

Stories of Globalisation: The Red Sea and the Persian Gulf from Late Prehistory to Early Modernity

Selected Papers of Red Sea Project VII

Edited by

Andrea Manzo
Chiara Zazzaro
Diana Joyce de Falco



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Introduction

This book collects the contributions presented during the Red Sea VII conference hosted in May 2015 by the University of Napoli “L’Orientale” in the wonderful venue of the island of Procida. The Red Sea VII conference was the latest in the successful series organised under the auspices of the British Foundation for the Study of Arabia, and previously held at the British Museum, the University of Southampton, the University of Exeter (UK) and the University of Tabuk (KSA). These have all been devoted to the study of the Red Sea in the broadest chronological sense, from the remote past to the present, and from different points of view, as traditionally the conferences included linguistics and ethnography as well as history and archaeology.

In 2015 the University of Napoli “L’Orientale” was chosen for hosting the conference due to its long-established tradition of studies and research concerning Asia and Africa, including the regions of the Red Sea. Actually, the first archaeological expedition that involved the university took place in the early years of the twentieth century, at Adulis on the shores of the Red Sea, in present-day Eritrea. Then, over the last thirty years, the activities of “L’Orientale” in the coastal regions of the Red Sea intensified considerably and involved – at various levels – professors, researchers, fellows, graduate students and students.

In the field of archaeology, it is worthwhile to mention here the expeditions of “L’Orientale” in eastern Sudan; at the pharaonic port of Mersa Gawasis and in Egypt’s Eastern Desert; the recent collaboration with the Eritrean government and the CeRDO for the excavations at Adulis, Eritrea; the excavations in Ethiopia; Yemen; and Saudi Arabia, where underwater investigations began in the last couple of years. In the fields of linguistics and history as well, “L’Orientale” actively conducts research projects in countries surrounding the Red Sea and beyond.

The conference was also placed under the auspices and the patronage of the ISMEO-Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente, a distinguished Italian scientific society – heir of the prestigious Istituto Italiano per il Medio e l’Estremo Oriente, of the Istituto Italo-Africano and of the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente – whose goal is to promote research on the cultures of Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean and on their interactions.

The title of the Red Sea VII conference was “The Red Sea and the Gulf: Two Maritime Alternative Routes in the Development of Global Economy, from Late Prehistory to Modern Times”. The scientific committee proposed for the first time in this series of conferences a comparison, on a scientific level, between two sea corridors and their shores: the Red Sea and the Gulf. These two

areas are similar geographically and environmentally, and complementary to each other, as well as being competitors in their economic and cultural interactions with the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.

The theme of the Red Sea VII conference was also inspired by the traditional fields of interests of the hosting institution, which extend to the Gulf regions, the Indian Ocean, Central Asia and the Far East. Thus the opportunity was taken of putting the Red Sea in a broader perspective, highlighting its role as a bridge between continents and different regions such as Africa, Asia, Arabia, the Mediterranean and the Far East. As was highlighted, once again, during the conference, the Red Sea region also had its own deeply rooted cultural traditions while dynamically participating in the broader, multisided interconnections and networks of the area.

The conference has yielded the opportunity to meet colleagues and exchange information, to share new ideas and to promote innovative projects based on international collaborations among scholars from worldwide institutions interested in the western Indian Ocean. Speakers presented papers focused on a wide range of subjects relating to the main topic of the conference, including recent and ongoing research; the Red Sea and the Gulf in the global economy; naval technologies and maritime knowledge in the Red Sea and the Gulf; people, ideas, technologies and religions between the Red Sea and the Gulf; and Greek, Roman and Byzantine maritime trade to the east. The chapters of the volume of the proceedings are grouped in three sections, corresponding to the various historical periods: prehistory and the Bronze Age, the Graeco-Roman and Byzantine period, and the modern and contemporary age. Each chapter offers the opportunity to the reader to travel across the regions of the Red Sea and the Gulf, and from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, from prehistory to the contemporary era. The reader will find accounts of recently discovered pharaonic activities in the Red Sea, which represents a new frontier of studies that dramatically changes our perspective, as for many years Egyptian navigation of the Red Sea was considered unlikely. The first chapter, by Kathryn Bard and Rodolfo Fattovich, discusses the function of the different areas excavated at the Middle Kingdom Egyptian harbour of Mersa/Wadi Gawasis by the Italian-American archaeological expedition. From there ancient Egyptians sailed to the land of Punt in the southern Red Sea, and the articulated and complex organisation of the expeditions is made evident in this chapter. In this same period, the harbour of Ayn Soukna was used for navigating to the Sinai, and rock carvings representing boats found in the mining region of Serabit al-Khadim are likely related to such activities. In his chapter, Patrice Pomey presents a typological classification of the rock carvings representing boats and suggests that they may date to the Middle and New Kingdoms.

Among the commodities Egyptians were importing via the Red Sea, copper was extracted from the Sinai and obsidian from the southern Red Sea. The identification of the sources of these commodities in the Red Sea and also in the Gulf is crucial for the reconstruction of ancient trade. This can be done by associating remote sensing and survey on the ground, as explained in the chapter by Ioana Dumitru and Michael Harrower.

The Red Sea and the Gulf may have been affected by similar cultural processes starting in the Bronze Age arising from the increasing request for raw materials from the states rooted in the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia. It is possible that navigation along the coast of the Arabian peninsula may have allowed direct relations between the two regions. This possibility is highlighted by Danièle Michaux-Colombot in her stimulating chapter connecting archaeology, lexicography and iconography, which discusses the location of fabulous and often fabled lands such as Punt, Magan and Melluḥḥa.

The Egyptians started navigating the Red Sea in at least the Old Kingdom period, as shown by the discoveries at Wadi al-Jarf. In that phase they already had developed an articulated terminology and specific administrative titles related to boats and navigation, as shown in the papyrus fragments found at Wadi al-Jarf and studied by Serena Esposito in her chapter. Some of these papyrus fragments mention the “Biblite” ships, vessels for maritime navigation whose name makes evident the relevance for ancient Egypt of the relations with Byblos and the eastern Mediterranean.

Egyptian interest in the Mediterranean is also demonstrated by the investigation of the Late Bronze Age port on Bates’ Island, near Mersa Matruh. In the chapter by Linda Hulin it is suggested that this was a spot where not only Egyptians and eastern Mediterranean sailors but also Libyans from inland areas interacted, and that the area may have been under Egyptian administrative and military control. The interest of the Egyptian state at that time may also have been related to the need to monitor groups of people migrating across the Mediterranean and trying to infiltrate the Nile Delta.

Recent research has revealed that at that time, crops also moved across the seas. The chapter by Alemseged Beldados and Suleiman Bashir focuses on sorghum, a Sahelian crop widely adopted in Asia. Its relevance was not only economic but also ritualistic and symbolic, as shown by sorghum’s occurrence in the painted decoration of Meroitic vessels from the Berber region. In the first millennium BCE regions of the southern Red Sea were also developing their own architectural and technological traits. The chapter by Mike Schnelle deals with the wooden frame technique characterising the Grät Be’al Gebri, an administrative building at Yeha, in northern Ethiopia. Surprisingly enough, the closest comparison for the technique used in this specific building can be

found not in South Arabia, as might be expected, but further afield in Asia Minor and Pakistan.

That during the first millennium BCE and the first half of the first millennium CE South Arabia was a cross-roads interacting with the wider ancient world through both caravan routes across the deserts and maritime routes across the Red Sea and the Gulf, is clearly reflected in the archaeological evidence. An overview of this is presented in the chapter by Sarah Japp.

This integrated and globalised part of the world was also such in Late Antique times, as stressed by the study by Ralph Pedersen on the Ayla-Aqaba amphorae. This type of amphorae is typical of several sites in the coastal regions of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, as well as in the shipwreck at Black Assarca Island in Eritrea.

Long-distance relations are also reflected in seemingly minor objects such as beads, as shown by Joanna Then-Obluska in her chapter on beads from the small port of Marsa Nakari, on the Egyptian Red Sea coast between Quseir and Berenike. The existence of such broad networks extending from the Red Sea to the Gulf is also reflected in the evidence of Sassanian turquoise-glazed pottery, torpedo vessels and other wares from the Gulf found at the Roman port of Myos Hormos, as shown by Roberta Tomber in her chapter.

From the first century BCE to the third century CE this network extended to India and was open toward the Indian Ocean, as clearly demonstrated in the paper by Sunil Gupta.

So far, Ptolemaic interest in the Red Sea was considered to be limited to the African coast. The chapter by Luigi Gallo, however, shows the progressive extension of the knowledge about western Arabia in Mediterranean sources between the third and the second centuries BCE. This may reflect Ptolemaic interests on the eastern side of the Red Sea, although there is no evidence of ports established by them. The ancient ports of the Arabian coast are still poorly known, but important progress has been made in the last few years thanks to the active support of the Saudi authorities. In his chapter, Michal Gawlikowski illustrates potential ports on the eastern side of the Red Sea, looking for the identification of Leuke Kome, a crucial trade center mentioned by Strabo. He presents in his chapter archaeological evidence of Nabataean involvement in the Red Sea trade. In this period, South Arabia represented a true bridge to India, as shown by the evidence of Indian elements in South Arabian art analysed by Serena Autiero in her chapter.

Most of the traded goods exported from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt to the regions of the southern Red Sea passed through Berenike. This port, which once accommodated large ships used by the Ptolemies to bring African elephants to Egypt, became a bustling port in later times. In his chapter, Steve Sidebotham

summarises the results of the last field seasons of the American-Polish expedition at Berenike, while Martin Hense focuses on the main temple of the town, where fragments of a stele of Amenemhat IV were recently found. He suggests that the port of Berenike may have been used earlier than previously thought. Of course, Berenike in Ptolemaic and Roman times was an ethnic and cultural melting pot, as ports often are. Groups of foreigners may have left their traces as well in the temples, where foreign cults may have been practised, as suggested in the chapter by Iwona Zych and Joanna Rądkowska.

While Aksumite, South Arabian and even Indian cults may have reached Egypt via the Red Sea, Christianity was diffusing to the regions of the southern Red Sea, as shown by Serena Massa and Caterina Giostra in their chapter on the churches brought to light at Adulis, the Aksumite gateway on the Red Sea, where an Eritrean-Italian expedition has resumed the excavation in recent years.

The role of religion as a major factor of interconnection across the Red Sea as well as with the inland regions becomes even more crucial in later periods. The importance of the pilgrimage to Mecca and Jerusalem in mediaeval times is highlighted by Jacke Phillips in her chapter.

From the sixteenth century, Suakin was a major port on the African coast of the Red Sea involved in the transit of pilgrims on their way to Mecca. Not only is its structure highly distinctive, but it may also have inspired the organisation of ports in the Nile basin, such as al-Khandaq, as the chapter by Ahmed Hussein Abdelrahman and Husna Taha Elatta suggests. From that period, the “Suakinese” identity depicted by Shadia Taha in her chapter began to be shaped by the interaction with the sea, and still represents a crucial factor in the life of the present inhabitants of that area of the Sudanese coast.

A similar continuity between the past and the present in the culture of the inhabitants of the coastal regions of the Red Sea is highlighted in the chapter by Lucy Semaan. This emerges from the archaeological and ethnographic evidence of boatbuilding and from the way wood supply was obtained.

As shown by this brief overview of the volume's chapters, the variety and quality of the contributions presented at Procida continued the tradition of previous Red Sea conferences. As in the previous editions, the seventh Red Sea Conference was characterised by the richness of the debate. This clearly demonstrates that research in the Red Sea area represents a specific field of study deserving wider recognition within the scientific community. The potential and crucial role of this research is expressed in overcoming the limits to gain an understanding of the complexity of a reality that has been too often neglected, perhaps due to a rigidity of academic organisation and borders between disciplines. It has also emerged from the chapters collected in this

volume that Red Sea studies are certainly a dynamic field of research, involving an increasing number of specialists of different disciplines.

The scientific committee of the conference involved several specialists of different disciplines: Rodolfo Fattovich, Giorgio Banti, Giuseppe Camodeca, Patrizia Carioti, Giuseppe Cataldi, Riccardo Contini, Anna Filigenzi, Ersilia Francesca, Bruno Genito, Roberta Giunta, Simonetta Graziani, Romolo Loreto, Gianfrancesco Lusini, Adriano Rossi and Luisa Sernicola (all of them from the University “L’Orientale”), and also Ali al-Ghabban (Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, KSA), Abdelrahman Ali Mohamed Rahma (National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan), Dionisius Agius (University of Exeter, UK), Gihane Zaki (Egyptian Academy in Rome), Kathryn A. Bard (Boston University, US), Steven E. Sidebotham (University of Delaware, US), Janet Starkey (British Foundation for the Study of Arabia, UK) and Maurizio Tosi (Università di Bologna, Italy). The editors thank them all for their support and help in all phases of the organisation of the conference as well as in reviewing the abstracts of the proposed presentations. Special thanks go to Ralph Pedersen and Diana Joyce de Falco for the copy-editing of this volume. Our deep gratitude goes to Teddi Dols, Kim Fiona Plas, Daniel Sentance and to the entire editorial staff at Brill who worked so tirelessly to bring this about.

Andrea Manzo and Chiara Zazzaro