

Roman Shipping **and Trade**

by Nathan Shepard

Grade 7

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Ancient Rome was a city that lived off its imports. It had a major Mediterranean port called Ostia, and the Romans invented the paved road for trade and travel over land. The Romans most often traded with Britain, Spain, Africa, India, and China. They traded wool, animal hides, hunting dogs, metals, olive oil, fish sauce, corn, dyes, wild beasts, jewelry, ivory, silks, spices, and perfumes. New building materials such as brick, marble, granite and wood. There were two major trade routes, the land and the sea were always being imported to build and rebuild Roman structures.

The Romans frequently sailed along the India Trade Route, a course from Rome around the tip of Africa to India and back. This pirate-filled route was the shortest passage to India known for many years until a merchant shipowner found a shortcut through the Red Sea.

Internal trade of raw materials across the Mediterranean Sea, made possible by the Pax Romana, was much more efficient and important, especially for the military, than any foreign trade. Alexandria, a major prosperous port in Egypt, easily and frequently delivered grain and other cargo to Rome. Phoenicia, a province on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, was forced by Roman rule to use its vast fleets to trade with Rome and other ports on the Mediterranean. It soon was the location of one of the largest ports in the Roman empire. The Pax Romana enabled many cities to become huge trading centers, and they flourished because of free Mediterranean trade. After the

fall of the empire, however, many ports were deserted because trade became difficult due to conflicts between the many different nations on the Mediterranean.

Trade ships were privately owned, and shipowners often owned their own docks and warehouses in many major ports. The shipowners earned their living by delivering cargo for money-paying customers. Roman merchant ships were about 50ft to 55ft long. A good ship could cover 100 miles in a day, much faster than travel by land. Although these ships were wider, shorter, faster, and more maneuverable than Roman warships, they were extremely vulnerable to any unfriendly craft, and had to rely on the Roman Navy for protection. Often shipowners would pay archers to man their ships for protection in pirate-filled or hostile waters outside the Mediterranean.

An edict was passed by the Emperor outlawing the blocking of seaports by construction or dumping trash due to the heavy ship traffic moving through them. Another law was passed that said if a Latin could fit a large enough cargo on his ship, and if he shipped materials for Rome for six years, he would receive Roman citizenship. As another benefit, Roman shipowners were exempt from community service for small crimes because it was considered that their jobs entailed community service. They were risking their lives every day to deliver food and other cargo, and therefore serving the community. After many cases involving fraudulent shipowners attempting to avoid punishment, it was decided that the offenders would be sentenced to community service for their fraud. Over all, the Romans were shipping geniuses.

The Romans were also traders over land. One route, the Silk Road, was a 6000 mile artery to China that allowed commerce and friendship to grow between the Chinese

and the Romans. China often traded wool, silk, gold, and silver to the Romans.

Caravans would meet and trade their goods halfway down the road to avoid the long journey. Even though the relationship with China didn't last, the road did, and it kept the two countries trading for centuries.

The Roman roadways were an unique invention. They allowed quick travel with less strain on the carts and wagons traveling on it. The idea of flattening a strip of land to make it solid and level was so ingenious, it is obvious how smart Romans were. The new roads allowed faster travel, better communication, and a way to firmly unite the empire. The paved road was exactly what the Romans needed for trade and military rule.

Roman trade was ingenious and creative. It was of great importance to the people, to Rome, and to the empire. The Romans overcame many daunting obstacles and went to great lengths, sometimes literally, to acquire their trade.

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