

# 5000 YEARS OF TRADE THROUGH BARBARICAN AND THE INDUS

By

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**I**nternational trade via ancient Indus delta port Barbarican and the River Indus with Middle East and other parts of the world has existed for over five thousand years.

Organized trade with Europe through Barbarican dates from the time when Darius-I in the sixth century B.C. after his conquest of Gandhara and Sindhu, sent Scylax to make the first scientific exploratory voyage down the Kabul and the Indus from Kaspapyrus (Peshawar) to the Sindh coast and thence along Arabian coast to the Red Sea and Egypt in about 518 B.C., completing the journey in 2.1/2 years. The voyage was meant to connect the Sub-continent to Egypt by sea and onwards to the Mediterranean rather than through the longer Mesopotamian land route.

Among others the Sumerians (Period of greatness 2850 – 1900 B.C.) navigated the Persian Gulf and had trade links through Barbarican and the Indus and land routes. The Ninean kingdom in the Arabian Peninsula (1200 – 650 BC) and the Sabaens of South Arabia (650 – 155 BC) also had similar trade links. Soloman employed Phoenicians to build him a fleet to trade with Ophir, thought to be the subcontinent and this continued through the centuries.

Though fully established shipping services must have been irregular at this time, tramping being the norm using current terminology. Ships sailed from the mouth of Indus along Makran and Persian coasts to the mouth of the Euphrates. Land and river routes provided a multimodal transport network which facilitated the distribution of goods brought in and exported by sea. Trade grew to unprecedented proportions.

Later between 500 – 400 BC. The Persian Captain Sataspes sailed round the pillar of Hercules (Gibraltar). This resulted into Greek, Phoenician and Arab mariners, establishing and maintaining connections between the Sub-continent, Persian Gulf, Babylonia, Egypt and the Mediterranean ports.

Nearchus on Alexander's orders sailed on an exploratory voyage from Patala to the sea coast most probably near Barbarican near the present day Karachi, then along the Makran coast to PersianGulf and finally to Diridotis in 325/24 BC., a route already

known and used between Indus valley and summer in the third millennium as mentioned above.

Ptolemy-I in Egypt connected the Nile with the Red Sea and thence by sea to Barbarican and other ports in Sindh along the Arabian coast, Persian Gulf and the Makran coast with the same purpose. Even after Ptolemy-I the Ptolemy dynasty's (period 300 BC – 30 BC.) contributions to the trade with the Subcontinent were significant and trade with the subcontinent was fully established. Ptolemy-III (246 – 221 BC.) built the port of Adulis on the Red Sea and Ptolemy-VII (146 BC – 117 BC.) dispatched Exoduses to establish direct trade between Egypt and the subcontinent. This was followed by similar communications on a considerable scale for about a century, when Romans on their arrival in Egypt in 30 BC. Further consolidated the direct sea route with Barbarican and other ports in Sindh which were linked to the extensive hinterland all over the subcontinent and even as far away as Tibet. This trade with the hinterland was largely via the Indus and land. In the meantime the land route between the Subcontinent, Syria and Egypt had deteriorated among other reasons due to the rise of Parthia, and anarchy in Syria which further curtailed facilities of land-routes. This brought sea trade with the subcontinent mainly through Barbarican into more frequent use and lent it even greater importance.

Besides Hippalus's discovery of trade winds, the rise of the Roman Empire, this firstly gave security and law and order to trade routes and secondly created heavy demand for the luxury goods, resulted in unprecedented increase in the volume of trade.

During Ptolemy-VIII Soter-II's rule (117 – 81 BC.), his tutor Agatharchides wrote a geography (120 – 110 BC.) which states that merchants of the subcontinent through Barbarican on the Indus in Sindh brought their cargo to Aden (Arabia Eudamon) and Muza (Mocha) on the Arabian Coast, wherefrom Egyptian merchants took it to Egypt via the Red Sea. This was written before the voyage of Eudoxus (120 – 100 BC.) alluded to above.

After Seleucus Nicator's treaty with Chandra-gupta Maurya Nicator's men made a few sea voyages to Sub-continent (Sindh and Gujrat ports), especially after harassment by the inhabitants of Gerrah, were dealt with by punitive action in 165 BC. By Autiocus. The intervening period saw the rise of the Parthians in Iran and the Persian Gulf and the

development by them of a major trading network across the Persian Plateau, from Seleucia through Exbata and Merv in Bactra and thence to Peshawar via Kabul. The Selucids would have found it profitable to use the alternative sea trade route via Barbarican along the Gulf and Euphrates to Northern Syria although evidence is not available yet due to scanty records at the time. Even when Bactria became independent it remained a hub for Central Asian, Siberian, Chinese and Persian trade as well as that with Taxila a new centre of trade in the subcontinent.

It may be mentioned that the Kushans abolished Hindu Kush route and maintained an over-land route between the present Pakistan and the Roman Empire (then extending to Asia Minor), across the Caspian Sea.

Khotan in Sinkiang became the meeting place of four civilizations Greek, Iranian, Chinese and Sub-continental-in the first century A.D. and helped in trade, especially of the Chinese silk, to Rome. The silk came via Kashgar and Chitral and from there by flat bottom boats down the Indus to Barbarican. This route is termed as the Indus silk route.

Discovery of the trade winds by Hippalus in about, about 40 A.D.(some say earlier) helped direct shipping from the Red Sea to Barbarican and other ports. The trade winds were known to the Sindhians, Persians and Arabs at least a century earlier, but were kept a secret from the Graeco-Egyptians. However, in spite of this knowledge this period from 2500 BC., to 40 A.D. may be considered as the period of pre-trade-wind coastal sailing. Some very valuable records are available of this trade via Barbarican after the fall of Cleopatra the last of the Ptolemy's. The route from Egypt was from Arsinoe to Berenice down the Red Sea and along the Somalian coast, then across to the Arabian side and on to Aden, Mukallah, Socotra, Ras Musandran and then along the coast to Barbarican. However, after the discovery of the trade winds by the nations to our West the sea routes in vogue included the following:

- i). Up to 50 A.D. ships sailed from Aden to Barbarican on the Indus Delta with exploratory voyages further south.
- ii). In the period of 50 to 60 A.D. ships sailed directly to Sigerus (South of Broach) and back.
- iii). In 60 to 70 A.D. ships sailed from Aden to Muziris on the Malabar Coast.
- iv). In the fourth phase ships left the Coromandal Coast for Malacca and back.

Ships sailed from Aden to Barbarican in the summer (April to August) with the South Westerly winds and back in the winter (October to February). The journey took about 20 days from Aden to our port in Barbarican. In spite of the development of direct links with other ports Barbarican continued to handle trade of North Western sub-continent right up to Delhi along the rivers whose combined waters the Indus was draining near Barbarican to the sea. It also exported Chinese, Tibetan and Central Asian goods as it was cheaper to transport them via the Indus and by sea than in caravans through Transoxiana route.

***The ancient port of Barbarican has been the gateway to a massive hinterland comprising the subcontinent China and Central Asia for thousands of years. Until the discovery of the trade winds it was the major sub-continental port and interface between the sea and the mighty Indus. It has spawned the oldest maritime tradition in the world.***

Although most of the trade was through Barbarican by sea, land routes with Persia, China and Central Asia were also operative both as a link to the port and as alternative routes.

The land and river routes with these countries in order of their importance were

- i). From Sindh via the Indus to Peshawar and from there by land to Kabul, Bactria, and Kashgar. From Kashgar, several roads went out to China. This was the most favored route of that time.
- ii). The route from Sindh via Multan and Gomal pass to Kabul; and Bactria. The Indus Valley silk route from China to Barbarican bifurcated from the main Transoxiana route at Kashgar and from there via Tashkurgan to Chitral, across 15000 feet altitude of the Himalayan peaks, to Caspapyra (Peshawar) and then the river Indus to the sea through Barbarican. An alternative route was from Kashgar to Merv (Margus or Morgiana), and from Merv two routes came to Sindh, one via Bactria, Kabul, Khyberpass, Caspapyra and thence by the Indus; the other from Merv to Kandhar, Bolan pass, Sibi, Alore and then down the Indus.
- iii). From Upper Sindh (Alore) via Mula pass or Bolan pass to Alexandropolia (Kandhar), where from routes went to Bactria, Persepolis or Gulashkird and then beyond to the Mediterranean coast.

- iv). From Sindh (Patala or Minnagara) to Rhambacia (near Las Bela in Baluchistan), Kiz (Kech near Turbat), Pur (in Iran), Gulashkird and Persepolis.

Unlike some of the other routes the Indus valley river and land routes were controlled by businessmen of the sub continent. However, it was largely Arabs who acted as intermediaries for trade with the West selling goods to the Egyptians who passed it on.

It would be interesting to note that the ships for sea voyages were made mostly of teak or sheesham. Ships were said to be of the order of 500 tons capacity. At Barbarican goods were transferred to flat bottomed boats to ply the Indus and other rivers up as far as possible and then by land to other parts of the subcontinent, Tibet, China and Central Asia to name a few.

Over the centuries events and conflict on land had a profound effect on the trade through Barbarican as did the development of new opportunities of sailing directly to other sub continental ports and the use of alternative land routes. Goods were diverted to other routes. Goods were diverted to other routes whenever getting the goods to Barbarican became a problem in the same way as today conflict in Afghanistan is blocking the way to Central Asia and so history repeats itself. Let us hope that we can revive and revitalize our historic land river and sea routes.