

Sidebotham, Steven E. *Berenike and the ancient maritime spice route*. California world history library, 18. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2011. xvii, 434 p. ISBN 9780520244306. \$49.95.

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<u n= [http://books.google.be/books?id=B\\_yRH2U3ZJYC&printsec=frontcover](http://books.google.be/books?id=B_yRH2U3ZJYC&printsec=frontcover)</u>

Rome's trade with the East, with Arabia, India and China, continues to fascinate scholars of ancient history. The existence of large commercial networks and long-distance maritime routes in a notoriously volatile business world, linking the Mediterranean and the shores of the Indian Ocean long before Europe's famous Age of Discovery, is indeed a remarkable aspect of ancient trade. In this book, Sidebotham analyzes the actual features of these trading routes by focusing on a single yet important harbor on the Egyptian coast, Berenike, where merchant ships moored after a voyage to the East and products destined for the Mediterranean were discharged and stored before being transported to the Nile. Having organized ten excavations on this site, Sidebotham obviously is best qualified for presenting a vivid and intimate picture of merchants, soldiers, artisans and citizens living and working together in Berenike.

A succinct introduction highlights Berenike's importance for the Roman-Indian trade and explains why an in-depth study of a single port may be a valuable starting point to analyze trading routes (p. 1-6).

Chapter 2 is dedicated to Berenike's geography and climate, its occurrence in ancient literary sources and previous research during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The final account of contemporary excavation logistics, the hostile environment, communication problems and plunder make a fascinating read, in particular for non-archaeologists (p. 18-20).

The next 3 chapters trace Berenike's earliest history and developments during the Ptolemaic era. Sidebotham explores stations and roads in the desert, the city's harbor infrastructure and diplomatic, military and commercial contacts with Arabia and India. Berenike must already have been a major trading hub during this period, for Sidebotham's team discovered written documents in 12 ancient languages (p. 55). The 4<sup>th</sup> chapter also focuses on imports from eastern Africa and the Ptolemaic and early Roman trade in elephants and ivory in particular. We learn how Egyptians organized real elephant-hunting parties, built specially adapted vessels (*elephantegoi*) to ship the animals back north and even included a recovery period before marching overland through the desert (p. 39-54).

Roman Berenike is discussed in the next 7 chapters. As the city witnessed the densest population, most intense trading activity and largest urban development during the first 3 centuries of the Roman empire, this period has yielded the most extensive epigraphical and archaeological datasets, allowing Sidebotham to reconstruct the city life in unprecedented detail. Chapter 6 examines everyday life of Berenike's inhabitants, their professions, religion, language, consumption patterns and ethnicity. The picture emerges of a multicultural commercial node, where people of the most diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds

met to do business (p. 68-86). In the next chapter, the author digresses on the critical importance of water for survival in this arid region and discusses requirements, sources of acquisition, storage and distribution (p. 87-124). Chapter 8 and 9 place Berenike's trade in a larger framework, by discussing the desert routes, connecting the port to the Nile valley, and contacts with other ports throughout the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. It appears that Berenike's terrestrial connectivity was to a large part the merit of the Roman government, which enlarged previously existing infrastructure by extending roads and creating new stations and watchtowers. Additionally, caravans had the ability to seek protection from military escorts and desert patrols. Having determined the constituents of trade, Sidebotham then dedicates 3 chapters to the organization of trade. He presents interesting figures on the dimensions of Ptolemaic and Roman trading vessels (p. 195-205), discusses trade and transport costs (p. 212-216) and makes a guesstimate of the buying power of Indian cargoes reaching Egypt's east coast (p. 217-218). His analysis ends with an impressive catalogue of archaeologically documented merchandize from Indian, Arabian and Mediterranean origin passing through Berenike (p. 223-245).

A final chapter visualizes Berenike's demise during Late Antiquity. The 3<sup>rd</sup>-century empire-wide crisis apparently profoundly changed the city's commercial contacts. Trade with the Mediterranean dwindled and merchants solely focused on the East instead. Importing Indian merchandize continued to be lucrative, but was now aimed at local Egyptian consumption or export to Persia.

On balance, Sidebotham's contribution to a better understanding of Berenike as a major commercial centre cannot be questioned. His book is warmly recommended to everyone interested in ancient trade between Egypt and the East or the ordinary life of people doing business in an Egyptian port city. Sidebotham appears to have missed not a single excavation report on Berenike's site and its hinterland nor any previous scholarship on ancient trade with the East, as the exhaustive bibliography indicates. The reader will find extensive references to little-known inscriptions, graffiti, petroglyphs and archaeological data illuminating Berenike's history. It is this in-depth analysis in which Sidebotham excels. Yet, when trying to contextualize his research in the larger discussion on the nature of ancient trade, one may find several slight inaccuracies.

First, some of the terminology the author is using as more or less neutral words, have a very specific meaning for historians. Take for instance the very first sentence of the introduction: <q>There was a "global" economy thousands of years before the term became fashionable in the late twentieth century.</q> (p. 1). Even with quotation marks, global economy is a very pregnant term. An economic historian immediately presupposes an integrated market, price convergence, a rather safe and predictable trading world and easy communication. I assume this is not what Sidebotham has in mind, so more careful phrasing was needed. [[1]] In his discussion of the cities along the Red Sea and Indian coasts, every harbor is called an emporium, whereas this word is no mere synonym of port but conveys a well-defined meaning in the discussion of ancient trade. [[2]]

Secondly, it could have been interesting to compare some of the archaeological objects to their Mediterranean counterparts. When examining the ethnicity of Berenike's population, Sidebotham notes that the names on plaster jar stoppers contained Latin, Greek or Egyptian

names. He is however unable to identify the people behind these names, for he assumes them to be either <q> the names of the owners, perhaps distributors, or persons whose olive presses, vineyards, and so forth produced the contents</q>. In the Roman business world, very similar amphorae stoppers had been used during the last 2 centuries of the Republic. It is now well-known that the names on the stoppers referred to the merchants marketing the wine. Perhaps the Egyptian stoppers served a similar purpose. [[3]]

Thirdly, some features of ancient trade could have been discussed more accurately by making use of more recent and specialized literature or by double-checking ancient sources. For instance, in financing business the Greek and Roman banks may seem “surprisingly rudimentary” (p. 216) in comparison with contemporary banking systems, but they definitely did far more than merely facilitating tax payments. Here the research on Egyptian banking, conducted by Bogaert, could have seriously ameliorated Sidebotham’s analysis. [[4]] Next, in his discussion of the pepper trade, Sidebotham claims that by the late second and early third century pepper was no longer subject to import duty, for it does not appear in a list of taxable merchandize, preserved in the Digest (p. 225; the legal text referred to is 39.4.16.7, instead of 39.4.16 as cited by Sidebotham). He therefore concludes that <q> these items were considered basic commodities and that the Roman government by that time ceased to levy tolls or taxes on their importation</q>. First, there is absolutely no reason why Rome would stop levying taxes on merchandize once it was considered a basic commodity, for then a major part of the Roman tax system would have become completely obsolete. Wine, grain, olive oil and slaves obviously were far more common merchandize than pepper ever was, yet continued to be taxed. Secondly, and far more importantly, the first words of the legal text read <i>species pertinentes ad vectigal: cinnamomum: piper longum: piper album: folium pentasphaerum (...)</i>, so two types of pepper actually were included, evidently making the author’s conclusions invalid.

These minor criticisms however do not reduce the value of Sidebotham’s book. He has offered the reader a remarkably detailed picture of the Egyptian business world along the Red Sea and Indian coast. Moreover, many historians will be grateful that a single volume contains so many relevant epigraphical and archaeological data which can be useful to reconstruct trade with the East.

[[1]] On market integration in the ancient economy, see most recently Bang, P. F. (2008). <i>The Roman bazaar: a comparative study of trade and markets in a tributary empire</i>. Cambridge.

[[2]] For the meaning of emporium, see Vélissaropoulos, J. (1977). Le monde de l’emporion. <i>Dialogues d’histoire ancienne</i> 3: 61-85.

[[3]] Hesnard, A. and P. A. Gianfrotta (1989). Les bouchons d’amphore en pouzzolane. <i>Amphores romaines et histoire économique - dix ans de recherche: actes du colloque de Sienne (22-24 mai 1986)</i>. Rome: 393-441.

[[4]] Bogaert, R. (1998-1999). Les opérations des banques de l’Égypte ptolémaïque. <i>Ancient Society</i> 29: 49-145; id. (2000). Les opérations des banques de l’Égypte romaine. <i>Ancient Society</i> 30: 135-269 and id. (2001). Les documents bancaires de l’Égypte gréco-romaine et byzantine. <i>Ancient Society</i> 31: 173-288.