

Rome and the Indian Ocean: The Classical World in a Global Context

UNIT 7 TASK BOOKLET – The “Barbaroi”



Amphora of the Barbarians (Krokodilo)

For this online task you will examine some of the written source material (epigraphic and literary) relating to the “barbaroi”, the indigenous peoples of the Eastern Desert region. A selection of translations and summaries of ostraka from the *praesidia* (small forts), as well as a few extracts from pertinent literary sources, are given on the following pages. You should examine these and then consider the questions set out below. Please collate your thoughts into a brief summary (a few paragraphs) and considering posting it to the Unit 7 discussion forum.

Questions to consider:

- 1) What are the challenges we face in trying to identify the various indigenous peoples who inhabited the Eastern Desert region?
- 2) How significant a concern does security along the routes of the Eastern Desert appear to have been for the Roman state?
- 3) When we come across incidents of conflict in the source material, do these appear to be more tit-for-tat, sporadic and reactive, or do we see any incidents of more asserted campaigning?

Written excerpts relating to the Roman military, Barbaroi, Blemmyes and other inhabitants of the Eastern Desert Region

Select ostraka from the *praesidium* of Krokodilo (Koptos-Myos Hormos Route) – trans. from Cuvigny (2014)

O.Krok. 6 (year 12 of Trajan, i.e. AD 108)

A copied report concerning conflict with 18 *barbaroi* – ‘We chased them with three horsemen and foot soldiers for x mile(s) through a difficult ground and we fought [...], squadron of Sosinius [was killed?], NN of the same cohors, squadron of Iust... was cudgelled. Then, overtaken by darkness, we came back to the *praesidium*’.

O.Krok. 49 (AD 109)

A copy of a circulated letter. Fragmentary. Cuvigny (2014) proposes the following reconstruction: ‘[an Arab/barbarian (?)] carrying fish, who was an Alabites (?) [...] came, saying: it makes three days today (?) that [...] searching (?) what they will rob [...] their dwellings and their footprints [...] I wrote to you in order that you keep intent [...] For ... appeared to us on the road [...] run his excellency [the prefect Artorius Priscillus]’

O.Krok. 87 (AD 118)

A copy of circulated reports on several *barbaroi* attacks. The most well-preserved is a letter from Cassius Victor of the *Cohors II Ituraeorum*, written on the 15th of March. The report comes from one of his cavalymen, detached in the *praesidium* of Patkoua (unknown location in the Eastern Desert) which had been attacked: ‘I want you to know that, on 13th March, 60 *barbaroi* attacked the *praesidium* of Patkoua. I fought them with my comrades from the tenth hour (of the day) until the second hour of the night. Then they sat down near the *praesidium* until dawn. On that day, Hermogenes, a foot-soldier, of the century of Serenus was killed, one woman and two children were carried off, one child was killed. On 14 March at dawn, we fought them. Damanaios, horseman, of the century of Victor, [was killed?], Valerius Firm— was struck and his horse as well...’

There is also preserved a following letter, written on the 26th of March by Arruntius Agrippinus (perhaps the second in command of the Prefect of Berenike) to the *curatores* of the *praesidia* on the Koptos-Myos Hormos road. An event – unknown as there is a lacuna in the text – occurred, and Agrippinus requests that the *curatores* provide escorts to transporters carrying supplies from Koptos ‘so as to deprive the *barbaroi* of any opportunity to do harm. Having read this letter, resend it quickly from *praesidium* to *praesidium*, and if you hear something clearer hasten to inform me at once.’

Select ostraka from the *praesidium* of Didymoi (Koptos-Berenike Route) –
trans. from Cuvigny (2014)

***O.Did. inv. 40* (c. AD 219)**

Draft letter from the *curator* of Didymoi addressed to the Prefect of the Desert, Valerius Apolinaris: ‘I inform you, my lord, that I went down to Koptos on 28 Mecheir. Regarding the three *kadoi* which I gave to change, I brought back all those which Petronius the barbarian made’. This “barbarian” craftsperson seems to work at Koptos and does business with the Roman army – he also appears to have adopted (or was given) a Latin name. A *kados* is a pot (likely metallic rather than ceramic) that would be attached to a *saqiya*-wheel (a mechanical water lifting device).

***O.Did. inv. 46* (dumped c. AD 220-250)**

Letter from the *curator* of Didymoi to that of Phoinikon (or possibly *vice versa*): ‘I inform you, so that you inform the prefect, that four barbarians, accompanied by three children, nine camels and four donkeys have come from the south [day (?), x hour] of the night, and that they went away on the 18th at the sixth hour of the day’. The group evidently spent the night in or near the station. The *barbaroi*, unlike civilians almost certainly did not need to have permission to travel in the region. Although, it seems the Roman state was still keen to observe the movement of different groups of indigenous nomads.

***O.Did. inv. 44* (c. beginning of third century AD based on stratigraphy)**

Letter of a *monomachos* (messenger) to a *tesserarius* (a low rank “officer”) who had sent him to Koptos on a mission. The messenger was heading back to the station (presumably Didymoi) when he and his companions had an unpleasant encounter: ‘Iekoun, who was going down with the barbarians, cudgelled us, having found us alone, and we took flight for a mile’. It seems that this group of *barbaroi* led by Iekoun were still potentially dangerous for messengers. But evidently they (the messengers) knew the group and the name of their leader. This is one of the few third century ostraka which seems to attest to potential tensions with the *barbaroi*.

***O.Did. 41* (c. mid-third century AD)**

A memorandum: ‘Mageiren, *dekanos*, and the five barbarians with him, sent by Baratit, *hypotyrrannos* of the barbarians, came to me and I gave them one *kolophōnion* and twelve pairs of loaves. 1 Phaophi’. The term *dekanos* seems to be an originally Hellenistic Macedonian term revived by Roman authorities, being the equivalent of *decurio*. In a military context this meant either an officer who commanded a squadron of cavalry or was in charge of a troop’s headquarters. In a civilian context, someone who commanded a civilian working team (perhaps in relating to water supply or transport). Cuvigny thinks the latter usage should be understood on the basis of parallels elsewhere in Eastern Desert ostraka. The twelve pairs of loaves are most likely two days of supplies for 6 men. A *kolophōnion* is a wine container. A *hypotyrrannos*,

literally a under- or sub-tyrant, is evidently a leader of a smaller band of nomads (perhaps under a more powerful “chieftain”).

Select ostraka from the *praesidium* of Xeron (Koptos-Berenike Route) – trans. from Cuvigny (2014)

***O.Xer. inv. 465* (c. AD 115-130, based on stratigraphy)**

Letter addressed from Petronius to Gaius: ‘I want you to know that the oil flask contains 6 *kotylai* [...] Know that, for the barbaroi, the price of the *chous* is 24 drachmas. Receive the oil flask through Biton’. 6 *kotylai* = 1.5 litres; *chous* = 12 *kotylai*

***O.Xer. inv. 620* (c. AD 217-219)**

Letter of Vettius Gallianus, Prefect of the Desert (i.e. Prefect of Berenike) which relates as follows: ‘(to?) authorize the animals of the barbarians to travel down’. By this the author of the letter means to travel along the Koptos-Berenike route.

***O.Xer. inv. 570* (c. AD 217-219)**

Letter of Iulius Kroni-- to [name not surviving]: ‘could you please lend my bedroom (*contubernium*) to the barbarian?’ It is likely the “*barbaros*” had to present the ostrakon to someone at Xeron.

***O.Xer. inv. 601* (28 May AD 219 [2nd Year of Elagabalus])**

Very Fragmentary circular letter of Marcus Aurelius Signas to the *curatores* from Xeron to Phoinikon (stations on the upper section of the Koptos-Berenike route) which appears to mention three *barbaroi* and two other men who have been sent(?). The fragmentary letter ends with the formula ‘I write to let you know’.

***O.Xer. inv. 374* (mid-third century AD)**

One of a group of 96 orders relating to the delivery of wheat to peoples whose names strongly suggest that they are *barbaroi* (that is to say indigenous peoples of the Eastern Desert region); though this term is not used in this dossier. However, the identification of the peoples named in the ostraka with the barbaroi seems to be strengthened by the inclusion of the name Barattit among them. Possibly the same Barattit mentioned in the ostraka from Didymoi and Dios.

‘11th year, 25 Pharmouthi. Measure out to Engosarek, in the name of Makak, half an *artaba* of wheat, equals ½ art., in the name of Khansaïa, half an *artaba* of wheat, equals ½ art., in the name of Makh, half an *artaba* of wheat, in the name of Khoiap five *matia*, equals 5 *m.*, in the name of Inknet, three *matia*, equals 3 *m.*, <grand total> 2 art. of wheat 2 *m.*’

1 *artaba* = 12 *matia* (or in another measurement 1 *artaba* = 10 *matia*).

An *artaba* is an Egyptian dry measurement of about 40 litres. One *artaba* was the standard monthly ration in Roman Egypt for a soldier as well as for certain skilled workmen, like the quarry workers who laboured at Mons Claudianus. However, in these ostraka we do not see standard allocations, which may suggested individual “payments” rather than “rations”.

Select ostraka from the *praesidium* of Dios (Koptos-Berenike Route) – trans. from Cuvigny (2014)

***O.Dios* inv. 687 (second century AD)**

A private letter in which Apollonios advises Melanas: ‘wait these two days without going out to collect wood, until we get fresh news concerning the barbarians’.

***O.Dios* inv. 481 (ca. mid-third century AD)**

Incomplete letter of Baratit (a *hypotyranos* of the *barbaroi*, though here without title) ‘to the soldiers’: ‘I want you to know that ... Do not neglect to ...’ The subject of the letter, due to its fragmentary nature, is difficult to recover as is the tone of it. The writer of the letter seems to be quite experienced (i.e. suggestive of someone quite literature), and different from a few of the other letters we have connected to Baratit. Evidently he has a few scribes working for him.

Select ostraka from the Mons Claudianus quarry area – trans. from Cuvigny (2014)

***O.Claud.* inv. 529 (Trajanic date)**

Letter from Epagathos to Gaion, who is in Mons Claudianus ‘when the Arabs come, receive fish from them.’

***O.Claud.* inv. 830 (Trajanic date)**

Epagathos to Gaion ‘when the Arabs come to [get?] as much fish as possible’.

***O.Claud.* inv. 7255 (c. AD 189, based on stratigraphy)**

‘Be on your guard because of the barbarians’ – letter of Aurelius Besarion, curator of Raima, to two comrades who are in Mons Claudianus.

***O.Claud.* inv. 7255 (end of the second century AD)**

Fragmentary letter addressed by the works to a high official, noting they could not finish their work ‘because of the fear of the barbarians’.

***O.Claud.* inv. 4888 (c. AD 145, based on stratigraphy)**

A letter from Petearoeris to Bekis: 'I want you to know that I have not eaten for two days because of the fear of the barbarians. Therefore, please, father, if we are relieved, that is fine. Otherwise, make an effort to have me transferred. Otherwise I am going to break down. For my salary has not yet been brought (?) to me. No matter all I did in order to come: nobody let me go. Let me know what is happening where you are'.

***O.Claud.* inv. 7255 (c. AD 189 based on stratigraphy and prosopography)**

Letter of Aurelius Besarion (curator of Raima) to two comrades who are in Mons Claudianus. He gives them the following advice: 'Be on your guard because of the barbarians'.

Papyrus 'della raccolta Milanese (Collezioni del Castello Sforzesco di Milano)'40. = *FHN* 309 – Trans. from the *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* vol. 3.

A fragmentary first century AD papyrus – possibly c. AD 60-94 (based on palaeographic analogies) – that appears to refer to some kind of battle between the Romans and the Ethiopians and Trogodytes. The Roman force evidently being (partly) led by Rufus. Turner (1950) thought this papyrus was a private letter rather than an official report, and related to some minor military operation. Bersina (1989) proposed that the Rufus referred to may be Marcus Mettius Rufus (attested August 3, AD 89-91/92) or Marcus Iunius Rufus (attested July 1, AD 94 to June 21, AD 98), both prefects of Egypt – with the implication that this was more than a minor skirmish. The text runs as follows:

'Rufus too arrived bring[ing] [...]

..., and on came also the [...] who had been se]nt for [...]

[the p]refect (*[e]parchos*) cavalry whom the Aithiopians [...]

fled [to the mou]ntains, the tops of which the [...]

The Trogod[ytes who had been dis]persed (?) by Rufus [...]

when the cavalry and [...] had taken stand (?) [...]

to [ar]rive after [...] had made [...]

[...] ... if (?) they were commanded [...] in silence (?) [...]

Bilingual Inscription (Greek and Latin) - *I.Pan.* 87 = *SEG* 57-1979 = *I.Col.Memnon* 20

This inscription set up by Sulpicius Serenus (AD 121/122), who may be Servius Sulpicius Serenus, tribune of the *Legio XXII* and prefect of the *Ala Voconces*, celebrates his speedy victory over the infamous Agriophagoi, their massacre, and the seizing of camels and booty.

He asserts that after a two day pursuit of the Agriophagoi the majority of them were killed, while there were no losses for his own men. This commemoration was written on a stela made from basanites stone from the Wadi Hammamat. Serenus claims to have set up an altar to Jupiter in fulfilment of a vow.

‘For the welfare of our lord Emperor Caesar Trajan Hadrian Augustus, Serenus built an altar to Jupiter. Chasing after the infamous Wild-Animals Eaters for two days, a great many of them perished in battle ... the camels and booty were seized.’

Literary sources on the inhabitants of the Eastern Desert region and surrounding area

Strabo *Geography* – Trans. from H. L. Jones (1932)

17.1.2

‘The lower parts of the country on either side of Meroê, along the Nile towards the Red Sea, are inhabited by Megabari and Blemmyes, who are subject to the Aethiopians and border on the Aegyptians, and, along the sea, by Troglodytes (the Troglodytes opposite Meroê are a ten or twelve days' journey distant from the Nile), but the parts on the left side of the course of the Nile, in Libya, are inhabited by Nubae, a large tribe, who, beginning at Meroê, extend as far as the bends of the river, and are not subject to the Aethiopians but are divided into several separate kingdoms.’

17.1.5

‘Now the early writers gave the name Aegypt to only the part of the country that was inhabited and watered by the Nile, beginning at the region of Syenê and extending to the sea; but the later writers down to the present time have added on the eastern side approximately all the parts between the Arabian Gulf [Red Sea] and the Nile (the Aethiopians do not use the Red Sea at all), and on the western side the parts extending as far as the oases...’

17.1.45

‘Thence one crosses an isthmus, which extends to the Red Sea, near a city Berenicê. The city has no harbour, but on account of the favourable lay of the isthmus has convenient landing-places. It is said that Philadelphus was the first person, by means of an army, to cut this road, which is without water, and to build stations, as though for the travels of merchants on camels, and that he did this because the Red Sea was hard to navigate, particularly for those who set sail from its innermost recess. So the utility of his plan was shown by experience to be great, and now all the Indian merchandise, as well as the Arabian and such of the Aethiopian as is brought down by the Arabian Gulf [Red Sea], is carried to Coptus, which is the emporium for such cargoes. Not far from Berenicê lies Myos Hormus, a city containing the naval station for sailors; and not far distant from Coptus lies Apollonospolis, as it is called, so that on either side there are two cities which form the boundaries of the isthmus. But now it is Coptus and Myos

Hormus that have high repute; and people frequent these places. Now in earlier times the camel-merchants travelled only by night, looking to the stars for guidance, and, like the mariners, also carried water with them when they travelled; but now they have constructed watering-places, having dug down to a great depth, and, although rain-water is scarce, still they have made cisterns for it. The journey takes six or seven days. On this isthmus are also the mines of smaragdus, where the Arabians [perhaps here better understood as the nomadic population of the region] dig deep tunnels, I might call them, and of other precious stones.'

17.1.53

'Now Aegypt was generally inclined to peace from the outset, because of the self-sufficiency of the country and of the difficulty of invasion by outsiders, being protected on the north by a harbourless coast and by the Aegyptian Sea, and on the east and west by the desert mountains of Libya and Arabia [i.e., the hills of the Eastern Desert], as I have said; and the remaining parts, those towards the south, are inhabited by Troglodytes, Blemmyes, Nubae, and Megabari, those Aethiopians who live about Syenê. These are nomads, and not numerous, or warlike either, though they were thought to be so by the ancients, because often, like brigands, they would attack defenceless persons. As for those Aethiopians who extend towards the south and Meroê, they are not numerous either, nor do they collect in one mass, inasmuch as they inhabitant a long, narrow, and winding stretch of river-land, such as I have described before; neither are they well equipped either for warfare or for any other kind of life. And now, too, the whole of the country is similarly disposed to peace.'

Periplus Maris Erythraei – Trans. from Schoff (1912)

'[2] On the right-hand coast next below Berenice is the country of the Berbers [or Barbaroi, "foreigners": traditionally designating any non-Greek speaker]. Along the shore are the Fish-Eaters, living in scattered caves in the narrow valleys. Further inland are the Berbers, and beyond them the Wild-flesh-Eaters and Calf-Eaters [Casson: "shoot-eaters", from Greek mosxophagoi: translatable as either "calf" or "shoot, twig"], each tribe governed by its chief; and behind them, further inland, in the country toward the west, there lies a city called Meroe.

...

[4] Below Ptolemais of the Hunts [likely somewhere on the coast of modern Sudan], at a distance of about three thousand stadia, there is Adulis [in the vicinity of modern Zula, Eritrea], a port established by law, lying at the inner end of a bay that runs in toward the south. Before the harbor lies the so-called Mountain Island, about two hundred stadia sea-ward from the very head of the bay, with the shores of the mainland close to it on both sides. Ships bound for this port now anchor here because of attacks from the land. They used formerly to anchor at the very head of the bay, by an island called Diodorus, close to the shore, which could be reached on foot from the land; by which means the barbarous natives attacked the island. Opposite Mountain Island, on the mainland twenty stadia from shore, lies Adulis, a fair-sized village, from which there is a three-days' journey to Coloe, an inland town and the first market for ivory. From that place to the city of the people called Auxumites there is a five days' journey more; to that place all the ivory is brought from the country beyond the Nile through the district

called Cyeneum, and thence to Adulis. Practically the whole number of elephants and rhinoceros that are killed live in the places inland, although at rare intervals they are hunted on the seacoast even near Adulis. Before the harbor of that market-town, out at sea on the right hand, there lie a great many little sandy islands called Alalaei, yielding tortoise-shell, which is brought to market there by the Fish-Eaters.'