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An Inscription from the Reign of Probus: Reflections on the Port of Berenike in the Third Century CE

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I'm grateful to Kamila Braulińska for doing Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) under challenging field conditions on inscriptions recently excavated in Berenike. My thanks are also due to the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities for continued support of the Berenike Project, to colleagues at the Polish Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology, especially Mariusz Gwiazda, for managing the Berenike concession, and to my colleague Steven Sidebotham and the whole Berenike team for everything that makes this such a rewarding mission.

- §1 The stele published here was first exposed in 2015 near the bottom of a pile of large stones in the northwest corner of the Isis temple courtyard at the port of Berenike on Egypt's Red Sea coast.¹ The inscribed side was not revealed until January 2022 after a large roof block had been removed from the top of the pile.



Figure 1. View looking to the SE of stone pile in which the stele was found in the Isis temple courtyard. Arrow indicates the location of the inscription. Photo by Szymon Popławski.

- §2 The stele measures $83 \times 72 \times 9$ cm² and is made of the anhydritic gypsum stone commonly used in Berenike for buildings, statues, inscriptions, etc., which was sourced on Ras Banas, the peninsula that stretches north and east of the port across from Foul Bay.³ Broken on the top and left sides, the dedication comprises at least five lines. Incised guidelines appear at intervals of about three centimeters and give the inscription an unfinished appearance. While such guidelines are apparent in

¹ This article is part of a larger publication project aimed at documenting inscriptions from the port of Berenike, most of which were found in the central Isis temple in recent years. For information about the Isis Temple excavations, see Sidebotham et al. [2019](#), [2020](#), [2022](#), [2023](#).

² Where dimensions are given in this article, the measurements are always in the order of width \times height \times thickness.

³ J.A. Harrell gives a detailed analysis of the local gypsum stone in [Sidebotham et al. 2021](#): 21–22.

other inscriptions from the site,⁴ here they are more pronounced. There is no sign of red paint having been used to highlight the letters, a common practice in Berenike.

- §3 The surface of the stone is now very damaged, and decipherment is seriously impeded by flaking, but it has been possible to read most of the extant text with the help of RTI.⁵ A novelty of this online edition is that it includes an RTI Web viewer for readers to view the images in.
- §4 The lettering of the inscription is largely bilinear with individual letters measuring 2.6–3.0 cm in height. Omicron poses an exception: In several places it is incised so small that it resembles an exaggerated medial dot (cf. the second omicron in Πρόβου in line 3 and that in κυρίου in line 4). Following Σεβαστοῦ at the end of the regnal formula in line 4 is a punctuation mark shaped like an angle bracket (>). A large ivy leaf (*hedera*) is visible after the month and day, Ἄθῦρ κα, in the last line. Whether another leaf was placed before the month name is difficult to say (see comm. *ad loc.*).
- §5 The format of the stele finds parallels in other third-century dedications from Berenike. The stones are in the shape of thin slabs, not the large dedication bases that supported monumental statues which are typical of the first and early second centuries, although the latter type is also found in the third century albeit in smaller formats.⁶ The slabs are too slender to have been self-standing. They must have leaned against a wall or other firm vertical surface. Other examples of the format are found in two Greek dedicatory stelai, one from the joint reign of Gallus and Volusianus (April 17, 253), 58 × 74 × 20 cm, another from the reign of Septimius Severus (September 7, 210), 70 × 73 × 13 cm,⁷ as well as in a Brahmi Sanskrit-Greek stele from the sixth year of Philip the Arab (September 9, 248), 55 × 83 × 17.5 cm.⁸ Like the inscription edited here, the Sanskrit stele features a large blank space at the bottom that might have served as a backdrop to a votive offering or have been decorated in paint or some other medium that has since faded from view.
- §6 The present inscription is a private dedication of an individual whose name is no longer preserved. All that remains of the part identifying the person are the letters -ων at the beginning of line 2. The dedicatee's name is also no longer extant, but it was likely either Isis or Sarapis, the two most common beneficiaries of dedications in the temple. The dedicant made the offering as an expression of piety (εὐσεβείας χάριν, ll. 2–3), the same motivation recorded in two other dedications from Berenike, one for Isis and one for Sarapis.⁹
- §7 All that can clearly be associated with a date, besides the month and day in line 5, is the expression Πρόβου τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Σεβαστοῦ in lines 3–4. As a regnal clause, this formulation is unparalleled in papyri and inscriptions. The closest formula found is the common ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν Πρόβος Σεβαστός.¹⁰ The only other inscription from Egypt dated in the reign of Probus has ὁ κύριος Πρόβος (☞ SEG 40 1565; Kharga Oasis).

4 Of the published inscriptions that show guidelines I can point to a dedication commissioned in 51 CE by Epaphroditus, the freedman of the merchant Marcus Laelius Cosmus, (☞ Ast 2021: 150–151 with Fig. 6) as well as to the Ptolemaic inscription ☞ I.Pan 70 from 133 BCE (☞ Ast 2020).

5 RTI has been employed in order to enhance legibility of the inscription. Information about the technology is available on the ☞ Cultural Heritage Imaging (CHI) website and in ☞ Earl et al. 2010. In addition to RTI, the project uses infrared photography for inked documents and photogrammetry for architectural and sculptural details.

6 Good examples of first- and early second-century large dedication bases from Berenike are in ☞ Ast and Bagnall 2015 and ☞ Ast 2021. An example of a third-century dedication base in a smaller format is BE-15/18 111.040 (inv. 111007); it is from 209 CE and measures 48 × 60 × 49 cm.

7 Both are still unpublished. The same general format is also observed in ☞ I.Portes 86 (August 13, 219; pl. 54.2) from Coptos, although that stele is smaller in size, measuring 47 x 58 (the thickness is not recorded).

8 ☞ Sidebotham et al. 2023: 20–21 with Pl. XXIII.2; full publication of the stele and other Indian artifacts from the port will appear in Sidebotham, Ast et al. (forthcoming 2025).

9 Respectively, these are BE-15/18 111.040 (inv. 111007) and BE-22 150b.011.001 (inv. 150[b]001), both unpublished.

10 ☞ Bureth 1964: 124–125.

§8 It is unclear what, if anything, directly preceded Πρόβου. After ἀγαθοῖς in the middle of line 3 there is space large enough for three to four letters. Within this space, the upper and lower guidelines are very clear, each consisting of doubled lines, as seen in other places on the stone. If Πρόβου marks the beginning of the regnal formula, then we would expect to see the year carved directly before it. There are a couple of vertical incisions visible, either of which might have belonged to the symbol for ἔτους; one could perhaps even make out remnants of a numeral. I have highlighted in Figure 2 below the area in which the traces are suggestive of letters. Alternatively, this space might have been deliberately left so that the year could be added later, which it never was. A final possibility is that Πρόβου is not the beginning of the regnal formula, but rather depends on a word, such as the preposition ὑπέρ, which is no longer legible in the space preceding it. Following this scenario, we might look to the beginning of line 5 for reference to the year, but there, too, it is very difficult to tell if anything was carved.¹¹



Figure 2. Area in which the year symbol and regnal year may have been carved. Photo by Kamila Braulińska.

Berenike in the Third Century

§9 The dedication dates to a period in the history of Berenike and the wider Eastern Desert that, until recently, had not been well represented. In fact, only one third-century inscription had been documented at the port prior to recent excavations in the Isis temple.¹² These excavations have substantially changed this picture, and the third century is now the second best-attested century in terms of precisely dated inscriptions. In total, eight third-century dedications have been registered: Four of them are from the first decade of the century (years 209 and 210) and one is from 215;¹³ the Sanskrit-Greek stele mentioned above dates to 248, and there is a dedication from the reign of Gallus and Volusianus (253);¹⁴ the inscription published here is from the period 276–281. The very latest temple inscription dates to the Tetrarchy (305).¹⁵ This evidence naturally changes our perspective on the period, and there can be no doubt that the port was operating throughout the third century, even if intermittently and on a smaller scale than in the first and early second centuries.

¹¹ See the commentary *ad loc.*

¹² The inscription in question, which is dated 215, was excavated in the so-called Palmyrene shrine; see A.M.F.W. Verhoogt in *Sidebotham and Wendrich 1998*: 193–196 (cf. *SEG 48 1977* and *SB 28 16916*). Although not precisely dated, another inscription from the same shrine likely comes from the late 2nd or early 3rd century: see *SEG 49 2117*; ed. pr. of M. Dijkstra and A.M.F.W. Verhoogt in *Sidebotham and Wendrich 1999*: 207–218. For discussion of the poor representation of the third century in Berenike, see *Sidebotham 2002*: 219–220, which was based on the evidence available at the time.

¹³ Cf. preceding note for the inscription from 215; the others are BE-15 111.021.067 + 111.014.037 (inv. 111005); BE-15/18 111.040 (inv. 111007); BE-15/18 111.030 (inv. 111008); BE-22 150.032.001 (inv. 150001).

¹⁴ See fn. 8 above; the inscription from 253 is BE-15/18 111.030 (inv. 111010).

¹⁵ BE-22 150.033.001 (inv. 150003).

- §10 The principal reason for believing that the third century was a stagnant time in Berenike has been the absence not only of dated texts, but also of coins and ceramics.¹⁶ As far as coins are concerned, what H. Cuvigny and K. Lach-Urgacz say about the *praesidia* of the Eastern Desert could equally apply to Berenike: “the absence of 3rd c. coins is easily explained by the fact that in this period almost only billon tetradrachms were minted, a denomination which people were careful not to lose, while the State relied on old bronze coins of previous reigns to serve in daily exchanges.”¹⁷ In the case of ceramics, very few third-century *loci* have been identified, but third century ostraca and dipinti have been documented among residual small finds. For example, in the area just outside the northern entrance to the Isis temple courtyard, a costrel from the second half of the second or the third century was found alongside a third-century ostrakon that appears to mention Palmyrene archers.¹⁸ Thus, given the irrefutable presence of third century material mainly from the temple but also from other parts of the site, it is tempting to suppose that either the third-century contexts simply await excavation or they have not been properly identified in previous seasons, or both.¹⁹
- §11 A significant body of third century material including dated texts has been excavated in the forts along the road that connected Berenike to the city of Coptos, which was the main emporium in the Nile valley for goods passing through Berenike from the East on their way to Alexandria. This evidence includes ostraca found in the last occupation layers of the fort of Xeron Pelagos, which are dated to 264 and overlap with the latest ostraca from the fort of Didymoi. J.-P. Brun has concluded from this material that the forts were abandoned sometime around 270. In his view, this coincided with the removal of the Palmyrene archers from the area following Zenobia’s capture of Egypt in 270.²⁰ The Probus inscription and the dedication from the reign of the Tetrarchy mentioned above prove that there was activity at Berenike during and after this time, which encourages us to consider pushing the date of the abandonment of the forts somewhat later. The shipments arriving in Berenike were likely still being transported to Coptos so that there must have been at least some infrastructure in place to serve the caravans along the Coptos–Berenike road.²¹
- §12 It is unclear who was residing in Berenike in the late third century. It was a politically tumultuous time in Upper Egypt, with Coptos being a flash point for hostilities. Probus (ca. 280), Galerius (293/94) and Diocletian (297/98) all took measures to deal with unrest fomented by rebels, especially by the semi-nomadic tribe of Blemmyes.²² Coptos’s status as an essential node in the trade network that joined the Mediterranean with the East was surely an important reason for imperial intervention, and this status depended on smooth operations in Berenike. Unfortunately, the inscription edited here does not shed direct light on the situation in Coptos. One might assume from the use of the regnal formula for Probus that imperial structures were still functioning at the port or that there was at least some degree of civic-mindedness, even if administrative controls like those offered by the office of

16 See [Cuvigny 2011](#): 63, where it is also noted that “nothing ... would indicate the physical appearance of ships or harbor facilities or their location” between the late second and early fourth centuries. [Sidebotham 2011](#): 63–64 acknowledges, however, that there was some evidence of activity in the late second and first part of the third centuries.

17 [Cuvigny and Lach-Urgacz 2020](#): 331.

18 See [O.Berenike 4 535](#) with references; the ostrakon is [O.Berenike 4 534](#).

19 Nick Bartos and Roderick Geerts, personal comm. 28.02.2024.

20 [Brun 2018](#) §31; cf. [Cuvigny 2022](#): 113–114 and [Cobb 2023](#): 125.

21 For the suggestion that the preferred sea route in this period led over Clysma and other harbors in the north, see [Nappo 2007](#): 238–239.

22 Accounts in the *Historia Augusta* (Probus 17.2–3 [ed. Hohl] = *FHN* 3.284) and Zosimus (1.71.1 = *Historia Augusta* 3.323) of Probus’s suppression of the Blemmyes, which led to the liberation of Coptos and Ptolemais, are well known. They differ with each other in detail, and attempts have been made to reconcile them; overall, Zosimus is regarded as the more reliable source. See [Kerler 1970](#): 253–254; so, too, [Desanges 1978](#): 343–344 w. n. 227. For the revolts confronted by Galerius and Diocletian, see [Barnes 1976](#): 180–182; [Thomas 1976](#) (on the date of the revolt of L. Domitius Domitianus); [Bowman 1978](#): 26–28; [Rathbone 2002](#): 194. For extensive treatment of material evidence for the presence of Blemmyes in the Eastern Desert of Egypt in the third century, see the contributions by Cuvigny, Chaufray, Cooper and Gates-Foster in [Cuvigny 2022](#); for discussion of papyrological evidence related to Blemmyes, see [Cuvigny 2021](#): 415–437. [Pollard 2013](#): 3–9, 33–35 looks at the security situation in Egypt in the late third and the fourth century, and at government measures (mainly Diocletian’s) to strengthen it.

the prefect of the desert no longer existed.²³ However, we cannot discount the possibility that the Blemmyes had taken over both Coptos and Berenike by this time, but were employing Roman imperial regnal formulas to date dedications.²⁴ Of course, the inscription edited here could postdate Probus's intervention and thus reflect a situation in which the imperial administration had reasserted itself. A further possibility is that our sources have exaggerated the discord in Coptos,²⁵ and trade channels had not been disrupted in any meaningful way. Without additional evidence, we are unable to ascertain who was organizing trade in Berenike in the time of Probus or how regional politics were affecting the port.

Figure 3. Visualization of RTI file in DeepZoom.

BE-15/18/22 111.999.001;
inv. 111016. TM 998119

83 (w) × 72 (h) × 9 (d)

276–281 CE, November 17/18
Berenike

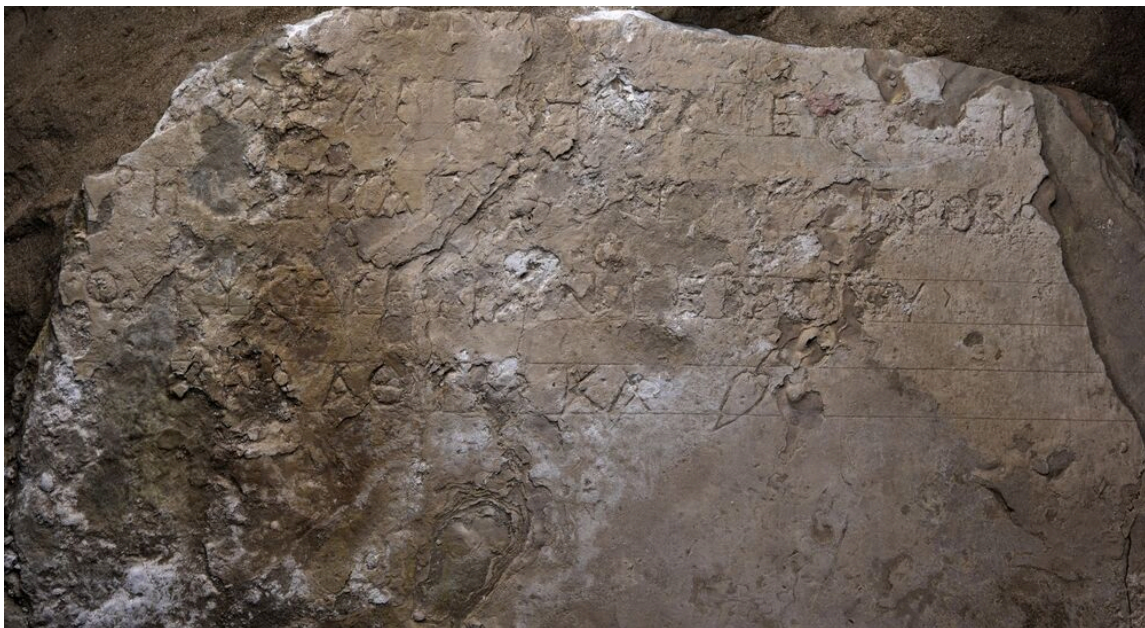


Figure 4. Dedication from the reign of Probus. Photo by Kamila Braulińska.

 [-ca.?-] [-ca.?-]
 [-ca.3-] ων ἀνέθηκεν εὐσ[εβ]εῖα[ς]
 [χ]άριν ἐπ' ἀγαθοῖς [-ca.4-(?)] Πρόβο[υ]
 τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Σεβαστοῦ
 5 [-ca.?-] (?) Ἄθῆρ κα ἥ

“... set this up as an expression of piety for the benefits ... of Probus our lord Augustus...Hathyr 21 (*hedera*).”

- 23 At Berenike the latest reference to the prefect of the desert comes sometime after the transfer of the *ala Herculiana* to Coptos in 183 (☞ SEG 48 1977). Outside Berenike, on the road leading to Coptos, the last securely dated reference to the office is in 219; see ☞ Cuvigny 2021: 104, 109, 127–132.
- 24 We know that at least by the late fourth or early fifth century the Blemmyes were using their own regnal system to date inscriptions, which appears to have been ‘keyed’ to Diocletianic eras. This is evidenced by an inscription from Berenike dated to the 10th year of the Blemmye King Isemne; see ☞ Ast and Rądkowska 2020.
- 25 ☞ Rathbone 2002: 195–196.

- §13 2 On autopsy, the reading [ca. 3]αρωγ seemed plausible, but not firm enough to be printed in the text.
- §14 The letters EY of the last word are easily read. Upsilon is followed by a vertical stroke connected to a horizontal hasta on top that sticks out to the right; this could be the top of either Σ or Π. At the end of the line is I and part of A. While εὐπλοίας could fit these traces, it would require much less space than is present on the stone. Moreover, part of E can probably be discerned before I. Thus, the reading εὐσεβείας is preferable.
- §15 3 There is empty space large enough for a single character between [χ]άρις and ἐπ'. While blank space may have marked a vacat, it is also possible that a punctuation mark stood there.
- §16 For discussion of the space between ἀγαθοῖς and Πρόβου, see the introduction above. ἐπ' ἀγαθοῖς is an uncommon expression in dedications from Egypt. Much more common is the singular ἐπ' ἀγαθῶ, which is attested also in numerous dedications from Berenike. The plural ἐπ' ἀγαθοῖς occurs in papyri of the late second and the third century CE, many of them connected to journeys of the Egyptian prefect; see BGU 13 2211.4n.
- §17 5 There appear to be deliberate incisions on the stone before the month name, which resemble the tips of two diagonal lines, a possible theta, and a rounded shape. Since Probus's title certainly ended in the previous line, they cannot belong to that. One possibility is that ἐπ' ἀγαθῶ was carved there, but there are two problems with this interpretation: 1) it does not account for the two diagonal lines (//) visible just to the right of the large lacuna; 2) it is hard to fit ω between what could be Θ and the round sign before alpha in Ἀθύρ. Another possibility is that the lines are from two slanting strokes that followed an L-shaped ἔτους symbol (L//), which was followed by Δ, not Θ. On this interpretation, the round sign before the alpha would be part of another *hedera*. If this is correct, the date of the inscription will be 17 November 278. But we cannot exclude the possibility that cracks on the stone give the (false) impression of lettering and no year was recorded in this line, as it had already been referred to in line 3 (see above).

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