"Barbarians" and Blemmyes: who was in control of the Red Sea port of Berenike in the Late Antique period?*

In the early centuries CE, the Roman state attempted to monitor, tax and protect traders and travelers crossing the Eastern Desert (against the potentially dangerous barbaroi*). These traders were operating from sites like Berenike and Myos Hormos, key ports for the Red Sea branch of the Indian Ocean trade. Conversely, during the course of the third century, this situation changed. The* praesidia *(small forts) lining these routes were abandoned, Myos Hormos ceased to operate, and activity at Berenike reached a low ebb. In the Late Antique period, there was a revival of activity, with more northerly ports like Clysma and Aila coming into prominence. Berenike also saw a revival, but who controlled this site remains less clear. Three possible scenarios are examined in this article. The first is that the Roman state was (in)directly in charge, perhaps through Christianized Saracen* foederati*. The second is that (a certain faction of) the Blemmyes were employed as* foederati*. The third is that the Blemmyes largely controlled Berenike and that traders were permitted to operate at the port under their sufferance. It is argued here that the latter two possibilities are now the most likely in light of recent archaeological and epigraphic discoveries.*

Introduction

The Red Sea port of Berenike was initially established by Ptolemy II to facilitate the acquisition of live elephants for the military.[1] However, this site also grew in commercial

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[1] Strabo 17.1.45; Plin. *HN* 6.33.167–68.

significance and continued to operate long after the elephant hunting activity ceased at some point in the second century BCE.[2] By the Roman Imperial period, Berenike, along with Myos Hormos, was one of the preeminent Red Sea trading ports. The site shows evidence for high levels of activity, especially during the first century, but this reached a low ebb during the so-called Third Century Crisis.[3]

Archaeological evidence from the port indicates a revival in prosperity from the mid-fourth century to early sixth centuries.[4] However, the picture becomes distinctly more complicated, specifically in terms of who controlled Berenike. If we accept the testimony of Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 394 CE), Olympiodorus (early–fifth century) and Cosmas (sixth century), the Blemmyes controlled the emerald mines of the Mons Smaragdus region just

[2] This commercial activity is evidenced, for example, from a loan agreement (150 BCE) involving individuals (as merchants, lenders or guarantors) from Egypt, Massalia, Carthage, Lacedaemonia, Thessalonike, and Elea who were engaged in a venture to the Spice-Bearing land (Ἀρωματόφορος χώρα); likely on the coast of Somalia – *SB* 3.7169. Additionally, an inscription from 130 BCE reveals that the Ptolemaic state had put the official Sōterichos (subordinate to Paōs, the *strategos* of Thebes) in charge of overseeing mining operations in the Eastern Desert, the monitoring of Red Sea shipping, and responsibility for ensuring the safe transport of aromatics across the desert to Koptos – *OGIS* 132 = *Pan du désert* 86. While, by the late second to early first century BCE, the role of overseer of the Erythraean and Indian Seas had been established (probably signifying the greater significance of this trade to the state) – *SB* 5.8036 = *I. Portes* 49.

[3] The designator CE will only be used when ambiguity may occur or specific dates are mentioned. All dates in BCE are indicated as such. On Berenike and wider Indian Ocean activity, see Sidebotham 2011; Cobb 2015; Tomber 2017. There is some indication of continued activity in the mid–third century. For example, a fragment of a monumental inscription from the Great Temple (referred to in earlier scholarship as the so-called Temple of Serapis, although it is now clear that it was dedicated to "The Greatest Goddess Isis"; associations with Serapis being secondary) which suffered *damnatio memoriae* seems to date to the joint reigns of Trebonianus Gallus and Volusianus (253 CE) – Sidebotham et al. 2019, 15.

[4] Sidebotham 2011, 259–82.

northwest of Berenike (intersecting the key Koptos-Berenike route).[5] Thus, raising questions about how Berenike functioned in this period and who had ultimate authority at the site.

This article considers what new light recent discoveries can shed on the issue. Three possible scenarios are considered here. The first one, advocated by Timothy Power, holds that Christianized Saracen *foederati* played a role in protecting travellers against the indigenous *barbaroi* or Blemmyes. A second scenario is that Berenike operated as a Roman-Byzantine port, but with the Blemmyes being co-opted; that is to say, being given tribute as part of Roman frontier policy (a situation perhaps going back to the reign of Diocletian). In this case, certain groups of Blemmyes may have formed part of a wider *limes* system; although shifting alliances and the pre-eminence of certain groups or individuals—in what might be categorized as a wider *barbaroi* or Blemmyan confederation—could suggest a fluid and changing situation. The third scenario considered here is that the Blemmyes largely controlled Berenike, meaning that traders from the Roman world and elsewhere operated at the port under their sufferance.[6] It is argued that scenarios two or three are more likely based on recent discoveries at Berenike and from the wider region encompassing southeast Egypt

[5] Epiph. *De XII gemmis* 19–21 = *FHN* 305; Olympiodorus, *fragm*. 1.37 (= Phot. *Bib.* cod. 80 p. 62a9–26) = *FHN* 309; Cosmas *Christian Topography* 11.339. See also Heliod. *Aeth*. 2.32. For an overview of the archaeological surveys of the routes, mining sites and settlements in the Mons Smaragdus region, see Sidebotham and Wright, et al. 2019.

[6] Sidebotham and Gates-Foster 2019, 24, raise the hypothesis that from the mid–fourth century the Roman government left the Blemmyes in control of Berenike on the understanding that they would receive a portion of the tolls and taxes levied on the goods passing through the port.

and northeast Sudan (the mid-lower Eastern Desert region). In particular, an inscription from Berenike mentioning an Isemne, King of the Blemmyes, strengthens this case.[7]

However, before analyzing each of these theories in turn, it is worth providing more contextual detail for point of comparison between the Imperial and Late Antique periods. In particular, for the sometimes tense, sometimes cooperative relationships that existed with the indigenous populations, and how the Roman state sought to monitor, tax and protect traders and travelers moving through the region. Additionally, it is valuable to consider some of the challenges posed by the source material.

Context: Red Sea activity from the Imperial to the Late Antique

By the early centuries CE, the Mediterranean world was firmly integrated into wider Indian Ocean networks of exchange. This was through a series of maritime, riverine and overland routes intersecting the Red Sea–Egypt, Persian Gulf–Mesopotamia and Arabian–Red Sea regions.[8] The Red Sea, in particular, provided a major artery for direct "Roman" participation in the Indian Ocean trade. That is to say, peoples from the Mediterranean world were able to directly engage in this trade alongside others from East Africa, Arabia, Persia, India, and beyond. These interconnections were greatly facilitated by infrastructure, notably ports and watering–points along Eastern Desert tracks. The existence of some tracks lining the Eastern Desert can be traced back to the Pre–Dynastic period, with mining, quarrying and trading

[7] An overview of this inscription was provided at the *Red Sea IX conference* (4 July 2019, Lyon) and has subsequently been published by Ast and Rądkowska in a recent edition of *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* (2020). It is discussed further below.

[8] For an overview see, among other scholarship, Bowersock 1983; Tomber 2008; Sidebotham 2011; Seland 2011 and 2014; Cobb 2018a; Gregoratti 2019.

operations having taken place at various points during the Pharaonic era.[9] However, during the Ptolemaic period some of these routes were expanded, supplied with wells and (semi) permanent garrisons (sometimes fortified), which were then further developed during the Roman Imperial period.[10]

Beside Red Sea trading activity, the Roman state was also very much interested in the Eastern Desert for its mineral resources, notably the hardstone from the major quarries at Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus.[11] Furthermore, it likely had wider military-diplomatic interests in the Red Sea region—no doubt, in part, connecting to trading activity—as suggested by the presence of Roman soldiers on the Farasan Islands.[12] The notion that the

[9] For earlier Pharaonic era trading, mining and quarrying activity see Sidebotham, Hense and Nouwens 2008; Creasman and Yamamoto 2019; Sidebotham and Gates-Foster 2019; and select chapters from Barnard and Duistermaat 2012. For a long history of the Eastern Desert dwellers, see Barnard 2019.

[10] For excavations and surveys of the routes and *praesidia* (small forts) that lined the Eastern Desert in the Graeco-Roman period see Zitterkopf and Sidebotham 1989; Sidebotham, Zitterkopf and Riley 1991; Cuvigny 2006, 2011 and 2012a; Paprocki 2019; Sidebotham, Gates-Foster and Rivard 2019.

[11] For reports on the excavations of Mons Porphyrites and Mons Claudianus, see Peacock and Maxfield 1997, 2001a and b, 2007.

[12] On the Roman presence on the Farasan Islands, see Bukharin 2005–2006, 2009–2010 and 2011; Villeneuve 2004 and 2007. The epigraphic evidence indicates that they were present at least during the first half of the second century, if not in earlier or later periods. Certainly there is additional evidence attesting to a wider Roman naval presence in the Red Sea from the Augustan period into the early centuries CE. For a brief overview, see Cobb 2018a, 117–20. On the Augustan period, see Strabo 16.4.23 (fleet of Aelius Gallus), 17.1.45 (naval station at Myos Hormos). For the later Julio-Claudian period see the Nikanor archive, which contains two ostraka mentioning a trierarch (commander of a trireme) and a *tessararis liburnou* (a swift galley) – *O.Petr.* 296 (*ca*. first–half of the first century); *O.Petr.* 279 (16 September 52 CE). In the late Flavian period (93 CE) we also have a papyrus from Myos Hormos which mentions a soldier called Lucius Longinus who served on the Hippokampos, a dispatch galley (*tesseraria*) – see P.004 – Van Rengen 2011, 335–36.

Roman military presence on the Farasan islands can be primarily explained in terms of combating piracy has been forcefully critiqued by Bukharin.[13] While Nappo has, in fact, argued that Trajan and his immediate successors sought to use Roman naval power to extend Roman domination (but not direct rule) further down the Red Sea.[14]

The narrative for the monitoring, administration, and taxation of the goods and peoples moving through the upper Red Sea ports can be reconstructed with a fair degree of plausibility for the Imperial period *(ca*. 30 BCE–third century CE). Merchants, sailors, and others were granted permission by the military to move through the Eastern Desert, in particular along tracks that linked the key ports of Berenike and Myos Hormos with the Nile emporium of Koptos.[15] Goods that entered Egypt via the Red Sea ports would be assessed for payment of a(n) (initial) *tetarte* (in the case of goods entering via Myos Hormos and Berenike, likely collected at Koptos), and potentially a further *tetarte* was levied at Alexandria for those goods being sold on elsewhere in the Empire.[16] A Roman military

[13] On the idea of combating piracy, see Villeneuve 2007, 25. *Contra* Bukharin 2005–2006, 137–39; Bukharin 2009–2010, 117; Bukharin 2011, 17–20.

[14] Nappo 2015.

[15] On ostraka from Berenike that record permissions to let goods pass, see Bagnall, Helms and Verhoogt 2000 and 2005; Ast and Bagnall 2016. See also the Koptos Tariff = *OGIS* 674.

[16] See the so-called Muziris Papyrus (*P.Vindob* G 40822 Recto) for the imposition of the *tetarte* (25% tax). De Romanis 2020, 132–33, 180–81, 277–97, 312, has recently argued, partially on the basis of Strabo's comments about double-duties (τέλη διπλάσια), that the *tetarte* was levied when goods entered Egypt (at Koptos), and then again for any of those sold at Alexandria for distribution to other markets in the Empire. He further suggests (p. 240, 283–97, 322–32) that the quarter-taxes and surcharges of the *arabarchoi* amounted to the ostensible equivalent of 43.75% taken on the goods carried in the Hermapollon (the ship mentioned in the Muziris Papyrus). For the supervision and collection of the taxes, and the connected offices of *arabarchos* and *paralemptes*, see Burkhalter-Acer 1999, 44–54; Cuvigny 2005, 59–62; De Romanis 2020, 298–320.

presence was also established at the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome on the northern Arabian Peninsula, likewise for tax collection.[17]

The archaeological and epigraphic evidence suggests a major phase of fortification of the routes linking Koptos with Myos Hormos and Berenike during the Flavian period (this was not to control the wider Eastern Desert region, which it is doubtful the Roman military ever did, but rather to control key routes running across it).[18] The second century ostraka from the *praesidia* (small forts) which lined these routes indicate periodic bouts of violence between "external" peoples and the so-called *barbaroi*; that is to say the various indigenous nomads of the region.[19] Similarly, some mid to late second–century ostraka from Mons Claudianus reveal that fear of the *barbaroi* could hinder the quarrymen from working.[20] It is even possible that one of the stations—Didymoi (on the Koptos-Berenike route)—was temporarily abandoned during the third quarter of the second century.[21]

Arguably, these tensions made operating from ports like Myos Hormos and Berenike a less attractive proposition for some during the course of the second century. The lower intensity of occupation suggested by the archaeological evidence may reflect this; although, this did not mean activity ceased, as inscriptional evidence from Berenike makes clear.[22]

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[17] *Periplus Maris Erythraei* 19. On the likelihood that this represents a direct Roman military presence and not a reference to local Nabataean personal, see Cobb 2018a, 135.

[18] For the archaeological and epigraphic evidence attesting to this dating, see Cuvigny 2006, 2011 and 2012a.

[19] Cuvigny 2005 and 2014.

[20] See *O.Claud*. Inv. 4888 (145 CE), 7309 (152/153 CE), 7226 (*ca*. 150–190 CE), 7255 (189 CE), IV 851 (end of second century); *O.Ka.La*. inv. 31. See also *P.Bagnall* 8 (186/187 CE).

[21] Brun 2011, 128; Brun, Cuvigny and Reddé 2011, 159–60; Cuvigny 2012b, 43–46; *I.Did*. 3.

[22] Certainly there is evidence for dedications being set up in Berenike during the Nervan-Antonine and Severan periods (as in earlier and later periods). See, for example, Ast and Bagnall 2015. Moreover, a Palmyrene merchant diaspora based at Koptos from around the mid-second into the third century, likely also utilised the

Very likely these tensions were a motivating factor in the re-dredging of the canal linking Arsinoe/Clysma with the Nile under Trajan and Hadrian's establishment of the *Via Nova Hadriana*.[23] In this context, smaller, more manoeuvrable ships will have found it attractive to operate from the northern ports, whereas larger, less agile ships (which due to prevailing wind conditions would have struggled to sail much above the 20° N parallel) presumably continued to operate from Berenike.[24] More generally, we might note that by the Severan period the 25% tax on Indian Ocean goods had to be lowered to 12.5%, possibly reflective of these wider developments.[25] Additionally, by the early to mid–third century the ostraka, especially those from Xeron and Dios, suggest a more conciliatory approach. In particular, 96 ostraka from Xeron record *barbaroi* were receiving distributions of wheat from the Roman

port of Berenike. See Cobb 2020. By contrast, the increasing demise of Myos Hormos can be arguably connected to the second century (with a complete abandonment during the third century). See Cobb 2019; Nappo 2020.

[23] Cobb 2019, 103–5; Nappo 2020, 27.

[24] From December to February, prevailing southerlies (in the lower-mid part of the Red Sea) would facilitate sailing up to 20° N. From March, there was a slightly better chance for fair winds to help with the final leg to Berenike (which is just below 24° N; by contrast Myos Hormos is just above 26° N) – McGrail 2004, 53. On the dangers of arriving at Berenike late in the season, see *P.CtYBR* inv. 624 – Peppard 2009. This papyrus reveals details of a group of ships engaged in a five hour struggle against foul winds to enter Berenike's harbor (the reign of Nerva on Pauni 11 = 5 June 97 CE). On the need for the largest ships to operate from Berenike, see Nappo 2020, 27; De Romanis 2020, 35–46, 68–70, 251. De Romanis suggests that perhaps eight or nine "very large ships", of around 600 metric tonnes plus, were operating from Berenike in the first century, reducing to around two for the latter second to third century (p. 202). On the μέγιστα πλοῖα (large ships), which are mentioned in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (56), see De Romanis 1996, 178–80 n. 40; De Romanis 2012, 75–77.

[25] The latest date that the *tetarte* is mentioned is 174 CE, while the earliest for the *octava* is 227 CE – *Codex Justinianus* 4.65.7; Wilson 2015, 27–28.

state.[26] The nature of these payments are unstated, but it seems reasonable to understand them in terms of conciliation or co-option. That is to say, they were being given supplies either as payment for protecting travelers and caravans or as a bribe not to attack them.

At some point during the mid–third century, we see the abandonment of the *praesidia*, a complete cessation of activity at Myos Hormos, and lower levels of activity at Berenike.[27] The broader political, social and economic problems that took place during the so-called Third Century Crisis will undoubtedly have impinged to some extent upon the total volume of eastern goods being consumed across the Roman Empire (although there was certainly no cessation of this consumption).[28] In particular, events in Egypt and the Near East during the last third of the century periodically complicated Red Sea trading operations; notably the Palmyrene invasion of Egypt, Blemmyan incursions into Upper Egypt around late 270s into early 280s CE, and a few revolts in the 290s CE.[29]

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[26] On the Xeron ostraka, see Cuvigny 2014; and Satzinger 2014.

[27] Whitcomb 1979, 37; Blue 2007, 265, 274–75 (Myos Hormos); Cuvigny 2014, 188–89 (*praesidia*); Sidebotham 2014, 617–19 (Berenike). The *barbaroi* seem to have increasingly controlled the routes leading to the Red Sea ports during the course of the third century – Lassányi 2012, 285, 287; Brun, Cuvigny and Reddé 2011, 162; Sidebotham and Gates-Foster 2019, 23.

[28] Some earlier scholars characterized the Indian Ocean trade as having an insignificant impact on the overall Roman economy, and dismissed the exchange as one largely dealing in luxury goods for the elite: see, for example, Finley 1999 (first published 1973), 23, 132; Whittaker 2004, 171. However, it has increasingly been recognised that many goods imported into the Roman Empire via Indian Ocean trade networks, notably plant products (often used in cuisine, perfumes, dyes, medical compounds, incense mixtures, etc.) like black pepper and frankincense, diffused more widely both geographically and across the socio-economic spectrum than the term "luxury" might imply. On this see, among others, Sidebotham 2011, 249–51; van der Veen 2011: 70; Purcell 2016, 75; Cobb 2018b, 519–44.

[29] On the capture of Koptos and Ptolemais and their subsequent restoration by the Emperor Probus, see *Hist. Aug., Probus* 17. On these difficulties in Egypt, see Pollard 2013.

During the Tetrarchic period, we see attempts to reorganize affairs in Egypt, such as the abandonment of the Dodekaschoinos and the reorganization of frontier forces. In the case of the latter, there was no attempt to reoccupy the *praesidia*, perhaps with the notable exception of Phoinikon, modern al-Laqita, where the Ala VIII Palmyrenorum was stationed according to the *Notitia dignitatum*.[30] Private security arrangements for those merchants crossing the Eastern Desert would have been necessary; although they were also employed by merchants and financiers in the Imperial period.[31]

Travelers and merchants entering certain part of the Eastern Desert, including traveling along the Koptos-Berenike route, presumably needed the permission of the local *hypotyrannoi* (sub-despots), *phylarchoi* (tribal chiefs) and perhaps even the *basileis*/*basiliskos* (king), if the comments of Olympiodorus are to be believed (*ca*. 423 CE).[32] A medieval Arabic text called the *Synaxarion* (possibly based on earlier Coptic text)

[30] While the latest iteration of the *Notitia dignitatum* may date to around 429 CE, it has been suggested that the section on the *Oriens* was completed a number of decades earlier, making it likely that troop disposition indicated in this work reflects earlier fourth century policy. On this see Pollard 2013.

[31] It is clear that private security arrangements can and were made by merchants and financier who needed to convey valuable goods across the Eastern Desert (between the Red Sea and the Nile) in the Imperial period. On this see the Muziris Papyrus = *P. Vindob* G 40822 Recto, Column 2 Line 2–4; and the Koptos Tariff = *OGIS* 674. Additionally, sometimes military escorts were provided by order of the Prefect of Berenike: see, for example, Cuvigny 2005, 25, 77–82, 94, 154 – K458, K315, K519a; *O.Krok.* 87. Perhaps the key difference, however, is that the Imperia era *praesidia* offered shelter for travelers and their camels at periodic interval, which is valuable since the ostraka from Krokodilo, Xeron and Dios and Didymoi indicate the potential threat posed by the *barbaroi*. For interior space available for civilians in these *praesidia*, see Reddé and Brun 2006.

[32] Olympiodorus *fragm*. 1.37 (= Phot. *Bib*. cod. 80 p. 62a9–26) = *FHN* 309. We see the term *basiliskos* (βασιλίσκος)—kinglet—appear in relation to the Silko inscription. Zacharopoulou 2016, 240, notes that this term was often used in relation to Byzantine protocol for the rulers of *foederati*. Essentially this emphasised the subordinate position of such a ruler to the Byzantine emperor. However, she argues that in this context, Silko

might add further testimony to the role played by the Beja (Blemmyes) in facilitating the transport of individuals from Koptos to Berenike. It mentions how a Bishop Nabis (*ca*. fourth to fifth centuries CE) had episcopal oversight of Aidhab (in this context probably actually a reference to Berenike).[33] He did not normally live there, but at Koptos, periodically sending a priest or deacon to the port. When Nabis did need to travel to "Aidhab", the Beja transported him and his ornaments, receiving a fee for the hire of their animals. That a close relationship between traders and the indigenous nomads of the Eastern Desert was important, is further underscored by the biography of Firmus in the *Historia Augusta*. It records his close relationships with the Blemmyes and Saracens and that his wealth derived from the Indian Ocean trade, the implication being that they facilitated this activity.[34] By contrast, there is no doubt that in the Imperial period the Roman military supervised and granted permission for travelers and merchants to traverse the main routes linking the Red Sea ports with the Nile.

From the mid-fourth to sixth centuries we see a revival of activity, but trading patterns had shifted. Northern Red Sea ports like Clysma and Aila grew in significance, while in the southern Red Sea the Axumites became a notable force (at times even dominating parts of

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may have wanted to emphasis the federated relationship, and that it was actually meant to convey his importance (even though the term βασιλεὺς would notionally appear superior).

[33] For an overview, see Gabra 2010. Based on references to contemporary bishops, Nabis can be connected to the late fourth to early fifth century. Gabra plausibly argues that reference to Aidhad, a port south of Berenike (founded in the ninth century), in this context actually means Berenike (because Aidhab had not yet been founded when Nabis was bishop, while Berenike had long ceased to operate when this Arabic text was written).

[34] *Hist. Aug. Firmus* 3.3. It is important to observe that aspects of this account have been deemed suspect, including the possibility that the "Firmus" of the *Historia Augusta* was an amalgamated figure. It is also possible that we are dealing with outbreaks of unrest rather than a full-blown revolt. See Bowman 1976. That said, even if the figure of Firmus is a partial invention, the detail about his friendly relations with the Blemmyes and Saracens, to facilitate his trading activity, likely added veracity to the narrative.

southern Arabia).[35] The Axumites and Himyarites have frequently been interpreted as playing key intermediary roles, overseeing significant commercial hubs.[36] Although, it should be noted some merchants from the Roman world did occasionally sail as far as Sri Lanka, as indicated by Cosmas' associate Sopatrus.[37] The port of Berenike also saw a revival in this period, but assessing how it operated is more complicated.[38] If we accept the testimony of Epiphanius, Olympiodorus and Cosmas, the Blemmyes ruled the areas around Berenike (including the emerald mines to the northwest).[39] Thus, raising the question, did the Late Roman-Byzantine state control Berenike during this renewed era of prosperity or was it the Blemmyes?

Problems with the source material

Before addressing this question, and considering the three scenarios outlined at the beginning of the article, it is worth briefly laying out the difficult nature of the source material (written and archaeological), as well as the problems inherent in its interpretation. With regards to the written material, we are largely dealing with external peoples writing about the inhabitants of the Eastern Desert region—principally in hieroglyphic Egyptian, Demotic, Greek, Latin, and Coptic texts.[40] These "external" sources can often be partisan, reductive and limited in detail.

[35] For a broader discussion of activity in the Late Antique Red Sea, see Power 2012a and b. On the Axumites and there regional interests, see Tomber 2005; Bowersock 2013.

[36] Tomber 2005, 42–48.

[37] Cosmas *Christian Topography* 11.338.

[38] Sidebotham 2011, 259–82.

[39] Epiph. *De XII gemmis* 19–21 = *FHN* 305; Olympiodorus, *fragm*. 1.37 (= Phot. *Bib.* cod. 80 p. 62a9–26) = *FHN* 309; Cosmas *Christian Topography* 11.339. See also Heliod. *Aeth*. 2.32.

[40] For an invaluable collation of this textual material both "external" and "internal" about the Blemmyes, see the *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* (*FHN*) volume 3 – Eide et al. 1998.

Sometimes the labels crudely applied to the peoples of the region define them by their purported eating habits.[41] Other authors hint at a collection of interrelated peoples, such as with the ethnonyms Trogodytae and Blemmyes.[42] In the case of the ostraka from the *praesidia* the nomadic peoples of the Eastern Desert are generally designated as *barbaroi*.[43] Some of the sources do recognize divisions within overarching groups, such as the Abylloi and Bolgioi who are referred to as being part of the Trogodytae; although unfortunately they rarely give more informative detail on the complexities of these tribal structures.[44]

How accurately the information presented in these sources reflects the contemporary situation or obsolete or anachronistic details from other periods can be contested. For example, it is not clear whether Claudius Ptolemy's (second century) association of the Blemmyes with the area around Avalites (in Somaliland) is accurate or a vestige of an outdated Hellenistic tradition.[45] Similarly, some have questioned Procopius' claim that Diocletian withdrew Roman forces from the Dodekaschoinos to Syene (Aswan) and instituted payments to the Blemmyes and Nobatai (Noubades) to dissuade them from raiding Upper Egypt. It has been suggested that this is a retrojection, reflecting later Justinianic policy.[46]

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[41] See Barnard 2019, 390–92, for various historical terms used to refer to Eastern Desert dwellers, including some of the Hellenistic era ethnonyms that relate to purported eating habits.

[42] On the distinction between Trogodytea and Troglogytea, see Murray and Warmington 1967; Tomber 2005.

[43] Cuvigny 2014, 169–70, 194–95.

[44] The Abylloi are mentioned by Apollodorus (*Periegesis fragm.* 106) and the Bolgioi by Diodorus Siculus (1.37.8).

[45] Claudius Ptolemy *Geog.* 4.7.31; Pierce 2012, 234–35.

[46] Procopius *Wars* 1.19.27–37. For example, Dijkstra 2012, 241, has expressed doubt that the Blemmyes were present in the Dodekaschoinos prior to the latter fourth century. It is noted that there is no evident rapid material cultural change in this area until roughly the end of the third century.

Whatever the case, by the third to fourth centuries, the Blemmyes are variously discussed in relation to the Eastern Desert (principally northeastern Sudan, southeastern Egypt) and the Nile Valley region (Lower Nubia and Upper Egypt). It has been suggested, quite plausibly, that they were able to occupy Lower Nubia (and attack into Upper Egypt) at points during the fourth century, but were pushed back by the Noubades into the Eastern Desert during the course of the fifth century.[47] However, as Dijkstra rightly notes, the peoples known as Blemmyes almost certainly were not one homogenous group, but what might be thought of as a confederation of interrelated pastoral nomads and (semi-)sedentary peoples.[48] Nevertheless, they clearly had sufficient cultural and linguistic overlap (see below) to conceive of themselves, and be perceived by others, as part of a larger group.

The few "internal" written sources that do exist date to the Late Antique period.[49] Among these are the well-known Silko Inscription (*ca*. fifth century) and Letter of Phonen (*ca*. mid–fifth century).[50] The former is a triumphal inscription in Greek on the western side of the forecourt of the temple of Mandulis at Kalabsha (Talmis), which celebrates King Silko's campaigns against the Blemmyes and his occupation of some of their territory. The

[47] On the idea that the Blemmyes originally lived in central Sudan in the Ptolemaic to early Imperial period, migrated to the Nile Valley area of Lower Nubia by the fourth century, but with their defeat by the Nobatai/ Noubades in the fifth century, and were forced back into the Eastern Desert, see Burstein 2008, 256–57, 260–61. See also Dijkstra 2012, 241–42, 246.

[48] Dijkstra 2012, 246. See also Skeat 1977, 164; Pierce 2012, 237.

[49] Barnard 2019, 392, notes that of the majority of these Blemmyan documents use Greek, while others use a combination of Greek and Coptic elements.

[50] Silko Inscription = *OGIS* 1.201 = *FHN* 317; Phonen Letter = Rea 1979, 147 ff. = *FHN* 319. See also *SB* 5.8697 = *FHN* 313 (fifth century), which is a pidgin Greek inscription on the cella of the temple of Mandulis at Kalabsha (Talmis). It records cult dedications, and refers to a Phonen as *phylarchos* (among other figures). If this is the same Phonen, it may indicate a period before his succession to the position of *basileis*.

Letter of Phonen (a Greek papyrus found at Qasr Ibrim) consists of an appeal by Phonen, King of the Blemmyes to Abourni, King of the Noubades (who had succeeded Silko). The former requests that the lands taken by the Noubades be returned, since it is claimed they already received payment for this and threatens violence if this is not fulfilled.

These "internal" or indigenous sources, limited in detail as they are, offer us valuable insights into issues such as the political structures of these (tribal) societies, the relationships between groups like the Blemmyes and Noubades, and the major centers of significance for these peoples (Kalabsha (Talmis), Taphis (Tafa), and Primis (Qasr Ibrim or Cortia)).[51] Coupled with some of the details from the "external" sources, it is possible to try and build a hazy and incomplete picture for the Blemmyes in the Late Antique period.

Of course, constructing a picture of shifting balances of power and the extent of territorial control over time is a fraught issue, to say the least. For example, in the aforementioned passage of Olympiodorus, he reports that the Blemmyes controlled several "cities" (reflecting power dynamics in the early fifth century), specifically Prima/Primis, Phoinikon, Khiris, Thapis (Taphis), and Talmis. References in the Silko inscription and some Blemmyan dedications at Kalabsha (Talmis) support the claim that the Blemmyes controlled Talmis at certain points in the fifth century.[52] Similarly, it has been suggested that Prima/Primis might be reasonably identified with Qasr Ibrim, the location where the Letter of Phonen was discovered. However, the site of Khiris has not been securely identified (a location somewhere on the old Koptos-Myos Hormos route is one possibility).[53] Moreover, as noted above, the *Notitia dignitatum* has a Roman military garrison based at Phoinikon (al-

[51] Dijkstra 2012, 245; Fournet 2018, 10.

[52] On the Blemmyan dedications at Kalabsha (Talmis) see *SB* 1.1521–1523 (*FHN* 310); *SB* 1.1524 (*FHN* 311); *SB* 5.8697 (*FHN* 313).

[53] Fournet 2018, 10.

Laqita), presumably during parts of the fourth century; but if we accept the testimony of Epiphanius and Olympiodorus (for which there is no obvious reason to reject it), the Blemmyes controlled this area by end of the fourth to early fifth century.

Studying the material evidence also poses challenges. Unsurprisingly more attention in the past has been focused on static settlements, like ports, quarries, mines and forts in the Eastern Desert region. Whereas, evidence attesting to mobile groups can be more difficult to identify. There is some material which can reasonably be connected to indigenous peoples in the region, although the extent to which this can be tied to any one particular group is not straightforward. For example, a type of handmade ceramic known as Eastern Desert Ware (EDW)—which often comes in the form of cups and bowls (possibly used in ritual consumptive practices and stylistically distinct from wheel-made pottery produced along the Nile)—might plausibly be tied to the Blemmyes, but Barnard urges caution on this point.[54] In any case, it was almost certainly produced in the region equating with northeast Sudan and Southeast Egypt. It has been found principally in central and southern Eastern Desert settlements and funerary sites, as well as along the eastern banks of Lower Nubia.[55]

Ultimately, it is less of an issue for our purposes that EDW is connected to a specific subset of the indigenous nomads from the central-southern Eastern Desert. Perhaps the most

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[54] See Barnard 2007, 2008, 2013, 2018 and 2019 for extensive discussion of EDW, its various forms, its chronology (mostly dating to the fourth to sixth centuries), its use, the difficulties of identifying a single source of production, and the problems of attributing it to one single group.

[55] Barnard 2008, 1, 40, 52, 64, 104; Barnard and Magid 2006, 16; Barnard 2013, 95, 98, 100; Barnard 2018, 282, 287; Barnard 2019, 396. Barnard notes the following sites in the Eastern Desert were EDW has been found: Bir Umm Fawakhir, Bir Manih, Hitan Rayan, Shenshef, Qaria Mustafa ‘Amir Gama’a, Bir Abraq(?), Wadi Alaqi, Tabot, the Mons Smaragdus area, Jabal Zabara, Wadi Sikait, Umm Hiran, Kab Marfu’a, Quseir al-Qadim, Marsa Nakari, and Berenike. In the Nile Valley area, he also notes: Kalabsha North and South, Wadi Qitna, Sayala, Wadi al-‘Arab, Qasr Ibrim, Wadi al-Tereif, Kurgus and possibly Gabati.

salient point is that it is best to think of the peoples of this region, stretching from the Wadi Hammamat down to the Fourth Cataract, as a collection of variegated but interrelated peoples that shared distinctive cultural habits. Indeed, this notion is supportable not only from the literary sources (reductive and homogenizing as they can sometimes be) but also from the study of the indigenous names that occur in the third–century Xeron ostraka. As Satzinger notes, while the names of the *barbaroi* recorded in these documents do not show exact parallels with known Blemmyan names, they do demonstrate very clear similarities.[56] Moreover, a third century ostrakon from Didymoi describes Baratit, a leader of a group of *barbaroi*, as a *hypotyrannos*, a term so far only connected with the Blemmyes; thus further attesting to these cultural and political interrelations.[57]

Scenario one: Christianized Saracen *Foederati*

Having laid out the historical context and the challenges posed by the evidence, we can now analyze each of the scenarios in turn. The first scenario assumes that the Late Roman-Byzantine state held sway over Berenike and the routes connecting it, but employed federated Saracen allies to protect their commercial interests against the local *barbaroi* or Blemmyes. In particular, Power has argued that Shenshef, a site to the southeast of Berenike (less than a day's walking distance from the port), was built and utilized by Arabs or Saracens (as they are often referred to in Late Antique sources). He points to parallels in architectural styles between Shenshef and Arabian courtyard houses of the Islamic period to support this notion.[58] As such, Power argues that Shenshef served as a base for Christianized Saracen *foederati* to protect travelers from 'opportunistic Blemmyan raiding' and assumes a

[56] Satzinger 2014.

[57] *O.Did*. 41; Cuvigny 2014, 187, 195.

[58] Power 2012a, 323–37; Power 2012b, 43–46.

connection with wider Red Sea commercial activity based on the presence of Indian Ocean and Mediterranean goods.[59] He further supports this notion by pointing to textual and epigraphic evidence relating to the Pharanite Arabs (who occupied the oasis of Pharan in the Sinai), asserting that they were employed to combat problems across the Egyptian Eastern Desert.[60]

The notion that the Late Roman-Byzantine state employed Christianized Saracen *foederati* is an intriguing idea, and one for which a case might be made at least for the central-northern Eastern Desert. Littmann and Meredith suggested that the dromedary corps in Panopolis and Kainopolis mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum* could be examples of *foederati*.[61] However, whether these were Arabs would be a matter of speculation. More concretely, Power points to a papyrus from Edfu recording Pharanite military units serving in the Thebaid region in the 520s CE and the archive of Dioscorus of Aphrodito (*fl*. 560) which reports on them having fought with the *dux* of the Thebiad against the Blemmyes.[62] It is also claimed that some of the northern Red Sea ports may have been integrated into the *limes* frontier system, with Pharanite Arabs being shuttled from their base in the Sinai to deal with problems in the Eastern Desert.[63] The appearance of a Greek graffito naming an Adidos, who

[59] Power 2012a, 335.

[60] Power 2012b, 36. See Sidebotham, Zitterkopf and Helms 2000, 124–25, for a discussion of the Arab-Christian settlement at Pharan, in the southwestern Sinai, and their protection of monastic communities.

[61] Littmann and Meredith 1954, 241.

[62] Power 2012b, 36; Sidebotham, Zitterkopf and Helms 2000, 125.

[63] Power 2012a, 334. For details on the discovery and context of this graffito, see Sidebotham, Zitterkopf and Helms 2000, 124–25.

refers to himself as a Pharanite, as well as related staurogram (a Christian monogram consisting of a τ and a ρ), may add some credence to this notion.[64]

However, while it is certainly possible that some groups like the Pharanites were employed as *foederati* in parts of the Eastern Desert and Nile region, this does not necessarily substantiate the view that Shenshef was a site occupied by Christianized Saracen *foederati*. Nor does it necessarily follow that they protected traders operating from Berenike.

First of all, there appear to be no epigraphic or material evidence from Shenshef that has any obvious links with particular Arabic groups.[65] By contrast both Shenshef and Berenike reveal material culture that is clearly reflective of indigenous peoples in the region (be they called Blemmyes, *barbaroi* or something else). Among the assemblage of finds associated with them are Indo-Pacific beads, faience beads, sea-shell pendants, ostrich eggs (beads and whole eggs ritually decorated), coral beads and EDW. Such material has been found in a number of funerary and other contexts, among them: post-Meröitic sites in Lower Nubia; Red Sea ports such as Berenike Marsa Nakari (Nechesia?) and Myos Hormos; the slightly inland site of Shenshef; and sites within the Mons Smaragdus area.[66] Moreover, between Berenike, Shenshef and Hitan Rayan some 640 odd Late Antique donut-shaped

[64] Sidebotham, Hense, Nouwens 2008, 221. Power 2012a, 334, cites a fifth century letter by Synesius of Cyrene (Letters 5, 112), which recounts a shipwreck between Alexandria and the Pentapolis causing the loss of a Saracen cavalry. He cites this as supporting evidence for the possibility that Pharanite Arabs were transported by ship along the Red Sea.

[65] Lassányi 2012, 292.

[66] For overview of the material at these sites, see Then-Obłuska 2015, 2016, 2017a and b; Then-Obłuska 2019. It is, in fact, probable that items like black pepper, Indo-Pacific beads, and certain Mesopotamian and Indian ceramics evident at Shenshef and sites in the Lower Nubia, reflect their transit by the "Blemmyes."

tombs (mostly looted) extend in a west and southwest direction; these show clear parallels with other burials sites elsewhere in northeast Africa, like Wadi Qitna and Kalabsha.[67]

This evidence fits in quite neatly with the impression given in our literary sources, which has the Blemmyes controlling eastern Lower Nubia and the Eastern Desert region as far north as the Wadi Hammamat. Indeed, Olympiodorus explicitly claimed that the Blemmyes controlled Phoinikon.[68] While Ammianus Marcellinus (mid–late fourth century) regarded the Wadi Hammamat area as the boundary between the Saracens and the Blemmyes.[69]

Secondly, Power's notion that Shenshef could not have been built by the Blemmyes due to their nomadic lifestyle is too reductive.[70] As already noted, we are likely dealing with a confederation rather than a single homogenous group. Some of these (sub-)groups were more sedentary, like those "Blemmyes" who at least in the late fourth century (if not earlier) controlled the eastern Lower Nubian region. Indeed, at certain points groups of Blemmyes were even able to capture settlements like Koptos and Ptolemais (*ca*. 280 CE), albeit temporarily.[71] The fact that they could extract emeralds as indicated by Olympiodorus and Cosmas (and paralleled by accounts from Strabo and later Islamic era sources on the Beja) should caution us about dismissing the capabilities of the Blemmyes.[72] In any case, we

[67] Sidebotham 2014, 622–25; Then-Obłuska 2019, 13.

[68] Olympiodorus *fragm*. 1.37 (= Phot. *Bib*. cod. 80 p. 62a9–26) = *FHN* 309.

[69] Amm. Marc. 14.4.3; Fournet 2018, 8.

[70] Power 2012b, 44–45.

[71] On the capture of Koptos and Ptolemais and their restoration under Probus, see *Hist. Aug. Probus* 17.

[72] On the *Arabes* (here probably better understood as a term for desert dweller, rather than a specific ethnic designation) mining precious stones in the Mons Smaragdus region, see Strabo 17.1.45. For Beja mining, see Al-Maqrizi 1911–27 = Vantini 1975, 622; Power 2012b, 17. On the question of whether the Blemmyes can be directly equated with the Beja, see Barnard 2007, 28. Lassányi 2012, 296, suggests that these mines could have

simply do not know who built Shenshef and exactly why it functioned.[73] But the material evidence at Shenshef is certainly indicative of the presence of peoples indigenous to the region (alongside others likely from Egypt and the wider Mediterranean world), whether they originally built the structure or not.

Scenarios two and three: the Blemmyes and Berenike

As already noted, a range of material culture (Indo-Pacific beads, faience beads, sea-shell pendants, ostrich eggs, EDW) at Berenike, Shenshef, Marsa Nakari (Nechesia?) and other Eastern Desert and Lower Nubian sites can be reasonably associated with the Blemmyes.[74] In addition to this, certain floral and faunal remains might tentatively be tied to these groups. As Sidebotham notes, food consumption practices can be indicative of specific cultural habits. In the case of Berenike (and Shenshef), we see sorghum (a type of grain consumed within northeast Africa) and a fair number of ovicaprid and camel bones (some showing signs of butchering), which probably reflect indigenous consumption practices. This is in contrast to

been financed and exploited by Byzantine investors, who contracted them from local tribal chiefs. But we need not rule out that this mining was done by indigenous peoples (themselves or in cooperation with others).

[73] While a definitive answer is not yet obtainable, Lassányi 2012, 292–93, thinks that Shenshef and some of the other so-called "enigmatic settlements" of the Eastern Desert were probably built by the Blemmyes.

[74] Of further interest, regarding Lower Nubian connections with Berenike, are Meröitic-style libation tables that appear in cult sanctuaries around Berenike, primarily dating to the Late Antique period. Sidebotham et al. 2019, 17. For further discussion of Meröitic connections with Berenike, see Sidebotham et al. forthcoming. In this context, it is worth also noting recent finds of a likely statue of a Meröitic god Sebiumeker and cooper alloy statue of Arensnuphis at the Great Temple of Berenike, which suggest early Roman connections between Meröe and the port – O. Kaper (paper delivered on his behalf by S. E. Sidebotham), *Red Sea IX conference* (2 July 2019, Lyon).

the evidence for bovine and porcine meat consumption (as well as marine protein sources), which seems to be more indicative of Mediterranean consumptive practices.[75]

Besides the material evidence, there is also some written testimony indicating the presence of indigenous peoples (be they labelled *barbaroi*, Blemmyes, or Trogodytae) at Berenike and other Red Sea ports. This is not a phenomenon new to the Late Antique period, as can be seen from earlier evidence. Cooperative engagement with the "external" peoples who came into the region was a strategy that could be employed by indigenous individuals or groups (rather than raiding/banditry). For example, we have testimony of an *Ichthyophagos*, Pakubis, wanting to move his fishing boat from Myos Hormos to Philoteras, while a Greek *dipinto* on an Egyptian amphora from Myos Hormos also refers to an individual designated as a Trogodyte.[76] There is additionally reference in a late–first century papyrus found at Berenike to a Chotiate and an Agabassi, both referred to as *barbaroi*, and their wives, receiving bread (presumably as payment for some kind of service).[77] In some of the ostraka from the *praesidia*, we also see evidence for commercial transactions between the "*barbaroi*" and "external" peoples, like the sale of oil.[78] Moreover, the Xeron ostraka (dating to the reign of Alexander Severus or Gallienus) record a significant number of indigenous individuals

[75] Lassányi 2012, 292, 301; Sidebotham 2014, 625–26. There were clear northern East African links with Berenike in the Late Antique period, likely contributing to the availability of sorghum at the site. On these connections, see Tomber 2005.

[76] Ichthyophagos – Thomas 2007, 151, 158, Ostrakon O512; Trogodyte – Cuvigny 2014, 171.

[77] *O.Ber*. 3.266 (verso) – Ast and Bagnall 2016, 56–8. On the possibility of a Blemmyan connection, see Ast and Rądkowska 2020, 152, 156. They also note an obscure inscription dating to 209 CE from a courtyard of the Isis temple which might also relate to the presence of indigenous Eastern Desert dwellers.

[78] Cuvigny 2014, 178–79, 185–88; *O.Xer.* Inv. 465 (*ca*. 115–130 CE).

who were receiving distributions of wheat (often through other *barbaroi* intermediaries).[79] The most likely explanation for these "payments" was that these *barbaroi* were either being paid off (not to cause problems) or that they were receiving payment for services rendered (possibly as caravan guards?).[80]

A recently discovered Late Antique inscription provides valuable evidence for the presence of indigenous peoples at Berenike. This inscription was written on a gympsum lintel which formed part of the main structure of the so-called "Northern Complex"; this was set up by a Mochosak interpreter of Lord Isemne, King of the Blemmyes.[81] The surrounding pottery, palaeographic comparisons, and the graffito from Kalabsha (see below) seem to confirm a date of the late fourth to first–half of the fifth century.[82] It is argued by Ast that the term ἑρμηνεύς means more than just interpreter in this context, and that Mochosak was probably the representative of a Blemmyan trade mission.[83]

Importantly, a reference to a King Isemne also occurs at Kalabsha (Talmis) on a Greek graffito at the temple of Mandulis—a site of known significance to the Blemmyes.[84] It

[79] For these distributions, see Cuvigny 2014, 188–94. Similarly, an ostrakon from Didymoi (*O.Did*. 41) includes information about a *dekanos* with a groups of five barbarians—sent by Baratit (a *hypotyrannos*)—receiving 1 *kolophonion* (of wine) and 12 pairs of loaves, likely indicating some sort of work party (*ca*. late second to early third century).

[80] Cobb 2019, 107.

[81] For an overview and translation of this recently published inscription, see Ast and Rądkowska 2020.

[82] Ast and Rądkowska 2020, 149, 151.

[83] Ast and Rądkowska 2020, 152, 154–55.

[84] *SB* 1.1524, Gauthier 1914, Pl. 66A = *FHN* 311. According to Millet 1973, it is also possible that a Yismeniye (who is referred to as a ruler) recorded in the late Meröitic inscription of Kharamadoye, on the Hypostyle Hall of the temple of Mandulis, was also this Isemne – Griffith 1912, Pls XIII–XIV. REM 0094. = *FHN* 300.

can be dates to somewhen between 394–453 CE.[85] Given the chronological overlap with the Berenike inscription, it is hard to imagine that they are not one and the same individual. These epigraphs further support the idea of a confederation of peoples who controlled the aforementioned areas of the Eastern Desert, and who had trade links with ports such as Berenike. This evidence further adds to the picture of a complex tribal hierarchy, with a ruling king (with the nominal allegiance of other (sub) tribal leaders) that clearly had interests spanning the southern and central Eastern Desert region. The Berenike inscription gives further credence to the view that the Blemmyes (partially) controlled the port around the turn of the fifth century, although it does not outright place this interpretation beyond doubt.[86]

Another possibility is that we are looking at some kind of federated relationship between the Blemmyes (or at least one dominant faction) and the Late Roman-Byzantine state. This appears to be the case during the reign of the Emperor Justin I (r. 518–527 CE), as indicated by the *Martyrium sancti Arethae* (originall written post–529 CE and no later than the seventh century).[87] The Blemmyes (and Noubades) were sent as Byzantine *foederati* to aid the Axumite king Ĕlla Aṣbĕḥa in his campaign to remove the Himyarite king Dhu-Nuwās, who had persecuted various Christian traders (from Byzantium and elsewhere). It is worth noting that at this point, while Berenike was still operating, the archaeological evidence suggests it was declining and would cease to function during the sixth century. The number

[85] It seems that the Blemmyes controlled Kalabsha between 394–453 CE, which would place the Isemne text within this period – Eide et al. 1998, 1107, 1131–32, 1137, 1157–58.

[86] Ast and Rądkowska 2020, 152, suggest the inscription supports the impression given by the authors Epiphanius, Olympiodorus and Cosmas, but not it does not demonstrate that they were in sole control.

[87] *Martyrium sancti Arethae* – see Boissonade, *Anecdota Graeca* 5, p. 41–43. = *FHN* 327. These 15,000 *foederati* ended up lost due to exhaustion (most likely somewhere in the mountains of Yemen) – Christides 2016, 68–76. See also Nebes 2010.

of ships which are said to have come from different Red Sea ports to aid the Axumites in this campaign, appears to be indicative of this point: 20 from Clysma (a port in Byzantine territory), 7 from Iotabê (Byzantine), 7 from Farasan (Byzantine?), 5 from Aila (Byzantine), 2 from Berenike (Byzantine territory / Blemmyan territory?) and 9 from "India" (Axumite territory).[88]

While this seems to be fairly solid evidence for the Blemmyes (or at least factions of them) operating as *foederati* in the early sixth century, it is not clear whether this was also the situation in earlier periods. In the archive of Flavius Abinnaeus (papyri relating to this cavalry-commander (*praefectus alae*) based at Dionysias in 342–351 CE), we have reference to Blemmyan refugees being escorted to the court of Constantius II in Constantinople. Flavius Abinnaeus was instructed to return with them to Blemmyan territory, where he stayed for a period of three years (*ca*. 339–341 CE).[89] The editors of the *Fontes historiae Nubiorum* suggest that they may have been set up as allied *foederati* (presumably in opposition to other hostile Blemmyan factions).[90] This idea seems plausible, not least as it is also mentioned in the document that he brought back recruits after this period. That any such federated relationship may not have encompased all the different tribal groupings within the Blemmyan confederation is also apparent. The political-military situation in the region across the fourth to early-sixth centuries was, no doubt, complex and variable.

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[88] *Martyrium sancti Arethae* 27–29. Here "India" should be understood as East Africa. On the development of the term "India" to refer to East Africa as well as South Asia, see Mayerson 1993; Schneider 2004 and 2016. Admittedly, the ships from Berenike could be larger, compensating for their more limited numbers.

[89] *P. Abinn*. 1. CPL 265. ChLA III 202. Bell et al. 1962, No. 1 = *FHN* 295. Lassányi 2012, 285–86, argues that the archive shows that Roman officials were familiar with the political situation beyond the Nile Valley areas.

[90] Eide et al. 1998, 1086–87.

Discussion

Constructing a clear narrative of who the Blemmyes were and the extent of their control of parts of the Eastern Desert region in the Late Antique period remains challenging. However, recent material and inscriptional finds seem to bolster the notion that such powerful confederations existed. It is likely that these peoples were interconnected across the region extending from the Fourth Cataract to the Wadi Hammamat, and may have even carried goods across it (for personal consumption or otherwise).[91]

Some of the literary sources give the impression that they acted as *foederati* for the Late Roman-Byzantine state, as is evident with their deployment in the campaign against Himyar (520s CE). But we should not discount the possibility that at certain periods they could have directly controlled Berenike (as well as the Mons Smaragdus region) in their own right; allowing Byzantine and other merchants to operate from the port. Or that the confederation was loose enough that certain tribal groups—increasingly called Blemmyes in Late Antique sources—may have had more cordial relations with the Late Roman-Byzantine state, while others had more hostile relationships. This state of affairs likely has its roots in the third century or earlier, as indicated by the reference to a Baratit, a local *hypotyrannos* (sub-tyrant), who appears in some of the third–century ostraka from the *praesidia*. He clearly had a cooperative relationship with the Roman military. By contrast, around the same period we also hear of an indigenous band, led by Iekoun, who was willing to attack travelers.[92]

These variable relationships among the different (sub-)tribal groups also seem discernable in the Late Antique period. Not least because Berenike was able to flourish in the fourth and fifth centuries; a period in which we also have reports of periodic attacks by

[91] On this see Then-Obłuska 2019, 177–78, 180–84; also, more broadly, Haaland 2014.

[92] *O.Did*. 44 (third century). In this ostrakon a *monomachos* (messenger) reports that he and his group were attacked by some *barbaroi* led by Iekoun.

certain Blemmyan groups. Among these is a series of raids on monasteries in the Sinai and the slaughtering of monks around 373/374 CE, as well as reports of the Blemmyes hindering the traditional voyage of the sacred barge of Isis to Abaton for the great Choiakh festival (as indicated by a graffito from Philae, *ca*. 372/373 CE).[93]

That there may have been different factions is suggested by the aforementioned archive of Flavius Abinnaeus. One of the documents relates to Blemmyan refugees being sent to the court of Constantius II in Constantinople (they had been driven out by another faction).[94] In other cases, sub-rulers appear to have been granted latitude in their own dealings with the Late Roman-Byzantine state. This is suggested by a Greek document (probably sixth century) from Gebelen.[95] The Blemmyan king Kharakhen had entrusted the administration of an island (Temsir/Tanare) to a few of his children. This was with the proviso that if the Romans did not pay over the customary due, the (local) *phylarchos* and *hypotyrannos* should not be hindered from seizing Romans in retaliation.[96] Moreoever, it is

[93] On the Demotic graffito recording Blemmyan activities in 372–373 CE – Griffith 1937, Ph. 371 = *FHN* 302; Zacharopoulou 2016, 234–35. Other examples of Blemmyan raids include a reference in the Coptic hagiography of the Monophysite archimandrite Shenute of Atripe (mid–fifth century), written by Besa. It records how the Blemmyes, who had seized some cities (including Psoi = Ptolemais?) and taken people captive, were brought to heel by the miracles of Shenute – Besa, *Vita Senutii*, Leipoldt 1951, 89–90 = *FHN* 301. See also S. Pachomii *Vita Prima Graeca* 85 and *Paralipomena* 9. BHG 1396. = *FHN* 296.

[94] *P. Abinn*. 1. CPL 265. ChLA III 202. Bell et al. 1962, No. 1 = *FHN* 295.

[95] *SB* III 6257. Eide-Flägg-Pierce 1984, No. 6. Hendrickx 1996, No. 1. = *FHN* 336.

[96] The editors suggest that these "dues" may have been perceived by the Roman state as gratuities – Eide et al. 1998, 1199, 1202, 1209–10.

possible that these "kings" could not always control the actions of their subordinates as the Letter of Phonen demonstrates.[97]

Indeed, it is probably best not to think of Romano-Blemmyan diplomatic relationships as straightforward "state" to "state" interactions, even if the Romans conceived of them that way. A telling example of this is Priscus' (latter fifth century) account of raids by the Noubades and Blemmyes into southern Egypt. Maximinus, the *dux et praeses* of the Thebaid (452–453 CE) had gotten the better of the Noubades and Blemmyes, leading them to seek terms with him. They proposed to enter into a peace treaty with him specifically, so long as he remained in the region of the Thebiad. This was deemed unacceptable, and they proposed a peace treaty, returning the booty and captives so long as Maximus lived. This was also rejected, and the Noubades and Blemmyes were ultimately compelled to sign a 100–year peace treaty, to return the captives and booty and pay compensation (the written agreement being confirmed at the temple of Philae). They also gave over hostages, including the children of *hypotyrannoi*. However, shortly afterward Maximinus died and the Noubades and Blemmyes broke the treaty, recovered their hostages and overran southern Egypt.[98]

No doubt, the point that the reader of Priscus' work was meant to take away is that the "barbarians" were "faithlessness." However, we might wish to consider the details of the account in the following way: the importance of interpersonal relationships between "strongmen", i.e. between Maximus and the leaders of the Noubades and Blemmyes may be culturally reflective of tribal societies, where power dynamics focused on individual leaders

[97] The details of the document are not always easy to follow, but at a certain point it appears that Phonen emphasises his ability stop his subordinates fighting without his consent, but mockingly implies that Abourni's (king of the Noubades) men might not always obey his authority (8–9) – Rea 1979, 147 ff. = *FHN* 319.

[98] Priscus *fragm*. 21 = *FHN* 318.

(*hypotyrannoi*, *phylarchoi*, kings) rather than abstract entities like states.[99] Therefore, they may no longer have felt beholden to this treaty once Maximus had died. Although sheer opportunism undoubtedly played its part; that is to say, they took advantage of the confusion and lack of leadership immediately after Maximus' death.

To conclude, the material, textual and epigraphic evidence seems to suggest that "Blemmyes" or more broadly various indigenous peoples of the Eastern Desert were present at Berenike, alongside individuals from the Mediterranean world and beyond. The recently discovered inscription mentioning Isemne, the Blemmyan king, makes it almost certain this presence was not insignificant. Whether various Blemmyan factions outright controlled Berenike at certain points in the fourth and fifth centuries or had been coopted as federate allies is difficult to reconstruct with much precision. But to the author's mind, these two scenarios seem to be the most credible explanations for how Berenike was managed in the Late Antique period. This need not preclude the theory that Pharanite Saracens were deployed by the Late Roman-Byzantine state to deal with problems in the Eastern Desert (most likely in the northern-central region).[100] But the notion that they controlled Shenshef or were responsible for the security of Berenike is not substantiated by the available evidence.

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[99] This does not mean that either the Noubades or the Blemmyes where conceptually incapable of grasping this concept. Indeed, as already noted, some engaged directly with the Imperial court at Constantinople.

[100] Certain "Saracen" groups in the central-northern Eastern Desert and Sinai area are reported as potential threats. For example, one account records the monastery of St. Anthony being attacked by Saracens while under the direction of Apa Sisoes – *Apophthegmata patrum* (*collectio alphabetica*), Apa Sisoês, 21 (= PG LXV, col. 401, 38). Thus, it may be the case that the Pharanites were sometimes deployed against other Saracens.

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