

The ruins of the ancient harbor of Berenike Troglodytika lie buried in the desert sands on the western coast of the Red Sea some 825 km south of Suez and about 300 km south of Quseir, the next large ancient and medieval port on the coast. The port was located in a small sheltered lagoon, hidden from the northern winds by the rocky cape of Ras Benas. The town of Roman date was constructed on a fossil reef projecting into the sea, directly on top of the earlier settlement established by the Ptolemaic kings. Archaeological investigations have been carried out on the site since 1994, first by a Dutch–American team (until 2001) and then by a Polish–American project (2008 ongoing). They have revealed a picture of a bustling international harbor with a web of trade contacts reaching in the 1st and 2nd century AD from Greece and Italy in the north and west to Arabia Felix, India and the Malaya in the east as well as Ethiopia and the coastal regions of East Africa in the south. The finds from Berenike include Indian textiles, pepper and precious gems, coins from the Axumite kingdom in Ethiopia and the Indo-Parthian kingdom, incense from South Arabia, beads from Java among others, and many others. They are the best material evidence to show how merchants from all over the Roman Empire took advantage of the bold and farsighted investment made by the Ptolemaic kings. But before the Polish–American team undertook excavations specifically in the Ptolemaic-Hellenistic part of Berenike in 2012, next to nothing was known about this first foundation, older by almost 300 years than the successful Roman harbor.

Extended analysis of a magnetic mapping of the unexplored part of the site, backed by archaeological testing in selected places, brought the spectacular discovery of parts of the early Hellenistic fortifications that had constituted the first step of the urban foundation. A huge multi-phase structure, rectangular in shape (160 m by 80 m) was traced on the map. Available evidence indicates that it was a fortified enclosure with storage and workshop functions. Test trenches also revealed sections of the earliest defenses, which appear to have encompassed (at least in the western part of the complex) a set of two parallel walls built of stone blocks, planned along a broken line and fortified at the turns with massive square towers. Remains of dwellings or administrative structures were also uncovered, as well as rubbish dumps of Hellenistic date with intact ceramic vessels, Hellenistic coins and, among others, the bone remains of a young elephant. The ruins of a well preserved fortified gate from the beginnings of Ptolemaic rule in Egypt (3rd century BC) were uncovered over the past two seasons. The gate was located on top of a subterranean rock-cut complex, which has not been explored fully as yet and which could have been either a storeroom or a water cistern complete with tunnel and an associated set of installations for collecting and storing water. There is also a presumed bath complex associated with these remains.

The described remains are of the highest scholarly value as they are the first known example of Hellenistic defensive urban architecture in all of the western Red Sea coast and the only preserved complex of its kind from all of Egypt (the fragmentary fortifications of Alexandria are now dated to the Roman and Mamluk ages). Moreover, no other Hellenistic architecture of any substance has not been excavated in any of the towns and harbors founded by the Ptolemies in the entire Red Sea region.

The project aims at a comprehensive historical and archaeological analysis of all the uncovered structures and artifacts (pottery, coins and other small objects), combined with commissioned archaeozoological studies of the bone remains of animals brought or raised in Berenike and biological analyses of large numbers of marine mollusks, archaeobotanical examination of plant remains and pollen, geological study of stone found inside and around the structures, geomorphological modeling of the coastline in antiquity, oceanographic data on sea currents and climatological data on rainfall and prevailing wind patterns in this part of the Red Sea. Based on a comprehensive examination of data from all these sources, it will be possible to reconstruct the appearance and functioning of the early Hellenistic city in its broadly understood environmental setting.

This comprehensive study of unique architectural remains and the associated material culture of a Ptolemaic–Hellenistic town will supply the material essential for preparing an extensive monograph, fully illustrated with 3D and orthophoto images, drawings, plans and geophysical maps etc. The catalogue of artifacts will be easily transformed into a database available online for other scholars and the interested public. The results of the research will be presented at relevant scholarly conferences and in leading peer-reviewed periodicals, as well as in the general media, thus providing broad access to the findings for both the international scholarly community and the general public.

The grant will spearhead the Polish contribution, initiated by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, to studies of the southeastern trade routes already conducted by an international group of scholars from Great Britain, the United States of America, France, Germany, Spain, India and Australia among others. It will also open the way for Polish archaeological participation in modern studies of trade and cultural globalization.