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.

Reviewers: Dr Richard Fynes

Ports of the Ancient Indian Ocean

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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 pluri-disciplinary 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 Kachhwahas, where, for the tenth century there is rare congruence 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 patterns.” Each honest appraisal of the conclusions of one’s research invites 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 Schott 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 calls to reconsider the questions they address and their methods.

Berenice Bella in The Inception of the Transcontinental Processes between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea from an Early City-State in the Thai-Mekong Vallay (Fourth-Sixteenth Centuries BC) also places her discussion in the context of world history by arguing that the political unifications of Mauryan India and Han China were the early example of a cosmopolitan city- state formed by cultural interactions and mixed configurations, a hypothesis that seems to be in need of further corroborative thus 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 gods of the god Sea. The cave could clearly have been a site for cultural transmission as it was toured the caves and left memorials of their experience there.

Robert T. Tomber 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 transhipment 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 Tallet 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 wove anchors found at one of them, Mersa Gawasis, provide evidence for a voyage to Punt, now generally agreed to be situated somewhere on the southern-most coast 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-Francois 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 be all that can be done.”

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A key element of the volume is its concern with geo- graphical writings and cartography. Emmanuelle Vagnon in Ports of Western India in late cartographic Sources, 1200-1500 Toponomy, Localisation and Evolution 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 politics.

The volume itself appears to have come slightly adrift from its moorings: we are told in the prefacing 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 prefatory 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 no 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. 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 as mentioned by V. Selvakumar in The Routes of Early Historic Tamil Nadu, South India 300 BC to 500 CE.

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