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

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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 Nearcocus, a 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 Theophrastus’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 Heroponopolis.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

Anaxikrates' associates\(^5\) 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 Arabic 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 it has been convincingly pointed out, is rather groundless.\(^12\) The presumed Ptolemaic foundations

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\(^8\) P. Cairo Zen. 59247.


\(^11\) Tarn 1929; Fraser 1972.


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of Berenike-Aelana\textsuperscript{13} 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 Hermonpolis 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, Chauloteaeans and Agraeans)\textsuperscript{17} and in the far south-west (the Mineaeans, Sabaeans, Cattabanians and Chatramotitae); as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, ed. and trans. R. Marcus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), 111, 8, 163.
\item \textsuperscript{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.
\end{itemize}
for the rest, he refers, in generic terms, to the presence of Skenítai. Only the
treatment of the south-west part, Arabia Felix, is more detailed. This coun-
try – 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 aro-
matics 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 con-
cern not the South Arabian coast but the African coast);¹⁸ moreover, Eratos-
thenes’ 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 geogra-
pher 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 pro-
gress 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 phe-
omenon not mentioned by Eratosthenes – Artemidorus examines the vari-
ous stretches of coast, underlining their local features. Furthermore, it is worth
noting the reference to sailing difficulties because of the lack of ports and har-
bours, as well as the accurate description of the Carmothas port, maybe the

¹⁹ On the Poseidion see also Diodorus, 3, 42, 1. On its location see Fraser 1972, 11, p. 300.
present Mahar, which, he said, was not very functional because of the narrow and dangerous access.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Periplus of the Eritrean Sea} is attested the presence of a centre functioning as a stopover before sailing to India.\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{20} On Carmothas port see Biffi 2002, pp. 303–304.


\textsuperscript{22} Analogous taboos are mentioned in \textit{The Golden Bough} by James Frazer. See Biffi 2002, p. 306.

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

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. 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.

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 Carthage 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 *cithaeron* 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.

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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, 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. The topos of primitivism also recurs in the description of the peoples living near the Debae, the Alilaei and the Gasandi, inhabiting a gold-bearing area – the modern region of Mahd al-Dhabab – 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). 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.
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.) 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. 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. 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

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31 On the problem see Gallo 2011, p. 176.
32 Diodorus 1933: 3: 43.
the second century.\textsuperscript{34} I think that the key factor is a well-known event: the loss of Coelesyria by the Ptolemies after the fifth Syrian war, as that region was the northern terminal of the caravan trade routes from southern Arabia.\textsuperscript{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.


\textsuperscript{35} The testimony of Zenon’s archive is significant in this regard: see Rostovzev 1966, i, p. 407.