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The Tale of the Theban Scholastikos, or journeys in a disconnected sea¹

Abstract: This article takes the under-used anonymous Roman source, the Tale of the Theban Scholastikos, to argue for a distinct Late Antique phase in the history of the western Indian Ocean. This late third- or fourth-century account of a Roman's journey to India and eventual return from captivity, has been too easily dismissed as inaccurate or mined for decontextualised details. The present study, by contrast, situates the tale within both its immediate epistolary context and seeks to offer a new interpretation of its global-scale setting. It offers a survey of the regions likely referred to in the text - the Roman Empire, the Aksumite Empire, south India and Sri Lanka -, alongside examination of related textual and archaeological data. The picture presented of these regions is, in turn, situated within the wider framework of a 'global hierarchy of value' proposed by Michael Herzfeld in 2004, and applied for the first time to Late Antiquity. What emerges is an initial framing of the western Indian Ocean in Late Antiquity as a space in which long-distance connections continued from earlier centuries, and in some places even thrived, but were systematically devalued, politically and ideologically, with concrete effects for those involved.

Once upon a time (probably in the late third or early fourth century) a civil servant (a scholastikos from Thebes in Egypt) travelled to India to expand his horizons... So says a much under-used source in accounts of the western Indian Ocean in Late Antiquity. Insofar as this source has been incorporated into wider accounts, and insofar as the western Indian Ocean has become in recent decades a focus for research specifically focussed on Late Antiquity, crucial questions remain con-

¹ This article began as a contribution to the conference 'Geography and Infrastructure of trade in early Islam (800-1000 CE)', organised by Hugh Kennedy and Fanny Bessard, and held at SOAS, University of London, in December 2015. It has since been through several stages of revision, with thanks due to critical peers at all stages for sharpening, clarifying and compelling me to more effectively substantiate the argument. These include conference attendees who made helpful points in discussion, Hugh and Fanny for initial editorial suggestions responding to the first written version of this paper, the two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Late Antiquity*, to whom considerable debts are owed, Jonathan Jarrett, who worked through various stages of argumentation with me, and my colleagues and students in the Department of History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck, University of London, who have heard quite a bit about the Tale of the Theban Scholastikos over the last four years and offered useful thoughts and questions.

tested concerning the world (or worlds) that such a traveller might have encountered. In particular, two issues recur: how connected was the western Indian Ocean in the centuries c. 250-750, and is Late Antiquity a useful periodisation for this maritime space?² This article takes the tale of the Theban scholastikos as a focal point for proposing that Late Antiquity is indeed a relevant and analytically useful periodisation for the western Indian Ocean region. This is because it was incorporated into a largely coherent understanding of social value, a global hierarchy of value, to use the anthropological theory proposed by Michael Herzfeld, that also provides a useful mechanism for exploring the vexed question of how connected the western Indian Ocean was.³ It concludes that seeing the western Indian Ocean of Late Antiquity as a disconnected space entails foregrounding the way in which attitudes about distance, travel and the global context impacted directly on social and economic behaviour and represented a distinctive perspective from either earlier or later periods.

Connectivity, pre-modernity and the global hierarchy of value

It has recently been declared, specifically of the Red Sea and its role as a connector of the Mediterranean and western Indian Ocean, that the 'late antique 'world system' possessed a globalizing dynamic into which Islam emerged, and as such helps explain its rapid spread from Spain to China'.⁴ Such proto-chronism has become a strategy used by scholars of various periods of pre-modernity: the assertion that qualities hitherto associated with modernity existed in earlier periods comes to serve as a validation of the earlier period and its relevance, or as a critique of the modern. In 1989, for example, Janet Abu Lughod's *Before European Hegemony: the world system, AD 1250-1350*

² R. Darley 2019a, introduction and note 7 on periodisation.

³ M. Herzfeld 2004.

⁴ T. Power 2012, 21.

placed the Indian Ocean and Fertile Crescent at the heart of a medieval world system stretching from China to northern Europe.⁵

Highlighting the dynamism of the Indian Ocean world, Abu Lughod was forthright in her use of the Middle Ages as a commentary on the present. *Before European Hegemony* is, as its title implies, as much about the modern as the premodern world. It functions as a critique of tendencies to see the hegemonic and exploitative structures of modern long-distance relationships as inevitable, and a study of the connections between assumptions in the present and the imagining of the past.⁶ It can, indeed, be tempting to see the foreshadowings of the present in an ever earlier past. Even better may be to find a vision of the present in the past, which preserves the favoured characteristics of the present (such as connectivity) unencumbered by its more troubling inequalities (in this case, European hegemony). However, the consequence of this strategy can also be both a flattening out of narratives of historical change, and in the case explored here, an obscuring of Late Antiquity as a distinct period of activity in the worlds of the Mediterranean and Western Indian Ocean.⁷ Any re-framing, though, must be geographical, as well as chronological, and address the ways in which sources produced usually within the context of particular terrestrial regions speak across and for maritime spaces.

Not only do most of the narrative sources pertaining to trade and travel survive from the Roman world, but some of the most detailed and extensive archaeological work has focussed on Roman sites along the west coast of the Red Sea, and connected with maritime routes through the

⁵ R. McLaughlin 2010 attempted less successfully to locate in Roman trade with Asia a flourishing exchange of goods and ideas nevertheless rooted in mutual respect and the absence of either Orientalism or Euro-centrism.

⁶ J. Abu Lughod 1989, especially Introduction and Chapter 11.

⁷ This study draws directly upon the recent movement towards maritime units as coherent and, for some questions, more valuable, units of study than terrestrial regions. This method, of course, has considerable pedigree in the work of F. Braudel 1966 and K. N. Chaudhuri 1985, but has more recently been reinvigorated by studies such as P. Horden and N. Purcell 2000 and the 2006 special issue of the *American Historical Review* edited by K. Wigen, on 'Oceans of History'.

Gulf of Aden.⁸ Increasing archaeological exploration of sites in East Africa, on the east coast of the Red Sea, on the Persian Gulf coasts and around the shores of the Indian peninsula and Sri Lanka is beginning to provide a more dense and balanced picture of life and connections around this maritime space and to create a narrative mainly derived from archaeological material, which is addressed at various points below.⁹ Nevertheless, their evidence is frequently interpreted within the context of a narrative derived from Greek and Latin textual sources.¹⁰

A basic chronology of Roman mercantile activity in the western Indian Ocean from around the first century B.C. to the sixth century A.D. is fairly clear from archaeological and textual evidence, with a peak in the first and second centuries, a definite drop in the third and some recovery of activity from the fourth century until the sixth, with a trail into the seventh.¹¹ The first- to third-century phase is not the focus here, but contact was sufficiently active for products associated with India to be available even to individuals of quite modest means and for the idea of India to become deeply embedded in Roman literary culture.¹² Whether this contact was peripheral to state-level de-

⁸ Roman textual sources dealing with or containing significant material on the western Indian Ocean include, in chronological order of ancient composition, and with critical edition/translation where available: the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, L. Casson 1989; the Muziris Papyrus, L. Casson 1990; the Tale of the Theban Scholastikos, J. Derrett and M. Duncan 1961; the *Life of Frumentius* in the *Church History* of Rufinus of Aquileia's *Ecclesiastical History*, Book One, chapter 9; the *Christian Topography*, often attributed to Cosmas Indicopleustes, with relevant sections in books II and XI, W. Wolska-Conus 1968-1973; Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, Book I, H. B. Dewing 1914. Publications of recent excavations of relevant Roman sites include: S. E. Sidebotham and W. Z. Wendrich 2007; S. T. Parker 2009; D. Peacock and L. Blue 2006 and 2011.

⁹ Excavations include, in alphabetical order: D. Peacock and L. Blue 2007; R. E. M. Wheeler, A. Ghosh and K. Deva 1946; V. Begley, P. Francis Jr., N. Karashima *et al.* 1996; T. S. Sridhar 2005; P. Cherian 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013; J. Carswell, S. Deraniyagala and A. Graham 2013; D. Whitehouse 2009. For a series of smaller sites, R. Boucharlat and J.-F. Salles 1981: 65 and N. Pinto-Orton 1991. R. Tomber 2009 provides the clearest attempt at a synthetic, primarily archaeological account of movement around the western Indian Ocean in the pre-Islamic period.

¹⁰ Examples of reliance on the narrative derived from Roman sources to interpret these sites can be found particularly strikingly, though not exclusively, in O. Bopearachchi 2006; S. Kiribamune 2013; T. Daryaee 2009, Chapter Five.

¹¹ R. Tomber 2009, for a general survey.

¹² G. Parker 2011.

isions or the economic functioning of the empire, or a crucial component of imperial policy and finance, however, remains contested.¹³

Activity in the western Indian Ocean in Late Antiquity has, by comparison, been a much more recent area of study, but remains subject to many of the mental pathways, developed in the study of earlier Roman trade, which are therefore worth briefly surveying.¹⁴ Concerted study of Indian Ocean trade, of Roman connections to the east and of the western Indian Ocean as a space, began in the late eighteenth century, in the context of growing densities of long-distance economic, military and political influence, specifically by European powers over non-European regions.¹⁵ The language for the pre-modern phases of Indian Ocean history has therefore consistently derived from the vocabulary of modern analysis and experience, such as ‘balance of trade’ or ‘monopoly’.¹⁶ These are not necessarily inappropriate terms, but sometimes import more baggage than is recognized into times long past. In the study of the pre-modern western Indian Ocean this is perhaps most visibly and significantly true of the language of connection. Connected places, global connectivity and trans-regional connections persistently recur.¹⁷ More so even than the languages of trade and

¹³ Arguing for the peripherality of trade with India to the Roman Empire: M. Raschke 1978. G. Young 2001 argues that the trade was economically significant but did not demonstrably influence policy, while the most recent and extreme argument for the centrality of trade with India to the Roman state is Fitzpatrick 2011. A trend towards favouring the importance of long-distance trade is visible here, but since the evidence-base used to reach these conclusions has not changed significantly between 1978 and 2011, especially as the more recent works make little use of archaeological discoveries, this is not the result of increasing precision of interpretation, but rather changing preferences in interpretation.

¹⁴ Studies specifically concerned with the Late Antique phases of western Indian Ocean trade include: R. Darley 2013, 2019b; T. Daryaee 2003, 1; R. Krishnamurthy 2007; D. Nappo 2009; E. H. Seland 2012, 72; S. Sidebotham 2009; W. D. Ward 2007.

¹⁵ S. Gupta 2005, 140.

¹⁶ Balance of trade/payments: S. B. Deo 1991, 39. Monopoly: I. Puskás 1987.

¹⁷ For example: L. Blue, J. P. Cooper, R. Thomas *et al.* 2009; O. Bopearachchi 1998, 158; G. Parker 2001; R. Salomon 1991, 731, 733; A. V. Sedov 1992, 110, 125; E. H. Seland 2012, 84. In these examples, ‘connection’ ranges widely from an object from one place found in another to the idea that two people who share the same religious confession are ‘connected’, but without defining in each case what that connection might signify, and in some cases, how it is verified in extant source material.

mobility, it is a word steeped in modernity and propelled to everyday usage by computing technology.¹⁸

Connectivity is popular, and indeed useful, because it has greater flexibility than concepts like trade or travel. It can cover a range of links, both mental and physical, direct and mediated, economic and cultural. It is theoretically quantifiable, subject to appropriate methods and evidence, but importantly well suited also to a qualitative evaluation, which provides scope for the study of regions and periods in which quantitative data is insufficient. At the heart of analyses of connectivity as a historical concept seems to be the idea that connections to other places might constitute a significant formative component of how a society structured and imagined itself, even if the total number of people and things moving was quite small. Consumption of foreign goods, display of foreign manners and ideas, the popularity of stories of foreign places or the occurrence of objects from one place in another might all constitute evidence for connectivity.¹⁹ Each might be the result of distinct social processes and yet collectively they might all suggest the ways in which a past society experienced the foreign and defined itself and its own social structures through it.

The downside to connectivity, however, is its homogeneity. If people and goods have always moved and if to talk about their mobility in terms of connectivity is to assume the significance of these movements, then it becomes impossible to evaluate how the connections made between one society and another were unique or similar, across time and space.²⁰ The case of connectivity across

¹⁸ A Google n-gram created 09/09/2016 suggests almost no use of 'connectivity' in book publication until the 1960s, with a sharp increase in usage from the late 1980s, and a continued rise into the age of the internet: <http://books.google.com/ngrams>.

¹⁹ See the examples above, note 14, for the range of possible types of correspondence which which be described as 'connected'.

²⁰ P. Squatriti 2002, 263, 271 points to this in his suggestion that what Horden and Purcell in 2000 wrote about as 'connectivity' in the Mediterranean, would have been in the 1940s to Pirenne insignificant because economically inconsequential.

the western Indian Ocean is a valuable example, because the evidence for it in Late Antiquity is sparse and invites readings forward from the Roman evidence of the first and second centuries and backward from the Indian Ocean of the ninth century onwards, as well as across from the better-documented contemporary Mediterranean. Combined with assumptions about the value of connectivity to contemporary societies and, thus, the relationship of connectivity to other indices of power, the result is often an impression of an Indian Ocean criss-crossed by regular, institutionalized and high value trade routes which, even if invisible in the surviving evidence, must inevitably have been there.²¹ Quantification of the material available is impossible, and connections did exist, so in order to challenge this reconstruction of Indian Ocean trade another perspective is required.

Herzfeld's 2004 study, *The body impolitic: artisans and artifice in the global hierarchy of value*, examined the lives of artisans and their apprentices in modern Crete. Herzfeld argues, from the perspective of a community which seems at times acutely local, that the essence of globalization is that nevertheless this community (and every community) exists within a global hierarchy of value that cannot be studied in the isolated arenas of heritage, culture or commerce or written about separately from the local expressions of it. The nature of globalism, Herzfeld argues, is that a particular understanding of value is pervasive.²² Even if specific aspects of value may be moved around in local contexts, they all fit into a semi-conscious awareness that there is, nevertheless, a larger global hierarchy - a means by which it is most appropriate and effective to express power and control of resources. This hierarchy is enforced by praise and contempt, opportunity and isolation, as well as by quantifiable mechanisms such as allocation of money or military resource. It either trumps local expressions of value and draws people into de-localised, high-value, global activities or forces

²¹ This is a point also made by N. Andrade 2018, 111, *mutatis mutandis*, concerning the scholarship on the movement of Christianity across the Western Indian Ocean in Late Antiquity.

²² M. Herzfeld 2004, 3.

communities into globally low-value practices in order to preserve local value structures, which in turn isolate and demean their participants in extra-local contexts. In the context of the artisans in Crete, for example, their low-value position in the global hierarchy reinforced and accentuated the internal hierarchy of artisan and apprentice, making an aggressive masculinity with diminishing currency globally into the only one available locally due to the lack of alternative opportunities for status-building.²³

To Herzfeld, this hierarchy is the essence of globalization, and a way of understanding the sometimes apparently paradoxical and self-harming reactions of small communities - such as, in the case of the artisans of Crete, rejecting re-training programmes because although these offer a possible way to rise in the global hierarchy, they also require relinquishing standing in the local hierarchy with no guarantee of a return. Mass media, greater opportunities for travel and, in comparison to antiquity, mass literacy, make Herzfeld's pervasiveness easier to see in modern contexts. It is possible, however, to discern in the surviving textual sources, and the archaeology of 'foreign objects' and local equivalents which moved around and were static within the western Indian Ocean and its surrounding polities, the outline of a global hierarchy of value in Late Antiquity stretching in effect from the western Mediterranean to China.²⁴

Such a hierarchy of behaviour and materiality was certainly weaker than in modernity and perhaps even non-existent at the level of subsistence communities, whether pastoral or agrarian, for whom it is entirely possible that the concept of a wider and variegated world made little impact on their choice of resource deployment. At the level of the decisions of states and the choices of those

²³ M. Herzfeld 2004, 210.

²⁴ For an examination of different types of 'foreign object' and their possible use in understanding past mobilities, D. Quast 2009.

with surplus (even a modest one) to dispose of, however, this article will argue that such a hierarchy can be seen influencing patterns of consumption, mobility and representation of self and others. Viewing the Late Antique western Indian Ocean through the lens of a global hierarchy of value goes beyond the assertion commonly found in accounts of trade and long-distance travel in the ancient and early medieval world, that while trade and travel were common, they simply do not appear much in textual sources because elites were not interested in writing about them, or saw commerce as unworthy to engage in publicly.²⁵ It suggests instead that attitudes about what sorts of objects and actions had value, and to whom, actually affected what was done, not just what was written about. Even if such attitudes did not prevent a certain type of activity, such as long-distance trade, they altered the significance of that activity within its wider social context, and thus the way in which it must be understood.

This is the crux not only of understanding how Late Antiquity in the western Indian Ocean differed from the periods immediately preceding and following it, but also of unpicking a persistent bias in favour of seeing significant connectivity in modern historiographical treatment of this maritime space. We operate in a world in which connectivity (or at least certain types of connectivity) have high value in the current global hierarchy. Cosmopolitanism and worldliness bring cultural capital.²⁶ When analysing the efforts which have been made to interpret textual and archaeological evidence from the Late Antique western Indian Ocean as signs of a bustling, thriving and cosmopolitan network of trade routes, involving state actors at the highest levels from India to Rome, it is not hard to see the subtle pervasiveness of this modern hierarchy of value at play. It is a tendency which has its detractors. Critiques of ideas such as cosmopolitanism and the importance of long-dis-

²⁵ For example: M. McCormick 2001, 4.

²⁶ A. Clukey 2010, especially 437-8 on the relationship between modernity and cosmopolitanism and its continued cachet in contemporary society.

tance trade are identifiable, but constitute a minority, arguing for insignificance where others see significance, but in a landscape lacking the capacity either for quantification or for any alternative framework within which to make such judgements.²⁷

Using the idea of the global hierarchy of value as exactly such a mechanism enables connectivity to become one way among many of understanding the unique character of a particular time or place. Specifically, the surviving evidence from the Late Antique western Indian Ocean suggests that this was a world in which connectivity was not highly placed in the global hierarchy of value. It may have sat near the top of some local hierarchies of value, but in turn served to situate these local societies in a position of disadvantage at the global scale. The Late Antique world of the western Indian Ocean, instead, was one in which connections were mediated within a system that valued disconnectivity, giving it a quality different from later periods, and to a marked degree, also distinct from the immediately preceding centuries. It was a disconnectivity which distinguished it especially from developments in the Islamic Indian Ocean, documentable from at least the ninth century. This disconnectivity and its effects on pre-existing connections can be seen in a close examination of one relatively under-used narrative source.

The tale of the Theban scholastikos

Few lengthy narrative sources for the western Indian Ocean survive from Late Antiquity, and of these a selection is particularly well-worn in studies of connections and routes. The two best known are perhaps the anonymous sixth-century treatise known as *The Christian Topography* and Procopius of Caesarea's *History of the Wars*, which includes in Book I (20.9-12) a frequently encountered account of Byzantine dealings with Aksum and the Himyarite kingdom of southern Ara-

²⁷ See note 10, above.

bia. In comparison, an anonymous fourth-century account, often termed ‘the tale of the Theban scholastikos’, plays only a bit-part in most discussions of the region and period.²⁸

The tale recounts the adventures of an anonymous ‘scholastikos’, or legal advisor, from Thebes, and is contained in a longer letter, attributed in the surviving manuscript copies to a certain Palladius, though probably not a Palladius known from any other text.²⁹ Even more anonymous than its writer is the intended recipient of the letter, who had asked Palladius for information about the Brahmins of India. Palladius replied that he had been to the borders of India in the company of the bishop of Adulis, that he had found it too hot and quickly left. Nevertheless, he excerpted for his correspondent, and commented on, a section of Arrian’s second-century A.D. writing about the Brahmins derived from the adventures of Alexander of Macedon in the fourth century B.C., and an anonymous account of a much later journey - that of the Theban scholastikos. The letter survives in several manuscript versions, including a Latin translation, all of which preserve the same narrative though with minor differences in expression.³⁰ The letter-writer, Palladius, stated that he had heard the account from the traveller himself, placing both the narrative and its surviving rendition, if both

²⁸ The title is usually Latinized to ‘scholasticus’. The text has been known since the seventeenth century and discussed in relation to western Indian Ocean trade since at least the 1920s. P. Coleman-Norton 1926, 154, summarizes early scholarship on the text. The first available critical edition, D. M. Derrett 1961, was supplemented by W. Berghoff 1967. Berghoff’s edition is based on a substantially different selection from the surviving manuscripts and both remain useful. Quotations in this chapter are from the Berghoff edition, with page references to this version. Extended translations are based on those of D. P. M. Weerakkody 1997, 239-244. Despite the availability of editions, many references to the text in synthetic discussions of the western Indian Ocean and its surrounding societies are based on the summary of the account provided in J. Derrett and M. Duncan 1962, 21. It is also not uncommon for examination of the account of the scholastikos to be omitted from overview studies. Examples of works which rely only on the 1962 summary include: C. Brunner 1983 and J. W. Sedlar 1980, 316. Studies which do not make any use of the text in the construction of their arguments about the relevant period and regions include: T. Power 2013 and D. Whitehouse and A. G. Williamson 1973, 29.

²⁹ On the manuscript tradition, J. Desanges 1969, 627. On the attribution of the manuscript to Palladius of Helenopolis and arguments against this see J. Derrett and M. Duncan 1962, 23-26, whose arguments about a broad dating of c. 300-400, and stylistic comparison with the known works of Palladius of Helenopolis suggest an otherwise unknown author, though the precise dating of the account to c. 355-60 proposed by Derret and Duncan is argued in this article to be spurious (see below).

³⁰ D. P. M. Weerakkody 1997 helpfully provides Berghoff’s Greek version alongside the Latin account, with consecutive translations of each, 239-244. This study works only with the earlier, Greek-language version of this text, and not with any of the several Latin versions which proliferated in the medieval and early modern periods. For a summary of the current debates about the various versions see N. Andrade 2018, 80.

are assumed to have existed, within probably a thirty- to sixty-year period of one another, and on the basis of linguistic dating, probably within the fourth century, or perhaps the late third for the journey described.

The tale goes that the scholastikos, having found that he did not enjoy and was not any good at his career, set out to visit India. He travelled initially with a certain presbyter, first to Adulis and then to Aksum, where he met a minor Indian king (βασιλίσκος μικρὸς τῶν Ἰνδῶν) who lived there.³¹ While there, the scholastikos learned about the island of Taprobanê, Sri Lanka, or possibly Socotra, as discussed below, (about which Palladius supplemented his own knowledge in his recapitulation of the tale). The scholastikos determined to visit the island - ultimately an unfulfilled wish. He departed in the company of Indians travelling, for the purpose of trade, in their boats (τινας πλοιαρίους διαβαίνοντας Ἰνδοῦς ἐμπορίας χάριν).³² In India he travelled inland, and at the border of the land of the Bisades, where pepper is collected (ἐγγὺς τῶν καλουμένων Βισάδων τῶν τὸ πίπερ συναγόντων), was taken prisoner.³³ Unable to explain himself, as neither he nor his captors understood the other's language, the scholastikos was condemned to slavery in the bakery of a local king. Six years later, a rival king informed the great king of the region, of whom more below, that the king of the Bisades was holding a Roman prisoner, and the great king, afraid of angering the Roman Empire, ordered the scholastikos released and had his captor flayed.

As a focal point for an examination of a disconnected Late Antiquity the tale of the Theban scholastikos will here be approached regionally, examining in turn what it suggests first and foremost about the government and inhabitants of the Roman Empire, and also what it may reveal about

³¹ W. Berghoff 1967, 4.

³² W. Berghoff 1967, 6.

³³ W. Berghoff 1967, 6.

the Aksumite Empire, and finally, the land termed ‘India’ both as real parts of the world Palladius wrote in and as elements of a narrative by or about the nameless scholastikos. In the case of each region there are issues of fact which must be addressed, but also of aims and ideas and the significance of long-distance connections. These must be situated in the context of other textual and archaeological evidence.

In journeying with the scholastikos in this way, there is no absolute need to resolve the question of whether he really existed or was a fictional hook from which Palladius could hang a variety of vignettes about India as he understood it. Elements of the tale fit plausibly with other contemporary evidence for the reality of movement in the western Indian Ocean. These include excavations at Adulis, the major port of the Aksumite Empire, and point to active involvement in trade with India and the Roman Empire in the fourth century.³⁴ Likewise, at the excavated ports of the Red Sea coast, further north in Roman territory, following a decline in the third century, activity increased in the fourth. Furthermore, new ports, such as Aqaba and Clysma, began to flourish in competition with the old ones, with a general movement towards more northerly sites.³⁵ Furthermore, port sites in southern Arabia remained active in this fourth-century period, and recent survey data is suggesting some continuity in the involvement of modern Somaliland in these maritime networks.³⁶ All of this suggests that the story either recorded an experience with that reality, or situated its story in a context sufficiently well-known to yield factual details. Likewise, other accounts, of a probably semi-fictional nature, including the *Life of Frumentius* and the epitomised *Ecclesiastical History* of Philostorgius, discussed further below, sketch a similar enough Indian Ocean environment to indi-

³⁴ D. Peacock and L. Blue 2007, 9; W. D. Ward 2007, 162-163; C. Zazzaro 2013, 2017; C. Zazzaro, E. Cocca and A. Manzo 2014.

³⁵ Though focussed on a slightly later period, Nappo 2009 synthesises this evidence for a general northward shift in Roman focus in the Red Sea.

³⁶ On southern Arabia: M. Raith, P. Yule and K. Damgaard 2013 and J.-F. Salles and A. V. Sedov 2010. On Somaliland, S. Mire 2015; especially 126-130.

cate a common understanding of this space in the Late Roman imagination. In unpicking the interplay of the literary and the experiential in individual details of the text, the impossibility and analytical futility of separating out a ‘real’ and a ‘constructed’ scholastikos become immediately apparent.

The Roman Empire

Despite his narrative beginning in the Roman Empire, the Theban scholastikos provides very little direct information about Roman involvement in Late Antique Indian Ocean trade. Indeed, the scholastikos does not set out to travel to India for the purposes of trade. At no point in his journey does he describe encounters with fellow Romans, either in East Africa or in India. It is possible, since he was travelling out of a desire for something new and different, that he was avoiding the familiar on his travels, but the impression gained is of Indian Ocean routes mainly plied by Indians. The only other reference to the Roman Empire in the account comes at its conclusion, when the scholastikos was released due to fears in India (or Sri Lanka) of Roman retribution.

Despite this paucity of information about Rome and Romans, interpretation of this text, and others relating to this Late Antique period, has tended to see systems, control and high levels of influence. Derrett and Duncan, for example, expressed some surprise that there was no Roman consul present on the Malabar coast when the scholastikos arrived, despite conceding that there is little evidence for the presence of Romans in India in Late Antiquity.³⁷ More recently, Nappo’s work has sought to identify long-term state involvement in control of trade from India via control of the island of Iotabê, located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf.³⁸ And, indeed, the *Ecclesiastical History* of Philostorgius, compiled in the fourth century, but surviving only in a summary preserved by the

³⁷ J. Derrett and M. Duncan 1962, 27.

³⁸ Nappo 2009, 2015.

ninth-century Patriarch of Constantinople and bibliophile Photios, provides indications that there was some imperial interest in the religious status of parts of the Red Sea region to which India was connected. The figure of Theophilus the Indian, who recurs throughout the *Ecclesiastical History* and probably originated from Socotra, is seen, for example, being dispatched on embassies to the Indians with the intention of spreading the imperially approved brand of Christianity.³⁹ Questions remain, though about how far this latter policy can serve as a proxy for either economic or political intervention in the Red Sea region, or where is meant by it.

The claim of the scholastikos that he was released due to a fear of the Roman Empire has, likewise, been taken for the most part at face value or ignored. In 1962 an attempt was even made to date the text to c. 355-60 on the grounds that only during Julian II's ultimately disastrous invasion of Persia would a king in India or Sri Lanka have been sufficiently afraid of the Roman Empire to react in this way.⁴⁰ The question of where India might have been located in the imagination of the text is addressed below, however, there is little evidence to support the contention that the Roman Empire ever exerted significant political or military influence in any of the eligible areas for the toponym. A more interesting question then becomes why the scholastikos (or Palladius) might have concluded his narrative this way?

If the status of the Roman Empire in Indian Ocean networks does not emerge with any clarity from the account and seems overstated when it appears, two other aspects are far clearer: the anonymity and haplessness of the scholastikos and the comical recounting of his tale. A civil servant, sick of his job, abandons a respectable and stable position in favour of a vague yearning for the mysteries of the east. The account of the scholastikos and his captors communicating with one

³⁹ Philostorgius, Book 3, Chapter 4.

⁴⁰ J. Derrett and M. Duncan 1962, 25-26.

another through angry expressions and trembling is visually striking and one of the longest descriptions of a single narrative component in the whole story - evidently an entertaining set-piece. This can perhaps be paralleled with the famous fragment of a drama, preserved among the Ozyrhynchus papyri, and featuring a dialogue which has been suggested to contain phrases in Kannada, and which likewise focuses on the hilarity to a Greco-Roman audience of barbaric Indian languages.⁴¹ Even the outcome for the protagonist is dramatic but benign: a cushy job in the palace kitchens then safe passage home. There is no indication in the story that the scholastikos, on his return, was feted for his experience, valued for his insights or even punished for potentially sparking a diplomatic outrage. The presentation of the scholastikos' adventures is redolent of the unheroic and absurd.

The impression of the tale of the scholastikos as a wry, entertaining interlude is strengthened by attention to its placement within Palladius' letter, which, regardless of the reality of the tales it recounts, should be seen in its own right as a constructed object, intended to reflect well on the letter writer, in the tradition of Roman epistolary culture.⁴² In his letter Palladius establishes, by his framing and ordering of different elements, a subtle hierarchy of knowledge and experience. Pride of place in this hierarchy goes to the mining of classical knowledge, with the account of Arrian both taking up more space than any other element of the letter and occupying the third and final position in Palladius' stacked accounts of India - the position of greatest importance in a set of three in Roman rhetorical training.⁴³ The two other accounts can, in this sense, be perceived as a Late Antique addendum to this classical repository of definitive knowledge: on one hand there is the self-representation of an educated, respectable Roman - Palladius himself -, and on the other there is the scholastikos, both of whom travelled to India. For the letter-writer, however, this was in the compa-

⁴¹ E. Hultsch 1904, and arguing against his reading, L. D. Barnett 1926.

⁴² N. K. Zeiner-Carmichael 2013, Chapter One.

⁴³ Hight 1949, 334.

ny of a high-ranking figure, the bishop of Adulis (μετὰ... τοῦ ἐπισκόπου τῶν Ἀδουληνῶν) and resulted in a swift return home owing to the inhospitable heat of the place, an aspect of geography linked in Roman literature with uncivilized places.⁴⁴ The scholastikos' place in this hierarchy is thus made clear: third in authority and respectability and a light-hearted comedic break for the reader.

A late Roman perspective on western Indian Ocean trade, therefore revolves not around the role of the empire in this Indian Ocean space: a substantial or structured Roman presence in the Indian Ocean is in fact entirely absent in Palladius' letter, even if archaeological evidence indicates a rise in Roman activity in the Red Sea at precisely this time, after a third century interruption in activity. Rather, what emerges is a set of interlocking ideas about India as an exotic faraway place, about the primacy of classical knowledge over autopsy and, closely related, about the limited value and high risk to any respectable Roman of seeking knowledge by travelling outside rather than back into the pre-digested wisdom of antiquity. The way in which the tale of the scholastikos is presented tells us something about its value, and the value of this kind of connectivity, to a Roman audience. If the scholastikos is regarded as a real figure, the story can perhaps be seen as a way for the author to place his low-status and rather embarrassing adventure as far as possible within the context of a local hierarchy of value, which accorded little cachet to learning a barbarian language or having experience of a foreign place: in the story, though the scholastikos says that he learned the local tongue, the knowledge is not central to his escape or explicitly of benefit him at all.⁴⁵ His salvation is ultimately found in representing the Roman Empire in far flung places and benefiting from its reflected aura. If the scholastikos is perceived as a literary creation, then Palladius may be seen to be expressing the same ideas.

⁴⁴ W. Berghoff 1967, 2. On the association of hot climates with lower levels of civilization and savagery of disposition, see B. Isaac 2006, 35-37.

⁴⁵ W. Berghoff 1967, 8.

The Aksumite Empire

The testimony of the Theban scholastikos concerning the Aksumite Empire is fuller than concerning the Roman Empire, but still rather limited. What the scholastikos says directly about the Aksumite Empire can be summarized as that a minor Indian king was resident there, for some purpose and an unspecified period of time, and that Indian merchants departed from there. Given the fluidity of the use of the term ‘India’, discussed below, it is even possible that the minor king was himself Aksumite, though in this text the author seems consistently to delineate Aksum and Aksumites from India and Indians, and a ‘minor king’, though perhaps indicating a local aristocrat, seems too diminutive to denote the emperor of Aksum himself. It therefore seems likely that the man in question is intended to indicate somebody from an ‘India’ outside of Aksum, though living there when the Scholastikos meets him. Since Aksum is inland, the Indian merchants presumably departed from the port of Adulis, which, from the first or second century, seems to have moved into the cultural and political orbit of Aksum, giving further textual confirmation of this official absorption.⁴⁶ It is possible that the minor king was in Aksum to trade and met the scholastikos during the lay-over necessitated by the monsoon season, but the verb used to describe his residence there (ἐκεῖ καθεζόμενος) is also identical with that used later to describe the king of Sri Lanka residing in his seat of power (ἐν Ταπροβάνη νήσῳ καθεζόμενον), and so more likely indicates a permanent arrangement.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Palladius, recounting the scholastikos’s travels, seems to use the term ‘Askum’ to refer both to the city and to the wider realm: W. Berghoff 1967, 6.

⁴⁷ On the seasonal lay-overs necessitated by monsoon sailing: L. Casson 1984, 473. For pointing out the use of the verb καθέζομαι in this text I am grateful to one of the two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Late Antiquity*.

From this unpromising kernel, however, much has been concluded about the role of the Aksumites in Indian Ocean trade - part of a wider interpretation of Aksum which has now been systematically undermined by especially archaeological investigation, but which persists in surveys of Indian Ocean history. With a territory controlling the western coast of the southern Red Sea, and sometimes venturing militarily into the southern Arabian Peninsula, it was long assumed that the power and prosperity of the Aksumite Empire must have derived in large part from their involvement as ‘middlemen’ with trade routes passing down the Red Sea from the Roman Empire and to India, exemplified by assertions such as that ‘[t]hey had a monopoly of the carrying trade, which no doubt they guarded jealously’.⁴⁸ Not only is this conclusion unsubstantiated in the tale of the *scholastikos*; it is directly contradicted by his passage to India on an Indian vessel. By the sixth century, the impression from Roman textual sources is little changed, with the *Christian Topography* recording that Aksumite sailors reached Sri Lanka, but along with ships from India, Rome, Persia and China, and Procopius’s account of a request by the emperor Justin II that the Aksumites attempt to push the Persians out of the Indian Ocean silk trade coming to nothing.⁴⁹ The *Christian Topography* adds that the Aksumite Empire had access to gold through exchange with a tribe on its southern border called the Sasou.⁵⁰ In combination with the archaeological material recovered from surveys and excavations, this points to an alternative interpretation of the Aksumite Empire as independently wealthy and militarily powerful, irrespective of its trade links with the Red Sea, though the ability to act as a stopping point for merchants heading either into or out of the Red Sea undoubtedly had the potential to yield a profit. Interpretation of the physical remains from Aksum is now increasingly drawing attention to a unique and autonomous development of elite visual symbols, like

⁴⁸ J. Derrett and M. Duncan 1962, 26. Other references to the Aksumites as ‘middlemen’ or as having power due to their control over or monopoly of Red Sea trade with India include: M. Morony 2004, 166, 186-187; J. Phillips 1997, 423, 450-451; E. H. Seland 2012, 77-78; S. Sidebotham 1991, 12-38, 34-35.

⁴⁹ *Christian Topography*, Book XI; Procopius, *History of the wars*, Book I.20.9-12.

⁵⁰ *Christian Topography* Book II.51-2

pre-Christian monumental stelae and decorative objects, such as ivory plaques and combs, which display Roman and Sasanian design elements but in a distinctive local style which does not seem to have been exported.⁵¹ At non-elite levels, survey work around Aksum and its hinterland has indicated a dense network of agricultural settlements, water management and distribution of local ceramics among them.⁵² This further underpins an impression of a state supported, first and foremost, by extraction of agricultural surplus and precious metal supplies.

Thus, as in the case of the Roman Empire, Aksumites clearly were involved in trade within the western Indian Ocean, but it is far less clear that such involvement determined state policy or commanded outstanding elite interest. Foreign decorative goods do not outweigh domestic elite production in quantity archaeologically, including in elite tombs. Apparent lack of interest at elite levels in long-distance trade is further supported by a text roughly contemporary with the tale of the scholastikos - the *Life of Frumentius* - the conversion story of Aksum and, though likely fictionalised in many details including its precise chronology, also embedded in a representation of Aksum which fits well with wider evidence patterns.⁵³ According to this story, Frumentius, whose narrative clearly echoes elements of the biblical story of Joseph, is enslaved during a trading trip to Aksum with his uncle, probably in the late third or early fourth century, as a result of a diplomatic incident between Rome and Aksum (otherwise unattested and unexplained). That a diplomatic incident might result in the immediate execution or enslavement of any Roman trader in Adulis gives an indication that, for the writer of Frumentius' *Life*, Aksum was not felt to be dependent for its survival on convivial trade relations with Rome. Later, Frumentius goes on to become a high-ranking advisor to the ruler of Aksum because of his wisdom, and requests permission to form a congregation.

⁵¹ On the monumental stelae: D. W. Phillipson 1994, 189. On decorative finds from the Tomb of the Brick Arches: D. W. Phillipson 1995, 1, 6-11.

⁵² L. Sernicola and L. Phillipson 2011, 190.

⁵³ W. Hahn 2015, 6-8. 7. The *Life of Frumentius* is preserved in its fullest form in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Rufinus.

Moved by divine influence, he asks permission to check whether there were among the Roman merchants any Christians, thereby confirming some trading presence by Romans in Adulis, with relevance for the discussion below about the identity of ‘India’, but without giving any indication of the importance of such trading communities to the state as a whole.⁵⁴

As in the case of the Roman Empire, what the tale of the Theban scholastikos reveals about the Aksumite empire and its involvement in long-distance connections depends only slightly on whether the scholastikos existed or not. Just as Palladius could equally have been reflecting on his knowledge and values as a Roman citizen of his own empire, so his own account of his travels informs us that he had travelled with an Aksumite bishop from Adulis, interestingly by land not sea. He could, therefore, either be recounting the tale of the scholastikos or packaging his own general knowledge and recalled conversations with his erstwhile companion. Whatever the case, the impression which emerges fits well with other evidence to provide little support for the idea of Aksum as a state supported by control over Red Sea trade, interested in exercising a monopoly over shipping to and from India or particularly engaged in external affairs. That Indians were present in Aksum is interesting from the perspective of tracing wider Indian Ocean mobility, and in suggesting the identity of said Indians, but does not indicate that their presence carried cachet within Aksum or that anything about the scholastikos or his fellow sea travellers motivated Aksumite rulers in the formation of imperial policy.

India

Finally, people described as ‘Indians’ feature heavily in the tale of the Theban scholastikos, but any discussion of the relationship of this term to other evidence must first consider the possible

⁵⁴ Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 1, Chapter 9.

meaning of the term. 'India' could potentially mean by the fourth century anywhere south of the Roman Empire from the Red Sea to Sri Lanka.⁵⁵ Recently, Schneider and Andrade have both explored in detail the extent to which the term India both expanded in its possible geographical meaning, and also the ways in which characteristics associated with India (the subcontinent) as known to Hellenistic and first- and second-century Roman authors, could be transplanted to other parts of the new Late Antique conception of India. It is a shift in meaning that is particularly apparent in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Philostorgius, roughly contemporary with the likely date of the Tale of the Theban Scholastikos, and in which India is clearly meant to refer to Arabia, parts of East Africa and Socotra.⁵⁶ Such changing labels also meant that from the fourth century onwards, the term Taprobanê, consistently meaning Sri Lanka in earlier sources, might in fact mean Socotra. Nevertheless, distinctions could be drawn, including between 'inner' or 'outermost' India, or between India as a place distinct from other places which, by a different author, or in a different context, might also be considered India. In the case of the text in question here, for example, both the people of Aksum and inhabitants of Taprobanê, are distinguished from the category of 'India/Indians' throughout (wherever Taprobanê itself indicates).

Andrade has, therefore, on the basis of this analysis, argued that the journey of the Scholastikos should be seen as taking him from Aksum to southern Arabia, with the island overlord sitting in Socotra.⁵⁷ This fits well with Andrade's wider argument that direct contact between the Roman Empire and the western Indian Ocean beyond southern Arabia and Socotra was cut off from the fourth to the sixth centuries. Here is not the place to address this fully, except to say that there are reasons for preferring a more subcontinental understanding of the term India in this text than

⁵⁵ P. Mayerson 1993, 169; P. Schneider 2004, 15-35; N. Andrade 2018, 67-93.

⁵⁶ N. Andrade 2018, 74-76.

⁵⁷ N. Andrade 2018, 80-81.

Andrade allows, which nevertheless, do not undermine his overall conclusions about diminished contact, or the more general westward migration of the points of reference for the label 'India'.

As noted above, the author of the letter in which the tale of the scholastikos occurs, seems careful to distinguish between Indian/Indians and at least the categories of Aksum/Aksumites and Taprobanê. Moreover, even within Andrade's chronology for the break of contact between the Roman Empire and subcontinental India, in the early fourth century, he acknowledges that Roman Egyptians still had direct commercial links with peninsular India.⁵⁸ This is probably testified to also by the substantial numbers of late Roman copper coins found in riverbeds in modern Tamil Nadu, and which, unlike gold coins, seem less plausible as desirable goods carried to India by local merchants.⁵⁹ Thus, if the tale of the scholastikos preserves either a late third or early fourth century narrative by a traveller, then it is entirely possible that this traveller had been to India. Even if the tale was substantially created by Palladius, he sat at the cusp of a shift in knowledge and understanding of the term India, in which older ideas, more closely correlated with our own, ought still to have existed, and as the extracts from Arrian show, Palladius was certainly in dialogue with a tradition which had been quite clear about the location of India, distinct from Arabia, East Africa or Socotra. The use of the term 'boats' in the text of the scholastikos's journey, rather than ships, may suggest that he did not really travel that far from East Africa and favour a reading of India as southern Arabia but given the existence of coast-hugging routes to India, as well as ocean-going voyages using the monsoon winds, this cannot be considered conclusive.

Finally, as the remainder of this section will explore, the account given of the pepper-growing country fits well with current evidence for social organisation within south India. This strength-

⁵⁸ N. Andrade 2018, 124-125.

⁵⁹ R. Krishnamurthy 2007.

ens an argument, which can be made, as above, on the basis of elements internal to the text, with external evidence, that in the case of this text, whether preserving personal travel memories or the remnants of a shifting classical tradition, India does refer to the subcontinent. As we will see, the identity of the island of Taprobanê is less certain because so little is said of it, but also less relevant to the story or the argument made here, though again, evidence for contemporary understandings of Sri Lanka and Socotra favour a reading of Taprobanê as meaning the former in this case. There is certainly plentiful evidence for Indians, meaning people coming from the subcontinent, and mostly its peninsular area, being heavily involved in trade across the western Indian Ocean, providing a further source of potential information for Palladius or his source. The clearest example of this can be found in the inscriptions recently published from the Hoq cave complex on Socotra. Socotra seems to have been used as an intermittent stopping point in the western Indian Ocean, where it became common practice for sailors to write their names in a long cave. These graffiti demonstrate an overwhelming preponderance of Indian names, particularly focussed in the second to fourth centuries AD, mainly coming from the northwestern coast of the peninsula, or the area of modern Gujarat.⁶⁰

Overall, the account in the tale of the scholastikos concerning India is far richer in detail, albeit some of it open to question, than for either the Roman or Aksumite empires. We are told that there was some local economic specialisation, in the form of pepper collection, that at least some groups inland from the coast had no knowledge of Greek and that the area was made up of multiple kingdoms, geographically and diachronically settled enough that at least the one in which the scholastikos was prisoner had a palace. If the argument is accepted that Palladius used the terms 'Aksumite' and 'Indian' to indicate distinct groups, then at least one minor Indian king was resident in Aksum, suggesting also external mobility by elites, in a way that is not apparent for the Roman or

⁶⁰ I. Strauch, Ingo 2013.

Aksumite empires either from this or other sources for this period. Finally, the account states that the over-king of the region of south India in which the scholastikos found himself was located in Sri Lanka (or possibly Socotra), and that all of the other kings answered to him as satraps (ἐν ταύτῃ δὲ τῇ νήσῳ καὶ ὁ μέγας βασιλεὺς κατοικεῖ τῶν Ἰνδῶν, ὃ πάντες οἱ βασιλῖσκοι τῆς χώρας ὑπόκεινται ὡς σατράπαι).⁶¹ It is a detail which, being untrue, calls into question the reliability of the scholastikos as any kind of individual eye-witness or even composite of common knowledge and plausible contemporary speculation.⁶²

To dismiss the account entirely on this basis, however, would be to miss the many details which accord well with other, independent sources for peninsular India in this period. It would also be to ignore the extent to which exactly such details of high political overlordship might be most likely to be incorrect within a generally plausible account. If the scholastikos is taken to have been the source of his own tale, then his status as a foreign kitchen slave would have put him in a poor position to understand well the precise political negotiations which ultimately saw his release, while his eventual attribution of this to his Roman citizenship is discussed in more detail below. If the story is assumed to be a work of fiction, set in an India tailored to contemporary, if a little classicizing, Roman perceptions and peppered with details from sailors and traders, then high political alliances might likewise have been difficult to perceive, but might easily have been considered to conform to patterns of sub-kings, satraps and over-kings known from other, more local contexts. In either case, however, it is also vital to recognise that the over-king in Sri Lanka serves a narrative purpose of obviously greater importance than his historical veracity. While other details of the adventure constitute the substance of a story of adventure, difference, exoticism and comedy, the Sri Lankan over-

⁶¹ W. Berghoff 1967, 4.

⁶² J. Derrett and M. Duncan 1962, 29-30. The detail would, incidentally, be equally untenable if Taprobanê were read as indicating Socotra, which was not in a position to exert any sort of overlordship in this period. See Darley 2019a, 239-241.

lord functions simply as a *deus ex machina* through whom the ultimate resolution, predicated upon the enormous trans-regional merit of being recognised as Roman, is achieved. This is significant, and arguably tips the case towards identifying the island as Sri Lanka because, in the context of classical traditions about the island, Taprobanê would remain firmly outside the realm of Roman knowledge or direct experience for another two centuries. Except by accident and misadventure, Taprobanê, meaning Sri Lanka, was a land of magical fertility and longevity, as well as strange customs and creatures. Sri Lanka was the ideal place in which to locate this mysterious and all-powerful agent of narrative closure.⁶³ By contrast, as the role of Theophilus the Indian in Philostorgius indicates, Socotra was, by the fourth century, if not closely integrated, then certainly a less mysterious element in the Christian *oikoumene*.

While the information about the over-king in Sri Lanka cannot have been an accurate account of the political situation in the fourth century, however, the broader shape of south Indian politics revealed by the tale of the scholastikos coincides well with other evidence. A landscape of small kingdoms engaged in potentially violent rivalry, with more powerful overlords providing regional identities, emerges clearly from the Tamil poetic tradition known as *sangam* literature, which flourished in especially south-eastern India from around the first century BC to around the fifth century AD.⁶⁴ The presence of numerous ‘hero stones’, especially in modern Karnataka, commemorating fallen warriors in battles with neighbouring communities, and many datable to the period c. A.D. 200-800, give a similar impression of small, competitive kingdoms.⁶⁵ The impression provided by the account of the scholastikos, though, is also very different from that of the Aksumite or Roman Empires with respect to trade.

⁶³ D. P. M. Weerakkody 1997.

⁶⁴ K. Zvelebil, 1992.

⁶⁵ C. Maloney 1975, 1, 11. See also R. Gurukkal 2016.

The inhabitants of India met by the scholastikos are almost all involved in trade. It is less clear, however, that this gave them particularly high status at a global or a local scale. The scholastikos comments quite scathingly that the total expenditure of the palace of the local king who kept him prisoner, and whose kingdom specialised in pepper production, was only a modios of wheat per year, and that he did not know where that came from (ἦν δὲ τὸ ἀνάλωμα τοῦ βασιλέως αὐτῶν, φησι, μόδιος εἰς σίτου εἰς ὅλον αὐτοῦ παλάτιον, κάκεῖνος οὐκ οἶδα πόθεν φερόμενος).⁶⁶ The clothing and housing of the Bisades are also reported to be modest. Interpreting the evidence for Indian involvement in western Indian Ocean trade in Late Antiquity has consequently veered between two extremes. One model posits highly complex, long-distance negotiations, in which, for example, the minor king met by the scholastikos in Aksum might be interpreted, though without any apparent support in the text, as a legal representative for the Indian traders with whom the scholastikos ultimately sailed.⁶⁷

The alternative, recently proposed and mainly on the basis of first- and second-century evidence by Gurukkal, is that Indians in the southern regions of the peninsula were in this period organized into social systems incapable of conceiving of trade as understood in western sources. As a consequence they were exploited by Roman traders in a fore-shadowing of later trade patterns.⁶⁸ Both of these models foreground an assumed correlation between involvement in long-distance trade and domestic social complexity. On one hand, it is asserted, because Indians were involved in long-distance trade, south Indian kingdoms must have been large, politically sophisticated and globally powerful. On the other hand, Gurukkal concludes that because south Indian kingdoms were

⁶⁶ W. Berghoff 1967, 8.

⁶⁷ J. Derrett and M. Duncan 1962, 26.

⁶⁸ R. Gurukkal 2015, especially Chapter One.

not demonstrably any of these things, they could not have engaged in substantial long-distance trade except as slightly passive procurers of goods sold by them for little or nothing and turned by western agents into huge profits in the markets of the Roman Empire. Both perspectives struggle to explain the now extensive evidence for Indians travelling westwards to trade at ports from Persia to the Red Sea, in combination with domestic evidence for far smaller and less materially wealthy political units than the Roman, Sasanian or Aksumite Empires, or indeed, the contemporary kingdom of Lanka, whose role as a participant in long-distance trade has also been overstated, and was probably almost entirely absent in the first four centuries AD, despite a thriving, wealthy and stable state based around the capital of Anuradhapura.⁶⁹

In all of these cases, however, situating these local economies in the context of a global hierarchy of value which gave limited value to long-distance luxury exchange provides a route through apparent contradictions. With respect to the Bisades, the chronology of trade sketched earlier in this chapter, suggests that they may be an example of one of the losing groups in the shift in a global hierarchy of value which differentiated Late Antiquity from the preceding centuries, trapping local communities into low-value activities as high-value tastes and choices left them behind. It is likely that, in the first and second centuries, providing pepper as a guaranteed product to markets on the west coast of India for trade to the Roman Empire was highly lucrative, to the extent that, even if it remained something not talked about, the super-elites of the Roman Empire would involve themselves in it, via freedmen or sea loans.⁷⁰ Both the flourishing of the Tamil *Sangam* epics in the first and second centuries, with their strong emphasis on the role of patronage by wealthy local leaders in supporting poets, and the large quantities of Roman gold and silver of the first centuries

⁶⁹ R. Darley 2017.

⁷⁰ See, for example, A. Tchernia 1997 on cross-generational trading by Roman merchants in the first and second centuries.

AD found in the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu, and perhaps close to where the Bisades might be placed on a map, suggest the possibilities for gain, and the engagement of peninsular India in precisely the structures of long-distance trade and communication which helped to draw Europe, Asia and Africa, from China to Britain into a globally shared set of expectations about status and representations of power.⁷¹ This need not have translated into strong state structures in this region, as Gurukkal's work demonstrates.

Following the third-century break in demand from the Roman Empire, this trade never reached its former proportions again, but to revert from a specialised cash-cropping system would have required investment, a degree of risk and, above all, the elusive and challenging leap of anti-faith that former levels of wealth were not going to return. And thus, the trap within the global hierarchy of value is set, with regions and social groups committing themselves to practices with diminished value, and which thereby provide increasingly little political or material capital from which to develop an alternative, more valuable, path out. The movement of the southern tip of peninsular India towards equilibrium within the Late Antique global hierarchy of value - a process of equalisation which is visible around the shores of the western Indian Ocean c. 200-800 - ultimately coincided not with an increase in long-distance trade but with its final petering out in the late fifth to early sixth centuries. This period witnessed the marked increase in land grants by elites in order to form strong, taxable and largely self-supporting agrarian kingdoms, a process only intensified by the rise and fall of a mysterious but apparently socially disruptive dynasty, the Kalabhras, in whose aftermath a range of states strengthened their hold over agrarian production even more firmly than before.⁷² Ironically, it was the comparatively strong integration of a trading system in the first and second centuries, albeit one in which commerce was not an elite practice to discuss, which also en-

⁷¹ S. P. Kandaswamy 1984.

⁷² R. Gurukkal 2007. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri 1975, 3. Darley 2019b.

abled a new mode of stately self-representation to proliferate from the late third century, which in turn favoured disconnection, with ideological foci on strong religious identities, landed agrarian wealth, theoretical autarky and military success characterising the most successful polities to emerge into this new, Late Antique, world.⁷³

The tale of the Theban scholastikos may provide a fragmentary insight into a moment in this process, in which the Bisades (or groups like them) were simultaneously both engaged in long-distance trade in a specialised, high-value, low-bulk crop, and also politically weak, with low state income and subject to intervention by a regional over-king, albeit located in the peninsula, rather than Sri Lanka, as the story has it. Indian traders in this moment of western Indian Ocean activity travelled extensively, appearing in Adulis for the scholastikos to join them, but not explicitly connected to the Indian minor prince who he met in Aksum, and not apparently able or willing to provide the scholastikos with support on his arrival in India. The Bisades appear at once connected to wider trans-regional economic networks and, at the same time, cut off from elite practices and flows of state wealth, military and diplomatic strength and patronage of high-quality material cultural production, architecture and literature.

Conclusion: visualising a disconnected Late Antiquity

The image of a Late Antique western Indian Ocean which emerges from this region-by-region reading of the tale of the Theban scholastikos is very different from other interpretations of the same text. It is an analysis compatible both with other textual sources available for the period and region, and with the growing body of Indian Ocean archaeological material. The altered reading is not a result of confronting ‘old’ textual sources with ‘new’ archaeological data. Rather, it is a result

⁷³ P. Sarris 2011.

of evaluating that evidence according to different questions about what was valued, by whom and how this affected lived experience.

It presents a world in which connectivity, and particularly economic connectivity, lacked high status. This had been true earlier, in the realm of representation - the rich and politically powerful did not talk about trade in the first and second centuries. However, in Late Antiquity, spread by precisely those networks which had moved pepper, gold and silver around earlier, the realm of representation began, in the wake of the temporary weakening of trade routes, to become constitutive of the realm of practice. In Late Antiquity it becomes harder to detect emperors, aristocrats and elites engaging in long-distance, trans-regional, above all, foreign, trade. That did not mean that for some people such connections were not valuable, as for example, the Bisades or the traders in Adulis, but their involvement in such connectivity restricted these individuals and groups to a low status at the global scale, and ultimately also in local contexts, as the global norms for elite behaviour began to be visible throughout the western Indian Ocean region in the formation of agrarian states with a strong ideology of economic autarchy and military and diplomatic dominance.

Crucially, in these Late Antique states, such tendencies did not just relegate trans-regional trade to the penumbra of literary sources. This was not just a change in fashions of representation. Rather, these changes in ideology and state priority materially reduced the resources of long-distance traders and their capacity to effect change in their own environment and externally, and this seems to have occurred across multiple regions along the shores of the western Indian Ocean. The king of the Bisades, whether real or a plausible narrative device for the scholastikos, may have had some sort of local control over pepper collection but had none over being flayed by a more powerful neighbouring monarch, apparently for reasons unconnected to trade. The tale of the Theban scholastikos is rare in this period for providing some literary focus on long-distance traders and

their world, even if its key characters are not themselves traders. It is also situated within a set of expectations deriving from contemporary Roman literary practice. It has provided a point of focus for the discussion here, but while it is an unusually vivid case study, its value is also as a starting point from which to link up a much larger body of evidence.

There are various implications to this disconnected image of Late Antiquity. The first is that, in a world in which long-distance economic connectivity does not generate social capital, evidence for such interaction cannot be used as a proxy for local, regional or global power or an indication of the standing which a state might have had in its relations with other states. It cannot be assumed, for example, that because the Sasanian Empire was militarily powerful it must have had a complex state policy for encouraging and developing long-distance trade. Expectations of interactions between individuals within a state are also affected. Connections have always existed - people and things have always moved - though the density of those connections may have fluctuated in ways dimly visible from our evidence but not quantifiable, but its meaning and cultural impact might change significantly over time and place.

A perspective focussed on disconnectivity also helps to understand the emphases and preoccupations of the surviving narrative sources. For figures like the Theban scholastikos or the author of the *Christian Topography*, it becomes clear that the experience of connectivity constituted a low-value currency in Late Roman society. In the case of the latter it could be made to serve the agenda of theological debate, thereby converting it into currency with greater worth in elite circles in Late Antique Egypt and the Levant. This can be seen happening quite literally, two centuries later, in the example offered by the author of the *Christian Topography* of God's favour towards the Romans over the pagan Persians, in which the author asserts that it is by divine will that Roman gold coins

were more valuable in Indian Ocean trade than Persian silver ones.⁷⁴ In the case of the Theban scholastikos, we perhaps see the same process of currency conversion (or, if the author is assumed to be Palladius himself, then the concluding message of his amusing morality tale) in the ultimate end to the story, in which the scholastikos is apparently saved not by his wealth, his network of personal connections or his familiarity with a foreign culture and language, but by being a Roman citizen and thereby protected by the military and political aura of the Roman Empire.

11,492 words (including footnotes, excluding reference list)

⁷⁴ *Christian Topography* Book II.68.

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