

THE TRADE ACTIVITIES IN THE RED SEA DURING THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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The aim of this paper is to show the importance of the Red Sea as a navigable highway during the "Pax Romana", as well as to focus and interpret the effect of sea commercial activities on the role which was played by the Romans in south western Asia especially in Arabia Felix.

Historical background :

Prior to the Roman time Arabia Peninsula was mainly the arterial commercial route between the Monsoon land in the East and the Mediterranean area in the west. The Red Sea was also the transit navigable trade way between the tropical area in East Africa and the coast of the Mediterranean sea.

The Port of "GERRHA", which was situated near the recent site of "el Akir" or "Ojair", on the Arabian Gulf, was the gateway of the Monsoon land's goods, which were sent via the caravan route through Hufuf and Najran to Marib. Adena "aden" was the reception Port of African goods which were transported by sea to the countries of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Arabs were able to monopolize the trade within the Arabia Peninsula until the first century A.D. when the Greeks and Romans diverted the Indian trade routes towards the Red Sea and Egypt.

The conflicting powers : Map (1)

The Red Sea was a meeting place and an overlapping area between the conflicting powers of the east and west during the «Pax Romana». The Roman authority represented the western power while the Eastern power centralized in Persia. Each of these powers tried to overbring Arabia and its people under its influence in order to capture, monopolize and restore the trade activities in the Red Sea.

The first and main power that of the Romans was centralized in the land of Pharaohs. They classed Egypt not as a province but as the property of the Emperor.

Internal trade was active but slow, land transport moved on animals. Much traffic went by inland waterways. A great canal, 150 feet wide was dug and completed in TRAJAN'S reign (1), it connected together both the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean through the Nile and the Red Sea, from whose ports at Arsinoe "Suez" (2), Myos Hormos and BERENICE ships left daily for Africa and India.

Across the Red Sea from Egypt lay Arabia Peninsula. Neither the pharaohs nor the Achaemenids nor the Romans had been able to conquer the mysterious peninsula. The Greeks and Romans however divided Arabia in their writings into three main physical sectors which corresponded with the political divisions of Arabia during the first century A.D. These sectors were :

- A) *Arabia Deserta* which included most of the peninsula and knew only Arab nomads.

B) *Arabia Petraea* or Arabia Petrix was situated in the northern fringe to the south west of the Syrian desert. Here the Nabatean arabs established a kingdom that slowly grew rich on passing caravans, until its rule extended from LAUKE KOME on the Red Sea along the eastern border of Palestine through GERASA and BOSTRA to DAMASCUS. During the first century A.D. Petra became the node of Arabia trade owing to its situation as a trading centre on the caravan routes between Mesopotamia and Yeman as well as between Syria, Palestine and Egypt.

The Nabateans gained wealth from commerce, so when the Ptolemies tried to monopolize the navigable trade and capture the Commercial activities in the Red Sea by establishing many post points and ports on its coast, and by improving their friendship with the Arabia Felix people, the Nabateans realised the danger of commercial newcomers in the Red Sea and tried to attack the Ptolemies interests in the area and sometimes they put their hand on their goods. Accordingly Ptolemy Philadelphus, King of Egypt, devoted him self to promote Egyptian commerce and built a great fleet of three tons burden to guard the Ptolemies trade. The result was that Egypt became secure against the Nabatean raids and Ptolemy maintained his control over the northern section of the Red Sea as the Gulf of Aqaba (3).

However, under King Aretas IV, King of Saba (9.B.C — A.D. 40), the country reached its zenith, Petra became a Hellenistic city, arabic in speech, Greek in art. After Trajan annexed Arabia Petraea into the Empire, Bostra became

the capital of province of Arabia and raised in its turn the architectural symbols of wealth and power. Petra decayed as Bostra and Palmyra became the cross-roads of the desert caravans.

- C) *Arabia Felix* In the south west of Arabia Peninsula a mountain range and its streams gave milder temperature and fruitful vegetation to the Yeman of today. In this Area the Kingdom of Saba flourished, the Sheba of the Bible, so rich in frankincense, myrrh, cassia and cinnamon, aloes and nard, senna and gum and precious stones that the Sabateans could build at Marib and elsewhere cities proud with temples. The arab merchants sold arab products at high prices and carried on caravan trade with northwestern Asia and an active commerce by sea with Egypt, Parthia and India.

During the reign of the first kingdom of Himyarite in Yeman (115 B.C — A.D. 30) Augustus, the Roman Emperor sent in 25 B.C. the governor of Egypt, Aeluis Gallus, to annex the Kingdom to the Empire in order to capture the trade routes which were monopolized by the kings of Saba (4) as well as to guard the commercial activities in the sea from the pirates. The Nabateans promised to aid the Romans' expedition ... which started from Leuke Kome and then by land route through Hijaz and Marib. the capital of the Himyarite Kingdom (5). Hence it was not very far to the Incence land of Hadramout but the Roman general disillusioned as to the reputed wealth of Arabia Felix. marched back to the coast and left the Arabs to themselves (6).

However, the legions failed to take Marib and returned to Egypt decimated by disease and heat. (7) Augustus contented himself with despoiling the Arabs of Adana "Aden" and thereby secured control of the trade between Egypt and India. He tried also to gain the friendship of Arabs. This point is reported in a book "Periplus Mares ERYTHRAEI" (8) which pointed out that the Romans signed an agreement with the King of Saba who had a large area of land which extends on the Red Sea, Hadramout and the east coast of Africa (9).

Under Augustus the navigable canals of Egypt were cleaned out and military operations were conducted on both sides of the Red Sea to check raiding and piracy. Trade with India flourished and Strabo reported that 120 ships were engaged in it (10).

About the middle of the first century A.D., a sea captain named Hippalus discovered the voyages that could be made from the Red Sea to India out of sight of land, thanks to the steady Monsoon winds. As a result of this discovery trade with India increased to such extent that Pliny bewails huge sums spent upon eastern luxuries (11). Large quantities of Roman coins have been discovered in southern India whence came spices and pearls, while silk, perfumes and ivory also reached Rome via the Red in considerable quantities.

The Abyssinians :

During the second Himyarite kingdom (A.B.300

— A.D. 525) the Abyssinians invaded and colonized for the first time Arabia Felix in A.D. 340. The period between A.D. 20 and A.D. 370 is not clear in the history of southern arabs. The history books, therefore did not report the first Abyssinian colonization. The only reference to this historical event came through some writings belonging to the ancient kingdom of UXOM.(12).

Some writers suggested that the economic aspect was the main reason behind the Abyssinian colonization which was a reaction (13) against the Himyarites who used to attack Abyssinian's trade in the Red Sea during the first century A.D. However, the factor was that the Abyssinians came to the Red Sea as a new commercial power at the time of the Roman Empire. At the same time the celebrated dam of Marib was demolished in 446 A.D. Some authors reported that the decline of the dam was due to the divergence of trade from Marib route to the navigable route of the Red Sea as well as to the commercial influence of the Romans in the area. So the the Himyarites lost their source of wealth and neglected the "sadd" which consequently declined and was demolished.

The first Abyssinian colonization did not survive more than thirty years the people of Yeman were able to liberate thier land between the years A.D. 300 — A.D. 378.

The second Abyssinian expedition to Arabia Felix during the Roman time was in A.D. 525. Some Arabic references mentioned that the Romans asked the king of Abyssinia for religious reasons to invade the Yeman but the real aim was a political and economic one. The Byzantine purpose was to preserve the monopoly and

control of the trade route to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea and to extend accordingly its political power over the Arabs in order to back its policy against the Persians. At the same time the Abyssinians were eager to secure their trade against the Arab pirates. So both the Romans and Abyssinians had a serious political and economic interest beside the religious aim to capture Arabia Felix.

Some historians reported in their writings that the king of Abyssinia ordered the Abyssinian viceroy in Yeman, Abraham or Aramios, to invade the Sassanid dynasty in Persia in A.D. 520 (14) and to extend his aid to the Romans. Abraham took the caravan routes which led to Syria via Mecca but his expedition failed and returned back to Yeman.

The Persians :

After the death of Abraham's son, Santurces (15) governed the Yeman and treated her people badly. So one of the national leader of Yeman, namely Saif Ibn Zee Yazin went to the Byzantine Emperor and asked for help against the Abyssinians. The Emperor Justinian promised to aid his people in order to secure the Roman economic and political interest in the Red Sea and Yeman. In fact Justinian did not offer any aid to the people of Yeman so they turned for help to the oriental power (that of Persia) where Emperor Keisra Ano Shirwan (Cyrus) A.D. 531 — A.D. 578) sent an expedition to liberate Arabia Felix from the Abyssinain influence. Consequently the Persian's interest increased in the area after they mastered the Red Sea and the navigable trade route to India as well as the caravan route of Hijaz. Moreover they extended the area of their commercial

influence along and across the Red Sea by invading Egypt and Syria in A.D. 614.

Hence, the sphere of the Roman trade activities shrank in the Red Sea and in southwestern Asia and never extended again to the Yeman which fell under the Islamic influence.

The commercial goods : Map (2)

The vessels travelling through the Red Sea during the "Pax Romana" carried a multi-goods from all parts of the Roman world, from the Roman Empire itself and from outside the Empire.

To Rome and the west, came from Arabia, incense, gum aloes myrrh, laudanum, ginger; cinnamon and precious stones from Ethiopia and from east Africa ivory, apes, tortoise shell, rare marbles obsidian, spices and Negro slaves; from central Africa, wild beasts from the Aarea,; from Parthia and Persia, came rare essence; from Egypt corn, papyrus linen, grass; jewellery, granite, basalt, alabaster and porphyry; from Palmyer came textiles, perfumes, drugs.

In addition to all this, manufactured or raw silk, came from China through Parthia or India; from India came pepper, spikenerd and other spices (16) herb, ivory, ebony, sadalwood, indigo, pearls'sardonyx, onyx, cosmetics textiles, tigers and elephants.

In return to the East, the Romans exported carpets, jewels, amber metals, dyes, drugs and glass. Chinese historians speak of an embassy coming by sea to the Emperor Huan-ti in 166 from the Emperor "An-Tun" — Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (17).

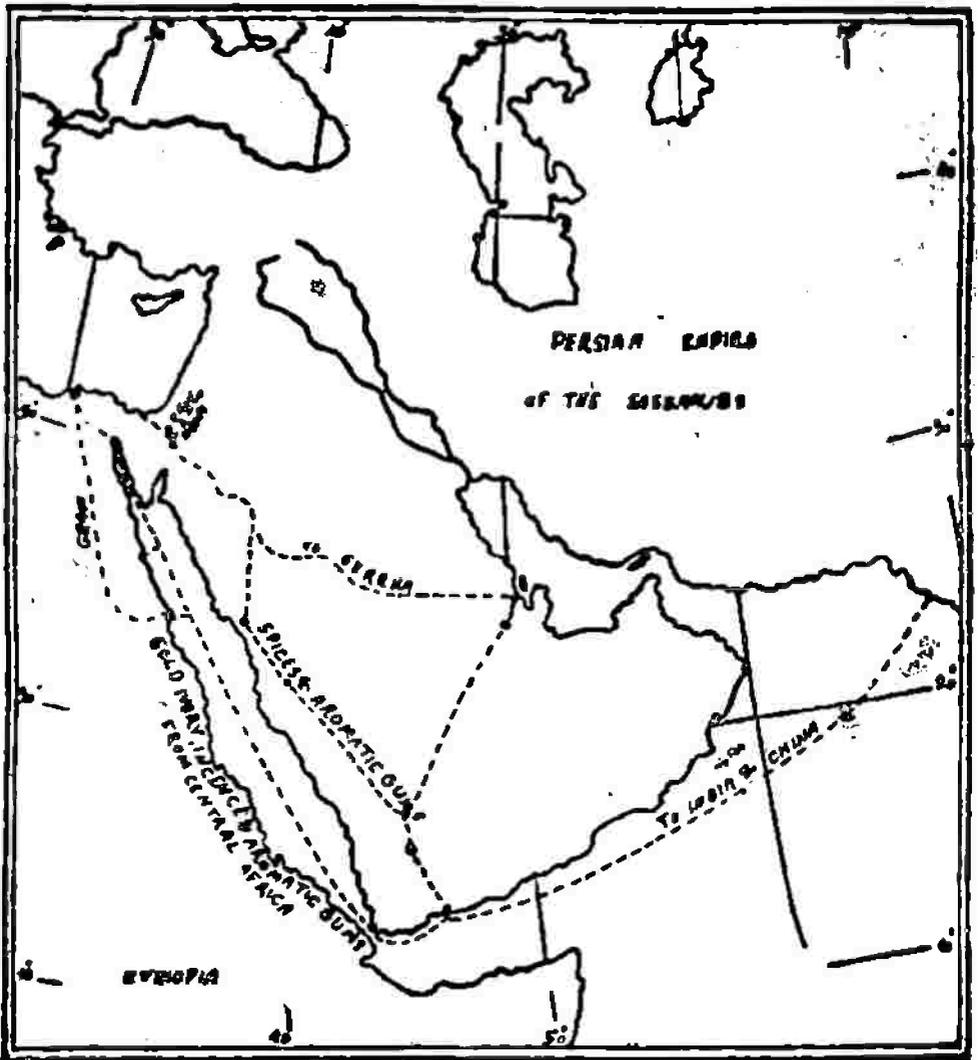
India imported also from Rome via the Red Sea and the Egyptian ports a modest quantity of wine & metals.

Conclusion :

The trade activities in the Red sea during the Roman Empire were so important in determining the political history of the area bordering the sea as well as the "raison d'être" of the struggle between the various conflicting powers in order to master Arabia Felix, the southern gate of the Red Sea.

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