Perceptions from Beyond: Some Observations on Non-Roman Assessments of the Roman Empire from the Great Eastern Trade Routes

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1 Transcontinental Connectivity

Centuries of continuous warfare and successful expansion turned the Roman Empire into the single dominant power in the Mediterranean basin. Yet, although Roman warfare never fully came to an end, the countryside and the two to three thousand cities of the Empire in Italy and the provinces experienced many uninterrupted decades of peaceful prosperity from the beginning of the imperial era onwards. This prosperous Roman world, the orbis Romanus, owed much of its success to an extensive network of communication lines by land and sea, through which it was interconnected and accessible. The development of the imperial transport and communication infrastructure reflects both the pragmatic and systematic approaches of the Romans: Building on existing local lines of communication, the Romans took over, expanded or constructed new roads in the deployment zones and in the countries they had conquered. Thereby, they systematically and consistently linked newly acquired territory with the center. In a next step following the establishment of peace—especially under the Empire—, Roman building programs improved and further expanded traffic connections in the subjected areas incorporated into the road network in order to penetrate the territory of the empire. All elements of this network by land and sea made up an estimated length of around 500,000 kilometers.¹

Nevertheless, even today this network is often thought of as a closed system, covering only the Roman world. But that was clearly not the case. Travel and commerce were by no means hindered by the confines of the Roman

the empire. Even the great military barriers in Britain, on the German frontier and in North Africa were permeable. Roman traffic ways connected to lines of communication into territories well beyond the empire. In most cases, these routes had been in use for centuries before the Roman conquest. They led by land or sea to the north, south or east, and ultimately connected the Mediterranean with the countries on the North and Baltic Seas, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, India and China. Since the conquests of Alexander the Great and the ‘discovery’ of the Monsoon winds in the second century CE, trade relations between the Mediterranean world and the countries of the Far East intensified, and India and China were firmly integrated into the Western concept of the inhabited world, the ‘oikumene’.

The famous medieval copy of an illustrated imperial Roman ‘road map’ (*itinerarium*) known as the ‘Tabula Peutingeriana’ with its depiction of the entire Roman road system from Britannia to the east provides a graphic illustration of this notion. For it shows how, in the east, the network of Roman roads seamlessly continues into non-Roman territories. Moreover, the last sheet of this remarkable document includes, for instance, references to *Sera Maior* (presumably China), the Ganges river (*fl. Ganges*), and the well known ancient seaport of Muziris with its *templ(um) Augusti* on the Malabar coast in south west India. The ‘Tabula Peutingeriana’ therefore displays a network of

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