

# *Role of Palmyra in the Formation of Roman View of the Far East in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Century*

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**Abstract:** Roman imagery of the far east could be influenced by the near-easterners either in ideological dimension or in interactive dimension. Since Palmyra was one of the most important cities that linked together Rome and the far east, this essay will discuss the role of Palmyra in the formation of Roman view of the far east in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century and try to resolve two main questions: How Palmyrene merchants as middlemen promoted the Roman maritime trades with the far east? Besides, what role did they take in the formation and progress of Romans' recognition of the far east? Based on the analysis of archaeological evidences and Latin literature which respectively infer the operation of Palmyrene commercial network and Roman imagery of the far east, it is concluded that Palmyrene merchants' activities and their complicated ethnic identity had brought positive effects to the Rome-far east trade through which geographical and material knowledge was accumulated and thus led to a refinement of Roman view of the far east.

**Keywords:** palmyrene, caravan trade, far east, roman imagery, silk road

## 1. Introduction

Palmyra, a small town inferred as a “*terris exempta a rerum natura*” by Pliny the elder [1], had been one of the most prosperous emporium cities in the “Persian Gulf-Syria trading route” for almost two centuries. In spite of the advantageous geographical condition of Palmyra in the caravan commerce mentioned by Pliny: its location in the bleak desert of Syria and possession of abundant water resources and fertile soil would make it an optimal hostel station for passing caravans [1], he somehow recognized this town in a more political and ideological level. According to him, it was Palmyra's “destiny” to be a pendulum oscillating between the two imperial powers of Rome and Parthia, and he emphasized that “at the first moment of a quarrel between them [i.e., Palmyrenes] always attracting the attention of both sides [i.e., Rome and Parthia]” [1]. Forasmuch as a short interval in the chronological line between the accomplishment of *Historia Natura* and Roman conquer in Palestine, political interstate relationships would naturally be a prior concern for Pliny. The political background could be a major factor to decide the fate of a state and could for shape the identity of a people, while in the case of Palmyrenes, it is their identity as interstate merchants and mediators that should be first considered in their ethnic spectrum and through which light can be shed on a broader perspective of trans-communications and the formation of mutual recognition between the east and the west during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century. For centuries Rome and Parthia had vied for the control of Palmyra owing to its high value as a metropolis of caravans. Archaeological

evidences could prove Palmyrene merchants' direct interactions with the far east [2], since Romans' eastern trades in Persian Gulf were accomplished practically through intermediary peoples, among which Palmyrenes could be fairly important, it would be reasonable to suppose that the Romans' view of the far east would be influenced by Palmyrenes. And this is exactly related to the question which is going to be discussed in this essay: What role had Palmyrene—in a niche both politically and culturally complicated—played in the transmission of the information of far east to Rome and how they had influenced Romans' portrayal of the far east?

In order to answer this question, the first step is to figure out how did Romans portray the far east during the first two centuries, which by far is untraceable in a universal extent in Roman society. Nevertheless, a large number of scriptures of poetries, essays and geographical records left by Roman intellectuals made it possible for us to form a general picture of this far-east imagery, at least, within the intellectual stratum. Besides, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* further provided some clues about the knowledge pertaining to the far east acquired by Roman merchants.

Given that the maritime trade between east and west before the reign of Augustus was rather unsystematic and comparatively small in scale, land borne trades across Eurasia were more frequent [3]. The latter would be whereas carried out with the intervention of middlemen whose roles, in this case, were played by the near-easterners. Even in the first century when Red Sea trade was gradually becoming prosperous with the official Roman involvement, few evidence could prove that any Roman merchants had ever reached an area eastward beyond India, as according to the record of *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Ganges seems to be the farthest eastern destination for a Roman merchant to reach. As for the Thinae, probably referred to China, and other “regions beyond” would be “not easy of access” [4]. Therefore, Romans could only indirectly get some limited and imprecise knowledges of the far east. On the other hand, the policy of “Pax Romana” to the east border and an unprecedented obsession with the east luxuries stimulated Romans' curiosity to the far east in this century. Thus, the consequence was obvious: half through hearsay and half through imagination, Romans had formed their own view of the far east which is by no means accurate; nevertheless, it should be noted that this full-of-loopholes view would not always remain unchanged. Comparing with the-first-century Roman literature, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman authors' references to the far east were much improved both in accuracy and detailedness. This cognitive progress should for a large part attributed to the merchants in Syria and their maturing mercantile networks.

Therefore, it comes back to the focus of this essay: Palmyrenes—a people of the only “caravan city” in Syria [2].

Although among the near easterners Parthians was no doubt the biggest middleman and monopolist, they would not be the main concern of this essay due to the absence of original Parthian records of their mercantile activities and the scarcity of material sources. What's more, it must not be ignored that Parthians, as the major profiteers in the inland silk trade, being in possession of great military power would naturally strive to hamper the direct intercourse between Rome and the far-east countries (especially China, almost the only producer of silk). Thereby, Parthians would serve more as an obstruction in this topic; while the choice of Palmyrenes as the research object is based on the comparatively abundant archaeological discoveries (including their funerary sculptures, inscriptions, textiles...) as well as their ethnic and political complexity in relation to both east and west. Furthermore, since Palmyra was possibly absorbed into Roman empire in A.D.17 [5], with some autonomy still remained, the role of Palmyrenes in the eastern trade between Rome and far east would at least not be anti-communicative, if not subjectively pro.

## 2. The Rising of Palmyra and Roman Expansion in Persian Gulf

### 2.1. The Sprouting of Palmyrene Network Driving Romans to Explore the Persian Gulf-Syria Eastern Trading Route

The very beginning of the rise of Palmyra, heading to be a trading centre for caravaners, might be some times earlier before Romans' eastern trade through seafaring stepped into a new era of prosperity in the first century. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E., Parthians had conquered the lower Mesopotamia and extended its sphere of influence to Dura Nicanoris [6] so that Parthians ulteriorly westward annexed a part of the trading route along the Euphrates basin. Meanwhile, the Nabataean caravan kingdom had expanded their control to Damascus [6]. Palmyrenes might at this period start to take the advantage of its location in the short-cut for caravans from Parthia to Rome, and in the meantime became a corridor through which Nabataean nomads could trade with the eastern agrarian society. Besides, Palmyrenes' probable connexion with the Nabataean kingdom in Persian Gulf might enable the Palmyrene merchants to explore sea route to the far east. There was evidence later in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. showed that they had reached the land as far as "the Saka kingdoms in North-West India" [2, 20]. Owing to the lack of material or textual sources that could tell the trading details in this period, the role of Palmyrenes in these connexions could only be postulated from a later inscription. According to Gawlikowski, the earliest evidence that could attest the mercantile activity in Palmyra was an inscription which recorded something about the tax on camels dating to about 10 C.E.:

*"(At) this wall, the taxes of the camels, so much as above the tax due to the Assembly of all the Palmyrenes, (are for) 'Atenatan b. Kaffatut b. Bar'a and for Yamliku his son, (both) from the tribe of Bene Mita, in the year 322."* [2]

The inscription can at least indicate that Palmyrenes had developed an organized assembly with leaders from one family around the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and they would make profit by taxing the passing caravans. Here is a guesstimate: if they did have some sort of connection with Nabataean nomads, there might be share of the taxation between them. In this sense, they resembled to some extent the later Mongolian "Ortaqs"—sharing profits with and seeking protection from Nabataeans—while the Palmyrene merchants' advantages in this cooperation were presented more in the geographical location of Palmyra. These connexions made Palmyra a city thus become increasingly animato in the mercantile activities. These connexions would continue to spread, and by the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E., Palmyra was wealthy enough to draw Romans' attention: Marcus Anthony first made an unsuccessful attempt of capturing this city in 41 B.C. [6, 7].

In fact, the appearance of this "caravan city" provided Romans with a new route other than the traditional Red Sea route (which was partly dominated by the Ethiopians, Axumites and Southern Arabs) to explore the far east by detouring the Parthian jurisdiction. Despite the limited contribution to silk transmission Parthians was in Romans' opinion either a traditional enemy or an obstruction for Romans to contact with far east [8]. The rise of Palmyra no doubt would attract more caravaners who were always in need of refilling their provision and changing caravan animals to come, and thus commercial profits that could be procured through selling provisions, hostel service and through taxation in Palmyra would be considerable. Palmyra's development at the budding stage made Romans see a possibility to directly trade with the far east, which might be a kernel factor that drove Roman merchants around the Christian era to make effort to explore into the Persian Gulf-Syria trading route.

## 2.2. Persian Gulf-Syria Trading Route as an Alternative for Romans and the Role of Palmyrenes in the First Century

At the turn of the first century, the tensivity of relationship between Rome and Parthia was much attenuated, entering into a stage called as “cold war” by many scholars [9], which rendered Syrian and Mesopotamian regions comparatively stable. The Roman government seemed to be rather prudent in actions concerning the regions of Syria-Mesopotamia after Augustus had brought back Roman hostages and made truce with Parthia. Most of the cities or stations along Euphrates were under the influence of Parthia, as it could be indicated from the recount of Isidore of Charax [10] and the demarcation of the territories was ambivalently subtle. Legions in the “village of Nabagath” even could “cross over to the Roman territory beyond the river” [10]. Probably due to the same reason, Roman infrastructures for taxation and government warehouses were absent in Syria as they would be commercially important for Romans in Egypt [11]. In this sense, comparing the two major maritime trading routes during this period, Romans’ occupation in Persian Gulf-Syria route could be particularly more limited than that in Alexandria-Nile-Red Sea route. Yet the former was not necessarily demeaned despite this distinction.

According to Seland, the Persian Gulf-Syria route was actually an essential alternative for Roman merchants to not only import commodities to Roman market in different seasons but also avoid encountering the occasional political turbulence in the Alexandria-Nile-Red Sea route [11], since Roman occupations in the east were for some times accompanied by intermittent revolts and suppressions, for instance, the uprising caused by the Roman system of tax collection in 29 B.C. and later the “Alexandria revolts” in 38 C.E. and 40 C.E. [3]. In the case of Syria-Persian Gulf, making allowance for their sensitive position in the near east most intermediary works were left to local peoples, and Palmyrenes who were culturally and racially attached to the near-easterners and Arabian nomads could be an influential impeller of trades in this trading route:

For starter, the names of Palmyrenes were originated from Aramaic or Arabic [12]. It could be possible that their ancestors come from both Syrian and Arabian ethnic groups and these ancient ties of consanguinity were still recognized among groups, which could also be a proof of the connexion between Nabataeans and Palmyrenes before the 1<sup>st</sup> century mentioned above. Besides, when Palmyra was assaulted by Marcus Anthony, Palmyrenes moved to the region of Euphrates and were thus under the protection of Parthia [7]. There should be some historical bounds between Palmyrenes and peoples who resided in the Euphrates basin. In fact, in order to maintain these interrelationships, Palmyrenes would obstinately keep their ethnic features to as easterners even after they had experienced some degrees of Romanization. While some public architectures built by Parmyrenes demonstrated some adopted Roman style such as the use of grand colonnade and basilica in the establishment of the “Arsu sanctuary”, their private funerary sculptures and gravestones kept most Palmyrene features including the application of frontality and maintenance of Aramaic inscriptions [13]. For one side, by accepting either actively or passively the assimilation to Rome in the public level Palmyrenes obtained a new identity as commercial agencies for Romans; the other side, with the maintenance of Aramaic language and their essential culture they would not lose the knots with these eastern communities.

As a result, it would be easier for Palmyrenes relying on their connections with Arabian nomads as well as residents of Euphrates to get access to the waterway of Euphrates and make good use of it. Besides, Palmyrene network in its developing stage was continuously absorbing new trading centres or emporium into its own system [14]. In other words, Palmyrene system was always dynamic and comparatively more flexible thanks to their diaspora identity; while Roman infrastructures as taxation institutions and commodity warehouses would be much more static and would encounter dissatisfactions from the local merchants or habitants. Thereby, as mediators in

this half-land-half-sea route, Palmyrenes could make amends for the absence of Roman infrastructures and frequently acted as mercantile envoys or caravan escorts of to-and-fro merchants between Rome and the east ports. In this sense, Palmyrenes propelled Romans' maritime trade to as far as the west coast of India in the first century.

When it came to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., Romans seemed to have a stronger linkage with the easterners comparing with the condition in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and the effects of their cultural propaganda in the east should not be underestimated. A patron of Palmyrene caravans known as "Šo'adu b. Bolyada" even built a temple specially for "the Roman imperial cult" in Vologesias which might formerly be under Parthian government [2]. And this happened to encounter with the zenith period of Palmyrenes' commercial activities in this district as they would further "establish trading colonies" and set agents for trade throughout the area of Syria-Mesopotamia [6]. Sculptures and inscriptions pertaining to mercantile activities in this period were at large. For these reasons, it is safe to conclude that Romans' advancing to east was closely related to Palmyrenes' activities.

### **3. The Formation and Change of Roman View of the Far East and Palmyrenes' Involvement**

#### **3.1. Traditional Bias Against the East**

The traditional Roman imageries of the far east tended to be negative and their description was ambivalent. Before the Christian era, the quantity of Roman texts pertaining to the far east was rather scarce and fragmental. Romans were whereas not indifferent to the far east since some influential authors like Horace, Virgil, Propertius and Ovid had given a few lines about the so called "Seres", which in Latin means "the people who make silk". In these proses, most of these mentions of "Seres" and other far-easterners like Saka and Indians would serve as a superficial romantic ornament in literature works as one of Virgil's lines in *Georgics* goes: "just as the Seres comb down fine tissues from their leaves? [15]" or in Ovid's *Amores*: "What (shall I say of your tresses)? Because they were fine and you were afraid to adorn them like the veils which the sallow-skinned Seres possess. [15]" Among these trivial references, however, Horace's recount was somehow distinctive. He seemed to portray all the far-easterners including Seres as potential threat to the authority Roman empire [16]. His use of words in *Odes* was defensive: "Those who drink of the deep Danube shall not infringe the Julian decrees, nor shall the Getae, nor the Seres, nor the untrustworthy Persians nor those born near the River Tanais. [15]" In his description, "Persians" and "Parthians" were "untrustworthy", and this could be a common Roman attitude in 1<sup>st</sup> C.B.C.E. after numerous battles with the Parthians. Thus, Horace's description was no more than a political propaganda conforming to the epochal trend. Nevertheless, his juxtaposition of Persians or Parthians and other east peoples indicated that Romans' imagery of the far-easterners might be influenced by their bias against Parthians in this period, and this could be mainly attributed to two reasons. The first one is the lack of knowledge. Since the overland road to the far east was blocked by Parthia empire and the maritime route was still at its sprouting age, even the secondary information that Romans could get was much limited, and therefore they could only view the far-easterners through the vision of near-easterners with whom they could get direct contact. By this way, Romans' wariness and distrust to Parthians would somewhat represent in their imagery of far-easterners. The other reason is Romans' tradition in picturing the easterners as "the ethnic others" [17]. As what the verses of Horace presented, all the east peoples shall prostrate before the law of Rome. Therefore, the formation of the Roman view about the easterners was simultaneously accompanied with the hubris of depiction of their own identity as a superrace.

Nevertheless, such a biased imagery was gradually changed during the next two centuries as with the spreading commercial network of Palmyrenes the maritime trading routes were becoming

increasingly prosperous and the knowledge about the far east would be more accessible for Romans. Even though the bias inevitably continued to exist, more objective records like geography and complexion of far-easterners were added to Romans' descriptions.

### 3.2. Contribution of Palmyrenes as a New Media Between Rome and the Far East

When it came to the 1<sup>st</sup>C.C.E., Romans' knowledge about far east was accumulating, and Roman authors were making efforts to offer some more concrete information to their readers, but in their recounts about far east there was an obvious disparity in Romans' knowledge procured about Indians and Seres. While Pliny described India with rather precise figures from the depth and width of Indus: "...Indus is nowhere more than 6.25 miles wide or 75 feet deep [1]" to the number of elephants of certain tribe: "...the Megallae whose king possesses 500 elephants [1]", information he gave upon Seres was scarce and he himself received the information from a Taprobane envoy [1]. The knowledge disparity could partly result from Palmyrenes' trading along the Persian Gulf as with the expansion of their trading colonies through Euphrates some of them would sail to the west coast of India and make direct commercial relation with the Saka-Scythia kingdom nearby [2]. Furthermore, there might be some cultural interactions among Palmyra, India and Parthia. Palmyrenes' traditional garment which features in the use of eastern cloths and patterns of western style like running dogs, torsades, twigs of oaks or laurels [18] had found its counterpart in both India and Parthia [12]. Considering Palmyra was largely impacted by the Romanization, Palmyrenes thus could be dutiful cultural messengers as well as merchants for both Romans and Indians.

Since then, Romans would tend to be friendly with Palmyrenes. Palmyra continued to spread its connections with the benefits brought by the peaceful policy to the east adopted by Hadrian government. And under the reign of Septimus Severus in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> C.C.E., Palmyrenes had had a closer relationship with Romans and meanwhile the Parthians were losing their monopoly of overland silk road with the declining of the Parthia empire [6]. For Romans, the outcome was the acceleration of the accumulation of knowledge about further east beyond India. In this period, the Roman world for the first time learnt the reality of silk production, as "the threads from which the Seres weave their garments are not made from bark but" were produced by certain "Ser" which "resembles spiders" [15]. Besides, in many 2<sup>nd</sup> century's Roman texts, the two geographical concepts--"Sinae" and "Serai"—were made a distinction. The former referred to Yunnan province and the south-east region, while the latter to China inland alone. This indicates that Romans' portrayal of far east geography was much more accurate in the 2<sup>nd</sup> C.C.E.

### 3.3. Limitations of the Palmyrene Contribution

Although Palmyrenes did promote the formation of Roman view of far east, the contribution they made was still a portion of the whole picture of the "silk road trade". Some information about Seres and other east areas was gained through Alexandria-Red Sea route as Pliny's record about Seres who had "red hair and blue eyes [1]" and the reference of "Thinae" in Periplus.

In another respect, Palmyrenes' identity as merchants might devalue their information in Romans' eye for Roman society was after all an agrarian society. Roman citizens who belonged to the elite stratum tended to distrust words from merchants. This peculiar bias could be seen in Ptolemy's Geography for he "like Marinus - believed that 'merchants do not think to examine the truth, being occupied more with trade and making intervals much larger than they actually are due to their boasting' [19]" This bias might let some valuable information about far east--carried by Palmyrenes or other merchant peoples--miss the archive of Roman classics.

#### 4. Conclusion

Palmyrene as a burgeoning merchant people in the first century partly replaced the Parthians' traditional position of middleman. Due to the incessant spreading of their trading networks, Palmyrenes promoted the development of Romans' maritime trading route in Syria-Persian Gulf throughout the first and the second century. In this level, Palmyrenes was a major driving force for Romans to explore the far east. Thus, they played an important part in Romans' procurance of information about far east. On the other side, since for a long time, Romans could only view far-easterners through the eyes of the near-easterners, Palmyrenes with their own complicated cultural and political identity also influenced Romans' imagery of the far-easterners. With Palmyrenes' increasing involvement, Romans' view of far east would change and make progress with the time. Despite Palmyrenes' great contribution in the communication between Rome and the far east, nevertheless, there were limitations owing to Romans' bias against merchants. Palmyrenes' activity was only a coin of the whole plan of west-and-east interaction, and there were other ancient peoples' participation more or less demeaned due to the lack of textual and archaeological discovery. Therefore, the author hope through the research of Palmyrenes' role in cultural and material intercourse between east and west, more studies about other ancient cities in the middle-east will be done such as Dura Nicanoris and put them in a perspective of cultural communication and merchants' identity.

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