CHAPTER 2

Trajan’s Canal: River Navigation from the Nile to the Red Sea?*

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Commercial contacts between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea have followed various land and sea routes over millennia. Since 1869, all ships have gone through the Suez Canal, built by the French after decades of planning and construction. The c. 160-km long waterway used by steam- or fuel-propelled ships over the last century and a half makes one forget that during most of history the land of Egypt (and other territories in the Near East) constituted a major obstacle on the passage between East and West. Sailing around the African continent was hardly an option in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and in so far as it was ever chosen, it was a choice made by adventurers rather than traders. Consequently, goods had to be carried overland from the Mediterranean shore to Red Sea harbours or vice versa. The overland journey was shortened thanks to the Nile, which could be accessed through several of its branches.

We also know of various ancient roads running across the Eastern Desert.1 One of the best-attested ones connects the Red Sea port of Quseyr, currently identified as the ancient Myos Hormos or, possibly, Leukos Limen, with the Nile Valley at Coptos. While this is certainly the shortest of several roads between the Red Sea coast and the Nile Valley, it is more than 150 km long and climbs to nearly 600 m above sea level, in a deserted area poorly provided with water and vulnerable to robbers. Comparatively, the distance from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, following the course of the modern canal, is hardly longer than the desert road, and it runs through some lowlands rising no more than 20 m above sea level, between Port Saïd in the north, in the

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1 See Sidebotham 2011, 125–74, esp. 126, Fig. 8.1.
vicinity of the ancient settlement of Pelusium, and Suez in the south, close to the ancient town of Clysma (near Ptolemaic Arsinoe or Cleopatris).\(^2\)

In Antiquity, eastward-bound cargoes had to be unloaded from Mediterranean ships and reloaded onto riverboats in harbours located near one of the mouths of the Nile,\(^3\) possibly at Alexandria, then shipped upstream to Middle or Upper Egypt, unloaded from the riverboats and loaded onto pack animals (camels, mules, donkeys) or carts for the desert stretch, and then unloaded and reloaded onto oceangoing ships.\(^4\) By comparison, the crossing on land over the Isthmus of Suez would have saved the trip up-river, one transfer, and the uphill-downhill stretch in the Eastern Desert. Logistical supply was also easier to provide because of the proximity of the above-mentioned settlements and others located in the Eastern Delta and the Wadi Tumilat.

The question is why ancient traders would have chosen the more difficult desert road across the hills while an easier albeit longer path was available.\(^5\) This question becomes even more relevant considering the fact that some ancient sources report—or allude to—the existence of a man-made waterway running from the Nile to the Gulf of Suez, known in Roman times as Trajan’s Canal. These written sources, epigraphical,\(^6\) literary,\(^7\) and papyrological,\(^8\) are supported by some rather ambiguous archaeological evidence spread over

\(^2\) For the location of this/these settlement/s, see Mayerson 1995b and 1996; and Cohen 2006, 308; Nappo, in this volume, points out that according to Strabo (16.4.23) Arsinoe/Clysma was the main hub for the Red Sea fleet from the time of Augustus onward. See also Sidebotham 2011, 51 and 178–79.

\(^3\) All mouths were not equal in this respect. Cf. map in Bietak 1975, 176, Ab. 43 and in Butzer 1975, 1047, Fig. 2.

\(^4\) Such a combination of land- and river-transport for trading purposes between the Mediterranean world and the East is attested in the context of the Nabataean perfume and aromatic trade, as discussed by Terpstra in this volume.

\(^5\) This question is discussed in detail by Cooper 2011.

\(^6\) Four stelae found in situ and set up by Darius (/Xerxes?, c.518 BCE) and one by Ptolemy II Philadelphus (c.270) commemorate work done on the eastern stretch of the canal. Cf. Aubert 2004a, 225–27, based on previous work by G. Posener. Some of the texts are translated in Cooper 2009, 197.

\(^7\) Hdt. 2.158 (c.460 BCE) and 4.39; Arist. Mete. 1.14 (352b) (c.335 BCE); Diod. Sic. 1.33.8–12 (c.60 BCE) and 3.43–44; Strabo 1.2.31; 16.4.23; and 17.1.25–26 (c.24 BCE–24 CE); Plin., HN 6.165–167 (mid first c.); Ptol., Geogr. 4.5.54 (mid. second c.); Lucian, Alex. 44 (c.180 CE); Egeria, Peregrinatio 1.7–8 (381–384); Gregory of Tours, Hist. Francorum 1.10 (c.575); Dicuil, Liber de mensura orbis terrae 6.12–20 (late eighth/early ninth c.); El-Maqrizi 202–3 (1364–1442).

\(^8\) SB VI 9545.32 = Ostracon, in W. Müller, APF 16 (1956) 211–12, no. 32 (Thebes, Memnonia?, 112 CE); O.Marb.priv. (Thebes, Memnonia? 112) = Jördens 2007, 478–80; O.Cair. gpw 99 (Thebes, Memnonia? 112) = P. Heilporn in Jördens 2007, 480–82; possibly some Elephantine ostraca