Vision, Folly and Balance: Imperial Approaches to Commerce and War in the Roman Near East, 27 BCE – 180 CE

Abstract: Few occurrences in antiquity are as widely discussed by a diverse, ancient authorship as transcontinental commerce between the Mediterranean Sea and East Asia. Yet modern historians remain profoundly divided over long-distance trade’s origin, operation and effect with regard to the governance of the Roman Principate. There is broad consensus, however, that the volume and value of this trade consistently increased between the administrations of Augustus and Marcus Aurelius. These two centuries also witness curiously divergent foreign policies between emperors, particularly in Rome’s Near Eastern possessions. It is thus argued that these phenomena are intrinsically connected and further, that emperors considered them so in deliberating policy. These findings throw light on previous topical historiography and propose a different approach to writing—and understanding—a Roman commercial history.

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Introduction

It was, no doubt, under the corrupting influence of such temptations as these, that our eagles achieved the conquest of the world: thus do we seek to obtain their patronage and sanction for our vices, and make them our precedent for using unguents even beneath the casque. ¹

--Pliny the Elder, Naturalis Historia, XIII.4

When Emperor Marcus Aurelius died on the banks of the Danube in 180 CE at Vindobona, or Vienna, the Roman Empire he left behind was the largest transcontinental, trans-cultural, singular political entity in history before the rise of the European nation state some fifteen centuries later. It was an empire that stretched from the Thames to the Euphrates, from the Rhine to the Nile. Thousands of miles from his campaign against the implacable Germanic tribes of the north was Rome’s second most militarily active region, the Near East comprised of Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and the western reaches of Mesopotamia. To Marcus, a disarmingly humble Stoic despite his dictatorial power, one distinction between the two wings of the empire was obvious. While the Atlantic Ocean rendered the western limits all but impenetrable, what lay beyond Rome’s eastern limits was not so shrouded in mystery. Romans, driven by an expansionist tradition, an infatuation with Alexander’s legacy and a simple profit motive, were cognizant of formidable cultures that occupied the other side of the Asian steppes. They were even more fixated by the exotic items that arrived by ship and camelback. Truly, the allure of the scarcely-known Far East made the Roman Near East, as a final departure point, that much more fantastic in the collective Roman imagination.

The governance of Rome’s eastern provinces in the first two centuries of the Principate cannot be adequately understood without a comprehensive explanation of what Romans, correctly or not, perceived to be the greatest threats, benefits and curiosities of the East at large. What were Rome’s primary interests? To what extent did various emperors direct Roman legions to actively secure these interests? How did the specter of the unknown Far East influence imperial administration? Was Roman interest in the region primarily commercial or security related? Were commercial and security objectives separable to begin with? Through careful examination of cliometric, archaeological, and literary evidence I will argue that all Roman priorities were secondary yet connected to the establishment, maintenance and protection of commerce.

At the core of this debate is the question of how to classify Rome’s intentions when evidence entertains various explanations. For example the establishment of roads, which will be of great import to this argument, both facilitated caravan traffic and legionary movement in greater Syria. Barring conclusive evidence, why should commercial or militaristic intentions be given privilege over the other? I will cautiously begin from the premise that commercial explanations should enjoy primary consideration because of a crucial distinction—warfare *always* cost money but only occasionally paid for itself. Whether Rome’s conquests were successful or not, the legions had to be paid. Therefore, any rational emperor would have had to consider financial ramifications first, or risk ruffling fickle legionary feathers and inflaming political rivalries thereafter—by all accounts, the latter option was the Roman politician’s fastest route to obscurity and death. Seeing as how military operations relied on fiscal prudence, and the Imperial budget was largely composed of tax revenue of commercial derivation—from directly taxing imports, caravan transport routes or individual “wealth”—we can reasonably
assert that emperors carefully considered the impacts of their foreign policy on trade. Glory mongering may have satiated the Roman psyche, but it did not pay the troops.

Part of what makes imperial intentions so difficult to parse is that most of the state’s pro-commerce functions—building roads, extending canals, gaining control over foreign maritime ports—were carried out by Roman legions. Rome’s bureaucracy did not employ a purely civilian workforce; nearly all government-employed citizens fell under the jurisdiction of the military. As a result, when we consider the Roman military in the Near East we must recognize that, between numerous punctuating moments of warfare, the legions were performing other crucial civic duties such as infrastructural development. Had Rome built infrastructure with the primary purpose of easing transportation burdens in future wars, we should expect the Principate to have initiated hostilities along the Euphrates on at least one occasion over two centuries. But no such instance occurs from the reign of Augustus through that of Marcus Aurelius.

This is not to suggest that the series of wars Rome fought against the Parthian empire do not deserve added emphasis in weighing intentions—they do. Nevertheless, prewar and postwar periods are crucial to understanding imperial commercial strategies that took decades to bear fruit. As the emperor dictated foreign policy, it necessarily follows that these strategies for encouraging commerce are reflected in Rome’s dealings with foreign entities. The personalities of individual emperors—a facet of inquiry that makes some scholars skittish—obviously influenced policy directly and thus requires continued attention. With these personages in mind, it is possible to evaluate the trends we find across administrations, so that we might formulate more ambitious propositions about the “commercial history” of Rome and, in doing so, suggest how scholars might approach these murky historiographical waters more confidently in the future.
This thesis will argue that this succession of emperors, both in extended peace and sporadic war, directed foreign policy to promote commerce in Roman Syria, Arabia, Egypt and beyond. The notion of Far Eastern exotica, amplified by elitist authorship and tangible products, played a considerable role in inflating Roman geopolitical aspirations in the region.

We are immediately confronted by the fact that Roman primary source material is fractured, scattered, biased, and often unreliable. This leaves considerable room for interpretation and disagreement among even the most eminent scholars. As this thesis attempts to draw conclusions that span from the economic to the political the historiography is not easily compartmentalized. Roman historians universally acknowledge that a great deal of variance and incongruity exists between specific eras, regions, provinces and familial dynasties. But past this recognition of complexity, few arguments go uncontested.

With regard to issues and problems of economics in the empire, historians generally gravitate to one of two schools of thought: the primitivist camp (which rallies around Moses Finley’s *The Ancient Economy* of 1973) and the modernist camp (which prefers Michael Rostovtzeff’s *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* of 1957). Though differences between both sides of the debate have been largely sensationalized, there are fundamental differences in opinion that ought to be expounded here.² The primitivist camp asserts that the Roman economy was solidly cellular, based mostly in self-sufficient local units, with little discernible growth over centuries. It further contends, “modern concepts of economic analysis

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designed for capitalist industrial economies are inappropriate for antiquity.”3 The modernist camp rejects the primitivist view as overly static. Modernists are more supportive of the notion of markets most strongly on a local scale, somewhat on a regional scale (peripheries of urban centers), and least potently on a transimperial scale. They typically prefer conclusions that highlight demonstrable growth and interconnectedness across the Mediterranean and beyond.

Recent attempts to synthesize these two schools have yielded some helpful insights. First, any analysis of the economy of the Roman Empire in its entirety over five centuries is likely to eschew local economic realities. Some regions—such as the Near East in the first two centuries of the Principate—experienced rapid growth in different eras and require focused analysis to discern what makes them exceptional. Second, the debate shows that the term ‘economic growth’ can be used on a per capita and aggregate basis, and the two should not be conflated. Surveys of different provinces show growth in population, productivity and aggregate production across provinces in the early empire.4 However consequential to the growth rate of the Roman economy at large, these blips of accelerated regional growth appear to have precipitated significant changes in diplomacy in their respective theaters. The Near East, I shall argue, is instructive of this truism. In an empire ruled by a rigid hierarchy, we ought to ask, “what are the policies that allowed for these marked changes?” In the Roman Near East, the dynamics of the luxury trade with the Far East is inextricable from any appropriate response.

Macroscopic economic theories aside, more ideological debates exist between scholars when conversation shifts to expansionist efforts, particularly in the Eastern provinces. Can it be accurately asserted that Rome’s millennium-long conquest of geographically disparate locales was dictated primarily by a cult-like ideology, or are military expeditions more readily explained

3 Manning & Morris, Ancient Economy, 224.
by complex practical concerns? Particular conquests of certain regions entertain more diversified debate concerning precipitating factors. The conquest of the Nabataean Kingdom by Trajan in 106 CE, for example, presents an example where a plethora of theories are suggested. Explanations of what prompted Rome’s rapid conquest of Arabia include: imperial grand strategy (to conquer for glory), administrative necessity (to “tidy up” a difficult region), security necessity (to protect interior Roman provinces), commercial potential (to promote trade), and imperial insecurity (to shore up support for unpopular politicians), among quite a few others. But these past attempts to divine Roman intentions in the Near East are all suspect in one way or another. Theories that privilege a single impetus are often too narrow in scope to provide more overarching understanding of Rome’s Near Eastern power dynamic.

*Map 3.2 The Nabataean kingdom – Showing major internal caravan tracks*
Conversely, the tendency among historians to hedge theoretical bets by presenting an array of possible explanations is often utterly unsatisfying. Profuse iterations of “perhaps”, “maybe”, and defeatist proclamations that historians will “always” be ignorant of some facts (commonplace in larger, composite histories) can imbue the reader with a sense of passivity. In constructing a similarly difficult narrative, Charles Darwin wrote that “any one whose disposition leads him to attach more weight to unexplained difficulties than to the explanation of a certain number of facts will certainly reject my theory.”

Though this analogy of course has its limits, natural history and Roman history nonetheless share the malady of incomplete archaeological evidence—we would do well to espouse Darwin’s view, and to consider the corpus of positive evidence while still acknowledging silences and shortcomings. This is an exercise in both deductive and inductive reasoning.

A single, market-relevant imperial action—be it taxation, public expenditure or coinage—could, and often did, have overlapping beneficiaries. The logic is as follows: investing in efficient infrastructure, around Rome’s borders, directly facilitated the business of private merchants, thus promoting general goodwill in a given area. The increased capacity of a locale for commerce allowed for higher volumes of goods to be exchanged at a faster rate. Roman officials then collected more revenue both intermittently (with the sporadic arrival of foreign imports) and statically (from the annual wealth tax) to fund further operations. Vibrant commerce ensured that political and ethnic tensions, ever a threat in the politically, ethnically and linguistically fractured Near East, remained at a lull.

The above hypothetical is meant to introduce the reader to the basic dynamic between empire, province and market that we will encounter in various forms across two centuries of

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Roman colonization. I encourage the reader to approach the historical phenomena I will present with a cutting skepticism—bear in mind that every sweeping historical trend can be explained by a litany of causes. But it does not follow from this reality that we should give all theories equal footing. We should picture ourselves fitting these causes into a loose hierarchy based first on evidence and second on theoretical viability. Which withstand our scrutiny? Which lose credibility after some rudimentary process-of-elimination? When confronted with an ambiguous record, it is far more fruitful (not to mention interesting) for historians of antiquity to construct a plausible narrative for a particular argument—a cogent reconstruction of all pertinent concrete and circumstantial evidence—than to merely recapitulate the various shortcomings of predecessors.

**Methodology**

This thesis aims to present the heretofore-unarticulated comprehensive argument in support of a commerce-dominated Roman foreign policy in the first two centuries. The nature of the argument requires that sometimes-ethereal commercial trends be situated in a framework of cathartic military events. This framework is divided into five periods corresponding to imperial administrations: Augustus (27 BCE – 14 CE), Vespasian (69-79 CE), Trajan (98-117 CE), Hadrian (117-138 CE), and Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE). In addition to including seminal moments of militaristic confrontation with Rome’s Near Eastern neighbors, these periods feature emperors of profound impact, unique disposition and considerable longevity.

Given this uneven chronology, it is necessary here to enumerate the methods of argument I will employ in subsequent chapters. The first approach is cliometric. Applying statistical data is essential to constructing a plausible explanation of a complex phenomenon, and will thus
guide this thesis where applicable (e.g., an analysis of Julio-Claudian coin frequency, or the application of a pertinent medieval economic model). The second approach is archaeological. Given the commercial focus of the argument, infrastructural remains—their frequency, location, time period and insessional dedications—provide an incomplete yet invaluable snapshot of actual physical structures from varying periods. The existence of such remains, like the Via Nova Traiana from the Gulf of Aqaba to Antioch, begs the question of their origin and purpose. Local finds *can* illustrate regional realities. The third approach is literary. Roman historians benefit greatly from the swaths of literary texts that have survived the past two millennia. Though surely biased and incomplete, the works of Pliny, Suetonius, Fronto, Cassius Dio and Herodian among others, help to corroborate ambiguous cliometric and archaeological evidence. At the very least, these accounts provide excellent samplings of the elite mentality at any given time. Statistical estimates of the size and distribution of the Roman economy—surely speculative and varied, yet instructive nonetheless—suggest beyond reasonable doubt that elites had disproportionately large exposure to and influence on commerce.

While we would do well to avoid taking elite literary records at face value if we were studying, say, literacy rates among the Syrian peasantry, some lofty-minded accounts are quite applicable to gauging imperial attitudes toward Far Eastern luxury by simple proximity. Whether accurate or not, these authors reflect the biases and tastes of the entrenched senatorial and equestrian classes—citizens who wielded considerable clout over private industries, provincial offices, and imperial policy. We should not discount the potential effect that historical and cultural transmission had on emperors who doubled as friends and patrons.
**Historical Background**

The phenomenon of transcontinental trade is not confined to the Roman period. Though the volume and frequency of commerce between the Mediterranean world and the Far East undoubtedly reached its height under the unified empire, inklings of the trade had begun before Rome conquered Italy and would continue after its demise, albeit at anemic rates. As this thesis will examine the intersection of politics and commerce in the Roman period, it is first essential to establish a cursory political and commercial history of the Eastern Mediterranean (Syria, Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt) before Roman rule. The importance of the stark differences between political entities in these periods will become more apparent as I detail Roman geographical expansion chronologically in the body of this argument.

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*Map 7.2: Land and sea routes of ancient Indian international trade.*

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Long before Julius Caesar installed Cleopatra as monarch of Egypt in 47 BCE, the Eastern Mediterranean was ruled by a collection of localized Hellenic and Semitic kingdoms. Alexander’s once sprawling conquests, stretching from Macedon to the Indus, had since fractured among his inheritors—notably, Seleucus of Babylon and Ptolemy of Egypt. By 312 BCE, Seleucus had established his namesake Seleucid kingdom in the northern reaches of Syria, stretching eastward to the Hellenized urban centers Alexander established beyond the Euphrates and Tigris. Seleucus’s rival Ptolemy usurped the Egyptian Pharaoh’s throne shortly thereafter, claiming dominion from the Nile to Palestine to southern Syria. The Ptolemaic kingdom adopted Egyptian customs into the Hellenic chassis, an example that later Roman occupiers would follow quite closely. Between these two remnants of the Alexandrian conquests remained a constellation of localities and minor “client” kingdoms, so-named because of their dependence on the patronage of more powerful monarchs. The Nabataean, Hasmonaean and Ituraean kingdoms maintained sovereignty over large areas bordering the Hellenic kingdoms, problematizing Ptolemaic and Seleucid claims to Palestine, Sinai and the Negev desert.7

The 250 years that followed witnessed the decline of Hellenic dominance as rivalries between competing Macedonian factions left their tenuous frontiers prone to foreign meddling. Local power shifts and territorial disputes exposed a region that was remarkably heterogeneous in ethnic, linguistic and political identities. As we will see, this fracture made it simply impossible for any one political entity to harness the economic potential of the region—despite

its ideal geographical situation at the crossroads of three continents and the confluence of major maritime arteries.

Two rising entities on the fringes of this geopolitical intermingling gravitated toward this promising intersection—Rome from the west and Parthia from the East. The Parthian Empire would become the perennial thorn in Rome’s side, and it deserves some exclusive attention here.

Once an obscure nomadic tribe, the Parthians traced their existence back to 247 BCE when they were founded by an Iranian dynasty known as the Arscids. They benefited greatly from the Mesopotamian geopolitical instability described above, consolidating power in northern Iran before steadily expanding westward for the next century or so. Under King Mithridates II, the Parthians finally wrested primacy in the region from the deteriorating Seleucids to the west and the Scythians to the East—by roughly 130 BCE, all the land between Roman and Indian control was subject to unified political control. Consequently, the storied Silk Road’s caravan traffic between the Far East and the Mediterranean operated on Parthian terms, tempered by Parthian taxes. Parthia’s capital at Ctesiphon, symbolically located across the Tigris from the old Seleucid capital, was poised to reap the benefits of a politically monolithic central Asia.

The effects of this realignment were not local. Traders as far away as China took notice of what unified central Asia could do to ease market efficiencies. Chinese archives report its famous traveler Chang K’ien spent considerable time in Parthian Bactria in 128 BCE. Shortly thereafter, Emperor Wu-Ti of the Han dynasty sent an embassy to the Parthian capital, bearing

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8 Julius Caesar planned an invasion of Parthia before his death.
ostrich eggs and, curiously, a paraplegic entertainer as tokens of common interest.\textsuperscript{11} The importance of this cross-cultural meeting cannot be understated, particularly in considering later Roman intentions in the same region. At the very least, it tells us that macroscopic commercial information reached entities at tremendous distances. The Han court at Chang’an stood no less than 5,800 km from the Parthian capital at Ctesiphon—a long, arduous journey through the central Asian steppes and China’s unforgiving western desert. Conversely, a robust Roman presence had already existed only 1100 km away from Ctesiphon along the Mediterranean coast for decades when the Republic forced the Seleucids to forfeit nearly all of Asia Minor after the decisive Battle of Magnesia in 189 BCE. Sheer distance aside, the Ctesiphon-Mediterranean route had the added advantage of the Euphrates and Orontes rivers to make movement all the less cumbersome. As will be detailed later, it is only logical to contend that the information flowing east along Eurasia’s most important commercial artery flowed west by at least a fraction of the distance.

The origins of commercial evolution were not restricted to Seleucid-Parthian territory in Mesopotamia. Nor was it restricted to terrestrial trade. The Seleucids’ cousins in Egypt, the Ptolemies, took a decidedly maritime approach to developing their eastern commercial networks.\textsuperscript{12} One of the most intriguing and fruitful documents of the Hellenic Near-East has far-reaching implications for the Roman period that followed. The \textit{Periplus Maris Erythraei} has tantalized the imaginations of ancient historians for centuries. An invaluable primary document, the \textit{Periplus} is our best-preserved, most lucid first hand account of the maritime trade routes between the Red Sea and the Indian subcontinent which date as far back to the Bronze Age,

\textsuperscript{11} Debevoise, \textit{Political History of Parthia}, 41-44.
though their rapid upswing in commercial volume is concomitant with that of the Silk Road.\footnote{Ratnagar, Shereen. Trading Encounters: From the Euphrates to the Indus in the Bronze Age. 2nd ed. Oxford India Collection. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 20-26 & 256-268.} It is a reference handbook of sorts for mercantile activity between continents, made possible by the second century BC discovery of seasonal monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean, whereby a voyage that had taken three years was winnowed to one.\footnote{Strabo attributes this discovery to the sailor Eudoxus in 116 BC (2.98-99). The author of the Periplus, however, says the discoverer was Hippalus. Casson has suggested that Hippalus may have been the helmsman for Eudoxus. Casson, Lionel. Periplus Maris Erythraei. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989, 241-244. Cf. Schoff, Wilfred H.. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912.} The author is undoubtedly a Hellenic Egyptian, explicitly using the term “we have” to modify the trees he refers to in Egypt.\footnote{“hmin” See: Casson, PME, 242; 29.9.27.} The original work had been dated from 230 BCE to 30 CE until Bowersock ascertained a later date of 50 CE by analyzing the nomenclature used to describe contemporary Nabataean kings.\footnote{Bowersock,G.W.. Roman Arabia. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983, 70-72.} The knowledge therein, however, is clearly the culmination of centuries of commercial seamanship.\footnote{De Romanis has shown that the identity of this particular wind’s (ζεϕυρος, or zephyr connoting the southwesterly seasonal monsoon wind that made long distance trade possible) discoverer remains in doubt. Still, all literary evidence is “further proof of the solid basis for the commercial relations between Egypt, Southern Arabia and India in the late Hellenistic age.” De Romanis, Federico. "Hypalos: Distances and Winds Between Arabia and India in the Hellenistic Knowledge." A Gateway from the Eastern Mediterranean to India (2005): 216-223.}
As is to be expected with any document of the period, difficulties in translating, and thus applying its content elsewhere, are legion. In this regard, the *Periplus* is exemplary of the greater corpus of literary material from the era—the manuscripts we refer to today are certainly not original to the times they detail. Our version of the *Periplus*, for example, was transcribed in the tenth century and now rests in Heidelberg, many miles and years away from its origin in the Red Sea. Luckily, the *Periplus* had but a few linguistic ambiguities that were recently clarified by eminent Roman historian Lionel Casson.\(^\text{18}\) Not all difficulties in translation, however, are to be lamented. Paradoxically, part of what lends credibility to the author of the *Periplus* is his colloquial and business-savvy style of the colloquial Greek, *koinê*. The narrative features mercantile terminology and stylistic repetitions that are commonly found in personal commercial

\(^\text{18}\) Casson, *PME*: 5-6.
documents—something of a businessman’s diary. As such, while certain proper nouns (referring to port cities, for example) may not escape our speculation, the authenticity of the document does not.

While a precious literary source to be sure, the *Periplus* is not our best evidence of Ptolemaic infatuation with the Far East. The author certainly helps to corroborate geographical locations along the Egyptian and Arabian coasts, but we have sufficient archaeological evidence to assert that the Ptolemaic pharaohs themselves founded strategic port cities around the Red Sea. Ptolemy II (309-246 BCE) and Ptolemy III (?-222) founded Myos Hormos, Koptos, and Berenike as mercantile outposts along the Egyptian coastline to the straights of Bab-el-Mandeb and the Ethiopian coast. Hellenic papyrological remains at these sites and other sites further inland, preserved fortuitously by the arid climate, depict a pre-Roman Egypt with vibrant trading houses and an entrenched mercantile class to finance them.

Few documents from the ancient world convey a more fascinating image than the Muziris papyrus, found in Egypt in 1985. Probably written a century after the *Periplus*, this papyrus relates a legal agreement between two Red Sea merchants, one of whom owned the cargo of a commercial ship from the southern Indian point of Muziris. The second merchant agrees to unload and transfer the cargo across Egypt’s eastern desert to the Nile and down the great river to the metropolis of Alexandria, with a loan and insurance agreement of course. More exceptional than the fairly sophisticated legal agreement is the breathtaking volume and value of

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the luxury cargo the *Hermapollon* carried. Between fabrics, Gangetic nards and ivory, estimates a total value of 1,154 talents and 2,852 drachmas—a colossal sum of 27.7 million sesterces.\(^{22}\) Moreover this number reflects only three of six parcels attested to by the authors—the cargo of the *Hermapollon* can reasonably be valued at 50 million sesterces. This is many, many times the property qualifications necessary to be a Roman senator.\(^{23}\)

It is important to note that the generations of elite Roman historians that would write gushing accounts of the riches of the Far East were by no means as geographically savvy as the author of the *Periplus*. Neither sailors nor adventurous merchants themselves, the intelligentsia’s concept of what lay beyond the Tigris and Arabian Sea was hazy at best. What is today Afghanistan was often confounded with India proper. There was a general ignorance of India’s interior and how it is connected to China. The unguent-rich coast of southeastern Arabia is prone to confusion with the Ethiopian coast. Strabo (63 BCE – 24 CE), commenting decades before the *Periplus* was written, was both prescient and self-defeating when he wrote:

But it is necessary for us to hear accounts of this country with indulgence, for not only is it farthest away from us, but not many of our people have seen it; and even those who have seen it, have seen only parts of it, and the greater part of what they say is from hearsay; and even what they saw they learned on a hasty passage with an army through the country. Wherefore they do not give out the same accounts of the same things, even though they have written these accounts as though their statements had been carefully confirmed. And some of them were both on the same expedition together and made their sojourns together, like those who helped Alexander to subdue Asia; yet they all frequently contradict one another. But if they differ thus about what was seen, what must we think of what they report from hearsay?\(^{24}\)

\(^{22}\) This figure is based off W.V. Harris’s conversion of 1 talent: 6,000 denarii and further, 1 denarius: 1 drachma. Harris, W.V. “The Late Republic”. *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*. 1, *Volume I*. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris and Richard Saller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007 (513-515)

\(^{23}\) For relative comparison, see pages 21-5.

\(^{24}\) Strabo, *Geo* 15.1.1-2
The resounding sense of awe is unmistakable. While maintaining skepticism toward the specific details claimed by each author, we will come to see that this Orientalist contagion transcends generations of Roman elite authorship. In the face of ignorance of the Far East, these ‘enlightened’ Romans often preferred flowery optimism to cold rationale.

Strabo’s moment of clarity notwithstanding, we can be sure of some things—particularly, the ways merchants traveled between both ends. It is generally accepted that products came and went via one of three routes. First, the Silk Road through central Asia presented the only plausible overland route to the Far East, though it required considerable resources for sustenance and protection from commonplace bandits.25 Second, an analogous route followed the trajectory of the Silk Road before cutting south to the Persian Gulf and across the sea to the western coast of India. The third route meandered southward along the Egyptian or western Arabian coasts before embarking from small port towns for the long, treacherous sea journey to India—an endeavor that required exceptional knowledge of the Indian Ocean’s monsoon cycle. The most prominent trade routes under Ptolemaic, Seleucid and Parthian rule remained so under Roman domination, again suggesting a fair amount of intercultural transmission through commerce. It appears no coincidence that a succession of Roman emperors would exercise, in various forms, both hard and soft power to draw terminals of each network into its sphere of influence.

The rhetoric that disseminated cultural fascination with the Far Eastern trade in Rome is unmatched by pre-Roman authors. Yet Mediterranean tastes for Far Eastern products predate Rome’s hegemony by centuries. So what were these goods that compelled pre-Roman polities to establish permanent trade relations with the Far East?

Without doubt, the primary focus of Far Eastern commerce was luxury goods. The author of the *Peiplus*, for example, ran a decidedly high-class operation without a single mundane item in his hull. His cargo is as illustrious as Pliny might have hoped for—ivory, rhinoceros horn, Indian myrrh, cinnamon, indigo, turquoise, onyx, silk, pearls, Chinese pelts, a whole host of gems and even Malaysian tortoise shells. Add to this list more oft-overlooked products, whose mentioning in ancient texts suggests their market relevance: Asiatic peach, liquorice, poisons and their antidotes. This astounding collection of sumptuous products must have been awe-inspiring to any Roman, if only as a sign of privilege. The burdensome τεταρτη or Hellenic quarter-tax, which imposed a 25% duty on cargo from eastern trade routes, does not seem to have disrupted luxury demand. It thus follows that the *tetartones* who assessed the *Hermapolion* at Alexandria probably collected around 12.5 million sesterces. This tax payment alone was enough for a man to be deemed a senator twelve times over. Even more stupefying is that the cargo, if valued at 50 million sesterces, could have financed the construction of the aqueduct at Alexandria Troas nearly twice over.

But the Far Eastern trade was not simply composed of virtually untenable riches—staple products were certainly present, bolstering the notion that these routes held social importance separate from the corporeal desires of the elites. More affordable goods were also imported at considerable rates, at times in tandem with expensive exotica. Arabian and Axumite

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26 Casson, *PME*: 15-21
frankincense, Far Eastern botanicals, and a cornucopia of peppers were mainstays not only in Near Eastern consumption, but across the Roman Empire.29

Moreover, some goods from the alleged Far East became not only commonplace but embedded in Roman cultural institutions. In Roman Britain, for example, there is incontrovertible evidence of peppers at fort under the reign of Vespasian, attested to by tablets bearing the fort’s inventory. The quantity of pepper at Vindolanda remains unclear, though we can be reasonably certain of a price around eight sesterces.30 First, this demonstrates the cultural ubiquity of some eastern products, reaching to the furthest corners of the empire for culinary usage early in the first century—even among those employed by the state. Second, basic supply-and-demand suggests the extremely high quantity of Indian peppers in the empire to demand such a low price as far away as Britain, especially for legionaries who earned many times this amount in a single year. The orient’s largesse was not proprietary of the Roman intelligentsia.

Pliny, in his dedication to the Emperor Vespasian, remarks “the country people, and, indeed, some whole nations offer milk to the Gods, and those who cannot procure frankincense substitute in its place salted cakes.”31 This passage clearly reflects a normative expectation that ritual dedications to deities sometimes required the use of specific substances. Frankincense, and thus the merchants who carried it from southern Arabia, had a cultural permanence to the masses as well. The Roman government, under which the author if the Periplus writes, legislated as much—Kane on the Arabian coast had, per government mandate, a monopoly on frankincense exports to Rome.32

29 Whitcomb 1982, Tomber 2000
31 Pliny Historia: 1.16
32 Casson, PME, 27:9.9-10
Imperial meddling with the Eastern commerce was, under at least some circumstances, as much a function of the emperor’s personal benevolence as his political authority. The physician Galen, recalls that the emperor’s amici—a designation that connotes both personal and professional alliance—often petitioned the emperor for cinnamon for use in medicines.\textsuperscript{33} Such abject imperial intervention is hardly commonplace in the historical record, but it demonstrates the degree of attention Rome paid to eastern imports on at least two occasions, and suggests a similar mentality in other contexts. The same ships that brought silks for Egypt’s praefectus also brought aromatics for the “country people,” making the Far Eastern trade a truly societal institution.

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Prices per Roman pound for commodities of the eastern trade in Pliny NH}
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|l|}
\hline
Commodity & Type & Reference & Price in denarii \\
\hline
Ammoniacum & & XII. 49 & 2 \\
Amomum & In cluster & XII. 28 & 60 \\
 & Broken & XII. 28 & 48 \\
Bdellium & & XII. 19 & 3 \\
Cardamom & & XII. 29 & 12 \\
Cassia & & XII. 43 & 50 \\
Cinnamon & & XII. 42 & 10 \\
 & Daphnitis & XII. 43 & 300 \\
Costus & & XII. 25 & 5.5 \\
Frankincense & 1st quality & XII. 32 & 6 \\
 & 2nd quality & XII. 32 & 5 \\
 & 3rd quality & XII. 32 & 3 \\
Ginger & & XII. 28 & 6 \\
Ladanum & & XII. 37 & 2.5 \\
Malabathom & Oil & XII. 54 & 100–300 \\
 & Large leaf & XII. 26 & 40 \\
 & Medium leaf & XII. 26 & 60 \\
 & Small leaf & XII. 26 & 75 \\
Myrrh & Trogodytic & XII. 35 & 16.5 \\
 & Erythraea & XII. 33 & 16 \\
 & Perfumer’s & XII. 35 & 12 \\
Nard & Large leaf & XII. 26 & 40 \\
 & Medium leaf & XII. 26 & 60 \\
 & Small leaf & XII. 26 & 75 \\
 & Spikenard oil & XII. 26 & 100 \\
Pepper & Long & XII. 28 & 15 \\
 & White & XII. 28 & 7 \\
 & Black & XII. 28 & 4 \\
Styrax & & XII. 55 & 17 \\
Sweet Flag & & XII. 48 & 1 \\
Sweet Rush & & XII. 48 & 5 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Before moving on to discuss imperial careers, it is necessary to present basic statistical data about the Roman economy at large. That economic projections of antiquity are speculative by nature ought to engender caution, but not callous apprehension—they are founded, some more reliably than others, in facts. More importantly, they allot to the Roman historian a realm of possibilities to work within, providing a sense of finite scale in the midst of abstractions. In the case of GDP, this scale is rather broad. Hopkins charted a low-point of 9 billion sesterces, whereas Duncan-Jones proposed an optimistic 20 billion sesterces. For our purposes, it will suffice to split the difference, putting GDP at 14.5 billion sesterces. Seen in this light, the cargo of the *Hermapollon* alone comprises $1/300^{th}$ of Roman GDP for an entire year.

Concerning the size and wealth of the elites, Goldsmith has estimated that the 600 families of the senatorial class represented .04% of the population of 55 million and .6% of total national income. More recently Scheidel proposed, quite differently, that the elite comprised 1.5% of population and 20% of GDP. Note that while these projections differ wildly in absolute terms, the primary estimates are almost equally proportional to the secondary estimates—Goldsmith’s elite’s share of total income is 15 times its share of population, while Scheidel’s elite’s share of GDP is 13.3 times its share of population. Put this way, the two estimates can be tentatively reconciled as a way to conceive wealth distribution in the Roman

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34 One reliable putative indicator is wages. Goldsmith’s estimates stem from the well-documented disparity in annual income between legionaries (1,200 sesterces) and imperial procurator (60,000 sesterces). That the difference is by a factor of fifty—and legionaries were certainly not regarded as poor men—suggests a massive perennial gap between rich and poor.

35 In reality, of course, these figures fluctuated over the two centuries under study. These numbers thus reflect a defensible reference point for purposes of comparison and further discussion.

36 50 million / 14.5 billion = approximately .0034%


Near East. While casting a skeptical eye toward numerical values, we should retain heuristics like these for their *comparative* value.

For our purposes, Goldsmith’s second estimate paints a more fulfilling picture of economic reality under the High Empire. He proposes that the wealthiest 3% of the population received 20-25% of total national income. This theoretical 3% consumed the majority of luxury products imported by Far Eastern trade routes, controlled all political appointments and most means of production, and produced almost every historical literary document that survives to the present. It is due to this conflation of power and influence that the Roman elite—the theoretical 3%—should receive much, but not all, our attention as we progress.  

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39 Lo Cascio (2008) 620
40 It may appeal to the reader to have comparative reference for the commercial and monetary terms that will occupy the majority of this thesis. Attached here, Scheidel has composed a very useful database of monetary valuations up to 235 CE. See Scheidel, Walter. "Monetary Valuation Database Princeton/Stanford Working Papers http://www.stanford.edu/~scheidel/papers.htm. (accessed February 12, 2010).
Augustus & Defining Dirigisme

Now that all the races of the west and south were subjugated, and also the races of the north, those at least between the Rhine and the Danube, and of the East between the Cyrus and the Euphrates, the other nations too, who were not under the rule of the empire, yet felt the greatness of Rome and revered its people as the conqueror of the world. For the Scythians and the Sarmatians sent ambassadors seeking friendship; the Seres too and the Indians, who live immediately beneath the sun, though they brought elephants amongst their gifts as well as precious stones and pearls, regarded their long journey, in the accomplishment of which they had spent four years, as the greatest tribute which they rendered; and indeed their complexion proved that they came from beneath another sky.

--Florus, Epitoma: 2.34.61-66

Augustus’s founding of the Roman Empire is concomitant with a surge in the volume and value of commerce between the Near East and the Far East—a trend that would continue for some two centuries. Naturally, we must ask what precedents, policies and power relationships he implemented that precipitated this vast commercial growth. Monitoring the trajectory of more empirical foreign policy trends that evolve between Augustus and Marcus—in provincial administrative organization (and its accompanying monetary implications), border location, and military operation—will provide the necessary contrast for proposing less empirical theories on imperial approaches to commercial policy.

Understanding the myriad changes that Augustus established in shifting from republic to empire is crucial to grasping how later emperors conceived of direct economic power, or dirigisme. Vespasian, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius all mixed and matched the executive’s component abilities—territorial expansion (and contraction), monetary recalibration and infrastructural development, among others—in the shadow of Augustan

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41 Translated as “Chinese”: see below for reference.
42 From the Loeb Classical Library Vol. 231.
precedent of promoting international commerce at large. In short, he made imperial provinces into a sort of laboratory where policies could be dictated and tested over decades.

The new emperor immediately annexed Egypt as a province.\footnote{43} This was but a small part of a greater political realignment, wherein Augustus forged an official distinction between senatorial provinces and imperial provinces. In the senatorial provinces, located in the developed interior, Republican business would go on much as usual. But rather than allow rival senators governance of volatile fringe provinces, Augustus began a policy of direct imperial appointment name, installing a \textit{praefectus} as his direct liaison and official governor. Other functions of the traditional Republican bureaucracy in the provinces, most notably that of minting official coinage, transferred to emperor-approved \textit{legati}. With political empire came no small degree of economic imperialism.

What prompted such reform? After the watershed Battle of Actium, Augustus was confronted with the problem of an inflationary currency, partly so because of extended civil war. In the last fifty years of the republic, the golden \textit{aureus} had depreciated some 33\% problematizing post-war commerce and debt repayment.\footnote{44} Decisive action was necessary. Augustus responded by ordering the creation of the \textit{fiscus Caesaris}—a \textit{de facto} proprietary imperial treasury distinct from the Senate’s \textit{aerarium populi Romani}—to swiftly restore solvency to the market. Not coincidentally, the provinces of Syria and Judaea joined Egypt under the umbrella of direct imperial patriarchy. Smaller reforms on a local level reinforced the imperial paradigm shift. Citing financial constraints, the emperor cut state expenditures on

\footnote{43} Egypt, perhaps for its cultural appeal or strategic location, was actually regarded as the Emperor’s private property. Its governor donned the title of \textit{praefectus}. As the other \textit{praefecti} had distinctly Rome-centered responsibilities—control of the Praetorian Guard, the public grain dole, the firemen and police, and Roman urban administration, respectively—this was a noteworthy innovation.

frivolous entertainment in 7 CE—an act more symbolic than pragmatic, but telling nonetheless.\footnote{Dio Cassius \textit{Historia Romana}: 55.31.4} A year earlier, he established a board of three ex-consuls to eradicate wasteful spending.\footnote{Ibid: 55.25.6}

Records also show, somewhat curiously, that a \textit{fiscus} was founded immediately in northern Spain under \textit{imperial} control despite being far from any serious battle lines. This appropriation makes far more sense to us when we consider that Spain had long been the principal supplier of gold, silver and copper to the Republic. Any effort to regulate currency at this moment began and ended in the mines of Novo Cartago—a colossal complex that, according to Republican historian Polybius, employed 40,000 men in the second century BCE.\footnote{Strabo \textit{Geo}: 3.2.10} This mercantilist policy in Spain strongly suggests that provincial reorganization had a certain commercial inclination in the Near Eastern provinces, too.

Two bronze tablets from Aljustrel in Roman Lusitania (Portugal) demonstrate how this new provincial system both raised money and encouraged stability on a local level.\footnote{CIL II 5181. Peter Orsted fleshes out the details and implications of these laws—the \textit{lex locationis} and the \textit{lex metallic dicta}—quite well. See: Orsted, Peter. "The Case of Mining in the Roman Empire." \textit{Cambridge Philological Society}, no. 26 (2000): 70-76.} In brief, the system was open to private participation under the precondition that all metals derived was subject to \textit{ius privatum}; the unquestionable authority of the emperor. Imperial \textit{procuratores} leased to Romans the right to conduct mining operations in an allotted space for the substantial price of 4000 sesterces, which these \textit{conductores} subsequently re-leased to laborers.\footnote{That this lease cost more than three times the annual income of a legionary—without any guarantee of profiting or even breaking even—suggests strongly that private citizens involved in mining were fairly well-to-do.} Details in dividing up profits, such as what kick-backs \textit{procuratores} may have charged, remain hazy—we do know anyone capable of leasing a mine could also sell his winnings at the highest market
price. The *fiscus* system thus both created semi-public jobs and injected currency into the market safely, efficiently and without senatorial meddling.  

Mining precious metals was only the first step in reviving the Mediterranean economy. To combat inflation, a system of fixed currency valuation was necessary. Augustus established a standard, yet imperfect, set of weights while maintaining interdenominational relationships for the sake of simplicity. Monetary recalibration was a necessity to ensure commercial continuity in any region of the empire—it was particularly crucial (and, as later sections will argue, effective) in the Roman Near East. Whereas the northwestern provinces, like Gaul Lugdunensis or Aquitania, had operated with far less monetized commercial systems before Roman conquest, the Eastern Mediterranean had a long history of currency-based economics dating back to pre-Alexandrian Hellenic domination. But Augustus’s reverence for Hellenic tradition was second to his dogged promotion of Roman dominance. The Syrian *tetradrachmae*, used both by Rome’s Seleucid and Ptolemaic predecessors, was ubiquitous in Near Eastern commercial affairs. Other client kingdoms, like the Semitic Nabataean Kingdom, which occupied the western parts of the Arabian peninsula, had a similar silver-based currency. Augustus, in apparent recognition of the commerce on his eastern border, established a logical, weight-based exchange rate between extant Roman denominations and antiquated Syrian ones—from then on, one Roman *denarius*, or four *sesterces*, would equal one *tetradrachma*. The business of merchants in the region, and their exchanges with foreigners traveling along Far Eastern trade routes, was thus made markedly easier. By proxy, it simultaneously facilitated the collection of the *τεταρτη* by Roman

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51 Dio Cassius *Hist.*: 53.32.2
52 This reinforces the notion that Spanish coinage was primarily focused on encouraging commerce in the Eastern, not western, Mediterranean.
officials newly assigned to levy import taxes—whether this payment came in cash or in kind is another issue altogether.\textsuperscript{53}

More symbolically, Augustus ordered that all honorific coin engravings feature dedications only to imperial authority. Republican coins featured the busts and acts of self-glorifying politicians who, by political favor or simple coercion, were quite capable of bringing themselves fame and authority by the very coins they paid their legions or constituents with. The case of Pompey the Great, rival of Augustus’s adopted father, is exemplary. A common \textit{aureus} dedicated to him is adorned with arbitrary imagery and abbreviated titles that could not have conveyed much authority to denizens of the Near East, considering similar Hellenic coinage abounded.\textsuperscript{54} Previously, portraits of deceased ancestors and conquered foreigners were commonplace. Pompey, regarded as a brilliant strategist, realized that coinage had the unparalleled capacity to convey authority to the masses, particularly when word-of-mouth took months to reach a destination. Showcasing one’s profile on the obverse and embellished images of victory on the reverse was good politics.

Compare the Pompeic coin from above with the common Augustan \textit{sesterius}.\textsuperscript{55} The visual effect is both simpler and more powerful than crowded Republican coins. The obverse features Augustus’s profile with the word, \textit{DIVI}, meaning “of the God”. The reverse features Roman laurels of victory surrounding the Latin, \textit{DIVOS IULIUS}, or “Divine Creator”. The symbolism is unmistakable when we recognize that this coin, and others like it, circulated among

\textsuperscript{53} See discussion of the Archive of Babatha, under ‘Hadrian’.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 220.
distinct ethnic, linguistic and political entities in Rome’s newly acquired Near East. A Nabataean caravan driver could scarcely do business without physically handling the symbol of the polity that beckoned for his products. The mere optics of Augustus’s monetary reforms had an ethereal stabilizing effect for the nascent Principate in the Near East.

In demonstrating the importance of imperial intervention in the mining industry, Peter Orsted asserts, correctly I think, that “these innovations of Augustus therefore ought to be the general starting point of any study of the economic history of the Roman Empire.” These monetary reforms were subtle, pervasive and efficient not only in guaranteeing his imperial control but, more importantly, in laying the groundwork for vibrant commerce with the Far East over the next two centuries.

So far I have argued that Augustus’s governmental reorganization had particularly pronounced effects on Near Eastern commerce. The effects of monetary reform—both in tax and coinage—were felt by all Romans and provincials. The effects of Egyptian annexation were more direct, bringing the province’s vast grain supply under Rome’s control, not to mention providing unobstructed physical access to the Red Sea ports that had so interested Ptolemaic rulers. Outgoing products could therefore leave from prominent coastal ports, like Myos Hormos and Berenice, without foreign obstruction. Incoming products could be shipped to same ports with (after some caravanning) direct access to the Nile and the metropolis of Alexandrian

56 The alternative ‘reverse’ for Julio-Claudian coinage featured the letters “S C”, meaning Senatus Consulto, or “by decree of the Senate”. It too has authoritative undertones when seen in conjunction with the emperor’s portrait on the obverse. See Vagi, Coinage: 217-237.
57 Surely, as W.V. Harris and other have demonstrated, the typical ‘Roman’ was not literate in Latin. But exposure to and participation in municipal conventions, like censuses, military movements and coinage would certainly have acquainted any merchant activity with some lexicon of terms. See: Harris, W.V.. Ancient Literacy. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989, 175-284.
58 Orsted, Mining: 72.
59 Rathbone has shown the Ptolemaic administration of Egypt’s economy to be deeply interventionist—with a periodic census for taxation, direct infrastructural investment and even forced migration. Rathbone, Ptolemaic to Roman Egypt: 45-49.
at its delta. Accordingly, the emperor could directly levy taxes on cargo like that in the Muziris papyrus and, additionally, demand regular tribute for protection of townsfolk from nomads and the like.\textsuperscript{60} As such, commercial benefits across these Near Eastern provinces were both public and private.

![Map of the Indian Ocean in Roman times showing major maritime routes](image)

Map 2.1 The Indian Ocean in Roman times—showing the major maritime routes as described in the Periplos. Geographical terms are those used in the Periplos.

But how can we measure just how effective Augustus’s policies were with regard to the Red Sea-Far East maritime trade routes? A numismatic approach is requisite to corroborate the more theoretical advantages that empire brought to eastern commerce. The best evidence of imperial efficiencies consists not only of what Rome often imported—particularly organic matter and temporary-use products like cinnamon or frankincense—but of what Rome sent in return. In

\textsuperscript{60} There may have been additional local taxes. \textit{Ostraka}—ceramic fragments—mention a separate 3% tax collected at Red Sea ports. There is also mention of a “Coptos tariff” that was paid to local \textit{arabarchs} for permission to use imperial roads. See also, OGIS 674; Young, Gary K.. \textit{Rome’s Eastern Trade}. London: Routledge, 2001, 208-10; Brunt, P.A. "The Administrators of Roman Egypt." \textit{The Journal of Roman Studies} 65, no. (1975): 124-147.
the case of Augustus and his immediate successors, one such output was coinage.

Archaeological evidence from the Indian subcontinent shows the effect of monetary reform in physical form. Extensive digs in recent decades have revealed a substantial record of coin hoards—sites where coinage has been found in close proximity and high volume—that make this thesis possible. The hoards are overwhelmingly comprised of Julio-Claudian coins, recognizable in part because of Augustus’s standardization of portraiture. Some 70% of the silver coins and 90% of the gold coins are located in hoards dotted along India’s southern extremities.  

We can deduce a number of interesting facts from these finds. First, Augustus’s annexation of Egypt had an augmentative effect on trade with India. The Red Sea ports he

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annexed were, beyond doubt, the departure points specifically for southern India due to seasonal monsoon winds that made more northerly routes impossible. Comparatively very few Hellenic coins are found in the region in spite of the fact that maritime technology and know-how were the same under pre-Roman control. It seems that Augustan monetary reform and territorial expansion dovetailed nicely, simultaneously furnishing private merchants with a better means of exchange and lower transportation costs. This evidence also suggests that the Roman denarius or aureus was the preferred currency for long distance commerce. The location of these hoards in the Coimbatore region further suggests that Romans in this period were trading for gems and pearls, which were a hallmark of the southern Indian peninsula. Whether Augustus foresaw this trade escalation is difficult to say—but the actions he took had such profound effect on Red Sea trade routes that no subsequent emperor could be ignorant of imperial influence on matters of trade.

What does the ancient literary record add to the debate surrounding imperial agency in commerce? As previously noted, prominent historians in the Roman world mostly operated through the largesse of a political sponsor. The historian Strabo was no exception, and his story is exemplary of later Strabo’s patron was a particularly powerful and revered one—Emperor Augustus, the founder of the Principate. In his self-laudatory autobiography, the Res Gestae, Augustus makes certain to point out that he was the first Roman commander to receive formal embassies from an Indian head-of-state (most likely a local king from the Indus River valley). Strabo predictably corroborates this claim, stating that a certain delegation from a king called Porus authorized Rome to pass through his territory. The Roman limites never came close to the Indus—but we can’t help but wonder what, if anything, the legendary emperor may have said

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63 Strabo Geog: 15.1.4-5.
or done to “insist” that Strabo make explicit note of such a meeting. Or perhaps Strabo was just relating fact.

Either way, we can deduce one of two conclusions from the existence of alleged diplomatic mission in the historical record. If this embassy did indeed come to Rome, we know that at least one (and probably many other) political entity not only knew of Rome’s formidable presence but also was willing to travel thousands of miles to curry its favor. But it’s unlikely that this attempt at favor was politically oriented. Any local Indian monarch with knowledge of Rome also knew of much more pertinent and worthy objects of political wooing (the Parthians, for example, who stood between these two entities)—particularly under Augustus, who had a somewhat tenuous hold on the Syrian coast after decades of civil war. Mutual commercial interest is a far more feasible explanation, considering the history, albeit limited, of trade between the two regions.\footnote{Tomber, \textit{Indo-Roman Trade}: 15-16.}

If Augustus nudged Strabo to embellish this account, we know that the emperor felt a pressing need to advertise his knowledge and pursuit of the Far East’s wealth. Just as with Alexander’s, Augustus’s messianic position in the narrative of Roman history—as father of the Empire, conqueror of barbarians and promulgator of the Roman standard—should be considered through a commercial lens. Considering how all emperors thereafter would trace their lineage to the first emperor, evident in innumerous ways including honorific nomenclature, we should consider that Augustus’s claims to far-reaching contact was subsequently inseparable from his office.

Whether Augustus influenced Strabo’s writing or Strabo Augustus’s policies, we cannot portend to know beyond doubt. Though the interrelatedness between emperor and amicus is somewhat speculative, its applicability will gain gravity when we explore similar relationships in
later imperial administrations. For now, it should suffice to recognize that eminent ancient historians and emperors often socialized among the same crowd. Accordingly, in the absence of evidence of direct correspondence between them, we should feel comfortable asserting that the emperor had to be attentive to his beneficiaries’ passions as a practical matter.

The reverberations of Augustus’s reign throughout the empire and beyond its borders can hardly be understated in commercial terms. Through market-oriented reform, Augustus engendered an atmosphere of stability and unification in a region of conflicting identities and tumultuous multilateral relations. He embedded a fiscal consciousness in senatorial bureaucracy yet weakened it by siphoning off its funds to his own hands. He ordered the failed invasion of the Arabian side of the Red Sea after annexing the Egyptian side. In sum, he established an activist approach to imperial governance and defined how emperors could exercise *dirigisme* with profound economic impact: manipulating currency, spending public funds on building project, fitting provincial administration to the needs of empire and waging war. That Augustus ordered a schematically logical convergence of these strategies in the Near East seems quite intentional if still imperfect.

For Roman historians, Augustus’s legacy is greater than the sum of its parts. How can we conceptualize the varying arguments above as a coherent whole? Keith Hopkins’s “tax and trade” model has withstood significant scholarly criticism in the past thirty years yet it remains very viable, with good reason. It holds that the imperial economy operated as a function of two codependent zones: “tax producing” regions where most public funds were derived (Spain, Asia

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65 Bowersock argues, convincingly, that the ultimate goal of the invasion was not the Nabataean Kingdom in northwest Arabia, but the Sabaeans in southwestern *Arabia Felix* who, having “grown rich with the proceeds of commerce in perfume and spices,” attracted Augustus’s attention. This would have been an extraordinarily ambitious accomplishment in the reach toward the East. Fittingly, Strabo was a personal friend of the Arabian expedition’s commander, Aelius Gallus. See: Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*: 46-49. See also: Strabo *Geographica*, 16.4.22.
Minor) and “tax consuming” regions (Rome itself, and costly frontier provinces). While this economic dynamic between zones seems spot on, it seems to me that these two categories should be delineated somewhat differently.

Lo Cascio has noted that “the model is predicated upon the assumption that the amount of taxes necessary for the state to finance its expenditure must have been small to allow the extraction of private rents.” Rent revenue, however, should logically follow the centers of population more closely than simple frontier proximity. After Rome, the next four most populous cities were all in the Eastern Mediterranean: Alexandria, and then Antioch, Ephesus and Pergamum. Despite proximity to the frontier these cities, particularly Alexandria and Antioch, necessarily had higher tax burdens as collection points for the Eastern quarter-tax. Yet they appear to have remained fiscally viable. Thus, we should consider the possibility that western provinces produced tax revenue for consumption in Rome and peninsular Italy, while the Near Eastern provinces, with their lines of commerce and population centers, could have generated more than its own share of the tax burden. Part of the value of the Hopkins model is that it allows for this type of theoretical conversation—we would do well to keep it in mind.

**Vespasian: Building Peace on Roman Terms**

Now it is impossible to describe the multitude of the shows as they deserve, and the magnificence of them all; such indeed as a man could not easily think of as performed, either by the labor of workmen, or the variety of riches, or the rarities of nature; for almost all such curiosities as the most happy men ever get by piecemeal were here one heaped on another, and those both admirable and costly in their nature; and all brought together on that day demonstrated the vastness of the dominions of the Romans; for there was here to be seen a mighty quantity of silver, and gold, and ivory, contrived into all sorts of things, and did not appear as carried along in pompous show only, but, as a man may say, running along like a river.

--- Flavius Josephus, de bello Judaico, 7.132

If Augustus can be credited with streamlining monetary and geopolitical boundaries in the Roman Near East, Emperor Vespasian can be credited with beginning to bridge these boundaries physically, most notably through infrastructural development. Vespasian (69-79), founder of the Flavian Dynasty, assumed the throne much in the same manner that Augustus did—after a period of utterly destructive civil war. The Year of the Four Emperors, wherein the Emperors Nero, Galba, Otho and Vitellius fell amid bloody infighting, presented Vespasian, then legatus of Judaea and commander of the three legions tasked with suppressing the First Jewish Revolt. By the time the first three emperors had destroyed each other, Vespasian had largely pacified the province when his allies executed Vitellius, leaving him sole control of the empire. While Vespasian symbolically declared his ascension date as July 1st 69, when the Judaean legions hailed him as Emperor, the begrudging Senate did not recognize his authority until December 21st. Perhaps taking a lesson from Augustus, Vespasian defined his reign by usurping a bankrupt financial system and applying its resources to secure strategic interests.

By the time Vespasian finally reached Rome in the summer of 70 CE, no region of the empire called for more executive attention than the Near East. Though Rome had controlled the entirety of the Mediterranean rim for close to a century, costly preoccupations elsewhere in the
Empire—like Claudius’s invasion of Britain—rendered Rome’s governmental presence in the Near East little more than a foothold. Emperor Nero’s extravagant spending depleted government coffers while undermining a stagnant Roman state of diplomatic affairs in Syria and Judaea. The Roman eastern frontier was far too volatile for a laissez-faire mentality. Insular client kingdoms like Commagene, Emesa, Chalcis, and Palmyra in northern Syria along with the Decapolis (a loose federation of vestigial Hellenic communities) and the Nabataean kingdom to the south were immensely important buffers between Rome and the increasingly bothersome Parthian Empire. The region needed a reassertion of imperial authority.

Vespasian was uniquely qualified to respond to the crisis at hand. He had commanded the Legio II Augusta when Claudius invaded Britain. His later victories against the Jewish rebels no doubt acclimated him to the turmoil of the Near East, as Roman forces in Syria continued to stave off Parthian encroachment along the Tarsus mountains. A miser at the core (his grandfather was a tax collector and banker), Vespasian used his weight as emperor to garner funds in the most unsightly ways; nepotism and patronage were common, though more uncouth methods like charging entrance fees to public restrooms also helped. Suetonius records that Vespasian called for 400,000,000 aurei—a colossal, unrealistic sum—to restore order to the empire at large.

This dire appeal for funding raises at least two pertinent questions. First, could Suetonius’s mathematical account be accurate? The short answer is no. Four-hundred million

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69 Much of the contestation between Rome and Parthia was proxy war. The two empires jousted over rival pet-monarchs in Armenia, rallying smaller buffer kingdoms to their causes. Still, various legati of Syria, like C. Cestius Gallus, fought off Parthian intrusions while Nero’s attention remained fixed to the western provinces. See: Dabrowa, Edward. The Governors of Roman Syria from Augustus to Septimius Severus. Bonn: Dr. Rudolf Habelt GMBH, 1998, 56-7.

70 A legion consisted of five thousand citizen-soldiers. Provincials and other non-citizens comprised auxiliary forces.

71 Suet. Vesp.: 10.23.

72 Suet. Vesp.: 10.16.
aurei translates to 40 billion sesterces—we know, however, that the entire Roman GDP in the first century could not have exceeded 20 billion sesterces, let alone the imperial budget.\textsuperscript{73} This significant overstatement is most easily explained by the errant use of denominations.\textsuperscript{74} Second, where did the emperor intend to invest this budget? Vespasian’s son and future emperor Domitian had already silenced remnants of his father’s insubordinate opponents in Rome’s two German provinces. Its governmental apparatus remained in tact as indigenous tribes had no obvious stake in Roman political posturing. Given the emperor’s background in taxing and soldiering, it is little wonder that he turned his attention to the Near East.

Profligate imperial spending was risky business. For every constituency appeased by Roman largesse, many more were insulted at being overlooked. The shrewdly experienced Vespasian had to confront a tricky geopolitical dilemma in the Near East. A military presence was needed to keep order—too few legionaries could embolden Parthian rivals while too many, as Vespasian knew all too well, could grant commanding legati a dangerous amount of power. But not all military influence in the region was Roman. Maintaining amicable relations with client kingdoms was another slippery slope. Rome had to balance commercial interests—acquired through taxation, conquest or tribute—against the possibility of client and Parthian unrest. Alternatively, too many concessions to local monarchs could leverage extant Parthian animosity against Rome. This matrix of commercial-political contingencies needed a strategy fitted to local considerations.

It appears Vespasian invested an extraordinary portion of his fiscus in infrastructure. To that end, the emperor raised the number of legions from four to six, while distributing them

\textsuperscript{73} Scheidel, \textit{Size of the economy}: 3-4.
\textsuperscript{74} Any lower-valued unit is reconcilable with Suetonius’s projection. A sestertius [1/100\textsuperscript{th} of aureus] or quinarius [1/50\textsuperscript{th}] would make feasible budget numbers, considering budget expenditures typically totalled 5\% of GDP. See ibid.:3-4; See also: Sutherland, \textit{Coinage}: 23.
between Armenia and Cappadocia (zero to two), Syria (four to three) and Judaea (zero to one) dispersing their power and focusing their strengths on provincial concerns. The Roman concept of the legion was perfectly suited to stabilize the Near East because of its engineering culture that championed technocratic warfare. When not fighting, legions spent most of their time making physical improvements to municipal services (canals, highways, public structures) and, if needed, taking advantages of these very improvements to swiftly confront subversive actions on the frontier.

The archaeological record of Vespasian’s constructive activity along the Syrian border, as with Augustus, can be viewed as a commercial approach to a foreign policy problem. Vespasian probably understood the demography of the region better than most. Any commander in Judaea would have realized that substantial populations living under Parthian influence were not loyal to Parthia by default. The Arascid Parthians were, after all, occupiers much in the same sense that the Romans were. By streamlining the physical boundaries between Syria and Mesopotamia, Vespasian was effectively lowering transportation costs for Silk Road merchants whose profits had once evaporated from cumbersome taxes at each political border.

A comparative analysis of two events from the early 70s CE brings Vespasian’s strategy into relief. L. Caesennius Paetus, appointed legatus of Syria as an amicus of Vespasian, built a highway from Antioch to the Red Sea region in early 72. Later in the year, Paetus reflected his loyalty to the emperor by sending a written warning that King Antiochus IV of Commagene, a client kingdom of Rome, had been rubbing elbows with Parthian envoys from the East. The emperor responded with calculated opportunism. He ordered Paetus to invade Commagene and

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76 Debevoise, Parthia: xxxvii-xlili. See also: Colledge, The Parthians: 57-76.
77 AE 1907.193. For an excellent survey of this relationship, see: Millar, Emperor: 110-131.
its ideally situated capital of Samosata on the Euphrates. Paetus was aided by the armies of Chalcis and Emesa, two small states to the East of the Orontes—nominally independent but well within Rome’s traditional sphere of influence west of the Euphrates. Vespasian’s days in Judaea may have taught him to better understand the relation between governor and governed in neighboring kingdoms. Paetus encountered no discernible popular resistance—only Commagene’s professional soldiers stood against, and were promptly crushed by, Rome in a single day. Had Commagene’s population been concerned with political rule, we should have certainly expected violence to have lasted longer than a day, particularly with Parthian meddling in the matter. But no such response ensued. Engendering the loyalties of some neighbors with universally beneficial infrastructural improvements ensured that the region would not revolt en masse while Roman legions dispatched isolated disturbances, like in Commagene.

Vespasian’s response to the Commagene dilemma does not reflect a militaristic ideology for three reasons. First, we know that Paetus was restructuring commercial roads when he learned of Parthian encroachment in Commagene—road building toward the southwest is hardly a logical forerunner to military movement to the northeast. Second, we know that Paetus felt obliged to ask for Vespasian’s permission before invading—it would have been quite strange indeed for Vespasian to appoint Paetus to an explicitly-militaristic position considering Paetus’s past crushing defeat in Armenia in 62 CE. Third, the Kingdoms of Chalcis and Emesa would have presented far more logical starting points for a grand strategy to bring clients under the Roman standard—whereas Samosata was some two hundred kilometers from Antioch, the other client kingdoms were situated nearby in the Orontes river valley. The annexation of this kingdom, as opposed to that of the Egyptian Ptolemies, appears to have been reactionary.

79 Also, given this correspondence, we can be sure of some degree of Vespasian’s agency throughout the rest of Paetus’s campaign. See Dabrowa, Governors of Roman Syria: 60-61.
This is not to say, however, that Vespasian was complacent with the frontiers he inherited. His actions in Roman Britain prove quite the opposite. Rather, the Roman military was to remain prepared and react according to the nature of its antagonist and the theater of conflict. Capitalizing on the weaknesses of neighboring powers was a function of developing its territory to suit both Roman and indigenous purposes. As the Near East was often characterized by the disconnect between ruling classes and the masses, this proved to be a particularly effective strategy. Immediately after conquest, for example, Roman soldiers constructed an intensive system of roads that Commagene previously lacked.\textsuperscript{80} Bringing an area under nominal control was one thing, actually stabilizing it, another.

Vespasian also realized that, in a region where political boundaries separated shades of gray as opposed to black and white, stabilizing the territory of a neighbor could be more advantageous than bringing an uproarious area under official governance. A Latin inscription found on the Eastern bank of the Euphrates records that Vespasian and his son Titus financed the construction of an \textit{opus cochleae}, or water screw, halfway between Zeugma and Samosata, an area that would remain firmly under Parthian control until CE 114.\textsuperscript{81} Seeing as how the Roman legions were stationed to the west of the river, this perk almost certainly was directed to solicit the loyalties of the locals. Further, the annexation of Commagene gave Rome a permanent presence on the northern tributaries of the Euphrates, allowing for eastbound merchants to reach Mesopotamian trade routes and even the Persian Gulf with the backing of Roman authority.

But a substantial amount of Vespasian’s internal developments are evident in areas where Rome had little to fear from foreign armies. A year after the Syrian \textit{legatus} Paetus retired, Vespasian appointed Marcus Ulpius Traianus to assume the improvement of public works in the

\textsuperscript{80} IGLS I.38. See also: Millar, \textit{Roman Near East}: 82-84.
\textsuperscript{81} IGLS I.65.
Near East. Traianus, the father of the future Emperor Trajan, directed the construction of an intriguing road from Palmyra to Sura-on-Euphrates, just south of Babylon. The case of Palmyra, a client state long regarded as a crucial entrepôt on the Silk Road, raises some questions relevant to Rome’s engagement with Far Eastern trade routes.

Was Palmyra actually part of Rome? Modern scholars cite a singular milestone dated to 75 CE as evidence in the affirmative. But, as we just saw with Commagene, Vespasian ordered other legati to build municipal structures outside of Rome’s proper borders in at least one other case. It is a distinct possibility that he would do the same to garner loyalties with an exceptionally wealthy mercantile center. Pliny the Elder, a close intimate of Vespasian to whom we will pay ample attention shortly, clearly was under this impression that Palmyra was a buffer kingdom to separate Rome from Parthia.

At the very least, the discrepancy between our best modern understanding and our best ancient understanding reinforces the notion that authority in the Near East under Vespasian more closely resembled rounded topographical lines—concentric circles with Roman influence strongest in cities, dissipating as one moves outward—than rigid geopolitical ones. While the political implications of Traianus’s road to Sura remain murky, the commercial implications are vivid. Vespasian wanted to expand long-distance trade across Mesopotamia because he thought it both stabilizing and profitable, quite possibly from his personal experience in the region. Militaristic and ideological theories simply aren’t adequate to explain the motivations of an emperor universally castigated or praised for his miserly nature.

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82 We know from Vespasian’s and Titus’s titulature that Traianus had no military responsibilities after negotiating peace with the Parthians in 73 CE. See Dabrowa, Governors of Roman Syria: 64-67.
83 Simultaneous construction of the road at Arak, the agora of Palmyra and the arches of Bostra appear to be part of a broader strategy. That they seem logically connected suggests they are. Bowersock, G.W. “Syria under Vespasian.” The Journal of Roman Studies 63, no. (1973): 140.
84 Pliny Historia: 5.21.88.
85 Bowersock agrees with the characterization of Vespasian as a capable manager, noting the apparent cohesion between building initiatives. See: Bowersock, Syria under Vespasian: 140.
Again, Pliny insinuates that both Rome and private merchants stood to profit from expanded Roman dominance of the Silk Road.

There are certain portions also of the frankincense which are given to the priests and the king’s secretaries; and in addition to these, the keepers of it, as well as the soldiers who guard it, the gate-keepers, and various other employees, have their share as well. And then besides, all along the route, there is at one place water to pay for, at another fodder, lodging at the stations, and various taxes and imposts besides; the consequence of which is, that the expense for each camel before it arrives at the shores of our sea is six hundred and eighty-eight denarii; after all this, too, there are certain payments still to be made to the farmers of the revenue of our empire.

It would be strange for a Roman emperor to direct his military for the good of the middling merchant class traveling the Mesopotamian trade routes. But given his military experience and fiscal pedigree, it is clear that Vespasian was not solely concerned with his fiscus.

Pliny the Elder laments that some 50 million Roman sesterces are “lost” annually to India in the trade for luxury goods. Aside from the fact that this sum would have been offset by a single Hermapollon cargo hold, we should expect to find a substantial record of this coinage at the Indus terminus—especially when we consider that, like Augustus before him, Vespasian countermarked and re-minted century-old currency in the early 70s CE, presumably for similar commercial reasons. Alas, the archaeological record in India’s north shows very little in the way of coin hoards along the coast.

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86 Ibid. 12.32.65
87 Some modern scholars echo Pliny’s claim that the empire had to be bleeding wealth yearly. See: Warmington, E.H.. The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India. 2nd ed. London: Cambridge University Press, 1928, 261-71, 272-318.
88 Vagi, Coinage: 19.
89 This difference has been attributed to a number of possible causes. Casson has posited that coinage was used for barter at Barygaza and as currency at Barbarikon. A wider consensus holds that southern India was a non-monetaryized society, using coins as gifts or decoration, while the north used coins for internal transactions. See: Casson PME: 30-1. Cf. De Romanis, Federico. Crossings: Early Mediterranean Contacts with India. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1997, 98; and also Gurukkal, Pre-Modern South India: 250.
How can we connect Vespasian’s deliberative foreign policies in the Near East to the overarching concept of cross-continental trade? Once again, we should direct our attention to India.

Rather than conclude that Vespasian’s reforms had little effect on commerce, we should consider what Pliny seems to have overlooked—the strong possibility that the 50 million sesterces were merely the value of total goods exchanged as opposed to that of metals alone. Roman amphorae—ceramic vessels used to transport liquids like olive oil, wine and fish sauce (garum)—are present in the Indian archaeological record from the first century BC onwards.90

Sure enough, two of the largest finds in northern India are comprised of early Roman vessels made mostly Greece with some from as far away as Spain. These are found in their highest concentration along the southeastern Coromandel coast at well-known commercial centers, perhaps giving us reason to question the orthodoxy that Roman merchants only traded directly with western Indians.91 Whoever was responsible for actually carrying the amphora, the evidence exists. Amphorae from the period can be found along the southern tip of the peninsula in such frequency and volume that we can assert Rome regularly shipped staple goods in addition to precious metals along both the Silk Road and Red Sea routes.

Another reliable proxy for determining whether this period was indeed one of increased trade is glass that, like amphorae, can be given place and time of origin with considerable accuracy. There is no record of glass vessels made in India during the Satavahana period (100 BCE – 200 CE).92 Yet the archaeological record around the very site where Mediterranean

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90 Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade* 42.
92 These finds are matched by contemporaneous finds of Roman-produced perfume bottles in the interior northwest at Ter and Taxila. Stern, E. Marianne. “Early Roman Export Glass in India.” *Rome and India:*
amphorae were found, Arikamedu, also includes distinctly Roman ribbed bowls that date approximately to Vespasian’s reign.\textsuperscript{93} These pieces required a degree of craftsmanship unequaled by local bead-makers of the time, and their presence tells us one of two things—either Roman finished glassware was in demand in the region (as it undoubtedly was in more northern reaches of India), or a less likely scenario, Roman merchants actually founded a small colony in the city.\textsuperscript{94} Either way, the Roman presence is demonstrably more pronounced than it was, or could’ve been, under Augustus. The commercial benefits of empire seem to have recapitulated themselves with time.

We should not discount possible articles of evidence from non-archaeological Indian source. While the subcontinent certainly lacked a Roman brand of political unity, common literary traditions in the form of\textit{ Arthashastra, Jatakas,} and\textit{ Sangam} poetry cannot be disregarded, if for nothing else than corroborative purposes.\textsuperscript{95} Moreover, there is burgeoning evidence that India began to develop a wine-consuming culture in this period. One\textit{ Sangam} verse refers to, “the cool fragrant wine brought by the Yavanas.”\textsuperscript{96} Pre-Roman Indian sources communicate the presence of rather unappetizing yet intoxicating drinks—made from rice, sugarcane juice, grapes and other spices.\textsuperscript{97} Modern Ayurvedic scholars contend that these concoctions, first fermented and \textit{then} distilled, are mentioned in texts as early as 500 BCE. The vessels that carried these sacramental and medicinal potables are ubiquitous in the Indian archaeological record. We can thus be quite certain that Indians were at least receptive to the notion Roman viticulture. Cool, sweet Roman wine, as a vehicle for pleasure or sacrament, must

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\textsuperscript{93} Ibid. 117.\\
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid. 119.\\
\textsuperscript{95} Avari, \textit{India}, 144-6.\\
\textsuperscript{96} Tomber, \textit{Indo-Roman Trade}: 149.\\
\end{flushright}
have presented an enticing alternative to palette-wrenching mixtures of sweet, savory and spicy. This type of class-conscious cultural exchange indeed may explain the beginnings of the draconian Indian Caste system. Such is the binary legacy of luxury—you can either afford it or you can’t.

There is a circumstantial case to be made, I think, that Roman merchants catalyzed Indian class differentiation over the course of centuries. Far Eastern products certainly had this effect in Roman circles. See: Avari, India: 166-7.
But the archaeological record in India is nowhere near complete, having only been established for some fifty years. Even more importantly, Chinese archaeological inquiries into trade with Rome, particularly in its western deserts, are close to non-existent. This should strike us as a glaring problem. Indian ports were not the terminus themselves, but a coastal collection of redistribution points to locales far more remote than any Roman might travel. For now, we can only wonder what the arid climates of China’s western deserts are preserving for future digs. Ultimately, there is little reason to believe Pliny’s numerical figures—that he commented on the woes of luxury suggests its prevalence. Logic tells us that too many powerful individuals had their livelihoods at stake to run a losing enterprise for centuries. Judging by Vespasian’s infrastructural and diplomatic maneuvers, it seems likely that the Far East was actually a source of wealth well worth chasing.

In sum, the most salient features of Vespasianic foreign policy are strongly commercial in character. While it is difficult to trace different product types to the imperial policies of one decade alone, the greater trend that we can see unfolding—increasing trade between Rome and the Far East—required improved efficiencies that strongly imply Roman imperial agency. There were no other bureaucracies with the authority or capability to orchestrate the kind of inter-provincial development we find in Vespasian’s period—and private merchants were simply not organized to finance such a cumbersome task. All the traces of a pro-commerce ideology are present, even if its official articulation continues to elude us.

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99 A review of the trends that evolve across these imperial administrations will come in the final chapter.
Trajan & Commercial Conquest

[Trajan] came to the [Persian Gulf] itself, and when he had learned its nature and had seen a ship sailing to India, he said: ‘I should certainly have crossed over to the Indi, too, if I were still young.’ For he began to think about the Indi and was curious about their affairs…”

--Dio Cassius, Historia Romana, 68.29

Annals from the Han Empire tell a riveting story of a Chinese envoy who traveled westward in 97 CE with merchants to a place called An-hsi. An-his was the Parthian state and Ssu-pin was the capital city of Ctesiphon. The story goes that Kan Ying could see that Parthia was not the terminus of this trade route and expressed his desire to continue westward. Parthian sailors warned that the sea route required a two-to-three year endeavor through treacherous waters.100 This was of course a cynical overstatement, probably with the intention of keeping the Chinese from discovering the fastest way—from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea—to Roman markets while bypassing tax-happy Parthian middlemen.101 The ploy worked and Kan Ying returned to Peking.102

Whether or not news of such Far Eastern emissaries reached Roman imperial ears, the Emperor Trajan, ascending to the throne two years after Kan Ying’s odyssey, responded by moving the limes eastward. Commercially, the logic is clear if crude—cut out intermediaries by conquering them. The next two decades were marked by militaristic and expansionist policy on

102 Interestingly, a stroke of linguistic luck makes this observation possible. Whereas Indian Tamil sources label all westerners as “yavanas” without clearly distinguishing between Romans and Parthians, Chinese sources are more scrutinizing; Persian intermediaries allegedly tried to keep their neighbors to the East aware of their neighbors to the west. Sidebotham, Steven. “Romans and Arabs in the Red Sea.” A Gateway from the Eastern Mediterranean to India (2005): 170-1.
two of Rome’s most volatile frontiers, the Danube and the Euphrates. Though hailing from Spain, Trajan’s awareness of and taste for the decadence of lands far past the Euphrates would be hallmarks of his travails in the East. This mercantilistic logic was, however, more sensible in theory than in practice. But to fully understand the intent of Trajan’s policies must begin a full decade before the Emperor even departed Rome for the East, with the legateship of A. Cornelius Palma in Syria at the dawn of the second century.

The annexation of the Nabataean kingdom in 106 CE presents Trajan’s first significant Imperial accomplishment in the Near East. Appointed by the Emperor a year earlier, A. Cornelius Palma descended from Syria into the Arabian Peninsula and encountered little resistance from Royal militia, effectively completing Rome’s control of the entire eastern Mediterranean coastline.

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103 Roman imperial authorities in later antiquity seems to have understood this much. From the fourth to the sixth century, Rome cooperated with Red Sea powers like the Arab Kingdom of Himyar and the African Kingdom of Axum to encourage maritime trade that would divert resources away from Parthian-Sassanian control. As the trajectory of long distance trade in the late antique period was the same as in ours, we can comfortably assert that emperors like Trajan confronted the question of ‘cutting out the middlemen’. See: Sidebotham, *Romans and Arabs in the Red Sea*: 170-1; Debevoise, *Parthia*: 203-12. See also: Metlich, M.A. “Aksumite Gold Coins and their Relation to the Roman-Indian Trade” [paper presented at the Instituto Italiano Di Numismatica, Rome, Italy, September 17, 2004].
How can we explain the invasion in terms of Roman interests? In spite of Palma’s command over the VI Ferrata and the III Cyrenaica, there is little evidence for any military skirmish with the Royal Nabataean army, much less any major pitched battles. The employment of a relatively small legionary expedition such as this suggests that Palma and his superior Trajan did not view the Nabataean Kingdom of Rabbel II as a serious security threat that needed to be preempted by Roman militaristic invasion. Indeed, Rabbel II had just died months earlier after a 36 year reign, bolstering the claim that the annexation was yet another example of calculated opportunism as opposed to longstanding ideological commitment. It is worth noting that Trajan’s official title subsequently included *Dacicus* and later *Parthicus* but not *Arabicus*, even in inscriptions found in Arabia itself.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ A Roman conqueror as self-aggrandizing as Trajan (look no further than his famous column in Rome) would certainly not have left out any honorific title that followed a military conquest—this suggests that the Arabian annexation was ordered for non-military purposes. See: Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*: 81-5.
Rather, upon further analysis, it becomes clear that Nabataea’s appeal rests in the considerable commercial advantages it could offer to Roman interests—for both private merchants, and the \textit{fiscus}. Taking an economic approach to this Nabataean conquest, the benefits of the Arabian peninsula are clear. Rome already held complete control of the Red Sea’s western coast along with its major port connections to the Far Eastern luxury trade, Myos Hormos and Berenice (these ports offer remarkable insights for our purposes, but scope must now be limited to the East of the Red Sea). By annexing Nabataea, Trajan may have doubled the volume of trade the Empire received directly through Arabian ports like Muza, Qana and Eudaimon Arabia.\textsuperscript{105} Dominance of the Red Sea trade (which included, not insignificantly, more access to domestic Arabian nards and unguents that Pliny the Elder expresses wonder for in Book XII-XIII of his \textit{Natural History}) should be granted primacy in explaining Arabia’s absorption into the Empire in the absence of any realistic security explanations.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{105} Tomber, \textit{Indo-Roman Trade}: 102.
\textsuperscript{106} Lo Cascio has discussed how the Mediterranean economy must have enjoyed great reduction in transaction costs. Trajan did Rome one better bringing the Red Sea, and the control of the markets it serviced, firmly into Roman hands. See: Lo Cascio, \textit{Impact of the Organization of the Empire}: 77-9.
A monetary explanation dovetails nicely with the notion that Arabia’s geographic suitability attracted Roman military attention. Consider the example of Nabataea’s coinage value before 106 CE. Whereas the value of the Roman *denarius* and the Syrian *tetradrachma* remained relatively stable after Vespasian’s death, around 91% and 81% silver respectively, the percentage of silver in Nabataean coinage dropped from an already anemic 42% to 20% in just twenty years.\(^{107}\) Indeed, its coinage had not been equally valued against Rome’s since Augustus mandated monetary reform over a century earlier. It would be disingenuous to suggest that Trajan and his underlings did not notice this gaping disparity in values, if they did not understand it completely. We should picture a number of scenarios that account for part of Trajan’s motivation. If Roman merchants realized their exchange advantages and the Arabs did not, Romans will have garnered stratospheric profits from the aromatic trades—if past is prologue, then the Nabataean annexation is a smaller example of the mercantilist strategy Trajan employs in invading Mesopotamia a decade later. While it is possible that Roman interests called for invasion due to monetary inequality and resulting inefficiencies, it is more likely that both sides saw advantages in annexation. Roman coinage minting in the Near East had profound effects on a trade-based kingdom such as Nabataea.\(^{108}\) Submitting to the Roman standards allowed commerce to continue while Rome re-minted the weak Nabataean coin to have broader recognition and purchasing power in strategic mercantile locations like Myos Hormos and the capital of Petra.

\(^{107}\) Young, *Rome’s Eastern Trade*: 225-227.

\(^{108}\) Especially after the massive spending in the Year of Four Emperors and the Jewish Revolt.
Also in 106 CE, Trajan completed a far larger military operation that is instructive of his broader approach to commerce, war and the imperial revenue needed to fund both. The five-year First Dacian war—named for the region in modern day Hungary, Serbia and Romania—that Trajan led against the storied Decebalus required what was perhaps the largest single army an emperor had assembled since Augustus. More pertinent to our task than the war itself is what Dacia stood to contribute to the commercial maturation we have explored in the Near East.

Along with other Danubian provinces like Noricum and Moesia, Trajan recognized that Dacia boasted mammoth gold and silver mines that were largely untapped. It is here that we see Trajan exuding shades of Augustus’s mercantilist strategy in the mines of Spain and Portugal. But
whereas Augustus had only to issue a decree to bring the Iberian mines under his imperium, Trajan had to issue a declaration of war. Trajan’s principal modern biographer, Julian Bennett has suggested that the emperor’s war in Dacia was punitive, unrelated to conquest or commerce, designed to reclaim the honor lost by two murdered generals.\textsuperscript{109}

This half-baked notion that vengeance alone could have justified two costly campaigns hardly requires corrective rebuttal—it is naïve to privilege perennially unreliable literary accounts over practical matters without equivocation.\textsuperscript{110} Rather, the speed with which Rome developed mines in the Bihor mountains at Alburnus Maior, for example, and their subsequent exhaustion must have been a determining factor before invasion. The copious amounts of precious metals in the Danubian provinces would have been an extraordinary, even punishable omission for generals to make in preparation. Given Trajan’s simultaneous and later actions in the Near East, it seems far likelier that control of these mines presented an opportunity to extract resources for future initiatives, if not for simple profit.\textsuperscript{111} Trajan surely knew that any spoils he confiscated abroad would be immediately transferred to his fiscus. Logic suggests a mercantilist rather than retaliatory frame of mind; there was no doubt a legitimate security threat in Decebalus, but confronting him was a pragmatist, not emotional, pursuit.

As coins are only one measure of our archaeological record, let us now turn from silver to stone. Post-annexation Nabataean evidence shows Vespasianic levels of investment in infrastructure on the Arabian coast between 106-116 CE. Trajan ordered the renovation of the Ptolemaic era canal from the Red Sea, through the Bitter Lakes, to the Nile, effectively streamlining the passage of goods to the metropolis of Alexandria from Arabia, India and

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\textsuperscript{110} Surely, ancient histories and literary accounts can and should attract our attention. But they ought to guide our understanding of events, not dictate it. \\
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In this same manner, the *fiscus* financed the renovation of the King’s Highway (and, predictably, renamed it the Via Nova Traiana) that connected the Gulf of Aqaba (and its port city Aila) with bustling market places to the north such as Bostra, Petra (which notably was still autonomous), Damascus and the metropolis of Antioch. Work on the Via Maris along the Mediterranean coast provided a more direct land route between Alexandria and Antioch—not coincidentally the two largest cities in the empire, save for Rome. The fact that C. Claudius Severus had an unusually long tenure as Governor of Arabia suggests these projects were bequeathed to him directly and required his specific attention. Similar projects were undertaken in Syria to the north, widening the Orontes near Antioch for increased traffic and constructing bridges and roads not only in Roman territory, but also in client kingdoms like Edessa as well. These were highly strategic routes, and their structural improvement must have been predicated on the possibility of tangible benefits for Rome.

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113 IEJ 13. See also: Bowersock, *Roman Arabia:* 80-5.
Taken together, what did monetary and infrastructural development mean in the early second century Near East? There are a number of advantages that commercial “encouragement” could pose for the Principate. Trade within Syria, Arabia and Egypt, undoubtedly benefited not only due to increased efficiency, but because merchants were attracted to routes with Roman guard posts and protection from nomadic bandits that pervaded the region.\textsuperscript{114} On a larger scale, the considerable volume of trade that entered the Mediterranean region through the Arabian coast would thereby be subject to the τεταρπτη, the 25% tax levied on all goods of non-Roman eastern origin. Perhaps the only thing Rome imposed on all newly conquered territory was its tax collection—linguistic and cultural conventions, and even basic local governmental structure, were very negotiable. The fact that Rome did not drastically alter a preexisting system, or the Hellenic nomenclature attached to it, suggests the system of the “tetartones” was profitable. In fact, the Romans may have briefly extended the collection system eastward in this period as is shown by a Palmyrene inscription carved under Antoninus Pius (138-161 CE).\textsuperscript{115} Strabo, too, cites the tax as responsible for generating huge revenues for the empire.\textsuperscript{116} Trajan need not be considered a genius for realizing that taxation in the Near East provided needed revenue for Imperial purposes elsewhere—notably, wars on the Danube.

Wealth, however, is not measured simply by governmental spending capacity. Another motivation may have well been to enrich non-Roman denizens of a politically volatile region. Numerous small kingdoms that separated Rome’s eastern \textit{limes} from areas of Parthian control included mercantile centers that undoubtedly benefited from Roman infrastructural improvement. Indeed, given the breadth of building projects undertaken in the decade before Trajan’s Parthian War, it seems that the presence of Roman legions was almost entirely directed

\textsuperscript{114} Young, \textit{Rome’s Eastern Trade}: 119-121.
\textsuperscript{115} Casson, \textit{PME}: 145.
\textsuperscript{116} Strabo \textit{Geog.}: 17.1.13. See also: De Romanis, \textit{Crossings}: 55.
at encouraging commerce while law enforcement was left to auxiliary troops. Roman soldiers were again surprisingly active in building projects outside of annexed territory, constructing a multitude of bridges and roads within the boundaries of client kingdoms like Edessa, Commagene and Osrhoene.

A remarkably useful letter from a legionary stationed in Bostra soon after the Nabataean annexation offers an interesting perspective. Julius Apollinaris, probably of the III Cyrenaica, states that around the time of annexation merchants began to arrive from Egypt everyday.\(^{118}\) There is no reason to think that these traders stopped at Bostra, just as there is no reason to think that commercial products weren’t moving in the other direction as well. Client kingdoms did not scare the Romans, as they lacked any awe-inspiring military apparatus, but their insubordination would and did cost Rome financially by interrupting trade and taxation. Thus, these building projects seem to have had the tacit goal of engendering stability.

What other possible benefits could Trajan have seen arising from these projects? In addition to enriching its own mercantile elites, it seems very likely that the Emperor considered

\(^{117}\) Near East under Augustus.  
his ability to pacify neighboring kingdoms through (seemingly) pro bono municipal projects. Road and highway expertise was one of a few areas where Roman ingenuity flatly outmatched that of other polities, especially the traditionally nomadic Parthians to the East.119 A vibrant, solid infrastructural base to facilitate the actions of everyday public life in these areas may have bought the loyalty of royal elites sandwiched between two empires—especially when Trajan was preoccupied on the Danube. These kingdoms in turn offered Rome the use of its soldiers in subsequent defensive campaigns against Parthian and Dacian invasion.120 While fractured in political, linguistic and geographic terms, all people within the Roman sphere of influence had a vested interest in faster, cheaper commerce. There is ample support throughout history for the argument that political stability rests in the fruits of trade and prosperity.

When Trajan came to confront the Parthians in 114 CE due to conflicting claims over control of the Armenian kingship, his expansionist desires were all too clear. Conflict in Armenia gave way to a full Mesopotamian invasion, the details of which are too complex to be discussed here.121 It will suffice to say that Trajan made a fatal miscalculation when he envisioned his dominion extending to the Persian Gulf—after initial conquest, revolts in Egypt, Cyprus and even parts of Asia Minor (comprised mostly of Jews) drove Roman legions back to a Mediterranean defensive. The incremental approach he directed in Arabia, tempered by clear attention to constructive commerce, gave way to an unsustainable quest to extend Rome’s

119 Kennedy, Eastern Perspectives: 86.
frontier by several hundred miles over diverse lands and populations—all while Roman legions continued to be bogged down in Pannonia and Dacia.\textsuperscript{122} We can only wonder what Rome’s imperial trajectory in the East may have looked like had Trajan limited his soaring ambition to Armenia. His dispatch to the Senate in May of CE 116, falsely claiming that he had surpassed Alexander’s conquest, speaks volumes about his fascination with the Far East and his delusion over how to get there late in his life.\textsuperscript{123}

Trajan suffered a rude awakening from his Alexandrian dream and died with a whimper before he could return to Rome. Though his concept of a coherent commercial policy was clearly flawed, due in no small part to special interests and delusions of grandeur, the archaeological evidence from Trajan’s war is instructive. Ruprecht Ziegler has shown that before the invasion of Mesopotamia, and indeed during every major military initiative in the Near East, the minting of coins at sites in northwest Syria and Anatolia spiked to unmatched heights.\textsuperscript{124} This augmentation in production was directly caused by a need to pay the thousands of legionaries and auxiliaries at war.\textsuperscript{125} In a world of intermediates and client kings, this also entails an enrichment of Rome’s Near Eastern neighbors and the mercantile caravans that pervaded them. Though Far Eastern trade may have almost ceased during these punctuating moments of war, its rejuvenation after peace was restored must owe itself to the massive infusion of Roman coinage into local and international commercial enterprise.\textsuperscript{126 127} This is a lesson we must keep close at hand if we are to understand Trajan’s successor, Publius Aelius Hadrianus.

\textsuperscript{122} Trajan commanded 8 legions in the East while a full 14 remained on the Rhine and Danube. See: \textit{Kennedy, Eastern Perspectives}: 85.
\textsuperscript{125} Trajan, it seems, was ignorant of inflation and the administrative costs of expanding the frontier by hundreds of miles.
\textsuperscript{126} Young, \textit{Rome’s Eastern Trade}: 216-7.
Hadrian & Redefining the Frontier

Other traits for which people found fault with him were his great strictness, his curiosity and his meddlesomeness. Yet he balanced and atoned for these defects by his careful oversight, his prudence, his munificence and his skill; furthermore, he did not stir up any war, and he terminated those already in progress; and he deprived no one of money unjustly, while upon many — communities and private citizens, senators and knights — he bestowed large sums. Indeed, he did not even wait to be asked, but acted in absolutely every case according to the individual needs. He subjected the legions to the strictest discipline, so that, though strong, they were neither insubordinate nor insolent; and he aided the allied and subject cities most munificently. He had seen many of them,— more, in fact, than any other emperor,— and he assisted practically all of them, giving to some a water supply, to others harbours, food, public works, money and various honours, differing the different cities.

--Dio Cassius, Historia Romana, 69.5.1-3

When Trajan died in southern Anatolia, his heir P. Aelius Hadrianus was already at the forefront of the Roman Near East as legatus of Syria. We can only wonder if Hadrian, having witnessed the successes and failures of his predecessor (as he was most certainly present at the beginning of the Parthian War), formulated his policies in reaction to Trajan’s indiscretions.128 What is clear beyond any doubt, however, is that Hadrian was the best-traveled emperor since Augustus. Hailing from Spain, he spent considerable time in Athens, Dacia and then Syria before assuming the throne. Given all the time he spent traveling about the Empire inspecting the armies, it seems only logical that he would continue the legacy of Vespasianic infrastructure development in the Near East, albeit with a strictly non-expansionist military presence in Trajan’s mold. Indeed, the Alexandrian historian Appian appears to be speaking of Hadrian’s fiscal and military conservatism when he wrote,

Possessing the best part of the earth and sea [the Romans] have, on the whole, aimed to preserve their empire by the exercise of prudence, rather than to extend their sway indefinitely over poverty-stricken and profitless tribes of barbarians,

127 Tomber, Indo-Roman Trade: 32.
128 Dabrowa, Governors of Roman Syria: 89.
some of whom I have seen at Rome offering themselves, by their ambassadors, as its subjects, but the chief of the state would not accept them because they would be of no use to it. They give kings to a great many other nations whom they do not wish to have under their own government.  

This style of governance clearly resembles Hadrian’s philosophy rather than Trajan’s. What is important, however, is that financial considerations are explicitly mentioned as determinants in deliberating imperial expansion. The characterization of Hadrian as a temperate, fiscally responsible man is further corroborated by his affinity for his eventual successor, Antoninus Pius. The *Historia Augusta* records that Hadrian sought out Pius for advice on all matters. The anonymous historian then remarks that Pius “knew the budgets of all the provinces and their revenues very well,” suggesting Hadrian was concerned with frugality as well. These remarks seem to confirm Hopkins’s tax-and-trade theory: first, Pius implies that provincial finances were analyzed individually and second, Appian implies that tax revenue from elsewhere would be lost in annexing “profitless” tribes. Knowing that Hadrian spent time as the governor of Syria, we can assert that his actions account for commercial implications—no small part of the revenue raised in Syria came from the collection of the τεταρτη from eastern trade routes.

Regarding Hadrian as a penny-pincher also makes more sense of his momentous decision to withdraw from all the lands that Trajan took east of the Euphrates, which the new Emperor considered indefensible probably due to the populist revolts that shadowed his adopted father’s conquest. Instead, considerable sums of money were channeled toward improving the Mediterranean rim. In 123-4 CE, Hadrian donated some 1.5 million *sesterces* to the renovation of the Via Appia. Just as we did with Trajan, we must ask what advantages Hadrian could have

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131 More to this point, a letter from who appears to be Hadrian to a Greek city in the Balkans, Dyrrachium, that gives precise, cost-conscious instructions of how to build roads. The Megara road is also mentioned by Pausanias. See: *IG IV 69*; Pausanias *Description of Greece*: 1.44.10.
seen in complete withdrawal from Mesopotamia. Federico De Romanis has shown that the τεταρτή was paid in major market cities like Bostra, Antioch and Alexandria. As long as these entrepot cities between Rome and India continued to thrive, Rome stood to gain substantial profits from the quarter-tax—even if intermediate states watered these profits down. It can therefore be argued that Rome’s ability to generate wealth from luxury good taxation was unharmed by the military’s retreat. Administrative and transportation costs of ruling east of the Euphrates must have been daunting, and maintaining control of the entire Mediterranean coast was hardly a disadvantageous strategy to fall back upon. The former legatus of Syria would have certainly been quite familiar with this type of cost-benefit analysis, as our ancient authors have suggested.

Hadrian appears to have been far more judicious than his predecessor with regard to the use of force. Though always quick to make (and act on) personal threats, Hadrian utilized a disarming measure of diplomacy to build foreign loyalties in the ever-fractured east. At his second “durbar” in 129 CE, Hadrian exchanged gifts and good graces with rulers of small Caucasian tribes along with emissaries from more substantial states like Mesene on the Persian Gulf and even, as the Historia Augusta recalls, the King of the Bactrians. It appears to be entirely intentional that Hadrian never sought outright war with any of Parthia’s weaker but strategically located neighbors. Some Palmyrene inscriptions suggest he did the opposite. A M. Ulpius Iarhai—a man who must have been given citizenship by Hadrian in light of his nomen, though Trajan may have done so while his troops were garrisoned in Palmyra en route to

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134 Birley, Hadrian: 225.
Ctesiphon—is thanked by the local traders of Spasino Charax on the Persian Gulf no fewer than ten times for protecting their journey to the oasis at Palmyra.\footnote{CIS 3928, 3960. Cf. SEG VII, 142. See: Matthews, *Tax Law of Palmyra*: 164-7.} More perplexing is another dedication to Ulpius near Babylon, well inside Parthian borders. These inscriptions confirm both the existence of private Roman involvement in intermediate legs of the overland caravan trade and also its extent beyond Roman territory shortly after Hadrian’s death.\footnote{Approximately 700 km.} That Romans could conduct trade in once-and-future hostile territories bolsters the claim that Hadrian was well aware of the amplifying effects withdrawal from Mesopotamia had on commercial activity.

![Map of the Gulf](image)

Fig. 18. Map of the Gulf.

The use of soft power by Hadrian was as or more effective than Trajan’s strategy for garnering the loyalty of the political entities that remained between Rome and Parthia (save for Commagene, which had been promptly annexed)—a strategy that, judging by all available evidence, had encouraging effects on commerce. For Hadrian, owning the land through which
long distance trade passed seems to have been erroneous. Rather, by controlling strategic points like Aila, Berenike and Samosata in Commagene, which Hadrian added himself, taxes could be extracted, trade could continue, and stability could ensue.\textsuperscript{137} In touring the Near-East, Hadrian displayed this very ideology. The mercantile center of Palmyra is exemplary. Visiting the oasis in 130 CE, Hadrian certainly could have summoned the military force to subdue and annex the lucrative region, but he instead simply enjoyed its symbolic adornment, even earning the dedication of a temple in the Parthian city of Vologesias.\textsuperscript{138} Hadrianic Romanization in the Near East was marked by tacit attempts to encourage regional prosperity, if only to avoid costly conflict. The relatively open border allowed tension to diffuse between polities.

While an expansionist commercial strategy might have attracted Hadrian even if it was a drain on imperial coffers, other concerns prohibited a militant approach. Hadrian, like his predecessor Trajan, had far more grave concerns in fighting Germanic tribes along the Rhine and the Danube. The German and Danubian provinces called for an astonishing fourteen legions (twice that in the Near East) to stave off waves of enemies whose voracity and constancy made the Parthian menace pale in retrospective comparison. Hadrian realized that the Parthians could be negotiated with where the Teutonic hoards could not—accordingly he struck a peace accord fairly early in his reign, sanctioning the replacement of a Roman puppet with a Parthian one. The Eastern provinces were a cash cow for tax revenue. Declaring war over installing a client king could not be justified as it not only slowed tax collection but also required the costly

\textsuperscript{137} It seems more plausible still when we recognize that elite Romans were thoroughly involved in commercial investments under the high empire. Thus, the tax burden would’ve fallen disproportionately on the richest class—the masses would’ve had less to lose from the \textit{tetarte}, perhaps explaining the relative stability in Hadrian’s reign. See: D’Arms, John H. \textit{Commerce and Social Standing in Ancient Rome}. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981, 152-8; Pleket, H.W. “Urban Elites and Business in the Greek Part of the Roman Empire.” P. Garnsey, K. Hopkins, C. Whittaker, London: The Hogarth Press, 1983.

commitment of more troops from Rome’s primary concern in Germany. Conversely, Hadrian, through careful diplomacy, could ensure the continuation of peace with Parthia and channel revenue to more urgent matters.

This should have been a fairly easy decision for the contemplative emperor to make, particularly if we recall Trajan’s Parthian War, of which Hadrian was a central commander, and Ziegler’s finds regarding regional mints. As governor, Hadrian certainly oversaw the massive Roman efforts to increase the volume of coinage in the East. From first-hand experience only a few years earlier, the emperor was uniquely positioned to direct near Eastern policy substantively. He saw the effects of war on commerce, and how unsustainable expansion only prolonged and worsened Rome’s unstable predicament. The account I have here presented may not reflect the actual sequence of events but, lacking tangible evidence, is the only logic that fits squarely with what we know of Hadrian and the dilemmas facing Rome under his watch.

Hadrian’s strategy in at least one other province is similarly instructive in that it is diametrically opposed to the efforts for increased fluidity between Rome and its neighbors we see in the Near East. I am speaking of course about Hadrian’s Wall in Roman Britain. After Agricola, an amicus of Vespasian, succeeded in subduing the Caledonians (Scots) in CE 84, relations with local tribes failed to normalize. Vespasian’s son Domitian had scaled down Roman operations considerably. Hadrian visited Britain himself and found that “the Britons could not

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140 Recall that revolts in client kingdoms and Rome proper began only after the disruption of commerce by Trajan’s invasion—the operation was categorically directed at Parthia, not the region as a whole.
141 Various explanations abound; it is possible that Domitian, widely known to be a paranoid ruler, feared rival military success in Germany might undermine his own.
be kept under Roman control.”142 He therefore, “erected a Wall along a length of eighty miles, which was to separate barbarians and Romans.”143

Why this isolationist strategy, and why here? Because the Caledonians were barbarians? The Romans undoubtedly considered foreigners east of the Euphrates to be barbarians too—ancient authors have given us ample evidence of such a mindset. Or, because the tribal armies were too strong to be repelled by the Roman military?

The Romans rebuffed far larger armies from Parthia on multiple occasions, even in Hadrian’s lifetime. Mesopotamia’s population was unquestionably larger than that of Britain, so the security reasoning is somewhat suspect. One defensible explanation for building Hadrian’s Wall is that imperial revenues in Britain, inextricably tied to the volume and value of its commerce, were insufficient to justify military costs. Surely, the Caledonians were one of the peoples Appian referred to above as profitless and Briton was one of the regions whose finances Hadrian knew intimately. We ought to thus recognize that, on at least some occasions, Roman foreign policy followed the perceived profits of regional commerce. Applying this same logic to our understanding of Hadrian’s decision to not build similar blockades in the Near East, we then come to the conclusion that not only was commerce accordingly profitable, but that Hadrian’s policy was designed to ensure it was so. Tellingly, Hadriana built the Via Hadriana from the Nile at Antinooopolis to the Red Sea, facilitating movement rather than constricting it as he did in Britain. Similarly, Minor fort construction along these arteries is also clear under Hadrian’s rule.144 These clearly conflicted strategies on either side of the empire seem to reflect simple cost-benefit analyses.

142 Unknown, HA: Hadrian 5.1-3
143 Ibid., 10.2
144 CIL III 14149
Not all building projects in the Near East were warmly received. When Hadrian rebuilt the Jewish temple in Jerusalem as the *Aelia Capitoliana*—a sign of Roman opulence and domination—he evinced the opposite response such projects were meant to engender among locals. The Bar Kohkba revolt that followed in 132 CE, driven partly by the same aversion to Roman worldly wealth we find in the Christian gospels, makes all the more sense in a highly commercialized region. This event probably also precipitated the stashing of another valuable primary document, the archive of Babatha. In Babatha’s writings—which were notably in Greek, not Aramaic—we find vivid evidence of Roman intervention in the lives and finances of local Jewish provincials. Babatha is taxed both in cash and in kind for owning four date groves after her husband died.\(^{145}\) This Jewish revolt, though precipitated by symbolic desecration, seems to reflect Roman commercial successes.

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We have yet another sound proximate reason to believe Hadrian’s primary concern in the Near East was the promotion of long distance commerce; that is, the selection of his successor. Sensing his demise was close, Hadrian realized that his adopted emperors-to-be were too young to rule responsibly and thus adopted a senator whom he thought embraced the demeanor and philosophy required to maintain Roman dominance. This senator was fifty-two year old Antonius Pius. In the twenty-three year reign of Pius, it is difficult to see any substantive changes to Hadrianic foreign or commercial policy. In Britain, Pius built another isolating wall 80 miles north of even Hadrian’s. More importantly for our purposes, Pius pursued no warfare in the East—he actually continued building projects and successfully sent diplomats a looming Parthian invasion at the end of his reign. 146 In the end, Pius honored Hadrian’s dying wish to adopt Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus as heirs. As we can see, Pius forwarded his

146 *IGLS* 1135.
predecessor’s vision of both strong leaders and strong policies. The Hadrianic emphasis on fiscal sensibility had staying power.\textsuperscript{147}

While Pius does not require in-depth consideration of his own, seeing as how he largely followed precedent, his reign remains important in that it preserved and transmitted the important Hadrianic vision of how foreign policy ought to operate around commercial concerns. The final verdict of Pius’s success in this right is manifest in the fact that the imperial budget had a 675 million \textit{denarii} (2.7 billion \textit{sesterces}) \textit{surplus} when he died.\textsuperscript{148} The eminent historian Edward Gibbon, in his seminal work on the decline of Rome, referred to Pius as the “cumin splitter” to denote his miserly nature. Gibbon probably didn’t realize just how fitting this moniker was. Cumin, a pervasive presence in culinary traditions around the modern world, is a spice that was grown almost exclusively in India and Arabia in the ancient world. It reached the Roman palette by the very same commercial routes Pius, and Hadrian, labored to preserve through diplomacy.

\textsuperscript{147} Strangely, the best summary of these efficiencies comes in Birley’s biography of Marcus, not Hadrian. See: Birley, Anthony R. \textit{Marcus Aurelius}. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966, 10-12.

\textsuperscript{148} Staying with our estimate of 14.5 billion sesterces, this surplus would represent about 18\% of GDP. This seems a bit high, though quite possible considering Pius’s lack of war expenditures in his lengthy reign.
Marcus Aurelius & the Seeds of Decline

Alexander, Caius, Pompey, what were they in comparison with Diogenes, Heraclitus, and Socrates? These latter knew the natures of things, and their causes, and materials: And thus their governing parts were employed. As to the former, what a multitude of things were the objects of their care? To how many were they enslaved? …All things happen according to the nature of the whole. In a little time you shall be gone, as Hadrian, and Augustus.149

--Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Book VIII, 3-5

Few monarchs in the annals of history can claim to have espoused, much less lived by, a philosophy that directly questions his or her ability to change worldly events. Marcus Aurelius, the devout Stoic and last of the “Five Good Emperors”, presents perhaps the most salient example of an emperor whose great political power was matched only by the philosophical belief that such power had certain inexorable temporal limits. By most any estimation Marcus was the most powerful man on earth from 161-180 CE, though one wouldn’t know it by reading his Meditations. Whereas ancient monarchs of lore declared wars and erected monuments to grasp at historical immortality—to be the most famous king by whom history will measure all others—Marcus embraced the teaching that his works, like those of Hadrian and Augustus before him, would one day be ensconced by the sands of time. One popular fable holds that Marcus tasked one of his slaves with reminding him that he was “only a man” as he strolled through the forum among throngs of adulating Romans.

Marcus the philosopher exuded a disarming humility with the pen; he would entertain no Trajanic delusions of oriental decadence and Alexandrian glory in India. But, as with the coins that bore his likeness, Marcus the philosopher had a flipside in Marcus the emperor. His Stoic predispositions aside, Marcus was a king first and a philosopher second. He had been selected

by Hadrian as an adolescent and groomed for two decades by Antoninus Pius, as caesar and consul, explicitly to rule.¹⁵⁰ Pius’s reign was both a blessing and a curse to Marcus—general peace around the empire allowed the young Caesar twenty years to hone his rhetoric, diplomatic and historical aptitude. But it also rendered the forty-year old emperor much less experienced than his predecessors in warfare—the threat and periodic application of which was so crucial to maintaining the fragile yet prosperous commerce between Rome and its eastern counterparts in India and beyond.

Indeed, when Marcus exhorted himself in *Meditations*, to act “in all things like a pupil of Antoninus; his energy in dealing with what had to be done in accordance with reason, his equability everywhere, his piety, the serenity of his face, his sweetness, his disregard for empty glory, and his determination to grasp his work,” he was expressing devotion to the Antonine sense of duty (part of the reason he was awarded the moniker ‘Pius’ by the Senate) rather than any specific military precedent.¹⁵¹ No such military precedent existed. And there was certainly no Stoic guideline for how an emperor should approach war.

But war was brought upon Marcus almost immediately upon his ascension. The opportunistic King Vologases III seized upon the chance to erase Roman gains—in territory and influence—across the Near East since Trajan’s meteoric conquest and withdrawal some thirty-five years earlier. Marcus’s dilemma of which foreign policy (and thus, which commercial policy) to pursue in the Near East was thus foisted upon him by realities on the ground. Circumstances called for swift, harsh military reaction. Still, as we have seen with earlier

imperial administrations, we can decipher much about the new emperor’s designs for the region by his conduct of the war and its aftermath.

Marcus first saw fit to approach the Parthian incursion into the coveted buffer zone of Armenia as a purely provincial issue—one to be dealt with by the troops already concentrated in Cappadocia and Syria. Cappadocia’s legatus, Marcus Sedatius Severianus foolishly marched far behind enemy lines to Elegeia only to be cornered and crushed by the Parthian general Chosroes. The annihilation of this legion, either the XV Apollinaris or the XII Fulminata, took a mere three days. Suddenly Rome’s east was exposed to external invasion and internal subversion, jeopardizing the equilibrium between military and commerce that had persisted for the better part of a century. The philosopher king’s dominion was quickly becoming tenuous, and no amount of laissez-faire Stoicism could repel bellicose Parthian ambitions. However militarily inexperienced, Marcus was nothing if not contemplative—he took a four day recess at the imperial country resort at Alsium to ponder the Parthian question. How was Marcus, ever a student of history, to repel Rome’s eastern foes with Trajan’s violent vigor and Hadrian’s diplomatic restraint?

It is in these four days of deliberation that we once again sense the distinct relevance of the relationship between emperor and amicus in determining imperial policy. Since being tapped as successor to Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, tutors of Greek philosophy and Latin rhetoric surrounded Marcus. The most noteworthy, and the closest to Marcus’s heart, was M. Cornelius Fronto. It was Fronto who cautioned Marcus not to lose heart in the face of early defeat along the Euphrates and similar building tensions along the Rhine and Danube. The grammarian forwarded to Marcus a transcription of Cicero’s rousing pro lege Manilia wherein the famous orator called for a supreme commander to combat another Parthian menace, Mithridates, in the
1st century BCE. Cicero preaches about the importance of allies’ interests, the protection of provinces and the discipline of Roman soldiers—all marks of stability, Marcus surely recognized, that both depended on and contributed to healthy economic activity in a border region. Fronto offered one piece of advice that seems to have cut to the heart of the conflicted emperor. “Suppose, Caesar, that you can attain to the wisdom of Cleanthes and Zeno, yet, against your will, you must put on the purple imperial cloak, not the philosopher’s woolen cape. Philosophy will tell you what to say, eloquence will tell you how to say it.”

We might say that Marcus interpreted this adage politically, substituting “commerce” for philosophy, “war” for eloquence, and “do” for say. He sent younger co-emperor Lucius Verus, co-adoptive of Hadrian and a more Hedonistic foil to the Stoic Marcus, to personally drive the Parthians out of Armenia and back to their capital at Ctesiphon. Just as the Senate had instructed Pompey more than two centuries earlier, Marcus resolved that there would be no war of attrition if all of Rome’s interests, commercial and security, were to be secured. Marcus realized that Roman stability resided as much in the continued health of long distance trade routes as it did in the integrity of political boundaries. In any case, this correspondence between the weathered tutor and the freshman emperor is enlightening.

Fronto’s advice proved worthwhile. Verus whipped the Syrian legions, slothful from three decades of peace, into shape with a vengeance. Parthian puppets were quickly expunged from Armenia. Had Marcus only been concerned with Rome’s territorial sovereignty, he certainly would have ordered Verus to establish defensive positions. But he issued no such order. Instead, Marcus ordered Verus to spend 164 CE preparing a titanic assault on the Parthian

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154 Unknown, HA, Verus 6.9.
heartland, suggesting that Marcus understood the difference between conquest and stability in a volatile region. Verus pushed eastward through bloody conflicts until reaching the twin Parthian capitals on the Tigris, Seleucia and Ctesiphon. The former was sacked, and the latter saw its royal palace burn to the ground. Parthia had been roundly defeated, and would pose little threat for decades to come.

What is important for our purposes here, however, is not that Marcus successfully ordered the destruction of an enemy from afar, but that he was temperate enough to rein in vestiges of Trajanic ambition by halting the Roman progression eastward. Then, much in the manner of his adopted grandfather Hadrian, Marcus withdrew his legions, ceding nominal political control to local clients. Quite interestingly, he made an administrative alteration that was clearly aimed to maintain Roman commercial might without its political baggage—Marcus installed a *logistes* in the intermediate trading oasis of Palmyra, which had remained fairly autonomous, to oversee the city’s storied role in overland with the Far East. This is an uncanny example of a Roman emperor understanding, and acting in light of, recent history regardless of honorific laurels that may have come with the alternative, permanent occupation. The fact that Marcus inserted a *logistes*, not a legion, should not escape us.

Ironically enough, Marcus’s successes in trade liberalization may be evidenced by the rapid *decrease* in commerce between Rome and the Far East that we see after 200 CE. The accordingly-named Antonine Plague that followed Verus and his legions back from Ctesiphon had devastating effects on population and thus overall economic output. The general paranoia

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156 It has been suggested that as much as 2% of the population—1 million people—died from the plague. Naturally, the dead would’ve been concentrated along the Eastern Mediterranean. The plague may have had lesser effect on Egypt according to agricultural records. On death toll, see: Littman, R.J. and M.L. "Galen and the Antonine Plague." *The American Journal of Philology* 94, no. 3 (1973): 243-255. On
that accompanies any market economy in crisis must have crippled Roman confidence in profitable commerce. In physical terms, the resulting lower population meant fewer producers of wealth and a lower demand for products from the East. That overall wealth declined, there can be no doubt. But as the Romans most likely to die were undoubtedly of the poorer classes, while more affluent circles insulated themselves from public hysteria, the GDP per capita may have actually risen while aggregate GDP dipped significantly. Such are the caveats of economic statistics in antiquity.

Marcus’s diplomatic disposition is further evident in a collection of inscriptions found far south on the Arabian Peninsula. The inscriptions speak of a treaty forged between warring Thamudic Arab tribes—two in Greek, one in Nabataean, and a bilingual inscription in both.157 They have been dated to the joint reign of Marcus and Verus, and their languages of course reflect their audience. One bilingual inscription credits Αντιστιος Αδουεντου, Q. Antistius Adventus, who was legatus of Arabia from 166-9 CE. A Greek inscription attributes the agreement to Λουκιου Κλαυδιου Μοδεστου, or L. Claudius Modestus, his likely successor.158 We cannot know whether Adventus himself was involved; it seems unlikely given his retinue, but it could have been something of a training exercise for Modestus. But it demonstrates a policy of active local treaty negotiation in non-military situations.159

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159 Further north, at the oasis at al-Jawf, there is an inscription in Latin, strangely, from a centurion of III Cyrenaica. This proves the Romans had active non-conquest operations in fairly wide stretch of desert. See: Bowersock, Syria under Vespasian: 139. For commentary on Roman-Thamudic relations, see: Graf, Saracens: 12-26.
We are again confronted with the question, why? Why were Marcus and his appointed officials concerned with relatively small-scale sectarian violence not directed toward Rome? Surely the rival tribes could not have posed threat enough to the Roman cities to necessitate distraction, especially in the midst of withdrawal from Parthia and escalation on the Danube. This gesture is more readily explained by a general imperial will to avoid the damaging effects such infighting had on overland caravan trade routes from Leuke Kome or further south in Arabia Felix. Claims to control these trade routes probably explain the presence of intertribal tension to begin with. These trade routes, the goods they carried, and the taxes levied on them, were crucial to funding more bellicose imperial projects elsewhere.

These political goings-on were the subject of correspondence between Marcus, Verus and Fronto—quite possibly the best, unadulterated collection of letters we have between acting emperors and private citizens. There is much more to unpack than can be adequately done in the space allotted here. But the imperial relationship with Fronto speaks to how earlier emperor-historian relationships might have functioned. Indeed, that the two joint emperors were equally fond of their old tutor is begs for a brief comparison and some tenuous conclusions. With Marcus, Fronto largely continues his duty as tutor and mentor, offering professional advice and exhortations along with personal niceties.  

Verus, however, exhibits a demeanor more reminiscent of Trajan than his Stoic brother would ever allow. Before the crushing invasion of the Mesopotamian interior, Verus was communicating with Fronto about the imminent writing of the war’s official history. Verus’s vanity is breathtaking. He prods Fronto to,

Dwell at length on the causes and the opening stages of the war, and especially on our lack of success in my absence. Take your time to come to my share. Further

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I think it necessary to make it crystal clear how greatly superior the Parthians were before my arrival, so that the scale of my achievement will be apparent…In conclusion, my achievements are no greater than they actually are. But they can be made to seem as great as you would have them seem.\footnote{Ibid.: 114-123}

This shameless request for a favorable history should drive us to carefully reconsider what \textit{quid pro quo} earlier emperors may have pursued with their own historians at particular crucial moments and, by proxy, what wealthy equestrian and senatorial authors may have been appropriated in return.\footnote{Some popular histories written just after 166 CE contend, wrongly, that Verus crossed the Indus with a Syrian legion. The rhetorician Lucian—from Samosata—laments that at least one author got rich off of the war by fabricating vivid images in their work. Lucian \textit{Hist. Conscr.}: 2.10, 2.31.} We can reasonably hypothesize as to what a Strabo, Pliny or Suetonius stood to gain financially from liberalized commercial barriers, though others of their ilk surely owned lucrative mercantile operations in the Near East. Direct cash payments are a distinct possibility. Political appointments would have been a more alluring bribe, as the emperors exercised absolute executive power in the border provinces—Egypt, Syria (in all its forms), Arabia—that would benefit materially as the bottlenecks of thriving eastern commerce. Fronto hints at such an arrangement in northern Africa.\textsuperscript{*} It seems entirely reasonable, given the candor of the Fronto-Verus correspondence, to suggest this type of exchange was commonplace. The room for convergence of powerful interests in the Near East is manifest.

Part of my task in proposing a commercial approach to understanding foreign policy is to dispatch the Roman historian’s predisposition that trade priorities should always be regarded as secondary, incidental or indirect. Marcus’s most astute biographer, Anthony Birley, is but one of many historians who at times exemplify this mindset. In opining as to why Rome engaged Parthia in a “consistent pattern” of war at “fairly regular intervals”, Birley posits, “There may too have been hidden factors, such as the need by Rome to keep trade routes with Central Asia and
the Far East free from Parthian interference.”¹⁶³ I have shown at great length, in various imperial administrations, how intertwined trade and military were at this crossroads—it seems ludicrous to suggest that abrupt blockages on perhaps the world’s most used caravan network could be obscured, much less hidden. The sheer number of moving parts in this commercial system strongly suggests that the standard Mesopotamian resident would feel the metaphorical ripples of trade stoppage before the actual vibrations of a marching Roman legionary arrival.

Consider a brief thought experiment. Would, and should, Roman historians feel more secure arguing for the centrality of commercial purposes with (a) a comprehensive written explanation of trade goals from Augustus without archaeological evidence for it, or (b) a wide range of archaeological evidence across continents without a comprehensive written explanation of trade policy? The modern orthodoxy seems to gravitate closer to (a) than (b), striking me as quite backwards. The physical proof we have, in all its forms, eras and locations, would have necessitated some sort of periodic top-down commercial strategies to be so pervasive. To once more call upon the analogy to Natural History, I am advocating a tenuous Intelligent Design understanding of Roman commerce in the Near East.

¹⁶³ Birley, Marcus: 200.
Conclusions

As I have aimed to demonstrate the reasons why commercial explanations for Roman foreign policy in the Near East eclipse others *en masse*, I will now review the development of relevant trends between emperors. It is important to evaluate these findings through in context of the increase of overall trade volume between the Mediterranean and the Far East that culminated soon after Marcus’s death.

Administration

Without question, Augustus’s 27 BCE distinctions between imperial and senatorial provinces was the most significant administrative change in the two centuries under examination. In the Near East, we saw that he brought Syria and Egypt directly under imperial control and that these provinces would have been the most responsive to the tools of *dirigisme* at his disposal due to their situation on trade routes. But this was the first, not the last, “executivization” of Rome’s provincial structure. Augustus later added a *legatus* in Judaea in 6 CE. His successor Tiberius expanded direct imperial power eastward, making Cappadocia an imperial province in 18 CE. A century later, Trajan did the same in Arabia, the Danubian provinces and in his briefly held Mesopotamian possessions. Little more than a decade after the death of Marcus, Syria is divided into two imperial provinces.

This trend indicates that Rome’s political center of gravity—where the majority of its concern was focused—gradually moved east beginning with Augustus. This was not simply a function of Rome’s expanding borders. Rather, the complex realities of the region required a more unilateral authority than the traditional Republican system could offer. Some of this shift can be explained by legitimate security concerns, but not all of it. Executive provincial authority
also permitted expedited public works projects, taxation collection, monetary control and negotiation with power structures.\(^{164}\) The need for executive authority in the Near East culminates with Marcus’s decision to send the first co-emperor Lucius Verus to take charge of the East, foreshadowing the future permanent division between Rome and Constantinople.

**Frontier**

Territorial expansion in the Near East had both palpable and subtle effects on the notion of the frontier, or *limes*. Trajan’s annexation of Arabia, for example, added a circumscribed piece of land to the empire with certain upsides and shortcomings. But, when viewed in concert with other Roman possessions, it has added significance. Control of Arabia meant control of both coasts of the Red Sea and thus a semi-proprietary claim to whatever entered its waters—from Axum, Sri Lanka or whatever was *out there*. In a sense, Rome did border the Far East.

We see this same dynamic at work in landlocked Near Eastern possessions. Over time, Roman territory became less defined by the Euphrates River or geographical landmarks than by its influence in commercial hubs that dotted the southwest Asian deserts. It is useful to envision Mesopotamia as a sea in itself with mercantile oases like Palmyra, Bostra, Petra as islands, or even stepping-stones. Interspersed between trade routes and cities, small forts could provide security and small markets in themselves.\(^{165}\) The argument for a limited, nebulous frontier under Roman patrimony is bolstered by the fact that we find very little evidence of popular revolts between Trajan’s failed invasion of Mesopotamia and Marcus’s demise. This absence is quite

\(^{164}\) Since Augustus, Rome’s role in Arabia has progressed from invader to legitimate peace broker.

\(^{165}\) Forts were small markets in themselves, but their primary purpose is obviously security. This frontier comes to more closely resemble the Danube through increased fort construction between 200-350 CE. See: “Was there an eastern origin for the design of late Roman fortifications? Some problems for research on forts of Rome’s eastern frontier.” *Journal of Roman Archaeology*. ed. David Kennedy, 18, *Supplementary Series*. Ann Arbor, Mi: JRA, 1996, 169-78. To compare fort concentration before and after Marcus, see: Ibid.: 204-5.
noteworthy considering the collection of historically volatile peoples with strong national identities. Only a century later, the warrior-queen Zenobia led a violent Palmyrene insurgence against Rome that was strong enough to forge a brief ethnic empire.¹⁶⁶

Conversely, notions of boundaries in northern and western provinces took on a much more finite character—we find cordons on the Rhine and even more extensive ones on Danube, along with a succession of walls in Britain. Whereas war became an end in itself in Eastern Europe, it was usually a means to an end—a commercial, profitable end—in the Near East. Ultimately, nominal control of the rich Near Eastern trade routes was secondary—the Romans seem to have been more concerned with the trade funnels, or the cities that channeled all of this wealth into the Mediterranean.

**Military:**

Historians have suggested that the two emperors that frame our period—Augustus and Marcus—presided over greater aggregate loss of life than any others in antiquity. It is worth noting how strangely similar Rome’s military predicaments were in 14 and 180 CE, their various conquests notwithstanding. Four legions were stationed in Syria under Augustus; Marcus commanded five between Syria and Syria Palaestina (formerly Judaea).¹⁶⁷ As we saw, these legions served mostly defensive and preventative goals. Both emperors had far more pressing concerns in northeastern European possessions. Augustus was undoubtedly fixated on the Rhineland, where his general Varus infamously led three entire legions to their annihilation in Teutoberg forest. Marcus too dealt with constant menacing incursions into Roman territory in upper Germany early in his administration, before turning to the personally repel Germanic tribes

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¹⁶⁶ Stoneman, *Palmyra*: 111-28
¹⁶⁷ Kennedy, *Eastern Perspectives*: 85.
on the Danube for the better part of a decade. Constant border tension in Europe required more military attention—though, as I have argued, not necessarily more *imperial* attention—than did intermittent Parthian confrontations. After 150 CE, some 169,000 Roman legions and auxiliaries occupied the Rhine and Danube; only 77,490 occupied the entire near East.\textsuperscript{168} These troop locations certainly seem to reflect the logic of the Hopkins tax-and-trade model.

*Looking Ahead:*

This strengths and weaknesses of the argument I have forwarded offer some teachable suggestions for approaching other questions of commercial history in antiquity.

First, we need not accept that our incomplete archaeological record remain so indefinitely. The sheer geographical breadth of this subject matter requires concerted research efforts not only in the Eastern Mediterranean Further, but much more importantly in China, India and the central Asian republics. What great insights about the contours of ancient transcontinental commerce if Roman silver was uncovered in China’s desert? Its arid Gobi climate does indeed seem ideal to preserve the type of evidence my research is based upon. Yet we find very little academic resources devoted to Roman-Han archaeological studies at eastern universities. Indeed, many of China’s prominent early historical texts have *still* not been translated into English—two thirds of the *Hanshu*, much of the *Zizi Tongjian*, and the entire *Hou Hanshu* remain inaccessible to western scholars.\textsuperscript{169} India’s extensive coastline leaves much to be explored in terms of maritime commerce with the Red Sea. Studying the actual Silk Road routes is needed, though made increasingly cumbersome due to its trajectory through fledgling

modern states with deficient infrastructure. Strikingly, the distance between Rome and the Far East in antiquity is mirrored by a disconnect between each region’s modern scholars today.

Second, we should further explore what avenues influential Romans could follow to lobby the emperor for certain policy concessions. Most scholars hold an uneasy recognition of nepotism between emperor and constituent, but few are willing to posit how this system may have altered actual historical events. Lucius Verus’s correspondence with Fronto allowed us an extraordinarily candid example of the imperial side of the *quid pro quo* coin—what might have Fronto have extracted in return? On a grander scale, how may have merchants—power individuals, or perhaps influential guilds—petitioned the emperor to act according to their interests? Such questions are even more pertinent considering that the mercantile classes, stationed along trade arteries around the nebulous Roman frontier, were tied to local elites whose loyalty was so important to maintaining political stability. Accordingly, it follows that foreign policy should be analyzed not only as a reflection of the desires of Rome, but also as a reflection of the desires of provincials and bordering neighbors. If Near Easterners made a living through trade routes, then Roman foreign policy there was necessarily a function of commerce.

Following this, we should also inquire as to why Parthian rulers, for generations, were fixated on conquering the Roman eastern Mediterranean rim. Unfortunately, the Parthian archaeological record is far less decipherable than the Roman, obscured by syncretism with earlier and later Persian dynasties. Still, a defensible explanation for their repeated incursions into the territory of a plainly superior military consists of an inverse iteration of my argument—emboldened by their unfettered access to Chinese and Indian markets, the Parthians sought to establish a permanent commercial foothold on the Mediterranean and its proximate markets by intervention with client states and occasional war. Perhaps they concluded that Rome would
withdraw due to the financial burdens of endlessly contested occupation. There is room for substantial academic comparison between Roman neighboring nations as a way to better understand Roman attitudes regarding commerce.

Third, and finally, we should recognize that writing a commercial history of Rome is very much an ongoing enterprise. Recent discoveries like the *Muziris* papyrus continue to alter our best interpretations, and future discoveries promise to change them considerably more. In a historical pursuit whose evidence is so clearly subject to ineffable contingencies, we should not shy away from connecting the dots responsibly. Roman Archaeologists are always one find away from shaking our most strongly held beliefs about transcontinental encounters in antiquity.

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170 These discoveries and silences communicate the need for economic models to bridge gaps in evidence. For example, it’s quite unlikely that the arrival of the *Hermapollon* in the Red Sea was a one-time occurrence—logic aside, the legal contracts strongly suggest the sense of routine regularity. If analogous ships arrived even once per month, Rome may have derived as much as 4% of GDP or 1% of the *fiscus* budget from taxing Far Eastern luxury products alone over the course of a year. Thus, this sum could have financed anywhere from 10-25% of annual imperial spending. (Refer to statistics on p. 21-3).
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Papyrology/Epigraphy:

N.B. – Below are multi-lingual, multi-volume collections of papyri and inscriptions.

*L’Anee Epigraphique*

*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*

*Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*

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