

Red Sea studies: A historiographical sketch



Abstract: With the coming of age of Red Sea studies, William Facey's description of "a sea on the way to somewhere else" has been demonstrated to be only one of the stories that can be told about the region. Starting as appendices to classical, egyptological and orientalist scholarship, the archaeology and history of the Red Sea has over the last three decades emerged as a scholarly field in its own right. This paper discusses how scholars have approached the distant past of the region, highlighting some of the influences that have shaped Red Sea studies, and points to some of the challenges and opportunities that have been opened.

Keywords: Red Sea, historiography, research history, archaeology, history

Research into the archaeology and history of the Red Sea, which started out as an appendix to classical, egyptological and orientalist scholarship, has emerged over the last three decades as a scholarly field in its own right. This discussion reveals how scholars have approached the distant past of the region, highlighting some of the influences that have shaped Red Sea studies. It also points to some of the challenges and opportunities that have opened (for reviews of the Red Sea archaeology, see Seland 2014; 2017).

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EXPLORERS

Red Sea studies build on venerable traditions. In the 15th century, Greek geographical knowledge, preserved in Byzantine libraries, started to reach Western Europe. This coincided with two other seminal developments, namely the development of the printing press and its expanded application, and the incipient rush by Italian, Spanish and Portuguese governments for new routes to access Asian textiles and spices. In order to do this, European rulers and navigators became interested in Classical works describing the Red Sea and other parts of Africa and Asia. Two key works in this context were Ptolemy's *Geography*, and also the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. The latter was first translated into a modern language in 1550 as a part of Ramusio's famous *Navigazioni et viaggi*, collecting ancient and contemporary, that is, 15th–16th century texts on exploration, navigation, travel and geography (Ramusio 1550), and a map of the Indian Ocean as depicted in the *Periplus* was included in Abraham Ortelius' atlas of historical

maps that accompanied his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* from 1597 (Marcotte 2017). This laid the foundation for later travellers in the Red Sea, importantly Carsten Niebuhr, the sole survivor of the royal Danish expedition that visited the Red Sea in 1762–1763, who frequently refers to the distant past of the region and the classical sources (Niebuhr 1778). A number of travelers explored the site of Berenike after Giovanni Belzoni published his account of his 1818 visit to the site (Belzoni 1820; Sidebotham 2011: 16–17). James Wellsted, a member of the crew of the *Palinurus*, one of the two British ships that completed the first detailed survey of the Red Sea in 1829–1833, in his published diaries reveals himself as an author constantly occupied with the ancient remains that he seeks, often with remarkable precision, to identify with places named in classical literature (Wellsted 1838). Also Richard Burton travelled the Hejaz in search of traces of Egyptian, Hellenistic and Nabataean past (Burton 1879).

RED SEA STUDIES IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The beginnings of Red Sea archaeology are a direct offshoot of European imperial expansion into the region in the late 19th and early 20th century.

An expert from the British Museum followed the Abyssinian expedition of 1868, excavating, looting and purchasing to the best of his ability (Holland and Hozier 1870: 398–399; Munro-Hay 1989b). Enno Littmann pioneered the exploration of the Tigrai and Northern Ethiopia (Littmann 1913; Wenig 2012).

Roberto Paribeni and Richard Sundström excavated in Adulis (Paribeni 1907; Sundström 1907; Zazzaro 2013). Three decades later Bernard Bruyère conducted detailed excavations of late Roman and early Islamic Suez (Bruyère 1966). After World War II, the American Foundation for the Study of Man pioneered South Arabian archaeology with their excavations at Marib and Khor Rori (Phillips 1955; Albright 1982), sites not on the Red Sea, but neverthe-

less very relevant in a regional context.

Two main motivations or agendas were behind these early investigations into the distant past of the Red Sea. One was to search for, as Mortimer Wheeler's famous book from the end of this period encapsulated it in its title, "Rome beyond the imperial frontier" (Wheeler 1955). The name of Rome carried huge prestige in the age of Imperialism. As Richard Hingley has argued, British colonial servicemen saw themselves as direct successors to the Roman Imperial authorities (Hingley 2000; see also Ray 2008). The Italians in Eritrea and also in Libya explicitly aimed to shoulder the heritage of the Roman Empire in Africa (De Donno and Srivastava 2006: 376; Visser 1992: 6–7). Uncovering the remains of Roman activities in the Red Sea could be read as part of justifying contemporary colonial rule.

The other program pursued by these early scholars was that of biblical archaeology and Church history (cf. Moorey 1991). The Red Sea might be at the margins of the Holy Lands, yet the story of the Exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea and the wanderings in Sinai as well as

the Queen of Sheba, the ancient church of Ethiopia, and the late Roman narratives of martyrs, missionaries and saints in the Red Sea, were powerful attractions for Christian scholars, and the non-archaeological expertise on these regions, for instances in the different ancient languages, was very much a preserve of men of the church. Research into what we now call Late Antiquity was to a large degree a quest for knowledge of the early history of the Christian church.

That these scholars had clear agendas does not necessarily diminish the quality and significance of their work, which in many cases was remarkable. It does, however, underline that they were not primarily interested in Red Sea studies or Red Sea archaeology, but in Roman or Biblical studies that happened to be situated in the Red Sea. Both of these traditions, although thoroughly transformed over the last century, are still very much alive in Red Sea studies today, the difference now being that they feed into our understanding of the Red Sea, as much as, more than or in addition to studies of the classical or biblical past.

A SEA OF NATIONS

In the postcolonial period the Red Sea region became divided between eight countries, each with separate national archaeological traditions. Political borders would decide access and survey areas, and the ecclesiastical and imperial narratives that scholars had earlier been pursuing were replaced with national narratives, also with varying relevance to what had been going on in the distant past. With notable exceptions, such as the French–Ethiopian excava-

tions of Adulis in 1961–1962 (Anfray 1974) and the Saudi-Arabian Comprehensive Archaeological Survey program in 1976–1981 (Zarins 1980; Ingraham et al. 1981; Whalen 1981), most historical and archaeological interest focused on highlands and hinterlands, as the early states that had flourished in these regions were seen as precursors or as relevant national symbols for the modern nations that also had their main centres of power and population in these regions.

In some cases, emphasis on the archaeology of the Red Sea might have been perceived as promoting regionalism, and in many cases political conditions or security concerns would have complicated archaeology anyway. Clearly, it was legitimate to prioritize limited resources available for historical and archaeological studies for different purposes, but arguably this pushed the Red Sea even further into the background than before.

Parallel to this trend came the post-colonial turn away from diffusionism and evolutionary narratives within archaeology, and while this was perhaps a needed correction to earlier narratives based on slender evidence, it left little room to study the Red Sea as a contact zone within paradigms that emphasized to the point of insistence how different societies had developed on their own terms. After reading Manfred Raschke's rhetoric tour de force "New studies in Roman commerce with the East", a 90-page article with some

700 pages of endnotes (Raschke 1978), the reader is left with the impression that any movement of anything—goods people or ideas—would have happened more or less by accident.

This of course does not imply that important work was not published. Studies based on epigraphy and literary sources that have very much stood the test of time continued to come out (including, but not limited to Kirwan 1972; Kobishchanow and Michels 1979; Beeston 1980; Groom 1981; Desanges 1982; Hopkins 1983; Dihle 1984). There is also a considerable body of archaeological work, especially within Axumite or Ethiopian studies, and also in Arabian archaeology that had important implications for the study of the Red Sea although they were mostly situated in their national or regional contexts rather than in that of the Red Sea (examples include Chittick 1979; Zarins et al. 1980; Butzer 1981; Ingraham et al. 1981; Whalen et al. 1981; Whitcomb 1983; Munro-Hay 1989a; 1991).

AN EMERGING REGION

The scholarship, as described above, became the basis for renewed interest in the Red Sea in the mid 1980s. New studies of classical sources and of the limited archaeological evidence then available of Greek and Roman interest in the Red Sea were important in bringing classical archaeology back into the region, with a transnational, albeit Romanocentric perspective (Desanges 1982; Sidebotham 1986; Burstein 1995). Reopening topics and problems that had been very little discussed in classical studies since the interwar period, authors were now

able to draw on much better African and Arabian historiographies than their colonial-period predecessors, and also had the benefit of substantial epigraphic evidence that had not been available to 19th- and early 20th-century scholars of Roman contacts with the East. Two text editions proved extremely important, namely, Lionel Casson's edition and translation of *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (Casson 1989), and Stanley Burstein's translation of the preserved fragments of Agatharchides lost *On the Red Sea* (Burstein 1989). While

especially Casson's book also has an impressive topographic and historical commentary, the critical importance of these editions was that they made the works available to non-philologists. The translation of Agatharchides was the first since the Latin translation from 1855 (Müller 1855). The translation of the *Periplus* was the first with a parallel Greek text and a modern philological commentary. It replaced not so much George Huntingford's 1980 translation (Huntingford 1980), which was well received, but lacked the Greek text and an extensive commentary, but rather Wilfred Schoff's 1912 translation (Schoff 1912), that had perpetuated many textual errors and emendations that are now for good reasons considered unsound, and which commentary reflected the late 19th-century knowledge and Western perception of Arabia and Africa.

Since the 1990s, two engines have propelled historical and archaeological Red Sea studies. One consists of the many archaeological field projects, covering all coasts of the Red Sea,¹ and the other is made up of the numerous edited volumes from conferences and workshops, with

the eight Red Sea conferences under the auspices of the British Foundation for the Study of Arabia at the forefront.² The latter has served not so much as a venue for the dissemination of the former, which has mainly taken place in journals and reports, but as a forum for further discussion, utilisation and contextualisation of the data brought forth by the field projects. In my view, it is this combination of new archaeological data with venues for cross-disciplinary discussion that has facilitated the formation of Red Sea studies as a field in its own right, as a survey of the scholarship published in the reports of the first six Red-Sea conferences might illustrate.³

Below I have mostly left out contributions primarily presenting new historical, topographical, archaeological, ethnographic and environmental data (see Seland 2017), emphasising instead those that situate such data in a Red Sea context. At least three interrelated areas of scholarship that stand out: **Movement, travel and connectivity** is one, **People, places and infrastructure** another, and the third is **Natural resources and environment**.

1 An incomplete list of important projects directly addressing Red Sea archaeology includes Quseir al-Qadim (1978–1980), KSA Comprehensive Archaeological Survey (1976–1982), Aqaba/Aila (1986–1993), Berenike and the Eastern Desert (1994–2001, 2008–), Myos Hormos (1999–2003), Wadi Gawasis (2001–2011), Suakin (2002–2007), Adulis (2004–2005, 2011–), MARES (2008–2011), Marburg Nautical Red Sea Survey (2012–2013), al-'Ula–Red Sea Archaeological Survey (2013–), and Aynunah (2014–2020).

2 Volumes that directly address the Red Sea include (Agius et al. 2012; 2017; Blue et al. 2009; Boussac and Salles 2005; Lunde and Porter 2004; Starkey 2005a; Starkey, Starkey, and Wilkinson 2007). In addition, several edited volumes on the Indian Ocean contain relevant scholarship (Salles 1988; Begley and De Puma 1991; Boussac and Salles 1995; Reade 1996; Seland 2007b; Boussac, Salles, and Yon 2012).

3 Agius et al. 2012; 2017; Blue et al. 2009; Lunde and Porter 2004; Starkey 2005a; Starkey, Starkey, and Wilkinson 2007). The references below should be considered representative rather than exhaustive. The proceedings of Red Sea VII were not yet published at the time of writing.

MOVEMENT, TRAVEL, AND CONNECTIVITY

Oceans have long been considered as media of contact rather than as barriers, and this is of course the point of departure for any kind of historical study using the Red Sea as its frame of reference. Mediterranean and Indian Ocean studies have particularly strong scholarly traditions of taking the sea as the common denominator for its hinterlands (Braudel 1966; Chaudhuri 1990; Horden and Purcell 2000; Ray 2003; Horden 2005; Beaujard 2012; Broodbank 2015), but also the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans have served as units of analysis. The first monographs addressing the Red Sea in specific periods have already appeared (Power 2012a; Wick 2016), but studies of the region in the *longue durée*, inspired by the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean examples, are still largely lacking.

Nevertheless, a large share of the Red Sea scholarship has focused on various aspects of connectivity, such as:

- the extent and nature of contacts between Red Sea coasts (Curtis 2004; Keall 2004; Pankhurst 2004; Schmid and Studer 2007);
- itineraries used by traders, pilgrims, missionaries, armies, and other travellers

(Curtis 2004; Facey 2005; Starkey 2005b; Seland 2009; W. Ward 2009);

- trading and navigation patterns within the Red Sea, and how did they relate to the neighbouring systems in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean (Facey 2004; Manzo 2005; Plisson 2005; Tomber 2007; Cooper 2009; De Romanis 2009; Power 2009; 2012b; Shatzmiller 2009);
- the kinds of vessels plied and the implications of this on the previous aspects (Taylor 2007; Weismann 2007; Whitewright 2007; 2012; Sidebotham 2008; Blue, Hill, and Thomas 2012; C. Ward 2012; Kotarba-Morley 2017).

The results of these investigations have largely dispelled three notions left from colonial-period scholarship, namely

- that the Red Sea region was primarily a place to be passed while going somewhere else,
 - that the Red Sea was so hard and dangerous to navigate that it severely shaped and limited movement, and
 - that Red Sea connectivity primarily rested on outside interest and initiative.
- These have been demonstrated to represent only part of the story of a sea that was deeply interconnected with the outside world throughout most of its history.

PEOPLES, PLACES, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Much archaeological work has focused on the physical infrastructure of the early Red Sea contacts. Major ports have been excavated at Adulis, Suakin, Berenike, Myos Hormos, Aylah and Aynuna, and numerous landing-places and intermittent harbours have been lo-

cated (Fattovich 2005; Peacock and Blue 2007; 2011; Seland 2007a; W. Ward 2007; Damgaard 2009; Facey 2009; Parker 2009; Sidebotham 2009; 2011; Bard and Fattovich 2011; Smith et al. 2012; Tallet 2012; Zazzaro 2013; 2017). Surveys have addressed the infrastructure connect-

ing the arid Red Sea coasts with their agricultural hinterlands (e.g., Cuvigny 2003; Raunig 2004; Sidebotham, Hense, and Nouwens 2008). These studies have supplied the bulk of the data that has allowed also for a much more comprehensive and nuanced understanding also of other aspects of early Red Sea history. Connectivity necessarily involves people moving between places. In line with a wider scholarly interest in the groups that Eric Wolf (1982) ironically called “the people without history”, that is, the groups encountered by Europeans from the early modern period onwards, many studies have addressed the group identity of people living along the Red Sea shores (Barnard 2005; Kitchen 2005; Power 2007; Thomas 2007; Nalesini 2009; Durand 2012; Manzo 2012), and of those engaging in maritime activities, such as trade, navigation and fishing

(Sidebotham 2004; van der Veen 2004; Tomber 2005; Blench 2012). By highlighting local agency this has played down the earlier emphasis on outside, imperial engagement in the region. That said, people with Greek and Roman cultural backgrounds were active in the Red Sea for a combined period of some nine centuries and should not be considered outsiders through most of that period. Hinterland interest, e.g., from the Nile Valley, the highlands of Yemen and Eritrea/Ethiopia, and the Hejaz, in the resources offered by the sea has been an important motivation for coastal presence and maritime activities throughout history. Nevertheless, studies of maritime communities have been critical in establishing the region as a field of study in its own, rather than an appendix to national and imperial historiographies.

NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT

The historical significance of the natural environment of the Red Sea has been in focus at all the Red Sea conferences (see also Rasul and Stewart 2015). Topography, navigational hazards, and wind regimes have been recurrent topics in discussions on navigation. Geoarchaeological, archaeobotanical and archeozoological studies have been part of excavation projects, and have contributed greatly towards our understanding of the traffic in biological substances as well as of populations and their subsistence on the Red Sea rim (van der Veen 2004; Cappers 2006; Wild and Wild 2007; Handley 2011; van

der Veen, Cox, and Morales 2011). Arguably, there is still room for better integration of data from the natural sciences in the archaeological and historical narratives of the Red Sea. To name a few examples, studies of mining and metallurgy, well documented along all of the coasts of the Red Sea, and activities often though not necessarily related to trade, have rarely been seen in a maritime perspective. The influence of sea level- and climate change on human activities in the Red Sea has hardly been addressed, and the significance of maritime resources also remains understudied.

CHALLENGES

Most studies of the Red Sea address connectivity either as topic or as justification. While certainly important, should connectivity necessarily be taken for granted? In the long run, different regions around the Red Sea seem to connect, disconnect and reconnect from the maritime network. Axes of commercial contact and cultural influence seem to alternate between the North–South and East–West axes (Seland 2017).

Some coasts, however, seem less touched than others by their maritime hinterlands over long periods of time. To name but two examples, the coasts of present-day Sudan and Saudi Arabia seem to be less integrated in the Red Sea networks in the pre-Islamic period than they become in the early Islamic period, which witnessed the rise of important centres of trade and pilgrimage in the Hejaz as well as the establishment of a series of ports along the coast of Sudan (Mayerson 1996; Power 2008; Damgaard 2011). Undoubtedly, this lack of evidence from the preceding period can, to some extent, be ascribed to under-exploration, and considerable evidence from Saudi Arabia is starting to come to light (Pedersen 2015). Even so ports, harbours and anchorages might not resemble the permanent and partly monumental infrastructure found in once Roman ports and in Adulis. Ethnographic evidence as well as historical sources point to bays, *khors* (inlets) and sheltered lagoons being used as mooring-places for ships stopping at night and some of these can probably be identified through littoral and underwater surveys. Similarly, overland

routes to hinterland centres might not resemble the pattern from Roman Egypt with expensive infrastructure in the form of fortified stations and wells, which depended on a specific political situation, where activities were initiated by hinterland agents without or with only limited cooperation of the local populations. GIS cost-path analyses as well as ethnographic accounts and studies of the availability of water along different itineraries might shed more light on this.

Even if more evidence of connectivity might be found by looking through different lenses and in new places, there could also be periods and situations where hinterland as well as littoral populations saw little purpose in engaging with maritime networks, and when outsiders saw few reasons to visit certain coasts. All the more necessity to continue investigations into Red Sea populations and maritime communities. Life on the Red Sea coast may not always have had very much to do with long distance commerce. Evidence of local settlement and subsistence, including fisheries, agri- and horticulture, short-distance connectivity, island-life, and piracy would certainly refine our understanding of the early Red Sea communities. Here the integration of data on climate change, soil archaeology, genetics and archaeobotany could have the potential both to challenge and to reinforce paradigms as, arguably, in the case of the results of genetic studies conducted by the SEALINKS project with samples from sites in East Africa (e.g., Boivin and Fuller 2009; Boivin, Fuller, and Crowther 2012).

The first sentence of the first chapter in William Facey's report of the first Red Sea project describes the Red Sea as "a sea on the way to somewhere else" (Facey 2004: 7). Justified at that time, at least as a description of the state of the art, the coming of age of Red Sea studies has certainly demonstrated this to be only one of

the stories that can be told about the region. Over the last three decades Red Sea studies have emerged as a field spanning across disciplines as well as chronological periods. The impressive amount and quality of archaeological work, combined with venues for discussion and publication, have been instrumental in this.

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