

Before/After

Transformation, Change, and Abandonment in the Roman and Late Antique Mediterranean

edited by

**Paolo Cimadomo, Rocco Palermo,
Raffaella Pappalardo
and Raffaella Pierobon Benoit**

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The Abandonment of Myos Hormos

Dario Nappo¹

Abstract

The paper focuses on the development and the decline of the ancient settlement of Myos Hormos, which was a prominent port on the Red Sea coast of Egypt. Many writers from the first centuries BCE and CE agree on describing it as one of the most important commercial hubs of the area, along the more southern port of Berenike. Still, while Berenike kept its functionality well into the late antique period, Myos Hormos was abandoned and fell out of use for no evident reason at some point along the third century CE. This decline has been explained by most scholars as a consequence of the third century crisis that stroke the Empire, and that triggered a steady regression of the Roman trading activities in the Red Sea. In this paper a different point of view is offered: the demise of Myos Hormos would not have anything to do with commercial decline nor with the shrinking of the trading horizon of the Romans, but it was rather the consequence of an adjustment of the organisation of the Red Sea area that started during the second century CE.

Introduction

The town of Myos Hormos² was a prominent port in the Red Sea basin, engaged in the international maritime trade connecting the Mediterranean World with India and Arabia (**Fig. 1**). First century writers on Roman rule over Egypt all recognise the important role of the port. Strabo writes about the town several times, first defining its geographical location:

*‘Next is Myos Hormos, which is also called Aphrodites Hormos; it is a large harbour with an oblique entrance. In front are three islands; two are covered with olive trees, and one (the third) is less shaded with trees, and abounds with guinea-fowls’ (Strab. 16. 4. 5).*³

He also makes it clear that along with Berenike, Myos Hormos is the most important port of trade on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea:

‘Not far from Berenike is Myos Hormos, a city with a naval station for vessels which navigate this sea; at no great distance from Coptos is the city of Apollo, so that two cities are the boundaries of the isthmus, one on each side. But at present Coptos and Myos Hormos are in repute, and they are frequented’ (Strab. 17. 1. 45).

Strabo’s most famous reference to Myos Hormos remains his comparison between the volume of trade passing through it in Roman times, and the levels recorded during the age of the Ptolemies, previous rulers of Egypt:

1 University of Naples, Federico II. This research was carried out in the framework of Programme STAR, financially supported by UniNA and Compagnia di San Paolo

2 On the etymology of the name, see De Romanis 1996, 147-150.

3 For the English version of Strabo’s text, I have used Jones 1989.

'I was with Gallus at the time he was prefect of Egypt, and accompanied him as far as Syene and the frontiers of Ethiopia, and I found that about one hundred and twenty ships sail from Myos Hormos to India, although, in the time of the Ptolemies, scarcely any one would venture on this voyage and the commerce with the Indies' (Strab. 2.5.12).

Roughly a century later than Strabo, the anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Red Sea* appears to have shared Strabo's opinion regarding the importance to international trade of the two Egyptian ports:

'Of the designated harbours of the Erythrean Sea and the ports of trade on it, first comes Egypt's port of Myos Hormos and, beyond it, after a sail of 1800 stades to the right, Berenike. The ports of both are bays of the Red Sea on the edge of Egypt' (PME 1).

Despite these statements on the pivotal role that the port played in antiquity, most of its history is still unclear. The first issue to tackle is the dating of the foundation of the settlement. It is normally assumed that this happened during the Ptolemaic period. More precisely, on the ground of Strabo's report quoted above (and of Diod. Sic. 3.39.1-2), most scholars agree a dating of the foundation of the town to the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283 to 246 BCE), notwithstanding the dearth of archaeological evidence to endorse such a claim.⁴

The process of identifying the site of Myos Hormos has been a very long one. For decades, most scholars maintained that ancient Myos Hormos was the present-day town of 'Abu Sha'ar (Casson 1989, 96, and bibliography). However, this hypothesis proved to be inconsistent when archaeological investigations conducted in 'Abu Sha'ar demonstrated that this was founded at the beginning of the fourth century CE (Bongrani Fanfoni 1997, 53-59).

Archaeological excavations in Quseir al-Qadim had already begun in 1978, i.e. before its final identification with the ancient Myos Hormos. Only in the year 1993, in fact, Peacock first suggested the identification of Myos Hormos with modern Quseir al-Qadim, basing his hypothesis on observation of aerial photographs of the area.

So far, three different teams have worked at the site: one from the USA (1978-1982. Whitcomb and Johnson 1979; 1982a; 1982b), one from France (1994-1997. Cuvigny 2003a; 2003b) and finally one from the UK (1999-2003. Peacock and Blue 2006; 2011). The three teams did not always interpret the data in a consistent way, but it is nevertheless possible to summarise some key points on which they all agreed. Quseir al-Qadim lies some 500 km south of Suez, and 8 km north of Quseir. The settlement is in a region hardly suitable for human habitation, difficult to reach and characterised by a very harsh climate,⁵ but it has the advantage of standing at the closest point on the Red Sea to the Nile River (Peacock and Blue 2006, 1-3). This proximity significantly reduced the time and cost involved in transferring goods from the coast to Coptos (Jackson 2002, 81-82).

Despite the alleged Ptolemaic foundation of the town, the earliest levels to be found date to the first century BCE (Peacock and Blue 2006, 46-58). The Romans built a harbour there, but it tended to rapidly silt up. For this reason, maintenance work was frequent (Peacock and Blue 2006, 65-84).

The analysis of pottery shreds confirms the traditional chronology, dating the acme of the site to the first century CE. Two Tamil inscriptions dated to the same period add to the scenario of Myos Hormos

⁴ See Tarn 1929, 22; Sidebotham 1986, 2-3; Peacock 1993, 226. Whitcomb (1996, 759-761) has suggested that the Ptolemaic Myos Hormos might be identified with the modern town of Quseir (further south than Quseir al-Qadim). Such a hypothesis is accepted by Cuvigny (2003a and 2003b), while Peacock and Blue (2006, 5-7) oppose it.

⁵ It has been noted, anyway, that the extremely dry weather that nowadays characterises the area was somehow wetter in antiquity. See Littman and Meredith 1953, 27.

having been commercially connected to South India, particularly Arikamedu (Whitcomb and Johnson 1979, fig. 27j; 1982, 263; Whitcomb 1996, 749-52; Peacock and Blue 2011, 5-9). Based on the same evidence, some scholars have also suggested that Myos Hormos hosted some communities of foreign residents, who lived there on a permanent, or semi-permanent basis (Sidebotham 1986, 16-17; Whitcomb 1996, 753; Peacock and Blue 2011, 347). Apart from Tamil, other languages are also attested in the town, such as South Arabian, Nabataic, and Palmirene: evidence that strengthens the interpretation of Myos Hormos as a multi-ethnic community, and an important commercial hub in the Red Sea (Peacock and Blue 2011, 7-8).

Among the Greek and Latin texts, it is worth mentioning a group referring to a military presence in Myos Hormos: a garrison of 50-100 soldiers, under the command of a *curator praesidii* (Bagnall 1986, 5; Whitcomb 1996). These documents attest the presence of the army since the beginning of the first century CE until the first half of the second (Bagnall 1986, 4. See also Strabo, 16.4.24, who records the presence of the army in the town in the year 25 BCE). On the other hand, no unequivocal evidence for a military structure has so far emerged from the archaeological investigations (Peacock and Blue 2006, 176).⁶

As it is evident from this cursory and preliminary analysis of the available evidence, most of the information available on Myos Hormos dates to the first two centuries of the Roman power over Egypt. After that time span, the name of the settlement suddenly disappears from our sources, and coherently the archaeological excavations have yielded no material associable to a late phase of the life of the port. This leads us to the central question of this paper, the problem of the demise of Myos Hormos. Our written sources make absolutely no mention of it after the first century CE, and none of them makes any explicit reference to the abandonment of the town. Despite this dearth of our knowledge, there is some degree of agreement among scholars that the period of major development of the port was in the first century CE, and that it declined steadily from the third century, and then it was abandoned for 12 centuries (Jackson 2002, 81-83; Tomber 2016, 43; Cobb 2018, 296-298). In the harbour area, through the analysis of the available pottery, it was possible to reconstruct the chronology of the use of the settlement: pottery from the end of the first century BCE to the second century is available, but nothing dated to the later periods; also geophysical analyses of the area have confirmed such chronology (Peacock and Blue 2006, 80-81; 84; 94). Both the jetty and the workshop, which were used intensely during the late first century BCE and the first century CE, fell into disuse during the second century. In the town area, the situation is less clear-cut, but the available archaeological evidence has been interpreted as to fit the same chronological pattern. Many buildings had been constructed and used in the first century CE but were no longer inhabited during the second (Meyer 1982, 201-213; Copeland 2006, 121-126; Peacock and Blue 2006, 176; Tomber 2008, 61; Cobb 2015, 403-407).

Many reasons have been put forward to explain this demise. It has been noted that the port was prone to frequent silting up, which might have led to its abandonment. The event that has been more often associated with the demise of Myos Hormos is the so called 'third century crisis'. It is well known that the third century CE represented a difficult time for the Roman Empire on many levels: political, military and economic. The general agreement is that the economic crisis that struck the empire generated a number of phenomena that hampered international trade with India, causing the decline of several ports on the Red Sea. While some other ports eventually regained their role in such commerce (most notably Berenike), Myos Hormos never recovered from this decline and was consequently permanently abandoned.

6 A different interpretation is in Whitcomb 1996, 747-760; Whitcomb 1999, 658-660.

We can sum up the general consensus on the demise of Myos Hormos in a schematic way. We would have the following events, one relating to the others:

Event 1. The third century crisis. A general crisis of the Roman Empire that had dire repercussions for the political, social, and economic life of the Empire. Among its consequences, we find

Event 2. A severe debasement of the silver currency of the Empire, caused by the need for the emperors to produce more and more cash to cover the increased military expenses during the crisis. The debasement caused a loss of purchasing power of the silver currency, which led to

Event 3. Hyperinflation generated by the loss of confidence in the Roman currency. This would affect the purchasing power of Roman customers inside the empire, which therefore led to

Event 4. The decline of the international trade of expensive Indian items.

Event 5. Directly connected to event 1, there were riots in Egypt at the end of the third century that triggered a decisive response from the tetrarchs, causing the destruction of Coptos, a Nile port that functioned as a link between the River and the ports on the Red Sea. The decline of Coptos also affected the economic life of Myos Hormos and Berenike, the two main ports on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea.

Most scholars who have dealt with the subject basically accept this reconstruction, but I would like to propose here a different interpretation. To do this, I first need to explain why I consider the traditional explanation to be faulty, and subsequently propose my own view. First I will go through the four points of the traditional explanation.

The so-called third century crisis

The subject of the crisis that struck the Empire during the third century is very complex. Over the decades, scholars have published a number of essays on the crisis, and the perception of it has changed considerably over time. Nowadays many scholars strongly reject the use of the word 'crisis' to describe the entire third century. Many have stressed the importance of the continuity of that period, and 'transformation' is now the term preferred when describing what happened at the time (De Blois 2002, 204-217). This is not the place to examine all the scholarship on the subject, but I will try to summarise some elements that are of interest for the present analysis.

The concept of 'crisis' associated with the third century CE has a long history, and the word was used for almost a century 'as a convenient, indeed obvious, word to describe a period filled with dangerous problems, irrespective of whether you think of the period as a single long crisis, or as a succession of many crises. [...] It was certainly not proposed as an explicatory model, a technique which ancient historians did not employ' (Liebeschuetz 2007, 11). In the last decades, especially in the Anglo-Saxon World, the word *crisis* started to progressively disappear from the scholarship, replaced by more neutral terms like *change*, *transformation* and *transition* (Bowersock 1996). Transition especially tends to be used in a weak sense, although it has been pointed out that "as a concept of Marxist political economy, transition refers to the decline and rise of socio-economic systems. [...] Transition is a strong concept, and not simply a synonym for transformation. Even in its most generic and limited sense, it implies the comparing of different forms" (Giardina 2007, 29). This tendency to soften the meaning of

definitions is still very much on in the recent scholarship,⁷ although some scholars, even in the Anglo-Saxon World, have subsequently argued against it (Ward-Perkins 2005). There has been much debate about the length and the extent of the crisis. Many scholars have investigated how the crisis took place in different ways and at different times over the regions of the Empire, and some have even played down the real impact of the crisis on the Empire (Strobel 1993, 347). There is no official agreement as to the time span of the crisis, but recent scholarship prefers to place the end of the early imperial age to the 250s, therefore limiting the whole period of the crisis to the years 250-280 CE, up to the reign of Emperor Diocletian (Liebeschuetz 2007, 18). This last point is of crucial importance to understand the chronological argument of this work.

Debasement of the currency

There is little argument concerning the debasement of the Roman currency during the third century. Scholars generally agree about the history of the debasement of Roman coinage (though there is no agreement about the consequences of this debasement on prices and the economy of the Empire).

The silver coinage, the *denarius*, had been the spine of the Roman monetary system for over four centuries (late third century BCE – early third century CE) (**Fig. 2**). Its debasement began under Emperor Nero, who reduced its weight standard from 1/84 to 1/96 pound, and its purity from 98% to 93%. In the following century the purity fell to ca. 90%. The reduction continued over the following decades, and by the time of Caracalla the purity had dropped to ca. 50%. Caracalla also introduced a new silver coin, the so-called *antoninianus*, which initially had a purity of less than 50%. From 238 CE, this coinage became the new silver standard of Roman currency, replacing the *denarius*. However, in the 250s and 260s the silver content and weight of the *antoninianus* was rapidly reduced, until the coin was no more than 1-2% purity (Verboven 2007; Temin 2013).

Emperor Aurelian tried to restore the silver currency, introducing a new coinage of slightly better quality than the *antoninianus*. Aurelian's coin was heavier and purer than the *antoninianus*, with ca. 4% silver. This attempt to improve the quality of the coinage appears not to have been successful, however, as we know that the introduction of the new coinage into the marketplace encountered many problems (**Fig. 3**). A general restoration of Roman currency finally occurred only with the coinage reform promoted by the Emperor Diocletian at the end of the century.

Inflation

Calculating the level of inflation under the Roman Empire is not an easy task. Many scholars have attempted, though without complete agreement, to create at least a general scheme to describe the fluctuation in prices over the centuries. It is generally assumed that prices were stable from the late Republic through the second century CE. The great inflation only began during the third century crisis.

The conventional view on inflation is that it was the result of currency debasement, but some scholars (Howgego 1995, 123) have argued that we 'should be cautious about theories which imply a simple relationship between coin supply and prices'.

⁷ See e.g. the definition of transition provided by Halsall 1995: 'slow process from one pre-defined state of affairs to another, [useful to describe] a single line of development'.

In fact, most eminent scholars of the subject dispute such a direct relationship. ‘Monetarist theory predicts that Gresham’s law provokes inflation because sellers anticipate that they will be paid in bad money and raise their prices in response. However, it now seems almost certain that such monetary inflation did not occur before at least the second half of the century. Papyri show price stability until ca. 274 CE, while inscriptions indicate that at least until the 250s there was no structural inflation in the West. The presence in hoards until the 260s of denarii alongside *antoniniani* and Antonine and early Severan *denarii* alongside younger *denarii*, indicates that it was not worthwhile for private persons to melt down their coins and consequently that the price of silver bullion had not (yet) surged. The absence of inflation [...] indicates that price levels were little dependent on changes in the silver currency’ (Verboven 2007, 252). A similar opinion was shared by Rathbone (2007, 713): ‘The price bands for other goods and wages display a remarkable stability from the AD 70s to the 160s, and then again from the 190s to AD 274.’

Around 274 CE the papyrological documentation attests a sudden tenfold increase in prices in Egypt (Rathbone 1996, 335-338; Verboven 2007, 256). It is only at this moment that we clearly see the presence of real inflation in the Roman Empire, several decades after the beginning of the major debasement under the Severans. It is useful to remind ourselves here that the rise of inflation appears to coincide with the unfortunate reform by Aurelian, the first emperor in decades to have increased the purity of silver coinage.

From this brief outline I hope to have clarified some points. The crisis struck the Empire particularly in the second half of the third century CE; debasement occurred throughout the whole century, but only after 274 CE can we identify a real increase in prices, which could have led to a decline in purchasing power. All this means that the conditions that could have badly affected international trade occurred only in the late third century.

Destruction of Coptos

I will now move on to examine the last of the points normally considered when explaining the demise of Myos Hormos, i.e. the temporary decline of Coptos.

The story of Coptos from the third century CE is complex. From the early imperial time, the town had important status: it was the *μητρόπολις* of its own *νομός*. Its strategical position made it a pivotal hub in the region, and for this reason it was protected by the army.

From the end of the third century, the available information on Coptos decreases: papyri and inscriptions relating to the town become scarce, and the written sources do not fill the gap. This might be due to the complex political and military events in which Coptos and its region were entangled from the end of the third century (Fournet 2000, 196). Most of the troubles that Coptos experienced can be attributed to the two revolts against Rome happened in Egypt toward the end of the third century. The first revolt took place around 290 CE: Emperor Diocletian and his *caesar* Galerius decisively quashed the riots between 291 and 293/4. Coptos was involved in this revolt, and as it was its main centre, it was severely punished by the emperors (Barnes 1976, 174-193; Fournet 2000, 198; Leadbetter 2002, 85-88; Sidebotham 2011, 260).

A few years later, in 296/7, there was an attempt of secession led by L. Domitius Domitianus and by his accomplice, the *corrector* Aurelius Achilleus (Thomas 1976, 253-279). The revolt soon spread to the whole province of Egypt, and Domitianus proclaimed himself Emperor in Alexandria. Papyri attest the participation of Coptos in this revolt (P.Mich. III, 220), which was again suppressed by Diocletian. He

laid siege to Alexandria in 298 and later marched to Upper Egypt, residing for a while in Coptos. Written sources report the siege and destruction of Coptos at the hands of Galerius.⁸

The idea that Coptos was completely destroyed during this period was for some time accepted by scholarship, and this was also listed among the causes of the decline of Myos Hormos and Berenike (Sidebotham 2011, 260-261). Despite exaggeration in the written sources, which tell of the complete destruction of the town, there is no firm evidence that Coptos suffered significant structural damage as a result of the suppression. The town was certainly punished, but the nature of the punishment differs from that suggested by the sources. A papyrus from Panopolis dated to 300 CE gives a hint of what really happened to Coptos: the papyrus refers to κάστρα τῆς Ποτεκόπτου (P. Panop. Beatty 2, 162; 187; 193), a toponym nowhere else attested. The editor of the papyrus has suggested an interpretation as follows: 'Coptos was the centre of a revolt against Diocletian – either the rebellion of Domitianus or an earlier rising – and the city was taken and destroyed by the Emperor. I suggest that, as punishment for the city, it was proposed to abolish its name and substitute another, and that pending a decision on its new name it was referred to officially as ἡ ποτὲ Κόπτος, 'the former Coptos'.'⁹

If such an interpretation is sound, we have here a symbolic cancellation of the town, rather than its actual destruction as recorded in the written sources. As Bowman pointed out some 35 years ago, the account of the destruction of Coptos is the result of a rhetoric stereotypic exaggeration, whereas the town soon recovered from its troubles and once more became a prominent settlement in the region (Bowman 1984, 35). Although archaeological remains for investigation at Coptos are badly compromised, nevertheless most scholars now agree on the fact that the town recovered from the fourth century CE, as attested by a new burst in building activities, military presence and coin circulation in the area of the ancient settlement (Reinach 1910; Fournet 2000 and 2002; Herbert and Berlin 2003).

After the difficult years at the end of the third century, Coptos was at the centre of a military reorganization of the area, as attested by a number of sources. As well as the papyrus already quoted, we have archaeological evidence for the militarisation of the town (Fournet 2000, 199); an inscription dated to 316 CE reports the presence of a *vexillatio* of the *Legio III Gallica* and of the *Legio I Illyrica* (Bernard 1984, n. 91). The *Notitia Dignitatum* attests the presence of the *Legio I Valentiniana* along with *equites sagittarii indigenae* (Not. Dig. Or., XXXI 18, 19, 26, 36). The last document referring to a military presence in Coptos is a dossier of *ostraka* from Aphroditos, mentioning some *buccellarii* in the town (Gasco and Worp 1990, 217-244, n. 16, 20, 21 and 25).

From the fourth century, Coptos regained its prominent role as a commercial hub in the region, connected to the Red Sea trade, and its recovery positively affected Berenike, which also experienced a regeneration of its trading activity. However, this recovery did not extend to Myos Hormos, and it is now time to offer a different hypothesis to explain its demise, other than as a casualty of the third century crisis. The hypothesis I would like to put forward is that Myos Hormos was intentionally abandoned for two reasons; because of events that took place in the second (not the third) century CE, and because of its geographical position.

8 Jer. Chronic., a.226: *Busiris et Coptus contra Romanos rebellantes ad solum usque subversae sunt*; Theoph., *Chronogr.*, p. 7, ll. 23-25 ed. De Boor (= anno Mundi 5782): Τούτῳ τῷ ἔτει Διοκλητιανὸς καὶ Μαξιμιανὸς ὁ Ἐρκούλιος Ὁβουσίριν καὶ Κόπτον, πόλεις ἐν Θήβαις τῆς Αἰγύπτου, εἰς ἔδαφος κατέσκαψαν ἀποστατήσας τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς; Zonar., XII, 31: Βουσίρεως δὲ καὶ Κόπτου πολέων Αἰγυπτιακῶν περὶ τὰς ἐκεῖ Θήβας οἰκουμένων εἰς ἀποστασίαν ἐκκλινασῶν, ὁ Διοκλητιανὸς ἐκστρατεύσας κατ'αὐτῶν εἶλέ τε αὐτὰς καὶ κατέσκαψεν; Cedr., 266D: τῷ ζ' ἔτει αὐτῶν τὴν Βουσίριν καὶ τὴν Κόπτον, πόλεις ἐν Θήβαις τῆς Αἰγύπτου, ἀποστατήσας τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς, εἰς ἔδαφος κατέσκαψαν.

9 P. Panop. Beatty 2, 162, note 5. A slight different interpretation was provided by Fournet 2002, 53: "on peut aussi penser que Coptos s'est vue tout simplement privée de nom en signe de ce que j'appellerais une « *damnatio memoriae* toponimique », qui pourrait aller de pair avec la destruction qu'elle aurait subie d'après quelques sources littéraires – destruction probablement plus symbolique que réelle."

Archaeological investigation clearly shows signs of abandonment or disuse from the second century CE in many areas of Myos Hormos. The harbour area shows signs of substantial activity at the end of the first century CE, but the jetty and some of the workshops in the area seem to have already fallen into disuse in the second century CE (Peacock 2006, 67-94; Cobb 2015, 376).

If we analyse the chronology of the site area by area, we gain a clearer picture of the situation.¹⁰ In the harbour area (trenches 7, 10, 12, 14, 15) there are strong signs of occupation between the first century BCE and the first CE, while its abandonment is dated at some point during the early-mid second century CE. In the town area (trenches 2, 8, 17) we find a civic building, abandoned by the end of first century CE, then a bakery built in the first century CE and partially abandoned before the third century, and finally a private structure built in the first century CE, later collapsed and never rebuilt. The rubbish dump (trench 6) yielded primarily materials dated to the first to the mid-second century CE. The general timeframe of the pottery is again between the first century BCE and the second CE. Written materials span a period between the first and third centuries CE, with a majority dating to the first and early second centuries. Finally, fewer than 200 coins were recovered in the site; the vast majority of them (around 63%) belong to the first century CE, and almost all the others are dated between the late Ptolemaic era and the beginning of the second century CE, with only one coin dated to the third century CE.

This analysis clearly shows that the chronologies of the demise of Myos Hormos and of the third century crisis are incompatible. I would point out that the demise of Myos Hormos coincides with two events: the beginning of the prominence of the northern Red Sea ports (Clysma and Aila) in the context of international trade, and the restoration of the so-called Nile canal, promoted by Emperor Trajan (**Fig. 4**). It is my opinion that this last fact is crucial for comprehending the transformations that occurred in the late antique Red Sea region. Trajan's canal was opened after 112 CE,¹¹ and it stayed open for centuries to come,¹² but there is no agreement among scholars as to why Trajan built it, or what was its use. Some have postulated that the channel was to be used in the forthcoming war against the Parthians, while others suggest that it was intended to foster trade in the northern Red Sea area. Equally unclear is whether or not the canal was actually navigable, or if it was only meant for irrigation in north-eastern Egypt (Faville 1902-03; Calderini 1920; Bourdon 1925; Posener 1938, 25-26; Sijpesteijn 1963, 70-83; Oertel 1964, 18-52; De Romanis 1996, 71-95; Aubert 2004, 219-252; Cooper 2009, 195-209; Cooper 2011; Aubert 2015). Often quoted against such a reductive interpretation is a passage of Lucian of Samosata, who in one of his works tells the story of a young man who sailed from Alexandria to Clysma, and then from there to India (Lucian, *Alexander sive Pseudomantis*, 44, 16-18). One must admit that the nature of the source, a fictional narrative by a Greek satirist, has limited the credit given to the information by scholars. On the other hand, it is also true that archaeological investigation in the area has confirmed the information provided by the ancient sources, which claim that the canal was wide enough for two triremes to row abreast (Cooper 2009, 204), a detail that makes it hard to believe that the canal's purpose was only to provide fresh water to north-eastern Egypt.

Another interesting detail is that there was a noticeable increase in activity at Clysma (modern Suez) right after the second century CE and the opening of the canal (Bruyère 1966; Ward 2007). It is safe to assume that the canal played a role in the economic development of an otherwise poorly

¹⁰ The following summary is largely based on data provided by: Copeland et al. 2006, 116-154; Peacock et al. 2006, 67-94; Blue 2011, 35-42; Copeland 2011, 89-120; Peacock 2011a, 47-56 and 2011b, 85-87; Thomas 2011a, 11-34; Thomas 2011b, 79-83; Blue, Whitewright, and Thomas 2011, 179-209; Van Rengan 2011, 335-338; Sidebotham 2011b, 353-360; van der Veen 2011, 31-34. I should also acknowledge Cobb 2015 for putting the data together and pointing to the correct dating of the demise of Myos Hormos.

¹¹ As attested by SB VI, 9545 (32).

¹² Papyri attest the regular recruitment of seasonal workers to clean the canal, between the second and the sixth century CE SB VI 9545 (32): 112 CE; P.Oxy. LX 4070: c. 208 CE; P.Bub 4.269: 221 CE; SB V 7676 (= P.Cair. Isidor. 81): 297 CE; P.Oxy. LV 3814: end of the third / beginning of the fourth century CE; P.Oxy XII 1462: 332 CE; SB V 7756 (=P.Lond. inv. 2574): 358/9 CE; PSI 689: 420/21 CE; Psi 87: 423 CE; P. Wash 7: fifth or sixth century CE.

connected region, opening a communication link between the port of Clysma and the hinterland, up to Alexandria. This increase in the involvement of the northern ports in the international trade indeed perfectly coincides with the progressive demise of Myos Hormos. Since the opening of the canal and the consequent rise of Clysma, Myos Hormos became less convenient as a port of trade, and this is easily understandable, when one thinks of the nature of the Red Sea and its ancient ports. In fact, the winds and the shallow waters make it very difficult for large ships to navigate in the northern part of the Red Sea. The limit for navigating northward in the Red sea is the 20th parallel North. While Berenike was not much further north than this, Myos Hormos was well beyond the limit, so that ships bound for the port faced a long trip upwind in shallow waters. The benefit for sailors who chose this route was to berth on a port relatively close to Coptos and the Nile, saving many days of the tiring journey overland through the Egyptian Eastern Desert. During the early imperial age, when Myos Hormos was still a prominent port in the area, only smaller, more manoeuvrable, ships could have reached it. We can trace an indirect proof of this from what the anonymous author of the *Periplus* (PME, 19) tells us regarding Leuke Kome, a port situated right in front of Myos Hormos, on the Arabian coast of the Red Sea (Nappo 2010). When northern ports such as Clysma were fully operational in the Red Sea, the option of Myos Hormos was no longer a convenient one.¹³ In fact, Clysma would have benefitted from the same winds that allowed the vessels to reach Myos Hormos, but Clysma had the advantage to be far closer to the Nile river.

This means that during the second century CE Myos Hormos was progressively, but inexorably, abandoned by the Roman traders, who gradually shifted their business northward, to use more convenient ports such Clysma (Fig. 4). If this interpretation is sound, we need to further consider changing the way we think about Red Sea trade and trading activities in general under the Roman Empire. Cases such as Myos Hormos should prove, in my opinion, that, along with military and/or political necessities, the economy was a driving force in the organization of the territory.

13 One more indirect proof comes from the *via Hadriana*, built by the emperor Hadrian after 137 CE. This road in theory could provide a convenient access to Myos Hormos, improving the connection of the port with the hinterland. Despite the effort, the road was a failure and fell into disuse very quickly. See Paprocki 2019, 152-156; see also the view of Sidebotham and Gates-Foster 2019.

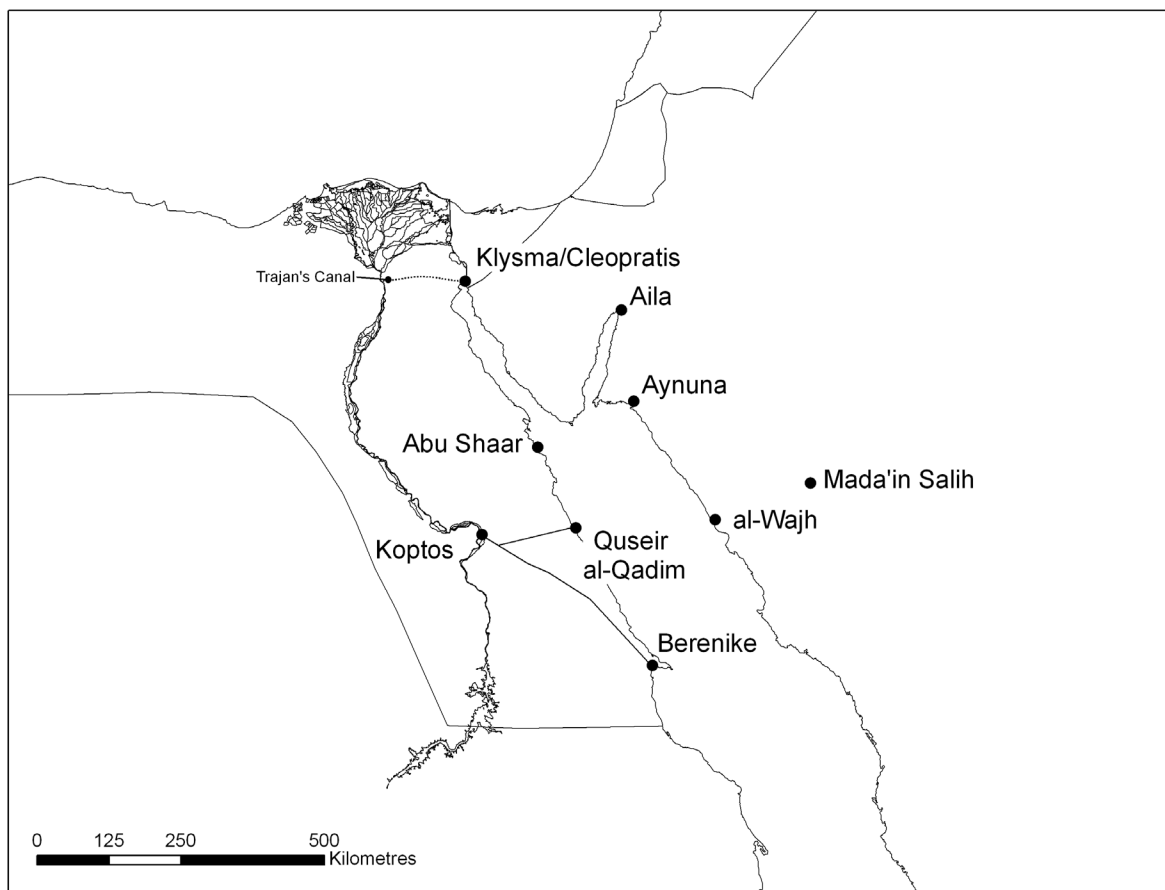


Fig. 1. Map of the Red Sea (map by the author)



Fig. 2. Denarius of Augustus of the CAIUS and LUCIUS CAESARES series, among the most common Roman coins found in India (taken from www.coinarchives.com).



Fig. 3. New currency introduced by Aurelian, which arguably triggered the inflation in late 3rd century CE (taken from www.coinarchives.com).

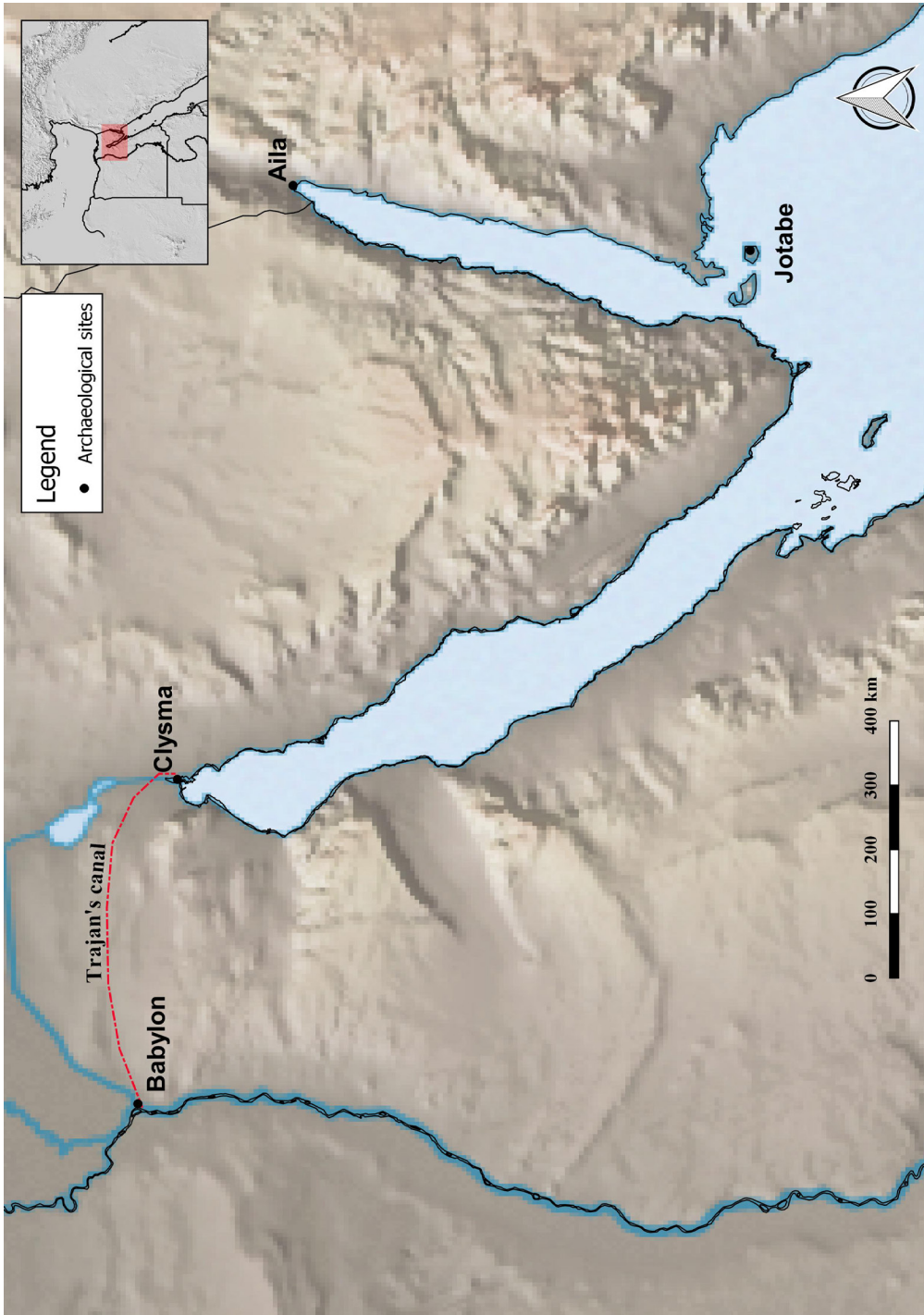


Fig. 4. Trajan's canal and the northern ports of the Red Sea (map produced by E. Cocca).

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