

Purple empowerment --The political skills of Roman merchants over the Indian Ocean trade

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Abstract: *Periplus* leave numbers of the Roman empire trade records in the Indian Ocean. This paper mainly takes the transaction items of the purple clothes from *Periplus* as the entry point. Purple clothes are luxury goods with expensive value and hierarchical significance. The luxury purple clothing is usually sold along the Mediterranean coast but appears in the Indian Ocean market. Through the location and trade route of purple clothing in the Indian Ocean trading market, this paper reanalyzes the new diplomatic mode that the Roman Empire may carry out in the Indian Ocean, namely the local King obtains the authorization of the Roman Empire through purple clothes. If purple clothing is not only a luxury, but also a symbol of imperial power, then its presence in Indian Ocean trade will have political influence, not only as a diplomatic gift, but also as a potentially authorized item. It also reflects the different forms of expansion of the Roman Empire in the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: Purple clothes, Indian Ocean, Roman, *Periplus*

1. Introduction

In the 1st century BC, Rome became a big empire that included the Mediterranean Sea and covered three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. When the Mediterranean Sea became the inner sea of the Roman empire, the sea power of the Roman empire grew rapidly. From then on, Rome began to covet the eastern world and wanted to expand its power by opening a new way of maritime trade. On the *Periplus* [1], there were a lot of the Roman empire trade records in the Indian Ocean. The range of maritime trade was so vast that it extended from the king, the elites and to the farmers, and the range of goods switched from daily supplied to luxury goods. Rome was the biggest luxury goods consumer in the market. *Periplus*'s author was a merchant, as a result, most of the goods he records must have a high value. Also, it is easy to find that many luxury goods are provided to the Roman nobles, such as diamonds, pearls, hawkbill, silk, etc. One of the most interesting things is the purple clothes in Muza and Ommama. Purple was originally extracted by the Phoenicians from a type of snail on their national beaches that produced a good purple coloring matter. Because of its complicated production process, the price of purple was 20 times more expensive than gold[2]. The Phoenicians were also known as the purple merchant because of the purple they carried out in the Mediterranean. But why purple was ignored in the Indian Ocean trade? From my perspective, there may be two reasons: one reason is due to the luxuries trade with the Roman empire in the Indian Ocean is numerous, and purple clothes was less than other luxury items, so it is less on the list than other luxury goods. The other reason is that most of the purple clothes sells majorly in the Mediterranean area, because that was the original source area of purple and there were large groups of purple consumers.

Apart from being the source material of luxury goods, purple can also differentiate social classes. At that time, the first buyers of purple were the Romans. Their royal families showed great appreciation for this pigment and paid a lot of money for the purple. Thus, purple clothes was also a reflection of the power of the Roman empire. Roman inscriptions decreed that purple clothes could only be worn by kings and the elites. It was illegal for civilians to wear it[3]. So, it is revealed that these neglected purple clothes was a new key role for us to explore the Roman trade in the Indian Ocean. Why did the purple clothes appear so far away from major consumers in Europe and the Roman royal family? What did roman merchant try to do with purple? Could they give the Indian Ocean owner the same power from the purple clothes? . The examination of *periplus* could lead to the answers. The value and innovative part of this article is that it answers three questions: when the goods are no longer treated as commodities, but something with special political power; whether people own the goods out of the pursuit of value; whether merchants apply political skills in trade.

2. The Reasons and Measures of the Roman Empire's Struggle for Supremacy in the Indian Ocean

Before discussing about the purple cloths, three questions should be answered first. Why did Romans trade on the Indian Ocean? What difficulties did they encounter in trade? What mythologies did they apply to solve the problems? Although the geographical location of the Roman empire was not conducive to the development of navigation, the main income of the citizen still came from basic agriculture, and the reputation of the merchant was not noble, but this did not prevent the Roman empire from taking this step and developed maritime trade. At that time, Rome's stable economic and political background also provided commercial opportunities for maritime trade. Rome's commercial experiments in the red sea and the Indian Ocean, along with the commodities could be bring luxury goods to the Roman aristocracy, different materials to the common citizens, and expand new power networks for the government[4].

The most direct and main driving force of the expansion of the Roman empire's economic power in the Indian Ocean, was the large demand for luxury goods of the upper class, but it could also result from the Roman empire's ambition of expanding the maritime territory. Accordingly, navigation business exerted great influence on Roman society and even the dominance hierarchy. Roman trade in the Indian Ocean was extremely complex. *Periplus* has recorded the area from Rome to the Indian Ocean with many countries, islands, kings and tribal chiefs, also some Arabian who has traveled widely in business. The article mentioned that different cultural backgrounds and languages brought some difficulties for maritime trade[3]. For that reason, it was necessary to send some merchants or emissaries who were good at business and communication to negotiate with the local ruler. However, the Roman empire needed to continuously diplomatic relations with small island countries, which also facilitated Rome to expand its trade range and political power range[5]. It is also illustrated from the *Periplus* that major trading ports such as Barbaricum, Adulis, and Aana belonged to different countries. The Roman empire was able to charge a lot of entry taxes, port taxes, market taxes every year from the ownership of trade ports. Augustus period had sent an expeditionary force into the Arabian peninsula south, took some important port for Rome, competed for the rights to control the two rivers and Persian gulf of the sea which was always important for the Roman empire. Moreover, the king of Rome has exancted some specified laws about trade on the ocean. War is not an ultimate solution, resorting to diplomacy could be more effective, so Roman merchants played an important role in this by becoming mediators between the Roman empire and the kings of the Indian Ocean.

3. Purple empowerment on Periplus

After understanding the Roman trade background on the Indian Ocean, the focus can be put on purple clothes. According to *Periplus*, purple clothes can be found in Muza and Omana. Muza had no official port, but its anchorage was stable and safe. Muza was located in the south of the Arabian peninsula and was controlled by the kingdom of Saba, a kingdom usually manages the import and export of locally produced goods. For example, Saba would centralize the administration of myrrh. Muza next station might be the east African islands or India. Large ships are used for carrying gold, silver, and copper in exchange for better horses and mules to local chiefs. As for Ommana, most of the ships were mainly for the Arabian and the Indian Ocean, and transported most of the goods belong to the upper nobility.

Physical distance will be discussed in the first place. The origin of the purple item from Ommana is more likely to have come from Phoenicia than from Africa. Pliny was mentioned, "The proper proportions for mixing are, for fifty pounds of wool, two hundred pounds of the juice of the buccinum and one hundred and eleven of juice of the pelagian". So to dye, a robe requires a lot of raw materials, but obviously, the raw materials are limited in the Mediterranean region; although the Pliny was mentioned that Africa also can produce purple, but the adequacy of raw materials is also another problem. So purple clothes was more likely to come from Phoenicia.

Secondly, Roman law was strict about the location to wear luxuries. This can reflect the importance of the Roman royal purple clothes. Statistics showed that in early Roman times, wealthy Roman citizens were able to use purple clothing, but since most of Romans were peasant, it was very difficult to buy it. And the highest quality goods were strictly restricted to export, and only the emperor and his family members could use them. For example, the Purple of Tyrian from Phoenicia was the Rome royal purple. Therefore, Purple is also divided into different varieties and ranks, thus being used by the nobility to represent the class status. As speculated, the purple on Ommana came from Phoenician, so it

must be Tyrian purple, which was only Roman nobles could use.

Thirdly, if you are a Roman merchant and you have the purple clothes that represents the power of the Roman royal family, who do you think is most likely to buy your purple clothes? It shows that the chances for general civilians in India or the Arab kingdom to purchase purple clothes were very low, but what about the local kings? They seemed more able to afford the high price, but why did the local king needed to buy purple clothing? When you buying a product, you need to know the value of it. The value of purple clothes is different from that of other luxuries. Apart from its beautiful characteristic, it also has other attributes, such as being symbols of royal power.

There are historical examples of purple as a symbol of royalty. In Byzantine times, emperors who were descended from a royal line would add the phrase "Born to The Purple" on their titles, to indicate their orthodox origins and to distinguish them from those who had acquired the throne through other means. Because purple clothing can represent power, it also has the property of being diplomatic gifts. For instance, Herodotus was talking about the Persian kings who gave the Ethiopian king a purple cloaks as a diplomatic gift " He offered up three thousand beasts from all the kinds fit for sacrifice, and on a great pyre burnt couches covered with gold and silver, golden goblets, and purple cloaks and tunics. Purple clothes replaced the royal family and had diplomatic functions when the two countries were fighting for power. It shows that the value of purple clothes is power and diplomacy.

The advertisements on TV tell the audience that their skin can be as good as a superstar after applying this skincare product. Buying a luxurious car is considered as a symbol of success. So, it is conceivable that Roman merchants who bought purple clothing would have to find a way to sell it to their target customers: the local kings, they would begin to imply to their customers that the item was of high value, and that they would highlight the most important property of the item ---power. This commodity was expensive because of its scarcity and its representation of power represent power, so owning purple clothes meant owning a special royalty power. Roman merchants may have tried to use purple clothes as an agency for Roman power. Local kings were empowered to buy purple clothes. For them, it is good to own these clothes with the relative authority of official certification.

Besides, the circulation of purple clothes in the Indian Ocean was a special way for the Roman empire to maintain a good trade relationship with the local kings. From the *periples*, "the Homerites and those living next to them, called the Sabaites; Through continual embassies and gifts, he is a friend of the Emperors. "It is revealed that the local tribal king intended to develop diplomatic relations with the kind of Rome by giving gifts. *Periplus* also mentions "this country is not subject to a king, but each market-town is ruled by its separate chief." It shows that there are some areas outside the jurisdiction of the Roman empire, but it still need to keep close contact with them. From this information, the Roman empire hoped to achieve friendly and stable trade relations with the local kings while expanding its trade relations in the Indian Ocean. The Roman empire may also present these purple clothes as a symbol of power to the local tribal kings in the form of diplomatic gifts as a gesture of friendship. Rome has also tried to make peaceful contact with Arab and Indian countries, such as homerite and the sale of charibael in Sabah, as well as envoys sent by king bonus of northwest India. These external links also facilitate mutual trade.

In short, the connection between the local kings and the Roman merchants and the Roman empire was a kind of diplomatic exchanges. The Romans could also strengthen the link between the local kings and the Roman royal family through purple clothes, which was conducive to forming a stable political and economic relationship.

4. Other political commodities in the Indian Ocean

In the course of the trade between the Roman empire and the small island states in the sea, despite the expensive purple clothes, the nobles of different countries kept consuming other luxury goods and giving these luxury goods to each other as diplomatic means. Thus, some special commodities had not only commercial value but also political value.[7]

Although the *periplus* doesn't explicitly describe the animal trade involved with thins like ivory and tortoise shells, *periplus* does mention animals such as leopards, tigers, elephants, and giant snakes. Animals trade still exists in the Indian Ocean trade at that time, due to national privacy issues, do not have much exposure on the shipping lines, but it can be predicted that Rome's Colosseum always needs a lot of wild animals, in addition to the artificial breeding animals, sometimes they need to find exotic animals such as crocodiles, rhinoceroses, giraffes from Africa, Arabia, India. The purchase of these

animals is a symbol of the aristocracy.[8]

The trade between China and India are discussed in the *Periplus*. In the HanShu, there is also a record of the diplomacy between India and China, “Huang zhi send rhinoceros in year 2 A.D.”[9] The kingdom “Huang zhi” refers to the Indian peninsula, it shows Indian kingdom used to send rhinoceros to China, and China used to receive some giraffes from Africa as diplomatic gifts, and all of those animals come from the Indian Ocean trade. So these exotic animal products are both luxury goods and have political implications. Why did people choose living animals as diplomatic goods instead of sending some ordinary goods? It can be seen that animals are far more meaningful than rare goods. It is an emotional life.[10]

The transmission of animals is the carrier of emotion between the two countries, and the binding of emotion between the two countries can be demonstrated through animal diplomacy. As a commodity, sometimes the value carried by the commodity often exceeds its value.

5. Conclusion

When people refer to purple and Phoenicians, there are some trade stories between the Mediterranean and Europe. But it's hard to find more information about purple goods in the Indian Ocean, but in addition to the Phoenician commodities for profiteering, purple clothing is also a hierarchical item of the Roman Empire and other countries, which embodies diplomatic functions, and is even treated as a kind of power transfer. Therefore, the significance of their movement in maritime trade cannot be ignored. It's pleased to see that purple clothing appeared in two large trading markets from *periplus*, so it can speculate that the owners of this purple clothes owner would be the local king and the noble. Roman merchants' selling of purple clothes could attribute to empowering local kings. This kind of purple authorization may be in the process of trade, they may try to authorized institutions to establish a legal correlation with the local king, mutual benefit for both sides in the Indian Ocean trade process, and to establish the interests and power of sustained and stable relationships. This special diplomatic item with the property of power is rare in the Indian Ocean trade. The purple dress as the key role also provides a new perspective for us to understand the early expansion of the Roman empire's power in the Indian Ocean.

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