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Steven E. Sidebotham: *Berenike and the Ancient Spice Route*: University of California Press, 2011: 434 pp., hardback, £29.60.
Raoul McLoughlin: *Rome and the Distant East: Trade routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*: Continuum, 2010: 236 pp., hardback, £65.00.
I'm all the better for reading these two books and I'm happy to have them on my shelves. Starting with different perspectives, they overlap rather usefully. They tell me much I didn't know and they help me to find out more. I trust them up to a point: not quite on everything.

Sidebotham begins from the ancient port town of Berenike, founded by Ptolemy II of Egypt and further developed under the Romans. It lay at the extreme southeast corner of the ancient Roman Empire and of modern Egypt. He has been excavating there for ten years and he knows this extremely odd site like the back of his hand. It was a bustling place, a hub of long-distance trade, but desert-bound and unable to survive independently from year to year. The relief staff, much of the basic food and drink, and practically everything else, had to be carried in by camel and donkey caravan along a twelve-day mountain trackway from the Nile valley. The track itself, traversing uninhabited country, had to have relay stations that were secure against tribal marauders and reliably supplied with water. From this almost-extraplanetary base Roman ships plied the ocean route, taking gold, silver, the best Mediterranean wines and the finest European slaves down to southern Arabia, across to India, and even beyond, and bringing back the legendary spices after which that UNESCO-defined route is now named.

It's a very big book, and if you're more interested in the foods and wines than the other things you will skim over some of it, noting meanwhile that Sidebotham knows what he's talking about. He's written a fair bit of this before, but here it all is in one package. You will see how this ancient trade grew and how it declined: you will make an armchair tour of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean ports with which Berenike dealt; you will inspect the cargoes, weigh the gold and sneeze at the pepper; you will admire the ships with their teak timbers. Both teak and peppercorns survive in Berenike's arid soil.

McLoughlin's must have been the most ambitious dissertation of 2006: Roman relations with central Asia and China, southern Arabia, eastern Africa, India and south-east Asia, including both trade and diplomacy, over four centuries. The sources are numerous and hard to grasp. Foregoing

scholarship is vast and belongs to many academic fields with different approaches. He sets it all out systematically and he quotes liberally from the texts. As you read McLoughlin you will trace the seaways of the Indian Ocean, the trackways of Arabia, the long and difficult route that coasted Indochina and reached the southern edge of China; you will, of course, be guided along the Silk Road through the Parthian Empire, Bactria, Sogdiana and the Taklamakan desert to make your way eventually to the Chinese capital, thus described in one Greek source:

At the extreme north, where the sea ends, lies a very great inland city called Thina from which silk floss, yarn and cloth are brought on foot ... It is not easy to travel to this Thina: rarely do people come from it, and only a few. The place lies directly under Ursa Minor.

Most engaging, I found, are McLoughlin's detailed narratives of the most adventurous of recorded ancient travels – the trader Titianus Maës who reported the length of the Silk Road (having sent sidekicks to complete the journey), the freedman (name unknown) who was blown off course and became the first Roman to set foot in Sri Lanka, the Alexandros who, having crossed the Malay peninsula, was surely the first Westerner to see the South China Sea, and Gan Ying, Chinese envoy to Rome, who got as far west as the Persian Gulf where, homesick no doubt, he was persuaded by his hosts to turn back. Some of these narratives worried me a bit. Keen to make links across the wilderness of texts, McLoughlin believes he knows the Chinese dénouement of the Maës story, he believes he knows the name of the Ceylonese king who greeted the Roman freedman, and he believes that the mysterious seaport of Kattigara, Alexandros's destination, was in Borneo. I'm not so sure of these things, but I thank him for the possibilities and for the source texts.

McLoughlin's bibliography is very rich. The richness of Sidebotham's is as the wealth of Croesus, sixty large-format closely-printed pages. Why? Partly because one must cite everything: McLoughlin dared not leave anything out of his dissertation, and it's a pity there was no supervisor or copy-editor to advise him not to say 'details available from the British Library', words from which one gathers he hasn't seen a few of those books himself. Partly because one cites more when slightly out of one's depth: step forward, Vehling's translation of Apicius, a bad book in 1936, superseded in 1958, doubly superseded today, but there it was on Sidebotham's bookshelf and what should he do but use it? Partly because so much new research

in all relevant fields is being published year by year: ancient Indian Ocean trade was described 15 years ago as an emerging field, but you couldn't say that now. And partly because we all write a bit too much. But never mind that. Read McLoughlin on ancient travellers; trust Sidebotham on Berenike.

ANDREW DALBY

William Sitwell: *A History of Food in 100 Recipes*: Collins, 2012: 352 pp., hardback, £20.00.

If you like your facts in bite-sized chunks, then this is the book for you! Almost certainly inspired by Neil MacGregor's excellent *History of the World in 1000 Objects*, William Sitwell, food writer and editor of *Waitrose Kitchen* magazine canters through four thousand years of food history from bread and beer in ancient Egypt to Heston Blumenthal's *Meat Fruit* today.

However, the term 'recipes' seems a misnomer, as this is not really a cookery book as most would understand it. Each short chapter begins with a 'recipe', which is used to provide an insight into the position of food at that particular time, and as such, is as much a socio-cultural history as a culinary one.

The recipes are in chronological order beginning with the ancient world and progressing though the Middle Ages, Early Modern, Georgian, Victorian and right up to the current era complete with Jamie Oliver and Delia Smith. Many of the foods discussed have a distinctly British flavour such as Oxo, roast beef, Yorkshire puddings and jam roly-poly, but others are drawn from around the world including the USA and Europe and from all time periods.

The book is liberally cross referenced, and has a useful bibliography and website list. It is well illustrated, using both line drawings and historical documents including advertising material. One delightful illustration from General Electric shows a woman in hat and gloves gazing longingly at an open and empty refrigerator while her husband (in suit and tie) looks on!

Irritating as the jokey, journalese prose can be, William Sitwell has written an accessible book for general readers who may well find some nuggets of food history that had escaped them in the past.

MARILYN JONES