



Review

S.E. SIDEBOTHAM

BERENIKE AND THE ANCIENT MARITIME SPICE ROUTE

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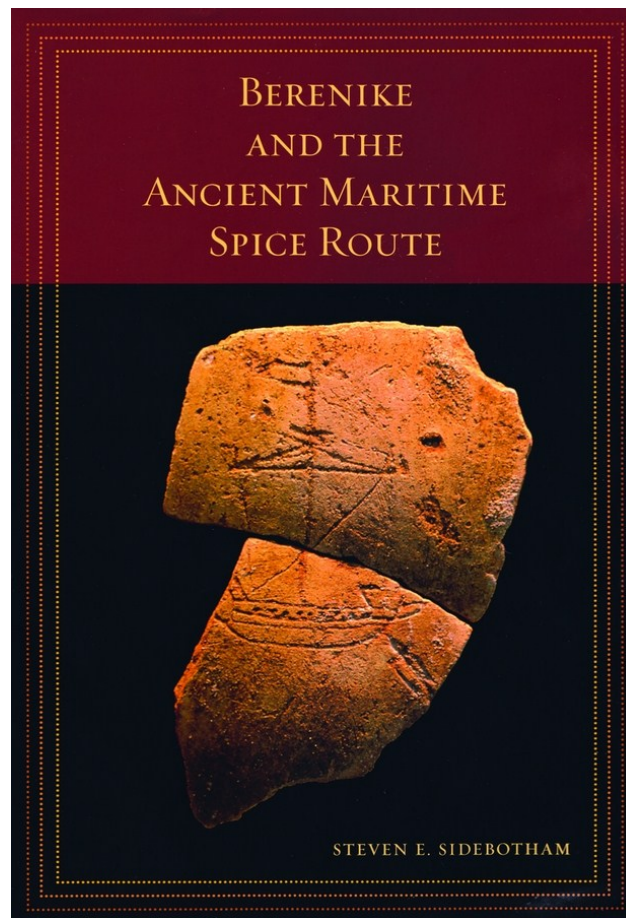
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Founded in the third century B.C.E. by Ptolemaic authorities on the Red Sea shore of the Egyptian Eastern Desert, Berenike Trogydytika served as a vital entrepôt in the Ptolemaic and Roman era Maritime Spice Route for eight centuries. Drawing on ten seasons of excavation and subsequent analysis, Steven E. Sidebotham provides a compelling account of the history, growth, and significance of this remote site and its inhabitants in *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*.

Sidebotham does more than report findings of a long-term archaeological investigation, which began in 1994; he advances a synthesis of a wide swath of available evidence underscoring Berenike's role in local, regional, and global economies over an approximately 800-year period. While the primary temporal foci of this work lie in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, the author tangentially considers evidence of all periods that relate to the site, from the Archaic and Early Dynastic periods to the history of early modern archaeologists and tourists. He frames Berenike



as a conduit in a maritime trade system that connected cultures in and around the Mediterranean, Nile Valley, Sub-Saharan Africa, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean (and, rarely, the Persian Gulf), extending as far west as Mauretania and possibly as far east as the island of Java.

The work represents an impressive effort, especially considering that only about two percent of the surface of the site has been excavated (p. 222). Equally impressive is Sidebotham's candid analysis of the material presented in light of this point: the author directly and indirectly identifies numerous matters in need of further research. Anyone interested in maritime interconnections, commerce, military strategy, or daily life can find inspiration for future research here.

In each of the book's 13 thematic chapters Sidebotham presents a thorough examination

of a topic, which is integrated into the broader discussion of Berenike. The first two chapters provide a general introduction and the geographical and cultural context necessary to under

-stand the site. The remainder addresses critical aspects of establishing and maintaining a relatively remote outpost and its direct role in ancient maritime trade.

Through chapter 1, Sidebotham concisely places Berenike in its broader context as one of many hubs in the ancient Old World economic network, specifically touching on the relationship between Nilotic and Red Sea emporia. As expected from its title, “Geography, Climate, Ancient Authors, and Modern Visitors,” the second chapter merges an historical account of the site with a sense of personal understanding of what it might have been like to live or excavate at Berenike. These first two chapters adequately prepare any reader to delve into the remainder of the work.

Chapter 3, “Pre-Roman Infrastructure in the Eastern Desert,” surveys and describes many known roads and way stations in the Eastern Desert. Here Sidebotham addresses some of the practical concerns that must have faced travelers who made the crossing, including matters of security, travel aids (e.g., maps and guides), and the availability of water. Significant detail and citations are provided regarding pharaonic endeavors in this expanse of desert.

The origins, trade networks, and possible destinations of elephants, elephant-related goods, gold and minerals, and, of course, spices form the core of chapter 4, which examines diplomatic, military, and commercial activities during the Ptolemaic period. Taxes and other scourges—such as Nabataean “pirates”—are discussed. Preferable timing and possible durations of voyages both to and from foreign ports are offered. The “size, layout, and building methods and materials used to create the port’s infrastructure and how these changed over the life of the city” (p. 55) in Ptolemaic and Early Roman times undergo examination in chapter 5. Pirates, plague, and the *Periplus* figure prominently in Sidebotham’s understanding of the port’s economic downturn during the late second and third centuries C.E. Berenike’s hinterland, described briefly in this chapter, is expected to be the focus of future fieldwork.

Chapter 6 examines “those who lived in Berenike in the Roman period, their professions, religious practices, and the languages they wrote and, likely, spoke” (p. 68), as well evidence of diet, ethnicity, and social status of the various residents. Residents came to this port from throughout the ancient world, including Egypt, the Mediterranean region, Nabataea, Axum, Sub-Saharan Africa, and southern Arabia. Various Indian and Sinhalese contemporaries visited but likely returned home with the August monsoons. Pottery ostraka, papyri, stone inscriptions, plaster amphora stoppers, and other objects provide textual evidence, which covers a variety of topics (customs records, public documents, military involvement in the city’s water supply, personal correspondence, bills of sale, etc.).

The concern regarding water faced by travelers passing through the Eastern Desert to the Red Sea, raised in chapter 4, comes to the forefront in chapter 7. Here the author identifies methods and agents of water acquisition, storage, protection, and distribution both in the desert and at the ports. Ptolemaic and Roman systems are compared with pharaonic. The implications of the different needs of humans, including irrigation and industry, and animals for water supply and use are explored.

An impressive accomplishment of Sidebotham’s research appears in chapter 8, “Nile-Red Sea Roads,” a survey of the major ancient overland routes that linked Berenike with contemporary towns and outposts. The tables of major Ptolemaic and Roman roads and stations/stops in the Eastern Desert (which include site name, site type, dates, and distances) contain a gold mine of information. Roman settlements, including military sites and quarries, in the Eastern Desert also receive detailed discussion.

Berenike was only one of many emporia in antiquity. Chapter 9 compares roughly contemporary locations, some of which have not been identified archaeologically, that may have interacted with Berenike in some way. Among these are as Ampelome/Ampelone (as yet unlocated), Leuke Home/Albus Portus (possibly in Saudi Arabia), Cleopatra/Arsinoë/Clysmia/Islamic Qolzoum (another ancient harbor not yet uncovered; future work is planned), the Nile-Red Sea canal, and several other ports: Abu Sha’ar, Philoteris (unlocated), Myos Hormos, Marsa Nakari (Nechesia?), Ptolemais (Epi)Theron (unlocated), Adulis (Gabaza), Opônê (Ras Hafun), and Dioscurida/Dioscurides (Socotra archipelago). Excellent summaries and citations are provided for each location.

Those interested in the ships and shipping that passed through Berenike’s harbor will find the next chapter, entitled “Merchant Ships,” to be tantalizingly brief. However, interspersed throughout the book are valuable discussions of related topics, such as the practicalities of sailing on the Red Sea. The identification of lead sheathing and recycled teak ship timbers is certain to raise interest. Many will welcome Sidebotham’s indication that future work will be conducted in the harbor.

Chapter 11, “Commercial Networks and Trade Costs,” explains Berenike’s role in the webs of communication and commerce, especially after the Roman annexation of Egypt. Sidebotham compares the Maritime Spice Route to the Amber Route, Salt/Slave Route, Silk Road, and Trans-Arabian Incense Route. Of particular importance is the discussion of the Red Sea-Indian Ocean network, which includes consideration of travel time, ship maintenance, banking practices, and tariffs.

Chapter 12, “Trade in Roman Berenike,” examines the city’s peak trading era, which occupied the first century C.E. and

possibly the early part of the second. Archaeological evidence is compared to relevant textual records. Pepper is, in Sidebotham's analysis, the "most noteworthy import" (p. 224), and this spice accompanies sorghum, rice, coconuts, mung beans, and sesame seeds from India. Dozens of other imported foodstuffs and botanical finds are noted, including timber and cloth. The author discusses inorganics, such as glass for export, rocks, marble, precious and semiprecious stones. Luxury trade is briefly addressed as well.

Following its economic peak, Berenike experienced an ebb and flow in its activity and significance; ultimately the city was abandoned, probably in the first half of the sixth century C.E. Chapter 13, "Late Roman Berenike and Its Demise," offers a combination of factors for the decreasing significance of the port, uncontrolled silting of the harbor and the continual expense of maintaining the port's inhabitants being key. Located far from the "new" centers of habitation at its nadir, the city seems to have escaped the "harvesting" often associated with sites in demise.

Criticisms of the volume are few and minor. While the published arrangement flows logically when the reader consumes the work in its entirety, the text could have been improved by organizing chapters in thematic sections. For example, chapters 4, 11, and 12 might have been grouped into "Commerce" and chapters 7-10 drawn together as "Interconnections," with chapters 2, 5, and 6 as, perhaps, "People and Environment." Such themes may have allowed readers with specialized interests to locate relevant material with greater ease and less worry that a

seemingly unrelated chapter might, in fact, contain pertinent information or discussion. Nevertheless, only the regular internal citations (e.g., "see chapter 8") prevent each chapter from standing essentially on its own.

Attention to detail in the production of the book is evident. The images, which are printed in black and white, are generally sharp, appropriately sized for ease of viewing, and include clear notation of relative size or a scale with units. For some images, especially those depicting graffiti, greater contrast would have been useful. The maps, by M. Hense, are excellent, and could be of great value for educational purposes, especially if provided in color. The index is extremely effective given the range of evidence included. Similarly, the extensive bibliography, which runs 68 pages, is a worthy resource unto itself. It is a struggle to find significant resources that have been overlooked.

In summary, readers of this journal and others interested in Ptolemaic and Roman maritime commerce, general trade, military organization, ports, daily life and interconnections in and around Egypt are likely to find *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route* an interesting, informative, and valuable volume. While the route itself "was never a major competitor of the more northerly and more famous terrestrial route" (pp. 2-3), Sidebotham's treatment demands that the Maritime Spice Route be considered a significant and complementary partner to the Silk Road.¹

Notes

¹ Some color images and recent project updates can be found at <http://www.pcma.uw.edu.pl/index.php?id=723&L=2>. See also the project's previous page <http://www.archbase.com/berenike/english1.html>.