Selling Out: The Flourishing of a Luxury Economy in the Elite Moral Atmosphere of the Roman Empire in the First Century C.E.

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Abstract:

This essay examines the moral discourse that exists in the Roman Empire during the early imperial period beginning in the first century C.E. and how it related to the luxury economy that had developed in Rome at this time due to trade with the east. Sources from Pliny the Elder and Seneca tell of a huge consumer market of luxury goods, such as silk, jewels, pearls, and perfumes, but they simultaneously harangue this luxury as it challenged traditional Roman views of proper behavior and self control. However, even with the strong moral discourse which condemned this luxury trade, many important figures, including the Emperor Augustus, famous for his moralism, played a significant role in fostering this trade by developing infrastructure such as roads and ports in eastern areas such as Syria and Egypt, despite the fact that these areas had negative connotations in the Roman mind due to their association with luxurious corruption of proper behavior.
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Introduction

Roman traditional values tended to lean on the side of austerity. Romans were expected to be brave, in control of themselves, and the men were expected to sacrifice their own time for the most noble pursuit of living a life in public office. Roman views on luxury and living an opulent lifestyle also tended to be very negative. However, by the first century C.E. Rome had been expanding for centuries and its wealth had continued to grow immensely. The Romans also found themselves coming into contact with many diverse and often wealthy groups of people. As a result a luxury economy had been developing in the Roman world for centuries by the time of Emperor Augustus and would continue to get stronger. People on all levels of Roman society took to the luxury economy and the goods it offered, and its effects were most powerfully felt among the elite levels of Roman society, even going all the way to the top as many of the most powerful figures in Roman history, such as the emperor Augustus, took deliberate steps to foster this trade through the construction of roads and fortresses throughout the empire which allowed for quicker transportation or trade across longer distances.

By the first century C.E. the Roman Empire had established major trade connections throughout its empire, but it had also established trade with many foreign cultures as far away as Han China. The trade coming in from and going to these places benefited the entire Empire, but it was especially potent in the eastern provinces of the Empire where Rome connected to the Middle East and Asia, and where vast amounts of foreign trade goods poured in. Many of the eastern provinces were officially incorporated into the Roman Empire during the end of the first century B.C.E. and the beginning of the first century C.E. These territories were the doorway through which trade entered the empire and because of this they became of central importance to

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the empire. Many figures throughout all levels of Roman society recognized this and moved almost immediately to build up these provinces and take advantage of their position upon incorporation. Figures such as the Emperor Augustus and his close ally Agrippa built roads and established the Roman military and bureaucracy in these provinces in large part to foster trade and the creation of foreign diplomatic contacts, as one way of increasing the Empire’s revenue, something that was sorely needed after the long period of civil war.² As a result the east became one of the most important centers of power and wealth in the Roman Empire.

In this paper I will examine the traditional Roman moral discourse and the image that it created of how Romans should behave and live their lives. My discussion will begin with an examination of the view of hardworking farmers as the source of Rome’s strongest and bravest men as laid out by Cato the Elder and how this view was challenged by the lifestyle that many upper class Romans were living by the first century C.E. in which they did not do much of their own farming. I will also explore the fact that the prevalence of the luxury economy was problematic as the massive amount of spending on unnecessary luxury items was connected with the Roman idea of softness or mollitia. During the time of Augustus luxury was strongly linked with the east and places such as Egypt and Syria as Augustus used the fact that his rival Mark Antony resided in the east, to say that the extravagance there had corrupted him. However, despite this negative moral discourse on luxury and the east, the Romans readily took to expansion there and developed infrastructure in places such as Antioch, in Syria, and in Egypt which fostered the trade networks which supported the luxury economy.

² Raoul McLaughlin, Rome and the Distant East; Trade routes to the ancient lands of Arabia, India, and China (London: Continuum, 2010), 166.
Traditional Roman Values

At the core of the problem is the fact that the existence of the consumer market as a whole could be seen as an affront to traditional Roman values. The consumer market caused the problems in the traditional Roman view because the market by its very nature entailed that people would be buying things that they did not need, let alone the fact that some of the items could be seen as immoral in themselves, such as sheer silk dresses which became very popular and which are discussed in more detail below. But traditional Roman work ethic was being ignored here as well. This is due mainly to the fact that farming was once seen as the noblest profession a man could have and it was no longer being practiced in the traditional “right” way.

In the introduction to his work *On Agriculture*, Marcus Porcius Cato, more commonly known as Cato the Elder or Cato the Censor, writes of farming and other professions saying:

It is true that to obtain money by trade is sometimes more profitable, were it not so hazardous; and likewise money-lending, if it were as honourable. Our ancestors held this view and embodied it in their laws, which required that the thief be mulcted double and the usurer fourfold; how much less desirable a citizen they considered the usurer than the thief, one may judge from this. And when they would praise a worthy man their praise took this form: "good husbandman, good farmer"; one so praised was thought to have received the greatest commendation. The trader I consider to be an energetic man, and one bent on making money; but, as I said above, it is a dangerous career and one subject to disaster. On the other hand, it is from the farming class that the bravest men and the sturdiest soldiers come, their calling is most highly respected, their livelihood is most assured and is looked on with the least hostility, and those who are engaged in that pursuit are least inclined to be disaffected. And now, to come back to my subject, the above will serve as an introduction to what I have undertaken.3

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3 Cato the elder *On Agriculture* book 1 lines 1-4
This passage was written in the mid-second century B.C.E. and it showed that respect for the hard and honest labor associated with farming was a long established precedent in Roman traditional thinking. As Cato points out, farmers were thought to be stronger, braver, and more honorable than men from other professions. Merchants and money lenders are not looked highly upon and the latter are implied to be dishonest, likely more than an implication for the Roman reader. Pliny, Seneca, and others concerned with traditional Roman morals were outraged when so many moved away from traditional farms, especially because this meant that the stock of brave and honorable Roman men was falling. However, this did not mean that Romans were leaving their farms to become merchants. Although some surly did, and the merchant class as a whole certainly benefitted from the consumer economy, most Romans simply fell into patterns of allowing others to do their farming for them. For example grain importation from Egypt became necessary to support the population of Rome by the first century C.E.

However, by the first century C.E. this trade economy was well established and people across the Roman Empire were enjoying its fruits. Many of the different luxury goods which the trade networks brought in became hugely popular and were in great demand. Everyone wanted to get their hands on silk, jewelry, perfumes, and countless other types of goods and they would often spend small fortunes in order to get them. The explosion of this new consumer market may be looked favorably upon by a modern view, but many in the Roman world were deeply opposed to the sumptuous luxury and, as they saw it, reckless spending of those engaged in this market. Both Pliny, in his *Natural History*, and Seneca in his work *On Benefits* provided examples of the types of wares that could be found as a result of the intercultural trade, but it is not difficult to see that their statements are incredibly critical of many different aspects of the luxury and spending.
The problems associated with this luxury and the lifestyle that people were living, i.e. that they were spending too much on frivolous things and not active in the traditional farming life, fell under the Roman idea of mollitia, meaning softness or effeminacy. To be accused of mollitia meant that a person had failed to act in an “unmanly” way, although this could mean number of things. Cato revealed the importance of living a traditional life style when he reported that the farmers were stronger and braver men and that the best soldiers were farmers. This also implies (not subtly) that those who are not engaged in farming are weaker and more cowardly from living easier lives filled with luxury in which they would not have to work hard and could overindulge. In essence these people had “gone soft” and had been overtaken by mollitia.

But the problems associated with mollitia went beyond the perception of someone who has a lack of courage and strength. Mollitia was also strongly associated with sexual connotations. The idea was that someone who was associated with the effeminacy of mollitia would engage in perverse (by Ancient Roman standards) sexual behavior, such as submitting to another man and being penetrated. It is important to note that what mattered to the Roman’s was not that two men were engaged in sexual intercourse with one another. This cannot be framed, as it might be today, in an anti-homosexual light, as the Romans operated by a completely different set of social norms and beliefs governing sexual understanding and behavior. What mattered to the Romans was that one man had elected to take the submissive role during sex and he was therefore dominated by the other man, which brought shame to himself and his body. The problem was that he had adopted the female role, and in essences surrendered his masculinity and this would have serious implications, as a man’s masculinity was central in all aspects of life both private and public. The negative implications of being associated with mollitia were felt.

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most keenly in the public sphere as it would make a man unfit for public service, which was the
highest and most important role that a Roman elite could undertake.⁵

**Emperor Augustus’ Moralism of the First Century**

Gaius Octavian, the adopted heir of Julius Caesar, became the first emperor of Rome in 31 B.C.E. after he defeated Mark Antony, his rival for power. Octavian was officially given the title of Augustus in 27 B.C.E. and as emperor many of his goals concerned trying to strengthen and reunify the empire which had begun to fray during the civil wars of the late Republic. He encouraged a new moral order that focused largely on family. Augustus demanded proper behavior among his subjects and lived as an example of this, by doing such things as continuing to live in a modest house, as opposed to living in an extravagant palace as later emperors would.⁶ However, Augustus did not suddenly begin his moral campaign after he was made emperor. He had run a huge smear campaign against his rival, Mark Antony, while Antony had been living in the east with Cleopatra where his base of power was. This campaign would associate the east with luxury and decadence and it provides another example of how the moral discourse of the time ran counter to the actions that were being taken in the east, and throughout the empire, in order to take advantage of the trade.

During their rivalry for power in Rome, both Augustus, Octavian at the time, and Mark Antony came to identify themselves with certain gods; Apollo in the case of Augustus and Dionysus for Mark Antony.⁷ Each of these was significant in a number of ways, but the association of Mark Antony with Dionysus, a voluntary one undertaken by Antony, was very important because of how Augustus used it against him, and because of what this tells us about

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⁷ Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 44.
ideas held at the time about the east and the implications of its accusation with decadence.

Antony associated himself with Dionysius because that god was said to be an unstoppable force whose power could overcome any enemy. It is certainly easy to understand why a military and political leader battling for sole power of something like the Roman Empire might want to be seen as unstoppably powerful, but these were not the only qualities associated with Dionysius, and Antony’s choice to associate with him would prove to be a fateful one.

Dionysius, also known as Bacchus is Latin, was one of the Olympian gods of the Greek pantheon. He was the god of grapes and vines and by extension also of wine and drunkenness as well. His followers were members of a mystery cult (meaning their secret rights were not allowed to be known to the uninitiated) and they were often associated with wild and drunken behavior as they would go into states of ecstasy whilst they celebrated their ritual. This became connected with Antony who became associated with a sort of un-Roman eastern wildness.

Efforts of Augustus’ propaganda war are reflected in many different texts including the *Historia Romana* written by Cassuis Dio written in 229 C.E. In the *Historia Romana* Antony is said to have taken to drunkenness after he gained power and he “joined Cleopatra and the Egyptians in general in their life of luxurious ease, until he was entirely demoralized.” Dio goes on to write that a clear difference in demeanor could be seen between Augustus and Antony when they met in order to reach an agreement saying that Augustus acted “in military and Roman fashion and Antony in Asiatic and Egyptian style.” Both of these passages show a clear and negative association between luxury and decadence and the east in general. However, in his

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8 Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 47
10 Casius Dio, Historia Romana, book 48
11 Cassius Dio, Historia Romana, book 48
Pliny the Elder recounts a story that showed Antony and his lover and ally Cleopatra’s decadence. In this story Cleopatra bet Antony that she would be able to spend 10 million sestercies at one dinner banquet. Intrigued as to how this would even be possible Antony wagered that she would not be able. To accomplish her goal, Cleopatra dissolved one of two pearl earrings, said to be the biggest and most valuable ever known (and valued at 10 million sestercies), in vinegar and drank it. This Pliny describes as “the most supreme evidence of luxury.”

The Roman Elite’s View of Wealth and Morals

Augustus was not the only one to decry luxury, especially coming from the east. Among the other writers were Pliny the elder (mentioned above) and Seneca. Gaius Plinius Secundus, commonly known as Pliny the Elder was born in Novum Comum in Northern Italy. He lived from 23 C.E. until 79 C.E. when he was killed during the eruption of Vesuvius, likely by inhaling too much ash, as reported by his nephew Pliny the Younger. He was born into a family of equestrian rank and was given an education in the Stoic philosophy. Both of these, but especially his Stoic education, would have significant effects on his writing and the attitudes contained within. His is credited with many major works including a twenty volume history of the wars between Rome and Germania, and a thirty one volume History of Rome. However his only surviving work is the *Natural History* which can be described as “a comprehensive summation of Roman culture in the first century C.E.”

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12 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, book 9 chapter 58
13 Pliny, *Natural History*, book 9 chapter 58
14 Pliny, Letter 6.16
Lucius Annaeus Seneca, or Seneca the Younger, is in many ways very similar to Pliny. He was born in Corduba, modern day Cordova, in Southern Spain. Like Pliny he was born to an equestrian family. While still young he traveled to Rome where he received a Stoic education as well. Seneca’s Stoic ideologies are very clearly revealed in a number of surviving works. Through such works as *On Mercy*, *On Benefits*, and *On Tranquility of the Mind* Seneca reveals the stoic values of hard work, self control, and the value of engaging in public life, among many others.  

Of the characteristics that these men shared perhaps the two most important are their equestrian class background and their stoic education. The equestrian order was the second highest in Roman society behind the Senatorial order. Inclusion in the equestrian class was based on three criteria birth, wealth, and education. One must be born into the proper family, but in the early republic a family must have at least four hundred thousand sesterces in order to be considered in the equestrian class.

Early in its existence the equestrian class severed a primarily military function. Whereas the Senators were in control of the highest levels of government, the equestrians served as the cavalry soldiers for the military as their name implies coming from *equus* the Latin word for horse. This generally required the equestrians to have some considerable wealth, as maintaining horses fit for battle was not cheap. The equites were therefore something akin to the medieval knights. However, as time went on the equestrians often became more wealth and in many ways more removed from their original purpose of battle. Because of this education became more and more central to the equestrian order.

16 *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*. “Seneca the Younger”
17 *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*. “equites”
Stoicism was by no means the official school of thought for the Roman elite, but many of its views matched up well with traditional Roman values and it was popular among many elites. Stoicism also had many qualms with the prevalence of a luxury economy because many of its principals. Stoics added their voice to the harsh moral atmosphere of the first century C.E. and joined in condemning the frivolous spending and obsession with trinkets that came with the luxury economy.

The philosophic school of thought known as Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium who lived from 334 to 262 B.C.E. It was similar in many respects to other forms of Hellenistic philosophy, many of which were founded around the same time, around the third and fourth centuries B.C.E. These included many well known schools of thought such as Epicureanism and skepticism. These were by no means the only types of philosophic thought that had taken root in the Hellenistic and Roman world, but they were among the most important and widespread.

Stoicism in particular had become a very important and widely accepted school of thought in the Roman world. Among its principal tenets Stoicism preached that people should not allow themselves to be upset, and therefore suffer unnecessary pain, over something that is not truly important, such as the loss of material objects, which are actually meaningless even if people put a lot of value into them. Stoics believed that one should not allow themselves to get upset even in more extreme cases which we may feel warrant some mourning, or perhaps even severe mourning, such as a terrible natural disaster, or the death of a loved one. This is because the Stoics believed that it is not helpful or worthwhile to get upset over something that is out of

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our hands. Death and disaster will occur, it is simply a fact of life, and although some sadness may be natural, Stoics believed that we must learn to accept what we cannot change and recognize that the events themselves are not good or evil, and that we simply assign these values to them. We must move on and live life according to the plan that has been laid out for us, as all life follows a predetermined plan.

One more important aspect of Stoic philosophy fit very nicely with many of the traditional Roman values. It was the idea that Stoics ought to be able to understand what things are valuable and what things are frivolous. This could be applied to all aspects of life and was particularly important to the Stoic understanding of how a person should live his or her life. Too much opulence, in fact much at all, would be seen as a very bad thing as it would mean that the person has lost sight of what is important a now focuses too much on hoarding material objects.

This aspect of Stoicism is very clear in the writings of Pliny and Seneca. They saw the extravagance brought in by the trade economy as inappropriate due to their stoic way of thinking, but also as an affront to traditional Roman values, particularly those of austerity and self control. For example Seneca chastises some of his fellow Romans for their expensive tastes by observing that they have “crystal vessels, whose price is enhanced by their fragility, for among the ignorant the risk of losing things increases their value instead of lowering it, as it ought. I see murrhine cups, for luxury would be too cheap if men did not drink to one another out of hollow gems the wine to be afterwards thrown up again.” Most people living in Roman society would not have enough money to take advantage of the trade goods and live opulently, but even those who did have the funds, such as the senators and equites, were had developed a tradition of austere and

19 Bispam, Edinburgh Companion, 374.
21 Seneca, On Benefits, book 7 section 9
strict living that the luxury of the first century went against. Roman men were expected to live simply and devote much of their time to hard work, especially in the public sphere of politics, assuming they were in the right class. To spend opulently on yourself was seen as offensive and a failure to control yourself and abstain from luxuries.

Self control was one of the most important personal values to the Romans. Roman men were expected to exercise self control in all aspects of their life. This would include how they spent their money, particularly meaning that they were able to refrain from buying things that were not needed or seen as excessive. But this idea of self control extended to all aspects of life as well. Romans were expected not to eat or drink too much and not to engage in an excess of sexual activity. Even excessive love was seen as bad. A Roman man who loved his wife too much could be criticized for failing to control his emotions and allowing himself to become a slave to them. Self control was so important because as leading Romans saw it “their capacity for self control legitimated the control they exercised on others who were, it was implied, unable to control themselves.”

Men also came under criticism as they began to wear lighter eastern style clothing instead of the traditional togas. These were not see through and therefore not criticized for being immoral, but rather for being very extravagant, as they were often made very colorful after being reworked in the Roman shops. This was thought of as an affront to the traditional Roman values of austerity and self control. Pliny wrote of the matter complaining that

Nor, in fact, have the men even felt ashamed to make use of garments formed of this material [silk], in consequence of their extreme lightness in summer: for, so greatly have

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manners degenerated in our day, that, so far from wearing a cuirass, a garment [toga] even is found to be too heavy. The produce of the Assyrian silk-worm, however, we have till now left to the women only.\textsuperscript{24}

This developing culture of extravagance was criticized on many levels. Women who wore the transparent dresses were chastised for their immodesty, but their fault was seen as larger than that as well. Seneca wrote about such women calling them immoral, but not just for their style of dress, he also criticizes the vast sums of money that people spent to obtain these and ostentatiously display themselves, saying

\begin{quote}
I see ladies’ silk dresses, if those deserve to be called dresses which can neither cover their body or their shame; when wearing which, they can scarcely with a good conscience, swear they are not naked. These are imported at a vast expense from nations unknown even to trade, in order that our matrons may show as much of their persons in public as they do to their lovers in private.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

This passage reveals how the women who wear these dresses offend the traditional Roman mind. The fact that these dresses do not cover their bodies allows them to be seen essentially naked in public. This is problematic because, as Seneca points out, sex and sexuality, including female nudity, is something that is relegated to the private sphere of life and should be shared only with one’s lover. The moralists of the age would view the fact that women wearing these clothes in public as a brazen and shameless act. This may not be too surprising as much of the modern western world considers public nudity to be inappropriate and something as simple as public kissing may prompt the response “get a room,” reflecting the notion that these things belong to the private sphere. But this was very problematic for the Romans because women, like men, were expected to control themselves and act in a morally upright way. Roman matrons, the female heads of the household, were very much expected to act as exemplars of fidelity (to their

\textsuperscript{24} Pliny, \textit{Natural History}, book 11 chapter 27. Retrieved from Perseus Digital Library. Produce of the Assyrian silk worm refers to Assyrian style dresses

\textsuperscript{25} Seneca, \textit{On Benefits}, book 7 chapter 1 paragraph 9. retrieved from Project Gutenberg. Remark about unknown to trade may reflect lack of direct diplomatic contact
husbands) and moral righteousness. When these and other upper class women began wearing
the sheer dresses in public, especially in such large number, it marked for many, such as Seneca,
a major failure to uphold traditional Roman values.

Clothing was not the only issue for the Stoic moralists. Jewels such as diamonds, rubies,
emeralds and others became wildly popular. Pearls became the stone of choice among the
women in Roman society. They became so popular among women in all classes of society that
Pliny felt compelled to criticize, saying:

and now, at the present day, the poorer classes are even affecting them, as people
are in the habit of saying, that "a pearl worn by a woman in public, is as good as
a lictor"

Perfumes and other fragrant materials also became very popular. At first these were used
primarily for religious reasons including burning incense at funerals and anointing bodies or
other ritual objects. One of the most important, and expensive, material used in religious
anointing was an oil called nard, which became liked with the symbolism of preparing a body for
burial. Frankincense and myrrh, from Arabia and Africa were also high valued, often as much as
gold of silver. As the trade routes with the civilizations to the East were solidified and more
goods flooded into the empire these fragrant materials became more popular for personal use.
Both men and women used perfumes and oils in order to make themselves smell more appealing
at a time when bathing was relatively infrequent among much of the population. Men took to
using scented hair oils, with the popularity of this trend rising during and after the first century
C.E. Like so many of the other opulent consumer fashions that were gaining popularity since
their influx of foreign trade the use of scented oils and perfumes came under attack by critics

27 Pliny, Natural History, book 9 chapter 56.
28 McLaughlin, Rome and the distant East, 61
who believed the behavior to be reckless and overly indulgent. Again Pliny is one of the most outspoken critics, and he warns people not to allow themselves to be swayed by the scents of others perfumes and fall in love for that reason alone.29

Rome imported a great many other commodities as well. These included as timber, stone (for building), ivory and tortoise shell, and spices, among a great many other things. Rome paid for many of these imports directly with minted coins, usually gold or silver, and sometimes copper as well. Pliny complained about the rate at which Roman coinage was flooding east saying:

At the very lowest computation, India, the Seres, and the Arabian Peninsula, withdraw from our empire one hundred millions of sesterces every year—so dearly do we pay for our luxury and our women.30

and:

In no year does India drain our empire of less than five hundred and fifty millions of sesterces, giving back her own wares in exchange, which are sold among us at fully one hundred times their prime cost.31

There appears to be a significant trade imbalance in the Roman imports of foreign luxury goods, but it must be remembered that these lines both come to us from the author Pliny, who clearly had an axe to grind when it came to the new Roman opulent spending, especially when it came to women. Although Rome did send vast sums of money to foreign kingdoms, as shown by a number of wreaked trade vessels found off the coast of India which carried large cargos of coins,32 it had thriving pre-modern industries of its own which exported goods all over the Empire, and along the eastern trade routes as well.

Diversity of the Roman Economy

There exists in the study of the Ancient Rome a debate over what the Roman economy looked like and how it functioned. One of the most important works on the subject is the book *The Ancient Economy* by M.I. Finley. In this book Finley argued that the ancient Roman economy was an agricultural one, which depended almost entirely on agricultural production and consumption as well as the taxes on agricultural goods as its main source of revenue.\(^{33}\) However, in recent times many classicists and historians have come to question whether this is true. Scholars such as Helen Parkins, Raoul McLaughlin, and Jeroen Poblome, among many others, have all written works which challenge the view of the stagnant agricultural economy. Although none argue that Finley’s point is completely false and that agriculture was not very important, they all argue that the Roman economy was much more diverse than Finley’s argument allowed.

The understanding of the Ancient Roman economy has evolved to include the importance of intercultural trade, that is, trade with cultures and kingdoms outside of its own imperial borders, and Roman industry to the economy. Here it is important that I underline the fact that this does not mean that the Roman economy should be considered to be something along the lines of a modern industrial society. The term “Roman industry” is used for convenience and refers to artisanal and craft production on multiple levels including home, small town and city wide production.\(^{34}\) The Roman economy must be understood as falling in between the levels of total agricultural economy, and a modern industrial economy. We must find a balance between “The primitivism and the modernist, no-trade or long-distance trade, autarky or integrated

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markets, technological stagnation or development, economic stagnation or growth.”

Agriculture did not lose its importance, but the importance of its practice on a personal level did fade for many Romans. Instead their focus often shifted to the trade economy, not to become merchants, but consumers. This became a major aggravation for many who saw participation in the luxury economy as shameful. But is seems that these traditional values were not enough to deter the development of and the participation in the luxury economy.

This luxury economy included a great deal of items, but one of the most important items traded along the silk route was cloth. Silk was the most the most famous of these, and with good reason, as it was widely sought after in markets throughout the trade network, not just in Rome. However, the Romans did have a very large appetite for East Asian silk. The silk was manufactured in China and often traded as tribute to different groups on the Chinese frontier, in particular the Xiongnu, when the Chinese were unable to subdue militarily. The Chinese were forced to make peace with the Xiongnu Confederation through a reciprocal trade agreement. Through this agreement the Chinese sent massive amounts to the Xiongnu alone. One estimate put the amount of silk sent to the Xiongnu for the year 1 B.C.E. at “370 garments, 30,000 rolls of silk, and 30,099 pounds of silk floss.”

The Chinese also traded silk with many of the other cultures in the area including the Kushan, and Bactria, as well as the area of Sogdiana to the north of the Bactrian Region. From here the silk would travel along the usual routes; either over land through the Parthian Empire and on to the Eastern Roman territories, or they would make their way into India and from their travel either to Arabia, or directly to Roman Egypt. Silk became so widely imported by Rome that, even though the Romans knew little of the Chinese,

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35 Poblome, Comparing Ordinary Craft Production, 491.
36 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Year One, 12.
they came to be known as the Seres, or silk people.\textsuperscript{37} The idea of the Seres was well known enough to merit a short chapter in book six of Pliny’s \textit{Natural History}, the title of the book being (in Pliny’s typical wonderfully succinct manner) “An Account of the Countries, Nations, Seas, Townes, Havens, Mountains, Rivers, Distances, and Peoples Who Now Exist or Formerly Existed.” Even in this chapter devoted to them very little is said about the Seres themselves. They are said to be from lands far east and to be “of inoffensive manners, but, bearing a strong resemblance therein to all savage nations, they shun all intercourse with the rest of mankind, and await the approach of those who wish to traffic with them.”\textsuperscript{38} No other characteristics are given about their culture and the rest of the chapter is devoted to other races and various aspects of the landscape. Pliny does mention that the Seres are the people who make a cloth (silk) that the Romans are very fond of, taking time here to cast his moralizing slant on the situation, and to mention the Roman industry that developed around the reworking of this cloth into lighter sheer forms (discussed below) by describing the Seres as the people who are “so famous for the wool that is found in their forests. After steeping it in water, they comb off a white down that adheres to the leaves; and then to the females of our part of the world they give the twofold task of unraveling their textures, and of weaving the threads afresh. So manifold is the labour, and so distant are the regions which are thus ransacked to supply a dress through which our ladies may in public display.”\textsuperscript{39}

The Romans were not just consumers of silk. A major Roman industry developed to process the incoming fabric into a form more suitable to Roman tastes. This was done mainly

\textsuperscript{37} Metropolitan Museum of Art, \textit{Year One}, 12.
\textsuperscript{38} Pliny, \textit{Natural History}, book 6, chapter 20
\textsuperscript{39} Pliny, \textit{Natural History}, book 6 chapter 20
through the reweaving of the fabric to make it much lighter than the relatively heavily silk that came in from China.\textsuperscript{40} Eventually changing Roman styles came to produce a silk that was sheer and often very colorful. It became incredibly popular throughout the Roman Empire at first with groups such as prostitutes, but eventually these translucent dresses were adopted by women in the “respectable” classes of Roman society.\textsuperscript{41} Many came to criticize this new trend as Roman women were expected to cover themselves in a highly modest fashion, but it became too popular among the new luxury crazed Roman culture of the first century to be stopped. In fact, it was well known that Cleopatra, the last Ptolemaic ruler and consort to Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, wore a transparent silk dress.\textsuperscript{42} Perhaps the most famous of these is Cleopatra who is described in Marcus Annaeus Lucanus’ \textit{Pharsalia}

laden she lay On neck and hair with all the Red Sea spoils, And faint beneath the weight of gems and gold. Her snowy breast shone through Sidonian lawn which woven close by shuttles of the East the art of Nile had loosened.\textsuperscript{43}

One of Rome’s largest industries was in cloth, which may seem surprising as the ancient cloth industry is usually associated with Chinese Silk, because of its dominance along the silk route. As mentioned Rome developed a huge industry based around the re-weaving and dying of imported Chinese silk, but the Roman cloth industry went far beyond this. Egypt had long been a producer of fine cotton cloth, which it is still renowned for, and often sent this east for trade along with woolen products, often rugs.\textsuperscript{44} According to historian Jeroen Poblome the Roman textile industry was extensive and made a number of products including “all kinds of clothing.

\textsuperscript{40} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 148.
\textsuperscript{41} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 148.
\textsuperscript{42} Metropolitan Museum of Art, \textit{Year One}, 12.
\textsuperscript{43} Lucan, \textit{Pharsalia}, book 10
\textsuperscript{44} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 68,86-87.
interior decoration including bedrooms, and practical items such as ropes, sacks, covers and sails. Poblome points out that the Roman Empire had an extensive industry which manufactured clay containers, called amphorae (singular- amphora) which were used primarily for transporting foodstuffs, such as oils, wine, or other goods.

Silk may have been one of the largest imports, but there were many other items that the Romans came to covet as well, and many of these items were also criticized by many in Roman society because of their lavish nature. Precious gemstones and pearls became very popular in Roman society among both men and women who wore them as status symbols. The men often wore these stones in the form of engraved signet rings which were made from a variety of materials such as emeralds, diamonds, jasper, and many other precious and semi-precious stones. These gemstones came from all over the Roman trade network many of them coming from Arabia and India, but Rome also mined many of its own gemstones and they were circulated throughout the empire and exported them to other cultures along the trade routes. One semi-precious stone that became very popular in Roman society was fluorspar a gemstone from Iran used to make serving vessels and drinking goblets.

This diverse trade made the eastern provinces of the Empire very important because they sat on the border than linked the Roman Empire to the other cultures, such as Arabia, India, and China. Many officials in the Roman Empire realized the importance of the eastern provinces and moved to establish Roman institutions in these provinces in order to bolster trade and encourage diplomatic contacts, especially in the first century C.E. This is evident in the province of Syria in the city of Antioch which sat along the overland trade routes into the Middle East, and with

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45 Poblome, Comparing Ordinary Craft Production, 492.
46 Poblome, Comparing Ordinary Craft Production, 492.
47 McLaughlin, Rome and the Distant East, 150.
Egypt which contained some of the major sea routes to Arabia and India through the Red Sea. These areas make excellent examples of how the diverse and intercultural trade economy first came to be and how it was continually developed despite the fact that traditional attitudes towards such things might make its development seem unlikely.

Ancient Antioch: Pre-Roman History and Background

The city of Antioch and the Syrian province provides one of the best examples of the diverse Roman economy and the intentional measures undertaken by certain leaders, especially during the Augustan era to take advantage of its position along one of the most important trade routes of the ancient world. It would become one of the major economic hubs of the Roman Empire, but its importance did not begin with its official incorporation into the Roman Empire in 64 B.C.E. Since its founding in the year 300 B.C.E. by Seleucus I, Antioch played an important economic role. Antioch’s development was not that of a small village experiencing haphazard and relatively unintentional growth until one day it found itself a large and developed enough area to call itself an important city. The city was built completely from scratch but was founded over the already existing village of Bottia. Once founded the city’s design and construction followed a premeditated plan that would develop the city into a key strategic site.

Antioch was intentionally designed and built to serve as an important strategic location, given that its location would make it an excellent base for trade, as well as exercising control of the region though military occupation. Antioch was one of four cities designed and founded by Seleucus I for the purpose of solidifying control of the region. The other “sister cities” were Seleucia Pieria, Apamea, and Laodicea-on-the-Sea. Although all of these cities were very

49 Downey, History of Antioch, 69.
important to the Seleucid Empire, established by Seleucus I, Antioch would quickly become one of the most important cities in the area, rising above the others, even Seleucia Pieria which was the royal headquarters and capital of the region. These cities were designed in the image of the Greek *polis* and were often populated by a mix of Greek, Macedonian, and local Syrian people. It was often a common practice for Alexander the Great and his generals who took over parts of his former kingdom, such as Seleucus, to encourage people from the Greek work to settle in these new areas.

Antioch continued to flourish under the Seleucid rulers. Although it would not come to be ruled by Rome until 64 B.C.E. Antioch, and the whole of the Seleucid Empire, came into conflict with Rome and its expanding empire relatively early in its existence. Under Antiochus III, who ruled from 223 to 187 B.C.E. the Seleucids declared their support for Rome’s greatest enemy, Hannibal. Rome eventually prevailed and the Seleucids were dealt a major blow. Their empire would continue to exist for some time, but the Seleucids and Antioch were forced to pay heavy annual tribute to the Romans, which hurt them economically but was even more detrimental to their pride.

The successor of Antiochus III, his son Seleucus IV, focused much of his energies on trying to reorganize the territories of his empire in order to meet the demands of the Roman tribute. This reorganization may have even streamlined trade and helped the region to become an even more economically powerful area, and may have helped Antioch in the long run, as the Romans would be able to take advantage of the new organization by the time they arrived much later.

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later. The Seleucids would likely not have seen much of the benefit, as it went immediately to Rome as tribute.

One of Antioch’s greatest pre-Roman expansions took place under Seleucus’ IV brother, Antiochus IV, who took the throne in 175 B.C.E. and ruled until 163 B.C.E. Antiochus IV is one of the most interesting of the Seleucid kings. He could be considered in many ways a visionary for his extensive building projects and social policies which he created in an attempt to rebuild (or even construct in the first place) a unified Seleucid identity in order to strengthen the empire in the face of the defeat at the hands of the Romans. However, he is also called “Antiochus the Mad” by some ancient writers, which seems to be linked to his supposed eccentric behavior.

Antiochus IV was also known as the “second founder” of Antioch because his building projects focused on this city, which had become the capital of the Seleucid Empire and the royal home by this time. His largest contribution to the city was the creation of a new quarter called Epiphania which expanded the city size significantly and allowed it to support a larger population. He also built a number of individual structures such as temples, the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus chief among them, and an agora, a sort of public gathering space.

Part of Antiochus’ “madness” may have been due to that fact that he had a great enthusiasm for Roman and Greek culture and he sought to bring in many elements of these to Antioch. His fondness for these cultures was due to the impression they had on him while he was a hostage of the Roman’s living in the city of Athens. The term hostage may seem very harsh, but exchanging a member (often a son) of the royal family to live with the leaders of another

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54 Downey, History of Antioch, 95-97.
55 Strabo, Geography, 16.2.4.
56 Downey, History of Antioch, 99-101, 104.
57 Downey, History of Antioch, 97.
nation was a common practice of good will in many ancient cultures. However, the arrangement was not completely innocent; as the person was being held as collateral should the other nation choose to go back on any arrangements that had been made. The experience had a profound effect on him. According to the Greek historian Polybius, writing in the second century B.C.E., Antiochus had some peculiar habits, such as wandering about town trying to solicit votes from his people in order to be elected to different Roman public offices, such as aedile or tribune (a strange thing for the king of the Seleucid Empire to be doing). He was also said to join parties of young men who were carousing should he happen upon one. Polybius also writes that he stole from the court and would often consume himself with matters of luxury as his favorite places to frequent were gold and silver smiths, and his favorite topic of discussion was art.\(^{58}\)

Antiochus was particularly fond of the gladiatorial games and Roman spectacle. He brought both of these to Antioch and regularly held games of his own. These were often accompanied by lavish processions which were supposed to demonstrate the wealth and power of the Seleucids, as well as Antiochus himself. However, although the practice of having Roman style gladiatorial games did eventually catch on, it was something that made him very unpopular at first, as many people were angered by the expense and pomp associated with the games.\(^{59}\) Antiochus also adopted the idea of the leader cult, which had not yet caught on in Rome as these were still the days of the Republic. He sought to fashion himself as a living god in the hopes of bolstering this plan of unification of the Seleucid people.\(^{60}\)

\(^{59}\) Livy, 41.20
\(^{60}\) Downey, *History of Antioch*, 96-98.
Antioch Under Rome

The second major development of the city of Antioch would take place under the Roman Empire and would be focused on the few decades leading up to the year one. The major contributors were the Emperors Augustus and his successor Tiberius, Augustus’ son-in-law Agrippa, as well as King Herod of Judea. Had become a Roman province in 63 B.C.E. after in was conquered by Pompey the Great. The city had suffered significantly since the reign of Antiochus IV due to the general decline of the Seleucid Empire but also to war, and even more so to earthquakes which had ravaged the region. Many parts of the city were in disrepair and attempts to repair and expand the city had begun under Pompey in 64 B.C.E, but these were interrupted by the civil wars, first involving Julius Caesar, and then between Augustus and Mark Antony. Once Augustus defeated Mark Antony at the battle of Actium he launched a major campaign across the empire to rebuild and promote peace, as well as cement his rule in the process. Antioch was one of many cities that was targeted due to its importance and due to the fact that it fit nicely with Augustus’ plans to spread a peaceable and progressive image and became a major site in the Augustan building plans.

One of the most important legacies of these building projects was the construction of a major road through the city, which was something akin to a modern main street. The road was two Roman miles long and, although it did not expand the city directly as it was built within the existing boundaries, it did help to expand the city’s reputation as it was considered one of the wonders of the region and brought many visitors to Antioch. The long road also provided a

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61 Downey, History of Antioch, 169.
63 Downey, History of Antioch, 169.
64 Downey, History of Antioch, 173-174.
great location to set up shop and engage in trade with both the local residents and the visitors coming into the city.

Under the Roman Empire Antioch experienced a general expansion of the city including the creation of another new quarter, which was ordered by Agrippa. In fact Agrippa ordered many of the projects which expanded and improved the city. He ordered the construction of a number of baths, and expanded the number of seats in the theater. Agrippa also cleared and repaired the hippodrome, a stadium for chariot racing, and restored it to proper working order after it had been damaged by an earthquake some time before.65

Aside from specific structures, which were usually of a public nature, many of the Roman programs involved a general beautification of the city. Tiberius, in particular, is credited with many projects that helped improve the city artistically. He added roofed colonnades along the main road which had already been built. He also improved the look of many existing structures by adding such things as reworked marble exteriors, or adding mosaic works in the classic style that has now become so well associated with Roman art. He also added a great number a statues throughout the city, which were usually bronze or marble. The walls were also extended, although to what extent is disputed because different sources suggest that significant portions of the wall had already been completed under the Seleucid Empire, while others attribute the bulk of the work to the Romans.66

One of the most important structures in to the city was its mint. Here the city was able to produce that was circulated throughout the whole region, and brought many traders to the city. Antioch had had its own mint for centuries before the Romans had arrived. Many of the Seleucid

65 Downey, History of Antioch, 171-172.
66 Downey, History of Antioch, 174, 177-178.
kings relied on Antioch’s mint in order to keep currency flowing thorough their empire. Once under the rule of the Roman Empire the mint at Antioch retained its importance to the region, and in some ways gained an imperial importance as it too became a piece in Augustus’ plan to spread his desired image throughout the empire, this time quite literally. Augustus allowed the mint to continue producing its traditional silver coins for a few years, but gradually he replaced the design of those coins with ones bearing his own portrait, and which were dated based on the beginning of his reign. These coins no doubt played a powerful propagandistic role for Augustus, and aided him in spreading a specific image of himself throughout the empire.

The mint at Antioch dominated the coinage production in the Roman Eastern Empire with the other notable coinage production site at the city of Caesarea in Cappadocia, in modern day Turkey. The mint continued to produce coins, dealing especially in silver coins, for the Roman Empire until the middle of the third century when the city was captured by Sapor I. The city would eventually be retaken and the mint would resume its work, but it lost much of its dominance due to the fact that a number of other imperial mints had been established in cities throughout the region by that time. However, in an ironic return to normalcy, by the end of the third century command over the production of silver coins would return to Antioch and Caesarea. Unfortunately for Roman and these cities this was due more to the debasement of the value of these coins and the economic struggles of the Empire, rather that the outright economic strength of these two cities.

Long before the Romans took control of the city Antioch had been a vibrant multicultural center. It had strong ties to the Greek and Macedonian traditions though its founder Seleucus I

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67 Downey, History of Antioch, 166.
who was one of Alexander the Great’s generals. After Alexander’s death his empire was carved up and the Seleucid Empire was formed in what is now much of Asia Minor and Syria.\textsuperscript{69} Along with Seleucus’ men many other Greek and Macedonian colonists came to the newly “Hellenized” region. A sizable Jewish community also existed in its own section of the city, and of course there was a large local Syrian population as well.\textsuperscript{70} Once the city was incorporated into the Roman Empire, its population was bolstered and diversified even further. The city became the home of a Roman garrison and these soldiers often brought their families. Furthermore a large number of administrators were also sent to the city.\textsuperscript{71}

The addition of the Roman troops and officials helped to draw in many non-Romans and Roman citizens who were not sent on official imperial or bureaucratic business, but simply wanted to take advantage of the new opportunities, and especially the new security in the area provided by the garrison. The bureaucracy and its links to the officials and Roman law system also encouraged visitors and made the city an even more appealing destination for those who wished to do business.\textsuperscript{72}

The presence of Roman officials also attracted many people who wished to establish ties with the Empire on behalf of their own kingdoms, either diplomatic or economic, but who did not become residents. The city’s position in the near east meant that it fell relatively near the edge of the Roman Empire and because of its size and importance, it made a logical place for foreign emissaries to visit in order to establish relations with the powerful and wealthy Roman empire. Diplomats and traders came to Antioch and cities like it from many different nations in

\textsuperscript{70} Antioch, \textit{Oxford Encyclopedia of Greece and Rome}
\textsuperscript{71} Downey, \textit{History of Antioch}, 169.
\textsuperscript{72} Downey, \textit{History of Antioch}, 169.
order to establish contact with the Romans. These people came from such places as Arabia, Persia, and many other kingdoms and regions scattered throughout the Middle East. These contacts were not limited to the Middle East and many emissaries arrived from places as far away as India and even inner Asia.  

Estonian Sea Routes

By the first century C.E. the Roman Empire had long established trade routes which linked it to many places around the world. Much of these extra-imperial trade routes traveled east in order to link Rome with the many wealthy kingdoms which lay in the Middle East and Asia. The most important trade contacts that the Roman Empire developed were with Arabia, India, and China. However, Rome did not always trade directly with these nations; instead eventually receiving the goods through a number of other cultures who acted as middle men, as was especially true in the case of trade with China. These cultures were very important, not just because they acted as the vehicle that allowed the goods and money, which at this time would be coins minted from precious metals, but also because they often engaged in the mutual exchange of ideas and culture that resulted from trade. They were not only influenced by the goods, and ideas that traveled though their lands, but played an active part in adding their own culture to the mix as well.

Many of these cultural ideas were religious. A number of different religious traditions began to make their way into the Roman Empire as contact and trade between Roman and the eastern kingdoms. Among these were such traditions as Mithraism and Zoroastrianism, both religious traditions which would become influential throughout parts of the Roman Empire.

Mithraism would become very popular among the Roman army, which became the major vehicle which facilitated the cult’s spread. But many interesting ideas traveled east as well, including ideas about the Romans themselves which are reported in the official Chinese document the Weilue written between 239 and 265 C.E. by Yu Huan including a description of the capital of Rome as being several thousand li (one li is calculated as 415.8 meters\(^75\)) and the Romans themselves are said to have many incredible skills such as the ability to “produce fire from their mouths, bind and then free themselves, and juggle twelve balls with extraordinary skill.”\(^76\)

However the most interesting description of the Romans is one which states that “the common people are tall and virtuous like the Chinese, but wear hu (‘Western’) clothes. They say they originally came from China, but left it.”\(^77\) This is very interesting as it seems to be a direct, if not slightly misunderstood, reference to the Roman foundation myth in which the hero Aeneas fled Troy after its fall and eventually settled in Italy where he established the line that would eventually found the city of Rome. Troy was in modern day Turkey, not China, but it is not difficult to think that the Chinese being told this story of a man who came from eastern lands before settling much farther west might connect this story with their lands. The Chinese also understood the Da Qin (Rome) to be a great nation because of its sheer size if nothing else and connecting themselves with such a kingdom (as they understood it), especially by claiming that such a people’s greatness came from being Chinese, could have played to certain egos.

One of the best examples of direct trade between Rome and one of the other major empires, as opposed to receiving the goods through one of the intermediaries, was the trade

\(^76\) Yu Huan, “section 11 Da Qin” from Weilue translated by John E. Hill, retrieved from http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/weilue/weilue.html#section11
\(^77\) Yu Huan, “section 11 Da Qin” from Weilue translated by John E. Hill, retrieved from http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/weilue/weilue.html#section11
routes to India. Interestingly the direct trade routes were sea routes, although much trade did reach the Roman Empire’s eastern provinces by traveling over land through the intermediaries as well. First contact with the Indians is said to have happened when an Indian merchant, whose ship was blown off course and destroyed, was recovered by an Egyptian Ptolemaic trading vessel that was in the Gulf of Aden of the Arabian Coast. Although the Ptolemaic king is said to have sent a diplomatic envoy to India under the guidance of the recovered sailor, direct trade between India and the Mediterranean did not develop right away. Instead, the Ptolemaic traders tended to get Indian items at the Arabian trading port of Aden. Traveling any further was considered too dangerous and not worthwhile.

The kingdom of the Ptolemies was defeated with the fall of Cleopatra and the ascension of Augustus as the Emperor of Rome. Egypt now became a Roman province and became the subject of many of the same reforms and projects that affected Antioch and the surrounding provinces at this time. One of Augustus’ main motivations with these projects was to strengthen and unify the Empire, as well as to increase its ability to respond to threats, both internal and external. Therefore many of the projects served a clear logistical purpose, such as the reconstruction of the aqueduct throughout the Egyptian province, which had been allowed to fall into disrepair. Rome also established its powerful and extensive signature bureaucratic structure in the province. These were crucial because Egypt had long since become of Rome’s major grain suppliers and Augustus wanted to ensure that the grain kept coming, by improving

78 McLaughlin, Rome and the Distant East, 25.
80 McLaughlin, Rome and the Distant East, 27.
irrigation with the repaired aqueducts and creating the strong bureaucratic system to keep schedules and measures consistent.\textsuperscript{81}

As with Antioch the establishment of the bureaucracy in the province helped to significantly boost trade in the area.\textsuperscript{82} The presence of this bureaucracy, along with the military, helped to make the process of travel and trade safer for many merchants, who would have previously considered the trip too dangerous. The bureaucracy also encouraged the formation of diplomatic contacts with nearby foreign powers, which not surprisingly often led to trade relations.

One of Augustus’ other most important undertakings in the area was the construction of roads throughout the region. Again Augustus’ reasoning was primarily logistical. The military was the primary workforce in the construction of these roads. This was not uncommon throughout the Empire, because the legions were not only a professional fighting force, but they also made up a highly disciplined state controlled labor force as well. Furthermore the construction of the roads was primarily done to benefit the legions who would use the networks to travel quickly throughout the empire. This would allow them to efficiently engage any threats to the empire and maintain stability.\textsuperscript{83} The convenience of these roads was not lost on traders and merchants either. They quickly came to utilize them in order to increase the range of their business. The pot was sweetened by that fact that the Roman legions did not simply build the forts and leave, but they built a large number of forts and watchtowers along these routes as well.\textsuperscript{84} These not only increased security for the merchants using the roads, but many of the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{81} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 27-28.
  \item \textsuperscript{82} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 27.
  \item \textsuperscript{83} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 27-30.
  \item \textsuperscript{84} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 27-28.
\end{itemize}
fortified structures also served as depots where the merchants could stop and sleep or refill their provisions, especially water, which greatly increased the range they could travel.

Not surprisingly many cities began to reap the benefits of the greatly increased trade traveling through the area that Rome was developing. In Egypt many cities developed on the East African coast along the Red Sea. This was the main area where trade from the Arabian Peninsula would arrive by sea into the Roman Empire. Soon After the time of Augustus, this increase in trade would come to include direct with the Indian Kingdoms. The two cities of Berenice and Myos Hormos developed into the major port cities on the Red Sea. Once Arabian and Indian goods were offloaded they would travel via inland roads from these cities to another major trade hub, the city Coptos. Coptos sat on the River Nile about a twelve day journey from the city of Alexandria. 85 Once goods had traveled up the Nile to Alexandria, one of the largest cities in the entire Mediterranean, it could be easily exported to the rest of the empire. Of course this route worked in reverse as well. Many traveled down to the Red Sea ports in order to seek their fortunes. They sought employment in a diverse number of jobs. Besides just merchants, there were also artisans, sailors, businessmen, commercial and bureaucratic agents, and mercenaries, as well as many who came simply as investors. 86

From these Red Sea ports the Romans were able to launch trade missions to places like Arabia, and India. As mentioned the merchants first dared to travel only as far as the South Western edge of the Arabian Peninsula where they traded in the Gulf of Aden. However, merchant vessels soon began to travel further and soon found themselves trading with the Indian Kingdoms directly. At first they accomplished this by sticking close to the Arabian Peninsula as

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86 McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 3-34.
they traveled further east, eventually arriving at the Indian subcontinent.\textsuperscript{87} Thanks to changing
technology and no small amount of bravery and cunning, the sailors soon discovered that they
could make the trip much shorter if they took a direct line across the open waters to India.\textsuperscript{88}

The technological advancement that made this journey possible was new method of
shipbuilding. The new type of ship, which was built specifically for this open ocean journey, was
reported to be massive by the standards of the day. One report says that each of these merchant
ships was the size of several ships used by other peoples.\textsuperscript{89} These ships were not only large, but
also very tough, as they would have to withstand rough seas and sometimes even monsoon
conditions on their travels. The hull was built to be self supporting, but it was further
strengthened by an internal frame. The technique reflects the creativity of the ship builders and
likely the diverse background which they came from as it more closely resembled cabinet
making than other traditional shipbuilding techniques.\textsuperscript{90} Thus these ships were able to do what
previously was too dangerous as the ancient geographer Strabo, writing between 18 and 23 C.E.
reports: “For formerly not even twenty vessels ventured to navigate the Arabian Gulf, or advance
to the smallest distance beyond the straits at its mouth; but now large fleets are dispatched as far
as India and the extremities of Ethiopia, from which places the most valuable freights are
brought to Egypt.”\textsuperscript{91}

The merchant sailors developed a very precise system out of necessity. Their movements
were restricted by the winds and the seasons, and so the merchants had to create and adhere to a
very strict timetable for departures and arrivals to their various locations. The ships would

\textsuperscript{87} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 41.
\textsuperscript{88} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 41.
\textsuperscript{89} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 36.
\textsuperscript{90} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 37.
\textsuperscript{91} Strabo, \textit{Geography}. retrieved from Perseus Digital Library, Book 17 Chapter 1.
generally set out from the Egyptian ports in July; from there they would reach the Gulf of Aden and set sail on the open ocean by August.\textsuperscript{92} These ships would travel immense distances in order to reach their destinations. Those traveling from the Arabian Peninsula to India faced a journey of close to 2,600 kilometers, and the entire journey from Egypt to India would have lasted at lease as long as seventy days.\textsuperscript{93}

Although these Egyptian sea trade routes with Arabia and India did not directly involve Antioch, although it may have received some of these trade goods after they had entered the Empire though Alexandria, they do help to illustrate the modus operandi of Roman trade. The eastern provinces were already in prime locations to take advantage of trade with Rome’s neighbors to the east and other nations beyond, but it what really allowed for an explosion of trade was the incorporation of these lands as official Roman provinces and the benefits that came with it.

Incorporation brought with it much of the infrastructure necessary to conduct trade with distant places on a large scale. The construction of roads was crucial for extending the distances which merchant could travel. These roads often had access to legionary fortifications as well which increased security in the area and encouraged trade. The bureaucracy was also instrumental in increasing trade. It allowed for much quicker and more organized trade relations to form that had been previously possible and its presents encouraged the creation of diplomatic ties to foreign powers as well. Finally, once provinces like Egypt and Syria were firmly connected to the Roman Empire as a whole they gained the most crucial element for successful

\textsuperscript{92} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 40.
\textsuperscript{93} McLaughlin, \textit{Rome and the Distant East}, 41-42.
trade, a massive and avid consumer market ready to import the goods that these foreign powers had to give.

Intermediary Trade with Central Asia

By the first century C.E. the Roman Empire was trading with nations as far away as Han China. However, direct contact with the Chinese was extremely rare. Rather the Chinese and Roman goods made their way through Asia on a system that is commonly known as the “Silk Road.” In recent times this name has undergone a bit of a revision due to the fact that it can be a little misleading. For one thing the “Silk Road” was not a singular road, or even really a series of roads. Rather the trade goods were transferred among a number of different ethnic groups who would keep trading them until the many goods, as some surely stayed with these intermediary traders, steadily made their way either east or west. The name also seems to imply that silk is the only commodity traded along this route. Silk is given a prominent position with good reason, as it was one of the most valuable and widely traded commodities coming out of China and East Asia, but it was certainly not the only one.94 The name has therefore been changed to the “Silk Route.” Silk is still the only commodity mentioned, perhaps simply for simplicity’s sake, but the term road has been changed to route in order to better draw attention to this systems’ rather unorganized and segmented process.

There are many different cultures and groups who had a hand in this trade system but the major players are surprisingly few. The Metropolitan Museum of Arts’ book The Year One states that “at this time [1 C.E.] five contiguous powers stretched from the Atlantic ocean across the Mediterranean Sea and Asia to the Pacific: The Roman Empire, the Parthian Empire, the Kushan

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94 McLaughlin, Rome and the Distant East, 83.
Empire, the nomadic confederation of the Xiongnu, and the Han Empire." The Roman and Han Empires made up the two ends of this line with Rome on the West end and Han China on the East. The other three fell in the middle of this line. From west traveling east the Parthian Empire came first, the Kushan Empire fell roughly in the middle and the Xiongnu, a group of nomadic horsemen roamed in central Asia outside the Han Empire. However, the Xiongnu lived largely to the north and west of Han China and their presents in the more southerly trade routes near the Kushan Empire may be overstated. Still they played a significant role. These middle kingdoms were essential for creating the links necessary to link the Roman and Han Empires. Each was a powerful Empire of its own, even the Xiongnu, although their nomadic confederacy was not nearly as centralized as the other powers involved.

The first of the empires, the Parthian Empire began as part of the Seleucid Empire. It had been part of Alexander’s massive empire and therefore had a mix of Hellenistic and local, largely Iranian and Persian, culture. The area that would become the Parthian Empire was conquered and taken from the Seleucids by the Parni, members of an Iranian semi-nomadic confederacy in Central Asia. Established in 274 B.C.E. the Parthians quickly established their dominance in the area which encompasses modern day Iran, much of Mesopotamia, and the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. They came into conflict with the Roman Empire, but proved themselves a match and the Emperor Augustus had to settle for peace, which would ultimately aid trade in the area. Parthia would aid trade in the area in much the same ways that the Roman Empire did as it improved infrastructure and politics in an area, thus helping to streamline and protect the

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96 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Year One, 15.
97 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Year One, 116.
98 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Year One, 116-117.
The silk trade routes had already existed before the consolidation of the Parthian Empire, but under their rule trade grew significantly, and became the Empire’s chief source of revenue.  

The Parthians were Rome’s immediate neighbor to the east and they formed a critical junction along the silk route, but they were by no means the only culture which took part in this trade. One of the most important of these was region of Bactria. Bactria sat in between the Parthian Empire and the westernmost Tarim regions of Han China. With this geographic position, Bactria was able to play a major role in the silk route. It was often the first place that Chinese goods leaving the Tarim regions would pass through, before being routed on to Parthia or the Kushan Empire in India.  

The Bactrian people were very multiethnic, as was not uncommon of the different groups sitting along the silk route. They were primarily made up of a group of nomadic horsemen, called the Yuezhi, who had been pushed southwest by the more powerful Xiongnu tribes. Once settled the Bactrian people came into contact with the Chinese who were busy expanding their boarders at this time, around the end of the second century B.C.E. However, a Greek presence existed in Bactria as well. This is another example of the legacy of Alexander the Great and his empire. The region of Bactria would never see one of the great post-Alexandrian empires such as the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, or the Parthians, but it would be home to a number of smaller kingdoms created by the Greek settlers. This would change with the influx of the Yuezhi people.
who came to dominate the area after they arrived around 130 B.C.E., although the region would still maintain its multicultural makeup.\textsuperscript{102}

Conclusion

Finally, the development of this consumer economy created a moral crisis for many in Rome. Writers such as Pliny and Seneca, who were members of the elite equestrian rank and trained in the stoic philosophy, disapproved of the behavior of those who spent lavishly in order to get their hands on the trinkets and clothes brought in by trade. They believed that these people had not only forgotten traditional Roman values, but had allowed themselves to be completely taken by their greed and lust. This was not only morally reprehensible, but incredibly dangerous. Because these men and women were no longer keeping to traditional values society was not longer producing good and honorable Romans. And because so many moved to a more luxuriant and lazy lifestyle, instead of sticking to the noble profession of farming, all that had once made Rome strong was now being undermined. But this does not seem to have been the mindset of the majority. At the very least, if people did feel some pangs of guilt or shame, it does not seem to have slowed down the influx of luxury goods into the empire nor did it stop Rome’s wealth from flowing into other nations. The flood gates had been opened and the increasingly wealthy Romans seemed to find few things better suited to spending their money on than wondrous and exotic consumer goods.

The Roman economy was clearly a vibrant and diverse one. Agriculture still remained the main source of revenue for this pre-modern economy, but the importance of trade and the Roman craft industries cannot be overlooked. Historian Jeremy Parsons argues that the “determination to

\cite{102} Metropolitan Museum of Art, \textit{Year One}, 12-13.
play down the abundant sources of commerce rests not only on the indubitable fact that agriculture provided for the lives of the vast majority of the population of the ancient world but also on a false dichotomy between agriculture and trade. They are not alternatives, but are inextricably linked in the chain of production and consumption in the Roman Empire at all levels.”103 The importance of the agricultural economy need not be downplayed in order to understand the importance of trade in ancient Rome. Trade flourished and networks were established, either directly or indirectly, with numerous civilizations such as Arabia, India, and China. The effects of this trade were profound. It created a culture of opulence in the Roman Empire that existed among all levels of society, not just among the rich and it allowed for ideas to be shared across these cultures.

Although Roman history tends to center around the city of Rome itself, the importance of the provinces, in this case the eastern provinces, cannot be forgotten. They sat in a perfect position to aid the empire through the development of trade networks with the non-Roman cultures to the east. Through no accident they were developed by characters such as Augustus and Agrippa so that they could take advantage of their excellent trade position. The addition of such institutions as the legions and the bureaucracy allowed for the streamlining of trade and the creation of diplomatic connection. The construction of roads and the increased development of cities also aided the trade process. This means that the development of Roman trade was not haphazard but in fact very intentional. This happened during a time when views of trade and the goods it brought in were primarily negative, meaning that it shows a shift in the cultural values of many Romans towards embracing a life of luxury and the development of trade even if the literary elite continued to write scathingly about this lifestyle.

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