

# A Buried Ancient Egyptian Port Reveals the Hidden Connections Between Distant Civilizations

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Jo Marchant

By [Jo Marchant](#)

Photographs by [Roger Anis](#)

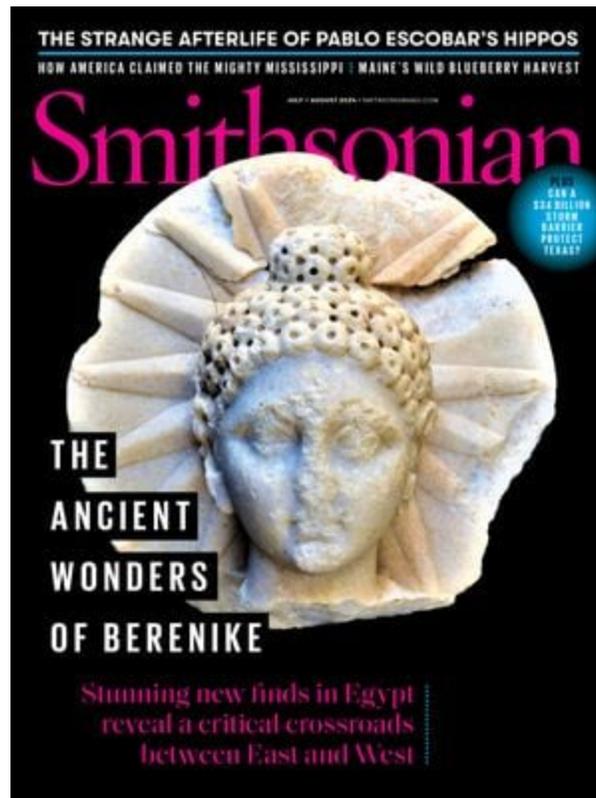
On a sunny morning this past January, [Ingo Strauch](#), an expert in ancient Indian history, crouches in the courtyard of what was once an Egyptian temple. The floor is littered with fallen stones and columns. Nearby, carved hieroglyphs are visible on the salt-corroded walls, which in some places still stand nearly eight feet high. Located just a few hundred steps from the glittering water of the Red Sea, in Egypt's eastern desert, this remote shrine was dedicated to the mother goddess Isis some 2,000 years ago. Today, the ruins form the most prominent feature of a barren, windswept landscape, inside a restricted military zone a few hours from the modern border with Sudan. But Strauch, scrutinizing a recently unearthed slab, is immersed in a different world. Just beneath the sand lies a once-bustling, cosmopolitan port city from which mighty ships laden with gold and wine sailed across the ocean and brought back spices, jewels, perfume and other exotic cargo in return.

In antiquity, this site, known as Berenike, was described by chroniclers such as Strabo and Pliny the Elder as the Roman Empire's maritime gateway to the East: a crucial entry point for mind-boggling riches brought across the sea from eastern Africa, southern Arabia, India and beyond. It is hard to imagine how such vast and complex trade could have been supported here, miles from any natural source of drinking water and many days' arduous trek across mountainous desert from the Nile. Yet excavations are revealing that the stories are true.

Archaeologists led by [Steven Sidebotham](#), of the University of Delaware, have revealed two harbors and scores of houses, shops and shrines. They have uncovered mounds of administrative detritus, including letters, receipts and customs passes, and imported treasures such as ivory, incense, textiles, gems and foodstuffs such as pots of Indian peppercorns, coconuts and rice. The finds are not only painting a uniquely detailed picture of life at a lesser-known but critical crossroads between East and West. They are also focusing scholarly attention on a vast ancient ocean trade that may have dwarfed the terrestrial Silk Road in economic importance and helped sustain the Roman Empire for centuries.

The ruined Isis temple alone has yielded inscriptions and ritual offerings made by Egyptian, Greek and Roman worshipers over hundreds of years, from painted pharaohs on the walls to bronze statues and gilded figurines. But these treasures aren't what Strauch, from the

University of Lausanne, in Switzerland, has traveled thousands of miles to see. Laid out before him on a blue blanket is a two-and-a-half-foot-long block of curiously inscribed white gypsum.





In the Isis temple, the pedestal that may have held the statue of the Egyptian goddess, with carvings of the Roman emperor Tiberius holding up the sky. Roger Anis

Near the top of the stone's rough, corroded surface are three lines of elegantly curved Sanskrit script. Strauch, wearing sunglasses and a Panama hat, traces the curling letters with his finger. "In the sixth year of King Philip," he reads, "the *kshatriya* Vasula gave this image for the welfare and happiness of all beings." Then he points to a single line, in Greek, written by the same person but in a cruder style, that says simply: "Vasula set this up." If not for the Greek translation and the reference to a Roman emperor—Philip the Arab, who ruled in the third century A.D.—this dedication could be mistaken as coming from India, Strauch says. The words are Sanskrit, expertly written in Brahmi script. The message itself, with its reference to universal happiness, is undeniably Buddhist. And the author, Vasula, who arranged for the dedication, proudly describes himself as *kshatriya*, from the warrior caste.

The stele is just one of a series of remarkable finds that have specialists scrambling to reassess their understanding of Rome's connections to the Eastern world. Others include a magnificent Buddha statue, carved from Mediterranean marble and mixing Indian and Roman-Egyptian features, the first ever found anywhere in the ancient Western world. A second stele features a carved Greco-Roman arch that frames a triad of early Indian gods. Nothing like these objects, with their unmistakable blend of Eastern and Western styles, has ever been seen in the Roman world. Peter Stewart, a historian of classical art at the University of Oxford, described himself as "flabbergasted" by them. Shailendra Bhandare, an expert in ancient India at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, said that when he heard about the Indic triad, "I fell off my chair."

Now Sidebotham and his team have returned to dig for more. What kind of place boasts Buddhists who worship at the temple of an Egyptian goddess? Who was creating such original religious artworks, and why, and what can these treasures tell us about trends of ancient cultural exchange that have remained mysterious until now? To visit Berenike is to discover war elephants and pet monkeys, emperors and sailors, camel caravans and tax collectors. It's a paradoxical place where luxurious baths sprang from the desert, where houses were built from ships and coral, where nothing grew yet unimaginable fortunes could be made. In some ways it was a wild frontier at the edge of an empire, but it was also the center of something much bigger: a beating heart that drove the makings of the modern world.

The morning after Strauch's visit, archaeologists are buzzing around a prominent spot to the north of the site, overlooking the sea. Excavations here have uncovered a series of small shrines that the team has dubbed the "northern complex." It is almost the end of the dig season, but as the archaeologists are cleaning up their trenches, they notice an unusual stone, paler than the rest, embedded at the base of a roughly built wall. It looks head-shaped; just visible is an upside-down ear.



Berenike was the Roman Empire's southernmost port, from which fleets of merchant ships rode monsoon winds across the Indian Ocean—and fueled an ocean trade that rivaled, and likely surpassed, the terrestrial Silk Road in economic importance. Now findings on both sides of the ocean are driving a broad reassessment of the interconnectedness of the ancient world. Guilbert Gates

Sidebotham, cheery but businesslike, with gray stubble and a blue, floppy sunhat, arrives within minutes. "Oh, geez," he says. "You're going to have to do an emergency." The archaeologists were supposed to have finished digging at this part of the site already, he

explains. “But we gotta get this out.” Four workers with trowels are soon dismantling the blocks. A local Bedouin boy brings empty baskets to hold the sand. A small crowd gathers; Sidebotham points a camcorder. “The magic moment is almost with us,” he says, hamming it up for the film. “This better be good.”

Soon a handsome statue head, a little larger than life-size, is extracted from what’s left of the wall. As it’s turned upright, there’s a gasp at the sight of a round mass on the back, reminiscent of a Buddha’s characteristic topknot hairstyle. But as it’s brushed clean, the mass falls away, revealed as a clump of dirt. The head is instead identified as a first-century ruler, possibly Nero, with a creased forehead, cropped curls and a slight double chin, although there’s something distinctly Egyptian-style about his round, bulging eyes. (Later analysis will suggest it may actually be a portrait of an important local official involved in the Eastern trade.)

A few feet away, the team had earlier uncovered the bottom half of a carved stone relief showing the sandaled legs of an unidentified warrior god accompanied by a mysterious creature—perhaps a lion. “It’s so strange!” says Marianne Bergmann, an expert in Greco-Roman sculpture visiting from the University of Göttingen in Germany, as she and her colleagues gleefully Google on their phones for comparison. But it’s just another day at Berenike, which has been keeping Sidebotham on his toes for 30 years.

Now 72, Sidebotham knew he wanted to be an archaeologist from the age of 14. When his father, who was in the U.S. Army, was posted in Turkey, the family moved to Ankara, and the teenager spent his free time photographing ruins and collecting Roman coins. After training in Cairo, Athens and the United States, he excavated sites in Italy, Greece, Libya, Tunisia and elsewhere before working on the Red Sea coast for the first time in 1980. “I just fell in love with this place,” he says. “I love the desert, the Bedouin, the sites, everything about it.” He became friendly with the local tribespeople, who showed him ruins that archaeologists didn’t know existed. “They’ll take you to places—the last Westerner was some Roman guy,” he jokes.

His aim, though, was always to get to the famed port of Berenike. “All the ancient sources talk about this place,” he says. One Greco-Roman text, known as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, or “Voyage around the Erythraean Sea”—which Bhandare, of Oxford, described as “a kind of Lonely Planet guide for the first century A.D.”—lists the port as a hub for maritime trade routes stretching south as far as modern-day Tanzania, and east, past Arabia, to India and beyond. But Berenike’s location was lost for centuries, until the Italian explorer Giovanni Belzoni, after nearly perishing from thirst in the search, rediscovered it in 1818 and hired a Bedouin youth to dig in the Isis temple with a giant seashell. A handful of European and American travelers followed, but the entire area fell back out of reach for decades, designated off-limits by an Egyptian army keen to control the coastline close to Sudan.

“I never thought I’d be able to visit the site, let alone dig here,” Sidebotham says. He excavated farther up the coast for years, patiently building contacts in Egypt’s antiquities service before finally winning a permit in 1994. Now he brings an international team of specialists for a few weeks each winter, watched over by a sand-colored military base just up the coast.



The city boasted two harbors. The multi-lingual, multi-ethnic desert outpost welcomed merchants, sailors and traders of many religions and backgrounds. “It’s a great example of ancient cosmopolitanism,” Sidebotham says. He estimates that only 2 percent or so of the city has been excavated so far. Guilbert Gates

The archaeologists sleep in small, white tents. Water is brought in by truck. Phones and laptops run off a solar panel, food is cooked by locals, and toilets are dug into the sand. The only permanent fixture, a simple brick building, provides a few small offices and storerooms set around a central courtyard. Daily finds are meticulously sorted under canvas shelters:

one for pottery, one for bones. Gradually, the team has uncovered the colorful history of a port that endured for more than 800 years, both predating and outlasting its masters in Rome.

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According to ancient sources, the city was founded by Pharaoh Ptolemy II, the son of the Macedonian Greek general who ruled Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great, and who named Berenike for his mother around 275 B.C. Alexander, during his military campaign in India, had pioneered the use of the country's elephants in his battles against Persia, and afterward the animals became a military must-have, like tanks today. But when Alexander's empire split into rival kingdoms, the Seleucids, who ruled western Asia, cornered the overland supply. So Ptolemy II turned to African elephants, shipping them up the coast from present-day Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia to the sheltered, south-facing bay of Berenike.

Excavations have turned up elephant skull fragments and teeth, as well as a V-shaped dry moat that contained the beasts as they recovered from their sea voyage. When the use of war elephants declined in the second century B.C., Berenike's importance waned, too. But after the Romans conquered Egypt in 30 B.C., the port found a new purpose.

Now Roman traders learned to ride monsoon currents from the Horn of Africa directly across the Indian Ocean. The waters flow northeast in summer before reversing each winter, so if they timed it right, they could make the journey in a couple of months, then wait until conditions were right to return. Suddenly, fleets of huge merchant ships, capable of carrying extravagant cargoes, set out from Roman Egypt to India. And Berenike was the first convenient place in the empire for these vast, oceangoing vessels to unload on the return trip, rather than battling further against the Red Sea's relentless north winds.

From Berenike, cargoes were carried by camel caravan to Coptos, on the Nile, shipped down the river to Alexandria, and from there to Rome and the rest of the Mediterranean world. Excavations are now confirming the wealth and breadth of the goods passing through Berenike in both directions, yielding pottery from Spain and Morocco; frankincense and resin from South Arabia; beads from Thailand or Vietnam and even Java. And "just tons" of Indian material, says Sidebotham, including gems and pearls, woven mats and baskets, as well as rice and a jar containing more than 16 pounds of peppercorns, the largest such cache from antiquity ever found.



Ingo Strauch, a historian of ancient India, examines a third-century A.D. slab inscribed with Sanskrit.  
Roger Anis

At the same time, the archaeologists are discovering what the literary sources don't describe: the mechanics of life in an ancient intercontinental port. Around the main harbor they have found the remains of planking from ships built on both sides of the ocean (cedar from Lebanon, teak from Kerala); workshops and storehouses; and huge ropes and torn sails.

From the sea, a main street led up through the town over a central crossroads—probably the location of the city's Roman baths—to the Isis temple. On either side of this thoroughfare were streets lined with houses and shops, some two or three stories high. In early Roman times, the main construction material was a white, local stone called anhydritic gypsum; later builders used coral and Indian teak, recycled from the ships. Only a tiny proportion of the city has been excavated so far, but the coral fragments that litter the ground are heaped in slightly raised linear mounds, unremarkable to the untrained eye until Sidebotham runs along their tops, pointing out hidden streets, rooms, courtyards and doorways, effortlessly conjuring a city from the sand.

On the edge of town was a trash dump. This is the source of most of the 100 or so texts unearthed so far this season, which are analyzed back at the storehouse by papyrologists [Rodney Ast](#), a co-director of this season's excavation, and [Julia Lougovaya](#), both of Heidelberg University in Germany. Most of these are pottery fragments, inscribed, for example, with customs passes or receipts for precious water. While I was there, the pair were particularly excited about an exquisitely preserved papyrus, as thin as silk, that took

them hours to painstakingly unroll. Written in Greek, probably in the late first or early second century A.D., it is one of the most extensive texts they've discovered so far. It turns out to be a letter, although details about the sender and recipient are lost; the writer, apparently located somewhere between Berenike and the Nile, was asking his correspondent in the port to send him money and supplies, including olive oil, veal and two wooden tent poles. "It shows that this was a place of supply," Ast says, that despite the remote, barren location, "people here had access to resources."

Intriguingly, the site of the trash dump has also yielded separate archaeological layers with buried animals. The team has found hundreds so far from the first and second centuries A.D., mostly cats but also dogs and young monkeys, laid to rest wrapped in matting or covered with broken pottery. Many are wearing leashes or collars and were nurtured into old age. "People were caring for these animals," says Marta Osypińska, an archaeologist from the University of Wroclaw in Poland, as she shows me the bones. "This is the first site in the ancient world with a pet cemetery."

Finds this season include a miniature dog from the Mediterranean area; a white, long-haired cat possibly imported from Asia; and, Osypińska says, "a monkey hugging a kitten," found just a few days earlier. At first, she assumed the monkeys buried here were from Africa, but when she analyzed their skulls she found they were rhesus and bonnet macaques from India. It would have been a huge investment to care for them for months at sea, she says. "We can imagine these were very special pets." Her colleague Iwona Zych, of the University of Warsaw, says the monkeys in particular conjure Berenike's colorful, adventurous spirit. "Imagine a sailor with a monkey on his shoulder, or, in a tavern, there's a guy with a monkey doing tricks."



A Greco-Roman arch framing Indic gods, from left: Balarama, with a plough; Ekanamsa; Vasudeva, who later became Krishna, with a wheel and club. Roger Anis

Perhaps the most prominent feature of the town, though, is a profusion of shrines. “You stumble from one religious institution to another,” Sidebotham jokes. There’s the northern complex, which featured chapels of various cults built over the centuries, including one that contained the remains of 15 falcons. Elsewhere, there’s a third-century A.D. shrine dedicated to deities from Palmyra, Syria, and a Christian church, dating to the fifth century, in which archaeologists found a lamp inscribed with the message “Jesus, forgive me.”

On the highest ground, facing the sea, was the Isis temple—a walled rectangle roughly 100 by 40 feet. In 2020, the team discovered a Greek inscription above the entrance gate, announcing that the temple was built by a merchant named Marcus Laelius Cosmus around A.D. 20, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius. The gate led to a paved courtyard where the people of Berenike made offerings and dedications. The archaeologists have uncovered the remains of multiple statues here, as well as accompanying inscriptions on stone blocks: a gilded, wooden figure of the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis, probably carved from a broken ship’s mast; a stone head with tight curls, thought to represent a king from Meroe, in what is now Sudan; and two bronze fingers, suggesting that bronze statues, life-size or bigger, once adorned this space. These would have been hugely expensive. Or, as Sidebotham puts it, “There’s some beaucoup bucks being made.” The dedications offer prayers and thanks for safe ocean travels, but the intent wasn’t purely religious; some figures honor administrative

officials such as the local tax collector. “I think everybody who came through went to that temple,” says Bergmann, of the University of Göttingen. “If you have some economic interests, you’d want to be represented here.”

Beyond the courtyard was Berenike’s most sacred space: a series of small, richly decorated rooms at the temple’s rear. Olaf Kaper, an Egyptologist from Leiden University, in the Netherlands, and one of the excavation’s co-directors this year, offers a tour. The design recalls better-known sites along the Nile—Luxor, Aswan, Edfu—but is extremely rare for such a remote location. “We all know famous temples from Egypt, but not out in the Egyptian desert,” he says. “It’s remarkable.” The once-painted stone is badly corroded from exposure to the salty air, but the carvings are still visible: hymns to Isis on every doorway, and papyrus and lily garlanding the walls. On the floor are fallen ceiling blocks carved with stars and vultures, and the sacred pedestal that may have once carried the statue of Isis herself, decorated with the Roman emperor Tiberius holding up the sky.

Taken together, the finds conjure an atmosphere of creativity and opportunity that clearly appeals to many of the archaeologists working here. The town they are uncovering was a vibrant tangle of gods and rituals, lifestyles and languages, with the whole fragile enterprise dependent on winds and currents and the seasonal ebb and flow of the ships. One of the archaeologists describes Berenike as “a beautiful window to the outside world.” Another says it evokes “a bar in a Wild West film,” an eclectic mix of outsiders drawn together by the promise of fortunes and the call of the unknown.

For a Roman citizen or subject, when you reached this harbor, you were already on the edge of the world, far from safety, comfort and civilization, at the most remote and southerly corner of the entire empire. Yet from this precarious spot, people reached even farther, sailing to India, thousands of miles away. What scholars are now realizing is that the rewards for such audacity, both for individuals and for the entire Roman sphere of influence, were huge.

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No port can operate alone. To understand the significance of this outpost, says [Matthew Cobb](#), an ancient historian at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, it’s critical to look across the sea to uncover what he calls “an intricate web of overlapping connections.”



A first- or second-century A.D. papyrus letter, written in Greek, requesting provisions, including olive oil, veal and tent poles. Roger Anis

Off the coast of what is now Yemen, for example, is a rocky island called Socotra, mentioned in the *Periplus* as a stopping point for ships passing between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Socotra's cliffs boast a deep cave with hundreds of inscribed messages, graffiti left by sailors written in South Arabian, Ethiopian, Palmyrene, Bactrian and Greek scripts and languages. In 2019, Strauch analyzed inscriptions from more than 100 Indian visitors written between the second and fifth centuries A.D., concluding that a number of sailors and ship captains hailed from Gujarat, on India's northwestern coast.

And then there's Pattanam, on India's southern Kerala coast, today a quiet, palm-shaded village that Sidebotham describes as Berenike's "sister site." Archaeologists believe this was likely once the great port of Muziris, described in literary sources such as a Tamil epic poem from around the second century A.D., which told how Greek traders exchanged their gold for Indian pepper. In 2006, Indian researchers, led by [P.J. Cherian](#), of the PAMA Institute for the Advancement of Transdisciplinary Archaeological Sciences in Kerala, began excavations at Pattanam and have since found a wharf area, a 20-foot-long wooden canoe apparently used to ferry goods to ships anchored in deeper water, and thousands of pottery sherds from the Mediterranean: amphoras used to transport wine, olive oil and *garum* (a beloved Roman fish sauce).

They've also unearthed spindle whorls and gaming counters; fragments of marble, iron, copper and gold; nearly 100,000 glass beads and thousands more of semiprecious stone; and, in 2020, a rare seal ring made of banded agate, an Indian gemstone, yet carved with an

elegant Egyptian sphinx. (Augustus Caesar wore one just like it early in his political career.) The ring hints at the presence of Greco-Roman craftsmen working with local gems. As on the Egyptian side, Cherian says, the trade route didn't end at Muziris but would have continued across land and sea to India's east coast and on to China. From his perspective, it was Muziris, not Berenike, that formed the "junction between East and West," the central hub that connected the known world.

And as archaeologists are busy analyzing the growing material finds, other scholars are reassessing literary sources to better evaluate the economic impacts of these intercontinental networks. They already knew that trade was robust. In the early first century A.D., before trade reached its peak, the Greek geographer Strabo described eastbound fleets of more than 100 merchant ships. Another key source, a contract known as the Muziris papyrus dating from the second century, is more specific, describing a loan between an Alexandria-based businessman and a merchant for a return voyage to Muziris. On the reverse side, the text details the cargo of a ship called the *Hermapollon*, which included 140 tons of pepper, 80 boxes of nard (an aromatic oil used for perfumes, medicines and rituals), and around four tons of ivory. Its value, after payment of the Roman Empire's 25 percent import tax, was nearly seven million sesterces, which scholars have calculated was easily enough to buy a luxury estate in central Italy, or, if you prefer, to pay 40,000 stonecutters for a year. That translates into some vast fortunes.



Steven Sidebotham, the excavation co-director, photographing the site toward the end of the 2024 season. The University of Delaware archaeologist has been excavating at Berenike since 1994.

Roger Anis

Meanwhile, Rome's emperors were filling their own coffers. In 2014, the independent historian and author [Raoul McLaughlin](#) used sources including the Muziris papyrus to estimate that by the first century A.D., the Roman tax revenues from Indian Ocean trade may have generated as much as one-third of the empire's total income. Cobb puts the figure lower, perhaps at 10 or 15 percent, but he agrees that the volume of such goods would have likely dwarfed those transported along the Silk Road—the network of overland routes that connected China with Rome—which have received much more scholarly and public attention. Just think of the number of camel or donkey loads you would need, he says, to transport the several hundred tons of cargo that could fit onto just one ship.

The huge incomes from these maritime connections would have been vital for supporting Rome's territories and conquests across an empire that stretched from Hadrian's Wall, at the border with Scotland, to the waters of the Persian Gulf. And just as global trade today impacts more than economics, the cultural influences were profound, too. For instance, historians have long thought about Roman trade with the East in terms of luxury items enjoyed by small numbers of Roman elites: Pliny mentions a rock-crystal ladle worth 150,000 sesterces, for example, and an opal ring that cost two million sesterces. But what Berenike emphatically drives home, Sidebotham says, is that trade among the Mediterranean world, Asia, Arabia and Africa “just exploded,” with land and maritime routes complementing each other. “There was a global economy, such as they knew the globe back then. It's not just being used by the tiny elite.”

By the end of the first century, Eastern herbs, spices, clothing and even animals would have changed ordinary people's lives, from the tigers, rhinoceroses and wild boars brought for gladiatorial shows to frankincense and myrrh widely used as perfumes, as medicines and in religious rituals. And black pepper shipped across the Indian Ocean would have radically shifted the “tastescape,” as Cobb puts it, of the Western world. In a Roman cookbook known as *Apicius*, for example, possibly compiled in the first century A.D., pepper is called for in 349 out of 468 recipes, from mulled wine to roast pork.

Elites did consume huge quantities of Eastern goods: At the funeral of Nero's wife Poppaea, the emperor reportedly burned more incense than Arabia could produce in a year. But more modest amounts were within reach of even relatively low-status individuals in remote regions. A tablet dating from the second century A.D., found at the relatively remote Roman fort of Vindolanda, in northern England, records an ordinary soldier's order for two denarii (eight sesterces) worth of pepper. The cumulative effect, Cobb suggests, would have been to give people across the empire a sense of living in “a much larger world” that stretched far beyond Roman realms.



Berenike today is barren desert along the Red Sea. In its Roman-era heyday, it was a bustling port city with homes, shops, shrines and baths. Roger Anis

What is now coming out of Berenike, however, suggests cultural exchange of a wholly unexpected kind.

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“I’ll never forget the day,” Sidebotham says. It was January 18, 2022, and he was in the excavation house, examining some small finds, when a worker ran in with a note saying that something had been found in the temple courtyard. He hurried over to find the trench supervisor, Mariana Castro, grinning widely and hiding something behind her back: several pieces of carved marble, which fit together into an exquisite, haloed head. With its youthful, beatific expression, elongated ears and topknot of tight curls, it could only be a Buddha—the only such find from antiquity anywhere west of Afghanistan.

Two years later, the archaeologists are still trying to make sense of it. In the team’s shared office, Bergmann flips through photographs of the carved head on her laptop screen. (The sculpture itself was quickly removed for safekeeping by Egyptian authorities, who have said they plan to display it in a museum in the northern Egyptian city of Ismailia.) From examining photographs, the team is confident the head belongs to a robed, marble body found in 2018, making a statue a little under 28 inches tall.

The figure is carved from white marble quarried from the island of Prokonnesos, near present-day Istanbul. And it doesn’t look like any Buddha found before or since. “It’s clearly a Buddha, because of the gestures and the way the garments are worn,” Bergmann says,

referring to the right hand raised in reassurance and the left hand holding the robe. “But it does not look Indian at all.”

The drilled, spiral hair, which Bergmann has dubbed “tortellini curls,” appears to be influenced by a hairstyle fashionable with elite Roman women up to around A.D. 140. Likewise the triangular sun rays added to the halo appear more in keeping with Mediterranean sun god traditions than with conventional Buddhas. Remarkably, the team has also found pieces of other, smaller Buddhas, made from local stone. Bergmann suggests they were all carved here by Greco-Roman sculptors, some of whom may have traveled from Alexandria. Perhaps they were given models to copy, possibly little bronze or wooden figurines brought over on ships, and they filled in the details using their own knowledge and expertise.



The city has the world's earliest known pet burial ground, including this monkey from India. Roger Anis

At the time, in the early centuries A.D., the Indian subcontinent was dominated by three powerful dynasties. The Kushan Empire ruled the north, including Gandhara, a region covering areas of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Western Kshatrapas controlled western India, including what's now Gujarat, while the Satavahanas prevailed in the south. Scholars aren't sure precisely where the model for the Berenike Buddha originates from, but Bergmann sees the closest parallels in artistic style with second-century A.D. Buddhas from Gandhara. The Sanskrit inscription, which was found near the Buddha's head barely half an hour later, seems to have a different origin. It dates to A.D. 249, more than a century later,

and has its closest parallels in texts from Gujarat. It, too, appears to have been carved at Berenike, however, uniquely combining Eastern and Western features. “It’s the first Buddhist inscription that we find in Egypt,” Strauch says. “The first inscription in Sanskrit. It’s the only one with a Roman emperor mentioned.”

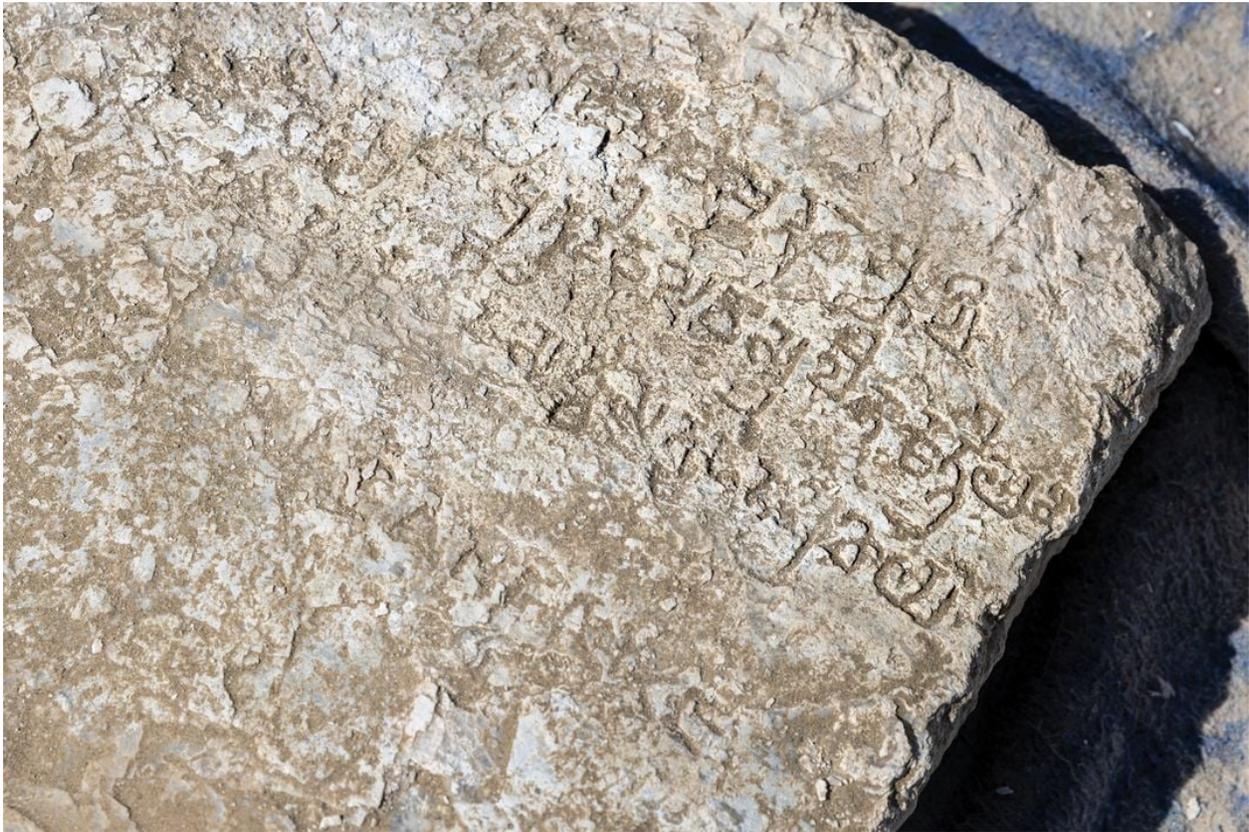
The carved triad is also unprecedented. Bhandare, of the Ashmolean Museum, identifies the figures as early Indic deities: Balarama, holding a plough; Vasudeva, who later became Krishna, with a wheel and a club; and the goddess Ekanamsa. The closest comparisons he can find are on coins from Mathura in northern India (a region associated with the Kushan dynasty). But the Berenike figures are carved from local stone and are surrounded by a typically Greco-Roman decorative arch. Bhandare tentatively dates the stele to between A.D. 50 and 150. “It is absolutely stunning that intimate knowledge of Indian iconography seems to be available in Berenike at this time,” he says.



Kamila Braulinska, an archaeologist, later prepares the head to be photographed. First thought to show a Roman emperor, the head may portray an important local official. Roger Anis

Lougovaya, the papyrologist from Germany, points out just how unexpected it was to discover such items in the Isis temple. “It’s like having an Indian sanctuary in the Vatican,” she says. “It takes cultural exchange to a different level than we have observed anywhere else.” Kaper, the Egyptologist, wonders how worshipers of local cults would have responded to the statues, noting that followers of polytheistic religions were generally welcoming of new faiths. We know that Greeks and Romans tried to recognize their own gods in the Egyptian gods, he says. “They must have done that with the Buddha. It’s completely fascinating.”

A handful of objects related to ancient Indian religions have previously been found in the Roman world, most notably an ivory statuette of a *yakshi* fertility spirit, dated to the first century A.D., unearthed at Pompeii. But the Berenike finds are not just traded objects that have been “picked up from one place and dropped at the other,” Bhandare says. “That’s what sets these things apart.” These locally made items show that people must have been traveling from India and bringing their traditions, religious beliefs and languages with them. “We knew they were bringing in Indian goods,” Ast says. “We didn’t know they were living their lives here, pursuing their cults and rituals.”



The dedication was arranged by a wealthy Indian merchant and conveys a Buddhist message—a surprise for an object found in an Isis temple. Roger Anis

As recently as 2019, Strauch published an article arguing that there was no material evidence for Buddhist communities in the ancient West. Now he has torn up that conclusion. There must have been a community of Indians not just passing through but living and worshiping in Berenike, he says. “This is a social act. They want to have a presence here.” That presence, he goes on, may help to explain how Latin and Greek authors who mentioned Buddhism in their texts, such as the second-century A.D. Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria, learned about the Eastern faith. Scholars have occasionally suggested that Buddhism influenced aspects of early Christianity, from the practices of early Christian monasteries in Egypt to similarities between the life stories of Buddha and Jesus Christ, although most researchers emphasize that there is little evidence for direct links.

Even accounting for the new finds, Bhandare says, it would be “a bit of a jump” to assume significant direct influence. Nevertheless, the finds show that “these people were there, they were exchanging ideas,” he says. “It’s definitely plausible.”

What has researchers most excited, though, is how the finds are helping to change ideas about the people driving the trans-ocean trade. Take the Buddha statue. Shipping the marble and the specialist stonecutters required to work on it from Alexandria to this remote desert port would have been a major undertaking. “It’s definitely a high-status dedication,” Bhandare says. Whoever commissioned the statue must have been wealthy, presumably a shipowner or merchant, and was keen to display that wealth. Similarly, the Sanskrit inscription was carved by an accomplished Indian scribe, and the donor took pains to point out his high class.

In other words, the Indian visitors to Berenike weren’t simply hired hands on Roman ships but wealthy, influential players in their own right—agents, merchants and shipowners—who contributed to the community and stayed for significant periods of time, if not for good. Strauch’s work on the Socotra inscriptions showed that hundreds of Indian travelers stopped over on the island, and they came from multiple levels of Indian society, including Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers) and Vaishyas (farmers and merchants). By contrast, there are no Latin inscriptions and only two in Greek.





The 28-inch marble statue is the first Buddha from antiquity found west of Afghanistan. Exhibiting Eastern and Western styles, it includes a characteristic beatific expression, elongated ears and topknot, plus a Roman hairstyle and Mediterranean-style sun rays. Steven Sidebotham

Such finds make clear that it's no longer possible to think of the trans-ocean trade as a "Roman" endeavor. By the first century A.D., Strauch says, India was "one of the main powers in these transcontinental trade routes." Profits from this trade were "extremely important" for the success of all three ruling dynasties, Strauch says, and for the growth of Buddhism, which they supported. In fact, he suggests, it may have been the Indians, not the Romans, who instigated and drove Indian Ocean trade: "I think the Indians were the main agents." Cobb says that the traditional view that Romans primarily built and sailed the ships, reaping the riches they found in exotic lands, "has fallen to the wayside," a shift in historical understanding that has been "hammered home" by the accumulating finds at Berenike and Socotra.

This shift is also reframing our view of Western impacts on India, where Greeks began to settle after Alexander's conquests. Indo-Greek kings of the second century B.C. famously blended Greek and Indian languages, symbols and beliefs. But these influences are often seen as examples of Western colonizers imposing their culture and dominating other lands. For Strauch, Bhandare and others, the importance of the Berenike finds is to refocus the lens, drawing attention to the Indian merchants, ship captains and sailors who carried their own culture across the ocean, and the role they played in shaping the Western world. "The colonial tradition says that people only came here—we never go there," says Cherian, the archaeologist in Kerala. "But it was two-way."

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Late one afternoon, as the sun dips toward the mountains, Sidebotham takes a walk to the beach, where the sand is strewn with traces of modern ocean trade: water bottles and Pepsi cans and shredded plastic bags. On the way, he passes a small Egyptian temple by the old harbor. It was used during Berenike's final phase, in the fourth and fifth centuries, after the Roman Empire had begun to weaken.



Workers recover the head of a statue, possibly a first-century A.D. ruler, from the “northern complex,” a series of Egyptian and Greco-Roman shrines. Roger Anis

At the time, the temple may have stood on a little island, surrounded by the sea. All that’s visible now is a rectangular mound of coral fragments, but when the team excavated, it must have felt as if the worshipers had only just left. Inside were stone benches and mats made from tamarisk twigs, an altar and a heap of cowrie shells apparently once strung up in a curtain across the door. Ritual items included a bronze bull’s head, carefully placed lotus seeds, a terra-cotta jar containing 50 crescents of silver, and broken bowls still holding the bones from portions of mutton stew. From this later period, Sidebotham’s team still finds ceramics and other goods from across the ocean, including from India. And a few years ago, in the northern complex, they found two inscriptions from the fourth or fifth centuries dedicated not to Roman emperors but Blemmyean kings. The Blemmyes were semi-nomadic tribes indigenous to the eastern desert. The Romans described them as wild, headless barbarians, with faces on their chests. But it appears that after the third century, Roman officials no longer controlled this gateway to the east. Trade continued, but the locals were effectively in charge.

As Christianity spread through Egypt, becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, this watery temple was one of the last outposts of the old faith. The Blemmyes resisted conversion and continued to worship Isis here into the sixth century. As Kaper puts it: “This is where the Egyptian religion dies out.” The last literary reference to Berenike describes an event from around A.D. 525. Then it disappears from history, as

traders found safer, more profitable routes. A few years later, bubonic plague swept up the Red Sea coast. Maybe that is what caused the fading port finally to be abandoned, says Sidebotham. The Blemmyes returned to the desert, and Berenike returned to the sand.

Three decades after Sidebotham first set foot in this remote bay, the secrets unearthed here have proved “beyond expectations,” he says. “The flies drive you crazy. The toilets are awful. But this is my life, right here. This is what I live for.” And he has no plans to stop. With only 2 percent or so of the site excavated so far, he wonders: Could the sand be hiding treasures—silks, ceramics, even statues—from China, 5,000 miles away? It would mean the ships swept by the monsoons into this once-vibrant harbor rivaled the caravans of the Silk Road not only in cash terms but in distance, too, propelling trade networks stretching to the great Han dynasty and the very edge of the known world. “I think it’s probably here,” he says. “We just haven’t found it yet.”

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Jo Marchant | | [READ MORE](#)

Jo Marchant is an award-winning science journalist and former editor at *New Scientist* and *Nature*. She is the author of [The Human Cosmos: Civilization and the Stars](#) and [The Shadow King: The Bizarre Afterlife of King Tut's Mummy](#). Website: [jomarchant.com](http://jomarchant.com)

Roger Anis | [READ MORE](#)

Roger Anis is a photojournalist based in Egypt.

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