



A POSSIBLE SOLUTION FOR LEUCE COME?

Dan Gibson, 2004

For many years historians and archeologists have wondered about the location of the Nabataean port city of Leuce Come, (meaning, "*white village*"). This village is mentioned in several ancient writings, such as the Periplus of the Eruthraean Sea, Strabo's history, etc. The most serious guess at the location of Leuce Come comes from the famous naval historian, Lionel Casson who calculated the location of Leuce Come to be the port of [Myos Hormos](#). He assumed that the Myos Harbor (*Mussel Harbor*), was located at Abu Sha'r. He defends this opinion on page 96 of his translation of the Perilpus Maris Eruthraei. From this location on the west shore of the Gulf of Suez he followed the writers description and came to the conclusion that Leuce Come was located in the vicinity of Aynunah on the shores of Saudi Arabia (*page 143*). Casson goes on to mention some of the other educated guesses that have been made concerning the location of Leuce Come, such as Haura and Yanbu further south on the Saudi Arabian coast. (*The Perilpus Maris Eruthraei, Text with Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, Lionel Casson, Princeton University Press, 1989)

These educated guesses were all based on scholarly study and opinion. However, since their writing several important archeological discoveries have been made. The location of Myos Hormos has now been positively fixed at Quseir al-Qadim far to the south of Abu Sha'r. The ruins at Quseir al-Qadim were the subject of exploratory excavations between 1978 and 1982 (Whitcomb and Johnson 1979; 1982a,b), when it was thought to be the relatively minor Roman port of Leucos Limen, a view apparently confirmed by a somewhat enigmatic ostracon (*Bagnall 1986*), and held by Casson. Some scholars have voiced the opinion that Leucos Limen might even been Leuce Come.

Then in 1994, ostraca from the French excavations at Zerqa on the road between Quseir and Qift, showed that beyond doubt, the port at the end of the road was indeed called Myos Hormos (*Bülow-Jacobsen, Cuvigny and Fournet 1994*). Archeological work done in 1999 demonstrated that the road ended at Quseir al-Qadim (rather than Quseir) and amongst the few ostraca the archeologists recovered was one bearing the name '*Myos Hormos*'. Suddenly historians realized that Quseir al-Qadim was not a minor trading station, but rather Myos Hormos, the renowned ancient port that traded with India and beyond.

For more information visit the website: <http://www.arch.soton.ac.uk/Research/Quseir>

The positive identification of Myos Hormos has changed all of the previous suggestions for the location of Leuce Come. Myos Hormos was not located in the Gulf of Suez, but on the Red Sea itself. This new location shed a very interesting light of how we now view the words in the Periplus of the Eruthraean Sea. Using the new location of Myos Hormos, we can set out to discover where Leuce Come was located. What we discovered in our search surprised all of us.

The Search

We started our search for Leuce Come using the description of it's location as found in the Periplus of the Eruthraean Sea: (19).

"Now to the left of Berenice, sailing for two or three days from Mussel Harbor eastward across the adjacent gulf (across the Red Sea or is it a gulf on the Egypt side?), there is another harbor and fortified place, which is called White Village (Leuce Come), from which there is a road to Petra, which is subject to Malichas, King of the Nabataeans."

"It holds the position of a market town for the small vessels sent there from (South) Arabia; and so a centurion is stationed there as a collector of one-fourth of the merchandise imported, with an armed force, as a garrison."

To locate this missing city we must determine if the "*White Village*" was south or north of Berenice, and if it was on the Egypt or Arabian side of the Red Sea.

North or South

From the quote above, the presence of a road linking the White Village with Petra is undeniable. It would make little sense to describe a port SOUTH of [Berenice](#) on the Egypt side that had a road linking to Petra (which is far NORTH of Berenice.) So the answer is simply that the White Village must have been located across the Red Sea. The problem is that there are no ports that fit this description, nor or there any roads that fit the description.

The other important term is the use of the word "to the left." This term can be understood from the opening sentence of the Periplus: "first comes Egypt's port of Myos Hormos, and beyond it, after a sail of 1800 stades to the right, Berenice. The ports of both are bays on the Red Sea on the edge of Egypt."

So the writer is imagining himself standing on the shores of Egypt (he was writing from [Alexandria](#)). He locates Myos Hormos and Berenice for us, and tells us that Berenice is to the right of Myos Hormos. This would indicate that right means "south east."

Now a few paragraphs later he tells us that the "White Village" is to the "LEFT" of Berenice. He does not give the distance in stades, but rather in runs.

At this point his directions seem a little confused, but I would like to point out that they are quite clear if you know what he is talking about. First of all, we are talking NORTH of Berenice. Then he adds the sentence: "after a voyage of two or three runs eastward from Myos Hormos past the gulf lying alongside."



Look at the map at the left. He points us NORTH of Berenice, the main port on the Red Sea. He then takes us to the smaller port of Myos Hormos. So our journey starts in the south and moves north. The writer then tells us to travel eastward from Myos Hormos for two or three runs, past the gulf that lies along side of Myos Hormos. Given the now positive location of Myos Hormos, and the northward course of the writer's directions, there is only one conclusion that can be reached.

North of Myos Hormos the Red Sea splits into TWO branches. The writer tells us to take the EAST branch and go north for two or three runs. He doesn't tell us where to find the port, because we will run into it at the end of the "bay." Today this place is known as Aqaba, or in ancient times [Aila](#).

It would make no sense for the writer to start us in Berenice, take us NORTH to Myos Hormos, and the SOUTH to some port on the Saudi side of the Red Sea. Rather the writer starts us in Berenice, takes us north to Myos Hormos, and then expects us to continue traveling north, (in the eastern gulf or bay) until we reach Leuce Come. (Aila)

[Aila](#) was a place built of white sand structures. Excavations are currently taking place, but the Nabataean port has been mostly destroyed. It did, however, contain a lot of mud buildings. The Periplus informs us that the "White Village" had a road attaching it to Petra. This is very true. The Romans built the Via Traiana overtop of the existing road that was known in ancient times as "The King's Highway." This road linked Aila with Petra and north to Damascus. It fits the description of the Periplus perfectly. There WAS a fort in Aila and the city was definitely under the control of Malichus, the king of the Nabataeans.

The Periplus tells us that this port was used by small craft (there is no deep harbor at Aila proper), and that it was loaded with freight from Arabia. (See "[Who were the Ancient Arab Traders?](#)") It is also interesting to note that the Periplus, which was written to describe "Trade on the Red Sea" does not mention Aila at all. This obvious oversight can now be understood by identifying the "White Village" with the known port of "Aila."

Farther South

The Periplus then tells us that after this harbour, (White Village) extending "far" down the Red Sea, there are a variety tribes, with some huts along the coast, and they are pirates. It then adds that to set a course along the coast of Arabia is altogether risky, since the region with its lack of harbors offers poor anchorage, is foul with rocky stretches, and cannot be approached because of cliffs. This is why it is important for sailors to sail to the "Burnt Island" before approaching the coast. Several historians have suggested that the "burnt island" is Jabal at Ta'ir, which has a nearly dead volcano. (Casson, Muller, Schoff) Then sailing down this coast, there is on the left hand shore, the port of Muza (*paraphrased from The Periplus Maris Eruthraei 20 - 21.*)

This sounds like a perfect description of the Saudi coast, looking south from Aila. That is why we cannot find the Leuce-Come along that barren coast. It never was there.

Other Considerations: Strabo

There are two other consideration that must be taken into our calculations. Strabo relates to us the account of the attempted Roman invasion of Arabia. The Romans built boats on the Egyptian side and sailed them to Leuce-Come.

"After enduring great hardships and distress, he arrived on the fifteenth day at Leuce-Come, a large mart in the territory of the Nabataeans, with the loss of many of his vessels, some with all their crews, in consequence of the difficulty of the

navigation, but by no opposition from an enemy. These misfortunes were occasioned by the perfidy of Syllaesus, who insisted that there was no road for an army by land to Leuce-Come, to which and from which place the camel traders travel with ease and in safety from Selah, and back to Selah, with so large a body of men and camels as to differ in no respect from an army." XVI.iv.24

Notice that they endured great hardships and distress in a "fifteen day journey" to Leuce Come. They lost many vessels along the way because of the difficulty of navigation. This has always puzzled me. To sail ACROSS the Red Sea is quite easy. To sail NORTH to Aila however, would have been a very tricky job for Roman boats with square 'lug sails.' This may be an indicator that the Nabataeans were using 'lateen' sails by this time allowing them to tack in the wind. Most of the year the north-eastern arm of the Red Sea (Gulf of Aqaba) is plagued with winds from the north west, making the journey up the sea almost impossible, unless you had a triangular sail and knew [how to tack](#). The Roman boats were not capable of this.

By locating Leuce-Come as Aila, this passage of Strabo now becomes more understandable. The Romans would have had to sail through the rocky entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba and northward along the rocky coasts where the Roman boats could easily have fouled.

[Petra \(A complete section in itself\)](#)

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