

INDO-ROMAN TRADE

DE ROMANIS (F.) *The Indo-Roman Pepper Trade and the Muziris Papyrus*. Pp. xxvi + 381, figs, ills, maps. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Cased, £85, US\$110. ISBN: 978-0-19-884234-7.
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This volume represents a milestone in the study of the complex economic relations between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean in antiquity. D.R. is a recognised expert on the subject, and this publication on the one hand ties together many of his previous lines of research, while on the other it offers many new and interesting insights into Indo-Roman trade. The title only partially gives justice to its content: the volume contains much more than just an analysis of the Muziris Papyrus and the Indo-Roman pepper trade; it also offers a general review of trade between the Mediterranean world and the Indian Ocean.

However, it is true that the undisputed protagonist of the volume is *P. Vindobonensis G 40822*, known as the Muziris Papyrus, a complex document, in fact containing two different texts, one on the recto and one on the verso. On the recto is a partially preserved loan contract in support of a commercial enterprise to Muziris, in India. On the verso, an equally fragmentary text lists the assessment of customs duties on the Indian cargo imported by the ship *Hermapollon*. The papyrus is usually dated to the mid second century CE. It was first published in 1985, and since then has been the subject of a long list of scholarly works (duly acknowledged in the 'Introductory Notes' of the book). In fact, the introduction and all of Part 1, i.e. around 40% of the book, are centred on the analysis of the text and the context of the Muziris Papyrus. Here, D.R. displays his huge competence on the papyrus. He proposes a full list of the integration and possible interpretation of controversial parts of the fragmentary text, restoring as far as possible the overall comprehension of the papyrus and of the documents contained in it. D.R. then offers a detailed analysis of the importance and the significance of the papyrus in the context not only of Indo-Roman trade, but also of ancient economic history. This is probably the most interesting part of the book, and a much needed one, adding order to decades of scholarship on the subject and offering a unifying and coherent interpretation of the text. Furthermore, D.R. underlines the challenges of the voyage between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, describing the geography and the weather conditions of the area under scrutiny.

In the second half of Part 1 D.R. focuses on the Indian coasts and on the merchandise that it was possible to trade there. This part ends with a detailed analysis of the written sources on the trade, in particular the Periplus of the Red Sea, Strabo, Pliny and Ptolemy, amongst others. Reconciling the accounts of the sources with the available archaeological and numismatic evidence is never a straightforward process, and D.R. is aware of these difficulties. Nevertheless, in most cases his reconstructions sound persuasive, especially in the section devoted to Pliny the Elder, which is the most convincing and best argued of his philological analyses.

The relatively brief Part 2 deals with the technicalities of the loan agreement on the recto of the Muziris papyrus. Here again the philological skills of D.R. are essential to allow him a coherent and convincing overall reconstruction of the loan contract as well as of the deadlines and clauses relating to the repayment of the loan. The fragmentary status of the text implies that some of the restorations proposed are somewhat speculative; therefore not all the hypotheses put forward by D.R. are equally convincing. For instance,

Chapter 8.1 is entirely based on reconstructed text, and starting from this conjecture D.R. builds a full range of complex interpretations. Nevertheless, this is not to cast doubt on the quality of this part, and possible and hoped-for future discoveries in papyrology may well shed more light on the issue and give D.R. merit for what is now speculation.

Part 3 contains the assessment of the cargo from Muziris. Chapters 9 and 10 reconstruct the whole list of items transported by the *Hermapollon*. In fact, because of the fragmentary nature of the text, the names of only three of the six items are clearly readable in the papyrus (gangetic nard oil, *schidai* and ivory), while, through guessing and calculation, D.R. suggests that the other three missing items were pepper, tortoiseshell and malabathrum. This is interesting, although it is something that D.R. had already solidly demonstrated in a previous study (*JAIH* 27 [2012], 75–101). Chapter 11, the final chapter of Part 3, makes a comparison between the cargo of the *Hermapollon* and supposedly similar ships from the Portuguese colonial period. Such comparisons between different ages and technologies are always intriguing, although the evidence available for the Portuguese trade is overwhelmingly more abundant than scholars can put together for the Indo-Roman trade, let alone the sole case of the *Hermapollon*.

Part 4, 'The Red Sea Tax and the Muziris Papyrus', deals with the subject of taxes and revenues deriving from the Red Sea trade. Chapter 12 tackles an old and to some extent worn-out debate on how taxes were paid in the Egyptian *emporia*, whether in kind or in cash. It is a complex issue, and D.R. elaborates on a scenario that keeps both possibilities open, imagining that traders would switch from one system to the other, according to their convenience (i.e. they would pay in cash only when the difference between market price and fiscal price would allow a profit). The mere reference to something such as 'market prices' in the ancient world opens a debate on the nature of ancient economy, which is beyond the limits of this review.

Chapter 13 explains the officials who were involved in the process of taxation, and a final, brief epilogue summarises the aim of D.R., trying to place the Muziris papyrus within the wider context of the Indo-Roman trade and the ancient economy.

Two brief appendices close the book, the first on the issue of exchanging coins in Barygaza, while the second is an extremely concise overview of the late antique Indian Ocean. The latter does not add much to existing scholarship on the later Indo-Roman trade. The former returns one more time to the issue of Roman coins in India, specifically at Barygaza, a subject already addressed in Chapter 5. Here D.R. tackles the issue of the possibility, explicitly referred to by the Periplus, that Roman traders could trade silver and gold Roman coins at Barygaza, gaining some profit. D.R. discards all the hypotheses put forward by scholars to explain the meaning of this reference, but in the end, he does not provide an unambiguous interpretation of the issue, listing three alternative hypotheses for reconstructing the process.

The volume represents an innovative and stimulating attempt at approaching Indo-Roman trade. Its methodology is clear, and the quality of the scholarly discussion is high. The volume will be of great interest to students of the ancient economy, not only for those interested in the international trade between the Roman Empire and India. It will undoubtedly provide a reference point for all scholars dealing with the ancient economy in the future.

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