

Ancient logistics

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At the beginning of the Christian Era Rome was a metropolis of more than a million inhabitants. The citizens' most important foodstuff consisted of wheat. Most of the wheat was imported from Egypt in simple sailing vessels built according to Egyptian, Phoenician and Greek ship building traditions.

The loading capacity of ships varied from 70 to 400 tons, averaging 250 tons. The maximum length of the sailing season was 8 months a year. One ship usually made two trips during the season. The crew consisted of free men or slaves.

The ships transporting wheat took the route from Alexandria to the North-West either along the African coast passing Malta and Sicily or via Crete and Cyprus passing Sicily. The most important ports on the western coast were Ostia and Puteoli. In Puteoli, the cargoes were loaded from the large ships into smaller vessels to be taken to Ostia whereas smaller ships sailed directly to Ostia. From Ostia the grain was transported to Rome along the River Tiber in barges pulled by oxen or slaves. In Rome, the grain was distributed to the heads of families.

The state was in charge of about one fifth of the wheat import, so most of the trade was in the hands of private people. The financial risks as well as those of shipping were considerable, but so were also the profits.

The Romans traded by sea in the Mediterranean area and even beyond, by sailing, for example, to India and the British Isles. To safeguard the shipping, the Romans built an extensive network of ports and a large number of lighthouses in the Mediterranean Sea.

Water supply and waste management were parts of the city logistics.