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Roman Alexandria, Queen of the Mediterranean and Arabian Seas

Abstract. Regarding the concept of connectivity entre mers—Outre-Mer, Alexandria ad Aegyptum reminds us of the circumstance that in addition to seascapes, straits and islands on the one hand, and the adjacent port cities and territories on the other, cities that seem inconveniently located can emerge as a point of reference as well. This was the case with Alexandria, especially in Roman times: not only did all the luxuries of maritime trade with India and Arabia pass through her gates, but all those engaged in this trade, wealthy financiers and Roman authorities alike, were based there. This is illustrated by three different pieces of evidence, namely, an inscription that attests to the presence of Roman military forces in the Arabian Sea, and two papyri, one furnishing first-hand details of the terms and conditions of the Indo-Roman trade, and the other featuring sketches of south Asian animals.

When the young Roman general, who is best known under his later and honorary name Augustus, marched into the capital of his famous antagonist Cleopatra on the evening of August 1, 30 BC, he set foot in one of the most splendid cities of the then-known world.¹ At that time, Alexandria was a rather young city compared to her neighbours in the ancient Near East, such as the age-old centers Babylon, Jerusalem, Tyros or Memphis. As her name already tells us, Alexandria had been founded by Alexander the Great, in the year 331 when the Macedonian king was on his way to the Siwa Oasis where he would be addressed as the son of Zeus-Ammon and future master of the universe. 300

¹ From the countless and manifold studies of Alexandria, I mention only Peter M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 3 vols., Oxford 1972, and, for the archaeological evidence, Judith McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt c. 300 BC to AD 700*, New Haven 2007. German readers who are particularly interested in the Ptolemaic city may also be referred to Michael Frommer, *Alexandria. Im Schatten der Pyramiden*. Mainz am Rhein 1999, and Günter Grimm, *Alexandria. Die erste Königsstadt der hellenistischen Welt. Bilder aus der Nilmetropole von Alexander dem Großen bis Kleopatra VII.*, Mainz am Rhein 1998, in the series *Zaberns Bildbände zur Archäologie*.—I would like to thank Rodney Ast and Julia Lougovaya for their help and many fruitful discussions and, not least, for correcting my English, and also Michael Speidel for his helpful suggestions.

years later, when the Romans took over Egypt, things had completely changed. The former fishing place—if it was even that—which had celebrated its 300th anniversary in those very days, had become one of the greatest cities in the world. Of all the towns that were founded by Alexander and bore his name—some twenty cities, most of them in the Persian East, as far as modern Afghanistan—this was surely the most important. Over the past three centuries, Alexandria *ad Aegyptum*, which had been fostered by the Ptolemaic kings, had grown into a mega-city second to none in the ancient world, and is still today the largest city lying directly on the Mediterranean coast. Her splendour was already legendary in antiquity, due to the brightness of her streets and buildings—including the Lighthouse of Pharos, which was counted among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World—as well as her culture. Indeed, the king-sponsored *mouseion* and library outshone all similar institutions, and within less than a century Alexandrian scholarship had even outstripped the reputation of Athens.

All this did not end, of course, under Roman rule. Yet, in terms of status, Alexandria experienced a sharp decline. Although she had been, especially in the last years of Cleopatra's reign and with the kind assistance of the Roman general and royal consort Mark Antony, the capital of a newly created kingdom that stretched from Armenia, Media, and Parthia to Cyrenaica and Libya again, she was henceforth reduced to the mere seat of a provincial governor of secondary rank. What this meant to citizen pride, we see best in the new literary genre of the so-called *Acta Alexandrinorum*, where lion-hearted Greek Alexandrians campaigned against Jews and Roman emperors alike for the glory and autonomy of the city and, fighting fiercely—and, of course, in vain—eventually died a heroic martyr's death.²

As usual, however, there are two sides of the coin. What is much less visible is the other side, namely, the prominence that accrued to Alexandria at this same time in the realm of long-distance trade. It is quite obvious that Egypt had always been the very hinge between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Upon looking at the map, however, one may duly wonder how this could apply to Alexandria as well, or to be more precise, how a city that was located at its northwestern edge right on the border with the Libyan desert could play a major role in Indo-Roman trade. What is most interesting, though, is that Alexandria emerged anew as a point of reference, against all odds. This is to

² Andrew Harker, *Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt. The Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum*, New York 2008; Andreas Hartmann, *Judenhass und Märtyrertum. Zum kulturgeschichtlichen Kontext der Acta Alexandrinorum*, in: Andreas Hartmann and Gregor Weber (ed.), *Zwischen Antike und Moderne (Festschrift für J. Malitz zum 65. Geburtstag)*, Speyer 2012, 119–209.

remind us that in exploring the concept of connectivity *Entre Mers—Outre Mer* it will not suffice to look at seascares, straits and islands, on the one hand, and the adjacent port cities and territories, on the other. There are still other factors that cannot easily be accounted for, individual terms and circumstances, so to speak, that may initiate quite unexpected developments.

Thus, the question turns out to be far more complex, and Alexandria *ad Aegyptum* is without any doubt one of the finest examples in this respect. As with the other Alexandrias as well, when she was founded no one could foresee how things would go in the future, let alone predict the unique rise that we already observe in Ptolemaic times.³ This was the more surprising given the location, which, at first glance, did not seem very favourable. Indeed, the main settlement area was situated on waterless lime rock, only 2 km wide and sandwiched between the Mediterranean Sea in the north and Lake Mariout in the South.⁴ Presumably, this was the reason why the area had not been occupied before—and why, right from the beginning, commerce played so prominent a role.⁵ Good harbours, then, were crucial for the flourishing of the town, and, to maximise the use of the port, the newcomers simply doubled them. By constructing the so-called Heptastadion, the causeway which joined the island of Pharos to the mainland, they divided the coastline up into two magnificent harbours:⁶ One to the east, that was most beautiful, as we are told, but of rather difficult access, with a narrow entrance and several reefs, in part under water, and a passage that was safeguarded only by the Pharos.⁷ This was called the Great Harbour where the main parts of the city and the royal quarters were sit-

3 See e.g. the sketch by Mostafa El-Abbadi, *The Greatest Emporium in the Inhabited World*, in: Mostafa Hassan Mostafa, Nicolas Grimal and Douglas Nakashima (ed.), *Underwater Archaeology and Coastal Management. Focus on Alexandria*, Paris 2000, 17–21.

4 McKenzie, *The Architecture* (cf. n. 1), esp. the map on p. 33, fig. [35].

5 There may have been some activities on the site before, see now Jean-Daniel Stanley and Elizabeth A. Landau, *Early Human Activity (pre-332 BC) in Alexandria, Egypt: New Findings in Sediment Cores from the Eastern Harbour*, in: Damian Robinson and Andrew Wilson (ed.), *Alexandria and the North-Western Delta. Joint Conference Proceedings of Alexandria: City and Harbour (Oxford 2004) and The Trade and Topography of Egypt's North-West Delta, 8th century BC to 8th century AD (Berlin 2006)*, Oxford 2010, 35–52; David Fabre and Franck Goddio, *The Development and Operation of the Portus Magnus in Early Alexandria—An Overview*, in: *ibid.*, 53–74, here 65; esp. McKenzie, *The Architecture* (cf. n. 1), 37 with 36, fig. [36], and for the still ongoing debate, 40 with n. 36 (383). But the changes induced by the Greek newcomers were fundamental anyway.

6 See McKenzie, *The Architecture* (cf. n. 1), 45–47 with 36, fig. [36] and [37].

7 Strabo 17.1.6 C 791–792; 17.1.9 C 794; for the topography, see now Fabre and Goddio, *Development* (cf. n. 5).

uated and where the famous Corniche is still one of the most conspicuous features of Alexandria today.

The other one, to the west, is much less known, but at least from the economic point of view this must have been the more important one. Strictly speaking, there were even two different harbours: the so-called Eunostos, “Harbour of Fortunate Return”, whose name already indicates its high esteem; and a smaller, artificially excavated harbour to its rear, the “Kibotos” or “Chest”.⁸ This was where the canal that linked the city with the Canopic branch of the Nile ended, and clearly the route where commodities from the hinterland came in. Thus, one may wonder if the latter was intended first for domestic produce and the food supply, or for more valuable goods under special custody. Regrettably, our sources do not tell us much about these parts of the city. It is safe, however, to assume that it was here in the west and south of Alexandria, in the immediate neighbourhood of these less familiar harbours, where the industrial and commercial facilities of all sorts were situated, be it shipbuilding, glass, or ceramics industries, as well as storehouses and customs centres—the large *paraleptikai apothekai* which we will hear of later—and where huge transactions in maritime trade took place.

Nearly all these harbours saw the Mediterranean as the first and foremost communication line. This is, after all, what we should expect as it holds true for all the Greek foundations, those of the Black Sea like Olbia or Trapezus as well as those in the West like Massilia, Syracuse or Tarentum. Moreover, we know that the Ptolemies had strong interests in the Aegean Sea. What made Alexandria the very queen of the Mediterranean, however, was her singular position in the network of international trade. Of course, Alexandria was an important and thriving centre of production herself, and she was renowned for her artisanal crafts and industries, her glass production, and the manufacture of numerous works of art, such as jewellery, mosaics, and sculpture, to name only a few. Still, this was matched, if not superseded, by her importance as a hub. This applies not only to the large-scale transport of grain that was regularly shipped from the Nile valley to the outside, in particular to Rome and later to Byzantium, but also to the processing and marketing of other typical Egyptian products and commodities like papyrus and textiles. It is even truer for goods that originated far beyond the borders of the then-known world, such as spices,

⁸ Strabo 17.1.6 C 792; 17.1.10 C 794–795 and the notes in Horace Leonard Jones, *Strabo VIII: Geography Book XVII, General Index. Text and Translation*, Cambridge, Mass. 1932, 26 f.; Manfred Clauss, *Claustra Aegypti – Alexandria und seine Häfen*, in: *Millennium 2* (2005), 297–328, here 297 f. The precise location of the Kibotos harbour, which is normally thought to have been near the Heptastadion, is still disputed; for a possible identification with the Ptolemaic harbour on Lake Mareotis—on which Strabo 17.1.7 C 793—Clauss, 303.

frankincense, and ivory. This was the case especially in Roman times, when the trade with India and Arabia gained new and considerable significance.

Indeed, for all the luxuries of maritime trade, it was clearly Alexandria where the goods passed through, to be distributed from there to other Mediterranean centres.⁹ This may come as a surprise because communication in this direction, as I have shown before, was by no means obvious; moreover, the shores of the Erythraean and Arabian Seas were very far away. Nevertheless, there were old and reliable transport routes from the Red Sea ports through the Eastern Desert,¹⁰ and, in combination with the subsequent passage on the Nile, for all people from beyond the south-eastern borders, traders and visitors alike, the way via Egypt was definitely the most appealing one. For all these, Alexandria was the door to the Mediterranean world, the unique point of reference, whose fame must have spread far and wide over the bordering coasts. This was true once more in the first two centuries CE, when the monsoon-driven trade went full speed, and the sheer amount of merchandise handled made Alexandria the queen not only of the Mediterranean but also of the Arabian Seas.

There is a lot of material evidence, of course, which could illustrate what has been said so far. For Indo-Roman trade, one could mention, for instance, the numerous hoards of Imperial coins that have been found along the West Indian Malabar Coast since the 1870s or sherds of Italian amphoras as far as the site of Arikamedu in South-Eastern Tamil Nadu.¹¹ Conversely, for imports into the Roman Empire one may cite literary texts as well, such as the famous *Periplus*

⁹ Also noticed by e.g. Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade. From Pots to Pepper*, London 2008; Katia Schörlle, Pearls, Power, and Profit: Mercantile Networks and Economic Considerations of the Pearl Trade in the Roman Empire, in: Federico De Romanis and Marco Maiuro (ed.), *Across the Ocean. Nine Essays on Indo-Mediterranean Trade*, Leiden 2015, 43–54.

¹⁰ See e.g. Paul Lunde and Alexandra Porter (ed.), *Trade and Travel in the Red Sea Region (Proceedings of Red Sea Project I Held in the British Museum October 2002)*, Oxford 2004, esp. the articles by Kenneth A. Kitchen, The Elusive Land of Punt Revisited (25–31), and D. M. Dixon, Pharaonic Egypt and the Red Sea Arms Trade, (33–41); Steven E. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route*, Berkeley, Calif. 2011, esp. 21–31; and, with special emphasis on the perennial problem of water availability, Jonatan Krzywinski, Water Harvesting in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, in: Eivind Heldaas Seland (ed.), *The Indian Ocean in the Ancient Period. Definite Places, Translocal Exchange*, Oxford 2007, 45–57. Of course, this cannot be compared with the much more intense use in Roman times, see below.

¹¹ For a most useful overview of Roman antiquities found in India, esp. Subra Suresh, *Symbols of Trade. Roman and Pseudo-Roman Objects Found in India*, New Delhi 2004, but see also Vimala Begley and Richard Daniel De Puma (ed.), *Rome and India. The Ancient Sea Trade*, Madison, Wisc. 1991. The wealth of research as well as publications that resulted from the boost in Indo-Roman studies in the past thirty years, be it on Indo-

Maris Erythraei, which tells us about the influx of pepper, malabathron, pearls, ivory, silk and nard from just these regions,¹² and a plethora of other luxury goods from elsewhere in these parts of the world. This was still true in late antique times, if we trust the Digests. There, Justinian resumed a passage from the Severan Jurist Marcianus who had listed a total of fifty-four items that were pertinent to the vectigal—that is the quarter-tax assessed in Alexandria.¹³ For my part, I will draw attention to three pieces of evidence that show convincingly why Alexandria may properly be called the queen of both seas.

The first is the so-called Muziris-papyrus, written on both sides in different hands, from the mid-second century CE.¹⁴ One side contains a contract apparently between an Alexandrian financier and the merchant who, on the Alexandrian's behalf and with his money, conducts the trip to India, the other a detailed list of the goods shipped from India to Egypt, or rather an account of the price of the goods after the quarter tax had been assessed and deducted. In both cases, we do not have an official copy, and only parts of the original text. Fragmentary as they might be, the accounts reveal that the amount of nard and ivory¹⁵ was less than an eighth of the overall cargo on the ship *Hermapollon*. Indeed, the estimated value of the whole cargo came to nearly 1,152 talents or, to be more precise, 6,911,852 drachmas. A huge sum, equivalent to about 10,000

Roman trade in general or on the material evidence detected on the shores of the Arabian sea in particular, can hardly be mentioned here. For Mediterranean artifacts found even beyond, in the Far East, see e.g. Brigitte Borell, The Early Byzantine Lamp from Pong Tuk, in: *Journal of the Siam Society* 96 (2008), 1–26; Eadem, Trade and Glass Vessels along the Maritime Silk Road, in: Bettina Zorn and Alexandra Hilgner (ed.), *Glass along the Silk Road from 200 BC to AD 1000 (International Conference within the Scope of the »Sino-German Project on Cultural Heritage Preservation« of the RGZM and the Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, December 11th-12th 2008)*, Mainz 2010, 127–142; Eadem, Bérénice Bellina and Boonyarit Chaisuwan, Contacts between the Upper Thai-Malay Peninsula and the Mediterranean World, in: Nicolas Revire and Stephen A. Murphy (ed.), *Before Siam. Essays in Art and Archaeology*, Bangkok 2014, 119–209. Yet, the debate on the character of the trade is ongoing; see, e.g., the survey by Bram Fauconnier, Graeco-Roman Merchants in the Indian Ocean Revealing a Multicultural Trade, in: Marie-Françoise Boussac, Jean-François Salles and Jean-Baptiste Yon (ed.), *Autour du Périples de la mer Érythrée* (Topoi Suppl. 11), Paris 2012, 75–109.

¹² PME 56.

¹³ Dig. 39.4.16.7 (Marcian., lib. sing. de delat.).

¹⁴ The now famous papyrus (= SB XVIII 13167, a.k.a. P. Vindob. G 40.822) turns up in nearly all publications related to Indo-Roman trade; for some amendments to the text and thorough discussion, esp. Dominic Rathbone, The 'Muziris' Papyrus (SB XVIII 13167): Financing Roman Trade with India, in: *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique d'Alexandrie* 46 (2000) (= Alexandrian Studies II in Honour of Mostafa el-Abbadi), 39–50; Federico Morelli, Dal Mar Rosso ad Alessandria. Il verso (ma anche il recto) del 'papiro di Muziris' (SB XVIII 13167), in: *Tyche* 26 (2011), 199–233.

camels, more than 40,000 donkeys, or the cost of living for 30,600 individuals for a year;¹⁶ in Rome, the value should have doubled anyway.

These accounts and calculations give an idea of the immense scale of Indo-Roman trade which passed through Alexandria, but the other side of the papyrus contains even more information. Here, we get not only a glimpse into the rather sophisticated contractual arrangements that characterised and secured the intricate relationship between the wealthy financier and the merchant who ran the delicate venture to Muziris and back again.¹⁷ Apart from the distribution of risk and responsibility between the two partners, which is of no little interest in itself, we can also see the manifold managerial duties that turned up during the journey and even after the arrival in the Red Sea ports. Indeed, the conveyance of goods first by caravans through the desert, then by ship down the Nile up to Alexandria was interspersed with a great deal of negotiations, be it with the customs officers at various points of the journey or else with the agents sent out by the financier. Thus, it was not only a risky but also a complex business, and one may duly wonder which of all these tasks was most demanding.

What is interesting, though, is the role of Alexandria in this play. It is safe to assume that the financier of the venture resided there, but of course he did not actively take part in the trip to India. Rather, he commanded a host of agents—probably slaves or freedmen—who were in charge in his stead of monitoring the journey and, in particular, of controlling the cargoes at various places along the route where they were endangered most. Of course, these agents did not dirty their hands themselves with loading goods from the ship onto the camels, from the camels onto the ships again, and at the recurrent warehouses

15 These are at least the commodities we encounter in the extant portion of the papyrus. As has been argued most convincingly by Federico De Romanis, Playing Sudoku on the Verso of the 'Muziris Papyrus': Pepper, Malabathron and Tortoise Shell in the Cargo of the Hermapollon, in: *Journal of Ancient Indian History* 27 (2010–11), 75–101, pepper was listed as well, presumably also malabathron and tortoise shell; for the identification of the mysterious *schidai* as “fragments of tusks trimmed away from captive elephants” (thus in the abstract), see now Federico De Romanis, *Ivory from Muziris* (ISAW Papers 8, 2014) URL: <http://dlib.nyu.edu/awdl/isaw/isaw-papers/8/> (accessed 3 January 2018).

16 For average prices in Roman Egypt—500–650 dr. per camel, or ca. 160 dr. per donkey, see Hans-Joachim Drexhage. *Preise, Mieten/Pachten, Kosten und Löhne im römischen Ägypten bis zum Regierungsantritt Diokletians. Vorarbeiten zu einer Wirtschaftsgeschichte des römischen Ägypten I*, St. Katharinen 1991; equated with the cost of living in: Hans-Joachim Drexhage, Heinrich Konen and Kai Ruffing, *Die Wirtschaft des Römischen Reiches (1.-3. Jahrhundert). Eine Einführung*, Berlin 2002, 265.

17 With special emphasis, Gerhard Thür, Hypotheken-Urkunde eines Seedarlehens für eine Reise nach Muziris und Apographie für die Tetarte in Alexandria (zu P. Vindob. G 40822), in: *Tyche* 2 (1987), 229–245.

in between, as all these organisational duties fell clearly on the merchant himself. They were however present to set their seals on the cargoes anytime and anywhere.

The customs authorities, for their part, behaved in just the same way. At least in the first century CE, the taxes on goods that were imported from beyond the eastern and southern borders of the Empire were still farmed out. As the name—*tetarte*—already indicates, these taxes amounted to a quarter of the value of the goods, and the farming must have been one of the most profitable activities in the Roman Empire one could think of. Accordingly, we encounter some of the wealthiest Alexandrians under these tax farmers, who were properly called *arabarchai* or “lords of Arabia”; I mention only the *arabarches par excellence*, the famous C. Iulius Alexander, who administered the Egyptian possessions of Antonia Minor, the niece of Augustus and mother of Germanicus and Claudius, and who adorned the nine gates of the temple of Jerusalem, as Josephus tells us, lavishly with plates of silver and gold.¹⁸ In the second century, these functions may have been taken over by Roman state officials, but unequivocal evidence is still lacking.¹⁹

Be that as it may, these developments did not affect the lower levels of the system. Indeed, in the Red Sea ports as well as in the major entrepôt of Koptos, where the cargoes were loaded onto the ships, we find the same tax farmers as before, who assessed the value of the goods and placed them under bonds. These local customs officers, even if they were sometimes called arabarchs themselves, must not be confused with the high-ranking functionaries at Alexandria with the same title. Rather, they are to be compared with the agents of our financier, as both groups were instructed to register and to safeguard the goods but had apparently to refrain from any active dealing with them. There was simply too much at stake—the precious goods could be damaged, get lost or be stolen. Thus, the risk of conveyance was left completely to the merchant who was held responsible for the whole journey, right from the ports of India up to the eventual delivery at the Alexandrian *paraleptikai apothekai*.²⁰

18 Fabienne Burkhalter-Arce, Les fermiers de l’arabarchie: Notables et hommes d’affaires à Alexandrie, in: *Alexandrie: Une mégapole cosmopolite* (Cahiers de la Villa « Kérylos » 9), Paris 1999, 41–54; on C. Iulius Alexander, esp. 42 f., on his adorning the temple of Jerusalem Ios., Bell. Iud. 5.204 f.

19 Andrea Jördens, *Statthalterliche Verwaltung in der römischen Kaiserzeit. Studien zum praefectus Aegypti* (Historia Einzelschriften 175), Stuttgart 2009, 359 f., esp. n. 16. Similar questions arise in connection with the so-called *paraleptai*, which cannot be discussed here. At least there is a fair chance that new evidence will add to our knowledge, as two inscriptions from recent excavations at Berenike suggest: Rodney Ast and Roger S. Bagnall, The Receivers of Berenike. New Inscriptions from the 2015 Season, in: *Chiron* 45 (2015), 171–185, esp. 178–183.

Admittedly, there were some *apothekai* also in between, not least because the goods had to be securely stored while awaiting assessment and further conveyance. This applies not only to Koptos, whose importance to Indo-Roman trade has never been denied,²¹ but to the Red Sea ports as well, as is made clear by recently discovered inscriptions at Berenike.²² Given that the merchant who spent as much money as he could in India was probably in need of cash to pay the numerous transport fees, it is not inconceivable that some goods were consumed and distributed locally. Besides, this can account for the enigmatic “parts of the arabarchs” that were deducted and converted there already.²³

At best, however, this was only a small percentage that in no way affected the substance. Regarding the lion’s share, in fact, we have every reason to believe that the cargoes were practically locked up during the journey. One should bear in mind, after all, that only if the cargoes were delivered intact and without any loss or damage could the quarter tax be duly assessed in Alexandria. Accordingly, it was Alexandria-based people who were pulling the strings behind the scenes, such as the arabarch and his successors who had had the goods taken in bond, as well as the financiers whose agents placed them under seal. Thus, the control was at least a double one, for the respective personnel were monitoring not only the merchant but also each other.

There was, however, a third party at play that we have to reckon with, namely Rome herself,²⁴ or more precisely the Roman authorities who were based at Alexandria, civilian and military alike. First, there were the representa-

20 Summarizing Morelli, *Dal Mar Rosso* (cf. n. 14), 231–233.

21 See Marie-Françoise Boussac (ed.), *Autour de Koptos. Actes du colloque organisé au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, 17–18 mars 2000* (Topoi Suppl. 3), Paris 2002, esp. the articles by Dominic Rathbone, Koptos the *Emporion*. Economy and Society, I–III AD, 179–198, and Fabienne Burkhalter-Arce, Le « tarif de Coptos ». La douane de Coptos, les fermiers de l’*apostolion* et le préfet du désert de Bérénice, 199–233.

22 Ast and Bagnall, *The Receivers* (cf. n. 19).

23 For the calculations Morelli, *Dal Mar Rosso* (cf. n. 14), 218–220.

24 The intricate question of whether and to what extent the imperial power actively participated in Indo-Roman trade shall not be addressed here; surveying the earlier discussion, with reservations, Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Princeton 1989, esp. 35–39; more confident, Alan K. Bowman, Trade and the Flag – Alexandria, Egypt and the Imperial House, in: Robinson and Wilson (ed.), *Alexandria and the North-Western Delta* (cf. n. 5), 103–109; Andrew Wilson, Red Sea Trade and the State, in: De Romanis and Maiuro (ed.), *Across the Ocean* (cf. n. 9), 13–32; from a different point of view, see now Michael Alexander Speidel, Wars, Trade and Treaties: New, Revised, and Neglected Sources for the Political, Diplomatic, and Military Aspects of Imperial Rome’s Relations with the Red Sea Basin and India, from Augustus to Diocletian, in: Kuzhippalli S. Mathew (ed.), *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris: New Perspectives on Maritime Trade*, New Delhi 2015, 83–128; Idem, Fernhandel und Freundschaft. Zu Roms

tives of the Roman treasury who deducted the quarter tax at the very end of the journey. Second, there was a large military presence in the Red Sea region—and, as we see more and more clearly, well beyond. Indeed, from literary evidence, or more precisely from the famous *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, it has long been known that there was a Roman garrison and tax official at Leuke kome, a Nabataean port on the Arabian coast.²⁵ However, this was usually deemed an exception, to the point that some scholars maintained that the centurion we hear of was a Nabataean one.²⁶ This is not necessarily so, as Manfred Raschke had already pointed out in his groundbreaking and still invaluable *New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East*. Writing in the late 1970s and renowned for his thorough and well-considered treatment of the subject, Raschke had no doubts that Roman troops and tax collectors could be stationed in the territory of a client state, and that this was also the case here.²⁷ Nevertheless, he was convinced that this did not go beyond that, as he firmly asserted: “There is in fact no trace of a Roman military presence in the Red Sea south of Berenice.”²⁸

Thirty years later, this assertion was upended by the discovery of two Latin inscriptions, my second piece of evidence, on the Farasan islands far to the south, opposite the Yemeni coast, in the immediate neighbourhood of the Bāb al-Mandab. These inscriptions testify to a Roman military unit under the command of a *praefectus Ferresani portus et Ponti Herculis* in the first half of the second century CE.²⁹ Comparable prefectures that were established in exposed places and regions are quite well known; one need only mention the *praefectus*

amici an den Handelsrouten nach Südarabien und Indien, in: *Orbis Terrarum* 14 (2016), 155–193; for a general picture, Gary K. Young, *Rome’s Eastern Trade. International Commerce and Imperial Policy 31 BC-AD 305*, London 2001.

²⁵ PME 19; Jördens, *Statthalterliche Verwaltung* (cf. n. 19), 356 f. 364 f.; and see Sidebotham, *Berenike* (cf. n. 10), 175–177; Speidel, *Wars* (cf. n. 24), 103; Idem, *Fernhandel* (cf. n. 24), 159; on the long disputed question of location esp. Dario Nappo, On the Location of Leuke Kome, in: *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 23 (2010), 335–348, arguing in favour of al-Wajh, lying on the same latitude as Myos Hormos.

²⁶ This has been the prevailing view since Ulrich Wilcken, Ein νόμος τελωνικός aus der Kaiserzeit, in: *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 3 (1906), 185–200 [Ed. pr. von W. Chr. 273], esp. 197–200; see Jördens, *Statthalterliche Verwaltung* (cf. n. 19), 364 with n. 39.

²⁷ Manfred G. Raschke, *New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East*, in: Hildegard Temporini (ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt. II. Prinzipat*, vol. 9.2, Berlin 1978, 604–1378, here 664.

²⁸ Raschke, *New Studies* (cf. n. 26), 647.

²⁹ AE 2005, 1640 = AE 2007, 1659 (Hadrianic?); AE 2004, 1643 = AE 2005, 1639 = AE 2007, 1659 (140 CE); and see Michael Alexander Speidel, Ausserhalb des Reiches? Zu neuen lateinischen Inschriften aus Saudi Arabien und zur Ausdehnung der römischen Herrschaft am Roten Meer, in: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 163 (2007), 296–306 (also in: Idem, *Heer und Herrschaft im Römischen Reich der Hohen Kaiserzeit*, Stutt-

insularum Baliarum or the *praefectus orae Ponticae maritimae*. Usually, their main duties were, as it seems, to safeguard travel and trade—that is, to prevent any raid and particularly to fight against bandits or pirates.³⁰

It is all the more remarkable that we encounter one of these prefectures in Egypt itself, namely the *praefectus montis Berenicidis*. As his title already indicates, he was in charge of the Eastern desert, that is, not only the imperial quarries located there but the whole area between Koptos and Berenike.³¹ Accordingly, this comprised the caravan routes through the desert as well, where we see much better than elsewhere what the double task of protecting the roads and fighting against barbarians might imply. We do not know if the attacks by nomads increased after the middle of the first century CE,³² but we can observe new and large-scale activities by the Romans in the following decades. The fortification and equipping of the Koptos-Berenike road with wells in Flavian times was clearly no small investment, and it eventually resulted in a shift of the main communication lines. In the early Imperial period, as attested by Strabo and material evidence alike, the port of Myos Hormos, which was closest to the Nile, was the preferred one for Indo-Roman trade. From the Flavian period onwards, however, and more so in the second century CE, south-eastern Berenike Troglodytike may have taken the lead.³³

gart 2009, 633–649); Speidel, Wars (cf. n. 24), 89–94; Dario Nappo, Roman Policy on the Red Sea in the Second Century CE, in: De Romanis and Maiuro (ed.), *Across the Ocean* (cf. n. 9), 55–72; Speidel, Fernhandel (cf. n. 24), 157–165.

³⁰ See now Speidel, Fernhandel (cf. n. 24).

³¹ Adam Bülow-Jacobsen and Hélène Cuvigny, Sulpicius Serenus, *procurator Augusti*, et la titulature des préfets de Bérénice, in: *Chiron* 37 (2007), 11–33; Andreina Magioncalda, I prefetti di Berenice, in: Catherine Wolff (ed.), *Le métier de soldat dans le monde romain (Actes du cinquième Congrès de Lyon 23–25 sept. 2010)*, Paris 2012, 461–477.

³² However, see now Hélène Cuvigny, Papyrological Evidence on ‘Barbarians’ in the Egyptian Eastern Desert, in: Jitse H. F. Dijkstra and Greg Fisher (ed.), *Inside and Out. Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, Leuven 2014, 165–198.

³³ For a most useful overview, see now Sidebotham, *Berenike* (cf. n. 10), on the development of the road system esp. 125–174; Hélène Cuvigny, Le système routier du désert Oriental égyptien sous le Haut-Empire à la lumière des ostraca trouvés en fouille, in: Jérôme France and Jocelyne Nelis-Clément (ed.), *La statio. Archéologie d’un lieu de pouvoir dans l’empire romain*, Bordeaux 2014, 247–278, esp. 257–263; for the results of the excavations conducted since the 1990s in the framework of the *Programme « Désert Orientale »*, see also the site URL: <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/archeologie/praesidia/> (accessed 3 January 2018), with the pertinent series *Praesidia du désert de Bérénice*, published by the Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale since 2003; and, for a wider audience at an intermediate stage, the articles by Michel Reddé, La présence militaire romaine dans le désert Oriental (385–394), Jean-Pierre Brun, *Hodos Myshormitikhè : l’équipement de la route de Coptos et la mer Rouge aux époques ptolémaïque et romaine* (395–414), and

Yet, even here, Alexandria was the constitutive reference. We shall not forget, after all, that the units that served in the Eastern desert and on the Farasan islands were part of the provincial army, as were their local commanders. Moreover, the above-mentioned prefects, who most probably resided at Koptos, were answerable to the prefects of Egypt as well. Thus, as far as the Roman army is concerned, we arrive at the same conclusion as before, namely, that the core of the system was situated nowhere else but in Alexandria. Indeed, the similarity of the organisational structures is especially striking. Just as in the realm of trade and customs duties, the leading figures were based regularly there. The personnel on the spot, for their part, however impressive they may have been to the outside, had only limited powers for a limited time and, in spite of their virtually awesome appearance, no authority of their own.

In this case, however, there seems to have been even more. For it is not too far-fetched to assume that the military was in charge of controlling not only the foreign and possibly hostile forces but also the merchants and the merchandise—and, we may add, the customs officers as well. This is, in all probability, why we find Roman stationary detachments as far as the straits; and there is good reason to suppose that there were still other, albeit less numerous, units on the other side of the Bāb al-Mandab as well. Indeed, one may duly wonder how the more than one hundred vessels that even in Strabo's time sailed to and fro each year could do so if there was no concrete and robust protection against one of the most obvious dangers of such a venture, namely, the capture and seizure, or worse, of goods and persons.

Such military support apart, it has recently been argued that the Romans created a network of *amici* to foster travel and trade in these parts of the world.³⁴ This need not imply genuine treaties of friendship, which we know about already from Republican times and which proved crucial for establishing peaceful and friendly relations between Rome and another state.³⁵ Rather, we should consider the pertinent title that was granted—then by the senate, now by the princeps—to states as well as to individuals who rendered special ser-

Steven E. Sidebotham, From Berenike to Koptos: Recent Results of the Desert Route Survey (415–438), in: Boussac (ed.), *Autour de Coptos* (cf. n. 21). <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/archeologie/praesidia/> (accessed 3 January 2018), with the pertinent series *Praesidia du désert de Bérénice*, published by the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale since 2003; and, for a wider audience at an intermediate stage, the articles by Michel Reddé, La présence militaire romaine dans le désert Oriental (385–394), Jean-Pierre Brun, *Hodos Myshormitikè* : l'équipement de la route de Coptos et la mer Rouge aux époques ptolémaïque et romaine (395–414), and Steven E. Sidebotham, From Berenike to Koptos: Recent Results of the Desert Route Survey (415–438), in: Boussac (ed.), *Autour de Coptos* (cf. n. 21).

34 Speidel, Wars (cf. n. 24), esp. 113–119; Speidel, Fernhandel (cf. n. 24).

vices to Rome, or were at least expected to render them in the very near future. Of course, on the way to India, far beyond the frontiers of the then-known world, friendly relationships must have been more essential than ever, which makes this idea even more appealing. On the other hand, these putative *amici* could surely hope for some reward. Thus, it is safe to assume that the Roman military forces that were most plausibly present in the Arabian Sea also had a share in this respect. At least there is no reason why they should not have helped out merchants and *amici* in critical situations, to the benefit of all.

All these more theoretical reflections have taken us, however, far from Alexandria, and even farther from any evidence that could support our case. Thus, it is time to return to the Mediterranean, and we may follow an Indian embassy for that. “Embassies”, as Augustus proudly declares in his *Res gestae*, “were often sent to me from kings in India; never before had they been seen in the presence of any Roman commander.” He goes on with listing quite a number of other kings and peoples that “sought our friendship”—*amicitia*, as he explicitly states, “by means of embassies”.³⁶ Of course, the degree of truth in such assertions must not always be taken for granted. In the case of Augustus, however, we have a good deal of evidence that this was by no means mere boasting but relates to very real events.

Indeed, there was at least one embassy from India that must have been most impressive, for it is recorded in literary sources even centuries later. The Severan historian Cassius Dio reports that in the winter 20/19 BCE, when Augustus sojourned at Samos, “a great many embassies came to him, and the people of India, who had already made overtures, now made a treaty of friendship, sending among other gifts tigers, which were then for the first time seen by the Romans” and the most memorable of all, we are told, was the Indian sage who accompanied the embassy and, after being initiated into the Eleusian mysteries at Athens where they stopped on the way to Rome, decided to burn himself alive.³⁷

³⁵ Succinctly, Adolf Berger, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, in: *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* N.S. 43/2 (1953), 333–808, here 361 s.v. *Amicitia (foedus amicitiae)*; and see now *Forschungen über die rechtlichen Grundlagen der römischen Außenbeziehungen während der Republik bis zum Beginn des Prinzipats*, thorough studies conducted by Andreas Zack and published subsequently in: *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaften* 14 (2011), 47–119 (I); 15 (2012), 61–128 (II); 16 (2013), 63–113 (III); 17 (2014), 131–180 (IV); 17 (2014), 247–308 (V); 18 (2015), 27–83 (VI); 18 (2015), 115–178 (VII); 19 (2016), 89–163 (VIII).

³⁶ Augustus, *Res g.* 31.1 f.; trans. Grant Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, Cambridge 2008, 210. For a range of possible candidates, see now Speidel, Fernhandel (cf. n. 24).

³⁷ Cass. Dio 54.9.8–10, the citation in 9.8; trans. Earnest Cary, *Dio’s Roman History with an English Translation, in Nine Volumes*, vol. 6, Cambridge, Mass. 1960.

This must have been the same embassy that is mentioned also by Strabo who, for his part, refers to the former tutor of royal children and historian Nicolaus of Damascus for more substantial details. Nicolaus, in fact, was credited with having encountered the Indian ambassadors himself when they passed through Antioch epi Daphne, and may have even got a glimpse of the letter of the king they delivered, written in Greek on a skin and offering Augustus the chance “to co-operate with him in anything that was honourable”.³⁸ Again, we hear of the marvellous gifts and the Indian sage who leaped upon the pyre with a laugh, and even of the epitaph that the Athenians inscribed on his tombstone.

Yet, we do not exactly know where this embassy came from and which route it had taken. According to Nicolaus, the letter was written by a King Poros, who was ruler of six hundred kings, but this sounds hardly reliable considering that Poros was the king’s name as early as in Alexander’s time. If we trust the above-mentioned epitaph, they would have come from Bargosa or Barygaza, the famous commercial hub at the North Indian coast.³⁹ Thus, it is quite possible that the embassy took the overland route to the west and travelled through Mesopotamia and Syria. It is just as likely, if not even more plausible, that they came by sea. As is well known, the Southwest Monsoon, which was of critical importance to Indo-Roman trade, splits into two parts: the so-called *Arabian Sea Branch* that led to Kerala, and more precisely, as we have seen, to Muziris; and the northerly *Bay of Bengal Branch* that made Barygaza the terminus.⁴⁰ If the Indian embassy, as is most probable, embarked on the prevailing route, they would clearly have entered the Roman Empire via Egypt and, of course, Alexandria.

Now, we can be quite sure that this was indeed the case, as is shown by my third piece of evidence, viz. the so-called Artemidorus Papyrus. This papyrus has gained prominence in the last decade because it has been claimed to be a nineteenth-century forgery, and the discussion, as a matter of fact, continues.⁴¹ According to the proponents of this view, forgery can be proved not least

³⁸ Strab. 15.1.73 C 719; trans. Horace Leonard Jones, *Strabo VII: Geography Book XV and XVI, Text and Translation*, Cambridge, Mass. 1930.

³⁹ See Strab. 15.1.73 C 720: “Here lies Zarmanochegas, an Indian from Bargosa, who immortalised himself in accordance with the ancestral customs of Indians” (trans. Jones, *Strabo VII*).

⁴⁰ Succinctly, Lionel Casson, *Ancient Naval Technology and the Route to India*, in: Begley and De Puma (ed.), *Rome and India* (cf. n. 11), 8–11; Young, *Rome’s Eastern Trade* (cf. n. 24), 28–30; see André Tchernia, *Winds and Coins: From the Supposed Discovery of the Monsoon to the Denarii of Tiberius*, in: Federico De Romanis and André Tchernia (ed.), *Crossings. Early Mediterranean Contacts with India*, New Delhi 1997, 250–276, and, most recently, James Beresford, *The Ancient Sailing Season* (Mnemosyne Suppl. 351), Leiden 2013, 213–235.

by the strange bestiary that has been sketched on the reverse. Indeed, there is a plethora of most elegant and seemingly fanciful animal drawings that in all their liveliness make a quite modern appearance. Moreover, it is not to be denied that some of them are likely products of fantasy and myth, in particular those engaged in fights.

Most of them, however, are not.⁴² Indeed, there are several animals whose strangeness results primarily from the fact that their features are not those we are familiar with from the Mediterranean world. Of course, the illustrator could not rely on modern techniques, and the sketches were not always precise, and now and then they were made from memory. Nevertheless, there are too many details that point to the fact that there were very real animals—marine, winged, and terrestrial alike—that served for him as models. Most of them came clearly from the African regions beyond Syene, to mention only the giraffe (V21), the caracal (V38), or the flamingo (V28). There are, however, others with an unquestionable Asian provenance—the tiger, for instance (V31), the Himalayan monal (V27), the Ganges softshell turtle (V36), the Indian python (V16), and possibly even a New Guinean southern cassowary (V07). Indeed, the sheer number of these South- or South-East Asian animals on the papyrus is astonishing, and this can be by no means a coincidence.

Thus, there is every reason to argue that all these exotic animals were among the gifts presented by the Indian embassy to Augustus, and that they were on display at Alexandria when the ambassadors passed through on their

41 This prompted several conferences and a session at the XXVI Congress of Papyrology in Geneva; see, e.g., Kai Brodersen and Jaś Elsner (ed.), *Images and Texts on the "Artemidorus Papyrus". Working Papers on P.Artemid. (St. John's College Oxford, 2008)* (Historia Einzelschriften 214), Stuttgart 2009; the conference series *Intorno al Papiro di Artemidoro*: Claudio Gallazzi, Bärbel Kramer and Salvatore Settis (ed.), vol. 1: *Contesto culturale, lingua, stile e tradizione (Atti del Convegno internazionale del 15 nov. 2008 presso la Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa)*, Milano 2010; idem (ed.), vol. 2: *Geografia e Cartografia (Atti del Convegno internazionale del 27 nov. 2009 presso la Società Geografica Italiana, Villa Celimontana, Roma)*, Milano 2012; Gianfranco Adornato (ed.), vol. 3: *I Disegni (Atti del Convegno internazionale del 4 febr. 2011 presso il Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Firenze)*, Milano 2016; Paul Schubert, *Actes du 26e Congrès international de papyrologie Genève, 16–21 août 2010*, Genève 2012, XIX, and the article by Jürgen Hammerstaedt, *The status quaestionis of the Artemidorus Papyrus*, *ibid.* 307–313; most recently, Luciano Canfora, *Simonides als Verfasser des falschen Artemidor (249–255)*, and Jürgen Hammerstaedt, *Simonides ist nicht an allem schuld! Die Debatte um den Artemidor-Papyrus (257–278)*, in: Andreas E. Müller, Lilia Diamantopoulou, Christian Gastgeber and Athanasia Katsiakiori-Rankl (ed.), *Die getäuschte Wissenschaft. Ein Genie betrügt Europa – Konstantinos Simonides*, Wien 2017.

42 See Ragnar K. Kinzelbach, *Tierbilder aus dem ersten Jahrhundert. Ein zoologischer Kommentar zum Artemidor-Papyrus* (Archiv für Papyrusforschung, Beiheft 28), Berlin 2009, whose numbering of the sketches has been adopted in what follows.

way to Samos and Antioch. This assumption is the more convincing as some of them can in all probability be identified. Indeed, what is most interesting for us in Strabo’s account is the enumeration of the animals that Nicolaus is purported to have seen when the Indians eventually arrived; apart from the tiger which is also mentioned by Cassius Dio (V31), he lists “large vipers (we have at least one king cobra, V25b), and a serpent ten cubits in length (our python, V16), and a river tortoise three cubits in length (our Ganges softshell turtle, V36), and a partridge larger than a vulture (our Himalayan monal, V27)”.⁴³ To cut a long story short, the Artemidorus Papyrus is no fake, and it is more probable than not that those were the very models the sketches on the reverse were based on.

To conclude, if the title of the paper seems surprising, I hope to have shown that it is more than justified. Since Ptolemaic times, Alexandria was one of the world’s leading cities in terms of learning, culture, and beauty, a place that could not easily be matched by any other capital of the ancient Mediterranean. Moreover, she was a thriving centre of production and commerce in her own right, and, not least, the door to the immense prosperity and wealth of Egypt. Under the Romans, her importance increased even more, and her area of influence expanded far and wide, to regions that had hardly ever been known before. For all the activities between the Levant and the Indian shores—trade, military, and diplomacy alike— Alexandria became the one and only point of reference that can properly be labelled the Queen of the Mediterranean and Arabian Seas.

⁴³ See Strab. 15.1.73 C 719; trans. Jones, *Strabo VII* (with my comments in brackets).