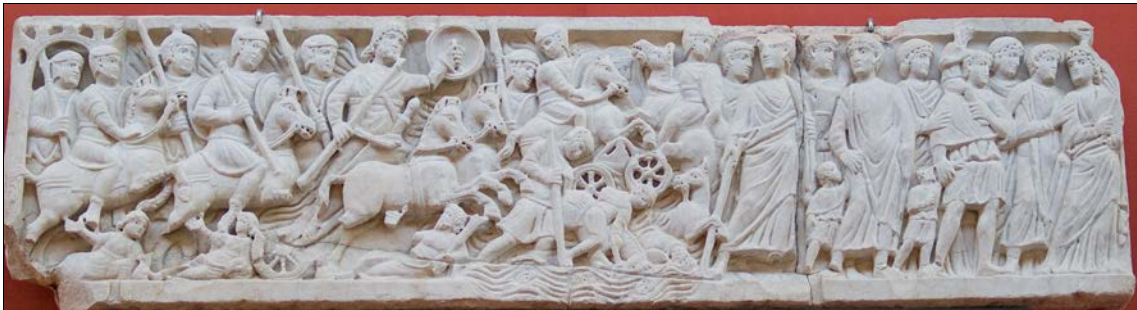


*Mercoledì 30 ottobre 2013, h. 15
Dip. Civiltà e Forme del Sapere
Via Galvani, 1 - V piano*

Michael A. Speidel
Università di Berna

"Rome and the Red Sea: from Augustus to Diocletian"



*Conferenza organizzata dalla Prof. A. Avanzini
Insegnamento di Archeologia e Storia della Penisola Araba*

Abstract

War, trade and treaties

New, revised, and neglected sources for the political, diplomatic, and military aspects of imperial Rome's relations with the Red Sea basin and India, from Augustus to Diocletian

Michael A. Speidel,
Universities of Zürich, Basel and Bern

The development of Mediterranean contacts with the Red Sea basin and with India in Antiquity has received much attention in recent decades. Given the nature of the surviving literary, documentary and archaeological evidence, modern scholarship quite naturally focussed on a plethora of economic issues, and substantial progress concerning this fascinating feature of the Ancient World has been made. Yet other related phenomena have drawn less scholarly interest in the past decades. In particular, the extent and the means by which Roman imperial governments and foreign powers consciously and purposely interfered with the mechanics and the contexts of the Indo-Mediterranean and Red Sea trade received relatively little attention in recent publications. This is surely (at least in part) due to the influence of one school of thought, which holds that Roman imperial governments never undertook measures to promote maritime trade with the East. According to this view, the Roman emperors neither conceived of their realm as an economic unit nor did they develop anything that could be described as an imperial economic policy. Trade through the Red Sea and to India, particularly during the first three centuries CE, is therefore usually understood to have been free of political implications (at least as far as the Roman Empire is concerned). Yet even if there are good reasons to question whether Roman governments had any deeper understanding of economic fundamentals, they were undeniably aware of the importance of taxes and customs duties as major sources of income for the imperial treasury.

On the other hand, an ancient merchant wishing to engage in trade activities beyond the confines of his native state not only needed the relevant sets of knowledge (economic, geographical, behavioural, logistic, etc.), but he also depended on an environment, which was favourable to his commercial intentions. That foremost included safe access to the foreign markets he intended to visit, as well as the necessary property and market rights. He equally needed indiscriminating access to foreign legal systems or to be received into local traditions of hospitality. For if long-distance merchants wanted to successfully and safely carry out transactions abroad, and if they wanted to have some guarantee that their private contracts would be honoured by local and other foreign partners, they depended on physical safety and legal security alike.

In a world such as ours today we would surely expect international treaties and trade agreements to cover such issues as access to foreign markets and legal systems. For the exchange of goods generally requires an institutional environment that sets the rules of how, where, and under which conditions sales were conducted. However, there seems to be a firm consensus among the historians of the Roman Empire that imperial Rome never concluded international trade accords. Moses Finley held that Rome only ever signed such agreements (with its Italian allies and with Carthage) in the very early phases of its history. After Rome became the predominant power in Italy and the Western Mediterranean it allegedly ceased to do so, for as the victorious conqueror it could now set the rules unilaterally and simply impose its will by the use of force. But did Rome really refrain from trying to exercise control beyond Egypt's southern borders?

Recent publications of new or revised documentary evidence (Roman, Nabataean, Sabaeen, Indian etc.), epigraphic mainly, but some also papyrological and numismatic, as well as some hitherto neglected sources (documentary and literary) encourage a re-examination of the measures imperial Rome took and the impact of these measures on the long distance trade around and through the Red Sea basin. This evidence strongly suggests that Rome (contrary a widely held opinion) not only indeed consciously interfered with the long distance trade (apparently aiming to secure its enormously high income from import customs), but that it also employed a set of different tools to reach this goal. Military measures, physical protection, as well as diplomacy and treaties all seem to have been part of a set of instruments, which Rome applied in order to establish a secure and thus economically favourable environment around the Red Sea basin. Chronologically, the reigns of Augustus and Trajan emerge as periods of increased Roman activity in the Red Sea region. This led to a regional network of alliances that Rome, according to the surviving sources, intended to control (with the occasional use of military force) during the first three centuries CE. *Amicitia*, international political 'friendship' (not a technical term for any specific type of treaty) is repeatedly on record of having been the name of the status, which Rome strived to establish by whatever means were felt necessary and employable with regard to the enormous geographical constraints. The relevance of *amicitia* for international trade is borne out by the transmitted and surviving details of such agreements. Moreover, there is evidence to imply that *amicitia* agreements even existed between Indian rulers and the Roman Empire. Overall, there is significant evidence at hand to suggest that Rome indeed employed a variety of means to exercise control not only in the northern parts of the Red Sea basin but also beyond the southern borders of Egypt in order to establish a safe and favourable environment for the long distance trade through the Red Sea and to India.