

Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-4a Rome's Growing Presence in the World

Book Title: World Civilizations

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Commerce and manufacturing enjoyed a considerable boom. Rome's empire encircled almost the entire Mediterranean Sea, and she was able to exploit this dominance, growing rich off the tribute and trade her possessions provided for imperial officials and merchants. Both basic necessities (like foodstuffs) and luxuries from Europe, North Africa, Egypt, and western Asia streamed into the capital and Italy through the port of Ostia. Much of this has been documented and attested through the findings of archaeologists.

Beginning in Roman times, Europeans' appetite for Asian imports—Chinese silk and spices imported from India used in seasoning and food preservation—also spurred trade with the East. Indians grew and supplied pepper, cardamom, and ginger, and their knowledge of the Indian Ocean monsoon winds had enabled them to obtain turmeric, saffron, cinnamon, nutmeg, and clove from Southeast Asian sources. Others, too, played active roles in this commerce between East and West: For example, Austronesians appear not only as producers of spices but as merchants and skilled seamen. (see [Chapters 4](#) and [6](#) as well as [Evidence of the Past](#)). The Chinese took a more active part during the Han period, which corresponded roughly with the period of the Roman Empire; overland caravan routes extended both eastward from India and Central Asia and westward from China, and came to be known as the *Silk Road*. (see [Chapters 12](#) and [13](#)). Arabs and Persians seem to have been involved with the trade through the Persian Gulf. In northeast Africa the kingdom of Axum waxed powerful largely off the Red Sea end of the trade.

Evidence of the Past

The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea

Scholars believe that the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* is a description of travel and trade in the Indian Ocean that was written sometime in the first century C.E. Some have interpreted the text and the discovery of Roman coins in some ancient seaports on the west and south coasts of India as evidence of a direct Greco-Roman presence in India and the Persian Gulf by then, but in most instances, this trade was conducted by Arabs, Persians, and Indians who had better knowledge of the prevailing winds and currents than did Europeans. The following are a few passages about India:

Beyond the gulf of Baraca [Gulf of Kutch] is ... Barygaza [Kutch] ... It is a fertile country, yielding wheat and rice and sesame oil and clarified butter, cotton and the Indian cloths made therefrom, of the coarser sorts. Very many cattle are pastured there, and the men are of great stature and black in color. The metropolis of this

country is Minnagara, from which much cotton cloth is brought down to Barygaza. (*Periplus*, p. 41)

The *Periplus* then describes the trade of Kutch and Gujerat in northwest India:

There are imported into [the market town of Kutch], wine, Italian preferred, [but] also Laodicean [Greek] and Arabian; copper, tin, and lead; coral and topaz; thin clothing and inferior sorts of all kinds; bright-colored girdles a cubit wide; storax, sweet clover, flint glass, realgar [a rat poison], antimony, gold and silver coin.... There are exported from these places spikenard [incense oil], costus [ginger], bdellium [aromatic gum], ivory, agate and carnelian [a gem stone], lycium [nightshade], cotton cloth of all kinds, silk cloth, mallow cloth, yarn, long pepper and such other things as are brought here from the various market-towns. Those bound for this market-town from Egypt make the voyage favorably about the month of July, that is Epiphi. (*Periplus*, [Chapter 49](#))

Farther south, near the southern end of India, is the Tamil-speaking region named Kerala (KAYR-ah-lah). Located there was the second great emporium of India: Muziris.

Muziris, of the same kingdom, abounds in ships sent there with cargoes from Arabia, and by the Greeks; it is located on a river, distant from Tyndis by river and sea five hundred stadia, and up the river from the shore twenty stadia. Nelcynda is distant from Muziris by river and sea about five hundred stadia, and is of another Kingdom, the Pandian. This place also is situated on a river, about one hundred and twenty stadia from the sea. (*Periplus*, pp. 53–54)

From the southwest coast of India, trade extended to the region of the Ganges River (in northern India), from which, “Besides this there are exported great quantities of fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, spikenard from the Ganges, malabathrum [?] from the places in the interior, transparent stones of all kinds, diamonds and sapphires, and tortoise-shell.” (*Periplus*, 56)

Analyze and Interpret

What do these passages tell us about Greco-Roman knowledge of Asia in the first century C.E.? From whom do you think this knowledge might have been obtained? Considering the types of items that were exchanged, which side seemed to be getting the better end of this trade between East and West?

Source: *Periplus* quotations taken from W. H. Schoff (trans. and ed.), *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century* (London, Bombay & Calcutta,

1912).

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