**A Comparative Analysis of the Roman and Portuguese Pepper Trade**

A comparison of the pepper trade in the ancient and early modern eras allows insights that might otherwise be missed during the individual analysis of Indian trade in each time period. The abundant and rich documentation of the early modern period helps to clarify the rarer and more controversial ancient documents, which in their turn demonstrate the chronological depth of a phenomenon so clearly observable in the modern age. For instance, information obtained from early modern travelogues helps both to define the geographical, ecological and anthropological context of surplus Malabar pepper production and to decipher the cryptic references to production in the classical literature. What emerges is that, from antiquity to modernity, trade depended less on the pepper harvested by the low caste people in the small gardens of the coastal areas than on the pepper collected by the tribal people in the highland forests of the Ghats.

The juxtaposition of Roman and Portuguese documentary evidence also becomes more relevant now, as a result of recent improvements in the reading of the P.Vindob. G 40,822 (= SB XVIII 13167), the so-called Muziris papyrus. The new reading allows us to reconstruct, almost entirely, the composition and fiscal evaluation of a typical return cargo of an Indiamen vessel from the 2nd century CE. Particularly important are the data related to pepper, which represented most of the weight (544 tons *ca*.) and the fiscal value (more than 771 money talents) of the cargo. Equally interesting are the technicalities of the complex fiscal procedure to which these commodities were subject and the conventional fiscal prices given to each commodity (only 6 drachmas per mina for pepper). A comparison with data available for16th century Portuguese ships provides a more nuanced appreciation of the quantitative dimensions of pepper imports in antiquity and reveals the very different economic policies of the Roman Empire and early modern Portugal. Nonetheless, an assessment of the overall economic impact of both Roman and Portuguese trade with India remains uncertain, in part due to the secrecy surrounding the trade of other goods that were closely tied to the pepper trade, such as pearls and precious stones.