



chapter three

Expanding Empires – Expanding Trade

The Legacy of Alexander



▲ This Roman mosaic is based on a Greek painting from the time of Alexander. It depicts the Battle of Issos (333 BCE) between Alexander (shown left) and King Darius of Persia (centre).

▼ A Greek merchant ship painted on a cup dating from 540 BCE.



The first millennium before the Common Era saw a great increase in maritime trade around the Mediterranean. This was largely handled by two great seafaring peoples – the Greeks and the Phoenicians. By establishing a network of trading colonies, both dominated large areas of the Mediterranean coastline. In their hands, goods from the East that reached the Mediterranean along the Spice Routes were transported still further west.

However, the ancient Persian Empire (established around 550 BCE) and smaller kingdoms of the Middle East maintained an effective grip on the east-west trade with India and beyond. But, in the Fourth Century BCE, a Greek leader emerged who was to change this. His name was Alexander the Great.

Born in 356 BCE, Alexander became ruler of Macedonia in northern Greece in 336 after the death of his father, Philip. Having swiftly consolidated his father's campaign to control the whole of

Greece, he turned his attention eastwards. The wealth of the trading kingdoms of the Middle East, and in particular the Persian Empire, was more than enough temptation for the ambitious leader. In 334 BCE, Alexander and his armies crossed into Asia to fight a campaign whose successes have passed into legend. By the time of his death in 323 BCE, he had established a Greek empire that stretched from Egypt across Asia to the River Indus of northern India. He was not quite 33 years old.

As Alexander conquered, he also colonized, founding new cities which he populated not only with local peoples but also with Greek administrators, craftsmen and merchants. The Greeks, already experienced international traders, were keen to exploit the possibilities of their new markets and new sources of supply. The city of Alexandria in Egypt, founded by Alexander at the mouth of the River Nile, was to be one of the major distribution and refinement points of Spice Routes trade for several centuries to come. In addition, Greek sailors now had access to the Red Sea and Persian Gulf and so to the west coast ports of India.

After his death, Alexander's empire fragmented but was still largely Greek controlled. The Greek language, philosophy and ideas spread throughout western Asia, while Greek knowledge of the world beyond Europe was vastly increased. Amongst other things came new information on plants and their products, including spices, which formed the basis for Greco-Roman medicine and cosmetics and food flavouring. Theophrastus (372-288 BCE), sometimes known as 'the father of botany', wrote at this time. He was the first person to describe all known plants by categories, list their uses and where they came from.

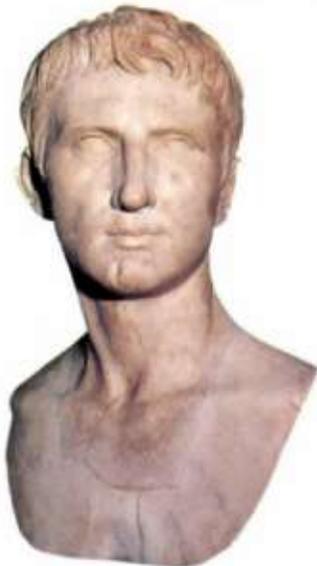
All this knowledge was to be inherited and expanded upon by the next European power to attempt to control the trade routes through the Middle East – the Romans.



▲ Alexander's empire in 323 BCE.

▼ A page from a book called *De Materia Medica* written by Dioskorides, a Roman army physician, in 65 CE. Nearly all the prescriptions contained in the book include at least one spice from Arabia, the Far East or Africa. The tradition for books of this nature dates back to Theophrastus.





▲ *Augustus (63 BCE–14 CE), first Roman emperor.*

The Romans' Quest for Spices

Towards the end of the Third Century BCE, Rome emerged as the main rival to the Greeks in the Mediterranean. By 133 BCE, its territories included all of Italy, Greece itself, much of Spain and parts of North Africa and Turkey. The vast and ever-increasing empire generated huge wealth and the Roman citizens looked towards the East for luxuries on which to spend it.

However, Roman access to the trade from the East was limited. The goods reached them through a series of middlemen and, as a result, were exorbitantly priced. The Parthians, the successors to the Greeks in Persia, held a strong grip on many of the land routes and access to the Spice Routes via the Persian Gulf. So it was to the Red Sea trade that the Romans turned their attentions.

In 30 BCE, Augustus, soon to become the first Roman emperor, made Egypt a Roman province. This was an important move as Egypt, with its port of Alexandria, was one of the main entry points for spices and other luxury goods into the Mediterranean. However, a group of states in southern Arabia (including today's Yemen and Oman) held the

The Incense Road

From about 1000 BCE, long winding camel caravans travelled 2,700 kilometres up the length of the Arabian Peninsula along a route that is known as the Incense Road. They carried frankincense and myrrh from southern Arabia (today's Yemen and Oman) to the markets of the north. Southern Arabia became so rich from this trade that the Romans called it *Arabia Felix* (Arabia the Fortunate). The path of the Incense Road is marked on the map below, which also shows the extent of the Roman Empire in 14CE.



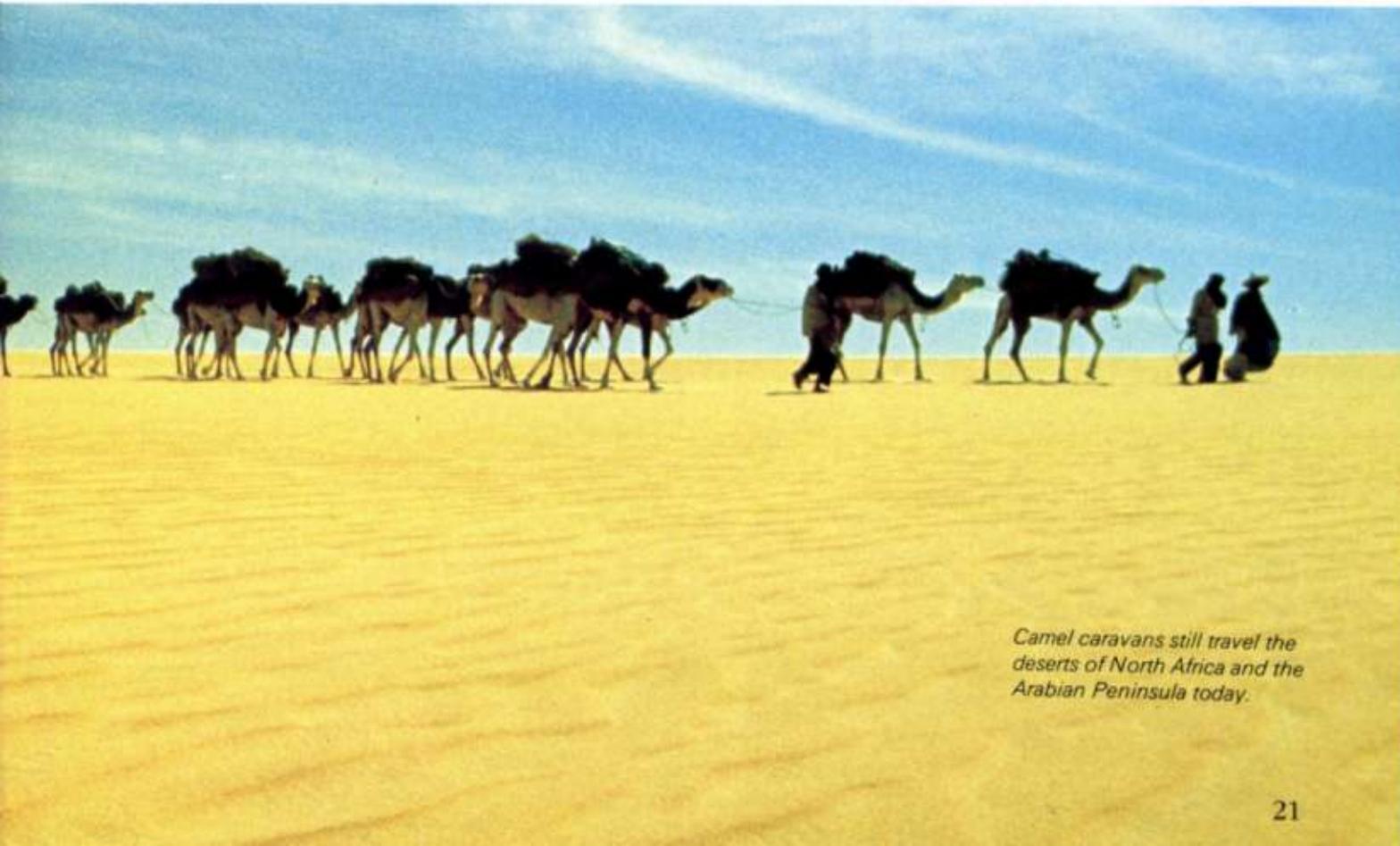
other end of the Red Sea route to India and also the Incense Road. Like the Parthians, they therefore controlled the trade that passed along them. Roman attempts to gain power over this by force failed dismally, and Augustus had to change his policy: he built large new ships and opened up a direct service between Egypt and India.

The early voyages by Roman ships were very dangerous and undertaken by less than 20 ships a year. The journey took two years to complete, the ships hugging the coastline and stopping at many ports along the way. But, by the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (14-37 CE), the Romans had learnt how to exploit the monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean – information first discovered by a Greek sailor, Hippalus, a century before. This completely changed the Roman use of the Spice Routes. Now they could sail direct from Cana to the Malabar Coast of India where the coveted black pepper grew.

Until then, spices had been extremely expensive. The new Spice Route bypassed so many of the middlemen and gave access to such plentiful supplies that the price of spices in the Empire dropped by more than half. Every April the Roman government sent a fleet of 120 large ships from Myos Hormus in the Red Sea to the Malabar Coast, which returned the following March. The whole journey took less than a year. Spices, silks and luxury goods from the East flowed into Europe as never before whilst, in exchange, the Romans sent metals, dyes, cloth, drugs and glassware to the expanding markets of Asia.



▲ This Roman ivory plaque shows a priestess sprinkling frankincense on the altar of the god, Jupiter.



Camel caravans still travel the deserts of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula today.



The Chinese look Westwards



▲ A sacred Chinese Buddhist hanging painted on silk during the Tang Dynasty. The increase in China's foreign trade brought with it new ideas on religion and styles of art.

If the Romans were looking to the East for their luxuries, so too the Chinese were looking increasingly beyond their borders to trade. At much the same time as Rome was emerging as the dominant power in Europe, China was entering an age of great prosperity and progress under the Han Dynasty.

In 221 BCE, the various kingdoms of China had been unified for the first time under the Qin Dynasty but they had been unable to maintain power after the death of the 'First Emperor', Zhang, in 210 BCE. Civil war ensued and it was the Han that emerged victorious in 202 BCE. As China's empire grew under the Han, so did her trade over land and sea.

It was during the reign of the Emperor Wu-di (140-86 BCE) that Chinese expansion resulted in the opening of a major trade route that linked East with West by land. Running through the heart of the Asian landmass, this was the famous Silk Route. Over the next 1600 years it was to be the main rival to the Spice Routes as a channel for international trade.

The Han had pushed into Central Asia to defend their territories from the northern barbarian tribe, the Xiongnu (later known in Europe as the Huns). In doing so, they discovered the huge markets for Chinese goods, such as silk and iron, in western Asia. The Chinese were equally delighted with the exotic items they received in return. Describing the imperial court of this period, the Han historian Pan Ku wrote: 'Precious articles like shining pearls, rhinoceros horns, tortoise shells and emeralds overflowed in the inner palace . . . In short, rare things of various places came from all directions.'

Han power dwindled during the Second Century CE. China fragmented but the trade the Han had built up continued on a limited scale along both the Silk and Spice Routes. When the Empire reunited



under the Sui Dynasty (580-618 CE), the trade links were there to be exploited on an even greater scale and to grow still further under the Tang (618-970 CE). By the Eighth Century, huge ships called at Canton laden with cargoes of spices, ivory, frankincense and other precious goods, making the port one of the greatest in the world.

Ships now came not only from Korea and Indonesia, but from Sri Lanka, India and even the Middle East. Chinese records of the time report that the largest ships came from Sri Lanka. They were 65 metres long and carried as many as 700 men. But, significantly, the most important ships were the 'Persian Argosies' – the ships of sailors who practised the new Muslim religion.



▲▲ *The Silk Route (top) passed through high mountains and across deserts. But it was political unrest and not the difficult terrain that would disrupt Silk Route trade. When this happened, the Spice Routes still provided a channel for east-west trade.*

▲ *This picture of a horse is taken from a stone relief in a Han Dynasty tomb in China.*