



# PEPPER A HISTORY

**Robert Wernick**

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# **PEPPER**

## **A HISTORY**

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"The passion for pepper seemed to burn like a flame of love in the breast of Dutch and English adventurers about the time of James the First. Where wouldn't they go for pepper! For a bag of pepper they would cut each other's throats without hesitation, and would forswear their souls, of which they were so careful otherwise; the bizarre obstinacy of that desire made them defy death in a thousand shapes – the unknown seas, the loathsome and strange diseases, wounds, captivity, hunger, pestilence and despair. . . . They left their bones to lie bleaching on distant shores."

So muses Joseph Conrad's narrator, Marlow, in chapter 22 of his novel *Lord Jim*. Lord Jim himself was to add his bones to the rest, in his dark, doomed corner of the East, where some earlier adventurer had decided the soil was right for a pepper plantation.

And all that grief and blood for a few handfuls of what, in Conrad's time as in our own, was often nothing more than a powdered condiment to be found on every table, to be flicked carelessly on every humdrum meal. What in the world, Conrad or you or I might wonder, could be so extraordinary about pepper that men willingly died for it?

If you enlarge your historical horizon a bit, and look back just a few centuries, there is nothing at all bizarre about the obstinacy of those pepper seekers. They were dealing with one of the great motive forces of human events. Closely examine any of the great events that have shaped the world as we know it – the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, the Crusades, the discovery of America – and often as not you will find a pungent smell of pepper at its core.

When Alaric the Visigoth held the city of Rome to ransom in A.D. 408, he demanded and got 5,000 pounds of gold, 30,000 pounds of silver; 4,000 silk tunics, and 3,000 pounds of pepper.

There are people in the spice trade who will tell you that Alaric wanted the pepper to put in his sausages - a recent invention of the Visigothic horsemen that enabled them to travel great distances with a relatively well-preserved supply of meat and thus be able to attack and plunder unsuspecting provinces at

their leisure. But the early history of the sausage is murky; and it is more likely that Alaric wanted pepper simply because his keen gangster eye could see that it was so profitable: It was small in bulk, light in weight, and enormously expensive. The Romans, like the Greeks before them, were wild about pepper, which they imported at great expense from the East. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder chided them for exchanging precious metal for a product that grew like a weed in its homeland. But they went on without a murmur paying steadily out the gold and silver they collected in plunder, tribute, taxes, tariffs, and bribes.

First they paid it to Arabian middlemen. When they learned that pepper grew in India, they discovered how to use the monsoon winds to sail regularly back and forth between the Red Sea ports and the Malabar coast ports like Muziris, and it became one of their principal trade routes. An old Sanskrit text records how the Roman traders "came with gold and returned with pepper and Muziris resounded with the noise."

The duty levied on that pepper in the customhouses of Alexandria was one of the mainstays of the Imperial budget. And all that gold flowing to Muziris and the other ports of India deepened the deficit in the balance of payments, which, according to one school of modern historians, led to the financial crisis that helped destroy the Roman Empire, like the one that helped destroy the Soviet Empire a millennium and a half later.

It wasn't pepper alone, of course. Other luxury goods in the East were attracting Roman gold: pearls and ivory and apes and peacocks and such. And there were dozens of other spices, like nutmeg and cinnamon and cloves and cardamom. For that matter there were at least 20 other plants of the genus *Piper* growing wild in India. But black pepper, *Piper nigrum*, was always everyone's favorite and has always provided the bulk of the spice trade.

After Rome fell, pepper became much rarer and more expensive in the Western world. Wars and invasions made trading hazardous. Then the rise of Islam turned the Mediterranean into a Muslim lake closed to European shipping, and the regular trade routes to the Orient almost dried up, plunging Western Europe into centuries of depression and stagnation and decay.