

Lost port of the Red Sea

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Ancient written sources list about a dozen ports along the western coast of the Red Sea. Most of them were established during the early Hellenistic period, in fulfillment of a program initiated by Ptolemy II aiming among others to obtain war elephants for his army. Only a few of these ports have been located and investigated archaeologically. On most of the sites mainly layers from the later, Roman phase were recognized (Sidebotham 2006; 2011). Berenike Trogodytika is therefore an exception among them, because the site having yielded remarkable, well-preserved remains of a Hellenistic structures. (Woźniak, Rądkowska 2014; Woźniak et al. forthcoming). A number of bases/ports have been located, but without precisely mapping and surveying the sites. There are, however, some that are not on any list, and whose existence is indicated only by circumstantial evidence of various kinds.

Where to look?

The largest group of precisely located ancient port sites in the Red Sea region is found in the northern part of the Red Sea. Of the Roman-period sites in this area, Klysma/Kleopatris (Suez), Myos Hormos (Quseir al-Qadim), Nechesia (Marsa Nakari) and Berenike have been located and surveyed. One can add Philotera (southern end of the Gulf of Suez) and, in the south, Ptolemais Theron (Nowarat delta in Sudan) and Adulis (Galala in Eritrea). Notably, these sites are located at regular distances, every 150–200 km. Locations were chosen either at existing sites or, for the most part, in places without earlier settlement (Cohen 2006; Macleroy-Obied 2010, 65–79; Sidebotham 2011, 175–188;). The only region where such centers were not recorded is the section between Berenike and Ptolemais Theron.

Ships sailing in the Red Sea probably avoided the offshore zone of shallower waters (about 20–40 km) dotted with coral reefs. For safety they sailed with the winds, across the

open sea outside of the reef zone, thus explaining why only certain parts of the coast were mentioned in written sources, such as Topazos island located far out at sea (Plin.*HN*.37.108; Strab.16.4.7.152). This reconstruction of the sea route to the south is also supported by shipwreck finds, e.g. dating to the first century BC/ first century AD. wreck discovered near the island of St. John Topazos/Zabargad (Sidebotham 2011, 199). With such sailing, in some sections of the sea route, the ships “automatically” approached parts of the coast that extend out to sea. The ports of Ptolemais Theron and Adulis were located in such a zone. Such a zone existed also halfway between Ptolemais and Berenike.

Abraq (discovered in 1832) was a large Hellenistic fort located in the mountains southwest of Berenike. A survey by the Berenike Project in the 1990s traced an overland trail connecting the fort to Syene (Sidebotham 2011, 41–42, 128). The eastern part of the route could have led to Berenike, according to the researchers, although this would have been a rather round-about way, Abraq being too far south. A much shorter and equally convenient route and from Berenike to Syene would have led through via Wadi Abu Greiya, for example. Assuming a certain similarity of the trail in question to the well-known routes from Berenike or Nechesia to Edfu and Koptos, its final destination on the coast (a port?) would have been southeast of the Abraq fort, that is, south of the present port of Shalateen. It would have been the first port for unloading goods (or animals) shipped in from the south and transporting them to the Nile valley downstream from the cataracts. But because of the distances involved, it could have been an “alternative” or “rescue” route (hence so few wells on it). Berenike offered better conditions in every respect, but it had to be reached first and under certain circumstances (e.g. a breakdown in the weather), it may have not been possible.

The region south of Shalateen, about 150–200 km from Berenike, which the geographical and archaeological evidence points to as the potential location of the ancient port, is not mentioned in most of the written sources, such as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Pliny’s *Historia Naturalis* or Ptolemy’s *Geography*. There is, however, one completely forgotten reference, Strabo (16.4.7.152) who speaks of a port called Soteira located somewhere south of Topazos island (now St John’s island) and Berenike, and to the north of Ptolemais Theron. The ancient geographer was even more specific regarding the location: just north of the point where the African shore of the Red Sea in this zone is nearest to Arabia. The name allegedly commemorates the rescue of a ship, which found anchorage in this place after passing through some terrible dangers (typically on the Red Sea, strong winds, storms which were dangerous especially on the high seas, and reefs lurking near the shores).

Considering the sailing pattern of ships leaving Berenike, they would go out to sea to avoid the reefs in Akatarthos Bay (Strab.16.4.5.151), then headed southeast leaving Topazos island on the left and sailed with the strong north-westerly winds through the open sea. Sailors

would have gradually lost sight of the shore, which runs almost exactly N–S here. Any storm at this point put them in great peril for lack of a convenient and safe harbor. Ships heading north from Ptolemais Theron were in a similar situation. However, if the crew managed to maintain course, they reached the part of the coast where the shore ran out to the east again. Here, they could find anchorage, even if in the zone of shallow waters dotted with coral reefs, rocks and shoals (e.g. between the land, Sayal Islands and Halaib Islands).

Strabo (16.4.7.152) described meadows and trees visible underwater near Soteira, beyond the port, which would put these unusually shallow waters south of it. His mistake might be because, not having sailed the route himself, he was relying on an account of a sailor sailing from the south, in the opposite direction. Sailing from Soteira in the direction of Ptolemais Theron one could see bull-shaped rocks and a mountain with a temple of Isis near it. No other coastal landmarks were included in Strabo's description until the islands near Ptolemais.

Actually, the mountains come close to the seashore at a point about 250 km southwest of Berenike, where the Red Sea shore runs out towards Arabia. Their distinctive peaks could have provided convenient reference points for sailors. Immediately beyond this point, the coastline again recedes, disappearing from sight for sailors sailing southeast with the wind and sea currents as far as Nowarat area.

Interestingly, there was an ancient port, called Aidhab, in the area described by Strabo, some 200 km southeast of Berenike, but it was established 600 years later, presumably as a landing point for a Muslim army on its way to conquer Upper Egypt (Power 2012, 63–64, 96–97). This army crossed the mountains marching on Aswan, probably taking the same route that the Ptolemaic hunters and sailors had used, passing the ancient ruins in Abraha). Later this route was also used by Muslim pilgrims traveling in the opposite direction. The point is how did the Muslim commanders get to know about this passage? Was the small Hellenistic port and the associated route still strong in the memory of the Red Sea sailing community? Or was there perhaps a fishing village still on the site? A village still exists today in Halaib, about 20 km south of the Islamic Aidhab, and it has a harbor even better than Aidhab. The village lies on the shore of a beautiful bay sheltered from northern winds and currents by a large island of the same name. The Islamic port of Badi is an excellent parallel for the continuation of settlement and port activities. Archaeological finds indicate that it is located almost directly on the site of Ptolemais Theron, in a place where the village of Adobona still exists today (Seeger et al. 2006, 9–17).

Conclusion

Strabo writes of a harbor at Soteira, hence it was more than just an anchorage. The infrastructure there would have probably been related to collecting and storing water, possibly resembling the facility discovered at Berenike (Woźniak et al. forthcoming). The connection with the route across the mountains seems to confirm this assumption. The port presumably did not function beyond the Hellenistic period, which is why it was not included in any Roman sources later than Strabo who availed himself of Hellenistic sources in his work. However, knowledge of the anchorage and the route did not disappear and was used even many centuries later by pilgrims and merchants traveling from Aswan to the religious centers of central Arabia and the commercial centers of Yemen. Their choice of route and location for the port were well grounded.

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