The Palmyrene Merchant Diaspora in Egypt

Palmyrene individuals and diaspora communities can be traced to various parts of the Europe, Africa and Asia. Some were clearly undertaking military service in different territories controlled by the Roman Empire.[1] Others were engaged in some form of commercial (and diplomatic) activity which saw them travel to a number of regions, both inside and beyond Rome's frontiers, such as Socotra, southern Arabia, Mesopotamia and "Skythia" (northwest Indian subcontinent).[2] In the case of Egypt, we have clear evidence for both the presence of Palmyrene military auxilia and for a "merchant diaspora", a settled community based in Egypt that was engaged in long-distance trade. The latter represents something more substantive and long-lasting than just individuals who may have temporarily ended up in a location due to trade, diplomacy or some other unknown factor (such as Abgar who turns up on the island of Socotra).[3] It is the merchant diaspora in Egypt which forms the main focus of this chapter, although there are some intersections with the evidence for military units. Among the issues discussed are the character and location of this diaspora, its duration, and the expressions of identity by its members.

Examining Egypt's Palmyrene merchant diaspora

The main evidence we have for a community of Palmyrene merchants based in Egypt is epigraphic, and it comes from the province itself. It is beyond doubt that a community of traders and ship-owners can be connected to the Nile emporion of Koptos (modern Qift) in the Thebaid region. Palmyrene traders likely also operated (seasonally if not more permanently) from the Red Sea ports of Berenike (located on Foul Bay, just south of Ras Banas) and possibly Myos Hormos (Quseir al-Qadim). A more questionable claim has been made that a community of

[1] On this see Magnani's chapter, this volume.

[2] For the appearance of Palmyrene individuals and communities at sites in Babylonia, southern Mesopotamia, and also further into the Persian Gulf (Bahrain) see, Broekaert 2017, 7; Schörle 2017, 149; Seland 2013a, 69 f.; Żuchowska 2013, 381 f. For voyages to Skythia see, *PAT* 1403; *PAT* 2763; possibly also *PAT* 0306. On these inscriptions see Schwartz 1960, 31; Sommer 2015, 173 f.

[3] On Abgar and the Hoq Cave inscriptions, and the possible reasons for his presence on Socotra, see Cobb 2020, 70-75; Dridi (2012): 461 f.; Gorea 2012; Strauch et al. 2012, 205 f.

Palmyrenes was based at Tentyris (modern Denderah). It might also be inferred that some Palmyrenes travelled to Alexandria, if not necessarily being permanently resident in the city.

The Koptos inscription

The Koptos inscription presents us with solid evidence for a diaspora community. The Greek inscription records that it had been set up to celebrate Zabdalas, son of Salmanos, also called Aneinas, specifically by the Palmyrene community of Red Sea merchants (ἔμποροι) and ship-owners (τῶν Ἁδριανῶν Παλμυρηνῶν ναυκλήρων Ἐρυθραικῶν).[4] Zabdalas was being lauded for his act of benefaction, having paid for the construction of a propylaia (gateway), three stoae (porticos), and thuromata (chambers). The inscription likely dates to the mid-late second century CE, but it could also be third century CE; the inclusion of the honorific Hadriane Palmyra ensures a *terminus post quem* of 129 CE.[5] It is not difficult to imagine that a communal space for social, business and religious activity was desirable (some go so far as to suggest this inscription attests to a *collegium*).[6] This is because the establishment of familiarity, trust, community support and a venue for dispute resolution would have been vital for those engaged in risky, but potentially highly profitable, voyages in the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean.[7] Certainly there seems to be some comparative evidence for these types of communal activity among the Palmyrene community of Vologesias in Mesopotamia.[8]

The reference in the Koptos inscription to Red Sea merchants and ship-owners indicates that members of this Palmyrene diaspora were sailing to ports at least in the Red Sea proper, if not also into western Indian Ocean (Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea). This is because the term Ερυθρά θάλασσα (and its Latin equivalent *Mare Rubrum*) carried the sense of the Red Sea proper, the wider Indian Ocean, and in some circumstances also the Persian Gulf (the term was not always used consistently).[9] As discussed in other chapters in this volume, a few Palmyrenes

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[4] *I. Portes* 103 = *AE* 1912, 55 no. 171; Young 2001, 80 f.; Schörle 2017, 151 f.

[5] *PAT* 0305 = *IGLS* 17.1.245; see also *PAT* 0259. Sidebotham 1986, 95 f.; Andrade 2013, 177. It has been suggested that associated terra sigillata sherds makes a mid-second century date most likely.

[6] Sidebotham 1986, 95; Smith II 2013, 161 f.; Seland 2016, 41 f.; Evers 2017, 129.

[7] For the role of diaspora communities in relation to ancient Indian Ocean commerce, see Seland 2013b.

[8] See Terpstra 2016, 43, who points to an inscription dating to 108 CE – Inv. 9,15 = *CIS* 2,3917.

[9] For an overview of this issue, see Cobb 2018, 5. Arrian uses several phrases, including Indian Sea (Arr. *Ind*. 38.3), Great Sea (43.2) and Erythra Thalassa (43.7). Marcotte 2016, 181–83, suggests the term Indian Sea became more common in the first and second centuries CE, although the term Erythra Thalassa remained in use.

do appear at sites in Southern Arabia (notably at Al Uqla and Shabwa) and at Socotra (the aforementioned Hoq cave inscription), but whether their presence relates to either Red Sea or Persian Gulf commercial networks (or neither) remains an unresolved issue.[10] Regardless of whether these merchants traded only within the Red Sea proper (perhaps sailing to ports like Adulis), or sailed beyond the Bab-el-Mandeb, they almost certainly would have set out from the ports of Myos Hormos or Berenike if operating from Koptos.[11]

The Red Sea ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike

Our evidence for their presence at Myos Hormos is very limited, consisting of a partial sherd of an amphora which has an ink dipinto written in Palmyrene Aramaic cursive script. Exactly what the text represents is unclear (possibly an owner's graffito, or a reference to its origin, weight, or content).[12] The amphora fragment has parallels with second-third century vessels unearthed in Palmyra, but it probably dates to the late first or early second century CE.[13] Of course, the presence of a sherd with Palmyrene script on it does not guarantee that the amphora to which it formed part was originally taken there by a Palmyrene.

There is slightly more material from Berenike, but it also has its ambiguities. Certainly a number of broadly Semitic names appear on several mid-frist century ostraka at the site (a few are in doubt), but whether these reflect individuals with Palmyrene ancestry or connections, as opposed to elsewhere in the broader Syrian-Levantine region, is unsure.[14] More plausibly, the name Hierabole (Ἱεραβολῆς), likely a femine variant of the masculine Hierabolos, seems to reflect an individual named in connection with the Palmyrene deity Hierobol/Yarhibol (the ostrakon also dates to the mid-first century). Why this individual was present in the region at

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[10] On this problem, see Cobb 2020, 70-75.

[11] Strabo refers to Koptos as the emporion for cargoes from Aethiopia, Arabia and India – Strab. 17.1.45. Similarly the Muziris Papyrus also refers to Koptos as having a customs warehouse – *P. Vindob* G 40822 recto ii.1-4.

[12] Tomber et al. 2011, 7; Evers 2017, 129.

[13] Tomber et al. 2011, 7 f.

[14] For ostraka from Berenike with Semitic names, see *O. Ber*. 137-140a?, 183, 189?, 198?, see Bagnall – Helms – Verhoogt 2005. Several Semitic names (Bargates, Dosarion, Mambougaios, Thaimos?, and Zaneos) appear in the ostraka from the 2009-2013 seasons, although in the case of Bargates, Dosarion and Zaneos it is though these are probably Nabataean, see Ast – Bagnall 2016, 12. In the case of the 1996-1998 seasons, besides Hierabole, the possibly Semitic names Rhobaos and Chennas appear, but in the case of the latter two any obvious Palmyrene connection is not apparent, see Bagnall – Helms – Verhoogt 2000, 27.

this point and what they were doing remains unclear.[15] Another four Berenike ostraka, which date to the period around the third quarter of the first century, contain Palmyrene cursive script and one ostrakon faintly shows the names Abgar and Abu Magdi or Malki. [16]

In isolation, these ostraka appear to provide fairly weak and indirect evidence for Palmyrene traders operating from Berenike and Myos Hormos, even if we assume that a community of Red Sea traders and shipowners based at Koptos must have operated from at least one of these ports. Berenike may be the more likely of the two, if considered in conjunction with the epigraphic testimony relating to Palmyrene soldiers at the site and the existance of a structure known as the Shrine of the Palmyrenes. This structure was built atop earlier Ptolemaic and Roman era strata (with no religious associations) and seems to have come into use around Antonine to Severan period (a point discussed further in the next secion). As Sidebotham observes, the design of the entrance way seems to share parallels with other Near Eastern cult structures, such as the that of Bel at Palmyra.[17] The presence of inscriptions connected to this building – the one relating to the soldier Marcus Aurelius Mokimos (September 8, 215 CE), the other a bilingual Greek-Palmyrene inscription celebrating the god Yarhibol/Hierobol (*ca*. 180-212 CE), that mentions various soldiers and an individual called Berichei who sculpted the accompanying statue of the god (discussed further in Magnani's chapter) – suggests that this structure may have formed the focus of Palmyrene communal and religious activity at the site.[18] This was clearly the case for Palmyrene soldiers operating in the Eastern Desert–Red Sea coast region, but presumably also for Palmyrene merchants operating from the port.

The Tentyris tablet

A quite modest, fragmentary bilingual funerary tablet was discovered at Tentyris (the surviving text is Greek, but with faint traces of Palmyrene script on left hand side). It commemorates a

[15] *O. Ber.* 97; Bagnall – Helms – Verhoogt 2000, 27. 30. 65.

[16] *O. Ber.* 254–7; Bagnall – Helms – Verhoogt 2005, 104 f. For the names Abgar and Abu Magdi or Malki see *O. Ber.* 256. See also Sidebotham – Zych 2012a, 38, for a wooden tag piece with Greek text on one side and a possible Semitic script on the other.

[17] Sidebotham 2014, 611-13.

[18] Sidebotham 2011, 63-6. 74; Sidebotham 2014, 612 f.; Sidebotham 2017, 63 f.; Speidel 1984, 221; Verhoogt 1998, 193–8.

Julius Aurelius, who may have had the cognomen or patronymic Makkai/Makkaios.[19] The lacuna makes reading the text difficult, but it appears to mention merchants (ἔμπο[ροι]) and possibly refers to a caravan (συ[νοδίαν]), though the latter reconstruction is more tentative.[20] It is assumed to date between 160 and 212 CE. [21]

Seland has previously mused that this tablet could suggest the existance of a route running from this area up to Abu Sha'ar on the northern Red Sea coast; the latter which would have facilited a short crossing to the port of Leuke Kome on the northern Arabian coast, allowing one to then travel overland along the *Via Nova Traiana* up to Syria.[22] Evers goes a step further, suggeting that the Tentyris inscription may reveal the existance of a commercial route running from Syria to the Thebaid, with such caravans 'carrying specifically Palmyrene products into Egypt'.[23]

It is not beyond the realms of possiblity that some Palmyrenes may have travelled to Abu Sha'ar, although there is not a huge amount of early evidence for commercial activity at the port. The main fort at the site is Tetrarchic in date, but the nearby Abu Sha'ar el-Qibli (ca. 4.5-5 km to the west) may at least indicated some travelled along the Kainopolis-Abu Sha'ar route around the second century CE.[24] It is highly deboutful, however, that there would have been Palmyrene caravans bringing special "Palmyrene products" into Egypt via such a route.[25] First of all, it is worth noting that Tentyris was on the western bank of the Nile, whereas most traffic heading into the northern Eastern Desert would conventionally set out from Kainopolis/Kaine on the eastern bank (i.e. no river crossing was required). Indeed, the routes

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[19] *PAT* 0256 = *I. Portes* 39 = *CIS* II 3910.

[20] On the text, see Schörle 2017, 152; Seland 2016, 42.

[21] For dating see Sidebotham 1986, 96; Young 2001, 81. See also Smith II 2013, 162, who comments that '[s]ince most Palmyrene inscriptions that bear the same imperial *nomina* date to the early third century A.D., we may assume that this ones does as well.'

[22] Seland 2016, 42 f.

[23] Evers 2017, 130. For a critique of the notion that 'such an extraordinarily circuitous route was ever in use', see Young 2001, 81.

[24] On Abu Sha'ar and this route see Sidebotham – Hense – Nouwens 2008, 53-60; Sidebotham – Zitterkopf – Riley 1991, 571–622.

[25] Żuchowska 2013, 384, notes that on the Mesopotamian-Persian Gulf route, Palmyrene merchants may have exported purple murex dyes, and raw and worked glass available from the Eastern Mediterranean. But such goods could also be brought from the Levant via Mediterranean shipping to Egypt (and then down to the Thebaid too, if desired).

running from Kainopolis were primarily used by those engaged in quarrying activity at Mons Claudianus and Mons Porphyrites (especially in the second century CE).[26] Secondly, it is doubtful that such a commercial route, as suggested by Evers, would make much sense. Not just in terms of logistical issues, but also with regards to taxation. At least prior to the late Severan period, good brought into the Empire were charged a 25% import tax (*tetarte*); we have evidence for this both relating to Egypt's Red Sea ports and for goods being brought into the eastern Mediterranean via Leuke Kome.[27] Such a route might seem to entail exiting and re-entering the Empire. Surely any goods from the Levant region could more easily have been shipped to Alexandria, presumably being subject to much more modest internal duties (*portoria*).

More plausibly, Schörle has suggested that Tentyris was an important stopping point for traffic heading south, where it might be necesary to wait for better wind conditions to allow vessels to sail against the current (i.e. upstream). She also proposes that a Palmyrene presence might have been established at this site, paralleling what seems to be the case with the Palmyrene diaspora in Mesopotamia, where communities were set up at key centres on the Euphrates to help facilitate commercial activity.[28] However, given that this latter notion is depedent upon one fragmentary, modest tablet, we may wish to be weary of the idea of a Palmyrene diasporic community living at Tentyris. The tablet could just indicate a group of merchants travelling between Alexandria and Koptos and due to unknown reasons Julius Aurelius passed away on the journey.[29]

Alexandria

There is no direct evidence for any significant Palmyrene presence in Alexandria (prior to the invasion of 270 CE). It might be assumed that some travelled up to Alexandria in order to sell their imported Red Sea goods on the market, after paying a *tetarte*. Many would then be distributed to various markets within the Roman Empire (by a range of merchants from various

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[26] For an overview of these quarries, see Peacock – Maxfield 1997, 2001a, 2001b, 2007.

[27] On the *tetarte* see the Muziris Papyrus (*P. Vindob* G 40822 recto) and the *Periplus* (*PME* 19). The *tetarte* was replaced some when between 174 CE, when it is last mentioned, and 227 CE when the *octava* is recorded as being levied: *Codex Justinianus* 4.65.7; Wilson 2015, 27 f.

[28] Schörle 2017, 152.

[29] Cobb 2020, 68.

backgrounds). Seland has pondered whether the Palmyrene merchant diaspora of Egypt sought the finance and backing of some of the economic and political elites based in Alexandria. He points to the likes of Firmus (mentioned in the *Historia Augusta* as an ally of Zenobia and who undertook a failed rebellion in Egypt in 273 CE) as the kind of patron and financier that Palmyrene merchants might have sought out.[30] The author of the *Historia Augusta* describes him as native of Seleucia (presumably Seleucia in Pieria) who became wealthy from trade with India. He likewise reports that Firmus maintained good relations with the Blemmyes and the Saracens (something that would, indeed, have been useful for those crossing the Eastern Desert).[31] This basic premise is plausible, since we certainly have other evidence for those engaged in the trade making use of links with the financial, political and administrative elites of Egypt.[32] Smith goes beyond this, and wonders whether the Palmyrene merchants of Egypt were truly independent or bound by the economic interests of powerful patrons living in Palmyra.[33] There is no real evidence to answer this questions. However, I would suspect that a cooperative relationship between the Palmyrene military units operating between Koptos and Berenike (some of whom may also have been stationed at the *praesidia* lining the route) was more significant than any distant links with the mother city.[34]

In any case, it is possible that some Palmyrene merchants based at Koptos simply chose to sell their imported goods at this emporion. De Romanis has recently argued that double-

[30] *Hist. Aug. Aurelian* 32, *Firmus* 2–6; Seland 2016, 43.

[31] It should be noted that there are many suspect details about this account, including the possibility that the "Firmus" of the *Historia Augusta* was an amalgamated figure, and that there may have been unrest rather than a full-blown revolt. See Bowman 1976. That said, even if invented, the details about this figure accumulating wealth from Red Sea trading activities may have been added to provide an air of veracity to the narrative.

[32] See, for example, the links Aelia Isidora and Aelia Olympias (ship-owners and merchants) had with Apollinarios the *eparchos* (*ca*. second century CE) – *SEG* 8,703. Consider also Marcus Julius Alexander who seems to have had agents operating for him at Myos Hormos and Berenike (between 37-43/44 CE); he is likely the brother of Tiberius Julius Alexander, who was *epistrategos* of the Thebaid in 42 CE and later prefect of Egypt in 66-69 CE – *O.Petr.* 252, 266–267, 268(?), 270(?), 271, 282. For an overview, of organisation and financing backing in this period, see Cobb 2018, 61–91.

[33] Smith II 2013, 162 f.

[34] Cobb 2020, 78–80. For units connected with Berenike, see the discussion of the aforementioned inscriptions at the Shrine of the Palmyrenes. For units at Koptos, *IGRR* I 1169 = *OGIS* 639 = *SB* 8810. Possibly also *Antiquités Syriennes* III (Paris 1946) 167–214 = *AE* 1947, 170 and *AE* 1954 209 – Speidel 1984, 222 f., although this is more tentative. For Palmyrene soldiers operating at the *praesidium* of Didymoi, see Cuvigny 2012b, 2012c; Cuvigny – Gagos 2012; Cuvigny – Briquel-Chatonnet 2012.

duties (τέλη διπλάσια), which Strabo mentions in relation to the Red Sea commerce, do not infact relate to import and export duties, but rather duties levied on imported Indian Ocean goods which were taxed when entering Egypt via the Red Sea ports, and then taxed again for any of those sold out of Egypt to elsewhere in the Empire, via Alexandria.[35] This view is lent some plausibility by the fact that the Muziris papyrus mentions both customs houses at Koptos and at Alexandria.[36] The former would surely be redundant (perhaps beyond checking that no goods had gone wayward on their journey across the Eastern Desert) in a situation where imported goods were assessed upon arrival at the Red Sea ports (which they seem to have been) and then keep under seal until reaching Alexandria.[37] The Tentyris tablet may suggest that not all Palmyrene merchants choose to dispose of their entire cargo in Koptos, but some may have found it worthwhile to travel to Alexandria and sell some or all of their cargo at this metropolis.

The relative cost-benefit ratio of selling all of one's good in Koptos, rather than selling some or all in Alexandria, is difficult to assess given the lack of price data. Selling at Koptos would have lent a certain degree of convenience. One suspects that selling wholesale on the Alexandrian market (after paying the requisite taxes) may have garnered more than doing the equivalent in Koptos (which was aimed at the domestic Egyptian market). However, the markup was probably greater between those goods sold within Egypt and those in other major cities of the Empire like Rome. This latter point might be summised from De Romanis' reconstruction of the content of the Hermapollon's cargo that was recorded on the fragmentary

[35] Strab. 17.1.13; De Romanis 2020, 132-135. 240. 180 f. 277-297. 312. 322 f. He also argues that Pliny's *maris Rubri vectigal* (*HN* 6.24.84) was one and the same as Strabo's double-duties. It is suggested that some goods were likely sold in Koptos for the Egyptian market. De Romanis further suggests 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 on the verso of the Muziris Papyrus).

[36] *P. Vindob* G 40822 recto ii.1-4, 7-12. For an introduction to the Muziris Papyrus and its various reconstructions and interpretations, see Harrauer – Sijpesteijn 1985; Casson 1986, 1990; Thür 1987; Rathbone 2000; Morelli 2011; De Romanis 2020.

[37] The assessment of a ship's cargo and the calculation of the *tetarte* was under the responsibility of the *arabarchoi* (the post was probably farmed out by the Prefect of Egypt) who, assigned the *paralemptai* to collect the tax – *P. Vindob* G recto; *OGIS* 674; Burkhalter-Acer 1999, 44–54; Ast – Bagnall 2016, 177. 178–83; Cuvigny 2005, 59–62; De Romanis 2020, 132. 298–320. This is unlike with normal duties that were farmed out. De Romanis suggests that this tax was unlikely to be paid up front as a lump sum (especially given the immense value of the revenue that was collected), but rather the *arabarchoi* were responsible for recording and collecting the tax, of which they kept 'a percentage of the base-quarter rates' of the duties, as well as some small additional surcharges – De Romanis 2020, 299.

verso of the Muziris Papyrus.[38] He argues that the fiscal value (the valuation given for tax purposes) of the black pepper (possibly) mentioned in this document was about 6 Egyptian drachmae (equivalent to six sestertii) per mina (*ca*. 511g).[39] If one compares this to Pliny's retail price for black pepper in Rome (four denarii or sixteen sestertii for a libra = *ca*. 323g), this represents a fourfold mark-up.[40] Admittedly the retail price for Rome given by Pliny (early Flavian period) and the fiscal rate in Alexandria (mid second century) dervied from the Muziris Papyrus are a few generations apart. So fluctuations in supply and demand may have made an impact. Regardless, any assumption about business links between Palmyrenes based in Egypt and in other centres like Rome (i.e. engaging in vertigal integration business practices) is currently entirely hypothetical.[41]

The Palmyrene merchant diaspora of Egypt: how long-lived was it?

It is difficult to get a concrete idea of the absolute duration of this diaspora community. However, the patchy evidence that we have, when contextualised within wider developments relating to the Egyptian-Red Sea branch of the Indian Ocean trade, can at least provide us with a rough idea of the major phases of activity. The appearance of Palmyrene script on a few of the first century CE Berenike ostraka (and one late-first to early-second century ostrakon from Myos Hormos), along with the appearance of the names likely to be of Palmyrene origin, notably Hierabole, Abgar and Abu Magdi (or Malki), may suggest that some Palmyrenes were operating in this region during the early Imperial period. But, in isolation, this evidence is not enough to substantiate the existance of a large community of merchants at this point.

By the mid-late second century CE, the Koptos inscription (and perhaps also the Tentyris tablet) allow us to more confidently identify the existance of such a merchant diaspora.

[38] See De Romanis 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2020. Also Morelli 2011. It should be noted that both their reconstructions are based on a document that is lacunas; in some parts they rely on faint lettering and spacing for their identification of a particular item and its value.

[39] De Romanis 2020, 236–45.

[40] By contrast Morelli 2011, gives an estimate of 24 drachmae per mina, which would work out to only a 3% mark-up when compared with Pliny's figure. This is surely far too low. In most cases the fiscal rate charged for taxation purposes was likely lower than the market value of the goods in Alexandria, but the option to pay the tax in kind rather than cash may have been used in scenarios where the price for particular items dropped below the fiscal rate, or if a borrower was struggling to repay a creditor – De Romanis 2020, 6. 174. 280–83.

[41] More generally on Palmyrene merchants and vertical integration practices, see Schörle 2017.

Indeed, the fact that the Shrine of the Palmyrenes seems to have initially been established in the Antonine to Severan period may be telling in this regard. It is very likely that this period saw the community's establishment. There will have been multiple push and pull factors (alongside individual motivations) that contributed to this development. These factors potentially included problems caused by Romano-Persian relations in the latter second to early-third century, the profitability of the Red Sea route, the willingness of some members of a new wealthy "merchant class" (which had grown in prominence by the second to third centuries CE) to migrate to Egypt (unlike the traditional "warrior aristocracy" whose familial and friendship links to nomadic groups in the Syrian Desert region probably precluded such a move), and the placement of Palmyrene auxiliary units in Egypt from the mid-second into third centuries CE.[42] Indeed, the latter factor was likely of particular importance. It is not difficult to imagine the merchants exploited their shared linguistic and cultural heritage to obtain the support of Palmyrene soldiers stationed in the Eastern Desert region. Such support was likely invaluable given the seemingly increased predatory activities of some of the indigenous nomads of the Eastern Desert around the second century CE (as indicated by a number of ostraka from the *praesidia* that lined the route; these posts having been subject to a major phase of (re)fortification in the preceeding Flavian period and into the second century).[43]

Speidel has suggested that one of the reasons that Palmyrene soldiers were stationed at Koptos and Berenike around this time was that their expertise in desert warfare.[44] It might be worth speculating whether the experience of Palmyrene merchants in dealing with desert crossings and nomadism (both in terms of cooperation and resistance to predation) also allowed them to find a niche in an increasingly dangerous region. It is worth putting this idea in the context of broader development taking place during the first, second and third centuries CE. While the first century into the early second century seems to have been a boom period for activity at Berenike and Myos Hormos (paralleled by the appearance of a range of Roman glassware, bronze-wares, and wine amphorae fragments dating to the first century at various East African, Arabian and Indian sites), there seems to be a decline of activity during the second century CE, more notable in the third century.[45] Indeed, during the third century CE, Myos

[42] On the merits and limitations of these hypotheses, see Cobb 2020. See also, Grout 2016; Seland 2020.

[43] For an overview of these *praesidia*, the connected ostraka, and the general conditions in this period, see Cuvigny 2005, 2006, 2011, 2012a, 2014.

[44] Speidel 1984, 221.

[45] For an overview, see Cobb 2015.

Hormos is abandoned (Quseir al-Qadim would later be re-occupied in the medieval Islamic period).[46] This decline may partially tie into increased problems with nomadic predation in the Eastern Desert, and a (potentially interrelated) shift to the greater use of northern ports like Clysma which, thanks to the re-dredging of a canal by Trajan, became more accessible.[47]

If the Palmyrene community of ship-owners and merchants found a useful niche to exploit around the latter second into third century CE, how long did it last? Again, the evidence does not allow us to answer this questions definitively, but one suspects it probably did not survive much beyond the 270s CE. While the general pattern suggested by the archaeology and epigraphy is of a Berenike operating at a much lower ebb in the third century than it had in the previous two, we do still find pieces of evidence that indicate activity, such as inscription from the Great Temple which dates to the joint reigns of Trebonianus Gallus and Volusianus (253 CE).[48] The *praesidia*, while less densly occupied and not as well maintained (as suggested by the cessation in rubbish removal from the fortlets and failure to fill up cisterns with water), also seem to be occupied until perhaps the reign of Gallienus (*ca*. 264 CE); although they are abandoned shortly thereafter.[49] Subsequent events in Egypt and Palmyra, however, may have made the cohesion of the diaspora community difficult to maintain, both socio-culturally and economically. This does not just relate to the short-lived Palmyrene domination of Egypt, and the (second) sack of Palmyra in 272/273 CE.[50] But also due to Blemmyan raids and seizures of sites in Upper Egypt, like Koptos, around late 270s into early 280s CE, as well as a few revolts in Egypt in the 290s CE.[51]

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[46] On the abandonment of Myos Hormos, see Blue 2007, 265. 274 f; Tomber 2016, 43.

[47] See Cobb 2019; Nappo 2020. The *Via Nova Hadriana* – running from Antinoöpolis (Sheik ‘Ibada) to the coast of the Red Sea and then down to Berenike – is recorded as running through safe country, with the provisioning of wells, stations and guard-posts (*OGIS* 701 = *IGRR* 1,1142). Its establishment may also reflects concerns about the Eastern Desert nomads, offering a coastal route to bypass them. However, the lengthy overland nature of the route may have made it less attractive to merchants, and it does not seem to have been heavily used (Cobb 2019, 104).

[48] Sidebotham et al. 2019, 15. This monumental inscription is now in a fragmentary state and was found in association with the Great Temple (formerly called Temple of Serapis, although now known to have been dedicated to Isis, with Serapis having a secondary association); the names were subject to *damnatio memoriae*.

[49] Brun – Cuvigny – Reddé 2011, 162; Cuvigny 2014, 168 f.; Power 2012, 287.

[50] *Hist. Aug., Aurelian* 31.

[51] On the capture of Koptos and Ptolemais and then restoration under Probus, see *Hist. Aug., Probus* 17. On general difficulties in Egypt, see Pollard 2013.

Negotiating status and identity in Egypt

The use of Greek, as well as Palmyrene, on certain laudatory and commemorative inscriptions (such as that from Koptos and Tentyris) suggests that this community was likely outward facing. That is to say, it was not insular. It is not hard to fathom why this might be the case given their presence at multi-ethnic, multi-cultural emporia and ports. This would have necessitated being present alongside, if not actively engaging with, other individuals or groups, be they Graeco-Egyptian, Italian, Jewish, Nabataean, southern Arabian, Indian or Axumite.[52] Moreover, Greek was evidently an important *lingua franca* for those operating in the Red Sea branch of the Indian Ocean trade, both in Egypt but also in places like Axum.[53] For the Palmyrene auxilia, as well, a certain degree of bilingualism is perhaps to be expected (and evidenced from inscriptions at Koptos and Berenike, see Magnani's chapter).

Legal status and naming practices

Individuals with traditional Palmyrene names, as well as mixed appellations, have been identified: in the former case, we have, among others, Hierabole, Abgar, Abu Magdi (or Malki) and Zabdalas; in the latter, Julius Aurelius (Makkai/Makkaios?) and the soldier Marcus Aurelius Mokimos. It goes without saying that we have to be incredibly cautious in ascribing identity and status based on naming practices alone. Ethnicity is a construct, not a fixed category and status may not be always so easily deduced.[54] Admittedly, it is perhaps less likely for those without kinship or ancestral connections to Palmyra (i.e. non-Palmyrenes) to have adopted Palmyrene names. However, certain Palmyrenes may be harder to identify if using or being referred to by Latin, Greek or Egyptian names. For example, a fragmentary text has been discovered at the *praesidium* of Didymoi on the Koptos-Berenike route which lists soldiers belonging to a Palmyrene unit ([Παλ]μυρηνοί). It dates to around the end of the second to

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[52] Among the various scripts identified at Berenike are Greek, Demotic, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Hebrew, Latin, Aramaic, Palmyrene, Hadramawti, and various Indian languages and scripts (Tamil-Brahmi, Prakrit, and Sanskrit). See Sidebotham 2007, 164.

[53] On Zoskales, either a proto-Axumite ruler or ruler of territory around or to the south of Adulis, who could converse and trade in Greek, see *PME* 5. See also Cobb 2018, 62–77; Seland 2008, 72–74. However, this does not mean that translators were not needed. As is clear from an inscription at Berenike that relates to a Papiris, who was a secretary and translator. See Sidebotham – Zych, 2012b, 143; Sidebotham 2014, 620.

[54] Cobb 2018, 62 f.

beginning of the third century CE. Cuvigny has observed that only two of the names recorded appear to be Semitic (five seem to be typically Egyptian names).[55] This raises all kinds of questions about how the unit was constituted, how the soldiers may have perceived their own identity, and what was ascribed to them. Thus, we have to acknowledge that there may be individuals who remain hidden to us due to chance, the fragmentary nature of certain written material, and particular social dynamics where they adopted or were ascribed names that were non-Palmyrene in origin.

It might be inferred that those with *tria nomina* held Roman citizenship and could theoretically make use of Roman *ius civile* and attendant rights, such as making legally reconginsed wills, business and marriage contracts.[56] Of course, in the Roman Empire it was often feasible for non-Roman legal and social resolution mechanism to be employed (if both parties agreed). To what extent our Palmyrene merchant diaspora made use of either (or were able to make use), we simply do not know. Ostensibly the increasing importance of the categories of *honestiores and humiliores* from the latter second century CE, and the promulgation of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* from 212 CE, may have made holding this citizenship seem less prestigious for individual Palmyrenes (at least than had been the case in the early Empire).[57] However, Besson has recently argued that even in the decades leading up to Caracalla's grant, the status was still highly regulated and represented something esteemed.[58] In partical terms, having recourse to Roman *ius civile* may have made business relationships with non-Palmyrenes easier to manage. These points are quite hypothetical, however, as we lack evidence from Egypt for individual Palmyrenes making recourse to legal redress.

Religious activity

If the ability to use Greek as a form of communication represents a capacity to interact with and speak to non-Palmyrenes, the use of Palmyrene script and the worship of distinctly Palmyrene gods like Hierobol/Yarhibol would seem to represent a desire, in certain contexts, to reinforce "traditional" cultural practices. The fact that Hierobol/Yarhibol is invoked at

[55] No. 71 – Cuvigny 2012c, 135 f.

[56] On Roman citizenship, its rights and duties, see Sherwin-White 1973.

[57] On issues of legal rights, status, and shifting practices from the Imperial to Late Antique periods, see Mathisen 2012.

[58] Besson 2017.

military inscriptions at Berenike and Koptos seems to denote that this deity had strong resonances with Palmyrene soldiers (and potentially merchants).[59] However, we should not concieve of all Palmyrenes worshiping exclusively Palmyrene deities. The Mokimos inscription (at Berenike) honoured Caracalla and his mother Julia Domna, and the accompanying statue potentially represented Isis or Hygieia.[60] Other material culture and structural features of the Shrine of the Palmyrenes should also caution us about seeing this building or the individuals who visited it in overly exclusivist terms. Among the material finds associated with the Shrine of the Palmyrenes is a small head of Harpocrates, a stone statue of a Sphinx, and a possible libation table or pool that may parallel similar cult features seen in Nubia.[61]

Economic means

We can infer the economic means of some members of the Palmyrene merchant diaspora (at least impressionistically). If Zabdalas could afford to pay for the (re)construction of a gateway, three stoae and chambers, he was clearly a very prominent member of the community. The ship-owners (*naukleroi*) mentioned in the same Koptos inscription presumably owned quite expensive assests. We do not know the size of their ships which plied the Red Sea (proper, and perhaps into the western Indian Ocean), but it seems reasonably to expect that they would have cost something on the order of some tens to a few hundred thousand sestertii to construct.[62]

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[59] On these inscriptions, see Verhoogt 1998; Sidebotham 2011, 66. 74.

[60] Sidebotham – Hense – Nouwens 2008, 137 f.; Sidebotham 2014, 611 f.

[61] Sidebotham 2014, 612 f.

[62] Hopkins 2017, 298, estimates that a 400 ton merchant ship may have cost up to 300,000 sestertii to construct. For a general discussion of the ships operating from the Egyptian Red Sea ports, see Pomey 2012; Cobb 2018, 84–90. Some of the ships were potentially very large indeed. De Romanis (2012, 2015, 2020) suggests that the Hermapollon (the ship mentioned in the Muziris Papyrus) was over 600 tons capacity. However, this type of vessel was likely one of the very small number of "very big ships" (μέγιστα πλοῖα) which the author of the *Periplus* (*PME* 56) mentions sailed to southern India. See De Romanis, 1996, 178–180 n. 40; 2012, 75–77; 2017, 90. De Romanis 2020, 202, drawing parallels from European activity in the Indian Ocean at the start of the Early Modern period argues that there would not have been more than eight or nine of these types of ships operating in the first century, and perhaps as few as two by the late second to third century. Most of the ships operating from the Red Sea ports would have been much smaller than the μέγιστα πλοῖα (especially those operating from more northerly ports and sailing to destinations in East Africa or southern Arabia). Our Palmyrene *naukleroi* may not have owned ships as large as the Hermapollon, but even so we might expect a vessel to be a reasonably expensive asset.

The merchants (*emporoi*) will have been of varying economic means. Potentially some chartered space on board the vessels owned by their Palmyrene brethren (or others).[63] The surviving evidence does not tell us about the extent to which other members of the diaspora may have been involved in practical and organisational roles connected to the trade, be it as agents, hauliers, sailors, guards or crafts-persons (the latter being employed in the maintenance and repair of the ships).

Sidebotham pondered whether the soldier Marcus Aurelius Mokimos, who set up an inscription and statue in the Shrine of the Palmyrenes, acquired the resources to pay for it through some kind of involvement in the Red Sea trade.[64] As suggested above, Palmyrene merchants may have sought support from Palmyrene military units in facilitating their trading activity, so this theory is not impossible. We do not have any direct evidence for Palmyrene soldiers investing in, or acquiring wealth (through legitimate or corrupt means) from, the Red Sea trade, but this does not negate the possiblity.[65] Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that Marcus Aurelius Mokimos was able to save up the money to fund this by some other means (savings from pay, accumulated donatives).[66]

Conclusion

The Koptos inscription provides us with a fairly solid anchor around which to date the development of the Palmyrene merchant diaspora (most probably from the mid-late second

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[63] On broader evidence for the status, economic means and organisational strategies employed by those based in Egypt who engaged in the Indian Ocean trade, see Cobb 2018, 78-83.

[64] Sidebotham 2011, 253; Sidebotham 2014, 613.

[65] It is not without precedent that soldiers might be connected into Red Sea commercial activity in certain ways. A loan agreement on papyrus, albeit Ptolemaic in date (150 BCE), records a group of individuals originating from different parts of the Mediterranean world, including an Epeates (a Ptolemaic soldier), who were either acting as merchants, lenders or guarantors, in a trade venture to the Spice-Bearing land (Ἀρωματόφορος), likely a reference to the coast of Somalia. On this, see *SB* III 7169 – Wilcken 1925, 86–102; Young 2001, 54 f.; Evers 2016, 121 f. Interestingly, we also have a reference in one of the Berenike ostraka (customs passes) to a Heroninos, the soldier of Claudius Dorion, being allowed to pass through – O. *Ber*. 50. Claudius Dorion (possibly an imperial freedman) is mentioned in a number of ostraka, seemingly in connection the movement or procurement of goods for several different Graeco-Egyptian merchants – *O. Ber.* 50–66. See Bagnall – Helms – Verhoogt 2000.

[66] The ability to save up this money may have been aided by the fact that many soldiers did not have families and children to support (Tac. *Ann*. 14.27.2). Phang 2001, in fact notes that references to soldiers being married appears on only 15% of connected inscriptions.

century CE). The Tentyris tablet (*ca*. 160 and 212 CE) supplements this picture, since it seems to refer to *emporoi*; although the fragmentary nature of the text makes its interpretation contested. This is around the same time in which we see the strongest evidence for the presence of Palmyrene military units in Egypt. The potential of the merchants to draw upon support from their military brethren, coupled with their experience in desert crossings and dealing with nomadic groups, and the contemporaneous challenges posed by "barbaroi" attacks (alluded to in ostraka from the Eastern Desert *praesidia*), may have allowed them to exploit a niche. Epigraphic evidence connected to Myos Hormos and Berenike at least permits the possiblity that some Palmyrenes were operating in the first century CE. But the evidence is patchy, indirect and in isolation certainly cannot be used to backdate this diaspora community. We do not know how long this diaspora community operated at Koptos, but in the light of wider events connected to the region, it may have dwinlled from the 270s CE.

Again, it is the Koptos inscription which provides us with the clearest evidence for the character of this diaspora. It explicitly refers to Palmyrene Red Sea merchants (*emporoi*) and ship-owners (*naukleroi*), who presumably operated at least in the Red Sea proper (perhaps trading on the north-eastern African coast) if not also in the wider western Indian Ocean. The epigraphic testimony from Tentyris, Myos Hormos and Berenike supplements this picture. Suffice to say, if we did not have the Koptos inscription our understanding of Palmyrene commercial activity in Egypt would be much more limited.

The status and identity of members of this merchant diaspora community can, in certain contexts, be inferred, but the picture is strengthened when considered alongside some of the evidence connected to Palmyrene soldiers. The use of Greek in a number of laudatory and commemorative inscriptions reveals both the capacity and the willingness of some members of the community to speak to a wider audience. This is perhaps unsurprising in light of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural nature of the Red Sea trade. While this community was not insular, it does not mean we lack evidence for more traditional expressions of Palmyrene identity, be it in terms of the use of Palmyrene script, naming practices and the worship of certain deities like Hierobol/Yarhibol (although the latter is better attested in relation to Palmyrene soldiers). The lack of isolationism, means that it may be difficult to identify some Palmyrenes who were operating, either because they adopted or were ascribed non-Palmyrene names (as may be suggested by epigraphic testimony from Didymoi).

It is probable that at least some members of the merchant diaspora community were citizens prior to the *Constitutio Antoniniana* (Julius Aurelius (Makkai/Makkaios?) perhaps being one such example). It remains a matter of speculation whether any of them had recourse to Roman *ius civile*, particularly in relation to any engagements with non-Palmyrenes, or used more traditional Palmyrene dispute mechanisms (between members of the community), as may possibly have been facilitated by the communal association impled in the Koptos inscription. It is evident that some members of the community were reasonably prosperous, such as Zabdalas, or at least possessed a certain amount of resources: the *emporoi* and *naukleroi* mentioned in the same inscription. However, a more complex picture of the range of socio-economic and legal statuses that existed in the Palmyrene merchant diaspora is not currently possible to recover.

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