



Figure 1. James Bruce
(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Bruce)

James Bruce on pearls and their shells from the Red Sea (James Bruce over parels en hun schelpen van de Rode Zee)

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Samenvatting

De Schot James Bruce (1730-1794) heeft op zoek naar de bronnen van de Nijl vele jaren gereisd in Noord Afrika. In de jaren 1768-1770 heeft hij de Rode Zee bevaren. Vele jaren later publiceerde hij zijn reisverhalen, waaronder een hoofdstuk gewijd aan parels van de Rode Zee. Drie soorten schelpen, steekmossel, oester en mossel, waarin naar zijn mening meestal naar parels word gezocht, worden in zijn boek afgebeeld. Respectievelijk: waarschijnlijk *Pinna bicolor* Gmelin, 1791; *Pinctada margaritifera* (Linnaeus, 1758); waarschijnlijk *Brachidontes pharaonis* (P. Fischer, 1870).

Introduction

James Bruce (1730-1794), a portrait is presented in figure 1, was a Scottish traveler, who in search for the origins of the Nile spent many years in North Africa. In the period 1768-1770 he crossed the Red Sea twice, from Cosseir to Jidda and from there to Massawa (see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Bruce). On Google maps these places are respectively written as Kosseir, Jeddah and Masowa.

Many years later he published his travel journals in five or six volumes, including one chapter on pearls from the Red Sea in the final volume. The final volume is devoted to natural history, including plants, shrubs and trees, quadrupeds, birds and other animals and finally, pearls (Bruce, 1790). Quite a fair number of different editions and translations is known from his books on his travels.

Pearls

Bruce (1790) writes that "It is commonly said by the fishermen, that all bivalves in the Red Sea have pearls of some kind in them". However, he considers this view 'rude' and very general and describes specifically three shells from the Red Sea, which "regularly are sought after as containing pearls". The first one is a mussel; "... this is of the rarest kind, whether they are now failed in number, or whether they were at any former time frequent is unknown." Bruce reports only having seen this mussel north of Cosseir at the ancient port of Myos Hormos (northern Egyptian side of the Red Sea), also known as Harbour of the Mussel.

The *Pinna* is the second one; "It is broad and semicircular at the top, and decreases till it turns sharp at the lower end, where is the hinge. It is rough and figured on the outside, of a beautiful red colour, exceedingly fragil, and sometimes three feet long."

And finally the oyster; "... is what I suppose has been called the Oyster". Further on he calls this the Abyssinian oyster. Pearls from this shell are considered by Bruce, and others as he cites classic Greek and Roman writers, to be the most beautiful.

Bruce also discusses the habitat where pearls can be found; "It has been erroneously said, that pearl shells grow upon rocks, and again, that they are caught by nets. This is certainly a contradiction, as nobody would employ nets to gather fish from among rocks. On the contrary, all kinds of pearl are found in the deepest, stillest water, and softest bottom."

Their beauty is discussed too; "It is observed that pearls are always the most beautiful in those places in the sea where a quantity of fresh water falls."

Bruce also mentions finding pearls in mussels in salt springs in the Nubian desert. These pearls are, according to Bruce, "ill-formed, foul, and of a bad colour, but of the same consis-

tency, and lodged in the same part of the body as those in the sea."

And perhaps his real interest in pearls is shown when he discusses the price of Scottish fresh water pearls in relation to oriental ones.

See figure 2 for a copy of the plate with pictures of the three types of shells, with their (probable) identifications.

Acknowledgements

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References

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Figure 2. From top to bottom: probably *Pinna bicolor* Gmelin, 1791; *Pinctada margaritifera* (Linnaeus, 1758); probably *Brachidontes pharaonis* (P. Fischer, 1870)