

THE WEST AND THE EAST :
FROM ROMAN LONDON TO ROMAN INDIA

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THE excavator finds in the strange environment of Asia objects which he might have come upon in England or dug up on any bombed site of London.

Even the megalithic communal tombs of pre-history, with their little circular entrance, reminding one of a house of cards, have been discovered in Southern India and the Caucasus as well as in France and at many intermediate points. Examples, thousands of miles apart, are almost identical.

Less controversial links are represented by red-glazed pottery from Italy that is dug up from the foundations of Roman London and brought to light under the palm trees of Southern India.

Now there are shown on the screen workmen excavating a great Roman warehouse by a lagoon which was once a Roman treaty port in the Bay of Bengal. Why did we begin to dig in this particular spot?

It had been known for a long time that in the first and second centuries A.D. there was a very considerable trade between the Roman world and India, especially in pepper, a commodity much to the taste not only of the Romans, but also of the barbarians in Europe, e.g. of Attila, who demanded several tons of it from the Emperor of Byzantium. Other Oriental products finding a market in the Roman world were pearls, gems, ivory, apes and peacocks.

In return the Roman merchants brought to India metals, coral, high-class pottery, glass, gold and silver vessels, and especially wine. Since 1775 gold and silver coins have constantly been found in Southern India and now amount to several thousands.

On arrival in India I tried to locate one of these Roman trading posts. We knew nothing of comparative dates, we had no chronology to guide us in dating the pre-mediæval

archæology of South India. But the association of dated coins or pottery from the Mediterranean with Indian materials pointed to a possible starting-point.

In my first tour in 1944 I found by pure chance in a cupboard in the Madras Museum fragments of a Roman amphora. Here was the answer, though earlier investigators had failed to recognise it. Having been informed on inquiry that the amphora had been unearthed at Arikamedu, near Pondicherry, I visited the latter town and there, in the local library, came upon three exhibition cases, in which were fragments of red-glazed pottery, Arretine dishes identical in type with those exhibited in any London museum, manufactured in the same factories and during the same period—the first half of the first century A.D.—but representing trade moving eastwards from the Mediterranean instead of to the west. Among this pottery were other objects—a fragment of a Roman lamp, Roman glass, and a gem representing Cupid with an eagle. It was said that another gem, showing Augustus, had also been discovered, but this was no longer available.

My next step was to visit the lagoon mentioned earlier, where the high bank shown on the slide represents an ancient city, and the ends of brick walls appearing at intervals and dating from the first two centuries A.D. have been exposed by the process of erosion. Here in 1945 my department was authorised by the courteous French authorities to undertake excavation.

The slides show the brick wall of a warehouse such as might easily be found in Roman London, the remains of brick tanks used in the manufacture of the muslin which the Indian world exported to Rome, and drains not differing from those of the Roman world.

The sea-level of the Bay of Bengal is now 11 feet higher at this point than in Roman times and therefore we had to conduct our excavations at Arikamedu by baling away the water and then digging in slime. The objects discovered were laid out on a huge chessboard marked on the ground, the squares of which had been labelled beforehand to correspond with the various strata in which we were digging.

These objects might have been dug up in England, the same kind of things, of the same date, manufactured by the same workmen, turned out from the same factories as the wares discovered, for example, by Prof. Hawkes at Camulodunum.

Arretine pottery was found with the stamp of VIBIE(NUS), a bowl stamped CAMURI, the mark of Gaius Camurius, whose work has come to light at Rome, Athens and Alexandria, and a little pillared glass bowl of a form identical with several from London.

The local value of all this material was that it could be used to date the local Indian culture, for among the Roman pottery was a great mass of local ware. One class of this was decorated in the Roman way with concentric bands of a pattern made by a cogged wheel or roulette in a manner quite foreign to Indian ceramic. This pattern was copied from imported wares and therefore belonged to the same date as the surrounding objects. Could this date be confirmed by the results of excavation made at some distance from Pondicherry? During the past 50 years four or five silver coins of Augustus and Tiberius had been found at a site known as Chandravalli in central India. Could similar examples be found in association with Indian coins?

In 1947 we dug at this site and at first found nothing but local coins of unknown date. But one day we came across a lump of oxidised material which turned out to be a silver coin of Tiberius of the date of A.D. 26-37. This was recovered in the same layer as the rouletted pottery, and so in the high plateau of central India, many hundreds of miles from the original spot, was found the confirmation we sought.

There is another aspect of Roman trade with the East. So far we have dealt with the activities of Roman traders in South India. But at the same time a parallel commerce was in full swing in North-West India and Afghanistan. From very ancient times the silks of China had been carried to the Mediterranean across central Asia. But in the early centuries A.D. the Parthians barred the routes across Persia and the caravans had to turn south to the sea through North-West India.

Along this trade route excavations have been carried out for many years. A slide of Taxila shows that this town of Pakistan was built on a western plan, with the straight grid-lines of a Roman city. Many objects of Mediterranean origin have been excavated here: Roman amphoræ, a silver head of Dionysus, perhaps made in Alexandria, a charming little bronze of Harpocrates, designed in Egypt and exported to India in the first century A.D.

But more dramatic than these finds is a discovery made in Afghanistan by French archæologists, who in 1937 and 1939,

in excavating a site in the shadow of the Hindu Kush found two rooms packed from end to end with glass and bronze from the Mediterranean, Chinese lacquer and carved ivories from India.

We are concerned here only with the western wares the site produced. These were pillared glass bowls, cups of cut glass, cups with painted designs of Eastern Mediterranean type, a bowl with Neptune holding a steering oar on a lighthouse, perhaps representing the Pharos at Alexandria, a statuette of Hercules with Egyptian headdress, a plaster medallion of Cupid and Psyche, another representing the gathering of the vintage, and a third consisting of a beautiful helmeted head.

All this has a bearing upon a long-standing problem in the history of art. During the first few centuries A.D. there came into being in Afghanistan and North-West India a great Buddhist art, partly in stone but largely in stucco, which clearly owed a great deal to the art of the Mediterranean. It has always been a puzzle to know how this influence reached India. Examples are: an Apollo Belvedere from Pakistan, garlanded in Indian fashion, Cupids of Western conception but executed by an Oriental craftsman, an Antinous, a stucco head from Taxila with nothing Indian about it, a head of a Western satyr, a Trojan horse from North-West India, showing Laocoon in classical costume, but certainly rendered by a local sculptor. What was the source of this Western inspiration?

The bulk of the Indian (or Pakistan) trade with the West was based on Alexandria, centre of the luxury trade of the ancient world, and it is from Alexandria that the *motifs* of this sculpture in plaster or stucco were largely derived. When the city was founded at the end of the fourth century B.C., there sprang up a great demand for sculpture in marble, which, however, Alexandria did not possess. But plaster was easily obtainable in the vicinity and so was popularised by the Alexandrian sculptors as a marble-substitute, and from Alexandria the new art was carried to the East.

We cannot but regard with admiration the astonishing initiative of the Roman traders—using “Roman” in its widest sense—who travelled over the known world and even penetrated to China, where also they have left glass and coins to mark their presence.

As for India, important though the discoveries up to date have been, we are now only at the beginning of the beginning of archæological knowledge.