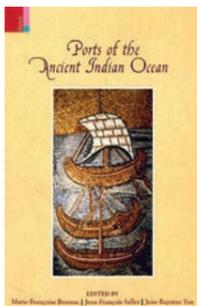


Ports of the Ancient Indian Ocean

This edited volume delivers much more than is suggested by its title, since it includes discussions of emporia as far inland as Delhi, the time-scale covered by its articles extends from the 20th century BC to the 18th century AD, and since not only the Indian Ocean, but also the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea are discussed by the various authors. Given the wide range and disparate nature of the twenty-four papers in the volume, how should one orient oneself among them? Best to begin with Elizabeth Lambourn's *'Describing a Lost Camel' – Clues for a West Asian Mercantile Networks in South Asian Maritime Trade (Tenth-Twelfth Centuries AD)*. The volume taken as a whole forms a contribution to the genre of world history and Lambourn provides a clear-eyed assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of that genre. Although Lambourn's paper is primarily concerned with the two hundred years from the tenth- to the twelfth centuries AD, her masterly analysis of the sources and criticism of the various methodologies in which they are employed provide the reader with a prism with which to view the remaining papers in the volume.

Reviewer: Dr Richard Fynes



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LAMBOURN BEGINS HER ACCOUNT with a review of the relevant archaeological and documentary evidence. It is salutary to learn just how insecure is the dating of many South Asian ceramic types and consequently of the archaeological sites whose dating has been largely derived from ceramic evidence. Lambourn notes the problems posed by pluridisciplinary character of the sources and their simultaneous use. Her paper focuses on the port of Sanjan, in the domain of the western Indian dynasty of the Rastrakuta, where, for the tenth century there is rare conjunction of evidence from archaeology, Arabic geographical writings and Indian epigraphy. Her discussion is rich both in evidence and insight, and she gives due acknowledgment to the work of Ranabir Chakravarti, whose work has led scholars to reformulate the questions they ask of the sources. Lambourn's findings lead her to speculate on the nature of world history and the relationship between micro- and macro history, as she expresses dissatisfaction that she is "left with an eclectic collection of small insights and few satisfactory larger narratives." Such honest appraisals of the conclusions of one's research invite further questions and are thus a stimulant to further research.

With Lambourn's discussion in mind, one can turn to the other papers. Rila Mukherjee in *Routes, Ports and Networks in Bengal; The China Connection* reviews connections over wide areas and a long chronology. She argues for the existence in history of a regional unit that she calls the northern Bay of Bengal, comprising parts of the areas of four modern states: China, India, Bangladesh and Burma, within whose early history were many states with a host of ethnicities, religions, languages and practices. Mukherjee argues that consideration of this unit allows one to abandon conventional ways of looking at places, such as points of view that are state-centric or categorized by area studies. The heart of her paper is an overview of trade networks in this area ranging from the second century BC to the fourteenth century AD. Much of her information about trade routes comes from early twentieth-century scholars such as Schoff and Pelliot, but her analysis is informed by the work of the recently deceased numismatist Nicholas Rhodes. Mukherjee's interesting and important study leads, however, to a somewhat banal and tautological conclusion: "...just as Bengal-China interactions fluctuated over time, so too did the networks between the two regions."

Such conclusions highlight the weaknesses in the genre of world history and the need for scholars to heed Lambourn's call to reconsider the questions they ask of their material.

Berenice Bellina in *The Inception of the Transnational Processes between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea from an Early City-State on the Thai-Malay Peninsula (Fourth-Sixth Centuries BCE)* also places her discussion in the context of world history by arguing that the political unifications of Mauryan India and Han China beginning in the fourth century BC, opened the overland and maritime Silk Roads and led the emergence of a Eurasian and African world-system, which lasted until the modern period in the sixteenth century, within which a chain of intertwined networks inaugurated a trading boom and major trans-national cultural processes. On the basis of archaeological evidence from Khao Sam Khaeo, on the west coast of the gulf of Thailand, Bellina builds the hypothesis that the site was an early example of a cosmopolitan city-state formed by cultural interactions and mixed configurations, a hypothesis that seems to be in need of stronger corroboration than that of the cited evidence.

Ingo Strauch in *Indian Inscriptions from Cave Hoq at Socotra* sheds a welcome beam of light on some of the participants in the Indian Ocean trade in the early centuries of the common era. While making guided tours of the spectacular Hoq cave on the island of Socotra, off the coast of the present-day state of Yemen, Indians, South Arabians, Ethiopians and a Bactrian left graffiti and drawings in the cave, which were discovered in 2000. Strauch's paper is concerned only with the India material. Among the inscriptions are two dedications to the Buddha and tridents engraved on some of the stalagmite/stalactites indicate their worship as *lingas* of the god Siva. The cave could clearly have been a site for cultural transmission, as different groups toured the caves and left memorials of their experience there.

Roberta Tomber *Living in the Egyptian Ports: Daily Life at Berenike and Myos Hormos* is concerned with the archaeological evidence for daily life in two of the most important Egyptian ports for the Indian Ocean trade during the Roman period. Berenike and Myos Hormos were primarily transit transshipment centres for the main emporium of Alexandria, and as described by Tomber life within them must have had a somewhat make-shift quality, while remaining strongly Roman and Mediterranean in character. Pierre Tallett discusses *The Egyptians on the Red Sea Shore during the Pharaonic Era* while reviewing the archaeological evidence from three sites on Egypt's Red Sea Coast. Inscriptions from votive anchors found at one of them, Mersa Gewasis, provide evidence for a voyage to Punt, now generally agreed to be situated somewhere on the southern-most coastline of the Red Sea, launched during the reign of Sesostris I (c.1950 BC).

The volume gives good coverage to ports and harbours on the southern coast of Arabia, the Persian Gulf and Western India. Jean-François Salles in *Towards a Geography of the Harbours of the Persian Gulf in Antiquity (Sixth Century BC-Sixth Century AD)* provides a wide-ranging overview based on archaeological and literary evidence but the results of his analysis lead him to

express a sense of frustration similar to that of Lambourn: "Such a survey of the harbours known in the PG over a dozen centuries will probably remain unsatisfactory... The concept of globalization/mondialization is becoming a *la mode* in Ancient History, but many complex questions cannot be answered through such theoretical approaches and will remain pending ..."

A key element of the volume is its concern with geographical writings and cartography. Emmanuelle Vagnon in *Ports of Western India in Latin Cartographic Sources, c.1200-1500: Toponymy, Localization and Evolutions* begins with a useful outline of recent changes in the history of cartography, both in methodology and in ways of understanding old maps. She makes the point that so-called errors and inaccuracies in the maps should be considered as traces of complex evolutions of the interpretation and transmission of source material. She then, however, proceeds to give an informative commentary on some maps that have been selected for their outstanding qualities, using a traditional chronological approach.

Without aiming to be comprehensive, the volume is wide-ranging in its coverage. However, one omission that detracts somewhat from its overall utility is the absence of any discussion of the kingdom of Axum and its port of Adulis, since during the late Roman/early Byzantine period Axumite traders acted as middlemen in the Indian Ocean trade until the power of Axum was eclipsed by the rise of Islamic polities.

The volume itself appears to have come slightly adrift from its moorings: we are told in the preface Editors' Note that a meeting in Kolkata at the Rabindranath Tagore Centre was organised as a result of cooperation between Indian and French archaeologists and historians and made possible by the French National Agency for Research but we are not told when the meeting took place. Are the papers in the volume re-worked and edited versions of papers given at the meeting or did scholarly interaction at the meeting provide the catalyst for their later writing? In their preface note the editors emphasize that a major moment of the meeting was the "beautiful inaugural address" of Professor Barun De; this sadly has not found its way into the printed volume.

There is not space in this review to mention all twenty-four papers in the volume. While working through them readers will create their own systems of reference points, which they can use to navigate the overlapping and fluctuating networks that are surveyed in the volume and thus gain a more comprehensive sense of the various interactions enabled by the Indian Ocean. As well as providing an overview of the current state of play in an area of study that is rapidly developing, the volume is rich in information that will in turn be a stimulant for further research; I for one would like to know more about the salt traders of early Tamil Nadu whose bullock carts were driven by women and who carried monkeys along with them mentioned by V. Selvakumar in *The Routes of Early Historic Tamil Nadu, South India 300 BC to 500 CE*.

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Above: Indian Ocean. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Harvey Berrison on Flickr.

Ancient Sanskrit literature refers to the Indian Ocean as Ratnakara which means 'the creator of jewels'. The Indian Ocean covers 1/5th of the earth's surface, connecting 18 Asian countries, 16 African countries, and 57 island groups. Main ports and harbors of the Indian Ocean include Richard's Bay in South Africa, Mumbai in Bombay India, Melbourne in Australia, Kolkata in Calcutta India, Jakarta in Indonesia, Durban in South Africa, Columbo in Sri Lanka, and Chennai in Madras India. The main access points to the Indian Ocean are the Suez Canal in Egypt, the Strait of Malacca in Indonesia/Malaysia, the Strait of Hormuz in Iran-Oman, and Bab el Mandeb in Djibouti-Yemen. These are also considered to be the world's most important ports.