

ANCIENT ROME - Trade

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Overview One can imagine that, in a state intact for a thousand years or more, there would have been a long and profitable commercial development. Nowhere is that truth clearer than in trade, for Roman trade was from the outset a mainstay of prosperity for the state, and a natural byproduct of the greatly expansive tendencies of the ultimately almost world wide Roman Empire.

Sea trade During the Roman Empire, especially during the period from the first to the end of the third century, C.E., the great majority of Roman trading was carried out on the sea—usually the Eastern Mediterranean, though Roman ships could be found transporting goods as far as India and England. Shipbuilding had reached a peak: efficient production, effective provisions for carrying commodities—from tons of grain, even to iron, and with inclusion for special container devices for amphorae of wine and oil. The cost of sea transportation, which conveyed almost everything produced in the Roman Empire, was estimated to be 60 % lower than that of land transportation, for even though roads were astonishingly good—and the Roman road network was in all 80,000 kilometers in length—road movement was slow, dangers cropped up on all sides, and as a result goods shipment on land was exorbitantly high.

Land trade Trade by land was made valuable by the high level of engineering skills among the Romans. Roads, whether made of concrete—which Roman engineers invented—or of durable cobble stones still drivable in places like northern England—provided a reliable network of land transportation. From the hub of the Empire, Rome itself, the endless flow of foreign commodities, into the port of Rome, were distributed throughout the Empire, to many points inaccessible by ocean transportation. There was, for example, an extensive two way road which followed the coast of the Mediterranean in North Africa for 4800 kilometers, and another road, equally fit for servicing regions far from major ocean trade, which covered 2500 kilometers between the Black Sea and the North Sea. We know, from archeological evidence, that Roman citizens living thousands of miles from the capital lived well off of the trade that entered Rome: select foods, pottery, woolen garments, housing tiles from throughout the Empire.

The place of trade in Roman culture and society The fact, as just hinted, was that the Romans founded their wealth, their comfort, and their prestige on the fruits of their vast trading empire. Wealth from trade was not approved of by all, for Roman aristocrats—for instance, all the senators—turned up their noses at trade and commerce, believing it, as Aristotle had put, a sport for inferior men, concerned only with their self-interest. But wealth from trade could be vast, and was achieved on a democratic basis, for many women entrepreneurs made fortunes in the oil and wine trades.

Readings

Grant, M., *The History of Rome*, London, 1993.

Ball, Warwick, *Rome in the East: Transformation of an Empire*, London, 2016.

Discussion questions

What kind of commodity price oversight was there in ancient Rome? Did merchants and traders set their own prices? Or were they regulated?

Why was it so *very* much more expensive to trade on land than on sea?

What kind of system of weights and measures did the Roman state insist on? How did Roman merchants calculate nautical miles, so that they could invoice their trades?