

Pepper: the spice in Rome's ransom

verdavita editorial team · Published 2026-11-05

When Alaric's Goths besieged Rome, the ransom reportedly included 3,000 pounds of pepper. A spice from India's Malabar Coast had become worth listing beside gold and silver.

A long way from home

Roman demand for pepper grew sharply after Rome took Egypt in 30 BCE, which opened sea routes toward India. Much of the pepper was bought at Muziris, a port on India's western coast, and carried by large ships.

Pliny the Elder complained that India drained the empire of fifty million sesterces a year.

30 BCE
Rome takes Egypt, and pepper imports rise

1st century
Pliny complains about money flowing to India

408
Pepper is part of the ransom for Rome

1341
A flood is said to end the port of Muziris

Dates as given in the sources below. Some accounts differ.

The ransom

Accounts of the siege list gold, silver, silk and scarlet hides, along with 3,000 pounds of pepper. Sources differ on some amounts and on dates, but pepper appears in the accounts

we checked.

A lost port

Muziris faded from the record, and one account says a flood in 1341 ended the town. Its story is a reminder that everyday kitchen ingredients once moved through long and costly trade routes.

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Sources

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