

LIFE IN THE EASTERN DESERT OF EGYPT

Unit 7 – The Roman Military and the
Indigenous Populations of the Eastern
Desert

HPAH7006

A Regional Perspective

- ▣ Roman participation in the Indian Ocean trade often connected to major geo-political or natural events:
 - e.g. Augustan unification of the Mediterranean, Antonine Plague, Third Century Crisis.
- ▣ However, indigenous populations of the Eastern Desert of Egypt and Red Sea littoral were also impactful.
- ▣ Possible correlation between the increased security concerns during the latter first to second century CE – and the peak and subsequent downturn in the levels of Roman participation in the Indian Ocean trade?
- ▣ Possibly a more conciliatory or cooperative relationship by the beginning of the third century CE?

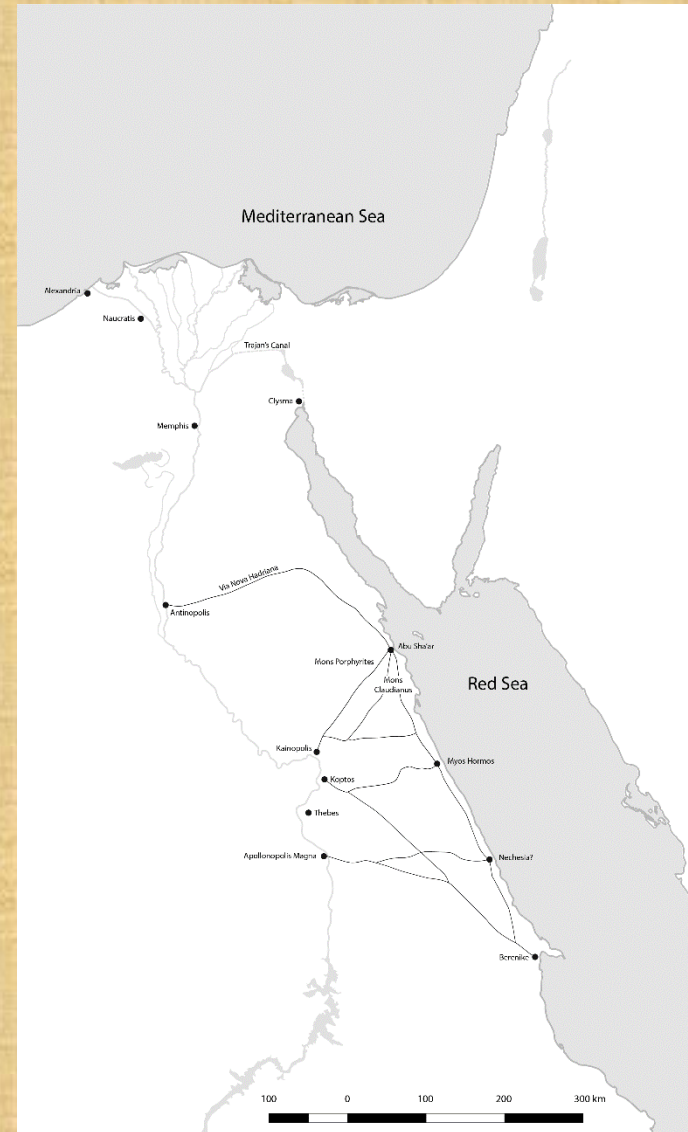
Exploitation of the Eastern Desert and Red Sea

- ▣ Periodic expeditions taking place from the Old Kingdom – more regular activity from the Late Period.
- ▣ Developments of stations in Eastern Desert and ports along Red Sea coast.
- ▣ Significant increase in commercial activity by the first century CE.
- ▣ Continued exploitation of precious gem and gold deposits; as well as exploitation of the hardstone quarries of Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus.



Size of the “External” Population?

- *praesidia* (fortlets) – garrison size on average around 15-24 men – potential overall populations: 38 (Dawwi) to 116 people (al-Muwayh, ancient Krokodilô) – Cuvigny (2003) and (2005).
- Rough estimates of 1,000 for Myos Hormos and 500-1,500 at Berenike. – Harrell (1996); Sidebotham, Hense, and Nouwens (2008).
- Ostrakon from Mons Claudianus– 920 people (110 CE), at least 60 of whom were soldiers (MC Inv. 0.1538+2921); Mons Porphyrites (similar in area – 0.44 ha – but more scattered settlements), c. 250-450 people – V. A. Maxfield (2003); Sidebotham, Hense, and Nouwens (2008).
- Several thousand temporary and more permanent inhabitants (at least)?



Indigenous Populations of the Eastern Desert

- ▣ Various groups inhabiting areas from Arsinoe down to the southern Red Sea coast – Strabo 16.4.4-5, 17.1.25-30; *Periplus* 2-12; Pliny *NH* 6.33.163-64 (puts the length of the Trogodytic coast at 1722 (Roman) miles).
- ▣ Sub-divisions - Ichthyophagoi (Fish-eaters), Agriophagoi (Wild Animal-eaters), Moschophagoi (Shoot-eaters), Rhizophagoi (Root-eaters), and Cynamolgoi - *Periplus* 2; Agatharkhides Frag. 5.30-49.
- ▣ Autaei, Gebadaei, and also the Asarri who, living between Arsinoe and Myos Hormos, had intermarried with the Trogodytae - Pliny *NH* 6.33.167-68.
- ▣ Sub-groups within the Trogodytes: Abylloi and Bolgioi - Apollodorus *Periegesis* Frag. 106; Diodorus Siculus 1.37.8.
- ▣ Broad label of barbaroi – e.g. *Periplus*; ostraka from Krokodilo, Didymoi, Xeron, and Dios; P.CtYBR inv. 624 – ZPE 171 (2009).



Nomadic Threat?

- Ptolemaic era prayers to Pan - spared from Trogodytic attacks - *I. Kanais* 3, 8, 13, 18, 43, 47, 62, 82, 90.
- Megabaroι - carry clubs and round shields; other groups use bows and arrows; they fight each other for pasturage rights - Agatharkhides frag. 62-64.
- Barbaroι a threat to traders along coast of Adulis - *Periplus* 4
- Nomads formerly considered to be dangerous because they acted as brigands, but now (mid-20s BCE) they are no threat - Strabo 17.1.53.
- *O. Did.* 44 (c. beginning of third century CE) - attack by some barbaroι on a *monomachos* (messenger) and his group.
- *O. Krok.* 60 (c. 114/15 CE) - murder of three *monomachoi*.
- *O. Krok.* 51 (109 CE) - report of trouble caused by barbaroι on the 13th of Choiak (mid to late December)
- *O. Krok.* 87 ("Amphora of the Barbarians" - 118 CE) - attack of the praesidium of Patkoua.



Roman Military Attacks on the Indigenous Groups

- A report that Roman soldiers had killed 61 “Barbarians”, warning to be on the look out for reprisals – Cuvigny 2005: - K693, column III lines 33-46.
- Campaign/battle against the Ethiopians and Troglodytes - Papyrus 40 ‘della Raccolta Milanese’ – E. Turner 1950.
- A Latin and Greek dedication by Sulpicius Serenus (possibly Servius, tribune of *Legio XXII* and prefect of *ala Voconces*) for a speedy victory over the infamous Agriophagoi who were massacred and whose camels and booty were seized – *I. Pan* 87.

Major Phase of Fortification in the Eastern Desert

- Major phase of (re)fortification of Eastern Desert stations from the Flavian period into the second century CE.
 - ▣ Large forts at main complexes at Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus (similarly late first into second century CE).
 - ▣ Issues with interpreting *ILS* 2483 = *CIL* III 6627:
 - Establishment of *lakkoi* at Apollonos Hydreuma, Compasi and Berenike, and a camp (*castrum*) at Myos Hormos.
- Acquisition of camels — Murray and Warmington (1967); Cuvigny (2006); Sidebotham, Hense and Nouwens (2008).



Correlations: Trade and Quarrying

TRADE

- ▣ First century CE peak for Roman participation in the Indian Ocean trade.
 - Clear prominence of archaeological visible material at various Indian Ocean sites which date from first century BCE to first century CE (Qana', Nevasa, Arikamedu, among other sites),
 - Peak phase in activity in first century CE at Berenike - e.g. 41% of coins minted in the Augustan period and first century CE (esp. reigns of Claudius, Nero, and the Flavians) - compare 9% for the second and third centuries CE.
 - Similar pattern, to a lesser extent, at Myos Hormos.
 - Peak phase of Roman coin exports to India in latter first century CE; a fair number continued to be exported during Nervan-Antonine period.

QUARRYING

- Upsurge in activity around the late first to early second centuries CE in Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus:
 - earliest inscription for main fort complex at Mons Claudianus - 108/9 CE
 - ceramic assemblage at a *hydreuma* just north of the main complex is largely Trajanic in date
 - ceramic assemblage in the sebakhs outside the fort at Wadi Abu Ma'amel - activity from the mid-first to early-third century, but most of the material belonging to the second century CE.



Correlations: Reports of Tension and Conflict – Roman Policy?

INCIDENTS OF CONFLICT

- ▣ *O. Krok.* 6 – pursuit of 18 barbaroi – 108 CE.
- ▣ *O. Krok.* 51 – circular mentioning attacks by barbaroi – 109 CE.
- ▣ *O. Krok.* 47 – injury and death in skirmish with barbaroi – 109 CE.
- ▣ *O.Krok.* 51 – barbaroi causing trouble - 109 CE.
- ▣ *O. Krok.* 60 – murder of three messengers - c. 114/15 CE.
- ▣ *O. Krok.* 87 – attack on Patkoua – 118 CE.
- ▣ K693, column III lines 33-46 – Cuvigny 2005 - troops attacked and killed 61 barbaroi.

ROMAN STRATEGIC INTERESTS

- ▣ Reactive or proactive policy of Flavian and Nerva-Antonine emperors? - Consolidation of control by Roman state?
- ▣ Keeping access to Red Sea naval fleet – Strabo 16.4.23 (Myos Hormos) - Farasan Islands inscriptions (first half of the second century CE).
- ▣ Allows embassies to reach Rome directly from Arabia and India – *Periplus* 23; *Itinerarium Egeriae* 6.4.7.

Impact on the Red Sea Trade: One Possible Factor?

- ▣ Increase in trade (latter first century CE peak) and hence booty to be had from raids.
- ▣ Subsequent decline in archaeologically visible goods at international sites in second century CE, and parallel decline in the intensity of occupation at the Red Sea ports (notably Berenike).
- ▣ Less dramatic downturn of “coinage” exports reflective of response to barbaroi attacks?
- ▣ By mid to late second century CE, ostraka from Mons Claudianus and Umm Balad record the threat posed by nomads (*O. Claud. Inv.* 4888 (145 CE), 7309 (152/53 CE), 7226 (c. 150-90 CE), 7255 (189 CE), IV 851 (end of second century CE); *O. Ka. La. inv.* 31. See also *P. Bagnall* 8 (186/87 CE).
- ▣ Temporary abandonment of Didymoi and Dios c. 150-175 CE – signs of apparent violent destruction at shrine in phase 6 at Dios?

Increased Cooperation?

- ▣ Some point between 174 and 227 CE the rate of duty on eastern imports went from 25% (*tetarte*) to 12.5% (*octava*) – *Cod. Iust.* 4.65.7.
- ▣ Giving of supplies (wheat, barley and wine) to some barbaroi – *O. Did.* 41, 42, 43, 46; 96 ostraka from Xeron mentioning the giving of supplies to individuals with “barbarian” names (c. reign Alexander Severus or the reign of Gallienus).
 - Payments for services rendered or to prevent attacks?
- ▣ Minor commercial transactions – 24 drachmae price for the barbaroi to buy a chous (= 12 kotylai or 3.12 litres) of oil (*O. Xer. Inv.* 465 – c. 115-130 CE); Arabes (Ἀραβες) involved in bringing fresh fish to the Mons Claudianus – *O. Claud. Inv.* 529, 830 (Trajanic era).
- ▣ Many complex sub-groups and identities – varying cooperative and hostile relationships in different periods.