

**Steven E. SIDEBOTHAM**, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011, 456 pp., ISBN 978-0-52-024430-6, \$ 55.00.

Many scholars have pondered the subject of Rome's Eastern trade, which remains perennially controversial and continues to baffle its researchers. The relative dearth of archaeological data and inaccessibility of many sites make the thorough investigation of this problem difficult at best. Steven E. SIDEBOTHAM [= S.], an archaeologist renowned for his excavations in Egypt's Eastern Desert, has recently published *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, a work that inspects the dynamics of Eastern trade from the viewpoint of those inhabiting Berenike. An extremely remote trading settlement on the shores of the Red Sea, Berenike Troglodytica (Egyptian Baranis) nevertheless managed to thrive, sustained by enormous quantities of Western and Eastern goods that went through its harbours. S. presents the growth of Berenike as a result of the interplay of environmental, economic and political factors. The author effortlessly connects local events with larger developments within the Empire and beyond its borders, proving that the microhistory approach can indeed elucidate more general happenings.

The first two chapters constitute an introduction to the site itself and the surrounding region. In the first chapter, "Introduction" (pp. 1–6), S. defines the significant role Berenike played in the Maritime Spice Route, via which frankincense, myrrh and black peppercorns were imported into the Mediterranean. In the second chapter, "Geography, Climate, Ancient Authors, and Modern Visitors" (pp. 7–20), we find a lucid description of the factors enumerated above, setting the background for the analysis to follow. The author begins with a thorough discussion of geographical conditions in the Eastern Desert. S. depicts the winds and currents of the Red Sea and the desert flash floods: these sudden downpours replenish desert water table but promote bay silting through sediment accumulation, simultaneously fostering and hindering the development of the harbour in Berenike. In the subsequent part, the archaeologist enumerates and discusses briefly Ptolemaic and Roman authors who mentioned Berenike and goes on to summarise the history of the exploration of the site.

The next four chapters are devoted to the so-called early period in the history of Berenike – that is, the Ptolemaic and Early Roman periods – which culminated in the era of its greatest prosperity in the second half of the first century CE. Chapter three ("Pre-Roman Infrastructure in the Eastern Desert", pp. 21–31) initially analyses pre-Ptolemaic desert travel, to turn then to the Ptolemaic desert installations that supplied travellers with water and other necessities of life. The following chapter ("Ptolemaic Diplomatic-Military-Commercial Activities", pp. 32–54) expounds intricacies of the Ptolemaic exploration of the Eastern Desert, the two main goods to be procured being Nubian gold and elephants. Initiating a lengthy discussion about the difficulties involved in hunting and sea transport of these pachyderms, the author speculates about the role Berenike played in elephant transport. The fifth chapter ("Ptolemaic and Early Roman Berenike and Environs", pp. 55–67) entails the enumeration of archaeological finds in the city itself. The author describes lingering architectural remains, artefacts and ecofacts found in Berenike, providing a constant commentary about the city's development in the Ptolemaic and Early Roman periods; additionally, the hinterland desert installations are discussed. In chapter six ("Inhabitants of Berenike in Roman Times", pp. 68–86), the social make-up of Berenike's citizens is analysed. As S. demonstrates, the city was an ethnic melting pot, housing, among others, inhabitants of Arabic, Indian, Greek, Roman and Egyptian extraction, all these groups differing slightly in dietary and religious practices.

The following five chapters present the bigger picture: the author adopts a wider perspective, analysing the generalia of life in the Eastern Desert and the spice trade Berenike took part in. An exposition of water in the Eastern Desert is provided in chapter seven, "Water in the Desert and the Ports" (pp. 87–124). Among other things, the chapter provides a wealth of detail about

issues such as liquid requirements for animals and humans or water procurement and distribution methods; interestingly, the author briefly touches on the issue of water pollution that must have accompanied human activities in the desert. In turn, chapter eight, “Nile–Red Sea Roads” (pp. 125–174), presents the dense network of routes and stations that linked Red Sea ports with the Nile valley breadbasket. Matters given particular attention are physical appearance of roads and settlements and types into which they may be classified. Beginning with chapter nine, S. examines the particulars of trade on the Indian Ocean littoral. The chapter “Other Emporia” (pp. 175–194) focuses on remaining trade ports within and beyond the Roman Empire, strewn along the shores of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. A map at the beginning of the chapter presents the position of all significant emporia; subsequently, S. discusses the probable sites of every emporium and enumerates their chief export products. Vessels that frequented the said ports are discussed in the “Merchant Ships” chapter (pp. 195–205), where the author analyses several aspects of these ships – such as design, seaworthiness and cargo capabilities – in respect to archaeological remains found at Berenike. These chapters set a frame of reference for the eleventh chapter, “Commercial Networks and Trade Costs” (pp. 206–220), in which S. investigates the issue of the trade balance between the East and the West that vexed many a scholar in the past. S. effectively demonstrates that both sides in the trade must have had gains, as no one would engage in trade that benefitted one side only. The final part of the book once again concentrates on archaeological data. The twelfth chapter, “Trade in Roman Berenike” (pp. 221–258) presents the finds of goods imported from the East in the Berenikean strata and the final, thirteenth chapter “Late Roman Berenike and Its Demise” (pp. 259–282) briefly summarises the century of renewed prosperity for Berenike that started circa 350 CE and reasons for the settlement’s subsequent abandonment.

What constitutes perhaps the main advantage of this work is its author’s versatility. S. masterfully embeds the finds at Berenike in the context of the Maritime Spice Route trade, drawing deftly from archaeological and literary sources to illustrate his points. His mastery over his interdisciplinary field is nothing short of amazing: he is deeply conversant with sources as diverse as modern hydrological data, *ostraka*/petroglyphs, *periploi*, ancient trade documents and food remains. As a highly experienced Eastern Desert excavator, S. is able to provide introductory reading for those unfamiliar with the specifics of that region. At the same time, he can seamlessly move into more arcane subjects, effortlessly linking what the reader has already learnt with novel developments in the field. What attracted my attention was the significant stagnation Berenike in S.’s view experienced in the later second and third centuries CE. The author convincingly demonstrates that the late Roman Berenike was not the same settlement that enjoyed its first *floruit* during the latter part of the first century CE. The earlier settlement was militarised and heavily dependent on the Nile Valley supplies. It was a temporary town for transient merchants who traded in Eastern commodities, with the government providing military protection and life essentials, but in turn levying heavy taxes on the transported cargoes. As such, Berenike accepted goods from almost all regions of the Mediterranean, acting as a meeting point of the Western and Eastern trade routes. The later settlement differed in many aspects from the previous one. The Late Roman Berenike was much more self-sustainable than in the previous, government-subsidised phase. The military presence in the area waned and contacts with the Nile valley became sporadic. Without the constant influx of Greco-Roman prospectors, the native, nomadic element began to predominate within the population. These newcomers were not passing merchants, but local Blemmye tribesmen who wished to settle. Eastern trade continued, but for personal – not governmental – gain; curiously enough, the Late Roman Berenike very rarely received goods from the western regions of the Mediterranean, even though the Western and Eastern portions of the Empire continued to trade. These observations of S. provide the context from which one may infer the general condition of Egypt at the dawn of the mediaeval era: increasing isolation and social pressures, combined with environmental factors, brought on the onset of transformation.

As for faults in the author’s work, they are negligible and their seriousness depends on the personal taste of the reader. S. often reiterates previously made points, at times copying verbatim

his previous sentences. It may be argued that this is done for the sake of clarity, but I must admit I found these repetitions jarring and unnecessarily padding out the already sizeable book. Of course, a balance between clarity and redundancy is notoriously difficult to achieve: some readers may appreciate these reiterations. Besides a small number of typing errors, the text is in pristine condition: the language flows smoothly and the author ensures that every foreign or obscure word is clarified. The book contains several maps and photographs to accompany the text. The amount is satisfactory; nonetheless, I would like to see more drawings, because, despite S.'s lucid style, some details of archaeological descriptions remain fuzzy. His previous work, *The Red Land: The Illustrated Archaeology of Egypt's Eastern Desert* (Cairo 2007) contains many sketches that elucidate the finer points of his arguments; it is a pity that *Berenike* does not equal its predecessor in that aspect. Overall, the work is highly commendable: a general introduction to the archaeology of the Eastern Desert of Egypt and the Eastern spice trade, it nevertheless contains a wealth of data many seasoned scholars will find indispensable. One can only wish that more authors would strike the perfect balance between being scholarly and accessible.

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