

Within the ancient history of Egypt the Ptolemaic and Roman periods were crucially important for the domestic animals economy, and more over – for the animals economy in whole Mediterranean World. Coincidence of factors as stabilized political situation, economic prosperity and development of new sailing techniques using Indian Ocean monsoons initiated far distance marine trade between Europe, Horn of Africa and India. That was most probably a time of the first large scale import of ‘zebu’ cattle from India – nowadays dominating the African populations. Also other species were introduced for a first time from the same location – e.g. water buffalo, kept both in Egypt (gamusa) and Italy (so we can delight the taste of Mozarella di Bufala) or chicken – one of the most popular diet element worldwide. It was also a time when Europeans met the foundations of Egyptian kynology and domesticated cat as a house-kept pet. Most of the modern breeds of dogs and cats origins from Egypt of the late-antique.

Our knowledge of this exciting and significant epoch origins from the historical sources however – both written and iconographic, merely finding support in empiric data as the archaeozoological results. We could explain it with the poor state of research or insufficient interest of archaeologists/Egyptologists focused on the political or religious issues. Also the Nile-related location of the most of excavated sites in Egypt doesn’t favor gaining data concerning Indian Ocean trade route. Thus, the Berenike excavations – ancient port town set by the Red Sea produce extremely important and unique data. Berenike was established by the pharaoh Ptolemy II as a landing point for war elephants carried by sea from the tropical Africa (kingdom of Aksum in nowadays Ethiopia). During proceeding period the port became a trans-oceanic shipping point mentioned in ancient ‘Periplus’ – one of the most important guide for merchants and sailors. Also archaeological discoveries confirms the transfer of luxury goods through Berenike – emeralds, ivory, oriental spices and wood, wine, oil and exotic animals – apart African elephants also monkeys, cats and probably other species. Survival of a town community in harsh ecological conditions of Red Sea coast (with permanent drinking water deficit) was possible (among others) due to supplies of life animals – cattle, pigs but also the non-consumable accompanying pets. At the fringes of ancient port-town Polish archaeologists unearthed unique cemetery of house-kept animals including cats, dogs (e.g. molos-type - favorite war-dogs of Romans) and monkeys. All the burials display features of intentional inhumations, and the animals were kept in good wealth.

Berenike finds no analogies in Egypt as the archaeozoological studies subject due to its potential. It is also a great challenge for the researchers demanding wide scale competences in the identification of species typical for Europe, North Africa but also India. Genetic analyses of secured samples should help in that issue, but as to the current Egyptian regulations disabling samples export, the main focus of research rely on classical field-based methods of identification. Thus, the current proposal embrace also scientific (archaeozoological) cooperation with the institutes from India and Ethiopia.

Archaeozoological research in Berenike undoubtedly will produce new significant data for a vivid debate on the origins of domestic species in the ancient Mediterranean world, but also let to analyze in details the economic aspects of the ancient port-town as well as the roots of emotional bond of man and pet-animals.