

UNIT 3 TASK BOOKLET – EMBASSIES TO ROME



Artistic imagining of the embassy from Taprobane - Stanley Kirindé

For this unit's task, you will consider diplomatic contacts between the Roman Empire and various kingdoms or chiefdoms from India, Taprobane (modern Sri Lanka), and the Seres (the "Silk People"). A series of passages from the ancient sources have been set out below which you should read in conjunction with a chapter by Speidel (see the Moodle page).

Please consider writing a short 500 word (approximately) piece and uploading it to the Unit 3 Moodle forum. Constructive and polite engagement with other students' posts is also encouraged.

While reading this material, consider the following questions set out below:

Questions:

- 1) Why do you think so many eastern embassies appear to have come to the Empire during the reign of Augustus?
- 2) What parallels can be drawn between the account of Zarmanochegas, who was part of an embassy from the Indian king Porus (or Pandion) to Augustus, and the Indian sage Calanus who joined Alexander the Great's entourage? Why might these parallels have been drawn?
- 3) Do you think that we can obtain any genuine ethnographic and historical information from Pliny's account of the people of Taprobane and the Seres, or is it largely a literary construct?
- 4) Critically consider Speidel's thesis about establishing diplomatic relationships for the purpose of trade – how convincing do you find his arguments?
- 5) Do the later narratives (post-Augustan) about diplomatic contact with the Roman Empire seem to share many of the same features?

Ancient Sources

Strabo *Geography* 15.1.4

As for the merchants who now sail from Egypt by the Nile and the “Red Sea” as far as India, only a small number have sailed as far as the Ganges; and even these are merely private citizens and of no use as regards the history of the places they have seen. But from India, from one place and from one king, I mean Pandion, or another Porus, there came to Caesar Augustus presents and gifts of honour and the Indian sophist who burnt himself up at Athens, as Calanus had done, who made a similar spectacular display of himself before Alexander.

(15.1.72-73)

...But one might add to the accounts here given that of Nicolaus Damascenus.

He says that at Antioch, near Daphnê, he chanced to meet the Indian ambassadors who had been sent out to Caesar Augustus; that the letter plainly indicated more than three ambassadors, but that only three had survived (whom he says he saw), but the rest, mostly by reason of the long journeys, had died; and that the letter was written in Greek on a skin; and that it plainly showed that Porus was the writer, and that, although he was ruler of 600 kings, still he was anxious to be a friend to Caesar, and was ready, not only to allow him a passage through his country, wherever he wished to go, but also to co-operate with him in anything that was honourable. Nicolaus says that this was the content of the letter to Caesar, and that the gifts carried to Caesar were presented by eight naked servants, who were clad only in loin-cloths besprinkled with sweet-smelling odours; and that the gifts consisted of the Hermes, a man who was born without arms, whom I myself have seen, and large vipers, and a serpent of ten cubits in length, and a river tortoise three cubits in length, and a partridge larger than a vulture; and they were accompanied also, according to him, by the man who burned himself up at Athens; and that whereas some commit suicide when they suffer adversity, seeking release from the ills at hand, others do so when their lot is happy, as was the case with that man; for, he adds, although that man had fared as he wished up to that time, he thought it necessary then to depart this life, lest something untoward might happen to him if he tarried here; and that therefore he leaped upon the pyre with a laugh, his naked body anointed, wearing only a loin-cloth; and that the following words were inscribed on his tomb: "Here lies Zarmanochegas, an Indian from Bactria, who immortalised himself in agreement with the ancestral customs of Indians."

Cf. Plutarch *Alexander* 65.5, 69.8

“Calanus, nevertheless, was persuaded by Taxiles to pay a visit to Alexander... In Persia, too, Calanus, who had suffered for a little while from intestinal disorder, asked that a funeral pyre might be prepared for him...and so sacrificed himself acceptably, as the wise men of his country had done from of old.”

CF. Arrian *Anabasis* 7.3.1-6

In India Calanus had never been ill, but when he was living in Persia all strength ultimately left his body. In spite of his enfeebled state he refused to submit to an invalid regimen, and told Alexander that he was content to die as he was, which would be preferable to enduring the misery of being forced to alter his way of life. Alexander, at some length, tried to talk him out of his obstinacy, but to no purpose. Then, convinced that if he were any further opposed he would find one means or another of making away with himself, he yielded to his request, and gave instructions for the building of a funeral pyre under the supervision of Ptolemy son of Lagus, of the Personal Guard.

Some say Calanus was escorted to the pyre by a solemn procession - horses, men, soldiers in armour and people carrying all kinds of precious oils and spices to throw upon the flames; other accounts mention drinking-cups of silver and gold and kingly robes. He was too ill to walk, and a horse was provided for him; but he was incapable of mounting it, and had to be carried by a litter, upon which he lay with his head wreathed with garlands in the Indian fashion, and singing Indian songs, which his countrymen declare were hymns of praise to their gods. The horse he was to have ridden was of the royal breed of Nisaia, and before he mounted the pyre he gave it to Lysimachus one of his pupils in philosophy, and distributed among other pupils and friends the drinking-cups and draperies which Alexander had ordered to be burnt in his honour upon the pyre.

At last he mounted the pyre and with due ceremony laid himself down. All the troops were watching. Alexander could not but feel that there was a sort of indelicacy in witnessing such a spectacle - the man, after all, had been his friend; everyone else, however, felt nothing but astonishment to see Calanus give not the smallest sign of shrinking from the flames. We read in Nearchus' account of this incident that at the moment the fire was kindled there was, by Alexander's orders, an impressive salute: the bugles sounded, the troops with one accord roared out their battle-cry, and the elephants joined in with their shrill war-trumpeting.

***Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 31**

Embassies were often sent to me from the kings of India, a thing never seen before in the camp of any general of the Romans.

Suetonius *Divine Augustus* 21.3

The reputation for prowess and moderation which he thus gained led even the Indians and the Scythians, nations known to us only by hearsay, to send envoys of their own free will and sue for his friendship and that of the Roman people.

Dio Cassius *Roman History* 54.9.7-10

But Augustus, for his part, returned to Samos and once more passed the winter there. In recognition of his stay he gave the islanders their freedom, and he also attended to many matters of business. For a great many embassies came to him, and the people of India, who had already

made overtures, now made a treaty of friendship, sending among other gifts tigers, which were then for the first time seen by the Romans, as also, I think by the Greeks. They also gave him a boy who had no shoulders or arms, like our statues of Hermes. And yet, defective as he was, he could use his feet for everything, as if they were hands: with them he would stretch a bow, shoot missiles, and put a trumpet to his lips. How he did this I do not know; I merely state what is recorded. One of the Indians, Zarmarus, for some reason wished to die, — either because, being of the caste of sages, he was on this account moved by ambition, or, in accordance with the traditional custom of the Indians, because of old age, or because he wished to make a display for the benefit of Augustus and the Athenians (for Augustus had reached Athens);— he was therefore initiated into the mysteries of the two goddesses, which were held out of season on account, they say, of Augustus, who also was an initiate, and he then threw himself alive into the fire.

Paulus Orosius *History Against the Pagans* 6.21.19

In the meantime, embassies of the Indians and Scythians, after travelling the whole world, at length came upon Caesar at Tarraco, a city of Hither Spain, beyond which they could not have sought him. They poured into his ears an account of the glories of Alexander the Great. Just as embassies of the Spaniards and Gauls came to Alexander at Babylon in the centre of the East to consider peace, so in Spain in the furthest West, eastern India and northern Scythia besought Caesar as suppliants and brought tribute from their countries.

Florus 34.61-62

Now that all the races of the west and south were subjugated, and also the races of the north, those at least between the Rhine and the Danube, and of the east between the Cyrus and the Euphrates, the other nations too, who were not under the rule of the empire, yet felt the greatness of Rome and revered its people as the conqueror of the world. For the Scythians and the Sarmatians sent ambassadors seeking friendship; the Seres too and the Indians, who live immediately beneath the sun, though they brought elephants amongst their gifts as well as precious stones and pearls, regarded their long journey, in the accomplishment of which they had spent four years, as the greatest tribute which they rendered; and indeed their complexion proved that they came from beneath another sky.

Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 6.24.81-91

Thus much we learn from the ancient writers; it has fallen to our lot, however, to obtain a still more accurate knowledge of these people; for during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, an embassy came from even this distant island to Rome. The circumstances under which this took place were as follow: Annius Plocamus had farmed from the treasury the revenues arising from the Red Sea. A certain freedman of his, while sailing around Arabia, was carried away by a gale from the north beyond the coast of Carmania. In the course of fifteen days he had drifted to Hippuros, a port of Taprobane, where he was most kindly and hospitably received by the king; and having, after a study of six months, become well acquainted with the language, was enabled to answer all his enquiries relative to the Romans and their emperor. But of all that he

heard, the king was more particularly struck with surprise at our rigid notions of justice, on ascertaining that among the money found on the captive, the denarii were all of equal weight, although the different figures on them plainly showed that they had been struck in the reigns of several emperors. By this circumstance in especial, the king was prompted to form an alliance with the Romans, and accordingly sent to Rome an embassy, consisting of four persons, the chief of whom was Rachias.

From these persons we learned that in Taprobane there are five hundred towns, and that there is a harbour that lies facing the south, and adjoining the city of Palæsimundus, the most famous city in the isle, the king's place of residence, and containing a population of two hundred thousand. They also informed us that in the interior there is a lake called Megisba, three hundred and seventy-five miles in circumference, and containing islands which are fertile, though for pasturage only. In this lake they informed us two rivers take their rise, one of which, called Palesimundus, flows into the harbour near the city of that name, by three channels, the narrowest of which is five stadia in width, the largest fifteen; while the other, Cydara by name, takes a direction northward, towards the Indian coast. We learned also that the nearest point of the Indian coast is a promontory known as Coliacum, distant from the island four days' sail, and that midway between them lies the island of the Sun. They stated also that those seas are of a deep green tint; besides which, there are numerous trees growing at the bottom, so much so, that the rudders of the vessels frequently break off portions of their foliage. They were much astonished at the constellations which are visible to us, the Greater Bear and the Pleiades, as though they had now beheld a new expanse of the heavens; and they declared that in their country the moon can only be seen above the horizon from the eighth to its sixteenth day. They also stated that Canopus, a large bright star, gives light to them by night. But what surprised them more than anything, was that the shadow of their bodies was thrown towards our hemisphere and not theirs, and that the sun arose on the left hand and set on the right, and not in the opposite direction. They also informed us that the side of their island which lies opposite to India is ten thousand stadia in length, and runs in a south-easterly direction—that beyond the Emodian Mountains they look towards the Seres, whose acquaintance they had also made in the pursuits of commerce; that the father of Rachias had frequently visited their country, and that the Seres always came to meet them on their arrival. These people, they said, exceeded the ordinary human height, had blondish red hair, and blue eyes, and made an uncouth sort of noise by way of talking, having no language of their own for the purpose of communicating their thoughts. The rest of their information was of a similar nature to that communicated by our merchants. It was to the effect that the merchandize on sale was left by them upon the opposite bank of a river on their coast, and it was then removed by the natives, if they thought proper to deal on terms of exchange. On no grounds ought luxury with greater reason to be detested by us, than if we only transport our thoughts to these scenes, and then reflect, what are its demands, to what distant spots it sends in order to satisfy them, and for how mean and how unworthy an end!

But yet Taprobane even, isolated as it is by nature from the rest of the world, is not exempt from our vices. Gold and silver are held in esteem even there. They have a marble which resembles tortoise-shell in appearance; this, as well as their pearls and precious stones, is highly valued; all our luxuries in fact, those even of the most exquisite nature, are there carried to the very highest pitch. They asserted that their wealth is much greater than ours, but admitted that we know better than they how to obtain real enjoyment from opulence.

In this island no slavery exists; they do not prolong their sleep to day-break, nor indeed during any part of the day; their buildings are only of a moderate height from the ground; the price of corn is always the same; they have no courts of law and no litigation. Hercules is the deity whom they worship; and their king is chosen by the people, an aged man always, distinguished for his mild and clement disposition, and without children. If after he has been elected king, he happens to become the father of children, his abdication is the consequence; this is done that there may be no danger of the sovereign power becoming hereditary. Thirty advisers are provided for him by the people, and it is only by the advice of the majority of them that any man is condemned to capital punishment. Even then, the person so condemned has a right of appealing to the people, in which case a jury consisting of seventy persons is appointed. Should these acquit the accused, the thirty counsellors are no longer held in any estimation, but are visited with the greatest disgrace. The king wears the costume of Father Liber, while the rest of the people dress like the natives of Arabia. The king, if he is found guilty of any offence, is condemned to death; but no one slays him; all turn their backs upon him, and refuse to hold any communication or even discourse with him. Their festivals are celebrated with the chase, the most valued sports being the pursuit of the tiger and the elephant. The lands are carefully tilled; the vine is not cultivated there, but of other fruits there is great abundance. They take great delight in fishing, and especially in catching turtles; beneath the shells of which whole families find an abode, of such vast size are they to be found. These people look upon a hundred years as a comparatively short life. Thus much have we learned respecting Taprobane.

Periplus Maris Erythraei 23

And after nine days more there is Saphar [Zafar, in modern Yemen], the metropolis, in which lives Charibael, lawful king of two tribes, the Homerites [Himyar] and those living next to them, called the Sabaites [Sabaea]; through continual embassies and gifts, he is a friend of the Emperors.

Cassius Dio 68.15

Upon Trajan's return to Rome [after his Dacian campaigns] a great many embassies came to him from various barbarians, including the Indians. And he gave spectacles on 123 days, in the course of which some 11,000 animals, both wild and tame, were slain, and 10,000 gladiators fought.

Eusebius Life of Constantine 4.7.1-3

Indeed, envoys were continually arriving from all nations, bringing for his [Constantine's] acceptance their most precious gifts. So that I myself [Eusebius] have sometimes stood near the entrance of the imperial palace, and observed a noticeable array of barbarians in attendance, differing from each other in costume and decorations, and equally unlike in the fashion of their hair and beard. Their aspect truculent and terrible, their bodily stature prodigious: some of a red complexion, others white as snow, others again of an intermediate colour. For in the number of those I have referred to might be seen specimens of the Blemmyean tribes, of the Indians, and the Ethiopians, that widely-divided race, remotest of mankind. All these in due succession,

like some painted pageant, presented to the emperor those gifts which their own nation held in most esteem; some offering crowns of gold, others diadems set with precious stones; some bringing fair-haired boys, others barbaric clothing embroidered with gold and flowers: some appeared with horses, others with shields and long spears, with arrows and bows, thereby offering their services and alliance for the emperor's acceptance. These presents he separately received and carefully laid aside, acknowledging them in so munificent a manner as at once to enrich those who bore them. He also honoured the noblest among them with Roman offices of dignity; so that many of them thenceforward preferred to continue their residence among us, and felt no desire to revisit their native land.

Ammianus Marcellinus 22.7.9-10

While he [the Emperor Julian] was attending to these and similar affairs he gained a reputation among foreign peoples for renown in bravery, sobriety, and knowledge of military affairs, as well as of all noble qualities; and his fame gradually spread and filled the entire world. Then, since the fear of his coming [his planned campaign against the Sassanian Persians] extended widely over neighbouring and far distant lands, delegations hastened to him from all sides more speedily than usual: on one side, the peoples beyond the Tigris and the Armenians begged for peace; on another, the Indian nations as far as the Divi [Laccadive Islands?] and the Serendivi [Maldives?] vied with one another in sending their leading men with gifts ahead of time; on the south, the Mauritanians offered their services to the Roman state; from the north and the desert regions, through which the Phasis flows to the sea, came embassies from the Bosporani and other hitherto unknown peoples, humbly asking that on payment of their annual tribute they might be allowed to live in peace within the bounds of their native lands.