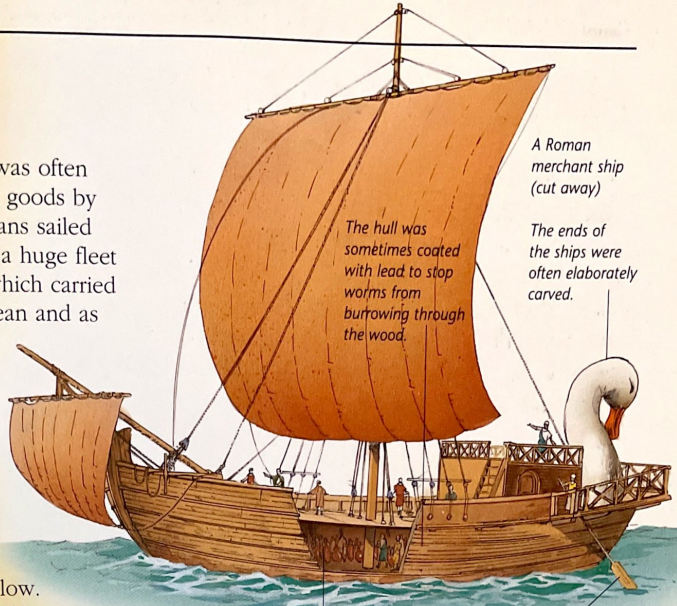


UNDER SAIL

Despite the excellent roads, it was often easier and cheaper to transport goods by boat. Where possible, the Romans sailed along rivers, but they also had a huge fleet of sea-going merchant ships, which carried goods all over the Mediterranean and as far away as India.

The Mediterranean could be very dangerous to cross, especially in winter. Ships frequently ran into terrible storms, and shipwrecks were common. Roman ships were strong, but they were clumsy and rather slow. With a top speed of only 7km (4 miles) an hour, a ship could take as long as three weeks to sail from Egypt to Italy.



A Roman merchant ship (cut away)

The ends of the ships were often elaborately carved.

The hull was sometimes coated with lead to stop worms from burrowing through the wood.

Pottery jars - or amphorae - filled with wine and olive oil

Ships were steered using two oars at the back.

THE PORT OF OSTIA

Most merchant ships were too big to sail up the Tiber to Rome. Instead, they docked at the port of Ostia, at the mouth of the river. There, the cargo was unloaded onto barges and taken the final 25km (15 miles) upriver to Rome. As Rome's main seaport, Ostia was vital to the city's economy and was a busy place packed with merchants, shipbuilders and officials.

WAREHOUSE OF THE WORLD

By the time of the Empire, Rome was at the heart of a vast trading network. Such huge quantities of goods reached the city that one writer described Rome as the 'warehouse of the world'. While grain, olive oil and wine were the most important items, wealthy Romans could buy an array of luxury goods, such as ivory from East Africa, spices and gems from India and silks from China.

Pepper - the dried fruit of the pepper plant - was a very popular spice.

