

AN AFRICAN BRANCH OF THE SILK ROAD IN THE ANCIENT TIMES?

The Hellenistic era ushered in fabulously wealthy social elites in the form of rulers, their families and courtiers, as well as various types of business people. Those highest echelons of society could afford to buy a wide variety of upscale products. It was for them that corps d'elite of craftsmen and merchants worked hard to satisfy the most refined tastes of their affluent customers. Rich people wanted products from the most remote quarters of the world. The borders of the Seleucid state reached as far as the Far East. Its rivals, the Ptolemies, ruled Egypt. Its eastern coast lies on the Red Sea, which leads to the Indian Ocean. It was owing to that fortuitous linkage that those rulers could think of plying maritime trade with peoples inhabiting parts of Arabia or India. Though never before on such a grand scale, Europe was visited by traders from Asia with their expensive stones, jewelery and other luxury goods, including textiles and spices. A rising demand for goods led to an abundant supply. Hence, merchant caravans traversed the landscape in the Mediterranean regions and Asia. On the conquest of the Hellenistic states by Rome, wealthy Romans became quite natural customers of the same merchants, and perhaps the same producers. The courts of Hellenistic rulers ceased to exist and in the first century AD their political and economic position was taken over by Roman emperors with their families, their favourites, and their adherents. On the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, the areas dependent on the Empire, local kings continued to wield power, as did the biblical Herod (cf. Sartre 1991, pp. 61-70).

Despite public complaints and laws prohibiting excessive wealth, senators and, with a passage of time, many Emperors basked in luxury. From the Middle East and even from the Far East various goods were transported to Europe and to other parts of the Empire. The Empire's relations with China, commercial dealings included, had been widely studied in a number of ancient texts. They were collected and carefully analyzed by G. Malinowski (Malinowski 2012, pp. 11-25). The ancient Greeks, and later the Romans, had a name for Chinese people, and called them *Seres*, that is, producers or suppliers of silk from *Serica* (Malinowski, 2012, p. 13). Particularly interesting is a document which makes a mention of ports and harbours that participated in that long-distance exchange. Today it is called *Periplus* (Casson 1989). That text was created in the early centuries of our era and is regarded as a guidebook to merchants sailing down to Arabia and India. Those were business journeys, not tourist voyages, and the guidebook was designed to make

it easier to find out where and why one should travel. According to G. Malinowski, written records, including Virgil's *Georgics*, reveal that silk trade agents were Indians and Ethiopians, which clearly indicates silk was transported via Africa (Malinowski 2012, p. 20). Other interesting information relating to commodities and price quotes is also provided by ostraka and papyri records (cf. Sidebotham 2011, pp. 156-161). Apart from written records like those cited by the above mentioned philologist, no less serious group of sources regarding ancient trade is offered by remnants of those imports. Occasionally, some iconographic sources, including mosaics, are also helpful. On the Sicilian mosaics of Villa del Casale you can see exotic animals being hunted and loaded on ships (see Dunbabin 1999, p.140, Fig. 142, 143). Animals were regarded as a commodity not suitable for long-term transportation. Indian elephants were to be delivered in full health to be exploited by military units of the Hellenic Army until they died or perished in war. What the Roman Empire craved and imported were exotic species of animals. Those were, for instance, African lions, ostriches, rhinos and Asian tigers that were to be delivered to Roman amphitheaters and killed in gladiatorial games, and not to die of thirst or heat in the desert. Apart from those animals, there was a whole range of products that had to be delivered within a reasonable time, and not to take long years to find a customer. Fashions kept changing as did tastes and social relations, and even the most beautiful emeralds had to be delivered before the buyer's death or dethronement.

It should be assumed that a journey by land was longer and more expensive and dangerous than sailing. Therefore, whenever a range of goods were transported over long distances, it was prudent to consider as the better option sea routes rather than journeying by land. In addition, where strategic travel planning was a case in point, it was preferable to use sea currents and gusty winds. The nature of the monsoon was familiar to sailors in the first century B.C. (Sartre 1991, p. 494). They knew it was enough to set sails and travel. Given that the sea was calm, a ship took one year to get from China to Europe (Hoppal 2011, p. 271), which, compared to a never-ending traipsing through the deserts, might seem almost trivial. Sailing between the Red Sea ports and the Arabian Peninsula was even shorter, taking no more than thirty days (Sidebotham 2011, p. 193). Even if we take it that merchants had not always travelled all the way between the producer's location and the end customer, but, having traversed leagues of sea space, sold the agents goods at a profit, then such transportation was bound to take months and increase sale costs exponentially. Consequently, it was worthwhile to put part of the cargo onto ships. During the said period, caravan trails reached the eastern Mediterranean coast. The most important destinations were, *inter alia*, Petra, Damascus, Palmyra or Dura Europos. Merchants trying to get to Europe had to surmount high mountains, deserts and rivers. They struggled with heat, lack

of water (which was also essential to pack animals), sandstorms, robbers, and also unkind politicians. There were other snags they ran into: customs duties, costly food and feed for animals and, lastly, sickness. A well turned dry in the desert, or an oasis occupied by robbers, meant a potentially tragic end to the entire enterprise. A journey by sea, followed by an arduous though brief caravan journey, was much shorter. With the vessel adequately manned and the journey diligently scheduled, the voyage seemed relatively safe and cheap. Sure enough, not always, for not all the ships reached their destination, even though the risk was worth the price. The findings of the ancient shipwrecks demonstrate that all types of cargo were transported at once. Silk trade was apparently linked to the trade of spices and precious stones (Loewe 1971, p. 166-179). At times a ship put in at a port or several ports of call where some cargos were topped up while others were unloaded. Those sailing between Asia and Europe could travel towards the Red Sea.

On the east coast of Egypt, in the Ptolemaic times, a number of ports were established. Archaeological records show that they had been created for the purposes of trade with the Near and Far East. Those were, *inter alia*, Arsinoe, Myos Hormos, Nechesia and Berenica. Those villages, within the African continent, had been linked by caravan routes to the river ports of the Nile (Casson 1989, p. 13). They reached the Koptos area. Wells were dug along the trail and watchtowers established to protect caravans (Sartre 1991, p. 494). Shipping down the river was the simplest, cheapest and safest method of traversing leagues of marine space. In the north merchants could visit the port of Alexandria, where various goods could be sold or reloaded onto ships sailing the Mediterranean. A sea journey to Rome took only a few days. It is worth while to dwell upon what products were the object of such long-distance trade. Thanks to S. E. Sidebotham's research of the port city of Berenica on the Red Sea in Egypt, we have gleaned a lot of information about goods that travelled from Asia to Egypt and further north, to Rome. Those were spices including pepper, groceries like sorghum and rice from India (Sidebotham 2011, pp. 224-229), aromatic plants and their seeds (*Abrus precatorius*) (Sidebotham 2011, p. 230) Also myrrh, balm and incense were shipped (Sidebotham 2011, p. 230). In the opposite direction, destined for India and Arabia, cargos with wine (Sidebotham 2011, pp. 232-233) and glass (Sidebotham 2011, pp. 234-235) were carried. From the East, a variety of precious and semi-precious stones, including emeralds, beryls and lapis lazuli were transported (Sidebotham 2011, p. 236-237). Jewels and pearls were brought from India, Sri Lanka and Persia (Sidebotham 2011, p. 237). Some stone slabs, such as travertine for wall cladding or possibly for flooring (Sidebotham 2011, p. 237), were brought from the East. Bamboo, sandalwood and other exotic wood were also imported from the Indian Ocean regions (Sidebotham, 2011, p. 239-241). The cynosure for tradesmen were also metals (Casson 1989, pp. 27-28). Fragments of Indian

fabrics, including cotton sails, were also uncovered in Berenica (Sidebotham 2011, p. 243). It has also been confirmed that silk was imported to Egypt. It was brought from Arabia, Persia and India (Sidebotham 2011, p. 243). No Chinese silk has been uncovered in Berenica to date. It may be surmised that the silk uncovered in Palmyra, Syria was made in China and India, where Chinese silk was faked. As has been confirmed by researchers, silk uncovered in Dura Europos was made in India (Sidebotham 2011, p. 245).

The Chinese allegedly thought that the Romans themselves produced silk for their own needs. That view was patently false. It is possible that Persian merchants, who mediated the trade between Europe and China, deliberately lied to the Chinese saying they did not bring the silk they had brought to Rome, as the Romans had their own silk (Hoppál 2011, p. 286). Consequently, it may be surmised that those merchants stymied Chinese producers from trying to sell directly in the Empire. There is a measure of certainty that the Romans imported silk from the Far East and did not produce it themselves. Today it is difficult to determine how much silk was shipped to the Roman Empire from China, and how much was transported by agents, or directly from India. It seems, however, that that maritime route could play a significant role in those consignments (Leslie, Gardiner 1996, p. 225-228). Particularly interesting is the use of the sea route, which reached up to the regions of the Sinai Peninsula. Just a few days of work and wanderings with the caravan were sufficient to reach the Mediterranean Sea and trade goods. With the advent of the Ptolomeic period, Alexandria became the largest port in that area and was the intended destination for caravans and merchant ships which plied the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The evidence of the Sinai trade route are the amphora findings. Interestingly, they show that, despite dramatic political events in the western part of the Empire, no commerce or trade declined in that region until the conquest of Africa by the Arabs. The archaeological findings show a clear continuity of Western supplies of oil, wine and other food products even in the era of Byzantium. That is amply confirmed by the findings of amphora fragments. That route led both ways, linking Europe and Africa and Asia. Merchants wishing to bring expensive goods from China or India could pack them into sealed boxes and deliver them to the destination very efficiently, in a relatively short time. Although not all products were fit to be shipped by sea, silk, unlike tea, belonged to those goods that had been transported by sea for centuries, not only to Europe but also to the Far East (Li 1982, p. 192-217).

That the maritime route played a much bigger role than it is revealed by the archaeological sources may be inferred from the way the Chinese limned the location of the Roman Empire. They did not see it as a far-away land “beyond the mountains and the forests, or beyond the deserts” but, we have to stress it most emphatically, a place “beyond the sea” or “beyond the seas” (Cf. Hoppál 2011, pp. 270-271). That overseas location may be used as an important

clue to the effect that the main road to Rome was not via the desert or the mountainous route of the Silk Road, but mainly over the sea-space. What is more, Chinese records give an account of a journey on a river in the west, which led north towards the sea and further on to the capital city (Hoppál 2011, p. 271). It is in tune with the vision of a passage on the Nile into the Mediterranean. According to M. P. Fitzpatrick, the Indian Ocean was practically dominated by the Romans, and trading with India at the time of the early Roman Empire was reported to draw an annual amount of 100 million sesterces (Fitzpatrick 2011, p. 27 et al.). The Romans placed the *Seres*, silk producers, by the Eastern Ocean (Malinowski 2012, p. 22). It was the Romans' idea that China was not to the east of the Parthian territories, beyond the mountains and the deserts, but beyond the waters of the ocean. G. Malinowski further admitted that the sea route discussed here was much older and more important than land routes (Malinowski 2012, p. 22). Political developments in Europe affected only the last stretch of the road in question. After the fall of Rome, it was the trade route, and not the western Mediterranean, that was taken to reach Constantinople where the Emperor and his court had lived for ages. The lavish pomp of the Byzantine splendour craved valuables and precious materials. There is little purple found in the iconographic sources on the mosaics of Ravenna. Yet, the shining coloured garments seem to be made of woven silk fabrics. The routes discussed here ran through eastern Africa or Sinai, and were linked to the areas where precious and semi-precious stones were mined. In the Eastern Desert, emeralds were collected which had sold profitably since the Hellenistic times. In the times of the pharaohs the Sinai Peninsula was a place where a fulness of semi-precious stones were collected. Interestingly enough, archaeologists found in those mining settlements in the heart of the desert, vestiges of regularly traded products, an oasis of sheer luxury. It was owned not by the miners, but by business people who apparently belonged to the upper ten at that time.

Today it is difficult to precisely define the details of trade of luxury goods, but much of the information extant clearly reveals some links between traders of articles in the Roman Empire and those in the Far East and the Middle East. There is ample evidence that the object of exchange was not so much mass merchandise, but rather upmarket articles such as precious stones, incense, myrrh or silk. Myrrh was used for medicine and funeral rites, and incense was sold as an offering to the gods. Who would dare to economize on medicine, offerings to gods or embalment for the dead? Those were presumably very lucrative branches of commerce, even though the goods in question took several days to be brought from the Middle East. Cargos from Saudi Arabia and deliveries from the Far East crossed paths en route. It was easier and more profitable to ship a silk bale, a box of china, a bag of spice and a pouch full of precious stones rather than transport a bulk cargo of mass merchandise. A demand for high-grade luxury prod-

ucts coupled with the inability to produce similar goods locally led to the development of a powerful market and presence of merchants dealing in goods from the Far East for hundreds of years (see Casson 1989, p. 15). Even though the Roman Empire ran a large trade deficit in commerce with the East, it may, despite the paucity of archaeological evidence, be safely concluded that the trade of goods was truly impressive.

In summary, it should be noted that in the light of the sources now available it seems highly likely that in ancient times the Silk Road ran not only along the caravan routes we know of today, but also along sea routes leading from Asia, through Indian ports to the east coast of Africa, and further towards Alexandria. It seems that the role of the sea route leading to Egypt was much more important than it is generally thought today.

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