SAND AND SPICE: ROMAN ARABIA IN WORLD HISTORICAL CONTEXT FROM THE THIRD CENTURY BCE TO THE SEVENTH CENTURY CE

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To my parents, Terrell and Nu Moose, who although they never quite understood why I do what I do, were responsible for making me who I am.
Many of us seek pleasant fields for research, while others deal with matters of immense complexity where one is overwhelmed and cannot see the wood for the trees.

– Pliny the Elder

*Natural History*
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Sand and Spice: Roman Arabia in World Historical Context from the Third Century BCE to the Seventh Century CE
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Most mental maps of the Roman world center on the Mediterranean basin. At the empire’s heart lies the “Eternal City,” with the edges of this mental map forming the limits of direct Roman political control. This conception of the Roman Empire is not, however, always the most useful way of thinking about the Roman world. Indeed, a Mediterranean-centered notion of the Roman world can actually be detrimental to the study of other aspects of the Roman period that do not emphasize high politics. This is especially the case when discussing Rome’s far flung frontiers, which were often governed in near independence by Roman appointed officials. One case in point is the province of Roman Arabia. Traditional perceptions of the Roman world place Roman Arabia on the empire’s far, southeastern fringe. The end result is an archaic perception of the ancient world; the mental equivalent of resigning the edges of one’s erudition to the old phrase, “hic sunt monstri.”

Modern scholars who persist in holding onto this perception of space cannot help but be adversely affected in their understanding of regions beyond the Italic peninsula. In the case of Roman Arabia, which was a major hub in the ancient world’s exchange networks, the region’s significance is greatly lessened by the adherence to such a mentality. What is necessary to overcome this effect is a shift in our perception of space and a broadening of our mental maps. For instance, if one were to place Roman Arabia at the center of our mental map and expand our view to encompass a wider region (both within and beyond Roman territory), we would see that Roman Arabia, far from being on the fringe of “civilization,” was actually a hinge connecting the communities of three continents.

This thesis examines the Roman province of Arabia on both a micro and macro level. Trans-regional world historical perspective reveals a history of Roman Arabia that is ultimately a study of exchange. As such, the narrative of this thesis is arranged topically, rather than temporally. Chapter One discusses the historiography of both the region and the field of Roman frontiers in general. Chapter Two examines the local and long-distance trade in which Roman Arabia was involved. Chapter Three investigates Rome’s military presence in the region and how the Roman presence affected the indigenous people. Chapter Four explores the interaction of people and their environment in Roman Arabia. And finally, Chapter Five compares Roman Arabia with Britannia, a Roman province on the other end of empire in order to show how we can better understand the history of a given region by changing our perception of space.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements are always a tricky thing. On the one hand, a writer wants to make sure that due credit is given to everyone involved. But on the other hand, one feels obligated to be as brief as possible. I will, therefore, attempt to find a happy medium here and hope that if anyone who reads this feels left out, that they can forgive my oversight.

First of all, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee for taking the time out of their busy schedules to guide me through this process: My Committee Chair, Dr. Elizabeth Ann Pollard (San Diego State University) for calling me out (tactfully and encouragingly) whenever I strayed too far off topic; Dr. David G. Christian (Macquarie University) for taking me “under his wing” and introducing me to World History; and to Dr. Joseph A. Smith (San Diego State University), who through our conversations has given me a Classicist’s perspective on my topic.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the last forty years the history of Roman Arabia has become a source of contention amongst some scholars.¹ Many have put forth arguments concerning Rome’s civic and military roles and the nature of the relationship between sedentary and nomadic populations. While most scholars agree that this region served as a conduit for trade between communities in Eastern Eurasia, Africa and Western Eurasia, most of the dialogue centers on how the region functioned as a bulwark against invasion. A close inspection of Roman Arabia in a world historical context, however, provides an ideal opportunity for scholars to understand the connectedness of these regions throughout history. Understanding how communities in the past have dealt with exchange is essential for understanding our own increasingly globalized world.²

Located at the juncture of three continents, Roman Arabia occupied a unique geographical location. This location made it ideally suited to act as a “clearing-house” for cultural and material exchange between disparate communities. Yet Roman Arabia’s role as a major hub in Afro-Eurasian history is often overlooked in lieu of never-ending debates over the traditional political-military history of the region. By concentrating so intensely on one aspect (warfare) of the region’s history, scholars have lost sight of the “big picture.”

What is needed is a reorientation of how we view regions, such as Roman Arabia, over time and space. The Mediterranean-centered paradigm which scholars have used to define our worldview for the last two centuries has proven to be somewhat misleading. This was especially the case where the history of the pre-modern world is concerned. The scholarship on Roman Arabia, for instance, is rife with theories about frontier defense, which

¹ The term Arabia used in the classical sense refers to the region, which is today occupied by the whole of the modern nation of Jordan, the eastern deserts of modern-day Israel, the southern part of modern-day Syria and the northern part of the modern-day nation of Saudi Arabia.

² In this work I use the term exchange in the universal sense. Exchange encompasses not only trade in material goods and currency, but also scientific, philosophical, religious and governmental aspects that have their origins in a particular culture and are shared, forced upon, or borrowed by another.
are a reflection of nineteenth-century colonialism. These theories do not necessarily reflect the worldview of Arabia’s past inhabitants. The problem inherently lies in our modern conceptions of the Roman Empire. When most people today think of the Roman world, a mental map of the Mediterranean basin immediately comes to mind. At the heart of the Roman Empire lies the “Eternal City” and the edges of this mental map form what we perceive to be the limits of direct Roman political control. This conception of the Roman Empire is not always the most useful way to think about the Roman world. Indeed, a Mediterranean-centered notion of the Roman world can actually be detrimental to the study of Rome’s provincial history, which was determined by more than just high politics. For Rome’s “far flung” frontiers were often governed in near independence by Roman appointed officials. In the case of Roman Arabia, traditional perceptions place it at the empire’s far, southeastern fringe. This has resulted in a skewed perception of the ancient world that discourages many scholars from looking beyond Rome’s borders. This perception is the mental equivalent of resigning the edges of one’s erudition to the old phrase, “hic sunt monstri” (here lie monsters).

Scholars of Roman history, who persist in holding onto traditional perceptions of space, cannot help but be adversely affected in their understanding of regions beyond the Italic peninsula. In the case of Roman Arabia, this region’s significance as a major hub for exchange in the ancient world is greatly lessened by the adherence to this boxed mentality. A shift in our perception of space and a broadening of our mental maps is needed in order to overcome this effect. For instance, if one were to place Arabia at the center of our mental map, while retaining the same scale that encompasses the region controlled by the Roman Empire at its height, one would see that Roman Arabia, rather than being on the fringe of “civilization,” was actually a hinge connecting the communities of three continents. Modern scholarship on Roman Arabia dates back to the nineteenth century. Early field researchers, such as Vincent Yorke, and John Peters were responsible for many of the early surveys of Roman sites in the Near East. Their works, however, read much like travelogues,

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focusing as much attention on the idiosyncrasies of traveling through the “Orient,” as they do on describing archaeological finds. While they are of some geographical benefit to later scholars, their works cater to the Victorian fascination with Oriental exoticism and adventure, offering little in regard to historical knowledge.  

Archaeological fieldwork in Roman Arabia began in earnest during the 1930s with the surveys of Aurel Stein, Nelson Glueck and Fritz Frank. Glueck’s aerial reconnaissance in 1937 has been especially helpful in understanding the network of roads that connected various ancient settlements and military installations. This network winds its way from Aila (modern day Aqaba) on the Red Sea, through Humayma, Petra, Bir Madhkur and finally to Gaza. Scholars, such as Rudolf Ernst Brunnow and Alfred von Domaszewski believed these to be part of an intricate Roman defense system, which they termed *limes*. They interpreted what they saw as a system of forts and *castella* (small fortifications) interspersed along Roman roads running parallel to a line of demarcation. Some later scholars thought this system served as both a means of rapid communication and deployment of Roman troops along a fortified frontier.  

Heavily influenced by their understanding of static-line warfare,
which was prevalent during the first half of the twentieth-century, these early scholars saw a double line of defense—an inner and outer *limes*.*9 This interpretation of the Roman frontier in Roman Arabia went uncontested for decades and was likely reinforced for later scholars by the *Weltanschauung* of the Cold War years.

In the years following World War II there were few classical scholars who chose to specialize in the study of Roman Arabia. The region was viewed by many scholars of Greco-Roman history as an obscure and rather eccentric area of specialization within the field of classical scholarship. This perception began to change, however, in the 1970s. Glen Bowersock’s article, “A Report on Arabia Provincia,” published in the November 1971 issue of *The Journal of Roman Studies*, breathed new life into a field that had been largely neglected in the preceding decades. Bowersock’s article can arguably be said to have been responsible for inspiring a whole generation of scholars to focus their efforts on Rome’s eastern frontier.10 Bowersock’s article was a watershed piece that detailed the historiography of research in the region. In doing so, Bowersock showed young scholars looking for an academic niche that there was still much work to be done on Roman Arabia. Before long, fresh research had produced new theories about Rome’s role in this desert region.

In 1976 Edward Luttwak published his book, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third*. Luttwak was neither a classicist, nor was he a historian, but was a strategic analyst by trade. Overall his book was well received. It helped that *Grand Strategy* was heavily endorsed by J. F. Gilliam – a respected scholar in the field of Greco-Roman history. Gilliam wrote, “In systematically analyzing the grand strategy of the Roman Empire during four centuries, he has done for Roman historians what they have...

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*Stein, “Roman Limes in ‘Iraq,” 62-66 passim; Bowersock, “Limes Arabicus,” 227-229. Although there are a few scholars who still subscribe to the concept of the inner and outer *limes* even today, some scholars, beginning with Glen Bowersock, had begun to question the feasibility of the theory by the mid-1970s.

not done for themselves.”¹¹ Luttwak’s book covered what he claimed was the strategy of the Empire as a whole and was not limited to Roman strategy in the east. As noted above, scholars who had been working in Roman Arabia had been addressing Roman strategy for quite some time. But until Luttwak, no one had bothered to look at Roman strategy on a grand scale.

Luttwak’s impetus for writing Grand Strategy was his dissatisfaction with the contemporary literature on Roman strategy. Luttwak wrote:

The archaeologists, epigraphists, numismatists, and textual critics, whose devoted labors have uncovered the information on which our knowledge rests, often applied grossly inappropriate strategic notions to their reconstruction of the evidence. It is not that these scholars were ignorant of the latest techniques of systems analysis or unaware of the content of modern strategic thought; indeed, their shortcoming was not that they were old-fashioned, but rather that they were far too modern.¹²

Luttwak contended that Clauswitzian notions of warfare, which emphasize offensive military campaigns and oppose “the use of images of force, for the purposes of diplomatic coercion,” have clouded scholars’ understanding of Roman strategy. In other words, Luttwak believed that the introduction of nuclear weapons had put the United States in a position that resembled ancient Rome.¹³

Luttwak identified three phases, or systems of Roman grand strategy; the Julio-Claudian system, the preclusive system, and the defense-in-depth system. The systems were marked by periods that reflect the changing political situations and the strength of the Roman Empire, which Luttwak measures in military manpower. The Julio-Claudian System was actually a holdover from the late Republic and was characterized by a hegemonic core (the Italian peninsula), which was surrounded by client states that owed fealty to Rome.¹⁴ The client states provided for their own military, and acted as a buffer against invading armies. However, these states could always rely on Rome for assistance in the form of mobile legions.

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¹¹ Luttwak, Grand Strategy, ix
¹² Luttwak, Grand Strategy, xi.
¹³ Luttwak, Grand Strategy, xii
¹⁴ While Luttwak calls this the Julio-Claudian system, he notes that this strategy was in place throughout the period of the Republic. Luttwak, Grand Strategy, 7.
that moved from threat to threat. The function of highly mobile Roman legions was to reinforce the established status quo by ensuring the client states remained within the sphere of Roman domination.

The Julio-Claudian system was replaced after 69 CE with what Luttwak calls a “preclusive defense system,” following the Flavians assumption of power in Rome. At this point many client states began to lose their autonomy and were incorporated into the empire as Roman provinces. Buffer states all but disappeared and Rome provided its own security. The Roman military during this period took on a more defensive stance, which was characterized by the deployment of the legions to static defensive positions along Rome’s outer provincial borders. Luttwak draws a connection between this new strategy and the legionary marching camps that were so characteristic of the Roman army during the Julio-Claudian era. Luttwak writes:

"The security policies of Vespasian and his successors, which reached a logical culmination under Hadrian and his successors, may be seen as an attempt to transform the empire into a marching camp writ large. The metaphor is perfectly applicable: the network of imperial border defenses created under these policies, like those of the marching camp, were intended to serve not as total barriers but rather as the one fixed element in a mobile strategy of imperial defense."

It is from these “fixed” frontier defensive positions that the Romans could launch attacks against potential threats beyond Rome’s borders, making this a preclusive system of defense.

The preclusive defense system was in turn replaced during the period known as the “Crisis of the Third Century.” During the third century the consolidation of “barbarian” confederations that were hostile to Rome coincided with a period of internal turmoil. Luttwak contends that this in turn forced the Romans to adopt another change in Roman frontier strategy, which he terms the defense-in-depth system. The defense-in-depth system was

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15 Luttwak, Grand Strategy, 7-50, 192
16 Luttwak, Grand Strategy, 18
17 In 69 CE it was actually Vespasian of the Flavian family who assumed power following the death of Nero in 68 and a brutal civil war. The Antonine Dynasty did not actually come to power until 96 CE with the ascension of Nerva to the Imperial throne. Luttwak is aware of this but places the two dynasties in the same classification, claiming that the roots of the Antonine System can be found in the reforms begun by the Flavians.
19 Luttwak, Grand Strategy, 57
characterized by fortified settlements and military strongholds, supported by highly mobile field armies that were stationed further back from the border. The role of the Roman army under this system was to act as a reactionary force instead of a proactive one. While similar to the Julio-Claudian system, Luttwak considers the defense-in-depth to have been inferior because it lacked the military manpower that would have been provided by client states under the Julio-Claudian system. Also, due to the reactionary nature of the new system, invasions could sometimes extend for hundreds of miles within Rome’s borders before they could be stopped, disrupting the infrastructure of settled areas in between. The cumulative destruction in these areas would contribute significantly to the decline of Rome, according to Luttwak.  

While Luttwak’s _Grand Strategy_ was a watershed for the field of Roman frontier studies, it was by no means perfect. First of all, Luttwak was not a Greco-Roman scholar, but a military strategy analyst for the United States government. Being untrained in classical languages, he was forced to use English translations of primary source material, which did not sit well with many in the Greco-Roman academic community. Secondly, his approach to the study of Roman strategy was from that of a modern-day strategist, who is familiar with the concepts of modern warfare. His assumption that the Romans were also familiar with these same concepts was viewed by many scholars with suspicion. Perhaps _Grand Strategy_’s greatest contribution lay in the fact that it opened the door to some much needed dialogue among scholars regarding different ways of thinking about Rome and its provinces. For while many in the Greco-Roman academic community lauded Luttwak’s innovative take on the study of Roman frontiers, _Grand Strategy_ was received with much skepticism. For instance, Benjamin Isaac later wrote:

> The most influential recent book on frontier studies is E.N. Luttwak’s _Grand Strategy_ of the Roman Empire. It is a lucid study, but it is based on secondary literature. It reinterprets interpretations by historians and archaeologists and is a systematization, not of historical material, but of modern scholarship.

One of Isaac’s main criticisms of _Grand Strategy_ was Luttwak’s assumption that the Romans even had a grand strategy of defense. Isaac argued that this is a completely modern

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concept – that there is no evidence of a centralized Roman High Command, who planned out long-term strategies. Instead, Isaac argued that surviving evidence indicates that the Romans were opportunistic and subject to the conditions dictated by any given situation.23 Thus, the empire’s borders were “simply the frozen forward lines of advance that could be held following military campaigns.”24

Isaac sought to offer a different view with his own book, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*, by explaining other roles that Rome’s military filled, based on what the ancient sources had to say about the subject.25 Drawing on archaeological, geographical, and literary evidence, Isaac contended that in order to understand the Roman frontiers, one must differentiate between the military authority and provincial authority. While they were inextricably intertwined, they exhibited different characteristics. Isaac acknowledged that Roman provinces did have fixed boundaries. He believed, however, that these boundaries did not restrict where the army could go. On the contrary, the army operated wherever its commanders saw fit. He held this to be true throughout Rome’s existence. Isaac wrote:

> The concept of a military border, whether defensible or not, was irrelevant to the Romans. . . . Few indications are found that territory played a role in military planning. Roman conceptions of power and military activity focused on peoples and towns rather than geography.26

If Isaac is correct, then the discovery of Roman barriers may have been misinterpreted by modern scholars as evidence that the Romans held to a defensive mentality.

Contributing to this debate, C. R. Whittaker’s *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study*, contrary to what the subtitle suggests, was not a Marxist treatment of Rome’s frontiers. Rather, Whittaker looked at the development of both sides of frontier society (that of Roman settlers and indigenous perspectives) under the Romans. Whittaker’s views largely coincided with Isaac’s. He did not agree, however, with all of Isaac’s ideas. For instance, Whittaker conceded that while it was highly improbable that the Romans followed a systematic grand strategy, he did not agree that the Roman borders

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wound up where they did by pure happenstance. Drawing on work done in Mongolia and China by Owen Lattimore, Whittaker argued that Roman leaders were well aware of how far they could extend the boundaries of the empire. Whittaker referred to this limit as a transitional region and argued that it represented a compromise between what the Roman army could seize and effectively govern in the long term.27

While Luttwak, Isaac and Whittaker focused their attention on the structure of the Roman frontier, others such as Fergus Millar, Greg Woolf and Nigel Pollard have focused their attention on trying to understand the cultural impacts that Romanization had on those living in the frontier. Drawing from predominantly epigraphic and literary evidence found in the eastern part of the empire, Millar concluded that traditionally indigenous cultures found in conquered regions gave way to Greco-Roman culture over time. Yet, although Greco-Roman language and culture was dominant, traces of local practices and traditions survived and became incorporated into the new Roman paradigm in the east.28 In contrast, Woolf has argued that Roman culture was in a constant state of development. When the Romans conquered Gaul, they did not force the Gauls to abandon their culture in favor of Roman culture.29 Woolf contended that the Gauls readily adopted and contributed to a Roman imperial culture that they recognized was still in development.30 N. Pollard, on the other hand, focused specifically on Roman soldiers and their relationship with indigenous populations in Roman Syria. According to N. Pollard, soldiers who lived in close proximity to indigenous populations neither identified with those populations, nor with Rome. For Roman soldiers, it was their military unit (particularly their cohort within a legion) with which they most closely identified. N. Pollard speculated that this mentality was prevalent

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29 Although Woolf’s area of specialization concerns Roman Gaul, his ideas on Romanization can be applied to other provinces within the Roman Empire.

even in soldiers recruited from the local populace because ethnicity and “nationality” were not the primary means of self-identification, as they are today.31

Gaps in the historical record pose a major problem for scholars of Graeco-Roman antiquity. It has, therefore, become necessary for historians and classicists to supplement what little written material is available with archaeological research. Much of what we now know of Roman Arabia and the Red Sea trade, we owe to a select few scholars, who have been willing to face the harsh conditions of excavation in the region. Tom Parker’s work on the legionary fort at el-Lejjun in the 1980s has broadened our understanding of the region during the Roman period. Parker’s research there has led him to conclude that the buildup of frontier defenses during the third century CE was a response to what the Romans saw as a growing Arab threat. Disruption of the caravan trade in the region during the third century led many who were involved to take up brigandage.32 By the seventh century CE the Roman defense of this region had completely broken down.33 Parker wrote, “Thus, there was no longer a fortified frontier to challenge the advancing Arab armies under the banner of Islam. The result was the Muslim conquest of the southeastern provinces of the empire.”34

Parker followed up his work at el-Lejjun with the Roman Aqaba Project in the 1990s.35 The Roman Aqaba Project was the excavation of the Roman port of Aila, which is located in the modern city of Aqaba, Jordan. Parker’s primary purpose for the excavation was to answer questions regarding Aila’s role in the Roman economy (particularly as a major trade port for spices) and how this role changed over time.36 Excavations at Aila revealed

large quantities of ceramics, copper, glass and coins. These discoveries suggest that Mediterranean goods, such as olive oil, wine and tableware may have been stored in Aila prior to being loaded on ships bound for communities around the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Parker’s work at Roman Aila seemed to support his conclusion following work at *el-Lejjun* – that by 530 CE protection of region was given over to a Saracen confederation under the Ghassanids. By the seventh century, the Ghassanids had been defeated by the early Muslims, leaving Aila completely exposed to conquest.

In recent years some scholars have taken an interest in the hinterlands of Roman Arabia. During the 1990s Andrew Smith conducted archaeological surveys in Wadi Araba north of Aila as part of Parker’s Roman Aqaba Project. Since 2008, Smith’s ongoing excavation of the Roman fort at Bir Madhkur has sought to explain the role of small, agricultural communities in the long-distance spice trade. Evidence suggests that the community of Bir Madhkur played a vital role in sustaining the spice routes between Petra and Gaza.

Roman Arabia was an important region to the Red Sea trade. It was not, however, the only link between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Excavations on the Red Sea port of Berenike in Egypt by Steven Sidebotham and Willeke Wendrich have revealed a complex model for Roman administration of communities who took part in the spice trade. Their work at Berenike has been especially helpful for understanding the transportation of goods and Roman administration in the provinces.

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38 Parker, “Roman Aqaba 1994,” 41


40 Smith, “Pathways,” 185.

What sets *Sand and Spice* apart from these previous works on Roman Arabia is its world historical approach. World history can trace its roots back to the “Father of History,” Herodotus. In attempting to understand the Greek war with the Persians in the fifth century BCE, Herodotus gave his readers the background of events leading up to the war, which included in depth discussions of the histories of other cultures who were involved. In modern scholarship, on the other hand, world history as both a subject and an approach has had a somewhat checkered past. Late nineteenth-century scholars, such as William Swinton used world history (which he termed General History) to justify the superiority of the “Caucasian race.” Swinton’s General History was followed in the twentieth century by Western Civilization, which focused on ideas of cultural superiority, rather than race.

Following WW I there was a major shift in historical thought. Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee developed world histories that became popular with non academic audiences. In his book, *The Decline of the West*, Spengler likened civilizations to organisms, who after going through various stages of life, would eventually die out, allowing another great civilization to emerge in its place. Spengler’s work did not sit well with many scholars because it trivialized human determination; human destiny was predetermined.

Like Spengler, Toynbee also saw civilizations as living organisms. In his series of books, *A Study of History*, Toynbee argued that civilizations began life as societies. It was the ability of creative minorities within societies to successfully meet challenges that allowed a society to progress to becoming a civilization. When these creative minorities within a civilization failed to successfully meet challenges, the civilization died. Toynbee contended that when this happened it was not because a civilization could not handle challenges, but

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*Survey of the Mons Smaragdus Region*, eds. Steven E. Sidebotham and Willeke Wendrich (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA, 2007), 183, 357

42 William O. Swinton, “Outlines of General History,” in *The New World History: A Teacher’s Companion* by Ross E. Dunn (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), 16


lost interest in overcoming obstacles. In essence, a civilization died from suicide, not murder.\(^{45}\)

The works of Spengler and Toynbee were infused with questions of God and humanity, which did not sit well with most professional historians of the time. Most scholars saw Spengler and Toynbee’s works as falling into the category of philosophy and were deemed of little use to historians. Often they were dismissed as the works of talented amateurs.\(^{46}\) In the long term, however, their contributions planted the seeds for a model that later world historians would implement, particularly the use of civilizations as a unit of study.

While Spengler and Toynbee were espousing their popularized “doom and gloom” take on world history, a group of French scholars were developing a revolutionary method for historical research. In 1929 Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch founded the journal *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* as a forum for what would become the *Annales* school. *Annales* scholars were dissatisfied with the “kings and battles” type of history that had been the standard since history became a formal discipline in the mid-nineteenth century. Historians who identified themselves as *Annales* scholars were interested in the collective consciousness of their subjects, which they termed *mentalité*. *Annales* historians were also interested in what they referred to as the *longue durée*, which they described as change over time.\(^{47}\) Total history is what *Annales* historians strived toward and it was believed that in order to attain an understanding of *mentalité* and *longue durée*, a multidisciplinary approach was necessary.\(^{48}\) Probably the best example of work produced by *Annales* historians is Fernand Braudel’s, *The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), in which Braudel looked at the economy of the Mediterranean as a unique unit of study.\(^{49}\)

\(^{45}\) Sorokin, “Toynbee’s Philosophy of History,” 376.


\(^{48}\) Gilderhus, *History and Historians*, 116

Historical scholarship in Europe had not gone unnoticed in the United States. In 1960 William McNeill published *The Rise of the West*, which began to change both scholars’ and laymen’s perception of World History.\(^5\) In *The Rise of the West*, McNeill argued that civilizations change through contact with strangers, not necessarily through isolation. McNeill expanded on this theme in subsequent books, most notably *Plagues and People* (1977) and *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since AD 1000* (1982). McNeill was strongly influenced by both Toynbee’s grand narrative and the *Annales* schools use of geography and ecology for understanding historical development. Unlike his European counterparts, however, McNeill reserved a prominent place for the human will in affecting historical change.\(^5\) That is because a third major influence in McNeill’s work came in the form of the new American anthropology. Having come to prominence in the 1930s, American anthropologists had begun to examine cultural borrowings among Native Americans. McNeill saw this as a model, which could be adapted to the greater metanarrative of world history.\(^5\)

Ancient historians have been slow to take up the torch of world history. Indeed, it has only been within the last decade that scholars of ancient history have to move in this direction. Within the relatively new field of Ancient World History, there are predominantly two schools of thought. First there is the trans-regional approach, in which scholars look at broader themes that connect disparate cultures, such as trade routes, the spread of disease, migrations, etc.\(^3\) The second school of thought is the comparative approach, in which a scholar looks at two distinct cultures and draws out similarities and differences between the

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\(^5\) McNeill’s title, *The Rise of the West* was a play on words of Spengler’s *The Decline of the West.*

\(^5\) Allardyce, “Toward World History,” 70.

\(^5\) Allardyce, “Toward World History,” 71

Neither school of thought is necessarily any better than the other. As I will demonstrate in this work, the use of each approach should be dictated by what is most useful for understanding of one’s topic. In general, my personal preference is to approach my subject from a trans-regional perspective because it allows me to see broader trends in history that can often be obscured by a comparative approach. In this work, however, readers will notice that I have opted to use a comparative approach at the end in order to demonstrate how Roman Arabia differs from other regions of the Roman Empire.55

From a world history perspective, very few cultures develop in isolation. Yet, this is how history has been traditionally taught and researched, particularly in the field of pre-modern history. Much of the problem stems from the dilemma that every historian faces when approaching a historical subject. Historians are forced to make difficult decisions about what bits of history to include in their narrative. To borrow from David Christian’s analogy of historical lenses, the wider a historian broadens his or her field of scrutiny, the more detail is sacrificed. In contrast, when (using the proverbial lens) historians “zoom-in” on their subject, they are able to see more detail.56 Both methods have their places in historical scholarship. My intention in this work is to strike a balance between a “zoom-in” approach and a “wide angle” approach in order to attain as close to a total “picture” of Roman Arabia as possible. This thesis will examine more than just the traditional political-military history on which so many other scholars have focused their attention. Much like William McNeill’s work, the underlying theme of this thesis is exchange (both among humans and between humans and their environment) and the effects it has had on this one particular region of the Roman Empire. As such, the narrative of this thesis is arranged topically, rather than temporally. It is by no means intended as a comprehensive study of Roman Arabia. Instead,


55 See Chapter 5.

readers should view this as a brief introduction to Roman Arabia from a world historical perspective.

This work deals with the topic of exchange on multiple levels, not least of which is the exchange of cultural goods. Since at least the early twentieth century, scholars of Greco-Roman history have held onto the concept of Romanization; the adoption of Roman “speech, thought, and culture” by a conquered people, particularly the ruling elite.57 In the latter half of the twentieth century perceptions of cultural interaction had begun to change and with it the terminology, as well. The two prevalent terms with which scholars now view cultural interaction between Romans and those they encountered are syncretism and creolization. While some may argue that a change in terminology is trivial, what is implied by each of these terms makes all the difference to our understanding of cultural interaction. Syncretism implies that there is a power relationship between two cultures. It assumes that there is a dominant culture that upon contact with another is able to impose its values on a weaker one. Creolization, on the other hand, implies that cultural exchange takes place equally in both directions. The equal influence of both cultures would over time form a distinct cultural identity among those living within a given region. Whether Romanization, syncretism, or creolization can fully explain cultural interaction in the past is difficult to say. Readers should keep in mind that these are modern concepts of which those who lived in Roman Arabia would have been unaware, certainly not enough to label them as such.

But cultural exchange, whether by means of Romanization, syncretism, or creolization, is only one aspect of this work. The following chapters will examine local and long-distance trade, Rome’s military presence in the region and its effect on the indigenous people, and the interaction between people and the ecology of Roman Arabia. Finally, I discuss the Roman province of Britannia as a contrast to Roman Arabia. Unlike Roman Arabia, Britannia because of its geographical location was at the fringe of the known Roman world. I will demonstrate how Britannia’s geographical isolation, together with Britannia’s

deteriorating sociopolitical conditions in Late Antiquity, created a “dark age” that was not experienced by Roman Arabia. It is my intention that by examining these issues, this work will demonstrate how Roman Arabia acted as a hinge that connected Afro-Eurasia, in ways that other regions, such as Britannia could not.
CHAPTER 2

EASTERN DELIGHTS: THE INDIAN OCEAN-RED SEA TRADE NETWORK FROM THE Hellenistic Period to Late Antiquity

This chapter will discuss aspects of the trade that passed through Roman Arabia. Following an introduction to some of the pertinent works by ancient writers, this chapter will then survey some of the theories posed by modern scholars on Afro-Eurasian trade and the dialogue generated by those theories. Finally, this chapter will discuss what we know of items that were traded through Roman Arabia and what they can tell us of the societies involved with this exchange. At the risk of being accused of falling into the “Finley” camp, I have taken a similar approach here in discussing the ancient trade network through Roman Arabia via the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Moses Finley was a late twentieth century economist who developed theories on the ancient economy. Finley’s model for the study of the ancient economy is often critiqued as being undiscerning of different ancient cultures and his oversimplification of the economic processes in antiquity. I have purposely adopted a similar approach in order to demonstrate that this particular network was in existence long before Rome assumed hegemony over it. This chapter is not so much a discussion of the ancient economy, as it is a discussion of one aspect of that economy, which is the network of Afro-Eurasian trade. It is my contention that the evidence, both literary and material, points to this network of exchange as being somewhat of a constant, over the longue durée.

In order to fully understand Roman Arabia’s role in the Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade, it is necessary to examine Rome’s predecessors in the region; the Nabataean Kingdom and their neighbors, those two great Hellenistic empires, the Seleucids and the Ptolemies. Rome did not create the Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade; so much as they inherited it. The span of this chapter, therefore, begins in the earliest period for which modern scholars have written evidence of trade in the region; the years following the division of Alexander of Macedon’s brief empire (ca. 323 BCE). Rome’s direct involvement in the Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade began after the annexation of Egypt in 30 BCE. Rome, however, did not have direct military
or political control over Arabia until 106 CE, at which time the Nabataean Kingdom became formally inducted into the Roman Empire as a province. The literary evidence for this period says nothing of the circumstances surrounding this event, but all evidence from the late first and second centuries CE point to a veritable golden age of long distance trade between the Mediterranean and Eastern Eurasia (ca. first and second centuries CE). Exchange through this region may have flourished during Rome’s rule in the region, but as readers will see, Roman Arabia’s importance as a gateway to Eastern Eurasia and Africa was recognized early on. Given the longevity of Arabia’s involvement in the spice trade, it is necessary to look back to earlier periods in order to understand aspects of exchange during the later period under the Romans.

As noted above, Greek sailors had been trading directly with Eastern Eurasia via the Indian Ocean-Red Sea since the beginning of what we now call the Hellenistic period (ca. 323 BCE – 30 BCE). The Hellenistic Greeks laid the foundation for what would become arguably one of the most important exchange networks the world had seen. But before the Greeks, Arab and Indian traders had been using these sea lanes regularly to exchange goods. The establishment of a stable infrastructure, which could handle large-volume trade through this region, can be attributed to the uneasy partnership between the Greek and Arab people during the Hellenistic period. What sets the Roman period (30 BCE-600 CE) apart from earlier periods is the sheer volume of goods that were able to pass through the region.

Contrary to what surviving evidence suggests, some scholars have been quick to dismiss Greek and Roman economic systems as insignificant and primitive. Moses Finley has argued that the Greco-Roman period was one of economic and innovative stagnation due to the absence of capitalist notions among the ruling elite. Finley’s argument seems to be a too simplistic, over-generalization of the Graeco-Roman mind. While the Greeks and Romans may have had no modern notions of capitalism or complex systems of economics (in comparison to today), the benefits to be had through extensive trade were not lost on them. In many ways ancient society can be viewed as protocapitalist. The evidence of complex infrastructures dedicated to facilitate long-distance trade contradicts Finley’s claim that the

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Greco-Roman economy was primitive and insignificant. For instance, there is the establishment of royal port-cities by Hellenistic rulers, found along the coasts of the Red Sea, the upper Arabian Peninsula, and the Persian Gulf. Following their founding of these port-cities during the latter part of the fourth century BCE, the volume of trade increased between Eastern Eurasia and the Mediterranean. In Roman Arabia (modern-day Jordan) the deserts are littered with the remains of caravanserai, which indicate a route stretching from the Gulf of Aqaba to Gaza. This evidence indicates that ancient governments not only had the ability to put infrastructures of trade into place, but (more importantly) the desire to do so. The Graeco-Roman period should be seen as one of immense economic growth and cross cultural exchange, rather than a long period of devolution, as Finley has argued.

**WHAT WE KNOW: EVIDENCE OF EXCHANGE**

Most of the scholarship dealing with ancient Greek and Roman exchange is centered on their commercial activities in the Mediterranean region. The Mediterranean, however, is not the only theatre of exchange in which the Greeks and Romans were involved. All too often classical scholars have neglected the importance of the Red Sea-Indian Ocean trade to world history. When this trade network is addressed, it is often done so from a purely Eurocentric perspective. This is primarily because more written evidence has survived from Mediterranean communities than others further east. Often the sources that have survived are not even contemporary primary sources, but ancient secondary sources. These secondary sources are sometimes centuries removed from the time period that their authors wrote about. For instance, the most comprehensive source for Alexander and his successors comes from the works of Arrian, a Roman writer and politician who lived during the reign of Hadrian in the first half of the second century CE. His work on Alexander, *The Anabasis*, is believed to have been written around 125 CE. Arrian drew his evidence from the personal accounts of

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60 Arrian’s *Anabasis* is not to be confused with Xenophon’s *Anabasis*. Ronald Syme, “The Career of
Alexander’s contemporaries, such as Ptolemy, Aristobulus, Megasthenes, and Eratosthenes—men whose works today either only survive in fragments, or have long since been lost. Their complete works, however, were available to Arrian during his lifetime and it is for this reason that he is considered by many modern scholars to be a good source for the early Hellenistic period because there are so few others.

Of the sources available to Arrian, the accounts of Megasthenes played a prominent role in Arrian’s writings on India. Megasthenes was a member of the royal court of Seleucus I. He is best known for his role as ambassador to the court of Chandragupta, the founder of the Mauryan Empire, where he negotiated the transfer of elephants for service in Seleucus’ military campaigns. Besides Arrian, Megasthenes is often cited by ancient authors, such as Strabo and Pliny, on topics dealing with India due to the first-hand knowledge he gained in his travels.

Another valuable source for understanding the Red Sea-Indian Ocean trade is the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. This is a first-century CE ‘hand-book’ written by an unknown author for merchants involved in the Red Sea-Indian Ocean trade. Although this work is believed to have been written around the middle of the first century CE, the author discusses elements in the Red Sea trade that had become well established prior to the time of the *Periplus*’ writing. The *Periplus*’ description of different ports-of-call and the items that could be had at each one, has made the *Periplus* indispensible for the study of Red Sea communities and trade in antiquity.

Scholars know almost nothing about the author of the *Periplus*, except what they have been able to glean from the writing itself. Based on the writings, it is believed that he was an

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Egyptian-Greek and that he was a merchant who was personally involved in the Red Sea trade, since he writes from personal experience.\textsuperscript{65} What is especially valuable to scholars is that the author of the \textit{Periplus} lists what goods are exchanged in which ports of call. These ports run along the coasts of Arabia, Eastern Africa, India, and the Far East.\textsuperscript{66}

Roman Arabia and those who lived there also make “cameos” in various other written sources. \textit{The Scriptores Historiae Augustae} makes several references to either the region, or its people—particularly in regard to the “Crisis of the Third Century.”\textsuperscript{67} Other authors, such as Zosimus, Ammianus Marcellinus, and Procopius also touch on Roman Arabia periodically. Mention of Roman Arabia, however, is sparse. And because what is discussed mostly revolves around early Christian ascetics, banditry, nomadic uprisings, and the occasional usurper, as described by ancient authors, the Roman Arabia of the later empire is reminiscent of the American “Wild West.” Since these are the sources that have survived, it is no wonder that modern scholars have come to see Roman Arabia as a peripheral region of Rome, as opposed to a central region in the broader ancient world community.

\section*{Modern Scholarship}

In recent years some scholars of Greco-Roman history have devoted more attention to the history of the Red Sea trade. Though, as mentioned above, work in this area has been predominantly approached from a rather Eurocentric perspective; the focus being on the importance of Hellenism in shaping non-European cultures. Two scholars who have taken a different perspective, however, are Susan Sherwin-White and Amelie Kuhrt. In their book, \textit{From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire}, Kuhrt and Sherwin-White traced the history of the Seleucid Empire through the extensive use of archaeological and literary evidence. Their ‘new approach’ is reflected in how they read the evidence. For instance, they outright rejected the notion of Hellenism as being necessarily superior to the cultural and political systems already in existence in the East prior to the arrival of the Greeks. They write:


\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Periplus}, passim

\textsuperscript{67} Aelius Spartianus, SHA, \textit{Severus}, trans. David Magie, Loeb Classical Library 139 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), ix.9, xii.6, xviii.1
What Alexander conquered was what we now, as a result of recent scholarship, know to have been a highly developed, successful and complex empire, whose institutions he himself and his Seleucid successors adopted and adapted. It is now well established that the Persian Empire was not, despite difficulties, in a state of political and economic decline in the fourth century [BCE]. The old image of Alexander the Great and the Greeks resuscitating a moribund and bankrupt ‘oriental’ despotic state by introducing new forms of economic and social life, such as cities, markets, slavery and coinage, which still lingers in some approaches to the Hellenistic world, can now be seen to be untenable.\(^{68}\)

Sherwin-White and Kuhrt make a good point. There were aspects of the Persian Empire that Mediterranean rulers found appealing, particularly the Persians’ organizational abilities and their access to the riches of the East. Greek adaptation of Persian institutions can be seen in their expansion of infrastructures that promoted trade between Eastern Eurasia and the Mediterranean.

Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s book, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study in Mediterranean History*, while not directly addressing regions beyond the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, has inspired much debate on perceptions of ancient exchange. Of particular interest is their aversion to concentrated study of what they refer to as ‘high trade’ networks.\(^{69}\) Horden and Purcell as a consequence of their micro-regional approach to the Mediterranean, have instead advocated that more research needs to be done on cabotage (local trade networks), since this offers a more lucid picture of the economy of a region. They warn that focusing on ‘high trade’ in isolation from other forms of exchange, such as cabotage, can lead scholars to false ideas about cultural interaction.\(^{70}\)

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\(^{70}\) Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, 144-145, 150-152; Lucia Nixon, review of *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 92 (2002): 196-197, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3184867 (accessed 13 October, 2010); Anthony Molho, review of *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 488-490, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078987 (accessed 13 October, 2010). Horden and Purcell’s *Corrupting Sea* has generally been well received. Lucia Nixon notes, however, the absence of gender in their discussions and that they neglected to expend any effort in discussing such cultures as the Byzantine and Pharaonic Egypt, both of which have had a significant impact on Mediterranean history. Others, such as Anthony Molho, lament what they see as Horden and Purcell’s over-use of postmodernist deconstruction in their approach. Molho writes, “Whenever a reader might think that, at last, the authors settled
Any researcher concerned with trade and commerce in antiquity must inevitably come to terms with the work of Moses Finley. Finley was an associate of Karl Polanyi, a professor of economic history at Columbia University. Both Polanyi and Finley were greatly affected by the works of Max Weber—the father of modern sociology. Weber and Polanyi believed that the role of sociology should be the study of modernity, and they viewed history as the key to understanding this. Both men also believed that the most important tool for understanding pre-modern society was the category of status, rather than class—class arguably being a strictly modern term. In modern society a person’s class is determined by their relation to the means of production—their occupation. \(^{71}\) According to Finley “class” distinction did not exist in ancient society, but “status” did.

Finley believed that the desire to improve one’s standing in ancient society was the main driving force behind the ancient economy. Since capitalism as we know it today did not exist in the ancient world, the driving force behind people’s actions in antiquity lay in social, rather than economic reasoning. \(^{72}\) Even so, the accruing of wealth was an essential step toward attaining and maintaining one’s high status. Finley writes that “[w]ealth was necessary and it was good; it was an absolute requisite for the good life; and on the whole that was all there was to it.” \(^{73}\) In Finley’s model, the means of accruing great wealth in antiquity lay in owning arable land; the more land one owned, the wealthier one became and the higher one’s status. Often the means of attaining more land involved taking it from someone else. This need for land may explain why wars of conquest were so frequent in antiquity, and could also provide insight into the mentality of the ancient elite. Wealth lay in first seizing land, then reaping the lucrative benefits from it by means of slave labor. \(^{74}\) The result for Finley is that the Graeco-Roman elite had neither a need, nor a desire to promote trade and innovation. Compared to advances made in the Neolithic and Medieval period,

\(^{71}\) Moses I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (1973; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 49

\(^{72}\) Finley, *Ancient Economy*, 35-36.

\(^{73}\) Finley, *Ancient Economy*, 36.

\(^{74}\) Finley, “Innovation,” 36, 39.
Graeco-Roman society was stagnant in this area, amounting to “not very much for a great civilization over fifteen hundred years.” Finley thus concludes that the ‘Greco-Roman period’ was one of technological and economic stagnation.

Not all scholars have agreed with Finley’s perspective on the Greco-Roman economy. The most common criticism of Finley is that his over-broad generalizations about the Greco-Roman world are unrealistic and do not reflect the multitude of cultures that took part in the broader economy. Among those who have criticized Finley for his homogenous treatment of Graeco-Roman antiquity are Horden and Purcell. They write:

Adding the notion of ‘the ancient economy’ to an already progressivist account of social and economic history makes sensible periodization very difficult. First, it lumps together the actually extremely diverse economic systems of the first millennium B.C. and the first half of the first millennium A.D. inhibiting their proper interpretation. In the process, it reifies the divisions between ‘Antiquity’ and later prehistory on the one hand, and the early Middle Ages on the other. They further argue against Finley’s chronological approach to history in lieu of regional comparative studies due to the risk of inadvertently putting a teleological ‘spin’ on the subject.

Problems in Finley’s argument due to his generalizations are especially apparent when applied to the history of exchange between Alexander’s successors and the people of Eastern Eurasia. While Finley claims that ancient states did not actively support long-distance exchange, surviving evidence for the Hellenistic period indicates otherwise. Following the end of the succession wars, some of the first steps taken by both the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires were the establishment of port-cities along the coast of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Readers should keep in mind that historically the primary purpose of most port-cities in antiquity was to facilitate trade. Concentrating the flow of goods into these port-cities allowed government officials more easily to impose taxes on items that were

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75 Finley, “Innovation,” 29.
77 Horden and Purcell, Corrupting Sea, 146-147
imported, thus generating revenue for the imperial coffers. This was the primary purpose of such ports as the Piraeus, Ostia, and Alexandria.

In recent years some scholars have attempted to understand Roman trade (particularly with regard to Eastern Eurasia) through Roman perceptions of commodities and their origins. In his book, *The Making of Roman India*, Grant Parker examines how in the ancient literature, India was perceived by Roman authors as both exotic and a source of great wealth. According to Parker, ancient India also represented the furthest reach of Roman influence to the Romans. To many Romans, India stood for everything that was *not* Roman and was therefore seen as a corrupting influence.79

Elizabeth Pollard has taken a different tack on Roman perceptions of goods coming from the Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade networks. Pliny the Elder’s writing of his *Natural History* (ca. 70s CE) coincides with the construction of the Emperor Vespasian’s *Templum Pacis* (Temple of Peace). The *Templum Pacis*, located in the Forum at Rome next to the spice market (*Horrea Piperataria*), contained what some have argued to have been an imperial garden.80 The proximity of the *Templum Pacis* to the *Horrea Piperataria*, taken together with the timing of Pliny’s writing of his *Natural History* indicate that the Romans under the Flavians were attempting a form of botanical imperialism. Pollard contended that Rome’s appropriation of botanical items indigenous to areas beyond Rome’s direct sphere of influence, was not only symbolic of Rome’s power over foreign cultures, but over nature, as well.81

As we can see, modern scholarship on ancient trade is rich in its diversity of approaches. While no single approach is necessarily better than another, as a whole they all make up a body of work whose scholars ultimately seek to understand exchange in antiquity and how people related to their world through material goods. Living in our modern world, we may never be able to “step into the shoes” of those living in the past and truly see their

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81 Pollard, “Pliny’s *Natural History,*” 320-329, 336.
world as they saw it. Ancient sources, both material and written, however, are plentiful enough that we can construct the mechanics of how those in the past dealt with exchange, even if understanding how they perceived exchange continues to elude us.

THE SOUTHERN EXCHANGE ROUTES

It is uncertain to modern scholars exactly when Hellenistic sailors first discovered the monsoons whose predictable cycle of winds were key to successful trade in the Indian Ocean. The author of the *Periplus* attributes the Greek “discovery” of the monsoons to a man named Hippolos, though no date for the discovery is given. Some modern scholars agree with the writer, Strabo, who attributes the discovery of the monsoons to one Eudoxus of Cyzicus, who in 116 BCE made a passage to India after stumbling into these winds. Several have suggested that for the Greeks the discovery of the monsoons was indeed a revelation for them, since trade between East and West had previously been the sole domain of Arab middle-men, who kept knowledge of the monsoons a closely guarded secret. This interpretation is corroborated by errors found in Greco-Roman sources, in which ancient writers based their writing on misinformation that they were given. For instance Diodorus writing in the first century BCE was under the impression that cinnamon originated from the Arabian Peninsula. It is likely that misinformation about the origins of particularly high-priced items, such as spices, was perpetuated by Arab middle-men who were protecting their livelihoods.

Following the death of Alexander of Macedon in 323 BCE, his empire was divided among his generals, who had imperial ambitions of their own. Once the dust had settled, following the mad scramble for power among Alexander’s generals, these young Hellenistic kingdoms began to take a more active role in long-distance exchange between Eastern Eurasia and the Mediterranean. The Hellenistic kingdoms’ interest in engaging in long-distance trade with the East is evident in their establishment of port cities, such as those founded by the Ptolemies along the coast of the Red Sea. These port-cities were created

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82 *Periplus* 57.2, in Casson, 87.
primarily to act as clearing-houses for the flow of goods coming in from further east. Ptolemy I Soter is unlikely to have promoted much commerce during his reign due to his preoccupation with wars against his former comrade, Seleucus, over Syria and his various campaigns to consolidate his empire. Under the rule of his son, Ptolemy II, however, the port cities of Arsinoe, Myos Hormos, Philoteras and Berenike were founded along the Red Sea, as well as a few small trading colonies along the eastern coast of Africa. In addition to founding of these Red Sea port cities, clearing-houses along the Nile at Coptos and Apollonopolis were established to handle the flow of goods between the Red Sea ports and Alexandria.

A similar pattern can be seen along the coasts of the Persian Gulf, under the control of the Seleucids. The Seleucids realized the importance of these port cities to their economy and even went so far as to occasionally issue tax immunity grants in order to attract merchants to these cities. Polybius records one such grant given to Rhodian merchants who upon unloading their cargoes at Syrian ports, were given (in addition to exemption from customs dues) gifts of ships loaded with timber and luxury items in order to entice them to do further business there.

The main ports of Gerrha (on the Arabian coast) and Antioch (on the Erythraean Sea) had already been in use by the Persians for centuries before falling into Seleucid hands. By the third century another port on the island of Failaka, off the coast of modern-day Kuwait, had been established, as well. From Gerrha, goods could be transported overland via caravan into the land of the Nabataeans and on to the major port of Gaza. From Antioch, ships could either sail up the Tigris, Euphrates or Eulaios on to Babylon, Seleukeia or Susa.

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88 Aperghis, *Royal Economy*, 77. Aperghis notes that Gerrha was actually in the hands of Arab merchants, who may have been competitors with the Seleucids. By the late third century, however, these very same merchants had begun to divert some of their trade north to Antioch-on-the-Erythraean—perhaps due to Seleucid coercion.
Another option was to unload cargo at Antioch and have it taken up-river via river boat.\textsuperscript{90} Most of the goods found their way to Seleukeia-Tigris, which became a major trading center for the Seleucid Empire. From there, they were taken by caravan to ports along the Mediterranean and Aegean, which included Laodikeia, Seleukeia-Pieria in what is today Lebanon, and Ephesos and Smyrna in what is today Turkey.\textsuperscript{91}

East of Egypt, on the opposite shore of the Red Sea, lay Arabia. Throughout most of the Hellenistic period the northwestern portion of this region was controlled by the Nabataean kingdom. Our main ancient source for the early Nabataeans comes from Diodorus, who wrote about the war with Antigonus in 312 BCE. Antigonus, a former general of Alexander, sent his officer, Athenaeus, with a complement of four thousand infantry and six hundred cavalry into Nabataean territory in what is now modern-day Jordan. His goal was to raid the nomadic ‘barbarians’ living there, and return with the booty. Athenaeus and his men caught the Nabataeans off guard, while they were celebrating a religious festival and made off with substantial amounts of frankincense, myrrh and silver. Their success, however, was short-lived. After regrouping, the Nabataeans initiated a surprise attack on the Greek camp, routing them and regaining their lost possessions.\textsuperscript{92} The Greeks made several more unsuccessful attempts to encroach upon the territory of the Nabataeans, before the Antigonids finally made an uneasy peace with their Nabataean neighbors. Glen Bowersock believes that it was the Antigonid’s failure to wrest this area away from the Nabataeans that ensured the Arab kingdom’s survival into the first century CE.\textsuperscript{93}

Evidence suggests that the Nabataeans were a relatively peaceful people, choosing to concentrate their efforts on the trade coming up from the Arabian Peninsula. There is one account, however, of the Nabataeans engaging in piracy in the Red Sea in the second century BCE. Whether their acts could be considered piracy, or an early form of government sponsored privateering is difficult to determine. In either case, economic competition with their Ptolemaic neighbors in Egypt was likely the root of the problem. Since the “discovery”

\textsuperscript{90} Aperghis, \textit{Royal Economy}, 76-77.
\textsuperscript{91} Aperghis, \textit{Royal Economy}, 77.
\textsuperscript{92} Bowersock, \textit{Roman Arabia}, 13.
\textsuperscript{93} Bowersock, \textit{Roman Arabia}, 17.
of the seasonal monsoon winds by Greek merchants, the Ptolemies had been making serious inroads into the trade with Eastern Eurasia. Previously, this had been a Nabataean monopoly. The inception of Egyptian shipping in the Red Sea allowed Hellenic traders to circumvent Nabataea altogether, making delivery of goods from Eastern Eurasia and the Arabian Peninsula to the Mediterranean both cheaper and quicker. Bowersock writes:

> The Nabataeans must have soon realized that the new traffic by sea would mean a gradual decline in the overland commerce which had been the basis of their prosperity and their sedentarization. Any fears they may have had were well grounded, for by the mid-first century A.D. the overland traffic through Petra had largely dried up.94

The struggle between the Nabataeans and their Ptolemaic neighbors over trade passing through the Red Sea is a situation that is all too familiar to historians who understand early trade between the New World and Europe (ca. 15th-18th Centuries CE). This is a conflict that would recur many times; after the destruction of baghdad in 1260 CE, trade shifted to the Egyptian routes, leading to a significant shift in economic and military power in the region. One strong indicator for judging a region’s importance to trade is the prevalence of piratical activities. During the period of the Fifteenth-Eighteenth Centuries (CE) it was common for European nations to issue Letters of Marque to merchant ship captains. This allowed captains to interrupt the trade of enemy nations by seizing their merchant vessels.95 Governments that issued Letters of Marque collected a percentage of seized goods and so in addition to inflicting damage to an enemy’s economy, privateering helped fill their nation’s coffers. While privateers are normally associated with open conflicts between other nations, there were exceptions. For instance, John Hawkins and Francis Drake of England carved out careers for themselves by conducting raids on Spanish shipping with the unofficial support of Queen Elizabeth I during the latter part of the sixteenth century.96 It is possible that, much like Elizabeth I of England, the Nabataeans resorted to unofficial state-sponsored piracy as a

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94 Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 21


means of recuperating trade losses to the Ptolemies, without having to engage in an open war; a war in which victory for the Nabataeans was uncertain.

One thing that modern scholars can be fairly certain of is that from the end of the fourth century BCE until the middle of the first century BCE Roman Arabia was a highly contested piece of real estate. Most of these conflicts between competing kingdoms took place either in the Red Sea, or in the Wadi Araba, which lies in a rift valley between modern-day Aqaba and the Dead Sea. Both the land around the Red Sea and Wadi Araba are unforgiving desert environments that offer little in the way of agriculture. We can, therefore, speculate that the early conflicts over Roman Arabia had more to do with the region’s importance as a corridor for trade, rather than what the region had to offer the world in terms of local goods.

THE GOODS

What was being exchanged? The *Periplus* is concerned mostly with high value items, such as spices and gems. It has long been held that there was an extreme imbalance between the worth of Western goods and Indian goods. Lionel Casson writes that “the goods imported from southern India were so costly that they far out-priced what Western goods were sold there. The result was a steady flow of gold coins out of Rome into India.” But some scholars are beginning to question how serious of an issue the gold drain from Rome really was. There is no question that Indian merchants desired gold in the form of Roman coins for the spices that became such a large part of Roman culture. Some scholars, such as Steven Sidebotham and M. P. Charlesworth, have pointed out that ancient authors will often exaggerate figures in order to make a moral statement.

Even if there was a gold supply crisis in Rome, it only makes sense that the Romans would have developed methods to bring the exchange back into balance. According to Elizabeth Pollard, the Emperor Vespasian attempted to restore this lost balance with the construction of *Templum Pacis* and the *Horrea Piperataria*. Pollard argues that while the

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98 Casson, *Periplus*, 17
99 Pollard, “Pliny’s *Natural History*,” n79, n86
Templum Pacis served as a symbol of Rome’s domination, the Horrea Piperataria served a more practical purpose, which was to control and distribute high-value spices. Rome also imposed a 25% tax on all goods that passed into Roman territory from beyond its borders; areas such as Roman Arabia.

The Roman elite may have taken credit for giving the people of Rome the ‘luxuries’ of the east. But it was the merchants of all backgrounds, who were responsible for the actual transactions and transport of these high value items. The effort that was needed to make the exchange happen was immense. The three main ports-of-call in India were Barbarikon, Barygaza and Muziris—all of which lay on the west coast of the subcontinent. The prime ports-of-call (Barygaza and Muziris) were located in southwestern India, though Barbarikon in northwestern India was also an option for merchants. According to the Periplus, the market for western imports in Barbarikon included good quality cloth (both plain and adorned), peridot, coral, storax, frankincense, glassware, silverware, money, and wine. Items from Barbarikon that could be purchased cheaply and sold for a profit in western Eurasian ports included costus, bdellium, lykion, nard turquoise, lapis lazuli, pelts from China, cloth, yarn, and indigo.

In the prime ports of Barygaza and Muziris, which were located in the southwest, western imports included wine (Italian wine being the most desired), copper, tin, lead, coral, peridot, clothing, storax, yellow clover, raw glass, realgar, sulphide of antimony, (Roman) money, gold, silver, and unguent. In addition, merchants could make a profit by selling to the elite particularly desirable items, such as silverware, slave musicians, attractive girls for concubinage, quality wine, and quality clothing. Exports that could be purchased by western merchants included nard, costus, bdellium, ivory, onyx, agate, lykion, cloth (cotton and silk), and long pepper. Muziris to the far south of Barygaza offered many of the same items that

100 Pollard, “Pliny’s Natural History,” 335-338.
101 Pollard, “Pliny’s Natural History,” 335
102 Periplus 39.2-3, in Casson, 75.
103 Periplus 49.1-3, in Casson, 81.
could be found in Barygaza, but was mainly known for its export in precious gems and pepper.\textsuperscript{104}

One item of interest found in the \textit{Periplus} is the mention of slave trade. Rather than the chattel slavery, such as is found in the Atlantic Slave Trade, slaves destined for India were imported for special purposes—boys trained in music and girls for concubinage.\textsuperscript{105} It is also worth pointing out that the direction of slave shipments in the \textit{Periplus} go from West to East. This is not to say that there were no Eastern slaves living in the Mediterranean. There are several mentions of slaves of Indian origin in the ancient texts.\textsuperscript{106} But the evidence for a slave trade between the Mediterranean and Eastern Eurasia indicates that slaves being traded to the east were considered to be luxury ‘goods’. Grant Parker writes, “References in the \textit{Periplus} to the slave-trade between the Red Sea and India make it clear that slaves were traded along with other goods.”\textsuperscript{107} Low demands for western slaves in Eastern Eurasia aside, there may have been practical reasons that deterred merchants from engaging in more slave trade. The logistics of transporting large groups of people over such distances would have been daunting, not to mention expensive for such poor returns. There is first of all, the journey from the areas in which they were captured (either in Europe or anywhere in the Mediterranean basin) to ports along the southeastern Mediterranean, such as Alexandria or Gaza. The slavers with their human cargo would have then had to make the journey either across the desert or up the Nile to the Hellenistic ports along the Red Sea, where they would be loaded aboard ships for the transport to India. The timing of their arrival in ports such as Berenike would have to be impeccable, as the monsoons that made it possible to travel to the East occurred only during a certain time of the year. The slaves during this whole journey would have had to have been fed and cared for to ensure that they arrived to market alive and healthy. The responsibility and cost would have been borne by the slavers, who would in all likelihood have passed the cost onto the consumer.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Periplus} 56.1-5, in Casson, 85
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Periplus} 49.1-3, in Casson, 81
\textsuperscript{106} Parker, \textit{Roman India}, 157-158.
\textsuperscript{107} Parker, \textit{Roman India}, 158.
But of all the things that India had to offer Western European merchants, it was her spices for which she was best known. Not only were spices in great demand as ingredients for such things as cuisine, unguents, offerings to the gods, and medicines, but they also did not take up much space aboard a ship.\textsuperscript{108} Scholars, such as Finley, do not deny the existence of long-distance trade, but contend instead that long-distance trade was not nearly as prolific as some scholars have made it to be. Finley wrote, “It is our modern writers who are wrong when they exaggerate ancient export trade, as they often do, to enormous proportions.”\textsuperscript{109} Peter Greene contends that the trade in ‘luxury’ goods can tell scholars much about profit margins involved with long-distance trade, and should not be dismissed as unimportant.\textsuperscript{110} Horden and Purcell agree with Greene on this issue. They write:

\begin{quote}
The very high values of the cargoes of high commerce represent very considerable movements of capital; their social history is of far greater overall importance than the practical significance of the activities that they represent might suggest. . . . We must not be misled into thinking that because its bulk was small and its recipients few, ‘luxury’ trade was economically insignificant. \textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

But were the items that were imported from Eastern Eurasia merely ‘luxuries’ to be enjoyed by the elite? Some scholars have begun to question our definition of what a luxury item is in antiquity.

As mentioned above, the demand for spices in the Mediterranean world was astronomical. Although Romans did use it to flavor food, we must look beyond its use in cuisine to fully grasp spice’s importance to those living in antiquity. The idea that the Romans had a penchant for curry does not adequately explain the expense of importing such sheer volumes of spices from the other end of the known world. And although spices were used to scent perfumes, we should not look to Roman fashion to explain the demand for spices. A better explanation lies in how the Romans viewed their world.

To the Romans, the world abounded with gods and spirits. It cannot be overstated how much the Romans feared retribution from the gods for not paying the proper respects.

\textsuperscript{108} Horden and Purcell, \textit{Corrupting Sea}, 149.
\textsuperscript{109} Finley, “Innovation,” 40, 42.
\textsuperscript{110} Peter Green, “The First Sicilian Slave War,” \textit{Past and Present} no. 20 (Nov. 1961), 47.
\textsuperscript{111} Horden and Purcell, \textit{Corrupting Sea}, 149
From minor house gods to deified emperors, the rituals to appease the gods often required the burning of spices as sacrifice. To Romans, failure to pay the proper respects to the right gods and spirits could have dire consequences.\textsuperscript{112} For instance, Plutarch suggested that one reason for Crassus’ crushing defeat at the Battle of Carrhae may have been Crassus’ improper handling of purification ritual for his army before battle. Plutarch writes:

> When he [Crassus] was making the customary sacrifice of purification for the army, and the seer placed the viscera in his hands, he [Crassus] let them fall to the ground; then seeing that the bystanders were beyond measure distressed at the occurrence, he smiled and said, “Such is old age; but no weapon, you may be sure, will fall from its hands.”\textsuperscript{113}

Whether or not modern readers believe that one of the most disciplined armies of its time could be defeated because of a “simple” superstition, the important thing to remember is that the Romans did believe it. All other reasons aside, the need for South Asian spices for religious practices made Roman Arabia a key point of interest for the Romans and all who were involved in the trade.

There were other routes of exchange that existed between Eastern Eurasia and the Mediterranean, but they were slower and more expensive. Overland routes, however, such as the famous Silk Roads and routes through Persia, were dependent on large camel caravans. Given the immense distances through desolate lands that these caravans had to cover, caravans were slower and more prone to falling victim to banditry. Merchants who moved their goods via caravan could also expect to pay fees on their goods at every stop they made. Merchants involved in the Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade, however, could pack a ship’s holds full of high cost commodities and have a speedy voyage to any one of a number of ports on the Red Sea. From ports such as Berenike or Aila, merchandise could be loaded onto caravans and transported a relatively short distance to ports along the Mediterranean Sea. And during the Roman period, merchants were only required to pay a one-time 25% import fee to Roman officials. This fee may seem excessive, but the total cost would have still been less than merchants would have spent paying similar fees multiple times, like they would

\textsuperscript{112} Andrew M. Smith II, conversation with author, July 25, 2008.

have done on overland routes. Given the profits that one could expect to make, this would have been quite acceptable to most.

This chapter has discussed ancient sources, modern scholarship, and various aspects of Roman Arabia in relation to the Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade. Roman Arabia as an exotic frontier region has enthralled scholars for generations. But Roman Arabia was much more than just a fringe region of the Roman Empire. Because new evidence that contradicts the frontier model of Roman Arabia continues to surface, scholars have had to reassess our perceptions of this key region to world history. Modern scholars have developed models through which they hoped to understand how the ancient economy worked, particularly in regard to long-distance trade. Whether one subscribes to any one of the models proposed by modern scholars, or none at all, the ancient literary evidence is undeniable in establishing Roman Arabia as a major nexus for exchange in world history.
CHAPTER 3

ROMAN ARABIA: AN ENVIRONMENT AND ITS PEOPLE

As we saw in Chapter 2, there were compelling reasons for people in antiquity to engage in trade between the Mediterranean and Eastern Eurasia. The attainment of wealth and the blessing of the gods acted as powerful incentives for keeping the flow of exchange open. But maintaining long-distance connections requires a stable infrastructure in order for trade to work. This chapter will narrow the metaphorical lens to concentrate on Roman Arabia, itself. Fortune may have favored Roman Arabia geographically, but this alone would not have been enough to allow it to prosper through trade as it did. The social and ecological environment had to come together in such a way to provide the necessary stability for the region to thrive. And stability was essential for allowing Roman Arabia to continue in its role as a nexus for exchange.

JUST ADD WATER

The distance between the ancient seaport at Aila on the Gulf of Aqaba and the Nabataean city of Petra is approximately 170 kilometers. Some scholars have suggested that the region’s exceptionally harsh desert environment made it impossible for communities there to survive. Recent excavations sites in similar environments, such as the ancient port-city of Berenike, tell a different story. The port-city of Berenike, located on Egypt’s Red Sea coast, is located in a rugged desert environment, similar to that found in Roman Arabia. At first glance, potable water in these regions is difficult to attain. Excavations conducted at Berenike by Steven Sidebotham in 2000, however, have shown that the Romans were not averse to moving water via caravan when conditions required it. Sidebotham writes:

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114 On the concept of shifting lenses in history, see p. 18
115 Graf, “Saracens,” 2
116 Graf, “Saracens,” 3
The water in wells dug near Berenike is too brackish to drink, so water had to be brought in either by pipeline or pack animals over a distance of at least 5 km to be out of the brackish zone. . . . It seems that the site of trench 36, west of the town proper was the receiving end of the caravans of pack animals loaded with leather water sacks. . . . [During the early Roman period] no evidence for pipelines, a feature well known from other Roman sites . . . was found, so presumably early Roman Berenike was still dependent on water brought in by caravans.117

In the Wadi Hisma region of Roman Arabia, such drastic measures may not have been necessary. Sidebotham’s finds, however, reflect the lengths that Romans were willing to go in order to keep an important center of trade alive.

At Berenike forts in the region around the main settlement were built over sources of potable water.118 These hydreuma et lacuna (fortified wells) were not only vital to the lives of the area’s inhabitants, but they were also the lifeline of the caravans trekking across the desert between the Red Sea and the coastal communities of the Mediterranean Sea.119 Further evidence shows that not all of the fortified wells in the area were occupied concurrently. As one source of water was exhausted, another one was located, and a fort built there.120

In Roman Arabia we have found no evidence that there was ever a need to resort to water caravans. Those who lived in the region (particularly the Nabataeans) had over time become quite adept at manipulating their environment. The ancient city of Hawara (modern-day Humayma) sits along the trade-route leading between Aila and Petra. The environment here is dry and desolate, much like at the site of Berenike, with the exception that there is no coastline. An archaeological survey in 1986, led by John Eadie and John Oleson, indicated that with proper water harvesting techniques communities in even the most desolate regions, such as Humayma, could still thrive.121 Eadie and Oleson contended that Humayma was an important stopping point for caravans making the trip from Aila to Petra.122

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117 Sidebotham, *Berenike*, 373
119 Haeckl, “Wadi Kalalat,” 353
120 Haeckl, “Wadi Kalalat,” 356
What is especially interesting about Humayma is that it is neither an oasis, nor does the surrounding area receive much rainfall. According to Eadie and Oleson, there is no evidence that the inhabitants of Humayma dug wells in order to tap into the aquifer that lies beneath the settlement. Although evidence of wells exist in the surrounding area, these are located far enough away from the urban center that Eadie and Oleson suspect they may have been used to supply water for agriculture.

Water was supplied to Humayma via two methods. The first method used covered aqueducts, which brought water from two perennial springs found near the al-Shera escarpment 17 km to the north of Humayma. The construction of these aqueducts predates Roman occupation. The second method combined the natural terrain with manmade low-lying walls to direct runoff water from the seasonal rains into cisterns located throughout the settlement. Using these techniques, Humayma was able to thrive and evidence shows continuous occupation until 749 CE, when it was abandoned by its inhabitants during the uprising that led to the fall of the Umayyad Dynasty.

A similar site called Bir Madhkur lies northwest of Humayma in an environment that is no less difficult. Bir Madhkur lies approximately 11 kilometers northwest of Petra, in Wadi Araba. Like Humayma, Bir Madhkur receives less than 100 millimeters of rain per annum. The main excavation site itself consists of a Roman fort, a bath-house, and several domestic dwellings. Within sight of the main excavation area are the remains of two towers, both of which are located on hilltops that overlook the fort. Excavations in 2008 indicated that the urban settlement, Humayma boasts a fort, a *castellum*, and a watchtower, which are believed to date to the reign of Trajan. The three structures are located on the eastern-most side of the settlement, facing the *Via Nova Traiana*, which lies approximately 2 km to the east.

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122 Eadie and Oleson, “Humayma,” 50-52
123 Eadie and Oleson, “Humayma,” 54. Rainfall in this area averages approximately 95 mm per year
124 Eadie and Oleson, “Humayma,” 70, 71.
125 Eadie and Oleson, “Humayma,” 50, 56, 59-64, 66, 68-70. The construction of the aqueducts are most from the time of the city’s founding near the middle of the first century CE during the reign of Nabataean king, Aretas III
126 Some of the cisterns have been renovated by the Jordanian government and have been put to use providing water to the local Bedouin. Eadie and Oleson, “Humayma,” 52, 55-56
127 Smith II, “Bir Madhkur,” 57
site was occupied between the first and seventh centuries CE. The site’s location was probably chosen because of its proximity to both a reliable water source, and the trade route from Petra. Unlike at Humayma, Bir Madhkur shows no sign of urbanization. Surveys conducted throughout the area, however, indicate that Bir Madhkur lay at the center of what was once a burgeoning agricultural center. Interestingly, surveys conducted since the early 1990s initially failed to uncover any wells other than the one at the fort. This led excavators to initially conclude that agriculturalists living around Bir Madhkur were completely reliant on runoff from the annual rains, which were channeled into cisterns. A recent survey in 2009, however, has discovered several wells besides the one located at the fort. It is therefore highly probable that a combination of well usage and water harvesting techniques were used to provide water to the broader community.

But wells were not found at all archaeological sites in the general area around Bir Madhkur. Probing excavations around the caravanserai at Khirbet Umm Qhuntera, during the 2008 season of the Bir Madhkur Project, showed only evidence of a cistern made of sandstone as the location’s source of water. Sandstone is not indigenous to the region, which means that it was imported for the express purpose of constructing the cistern. Leading directly into the cistern were sandstone lined channels lined that originated from various wadis, which were filled water during the wet months.

The issue of water supply in Roman Arabia and who had control over it has become a source of contention among some scholars within recent decades. According to Tom Parker, Roman strategy for maintaining control over Roman Arabia was to limit who gained access to natural resources, particularly water. But Philip Mayerson argued that this was not the
case at all. Mayerson contends that if anyone one was denied water in Roman Arabia, it was the Romans—not the nomads. Mayerson writes:

The major objection to that [Parker’s] point of view is that we do not possess a recorded instance of a military unit “controlling” a nomadic raid; nor do we have a citation of Romans denying invaders food, water, and fresh mounts, nor of a mobile strike force taking preemptive action to intercept and destroy raiders. On the other hand there are more than ample citations . . . to demonstrate the inability of the Romans to control raids by Arab tribes.136

It is difficult to say who is right on this issue. After all, the Romans were able to maintain nominal control over Roman Arabia for over five hundred years. At the same time, nomadic tribes managed to thrive in the region, often intermingling with the sedentary populations there. So, even if Rome controlled access to some water sources, they did not control all of them.

Through letters recovered at Vindolanda in Britannia, we know that auxilia were deployed in small garrisons along the frontier zones, while the legions occupied strategic locations in the rear.137 This same pattern appears to hold true in the east, as well. As in Britannia, the auxilia in the Roman East maintained control of their designated sectors through consistent patrolling of the roadways, and the manning of watchtowers. These activities aided in keeping lines of communication open, and facilitated trade.138 What is unique about the eastern frontier is the Romans’ emphasis on maintaining control of natural resources – particularly water.

One must question the purpose of these fortified watering stations. Were they put in place to maintain control over the local populace, or were they meant to protect the local resources from outsiders? Withholding water from the local sedentary population does not seem likely. Controlling the nomads’ access to water seems a more likely reason.


137 Alan K. Bowman, Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier: Vindolanda and its People (NewYork: Routledge, 1998): 21. The auxilia were troops who were normally recruited from the provinces. They were often recruited for their specialized skills, such as archery, cavalry, or skirmishing abilities. These were skills that were not normally found in rank and file of the Roman legions. In addition to their pay, they were given Roman citizenship at the end of a 25 year enlistment.

138 Graf, “Saracens,” 229
If the excavations at Humayma and Bir Madhkur tell modern scholars nothing else, they at least indicate that while natural resources (particularly water) were difficult to come by in Roman Arabia, the difficulties in attaining them were not impossible to surmount. The port-city of Berenike on the Red Sea in Egypt suggests a similar Roman response to water shortages. That the Romans and Nabataeans were willing to expend so much effort and resources to keep these remote communities thriving is indicative of the region’s importance to trade.

**LEX MARTIUS**

Benjamin Isaac has argued that in order to understand how Rome governed its provinces, one must differentiate between the military authority and provincial authority. While these authorities were inextricably intertwined, they exhibit different characteristics. While Isaac acknowledged that Roman provinces did have fixed boundaries, he argued that these boundaries did not restrict where the army could go. On the contrary, throughout the empire’s existence, Roman armies operated wherever their commanders saw fit. Isaac contends that the Roman military commanders did not view their world in terms of military borders. In civil matters, however, Roman provincial authority was confined to urban areas (towns and cities). Concentrating on urban centers allowed the Romans better control over the people of a region, at the expense of controlling geographical features. Roman provincial authority could only exercise power within the boundary of the province. For Roman governors, “[boundaries] marked the extent of judicial and financial responsibilities” of Roman authority.139 From what we know of Rome’s spice trade, it makes sense that Rome would put so much emphasis in controlling urban centers, since taxable goods would inevitably have passed through these cities.

But where do the hinterlands fit into all of this? The archaeological remains of structures (forts, *castella* and watchtowers) and roads, which have been attributed to the Roman military occupation, can be misleading to scholars—some of whom have interpreted their existence as evidence that the Romans held a defensive mentality. Such is the case concerning the military structures that line the *Via Nova Traiana*, the major Roman highway.

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connecting Bostra (located in modern-day Syria) with the city of Aila on the Red Sea. Some scholars assume that because the road was lined with forts and way stations, the *Via Nova Traiana*’s primary purpose was as a fortified line of demarcation.\(^{140}\) Isaac, however, contended that this road sat on an old Nabataean caravan route and questioned whether its primary purpose was any different after it was improved by the Romans.\(^{141}\) Regardless of whether the *Via Nova Traiana* was built for military or commercial purposes, the fact that such a major artery existed in the region only confirms this area’s importance during this period. Though some scholars, such as Tom Parker have compellingly argued that the *Via Nova Traiana* was a military line of demarcation, it is helpful to keep in mind what is arguably the primary purpose of any road; to connect places, whether they be of military or civilian interests, not to act as a barrier. Roman Arabia’s importance as a nexus for the transfer of high value goods has already been established. Is it any coincidence that the *Via Nova Traiana* was constructed during what was arguably the height of the spice trade?

As for the role of the Roman military itself, Isaac argues that it was an army of occupation, not an army of aggression and not one of defense. Isaac writes:

> The army in Judaea, Arabia, and western Syria had . . . functions different from those elements of the eastern army based in forward locations on the Euphrates. The troops in Judaea and Arabia were armies of occupation which, as long as they served there and were not transferred elsewhere, performed tasks different from those carried out by troops stationed in an area of confrontation with Persia.\(^{142}\)

But there were other factors in Roman Arabia that called for a strong military presence. As a vital link in the spice trade, it was imperative that the Romans protect the caravan routes here, since items traveling both to and from the Red Sea represented a considerable investment. Roman Arabia was, quite literally, a gateway to the Indian Ocean and all the riches that it held.


\(^{141}\) Isaac, *Limits*, 120-121

\(^{142}\) Isaac, *Limits*, 33-34.
WOLVES OF ARABIA

Scholars generally accept that the Persians posed little direct threat to Roman Arabia. Modern scholars have, therefore, had to look elsewhere to explain the Roman military presence in Transjordan. But if not the Persians, then who would have posed enough of a threat to warrant the deployment of so many Roman troops? Since civil strife in Arabia’s urban population was virtually nonexistent, some scholars have begun to ponder whether Arabia’s nomadic populations were the raison d’être for Rome’s military presence. After all, in the seventh century CE these very same nomads were responsible for carving out an empire of their own at the expense of the Byzantines and Sassanids. Is it possible that the Romans foresaw a looming threat in Arabia’s pastoral communities? To answer, “Yes,” assumes that the nomadic tribes had both a desire to conquer the settled regions and that they could somehow set aside their tribal differences long enough to do so. As it stands, there is little to suggest that either one of these conditions could be fulfilled until the arrival of the enigmatic Muhammad and the rise of Islam in the seventh century.

Robert Hoyland believed that the relationship between the nomadic and sedentary populations in Arabia has been often misunderstood by scholars. Hoyland noted that while the poetry of nomadic Arabs often displayed contempt for those who allowed themselves to be subjugated (i.e. sedentary people), the message in the poetry should be taken as a reflection of what nomadic Arabs held dear. Hoyland writes, “The basic premise of nomad life is autonomy and its corollary of equality.” Likewise, the accounts of sedentary people in the region are equally contemptuous of those who lived the nomadic life. Looking at the two bodies of literature it is evident that there was an element of tension in the relationship between the adherents of either lifestyle. This has caused some scholars to see “nomad –


144 Robert G. Hoyland, Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam (London: Routledge, 2001), 96. The issue of symbiotic relations and ecological niches, which Hoyland touches on here will be elaborated on more fully below.
sedentary relations as inherently antagonistic.” According to Hoyland, the message found in the literature can often be misleading. He writes:

The reality of nomad – sedentary relations is, however, much less clear cut than the rhetoric, for, despite all their fighting talk, Arab nomads were economically dependent on the settlements along their migratory routes. Often steppe and desert do not afford complete subsistence. In poor grazing seasons the migratory herder may be unable to supply his stock and he is forced into town by their needs, and perhaps into some arrangement with local farmers for access to the stubble or harvested fields. Nor is mobile life compatible with developed craft specialization, and a visit to the town will often be necessary for vital manufactures.

From my own experience as an archaeologist on the Bir Madhkur Project in southern Jordan, it is evident that this same relationship between sedentary and [semi-]nomadic people is still practiced today.

Since 2008, the Bir Madhkur excavation team worked very closely with the ‘Sahid’in, a semi-nomadic Bedouin tribe living in Wadi Araba. Through various grants received by the Project Director, Dr. Andrew Smith, we are able to hire approximately ten ‘Sahid’in as laborers every summer to help with our excavations. Through government sponsored settlement programs, many of the ‘Sahid’in have settled in small sedentary villages. But there are still many ‘Sahid’in who live a traditional semi-nomadic, pastoral lifestyle, moving their homes and herds of goats with the changing seasons. Since the ‘Sahid’in do not have any industry, other than what they are able to harvest from their goats, manufactured items must be purchased in the surrounding towns and cities. The money that the ‘Sahid’in receive from us, or nearby agricultural sites, goes toward purchasing items that the ‘Sahid’in are unable to make for themselves.

Other scholars have observed similar patterns and have attempted to use this information to understand the relationship between sedentary-nomadic peoples in the past. For instance, in a 1986 article published in the Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research (BASOR) E. B. Banning contended that ecological factors in Roman Arabia dictated the nature of the relationship between sedentary agriculturalists and nomadic

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145 Hoyland, Arabia, 98
146 Hoyland, Arabia, 98
pastoralists in antiquity. Through evidence collected in his 1979 archaeological survey of the Wadi el-Hasa region in southern Jordan, Banning concluded that the relationship between pastoral nomads and sedentary agriculturalists was by necessity a relatively peaceful, symbiotic one.147

Banning drew heavily on the work of Fredrik Barth, who in 1956 published an article in *American Anthropologist* detailing his study of ethnic groups in Swat, a region in northern Pakistan. There were three ethnic groups living in the region at the time of his study—Pathans (Pashto-speaking agriculturalists), Kohistanis (Dardic-speaking semi-nomadic people), and Gujars (Gujri-speaking nomadic herders). Using concepts derived from ecology, Barth applied the concept of the ecological niche in order to understand how the various groups within the region interacted with each other.148 According to Barth, the sedentary Pathans held hegemony over the region and owned land, which included most of the hills and mountainsides of the area. Since the Pathans concentrated their efforts mostly on agriculture, they had little use for the rougher, hilly regions except for harvesting firewood. The Pathans earned extra income by renting out the hills and mountainsides to the nomadic Gujars, who used the land for grazing their flocks and herds. In return for being allowed to graze their livestock on the Pathan-owned hillsides, the Gujars paid rent to the Pathans in the form of animal products, such as butter, milk, skins and meat. The Gujars were also hired by the Pathans as laborers during times of harvest.149 Meanwhile, the Kohistanis, who were semi-nomadic, occupied adjoining regions. The Kohistanis, however, did not have much interaction with either the Pathans or Gujars, since they lived in regions that were unsuitable for Pathan agricultural methods. The Kohistanis essentially filled the niche normally fulfilled by Gujars, who roamed in the territory occupied by Pathans.150 Barth’s observations led him to conclude that “different ethnic groups will establish themselves in stable co-residence in


149 Barth, “Swat,” 1085

150 Barth, “Swat,” 1081-1082
an area if they exploit different ecologic niches, and especially if they can thus establish symbiotic economic relations.”

When Banning applied Barth’s this model to his survey of Wadi al-Hasa, the results indicated that a similar situation was very likely to have existed in antiquity. Banning noted that in harsh environments, like that found in Wadi al-Hasa, there are great benefits to be gained through the cooperation of groups filling different niches. For instance, in a sedentary agriculturalist community the number of livestock that can be kept is limited by the amount of grain and pasture available on a given plot. Because livestock that are kept in pens are more susceptible to animal diseases, this also limits the number of animals that can be kept by sedentary societies. In Transjordan a relationship between sedentary and nomadic populations would give farmers access to manure to rejuvenate their soil, healthy animal products, and labor—both human and animal. In return, nomadic people would have access to agricultural products, and be able to earn wages in coin, which could be used to purchase necessities and luxuries from any other populations with which they had contact.

Before beginning his research, Banning stipulated that there were certain conditions that his archaeological sites needed to satisfy in order to support such his hypothesis. First, material evidence needed to show that at least two different groups had occupied the site at the same time. In the event of two sites, the proximity of the sites must indicate the exploitation of two different niches. The two also needed to exhibit signs that communication between different groups was easy; i.e. the terrain must allow for the free movement of people and products. And finally, evidence needed to show that the activities of one group did not visibly degrade the niche of the other. Banning argued that this last condition was especially important, since if there were signs of niche degradation there could be no symbiosis. If this were the case, then military coercion on the part of one group over another would have been highly probable.

151 Barth, “Swat,” 1088
152 Banning, “Mutualism,” 29
153 Banning, “Mutualism,” 29
Banning’s research was somewhat inconclusive. In observing modern groups of agriculturalists and pastoralists living in the Wadi al-Hasa, Banning’s results showed a “conflict with the agricultural schedule.”\textsuperscript{155} Banning noted that the schedule of migration for the local Bedouin meant that from June through October they remained in the desert, pitching their camps around watering holes. Bedouin would not move west, toward agricultural areas, until the first rains began sometime between October and November. But local climatic conditions dictated that agriculturalists begin their harvest in July, followed by plowing and sowing in late November. This meant that the schedule of Bedouin migration was a full two months off-schedule.\textsuperscript{156} Banning’s argument that because there was more agriculture in antiquity, it would have been possible for nomadic migrations to occur earlier in the year, does not seem very convincing.\textsuperscript{157} Although his study of the modern population in Wadi al-Hasa failed to support his hypothesis, Banning believed that his theory of mutualism among populations in antiquity is still a valid alternative to other contending theories.\textsuperscript{158}

One of Banning’s most vocal critics was Tom Parker. Parker contended that while there may have been at times amiable relations between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary agriculturalists, this was only possible due to a strong government, which was supported by a capable military presence.\textsuperscript{159} According to Parker, Banning’s most crucial error was that he neglected to account for a third group, which would have had an enormous impact upon the local population in antiquity; namely, the Romans.\textsuperscript{160}

Parker contended that the disappearance of sedentary Arab states, such as Palmyra and Nabataea, resulted in an upsurge in banditry. Banditry was already a serious problem in the eastern Roman provinces, which included Roman Arabia. Occasionally brigandage would become such a problem that large-scale violence between bandits and Roman forces was inevitable. Parker cites Diocletian’s campaign of 290 CE in which the emperor himself took

\textsuperscript{155} Banning, “Mutualism,” 44.
\textsuperscript{156} Banning, “Mutualism,” 42-44.
\textsuperscript{157} Banning, “Mutualism,” 44
\textsuperscript{158} Banning, “Mutualism,” 45
\textsuperscript{159} Parker, “A Different View,” 35
\textsuperscript{160} Parker, “A Different View,” 37.
part, as one example.\textsuperscript{161} In addition, overpopulation in the Arabian Peninsula among the nomads forced them to migrate, bringing them into contact with sedentary populations to their north in Roman Arabia. While Parker agreed that these contacts were not always violent, the outbreak of hostilities was only kept in check through the strength and vigilance of Rome’s military.\textsuperscript{162}

In addition to brute military force, Parker explained that there were several other methods that Rome used to maintain peace in the region. First and foremost was careful monitoring of nomadic migrations through the hinterland of Roman Arabia. The Romans could easily monitor human movement by observing from their network of hilltop towers and through routine patrols. Roman officials also ratified treaties and arranged good-will payments to tribal leaders. As allies of Rome, tribal leaders were reluctant to organize raids on Roman territory and ensured that their people followed suit. Indeed, there is evidence that some agreements called for the active protection of settled territories and caravans.\textsuperscript{163} And after all, who better to guide caravans across the seemingly waterless desert, than those who made this veritable wasteland their homes?

Philip Mayerson also chimed in on the dialogue between Banning and Parker. What Mayerson proposed appears to have been a compromise between Banning’s mutualism model and Parker’s defense-in-depth model. Mayerson contended that while peace generally existed between sedentary and nomadic populations in Transjordan, this was not always the case. Like Parker, Mayerson too believed that Banning’s survey was “flawed in terms of its use as a model for other areas.”\textsuperscript{164} But while Mayerson and Parker agree that Roman soldiers in watchtowers may have been monitoring nomadic movements, Mayerson found it difficult to believe that Roman soldiers were ever actually able to do more than alert communities to potential threats. Mayerson writes:

\textsuperscript{161} Parker, “A Different View,” 44-45
\textsuperscript{162} Parker, “A Different View,” 46-48.
Monitoring is another matter, if it means observing the movement of tribes so as to be on the alert against attacks. Towers, of course, would be used for that purpose. Monitoring in that sense would be a defensive action; it would give the local inhabitants time to seek safety in a tower or fortified place.\textsuperscript{165}

In addition to providing safety for travelers, \textit{castella} served the dual-function of housing military detachments, which would often be tasked with caravan escort—not for preemptive strikes on raiding nomads.\textsuperscript{166} Actual stability was only reached with alliances established between nomadic tribes and Romans. In such cases, the nomadic tribes became \textit{foederati} and were responsible for the safety of sedentary communities and the trade routes on which everyone depended.\textsuperscript{167}

Other than reports of a few raids on a few remote monasteries in the fifth and sixth centuries CE, there is very little evidence to suggest that any major conflicts took place in Roman Arabia.\textsuperscript{168} Yet, the Roman military presence cannot be ignored. It is tempting to attribute the relative peace in Roman Arabia to the diligent watchfulness of the Romans. To do so, however, is to oversimplify the complex social relationships between the various groups who called Roman Arabia home in antiquity.

The Roman military did play an important role in Roman Arabia. As the only tangible representatives of Rome in the hinterlands, it stands to reason that they would be responsible for collecting tariffs from caravans moving through the region, settling local disputes, overseeing public building projects, and protecting local communities from the occasional raid. In short, the Roman military in Arabia served no single purpose, but rather played a range of roles. These different roles included facilitating the economy by keeping avenues of trade open, performing civic functions, such as building projects and law enforcement, as well as traditional military actions.

Some scholars, such as Hoyland, have argued that the “nomadic menace” paradigm is too rigid a model to reflect the reality of life in the region. According to Hoyland, the “nomadic menace” view does not take into account semi-sedentary tribesmen, whose social

\textsuperscript{165} Mayerson, “Micro-Macro,” 75
\textsuperscript{166} Mayerson, “Micro-Macro,” 75
\textsuperscript{167} Mayerson, “Saracens and Limes,” 35, 39
\textsuperscript{168} Mayerson, “Saracens and Romans,” 72-73.
system often included an “urban-elite.” This is not to say that nomadic Arabs did not engage in the occasional raid, either on settlements or caravans. The evidence, however, indicates that most raids did not take place on a large scale. In circumstances where nomads did attack settlements en masse, the raids were usually preceded by ecological disasters that forced nomadic people to migrate into already occupied areas.

Banditry, on the other hand, was a major problem during all periods of antiquity, in all regions. It was common enough that in every area of Roman occupation gravestones can be found with the inscription *interfectus a latronibus* (killed by bandits). In a frontier zones, such as Arabia, the Romans surely must have felt the need to deter raiding activity through displays of strength. By constructing towers and forts and enforcing Roman law where possible, they were able at least to project the appearance that they were maintaining order in the province. For the Romans, who used the term banditry in much the same way that the term terrorism is used today, these appearances were extremely important. A province rife with banditry may have been seen by the indigenous population as a sign of weakness, which could then lead to uprisings. Also, much of Rome’s wealth lay in trade and the natural resources provided by its provinces and beyond. Bandits not only threatened local economies, but by extension they threatened the economic welfare of the empire itself. Because Transjordan was a nexus for East-West trade, via the Red Sea, an outbreak of rampant brigandage would have been very costly to Rome. This may explain why the Roman military presence was so prevalent in Roman Arabia.

Banditry among Roman Arabia’s nomadic populations may not have been the only threat to the security of the province. Tom Parker has suggested that incursions by nomadic tribes beyond Roman territory to the South and East were the primary threat to Roman

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170 Hoyland, *Arabia*, 100; Andrew M. Smith II, e-mail message to author, January 19, 2009.
171 Defining banditry in antiquity is difficult. For the purposes of this study, bandits are engaged in acts of violence motivated by personal greed for material gain, while raiders are engaged in acts as a reaction to environmental conditions (desperation through drought, political issues, tribal issues, etc.).
Arabia. This view is not universally accepted by scholars, particularly those whose work concerns the study of pre-Islamic Arabs. Montgomery Watt explained that the *razzia* (raid), an accepted cultural practice of the nomadic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, was far less destructive than is commonly perceived. Watt writes:

It was a kind of sport rather than war. The Arabs had their wars indeed, but these were much more serious affairs. The *razzia* was directed against the camels and other animals of an unfriendly tribe. A body of raiders would try to take by surprise a few camel-herds and their charges, while the rest of the clan or tribe was far away. For the time being the raiders would have overwhelming force, and little resistance would be offered. The raiders had then to try to rejoin the main body of their tribe before a superior force from the tribe attacked could overtake them. *The Arabs generally tried to avoid hand-to-hand fighting on approximately equal terms. They seldom deliberately attacked except when they had the advantage of surprise or of overwhelming superiority, however temporary. Thus the loss of life in razzias was usually small* [emphasis added]. Loss of life, of course, was always a serious matter, since it could lead to a bitter blood-feud, and both sides would try to avoid it when there was no specific hostility between them.

A few scholars, such as Tom Parker and David Graf, have suggested that the Romans viewed aggressive incursions by nomadic tribes from the Arabian Peninsula as a direct threat to the empire itself. Given Roman Arabia’s vital role in the Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade, it is easy to understand why the Romans would take any threat, perceived or real, so seriously. Watt has suggested that the *razzia* was an accepted cultural practice of the nomadic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. Is it possible that these violent games of honor were interpreted as acts of war by the Romans? It is doubtful that the Romans would have willingly participated in such “games” with anyone, much less nomadic raiders. Perhaps through a misunderstanding of the nature of these *razzias*, a blood feud developed between the Romans and nomadic Arabs.

Regardless of the intent, under Roman law, banditry was punishable by death – either by being thrown to the beasts or, as was most common, public crucifixion. These forms of

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punishment may seem overly extreme, even barbaric to modern senses of justice. The Romans, however, viewed banditry in much the same way that terrorism is viewed today.\textsuperscript{177} Two practical reasons why the Romans dealt with banditry so severely come to mind. First, a province that was rife with banditry may have been seen as indicative that the empire was weak, and might lead the indigenous population of a province to believe that they were better off running things themselves. The second reason has to do with economic factors. Rome’s wealth lay in trade, and the natural resources provided by its provinces. Ultimately, the Romans needed to show that they had the strength to maintain peace and prosperity. Bandits not only threatened the local economy, but by extension they threatened the economic welfare of the empire itself.

A show of force, however, can only go so far. In a region where manpower was spread thinly, the cooperation of the native population was required. Prior to Roman involvement in Arabia, the Nabataeans had migrated into the region from the Arabian Peninsula (ca. fourth century BCE).\textsuperscript{178} By the time the Romans first encountered them during the first century BCE, they had become a fully sedentary people, whose success lay in their position as merchants and brokers for goods coming in from the east. As brokers in the spice trade, it was essential that they maintained good relations with those with whom they came into contact in order to keep their trade caravans from being harassed.\textsuperscript{179} David Graf postulates that this policy of “good will” included negotiations with nomadic Arabs. The Romans found the Nabataeans to be good neighbors, and were content to have them as a client state until the year 106 CE, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan.\textsuperscript{180} Graf believes that when the Romans took possession of Nabataea, they too found it necessary to negotiate with the Arab nomads in order to keep the trade routes open. Graf writes:

Roman interest continued to be maintained in the old caravan routes of the Arabian Peninsula. This is evidenced by military activity in the Hejaz during the

\textsuperscript{177} Shaw, “Bandits,” 21
\textsuperscript{178} Bowersock, \textit{Roman Arabia}, 12-13
\textsuperscript{180} Bowersock, \textit{Roman Arabia}, 81-85. It is commonly believed that a breakdown in the Nabataean infrastructure prompted the Romans to annex Nabataea peacefully, as there is no material evidence to indicate that a conflict took place, and Roman writers would surely have written about a Roman victory
late 2nd century. The presence of Rome in this area and the inevitable encounters with the socio-political organizations of the region, some of which must have been uncooperative and disruptive of Roman interests, made imperial diplomacy a necessary adjunct to defensive policy. A concerted effort was therefore made to cultivate friendship with the tribal structures adjacent to the borders of the empire. The focus of these attempts was normally tribal organizations of considerable size and influence, i.e., those who were able to act effectively as buffers against the penetration of the defensive system by warring or rebellious tribes.\(^{181}\)

Inscriptions found in a Thamudic sanctuary in Rawwafa illuminate this relationship between the Romans and the nomadic tribes of Roman Arabia. As time wore on, many of these same Arab tribesmen—the “wolves of the desert,” as Cyrillus (ca. 5th C. CE) refers to them—became partners with Rome.\(^{182}\) If Roman Arabia was the gateway to the trade routes of the Indian Ocean, the key lay in its people.

When Rome assumed control over Arabia in 106 CE, it did so with little fanfare. As noted above, the Romans may have attempted to establish control over the region by fortifying water sources, although, as Mayerson pointed out, this was done perhaps with the realization that water could be denied to them at any point, should the local populace desire it.\(^{183}\) But according to the historical record, the Romans managed to rule Arabia with relatively little difficulty for almost five centuries. This fact alone indicates that the Romans must have come to terms with Arabia’s indigenous population. Perhaps the promise of a stable infrastructure, which allowed both Romans and Arabs to prosper were enough to establish long-term symbiotic relationships in the region. Ultimately, what this relationship demonstrates, however, is that geography is not the only factor in determining whether a region counts as a hinge or a fringe region in world history. The proper social conditions must be met in order for a region to function as a nexus for exchange. Roman Arabia possessed both of these qualities – the ideal geographical location and the right social conditions. As readers will discover in the next chapter, not all regions qualify to be hinges in world history.

\(^{181}\) Graf, “Saracens,” 20


\(^{183}\) Mayerson, “Saracens and Romans,” 75
CHAPTER 4
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD

Until now this thesis has been concerned with Roman Arabia, its role in the Indian Ocean-Red Sea exchange, and how the social climate there was a factor in facilitating this exchange. There are certain patterns that made this region a primary nexus for exchange in ancient World History. This work has discussed the major scholarship concerning Roman Arabia (Chapter 1); trade routes and the importance of Eastern Eurasian products to the Romans (Chapter 2); and encounters between the Romans and Arabia’s indigenous peoples (Chapter 3). Readers should now be familiar with the traits that make a region a hinge in World History. It is now time to see what aspects make a fringe.

In this chapter the metaphorical lens will once again shift, this time to the province of Britannia. Several reasons make Britannia an ideal counterpoint to Roman Arabia. Roman Arabia and Britannia were situated geographically opposite one another at the far edges of the Roman world. Their similarities, however, end there. The differences in social circumstance and levels of geographical isolation, which are inherent in each Roman province, determined the roles each would play in World History once they were no longer a part of the Roman Empire.

In the case of Britannia, both archaeological evidence and literary sources indicate that from the fourth century CE onward the society experienced a drastic decline in complexity and its citizens a lower standard of living. The primary catalyst behind Britannia’s decline was the violent introduction of migrating Germanic people, who sought to settle there. This contact led to the collapse of infrastructures, which had previously facilitated Britannia’s involvement in the greater Afro-Eurasian trade networks. Prior to the fourth century CE, Britannia’s relative isolation from the mainland was not an issue, so long as the infrastructures of exchange remained in place. With the contraction of the Western Roman Empire, however, Britannia became more and more isolated. By the fifth century the combination of internal strife and hostile Germanic tribes, who had migrated into Gaul, had all but isolated this once prosperous island.
One argument made in this work is that geographical location is a key factor in determining what role a region plays in world history. This is known as geographical determinism and it is a troubling term for many scholars. Geographical determinism suggests that certain cultures are naturally inclined to advance faster than others due to benefits found in their environment. Though lauded by some for his unique take on World History, Jared Diamond has also been criticized by world historians, such as John McNeill for suggesting that the primacy of Western Civilization is traced to Europe’s geographical location. McNeill was particularly concerned with Diamond’s theory that the advancement of culture is based on the climatic axis in which a particular landmass lies.\textsuperscript{184}

According to Diamond, there are four conditions (which Diamond refers to as differences) that determine the speed with which a culture advances.\textsuperscript{185} The first is the availability of flora and fauna that can be domesticated. Food production is important because a surplus allows a society to develop non-food production specialists. The second condition is the ease with which migration and diffusion of species and ideas within a continent can occur. A third condition is the ease with which migration and diffusion between continents can occur. The final condition is the size of the land that is able to support population growth.\textsuperscript{186} All four of these conditions are determined by the alignment of a given landmass (tilting axes). Diamond writes:

[Diffusion and migration] were most rapid in Eurasia, because of its east-west major axis and its relatively modest ecological and geographical barriers. The reasoning is straightforward for movements of crops and livestock, which depend strongly on climate and hence on latitude. But similar reasoning also applies to the diffusion of technological innovations, insofar as they are best suited without modification to specific environments. Diffusion was slower in Africa and especially in the Americas, because of those continents’ north-south major axes and \textit{geographic and ecological barriers} [emphasis added].\textsuperscript{187}


\textsuperscript{185} Diamond is referring to periods of history before the total globalization of our world in the twentieth and twenty first centuries.


\textsuperscript{187} Diamond, \textit{Guns}, 407.
Diamond did, however, note that human inventiveness must be taken into account, as well.188

As to why of all cultures it was Europeans, who sprang ahead in complexity within the last five hundred years, Diamond said that there were several reasons. First, power began to shift to the West in the fourth century BCE with the conquests of Alexander. What lay behind this power-shift was the ecological fragility of early non-European food-producing centers, such as the Fertile Crescent. In contrast, Europe’s relatively wet climate meant that its ecology was more robust and its environment could handle a fair amount of destruction due to agriculture.189 Diamond claimed that environmental issues had little to do with China’s decline. China fell behind the West because cultural traditions in China, which were conducive to government centralization, led to the stagnation of Chinese society. Whereas China in the fifteenth century CE consolidated what it had, which slowed innovation, European societies competed with each other. Diamond argues that this competition amongst fellow Europeans forced them to innovate in order to get ahead.190

McNeill agreed with some aspects of Diamond’s theory, such as Diamond’s explanation of how longitude affects the length of days and climate, which in turn affects the adaptability of plants and animals that are brought to a new region.191 McNeill found Diamond’s argument for geographical determinism to be problematic, however. Although Diamond made a convincing argument for geographical features acting as barriers to the diffusion of domesticable species, McNeill took issue with Diamond’s claim that all points along east-west latitudes in Eurasia share a similar climate. McNeill writes:

Eurasia’s east-west axis could not have been much help in the spread of cattle or goats. Its extreme variety of climatic conditions, its high mountains, deserts, and tropical forests posed a considerable challenge for the spread of most animals (and I should think, plants). . . . Indeed the successful spread of crops and livestock (not to mention the writing, wheels, and other inventions that Diamond mentions in this argument) is surely determined in large part by factors other than geography, and the role of geography is much more complex than the axes suggest. . . . The spread of useful species was usually a conscious act (weeds were different). They could not, of course, flourish where ecological conditions did not

188 Diamond, *Guns*, 408.
189 Diamond, *Guns*, 410–411
permit, but where they went when was largely a human affair, determined by trade links, migration routes, and happenstance.\textsuperscript{192}

McNeill further argued that Diamond’s model of geographical determinism is latently Eurocentric because Diamond did not take into account temporary phenomena, which may push one society ahead of others. Instead, Diamond grounds his argument in relatively unchanging features in history as determining human fate, such as topography.\textsuperscript{193}

My use of geography as a determining factor in the development of a society should not be taken as a wholesale ‘back-door’ argument supporting Diamond’s geographical determinism model. In using geography to compare Roman Arabia with Britannia, I merely point out how the isolation of one society from the greater world community can lead to stagnation. In the case of Britannia, this seems to be a valid point. Because of its geographical location, Britannia was at a disadvantage when it came to long-distance exchange during the fifth century CE. When viewed from a map that encompasses the whole Afro-Eurasian landmass, Britannia remains at the edge of this landmass, distant from the major exchange networks. Roman Arabia, on the other hand, occupies a position that is not only nearer the center of Afro-Eurasia, but is at the juncture of Europe, Asia and Africa. Roman Arabia was not just a hub of exchange, but a major nexus point for exchange between three continents.

One concept that I have (rather shamelessly) borrowed is the Annales school’s total history – renamed for my purposes as total environment. A region’s total environment includes geographical, social, economic and cultural contexts that can help explain its historical circumstances.\textsuperscript{194} Often, a province’s total environment is overlooked by scholars, who assign provinces a peripheral role. By situating a province within its total environment, rather than just focusing on its position within an empire, it is possible to draw more accurate conclusions about the region’s history and its role in the history of the greater world community. Furthermore, doing this allows us a better understanding of how people in these regions have interacted with their world-at-large. For Roman provincials—especially those

\textsuperscript{192} J. R. McNeill, “Jared Diamond,” 171-172.
\textsuperscript{194} Insofar as is possible.
on the fringes of the Empire—the Roman world was not the only world with which they interacted.

**ROMAN ARABIA: A LAND IN TRANSITION**

Before moving on to a discussion of Britannia, a brief recap of Roman Arabia is in order. As mentioned above in Chapter 3, some scholars agree that the looming “specter of Persia,” actually posed little direct threat to Roman Arabia. The land in Roman Arabia was (and still is) a vast desert with communities scattered intermittently near known water sources. Persian armies would have found the harsh environment of Roman Arabia to be worse than any number of legions the Romans could throw at them. The Romans themselves learned just how unforgiving the environment could be during the reign of Augustus, when in 26 BCE the Roman Prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, led an ill-fated expedition to take Arabia Felix. After being weakened by the desert environment and wracked with disease, the population mounted a series of counterattacks upon Gallus and his men, driving the Romans out of the country.  

Roman Arabia was still the independent kingdom of Nabataea during the time of Gallus’ expedition. The Nabataeans are believed to have flourished in Petra and the Hawran as early as the fourth century BCE. Their success as a culture can be attributed to their success as merchants and middlemen involved with the Red Sea trade. The sources indicate that they had few enemies, though there are historical accounts that depict the Nabataeans engaging in Red Sea piracy during the second century BCE. Bowersock argued that Nabataean piracy was a response to economic competition with their neighbors, the Ptolemies in Egypt. Ptolemaic merchants, having discovered how to use the monsoons to travel to and from India via the Red Sea, had begun to circumvent Nabataea altogether. By 30 BCE Egypt was under the direct control of Rome, while Nabataea had found its way into the position of a client-kingdom of the Romans. Bowersock writes:

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196 Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 12-13, 17

This arrangement permitted the Roman government to rely, where appropriate, on experienced native resources without an outlay of funds and men. At certain moments, either from the weakness of a local dynasty, from disaffection, or from a need for more direct administrative intervention, the Romans periodically annexed the territory of what had once been a client kingdom or principality. Nabataea became the Roman province of Arabia in 106 CE. The Roman sources for the annexation of Nabataea are unclear about the sequence of events that led to the transition from autonomous kingdom to Roman province.

Following the annexation of Nabataea, the Roman Emperor Trajan built a new highway, the *Via Nova Traiana*, which ran the length of the new province of Roman Arabia from north to south. Some scholars, such as Tom Parker and Edward Luttwak, have interpreted the Via Nova to be the remains of a Roman defense system, *a limes*, based on the existence of Roman forts that are situated along the road’s length. Others, such as Benjamin Issac and Phillip Mayerson, have speculated that the *Via Nova’s* primary purpose was to facilitate commerce, since the road was built over an existing Nabataean road built for that very purpose.

Most of the Indian Ocean-Red Sea trade that passed through the region did so through ancient Aila (modern-day Aqaba). Parker argued that without the outer *limes* guarding its eastern approaches, Aila would have been at great risk to the same Arab tribes that the defensive system was supposedly put in place to protect against. Nabataen-Greek and Latin graffiti dating to the second century CE have been found in this area, indicating that there may have been dromedary and cavalry patrols. Parker writes:

> The harsh climate in the northern Hisma desert meant that there was no significant sedentary population to protect. Thus no fortified zone, like that found to the north, was required. Forts and garrisons along the *via nova Traiana*, which ran through the desert north of Aqaba, protected the caravan traffic and could, through patrols and watchtowers, monitor nomadic movements across the road.

Furthermore, Parker notes that Roman Arabia was governed by a propraetorian legate, who maintained a medium sized force that consisted of a full legion and roughly ten units of

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200 Parker, “A Different View,” 43.
201 Parker, “A Different View,” 43.
auxilia. Given how overstretched the Roman Army was, Parker argues that the Romans would not have assigned so many resources to an area that they perceived as being secure from threat.\textsuperscript{202}

The evidence, however, is sparse and there has yet to be found any evidence to suggest that a significant Roman military presence was maintained as part of an effective defense-in-depth.\textsuperscript{203} Graf argued that this indicates there was an amiable relationship between Rome and Thamudic tribes from the Hisma, who may have served to guard this area as Rome’s \textit{foederati}. Graf writes:

As throughout the empire, Roman relationships with border inhabitants determined the character and requirements of military defense. The absence of any fortified zone of appreciable depth in southern Jordan is only an expression of the close ties which existed between Rome and the Thamudic confederation. As \textit{foederati}, the tribal league must have provided contingents for patrolling the Wadi Ramm and the rest of the Hisma region. For all essential purposes, these tribes performed the same function for Rome as had the Nabataean client kingdom in the early centuries.\textsuperscript{204}

Graf speculated that this arrangement allowed Rome (later the Byzantines) to forego the expense and manpower of fortifying this area.

Other scholars have chimed in on the discussion. As noted in Chapter 3, E. B. Banning challenged Parker’s assertion that southern Roman Arabia was a part of a greater system of limes. Citing Graf and using Fredrik Barth’s ecological niche model, Banning concluded that the presence for a system of defense in Roman Arabia was unnecessary to the security of the region because nomadic and sedentary peoples were cognizant of being in a symbiotic relationship.\textsuperscript{205}

\textsuperscript{202} Parker, “A Different View,” 43
\textsuperscript{203} Graf, “Saracens,” 3.
\textsuperscript{204} Graf, “Saracens,” 20
\textsuperscript{205} Fredrik Barth, “Ecological Relationships of Ethnic Groups in Swat, North Pakistan,” American Anthropologist, New Series 58, no. 6 (Dec. 1956): 1079, 1088; E. B. Banning, “Peasants, Pastoralists and ‘Pax Romana’: Mutualism in the Southern Highlands of Jordan,” \textit{Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research} 261 (Feb. 1986): 25, 29, 43, 44. Barth was an anthropologist who conducted research in what is now modern-day Swat, Pakistan. His research among the sedentary, semi-sedentary, and nomadic populations of the region led him to conclude that, although there was cultural animosity between these groups, the harsh environment in which they lived dictated that they work together. In other words, each group filled an ecological niche that was essential for the other groups to survive.
By far the soundest argument comes from Greg Fisher. While Fisher acknowledges that the Romans provided security to the province for a time, he notes that by the fifth century CE numismatic evidence has all but disappeared in places, such as the legionary fort at Lejjun. Fisher speculates that this was due to a withdrawal of Roman troops from the region to deal with the Vandals in North Africa. Roman Arabia, being a somewhat stable province, was left to the care of Rome’s foederati—certain Arab tribes. With the defeat of the Roman army to the Vandals at Cape Bon in 468, the Roman Empire in the east did not possess the resources to refortify Roman Arabia. Constantinople’s answer to securing the region was to allow their foederati to continue administering the Roman province.

Fisher’s theory could explain why Roman Arabia did not experience a decline, like that experienced by western provinces. Relationships between the various populations in Roman Arabia had already been well-established in previous centuries. The area was, therefore, relatively stable by the fifth century CE. The withdrawal of Rome’s military presence left Roman Arabia in the care of its Arab foederati; semi-nomadic allies of Rome, whose culture had begun to meld with Roman Arabia’s sedentary population. Under the foederati, avenues of trade were secured and the region continued to prosper. These conditions allowed for the relatively smooth transition that occurred when Roman Arabia finally left the sphere of the Roman world and entered that of the Islamic in the seventh century CE.

**BRITANNIA IN PASSING**

Whereas written sources for Roman Arabia are scarce, the written sources for Britannia are relatively prolific. In addition to archaeological material and incidental references in such texts as the *Historiae Augustae* and the *Historia Nova*, modern scholars are fortunate to have three surviving texts that were written in, or near the period of the fifth century: *The Ruin of Britain* by Gildas, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by Bede, and *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle* of multiple, anonymous authors. These have survived

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207 Fisher, “New Perspective,” 51-52

208 Fisher, “New Perspective,” 57
mainly due to the monastic tradition of transliterating ancient works that were of interest to the church.

Regarding the first of the sources for Britannia, Gildas wrote his works in the middle of the sixth century. For scholars of Britannia, his most important work is *The Ruin of Britain*. Gildas did not write *Ruin* so much as a history, but rather as a social criticism of the rulers and churchmen of his day. Gildas’ disapproval of his countrymen’s actions is evident in his discussion of Britannia just before the coming of the first Saxon settlers. Gildas writes:

> The old saying of the prophet denouncing his people could have been aptly applied to our country. . . . Everything they did went against their salvation. . . . And this was true not merely of worldly men; the flock of the Lord and his shepherds, who should have been an example to the whole people, lay about, most of them, in drunken stupor, as though sodden in wine. They were a prey to swelling hatreds, contentious quarrels, the greedy talons of envy, judgment that made no distinction between good and evil: it looked very much as though then, as now, contempt was being poured on the princes, so that they were seduced by their follies.\(^{209}\)

Gildas goes on to describe the coming of the Saxons as God’s punishment of the wicked.\(^{210}\)

Building on the work of Gildas, Bede wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in the seventh century. Unlike Gildas, Bede’s aim for writing *The History* was to record the evolution of the Church in Britannia. In this sense, it is somewhat of a celebration of England itself. For this reason, many past English scholars have attributed to him the honorary title of ‘Father of National Historiography’.\(^{211}\)

Finally, our last major source for late Roman Britain is *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle*. *The Chronicle* is believed to have been commissioned by the Saxon king, Alfred sometime in the late ninth century and was maintained until the middle of the twelfth century.\(^{212}\) As its title indicates, *The Chronicle* traces the major events of the island from the time of Augustus.

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\(^{210}\) Gildas, *Ruin*, xxii.1


As noted above, unlike Roman Arabia, from a world view Britannia was situated geographically at the furthest edge of the Afro-Eurasian landmass. Although Britannia lay in relative isolation, under the Roman Empire a stable infrastructure allowed Britannia to take part in the broader trade networks. Archaeological evidence in the form of amphorae dating from the first century to the third indicates that garum (a type of fish sauce) and olive oil were part of the common diet in Britannia. Neither of these products were produced locally, but had to be imported from Spain and African provinces, respectively. Amphorae recovered by archaeologists have indicated that by the middle of the third century CE there was a drastic decline in the import of garum and oil. Changes in dietary taste could account for the declining demand for these imported items among Britannia’s people. But if one were to turn to the historical record to see what events were transpiring, one would see that there was general turmoil in the Roman world that coincides with the decline of trade during this period. What ancient authors refer to as the “Crisis of the Third Century” disrupted many trade networks and this may have caused those living in Roman Britain to seek alternative food sources. While Britannia was not the scene of any major conflicts during the third century CE, empire-wide civil wars and large external wars must have hindered the volume of exchange between the island and the rest of the empire.

By the middle of the fourth century CE, the Picts and the Scots, who hailed from modern-day Scotland and Ireland respectively, had begun to conduct raids south of Hadrian’s Wall with more frequency. In 367 CE they formed a loose coalition with Germanic tribes. Historians refer to this event as the Barbarian Conspiracy. Ammianus Marcellinus writes:

At that time the Picts, of whom there were two tribes . . . and the Scots were roving at large and causing great devastation. In addition the Franks and Saxons were losing no opportunity of raiding the parts of Gaul nearest to them by land and sea, plundering, burning, putting to death all their prisoners.

These raiders were driven-off by the future emperor Theodosius. The “barbarian” threat, however, became ever more problematic over the next century. As larger and stronger tribes,

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214 Cool, *Eating*, 221-222.

such as the Goths and Huns, migrated from the Eurasian steppes into Europe, the pressure forced Germanic tribes to seek new homes in Roman territory. As the pressure from these migrations mounted, Rome’s hold over areas in the west, particularly Gaul, began to slip.

By the fifth century CE, Britannia became more and more isolated from the rest of the empire. As long as there were disciplined Roman troops occupying the island, Britannia could cope with these problems. But beginning with Magnus Maximus in 383 CE in Britannia, Rome experienced a series of military revolts against the authority of the Roman Emperors. 216 This culminated in 407 with Constantine III denuding Britannia of her protective legions in order to seize imperial power on mainland Europe.217 With the legions gone, the island was left virtually undefended. The eighth-century CE historian and monk Bede wrote that following the departure of Constantine III with Britannia’s two Roman legions, they were once again invaded by the Picts and the Scots. An urgent message was then sent to Rome requesting assistance. Bede writes, “An armed legion was quickly dispatched to them which duly reached the island, attacked the enemy, destroying a great number of them and driving the rest from the territories of their allies.”218 The victory was short-lived, however. For no sooner had the legion departed than the Picts and Scots returned to ravage the land. Another message was sent in 410 CE and a legion was once again dispatched to drive them off. Again the Romans were triumphant. Following this operation, the Romans helped the Britons revamp the country’s defenses. Bede writes, “Then the Romans informed the Britons that they could no longer be burdened with such troublesome expeditions for their defense; they advised them to take up arms themselves and make an effort to oppose their foes.”219

The defenses built by the Roman legion in 410 CE continued to work for a few decades. But by the 440s CE, Britannia was once again under threat of being overrun by the Picts and Scots. A final request for help was sent to the Roman general, Aetius in Rome, who

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216 Gildas, Ruin, 13.2.
217 Bede, Ecclesiastical History, I.11.
218 Bede, Ecclesiastical History, I.12
219 Bede, Ecclesiastical History, I.12.
was in his third consulship. The message went unanswered. Vortigern, a prominent warlord in Britannia, then arranged to hire some Germanic mercenaries in 449 CE. Bede writes,

> At that time the race of the Angles or Saxons, invited by Vortigern, came to Britain in three warships and by his command were granted a place of settlement in the eastern part of the island, ostensibly to fight on behalf of the country, but their real intention was to conquer it. First they attacked the enemy . . . and the Saxons won the victory. A report of this, as well as of the fertility of the island and the slackness of the Britons reached their homes and at once a much larger fleet was sent over with a stronger band of warriors.²²⁰

What ensued in Britannia was a half millennium of Saxon rule. The term Saxon is a broad term describing various Germanic tribes who resided at the time in what is today the region of Denmark. Hungry for land and resources, they came to Britannia and fought not only the people there, but they fought amongst themselves. By the time Bede was writing his *Ecclesiastical History*, the Saxons had coalesced into roughly three main groups.

### Fringe vs. Hinge

The fate of Britannia in the fifth century CE was quite different from that of Roman Arabia. The key to understanding the resilience of Roman Arabia lies how its various peoples had developed older, traditional ties amongst themselves. This willingness to compromise and develop symbiotic relationships allowed the region to experience a relatively smooth transition that carried it into the Islamic World. In Britannia, conditions were far from ideal. The conflict that ensued through the introduction of migrating foreigners to the island destabilized preexisting infrastructures. This made it impossible for preexisting positive exchange networks to continue. In other words, Britannia’s total environment included the mass migration of foreigners, who had not yet established long-running ties with the island’s population. It was not until the Norman conquest of 1066 CE that stability in the region was reestablished, allowing Britannia to once again become a participant in the greater world community.

Britannia lay on the literal geographical edges of the Afro-Eurasia landmass. To Britannia’s immediate west lay Ireland and beyond that lay thousands of miles of ocean. Ships of that period were not able to cross the Atlantic Ocean. It was not until the eighth

century CE, with the advent of Viking long ships, that maritime technology had advanced far enough to make such voyages. And even then, the long ships were confined to crawling their way along the coasts of Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland. Internal strife, foreign invasions and an absence of central authority had since the fifth century CE ensured that the island remained in virtual isolation. Contact with the rest of the world community was limited to destructive raids on Britannia’s coastline, carried out by first Germanic and later Nordic peoples.

In this sense, Britannia’s relatively lush climate may have actually worked against those who lived there. The mildness of Britannia’s climate did not call for relatively small populations to fill ecological niches in order to survive. What it did was attract others who arrived in ever greater numbers to settle on land that was already occupied. These settlers brought with them new methods of warfare against which Britannia’s population could not cope.

In contrast to Britannia, Roman Arabia lay at a vital juncture in the Indian Ocean-Red Sea exchange network. Throughout most of the region’s history it has had constant interaction with communities in the Mediterranean, East Africa and Eastern Eurasia. Though it did experience periods of warfare and civil strife, these sporadic periods did not last long and there was an unspoken agreement among Roman Arabia’s inhabitants to keep the exchange routes open; a sort of mentalité of exchange existed. And the history of the province in the Roman era suggests that these structures and associated structures of exchange and alliance were remarkable durable. Roman Arabia was also able to avoid the types of social upheaval that Britannia experienced because there was no sudden inundation of “strangers” who arrived en masse to settle there. What Roman Arabia did have were differing populations who were long-time inhabitants and had worked out their major differences long beforehand. The harsh conditions of the environment dictated that over time those living in Roman Arabia come to terms with one another, each demographic group filling a necessary niche. Here Geography, trade and mentalité came together to form the

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ideal conditions to make Roman Arabia a hinge in World History, whereas conditions in Britannia determined that it become a fringe.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Applying world historical method to ancient literary sources, archaeological data and modern scholarship gives readers a glimpse into the world of those who lived and died in Roman Arabia between the third century BCE and the seventh century CE. In doing so, I have argued that Roman Arabia occupied a unique position in world history, acting as what I refer to as a hinge – a region that acts as a vital nexus for connecting different cultures through the process of exchange. Throughout the history of ancient Afro-Eurasia, there were very few places that could be said to have fulfilled this role; the region of the Bosporus being one of them and the steppes of Central Asia being another.

There are four factors that determine whether a region could be classified as a fringe or a hinge in world history: (1) geography, (2) a desire for exchange to take place, (3) relative stability in the region where exchange was to take place, and finally (4) the ability of a region’s people to facilitate exchange in multiple directions beyond its own borders. From the third century BCE to the seventh century CE, Roman Arabia met all four of these conditions.

By centering our metaphorical lens on Roman Arabia, it is evident that this region occupied a key geographical position. Located at the very north end of the Red Sea, merchants based in Roman Arabia had easy access to the Indian Ocean and its very predictable monsoon winds. This location allowed for reliable and regular access to communities along the eastern coast of Africa, the coasts of the Arabian Peninsula, India and beyond to other areas of Eastern Eurasia, including China and Indonesia. To Roman Arabia’s northwest, natural corridors through the mountains and deserts allowed for a relatively short journey to ports along the Mediterranean via caravans.

From at least the late fourth century CE, those who called Arabia “home” expressed a desire to engage in long-distance exchange. The Nabataeans, followed by the Romans in the second century CE, created and maintained an infrastructure that facilitated a network of exchange that continued even past the scope of time covered in this thesis. This infrastructure
included the port-city of Aila, inland cities, such as Petra and Humayma, fortified caravanserais, and military forts and towers by means of which soldiers could keep the lanes of trade safe and operational.

In the time period under consideration in this thesis, Roman Arabia was also one of the least volatile regions in Rome’s possession. Barring the occasional nomadic razzia or occurrence of brigandage, the various peoples of Roman Arabia lived in relative harmony with each other. As discussed in Chapter 3, Roman Arabia’s exceptionally harsh environment ensured that her people were inclined to fill certain ecological niches in order to survive and prosper. This relationship between various peoples and their environment was a symbiotic one, each group dependent upon the other for their continued existence. These relationships were long-standing ones, complex relations of interdependence between the peoples involved having been settled long before the arrival of the Romans.

But the people of Roman Arabia did not just engage in long-distance exchange between themselves and one or another culture. At the behest of its people, Roman Arabia became a sort of clearing house for merchandise to be dispersed throughout Afro-Eurasia. With the dispersion of merchandise came the spread of information; new philosophies, religions, science and technologies all passed through this tiny nexus that, far from being a fringe, was a vital hinge that connected the communities of three continents.
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