

Citation style

Sánchez Hernández, Juan Pablo: review of: Raoul McLaughlin, Rome and the Distant East. Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China, London [u.a.]: Continuum, 2010, in: Journal of Ancient Civilizations, 26 (2011), p. 103-105, DOI: 10.21245/rec.ant.603565401



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

REVIEWS

Review article: Raoul McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East. Trade routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*, Continuum, 2010.

Dr. Raoul McLaughlin (<http://www.raoul-mclaughlin.net/>) studied Archaeology and Ancient History at Queen's University Belfast, where he is currently Tutor. His research fields include Roman commerce, the ancient economy and contacts between Rome and the Distant East. This monograph is based on the author's Phd dissertation on Rome's eastern trade completed in 2006. Besides this book, McLaughlin has also published some magazine and newspaper articles on this topic.

The present book is divided into six chapters: Chapter 1 (*Ancient Evidence for Eastern Contacts*), identifies and discuss at length the highlights and the lowlights of the varied sources available for Rome's eastern trade for the 1st and 2nd centuries AD: historical sources (The *Periplus of the Erythraen sea*, Strabo, Pliny, Chinese sources, etc.), inscriptions (from Palmyra and India), ostraca (the Nicanor Archive), papyri (the Muziris papyrus), archaeology and coinage. The following chapters (Chapter 2, *Roman Egypt and the Sea Routes to India*; Chapter 3, *Rome and the Arabian Trade Routes*; Chapter 4, *Trade Routes through Asia and the Silk Road Connection*) describes the attested trade maritime and land routes between the Roman empire and the distant East in the line of previous monographs on the subject¹. Chapter 5 (*Diplomatic Contacts with the Distant East*), and Chapter 6 (*The Economic Impact on the Roman Empire*) consider the political and economic contexts for the development of these trade routes between the two of the most powerful empires of the era: the Roman Empire and Han China.

The author limits his subject to the period running from the closing years of the Republican era to the High Roman Empire until the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 AD. McLaughlin perhaps puts too much emphasis on the effects of the Antonine plague (59 – 60), as a turning point in the history of the Roman contacts with the distant East. However, the actual impact of this plague on the population is difficult to assess due to the literary exaggerations of the majority of the extant written accounts and the disparate character and availability of references in some areas (we are better informed in the case of Egypt, for example, thanks to the papyri documentation than anywhere else). Besides, according to some sources, Rome's eastern trade was still active (though not thriving) in some areas until the end of the Severan dynasty in the first quarter of the third century². So the Antonine plague should be rather coupled as a factor of decline with other profound changes endured by the Roman empire during the period of the Military Anarchy in the third century (235-284 AD), *i.e.* the outbreak of another pandemic plague

¹ On Roman Eastern trade routes in general, see also WHEELER, M. *Rome beyond the Imperial Frontiers*, London, 1954, 141 – 207, MILLER, J. I., *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire 29 B. C. to A.D. 641*, Oxford, 1969, 119-152, RASCHKE, M.G., "New studies in Roman commerce with the East," *ANRW* 9.2 (Berlin-New York, 1978), 641-1359, YOUNG, G.K., *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy 31-BC-AD 305*, London-New York, 2001.

² At this time inscriptions attest the presence of Palmyrene traders and soldiers guarding the caravan routes in Egypt. See discussion. A reason of their presence in Egypt might be precisely the disruption caused by the Parthian War (AD 161-166) and the Antonine Plague (AD 165 – 180) in Central Asia.

in the 250s that also contributed to the manpower shortage in the Roman Empire, the hyperinflation and the continuous coinage debasement, and the political and military instability that disrupted, as a consequence, the extensive trade networks within the borders of the Roman empire and beyond (factors which are also referred to, but by passing in the conclusions in the monograph on p. 176).

That author is at his best in the plethora of detailed and new information which his work offers. McLaughlin provides in translation references from the vast corpus of Tamil poetry of the Sangam period (300 BC to 300 AD), where Roman merchants in India are called *Yavanas*³ (quotations are drawn from the *Silapattikaram*, the *Akananuru*, and mostly the *Purananuru* on p. 46-57), and from the Sogdian letters for Central Asia (p. 85 – 90). He also quotes from the recent scholarship about commerce and Ancient trade settlements in India, including monographs and articles produced by Indian authors and published in India. This seemingly growing literature has challenge the views and conclusions of Mortimer Wheeler's pioneering work, *Rome beyond the Imperial Frontiers*, (which appeared in the 60's) with the appearance of new evidence and the reassessment of the already available data, and Machlaughlin skillfully integrates this new information into his monograph⁴.

One would readily assume that references would be mostly drawn from the sources mentioned in the first chapter. When this is not the case, the author seems too much vague in the identification⁵. The author might have drawn these quotations from his readings of secondary literature, which may explain some of the very few, very minor slips in the text⁶ and the fact that many of these casual references are not included in the final index (in fact, a separate index of authors would have been useful). A particular case is his quotations of Procopius of Caesarea, whom he identifies as “a Greek historian named Procopius” (p. 62) ... “writing in later era (p. 93)⁷”. Procopius was a well-positioned court historian of the Byzantine Empire as secretary of Belisarius, the triumphal general that led the recovery of the Western territories from Constantinople in the 6th century AD. Procopius pertains to an entirely different era, when the Roman

³ Besides the bibliographical references provided by McLaughlin, see also RAY. H. P., “The Yavana presence in Ancient India,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 31/3 (1988), 311 – 325.

⁴ Two cases are the fine study on Mediterranean pottery in India by TOMBER, R., *Indo Roman trade: From Pots to Pepper*, London 2008, and the reported discovery of the ancient port of Muziris. See SHAJAN, K.P., TOMBER, R., SELVAKUMAR, V. AND CHERIAN, P. J., “Locating the Ancient Port of Muziris, fresh findings from Pattanam,” in *JRA* 17 (2004), 351 – 359 (which updates the article of Gurukkal and Whittaker, quoted by McLaughlin).

⁵ The “Roman author named Dioscourides” (as vaguely named on p. 144) is rather known as Papius Dioscorides and is a Greek Physician who practiced medicine in Neronian Rome.

⁶ See, for example, on p. 175: “Dio remarks that after the death of Aurelian, Roman history descended from a realm of gold to one of iron and rust”. (DC 73 – 36). Dio Cassius refers to the reign of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (AD 121 – 180), during which the first contacts with China are attested and the great Antonine Plague broke out, and not to the emperor Aurelian (AD 215 – 275), also mentioned in the monograph on p. 121. I exclude the possibility that MacLaughlin has confounded both emperors in his work, since this mistake also can be explained as a typos: On p. 92 the border town of Zeugma (because of the bridge over the Euphrates) also appears as Zuegma.

⁷ *Persian Wars*, 1. 19.17-19, 23-4 and *Secret History*, 25.14-5. These quotations are on p. 62-3 (not on p. 61, as recorded in the index), p. 67 (not in 68), and p. 93.

Empire no longer existed as it was, being transformed into the Byzantine Empire in the East, so well after the period covered by McLaughlin in his work. It is precisely Procopius who reports how two adventurous monks smuggled silkworms' eggs in a hollow cane from Central Asia to Constantinople, where a new silk-weaving centre was created as an imperial monopoly. It is also during the Byzantine period when China received new embassies and commercial mission from the West and learns from the existence of (the Byzantine empire) formerly known as *Da Qin*. Perhaps one should, therefore, discuss Procopius' references in another monograph⁸.

McLaughlin's discussion on the Economic impact on the Roman Empire of Rome's eastern trade also includes a convenient discussion (especially on pp. 141-155) of the impact of these imported products on the everyday life and habits of the common Roman citizen. In spite of Pliny the Elder, Seneca, and Juvenal's moralistic homilies, jewels, silk, pearls, ivory, exotic animals caused a rage in imperial Rome. Upper class women (and even men) dressed on silk became so common that it was widely mentioned especially by the Roman elegiac poets of the Augustan Golden Age (*i.e.* as common adornment of their beloved ones). Consequently, a basic knowledge based on misconceptions and half truths about these distant lands became part of the Roman popular culture. This is precisely a very rich and open research area. For example, Arrian of Nicomedia, whose *Indiká* is largely based on previous scholarly works of the Hellenistic era (another period of major contacts of the Mediterranean world with the Far East), could not avoid to include some notes derived from these contemporary oral sources, merchants, adventures and bold sailors who visited these lands⁹.

The author acknowledges at the introduction of his work that "Eastern commerce is a worthy subject area for future historical inquiry" and he claims "to create the context that future scholars can use to further explore this fascinating subject" (p. 6). McLaughlin in his detailed and readable book has precisely produced such synthetic up-to-date account summarizing all the data available and I hope that his work will encourage the production of a body literature on the global trade and diplomatic contacts in the Antiquity., precisely now when Classical studies are developing here in China and, as it seems, also in India.

Juan Pablo Sanchez

⁸ For example, the importance of Tyre as a silk-manufacturer and cloth dyeing town, lasting for generations as remarked by Procopius (*Secret History*, 25.14 – 5) is already noted by Strabo (16.2.23) and Pliny (*NH* 5.12).

⁹ He mentions elephants (14.5-6), parrots and apes (*Ind.* 15.9) and pearls (*Ind.* 8.9) as a common sight in the Mediterranean markets which attracted his attention.