

# Ancient Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean: Maritime Links of the Kushan Empire ca 50-200 CE<sup>1</sup>

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*In the first two centuries CE, commodities from Afghanistan and traded by way of Afghanistan held a prominent place in the maritime trade of the western Indian Ocean. This paper explores the maritime links between Afghanistan, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf as they appear in the first-century merchants guide *Periplus Maris Erythraei* and second-century epigraphic and archaeological material from Syrian Palmyra, and asks why the maritime routes became attractive alternatives in this period despite the considerable detours constituted by them.*

Modern Afghanistan is categorised by the UN as a “landlocked developing country”, surpassed only by Kazakhstan in terms of distance to the sea. This trivial fact of geography did not prevent the Indian Ocean from playing an important part in connecting ancient Afghanistan with the larger world. The first-century CE Roman glass, bronze and plaster objects from the storerooms excavated at Begram in 1937-1939 (Mehendale, 2011: 168-185, 197-208), only reached the Kabul Valley after being transported from Roman Egypt by way of the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea (Fig. 1). First-third-century tombs from the city of Palmyra in Roman Syria contained Chinese silk (Schmidt-Colinet, Stauffer, & Al-As’ad, 2000), probably brought there by merchants

who travelled to the Kushan Empire by way of the Persian Gulf (Delplace 2003; Healy 1996; Seyrig 1936). Geographical reasons explain why ancient Afghanistan became a node in the overland caravan routes extending across Eurasia. But why did the Indian Ocean become important to the rulers of a landlocked Central Asian kingdom in this period?

## **THE PERIPLUS OF THE ERYTHRAEAN SEA AND THE MARITIME CONNECTIONS OF AFGHANISTAN IN THE MID FIRST CENTURY CE**

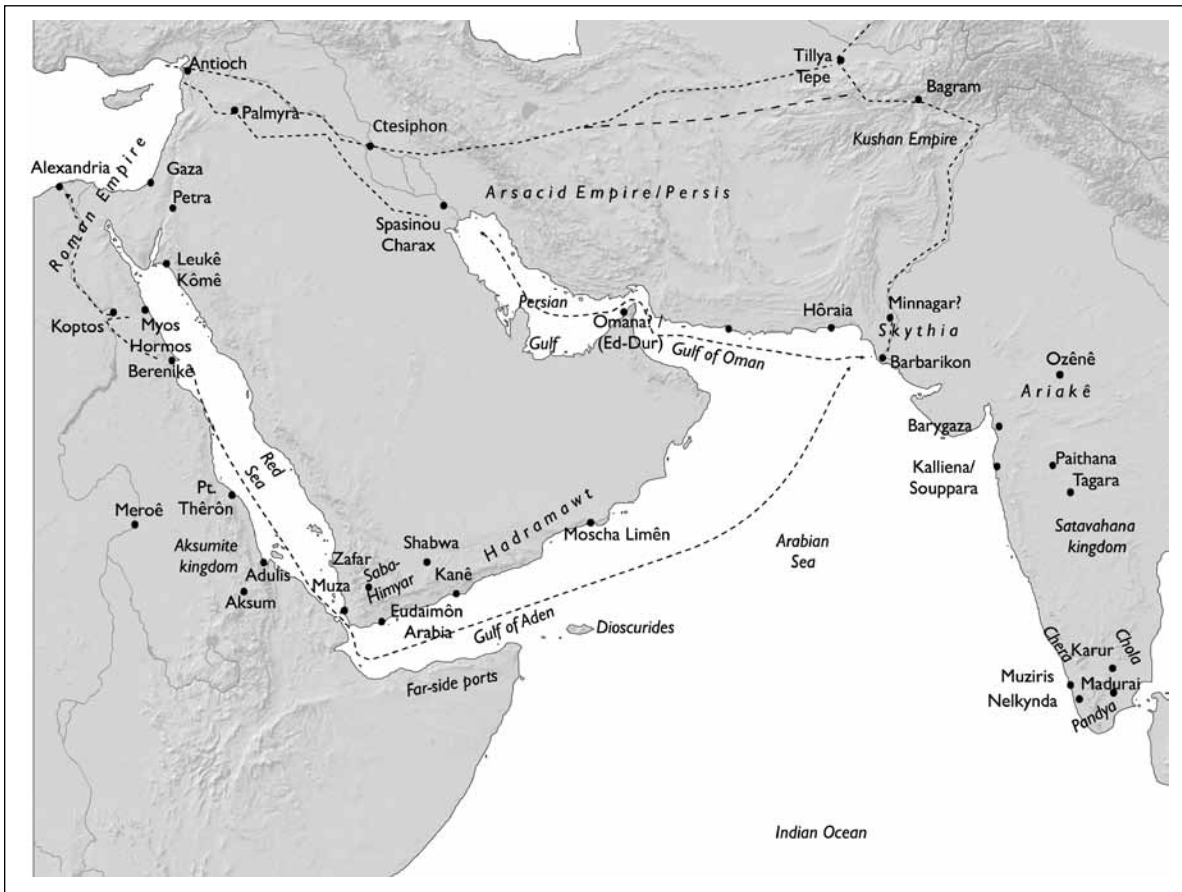
Most of the Mediterranean finds from Begram can be dated to the first century CE (Mehendale 2011: 168-185, 197-208). Our main evidence of Roman trade with the east from this period is from the Roman

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**Fig. 1:** Map showing land and sea routes connecting Begram (Afghanistan) to the western world

Red Sea ports of Berenike and Myos Hormos (Peacock & Blue 2006; Steven E. Sidebotham & Wendrich 1999; Wendrich et al. 2003) and from the anonymous *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greek-language report or handbook describing Indian Ocean trade as seen from Roman Egypt. As the glass vessels from Begram are more or less contemporary with the *Periplus* and have close parallels to glassware from Egypt in terms of style and chemical composition (Menninger 1996; Whitehouse 1989: 96-99; 2001), the trading networks described in the *Periplus* are likely to have been among those that conveyed the Mediterranean objects found

in Begram to ports from which they could reach Afghanistan.

The *Periplus* was composed in the mid first century CE (Fussman 1991; Robin 1991) by a captain or merchant based in Egypt (Casson 1989: 7-8). The text describes the coasts of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, giving details on geography, trade and political conditions. Large parts of the work seems to be based on personal experience or first-hand accounts, including the descriptions of the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and west coast of India (Seland 2010: 15).

The Kushans maintained no coastal presence at the time of the *Periplus*, and



are only mentioned in passing as “the very warlike people of the Bactrians, under a king” (PME 47). The finds from Begram, however, clearly show that they took part in long distance exchange at this date, and the *Periplus* gives relevant information on this trade in the description of their neighbours in the lower Indus Valley, the country called Skythia in the *Periplus* and other Greek texts of this period. This is the way by which the goods in the storerooms from Begram will have reached the Kushan kingdom, after covering approximately 2000 kilometres on or along the Indus river and across the Khyber Pass.

The toponym Skythia identifies the kingdom with the Saka, but the *Periplus* reports that it was ruled by kings of Parthian origin at this time (PME 38). The main port in the region was Barbarikon, at the mouth of the Indus. The capital (*metropolis*) of the kingdom, Minnagar, was situated upriver at a yet unidentified site. The *Periplus* lists textiles, gems probably identified as peridot, coral, the aromatic resin storax, frankincense, glassware, silverware, money and wine as goods, which could be sold there. Roman glass and a coin of Tiberius (ruled 19-37 CE) are among the finds from Begram and Tillya Tepe (Mehendale 2011: 168-176, 197-201; Schiltz 2011:). Silverware, glass and wine-amphora fragments have been found at Taxila (Marshal 1977: 408-409, 451, 517-518, 607-608, 684-689), which will have received its imports by way of the same routes as Begram.

Imported goods were attractive because

they were relatively scarce, and could thus be used as status enhancing and alliance building assets in political processes (Seland 2010: 77-79). Rulers on the Indian Ocean rim seem to have taken keen interest in maritime trade, and to have adjusted their policies with the aim of controlling trade and regulating access to key imports (Seland 2010: 74-78). The king of Skythia was no exception in this respect. The *Periplus* reports that “all the cargoes are taken upriver to the king at the metropolis” (PME 39). An arrangement of this kind does not necessarily imply a royal monopoly of trade, but signifies an effort to control it in order to facilitate taxation and access to attractive commodities. Even though there is no way to know whether the kings in Begram pursued similar policies, it shows that there is no necessary contradiction between the two main interpretations of the Begram hoard as either a royal treasure or a merchant’s depot (Cambon 2011:142-143). Kings in this part of the world and in this period took active interest in trade and in imported commodities.

The return cargoes offered at Barbarikon were plant products: costus, bdellium, *lykion* and nard; minerals: turquoise and lapis lazuli; Chinese yarn and cloth (silk) as well as Chinese pelts (PME 39). The aromatics might have been harvested in large parts of northern India / Pakistan and Afghanistan (Casson 1989: 191-193), including regions controlled by the Kushan kings. Their main assets in this trade, however, were the goods that came from Afghanistan or had to pass by way of Afghanistan. Lapis Lazuli



was mined in Badakshan in northeastern Afghanistan, turquoise came from Nishapur in northeastern Iran (Casson 1989: 194). Both products are likely to have reached the Indus Valley by way of the Begram region. The same goes for the Chinese products, which will have reached Afghanistan by way of the Tarim Basin and Tadjikistan.

### **PALMYRENE TRADE WITH SKYTHIA BY WAY OF THE PERSIAN GULF**

The largest strength of the *Periplus* as a source of information about ancient Indian Ocean trade is also its main shortcoming: the work was written by a single author and was based on his personal knowledge and idiosyncrasies. From the Egyptian point of view, mere shadows are visible of a lively trade between the Persian Gulf, India and Southern Arabia (PME 34-36), which would have been of equal or larger importance in north-western India to the links with the Red Sea. Another glimpse of this network is available from the Syrian city of Palmyra, where inscriptions of the first to third centuries record caravans to the Persian Gulf and maritime connections with the Kushan Empire (Fig. 1).

Palmyra was an oasis settlement in the Syrian Desert, about halfway between the Euphrates and the coast. The earliest reference to Palmyrene trade is in a passage from Appian, describing a Roman attack on the city in 41 BCE, where the Palmyrenes are described as merchants bringing goods from Arabia and India into Roman territory (Appian *B.C.* 1.9). The passage has been

considered anachronistic, reflecting Appian's own time, the second century CE, better than the first century BCE (Edwell 2008: 35; Millar 1994: 321; Sommer 2005: 152). Recent archaeological work has shown that Palmyra was a flourishing city already in the late Hellenistic period (Plattner & Schmidt-Colinet 2010), and in that context, the historicity of Appian's account is less unlikely.

The main evidence of Palmyrene trade with the Indian Ocean is, however, of epigraphic nature. About 35 inscriptions from Palmyra deal with caravans organised by Palmyrene merchants or Palmyrene individuals or communities settled in or doing business in Mesopotamia (Gawlikowski 1996: 142-143; Yon 2002: 263-264). In addition to this there is Palmyrene presence epigraphically attested in Bahrain (PAT 1374), Koptos, Berenike and Tentyris / Denderah in Egypt (Bernand 1984: 146-148, 238-141, 262-163; Bingen 1984; Dijkstra & Verhoogt 1999), Hadramawt in Yemen (Bron 1986) and Socotra in the Arabian Sea (Robin & Gorea 2002: 436).

Fifteen of the inscriptions from Palmyra, dated in the period 88-193 CE mention Spasinou Charax (Gawlikowski 1996: 142-143), the capital of the kingdom of Mesene on the Persian Gulf. Two mention Forat, a town just downstream of Charax (PAT 0262, 1412). This is a clear indication that Palmyra depended on maritime trade, as there would be little reason to go to the Gulf ports in order to connect to overland networks. For comparison, ten inscriptions dated 19 - 247



CE mention the cities of Babylon, Seleucia and Vologesias in middle Mesopotamia (Gawlikowski 1996: 142-143), which would be good places to link up to maritime as well as overland networks.

Some of the trade will no doubt have been indirect, Palmyrene merchants buying products brought from India by Indian, Arabian and Persian Gulf shippers, but three inscriptions also report Palmyrenes who went themselves to the Kushan Empire. PAT 1403 and 2763 were dedicated by merchants returning from Skythia, probably in 157 CE, on ships owned by named, presumably Palmyrene, individuals. The mouth of the Indus was their destination, which by the mid second century was under Kushan control. PAT 0306, dated in the same year, was put up by merchants, who according to a new reading proposed by Christiane Delplace, were returning from the land of the

Kushans (Delplace 2003). The fact that all inscriptions mentioning the Kushan Empire are from the same year could indicate that the voyages were incidental. On the other hand, the well-documented Palmyrene diaspora in Southern Mesopotamia (Yon 2002: 263-264), the existence of a guild of Palmyrene Red Sea-shipowners documented in third-century Egypt (Bingen 1984), the beautiful ship-relief from the tomb of Julius Aureus Marona in Palmyra (236 CE) (Fig. 2) and the presence of a Palmyrene individual acting as satrap of the Mesenian king in Bahrein (PAT 1374), all point towards the Palmyrenes being engaged in maritime trade in the Persian Gulf over time.

The evidence of Palmyrene or other Roman overland trade with Central Asia, on the other hand, is scarce. The two Palmyrene portrait busts, which were found in Merv in 1957 have been shown to have reached the



**Fig. 2:** Ship relief from the tomb of Julius Aureus Marona Palmyra 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE





region in modern times (Parlasca 1969: 183; 1992: 258). Little exists except a reference in Ptolemy's *Geography* to a Macedonian merchant who had sent his agents to the Sera (Chinese) (Pt. *Geo.* 1.12). This is not to say that the overland routes by way of the Parthian Empire were not used, only that our evidence from the first and second centuries relates mainly to the maritime trade and its overland connections.

### **CHINESE TEXTILES FROM PALMYRENE FUNERARY SETTINGS**

It is likely that Palmyrene merchants trading with India and the Persian Gulf would buy the same goods from Skythia as their Egyptian counterparts described in the *Periplus* did, but the only eastern imports archaeologically attested in the Syrian city are Chinese and Indian textiles. Silk is of special interest here, because it is likely to have reached Palmyra by way of the Kushan kingdom, while cotton could have been produced in large parts of South Asia.

Silk has been found in several Palmyrene tower tombs dating from the late first century BCE to the early second century CE (Schmidt-Colinet et al. 2000: 2). Palmyrene tombs were family graves, some of them with a capacity of several hundred burials. Schmidt-Colinet, Stauffer and As'Ad, however, point out that most graves seem to have been used for one to two generations, and that most finds thus belong to the first two centuries CE, although later specimens cannot be ruled out (Schmidt – Colinet et al. 2000:2).

Silk, either as strips and pieces, or as pre-used clothes adapted for the purpose, was employed in the outermost of three layers of textiles covering the mummified remains of deceased Palmyrenes (Schmidt-Colinet et al. 2000: 56-57). The use of silk in the outer, and thus visible, layer of cloth signifies the prestige connected with the imported textiles even in a city where trade with the East must be considered a main economic activity. Most of the silk from Palmyra seems to have been woven in China (Schmidt-Colinet. et al. 2000: 53), but there are also specimens with patterns reflecting local traditions, and composite textiles consisting of silk interwoven with fine wool (Schmidt-Colinet. et al. 2000: 53). This seems to reflect the list of exports from Barbarikon in the *Periplus* mentioning not only silken textiles, but also yarn (*othonion kai nêma sirikon*) (PME 39:13.11-12).

### **WHY AFGHANISTAN AND THE INDIAN OCEAN?**

The literary account of the first century CE *Periplus* combined with the archaeological records from Begram and Palmyra, clearly shows that the Kushan Empire took part in the maritime trade in the western Indian Ocean, albeit indirectly, before the conquest of the Indo-Parthian kingdom in the Indus Valley. This opens the question as to why the maritime routes seem to have been preferred over overland alternatives. After all, goods had to cover approximately 2000 kilometres and cross mountains in order to reach the



coast, where they would be further away from Mediterranean glass workshops and silk consumers than when they started.

Part of the explanation can perhaps be found in transportation costs. In the ancient world, sea transport was in normal cases cheaper than river transport, which in turn was cheaper than overland transport (Erdkamp 1999: 565). Once goods had crossed the mountains they could be transported on the river. Alex Burnes' memoirs report that in the eighteen thirties 700 boats were engaged in Indus navigation between Lahore and the sea, the upriver leg being covered in 60 days utilising sails and a downriver journey taking only 15 days under favourable circumstances (Burnes 1834: 200-201). Arrian's account of Alexander's voyage down the Hydaspes, despite the problems experienced, clearly shows the feasibility of river transport on the Indus in antiquity as well. When goods had reached the Indus delta, they could be transported onwards in ships to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea ports.

A related consideration might have been a wish to cut down on taxes and costs of protection. Strabo (*Geo.* 16.1.27) and Pliny (*HN* 12.63-65) relate how rulers charged merchants at every opportunity along the overland routes of the Euphrates valley and western Arabia. When the Indus valley had become a part of the Kushan Empire, transport from Begram to the coast would take place within Kushan jurisdiction. At the time of the *Periplus*, it must have depended on reasonably good relations between the Kushans and the Indo-Parthian kings, but

once the goods had left Indian Ocean ports, long distances could be covered without having to deal with political authorities.

Older literature emphasise a wish to bypass the Parthian Empire as a reason to engage in Indian Ocean trade. Chinese sources relate a story about envoys being told by Parthian sailors that the voyage by sea to the Roman Empire was too long and dangerous (Hirth 1885: 39), and Procopius reports a diplomatic initiative made ca 530 CE by the Byzantine emperor Justinian towards the Aksumite king, in order to buy silk from the Aksumites rather than from the Sassanians (*Pro. Bell.* 1.20.9). Justinian is also credited with the successful introduction of the silk worm to the Roman Empire ca 552 (*Pro. Bell.* 8.17.1-8).

It should, however, be emphasised, that any wish to exclude the Parthian Empire from the silk trade made sense only from the Roman point of view. We have no sources indicating that the Parthians did not want to trade with the Romans. Indeed, the route by way of Palmyra for a large part ran through territory controlled by them, and Herodian of Antioch relates a letter from Caracalla (211-217) to Artabanus IV, the last Parthian king, where the Roman emperor proposes an alliance, underlines their common interest in textiles and spices, which were, "scarce and smuggled by merchants" (*Hdn.* 4.10).<sup>2</sup>

Although such considerations might have played a role, the main reason to link up to the Indian Ocean trade, was probably because this gave access to a network supplying goods not only from the Parthian



Empire and Rome, but also Southern Arabia, peninsular India and east Africa. A wider range of commodities would be available in larger quantities at Indian Ocean ports, than from itinerant merchants travelling the roads between Afghanistan and Iran. The *Periplus* and the increasing archaeological database of Indian Ocean trade (Tomber 2008; Sidebotham 2012) clearly indicate that the Indian Ocean in this period was a commercial centre of gravity, which would attract the interest of Kushan rulers and traders in the same manner it attracted the interest of merchants based in other faraway locations, such as Mediterranean

Italy (Tchernia 1997) and Syrian Palmyra.

## ABBREVIATIONS

Ancient authors and their works have been abbreviated in accordance with Liddell, H.G., Scott, R. and Jones, H.S. 1940. *A Greek English Lexicon* (with a revised supplement of 1996), 9th edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

*PAT* = Hillers, D.R. and E. Cussini. 2003. *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.

*Inv.* = *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre*. 1930-1949. Damas: Direction Générale des Antiquités de Syrie.

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<sup>2</sup> Σπανίζοντα λανθάνοντά τε δι' ἑμποίων κομισθήσεσθαι.

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