

# Indian trade between the Gulf and the Red Sea

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**Abstract:** This essay evaluates the relative importance of the maritime trade between the Roman Empire and India along two routes that were in use: one started and ended on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea, the other at the head of the Gulf. Both continued on land, following the caravan tracks to the Nile valley or through the Syrian desert to Palmyra. The latter land route, longer and presumably more cost-consuming, was used only during the 1st through 3rd centuries AD. The land link with the Far East, the so-called Silk Road, does not seem to have been regularly used. A document from Palmyra allows the value of the trade along the Syrian route to be estimated as much smaller than that of the Red Sea traffic. It could have been mainly of local, Syrian importance, and lasted only as long as political circumstances allowed.

**Keywords:** Indian trade, Gulf, Red Sea, Palmyra

One of the catchwords much used and very much abused in recent research on the foreign trade of the Roman Empire is the 'Silk Road', the alleged land link between China and the Mediterranean. While it is commonly agreed that the name stands for all the various itineraries between the Far East and the eastern Roman provinces, not excluding the sea routes, the public at large inevitably sees it as a caravan track going all the way across the deserts of Central Asia and Iran to the more familiar shores. Either way, it is of course a very heart-warming and politically correct idea, announcing the global economy of our time.

Needless to say, I do not aim to pretend that there were no contacts across these expanses. On the contrary, there is clear

evidence of Chinese imports in the West and of Roman products being appreciated not only in China, but even in Korea and Japan (Raschke 1978; Hübner 2005). Nonetheless, however, there is only one report of a journey from one end to the other, from the Syrian Hierapolis to a place called Sera Metropolis, probably to acquire silk (Bernard 2005; McLaughlin 2016: 188–191). As reported by Ptolemy, after Marinus of Tyre, a caravan had been sent there around AD 100 by a certain Maës Titianos; it came back safely two years later, bringing goods and news. The goods were presumably silk and the news were judged as not very reliable by the geographer. We know nothing of any other attempt to repeat the feat, either before or after.

### *Corrigendum*

*Information about the financing body was omitted from the original text of this publication in Special Studies "Research on the Red Sea" PAM 26/2 (2017).*

### **Acknowledgements**

The research for this article was made possible through financial support from the National Science Centre, Poland, Grant UMO-2014/14/M/HS3/00795 "Infrastructure of the international trade in the Red Sea area in the Roman period".

Moreover, information both about China reaching Rome and about Rome reaching China is so rare and vague that a regular and direct link is highly unlikely.

Is then the Silk Road simply a modern construct? Not, if it is seen as a handy name for commercial contacts between China on the one hand and Central Asia and Iranian lands on the other. The overland traffic between these countries must have made use of camels, presumably of the Bactrian, two-humped variety, and it could have been taken over by the Sogdians (Jäger 2003). We know nothing of overland links with the West (Millar 1998b).

The more direct connection with the West was by sea. Since the early days of Ubaid Culture in the 5th millennium BC, if not earlier, small vessels had plied the Gulf waters on their way to Dilmun, that is Bahrain Island, and to Magan, probably on the Omani coast. Contacts with Meluhha, somewhere in the Indus estuary, are attested later, about 2200 BC (Possehl 2002). Imported commodities reached Mesopotamian cities of the 3rd millennium and were distributed farther out from there. The road between the Gulf and the Mediterranean, the Lower and the Upper Sea to use Sumerian parlance, followed for millennia the course of the Euphrates up to a place from where the distance between the river and the Mediterranean was at its shortest and ran across usually safe, settled country. The Euphrates route made the fortunes of Mari, Aleppo, Ugarit, and Antioch, in various periods from time immemorial up to the early modern age.

The Red Sea route was a relative novelty. True, ancient Egyptians did mount expeditions to Punt and other places, but

these were far from regular (Phillips 1997), although the port in Marsa Gawasis near Safaga was used from the days of the Old Kingdom onward (Bard and Fattovich 2007). The reason for it was seemingly not so much the hardships of desert tracks between the Nile and the sea as the sailing conditions: in the northern half of the sea the northern winds prevail the whole year round, while the southern winds blow mainly in the southern half, approximately up to Jeddah, and only from January to March (Seland 2011). So it was easy to go out but difficult to come back.

Things changed with the Ptolemies, who founded the port of Berenike and used it for sailing to East Africa to bring back elephants, ivory and other exotic goods (Sidebotham 1986; 2011). They also made contact with the South Arabian kingdoms which, in turn, were linked to India by the ocean routes. But this was apparently limited traffic. South Arabia indeed provided frankincense, the “food of the gods”, but it was transported north preferably by land (Peacock and Williams 2007).

The Eastern sea trade expanded greatly with the arrival of the Romans to Egypt [*Fig. 1*]. Strabo (XVII 1.13), who visited Upper Egypt in 26 BC, was told that as many as 120 vessels left each year for India from the port of Myos Hormos, securely identified now with Quseir al-Qadim some 270 km north of Berenike (Bülow-Jacobsen, Cuvigny, and Fournet 1994; Peacock and Blue 2006). A direct link to the Malabar coast in the southern part of India was opened soon after (Casson 1989). Crossing the Indian Ocean directly was made possible by taking advantage of the monsoons: from May to September for the outward and

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from November to March for the return journeys. The monsoons did not need to be “discovered”, as they had always been well known to peoples living under their sway, and the alleged discoverer Hippalos apparently never existed (Tchernia 1995). It was the opening of the great market of the Roman Empire that encouraged Alexandrian merchants to invest in the far distance ocean trade (De Romanis 1996; Young 2001; Seland 2014a). Up to the 6th century AD they remained busy on the Red Sea routes, bringing pepper and other spices from India, which were themselves in part from farther inland, imported along with Chinese silk. Wine, glass, and red coral, among other rather cheap Roman commodities treasured in the East, went in the opposite direction, although they had to be supplemented with coined gold.

There is no doubt that the Red Sea route provided most of the goods supplied to Rome and its provinces via Alexandria. Yet the Gulf route was not abandoned (Salles 1993). There is enough evidence to show that the traffic on it remained intense. The kingdom of Mesene (Aramaic: Maishan) also called Characene, after its capital Spasinou Charax, founded in the 2nd century BC at the mouth of the twin rivers of Babylonia, was a hub of the Indian trade. In the Roman period, especially in the 2nd century, it controlled large swathes of Lower Mesopotamia (Bowersock 1989). Local, and probably Indian sailors provided essentially the same goods as those brought to Egypt by Alexandrian merchants, and also wood, so bitterly lacking in Babylonia. Some of them went on the canals and rivers as far as the current

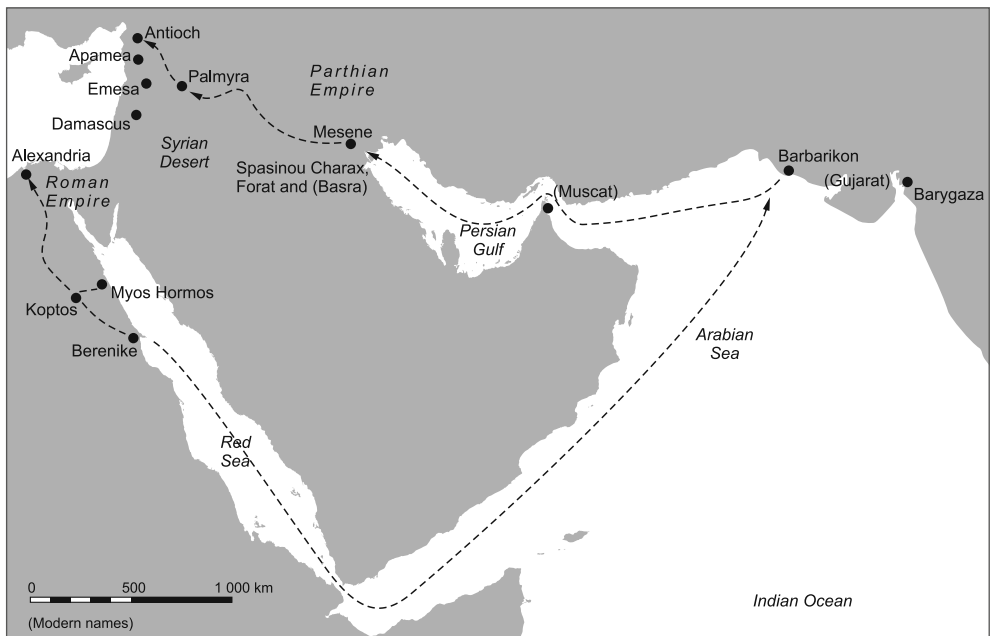


Fig. 1. *The Indian trade routes by land and sea*  
(Modified; original map courtesy of Eivind Seland)

allowed, supplying the Parthian capital Ctesiphon and the neighboring Greek city of Seleucia, no doubt at a lower cost than land transport could have offered. Some went even farther, to Syria, crossing into Roman territory at Zeugma on the Euphrates and ending in Antioch.

There was also a shortcut, a desert track through the oasis of Palmyra sitting halfway between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean (Gawlikowski 1994; Seland 2014b). This isolated place did not play any significant role in the Bronze and Iron Ages, in spite of being mentioned (very sparingly) under the name of Tadmor still used today. The track through it was never much in use except for the first three centuries of our era. And no wonder. Travellers had to carry all their food, water was scarce on the way, and the passage had to be paid off, the nomad chiefs being all too eager to pluck the caravans passing through their country. Even invading armies never risked that passage, always keeping to the river banks.

Things changed in the Roman period when signs of rapid growth appeared and the first monumental buildings were constructed. This change coincided with the first known caravan inscriptions set up by merchants coming safely back from the head of the Gulf (Gawlikowski 1994; Healey 1996). As far as we know, Palmyrene merchants remained attached exclusively to this direction. Among the inscriptions mentioning Palmyrene merchants, only the earliest two, of AD 19 and AD 24, name them as residents of Seleucia (without specifying which one) and Babylon, respectively. Except perhaps for the first of these texts, there is no hint whatsoever of the merchants' possible interest in the overland routes to Iran and beyond.

The flourishing of Palmyra can be attributed only to the track being manned and controlled by the nomads themselves, including people freshly settled in the oasis. Tribal links and neighbourly relations would have resulted in a network based on parentage, alliances and common interest. For a time this network ensured regular flow of desert traffic, short-circuiting the traditional Euphrates route. Shorter but more difficult, the transport via Palmyra must have also been more costly. This was, however, the only way the people of the oasis could take active part in the commercial exchange between the Roman Empire and the East. Their slice of the cake was perhaps thinner and acquired at a greater cost, but they were still partaking in it. The alternative would have been to stay in the backwater, cut off from the wider world.

This backwater thus became a caravan city. The notion was invented by Rostovtzeff (1932) in a book in which he described several ancient sites in modern Syria and Jordan: Petra, Gerasa, Dura-Europos, and Palmyra. Rostovtzeff thought that all these cities flourished in the Roman period because of their participation in the caravan trade. The concept was immediately criticized by Schlumberger (1935; see Dussaud 1936) and later by Millar (1998a); both of them have observed that the name could apply, with some justice, to Palmyra alone. Indeed, explicit mentions of caravans and long-distance trade can be found only in Palmyra, while the other cities Rostovtzeff discussed—and many others—cannot show any evidence whatsoever of such activity. The mere passing of some camels in and out hardly makes for a 'caravan city', even less so, if the caravan movement is

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only presumed and fails to be supported by any kind of evidence. The name makes sense only, if foreign trade is the reason for a city's existence or if it provides for at least a large part of its economy.

This occurred in Palmyra in the late Hellenistic period when there are signs of fast growth, although the first monumental buildings appeared only in the 1st century BC (G.A. Plattner, *apud* Schmidt-Colinet 2013: 89–103). The development must have been due to a massive influx of new settlers, and these could have come only from the nomad tribes of the Syrian *bādiya*. Indeed, early Tadmor was clearly a patchwork of various tribes and clans,

remaining so until it acquired, in the mid-1st century AD, a civic structure in the form of some institutions typical of the Graeco-Roman world (Sartre 1996).

This change coincided with the first known caravan inscriptions set up by the merchants coming safely back from Charax, the capital of the kingdom of Mesene and an emporium in Lower Mesopotamia, close to the Gulf [Fig. 2]. The merchants of Palmyra remained committed to this direction, whether they went to Charax itself, as they did most of the time, or to the neighbouring port of Forat, or to the city of Vologesias which should be placed downstream

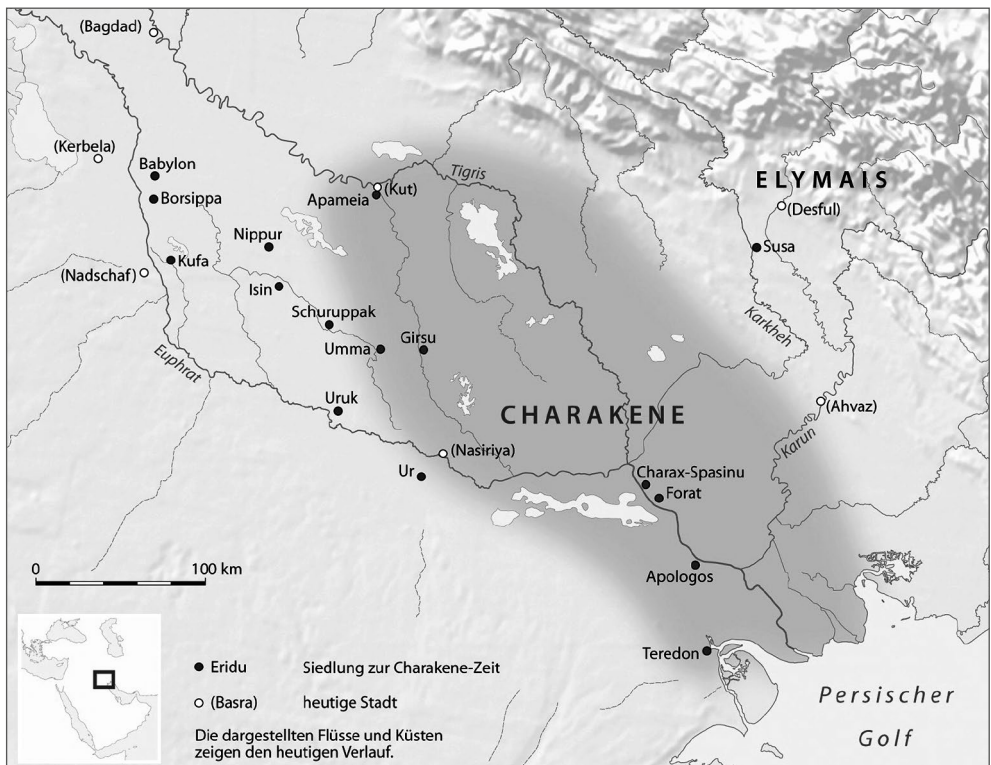


Fig. 2. *The kingdom of Mesene/Characene*  
(Courtesy Michael Sommer)

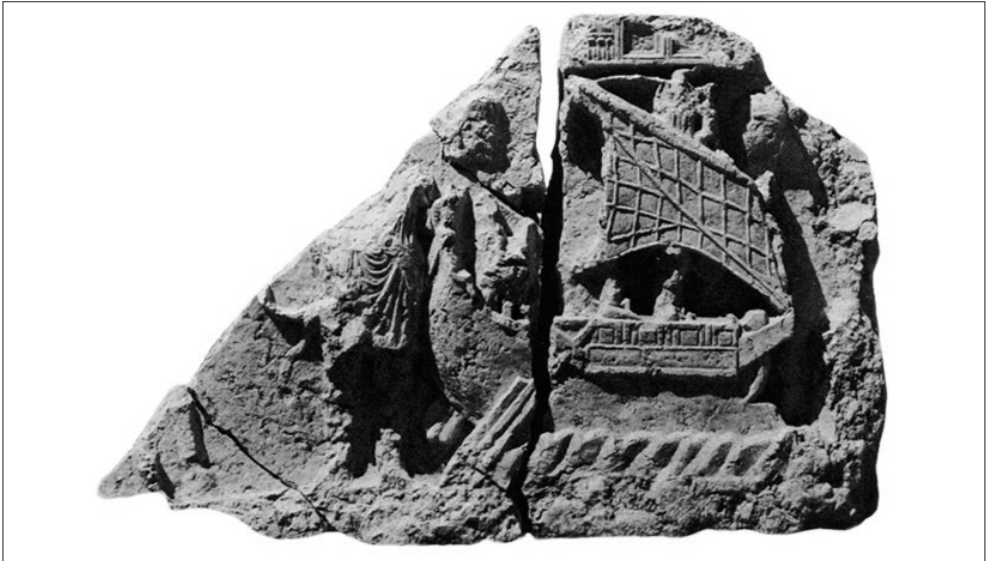
from Babylon along the branch of the Euphrates called Nahr Hindiye, the ancient Maarsares (Gawlikowski 1983). The so-called Silk Road, insofar as it really existed as a sustained link with the Far East, was the preserve of the Sogdians and other Iranians, and, inasmuch as it reached the Roman Empire, it would have rather crossed the Euphrates at Zeugma or close to Hierapolis and continued to Antioch. At any rate, Palmyra was not involved.

Most of caravan inscriptions are dated to the 2nd century AD, with the peak in the 130s and 140s (10 inscriptions). These years correspond to the reign of king Meherdat of Mesene, who favoured the Palmyrenes, even appointing some of them to high offices in his kingdom. His rule reached the island of Bahrain (Tilwan/Tylos) and the port of Omana (probably el-Dur in Umm al-Qaiwayn). The kingdom also encompassed Southern Babylonia, probably including the city of Vologesias. It seems that the king was a client of Rome until he was removed by his Arsacid cousin in AD 151/152. This dependence started probably in the times of Trajan and of Attambelos VI, the last of the line of native rulers of Mesene (Bowersock 1989). Recently, Andreas Luther (2004) put forward a hypothesis that the whole length of the Euphrates valley was in the same or similar situation in the same years. According to Luther, the city of Dura-Europos was under Parthian suzerainty not only up to AD 164 as is well known, but also after the war of Lucius Verus, depending on an Arsacid client of Rome. This state of affairs would have greatly favoured the movement of Palmyrene caravans, but even after Severan annexations, with Roman garrisons established in Kifrin near Ana (Invernizzi

1986), on the island of Bijan and maybe farther downstream, the caravans still passed to Charax, then under direct Arsacid and soon after under Sasanian control. Some sort of understanding must have been reached to keep them going.

Long ago, I suggested that the Palmyra caravans used water transport (Gawlikowski 1988), at least downstream, probably from Dura, the closest point on the river (220 km from Palmyra) and the seat of an important Palmyrene colony (Dirven 1996). Recently, Meyer and Seland (2016) have argued persuasively for the embarkation taking place farther downstream. In any case, this was certainly practical in terms of time and money, and even necessary in the maze of canals and marshes down south. Most of the time, the Palmyrenes sold their goods in Vologesias and other emporia of the kingdom of Mesene. There they purchased exotic products brought by sea from India by local or Indian ships. We know of only two instances of Palmyrene shipowners and of passage of their countrymen on their ships to a land they called 'Scythia', that is, the Indo-Scythian kingdom in Northwest India (Delplace 2003). It must have been an unusual venture. One of these bold adventurers ordered his ship and his camel to be depicted in the tomb of Marona, founded in AD 236 [Fig. 3].

Some Palmyrenes preferred to take to sea from Egypt. The evidence is meagre but clear (Bingen 1984). There are two Greek inscriptions from Koptos and one Aramaic graffito in Berenike. One of them mentions *naukleroi erythraikoi*, that is shipowners or skippers active in the Indian Ocean, with distinctly Palmyrene names, among merchants of the same origin who boarded their ships or at least entrusted them their



*Fig. 3. A Palmyrene ship in the Gulf; the shipowner and his camel are depicted on the left (Palmyra Museum; photo M. Gawlikowski)*



*Fig. 4. Palmyrene meharists (PCMA Palmyra excavations, CD 66/60/photo M. Gawlikowski)*



merchandise. There is also an isolated document of a Palmyrene traveller on the island of Socotra (Robin and Gorea 2002; Gorea 2012). Most of the relevant sources, however, concern the caravan movement between the Gulf and Palmyra (Will 1992: 57–102; Drexhage 1988; Seland 2014b). Some caravan leaders, Palmyrene residents in the ports of call, and sometimes military commanders were honoured with statues set up in public places (Delplace and Yon 2005). While the bronze figures are long gone, we are left with the accompanying inscriptions. A few sculptures help to visualise these camel-riding merchants and their equipment [Fig. 4]. Unfortunately the merchants, having arrived safely and with profit from Lower Mesopotamia, praised these worthies for “being agreeable to them” and do not mention their merits in more detail. Even so, it is clear that the passage was considered dangerous and that very important interests were at stake: some caravans are said to represent “all the Palmyrenes” and some inscriptions resume motions passed by the city council voting four statues in the four tribal sanctuaries for those particularly efficient in their service to the caravans, such as the famous Soados, a Palmyrene resident in Vologesias (Yon 2002: 100–106).

It has been observed that nothing is known about caravan movement from Palmyra westwards. Scholars have argued that the passage to Emesa (150 km) and on to the Mediterranean (70 km more), must have been uneventful and therefore there was no reason for recognition in the form of honorific statues funded by the city or groups of merchants. But is it certain that they had headed straight to the sea?

Emesa, today Homs, was a great city which flourished at the same time as

Palmyra, so it was assumed that its fortunes paralleled those of Palmyra and that its prosperity was founded on the caravan trade as well (Seyrig 1959). And yet, there are no thriving Mediterranean ports at the end of the road: the closest ones, Tripolis to the south and Arados to the north, were not particularly important in the Roman period. It would not have been so, if one or both of these ports were receiving a sustained stream of merchandise destined for Italy and the Western provinces of the Empire. The great Levantine ports of the time were Gaza, Caesarea, Tyre and Seleucia in Pieria, all of them too far away to be considered as an outlet for the Palmyra trade. The first three obviously served Arabia, Palestine, and Phoenicia, while Seleucia, the port of Antioch and its region, lay at the end of the Euphrates route. It is quite clear that the main port in this part of the world was Egyptian Alexandria and it was via Alexandria that the main bulk of Indian imports was shipped to the Roman West.

A recent important paper by Seland (2011) tries to establish the timetable of maritime expeditions to India and to explain how the Gulf branch could withstand the competition of the Red Sea routes [Fig. 5]. He points out that seasonal winds in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea allowed sailing from the Indian ports of Barygaza and Barbaricum with the monsoon in November/December, reaching the Red Sea around January, just in time to profit from the southerly winds to sail as far as Berenike. It is now well established (after the Muziris contract, to be discussed later on) that the imported goods were transported under seal on camelback from Berenike to government storage facilities in Koptos on the Nile.

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When customs procedures were not too long, wares could arrive in Koptos already in March, yet high water, allowing safe passage of heavy ships downstream, did not start until August. Once in Alexandria, after further formalities, the goods were ready to be shipped overseas some time in September, already close to the end of the sailing season in the Mediterranean.

Sailing with the same monsoon to the head of the Gulf, ships could reach Charax also in January. The long overland route to Palmyra could see the caravans arrive there in March (if winter conditions allowed the passage). Coincidentally, most of the inscriptions marking the successful outcome of a journey are dated, whenever the month is named, in March and April.

Seland opines that the import tax was to be paid in Antioch and therefore the

goods had to be transported there in time for the beginning of the sailing season. This, in spite of the long overland passage of about 1400 km, would give the Syrian road an advantage in comparison with the 380 km route from Berenike to Koptos.

This scenario is entirely plausible, except for the alleged necessity to pass through Antioch to pay a 25% tax on value imposed by the Roman administration on Oriental imports. While we know now that this tax was paid in Alexandria, this is by no means sure for Antioch in Syria. That country shared with Egypt the old Hellenistic system of separate contracts for the reception of taxes and duties in different custom-houses, and not of overall contracts covering a whole province or even several neighboring provinces as prevailing in the West (De Laet 1949: 331–339). We

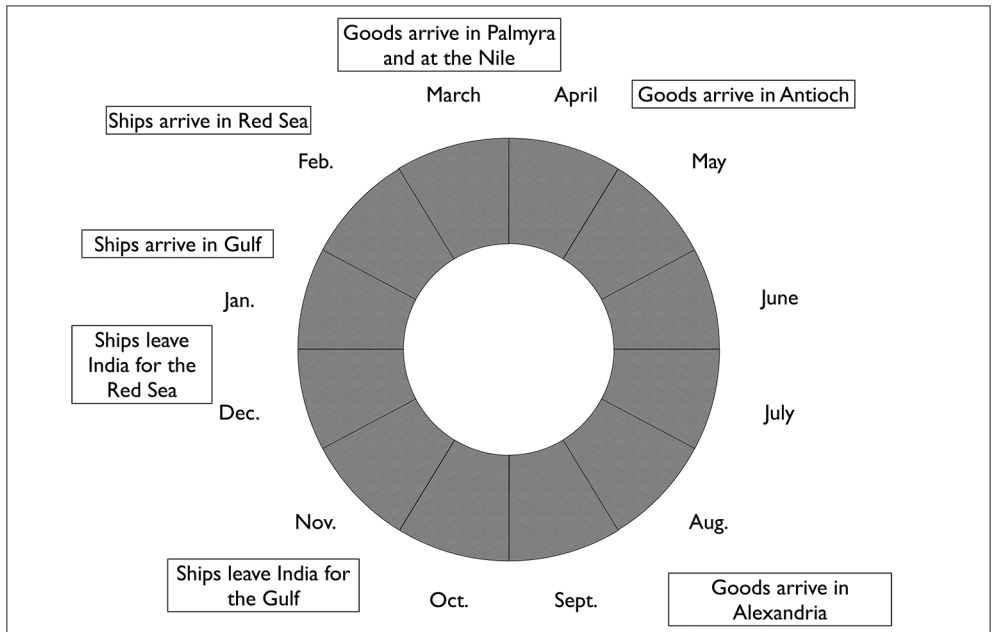


Fig. 5. Calendar of the Indian trade (Courtesy Eivind Seland)

know the names of several freedmen agents residing in 1st century Palmyra. Had they been busy with collecting local tolls only, there would be too many occasions to skip the massive quarter-tax between Palmyra and Antioch. Later, two Roman citizens honored with statues set up in the Agora: M. Aemilius Marcianus Asclepiades in AD 161 (Delplace and Yon 2005: 182–183) and L. Antonius Callistratus in AD 174 (Delplace and Yon 2005: 161) are explicitly described as collectors of the quarter tax. Asclepiades was also a councilor of Antioch, a circumstance not sufficient to prove that the seat of his tax-office was there. Palmyra, on the other hand, was a very suitable place to levy taxes on goods brought by caravans from the East; another office of that type was located in Zeugma on the Euphrates. Posts in some of the Levantine Mediterranean ports were involved only in internal tolls (Sartre 2001: 819–821). While the Muziris contract (Thür 1987; Casson 1990) shows that in Egypt the merchandise was sealed upon arrival in the Red Sea ports, kept in government storehouses in Koptos and carried to Alexandria by water, such precautions were more difficult to apply on the long land route through Syria.

Moreover, we now have positive proof of the quarter-tax being levied in Palmyra. An inscription scratched in a dark place on a wall in one of the tower tombs, which the author's son Piotr, then 13, discovered being just tall enough to see it at his eye-level, was interpreted in the original publication some 30 years ago as a money-lending operation (Gawlikowski 1986). Recently, Federico De Romanis (2004) provided a different interpretation of the text, which struck me immediately as obviously correct: the author of the

inscription was the quarter-tax collector and he put down the precise tax amount he was dealing with at the moment. It must remain a mystery why he scribbled his accounts in the family tomb.

The sum is important and quoted with a bookkeeper's precision: 3728 talents, 16 minae, 5 tetradrachms 1 drachm and 2 obols. It was dealt with in one month, which is not named. The sum is referred to with a word otherwise unattested, 'rbw' (*arbuá?*), clearly linked to rb' (*rubá*), translating the Greek *tetarte* (Riccardo Contini *apud* De Romanis 2004: 472). De Romanis thinks that this term designated the total value of imposable goods (*τιμή*); if it were a mere variant of the other word, meaning 'one quarter', then the imposed value would be of course four times bigger than the calculated tax (*τέλος*).

We are fortunate to be able to compare this account with another document, the already mentioned papyrus known as the Muziris contract (P. Vindob. 40.822, SB XVIII 13167). This text concerns merchandise brought to Berenike from South India on a ship called "Hermapollon" (Thür 1987; Casson 1990). The load's value was estimated at 1154 talents 2852 drachms. This is less than one third of what the man in Palmyra accounted for in one month.

Neither of these two documents can be dated. They can be compared only with data collected by Pliny the Elder between AD 50 and 77, which may be roughly contemporary or earlier, even by a century or more. As often quoted, Pliny deplors the expense of at least a hundred million sesterces every year for the wares of India, China and Arabia. "So much cost us pleasures and women!", he laments (Plin. *Nat.* XII 18, 84). In another passage, he

mentions the sum of 50 million sesterces for the Indian goods alone, brought to Egypt and sold at Rome with a hundredfold gain. Various scholars have taken these round numbers at face value, supposing them to be sourced from relevant imperial officials as the taxable volume of imports (Veyne 1979; Tchernia 2011: 15–17 and 301–303). Others have seen them merely as a symbolic figure to illustrate the moral indignation of the author.

Calculated in sesterces for the sake of this comparison, the load of the “Hermapollon” was worth 27.7 million and the sum noted in Palmyra amounted to slightly below 89.5 million.<sup>1</sup> So the scandalous expense, allegedly sustained every year by the Empire, would be worth just a little less than what four ships could bring to Berenike and not much more than the imports passing through Palmyra in one month. As noted above, it was reported by Strabo, a close friend of the governor of Egypt Aelius Gallus, hence presumably well informed, that 120 ships were going to India every year from the port of Myos Hormos alone. There is no reason to think that the traffic was diminished during the following century. Rather to the contrary, with Berenike doubling the stakes. If the load of the vessels mentioned by Strabo was comparable to that of the “Hermapollon”, the Roman imports from the East on that sea route would have been worth about three billion sesterces, and not the paltry one hundred million reported by Pliny. The discrepancy is so huge that the passage of time cannot account for it. Obviously, Pliny’s numbers have no relation to reality. We may safely disregard his virtuous alarms, also because any credible estimation of the

alleged loss should consider the balance of payments, while we have no idea of the value of Roman exports and of prices paid in India for Roman imports. Anyway, the very notion of overall commercial balance in international exchange seems never to have occurred to ancient authors. Even supposing that these 100 million represented the value of bullion exported, it would be a fraction of the value of imports as indicated in the direct sources just quoted.

Elsewhere however Pliny gives the Roman prices of exotic goods per pound and there is no reason not to believe him on that occasion. For instance, black pepper from Southern India was worth 4 denarii (Plin. *Nat.* XII 28), long pepper from Northern India 15 denarii, cassia (that is cinnamon bark from South China) 50 denarii per pound. Precious oils of nard or malabathrum could sell at as much as 300 denarii (Plin. *Nat.* XII 123), but they may have been refined in the Empire from imported leaves of these Indian plants, worth only 40 to 75 denarii per pound. A British Army manual of the 19th century recommends not exceeding 300–400 lb (135 to 180 kg) as a camel charge (Leonard 1894, quoted by Seland 2011). This corresponds to 400–540 Roman pounds.<sup>2</sup> So, if the whole amount of what the tax agent in Palmyra estimated at 22.37 million denarii was the value of black pepper only, it would have had to be brought by an improbable caravan of ten to fifteen thousand camels. More expensive spices, such as cassia, would require from 800 to 1100 animals to be transported, and even the most valuable oils of nard and malabathrum

<sup>1</sup> Counting 24,000 HS to one talent, 400 HS to a mina, and 4 HS to a drachm.

<sup>2</sup> There go 2.2 British pounds (453.6 g), but 3 Roman pounds (327.5 g) to 1 kg.

would call for from 135 to 185 camels. We have no idea of the silk price, but it was certainly high. Of course the weight of the most expensive precious stones or pearls was negligible. One can conclude that only the very costly wares were imported and even so several hundreds of camels were involved in the month accounted for by the man in Palmyra. It seems highly likely that it was one of spring months when caravans arrived from the Gulf with goods brought by ship with the winter monsoon. For the rest of the year the highly taxable Eastern imports could well have been negligible.

Even if the travelling season lasted longer, and even if the Palmyra account represents only the quarter-tax collected and not the value to be imposed, the volume of imports via the oasis would be many times lower than through the Red Sea. There is no doubt that Rome and Italy obtained their supplies from Alexandria. If the Palmyrene traders were delivering their goods to the coast, those destined for the West would be forwarded to Alexandria anyway, as this was the usual and fastest way to go to Rome from the Levantine coast. But, as Ernest Will (1992: 83–84) has already observed, we do not have any information about merchants from Palmyra present in the West. A few individuals, soldiers disregarded, who happened to leave a trace of their presence there seem to have been rather humble folk.

Meanwhile in Palmyra, caravan merchants enjoyed high esteem, quite in contrast to the disparaging attitude toward trade and merchants prevailing in Roman society in general. Roman elites and the public at large looked down upon tradesmen, always suspecting them of

cheating and profiteering (Tchernia 2011: 9–11; Morley 2007: 82–85). Not so in Palmyra, where the city Agora functioned as a kind of hall of fame exhibiting well over one hundred statues of great men and notables. Only the accompanying inscriptions remain, some of them fragmentary, but 73 texts preserved the names and/or qualities of the honorands (Delplace and Yon 2005). Only 14 of them were Romans, either imperial family, governors or army officers; in the case of the remaining 69 the occupation of the men was named in 45 instances: 17 civil servants, eight soldiers of local origin and as many as 20 caravan leaders or protectors. The latter were usually honored by merchants forming a caravan which has arrived safely and profitably from Lower Mesopotamia, but in some cases by the city council voting for four statues in the four tribal sanctuaries for those particularly efficient in their service to the caravans. Clearly, such people were greatly respected as major benefactors of the community. Nowhere else in the Empire do merchants have comparable social status and the same kind of attention is paid to their interests.

The flagrant fact that all the caravans we know of are those which came back from Mesene and the Gulf proves sufficiently that the so-called Silk Road traversing the Parthian and later the Sasanian empire was entirely disregarded by the Palmyrenes. They just skirted the borders of Parthian territory.

If we know nothing about caravans from Palmyra going West, is it because such tracks were safe and did not call for special protection, as usually supposed? Maybe we can go a step further and assume that there were simply no large caravans on the roads to Emesa, Apamea or Damascus. A caravan

bound for the Gulf was, of necessity, an association of many merchants putting their means together to secure a large host of animals of burden, an adequate armed escort, and a leader to deal with local powers along the way. To go West, every merchant could do on his own with a few camels and men. Those who did so were not necessarily the same people right back from the East. More likely, they were retailers, distributing exotic wares, and such local produce as the oasis could offer. Once the quarter-tax was paid by the Eastern caravan, these tradesmen (*pragmateis*, as distinct from wholesale *emporoi*) had only to pay the exit tax of 3 to 13 denarii per camel depending on the load.

They probably headed for local fairs (*panegyris*, Aram. *shuq*), held periodically in many places all over the country (de Ligt 1993: 70–75). Most available information in this respect concern Palestine where at least eight big markets were held under imperial privilege of tax exemption (Safrai 1994: 243–255). The most important was the “Fair of the Terebinth” at Mambre near Hebron. However, Syria was certainly home to many other seasonal fairs, not so well documented. For the Orontes valley, that is, the cities of Emesa, Arethusa, Epiphania, Apamea, to say nothing of smaller places, Palmyra would probably have been a better source of Oriental produce than Alexandria through the intermediary of the Levantine ports. The same could be true even of Damascus. For all this we have just one cryptic remark of Galen, recently discovered by Fergus Millar (1998a: 134): somewhere along the Phoenician coast the famous physician was offered Indian *lycium*, said to have arrived on camelback, which convinced

him that the plant was genuine; for Millar, it came via Palmyra. As for Antioch and its hinterland (the famous ‘dead cities’ not yet fully developed at the time), there is a good chance that it would have been supplied mainly via the Euphrates route and partly by sea from Alexandria. It seems to me that Palmyra could not have sustained direct competition with Alexandria on the Mediterranean sea routes. There is not the slightest hint that it ever tried.

Later on, after Palmyra’s end, we have precious testimony of the great fairs of the mid-4th century at Batnae (Ammianus XIV 3.3) and in Amida (Ammianus XVIII 3.3), both in Roman Mesopotamia. There, says Ammianus, great crowds assembled every year in early September to exchange products provided by the Indians and Chinese (*Seres*) and brought “by land and sea”. It could mean that both the overland and the Euphrates routes were used, the latter even more so, because in another passage the same author (XXIII 3.7) mentions Callinicum (the last Roman fortress on the Euphrates, at its confluence with the Khabur, today Buseira) as a place very well provided with every merchandise. All this must have come through Persian territory. The Red Sea route was apparently meeting the demand of the Roman market, and the Gulf route was definitely closed to Roman merchants. Callinicum is named again under Theodosius, together with Nisibis and Artaxata in Armenia, as the only allowed passages on the Persian frontier. The points of contact were limited to these places, all three in the north, apparently in order to protect the Red Sea route that the Romans still controlled (Winter 1987). The Palmyra shortcut was never used again.

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