
Roman Commerce

From “The Life and Epistles of St. Paul” by W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, Eerdmans ¹

Though the Romans had no natural love for the sea, and though a commercial life was never regarded by them as an honourable occupation, and thus both experience of practical seamanship, and the business of the carrying trade remained in a great measure with the Greeks, yet a vast development had been given to commerce by the consolidation of the Roman Empire. Piracy had been effectually put down before the close of the Republic. The annexation of Egypt drew towards Italy the rich trade of the Indian seas. After the effectual reduction of Gaul and Spain, Roman soldiers and Roman slave dealers invaded the shores of Britain. The trade of all the countries which surrounded the Mediterranean began to flow towards Rome. ²

The great city herself was passive, for she had nothing to export. But the cravings of her luxury, and the necessities of her vast population, drew to one centre the converging lines of a busy traffic from a wide extent of provinces. To leave out of view what hardly concerns us here, the commerce by land from the North, some of the principal directions of trade by sea may be briefly enumerated as follows. The harbours of Ostia and Puteoli were constantly full of ships from the West, which had brought wool and other articles from Cadiz a circumstance which possesses some interest for us here, as illustrating the mode in which St. Paul might hope to accomplish his voyage to Spain (Rom. 15:24).

On the South was Sicily, often called the Storehouse of Italy, and Africa, which sent furniture woods to Rome, and heavy cargoes of marble and granite. On the East, Asia Minor was the intermediate space through which the caravan trade passed, conveying silks and spices from beyond the Euphrates to the markets and wharves of Ephesus. We might extend this enumeration by alluding to the fisheries of the Black Sea, and the wine trade of the Archipelago. But enough has been said to give some notion of the commercial activity of which Italy was the centre: and our particular attention here is required only to one branch of trade, one line of constant traffic across the waters of the Mediterranean to Rome.

Alexandria has been mentioned already as a city, which, next after Athens, exerted the strongest intellectual influence over the age in which St. Paul's appointed work was done; and we have had occasion to notice some indirect connection between this city and the Apostle's own labours. But it was eminent commercially not less than intellectually. The prophetic views of Alexander were at that time receiving an ampler fulfilment than at any former period. The trade with the Indian Seas, which had been encouraged under the Ptolemies, received a vast impulse in the reign of Augustus: and under the reigns of his successors, the valley of the Nile was the channel of an active transit trade in spices, dyes, jewels, and perfumes, which were brought by Arabian mariners from the far East, and poured into the markets of Italy.

But Egypt was not only the medium of transit trade. She had her own manufactures of linen, paper, and glass, which she exported in large quantities. And one natural product of her soil has been a staple commodity from the time of Pharaoh to our own. We have only to think of the fertilising inundations of the Nile, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the multitudes composing the free and slave population of Italy, in order to comprehend the activity and

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² There seem to have been two great lines of inland trade through Asia Minor, one near the southern shore of the Black Sea, through the districts opened by the campaigns of Pompey, and the other through the centre of the country from Mazaca, on the Euphrates, to Ephesus.

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importance of the Alexandrian corn trade. At a later period the Emperor Commodus established a company of merchants to convey the supplies from Egypt to Rome; and the commendations which he gave himself for this forethought may still be read in the inscription round the ships represented on his coins.

The harbour, to which the Egyptian corn vessels were usually bound, was Puteoli. At the close of this chapter we shall refer to some passages which give an animated picture of the arrival of these ships. Meanwhile, it is well to have called attention to this line of traffic between Alexandria and Puteoli; for in so doing we have described the means which Divine Providence employed for bringing the Apostle to Rome.

The transition is easy from the commerce of the Mediterranean to the progress of travellers from point to point in that sea. If to this enumeration of the main lines of traffic by sea we add all the ramifications of the coasting trade which depended on them, we have before us a full view of the opportunities which travellers possessed of accomplishing their voyages. Just in this way we have lately seen St. Paul completing the journey, on which his mind

was set, from Philippi, by Miletus and Patara, to Caesarea (Chap. 20). We read of no periodical packets for the conveyance of passengers sailing between the great towns of the Mediterranean.

Emperors themselves were usually compelled to take advantage of the same opportunities to which Jewish pilgrims and Christian Apostles were limited. When Vespasian went to Rome, leaving Titus to prosecute the siege of Jerusalem, "he went on board a merchant ship, and sailed from Alexandria to Rhodes," and thence pursued his way through Greece to the Adriatic, and finally went to Rome through Italy by land. And when the Jewish war was ended, and when, suspicions having arisen concerning the allegiance of Titus to Vespasian, the son was anxious to rejoin his father, he also left Alexandria in a "merchant ship," and "hastened to Italy," touching at the very places at which St. Paul touched, first at Rhegium (28:13), and then at Puteoli.
