

The Ancient Spice Trade, Part IV: Rome and the Early Middle Ages

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In the last few issues of *Labyrinth*, we've looked at the role spices and the spice trade played in the building of empires for the many and the extravagance of the few. Alongside exploration, military campaigns and cultural expansion, spices were a ready companion to finance, enhance and flavour the lives and lifestyles of the people of the ancient world.

Beyond the myths and legends of spices and the fearsome creatures that guarded them in ancient Arabia (*Labyrinth* Issue 82, October 2003); beyond the legendary figures, such as Alexander who expanded our knowledge of spices as he expanded his empire (*Labyrinth* Issue 84, October 2004); beyond the trade and trade centres which the Greeks and Romans established throughout the eastern Mediterranean, we have the spices themselves - and the Romans were great users of these mysterious products from the east. Black and white pepper, anise, caraway, cumin, mint, mustard, ginger, sweet basil, laurel and sweet marjoram were all used by the ancient Romans (and the generations of people who made their empire), for food, medicine and personal extravagance. During the Roman occupation of Egypt, spices flowed through the Red Sea from India as they flooded the waiting markets of the Mediterranean. Arab trade in Near Eastern and East Indian spices ensured their place as major players on the international commodity scene, and the word "middleman" took on a whole new meaning. Constantinople - founded by the Roman Emperor Constantine during his reign between 324 and 337 AD - became the focal point of trade in spices between the far east and the far west of the great Empire. As the Roman Empire began to decline in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, spices such as pepper, cloves, saffron and nutmeg began to support the wealth of traders, brokers and emperors of the time. But before that, someone had to find a way to make this trade worthwhile, and the responsibility for that rests on the shoulders of a Greek merchant sailor from Alexandria in the 1st century AD - a fellow named Hippalus who discovered a "super-highway" to the source of the spices, and in so doing, cut the time of sailing from the Mediterranean to India in half. What once took traders two years to accomplish, the monsoon winds Hippalus "discovered" enabled sailors to do in just one year now. The Romans quickly picked up on this new route and from then on, it was all India could do to keep up with the supply and demand of an Empire hungry for exotic spices. Of these spices, pepper became the preferred commodity for medicines and especially food preparation. But spices were something that the newly emerging Christian Church did not hold in high regard. Perhaps because of the earlier Egyptian association of spices with embalming (*Labyrinth* Issue 83, March 2004) and the fact that these items were so sought after by the general populace, the Church saw them as addicting, as aphrodisiacs, as evil and as corrupting. In the early Church view, power may corrupt, but spices corrupt completely.

It may also have been a statement against Roman paganism as well. Spices could only be afforded by the pagan Roman upper class and their outrageous lifestyles. For these Romans, spices became a sort of status symbol. The Roman Emperor Elagabalus

(204-222 AD) was even said to have perfumed his swimming pools with exotic spices. And when spices were used for religious ceremonies by these pagan Romans, it must have upset the early Christians as well - in 65 AD, for instance, in a pagan religious funeral ceremony for Nero's wife, more than a year's supply of cinnamon was burned in her honour.

As the Romans spread their blanket of conquest over Northern Europe, pepper found its way into that region as well - so much so, that when the Goths threatened Rome itself around 410 AD, their leader, Alaric I, demanded a ransom of not only gold, jewels and silk, but also 30,000 pounds of pepper. It would seem that the invading Goths had acquired a taste for this spice, thanks to the Roman invaders before them! The reason for all this interest in spices was quite simple - with food processing and additives still some 15 centuries away, everyday meals of bread, fresh meats (when available) and vegetables must have been quite bland, and something was needed to spice things up! In a time when refrigeration was still unheard of, spices and salt also helped preserve meat both for the dinner table and for the long journeys that were commonplace back then.

At the eastern end of the Empire, the spice trade took a turn for the worse as well for the Romans - Arab and African spice merchants were quickly gaining control of the spice markets and Roman hold on this trade declined along with its power. Constantinople remained a market centre for spices in the emerging Byzantine era in Asia Minor, and Alexandria continued its dominance in the spice trade with Europe thanks to the rising importance of Venetian traders plying the waters between Italy and Egypt. As a result, these strong trade centres began to hold a monopoly on the commodities between east and west, and Europe soon saw spice prices - and in particular pepper - soar to a point where only a privileged few could actually afford them.

As the Muslim Empire took hold of the Near East from the 6th and 7th century AD onward, European trade in spices in the region all but dried up. The Prophet Mohammed and his followers even took advantage of the Arab spice trade in the Near East to help them spread their message of Islam far and wide. Mohammed himself even married a wealthy spice-trading widow in 595 AD, and his religious message may have carried more weight when associated with a commodity that people already wanted - spices. It was perhaps partly due to this shift in power and spice trading monopolies that, while Europe plunged into the Dark Ages, the Muslim world thrived as the centre of trade, culture, science and intellect.

In the coming centuries in Europe, both the need for spices and the need to break the Arab and Venetian stranglehold on the spice trade in the east eventually drove various western European countries to send out exploratory missions around the world. These voyages of discovery went out in search of better, cheaper and safer ways to bring back the pepper and other spices Europe was hungry for during the Renaissance - and the wealth that these new trade routes brought back to Europe was nothing to sneeze at.