

FACTS ABOUT ASIA

Rome and the Indian Subcontinent: A Forgotten Story of Impactful Economic Interactions?

Editor's Note: Richard Davis's AAS *Key Issues in Asian Studies* volume — *Global India circa 100 CE: South Asia in Early World History* — inspired me to incorporate part of his work and draw upon other sources as well in the following essay. Richard deserves the credit for stimulating my interest in this topic, but none of the blame for any errors I might have committed paraphrasing excerpts from Richard's volume or working with additional sources.

“The quest for India is a moving force of our whole history.”

— Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel¹

“The European discovery of India in the late medieval period by people like Marco Polo was in effect only a rediscovery of that miraculous country which was known to the ancient writers but had been cut off by the Arabs from direct contact with the West for several centuries.”

—Herman Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund²

When the Roman and Han Empires are considered, during each culture's imperial era and even earlier, many world history instructors realize at best, there were limited contacts through the Silk Roads. Roman-Indian subcontinent economic interactions were substantial, and occurred many years before the creation of the Roman Empire. These contacts became extensive in the first century CE but declined during the third century only to recover in the fourth century, and continued at impressive levels until the seventh century. Trade with Indian states economically and politically had more impact on Rome than on Indian polities. What follows is an introductory overview of this often-neglected story.

Coins and Archeological Discoveries

Roman coins and other Roman artifacts are a good place to start. Richard Davis in his AAS *Key Issues in Asian Studies* volume, recounts how in the 1940s a high school art teacher living in Madurai, India, over 4,500 miles from Rome, showed students his extensive collection after floods subsided, of 2,000 year old Roman coins he found by searching along the Vaigai River that runs by this southern city in Tamil-Nadu state. The collection is not particularly unique; over 6,000 Roman coins from the same time period have been collected in dozens of locations in coastal areas and near other rivers throughout India.

Archeologists have uncovered many items of Roman origins including pottery, jewelry, glassware, and storage jars for wine and olive oil in several locations. In 1945, British Archeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler unearthed the remnants of Arikamedu, an ancient port, located about two miles south



Entrance to the Arikamedu site. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/47hpbhs6>.

of Pondicherry—the capital of the Union Territory of Puducherry on the southeast coast of India—that constituted a “new town” populated in part by Greek and Roman merchants over 2,000 years ago. Extensive Roman artifacts including brick foundations of large halls and terraces, cisterns, and fortifications were unearthed. These discoveries and the large amount of gold coins constitute evidence, verified by written accounts, substantiating an extensive economic relationship between first century Roman and Indian contacts.

Rome's Involvement with the Subcontinent: Power Politics and Nautical Innovation

Although trade routes linking what is now India and the Mediterranean region existed for many centuries dating back to early Greek contacts, Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt, and the founding of Alexandria in 332 BCE would have momentous consequences for Rome slightly over 300 years later. Octavian's, (later Augustus Caesar) successful annexation of Egypt in 30 BCE gave Rome, already the dominant power in the Mediterranean, control over the Red Sea and direct access to subcontinental ports on the Indian Ocean.

Even before the annexation, Greek, and eventually Roman sailors learned from Arab, Egyptian, or Indian mariners how to use winds from the annual South Asia monsoon season to sail directly across the Indian Ocean rather than utilizing slower coastal routes. Strabo (64 BCE-24 CE) who attained fame in Rome as a geographer, credits in one account, the Greek, Edoxus of Cyzicus—a town on the eastern coast of the Sea of Marmara in present day Turkey—encountering a shipwrecked Indian navigator who taught him this nautical technique, once he learned Greek. Despite what mariner or mariners first learned this nautical technique, Roman-Indo trade substantially expanded in the first century CE, fueling the publication of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* by an anonymous Greek or Greek-speaking Egyptian in the second half of the century. The *Periplus* was a practical guide for merchants including information about various Indian Ocean (and African) ports, as well as business advice.

It is possible to imagine following a shipment from the Mediterranean to the coasts of India. A journey often beginning in Alexandria, the great destination for goods and commodities from the Mediterranean. The cargo was transported up the Nile River to Coptos, a river port closest to the Red Sea, then transported through the desert to sea ports on the Red sea, and loaded on large, sturdy ships that would sail southward around the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula into the Gulf of Aden, south of modern Yemen. Subsequently mariners might take three routes to get to India: following the eastern coast of Africa, sailing along the Arabian coast, or utilizing the more riskier but much faster gale-force monsoon winds to sail directly across the Indian Ocean to Indian subcontinental ports such as Barygaza, the Greco-Roman name for the modern city of Bharuch on the northwestern coast of India located at the mouth of the Narmada River just inland where it meets the Arabian Sea; Kalligeris, south of the present city of Mumbai; or in the southern portion of the Indian western coast at Muziri in modern Kerala near the city of Kochi.

Lucrative and Extensive Indo-Roman Trade

Rome at no point controlled Indian Ocean trade even though its demand for South Asian commodities and goods impacted Roman elite and

RESOURCES

FACTS ABOUT ASIA

middle-class life and was a lucrative source of tax income for the Imperial government.

South Asian spices, first and foremost pepper, but cinnamon and other spices as well, were highly popular Roman imports. Roman and Mediterranean traders also purchased spices, pearls, incense, ivory, diamonds, sapphires, tortoise shells, and for the benefit of Roman audiences, exotic Indian animals such as tigers and leopards. Ivory from tusks of Indian elephants was particularly prized; an Indian ivory ornament was discovered in the ruins of Pompeii, buried in the 79 CE Vesuvius eruption. Roman traders purchased Chinese silk from Indian ports, oil from the Gangetic plains and precious stones from Southeast Asia since Indian waterways and ocean ports served as entrepôts for a variety of products from other parts of Asia as well as Africa.

Roman aristocratic women were delighted to wear colorfast-dyed cotton cloth imported from India. The famed Greek historian, Herodotus, centuries earlier wrote in reference to Indian cotton: “There are wild trees there which produce a kind of wool which is more attractive and of a better quality than ‘sheep’s wool.’” Imagine its novelty in Rome when first introduced.

The popularity of pepper among Roman elites, certainly aristocrats, but increasing urban middle classes as well, ensured not only its consumption but its investment potential. A single sack of pepper, because the commodity was not available in the Roman Empire, made its value more than fifty-times that of a sack of grain. Pepper, not quick to spoil nor expensive to store, stimulated other economic opportunities. A Roman grain or wine dealer facing local oversupplies of these commodities at his trade destination could also transport sacks of pepper as insurance for a profitable trip. At the same time, substantial taxes on pepper and other luxury imports from South Asia helped fund the imperial government.

Post-Egypt annexation, in part because of the India trade, quickly increased revenues imperial Rome received from the Province of Egypt. Roman officials including, most important, Rome’s first emperor, Caesar Augustus, understood the vital connection between Egyptian trade revenues and imperial income. The historian Tacitus describes an incident late in the life of Augustus when the emperor’s ship was sailing past a major port in Italy and an Alexandrian freighter on its way to Rome approached the imperial vessel to salute the ageing emperor. The merchant crew and passengers who had donned white garments and dressed in garlands began burning incense in his honor. Augustus watched this display with pleasure and gave forty gold pieces to each one of the sailors. But he made them swear that they would spend their money on goods from Alexandria. The emperor appreciated that anyone who purchased incense and other eastern products was through taxes, ultimately enriching the Roman government. By mid-first century CE, the province was producing annual revenues worth 600 million sesterces (an ancient Roman coinage). It is difficult to impossible to calculate the value of an ancient currency in current dollars, but Egypt was producing impressive revenues for Rome—more in a month than the Roman province of Judea contributed in a year.

Imperial Rome traded with a variety of South Asian polities including the Tamil-speaking Chola Empire, other Tamil-speaking independent kingdoms, the Kushan Empire, Sri Lanka, and later the Gupta Empire. The key to understanding, the major Indian incentive for trade is revisiting the aforementioned *Periplus*. The author clearly stated that merchants traveling to what is now India should bring along gold. The most accurate generalization about the two-way trade is that Indian rulers desired massive amounts of gold, both coins and bullion, that Rome could supply. Scholars identify several reasons including low interest on the part of Indian sovereigns in substantial purchases of Roman goods and commodities, hoarding of massive amounts of gold, and an aesthetic affinity for gold on the part of Indians



A map of Indian Ocean Trade routes. The bottom-left route details the path beginning from Alexandria through the Gulf of Aden in the south to the Western coastal ports of India. Source: Google Arts and Culture at <https://tinyurl.com/25yu88p8>. Slight modifications by Jon Wilson.

who used gold in fashioning luxury objects such as ornaments, bangles, and pitchers.

Roman merchants simply did not have much to sell that Indians wanted to buy but drugs, cosmetics, silver ware and glass ware attracted buyers in southern India. Merchants provided for rulers and their courts fine ointments, wine, and trained male and female slaves. Evidence from Tamil literature indicated that sovereigns and their entourages enjoyed these Mediterranean luxuries.

Debate continues about the impact of the high volume of gold exports to India, but Romans, beginning in the middle of the first century were concerned about cash flow problems and potential inflation as evidenced by the comments of highly respected military commander, scholar, author, and advisor to the Imperial throne, Pliny the Elder who complained that Rome was annually exporting fifty-five million gold coins to India. Affluent Romans seemed conflicted regarding economic interactions with South Asia. Aristocrats influenced by fidelity to traditional Roman virtues such as Stoicism and frugality complained that the plethora of Indian imports were increasing cultural decadence. Yet, the investment prospects for many Roman elites of selling imports directly conflicted with their own sense of what values were best promoted to ensure Roman cultural continuity.

The eventual decline of Classical Period Roman-India trade is a story for another day but teachers and students should learn more about global India in early world history and Richard Davis’s *Key Issues* volume is a good place to start. ■

NOTES

1. Herman Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, “India, 100 BCE–1500,” in *Asia in Western and World History: A Guide for Teaching*, eds. Ainslee Thomas Embree and Carol Gluck (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 357.
2. *Ibid.*, 357.

Sources: Herman Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, “India, 100 BCE–1500,” in *Asia in Western and World History: A Guide for Teaching*, eds. Ainslee Thomas Embree and Carol Gluck (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); “Introduction: South Asia in History” and “Chapter 1: Traders” from Richard H. Davis, *Global India circa 100 CE: South Asia in Early World History* (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2009); “Introduction: The Ancient Economy” and “Chapter 2: Roman Prosperity,” from Raoul McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean: The Ancient World Economy and the Kingdoms of Africa, Arabia, and India* (Havertown, PA: Pen and Sword Books, 2014); “Part IV” from Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, “Provincializing Rome: The Indian Ocean Trade Network and Roman Imperialism,” *Journal of World History* 22, no. 1 (2011); “Chapter 6: Chasing the Monsoons,” in Lincoln Paine, *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).