

## KOPTOS (KIFT)

In the Classical Writings, Papyri, and Inscriptions

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Koptos is one of the most ancient towns of Upper Egypt, and about 620 Kilometers south of modern Cairo. Its name has suffered but a very little change throughout its long history. The ancient Egyptians<sup>1</sup> called it Gbtyio, the Greeks<sup>2</sup> "ΚΟΠΤΟΣ", the Romans<sup>3</sup> "Coptus", the Copts<sup>4</sup> "KBT, KEYT" and finally the Arabs Kift.

The town was mentioned several times by some classical authors, in papyri and inscriptions of the Ptolemaic and Roman eras. But unlike other ancient Egyptian towns, such as Thebes (mod. Luxor), and Memphis it did not have its fair share of consideration in classical writings. For as we shall see later, the town played and indeed has always played an important economic as well as a national role in the life of the Egyptians.

Strangely enough, there is no reference to Koptos in the Classical writings, which have survived, before the Roman rule in Egypt.

The first author to mention Koptos is the Asiatic Greek geographer Strabo (25 BC), who refers to the town in two places of his "Geography", Pliny less than a century later (AD.23 or 24-79),

describes it three times It is also mentioned by Athenaios (fl. C.A.D.200) (5).

Strabo visited the town in the company of his close friend Aelius Gallus, the second Roman prefect of Egypt. He does not seem to have stayed long enough there to know the town well, otherwise, he would have described it in greater detail.

Strabo locates the town<sup>6</sup> immediately after Tentyra (Dandarah), which latter, as he says lies west of the Nile bank, and another town or village, called Typhonia<sup>7</sup>. Thus he says that after Typhonia one comes to the canal that leads to Koptos. He further on<sup>8</sup> says that it is situated at the end of the isthmus along which the Nile valley- Red sea route runs. He also (9) correctly places it in the bad region (i.e upper Egypt )

Pliny the Elder , writing after Strabo seems to agree completely with his predecessor, when he describes (10)Koptos as a prefecturate of towns ( praefectura appidorum or nomos) among other nomoi (i.e. provinces ) that then constituted the Thebais (i.e. Thebaid)

Concerning the population of Koptos, Strabo, as an eye-witness, observes that the town was common to both Egyptians and Arabians<sup>11</sup>.

Strabo however failed to have observed that the town was also common to other races such as Greeks, Romans and also most probably Asians, as some literary and documentary sources testify<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps, Strabo considered other nationalities and races as foreigners residing temporarily in the town.

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We shall observe, however, that what attracted the attention of the Classical authors was the important role, which Koptos played in trade activities between East and West. Thus, in addition to his description of the site of the town given above, Strabo states<sup>13</sup> that in his time Koptos was the emporium of Indian, Ethiopian as well as

Arabian cargoes. He also points<sup>14</sup> out that at that time, although a proportion of East-West trade was still conveyed by sea and land or by land through Arabia as far as Petra, the capital of Nabataea, then to Rhinocolura (Al-Arish) and from there finally to the West, cargoes were for the most part transported across the Red sea from the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome (Al-Hawra) to Myos Hormos (Abu Shaar Al-Kibli on the Egyptian Coast of the Red sea). And from there by camels over to Koptos in the Thebais, then in a canal leading to the Nile, whence to Alexandria.

Strabo, besides makes it clear (9XVII.i.45) that although there were two trade routes connecting Myos Hormos and Berenice (Al-Harras) on the Red sea with Koptos and/or Apollonopolis (most probably Kena), which latter lied not far distant from the former (on the other end). Yet, Strabo adds (loc.cit.) that Myos Hormos and Koptos had high repute, and people frequented these places.

Pliny, too stresses the position of Koptos as an important Centre for East-West trade. He describes (N.H.V.xi.60) Koptos as the market (emporium) near the Nile for Indian and Arabian merchandise "Coptos

Indicarum Arabicarumque oppidum". Pliny, however, does not make any reference to the Ethiopian or rather the African merchandise which was clearly stated in Strabo's work. Would that mean that trade between Egypt and the Western World on one side and Ethiopia (i.e. East Africa) on the other had ceased by Pliny's time?

Moreover, Pliny, in his elaborate description of the trade route along the Eastern Desert (N.H. VI.xxvi-101), seems to imply that Myos Hormos was in his time no longer in use as a trading port, or at least its importance diminished and that Berenice had replaced it.

A modern view<sup>15</sup>, however, seems to disagree with Pliny's statement above quoted. This view suggests that both routes linking Koptos with Myos Hormos and Berenice were still in use up till the early second century A.D. long time after Pliny had written his statement.

The view that Koptos was a very important trade centre during both the Ptolemaic and Roman eras is also supported by papyrus testimony. Third century BC papyri show that Alexandria trade with the interior and the outside world was already in full swing. And that most of Alexandria's export and import trade with Arabia and the south was carried on the Nile at least as far as Koptos. Thus the Nile and its associated canals carried not only internal trade, but also a good proportion of foreign trade.

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Later on, a recently published papyrus from the Vienna collection, dating to mid-second century A.D. supplies illuminating detail. It contains <sup>16</sup> the text of an agreement between two shippers whereby one contracts to serve as agent for a cargo belonging to the other that, having originated in Muziris, had apparently just arrived in some Red Sea port. He promises the following :

"I will give to your camel driver 170 talents, 50 drachmas for use on the road to Koptos, and I will convey (sc. your goods) inland through the desert under guard and under security to the public warehouses for receiving revenues at Koptos and I will place (them ) under your ownership and seal, or of your representatives or of whoever of them is present, until loading aboard at the river and I will load (them) aboard at the required time on a seaworthy boat on the river and... will convey (them) downstream to the warehouse that receives the duty of one-fourth at Alexandria, and I will similarly place (them) under the ownership of you or your representative.

By the end of the third century A.D. the Koptos- Red sea trade route seemed to have been blocked for Greek traders. If that had taken place, it might have accounted for discontent in Koptos, which prompted in a series of revolts in 296 AD during the reigns of both Diocletianus and Galerius. These revolts were immediately crushed and Koptos and the neighbouring town of Busiris were destroyed . As a result a terminus for the caravan route was founded at

Maximianopolis (presumably Kena) a few miles north of Koptos. It is not impossible that the loss of trade connections with the East had vitally affected the caravan trade of Koptos and the luxury trade of Alexandria as well.<sup>17</sup>

In Koptos, too, was located a custom-house, where customs were levied on passengers and more probably on goods passing by the city. This is testified by a presence at Koptos of a stele on which are inscribed an elaborate list of fees levied on passengers rather than on goods.<sup>18</sup>

The welfare and prosperity of Koptos did not entirely depend on the role that it played as a trading post. For the town in ancient times used to produce wine, which Athenaeus<sup>19</sup> ranked among the best brands that Egypt produced.

Beside its trade role and its wine product Koptos also had also mineral resources, which were mined from the adjacent desert region. In this respect. (Strabo reports):<sup>20</sup> "On this isthmos (the road between Koptos and the Red Sea) are also the mines of smaragdus (i.e. emerald), where the Arabians dig deep tunnels, I might call them, and of other precious stones."

*ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ ἰσθμῷ τούτῳ καὶ τὰ τῆς  
σμαραγδοῦ μέταλλά ἐστι, τῶν Ἀράβων ὀρυκτόντων  
βαθεῖς τινὰς ὑπονόμους, καὶ ἄλλων λίθων πολυτελῶν.*

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There are also other evidences to corroborate Strabo's previous statement. For long before Strabo wrote, a limestone placque of the reign of Euergetes II. (145-116 BC) , carries a dedication to the Samothracian Gods when saved from perils by a Cretan comander of ships operating in the Red Rea, who was also charged with the collection of precious stones from the area of Koptos and the provisions of convoys for caravans carrying incense and other foreign goods <sup>21</sup> These minerals, however, continued to be exploited by the Roman authorities. <sup>22</sup>

As a result of the very important role it played in the economic life of ancient Egypt and since it became a centre of national resistance to foreign domination, Koptos was closely watched and heavily guarded by the Romans. To ensure stability and to secure stability they stationed a military garrison there. This fact was attested by papyri documents dating to the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. <sup>23</sup>.

Koptos, moreover, was a place of exile to which were sent undesirable elements as exiles. In this respect we find that Mahaffy <sup>24</sup> was the first modern scholar to point out an Egyptian stele found at Koptos . This stele refers to Arsinoe I daughter of Lysimachos, who was banished there by her husband Ptolemy II Philadelphos, because she was accused of planning a conspiracy against him. This custom of banishing away unwanted persons to remote and isolated areas in Upper Egypt, Nubia, Sinai, and the oasis of the Wetern desert was

practised throughout the Egyptian history by practically all powers both national and foreign that controlled Egypt.



- 1) For the name of Kift see Alan H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica* vol. II p. 28
- 2) Strabo, XVI. IV, 24, XVII 1, 44; Athenaios, 3
- 3) Pliny, N.H. V. ix. 49; xi. 60, VI. xxvi 101
- 4) See Gardiner, loc. cit.
- 5) Athenaios, loc. cit
- 6) Strabo, XVII I 44.
- 7) An unidentified place so far
- 8) Strabo, XVII. I. 45
- 9) Strabo, XVI I. 24
- 10) Pliny the Elder, op cit V ix. 49
- 11) Strabo, XVII. i. 44 See also the *Periplus Erythraei*, by Lionel Casson (Princeton UP. 1989) p. 34 (introduction ... it tells of the presence at Koptos of businessmen of Aden and Palmyra.
- 12) Casson (loc. cit) speaks of Roman as well as Indian merchants involved in the trade with Africa, Arabia and India that passes via Koptos to and from Alexandria
- 13) XVII. I. 45
- 14) XVI. iv. 24
- 15) See: P. Frazer, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. I pp. 146, 147.
- 16) See Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, p. 13 of the introduction.

- 17) see Allen Chester Johnson, *Egypt and the Roman Empire* pp.143, 144, see also Alan K. Bowman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs*, p.44.
- 18) I.G.R. 1183 (in a *History of Egypt under Roman Rule*, by J.Grafton Milne, P. 162 (London 1924)
- 19) Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai*. I. 33 D-F
- 20) Strabo, *XVII*i 45
- 21) see P. Frazer, *op. cit.* p.180
- 22) *Ibid* P. 801
- 23) see P. Amh. 107 . AD 185 ( a Receipt for Military Supplies), and A Letter (P. Oxy. 1666) 3rd Cent. A.D.
- 24) *Apud*. Ed. Bevan, *Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty* P. 59