

# The site of Myos Hormos: a view from space

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## Introduction

Myos Hormos on the Red Sea coast of Egypt was undoubtedly one of the great trading cities of the ancient world. With its sister port Berenice, it articulated trade between Rome and the east, commerce which resulted in the import of luxury goods such as spices and silks and the export of Roman fine pottery and wine to India.<sup>1</sup> The objects of this extraordinary trade have recently been reviewed by Sidebotham.<sup>2</sup> The ports were established by Ptolemy II Philadelphus (c.285-246) to facilitate this trade, no doubt because of the problems of sailing up the Red Sea as far as Arsinoe since early sea-craft would have had difficulties in negotiating the strong prevailing northwesterly wind.<sup>3</sup> It was preferable to make a more southerly landfall and to transport goods across the eastern desert to the Nile, whence they could be floated downstream to the Mediterranean. Warmington has argued from the rather slender literary evidence that Myos Hormos was pre-eminent during the 2nd c. B.C., and that Berenice began to rise in importance during the 1st c. B.C. and became the dominant port in the 1st c. A.D.,<sup>4</sup> although Myos Hormos continued in use.

The site of Berenice has been equated with the ruins near Ras Banas since its discovery by Belzoni in 1818; the attribution, supported by inscriptions, is secure.<sup>5</sup> The location of Myos Hormos, however, is more difficult, and a number of possibilities have been considered, including Abu Sha'ar, Ras Abu Soma, Safaga, and Quseir al-Qadim (fig.1). Of these, Abu Sha'ar has proved the most popular; it was regarded as "obvious and certain" by Murray,<sup>6</sup> and "securely located" by Kirwan.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, their confidence was misplaced, for recent excavations directed by S. Sidebotham have shown that the fort thought to be Myos Hormos itself dates between the late 3rd or 4th and the 7th c. A.D., and there is no trace of earlier occupation that might be contemporary with the great period of the port in the 2nd-1st c. B.C. Clearly, as Sidebotham concludes, Myos Hormos must be sought elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

## Myos Hormos and the classical geographers

The identification of the site of Myos Hormos rests on information given in the classical literature; while the references are few, the topographic information is, on the whole, clear and precise, although there is conflicting evidence to be resolved. The earliest description (c.116 B.C.) is that of Agatharchides of Knidos:

Πλησίον δὲ τῆς λίμνης εὐμεγέθει πεδία βεβηκὸς ὄρος ἀναφαίνεται μιλιῶδες, ἄλλην μὲν οὐδεμίαν ὑποδεικνύον ἰδιότητα, χροιάν δὲ τοιαύτην ἀπὸ τῆς κορυφῆς σημαίνον τῆς ἄκρας, ὥστε τῶν ἀτενιζόντων τὰς ὄψεις ἐπὶ πλεόν βλάπτεσθαι. Ἐφεξῆς δὲ λιμὴν μέγας ἐκδέχεται, ὅς πρότερον μὲν

- 1 As demonstrated by Wheeler's 1946 excavations at Arikamedu (*Ancient India* 2 [1946] 17-124), and see p.000 above.
- 2 S. E. Sidebotham, *Roman economic policy in the Erythra Thalassa* (Leiden 1986).
- 3 Cf. A. Lucas, *Red Sea and Indian Ocean cruising guide* (Huntingdon 1985) for an account of modern sailing conditions.
- 4 E. H. Warmington, *Commerce between the Roman empire and India* (London 1928) 6.
- 5 See L. Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton 1989) 94 for a recent review of the evidence.
- 6 G. W. Murray, "The Roman roads and stations in the Eastern Desert of Egypt," *JEA* 11 (1925) 138-50; "Trogoditica: the Red Sea littoral in Ptolemaic times," *GeogJ* 133 (1967) 24-32.
- 7 L. Kirwan, "A Roman shipmaster's handbook," *GeogJ* 147 (1981) 80-85.
- 8 S. E. Sidebotham, "Lure of the desert road," *Archaeology* July-August 1989, 58-60; id., "A limes in the Eastern Desert of Egypt: myth or reality?" in V. A. Maxfield and M. J. Dobson (edd.), *Roman frontier studies 1989. Proceedings of the XVth International Congress* 494-97; S. E. Sidebotham, J. A. Riley, H. A. Hamrroush and H. Barakat, "Fieldwork on the Red Sea coast. The 1987 season," *JARCE* 26 (1989) 131-33; S. E. Sidebotham, R. E. Zitterkopf, and J. A. Riley, "Survey of the 'Abu Sha'ar-Nile road," *AJA* 95 (1991) 571-622.