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E. H. Warmington

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PART I

THE OPENING UP AND PROGRESS
OF ROME'S COMMERCE WITH INDIA

INTRODUCTION

I. FOREWORD

THE first two centuries of the Roman Empire witnessed the establishment and development of a profitable commerce between two great regions of the earth, the Mediterranean countries and India. We need not wonder at this. In the first place, the century after Christ was an era of new discoveries and enterprises, for the western world, after ages of struggle, was united under the firm rule of Rome, and, in the enjoyment of lasting peace and prosperity, was ripe and ready for fresh developments in the intercourse of men; in the second place, the welding of the races of the West and of the near East into one well-governed whole brought into sharp relief the prominent geographical feature formed by Asia Minor, Palestine, Arabia, and the north-eastern corner of Africa. By using the near East as a base, merchants filled with the western characteristic of energetic discovery and the will and power to expand, backed by the governing power of Rome and the prestige of her great name, and helped by Roman capital, were readier to push eastwards by land and sea than they had been before. The moving force from first to last came from the West; the little-changing peoples of the East allowed the West to find them out. We have, then, on the one side India of the Orient, then, as now, a disjointed aggregate of countries but without the uniting force of British rule which she now has and, while open to commerce, content generally to remain within her borders and to engage in

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agriculture. On the other side we have Rome, also at first agricultural, but now risen after centuries of triumph to be mistress of a vast empire of peoples, with whom and through whom she conducted all her commerce. The peculiar attitude of Indians and Romans towards commerce caused them to meet each other rarely along any of the routes which linked them over long distances, and to conduct their affairs over unexplored seas and dangerous solitudes on land by means of intermediaries. These indispensable middlemen and carriers belonged, from geographical necessity, to the following: (*a*) Greeks, especially those of Alexandria and Egypt, Roman subjects who spread both east and west in enterprises conducted chiefly by sea; (*b*) Syrians, Jews, and other peoples of Asia Minor, Roman subjects who moved westwards and along land-routes eastwards; (*c*) Armenians and Caucasian tribes, Roman allies of very doubtful loyalty; (*d*) Arabians, non-Roman carriers upon desert-routes and oriental waters; (*e*) Axumites and Somali, non-Roman Arab-Africans who traded with the far East and the interior of Africa; (*f*) the Parthians, a great land-power, a rival of Rome, and controlling the great land-route to the far East. Of these, the non-Romans proved a difficult problem to Roman commerce through a succession of principates; the Parthians could place almost unsurmountable barriers in the way by land, and even on the sea, which is open to all, the Romans had to contest the right of control with Arabians and pirates.

If the vast expanse of Europe, Africa, and Asia be contemplated as a whole, it will be found that the long but narrow Mediterranean Sea and the extended curve of the Indian Ocean compress the tract formed by Asia Minor, Palestine, and Arabia, into what may be called a "waist" of land from which the coasts of Italy and India are roughly equidistant. The Mediterranean and Indian seas,

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thus brought close together, are brought closer still by the two western inlets of Indian waters—the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, and by them the positions of Syria and Arabia between East and West are emphasised. Lastly, the Red Sea approaches the Mediterranean to within a very small distance at its northern end, especially by means of the Heroopolite Gulf, and this fact fixed as the main channel of Rome's trade with India the sea-route from Alexandria through the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.

What we have called the “waist” of land received in some part of itself all the routes which connected India with the Mediterranean by land and sea, for the strip of land between the western coast of the Red Sea and the Nile must be included in the “waist.” In these intermediate territories were found nearly all the receivers and carriers of Indian merchandise bound for the West; into these regions flocked merchants from the West bent upon oriental trade; within these regions were found nearly all those great cities or races which were made great by seizing the opportunities offered by the reception and carriage of oriental trade.

Beginning with Italy and the Mediterranean Sea, we will work our way eastwards and review the various trade-routes between Rome and India and the nature of the foreign races through which they passed at the time when Augustus made himself master of the Roman world.

II. TRAVEL BETWEEN ITALY AND THE NEAR EAST

Rome had received Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt into her hands; her empire extended over the “waist” of Asia Minor so as to include all territories as far eastwards as the river Euphrates and the vague frontier separating Syria and Palestine from Arabia, but the arid tracts of the Arabian peninsula she did not control, while the uncouth

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tribes of the Caucasus mountains, surging between the Caspian and Black Seas, had felt but slightly the power of her military forces. The city itself, which had become the money-centre of the world through the speculative activities of Romans and through wars, had sent crowds of speculators to the near East and had received an extensive free population of Orientals; the old frugal austerity had long given way before the attractions of luxury, and wares of the far East were reaching Rome in some quantity at the end of the second century before Christ. Rome held the West as a unity, but India was not one whole. Central India with both coasts was under the sway of powerful Andhra kings; the north-west was chaotic, for Graeco-Bactrians and pastoral nomads (Sakas) from Central Asia were being driven southwards through Sind regions by the Yue(h)-chi, while Magadha kings ruled the north-east. Three strong Tamil kingdoms occupied the south of the peninsula. The Indians sent no ships farther westward than the Red Sea mouth, letting the Greeks come to them. Thus in dealing with the trade-routes, we start from the West(1).

Although Rome was the largest market for goods from the near and from the far East, the port used for landing the more precious and fragile wares in Italy was not Ostia, where the silting up of the Tiber caused danger and delay (2), but the safer one, Puteoli (Pozzuoli), close to fashionable Baiae, and more favoured for its proximity to the productive works of Campania than for its sheltered harbour, mole, pier, and large docks. Travellers, starting when the lamps were lit, could sail to Rome by night, but merchandise was sent thither along one hundred and fifty miles of road through Capua, Sinuessa, Minturnae, and Tarracina. Trade and travel between Puteoli and Syria and Alexandria were brisk and constant, and the place was a centre for transshipment to the provinces (3).

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When the Empire began, one of three journeys was normally taken to the near East—(a) from Brundisium across the Adriatic, along the Via Egnatia, and across to Bithynia or Troas whence great routes to the far East could be reached at Sardis, Tarsos, Antioch, and other centres—a slow journey but available throughout the year; (b) a voyage from Italy to Ephesos by way of Corinth and Athens or round the Peloponnese (4) to Asia Minor and Syria, a route used in summer by sight-seers, leisured men of business, and by traders with Greece; (c) a voyage direct from Rome or Puteoli to Alexandria, where Indian wares destined for the West were concentrated after transport from the Red Sea and even from Antioch and were shipped again to Puteoli, especially from May to September when corn-ships sailed direct between Puteoli and Alexandria, direct voyages between Italy and Syria or Asia Minor being by far less favoured (5). About July strong N.W. winds forced westward-bound ships with cargoes and passengers to sail by night when calms prevailed, or to coast Syria and Asia Minor by means of local breezes (6), while between mid-November and mid-March any voyage at all was exceptional (7).

The firm establishment of Augustus in the principate brought peace and prosperity, and since much trade shifted from the near East to Rome, the Mediterranean Sea had become filled with merchants (8), and the fashionable world began to demand oriental luxuries on a scale unknown before, brought by Greeks, Syrians, Jews, and Arabians in Greek vessels, true Romans (resident not farther east than Asia Minor) helping them with moneyed capital when it was needed. The main channel for these luxuries through the Mediterranean was the sea-voyage from Alexandria to Puteoli, and so we naturally turn to look at the “province” of Egypt first and to consider the relations of that important territory with India.

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CHAPTER I

The Trade-Routes between Rome and India

I. EGYPT AND THE SEA-ROUTE TO INDIA

THE great Nile river in a manner unites Egypt to that region of the world which we have called a "waist" of land, and, by way of the Red Sea, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean (which throughout this book includes the Arabian Sea of to-day) are placed geographically close to each other. Navigation in the Red Sea dates from very early times, and a definite but mostly indirect trade with India was established by the Ptolemies, under whom Alexandria became the inevitable entrepôt between East and West and a commercial meeting-place for the peoples of three continents, and when Augustus established himself as princeps of an united western world there were two permanent methods of travel between the Egyptian capital and Indian seas, one which avoided the Red Sea as much as possible, and one which braved that treacherous gulf throughout its length. Merchants who preferred the first method started from Iuliopolis on the canal which connected Alexandria with the Canobic arm of the Nile, and navigated that river southwards for about eleven days when winds were fair until the horseshoe-bend of the river was reached. In this region lay Caenopolis (Kenah) and Coptos (Keft) where roads struck out towards the Red Sea. From Caenopolis one track led N. and N.E. for six or seven days to Myos Hormos (Mussel-Harbour, now identified with Abu Scha'ar) while from Coptos another led S.E. for twelve days to Berenice upon the Umm-el-Ketef bay below Ras Benas. Coptos (1), reached through a short canal, was much frequented by Egyptians and Arabians with Indian and Arabian wares, and was in fact the starting-point of both these desert-routes,

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for Coptos and Caenepolis were connected by road as well as by river. Men travelled across the desert by camel or caravan and generally at night, and the Romans, leaving the tracks unpaved because of the camels, maintained the Ptolemaic division of them into stages with fortified supply-stations, cisterns (*hydreumata*), and armed guards; the caravansaries were large and the hostels at Berenice were considered good (2). The different statements made by Agatharchides, Strabo, and Pliny shew that the use made of the two ports varied at different periods. Both had been established as havens by Ptolemy Philadelphos, but when Agatharchides wrote in the time of Philometor (181–145), only Myos Hormos was important, probably because the Mons Porphyrites was close by the route and because weather and shoals were a nuisance at Berenice. When Strabo wrote under Augustus, Myos Hormos, where there was a naval station, was still the chief port, but Berenice, with its good landing-places, was rising. Lastly, when Pliny wrote under Nero and Vespasian, Berenice had surpassed the other, probably because a land-journey thither passed near some emerald mines and avoided part of the Red Sea, and it is possible that ships unloaded at Berenice but lay in harbour at Myos Hormos (3), which retained, perhaps, some importance as a receptacle of Arabian wares.

There were other desert-routes between the Nile and the Red Sea, notably a track branching off from the Caenepolis—Myos Hormos route at Arâs and leading to Philoterâs, probably at the mouth of the Wadi Guwesis; another branching from the Coptos—Berenice route at Phoenicon and leading eastwards to Leucos Limen (*Albus Portus*, *Kosseir*); and south of Thebes, a track from Redesiya on the Nile (near Apollinopolis Magna, Edfu) joining the Coptos—Berenice route at Phalacro (*Dwêg*); another from Ombos joining that route at Apollonos (*Wadi Gemal*); and one,

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beyond Roman influence, from Meroe to Ptolemais (4). Most of these had become unimportant when the Roman Empire began and in my judgment were used chiefly by people who were not in charge of loads of wares, but the route Coptos—Leucos Limen, provided with intervisible beacons as well as with stations, was used fully by loaded camels even in Roman times, and the route Redesiya—Berenice was also so trodden but less and less (5). Choice of route might vary according to a man's taste and to his home, to prevailing winds in the Red Sea, and to disturbances reported from time to time along the desert-roads.

If a man chose to risk the dangers of sea and pirates (6) he could use the ancient canal leaving the Pelusiatic branch of the Nile at Phacusse (at least in the time of Augustus, though the point of departure has not been constant), and by taking a journey of seven days from Alexandria along the Wadi Toumilat and by way of the Bitter Lakes could reach the Heroopolite Gulf (Gulf of Suez) where the second Ptolemy, who cleared out the wide and deep canal-channel and added locks to prevent flooding from the Red Sea, had founded Arsinoë or Cleopatra (Ardscherud near Suez). Augustus probably cleared it out afresh, but the frequent south wind and the shoals at Arsinoë continued to deter many an intending voyager (7). We shall describe some important developments in the use of this route which served to connect Egypt with Aela(na) (Akaba), Petra, and distant Gerrha on the Persian Gulf, passing through irrigated country as far as the Gulf of Suez, but under Augustus and throughout the imperial period the route up the Nile to Coptos and then to Berenice and Myos Hormos was the chief passage for the trade with India. Strabo says that in times gone by very few vessels durst pass the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, but under Augustus and especially after the expedition to Arabia Eudaemon (Yemen) in 25 B.C.

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Arabia and India became better known through frequent trading; one hundred and twenty ships (presumably Egyptian) left for the East every year, visiting India and the Somali in fleets which brought back precious freights to Alexandria—a city which controlled the trade, distributed cargoes to other regions, reaped double customs-dues, and attracted foreigners to a degree above all other marts. He emphasises the importance of Myos Hormos and Berenice in this traffic (8). The merchants who visited India, not yet knowing the best use of the monsoons, coasted all the way in small vessels, perhaps sometimes sailing across from Ras Fartak to the river Indus. In constant dread of the inhospitable and uncivilised Arabian coast and of the shoals in the Red Sea, they sailed under armed guards and with the help of professional guides down the middle of that long gulf or near its western side and called at Adulis (Zula, the present port being Massowa) chiefly for African wares, then on the east side at Muza (Mokha), and having taken in water at Ocelis (near Cella) near Cape Acila at the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb (9) proceeded into the Indian Ocean and found Indians and Indian wares in African marts of the Somali, in Socotra Island, but above all at Arabia Eudaemon (Aden), a prosperous and wealthy meeting-place of Greeks, Arabians, and Indians. Farther along, in Hadramaut, Cane (Hisn Ghorab) and Moscha (Khor Reiri), both trading with India, invited a call (10). Leaving out most of the Persian Gulf, men coasted along until they reached Barbaricon on the Indus, where Indian, Tibetan, Persian, and Chinese goods could be obtained. Further sailing to the south brought them to the Gulf of Cambay and the Saka mart Barygaza (Broach) on the Nerbudda. Local marts along the coast of India could be visited under the supervision of Andhra rulers who controlled much of the western and eastern shores, but the chief goals were the three Tamil

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States of South India—(a) the Chera Kingdom, controlling generally the sea-coast from Calicut to Cape Comorin, and possessing the famous pepper-marts, Muziris (Cranganore) and Nelcynda (Kottayam), though the latter may have passed already to (b) the Pandya Kingdom, occupying roughly the districts of Madura and Tinnevely and bounded on the S. and S.E. by the north coast of the Gulf of Manaar to the Palk Strait—a kingdom famous for its pearls of Kolkai; (c) the Chola Kingdom stretching along the east side of India from the Vaigai, or at least the Valiyar to Nellore and the river Pennar, and famous for its muslins (11). Ceylon, sending its products to these Tamil peoples, was known to but not visited by Roman subjects who however, according to Strabo, were penetrating to the Ganges by sea in small numbers. He says that their visits to India and the Ganges were rare and hasty, and complains of the unscientific nature of their reports and, as a result, he relies much upon earlier Hellenistic writers, gives no details about the Indian peninsula, and ignores the tributaries of the Ganges (12). Possibly the Greeks were quite unacquainted yet with the proper use of the monsoons even for coasting and for sailing to the Indus, though some think otherwise (13); Roman subjects did not reside yet in India (14), nor did many Indians visit Alexandria, for Cleopatra gave audience to Ethiopians, Trog(l)odytes, Hebrews, Arabs, Syrians, Medes, and Parthians; no Indians are mentioned (15).

Through their geographical position and their ignorance of the monsoons, the Greeks of Augustan Egypt were hampered in their trade by the activities of intermediary races. In the first place, a great part of the Indian merchandise now reaching the Roman Empire was obtained by the Egyptians from Arabians. The southern area of Arabia contains the highland plateaux of Asir and Yemen, of which the latter chiefly concerns us. In temperate regions