

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

Selected Papers of Red Sea Project VII

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The Greeks and the Arabian Coast of the Red Sea

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As is well known, the Greeks discovered the Arabian peninsula only with Alexander the Great; before that, other countries were included in the Greek notion of *Arabia*, namely the southern Near East and eastern Egypt. A real turning point in the geographical knowledge of the Greeks is due to Nearchus' famous journey from the Indus estuary to the Persian Gulf. During that journey a promontory, located in the present Omani peninsula, was observed, and the local guides said that it was *Arabia*.¹ But also the earliest knowledge about the western coast of Arabia, which I will dwell upon, are due to Alexander. Surely, the Arabian exploratory expeditions mentioned in Arrian, *History of Alexander*, 7, 20,² and probably all started in the Persian Gulf, did not reach the Red Sea. However, we learn about another expedition from a passage of Arrian's *Indike*, 43, 7: it started from the Egyptian coast of *Arabios kolpos*, perhaps in order to join the expedition of Hieron of Soli, who was ordered to circumnavigate the peninsula up to the Arabian Gulf; and it sailed along the Arabian coast until the water on board was depleted.³ The interesting point is the distance covered despite the well-known difficulties of navigation along this coast. It is in fact probable, as it is often admitted, that Theophrast's passage refers to the same event. This author reports, not without critical observations, the picking of myrrh and frankincense as it was described by some people who sailed from Heroonpolis.⁴ Therefore, we can deduce that these explorers, sent by Alexander, were the first Greeks who arrived to the so-called Arabia Felix. This can be confirmed by Strabo's reference to the evaluation by "Alexander and

- 1 Arrian, *L'Indike di Arriano*, ed. and trans. N. Biffi (Bari: Edipuglia, 2000), 32, 7. On this problem see S. Bianchetti, "La 'scoperta' della Penisola Arabica nell'età di Alessandro Magno", *Geographia Antiqua* 18 (2009): 153–163.
- 2 Arrian, *History of Alexander*, ed. and trans. W.L. Robson, 11 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).
- 3 On this expedition see P. Hönigmann, *Alexander der Grosse und Arabien* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1985), pp. 81 ff.
- 4 Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, trans. Sir Arthur Hort (London: Heinemann, 1926), 11, 9, 4, 6–8. See N. Biffi, *L'Indike di Arriano* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2000), p. 241.

Anaxicrates' associates⁵ of 14,000 stadia for the length of the *Arabios kolpos* of the Arabian coast.⁶

A wider knowledge of this part of Arabia was possible thanks to the explorations dispatched by the Ptolemies, starting with Ptolemy II. From Diodorus, 3, 42,⁷ we learn about an expedition, probably sent by Ptolemy II – perhaps in connection with the exploration of the African coast in the seventies and sixties of the third century BCE – and guided by a certain Ariston, generally identified with a man with the same name mentioned in Zenon's archive.⁸ Diodorus states that he was dispatched by a Ptolemy to investigate the coast of Arabia as far as the ocean.⁹ Perhaps it is possible to place in the same period (but this is uncertain) the activity of Bion of Soli, who, according to Pliny,¹⁰ would have drawn up a gazetteer of the Arabian coastal towns. The problem of the relationship between the Ptolemies and the opposing Arabian coast has been often widely investigated,¹¹ and it is not my intention to treat it in detail here. I just want to underline some aspects that I believe deserve rethinking: first, the interpretation by Tarn and others that explorations dispatched by Ptolemy II are part of a policy aimed at diverting the trade of aromatics with southern Arabia to the Red Sea and that this policy was also marked by the foundation of trading ports on the Arabian coast. The main argument on which Tarn based his hypothesis was a presumed reference, in the Pithom stele, to an expedition by Ptolemy II in north-western Arabia, in the land of the Nabataeans, in order to fight their piracy, but such an argument, as has been convincingly pointed out, is rather groundless.¹² The presumed Ptolemaic foundations

5 *oi peri Alexandron kai Anaxikrate*: Strabo, *Il Medio Oriente di Strabone: Libro XVI della "Geografia"*, ed. and trans. N. Biffi (Bari: Edipuglia, 2002), 16, 4, 4.

6 On Anaxikrates, who probably guided the expedition, see S. Amigues, "L'expédition d'Anaxikrate en Arabie occidentale", *Topoi* 6 (1996): 671–677.

7 Diodorus, *Diodorus of Sicily*, ed. and trans. C.H. Oldfather, I (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933).

8 *P. Cairo Zen.* 59247.

9 On Ariston see W.W. Tarn, "Ptolemy II and Arabia", *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 15 (1929), pp. 9–25, in part. p. 14; P.M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), I, p. 177; II, p. 300.

10 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, ed. and trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), II, 6, 178.

11 Tarn 1929; Fraser 1972.

12 See Tarn 1929, pp. 9–25. On Tarn's thesis see the critical observations by D. Lorton, "The Supposed Expedition of Ptolemy II to Persia", *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 57 (1971): 160–164, and by U. Fantasia, "L'Egitto tolemaico e la terra degli aromata", in *Profumi d'Arabia*, ed. A. Avanzini (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1997): 395–412, in part. p. 409.

of Berenike-Aelana¹³ and Ampelone – a Milesian colony according to Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 6, 159, conventionally located near the site of Leuke Kome (perhaps the modern site of Aynunah) – are both attested by isolated evidence, and are not attested in other sources, such as the descriptions I will analyse later.¹⁴ Therefore, a permanent Greek presence along the western coast of Arabia in the third century is extremely uncertain. Second, we can think – and I would like to concentrate on this aspect – that the Greeks acquired a more extensive knowledge of Arabia only at a later age than Ptolemy II, probably as a consequence of new explorations. As a matter of fact, we have descriptions of western Arabia dating back to different ages, so we can deduce how geographical knowledge became more extensive between the third and the second centuries by comparing them.

The first description occurs in a section of Strabo's book 16, from paragraph 2 to paragraph 4 of chapter 4.¹⁵ This is interesting because the author states that he is reporting Eratosthenes' *apophaseis*. Eratosthenes, the famous geographer, was in fact active at the Alexandrian court in the third century, at the time of Ptolemy III, so he could have read the reports of the Ptolemaic explorations of that time, although he could also have known information from merchants.¹⁶ The indication we can deduce is quite clear: I believe that there were still many gaps in the geographical knowledge of Arabia at that time. After referring to the extension of the region on the basis of the distance between Heroonpolis and Babylon – two places connected by a long-frequented caravan route – Eratosthenes examines the peoples, merely mentioning those who were established in the north (the Nabataeans, Chaulotaeans and Agraeans)¹⁷ and in the far south-west (the Minaeans, Sabaeans, Cattabanians and Chatramotitae); as

13 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, ed. and trans. R. Marcus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), III, 8, 163.

14 On Ampelone see Tarn 1929, pp. 21–22; Fraser 1972, I, p. 177; for a different view see Fantasia 1997, pp. 411–412; for a location on the Mesopotamian side of Arabia see H. von Wissmann, "Zamareni", *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft. Supplementband: XI Abregila bis Zengisa* (1968), col. 1334. On the location of Leuke Kome see M.L. Ingraham et al., "Saudi Arabian Comprehensive Survey Program: Preliminary Report on a Reconnaissance Survey of the Northwestern Province", *Atlat* 5 (1981): 59–84; D. Nappo, "On the Location of Leuke Kome", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 23 (2010): 335–348.

15 On Strabo's description of Arabia see H.I. Macadam, "Strabo, Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy of Alexandria: Three Views of Ancient Arabia and Its People", in *L'Arabie préislamique et son environnement historique et culturel*, ed. T. Fahd (Leiden: Brill 1989), pp. 297–301.

16 On Eratosthenes' description of Arabia see J. Retso, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 302 ff.

17 On Chaulotaeans and Agraeans see N. Biffi, *Il Medio Oriente di Strabone: Libro XVI della "Geografia"* (Bari: Edipuglia 2002), p. 261.

for the rest, he refers, in generic terms, to the presence of *Skenitai*. Only the treatment of the south-west part, Arabia Felix, is more detailed. This country is characterised by fabulous features both in terms of richness of territory – thanks to the rainfall regime, two harvests per year are possible, as in India – and political institutions. As a matter of fact, the description of the transmission system of the reign is curious: the throne goes to the one among the nobles' children who was born first, after the proclamation of the new king. This information is in contrast to what is said after, in 16, 4, 25 – that in the reigns of Arabia Felix the royal family's firstborn succeeds the throne; here, Strabo is obviously following a different source. Also the mention of the aromatics trade route from Minean territory to Aelana – with no reference to a presumed new name of this town – and from Chatramotitis (Hadramaut) to Gerrha, on the east coast, is worth noting: the fact that distances are measured by days of journey suggests that the information is based on the merchants' experience. In conclusion, if we consider Strabo's report, we can deduce that Eratosthenes' description did not include the southern region, east of the four realms (references occurring in 16, 4, 4, of a cinnamon-bearing country concern not the South Arabian coast but the African coast);¹⁸ moreover, Eratosthenes' description did not include the west coast between the Nabataeans and Arabia Felix.

Nevertheless, at the end of the section derived from Eratosthenes, Strabo himself underlines the need to complete this image of Arabia with information provided by other authors; therefore, still in book 16, he inserts a further and distinct treatment dedicated to Arabia (16, 4, 18–19), whose source is a more recent author than Eratosthenes: Artemidorus of Ephesus, the famous geographer of the second half of the second century who was also connected to the Alexandrian milieu. The different chronology of Artemidorus' description is of great interest: the comparison between the two sections evidences the progress in the geographical knowledge achieved in the sources of the later phase. As a matter of fact, unlike Eratosthenes, Artemidorus makes a circumstantial description of the west coast, starting from the north, precisely from the so-called Poseidion, on the east coast of the Sinai peninsula.¹⁹ After describing the Garindaeans and the Nabataeans, who are said to practice piracy – a phenomenon not mentioned by Eratosthenes – Artemidorus examines the various stretches of coast, underlining their local features. Furthermore, it is worth noting the reference to sailing difficulties because of the lack of ports and harbours, as well as the accurate description of the Carmothas port, maybe the

18 Fantasia 1997, pp. 398–399.

19 On the Poseidion see also Diodorus, 3, 42, 1. On its location see Fraser 1972, II, p. 300.

present Mahar, which, he said, was not very functional because of the narrow and dangerous access;²⁰ he also mentions the people and the kind of economy they practised. However, Strabo himself admits to having not reported the name of these tribes – he only mentions the Debae – because of the oddity of the pronunciations and the insignificance of these communities. As for Arabia Felix, Artemidorus concentrated on the Sabaeans (16, 4, 19), proving, also in this case, that he got more detailed information than Eratosthenes, who did not distinguish them from the other peoples of the same region. Concerning the Sabaeans, described as the inhabitants of some kind of a promised land, the author points out their great wealth, derived from the various types of aromatics produced in their territory (see the reference to the great quantity of gold and silver jewels, as well as to the rich decoration of their houses with golden, silver and ivory mosaic pictures), but he points out also the laziness deriving from this wealth, according to a widespread topos recurring also in Roman sources.²¹ This seems to be contradicted by the remark, mentioned in the text, that most of the population either cultivated the land or were devoted to the trade of local spices and of those coming from Ethiopia, from where the Sabaeans used to pick them up, crossing the strait in leather boats. The author then alights on the figure of the king, who lives in Mariaba (the topographic remark about the position of the town on a wooded mountain is lacking in Eratosthenes), and he mentions a curious rule according to which the sovereign is forbidden from leaving his palace because otherwise he would be stoned.²² It is worth noting also, in Artemidorus' description, the mention of the Acila promontory facing Deire (Strabo, 16, 4, 5), where at the time of Pliny and of the *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea* is attested the presence of a centre functioning as a stopover before sailing to India.²³ In short, the method of juxtaposing the sources followed by Strabo (who dedicates a further section on Arabia from 4, 21, to 4, 27, not discussed here) is extremely useful for us because it shows that geographical knowledge surely increased between the third and the second centuries. Therefore, there is no reason to think – as Tarn pretended – that the description of Artemidorus was still largely based on the reports

20 On Carmothas port see Biffi 2002, pp. 303–304.

21 See e.g., Vergilius, *Georgiche*, 1, 57, ed. and trans. H.R. Fairclough (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1916) (*molles Sabaei*), and Catullus, ed. and trans. F.W. Cornish, J.P. Postgate, J.W. Mackail (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1913), 11, 5, where it is referred in general to the Arabs.

22 Analogous taboos are mentioned in *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer. See Biffi 2002, p. 306.

23 Pliny 1942, II, 6, 104; L. Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 25.

describing the explorations during the time of Ptolemy II ("that its kernel dates from c. 280 does not seem to have been grasped"²⁴).

Such a conclusion is further confirmed if, leaving Strabo, we consider another description that goes back to a source of the second century and that was used by Artemidorus himself: Agatharchides of Cnidus. This author was active for some time at the court of Alexandria, from which it seems he was forced to escape, and wrote – in addition to some lost historical works – a treatise in five books, *On the Red Sea*, which is known thanks to both Photius and a large section of the third book of Diodorus. This treatise, as has often been pointed out, and as I have also argued in a previous contribution, is more complex than just a work of geography and ethnography.²⁵ The text by Agatharchides concerning the peoples of Arabia, as well as that on the populations of the African coast of the Red Sea, is strongly influenced by a somehow idealised vision of the "primitive" communities, the well-known myth of the noble savage, who lives according to the state of nature and who is not subject to the degeneration caused by civilisation; nevertheless, it is still of significant interest for us because it was based on the consultation of documents kept in the archives of Ptolemaic Alexandria. However, the fact that in a passage from Diodorus (probably derived from Agatharchides, 3, 42), the above-mentioned expedition of Ariston is quoted does not decisively prove that the information contained in the *Treaty* dates in large part to Ariston's exploration report.²⁶

Interestingly, if we examine the description of Arabia in Diodorus, 3, 43–47, which goes back precisely to our author, we can see that also in this case an accurate description of the west coast is made, as well as of a number of communities that come after the Nabataeans, those deliberately overlooked by Strabo, as we have seen. Noteworthy are the points in common with Strabo's section dating to Artemidorus, although there are some significant differences. For example, Agatharchides describes the harbour of Carmothas with obvious admiration for the beautiful landscape and for its comfortable entrance, even describing it as "the fairest of any which have come to be included in history" and comparing it to the *cothon* of Carthage. Artemidorus, in contrast, perhaps influenced by the experience of some merchants, states that it was not a functional but a dangerous harbour because of its narrow entrance. Above

²⁴ Tarn 1929, p. 14.

²⁵ On Agatharchides from Cnidus see L. Gallo, "Appunti per un riesame di Agatharchide di Cnido", *Hormos: Rivista di storia antica* 3 (2011): 168–176. On the use of Agatharchides by Artemidorus see Fraser 1972, I, pp. 549–550.

²⁶ See Tarn 1929, p. 14 (Ariston wrote a *Periplus* that was utilised by Agatharchides for his account of the Arabian coast); *contra* Fraser 1972, II, p. 300. On the presumed utilisation of Ariston's report by Agatharchides see also Retso 2003, p. 295 ff.

all, it seems that in Agatharchides the ethnographic interest was much more marked. In fact, when dealing with the Debae,²⁷ Agatharchides describes them as a group culturally underdeveloped, relying exclusively on the breeding of camels, from which they also drew nourishment (milk), and unable to exploit the presence of a river that carried gold dust; however, he also focuses on a somehow curious detail not mentioned by Artemidorus: the preference of the Debae for foreigners coming from Boeotia and Peloponnesus because of an ancient local legend about friendship between Heracles and their tribe, a tradition that, according to Tarn, could in some way be connected to the Ptolemies, who used to mention Heracles among their ancestors.²⁸ The topos of primitivism also recurs in the description of the peoples living near the Debae, the Alilaei and the Gasandi,²⁹ inhabiting a gold-bearing area – the modern region of Mahd al-Dhahab – well known also through sources of later periods (some mediaeval traditions situate here the legendary gold mines of King Solomon). These peoples, according to Agatharchides, lived in an extremely fertile land of excellent quality, producing all kinds of fruit, but, for their lack of experience in farming, were not able to benefit from this condition. As regards the gold, which they collected in natural tunnels in the ground, they were so unaware of its great value that they used it simply as an ornament for their wrists and necks, and exchanged it for equal parts of copper and iron, of which they were short. Moving to Arabia Felix, rich from aromatics, the remark that the fragrances were felt even by those that sail along the coast is significant, among other things, because it highlights the important role of maritime explorations in providing information on these regions. Agatharchides, as well as Artemidorus, focuses exclusively on the Sabaeans. I will not dwell on this description, which largely agrees with that of Artemidorus, regarding both the high level of prosperity of the population and the political institutions (as, for example, the references to the rich decoration of the houses or to the rule that prohibits the king leaving the palace because otherwise he will be stoned).³⁰ I will only point out a significant aspect of the cultural approach of the author – namely the interpretation he gives of the privileged status of the Sabaeans. Their fortune, according to Agatharchides, was due to the fact that, living in peripheral geographical areas, they were protected from looting and robbery, and, having everything they needed, without needing to get it from

27 Diodorus 1933, 3, 45, 4–5.

28 See Tarn 1929, p. 15.

29 Diodorus 1933, 3, 45, 6–8.

30 On the Agatharchides description of the Sabaeans see J. Pirenne, *Le royaume sud-arabe de Qatabân et sa datation d'après l'archéologie et les sources classiques jusqu'au Périple de la Mer Erythrée* (Louvain: Bibliothèque du Muséon, 1961), pp. 81 ff.; Fraser 1972, 1, pp. 544–545.

outside, they were totally unrelated to those who, for their greed, believed that wealth is owned by whoever finds it. (This statement has often been considered a polemic reference to Roman imperialism, but I think that this opinion is groundless.)³¹ This judgement can be compared with the one concerning the different fate of the Nabataeans, who lost their primitive innocence because of the policy of the Ptolemies. In fact the author states that, while they formerly lived piously, happy with the food produced by the cattle, later they started piracy, thus abandoning the state of nature after the kings of Alexandria had made the sea navigable for merchants; they not only attacked the shipwrecked but also preyed upon voyagers, until, caught in the open sea by some quadriremes, they were punished as they deserved.³² Now, most scholars place the repression of Nabataean piracy by the Ptolemies at the time of Ptolemy II. Although without a particular resonance, other interpretations were proposed; for example, some scholars have placed this event at the time of Ptolemy VIII, as suggested by a well-known inscription *OGIS*, 132, dating to that age and attesting that a Cretan commander of ships was in charge of protecting trade convoys in the Red Sea.³³ I think that there is no reason to place the Ptolemaic war against Nabataean piracy in the third century and that a date to the second century is, instead, much more likely also in light of what has been said here.

Coming to some brief conclusions, I believe that a more pronounced Ptolemaic interest in western Arabia and an attempt to divert the trade of aromatics to the Red Sea should not be earlier than the second century. This is also the period when, as a result, the piracy of the Nabataeans developed because the caravan trade from which they usually benefitted was now damaged by the new Ptolemaic policy. However, it is unlikely that, as Bowersock has asserted, such a change may be connected with the discovery by the Greeks of the regime of the monsoons, because this should be later than the end of

31. On the problem see Gallo 2011, p. 176.

32. Diodorus 1933, 3, 43.

33. The opinion according to which Nabataean piracy was fought by Ptolemy II is widespread: see e.g., Fraser 1972, I, p. 177; M. Rostovzev, *Storia economica e sociale del mondo ellenistico* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1966), I, pp. 407–408; S.E. Sidebotham, *Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa, 30 BC–AD 217* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), p. 6; M.E. Abd-El-Ghany, "The Arabs in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt Through Papyri and Inscriptions", *Egitto e storia antica dall'ellenismo all'età araba: Bilancio di un confronto*, ed. L. Criscuolo and G. Geraci (Bologna: Clueb 1989), pp. 233–234; F. De Romanis, *Cassia, cinnamomo, ossidiana: Uomini e merci tra Oceano Indiano e Mediterraneo* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1996), p. 131. For a different view see H. Kortenbeutel, *Der ägyptische Süd und Osthandel in der Politik der Ptolemäer und römischer Kaiser* (Berlin: Hoffman, 1931), p. 45; Fantasia 1997, p. 407. About *OGIS* 132 see Fraser 1972, II, p. 309.

the second century.³⁴ I think that the key factor is a well-known event: the loss of Coele Syria by the Ptolemies after the fifth Syrian war, as that region was the northern terminal of the caravan trade routes from southern Arabia.³⁵ As a result of this analysis, it is only in the second century that geographical knowledge about Arabia starts to be more detailed. This can also add a piece of evidence for building a different picture of the Ptolemaic policy towards the Arabian peninsula.

34 See G.W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 21. On the problem of the discovery of the monsoons see Fraser 1972, I, p. 181 ff.; De Romanis 1996, p. 141 ff.

35 The testimony of Zenon's archive is significant in this regard: see Rostovzev 1966, I, p. 407.