

## **ETHNOGRAPHICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL INFORMATION IN THE PERIPLUS MARIS ERYTHRAE**

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*Periplus Maris Erythrae* or *the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* is a treatise that bears witness to the thriving trade activities between the East and the West in its contemporary times. After much controversy scholars now seem to have agreed that this treatise was compiled somewhere circa mid first century AD by an anonymous author. Yet the scholars remain divided as to the purpose of its compilation. When some scholars consider this to be a handbook for sailors/ traders, its low circulation has led some others to consider this to be an official or a state document. However, our intention here is to examine the kind of ethnographical and anthropological information that is filtered through the extant text in order to gain a better knowledge on the commercial pursuits of these localities and also to examine the way the trade activities affected the lives of their inhabitants. Such an analysis may even lead to the identification of the purpose of the author in compiling this work.

The journey noted in this text begins at the Mussel harbor near Alexandria and continues in three directions with Rhapta (in east Africa), Ganges (in east India) and Thinae (China) as the respective destinations, yet, our study focuses only on the Red Sea area due to constraints of time. The first 32 paragraphs (out of the total 66 paragraphs) in the text *the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, relevant secondary sources and maps will be used in this study when necessary.

In the Red Sea area, the author refers to different ethnic groups namely the Axumites, Berbers, Nabateans, Homerites and Sabaites. Apart from these groups the author also speaks of fish-eaters who live in scattered caves in the narrow valleys along the shore below Berenice in Berbers land. It is likely that the author examines the tribes who live along and in nearby areas of these market towns and harbours together with their political setup, because he saw a link between the commercial activities and the socio-cultural practices of these communities. Moreover, in the author's records of the articles of trade which were both imported in to and exported out of a particular harbor or a market town in detail, he also focuses on the benefits such information could bring to the one who commissioned the trade activities of this region, namely Augustus Caesar. The evidence informs us that Augustus Caesar tried to overcome all obstacles that hindered the progress of the Roman trade with the East. Thus information of the ethnic groups in the territory may help the traders and naturally the government of Rome in their commercial pursuits.

Although it is hard to arrive at a general conclusion just by examining a part of the text, the attention that the author pays to the ethnographical and anthropological details of the area and the articles of trade in these localities suggests that the aim of the author was to benefit the traders and the authority that commissioned such activities, and the latter was the Roman emperor. Accordingly, as expected, these observations help us to argue that the author compiled this text subsequent to a request from the emperor, in order to maximize trading profits.