

God, Gold and Governance: a network analysis of transoceanic trade, wealth accumulation and early empire building in the South Deccan

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The paper explores intricate commercial ties between South India and the Roman empire, shedding light on the exchange of highly coveted goods and the resulting wealth accumulation and early empire building in the South Deccan. The authors highlighted that from the 3rd century BC, the kingdoms of South India maintained steady commercial ties with the Roman Empire, with trade reaching its peak during the 1st century AD before gradually declining and eventually ending around the 7th century AD. The goods exchanged included Indian spices, gemstones, silk, textiles, cotton, ivory, aromatic woods, and peacocks, which were highly sought after by Roman markets. In return, Indian traders obtained coral, amphorae of wine, olive oil, and metals such as gold, silver, and copper, mostly in the form of coins and jewelry. The study draws attention to the evidence of overland linkages between the various ports of entry for Roman goods on the Malabar coastline and the capital and commercial cities of the Chera, Chola, Pandya and Ay dynasties in the South Deccan. They mention the excavations of Roman earthenware and crafts along both coasts, providing hints towards the extent of trade. This research, thus, emphasizes the significance of network analysis in tracing the interconnectivity of markets and goods mentioned in historical works, providing insights into the supply-demand relationship of the period. Furthermore, the study explores how the inward flow of gold and silver bullion allowed the kingdoms to swell their treasuries and undertake measures to ensure the safe passage of merchants and trade goods across transport routes in their territories. Lastly, the study remarks the growing role of temples as one repository for this wealth (a sacred metal) and as the source for conferring 'ritual sovereignty' keyed the deepening of linkages between gold, temples and the ruler.