he says, "is the shortest road to Hiericus, a journey of three or four days, as also to the grove of palm trees, a journey of five days."⁵¹ Jericho is clearly far more than five days' journey, by foot or horse, from any of the sites in the Hijāz, which could mean that Strabo is wrong, or that he is talking about a different palm grove.

There are more ancient accounts if we shift closer in time to Procopius and three different writers. First, we have Nonnosus, via Photius, who also mentions the Palm Grove. He says "that most of the Saracens,

⁴⁹ Engel et al. 2018: 76.

⁵⁰ Hausleiter, Eichmann 2018: 38–39.

⁵¹ Strabo 16.4.21. See too Greatrex 2022: 274–275.

both those in the Palm Grove and those beyond the Palm Grove and the mountains called Taurēnoi, regard a particular place as sacred...⁵² In this case, the one helpful piece of additional evidence is the detail about the mountains, the Taurēnoi. Cosmas Indicopleustes mentions a palm grove, only his is located in the Sinai.⁵³ The author of the *Martyrium Arethae* puts the distance from Himyar to the Palm Grove at 30 stages.⁵⁴ If we take our starting or measuring point for Himyar as its capital, Zafar, which was likely in part of Sana'a in Yemen, 30 stages would be some 900 or so kilometres from the city. This would put the Palm Grove closer to Mecca (or just south of there), nowhere near (relatively speaking) any of the aforementioned sites in the Hijāz. Collectively then, as interesting as this comparative evidence is, it provides little help in determining the location of Procopius' palm grove.

5. The Land in Between

Looking at the archaeobotanical history of those Hijāz locations does not get us much closer to identifying Procopius' Palm Grove, and as interesting as the comparative literary evidence is, the same is true for it. There are some clues in Procopius' own comments, however, that might allow us to narrow down the potential location.

Procopius notes the land is in the interior, that the Palm Grove extends over a great distance, and nothing grows there save palm trees.⁵⁵ He also says that a land completely dry, lacking human settlement, and ten days' journey across lies between the Roman territory and this palm

⁵² Greatrex 2022: 683.

⁵³ Comas Indic. 5.13: Παρελθόντων οὖν τῶν Ἰσραηλιτῶν εἰς τὸ πέραν, εἰς τὸν λεγόμενον Φοινικῶνα, ἤρξαντο βαδίζειν τὴν ἔρημον Σούρ, τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμέρας νεφέλην αὐτοῖς εἰς σκέπην διαπετανύντος ἀπὸ τοῦ καύσωνος τοῦ ἡλίου καὶ ὀδηγῶν αὐτοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ καὶ νυκτὸς ἐν στύλῳ πυρὸς φαίνων καὶ καθοδηγῶν αὐτοὺς πᾶσαν τὴν ἔρημον, καθὼς γέγραπται: «Διεπέτασε νεφέλην εἰς σκέπην αὐτοῖς καὶ πῦρ τοῦ φωτίσαι αὐτοὺς τὴν νύκτα.» Ἔστιν οὖν καταγράψαι καὶ τοῦτο τοιῶσδε.

⁵⁴ Mart. Ar. 2: Ἔστι δὲ ἡ χώρα τῶν Ὀμηριτῶν ἐκ νότου τοῦ νῦν ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίους ὄντος καὶ λεγομένου Φοινικῶνος, ἀπέχουσα μονὰς τριάκοντα. See too Greatrex 2022: 274; Talbert 2000: 1143.

⁵⁵ Procop. Wars 1.19.7–10.

grove.⁵⁶ If we assume Aqaba (ancient Aila) was close to the southernmost reaches of the province in the 6th century, and using Google Earth Pro, the distance in a straight line from those two spots is just under 200 km.⁵⁷ A day's journey is somewhere between 30 and 40 km, depending on the author.⁵⁸ If Procopius' ten days' journey in between is correct, then Tabūk is too close. It is worth looking at the distances between Aqaba and the other potential sites.

If we look at Aqaba to Madā'in Salīh and use Google Earth Pro again, it gives about 425 km. Using 40 km as a day's journey, that works out to about 10 and a half days, a very promising result. Taymā gives about 405 km, which is right on 10 days. The distance from Aqaba to Dumat al-Jandal is about 470 km, which works out to a bit under 12 days. Madā'in Salīh and Taymā thus make for excellent candidates, even if these calculations are not absolute (we do not know where Procopius' starting point is, for example) – and Taymā is slightly better than Madā'in Salīh.

6. Concluding Discussion

Procopius mentions the Palm Grove a few times in the *Wars* and *Buildings*. He mentions the term, a form of φοινικόν, in the singular, which makes it likely he is referring to one spot rather than a whole series of palm groves. The one use in the plural is the anomaly, possibly a little slip, possibly a mistake in transmission. Unfortunately, what few details he has included makes it difficult to determine any precise location for the Palm Grove. For one thing, he does not get into much detail about the exact size of the palm grove. Though he does connect it to the territory of Abu Karib, for example, he provides no clarity on the precise dimensions of his kingdom. Even the publication of new

⁵⁶ Procop. *Wars* 1.19.12–13.

⁵⁷ On the organizational and administrative history of these provinces (Arabia, Third Palestine, and *Palestina Salutaris*), see Sipilä 2009.

⁵⁸ Geus 2012 argues that the day's journey of Herodotus is between 27 and 40 km. Google Maps shows that the driving distance from Aqaba to Tabuk is about 262 km. The route is not direct, however. Using modern roads – there are no direct routes – gives a misleading sense of the potential distance.

evidence, like the letter from Petra that names Abu Karib, gives us no help in this matter.

Modern scholars have by and large identified Procopius' Palm Grove with various palm groves in the Hijāz. While some, as we have seen, have preferred certain individual oases over others, a few scholars, namely Smith and, more recently, Robin, have argued for a much larger territory, which included Taymā and Madā'in Salīh, as well as Khaybar and Yathrib (which I have not discussed).⁵⁹ As far as evidence for the existence of palm groves in late antiquity goes, we find it at most of the potential sites discussed above, which does not allow us to isolate a good candidate location.

Ultimately, to my mind, the best way to narrow down the search is to focus on Procopius' comments about the distance of the territory from the Roman Empire. By and large, Procopius' use of numbers and distances is pretty strong, despite some claims to the contrary.⁶⁰ This makes Madā'in Salīh and Taymā as the two best candidates, each close to ten days' journey from Rome's then southern border, with the latter, Taymā, a little better attested in late antiquity than the former. In the absence of clearer evidence, however, a precise association remains elusive.

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⁵⁹ Smith 1954; Robin 2008: 174, n. 39. Neither go into any detail about why they settled on those locations.

⁶⁰ See Feissel 2002 and Whately 2015. Contra, see Hannestad 1960.

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