THE IMPACT OF THE THIRD CENTURY CRISIS ON THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE WITH THE EAST

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The commerce between the Roman Empire and the East was a flourishing one. From the far East came silk, spices and other similar goods. This commerce has frequently been described as a trade in luxuries, the result of decadent tastes and desires, especially of the Roman élites. We should, however, be careful in applying terms such as ‘luxury goods’ indiscriminately to these items. Some goods were indeed luxury goods, but on many occasions these commodities had medicinal or religious applications.¹

The Romans were not the first to recognize and exploit lucrative trade opportunities with Eastern regions. Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his descendants constructed ports along the Red Sea. Through these ports came exotic merchandise, including the elephants and gold that Ptolemy II used to wage war and pay his mercenary troops.² On the Arabian side of the Red Sea, the Nabatean kingdom had many commercial relations with South Arabia, from which it imported some spices, especially incense.³ But when Octavian added Egypt to the Roman Empire in 30 B.C., the Romans quickly became the dominant force in the East-West trade.⁴ From that moment onwards, they could use their knowledge of the monsoon winds to improve the imports of goods from the East.⁵

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⁵ L. Casson, ‘Rome’s Trade with the East: The Sea Voyage to Africa and India’, Transactions of the American Philological Association 110 (1980), 27; G.W. Bowersock, Roman
At the height of the Roman imperial age, several main ports were operating on the Red Sea coast. Although most of these were built by the Ptolemies and the Nabateans, it was the Romans who greatly expanded their economic importance. Many literary sources help to reconstruct how this ‘harbour system’ worked during the first two centuries A.D.: the most important are Strabo’s *Geography*, Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia*, Ptolemy’s *Geography* and, particularly the anonymous *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. According to Ptolemy’s *Geography*, these ports were from north to south Clysma, Philoteras, Myos Hormos, Leukos Limen, Nechesia and Berenike (on the Egyptian side); and Aila and Leuke Kome (on the Arabian side).²

So, starting at the Egyptian coast, the first port was Clysma, located at the northernmost point on the Red Sea, very close to modern Suez. It was founded in the Ptolemaic age, but was apparently not greatly utilized before the end of the second century A.D.³ The site of the Ptolemaic town of Philoteras has not been yet discovered. Strabo says that it was located before the “hot, salt springs”,⁴ which seem to point to a place not far from Ain Sukhna (Hot Spring) some 50 km south of modern Suez. Several modern scholars suggest that it is possibly situated to the south of the modern port of Safaga.⁵ Various sources, furthermore, attribute a leading role in the Erythrean trade to Myos Hormos. It is significant that in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* only two ports on the Egyptian coast are mentioned: Myos Hormos and Berenike.¹⁰ The location of Myos Hormos was established in the last years as modern Quseir al-Qadim.¹¹ We have no idea about the location of Leukos Limen or its real importance. Apart from Ptolemy, no literary source mentions it. Recently it was suggested that the great geographer made a mistake, duplicating the name of a harbour on the Arabian coast (Leuke *Arabia* (Cambridge MA 1983), 21; L. Casson, ‘Ancient Naval Technology and the Route to India’, in Begley and De Puma 1991, op. cit. (n. 2), 8–11.

⁴ Strabo, *Geographia* 16.4.5.