

ANCIENT ARABIA

Investigating and mapping Ancient Arabia

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MARITIME TRADE

The Arabian Peninsula is bordered by the Red Sea, the Arabian-Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. Maritime contacts constituted important links with the outside world. Arabian ships ventured overseas, and visitors came to Arabian ports from most of the wider Indian Ocean world. Arabia was tightly integrated in networks exchanging commodities ranging from necessities to prestige and luxury goods, as well as conveying cultural impulses.

Historical outline

Arabian populations have utilized the maritime environment since the Peninsula was first populated. Long distance links with Mesopotamia, the Indian Subcontinent and Egypt become visible in the latter half of the third millennium BCE (Fuller et al. 2011). After a hiatus in the source material following the Late Bronze Age crisis, the Red Sea and the Gulf reappear as corridors of exchange in the first half of the first millennium BCE, as evident in the activities of the South Arabian Kingdoms in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (De Procé & Phillips, 2010; Prioletta et al. 2021), some meagre accounts of Red Sea navigation in Herodotus (2.158–9; 4.43), and by the metal trade between Mesopotamia and the Gulf that is attested archaeologically as well as in Mesopotamian sources (Potts, 2009: 36–37).

With the establishment of Hellenistic rule in the northern Red Sea and Gulf, Arabia emerges as a transit hub for western Indian Ocean commerce. At *Khawr Rūrī* (Dhofar), South Indian potteries are present in strata of the third-second centuries BCE (Pavan 2015). Classical sources give Arabia as the origin of a number of Indian and Southeast Asian aromatics and gemstones, and the important Greek-language text of the Roman period called *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* ("The circumnavigation of the Red Sea") remembers Aden as a former meeting point for shipping from India and Egypt (*Periplus* 26). The *Periplus* also describes South Arabian activity and in places also suzerainty in the Horn of Africa, on Socotra and along the East African coast, which likely originated in this period. In eastern Arabia, *Thājī* (Saudi Arabia), one of the possible sites for the rich trading city of *Gerrha* known from the *Geography of Strabo* (*Geog.* 16.3.3), *Mleiha* (UAE), and *Tylos* (Bahrain) show close contact with Seleucid centers in the northern Gulf through finds of coins and ceramics (Potts 2009: 38–39).

With the Roman takeover in Egypt and the Levant, the literary sources describing Arabian maritime trade become more ample. Apart from the *Periplus*, particularly Strabo's *Geography* and Pliny's *Natural History*, both of the first century CE, give valuable information. Several Arabian ports active in this period have been surveyed or excavated including *Biṭ ʿAlī* (ancient Qanī in Yemen, see Salles & Sedov 2010), *Khawr Rūrī* (ancient Sumhuram in Oman, see Avanzini 2008), *ed-Dur* (Umm al-Quwain in the UAE, see Haerincck 2001), *Aynūna* (Northwest Arabia, see Gawlikowski et al. 2021) and a number of smaller sites (Pedersen 2015). Finds from these sites are echoed by those from their trading partners along other coasts of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean (see Seland 2014).

In this period, Arabia seems to have lost some of the role of the intermediary, but the demand for Arabian aromatics in the Roman and Arsacid empires as well as in the Indian sub-continent turned Arabian ports into important hubs in their own right, serving as gateways between hinterland, coastal, and oceanic networks. Strong and self-confident South Arabian states took active interest in maritime trade and the resources that it offered, including wine, glass and money from the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, African ivory, and Indian textiles and aromatics, while the overland "incense route" (see *Caravan trade*) seems to have lost importance. Ships and merchants from all parts of the Indian Ocean took part in this trade. Outside the peninsula, Arabian traders are most visible in Africa, but also in evidence in the northern Red Sea and in India (Sidebotham 2011; Fauconnier 2012). From northern Arabia and neighboring regions, Nabataeans and Palmyrenes took active part also in the maritime trade.

From the third century onwards the Arabian states of *Himyar* and *Hadramawt*, along with African *Aksum*, seem to again establish South Arabia and the Southern Red Sea as Indian Ocean entrepôts that import and export goods from various parts of the Indian Ocean (Schiettecatte 2012; Darley 2019). Limited epigraphic material and references in church histories and classical sources show diplomatic and commercial entanglements with the Roman and Sasanian worlds from the fourth century onwards, often in a Christian context. Weakened Byzantine presence in the Red Sea in the fifth century CE, along with Sasanian and Aksumite expansionism in the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth century, seems to have prompted a decline of maritime contacts from Arabia and possibly a revival of overland trade (Schiettecatte 2012; Robin 2014). With the Islamic conquest, the foci of Arabian maritime trade shift first to Mecca and the Hijaz in the west, and also to the Gulf route from Mesopotamia to Arabia and East Africa (Power 2012).

Commodities

Through most of antiquity, the most important Arabian exports were *myrrh* from present-day Yemen and *frankincense* from modern Oman as well as metals, pearls and dates. On account of classical sources, primarily the *Periplus*, and archaeological finds, other Arabian aromatics, along with transit goods from South Asia and Africa, e.g., gemstones, spices, and ivory, also played a role. Arabian imports included money, glass, wine, textiles, tableware, and horses.

Routes and schedules

Navigation in the Arabian Sea is determined by the monsoon, which blows from the southwest from May to September and from the northeast from November to March. In the Gulf and the Red Sea, prevailing winds are from the north through most of the year, but shift to the south during the north-east monsoon. While sailing against the monsoon is all but impossible and southern harbors were likely closed in the summer months, it was possible to navigate the Red Sea and the Gulf outside of seasons by utilizing local breezes and stopping at night (Casson 1989: 283–291).

The three wind systems that Arabian navigators had to recon with produced three interconnected navigation circuits: between the northern Red Sea and East Africa, between the Gulf of Aden and India (Casson 1989), and from the northern Gulf to India and East Africa. The monsoon made it easy to cover one of these circuits within a yearly cycle and possible to cover two (for instance between Egypt and India), but impossible to cover three. Thus, circumnavigation of Arabia seems to have been exceptional in antiquity (Salles 1988b). There is no direct evidence of navigation between Arabia and Southeast Asia in the pre-Islamic period, but indications of such contacts exist, such as the reports in classical sources that cinnamon and nutmeg were traded in Gulf of Aden markets.

The central location of southern Arabia on all three regional navigation circuits, along with attractive export goods and markets, and the possibility offered by Arabian ports to wait for changing winds and replenish water supplies, go a long way in explaining Arabia's important role in early Indian Ocean exchange.

Ships and vessels

Due to poor preservation, remains of ancient shipwrecks in the Indian Ocean are limited to non-perishable items from the cargo, such as ceramics, ballast, metal, and glass. Archaeological evidence from Egypt has shown that some of the ships sailing in the Indian Ocean were of the kind used in the Mediterranean, built hull first, mortise and tenon joinery (Whitewright 2007; Sidebotham 2011: 203–205). Literary sources also reveal other regional shipbuilding traditions. Importantly, they contain several references to sewn ships, likely to be forerunners of later Arabian and Indian Ocean ship types. Apart from ships, the *Periplus* (7; 27) also reports the use of rafts for coastal and cross-Red Sea navigation.

Arabians in Africa

In the *Periplus*, the ports along the coast of Somaliland are labelled "the far-side markets" (*ta peran emporia*). This has mostly been seen from an Egyptian perspective (Casson 1989), but likely refers to their position opposite the Arabian coast. Recent archaeological discoveries in Somaliland and Somalia have located Ancient South Arabian inscriptions (Mire 2015; Prioletta et al. 2021; González-Ruibal et al. 2022). In the *Periplus*, *Himyarite* suzerainty over parts of the East African coast and *Hadrami* control of Socotra are described, as well as lively trade between the Arabian and African coasts, with Arabian merchants settling and establishing families in African ports.

Organizations and actors

Ancient Indian Ocean trade seems to have been subject to active government interest and control. Nabataean and South Arabian governments took active part in trade and centralized trade to certain markets. The actual operation of trade seems to have been carried out by private merchants, using networks of family, shared faith and ethnicity in addition to contractual agreements, in order to create trust and cohesion, and thus lower transaction costs.

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