

On the location of Leuke Kome

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Roman harbours on the Red Sea are described in a number of literary sources, the most important of which are Strabo's *Geographia*, Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, Ptolemy's *Geographia* and the anonymous *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (hereafter *Periplus*). Leuke Kome, Myos Hormos and Berenike were the key commercial hubs on the Red Sea in the 1st and 2nd c. A.D. for trade with India.¹ Myos Hormos and Berenike have been identified and investigated: Berenike was sited just south of the large peninsula of Ras Benas, while Quseir al-Qadim is generally regarded as the site of Myos Hormos (fig. 1).² The exact location of Leuke Kome, however, remains uncertain. Most scholars believe that it should be located in the area of modern Aynuna, c.5 km from the coast at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba;³ surveys of the area have revealed extensive architecture, including a tower and a necropolis.⁴ Although the evidence is meager, this identification is generally accepted. Nevertheless, a few scholars have suggested that Leuke Kome is located farther south. P.-L. Gatier and J.-F. Salles analysed some of the features of Leuke Kome described by the *Periplus* and cautiously suggested locating it at al-Wajh or possibly Qarna.⁵ H. Cuvigny has also suggested al-Wajh on the basis of the description provided by the *Periplus* and the site's geographical setting.⁶ Most recently, J. Hill has posited the identification of al-Wajh with Leuke Kome on the basis of Chinese texts.⁷

The first goal of this article is to explore in greater detail the hypothesis put forward by Gatier and Salles, Cuvigny, and Hill, and to demonstrate that the equation of Leuke Kome with al-Wajh is the best possible one. The second is to show how the location of Leuke Kome can be used to advance our understanding of the development of the Roman port system over time.

The location of Leuke Kome

The two main sources on Leuke Kome are Strabo and the *Periplus*.⁸ In Book 16, Strabo tells the story of Aelius Gallus' failed military expedition which aimed to conquer S Arabia.⁹

1 See Sidebotham 1986a; De Romanis 1996; Young 2001; Tomber 2008.

2 On Berenike and its location, see Sidebotham and Wendrich 1995, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2007; Sidebotham 2002b. On the location of Myos Hormos, see below.

3 Kirwan 1979; Bowersock 1983, 48; Desanges 1984; Sidebotham 1986a, 124-26; Casson 1989, 144; Young 2001, 85-87; Tomber 2008, 68.

4 Ingraham *et al.* 1981, 76-78.

5 Gatier and Salles 1988, 186-87. Their view was accepted by De Romanis 1996.

6 Cuvigny 2003, 28-29.

7 See Hill's translation of the Weilue at <http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/weilue/weilue.html> (Section 16, viewed on Jan. 14, 2010).

8 For the text of the *Periplus*, see Casson 1989; for that of Strabo 16, see Biffi 2002.

9 Strab. 16.4.22-24. Although Gallus' expedition was a failure, it was viewed as a diplomatic success by Augustus, who mentioned it in his *Res Gestae* (26): *Meo iussu et auspicio ducti sunt duo exercitus eodem fere tempore in Aethiopiam et in Arabiam, quae appellatur Eudaemon, maximaequae hostium gentis utriusque copiae caesae sunt in acie et complura oppida capta. In Aethiopiam usque ad oppidum Nabata perventum est, cui proxima est Meroe. In Arabiam usque in fines Sabaeorum processit exercitus ad oppidum Mariba.* On this passage see Buschmann 1991; Jameson 1968; Luther 1999; Marek 1993; Potts 1994; Sidebotham 1986b; von Wissmann 1978.