

EGYPT AND THE MIDDLE EAST.

Productive and distributive centers of luxury goods in Classical Antiquity.

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Abstract

This study is part of my doctoral thesis entitled "The retail trade in the city of Rome during the Late Roman Empire", looking especially at trade gemstones, pearls, gold, garments, sumptuaries fabrics and ointments. All these are categorized as luxury products. My analysis covers the late Roman Republic until the end of Late Roman Empire (c. 1st-3rd cent. AD). In order to better understand the trade routes and the subsequent development of a graphic on the various trade routes of Oriental luxury products emerges after attending meetings of the EPNET Project. This trade is linked solely to satisfy the whims of a sector of the population of Rome increasingly highlighting their high purchasing power, capable of coping with large expenditures for pleasure.

Introduction

Once the Republic was abolished in favour of the new political system established by Augustus in 27 BC and the proclamation of the 'pax romana' after the expansion of Rome throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and the annexation of Egypt, the trade routes to the East were reestablished and improved. From Augustus to the third century A.D. Rome imposed an active policy both institutionally and commercially with regions bordering the Eritrean Sea. The emperor strengthened this business, with a non-interventionist trade policy. The Julio-Claudian policy encouraged the presence of Italian-Roman merchants in cities and ports where regularly luxury goods arrived. The presence of Mediterranean traders in these places was due to initial interest in reducing costs in the distribution of luxury goods to Rome. Avoiding more expensive products for a growing number of intermediaries in the distribution. Certainly direct control over East markets meant a greater economic benefit for traders in intercontinental trade. Pliny the Elder laments the large outflow of wealth of Roman territory such as gold or silver to cover the expenses that caused the eastern route (PLIN. 12, 41.84) This is an expensive business and it was not distributed equally. The most extraordinary goods gradually invaded the Roman market, changing their tastes and habits. The Romans could not do without these products.

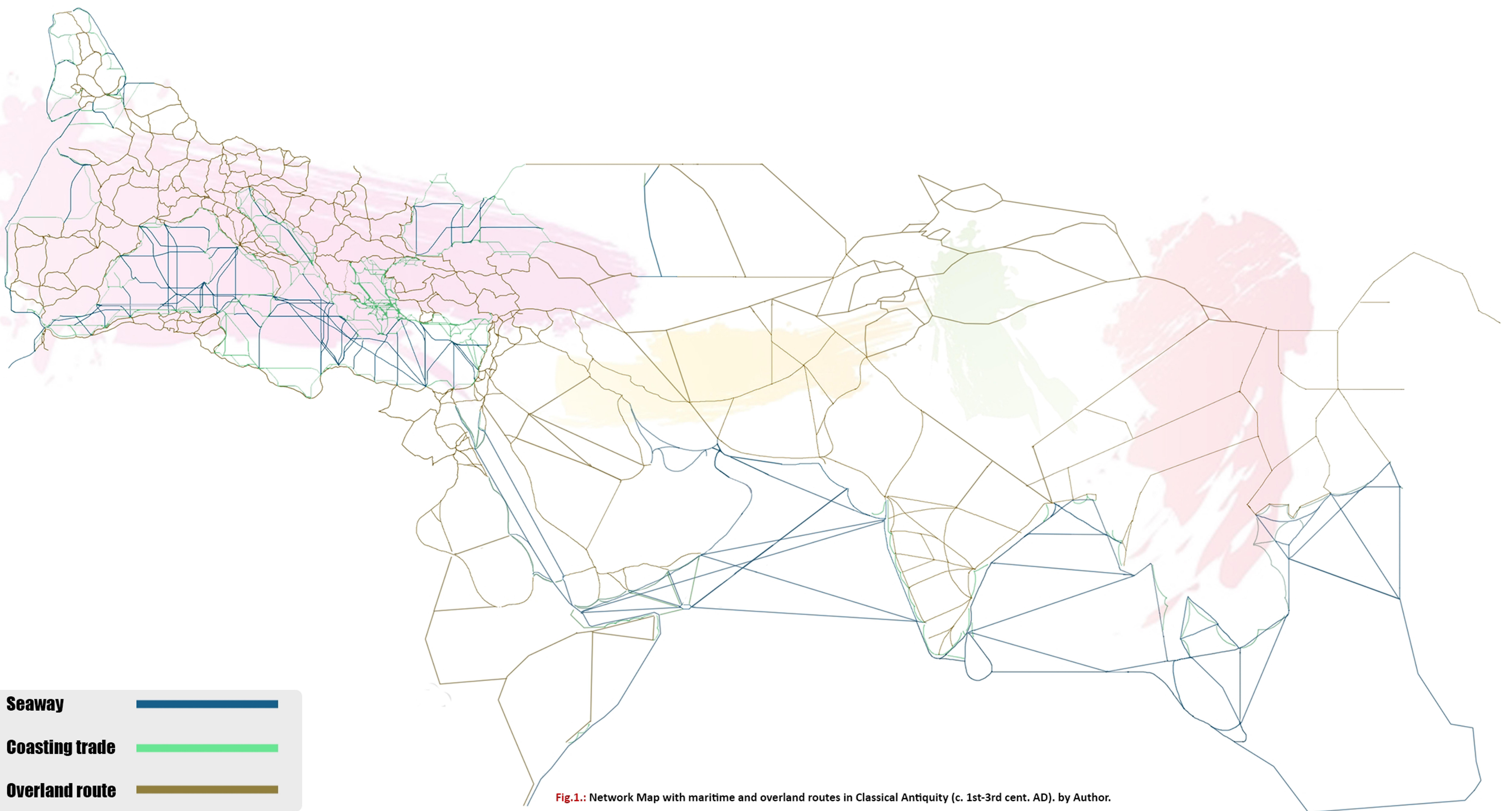


Fig.1.: Network Map with maritime and overland routes in Classical Antiquity (c. 1st-3rd cent. AD). by Author.

Materials, methodology and Conclusions

There are two commercial routes used by romans to the East and not merged between each other:

First, since Rome it was to sail to the eastern ports of Tyre, Sidon or Seleucid (Antioch). Next, the caravans heading to Palmira, venue of wealth from Parthia (Silk Road)

The second of the routes going from Egypt to India crossing the Red Sea.

The initial course for Egypt leads from Rome to Alexandria. Alexandria is to be the gate of the Roman Empire to products produced in Egypt or the Eritrean Sea. In this sense the Nile became a true gateway to the southern ports (Myos Hormos and Berenice)

Today the reasons why, at the same time coexisted four bordering empires that reach a power and cultural wealth solid enough to resist the greed of their neighbours are unknown. This allowed them to enjoy a period of peace and prosperity.

This bizarre accident of history, resulted in the fact that during the first two centuries our era this exceptional situation would allow the free movement of people, goods and ideas around the explored world. There are four empires which the government divided the world: the China of the Han (particularly those of the second dynasty), North India's Kushan, the Parthian Empire and the Roman Empire.

The China of the Han imperial and Rome sent embassies and expeditions to neighbouring territories of their borders. It was then that they met the interests of inbetween countries such as India or Parthia Kushan (Hou-Han-shu, ch.86). Early trade relations with neighboring states soon realized the interest of the Parthians or the Kushans to stay as middlemen in the lucrative intercontinental trade in luxury goods. The parthians follows to keep the trade routes under its control and in the utmost secrecy preventing other traders to access their routes.

It is also interesting as Hou-Han-shu mentions all the riches of Ta-T'sin. If the Romans to the East had become a land of wealth, like "El Dorado", (Luxury Goods Judea: JUV. Sat. 2, 6, 155-160, 3, 7, 129-139; in India. JUV. Sat., 2, 6, 457-467; MARC. Epig. 1, 72, 4, 109, 4, 2, 43, 9, 4, 28, 4, 10, 38, 4, 10, 98, 5; In the Nile: MARC. Epig. 11, 11, 1 ; 'Eritrean objects': 5, 37, 4-5, 8, 28, 14, 9, 2, 14, 12 (13), 4. Edict Concerning the Sale Price of Goods 24.1-26.274) the Mediterranean regions had the same image with regards to the Chinese population. (Hou-Han-shu, ch. 88.22-30)

In 1967, Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments, commonly known as the small-world experiment, where he argued that two states connected by an import-export network cannot be separated by more than two links. Therefore, if one wants to apply Milgram's 'six degrees of separation' concept to an analysis of trade networks, this interprovincial and transmaritime trade should be understood as connected by intermediary hubs. If we apply here the results Milgram, adapting it to the import-export network that connected these four states in antiquity, it's impossible to find more than two countries are separated by more than two links. Consequently, this fact benefited intermediate regions such as the Parthian Empire or India Kushan. Besides being producing countries of luxury goods, such as forced passage between East and West.

Surely neighboring states received all kinds of goods for trade, benefiting from the economic costs generated by transport and taxation, without being more involved in the commercial network. The same thing would eventually happen to the most adjacent areas of these states. Once proven impossible the conquest of Parthia, Rome increased its investment in commercial cities under their control in the Middle East and Egypt (Palmira, Alexandria, Berenice, Myos Hormos, Clysma, etc.). These cities acted as intermediary hubs within this luxury intercontinental trade. In conclusion, despite the density and extent of commercial network intercontinental the classical world provided multiple land and sea networks, there is a small number of active nodes that act required between different states as intermediary hubs.

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Fig.2.: Intermediary Hubs Network in Egypt and Middle East. by Author. (Blue (left): Rome. Yellow: 'IH' Egypt. Green, Blue & Purple: 'IH' Middle East)

