

The coasts of Arabia in the geographical literature of Roman times

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In recent years the scientific community has witnessed a sharp rise in studies of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a primordial source for scholars interested in how trade and relations in general worked between Roman Egypt, eastern Africa, southern Arabia and India in the early Roman Empire. Usually dated to the mid-first century AD, the *Periplus* has traditionally been regarded as something like a rewriting of a ship's log kept in Greek by one or more sea captains or possibly by a trader from Roman Egypt. Whoever wrote it had first-hand knowledge of shipping routes and commercial practices in the Indian Ocean region. More specifically, the text speaks of the Egyptian ports along the Red Sea all the way to southern India, including some references to the island of Taprobane (Sri Lanka) and the regions east of Cape Comorin, including the Asian southeast; this information was surely not obtained personally by the writer or writers of the *Periplus*, but was gathered through middlemen. Although the text has also been regarded as a common, vulgar work with little to no literary value, some very recent studies point to a certain level of literary skill, so apart from its purely practical information the *Periplus* might contain several elements tying it into the classic geographical tradition.

Certain phenomena that have happened or whose historic process has sped up in recent decades, such as globalization, have spurred specialists to reexamine the *Periplus* to try and disentangle all the elements it contains. Several significant studies have been devoted to explaining the development of complex societies in full political emergence in parallel with the commercial development that came about with the creation of remote trading networks in the Indian Ocean region, although in every case this evolution was non-linear and advanced by fits and starts.

One problem closely related with the development and use of commercial networks was that of ports and port infrastructure, which were fundamental for trading among contemporary Arabian political entities and other agents doing business in the far-flung environment defined by the peninsula's coastal states.

In this article I would like to focus on examining the main *emporion* and other Arabian ports mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and other more or less contemporary Greco-Roman sources (primarily Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy) for a better grasp of the role these trade centers played, especially politically. The initial hypothesis that I will pursue and try to demonstrate on the pages to follow consists in evaluating the role of the Arabian *emporion* as a site carefully selected by political authorities as a stage for trading with other agents in the Indian Ocean region in a way that was safe, controlled and profitable (through taxes, customs duties and port charges).

I will also be looking at a second hypothesis that is harder to support but would explain the existence of some *emporion* as the product of the foreign policy of Augustus and his successors, to whom various embassies appealed for *amicitia*. *Amicitia*, a vague and ambiguous term by definition, may be interpreted in this context as an agreement to establish trade relations between Rome and countries outside its structure of provinces and client nations.

Before beginning our analysis, let us review the historical context, the Roman Empire's well-known rush into the Indian Ocean region after Octavian made ancient Ptolemaic Egypt a province in 30 BC. One consequence of this political move was Rome's conspicuous entrance as a new player in the complex political and commercial relations of the Indian Ocean region. Another was the fact that the traditional caravan trade in incense and myrrh along the inland routes of Arabia was joined up to the system linking Roman Egypt to the far-off ports of India, Sri Lanka and southeast Asia (the latter indirectly), thanks to a knowledge of monsoons and the vast potential unlocked by the possibility of two seasons of open-sea sailing a year. This certainly did not mean the caravan trade through Arabia vanished, but it was forced to adapt quickly to the new system, where sea routes were much more important. The *Periplus* in a way reflects the result of that adaptation, speaking from what we might call a "Roman" viewpoint.

We have four mentions of rulers from the Arabian political scene in the *Periplus*. In order of appearance, they are Malichas, King of the Nabataeans; Cholaebus, a local "chief" of Mapharitis; Charibael, king of the Homerites and the Sabaites; and lastly Eleazus, king of the Frankincense Country or Hadramaut.

The first of them, Malichas, appears in the *Periplus* in a reference to Petra, which was his home. We are told that a port (*hormos*) with a small fort called White

Village (Leuke Kome) lay on the Arabian shore of the Red Sea, two or three days' sailing from Myos Hormos (Quseir al-Qadim), and from there a road led inland precisely to Petra. White Village was a marketplace for Arabian ships that were not too large. According to the *Periplus*, this was the reason why an official was sent there to collect the *tetarte*, or 25% duty on products imported into the Roman Empire, together with a centurion (*hekatontarchos*, a military rank also present in the Nabataean army) heading up a detachment tasked with guarding the place. As can be seen, the kingdom of the Nabataeans (which Trajan later annexed for the Roman Empire in 106 AD) was not considered a part of Arabia by the author(s) of the *Periplus*, and it is remarkable that there was a *tetarte* collector there. Returning to the Malichas mentioned in the text, the prevailing view is to identify him as Malchos or Malichus II, who reigned from approximately 40 to 70 AD.

"Arabia" proper, in the eyes of the author(s) of the *Periplus*, began south of White Village. No other ports are mentioned until we come to the *emporion* of Muza. Emphasis is laid on the dangers of these waters (full of breakers and cliffs and fearsome in general) and the inhabitants (the text speaks of fish-eaters along the coast and evil men called Canraites farther inland).

Once we reach the Burnt Island (Katakekaumene), we again find civilized people, grazing animals and camels (in a clear reference to caravans).

Muza, lying 12,000 stadia south of Berenike and 300 stadia north of the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, is considered an *emporion nomimon*, which may be translated as an "official" or "regular" *emporion*. This is one of the three *emporia nomima* mentioned in the *Periplus*. The other two are Adulis on the western coast of the Red Sea and Apologou on the edge of the Persian Gulf

Emporia nomima may be regarded as "official markets controlled by law." This hardly means that the other thirty-four ports mentioned in the *Periplus* were lawless, but that the three classified as *emporia nomima* were located in conflictive areas (the African coast of the Red Sea, far from Roman Egypt; the vicinity of the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb; and a pocket of the Persian Gulf controlled by the Parthians), so it would have been considered necessary to reinforce the effective involvement of the authorities, possibly at officially authorized trading facilities. While such a practice might have contrasted with the *laissez-faire* policy

that in theory reigned in other ports, it would not quite have constituted a monopoly for the local ruler.

Besides that, Muza is described as a bustling marketplace full of Arabian sailors and shipowners bound for both the African shore of the Red Sea and the *emporion* of Barygaza.

Interestingly, although Muza had no proper harbor, ships could reach it because the sea bottom there was sandy and therefore a good anchorage. The *Periplus* also gives a list of the products imported and exported at this *emporion*.

The list includes a series of products chosen for King Charibael and the “chief” Cholaebus: horses, mules, gold and copper dishes, engraved silver and very rich clothing. All of these products were of great symbolic value, great prestige or even great practicality; in a country where it was almost impossible to move goods by cart, mules would have been quite useful.

Next we are told that three days’ journey inland from this *emporion* lay the city of Saua (modern day As Sawā), in the region of Mapharitis. Saua was the residence of the “chief” (*tyrannos*) Cholaebus.

The capital holding sway over both Muza and Mapharitis was Saphar, nine days’ march away. When the information appearing in the *Periplus* was gathered, the “legitimate” king was Charibael, who governed both the Homerites and the Sabaites and was lord over Cholaebus.

The text also makes an interesting observation, asserting that Charibael was “friend (*philos*) of the emperors” thanks to continuously sending embassies and gifts. Throughout the entire Julio-Claudian dynasty we hear tell of ambassadors from the incense-producing country arriving in Rome. On the basis of that admittedly fuzzy information, we might roughly hypothesize that these embassies (whose point of origin is unknown, possibly Himyar or Hadramaut, or perhaps elsewhere in Arabia) went to Rome to petition *amicitia* to facilitate trade relations, as we see reflected in the *Periplus*, and it could even be interpreted that, from the Roman standpoint, the ambassadors’ gifts to each emperor could be understood as tribute.

Another and more daring hypothesis would be to consider the Homerites’ rise to control over southwestern Arabia a consequence of Aelius Gallus’s campaign, which in that case would not have been as disastrous as we think. That would also explain why the Homerites’ king, Charibael, would be sending gifts: he was

governing a state that Rome would have seen as having been subjugated and made a client.

The next geographic feature mentioned in the work is the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, about a 300-stadia sail from Muza and 60 stadia wide. In its center lay the island of Diodorus (now called Perim), which caused the currents and dangerous winds that made it tricky to sail through the strait. On the Arabian shore lay the coastal village of Ocelis, which we are told obeyed the same “chief,” Cholaebus. Ocelis is not described as an *emporion*, however; at the time that role in the kingdom of the Homerites and Sabaites was set aside for Muza. Ocelis was instead an anchorage, watering point and first port of call for ships on their way into the Gulf of Aden.

Some of the information in Pliny’s *Natural History* (information provided by traders who “did the India run” in the Roman admiral’s own time) proves quite pertinent if compared to what the *Periplus* has to offer: Ships used to set sail from the Roman Egyptian port of Berenike in early summer, before the star Sirius became visible, so that they could reach the southwest monsoon, which propelled them speedily to India. The crossing between Berenike and Ocelis took about thirty days, and Ocelis was in fact the best port at which to await the arrival of the monsoon (which Pliny called the “Hippalus wind”). Then, in another journey lasting about forty days, ships could reach the coast of Limyrikê, that is, southwest India, where lay the major *emporion* of Muziris and Nelkynda, from which precious objects including pepper, pearls and precious stones were exported.

Twelve hundred stadia from Ocelis lay Arabia Felix, described as a coastal village also belonging to the kingdom ruled by Charibael (the Homerite and Sabaite monarch), with better anchorages and watering places than Ocelis. Curiously, the *Periplus* tells us that in other, more prosperous days Arabia Felix used to be the only city that received goods from India and Egypt, acting as a middleman for trade between them, because there was no direct contact yet between India and Egypt at that point. The text also makes the interesting assertion that, not long before the era when the *Periplus* was written, “Caesar” destroyed Arabia Felix. Specialists unanimously agree that Arabia Felix (Eudaimon Arabia) is Aden, a port that appears to have been active before the beginning of our current era. The reason for its decline at the time when the information in the *Periplus* was

gathered has been explained by arguing that it could have been due to the increase in direct trade between the Roman-controlled Egyptian ports on the Red Sea and the ports of India, in addition to the fact that at that time the *emporion* of Muza, also under Charibael's control, could have been monopolizing the kingdom's harbor trade.

Certainly, the most controversial information about Arabia Felix is its supposed destruction at the hands of "Caesar." An abundance of historiographical work has been done to try and explain this, since Aden did not become really famous (being mentioned by authors like Mela, Pliny and Ptolemy) until after the date of its supposed destruction, and the only Roman expedition sent to Arabia before the writing of the *Periplus* stopped long before reaching Aden.

That expedition was, of course, the one commanded by Aelius Gallus, who was the second prefect of Egypt in the reign of Augustus. In about 26 or 25 BC, he sailed at the head of his fleet from the port of Cleopatra/Arsinoe. Strabo reported on the campaign some years after the fact. He said the prefect ordered more than eighty ships, biremes, triremes and light boats, built there while he waited for the appearance of Syllaeus, vizier of the Nabataeans, who had promised he would provide logistical aid and guide Gallus on his way to the country of Arabia Felix (the south-western Arabian peninsula, not the port discussed here). When Gallus realized Syllaeus had deceived him (as Strabo tells it), he had a hundred and thirty cargo vessels built in which he moved over ten thousand infantrymen. The port where they disembarked was precisely Leuke Kome, near Petra in the Nabataean territory, since Syllaeus himself had informed Gallus that it was impossible to reach Leuke Kome overland. After a lengthy campaign in which the Romans took heavy losses due to hunger, fatigue and disease, Gallus's troops failed to take the city of Marsiaba or Mariaba (which has been identified as Ma'rib, the capital of the kingdom of Saba) after an unsuccessful six-day siege, and they finally retreated to the Nabataean port of Egra, where they once again embarked for Myos Hormos.

The expedition certainly failed to reach any of its objectives (explore the territory and subjugate the Arabians or conquer them by arms to control their riches), and the only positive outcome was a greater knowledge of western Arabia's resources and the populations the Romans encountered. We may add that the military failure also contributed to the fact that the expedition was not loudly reported

among contemporary and later authors. However, this has not prevented numerous studies from having proposed various Roman rulers as the ones responsible for the supposed destruction of Aden mentioned in the *Periplus*. Actually, if this hypothesis were accepted, it would explain the friendship between Charibael and the Roman emperors mentioned in the *Periplus*, since, as we said before, the Homerites rose to power on the heels of Aelius Gallus's campaign.

The next *emporion* mentioned in the *Periplus* is Kané (modern-day Husn al-Ghurab, about 300 kilometers east of Aden), which was separated from Arabia Felix by a gulf 2000 stadia or more long, and where both nomads and fish-eaters lived in villages. This marketplace, Kané, founded around the first century BC, belonged to Hadramaut, the kingdom of Eleazus. Eleazus could well be the Ilf'azz known through various epigraphic references.

This country was a leading producer of incense, and its capital, Sabbathath (Shabwa), also lay inland.

We are told in the *Periplus* that incense was collected by the king's slaves and by convicts in the area east of Kané and carried to the *emporion* on camels, on rafts made of leather bags or in ships. Further interesting information is given about this *emporion's* maritime contacts with the markets of the African shore of the Red Sea, in addition to its contacts with Barygaza, Scythia, Omana and Persia.

Kané, like Muza, was a place where certain products were imported for the king's use only: wrought silver, coins, horses, statues and unembellished clothing of the finest quality.

The exports from this *emporion* were incense (of course) and aloe, probably from the island of Socotra, in addition to goods from other markets.

In front of Cape Syagros (described as the largest promontory in the world) and in the middle between Syagros and the Cape of Spices (Guardafui) lay the isle of Dioscorida (Socotra, mentioned above), whose northern end was populated by foreign people: Arabians, Indians and some Greeks.

For the purposes of this study, we would like to stress that the island was ruled by Eleazus of Hadramaut, although we are told that at an indeterminate earlier time some traders from Muza and seamen from Limyrikê and Barygaza were blown off course and ended up on the island. They took advantage of their stay to trade rice, grain, female slaves and cotton cloth from India for tortoiseshell

(there is no mention of incense, aloe or the “dragon’s blood” or “Indian cinnabar,” Socotra’s most prized product, an omission that seems inexplicable but is perhaps intended to avoid unwelcome visits). However, when the *Periplus* was written, it is said that “the kings had rented out the island and it was under guard.” One hypothesis suggests that the tenants may have been one or more Arabian traders from Hadramaut.

After Cape Syagros the deep Gulf of Omana began, followed by an area of mountains and cliffs whose inhabitants were cave dwellers. The next port was Moscha (traditionally identified with Sumhuram/Khor Rori, in Oman, but probably someplace farther west of Khor Rori), described as a *hormos apodedeigmenos* (which could be translated as “designated port”). Only three “designated ports” appear in the entire *Periplus*: Myos Hormos and Berenike, in Egypt, and Moscha. Specialists have debated about the exact nature of these *hormoi apodedeigmenoi*, which, as can be seen, were not considered *emporía*. One possibility is that they were ports established for the precise purpose of enabling ships to moor there overnight and thus keep both their cargo and their crew safe. Ships ran an ever-present risk sailing these pirate-infested waters (according to what the written sources say), and the overland routes between Red Sea ports and the Nile Valley were also studded with garrisons to avoid attacks, so it is no wonder that Myos Hormos and Berenike were two of these “designated” ports. Moscha was probably established to protect exports of prized incense from Arabia, no doubt on the orders of the rulers of Hadramaut.

As stated in the *Periplus*, incense from the surrounding region of Sachalites was loaded onto ships at Moscha. A number of ships were sent out from Kané each year, and others from Limyrikê and Barygaza arriving at the end of the sailing season (at the tail of the southwesterly monsoon) were allowed once in a while to spend the winter in Moscha. That was the only reason why these ships were allowed to trade their grain, oil and cotton cloth (native products of the Barygaza zone) for the incense stored at Moscha.

In fact, the *Periplus* emphatically asserts that incense could not be loaded onto any foreign ship without royal permission, a stricture that can and should also be considered in relationship with the fact that Moscha was a “designated port.” However, this makes us reconsider Moscha’s true significance and whether the *Periplus*’s information on this point (that ships that had missed out on sailing to

India were allowed to winter there) was a misunderstanding by the author (or the author's source), since Moscha may have been better integrated into the Indian Ocean/Red Sea commercial circuit than we think.

The port of Moscha is the last item of infrastructure singled out in this section of the *Periplus*. The text goes on to speak of the Zenobian Islands and the island of Serapis, while describing the rest of the coast (now the coast of Oman) and the entrance to the Persian Gulf in rather elusive terms.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from what we have seen. To begin with, we can infer that, when the information in the *Periplus* was gathered, the capital of each southern Arabian kingdom had one main port (Muza for the kingdom of the Homerites and Sabaites, and Kané for the kingdom of Hadramaut), which it kept under strict control. The author(s) called these ports *emporía*. This set-up was due fundamentally to the various rulers' political determination to keep long-distance trade under their strict control, firstly as a means of more easily and efficiently handling taxes, customs duties and port charges at each of the ports designated or authorized for foreign trade, and secondly so they could enjoy exclusive access to high-prestige luxury goods, which we know about in great detail thanks to the *Periplus*. Another extremely significant factor was that trade practices and the product distribution network in the Indian Ocean/Red Sea area had to be readjusted when Rome became a new player in the region –and an especially high-profile one at that, after its annexation of Egypt. Various rulers of kingdoms in the area then sought *amicitia* with the empire and leapt to send it diplomatic legations and gifts. So, we might well wonder about the scope of this new commercial readaptation or dimension endorsed by Rome and probably also by various Indian political entities, all seizing on the possibilities offered by knowledge of the monsoon route over the high sea. The various western and southern Arabian kingdoms certainly responded by building or expanding facilities at their *emporía* and other ports. The change did not happen suddenly, though; it took close to a century to reach its completion. That is precisely the scene that the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* paints for us. This singular source not only gives us optimum information about the products sold in the area during

the first century AC, but it also helps us gain a better understanding of the commercial and diplomatic practices of diverse major political players in the region of the Indian Ocean.