

Roman attempts to control Eastern Africa

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ABSTRACT

The Roman Empire showed a very distinct interest for the Red Sea area along all its history. This was due to the crucial role played by such region in both military and commercial Roman plans to expand its own influence in the East. The first echo of a military attempt to conquer the north eastern shores of Africa beyond Egypt dates back to the age of Augustus, but it is with Trajan that such project seems to reach a new level of coherence and strategic view. Under the latter, in fact, we have evidence for a climax in the Roman control over the area, which had important consequences on the history of the region for decades ahead.

KEYWORDS

Roman History, Roman army, Trajan, Roman Egypt, Papyrology

Africa outside the limits of the Egyptian area has always been an aim of the Roman emperors since the time of Augustus and his attempt to conquer Ethiopia.¹ Nevertheless, such goal was to remain unachieved for many years to come. In fact, it is only with Trajan and his eastern campaigns that we can see the old ambition becoming somehow real. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on how during the second century CE Romans were able to partially control the north eastern coast of Africa, south of Egypt.

Our sources tell us that in the summer of 116 CE, the emperor Trajan completed his Parthian campaign and reached Spasinou Charax on the shores of the Persian Gulf; when he arrived, he complained that he was not young enough to attempt the conquest of India, as Alexander the Great had done.

Κάντεϋθεν ἐπ' αὐτὸν τὸν ὠκεανὸν ἐλθὼν, τήν τε φύσιν αὐτοῦ καταμαθὼν καὶ πλοίων τι ἐς Ἰνδίαν πλέον ἰδὼν, εἶπεν ὅτι 'πάντως ἂν καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς Ἰνδοὺς, εἰ νέος ἔτι ἦν, ἐπεραιώθην.' Ἰνδοὺς τε γὰρ ἐνενόει, καὶ τὰ ἐκείνων πράγματα ἐπολυπραγμόνει, τὸν τε Ἀλέξανδρον ἐμακάριζε.²

Then he came to the ocean itself, and when he learned its nature and had seen a ship sailing to India, he said: 'I should certainly have crossed over to the Indians, too, if I were still young.' For he started to think about the Indians and was curious about their affairs, and he counted Alexander a lucky man.

This anecdote can be viewed as nothing more than the usual rhetorical *topos* of Roman emperors wishing to emulate Alexander the Great; Trajan was by no means the first to be fascinated by the charismatic Macedonian king.³

On the other hand, an echo of Dio's text might be found in the much later reports of Eutropius, Festus, and Jordanes,⁴ who explicitly tell us of a fleet in the Red Sea established by the emperor (*in mari Rubro classem instituit*) in order to 'conquer' India. If we compare the three accounts it is easy to recognise their great similarity, since they use almost the same words to describe what happened and are likely taken from the same sources.

[Traianus] usque ad Indiae fines et mare Rubrum accessit atque ibi tres provincias fecit, Armeniam, Assyriam, Mesopotamiam, cum his gentibus, quae Madenam attingunt. Arabiam postea in provinciae formam redegit. In mari Rubro classem instituit, ut per eam Indiae fines vastaret.⁵

¹ Augustus, *Res Gestae*, 26. See *infra* for text and comment.

² Cassius Dio, 68.29.1. The translation is taken from the Loeb edition of Cassius Dio, by G.P. Goold.

³ Parker 2008: 223-227.

⁴ A comparison recently made by Parker 2008: 222.

⁵ Eutropius, *Breviarium*, 8, 3.

[Trajan] advanced as far as the boundaries of India, and the Red Sea, where he formed three provinces, Armenia, Assyria, and Mesopotamia, including the tribes which border on Madena. He afterwards, too, reduced Arabia into the form of a province. He also fitted out a fleet for the Red Sea, that he might use it to lay waste the coasts of India.⁶

*Carduenos, Marcomedos obtinuit, Anthemusium, optimam. Persidis regionem, Seleuciam, Ctesiphontem, Babyloniam accepit ac tenuit, usque ad Indiae fines post Alexandrum accessit. In mare rubro classem instituit. Provincias fecit Armeniam, Mesopotamiam, Assyriam quae inter Tigridem atque Euphraten sita inriguis annibus instar Aegypti fecundatur.*⁷

[Trajan] obtained the Carduenians and Marcomedians; received and maintained Anthemusia, Persia's finest region; Seleucia; Ctesiphon; and Babylon; and, after Alexander, even reached the boundaries of India. He established a fleet in the Red Sea. He made Armenia, Assyria, and Mesopotamia into provinces, which, situated between the Tigris and Euphrates, is made equal to Egypt in fecundity by the flooding rivers.⁸

*Traianus pene omnium imperatorum potior regnavit an. xviii m. vi. Hic enim de Dacis Scythisque triumphavit Hiberosque et Sauromatas, Osroenos, Arabas, Bosforanos, Colchos edomuit, postquam ad feritatem prorupissent. Seleuciam et Tesifontem Babyloniamque pervasit et tenuit. Nec non et in mari rubro classem, unde Indiae fines vastaret, instituit ibique suam statuam dedicavit.*⁹

Trajan, more powerful than almost all emperors, reigned for 18 years and 6 months. For this man triumphed over the Dacians and Scythians and subdued the Iberians and Sauromat, the Osdroni, the Arabs, the Bosphorians, the Colchi after they had erupted into anarchy. He invaded and held Seleucia and Ctesiphon and Babylonia. He also established a fleet in the Red Sea whence he might lay waste to the borderlands of India, and consecrated his own statue there.¹⁰

These three accounts present what is likely merely imperial propaganda from the time of Trajan, as they try to link the eastern campaigns to the possibility of conquering India, though they *do* provide some concrete evidence for what actually occurred. Together with this information, they all also state as fact the first-time creation of a fleet in the Red Sea,¹¹ somehow related to a project

⁶ Trans. by the Rev. John Selby Watson. London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Convent Garden (1853).

⁷ Festus, *Rerum gestarum populi romani*, 20.

⁸ Trans. by Thomas M. Banchich and Jennifer A. Meka, Canisius College Translated Texts, Number 2, 2001.

⁹ Jordanes, *Romana*, 267-268.

¹⁰ Trans. by Brian T. Regan, Ph.D.

¹¹ The exact meaning of the sentence *Mare Rubrum* and its Greek equivalent in the ancient sources is not always clear. The phrase can refer to the present day Red Sea, or the Persian Gulf, or even the Indian Ocean. The analysis of the evidence presented in this work would suggest that at least for the sources included here, the *Mare Rubrum* is the Red Sea.

to reach the limits of India. This scenario is contradicted, however, by other strong evidence, which I am going to analyse.

1. EVIDENCE FOR THE PRESENCE OF A FLEET IN THE RED SEA

The presence of a military fleet in the Red Sea during Roman times has been discussed by a number of scholars, so far without much agreement.¹² In principle, it would seem reasonable to imagine that a regular fleet would be stationed in the Red Sea, in order to protect commerce. This seems even more obvious considering that evidence for such an institution already exists for the Ptolemaic¹³ and even for the Pharaonic period.¹⁴ In fact, evidence for the presence of a military fleet in Roman times can be found as early as the Augustan period. Both the emperor himself and his contemporary Greek geographer Strabo tell us the story of a military expedition led by Aelius Gallus, aiming at the conquest of South Arabia. In 25 BCE Gallus set out from Kleopatris (near modern Suez) with an army of ten thousand men, comprising a *legio* plus Nabataean and Jewish *auxiliares*.¹⁵ In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus describes the planning and achievements of the military expedition as follows:

*Meo iussu et auspicio ducti sunt duo exercitus eodem fere tempore in Aethiopiam et in Arabiam, quae appellatur Eudaemon, maximaeque 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.*¹⁶

By my order and auspices two armies were led at about the same time into Ethiopia and into that part of Arabia which is called Felix, and the troops of each nation of enemies were slaughtered in battle and many towns captured. They penetrated into Ethiopia all the way to the town Nabata, which is near to Meroe; and into Arabia all the way to the border of the Sabaei, advancing to the town Mariba.

Despite Augustus' triumphalist words,¹⁷ Strabo's account in fact presents the expedition as a failure.¹⁸ He records how the expedition intended to loot

¹² The first to postulate the presence of the Roman fleet was Rostovzev 1931: 25; followed by Koertenbeutel 1931: 70-71. Opposing opinions were expressed by Kienast 1966: 84; Sidebotham 1986a: 67-71.

¹³ OGIS 132 (dated to 130 BCE).

¹⁴ Bourdon 1925: 51.

¹⁵ Jameson 1968: 76-80.

¹⁶ Augustus, *Res Gestae*, 26.

¹⁷ On the propagandistic relevance of the Arabian expedition, see Jameson 1968; von Wissmann 1978; Sidebotham 1986b; Buschmann 1991; Marek 1993; Potis 1994; Luther 1999.

¹⁸ Strabo, 16.4.22-24.

Arabia's great treasures and conquer its territory. He then describes the preliminary arrangements for the expedition and explains that a fleet was set up to reach Arabia. It is this part of his account that is the most interesting for the purposes of our analysis:

Ἐπὶ τούτοις μὲν οὖν ἔστειλε τὴν στρατείαν ὁ Γάλλος. ἐξηπάτησε δ' αὐτὸν ὁ τῶν Ναβαταίων ἐπίτροπος Συλλαῖος, ὑποσχόμενος μὲν ἡγήσεσθαι τὴν ὁδὸν καὶ χορηγήσειν ἅπαντα καὶ συμπράξειν, ἅπαντα δ' ἐξ ἐπιβουλῆς πράξας, καὶ οὔτε παράπλουν ἀσφαλῆ μινύων οὔθ' ὁδὸν, ἀλλὰ ἀνοδίας καὶ κυκλοπορίας καὶ πάντων ἀπόροις χωρίοις ἢ ῥαχίαις ἀλιμένοις παραβάλλων ἢ χοιράδων ὑφάλων μεσταῖς ἢ τεναγώδεσι: πλείστον δὲ αἱ πλημμυρίδες ἐλύπουν ἐν τοιοῦτοις καὶ ταῦτα χωρίοις καὶ αἱ ἀμπώτεις. πρῶτον μὲν δὴ τοῦθ' ἀμάρτημα συνέβη τὸ μακρὰ κατασκευάσασθαι πλοῖα, μηδενὸς ὄντος μηδ' ἐσομένου κατὰ θάλατταν πολέμου. οὐδὲ γὰρ κατὰ γῆν σφόδρα πολεμισταὶ εἰσιν ἀλλὰ κάπηλοι μᾶλλον οἱ Ἄραβες καὶ ἐμπορικοὶ, μήτι γε κατὰ θάλατταν: ὁ δ' οὐκ ἔλαττον ὀγδοήκοντα ἐναυπηγήσατο δίχροτα καὶ τριήρεις καὶ φασήλους κατὰ Κλεοπατρίδα τὴν πρὸς τῇ παλαιᾷ διώρυνι τῇ ἀπὸ τοῦ Νείλου. γνοὺς δὲ διεψευσμένος ἐναυπηγήσατο σκευαγωγὰ ἑκατὸν καὶ τριάκοντα, οἷς ἐπλευσεν ἕχων περὶ μυρίους πεζοὺς τῶν ἐκ τῆς Αἰγύπτου Ῥωμαίων καὶ τῶν συμμάχων, ὧν ἦσαν Ἰουδαῖοι μὲν πεντακόσιοι Ναβαταῖοι δὲ χίλιοι μετὰ τοῦ Συλλαίου.¹⁹

Upon these considerations, therefore, Gallus set out on the expedition; but he was deceived by the Nabataean administrator, Syllaeus, who, although he had promised to be guide on the march and to supply all needs and to co-operate with him, acted treacherously in all things, and pointed out neither a safe voyage along the coast nor a safe journey by land, misguiding him through places that had no roads and by circuitous routes and through regions destitute of everything, or along rocky shores that had no harbours or through waters that were shallow or full of submarine rocks; and particularly in places of that kind the flood-tides, as also the ebb-tides, caused very great distress. Now this was the first mistake of Gallus, to build long boats, since there was no naval war at hand, or even to be expected; for the Arabians are not very good warriors even on land, rather being hucksters and merchants, to say nothing of fighting at sea. But Gallus built not less than eighty boats, biremes and triremes and light boats, at Cleopatris, which is near the old canal which extends from the Nile. But when he realised that he had been thoroughly deceived, he built one hundred and thirty vessels of burden, on which he set sail with about ten thousand infantry, consisting of Romans in Aegypt, as also of Roman allies, among whom were five hundred Jews and one thousand Nabataeans under Syllaeus.²⁰

Then Strabo continues with a description of how Gallus' troops were betrayed by Syllaeus, and the unsuccessful conclusion of the expedition.²¹ Above any

¹⁹ Strabo, 16.4.23.

²⁰ Trans. Vol. VII of the Loeb Classical Library edition, 1932.

²¹ Other less-detailed accounts on Aelius Gallus' expedition are provided by Pliny, *NH*, VI, 32, 160-162; Flav. Jos., *AJ*, XV, 317; Cass. Dio, LIII, 29, 3-8. For more on Syllaeus, see Terpstra, this volume.

consideration of the success or failure of the military campaign,²² what it is more important here is the fact that Strabo's text is the first account of the presence of a Roman military fleet in the Red Sea, an account dating in fact dating from only a few years after the formal annexation of Egypt to the Roman Empire.

We do not know whether this episode marked the beginning of the regular presence of a military fleet in the Red Sea, or if it was only linked to the military operations in South Arabia, although it has usually been assumed to be the latter. However, a new source of evidence offers proof of the presence of a fleet in the Red Sea soon after the beginning of the following century:²³ two *ostraka* from the archive of Nikanor report that two Roman fleet officers received provisions in ports on the Egyptian side of the Red Sea.²⁴

The first one is the O. Petr. 296, dated to 6–50 CE, from either Myos Hormos or Berenike:²⁵

Λούκιος Κλώδιος
τρηραρχως (τρήραρχος) Νικάνορι
Πανής. Ἀπέχω τοὺς γάμου(ς)
οὺς ἐπιθωμε σοι

Lucius Clodius / *trierarchos* to Nicanor, / son of Panes. I receive the loads / that we entrusted to you.

The reason scholarly discussion has for so long neglected this document is that the word τρηραρχως was in fact fragmentary and has only recently been properly read by G. Messeri.²⁶ The *trierarchos* was the captain of a trireme, a warship used by the Roman army that was able to host a crew of two hundred.²⁷ His presence at either Myos Hormos or Berenike strengthens the

²² See Sidebotham 1986: 127-128 for an interesting alternative assessment of the outcome of the Arabian expedition.

²³ This hypothesis was put forward for the first time many decades ago by Rostovtzev (1931: 25), on the basis of O.Petr. 279, which I am going to discuss below. See also Daris 1956: 244-6.

²⁴ The so-called archive of Nikanor belongs to a firm of transporters active on the routes between Coptos on the Nile and the ports of the Red Sea, namely Myos Hormos and Berenike. This firm operated between 18 BCE and 69 CE at least. Nikanor ran the firm for most of the years it existed, and for this reason the archive is named after him. The documents are published in O.Petr. 220-304, O.Bodl. 1968-1971, and O.Brux. 7. See Rostovtzev 1931: 23-26; Fuks 1951: 207-216; Sidebotham 1986: 83-92; Ruffing 1993: 1-26; Adams 2007: 221-6.

²⁵ First edition in Tait 1930: 125, n° 296. The text was recently republished with substantial amendments by Messeri (2004-05: 69-73). It is to her edition that I refer in this work.

²⁶ Messeri 2004-05: 69-71

²⁷ RE: *trierarchos*; Casson 1971: 141-147.

hypothesis that in the first century CE a military fleet was located in the Red Sea, and that it was connected to international trade.²⁸

A second document, from the same dossier as the previous one, adds to this reconstruction. It is O. Petr. 279, from Myos Hormos, safely dated to 52 CE. It reads as follows:²⁹

Σατορνίλος τεσσαράριος λυβέρονου
Ἐπωνύχῳ Ἀχιλλέως χαίρειν.
ἀπέχω παρὰ σοῦ ἐπὶ Μυὸς Ὀρμου.
πυροῦ ἀρτάβας τρεῖς (γίνονται) γ. (ἔτους) ιγ Τιβερίου
Κλαυδίου Καίσαρος Σεβαστοῦ Γερμανικού
Αὐτοκράτορος Θῶθ ιθ.

Satornilos *tesserarius liburnae* / to Eponichos, son of Achilleus, greetings. / I receive from you here in Myos Hormos / three artabas of grain. Year 13 of the Caesar / Tiberius Claudius Augustus Germanicus / Imperator, Thoth 19.

Unlike the previous one, this *ostrakon* has already been quoted as possible proof of the existence of a military fleet in the Red Sea, but again, an incorrect reading of the text has affected its interpretation. The original editor has, in fact, read the first line as Σατορνίλος τεσσαράριος κυβέρονου, i.e., ‘Satornilus, *tesserarius* of helmsman.’ The title *tesserarius* can be used either in a military context or in a civilian one.³⁰ However, the correct restoration of the word λυβέρονου allows us to safely rule out the possibility that he is a civilian. The *liburna* was in fact a kind of warship originally used by pirates in the Adriatic Sea and later adopted by the Roman army. Its manoeuvrability, especially in shallow waters, would have made it suitable for operations in the Red Sea.³¹ All of this enables us to affirm the *tesserarius* of O. Petr. 279 as an officer of the Roman army. He was a watch commander, who organised and held command over the nightly guard assigned to keep watch over the fort when in garrison or on campaign. On a normal day he could be found maintaining the duty and supervising work details or checking on the guard posts.³²

Thus the two *ostraka* appear to prove the existence of an established military fleet in the Red Sea waters. It can be noted that, while Strabo points

²⁸ It is universally accepted by scholars that Myos Hormos and Berenike were, through all of the Roman imperial period, the two most important Roman harbours on the Red Sea, functioning as hubs for trade with India. On Myos Hormos, see Peacock 1993; Cuvigny 2003; on Berenike, see Sidebotham & Wendrich 1995; Sidebotham & Wendrich 1996; Sidebotham & Wendrich 1998; Sidebotham & Wendrich 1999; Sidebotham & Wendrich 2000; Sidebotham & Wendrich 2007; Sidebotham 2002b.

²⁹ First edition in Tait 1930: 125, n° 279. See again the comment provided by Messeri 2004-05: 73.

³⁰ See the discussion in Sidebotham 1986: 69.

³¹ Casson 1971: 340; Höckmann 1985; Medas 2004: 129-138.

³² von Domaszewski 1981; Speidel 2000: 65-96.

to Arsinoe/Clysma as the main hub for the fleet, the two *ostraka* from the archive of Nicanor suggest that the fleet was later moved to either Myos Hormos or Berenike (or possibly divided between the two ports), an arrangement that would allow it to patrol the trading area more efficiently.

From what we have seen so far it should be clear that these documents demonstrate that traces of a Roman fleet in the Red Sea can be found from the very beginnings of Roman rule in the area, and that the Roman interest in military control of this area significantly predates Trajan, actually coinciding, at the very least, with the economic boom created by Roman trade with the East under Augustus and Tiberius.³³

2. THE ROLE OF TRAJAN IN THE ROMAN RED SEA

It should by now be clear that the interpretation of Trajan as the first ruler to set up a fleet in the Red Sea should not be accepted at face value. Therefore, there can be no doubt that the later Roman historians seem to grant Trajan special merit when defining Rome's military attitude toward the Red Sea area. Although they certainly exaggerate his role, this exaggeration must have been linked to the actual policy of the emperor, a policy that seems to have had such an impact that it was still remembered four centuries after Trajan's death, obliterating the memory of the policies of his predecessors. In fact, as I am going to discuss, there is enough evidence to argue that Trajan's campaigns marked the beginning of a new scenario in the Red Sea, and that the path opened by Trajan was most likely consistently pursued by his successors, at least up to Marcus Aurelius.

In order to understand what happened in the Red Sea at the beginning of the second century CE, it is necessary to quickly examine all of Trajan's enterprises in the area. An obvious starting point is the Roman annexation of the client kingdom of Nabataea, as the *provincia Arabia*.³⁴ Scholars do not yet agree on what led Trajan to annex the kingdom, though many hypotheses have been put forward. Some scholars have suggested that 'the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom was of an administrative nature more than a military

³³ See Sidebotham 1986; De Romanis 1996; Young 2001; Tomber 2008.

³⁴ See Speidel 1977: 688-730; Fiema 1987: 25-35; Freeman 1996: 91-118. Bowersock (1983: 80-1) was the first to suggest that the annexation of Nabatea was achieved without a real military campaign, and that the term 'annexation' would describe what really happened much better than 'conquer'. The main point put forward by the scholar is that Trajan did not take for himself the epithet of *Arabicus Maximus*, as he did after conquering Dacia (when he actually took the epithet of *Dacicus Maximus*). Even more significantly, on the celebrative coins minted after the annexation of Nabatea the legend *Arabia aquisita* appears, instead of *Arabia capta*, which would be the obvious choice in the case of military conquest.

one.³⁵ This hypothesis tends to identify the death of the last Nabataean king Rebbel II—and the extinction of his dynasty—as the reason for the annexation of the kingdom. Others have suggested that it stemmed from the need to reorganise the region³⁶ before the forthcoming war against the Parthians.³⁷ Lastly, some have preferred to focus on the economic factors that might have pushed Trajan to incorporate the Nabataean region.³⁸

This is not the place to dissect the scholarship on the subject,³⁹ but it is worth pointing out the important role played by the small kingdom in the context of international trade with Arabia. It is safe to assert, I think, that the annexation made a favourable impact on the economy of the empire, fully integrating a key strategic area for long-distance trade. A new road was quickly built connecting Bostra in the far north of the *provincia* with the Red Sea. The work most likely began in 106 CE, ending between 111 and 114.⁴⁰

Trajan's activity in the area was not limited to Arabia; in Egypt, he restored what Romans called 'Trajan's Canal', between the Nile and the Red Sea, near Clysma (modern Suez).⁴¹ The precise date of the inauguration of the canal is unknown, but an *ostrakon* dated to 112 CE provides a *terminus ante quem*.⁴² There is no agreement among scholars as to the reasons why Trajan built it, nor as to its utility. Some have postulated that the channel was to be used for the forthcoming war against the Parthians, while others suggest that it was meant to foster trade in the northern Red Sea area.⁴³ Equally unclear is whether or not the canal was actually navigable, or if it was only meant

³⁵ Quotation from Spijkerman 1978: 20, n. 54. Similar opinions were expressed by Raschke 1978: 647-648; Bowersock 1983: 82; Parker 1986: 123; Strobel 1988: 256; Isaac 1992: 119.

³⁶ Starcky 1955: 103; Graf 1978: 5-6; Parker 1986: 124.

³⁷ Bowersock 1983: 84; Strobel 1988: 256.

³⁸ Rey-Coquais 1978: 54; Parker 1986: 123; Eadie (1986), 243-5. Kirkbride (1990: 256) suggested that the real aim was to conquer the port of Aila, because of its importance in international trade. Such a hypothesis does not appear sound, though, when one considers that in this period Aila was not yet a very important port of trade. See Parker 2009: 79-84

³⁹ Very interesting on this topic is the opinion expressed, very matter-of-factly, by Strabo VI, 4, 2, that client kingdoms are *de facto* part of the empire and the emperor could decide to incorporate them at any time, using any official reason he wanted. See also Brunt 1978: 159-191.

⁴⁰ Pekáry 1968: 140-142; Isaac 1992: 120.

⁴¹ Claudius Ptolemaeus, *Geographia*, IV, 5. See Aubert's article in this volume for a complete overview of the history of the previous attempts by pharaohs and Hellenistic rulers to build a channel.

⁴² SB VI, 9545 (32).

⁴³ The scholarship on Trajan's canal is now very vast. See Faville 1902-1903: 66-75; Calderini 1920: 43-44; Bourdon 1925: *passim*; Posener 1938: 25-26; Sijpesteijn 1963: 70-83; Oertel 1964: 18-52; De Romanis 1996: 71-95; Aubert 2004: 219-252; Cooper 2009: 195-209.

for irrigation in north-eastern Egypt.⁴⁴ Often quoted against such a reductive interpretation is a passage of Lucianus, who in one of his works tells the story of a young man who sailed from Alexandria to Clysma, and then on from there to India:⁴⁵

τοιούτων δέ τι ἐγγένητο· ἀναπλεύσας ὁ νεανίσκος εἰς Αἴγυπτον ἄχρη τοῦ Κλύσματος, πλοίου ἀναγομένου ἐπέισθη καὶ αὐτὸς εἰς Ἰνδίαν πλεῦσαι

What had happened was this: The lad had sailed up the Nile, gone on to a Red Sea port, found a vessel starting for India, and been persuaded to make the voyage.⁴⁶

Such a text is not enough to prove that the channel was regularly used for trade, but what we can be sure of is that it was in use until the twelfth century,⁴⁷ and that it was regularly maintained to avoid its silting up. For this purpose, a *λειτουργία* was instituted, funded by *ἐπιμεληταί*. A number of papyri dated between the second and the sixth century CE attest the regular recruitment of seasonal workers to clean the canal.⁴⁸ In none of these texts, however, is there any clear reference either to its use for trading purposes, or to a commercial fleet at Clysma ready to set sail to India.

Nevertheless, even if we accept the minimalistic view of a channel open only a few months of the year, and mainly to provide irrigation, we cannot fail to recognise the evident increase in activity at Clysma after the second century.⁴⁹ It is safe to assume that the canal played a role in economic development, at least through the provision of drinkable water to an otherwise poorly supplied region, as well as the opening of a channel of communication between the port and the hinterland.⁵⁰

From all we have discussed so far in this section, it should be obvious that Trajan planned to better integrate the Red Sea region into the economic system of the Roman Empire by annexing a key area for trade (Nabatea), later providing it with roads to improve its communication system, and construct-

⁴⁴ Hypothesis put forward by Mayerson 1996: 119-126. Similarly also Aubert 2004: 219-252; Cooper 2009: 195-209.

⁴⁵ Lucianus, *Alexander seu Pseudomantis*, 44, 16-18.

⁴⁶ Trans. by Cassius Amicus.

⁴⁷ Cooper 2009: 198.

⁴⁸ SB VI 9545 (32): 112 CE; P.Oxy. LX 4070: ca. 208 CE; P.Bub. IV 1: 221 CE; SB V 7676 (= P.Cair.Isidor. 81): 297 CE; P.Oxy. LV 3814: end of third/beginning of fourth century CE; P.Oxy. XII 1426: 332 CE; SB V 7756 (= P.Lond. inv. 2574): 358/5 CE9; PSI 689: 420/21 CE; PSI 87: 423 CE; P.Wash. 17: fifth or sixth century CE.

⁴⁹ The first information on Clysma was available through the reports published by Bruyère 1966, although the quality of the archaeological investigation was very poor. A good analysis of the role of Clysma after the second century CE can be found in Ward 2007: 161-171.

⁵⁰ Cooper 2009: 197.

ing a canal in Egypt that ended the isolation of the port of Clysma. These enterprises, along with the Parthian wars, should be enough to explain why the Spanish emperor Trajan was associated with a plan to conquer India. Festus, Eutropius, and Jordanes, however, do not talk only of a vague plan to conquer India—instead, they all precisely point to the establishment of a fleet in the Red Sea, connected to some plan to ‘lay waste the coasts of India’, though none of them has provided enough detail for us to understand the circumstances involved.

Two recently discovered inscriptions might shed some light on this issue. Beginning in 2003, a team of archaeologists working in the archipelago of Farasan (Saudi Arabia) made two extremely interesting discoveries. The archipelago, which is located close to the southern end of the Red Sea on the Saudi Arabian side, just 500 km north of the Strait of Bâb el-Mandeb, consists of some 200 islands, of which two stand out for their size. The closest part of the Roman Empire to the archipelago was the southern border of the province of Egypt, some 1,000 km distant,⁵¹ which explains why the recent Farasan finds are so astonishing; these two inscriptions, both in Latin, attest for the first time the regular presence of the Roman army in the islands.

The first inscription to be discovered reads as follows:⁵²

*Imp(eratori) Caes(ari) Tito Ael(io) Hadr(iano)
Antonino Aug(usto) Pio Pont(ifici)
Maxim(o) trib(unicia) pot(estate) VII co(n)s(uli) III,
P(atri) P(atriciae), vexill(atio) Leg(ionis) II Tr(aiana) Fortis
et auxil(ia) eius castr(ens)es-
q(ue) sub praef(ecto) Ferresani portus
et Pont(i ?) Hercul(is) fec(erunt) et d[ed(icaverunt)]*

The first four lines of the inscription are a dedication to the emperor Antoninus Pius, whose titles allow us to safely date the inscription between 10 December 143 and 9 December 144 CE.⁵³ The following lines of the inscription list the people engaged in building the statue to which the inscription was linked: a *vexillatio* of the *legio II Traiana Fortis*, its *auxilia*, and finally some other people possibly defined as *castrenses* (the text is not clear at this point). In its final lines, the inscription seems to attest for the first time the existence of an officer named *praefectus Ferresani portus* (?), whose name is not reported. This anonymous officer is *praefectus* of a district called *Ferresani portus*, though it is worth pointing out that only the toponym can safely be read, since only

⁵¹ For a complete discussion of the geographical context of the Farasan archipelago, see Villeneuve et al. 2004a: 143-149.

⁵² The text was firstly edited in Villeneuve et al. 2004a: 143-190 and 2004b: 239-250. Later on, the editor suggested some corrections in Villeneuve 2004c: 419-429, and it is to this edition that I refer in this work.

⁵³ Villeneuve 2004c: 422.

the *p* of the word *portus* is clearly readable. The word *Ferresani* makes it obvious that the stone was carved locally, and therefore the inscription has been found *in loco*. Finally, the toponym *Pontus Herculis* is, once again, a *hapax*—a previously unknown geographical location, whose interpretation is unclear.⁵⁴

For the purposes of our analysis, the most important information provided by the inscription is the dating to 143–144 CE, under the reign of Antoninus Pius, and the mention of the presence of a *vexillatio* of the *Legio II Traiana Fortis* on the island. This legion was created by Trajan around 100 CE, and was eventually located in Egypt no later than 128 CE. From the reign of Antoninus Pius, it was the only legion located in this province.⁵⁵ This implies that the soldiers stationed at the Farasan Islands would necessarily have come from Egypt, and realistically they would have been in touch with the province through Berenike, the Roman Empire's southernmost Egyptian Red Sea port.⁵⁶ Despite the fact that the inscription refers only to a *vexillatio* and not to a fleet, it seems plausible that a fleet would have been present in the Red Sea to provide a stable connection between the *vexillatio* and the Empire.

A few years after the discovery of this first inscription, another one was found on the same island. Unfortunately this second inscription is very fragmentary, and it is possible to read only a few letters on its surface, from the lower right corner of the original block. It reads as follows:⁵⁷

...] VIFERR
...] PRPR

Meagre as it is, this second inscription does not offer much for interpretation, nevertheless, the editor has tried. He started from the second fragmentary line of the document, (the abbreviation PR PR), which he interpreted as *pr(o) pr(aetore)*. This interpretation is sound, and it implies that a *legatus Augusti pro praetore* was mentioned in the inscription. Given that the closest provinces to the Farasan archipelago are Arabia and Egypt, this *legatus* who was in some way in charge of the islands should have come from one of them. But in Egypt the officer in charge of the province was a *praefectus*, not a *legatus*, therefore the possibility of connecting this inscription to Egypt is ruled out. The only logical location would then be Arabia, which in fact was administered by a *legatus Augusti pro praetore*. This interpretation led the editor to interpret the abbreviation of the previous line as [... *legio*] VI *Ferr(ata)*.

⁵⁴ See the possible interpretations provided by Villeneuve 2004c: 426-428.

⁵⁵ Devijver 1974: 452-492; Daris 2000: 359-363.

⁵⁶ On Berenike and its location, see Sidebotham & Wendrich 1995; Sidebotham & Wendrich 1996; Sidebotham & Wendrich 1998; Sidebotham & Wendrich 1999; Sidebotham & Wendrich 2000; Sidebotham & Wendrich 2007; Sidebotham 2002b.

⁵⁷ Villeneuve 2007: 13-27.

The history of this legion is rather difficult to trace; it was originally located in Syria, then it took part in Trajan's eastern campaigns, it moved subsequently to Arabia for a short period, and from there it finally moved to Judea.⁵⁸ All these movements took place during an undefined time between the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian. Nevertheless, we do have two key dates: the *terminus ante quem* for the movement from Syria to Arabia is 119 CE,⁵⁹ while the final move into Judea took place before 139 CE. The final reconstruction suggested by Villeneuve would therefore be:

[... vexill(atio) leg(ionis)] VI Ferr(atae)
[sub leg(ato) Aug(usti)] pr(o) pr(aetore)

Given the very fragmentary status of the inscription, we must remember that other reconstructions are possible, though the one suggested by Villeneuve seems reasonable.⁶⁰

We can safely assume that a *vexillatio* of the *legio II Traiana Fortis* was operating on the islands in 143–144 CE as a detachment of the main legion, which was based in Egypt. Much less certain is the information we can infer from the second inscription, since it requires corroboration from some more solid evidence. According to Villeneuve's hypothesis (which has necessarily to be taken as a working hypothesis), the second inscription might perhaps attest the presence of a detachment of the *legio VI Ferrata* in the archipelago in a year at some point before 139 CE. The presence of this legion in Arabia is attested with certainty in 119 CE, but it might well have been there earlier, perhaps having been moved by Trajan to defend the recently created province, or by Hadrian when he was reorganizing the whole region. If indeed the second inscription referred to the *legio VI Ferrata*, it would make sense to postulate that the legion in charge of the newly created province was also sent to occupy the far archipelago in the aftermath of Trajan's campaigns, and subsequently a further reorganization of the area made it more convenient to have a *vexillatio* from Egypt rather than from Arabia (since the latter was farther from the Farasan Islands). This would mean that the presence of a Roman military detachment on the Farasan archipelago might stretch from the last years of Trajan (or the first of Hadrian) at least to the reign of Antoninus Pius.

⁵⁸ On the *legio VI Ferrata*, see Kennedy 1980: 283-309; Isaac 1992: 349-352; Keppie 1986; Cotton 2000: 351-357.

⁵⁹ Cotton 2000: 354-356.

⁶⁰ Other possible reconstructions are also listed by Villeneuve 2007: 24-27, although the one discussed above seems the most convincing.

3. DEFINING THE ROMAN POLICY IN THE RED SEA IN THE SECOND CENTURY CE

The evidence discussed in the previous section grants us a new perspective from which to reconsider the passages in Eutropius, Festus, and Jordanes that mention Trajan's new fleet in the Red Sea. As mentioned before, their manner misleads the reader into assuming that Trajan was the first ruler to station a regular fleet in the Red Sea, but this is definitely not true, as seen above. Nevertheless, there is in their reports an echo of something that actually happened at the beginning of the second century CE.

In order to draw appropriate conclusions, it is necessary to examine all of Trajan's activities in order to provide a context. The annexation of the Nabataean Kingdom and its subsequent connection to the Roman road system, the restoration of the canal on the Nile, and the occupation of the Farasan Islands are not separate actions, but rather distinct components of a larger master plan. All aspects of Trajan's policy in the East make much more sense when considered from this perspective: tighter control of the two ends of the Red Sea was the best way to secure control of the whole region.

If there was a master plan to control the Red Sea, what led Trajan to adopt such a plan? Along with military and administrative considerations, clearly his decision was motivated by the potential for economic gain. The Red Sea was a key area in the international trade route between the Roman Empire and the Far East (generally referred to by the Romans as 'India').⁶¹ The importance of the contribution of eastern trade to the economy of the empire could hardly be overestimated;⁶² this would be reason enough for the imperial interest in encouraging it.⁶³ Control of the Red Sea provided the best possible environment for trade.

This policy was first pursued by Trajan and then carried on by his successors, as demonstrated by some of the evidence presented in this work—most importantly, the permanence of the Roman army on the Farasan Islands at

⁶¹ See Mayerson 1993: 169-174; Schneider 2004.

⁶² Although the importance has been played down by some recent works such as Young 2001, most scholars agree. See, for instance, Sidebotham 1986; De Romanis 1998; Tomber 2008.

⁶³ On this subject, the most important evidence is still the so-called 'Muziris papyrus', a twofold document containing two incomplete texts, one on its *recto* and the other on its *verso*, written in separate hands, both dateable to the mid-second century CE. On the *recto* is one column, missing its left edge, with the end of a contract relating to a maritime loan for a trading voyage from Alexandria to Muziris. On the *verso* are the end of a line and the last column of an account of the value of a shipload of goods imported from India. It was first edited by Harrauer and Sijpesteijn 1985, 124-155. See also Thür 1987, 229-45; Id. 1988, 229-33; Casson 1986, 73-9; Id. 1990, 195-206; Foraboschi and Gara 1989, 280-2; Purpura 1996, 368-75; De Romanis 1996, 183-96; Id. 1998, 11-60; Rathbone, 2000, 39-50; Id. 2002, 179-98; Morelli 2011, 199-234; De Romanis 2012, 75.101.

least until 144 CE, and possibly even longer. Other hints that commerce with India escalated from the reign of Trajan onwards are provided through a variety of different sources of evidence. Literary sources from the second century CE reveal a very specific interest in the people living beyond the limits of the empire, especially on its eastern side. Works such as Arrian's *Indica*, *Parthica*, and the *Anabasis Alexandri* testify to the interest of Romans in the East. Authors such as Juvenal and Lucian exhibit considerable knowledge of India, including its products, culture, and religion.

The author who provides the best proof of an increased link between the Mediterranean World and India is Claudius Ptolemy (*fl.* 139–61 CE). In his *Geography*, he exhibits knowledge of the Far East well beyond that of earlier periods. He is not just more precise than his predecessors (Strabo, Pliny, and even sometimes the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*), he also describes regions which these earlier authors never mentioned in their works (e.g., East Asia). Ptolemy clearly obtained part of his information from travellers or merchants with an interest in the East, providing more proof of a strengthening of commercial relations between the Roman Empire and India during this period.⁶⁴

It is within the context of this expansion into the East that we find the first evidence for direct Roman contact with China; in 166 CE a Roman 'embassy' reached China, hoping to open a direct commercial link between the two empires. This is recorded in the *Chronicles of the Han Dynasty*:

They [*i.e.*, the Romans] traffic by sea with An-hsi [=Parthia] and T'ien-chu [=India], the profit of which trade is ten-fold. They are honest in their transactions, and there are no double prices. Cereals are always cheap. The budget is based on a well-filled treasury. When the embassies of neighbouring countries come to their frontier, they are driven by post to the capital, and, on arrival, are presented with golden money. Their kings always desired to send embassies to China, but the An-hsi [=Parthians] wished to carry on trade with them in Chinese silks, and it is for this reason that they were cut off from communication. This lasted till the ninth year of the Yen-hsi period during the emperor Huan-ti's reign [= A.D. 166] when the king of Ta-ts'in [= 'Big China', *i.e.*, the Roman Empire], An-tun [= Marcus Aurelius Antoninus], sent an embassy who, from the frontier of Jih-nan [=Annam] offered ivory, rhinoceros horns, and tortoise shell. From that time dates the [direct] intercourse with this country.⁶⁵

For the purposes of this work it does not make any difference whether this expedition was an official embassy sent by the emperor Marcus Aurelius himself, or a group of private traders operating on their own.⁶⁶ Two important points emerge from this story: first, whether official or private, the embassy certainly benefited from the favourable conditions for eastern trade created

⁶⁴ Sidebotham 1986: 142-3; Sidebotham 2011: 14-16.

⁶⁵ Text from Hirth 1975: 41; See also Hill 2009.

⁶⁶ Scholars still debate on this topic.

by Trajan's policy; second, the Chinese writer's assertion that the Roman traders wanted to establish a direct commercial connection with China but had always been blocked by the Parthians is significant. It makes perfect sense that the Roman traders would want to establish a direct commercial connection with China in order to increase their profits.

An attempt to cut the Parthians out of the trade would undoubtedly have been noticed by the Parthian rulers. It is perhaps not a mere coincidence that in the troubled-for-centuries relationship between Parthians and Romans the Arsacids attacked the Romans first only once—during the Parthian wars fought by Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus between 161–166 CE,⁶⁷ precisely during the years for which we have some evidence that Roman presence in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean had reached its peak.⁶⁸ I am not here suggesting that the main reason for this war was commercial (it is well known that the *casus belli* was the situation in Armenia),⁶⁹ but I do believe that the trade situation made the Arsacids more aggressive toward the Romans than they had ever been.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, all the evidence collected here should prove that Trajan initiated a period of Roman expansion in the Red Sea that had important commercial consequences. This policy was also consistently pursued by his successors, probably reaching its peak under Marcus Aurelius; it provided the right context for Roman commercial expansion in the East, which culminated with the Roman embassy to China.

If what is proposed in this paper is sound, I believe that it is safe to affirm that the policy inaugurated by Trajan was designed to make the Red Sea a *mare internum* in some way—a sea completely controlled (though not completely ruled) by the Romans. I am aware that the possibility of government interference in the eastern trade, or of commercial considerations determining Roman policy in the east, has been ruled out by several scholars.⁷⁰ Still, other scholars have already opened to this possibility,⁷¹ and I believe that the amount of evidence made available by archaeology over the last few years should lead to a reconsideration of the matter.

⁶⁷ *SHA Marcus* 8.6; Birley 2000: 121; for the date: Flinterman 1997: 281.

⁶⁸ See note 29 concerning Roman coins in India.

⁶⁹ Sicker 2000: 169.

⁷⁰ See Isaac 1992: 101-218; Young 2001: 216-217.

⁷¹ Most notably Sidebotham 1986: 48-77.

I also believe that the ‘military-economic’ approach identified in this paper during the time of Trajan and his successors was far from being a *unicum* in the history of the empire, since parallels in other periods can be found (for example between the reigns of Anastasius and Justinian in the sixth century CE, when the empire again tried to control all of the Red Sea region⁷²). I hope that these considerations will encourage a general rethinking of the imperial policy in this region and in particular concerning trade with the East, since they better reveal the real role of the emperor in such matters, and help us to more accurately assess the importance, in terms of international policy, held by this region.⁷³

⁷² Nappo 2009.

⁷³ The first example of such an approach can be found in Sidebotham 1986: 48-77.

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