

## Ancient Red Sea Route

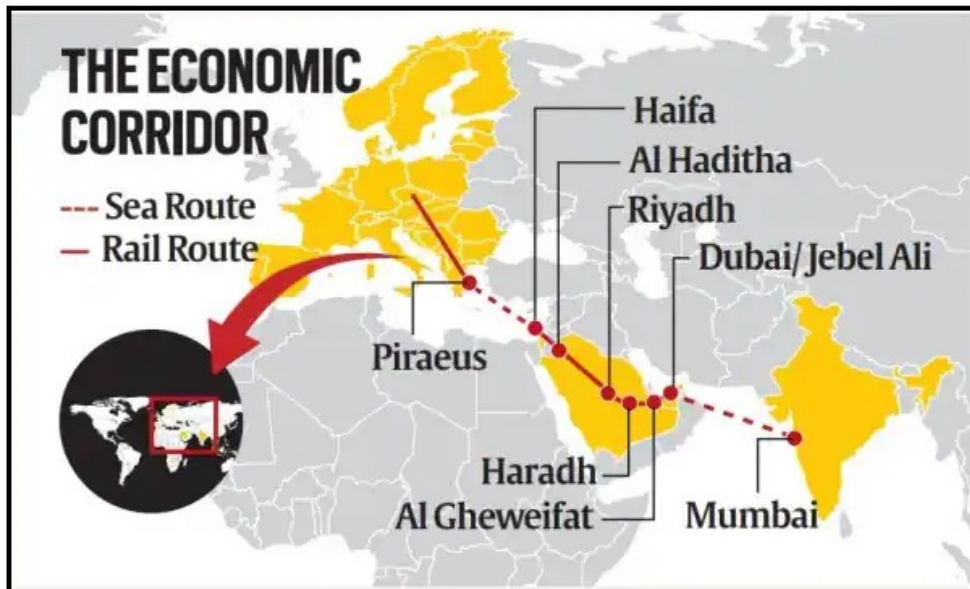
### Why in news?

In the G20 Summit 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday announced the launch of the historic India-Middle East-Europe mega economic corridor.

To know about the key outcomes of the G20 Summit 2023, click [here](#)

### What is India Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor?

- **Infrastructure corridor**- The rail and shipping corridor is part of the [Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment](#) (PGII) — a collaborative effort by G7 nations to fund infrastructure projects in developing nations.
- **Aim**- To enable greater trade among the involved countries, including energy products
- **Member countries**- India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the European Union, France, Italy, Germany and the US.
- **Proposed corridors**-
  - **East Corridor**- It connects India to West Asia/Middle East
  - **Northern Corridor**- It connects West Asia/Middle East to Europe.
- **Railway link**- The project involves the laying of a railway link through the [Arabian Peninsula](#) that could then link up with shipping passages to India and Europe.
- **Proposed projects**- The corridor will include
  - Electricity cable and high speed data cable,
  - Hydrogen pipeline
  - A green and digital bridge across continents and civilizations.
- **Significance**- The use of the land route in the Arabian Peninsula could bypass the congested Suez Canal that cargo ships currently take.
- The project eventually aims at laying out a seamless corridor running all the way from South East Asia to Europe
- It is seen as a weighty ideological alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.



## What is the ancient Red Sea trade route?

### Before Common Era

- **Meluha**-There are evidences of Indian diaspora in the Middle East even at the time of Meluha (the Indus Valley Civilisation, c. 3300-1300 BCE).
- It seems to have been more coastal and involved small quantities of goods.
- **Roman times**- The trade expanded with huge cargo ships moving directly between the subcontinent and the Roman Empire.

### After Common Era

*Roman Empire covered from lowland Scotland to the borders of Persia, and from the Sahara to the banks of the Rhine and Danube.*

- **Conquest of Egypt**- The trade picked up in the 1st and 2nd centuries after the Romans conquered Egypt, opening up for Roman merchants, who were adventurous enough to try to sail to India.
  - Sir Mortimer Wheeler's excavations at Arikamedu, Pondicherry in the 1930s and 40s, had established the existence of Indo-Roman trade in the 1st century CE.
- **Muziris Papyrus**- This document gives details of one particular cargo sent to the Egyptian port of *Berenike* from Muziris port, India.
- According to latest estimates, custom taxes on the Red Sea trade with India, Persia, and Ethiopia may have generated as much as one-third of the income of the Roman exchequer.
- **Maritime link**- In the 1st and 2nd century CE, maritime highway linked the Roman Empire and India through the Red Sea, with many hundreds of ships going in both directions each year.

## What was being traded on this route?

- **Exports-** There was a great demand across the Roman Empire for luxuries from India.
  - Cinnamon-like plant called malabathrum whose leaves were pressed to create perfume
  - Luxury items such as ivory, pearls, and precious gemstones
  - Ivory figures such as Yakshi fertility spirit
  - Exotic goods especially wild animals like elephants and tigers
  - Spices such as pepper have been found during excavations at Berenike
- **Import-** The flow of goods in the other direction was more limited.
  - The Roman historian ***Pliny the Elder*** (23-79 CE) says it was mainly gold that went to India and the balance of trade was firmly in India's favour.
  - There was some trade in *olive oil and Garum*, an ancient Roman fermented fish paste, evidence of which has been found in Arikamedu and in Kerala.
- **Trade organisation-** The evidence points that the trade being highly organised.
- **Contracts-** They were written between merchants in Kerala and shippers in Alexandria. There are even references to insurances.



## What roles did Indians have in this trade?

- **Role of monsoon winds-** The Indians were quick to grasp that the heating of the Tibetan Plateau meant that the monsoon winds blow in one direction in winter and the other in summer.
- **Paintings-** The pictures in Ajanta had large double-masted ships.
- **Coins-** Ships were a common insignia in many early Indian coins.
  - For example- Satvahana coins
- **Graffiti evidence-** It is found in the Hoq caves on the Socotra island, at the mouth of Gulf of Aden, left by Indian sailors (mostly Gujaratis from Barigaza, modern-day Bharuch)
- **Images-** There are images of Buddhist stupas, Shaivite tridents, swastikas, Syrian Christian crosses, and pictures of large three-masted Indian ships, as well as prayers to Krishna and Radha.
- **Recent evidences-** There is a lot of evidences in places like Muziris in Kerala and Berenike in Egypt.

- Recently, the head and torso of a magnificent Buddha, the first ever found to the west of Afghanistan, was discovered at the site in Berenike along with a triad of early Vaishnav deities.

### **How does the Red Sea Route differ from the Silk Route?**

*Silk route is an overland trade route stretching all the way across Asia from Xian in China to Antioch in Turkey.*

- **Absence of record** - The Silk Road was completely unknown in ancient or mediaeval times.
- It certainly existed during the Mongol period (13th and 14th centuries CE).
- However, during the Roman period, there's no evidence that China and Europe knew of each other's existence.
- **Usage of Indian ports**- Chinese silk seems to have reached Rome during this period via the ports of India.
  - For instance, overland through Kushana territory in northern India, to the ports of Gujarat and the mouth of the Indus.
- **China factor**- China has politicised the [Belt and Road initiative](#) and actively mobilised the idea as part of Chinese foreign policy, to make China the end of a worldwide trade network.

### **References**

1. [Indian Express- Maritime trade route India and Europe silk route](#)
2. [Indian Express- India Middle Europe Economic Corridor](#)

