

West meets East: At the Borders of the *Oikoumenē* and Beyond

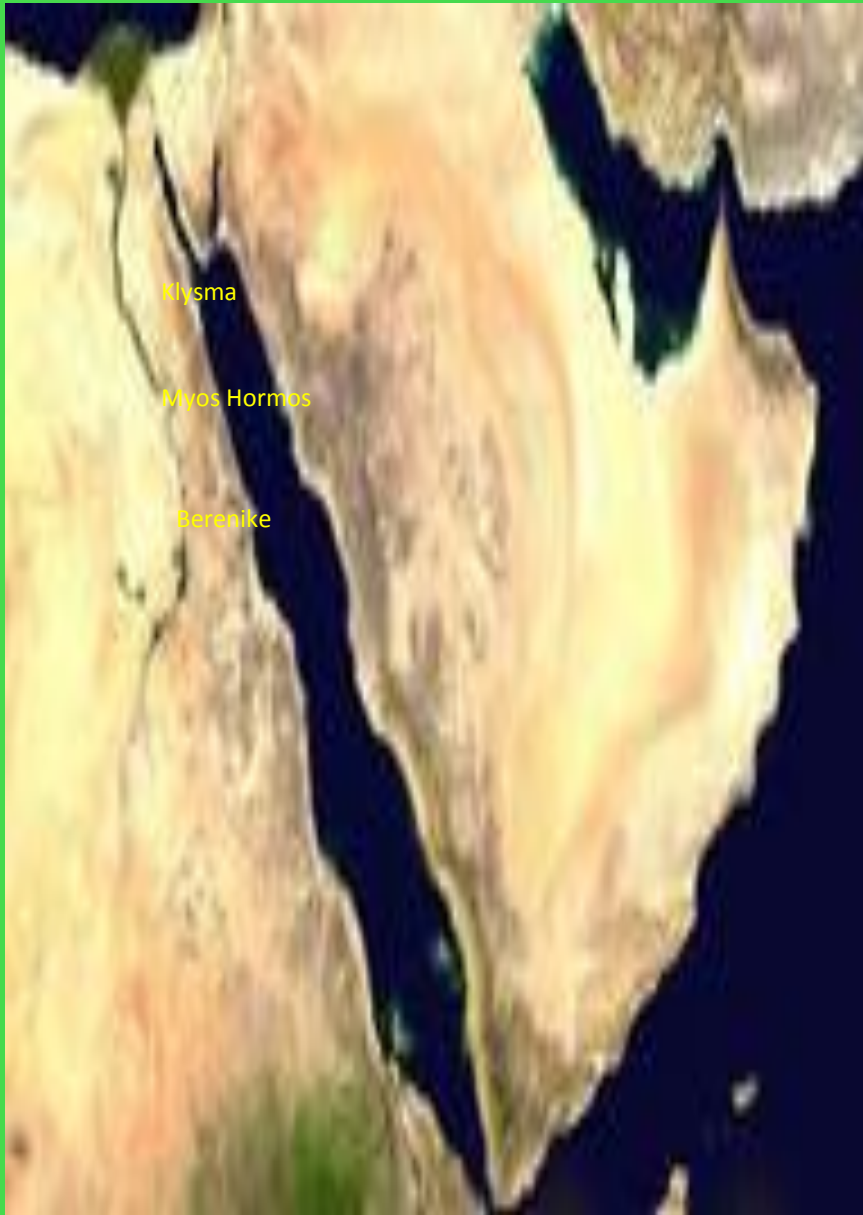
**Lecture 16 – The Wild East: The Roman Military and the
Indigenous Populations of the Eastern Desert of Egypt**

CLAH6007

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Overview of the Paper

- The attraction of the Eastern Desert region to the Romans despite its hostile environment.
- Who were the indigenous groups living in this region.
- Explanation for the apparent rise in tension between the nomads of this region and those intruding into it (particularly the Roman military).
- Motivations of the Romans to maintain access to the Red Sea.



- Eastern Desert a conduit for goods from India, Arabia and East Africa to reach the Nile and then Alexandria - Strabo *Geography*. 17.1.45; Pliny *NH* 6.26.102-103; Nikanor Archive = *O. Petr.* 220-304.
- The Roman state collected various tolls and taxes, most notably 25% import tax collected at Alexandria — Muziris Papyrus = *P. Vindob.* G 40822 recto; Koptos Tariff = *OGIS* 674 = *IGRR* I. 1183 = *I. Portes* 67.
- Various members of Roman Elite involved including Marcus Julius Alexander brother of Tiberius Julius Alexander (Prefect of Egypt AD 66-69) - *O. Petr.* nos. 252, 266-67, 268(?), 270(?), 271, 282.

Mines and Quarries

- Mons Porphyrites – purple and black porphery – Fortifications in the Flavian period, main phase mid-late second century AD.
- Mons Claudianus – granodiorite rock – earliest datable activity in AD 68, main phase in Trajanic period. Earliest inscription for main complex at Mons Claudianus dates to 12th year of Trajan (AD 108-09) – *CIL* III 24 – *ILS* 5741.
- Mons Smargdus – Gebel Sikait, Gebel Nugrus, Umm Kabu (area c.120 km northwest of Berenike).
- Gold Mines at Abu Gerida, Umm Russ, Bir Umm Fawakhir.

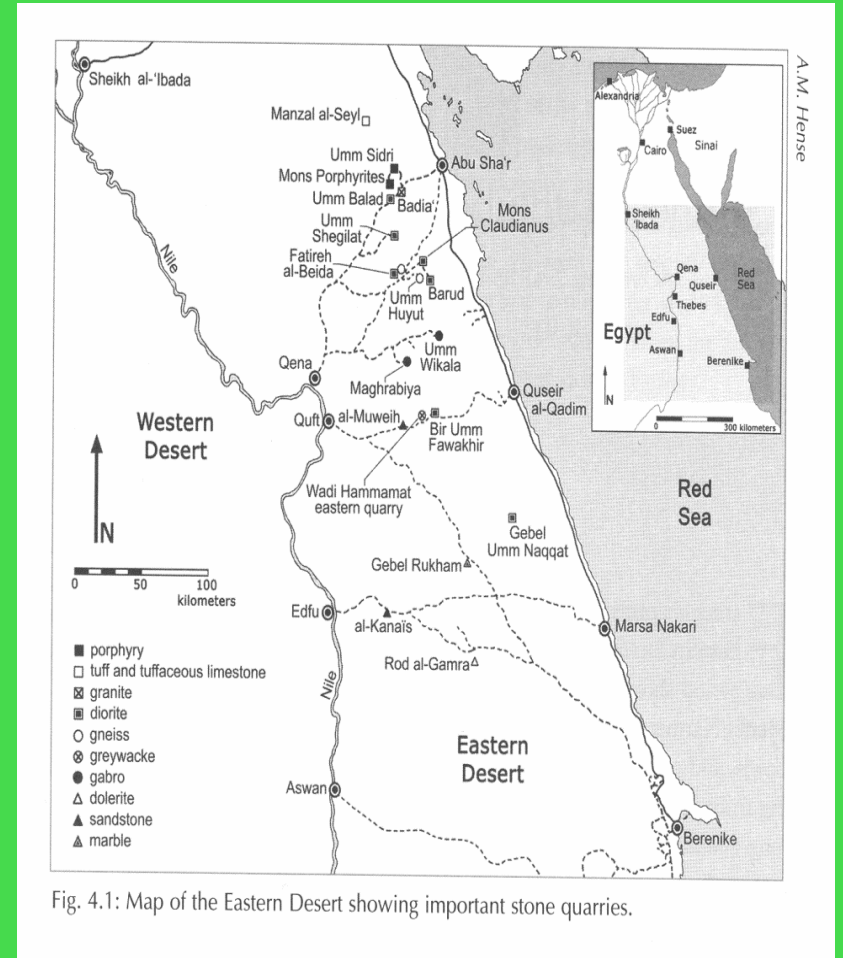


Fig. 4.1: Map of the Eastern Desert showing important stone quarries.

Image edited from Sidebotham, Hense and Nouwens (2008).

- Roads leading to the quarries at Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus show signs of wheel ruts, and animal tethering lines.
- Absence of such feature on routes to Myos Hormos and Berenike.
- Most of the workers appear to live in and around the main quarry site at Mons Claudianus.
- *O. Claud.* 62, 63, 67, 76, 80 – passes to travel on the roads.



Column from Mons Claudianus

Image from Quarryscapes

Environment of the Eastern Desert

- Little rainfall, occasional flash floods.
- Sub-surface seepage.
- Water taken from wells (*hydreumata*) held in cisterns (*lakkoi*)
- Means by which Roman military can try to control and distribute the supplies of water for drinking and limited agriculture and animal rearing.
- Water also used for industrial activities and bathing – evidence for bath complexes in main fort at Mons Claudianus and at *praesidia* (fortlets) of Maximianon and Didymoi.

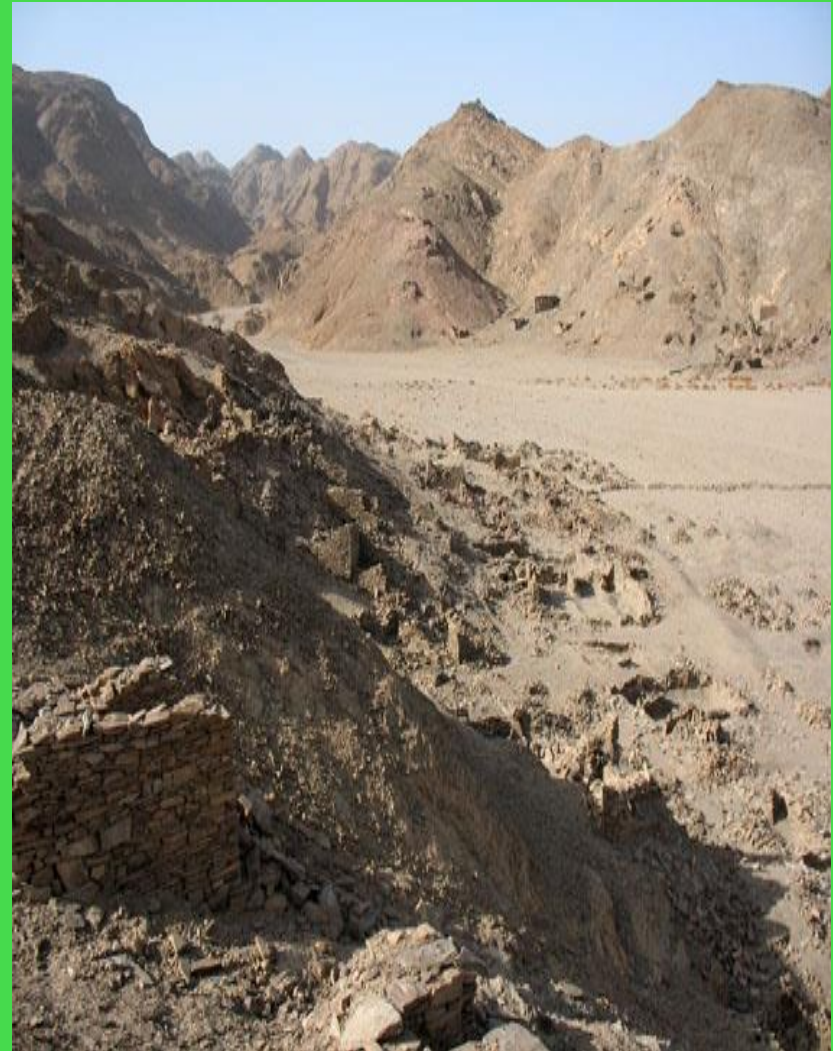


Image from Quarryscapes.

Supplies

- Most goods imported from Nile valley, some signs of sophisticated consumption – especially at port of Berenike.
- Raising of pigs and poultry - fish from ports like Myos Hormos brought to *praesidia* ***O.Max 175.***
- Nikanor Archive – ***O. Petr. 220-303.***

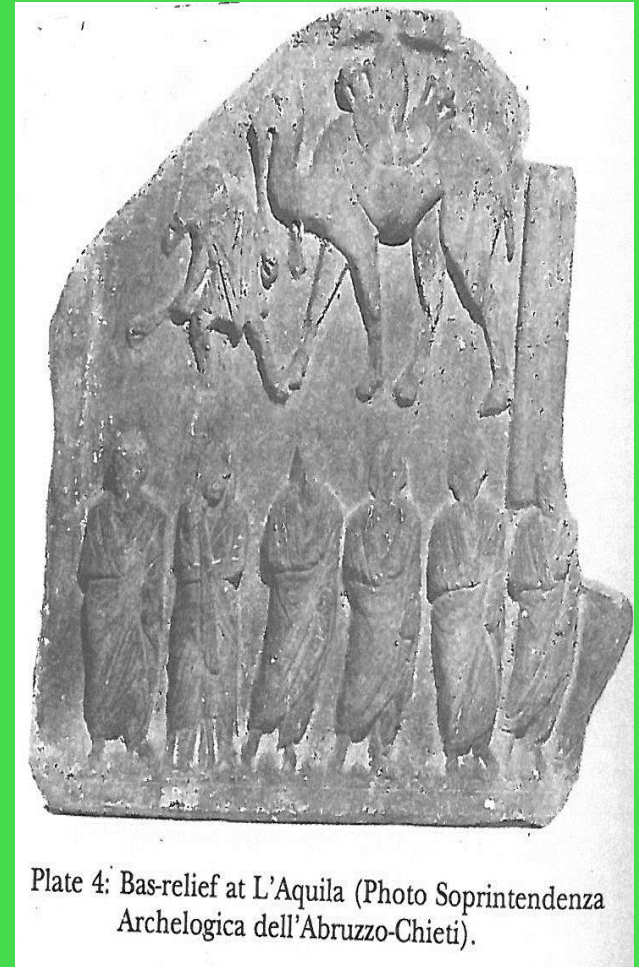


Image edited from De Romanis and Tchernia eds. (2011).

Supervision and control by the Roman Military

- Parts of region under control of military administration – *Praefectus Montis Berenicidis*.
- Prefect of Eastern Desert answers directly to prefect of Egypt - *I. Pan* 68.
- The Prefect sometimes travelled about the region (letter sent from Persou) - *O.Krok* 47.
- Military hierarchy – messages to centurions, decurions, *duplicarii*, *sesquiplicarii* and the *curatores* of the *Praesidia* of the desert - Cuvigny (2005), 136 - K3 + K5 + K214 - lines 63-72.

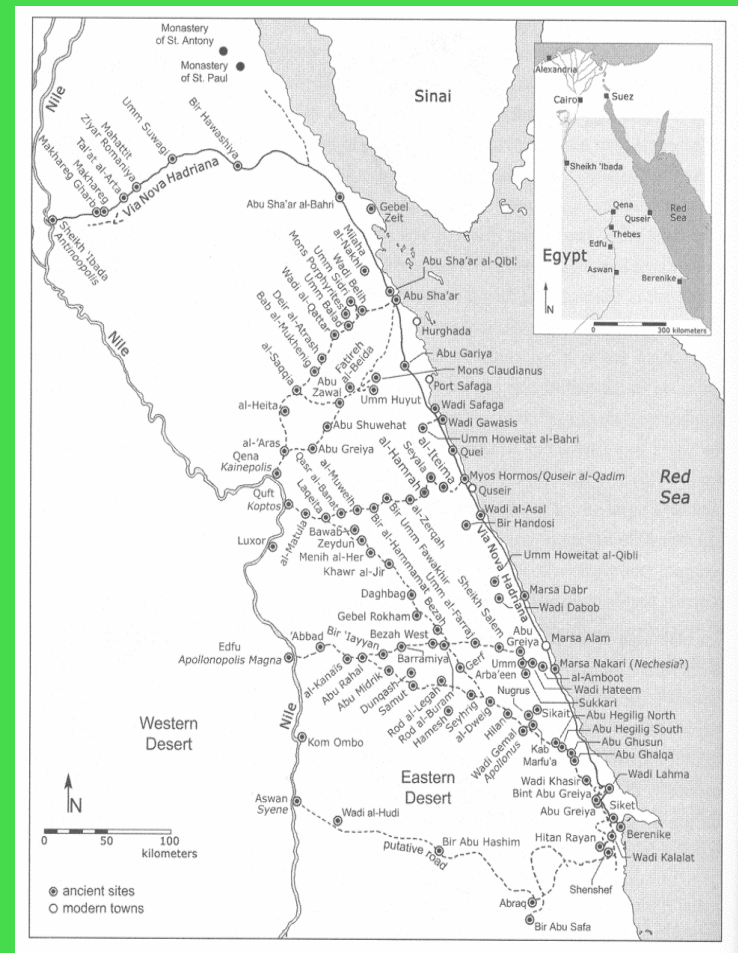


Image edited from Sidebotham (2011).

- Need permission to travel and carry goods between Nile and Red Sea ports – Koptos Tariff; Berenike Customs Receipts (*O. Ber.*).
- One of Krokodilo ostraka mentions an order to soldiers in *praesidia* of Eastern Desert to claim down on smuggling of wood – Cuvigny 2005: – K315.
- Military escorts sometimes granted to travellers, both civilian and military – e.g. Cuvigny 2005: - K456 centurion Aurelius; K315 escorts for travellers accompanied by donkeys.

Fortifications in Eastern Desert

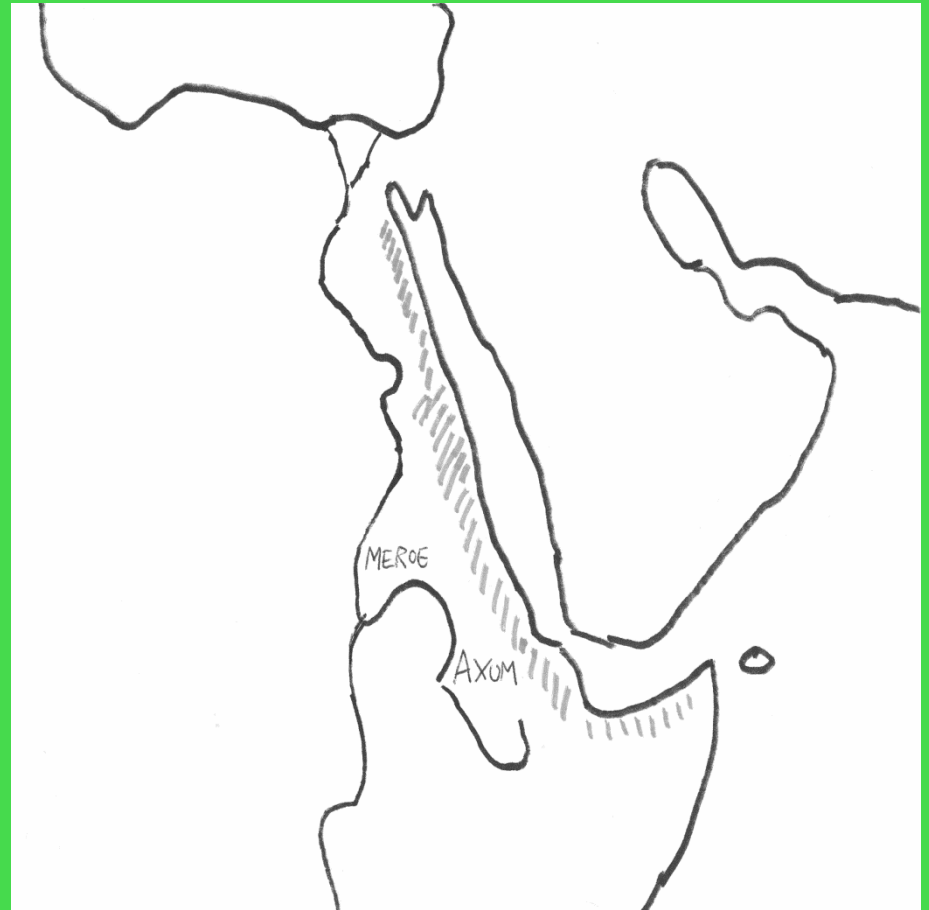
- *Praesidia* (fortlets) established to control water supply and protect travellers on roads from Koptos to Myos Hormos and Berenike – garrison size on average around 20-40 men, though some sites would have had larger garrisons – mixture of infantry and mounted troops.
- Large forts at main complexes at Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus.
- String of fortlets protecting the perimeter of Berenike.
- Most of these stations from the archaeological and written evidence indicate main phase of establishment / occupation in Flavian period and second century AD.



Fort at Umm Balad

Indigenous population of Eastern Desert

- Agatharkhides fragments surviving in Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and Photius.
- Pliny the Elder; *PME*.
- Trogodytes and the land of Trogodytica.
- They inhabit areas stretching from Arsinoe down to coast of Eritrea and up to Horn – Strabo 16.4.4-5, 17.1.25-30; *PME* 2-12; Pliny *NH* 6.33.163-64.



Appellations

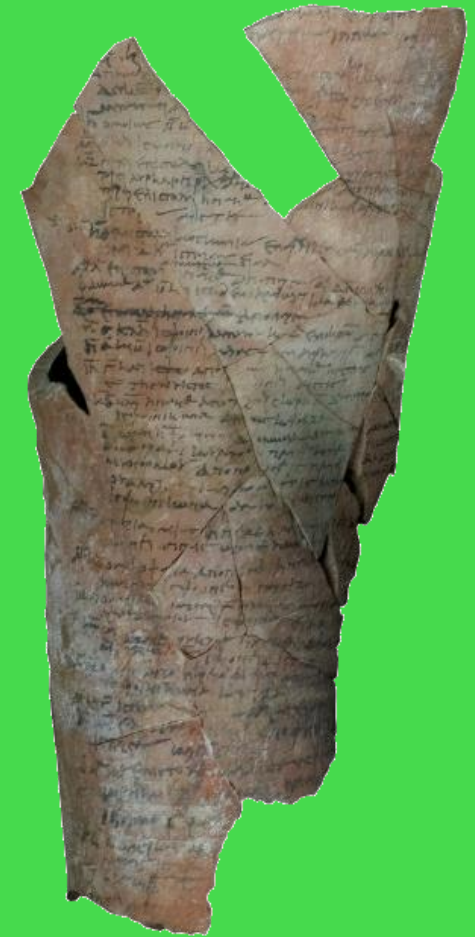
- Sub-divisions of these peoples - *Ichthyophagoi* (Fish-eaters), *Agriophagoi* (Wild Animal-eaters), *Moschophagoi* (Shoot-eaters), *Rhizophagoi* (Root-eaters), and *Cynamolgoi* - *PME* 2; Agatharkhides Fragments 5.30-49.
- Autaei, Gebadaei, and also the Asarri who, living between Arsinoe and Myos Hormos, had intermarried with the Trogodytae - Pliny *NH* 6.33.167-68.
- Sometimes referred to broadly as *Barbaroi* – e.g. *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (*PME*); Krokodilo ostraka; P.CtYBR inv. 624 – *ZPE* 171 (2009).

Threat posed by Nomads

- Ptolemaic travellers offering prayers to Pan for sparing them from the attacks of the Trogodytes – *I. Kanais* 3, 8, 13, 18, 43, 47, 62, 82, 90.
- Trogodytes known as Megabari are nomadic pastoralist who carry clubs and round shields, while other groups use bows and arrows; they fight each other for pasturage rights – **Agatharkhides fragments 62-64.**
- “...the remaining areas to the south are inhabited by Trogodytes, Blemmyes, Noubai, Megabaroï and the Ethiopians above Syene. These people are nomads, lack numbers and are not warlike, but were considered to be so by men of former times because often as brigands they attacked those without protection.” – **Strabo *Geography* 17.1.53.**
- *Ichthyophagoi* and inhabitants further in are vicious and attack those vessels which stray to close to the coast of Red Sea – “*Barbaroi*” a threat to traders along coast of Adulis – ***PME* 4.**

Krokodilo Ostraka

- Krokodilo a military station on Koptos-Myos Hormos route – ostraka date from AD 102/03-118.
- *O. Krok. 87* “Amphora of the Barbarians” – report of an attack by 60 “Barbarians” on the *praesidium* of Patkoua (in Lower Nubia) in which one or two soldiers are killed and a woman and her child are abducted – Camels stolen by 18 “barbarians” - orders to the *curatores* of the *praesidia* to protect certain travellers being menaced by the “barbarians”.
- An incomplete reference to an attack by the “Barbarians” – *O. Krok. 51*.
- 61 “barbarians” reported in the area – *O. Krok. 47*.
- Three individuals killed by some “Barbarians” – *O. Krok. 60*.



Roman Military Attacks on the Indigenous Population

- 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 Trogodytes - 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.

Causes of Nomadic Aggression

- Who is the main aggressor?
- Acquisition of camels — Murray and Warmington (1967); Cuvigny (2006); Sidebotham, Hense and Nouwens (2008).
- Increase in trade and hence booty to be had from raids (pattern of Roman coin finds in India, and at Berenike).
- Strain on resources such as pasturage due to increased presence in Eastern Desert.
- Consolidation of control by Roman state?

Purpose of Roman Presence in Eastern Desert

- Young's theory – main purpose of stations to ensure taxation, security a lesser and often private concern – Muziris Papyrus – private security for caravan; five drachmae toll for a guard - Koptos Tariff; archers used on board merchants vessels to protect against pirates - Pliny *NH* 6.26.101.
- Krokodilo Ostraka suggest “Barbarians” posed a very real threat.
- Practical reasons for placement of the stations in the valleys of the wadis – water acquisition, communication, interception, use of cavalry.

Via Hadriana

“(Hadrian) built the new Via Hadriana from Berenike to Antinoe [Antinoopolis], through safe and flat places by the Red Sea, and equipped at intervals with plentiful wells, stations and guard-posts.” - ***OGIS 701.***

Strategic and Diplomatic interest

- Vital to keep routes in Eastern Desert open to keep access to Red Sea and to naval fleet – Strabo 16.4.23 – Naval station at Myos Hormos - Farasan Islands (2nd C AD) – L'Anne Epigraphique 2004 – 1643, and 2005 – 1638-40; *Martyrium Sancti Arethae* 27-29.
- Allows embassies to reach Rome directly from Arabia and India – *PME* 23; *Itinerarium Egeriae* 6.4.7.

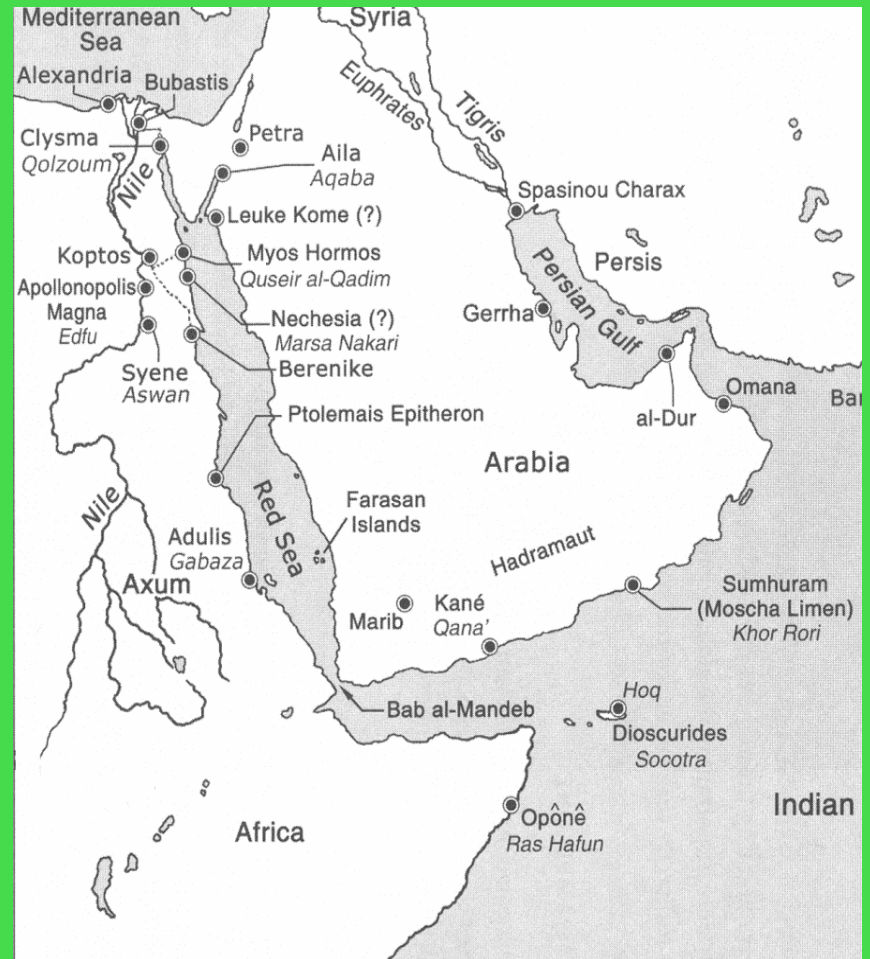


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Summary

- Increase in trade probably and mining activities at least partially responsible for the (re)construction activity in the Eastern Desert, and may also have aggravated and tempted some bands of nomads.
- Reflection of surviving source material?
- Not all interaction with indigenous population hostile - some *Ichthyophagoi* (O512 – Thomas 2007) and Troglodytes (O543 – Thomas 2007) present at Myos Hormos – Eastern Desert Ware at Late Roman Berenike.
- Some Roman “subjects” also engaged in banditry – Xenophon *Ephesian Tale* books 4-5.

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