



**HAL**  
open science

## Quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit : the mare Rubrum as a frontier of the Roman Empire

Pierre Schneider

► **To cite this version:**

Pierre Schneider. Quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit : the mare Rubrum as a frontier of the Roman Empire. *KLIO*, 2015, 97 (1), pp.135-156. 10.1515/klio-2015-0005 . halshs-03629664

**HAL Id: halshs-03629664**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03629664>**

Submitted on 4 Apr 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit : the mare Rubrum as a frontier of the Roman Empire**

Summary: This article deals with an excerpt from Tacitus' *Annals* which has often been commented on. The famous account of Germanicus' Egyptian tour contains a puzzling remark about *Syene* (*claustra olim Romani imperii quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit*) : the adverb *nunc* refers in an allusive way to a recent expansion of the Roman Empire. Several scholars have rightly pointed to the Nabataean kingdom, a conclusion which seems to be the best one. The *mare Rubrum* therefore was not seen by Tacitus and his public as a limit of Roman Egypt. In contrast, from Tacitus' point of view, it is the southern part of Arabia, bordered by the *mare Rubrum*, that became the new frontier of the Roman Empire after the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom. How this event was considered as a major expansion of the *imperium Romanum* is examined in the last section of the present paper.

The present article is an expanded version of a talk delivered at Stanford University (Department of Classics) in 2013. I thank Grant Parker and Christopher Krebs for their warm welcome and suggestive comments.

Pierre Schneider : Université d'Artois (Arras) – Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée (Lyon – France); e-mail: pierre.schneider@mom.fr

In 17 AD, Germanicus, Tiberius' adopted son, was sent to Asia with the *imperium proconsulare majus*. Having put an end to some disorders in the East, he headed to Alexandria. In the spring of 19 AD, he travelled to Egypt, where he went on a sightseeing trip. During this Egyptian "grand tour" Germanicus sailed up the Nile from Canopus and Alexandria as far as Memphis and Thebes, admiring the most praised wonders of Egypt : "... the stone image of Memnon, which, when struck by the sun's rays, gives out the sound of a human voice; the Pyramids, rising up like mountains amid almost impassable wastes of shifting sand, raised by the emulation and vast wealth of kings. (...) He then came to *Elephantine* and *Syene*, formerly the limits of the Roman empire, which now extends to the 'Red Sea'" (*exim ventum Elephantinen ac Syenen, claustra olim Romani imperii quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit*)<sup>1</sup>. The adverb "formerly" means: "before Tacitus' time", and obviously : "at the time when Germanicus visited Egypt" ; in contrast, "now" means : "at the time when Tacitus was writing the *Annals*".

This laconic remark has yielded abundant commentaries, most of which focus on the historical fact alluded to by Tacitus : what event involving the *mare Rubrum* happened after Germanicus' visit ? This is, in fact, a key question, since the answer, whatever it may be, may give a clue to date the *Annals*. This article, however, does not aim to deal with a problem which has been addressed, investigated and, I think, solved by several brilliant scholars. The title of this paper, which owes much to Nicolet's remarkable study<sup>2</sup>, could just as well have been "Géographie et politique sous le règne de Trajan". Indeed, Tacitus' sentence offers an interesting case study to examine how ideology and propaganda could shape the representation of space, and to observe the discrepancies between the geographical

---

<sup>1</sup> Tac. ann. 2, 61 (transl. A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb). Sir Ronald Syme (R. Syme, Tacitus, Oxford 1958, vol. 2, 470) translates as follows : "...once the extreme bounds of Rome's empire, which now reaches to the Indian Ocean." For other occurrences of the adverb *nunc* pointing to an alteration in empires' boundaries, see, eg., Curt. 5,7,9; 6,2,13. Greek authors employed *vuv* in the same way: see below p.8 (Cassius Dio) and n. 66 (Strabo).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nicolet, L'inventaire du monde. Géographie et politique aux origines de l'Empire romain, Paris 1988 (see, in particular, the chapters 1 [L'annonce de la conquête du monde : les *Res Gestae* d'Auguste] ; 2 [Symbolisme et allégories de la conquête du monde : Pompée, César, Auguste] ; 3 [Erreurs et vérités : les connaissances géographiques du temps]).

and political conceptions of space. However, before investigating the matter, let us recall how modern historians have solved the historical enigma which Tacitus left to posterity.

### 1. Which part of the *mare Rubrum* was incorporated into the *imperium Romanum* after 19 AD ?

The simplified map of the south-eastern boundary of the *imperium Romanum* in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD appended to this article will help to put Tacitus' comment in its geographical and historical context : when Germanicus toured Egypt in 19 AD, he says, the Roman border was located at *Syene* ; but later (= *nunc*), when he was composing the *Annals* (say in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) the *mare Rubrum* had become the new boundary of the Roman Empire in this part of the inhabited world. To quote Goodyear: "And what does (*imperium*) *patescit ad* denote ? Presumably the present extent of direct Roman control, as distinct from mere influence, in other words the area of a province or provinces (...)The frontier had been extended."<sup>3</sup> This means that Rome had managed to take control of a country bordered by the *mare Rubrum*.

Unfortunately, the name *mare Rubrum* (Red Sea) had several meanings in Greco-Roman times. Broadly, *mare Rubrum* – translated from the Greek name *Erythra thalassa* – would refer to three maritime areas, like its Greek equivalent.

The sea lying between East Africa and India was commonly called *mare Rubrum* : it roughly corresponds to our Western Indian Ocean – an alternative name was "Indian sea"<sup>4</sup>. Instead of producing a series of examples, it suffices to mention the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, whose title is particularly relevant to the point. As such, the name *mare Rubrum* may refer to the easternmost part of the ocean, in prose as well as in poetry, as shown by the following two examples : "... Alexander, in the thirteen years of his reign, first brought under his sway all the well-nigh boundless empire that had belonged to the Persians, and then traversed Arabia and India, where the *mare Rubrum* embraces the uttermost ends of the earth (... *Arabas hinc Indiamque, qua terrarum ultimos fines Rubrum mare amplectitur, peragravit*)<sup>5</sup>"; "or thou (*sc. Liber Pater*) art rushing in mad and flaring triumph by swelling Ganges and the farthest confines of red *Tethys* and the Eastern lands etc. (... *aut tumidum Gangen aut claustra novissima Rubrae /Tethyos Eoasque domos flagrante triumpho / perfuris* ...)"<sup>6</sup>.

The *Arabicus sinus* / Ἀράβιος κόλπος (what we call today the Red Sea) and the *Persicus sinus* / Περσικός κόλπος (*viz.* the Arab-Persian Gulf) were both regarded as parts of the *mare Rubrum*, being formed by the penetration of this body of water into the Asian land mass<sup>7</sup>. As a consequence, they were commonly designated by the name *mare Rubrum* (or *Erythra thalassa* in Greek sources). As to the former, see, among many examples, Pliny the Elder or Strabo: (i) "Travellers set sail from India on the return voyage at the beginning of the Egyptian month *Tybis*, which is our December (...).They set sail from India with a southeast wind, and after entering the *mare Rubrum*<sup>8</sup>, continue the voyage with a south-west or south wind (*navigant autem ex India vento volturmo et, cum intravere Rubrum mare, Africo vel austro*)" ; (ii) "There is another canal also, which empties itself into the Red Sea, or Arabian Gulf (εἰς τὴν Ἐρυθρὰν καὶ τὸν Ἀράβιον κόλπον), near the city Arsinoë, which some call Cleopatra."<sup>9</sup>

Numerous examples show that the name *mare Rubrum* / *Erythra thalassa* applied to the Arab-Persian Gulf, eg., : (i) "The Persians have always lived on the shore of the *mare Rubrum*, which is the reason why it is called the Persian Gulf (*Persae Rubrum mare semper accollere, propter quod is sinus Persicus vocatur*)"; (ii) "Finally they [*sc.* the Tigris and Euphrates] flow across Babylonia up to the *mare*

<sup>3</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* (volume 2: *Annals* 1.55-81 and *Annals* 2), transl. and comment. by F. R. D. Goodyear, Cambridge 1981, 391.

<sup>4</sup> Cf., eg., Plin. nat. 2,56 ; Plut. Comp. Nic. et Crassi 2,7.

<sup>5</sup> Liv. 45,9,5-6 (transl. A. C. Schlesinger); also see Liv. 42,52,14.

<sup>6</sup> Stat. Theb. 4,387-389 (transl. J. H. Mozley).

<sup>7</sup> See, eg., Mela 3,72 (*Rubrum mare Graeci ... Erythran thalassan appellat. (...) bis inrumpit, duosque iterum sinus aperuit*) ; Dion. Per. 38-40 & 51-53.

<sup>8</sup> To avoid confusions the names *mare Rubrum* / *Erythra thalassa* are not translated; I will refer to the name "Red Sea" only in its current sense.

<sup>9</sup> Plin. nat. 6,106 (transl. H. Rackham); Strabo, 17,1,25 (transl. H. C. Hamilton). Also see Plin. nat. 2,183 (*Ptolemaide oppido, quod in margine Rubri maris ad primos elephantorum venatus conditum est*).

*Rubrum*" (*tandem per Babyloniorum fines in Rubrum mare inrumpunt*)<sup>10</sup>. There seems to be no difference between these designations, which explains why more than one author equally employs *Arabicus* (or *Persicus*) *sinus* and *mare Rubrum*.<sup>11</sup>.

If ancient documents give no clue, which is the case with the passage in question<sup>12</sup>, the name *mare Rubrum* may become a puzzle to the modern historian. Indeed, because of its fundamental ambiguity<sup>13</sup>, this passage has been endlessly interpreted in different ways<sup>14</sup>. But two interpretations stand out from the rest, for these only are linked to a precise historical event (the other ones are summarized below, n. 23).

- a) In 113 AD Trajan waged a war against the Parthian empire, and two years later he conquered Mesopotamia. This region was incorporated in the Roman Empire as a province in 115 (*Mesopotamia*). One year later, in 116, Trajan and his armies headed further south. He reached the bottom of the Arab-Persian Gulf (= *mare Rubrum*) which was a remarkable military success. The king of *Mesenia* (or *Characene*, a kingdom whose capital city was *Spasinou*), Attambelos V, surrendered to Trajan, who then created the province of *Assyria*. However, the whole territory was recovered by the Parthians in 117, and the death of Trajan in the same year put an end to the imperialistic ambitions of the *optimus Princeps*. This interpretation of *quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit* was first suggested by the great humanist Justus Lipsius, on the basis of a passage from Eutropius' *Breviarum* (see below, n. 86), and was defended by strong supporters<sup>15</sup>. This was, however, to be challenged. In particular, O. Clason interpreted *mare Rubrum* as Red Sea (in its modern sense)<sup>16</sup>. Later J. Beaujeu argued that Tacitus would hardly refer to an achievement which actually ended in a failure<sup>17</sup>.
- b) An alternative option is the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom, whose south-western part is bordered by the north-east extremity of the *mare Rubrum* (= our Red Sea), i.e. the Gulf of Aqaba (see below). This event took place in 106 AD, after the death of the Nabataean king Rabbel II (105 AD). The annexation was immediately followed by the creation of the province of *Arabia*, and the establishment of the Roman administration<sup>18</sup>. This interpretation was first suggested by J. Aspach in 1896<sup>19</sup>. Later G. Bowersock offered fresh and good arguments in favour of this theory which definitely seems to be the less debatable. His conclusions are based on an inscription found in Saudi Arabia: "The problem has long seemed to me to be resolved decisively in favor of

<sup>10</sup> Plin. nat. 6,115 (transl. H. Rackham) ; Curt. 5,1,15. ). Also see the inscription quoted below, n. 62.

<sup>11</sup> See, eg., Plin. nat. 2,173 (... *ut centum quindecim milibus passuum Arabicus sinus distet ab Aegyptio mari* ...); Plin. nat. 6,124; Strab. 11,13,9; 17,1,6.

<sup>12</sup> "The two other references to *mare Rubrum* in the extant works of Tacitus provide no help" (M. M. Sage, Tacitus' Historical Works: a Survey and Appraisal", in: ANRW II.33.2, 1990, 851-1030, 956).

<sup>13</sup> One may hardly be convinced by K. Meister, Zur Datierung der Annalen des Tacitus und zur Geschichte der Provinz Aegypten, *Eranos* 46, 1948, 94-122, 98, who says: "Es darf überhaupt angenommen werden, dass die Römer, wenn sie den Namen *Rubrum mare* oder seine poetischen Umschreibungen hörten, in erster Linie an das heutige 'Rote Meer' gedacht haben". See J. Beaujeu, *Le mare Rubrum de Tacite et le problème de la chronologie des Annales*, REL 38,1960, 200-235, 209-210.

<sup>14</sup> For an excellent presentation of the controversy, see S. Borzák, s. v. P. Cornelius Tacitus, in: RE Suppl. XI, 1968, 467-469; Goodyear (n. 4), 390-393.

<sup>15</sup> Meister (n. 14) 94-95 ; R. P. Oliver, Did Tacitus finish the Annals, ICS 2, 1977, 289-314, 297, n. 29, who takes for granted that "the meaning of *Rubrum mare*" is "obvious". Also see Potter's – cautious – arguments in favour of this theory (D. S. Potter, The Inscriptions on the Bronze Herakles from Mesene : Vologeses IV's War with Rome and the Date of Tacitus' *Annales*, ZPE 88, 1991, 277-290, p. 287-290). Syme (n. 2) is well known to have favoured this theory with bright arguments.

<sup>16</sup> O. Clason, *De Taciti annalium aetate quaestiones geographicas ad mare Rubrum et Aegyptum maxime pertinentes interpretatus est* O. C., Rostock 1871 (*non vidi*).

<sup>17</sup> Beaujeu (n. 14) 211 : "Est-il vraisemblable que Tacite, ayant rédigé cette allusion triomphante pendant les quelques mois où l'Empire toucha le golfe Persique, ne l'ait pas effacée quand les précaires conquêtes de Trajan furent évacuées." See, however, Syme's ([n. 2] 471) counterargument : "Though the Roman armies retired to the western bank of the Euphrates, the next ruler for reasons of prestige could not, and did not, resign the claim to suzerainty, however slightly it might correspond with the reality."

<sup>18</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1983, 76-89 ; M. Sartre, *D'Alexandre à Zénobie. Histoire du Levant antique (4<sup>e</sup> s. av. J.-C. – 3<sup>e</sup> s. ap. J.-C.)*, Paris, 2001, 609-614, with references to the most important articles. Arabia was peaceably annexed. The reasons of the annexation remain unclear, however.

<sup>19</sup> Beaujeu (n. 14) 212 n. 5

interpreting *Rubrum mare* as what we know today as the Red Sea. Epigraphical evidence that turned up after the publication of Syme's Tacitus<sup>20</sup> has proved that the Roman province of Arabia, annexed in 106, actually extended along the coast of the Red Sea on the northwest side of the Saudi Arabian peninsula. Syme and virtually everyone else had formerly discounted the possibility of a province of such extent.<sup>21</sup> Bowersock's judgment is confirmed by further evidence and arguments which will appear in the third section of the present article<sup>22</sup>.

The historical problem having been solved, it is easier to grasp the meaning of Tacitus' observation: when Germanicus visited Egypt, the remotest border of the *imperium Romanum* in this part of the inhabited world was situated at the Egyptian city of *Syene*. In 106 AD, with the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom by Trajan and the creation of the province of *Arabia*, the Empire was expanded<sup>23</sup>, its new boundary being formed by the *mare Rubrum*: *exim ventum Elephantinen ac Syenen, claustra olim Romani imperii quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit*. This implies that, in Tacitus' view, the frontier of the Roman Empire had for the first time reached this body of water.

The reader at this stage is left with two geographical problems. First, considering that Egypt – with its ports lying on the Red Sea shore – was a part of the Roman Empire since 30 BC (*Aegyptum imperio populi Romani adiecta*<sup>24</sup>), the *mare Rubrum* was already the boundary of Rome in 19 AD<sup>25</sup>. Secondly, how could Tacitus affirm that the annexation of Arabia led to the expansion of the Roman Empire? As far as we know, the southernmost – inland – limit of the *Arabia provincia* was located as *Hegra* /

<sup>20</sup> G. W. Bowersock, The Greek-Nabataean bilingual inscription at Ruwwafa, Saudi Arabia, in J. Bingen - G. Cambier - G. Nachtergaele (eds.), *Le monde grec. Pensée, littérature, histoire, documents. Hommages à Claire Préaux*, Bruxelles 1975, 513-522, 518-519. Several years before, Beaujeu (n. 14) 222-225, adopted this solution as the best one. Also see . H. Volkmann, *Zur Datierung der Annalen des Tacitus*, Gymnasium 60, 1953, 236-239, 238-239; Sage (n. 13) 957), who argues that the first part of the *Annals* must have been composed before Armenia became a province (114 AD), and logically rejects the *mare Rubrum* (= *sinus Persicus*) option; Goodyear (n. 4) 392-393; R. Martin, *Tacitus*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1981, 247, n.16.

<sup>21</sup> G. W. Bowersock, Tacitus and the Province of Asia, in: T. J. Luce & A. J. Woodman (eds), *Tacitus and the Tacitean Tradition*, Princeton, 1993, 3-10, 4-5, 5. Bowersock rightly objects to Syme's view that the coastal part of Roman Arabia was small (Syme [n. 2] 768: "Virgil on Marcus Antonius (*Aen.* 8.686: *litore rubro*) would be enough to discount speculation about small tracts of the Red Sea coastland, whether Egyptian or Nabatean"). N.b.: the *Mesene*, the annexation of which supports Lipsius' theory, encompassed a very small part of the Arab-Persian Gulf.

<sup>22</sup> Three other interpretations are known to me. (i) Meister (n. 14) 113-116, argues that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, the Eastern desert between the right bank of the Nile and the Red Sea, and particularly the areas of *Berenice* and *Myos Hormos*, were incorporated in the administrative territory of Egypt. This assertion is allegedly proven by the disappearance of the *praefectura praesidiorum et montis Berenicidis* in the late 1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD, and the "Neueinrichtung des Gaues Berenike" in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. Volkmann (n. 21) and K. Wellesley, *The date of composition of Ann. II*, *RhM* 98, 1955, 135-149, have proven Meister wrong: "it seems reasonable to conclude that Roman Egypt reached the Red Sea, in theory from 30 BC, and in fact shortly afterwards, and that Tacitus has misled us in suggesting an extension of the frontier in this direction between AD 19 and the time at which he wrote *Annals II.*" (Wellesley 146). Sage (n. 13) 958 also objected to Meister's explanation, claiming that "the event is too minor for the emphatic nature of Tacitus' statement (also see Beaujeu [n. 14] 213; Syme [n. 2] 768: "an opinion less plausible"; Goodyear [n. 4] 392). (ii) E. Laube, *Die Abfassungszeit von Tacitus Annalen*, (Diss., Freie Universität Berlin, Philos. Fakult.) Berlin 1955, unpublished (*non vidi- known to me only from what Beaujeu reports*) has suggested a novel solution of this vexed question. He has written that the growth of commerce with India, following the discovery of the monsoon in the mid 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (sic), is the true Roman expansion in the *mare Rubrum*. Actually Rome's Eastern trade developed soon after the annexation of Egypt in 30 BC, which demolishes Laube's argument. In addition, as Beaujeu (n. 14) 214-215, rightly points out, "il est difficile d'admettre que Tacite ait eu en vue seulement une expansion commerciale, sans extension territoriale (...), le verbe *patescere* s'appliquant à une extension territoriale, chez Tacite, lorsqu'il a pour sujet un nom de pays." (J. Beaujeu has been followed by Sage [n. 13] 958). The final word goes to Syme [n. 2] 768: "... it is all misconception. The context and the colour of the Tacitean text seem to have been neglected." (iii) J. Desanges, *Arabes et Arabie en terre d'Afrique*, in: T. Fahd (ed.), *L'Arabie préislamique et son environnement historique et culturel. Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg, 24-27 juin 1987*, Leiden 1989, 413-429, 426-427: "A la différence de G. Bowersock, nous ne croyons donc pas que la remarque de Tacite soit une allusion précise à l'annexion de la Nabatène. Sans doute Tacite avait-il (...) une vision globale d'une présence arabe qui s'étendait de Syène à Petra, et entendait-il seulement dire que sur ces vastes espaces enserrant la mer Rouge, l'*imperium Romanum* était désormais solidement établi."

<sup>23</sup> Meister (n. 14) wrongly thought that the Roman Empire expanded from *Syene*. That is why he logically rejected the two other interpretations. As Volkmann (n. 21) 237, rightly says in his thorough critical review of Meister's theory, "Tacitus nicht von den *claustra Aegypti*, sondern von den *claustra Romani imperii* spricht".

<sup>24</sup> *Res Gest. Div. Aug. 27* (cf. also the Egyptian obelisk bearing the inscription: *Aegyptio in potestatem populi Romani redacta*, which had been erected in Rome [Nicolet [n. 3] 30]).

<sup>25</sup> Beaujeu (n. 14) 206: "L'Empire touchait à la mer Rouge depuis que la conquête de l'Égypte lui en avait ouvert l'accès, en 29 av. J.-C." This geographical fact provided a good argument to those who rejected the equation *mare Rubrum* = Red Sea (Beaujeu 213).



Mada'in Saleh, which is not as remote in latitude as *Syene*<sup>26</sup>. Was Tacitus completely wrong, or at least dramatically inaccurate? Some have thought so: "It seems reasonable to conclude that Roman Egypt reached the Red Sea, in theory from 30 BC, and in fact shortly afterwards, and that Tacitus has misled us in suggesting an extension of the frontier in this direction between AD 19 and the time at which he wrote *Annals* II. (...) Tacitus' rather sketchy knowledge of Egyptian and Arabian topography has led him to suppose that in that year (i.e. 106 AD) the Roman Empire for the first time reached the Red Sea"<sup>27</sup>. I believe, on the contrary, that this text is clear and coherent<sup>28</sup>. The present article aims to prove this.

## 2. *Aegyptus* and the *mare Rubrum*

To sum up the first problem: Tacitus claims that the Roman Empire did not reach the *mare Rubrum* until Arabia was annexed in 106 AD, which brings us to the conclusion that the modern Red Sea was neither the boundary of the "province" of Egypt, nor that of the *imperium Romanum*. In reality this statement reflects a common geographical conception of Egypt: basically ancient Egypt covered only the Nile valley and the Delta. This conception goes back to the Ionian geography, as this passage quoted from Herodotus shows: "Beyond and above *Heliopolis*, Egypt is a narrow land. For it is bounded on the one side by the mountains of Arabia, which run north to south, (...); on the side of Libya, Egypt is bounded by another range of rocky mountains."<sup>29</sup> Later on, Strabo, Pliny the Elder and other authorities shared the same conception. Thus their geographical accounts of Egypt do not deal with the Red Sea coastal area, which was regarded as the domain of various tribes, and particularly of the Trog(l)odytes<sup>30</sup>. That is why in Greek and Roman chorography, Egypt and *Trogodytice* were separately treated<sup>31</sup>.

One could object, however, that Tacitus lived in a period when the Eastern trade of Rome flourished. The bulk of exotic goods reached the Mediterranean world via the Egyptian gates of the Indian Ocean trade, that is to say ports lying on the Red Sea coast, such as *Myos Hormos* and *Berenice*. These harbours, founded in Ptolemaic times mainly for trade purposes, fell under the power of Rome as soon as Egypt was incorporated into the Empire<sup>32</sup>. Both were connected to the Nile valley (mostly to the city of Coptos) by several tracks crossing the Eastern desert. Since the Roman annexation of Egypt in 30 BC, an increasing flow of Indian, Arabian and east African commodities (spices, aromatics, ivory, gemstones, pearls *etc.*) was imported into the Mediterranean markets through these places. Thus it would be reasonable to assume that the Red Sea coast, being used for commerce purposes by Rome, had been included in Roman Egypt. Here it is worth recalling this significant passage of Strabo's *Geography*: "The ancients gave the name of Egypt to that country only which was inhabited and watered by the Nile, and the extent they assigned to it was from the neighbourhood of *Syene* to the [Mediterranean] sea. But later writers [= Hellenistic chorography?], to the present time, have included

<sup>26</sup> These "difficultés géographiques" (Beaujeu [n. 14] 222) have been really discussed only by Meister (n. 14) and Beaujeu. The southernmost place where the Roman army was garrisoned is *Hegra* / Mada'in Saleh, in the hinterland (Sartre [n. 19] 621; Bowersock [n. 21]). Latitude of Mada'in Saleh: 26° 47' N; latitude of Aswan: 24° 05' N (*n.b.*: the approximate latitude of the Euphrates' mouth [*Characene*] is 30°N).

<sup>27</sup> Wellesley (n. 23) 146-147.

<sup>28</sup> *Contra*, Beaujeu (n. 14) 208: "Faute de pouvoir prendre ce texte à la lettre, il reste à l'interpréter, c'est-à-dire à déterminer ce que l'auteur avait en vue, et à dégager soit le sens caché de son affirmation apparemment injustifiable, soit les raisons qui expliquent son erreur, si erreur il y a."

<sup>29</sup> Hdt. 2,8 (ἀπὸ δὲ Ἡλίου πόλιος ἄνω ἰόντι στενὴ ἐστὶ Αἴγυπτος · τῇ μὲν γὰρ τῆς Ἀραβίης ὄρος παρατέταται, φέρον ἀπὸ ἄρκτου πρὸς μεσαμβρίην τε καὶ νότον (...). Τὸ δὲ πρὸς Λιβύης τῆς Αἰγύπτου ὄρος ἄλλο πέτρινον τείνει – transl. A.D. Goodley). Egypt comprises also the Nile Delta (Hdt. 2, 5-7).

<sup>30</sup> See, eg., Plin. nat. 6,164 (... *Artemidorus Arabiae latere* |XVII| Ἰ, *Trogodytice, vero* |XI| LXXXVII *D p. Ptol* <e> *maida usque* ...); Curt. 4,7,18 (... *Trogodytis cognomen est; horum regio usque ad Rubrum mare*); Plut. Defect. Or. 2. This fact has been rightly stressed by Meister (n. 14) 401: "Er (sc. Strabo) betrachtet das Troglodytenland, das sich westlich von Ägypten und Äthiopien längs der Küste des Arabischen Golfes erstreckte, nicht als Teil, sondern als Nachbarland von Ägypten."

<sup>31</sup> See, in particular: (i) *Strabo*: Egypt = 17,1 (*in extenso*); the west side of the Red Sea = 16,4,1-13. (ii) *Pliny*: Egypt = 5,48-64; the west side of the R. S. = 6,163-176. (iii) *Mela*: Egypt = 1,49-60; the west side of the R. S. = 3,80-81. Note that the Troglodyte country is included by some authorities in Arabia (eg., Str., loc. cit.; Plin. nat. 6.168).

<sup>32</sup> About the Red Sea ports of trade, see G. K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade. International Commerce and Imperial Policy* (31 BC-AD 305), London-New York 2001, 38-45; about the desert roads, id. 45-47; about Coptos, id. 47-51.

on the eastern side almost all the tract between the Arabian Gulf and the Nile (the Aethiopians however do not make much use of the *Erythra thalatta*<sup>33</sup>). Must this – actually isolated – text be regarded as a decisive piece of evidence to establish that the Egyptian *mare Rubrum* was, contrary to Tacitus' words, the boundary of Rome? In my opinion, such is not the case.

In the prevalent Greco-Roman representation of space, *Myos Hormos* and *Berenice* were actually regarded as "excrecences", or "offshoots" protruding from, or very intimately connected to the Nile Valley<sup>34</sup>. The real centres of the Eastern trade of Rome were, in fact, *Coptus / Koptos* [today's Qift] and above all Alexandria, rather than those places. Pliny the Elder, eg., points out: "(...) notable, as is Coptos, the market near the Nile for Indian and Arabian goods (*Coptos, Indicarum Arabicarumque mercium Nilo proximum emporium*); to take another example, Aelius Aristide writes: "At Coptos, the Indian and Arabian trading center, it (= the Nile) [rises] twenty-one cubits."<sup>35</sup>. Interestingly Strabo claims that *Berenikê* lies at the end of an "isthmus" which begins at Coptos, this "isthmus" being an extension of the Nile valley towards the Red Sea shore<sup>36</sup>. Thus, despite the presence of the Roman administration in the coastal area<sup>37</sup>, the true core of Roman Egypt remained the Nile valley. To put it in other words, even if Rome controlled the above mentioned places, which were harbours rather than *emporium*, the *mare Rubrum* was, to some extent, disconnected from the Egyptian territory. As a consequence, *Myos Hormos* and *Berenike* were not important enough to form the boundary of the Empire in this region<sup>38</sup>. As a matter of fact, this conclusion is, as I think, reinforced by a further argument.

The Eastern Egyptian desert was occupied by several tribes, as we are told by Strabo: "The lower parts of the country towards the *Erythra thalatta* (= the Arabian Gulf) along the Nile are occupied by *Megabaroï* and *Blemmyes*, who are subjects to the Ethiopians, and border upon the Egyptians; about the sea are *Trôglodytai*.<sup>39</sup>" Strabo adds: "These are nomads, and not numerous nor warlike, but accounted so by the ancients, because frequently, like robbers, they attacked defenceless persons."<sup>40</sup> There is no doubt that this passage reflects Roman ideas of nomadic tribes<sup>41</sup>. Such peoples had to be controlled by Rome; in particular, they had to be prevented from attacking merchants in the desert

<sup>33</sup> Strab. 17,1,5 : οἱ μὲν οὖν ἀρχαῖοι τὸ οἰκούμενον αὐτὸ καὶ ποτιζόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ Νείλου μόνον Αἴγυπτον ἐκάλουν ἀπὸ τῶν περὶ Συήνην τόπων ἀρξάμενοι μέχρι τῆς θαλάττης, οἱ δ' ὕστερον μέχρι νῦν προσέλαβον ἐκ μὲν τῶν πρὸς ἔω μερῶν (τὰ μεταξὺ τοῦ Ἀραβίου κόλπου καὶ τοῦ Νείλου σχεδὸν τι πάντα (οἱ δ' Αἰθίοπες οὐ πάνυ χρῶνται τῇ Ἐρυθρᾷ θαλάττῃ). (trans. H. C. Hamilton). As far as I understand, Strabo wants to say that indigenous tribes called "Ethiopians" did not really take part in long distance commerce: only the Greeks, followed by the Romans were able to make use the *Erythra thalassa*. In fact *Adoulis*, a port gradually controlled by Axum, had not yet emerged as a major place of the Indian Ocean traffic. But was Strabo really referring to the *Aithiopes* living in modern Eritrea and Ethiopia (eg., Diod. 3,18,5 = Agatharch. Erythr. 5,41)? I rather think that he alludes to the "Ethiopian" neighbours of Egypt (Blemmyes, Troglodytes etc. - see Strab. 17,1,53 : λοιπὰ δὲ τὰ πρὸς νότον Τρωγλοδύται {καὶ} Βλέμμυες καὶ Νούβαι καὶ Μεγάβαροι οἱ ὑπὲρ Συήνης Αἰθίοπες), who did not engage much in this trade.

<sup>34</sup> See, eg., Plin. nat. 6.168 : *Berenice oppidum, matris Philadelphi nomine, ad quod iter a Copto diximus*.

<sup>35</sup> Plin. nat. 5, 60 (trans. H. Rackham) ; Aristeid. Aiguptios 115 (transl. C. A. Behr). Also see Str. (n. 36); Lucan. 10,313-315; Dion Chrys. 32,36; Jos. b.Jud. 4.608 [4.10.5]; Stat. Theb. 1.263-265.

<sup>36</sup> Strab. 17,1,45 : "Then follows the isthmus, extending to the Red Sea near Berenice, which has no harbour, but good landing-places, because the isthmus is conveniently situated (ἐντεῦθεν ἐστὶν ἰσθμὸς εἰς τὴν Ἐρυθρὰν κατὰ πόλιν Βερενίκην, ἀλίμενον μὲν τῇ δ' εὐκαιρία τοῦ ἰσθμοῦ καταγωγὰς ἐπιτηδείους ἔχουσαν). Philadelphus is said to be the first person that opened, by means of his army, this road, which had no supply of water, and to have provided stations. This he did because the navigation of the Red Sea was difficult, particularly to those who set out from the recess of the bay. Experience showed the great utility of this plan, and at present all the Indian, Arabian, and such Ethiopian merchandise as is imported by the Arabian Gulf is carried to Coptos, which is the mart for such commodities (ἐμπόριον τῶν τοιοῦτων φορτίων). Not far from Berenice is Myos Hormus, 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 (ὥστε καὶ αἱ διορίζουσαι τὸν ἰσθμὸν δύο πόλεις ἐκατέρωθεν εἰσιν)." (transl. H. C. Hamilton)

<sup>37</sup> See Wellesley (n. 23) 137-146 ; S. E. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Spice Route*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2011, 85-86.

<sup>38</sup> *N.b.* : we read in Pliny's encyclopaedia the name *Berenice urbs Troglodytarum* (Plin. nat. 2, 183).

<sup>39</sup> Strab. 17,1,2 (τὰ δὲ κατωτέρω ἐκατέρωθεν Μερῶς παρὰ μὲν τὸν Νείλον πρὸς τὴν Ἐρυθρὰν Μεγάβαροι καὶ Βλέμμυες, Αἰθίοπων ὑπακούοντες, Αἰγυπτίους δ' ὄμοροι παρὰ θάλατταν δὲ Τρωγλοδύται – transl. H. C. Hamilton).

<sup>40</sup> Strab. 17,1,53 (εἰσὶ δ' οὔτοι νομάδες καὶ οὐ πολλοὶ οὐδὲ μάχιμοι, δοκοῦντες δὲ τοῖς πάλοι διὰ τὸ ληστρικῶς ἀφυλάκτοις ἐπιτίθεσθαι πολλάκις – transl. H. C. Hamilton).

<sup>41</sup> The relationship between nomad peoples and the Roman Empire is a complex problem (see, eg., P. Troussset, *La frontière romaine et ses contradictions*, in: *La frontière (Travaux de la Maison de l'Orient 21)*, Lyon 1993, 25-33).

roads, which they used to do previously (*palai*). On the other hand, with regard to the definition of Rome's frontier, they did not really belong to the *imperium*, for the countries "where the inhabitants only lead a miserable and nomadic life" are worthless<sup>42</sup>. Such a conception is also expressed by Appianus (*flor.* under Trajan and Hadrian) : "Possessing (sc. the Romans) the best part of the earth and sea they have, on the whole, aimed to preserve their empire by the exercise of prudence, rather than to extend their sway indefinitely over poverty stricken and profitless tribes of Barbarians, some of whom I have seen at Rome offering themselves, by their ambassadors, as its subjects ; but the emperor would not accept them because they would be of no use to him."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the destitute tribes of *Trogodytice* were not judged important and prestigious enough to be incorporated into the Empire. This is the reason why I believe that the Egyptian side of the *mare Rubrum* was not perceived as a frontier of the Roman Empire.

Thus, in terms of political geography, the only well-defined border (*claustra*<sup>44</sup>) was located at *Syene*, which marked the southern end of the Roman Empire. Beyond this point lay *Aethiopia* – viz the kingdom of *Meroe*<sup>45</sup> – an organized state to which some of the above mentioned nomadic tribes were subject (see n. 40). Some scholars, however, have accused Tacitus of being inaccurate, since, at the time of Germanicus' trip, the border was situated 120 km south of *Syene*, at *Hiera Sykaminos* (today's Wadi Maharraqah), in a district called the *Dodecaschenus*<sup>46</sup>. In reality, the *Dodecaschenus* was just a kind of buffer area under the joint control of Romans and Ethiopians, or "une sorte de principauté romano-méroïtique"<sup>47</sup>. That is why, according not only to Tacitus, but also Strabo, Pliny or Pomponius Mela, *Syene* represented the actual limit between the *imperium Romanum* and *Aethiopia*<sup>48</sup>. Here, three cohorts in charge of protecting the Egyptian borders were garrisoned<sup>49</sup>. In addition, the famous<sup>50</sup> toponym *Syene* was likely to be more familiar to the general public than the obscure name *Hiera Sykaminos*<sup>51</sup>.

To conclude, the sentence *exim ventum Elephantinen ac Syenen, claustra olim Romani imperii* seems to reflect the imperial representation of space: the Red Sea area, although it was under the control of the Roman administration, was not a source of glory to the Empire; accordingly, it seems to have been ignored in the political geography, the only one in which Tacitus is interested – at least in this passage. Thus, from this point of view, *Syene* instead of the *mare Rubrum* was the boundary of *imperium Romanum* on its south-eastern fringe.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Strab. 17,3,24. "Of Africa (*Libyè*), the whole sea-coast on the Mediterranean is in their (sc. Rome) power; the rest of that country is uninhabited, or the inhabitants only lead a miserable and nomadic life." (transl. H. C. Hamilton).

<sup>43</sup> Appian. Proem. 26 (ὅλως τε δι' εὐβουλίαν τὰ κράτιστα γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης ἔχοντες σώζειν ἐθέλουσι μᾶλλον ἢ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐς ἄπειρον ἐκφέρειν ἐπὶ βάρβαρα ἔθνη πενιχρὰ καὶ ἀκερδῆ, ὧν ἐγὼ τινας εἶδον ἐν Ῥώμῃ πρεσβευομένους τε καὶ διδόντας ἑαυτοὺς ὑπηκόους εἶναι καὶ οὐ δεξάμενον βασιλέα ἀνδρας οὐδὲν αὐτῶ χρησίμους ἔσομένους – transl. H. White). Also see Aelius Aristeidis below, n. 87; Strab. 2,5,8 (about Brittany). *N.b.* : in Europe, on the contrary, Rome "after subduing numerous nations who were leading a savage life" taught "the arts of commerce to many who were formerly in total ignorance, and spread civilization amongst the most savage" (Strab. 2,5,26 – transl. H. C. Hamilton). Having been "civilized", these peoples could live in the Roman Empire for mutual benefit.

<sup>44</sup> About the meanings of *claustra*, see Beaujeu (n. 14) 224. This word is linked with the complicated and much debated problem of the Roman frontier. For a good presentation of the question, cf., eg., J.-M. Carrié, 1993 : ouverture des frontières romaines, in: A. Rousselle (ed.), *Frontières terrestres, frontières célestes dans l'Antiquité*, Perpignan 1995, 31-54 ; C. R. Whittaker, *Where are the Frontiers now?*, in: D. L. Kennedy, *The Roman Army in the East*, Ann Arbor 1996, 25-41 ; id., *Les frontières de l'Empire romain* (French translation), Besançon 1989.

<sup>45</sup> See, eg., Strab. 17,1,53.

<sup>46</sup> Wellesley (n. 23) 149: "Tacitus was not accurately informed concerning the frontiers of Egypt in the first century".

<sup>47</sup> J. Desanges, *Recherches sur l'activité des Méditerranéens aux confins de l'Afrique* (VI<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C. - IV<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C.), Rome 1978, 316.

<sup>48</sup> Plin. nat. 5,59 (*dicionis Aegyptiae esse incipit [sc. the Nile] a fine Aethiopiae Syene*) ; Mela 1,51 (*usque ad Elephantinen urbem Aegyptiam*) ; Strab. 17,1,3 (ὕπερ Συήνης καὶ Ἐλεφαντίνης ἀρχάμενος, οἵπερ εἰσὶν ὄροι τῆς Αἰγύπτου καὶ τῆς Αἰθιοπίας). Also see Strab. 1,2,32 ; 2,5,12 ; Dion. Per. 224 ; Steph. Byz. s.v. Syênê ; E. Bernard, *Les inscriptions grecques et latines de Philae*, t. 2 (Haut et Bas-Empire), Paris 1969, n° 171 p. 178-180 etc. Also see Beaujeu (n. 14) 216, n. 1 ; Desanges (n. 23) 426.

<sup>49</sup> Str. 17,1,12 (τρῆεις δ' ἐπὶ τῶν ὄρων τῆς Αἰθιοπίας ἐν Συήνῃ, φρουρὰ τοῖς τόποις).

<sup>50</sup> Here was the well which helped Eratosthenes calculate the circumference of the Earth.

<sup>51</sup> To the best of my knowledge, only Philostratus locates the border between Egypt and *Aithiopia* at *Hiera Sykaminos* (Philostr. Ap. 6,2).



### 3. *Arabia ; mare Rubrum ; oceanus ; imperium Romanum*

Let us now turn to the second part of the sentence, which contains the allusion to the creation of the *provincia Arabia* in 106 AD : (*Romani imperii*) *quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit*.

What must be first examined is the relationship between Arabia and the *mare Rubrum*. The question is why, unlike Egypt, the Nabataean kingdom was not disconnected from the Red Sea, from the Greco-Roman perspective. Of course, "we may remember that, as Beaujeu persuasively argues, the Red Sea counted for Tacitus as entirely within Arabia, not as adjacent to Egypt."<sup>52</sup> But more important than the whole of Arabia is the specific case of Nabataea. Long before the reign of Trajan, the Greeks were already aware that the Nabataeans, who had once been a largely nomadic people, had become a completely sedentary nation<sup>53</sup>: Nabataea was a kingdom, that is to say a state with its king, administration, army, and territory. As regards the last feature, at some point the Nabataean territory comprised the north-eastern end of the Red Sea, *viz. Aila* (today Aqaba) which played a part in the Nabataean trade activity, as Bowersock states : "The Nabataean trade routes up from 'Aqaba and westward to Gaza are clearly indicated by forts, cisterns, and abundant pottery"<sup>54</sup>. In particular, Nabataean piracy emerged in the Gulf of *Aila* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> (?) century BC, when the Nabataeans "realized that the new traffic by sea (*sc. via Myos Hormos and Berenikê*) would mean a gradual decline in the overland commerce which had been the basis of their prosperity and their sedentarization."<sup>55</sup>

At any rate, from the Greco-Roman point of view, the *mare Rubrum* was clearly a part of the Nabataean kingdom and therefore one of its borders. For instance Diodorus, quoting Agatharchides, states: "After one has sailed past this country the *Laeonites Gulf* (= the Gulf of *Aila*) comes next, about which are many inhabited villages of Arabs who are known as Nabataeans. This tribe occupies a large part of the coast and not a little of the country which stretches inland *etc.*"<sup>56</sup> About two centuries later, Pliny points out: "Beyond the Pelusiatic Mouth is Arabia, which extends to the *mare Rubrum*"<sup>57</sup>. As for sea ports, beside *Aila / Ailana* (the modern Aqaba)<sup>58</sup>, *Leukê Komê*, the location of which is still unknown, was under Nabataean control<sup>59</sup>. To put it in other words, in contrast with the west coast of the Red Sea, which was the domain of the Troglodytes, the Gulf of Aqaba belonged to Nabataea; in contrast with *Berenikê* and *Myos Hormos* which could be defined as "Egyptian enclaves" in Troglodyte territory, *Aila* (and *Leuke Komê*) were integrated into the Arabian territory.

Thus the creation of the province of Arabia "automatically" extended the frontier of the empire as far as the *mare Rubrum*. Here it is worth quoting a remarkably interesting passage of Cassius Dio (*ca* 150-235 AD), for it recalls Ann.2.61 in a striking way: "... while Syria and Phoenicia had become tranquil, Pompey turned against Aretas (= the Nabataean king Aretas III – Pompey's undertaking took place in 64 BC). The latter was king of the **Arabians, now subjects of the Romans, as far as the Erythra thalassa** (τρέπεται πρὸς Ἀρέταν. οὗτος δὲ Ἀραβίων μὲν τῶν νῦν [= *nunc*] τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις δουλευόντων [= *imperium Romanum*] μέχρι τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς θαλάσσης [= *Rubrum ad mare*] ἐβασίλευε)<sup>60</sup>. Interestingly Cassius Dio explicitly points to Aretas and the Nabataean kingdom, which corroborates Bowersock's interpretation of Tacitus.

<sup>52</sup> Goodyear (n. 4) 392.

<sup>53</sup> See Bowersock's (n. 19) fundamental chapters: "The region"; "The coming of Nabataeans".

<sup>54</sup> G. W. Bowersock, A Report on Arabia Provincia, JRS 61, 1971, 219-242, 221.

<sup>55</sup> Dioid. 3,43,5; Bowersock (n. 19) 20-21.

<sup>56</sup> Dioid. 3,43,4 (= Agatharchides Erythr. 5,88) : παραπλευσαντι δὲ ταύτην τὴν χώραν ἐκδέχεται κόλπος Λαιανίτης, περιοικούμενος πολλαῖς κώμαις Ἀραβίων τῶν προσαγορευομένων Ναβαταίων. οὗτοι δὲ πολλὴν μὲν τῆς παραλίου νέμονται, οὐκ ὀλίγην δὲ καὶ τῆς εἰς μεσόγειον ἀνηκούσης χώρας (transl. C. H. Oldfather). Also see Strab. 16,4,18, quoting Artemidorus : "Next is the Aelanitic Gulf and Nabataea, a country well peopled, and abounding in cattle. They also inhabit the islands which lie near." (transl. H. L. Jones)

<sup>57</sup> Plin. nat. 5,65 (*ultra Pelusiaticum Arabia est, ad Rubrum mare pertinens*).

<sup>58</sup> Plin. nat. 5,65.

<sup>59</sup> Strab. 16, 4, 23-24. According to Young (n. 33) 94-96, the port was probably located at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, at Aynunah.

<sup>60</sup> Cass. Dio 37,15,1 (transl. E. Cary).

The name *Mare Rubrum*, used by both Tacitus and Cassius Dio, was certainly not a neutral designation<sup>61</sup>. On the contrary, some political messages are likely to have been embedded in it. Let us again consider the two sides of the Red Sea: on the African coast lived the destitute Troglodytes. How could Rome take pride in including such tribes in its empire? On the opposite side lay the rich and prestigious kingdom of Arabia, which in the decades before 106 AD had witnessed “an unprecedented prosperity and growth.”<sup>62</sup> In this case, the name *mare Rubrum* was worth mentioning, since it provided a considerable glory to both Rome and Trajan: the country “extending to the *mare Rubrum* and to the Arabia known by the surname of Happy and famous for its perfumes and its wealth”<sup>63</sup>, which Alexander the Great wanted – or planned<sup>64</sup> – to subjugate, and of which Augustus<sup>65</sup> dreamt, had become a province within the Empire. Its sea had become the new boundary line of Rome.

At this point it must be remembered that Pompey the Great was the first to employ the political connotations conveyed by the name *mare Rubrum*. In 62 AD Aemilius Scaurus undertook a military expedition against the Nabataean kingdom on behalf of Pompey. The war quickly ended, as the king Aretas III offered a considerable amount of money (300 talents) and Arabia became nothing more than a “client state”<sup>66</sup>. Nevertheless, in his third triumph (61 AD)<sup>67</sup> Pompey praised himself as follows: “Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, *imperator*, having completed a thirty years' war, routed, scattered, slain or received the surrender of 12,183,000 people, sunk or taken 816 ships, received the capitulation of 1538 towns and forts, subdued the lands from the Maeotians to the *mare Rubrum*, duly dedicates his offering vowed to Minerva”<sup>68</sup>. No doubt the Roman citizens were aware that *mare Rubrum* meant Arabia<sup>69</sup>. Trajan, however, was the first to add prestigious Arabia to the Empire as a province: “Chronologiquement, c'est la première extension territoriale formellement reconnue et hautement proclamée de l'Empire romain jusqu'au fameux *mare Rubrum*.”<sup>70</sup> This achievement was publicized by various means. For instance, it has often been noted that a coinage bearing the inscription ARABIA ADQUISITA, and showing the personification of Arabia holding the branch of a frankincense tree<sup>71</sup> – the symbol of the famous trade in aromatics – was issued shortly after the annexation<sup>72</sup>. Beside this, the *Princeps* is likely to have also been praised by a form of propaganda, in which the name *mare*

<sup>61</sup> This probably was not the case of the name *mare Rubrum* engraved on milestones: Dessau ILS 5834: *viam novam (= via nova Trajana, from Bostra to Aila) a finibus Syriae usque ad mare Rubrum aperuit et stravit*.

<sup>62</sup> Bowersock (n. 19) 59.

<sup>63</sup> Plin. nat. 5,65 (trad. H. Rackham).

<sup>64</sup> P. Högemann, *Alexander der Grosse und Arabien*, München 1985, 186-197 (“der Operationsplan zur Eroberung Arabiens”).

<sup>65</sup> Numerous articles dealing with Aelius Gallus and C. Caesar expeditions have been published. On C. Caesar's campaign against the Nabataeans, cf. Bowersock (n. 55) 227-228. N.B.: Bowersock (n. 19) 54-55, considering that “there are no known coins advertising Aretas as king in 3, 2, and 1 BC” thinks that the Nabatean kingdom was annexed for this brief interval. This assumption, says Bowersock, receives support from Strabo: “The geographer Strabo stated unambiguously, in a passage that has been curiously neglected, that in his day (*nun de*) the Nabataeans, like the Syrians, were subjects of the Romans.” This text, however, is quite ambiguous. It reads: “The Nabataeans and Sabaeans, situated above Syria, are the first people who occupy Arabia Felix. They were frequently in the habit of overrunning this country before the Romans became masters of it, but at present **both they and the Syrians** are subject to the Romans (Πρώτοι δ' ὑπὲρ τῆς Συρίας Ναβαταῖοι καὶ Σαβαῖοι τὴν εὐδαίμονα Ἀραβίαν νέμονται, καὶ πολλάκις κατέτρεχον αὐτῆς πρὶν ἢ Ῥωμαίων γενέσθαι: νῦν δὲ **κάκεινοι** Ῥωμαίοις εἰσὶν ὑπήκοοι καὶ Σύροι – transl. H. C. Hamilton)”. If this interpretation is accepted, the Nabataeans may have been “subject” to Rome in the same way as the Sabaeans (see *Res Gest. div. Aug.* 26).

<sup>66</sup> Bowersock (n. 19) 28-34; M. Sartre (n. 19) 456: “Les Nabatéens se comportèrent désormais en fidèles alliés, apportant aide et soutien aux Romains” (also see: M. Sartre, *Rome et les Nabatéens à la fin de la République*, REA 81, 1979, 37-53).

<sup>67</sup> On the third triumph of Pompey, cf., eg., Cic. *Balb.* 5,13; 6,16.

<sup>68</sup> Plin. nat. 7,97. A coinage representing a camel and Aretas III offering a palm branch was issued by Ae. Scaurus in 58 BC (RRC 422 / 1b: AE. SCAUR. AED. CUR. EX SC. REX ARETA). Cf. A. Suspène, *Images royales en contexte romain: les rois étrangers sur les monnaies romaines (II<sup>e</sup> siècle a.C.- II<sup>e</sup> siècle p.C.)*, in: *Le Caractère du Prince*, CEA 49, 2012, 259-279.

<sup>69</sup> See Lucan. 2,590, and Beaujeu (n. 14) 215 n. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Beaujeu (n. 14) 225.

<sup>71</sup> A. Blanchet, *La figure de l'Arabie*, CRAI, 1944, 229-237, 234 (wrongly called “myrte”). In contrast, the king Aretas III represented on the coinage minted by Scaurus offers a palm branch (*Suspene* [n. 61]).

<sup>72</sup> H. Mattingly & E. A. Sydenham, *Roman imperial coinage*, vol. 2: 106-111 AD, p. 278, nr 465-468; 112-114 AD, p. 287, nr 610-615. According to Volkmann (n. 21) 237, this coinage was issued in 108 AD.

*Rubrum* may have played an important role. I tend to believe that Tacitus and Cassius Dio's texts have preserved some traces of this symbolic, or official geography<sup>73</sup>.

Incidentally, I wonder whether another political message was linked with the name *mare Rubrum*. The Parthian kings were the great rivals of Rome at that time. A common opinion was that the inhabited world was dominated by the Roman and Parthian empires. Tacitus, for instance, says: "There was also to be read what tributes were imposed (sc. by the ancient Pharaohs) on these nations (...) a revenue as magnificent as is now exacted by the might of Parthia or the power of Rome."<sup>74</sup> In fact the *mare Rubrum* (= Arab-Persian Gulf) was a boundary of the Parthian empire: "From there, they (sc. Alexander and his army) set off for the country of the Parthians, then an unknown people. Now they dominate all nations settled beyond the Euphrates and Tigris who are bordered by the *mare Rubrum*"<sup>75</sup>. We even come across the idea that the *mare Rubrum* was their own sea: such is the plausible meaning of an expression that we read in Lucanus' *Pharsalia*: "... their sea has a different colour from ours ..." (= the *mare Rubrum* belongs to the Parthians)<sup>76</sup>. However, once the *imperium Romanum*, in turn, reached the *mare Rubrum*, the Parthian empire was no longer the only one to "possess" this sea. That was also the glory of Rome and Trajan<sup>77</sup>.

Now let us go further. Tacitus stresses the fact that the annexation of Arabia enabled the *Romanum imperium* to expand. However, as I stated in the beginning, topographical maps contradict this assertion<sup>78</sup>: *Syene* is further south than the Nabataean Red Sea. Some scholars have argued that the Roman knowledge of this area was inaccurate and distorted: "As Beaujeu argues, the Romans saw Egypt and especially the Delta as belonging to Asia and not Africa. They were mistaken as well on its orientation which they took to be east-west and underestimated its size. Thus it would be possible for Tacitus to think of the annexation of 106 as an extension of Roman control in the west Asiatic area towards the southeast on the same basic line of orientation as the Red Sea coast of Egypt."<sup>79</sup> Tacitus' ignorance has also been pointed out: "Granted T.'s geographical incompetence and the considerable haziness about the region of Egypt and Arabia evident in Pliny and elsewhere, also the possibility T. did not recall when the Romans reached the west of the Red Sea, and the certainty he knew of the annexation of Arabia Petraea, then it seems likely a conflation of ideas could have prompted him to remark at this point, when Germanicus comes to the limit of his Egyptian travel, that in contrast to the position in AD 19, Roman control in the area extended by his own time to the Red

<sup>73</sup> Beaujeu (n. 14) 222: "... le seul fait historique notoire, auquel Tacite ait été susceptible de se référer parce qu'il a marqué, dans la réalité, mais aussi dans l'opinion publique orientée par la propagande officielle une extension de l'Empire jusqu'au *mare Rubrum*, c'est la conquête et l'annexion de l'Arabie ...". Cf. also Volkmann (n. 21) 238: "[...] so scheint es eben doch keineswegs ausgeschlossen, dass Tacitus mit seinem stolzen Zusatz weniger auf die Eroberung der Provinz Arabia als auf den Vorstoss Trajans, des zweiten Alexander, an das Rote Meer anspielen wollte." *Contra*, see P. Edwell, *Trajan: Imperialism Victorious and Frustrated*, in: D. Hoyos (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Imperialism*, Leiden – Boston 2013, 251-264, 257: "For modern analysts of Roman imperialism, this (= the establishment of the province of Arabia) surely represents a major symbolic step; but there is no suggestion in the ancient sources that it was celebrated as such, and whether Trajan conceived of it in this way is unknown to us."

<sup>74</sup> Tac. ann. 2,60 (transl. A. J. Church).

<sup>75</sup> Curt. 6,2,12 (*Hinc in Parthienem perventum est, tunc ignobilem gentem, nunc caput omnium, qui post Euphraten et Tigridem amnes siti Rubro mari terminantur*).

<sup>76</sup> Lucan. 8,290-293: "The waters of the Euphrates shut off from us a mighty world, and the Caspian Gates hide boundless solitudes; in Assyria a different hemisphere makes the changes of night and day; they have an ocean of their own, and a sea severed from ours and unlike in the colour of its water." (trans. J. D. Duff) (... *et abruptum est nostro mare discolor unda*). Cf. also Tac. ann. 2,2 about an embassy *petitum ex alio orbe* (= Parthia).

<sup>77</sup> N.b.: it has been suggested that the *Annals* could have been composed before 116 AD "on the grounds that Parthia is described as a major power in Ann. 2.60" (Potter [n. 16] 287).

<sup>78</sup> This kind of cartographical approach explains why the *mare Rubrum* (= the Arab-Persian Gulf), which is far away from the Mediterranean core of the Roman Empire, has been the preferred option of several scholars.

<sup>79</sup> Sage (n. 13) 958.

Sea.”<sup>80</sup>. However, if the reader accepts the idea that Tacitus echoes an imperial representation of space, which implies all kinds of manipulations and distortions<sup>81</sup>, things become different.

The point is that the *mare Rubrum* (= the Red Sea) was regarded by the Greco-Romans as a gulf of the Outer Ocean, like the Arab-Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. Accordingly, any emperor or king who had managed to conquer a country lying on such a gulf could claim that he had reached the ocean itself, that is to say, the edge of the *oikoumenê*: reaching the open ocean was by no means necessary; controlling the bottom of the *Arabicus* or *Persicus sinus* sufficed to achieve this. It is not an accident that, in the following three texts, Arabia and / or the *Erythra thalassa* (= *mare Rubrum*) is the link between Rome and the Outer Ocean<sup>82</sup>:

- “But the dire evil which had been slumbering for a long time, namely, his (sc. Mark Antony, in 36 BC, during the Eastern campaign) passion for Cleopatra, (...) blazed up again with renewed power as he drew near to Syria (...). And when she was come, he made her a present of no slight or insignificant addition to her dominions, namely, Phoenicia, (...) and all that part of Arabia Nabataea which slopes toward the Outer Sea (= the Ocean – καὶ τῆς Ναβαταίων Ἀραβίας ὄση πρὸς τὴν ἔκτος ἀποκλίνει θάλασσαν)<sup>83</sup>.”
- “Moreover, a great and eager passion possessed him (sc. Pompey the Great, ca 65 BC) to recover Syria, and march through Arabia to the *Erythra thalassa*, in order that he might bring his victorious career into touch with the Ocean which surrounds the world on all sides (διὰ τῆς Ἀραβίας ἐπὶ τὴν ἐρυθρὰν ἐλάσαι θάλασσαν, ὡς τῷ περιῖοντι τὴν οἰκουμένην πανταχόθεν Ὠκεανῷ προσμίξειε νικῶν). For in Africa he had been the first to carry his conquests as far as the Outer Sea (πρῶτος ἄχρι τῆς ἔκτος θαλάσσης κρατῶν προήλθε), and again in Spain he had made the Atlantic Ocean the boundary of the Roman dominion (...). In order, therefore, that he might connect the circuit of his military expeditions with the *Erythra thalassa*, he put his army in motion (ὡς οὖν συνάψων τὴν ἐρυθρὰ τὴν περίοδον τῆς στρατείας ἀνίστατο).<sup>84</sup>”
- “Again, the duration of the Assyrians, Medes, and Persians taken together (the three greatest empires before Alexander), does not amount to nine hundred years, a period which that of Rome has already reached and the size of their empire, I think, was not half that of the Romans, whose boundaries extend from the setting of the sun and the Western Ocean to Mount Caucasus and the river Euphrates, and through Egypt to Ethiopia, and through Arabia as far as the Eastern Ocean, so that their boundary is the ocean both where the sun-god rises and where he sinks, while they control the entire Mediterranean, and all its islands as well as Britain in the ocean (ὅτι Ῥωμαῖοις ἀπὸ τε δύσεων καὶ τοῦ πρὸς ἑσπέραν ὠκεανοῦ ἐπὶ τὸ Καύκασον ὄρος καὶ ποταμὸν Εὐφράτην καὶ ἐς Αἰθίοπας τοὺς ἄνω Αἰγύπτου καὶ <δί’> Ἀράβων ἐπὶ τὸν ἑῶν ὠκεανὸν ἡ ἀρχὴ διεξέρχεται, καὶ ὄρος ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς ὁ ὠκεανὸς ἀνερχομένου τε καὶ δυομένου τοῦ θεοῦ).<sup>85</sup>”

<sup>80</sup> Goodyear (n.4) 393. Also see Sage (n. 13) 958: “This possibility gains greater weight when we take into account the general weakness of the author.”

<sup>81</sup> Compare with the imperial space of Alexander (see Strab. 11,5,5; 15,1,8, who accuses Alexander’s companions of geographical forgeries and flattery).

<sup>82</sup> Syme (n. 2) 768, believed that Tacitus referred to the *mare Rubrum* in a very general way and did not really think of the (*Persicus*) *sinus*: “Now *Rubrum mare* as all agree has the general meaning of ‘the Indian Ocean’. The Persian Gulf and the Red Sea are its two great inlets as such, each of which can bear the name. But Tacitus is not thinking of either inlet as such. Rather the eastern ocean, the one end of the world, like Gades the other (*omnibus in terris quae sunt a Gadibus usque Auroram et Gangem* [Juvenal 10, 1-2]). To elucidate Tacitus, the language of poets, of orators, and of historians is relevant, the theme of Alexander and the theme of world conquest.” No doubt, as we will see below, Alexander is present in this ideological geography. On the other hand, should we admit that “Tacitus is not thinking of either inlet”, we would have to deduce that he did not refer to any historical event (either the creation of the province of Arabia, or the brief annexation of Mesene), which seems to me rather dubious. As Beaujeu (n. 14) 215, states, “il est évident que cette notation (...) doit se référer à un fait précis, survenu entre l’année 19 p.C. et les premières années du règne d’Hadrien.”

<sup>83</sup> Plut. Ant. 36,1-2 (transl. B. Perrin).

<sup>84</sup> Plut. Pomp. 38,2-3 (transl. B. Perrin).

<sup>85</sup> Appian. Proem. 34 ). Appianus continues as follows : “(...) But the greatest sea-power of the Medes and Persians included only the Gulf of Pamphylia and the single island of Cyprus or perhaps other small islets belonging to Ionia in the Mediterranean. They controlled the Persian Gulf also, but how much of that is open sea (Μήδοις δὲ καὶ Πέρσαις ἢ τε πλείστη θάλασσα [ἦ] ὁ Παμφύλιος κόλπος ἦν καὶ μία νῆσος ἢ Κύπρος ἢ <εἰ> τί που ἄλλο μικρὸν τῆς Ἰωνίας ἐν θαλάσσει· τοῦ τε Περσικοῦ κόλπου (καὶ γὰρ τοῦδε ἑκρατοῦν) πόσον τι καὶ τὸ τοῦτου πέλαιγός ἐστιν; - transl. H. White).



These three excerpts show how space was shaped and distorted for political and ideological purposes. The process consists in a combination of simple ideas: Arabia is connected to the *mare Rubrum*; the *mare Rubrum* is connected to the ocean; the ocean is the edge of the world; thus Arabia is connected to the edge of the world. A more developed form of this reasoning appears in Appian's Preface: on the one hand, he says, the Roman Empire is limited to the east by the Euphrates and to the south by *Aethiopia* (= *Syene*); on the other hand (the province of) Arabia and its southern boundary, the Red Sea, allow Rome to reach the eastern ocean. Thus, the *imperium Romanum* reaches the extreme east and west edges of the inhabited world, namely the Ocean.

No doubt, in this representation of space which enhances the Emperor's glory, the scientific tools of geography and cartography (orientations, measurements, angles<sup>86</sup> etc.) were absolutely irrelevant. Tacitus' text was similarly more influenced by political geography than cartographic accuracy. Celebrating Trajan's recent achievement, he emphasized that in the southeastern part of the *oikoumenê*, the Roman Empire had reached the ocean, *viz.* the end of the world<sup>87</sup>. From this point of view Rome really expanded far beyond *Syene* (compare with Appianus). Incidentally, it is worth noticing that Tacitus uses the verb *patescit*: whereas *claustra* refers to a limit, *patescit* implies an unlimited expansion<sup>88</sup>.

Of course, as many scholars have observed, the word *oceanus* (as well as *mare Rubrum* "im Sinn des Sudostmeeres") was connected to the name of Alexander the Great<sup>89</sup>. At the end of the Indian expedition in 325 BC, the young king sailed on a short way off the mouths of the Indus. The political message was obvious: he was the first to reach the Outer Ocean and the edge of the world<sup>90</sup>. It is well known that Antiochos I and Ptolemy II launched expeditions respectively on the Caspian Sea and the Red Sea in order to equal Alexander. It is also agreed that Pompey followed in Alexander's footsteps<sup>91</sup>. Thus, when Trajan annexed Arabia extending to the *mare Rubrum*, and consequently made the Eastern ocean<sup>92</sup> the boundary of its Empire, the memory of Alexander the Great was probably in his mind<sup>93</sup>.

<sup>86</sup> *Contra*, Beaujeu (n. 14) 223, who thinks that Tacitus' spatial representations emanate from a cartographic perception of the Red Sea area.

<sup>87</sup> N.b.: see how Aelius Aristide, who wrote his speech *Eis Rhômên* in ca 144 AD, describes the expansion of the Roman Empire: "Now, indeed, the boundaries of your empire are of extent not to be despised, not such that their interior can be measured. (...) Nothing escapes you, neither city, nor nation, nor harbor, nor land, unless you have condemned something as useless (πλὴν εἴ τινων ἄρα ἀχρηστίαν κατέγνωτε). The *Erythra thalassa* (= *mare Rubrum*), the cataracts of the Nile (= *Syene*) and lake Maeotis, which former men spoke of as the ends of the earth, are for this city "the fence of courtyard". As to the ocean, which certain writers neither believed existed at all nor that it flowed around the earth (...) you have discovered this ocean so thoroughly etc." (*Eis Rhômên* 28, p. 205 Jebb – transl. C. A. Behr).

<sup>88</sup> On *patescit*, see Beaujeu (n. 14) 214; Goodyear (n. 4) 391-392. From this point of view, the annexation of Arabia was not a minor alteration of the Roman frontier, contrary to Oliver's opinion (n. 16) 297: "Despite a phenomenal expenditure of perverse ingenuity in numerous attempts to explain away that passage, which in turn fixes the scope of the more general reference to expansion of empire in IV.4.3, the *Rubrum Mare* here is necessarily the *Rubrum Mare* of XIV. 2 5. 2 (i.e. the Arab-Persian Gulf), and Tacitus patently refers to an epochal enlargement of the empire, not a trivial rectification of frontiers. And since *nunc* means "now," Tacitus wrote that passage after hearing the first news of Trajan's conquest of Mesopotamia in 115 and before that territory was abandoned by Hadrian soon after the death of Trajan in August, 117".

<sup>89</sup> Volkmann (n. 21) 238. Cf. also Symes (n. 2) 768; Borzsák (n. 15) 468-469; Beaujeu (n. 14) 215 *etc.*

<sup>90</sup> Arrian. an. 6,19,3-5.

<sup>91</sup> See Nicolet (n. 3) 36-42; 45-47; G. Parker, *The Making of Roman India*, Cambridge 2008, p. 207-227.

<sup>92</sup> About Rome and the northern edge of the world, see Chr. Krebs: "Borealism: Caesar, Seneca, Tacitus, and the Roman discourse about the Germanic North," in: E. S. Gruen, *Cultural Identity and the Peoples of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Los Angeles, 2010, 202-221; *id.*, *Magni viri: Alexander, Pompey, and Caesar in Catullus 11*, *Philologus* 152, 2008, 223-229.

<sup>93</sup> Volkmann (n. 21) 238: "Trajan lebte besonders stark in der Tradition Alexanders d. Gr.". He quotes the famous passage by Cassius Dio (Hist. Rom. 68, 28-29): "Then he (sc. Trajan in *Mesene*) came to the ocean (sc. the bottom of the *Persicus sinus*) itself, and when he had learned its nature and had seen a ship sailing to India, he said: 'I should certainly have crossed over to the Indians, too, if I were still young (...) For he began to think about the Indians and was curious about their affairs, and he counted Alexander a lucky man. Yet he would declare that he himself had advanced farther than Alexander, and would so write to the senate, although he was unable to preserve even the territory that he had subdued" – transl. H. B. Foster). Also Eutr. *Breviarum ab urbe condita* 8,3,1: *Messenios vicin ac tenuit. Usque ad Indiae fines et mare Rubrum accessit*. On the presence of Alexander the Great in *Annals* 2, 59-61, see B. Kelly, *Tacitus, Germanicus and the kings of Egypt*, *CQ* 60.1, 2010, 221-237.



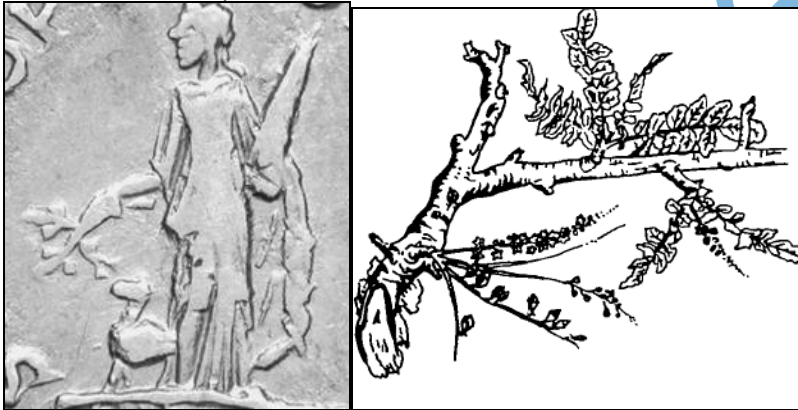
### Conclusion

The sentence *exim ventum Elephantinen ac Syenen, claustra olim Romani imperii quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit* seems to me to be clear and unambiguous. When the Nabataean kingdom was annexed by Trajan, for the first time, the Roman Empire was really bordered by the external ocean, in this part of the world<sup>94</sup>. This noticeable expansion must have been widely celebrated. The traces of some official records may have been preserved in Tacitus' *Annals*. This passage also discloses how the Roman power used certain names –in this case *mare Rubrum* – for political purposes. It also reveals how the Roman power defined the boundaries and shaped the imperial space for its own interest without cartographic accuracy: the Trogydites were more or less ignored, even if Rome controlled their country. On the other hand, the annexation of Arabia widened the Roman Empire far beyond the actual limits of the province<sup>95</sup>.

As Carrié says, "dans la situation d'hégémonie où se trouve l'empire, la frontière a moins de signification par elle-même que par le territoire de souveraineté qu'elle délimite. L'extension de ce territoire fait honneur à Rome portant loin et haut son *nomen*, tout ensemble nom et renom. Horizon quasi abstrait de cette gloire, les frontières se trouvent incontestablement investies de toute une charge idéologique qui comptait sans doute pour beaucoup dans la décision de les porter plus avant ou de les maintenir dans l'extension qu'elles avaient déjà atteinte."<sup>96</sup>

### Appendix

*Denarius (Arabia adquisita) -113 AD (BMC/RE.474) – Branch of frankincense tree*<sup>97</sup>



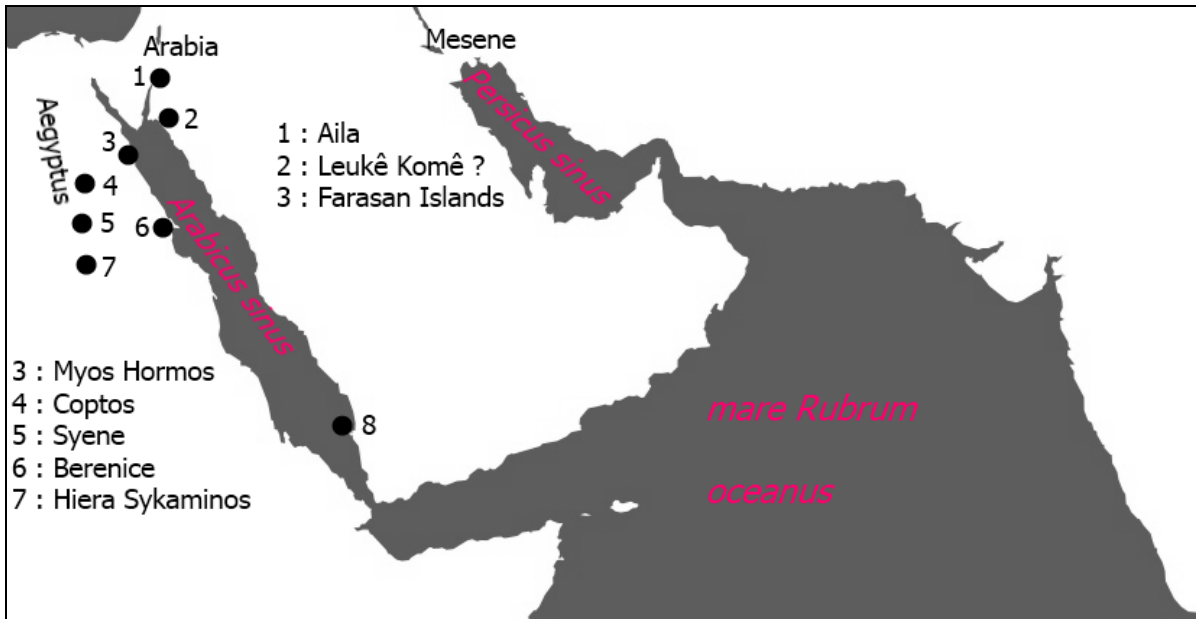
The Erythraean Sea area

<sup>94</sup> Thus, Tacitus' text does not need any correction, contrary to Wellesley opinion (n. 23) 148: "what Tacitus should have written (...) is: "*exim ventum Elephantinam ac Syenam, claustra olim Romani imperii quod nunc ad (Hieran Sykaminon aut) Rubrum mare patescit.*"

<sup>95</sup> Besides the political message embedded in the name *mare Rubrum*, there was a real Roman presence in the Red Sea far away from the province of Arabia : see the fundamental study of Fr. Villeneuve - C. Phillips- W. Facey, L'inscription latine de l'archipel Farasân (sud de la mer Rouge) et son contexte archéologique et historique, *Arabia* 2, 2004, 143-192, especially 182-185.

<sup>96</sup> Carrié (n. 45) p. 49.

<sup>97</sup> N. Groom, *Frankincense and myrrh: a study of the Arabian incense trade*, London-New York, 1981, p. 100.



accepted version