Cyrenaica and the Neighbours: Evidence of Trade and Absence of Evidence

Kristian Göransson

Introduction

Several Greek cities along the Cyrenaican coast, such as Apollonia, Taucheira and Euesperides, flourished as important nodes in long-distance maritime trade with the rest of the Greek world. But what were the commercial contacts with the Cyrenaican cities' immediate neighbours, Tripolitania and Egypt, like? Excavations in Cyrenaica have yielded a fair amount of Punic material but what about Egypt? Did Cyrenaica import commodities from Egypt, and if so what was such a trade made up of? How did the markets operate and what might have been traded in return from Cyrenaica to its eastern and western neighbours? This paper aims at investigating the sources – texts as well as archaeology – available from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period in an attempt to answer these questions. The period studied ranges from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period with a focus on the 4th and 3rd centuries BC. It will, admittedly, be a sketchy overview with selected examples of evidence of trade, but I hope to be able to raise some questions for discussion and points of departure for future research.

The current political situation in Libya has sadly made fieldwork come almost to a complete halt. The archaeological evidence on which this article is based comes to a disproportionate extent from the excavations of the westernmost of the Greek cities in Cyrenaica, Euesperides (Benghazi). The excavations were conducted between 1999 and 2007 by the Society for Libyan Studies, under the direction of Andrew Wilson, Paul Bennett and Ahmed Buzaian. Preliminary reports were published every year in *Libyan Studies,*[1] and two doctoral theses were written based on the substantial quantified pottery assemblage from the site.[2] Therefore a lot is known about the economic life of this city thanks to a much more detailed analysis of relative proportions of different kinds of imported and locally produced pottery than what has been done elsewhere in the region.

Background

To set the scene very briefly, Cyrene was founded by Greeks from Thera on an plateau of the Jebel Akhdar, 25 km from the sea, and this event is traditionally dated to 631 BC.[3] The city was a kingdom ruled by the Battiad dynasty, named after the *oikistes,* king Battus I. Later in the seventh and early sixth centuries other Greek settlements were founded throughout Cyrenaica: Taucheira, Euesperides and Barce. Excellent arable land on the plains around Cyrene and Barce made Cyrenaica a major producer and exporter

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of grain. However, the most famous export commodity – and probably the most valuable – was *silphion,* a giant fennel known in Latin as *silphium.* The plant grew wild in Cyrenaica only. Its fruit and resin were used for culinary and medical purposes and the Cyrenaeans considered it the gift of Apollo. Silphium features prominently on the coins of Cyrene. Herodotus notes that silphium grew all the way to the mouth of the Syrtic Gulf in the west,[4] probably on the lower escarpments of the Jebel Akhdar. Attempts to cultivate silphium had failed, and gradually it became rare until, in the time of emperor Nero, it became extinct.[5]

Cyrenaica and Egypt

The Western Desert separates Cyrenaica from Egypt and it should be stressed that communications overland are anything but easy. Likewise, communications in an east-west or west-east direction by sea are also difficult due to the prevailing north-westerly wind, which makes sailing along the North African coast a very risky business. Sailing eastwards from Cyrenaica one would risk being driven on-shore and sailing westwards from Alexandria one would have to sail straight into the prevailing wind.[6]

The historical sources have quite a lot to say about contacts between Cyrenaica and Egypt and in the following we shall turn our attention to this. Herodotus writes that the Greek expansion in Cyrenaica seriously worried the native Libyans and sparked them to invite the Egyptians for help against the Greeks. In 570 BC Apries sent an army to Libya, but he was defeated. Diplomacy proved a better way for both Egyptians and Greeks when Amasis (or Ahmose) II (569–526 BC), the successor of Apries, married the Cyrenaean princess Ladikè, daughter of Battus II and sent dedications to Cyrene: "a gilt image of Athena and a painted picture of himself".[7]

The stability between Cyrene and Egypt did not last long: in 525 BC the Persians took Egypt and in order to avoid an invasion the leading Cyrenaican cities, Cyrene and Barce, submitted to the Persians. Trouble within the royal family as well as between the nobles of Cyrene and Barce escalated. As king Arcesilas III was murdered in Barce by Cyrenaean enemies, the Persian governor of Egypt marched into Cyrenaica in 515 BC, capturing Barce and reaching as far west as Euesperides. The reign of Arcesilas IV, the last king of Cyrene, also ended violently with his murder at Euesperides in *c.* 440 BC after which followed an aristocratic and later a republican form of government in Cyrene.[8]

Alexander the Great came to Egypt and met Cyrenean ambassadors at Siwa in 332 BC and they offered him their support and loyalty. Diodorus[9] describes how in the 320s the Spartan adventurer Thibron invaded Cyrenaica with 7000 mercenaries and tried to create a kingdom for himself there. Euesperides and Barce sided with him. War on a large scale between Thibron and Cyrene followed. In this war Cyrene was aided by Libyan tribesmen as well as Carthaginians, but they could not stop Thibron from laying siege to Cyrene. Cyrenaean exiles had pleaded with Ptolemy in Alexandria to come to the city's

aid. Ptolemy took advantage of this excellent opportunity to invade Cyrenaica and sent the Macedonian general Ophellas to Cyrene with an army which defeated, captured and executed Thibron.

Around 300 BC Magas, the stepson of Ptolemy, was appointed governor of Cyrenaica. Magas ruled for almost fifty years and styled himself king, *basileus,* rather than governor. In doing so Magas can be said to have restored the Cyrenaean kingdom after more than a century of republican rule. Magas remained loyal to Ptolemy, but this changed when his half-brother Ptolemy II Philadelphus ascended the throne. From *c.* 282 BC Magas was in revolt against Ptolemy II for around twenty years until 261 BC when he was reconciled with Ptolemy II, and left more or less independent. A statue of Ptolemy was set up in the temple of Apollo in Cyrene confirming the reconciliation between the two kings.[10]

At the end of his life Magas (who died *c.* 250 BC) betrothed his daughter Berenice to the future Ptolemy III Euergetes to secure the continuation of his kingdom in Cyrene. Ptolemy III was installed as governor of Cyrene beside his future bride. His accession to the throne in 246 BC was soon followed by the wedding. As Ptolemy embarked on the Third Syrian War (246–245 BC) Berenice was left to rule. At that time she refounded Euesperides under the royal name of Berenice. She was hailed as *basilissa* on coins and she administered affairs in Alexandria. Cyrenaica was now controlled directly by the Ptolemies in Alexandria. During the rule of Ptolemy III, Cyrene declined somewhat, Barce even more and Euesperides was completely abandoned in favour of the new city Berenice.[11]

Another Ptolemaic city foundation in Cyrenaica is Ptolemais, which was probably founded already by Ptolemy I.[12] Mueller, building on Fraser, says that the interest of the Ptolemies may have lain even further westward and Ptolemais may have been built with the intention of creating a city that could support a continuous westward expansion and become the capital of Ptolemaic Cyrenaica.[13] Cyrenaica functioned effectively as a buffer zone for Ptolemaic Egypt. The new settlements in Cyrenaica were perhaps part of a defence line which would protect Egypt from Carthage.[14] This way they would also control incoming trade in Cyrenaica.[15]

The Ptolemies' need for increased revenue led to more extensive and more intensive agricultural exploitation in the Early Ptolemaic Period.[16] Ptolemy II's expansion into the deserts and the Red Sea coast shows that southern Egypt and the roads out to the coast, and through the oases in the west, were vital to the interests of the early Ptolemaic state. It has been suggested by several scholars that control of the trans-Saharan trade routes was one of the main reasons for the Ptolemaic interest in Cyrenaica, and thus a reason for founding new settlements there.[17]

Caravan Trade and the Sahara

Trade routes across the Sahara linked Egypt with the Fazzan where the Garamantes lived. Is there a Cyrenaican connection in this trade? Perhaps some trade went from Awjila or al-Jaghbub up to Cyrene and the coastal settlements like Ptolemais? These are difficult questions to answer, but surveys and excavations in the Libyan Fazzan,[18] demonstrate that contact between the Mediterranean coast and the Libyan Sahara existed from the fourth century BC to the sixth or seventh century AD, with a period of particularly intense contact from the late first century AD onwards when there is something like a regular caravan trade.[19] Much of this data is too late for the topic of this paper, but there may well have been trade in what Mattingly calls the Proto-Urban Garamantian period (500–1 BC).[20]

The Punic West

We will now turn to the west, to the Punic world, and begin by looking at the results of the study of the amphorae from the excavations at Euesperides. Amphorae from the Punic world were identified as coming primarily from Tunisia, Tripolitania and western Sicily, but also from the Iberian peninsula and the Straits of Gibraltar. The Punic amphorae make up 5% of the quantified amphora assemblage.[21] Before the publication of the results from Euesperides, the general view had been that trade between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania was limited. The Syrtic Gulf constituted a natural barrier due to treacherous shallows, dangerous currents and its inhospitable land. The pottery from Euesperides made it possible to establish the level of Punic trade with Cyrenaica. Not only are 5% of the amphorae Punic, but 15% of the coarse wares from the site are Punic imports.[22] The archaeological finds speak clearly of established, inter-regional trading activities between the Punic world and Cyrenaica.[23]

A war broke out *c.* 380 BC between Barce and Cyrene on the one hand and Carthage on the other. Wilson thinks the conflict centred on the trade across the Syrtic Gulf or along its shores.[24] The peace treaty of 340 BC settled the frontier between Greek and Punic territories. It is interesting to note that precisely from this period, the mid-fourth century BC, trade in Euesperides seems to intensify and extend westwards. Wilson has pointed out that this is contemporary with the first issues of bronze coinage in Cyrenaica (325 BC) and that the introduction of small change transformed the way coinage could be used and facilitated commerce at every level.[25]

The emerging picture when one looks at the combined archaeological evidence from Euesperides, is that there was extensive trade between Cyrenaica and the Punic world in the fourth and third centuries BC. In the city which succeeded Euesperides, Berenice, the proportion of Punic imports is noticeably lower than at Euesperides a hundred years earlier.[26] I agree with Wilson that this reflects "the increasing orientation

of North African trade towards Italy and the western Mediterranean in the aftermath of the Punic Wars, and Rome's emergence as the dominant power in the central Mediterranean."[27]

Exports from Cyrenaica

The main export from Cyrenaica would have been grain, but as previously mentioned silphium was the most famous and most valuable commodity. Silphium very likely grew on the pre-desert steppe south of the coastal cities including Euesperides. After the picking of the plants any refinement of silphium could be done in the cities. Theophrastus mentions the mixing of silphium with brine before the produce was shipped in pottery jars.[28] Silphium was also shipped in bundles as shown on the famous Arcesilas cup,[29] where the king of Cyrene oversees the weighing and loading of silphium.[30] Elsewhere I have put forward the idea that it is tempting to think that one or several of the Cyrenaican amphora types was used for the export of silphium derivatives.[31] The kings of Cyrene had a strong interest in silphium and the selling of it was a royal monopoly. From a passage in Strabo we are told that silphium was illicitly traded from Cyrenaica to Carthage from where it was shipped all over the known world.[32] Wilson has suggested that this trade may have gone via Euesperides, given its location as the westernmost city of Cyrenaica.[33]

Purple dye production was another important component in the economy of Euesperides.[34] The archaeological finds indicate a well-organized, large scale industrial activity involving a high degree of specialized labour. This must also have encompassed the surrounding *chora* of Euesperides and the interaction with the semi-nomadic, pastoralist economies of the Libyan tribes, who presumably supplied the city with the wool used in this textile industry. The ready textiles may have been exported.

Cyrene was famous for its horses and we know for example from Diodorus that Alexander received 300 horses and five four-horse chariots from the ambassadors he met at Siwa.[35]

Rostovtzeff notes that Ptolemaic Egypt relied on horses from elsewhere, including Cyrenaica.[36]

Conclusions

To sum up, one could say that quite a lot of information is available in the written sources on Egyptian meddling in Cyrenaican affairs, but that there is no archaeological evidence of trade. Is this surprising? Did trade between Egypt and Cyrenaica exist? If so, what was traded? Prevailing wind conditions in Cyrenaica encouraged sailing north to south or south to north rather than east to west or west to east. The Western Desert

separates Egypt from Cyrenaica, but some of the goods carried along the caravan trade routes from the Red Sea and Egypt may have reached the Greek cities in Cyrenaica.

For the Punic West and its interaction with Cyrenaica the situation is the opposite; we have very little information from the sources, but we do have archaeological evidence of extensive trade in the fourth and third centuries BC. This evidence comes from Euesperides, the city which lay closest to Tripolitania and may not be representative of Cyrenaica as a whole.

The ceramic evidence demonstrate that trade took place despite difficulties such as the treacherous waters and sandbanks of the Syrtic Gulf, and the prevailing northwesterly wind. Most of the trade in perishable goods has left no traces and one can only speculate and suggest more or less plausible hypotheses of what was traded. A more productive way forward, to my mind, would be a careful examination of pottery at sites in Egypt and the Punic west, which might lead to the identification of Cyrenaican pottery there. This might in turn shed more light on possible economic contacts between areas that are so close, but yet seem so isolated from one another.

Notes

[1] See Bennett et al. 2000; Wilson et al. 1999; 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006.

[2] K. P. Swift's 2005 DPhil thesis from University of Oxford looked at the coarse wares (Swift 2005) while K. Göransson's 2007 PhD thesis from Lund University looked at the transport amphorae (Göransson 2007). Zimi 2019 gives a good overview of the total ceramic assemblage from Euesperides.

[3] For the foundation of Cyrene see Hdt. 4.150–158. A good overview of the Greek settlement in Libya can be found in Austin 2008.

[4] Hdt. 4.169. See also Strabo 17.3.22.

[5] Plin. NH 19.39.

[6] Fulford 1989, 171.

[7] Hdt. 2.181–182.

[8] For a detailed account see Chamoux 1953, 205–206.

[9] Diod. Sic. 18.19–20.

[10] See van Oppen 2015, 8–9 for a very detailed scrutiny of the sources and discussion of the chronology.

[11] See Göransson 2007, 28 for more on the historical events described here in brief with references.

[12] Mueller 2006, 145.

[13] Fraser 1972 I, 63 and Mueller 2006, 145.

[14] Hölbl 2001; Gill 2016, 155.

[15] Manning 2010, 106.

[16] Thompson 2008, 35.

[17] Gill 2016 with ref. to Hölbl 2001, 18; Huss 2001, 103–104.

[18] E.g. Mattingly 2003.

[19] Wilson 2017.

[20] Mattingly 2003, 248–249.
[21] Göransson 2007, 174–192.
[22] Swift 2005.
[23] Göransson 2007, 220. See also the discussion in Zimi 2019.
[24] Wilson 2013, 137.
[25] Wilson 2013, 153–154.
[26] Riley 1979, 112–236 and discussion in Göransson 2007, 220–222.
[27] Wilson 2013, 155. See also Göransson 2013 on Italian imports at Euesperides and Berenice.
[28] Theophr. Hist. Pl. 6.3.1–6.
[29] This Laconian vase found at Vulci is displayed in the Cabinet des médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris.
[30] For the contrasting view that wool and not silphium is being weighed, see Applebaum 1979, 19, building on Lane 1933/1934 and Benton 1959. See Göransson 2007, 218–219 for a more detailed discussion on silphium.
[31] Göransson 2007, 219.
[32] Strabo 17.20.
[33] Wilson, pers. comm.
[34] See Wilson and Tébar Megías 2008 on the production of purple dye at Euesperides.
[35] Diod. Sic. 17.49.2–3.
[36] Rostovtzeff 1941, 293.

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