

# Introduction

## The Indian Embassies

When the emperor Caesar Augustus was on the island of Samos in 20 BC after organizing his eastern provinces and making a settlement with his neighbors the Parthians, he received an embassy from an Indian king named Poros or Pandion, who seems to have lived in the area of the mouth of the Indus.<sup>1</sup> His message, written in Greek, a language known in India for three centuries since Alexander the Great's invasion, was carried by the three envoys who had survived the journey. It read that, although the king ruled over 600 princes, he nevertheless set great store on becoming a friend of Caesar and was ready to grant him free passage and to cooperate with him as far as was appropriate. Eight slaves accompanied the envoys, clothed in nothing but scented loincloths, charged with conveying the king's gifts: tigers, a human "herm" born without arms, a number of large snakes, including a python, an enormous river-turtle, and a partridge larger than a vulture. There was also with them a Brahman called Zarmanochegas from Barygaza – from the class whom the Greeks called naked philosophers – who, when the party later visited Athens, was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries and subsequently cremated himself alive on a pyre. The Athenians showed due respect and gave the ashes a tomb with a commemorative inscription saying that he had committed suicide according to his ancestral tradition. Augustus is said to have accepted King Poros as a friend of the Roman people, though we know nothing of any embassy in return. He refers nevertheless in his official autobiography to frequent embassies from the Indians, perhaps from different rulers. Furthermore, there was by now regular commercial contact with India by sea, thanks to the exploitation of the monsoon winds.<sup>2</sup>

For the Indian kings Caesar Augustus was one of the great rulers of the world. Even if Roman military power was too remote to assist



### Map 1 The Roman Empire in the age of Augustus





**Figure 1** The Forum Romanum from the slope of the Capitol. In the foreground is the temple of Saturn (the public treasury); in the right background the three surviving columns of the temple of Castor stand out against the Palatine hill.

Poros in any struggles with rival powers in India (as he perhaps hoped it would), Augustus' friendship would have been a source of prestige, as indeed the Indian embassies were a source of prestige to Augustus. Poros may have viewed Augustus not so much as Roman but as ruler of that world which had once been dominated by Alexander the Great and with which he shared a language, Greek. If and when his embassy returned, they would have had much to tell him of the people who now ruled in place of Alexander and his Macedonians and what was Roman rather than Greek. The writing of ethnographies, accounts of foreign peoples and their societies, especially the more exotic, was one aspect of the reaction of Greeks and later Romans to the alien world around them.<sup>3</sup> We do not know if the Indians wrote anything similar. If such a work about the Romans or Greeks existed, it would be immensely precious as an account of Western civilization at that time by a complete outsider. For a European to write now an ethnography of the Romans in Augustus' time is to be an outsider in time but not in space nor entirely in culture. The envoys can be no more than a starting-point – what they might have written lies beyond even speculation; for the

present reader modern research and modern perceptions are more relevant. Nevertheless this book's priorities, I hope, will be those that the envoys' might have been: to pick out the important sources of Roman wealth and strength, to suggest what it was like to live among them, and to stress the features of their society that would have seemed exotic to a foreigner.

## First Impressions

The embassy did not sail, as traders from India regularly did, up the Red Sea to Berenice or Myos Hormos on the east coast of Egypt,<sup>4</sup> but arrived in Syria. They probably had sailed into the Persian Gulf (called by the Romans Arabian) and then followed the Euphrates from southern Mesopotamia (now Iraq) up to Zeugma – the town at the river-crossing, where the Euphrates emerges from the mountains, which is little more than 100 miles from the Mediterranean coast. The eastern bank of the river was the westernmost outpost of Rome's powerful neighbors, the Parthians, a northern Iranian people whose Arsacid dynasty had taken over the control of what is now Iran and Iraq in the second century BC from the Macedonian dynasty of Seleucids, who were descended from one of Alexander the Great's successors. As the Indians journeyed from there to Samos, Athens, and then presumably Rome, they would have noticed the characteristic Mediterranean landscape and cultivation – olives, vines, nut-trees, aromatic plants – and realized the importance of that sea for the empire. They would also have been conscious of a compression of space, a compactness of civilization compared with the vast distances of the Iranian empire and Indian subcontinent, accentuated by the multiplicity of cities.

Roman rule had initially spread from the peninsula of Italy to the other peninsulas, islands, and coasts of the Mediterranean. Before 100 BC the greatest territorial acquisitions had been in the Iberian peninsula and Anatolia (modern Turkey). More recently Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul had created a continental empire as far as the English Channel and the Rhine, and Augustus himself was about to extend this to the east as far as the Danube. Nevertheless, it remained to a great extent a maritime empire or, more precisely, one based on water. In North Africa, Roman rule was limited by the Sahara, except in Egypt, where, south of the Delta, the Nile provided a narrow salient of civilization, for the most part no more than a few miles wide on either side of the river, whence a road led from Coptos east through the mountains to the stone quarries

and the Red Sea. In the East, Roman rule was limited by the Euphrates and the Arabian desert. Expansion to the north had in part been facilitated by the great rivers of western Europe, especially impressive when compared with those of peninsular Italy and Greece. Indeed when Augustus' commanders conquered the Balkans, they seem to have accomplished this by an initial advance to the Danube and then the exploitation of its tributaries south and westward back toward the Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup>

Mediterranean civilization had been chiefly based on an abundance of towns or cities (the main exception was the complex of habitation associated with a great temple, found in Egypt and other parts of the Near East). Cities had grown up in the Greek world, early Italy, and among the Semitic peoples of the eastern Mediterranean; thence they had spread through Greek and Phoenician settlement to Sicily, North Africa, Spain, the shores of the Adriatic, and southern Gaul. However, it was not simply a matter of colonization: urban settlement was also the practice of those Iberians and Celts who were nearer their Greek and Phoenician neighbors. Even later in the course of Roman history Gaul south of Lugdunum (Lyon) was characterized by a far greater number of towns than the north. As they journeyed through Mesopotamia the Indian envoys would have had some foretaste of this through the Greek cities there, especially in the south and near the border-crossing in the northwest. These were not simply collections of people living and trading together but had civic institutions. The Parthian authorities dealt with them in much the same way as a Roman emperor dealt with his subordinate cities, as we can see from a letter of Artaban III to Susa (Seleucia on the Eulaios) of 21 AD.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless the increase in number of cities as the envoys traveled westward through the Roman empire would have been striking.

This was also an empire where commerce was essential. Several areas were not regularly self-sufficient in basic foodstuffs, and even those which were would not have been self-sufficient in raw materials. Sources of metal were widely dispersed; good-quality timber was not universally available. Civilization, moreover, had created its own demands in more specialized raw materials (for example fine stone for architecture and sculpture), luxury foodstuffs, and manufactured goods. Movement, on the other hand, though frequent, was not fast. Merchant vessels reached a considerable size; freighters of 350–500 tons were not unusual and there were some monstrous vessels. However, their average speeds over a long journey, even under favorable conditions, would barely reach four knots. Though it is wrong to think that the lateen rig was unknown to the Romans, and something similar could be achieved by a brailed sprit-

sail, we do not know how frequently these rigs were used. When Pliny gave estimates of the number of days' sail Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was from the Ganges, it was 20 days for "boats of papyrus and the rigging found on the Nile," compared with seven days for "our ships." The papyrus boats may have been rigged like a modern felucca. They were presumably considerably shorter than "our ships," which would explain their comparative lack of speed. A square-rigged vessel tacking against the wind would have found it difficult to point higher than 75° to it. The galleys of war-fleets, mainly under oars, would travel faster over short distances, but over a long journey would not exceed three knots.<sup>7</sup>

Some winds in the Mediterranean could be anticipated with considerable regularity. For example in the warmer months the hot air rising over the Sahara sucks in cooler air from the north, producing a variety of northerlies depending on the region: the Greek *bora* or *meltemi*, the *tramontana*, and the mistral. From time to time there is a reaction from North Africa in the form of a strong and arid southerly, the *sirocco*. It was thus difficult to sail into the northern Aegean, up the Adriatic, or up the Tyrrhenian in the summer, but the winds could assist voyages east and west along the length of the Mediterranean. In the winter the eastward procession of Atlantic depressions over this sea created winds that were both violent and of swiftly varying direction, making sailing a more unpredictable and dangerous business.

Heavy and bulky merchandise would have been moved by water as far as possible. For communication by land there were a number of well-maintained roads. The Indians on their journey would have followed one of the main routes of the old Persian empire of the Achaemenids into Syria and, if they had wished, they could have pursued it westward over the Taurus mountains into central Anatolia and thence down the Maeander valley to Ephesus. The Romans built or rebuilt roads in a characteristic fashion in the areas that came under their control. These roads consisted of a linear mound (*agger*) running between two ditches, whose base would include large stones for drainage. Superimposed on the *agger* were close-packed layers of gravel, flint, or other material, which might be surmounted with paving stones (those with a basalt surface are particularly durable). This raised the surface of the road high above possible flooding.

The Romans' conquest of Italy was accompanied and facilitated by these arteries. Major roads had also been built outside Italy under the Republic. After his conquest of southern Gaul in 121 BC, Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus built the *via Domitia* from the Rhône to the Col de Perthus in the Pyrenees, and it was extended down the Spanish coast to Cartagena

(New Carthage); one of his milestones can be seen in the museum at Narbonne (Narbo Martius). In the same period the proconsul Gnaeus Egnatius turned into a Roman road the artery that ran from the Adriatic over the Pindus mountains eastward into central Macedonia (near modern Thessaloniki).<sup>8</sup> This was subsequently extended through eastern Macedonia and Thrace to Byzantium and the crossing over the Bosphorus into Asia Minor. More recently, in Gaul, Caesar Augustus's most distinguished marshal, and later son-in-law, Marcus Agrippa, had built a road along the east bank of the Rhône and then northwards, which ultimately reached the English Channel, and another from Lyon to Aquitaine.<sup>9</sup> Many others were constructed during Augustus' reign. Their milestones commemorate the commander and the legions responsible for their construction. However important they might be commercially, the primary purpose of the roads was to facilitate the movement of troops and those on official business. This is especially clear from a road like the Augustan *via Sebaste* in Asia Minor (Pisidia), which improved communication in an area hard to control, or that in the semi-desert at the edge of the Sahara leading from the legionary winter-quarters at Tacape (Gabès) to Capsa (Gafsa) and beyond.<sup>10</sup>

The legions marched; others rode or used one of several types of two- or four-wheeled carriage; goods traveled in carts. No long or relatively fast journey would have been possible without relays of horses, mules, or other animals. The Achaemenid dynasty had established in the Persian empire a system of requisitioning men and beasts, which the Greeks had inherited and called *angareia* – used as an illustration in Christ's Sermon on the Mount.<sup>11</sup> Augustus developed a similar system throughout the Roman empire called the *cursus publicus* or *vehiculatio*. This is best attested in a series of inscribed documents from the first three centuries AD, which show Roman authorities seeking to repress abuses of the system. The earliest, from the beginning of the reign of Augustus' successor Tiberius, is an edict of Sextus Sotidius Strabo, governor of Galatia, found at Burdur (Sagalassus in Pisidia) in Asia Minor, which illustrates both this system and road transport in that area: "The people of Sagalassus must provide a service of ten carts and the same number of mules for the legitimate purposes of people passing through and receive from the users ten *asses* [bronze coins worth 1/16<sup>th</sup> of the silver *denarius*] per *schoenus* [i.e. a Persian parasang, roughly five miles] and four *asses* per *schoenus* for each mule." The extent of the responsibility of the Sagalassians is defined by two towns on either side. To escape this obligation, they had to pay a neighboring town or village at the same rate. This service, the edict continues, is not available to everybody. Those



who can profit from it are the imperial procurator (an official in charge of finance, taxes, and imperial estates in the province), those on military service, and those with a warrant (*diploma*), using up to ten carts, or three mules in place of each cart, or two donkeys in place of each mule; a Roman senator could get one cart or its mule or donkey equivalent; a knight in the imperial service three carts or their equivalents, and so on. The service is not available for those transporting grain or anything similar for commercial purposes or for their own use.<sup>12</sup>

The Indians would have experienced both sea and land transport of this kind on their travels. However, their first impression was perhaps more of a question. Where were the Romans, and what made this the Roman empire? They had come from the region east of the Euphrates, where Greek and Syriac were spoken, to one where the chief languages were again Greek and another Semitic language, Aramaic. At the frontier crossing there would have been tax-collectors, mainly locals under Roman supervision, the latter perhaps invisible. No doubt there were also some soldiers nearby, but possibly only a unit of local auxiliaries under a Roman commander or soldiers detached from the legions to keep a watch on the area (*stationarii*). This was an era when, especially in potential danger areas, the legions were a field army rather than a static garrison. The Syrian legions had winter-quarters by cities like Antioch and Laodicea on the coast: in the summer they would have been frequently either carrying out minor campaigns against rebels or bandits or engaged in a construction project. At Antioch, the headquarters of the imperial *legatus* (deputy) who governed Syria, there would have been the Romans who formed his entourage and the imperial procurators and their staff. Otherwise, the nucleus of what was Roman was the new Augustan *colonia* of Berytus (Beirut), which in time would become the location of an important school of Roman law. Some Romans had no doubt settled in the province for business reasons. There were also locals who had been rewarded with Roman citizenship for services rendered, notably Seleucus from the autonomous city of Rhosos, who had served the emperor as an admiral during the preceding civil wars, and his whole family.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, in general this was a region of mixed Greek and oriental culture with a small Roman superstructure.<sup>14</sup>

If the envoys had moved by road westward towards their rendezvous with Augustus on Samos, they would have found an essentially Greek world but many more Romans settlers living in the towns or on their estates. These had been numerous enough 30 years before for a governor of Cilicia (Cicero) to recruit from them a substantial reinforcement for his weak legions when faced with a Parthian threat.<sup>15</sup> Augustus, moreo-

ver, in the course of his reign settled time-served legionaries in *coloniae* in Asia Minor. Western Asia Minor had already been full of Roman citizens in 88 BC; on one, probably exaggerated, estimate some 80,000, when King Mithridates VI of Pontus successfully invaded the area and subsequently massacred them.<sup>16</sup> By Augustus' time it is likely that the Romans had returned in numbers – businessmen, estate-owners, employees of the companies of tax-collectors, not to forget their agents, usually freedmen (manumitted slaves) but sometimes actually slaves. When Cicero reached Samos on the way to his province in 51 BC, he was greeted by a large reception committee of such people, as well as local Greeks to whom he was well known.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, his brother Quintus, while governor of the province of Asia (effectively western Asia Minor) had created a monument to their family in one of the most prestigious religious sanctuaries of the ancient world, that of the temple of Hera on Samos, only some 25 meters from the steps of the temple itself. By 20 BC the emperor Augustus and his family too were developing a close relationship with the Samians, as attested by a complex series of decrees inscribed in the sanctuary of Hera, unfortunately only preserved in fragments.<sup>18</sup>

It would have been a similar story at Athens, where Romans went not merely for commercial purposes but to live there as expatriates enjoying its intellectual society and ancient fame; they even became Athenian citizens and subsequently members of the oldest Athenian political and judicial council, the Areopagus. Moreover, Rome and the imperial family were making a big impact on the physical appearance of Athens. A new Roman agora was created to the east of the original Athenian one; a temple to Rome and Augustus was built to the east of the Parthenon; Marcus Agrippa was responsible for the building of the Odeion, an auditorium, on the south side of the Agora, and a monument to him was placed outside the Propylaea on the Acropolis.<sup>19</sup>

Only, however, when the envoys at last crossed the Adriatic to Italy, perhaps to Brundisium, would they have felt that they were in an overwhelmingly Roman world. The Latin language had by now effectively supplanted, for both public and private purposes, the varied languages once spoken in Italy; a Roman pattern of town-planning and public architecture had largely come to dominate local traditions. The same process was occurring in North Africa and the western provinces, though there the speaking of local languages had not been eliminated. Above all there was the city of Rome itself which the emperor had been rebuilding so that it could appear worthy to be a capital of the world and strike awe into foreign visitors. As the Greek friend of Augustus, the geogra-



**Figure 2** The northwest end of the Forum Romanum. In the foreground are the Augustan Rostra. Behind this are the temple of Saturn (left) and the Republican basilica, now known as the Tabularium, incorporated into a medieval palace (right background).

pher Strabo wrote, “Again, if, after arriving in the old Forum, you were to see first one and yet another Forum extending beside it, and the basilicas and temples, if you were to see the Capitol and the architecture there and the building on the Palatine and in the Macellum of Livia, you could easily forget foreign places. Such is Rome.”<sup>20</sup>