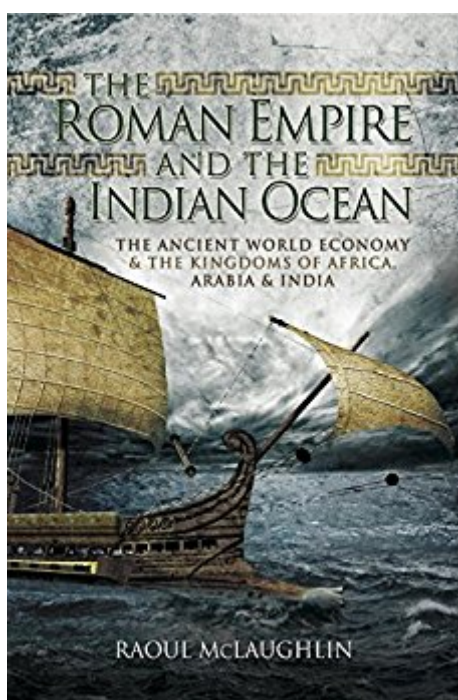


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The Roman Empire And The Indian Ocean: The Ancient World Economy And The Kingdoms Of Africa, Arabia And India



Synopsis

The ancient evidence suggests that international commerce supplied Roman government with up to a third of the revenues that sustained their empire. In ancient times large fleets of Roman merchant ships set sail from Egypt on voyages across the Indian Ocean. They sailed from Roman ports on the Red Sea to distant kingdoms on the east coast of Africa and the seaboard off southern Arabia. Many continued their voyages across the ocean to trade with the rich kingdoms of ancient India. Freighters from the Roman Empire left with bullion and returned with cargo holds filled with valuable trade goods, including exotic African products, Arabian incense and eastern spices. "This book examines Roman commerce with Indian kingdoms from the Indus region to the Tamil lands. It investigates contacts between the Roman Empire and powerful African kingdoms, including the Nilotic regime that ruled Meroe and the rising Axumite Realm. Further chapters explore Roman dealings with the Arab kingdoms of south Arabia, including the Saba-Himyarites and the Hadramaut Regime, which sent caravans along the incense trail to the ancient rock-carved city of Petra." "The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean is the first book to bring these subjects together in a single comprehensive study that reveals Rome's impact on the ancient world and explains how international trade funded the Legions that maintained imperial rule. It offers a new international perspective on the Roman Empire and its legacy for modern society.

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Customer Reviews

While this book provides a welcomed insight into the far-reaching economy of the Roman Empire, I do have some issues with it. My major concern is with how McLaughlin arrived at his estimate for the empire's revenues. He uses "snapshot" data to determine yearly revenue for the first two hundred years of the empire. By "snapshot" I mean that the author picks pieces of data from disparate points in time and regions in the empire and assumes that this data applies across the empire for two hundred years. I find this highly questionable. He then goes on to state that the 25% tax on imports made up one-third of the empire's revenue. However, with the figures for the tax income from other sources being so tenuous, this statement is also questionable. Regardless of these issues, the book contains a great deal of valuable information. The author details Roman trade across the Mediterranean to Egypt, Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, and even China (to use the modern names). He also clearly explicates the huge trade imbalance that existed between the empire and eastern kingdoms. Roman society coveted the spices, incenses, jewels, and ivory available in the East, but the empire had no comparable goods valued by eastern kingdoms except silver and gold. This meant that bullion was constantly drained from the empire, a situation that was only tenable as long as the mines were operating and/or new sources could be discovered. He then details how this very fragile arrangement was destroyed by the fifteen-year Antonine Plague. The plague not only decimated the Roman Empire (one-third or more of the population and legionaries may have died or been permanently incapacitated), but threw the entire trade system into chaos. Kingdom after kingdom in the East fell and the Roman Empire was invaded by "barbarians" who were not as severely affected by the plague. The modern world tends to believe that it created global trade in the 18th century. As McLaughlin shows, the Roman Empire had a robust trade system that encompassed Europe, Africa from the Horn north, and a great deal of Asia. The variety of goods and the lengths empire merchants went to obtain them, is truly staggering. And the fragility of the system should make us consider our own economic systems since our economies are even more interconnected.

Review first posted on .co.uk on 3 November 2014
The purpose of this book is to show the economic importance of what we call today long-distance international commerce for

the Roman Empire up to the end of the second century AD. The book has at least two sets of merits which make it valuable and certainly worth reading, but it also has some significant problems. One set of merits is to put things in perspective, and to attempt, through estimates, to quantify the importance of this long-distance trade for the Empire and its government. Another set of merits is to pull together a rather large number of works on the Roman Empire's economy and on its trade relations with the East in particular, including the author's own PhD dissertation. Accordingly, this is a valuable overview and starting point on one of the main characteristics of the Roman Empire's economy: the importance of its long-distance trade, with the existence of what we would describe in modern parlance as a structural imbalance in its foreign trade with the East. This point is repeatedly made throughout the book. The Roman Empire imported from East Africa, Arabia, India, and the Far East to a lesser extent, a range of goods that it could neither grow nor produce itself. These included all types of spices, most types of incense and balsam and just about every kind of precious and semi-precious stones. The high value of these imports was not matched by the goods that the Roman Empire had to offer so that the difference had to be made up in silver and gold coins or bullion, which these countries largely lacked. This drain in precious metals was ultimately unsustainable according to the author. It could only continue as long as the Empire's mines, and the silver mines in particular, remained productive or if new mines could be opened up. A related point made by the author is the importance of this long-distance trade for the Roman government and treasury. The author contends that it is these high custom dues - a 25% tax on the value of all goods imported into the Empire, mainly through Egypt, and coming from the East - that gave the Imperial Treasury the means to fund its far-flung Legions and auxiliary cohorts stationed on the frontiers in provinces with insufficient revenues to sustain them. This was especially the case in Britain, but also in Northern Gaul and the Rhine frontier, and in the Balkans, and the Danubian frontier. The author goes even further and uses ancient evidence to suggest that taxes on this trade supplied it with up to a third of the Empire's revenues. This is where I started having problems, principally because the author's estimates are not sufficient and perhaps even not rigorous enough to allow him to draw such categorical statements. The problem starts with what is termed 'ancient evidence'. The numbers used to estimate the Empire's revenues in AD 14, when Augustus died, mix up very different types of revenues raised at different at widely different times. Alongside extraordinary one-time levies, such as the 18 million sesterces levied in 49 BC, there is the 40 million sesterces of tribute raised in 50 BC from Gaul (excluding Gallia Narbonensis), according to Plutarch, revenues of the Roman State before Pompey's

conquests in the East (that is before 65 BC), possible revenues from Syria after 61 BC, and the revenues raised decades later from Anatolia, Asia and Palestine. Adding up all this disparate numbers, the author arrives at a total of about 640 million and compares this with about 1 billion sesterces of estimated expenses. There are problems with both sets of estimates. Regarding revenues, and taking the part of Gaul excluding Gallia Narbonensis as an example, it is at best difficult to believe, as the author seems to do, that it was still yielding only 40 million sesterces some sixty years after his (devastating) conquest and despite all the colonisation and development that had taken place during these two generations (or even three, given life expectancy at the time). A similar point can be made for Iberia, but also for the other provinces whose revenues would have increased, even if only slowly and only after 30 BC and the end of the Civil Wars. At the very least, the author's quantifications are unconvincing and seem to seriously underestimate the Empire's revenues from many of its provinces in AD 14, perhaps by as much as 30% or 40%. On the other hand, the estimates used for expenses do not add up to a billion sesterces but only to something between 870 and 910 million, quite a bit lower than the round number used by the author. The point here is that, given the significant margins of errors on both sides because we only have disparate evidence, it is rather difficult, and not very rigorous, to argue that taxes levied on long-distance trade made up to a third of the Empire's revenues at the time of Augustus' death and that these revenues were absolutely vital to plug the gap between expenses and other sources of revenues. This is not to say that the author is necessarily wrong. He may be correct, but his numbers are no much more than "guess-estimates" at best. There does seem to have been a structural deficit in what we would call nowadays the trade balances with East Africa, Arabia and India, and then with the Far East from the second century onwards. There therefore was a drain on Roman currency and bullion and on silver coins and bullion especially. It is also possible and even likely that the imbalance increased over time. However, it is simply impossible to be as categorical as the author happens to be simply because his estimates rely on insufficient evidence and implicit and very unlikely assumptions such as the one that government revenues raised in the Gallic provinces did not increase during a period where we know these provinces to have prospered. Because the author's estimates have very shaky foundations, the statement according to which it was international trade that funded the Legions that maintained imperial rule should at the very least have been seriously qualified. A similar critical analysis can be carried out regarding the value of the eastern trade with the author tends to show as tremendous without being entirely convincing since he uses point in time numbers to extrapolate an average number of ships and an average value of each cargo, but does not, among other things, take into account that

perhaps one ship out of six or seven might be lost at sea or to pirates. Despite these shortcomings and the speculative and tentative nature of the author's estimates, the book has significant value in several respects. The first is to show the growing importance of this eastern trade, even if the author might have exaggerated it significantly. The second is to bring together the contents of a number of more specialised publications on trade along the Red Sea to East Africa, Arabia, and the West coast of India and, during the second century AD, and the East coast of India, Burma and perhaps as far as Indonesia. Also very much of interest are sections summarising the trade in each of the main products, where they could be found and the main ports used for each trade, what they were worth, and what the Romans had to offer in exchange. There is also an interesting section on abortive relationships with Han China. These did not come to fruition as both the later and the Roman Empire soon both became engulfed in crises. The last section on the Antonine pandemic and its impact on the Roman economy and Empire is also valuable although, here again, one should perhaps take the author's assertions with a pinch of salt. This is because the pandemic, which certainly weakened the economy and reduced the Empire's available manpower (starting with the army which was severely affected) and the drain of currency and bullion in favour of the East are only two among the numerous factors that historians have put forward to explain the so-called 'crisis of the third century'. One last comment should be made about a further limitation of this book. Contrary to what its title suggests, it essentially deals with the Roman Empire's long distance trade from Augustus up to around AD 200, as opposed to the whole Roman Empire. In other words, there is virtually nothing on this long-distance trade during the third, fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, although we know that it still was sufficiently important during the reigns of Justinian and his successors for this trade to be an additional source of rivalry between the Eastern Roman Empire and the Sassanid Empire. Three stars.

This very well-written book was a critical piece of research my own piece of historical fiction, set in both the land and sea routes of Roman trading covered by the book. As I had already done considerable research, I felt comfortable judging its accuracy, but what really pleased me was its consolidation of all of what I had picked up from multiple scattered sources. I found this book not only useful in describing the Roman trade, south along the coast of Africa as far as Tanzania, and east as far as Borneo, where they encountered "naked cannibals," but also how this trade contributed to the Roman economy. Indeed the information on how the government financed itself overall was extremely enlightening, and left me with the impression that the economy was in fact perhaps at a level of 19th century European and US civilizations. The book also gives an insight into

how tightly woven the economies of Rome, Parthia, Bactria, India and China were in the first century, and how the Antonine Plague in 166AD was in fact a global pandemic that led to the collapse of all of those civilizations. As my book deals with a fictional Roman diplomatic mission to China in 100AD, that came in contact with all of those cultures, this book was a godsend to me. It almost seemed written to be a factual background to fictional story.

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