

Before/After

Abandonment, Collapse, and
Transformation in the Roman and Late
Antique World

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The Abandonment of Myos Hormos

Dario Nappo¹

The town of Myos Hormos² was a prominent port in the Red Sea basin, engaged in the international maritime trade connecting the Mediterranean World with India and Arabia. First century writers on Roman rule over Egypt all recognise the important role of the port. Strabo writes about the town several times, first defining its geographical location:

“Next is Myos Hormos, which is also called Aphrodites Hormos; it is a large harbour with an oblique entrance. In front are three islands; two are covered with olive trees, and one (the third) is less shaded with trees, and abounds with guinea-fowls (Strab. 16. 4. 5)”.

Strabo later places Myos Hormos in context with another port on the Red Sea, Berenike, in order to clarify the importance of both cities to the trade network in the area:

“Not far from Berenike is Myos Hormos, a city with a naval station for vessels which navigate this sea; at no great distance from Coptos is the city of Apollo, so that two cities are the boundaries of the isthmus, one on each side. But at present Coptos and Myos Hormos are in repute, and they are frequented (Strab. 17. 1. 45)”.

Strabo’s most famous reference to Myos Hormos remains his comparison between the volume of trade passing through it in Roman times, and the levels recorded during the age of the Ptolemies, the previous rulers of Egypt:

“I was with Gallus at the time he was prefect of Egypt, and accompanied him as far as Syene and the frontiers of Ethiopia, and I found that about one hundred and twenty ships sail from Myos Hormos *to India*, although, in the time of the Ptolemies, scarcely any one would venture on this voyage and the commerce with the Indies (Strab. 2.5.12)”

Roughly a century later than Strabo, the anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Red Sea* appears to have shared Strabo’s opinion regarding the importance to international trade of the two Egyptian ports:

“Of the designated harbours of the Erythrean Sea and the ports of trade on it, first comes Egypt’s port of Myos Hormos and, beyond it, after a sail of 1800 stades to the right, Berenike. The ports of both are bays of the Red Sea on the edge of Egypt (PME 1)”.

The history of Myos Hormos dates back to the Ptolemaic period (Diod. Sic. 3.39.1-2; Strab. 16.4.5). Most scholars agree a dating of the foundation of the town to the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283 to 246 BCE), despite the absence of literary references and a dearth of archaeological evidence to endorse such a claim.³

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² On the etymology of the name, see De Romanis 1996, 147-150.

³ See Tarn 1929, 22; Sidebotham 1986, 2-3; Peacock 1993, 226. Whitcomb 1996, 759-761 has suggested that the Ptolemaic

