

# The North Sinai survey and the evidence of transport amphorae for Roman and Byzantine trading patterns

Paul Arthur and Eliezer D. Oren

## Introduction: Northern Sinai

The well-travelled coastal plain of Northern Sinai (fig. 1), the ancient “Ways-of-Horus”, stretching between Wadi Gaza and the Suez Canal, acted as the most vital artery of communication between Egypt and Asia. Because of its strategic and economic importance, the history of North Sinai has been recorded in military annals, in the writings of historians and geographers, as well as on maps and travel itineraries. More information is available from Strabo, the Elder Pliny and Flavius Josephus, or administrative, geographical and cartographic records such as the *Itinerarium Antonini*, the *Notitia Dignitatum*, the *Tabula Peutingeriana* and the Madaba map, as well as the writings of the Fathers of the Church and Rabbinic sources.<sup>1</sup>

In the Persian period the first trading centres (*emporia*) were established along the Sinai coast, forming the nucleus of way-stations and sea-ports that would characterize the North Sinai corridor from Hellenistic times onwards.<sup>2</sup> As early as the Persian period the chief route for river transport was the Pelusiac arm of the Nile, and Pelusium itself at its estuary became the major port for Mediterranean goods. The sources make reference to major coastal stations at Gaza, Raphia, Rhinocolura (El-Arish), Ostrakine (El-Felusiyat), Kasion (El-Gals, Mt Casius), Gerra/Gerrum (Tell el-Mehamadiya), and Pelusium (Tell Farama), as well as Mgdolom (Tell el-Her) and Sile (Tell Abu-Seifeh) further inland. These centres reached the zenith of their prosperity during Roman-Byzantine times (1st-7th c.). Mediterranean trade, particularly in wine and oil, passed through some of these centres. Local economic activity included road and port facilities for passing caravans, military expeditions and pilgrims, and the collection of dues; trading and shipping; and industries such as textiles, glass, ship-building, fishing and fish-preserves (*garum*), large-scale salt-production, growing dates, and hunting quail.<sup>3</sup>

## The North Sinai survey

The North Sinai Expedition, under the direction of E. D. Oren on behalf of Ben Gurion University, conducted a systematic archaeological survey and excavations from 1972 to 1982 over an area of c.2000 km<sup>2</sup> along the coastal plain between the Suez Canal and Raphia. Out of some 1300 settlement sites<sup>4</sup> that the expedition recorded, ranging in date from the Middle Palaeolithic to Mediaeval times, some 730 were represented by material remains of the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods (3rd c. B.C. to 7th c. A.D.), including 347 sites of the Byzantine period. In order to gain closer familiarity with the material culture of the region throughout its history, as well as to obtain a stratigraphically-controlled profile of its ceramic assemblages, some 28 sites were selected for excavation on a larger or smaller scale, and 21 further sites were given priority for intensive surface survey. As a result, the dating of the finds from surface collections is aided by comparanda from assemblages at nearby settlement sites of the same cultural and chronological milieu. The distribution of Byzantine sites shows a noticeable hierarchical clustering along the coast as well as expansions further inland. Types

1. Oren 1993a, and bibliography.

2. Herod. 3.5.

3. Oren 1984; Chartier-Raymond *et al.* 1993; Carrey-Maratray and Defernez 1996.

4. An archaeological site is defined by the North Sinai Survey as any archaeological feature, however small, from town sites to a surface scatter of sherds.