

BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Darley, Rebecca (2020) Matthew A. Cobb (ed.), *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity: Political, Cultural and Economic Impacts*. London: Routledge, 2019. Pp. xi + 237, illus., maps. ISBN 9781138738263. £115.00. and Nathanael J. Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in the Late Antiquity: Networks and the Movement of Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xvii + 296, maps. ISBN 9781108419123. £75.00. [Book Review] (In Press)

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/29824/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

M. A. COBB (ED), *THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE IN ANTIQUITY: POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS*. London: Routledge, 2019. Pp. 237, illus., maps. ISBN 9781138738263. £115.00.

and

N. J. ANDRADE, *THE JOURNEY OF CHRISTIANITY TO INDIA IN LATE ANTIQUITY: NETWORKS AND THE MOVEMENT OF CULTURE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 296, maps. ISBN 9781108419123. £75.00.

Two different works in scope and approach, Matthew Cobb's edited collection and Nathanael Andrade's monograph both speak to the broad question of how the Indian Ocean operated in Antiquity. Cobb's edited volume has the larger chronological and geographical scope and therefore makes a logical starting point. Collecting papers presented in 2016, the prompt publication of this volume gives it an air of freshness and currency, and several chapters make important new contributions. Cobb's introduction raises some of the debates at stake and provides a useful frame, even if many of the issues he discusses are not explicitly revisited in any of the subsequent chapters. The chapters are then organised into three sections on developing trade in the Western Indian Ocean, cross-cultural engagement in the Indian Ocean and Indian Ocean influence on literary culture. The themes of the first two sections are difficult to distinguish, as some chapters in the first deal with areas beyond the Western Indian Ocean, and connected with cross-cultural contact (Ray and de Romanis), while chapters in the second directly address developing trade patterns (Schneider and Asher). The third section, however, is clearly distinct and, by introducing material from literary and philological studies helps to bring new voices into debates often confined to historical, archaeological and ethnographic approaches.

Taking the chapters briefly in order, Cobb provides a survey of the surviving evidence for Ptolemaic involvement in Indian Ocean trade, including useful consideration of the conflicting ancient western traditions about who discovered trans-Oceanic routes to India. Cobb makes the case that the Augustan conquest of Egypt is too often assumed to have been a watershed, even if continuity in practices such as taxation are difficult to track. The following chapter by Leonardo Gregoratti treats another under-studied player in ancient trade networks - the Parthian Empire, or confederation. The evidence presented for the Persian Gulf forming a major route between Mesopotamia and India, rather than contributing to a 'main' India-Egypt trunk, is thin but Gregoratti convincingly fits the question of Indian Ocean trade into a wider pattern of scholarship dismissing the Parthians due to the bias of Greco-Roman authors. Himanshu Prabha Ray then presents a rich contribution to her paradigm-shifting work on the role of Buddhism in shaping sub-continental economic and urban development. In this chapter she explores role of monumental coastal Buddhist sites in creating seafaring landscapes, while rejecting the idea that successful trading networks required strong state backing. Federico de Romanis examines the first-century CE Greek text, the *Periplus of the Erythreian Sea*. He uses its account of south Indian geography to identify several overlapping sets of information, and therefore networks of sources, with which the author worked to piece together what de Romanis argues was a more accurate impression than that of Ptolemy.

In the second section of the volume, Raoul McLaughlin opens with a chapter dedicated to his 'Eastern Commerce Revenue Model', which posits a high level of dependence by the Roman state (around a third of its revenue) on income from eastern trade. While McLaughlin claims that his reliance entirely on ancient sources rather than secondary debate demonstrates the strength of his argument, lack of engagement with any critical analysis of the sources he is using severely

undermines the credibility of his conclusions throughout. Pierre Schneider follows with a survey of the development of a taste for pearls in the Hellenistic and Roman world up to around the second century CE. Schneider clearly shows the growth of trade in pearls from the Indian Ocean and the development of a visual language which gave pearls meaning for both rich and comparatively ordinary Roman consumers, thereby driving a specialist industry in the procurement and working of pearls. The final chapter in this section by Frederick Asher examines the evidence for Indians moving around the Indian Ocean, east and west. The focus of the chapter is diaspora trading communities, which Asher argues were fundamental in creating the space for local adoption and modification of Indian practices, including systems of literacy and numeracy and devotional art and architecture, across Southeast Asia.

Addressing literary culture, Fiona Mitchell addresses the theme of the world emerging from an egg in both Indian and Hellenistic creation myths. While these may have been parallel developments, Mitchell argues that from the fourth century BCE increased contact led to interpenetration of narrative details, drawing the two traditions closer together. Juan Pablo Sánchez Hernández addresses references to India and Ethiopia in ancient Greek and Roman novels. Authors deployed details probably reflecting a popular understanding of overseas contacts and Sánchez Hernández posits a shift from Hellenistic associations of India with wisdom and wealth towards a Roman novelistic presentation of Indian effeminacy and decadence. The role of Ethiopia in the chapter is unclear and would have been interesting to explore further. Finally, Marco Palone uses structural analysis of Indian and Greek novels to demonstrate similarities in narrative construction - especially the use of first-person narration and nested stories - to suggest, convincingly, that literary connections ran deeper than oral transmission of popular stories, and may have involved translation or direct contact by authors within a Eurasian literary *oikoumene*.

Overall, the volume represents a worthwhile contribution to Indian Ocean and to Hellenistic and Roman studies. Extensive bibliographies are very useful and several chapters represent digestible statements of current research in fields that are sometimes treated as peripheral to an 'Indo-Roman' focus. This Indo-Roman axis is not, however, completely overcome. While chapters focussing on Mesopotamia, India and Southeast Asia explicitly take an ocean-wide perspective, most of those focussed on Hellenistic and Roman evidence really only consider India in their treatment of the Indian Ocean world. Likewise, while the volume promises chronological breadth, its coverage strongly privileges the period c. fourth century BCE to second century CE. It is perhaps telling that in Cobb's introduction a detailed case is made for starting in the fourth century BCE, while the rise of Islam is cited as an obvious terminal point then never mentioned again in the entire volume. This book should therefore be evaluated as a contribution to scholarship on the Ancient, rather than Late Antique Indian Ocean. Maps accompanying the texts are helpful, but not frequent enough and often not well integrated into the text. A persistent issue, especially for such an expensive book, is the very poor standard of proofreading, which affects some chapters more than others, but at times leaves sentences reading precisely the opposite of what the author clearly intended.

Nathanael Andrade's study of the movement of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity is both later in its chronological focus and tighter in its scope. It fills a very clear gap in existing scholarship by providing an in-depth study of the complex *Acts of St Thomas* in their literary-theological and socio-economic context. Andrade critiques a tendency in Indian Ocean studies to gather disparate evidence and assemble a picture that often fails to consider whether coincidence is causation or whether similarity constitutes corroboration or inter-textuality. His alternative, of reading narrative sources as products of trade networks, rather than deriving trade networks from remarks in narrative sources, is a valuable methodological intervention. Opening with an analysis of

the *Acts of St Thomas* and scholarly interpretations of them, Andrade demonstrates that oral accounts from South India, often taken to verify the *Acts*, were in fact heavily based on them. He also examines the date of the text and shows that its account of evangelisation was originally set in Parthia and only later transferred to India without including any concrete knowledge of the subcontinent. Thus, a real historical understanding by Christians, especially in the Roman world, that their co-religionists had settled in India and Central Asia from the first century onwards, Andrade points out, tells us nothing about the actual movement of Christianity to India. Subsequent chapters explore the changing state of Roman knowledge of the East from the third century onwards, including confusions about the use of the toponym 'India', before mapping these changes onto alternations in Roman Egyptian trade networks.

A point to which Andrade returns throughout the volume is that culture and belief in Antiquity had to be moved by physical bodies. Therefore, in the final section of his study Andrade argues that although Romans were in direct contact with India in up to the third century CE, those Romans were not demonstrably Christian, and therefore did not transmit Christianity to India. From the fourth century onwards Roman links to the Indian Ocean did not go much further than the mouth of the Red Sea, and thus Roman networks established Christianity only as far as East Africa and parts of southern Arabia and Mesopotamia. Instead, Andrade argues, it was Sasanian Christians from the fifth century CE who established Christianity in India, only for these Christians to be encountered again by Roman traders in the sixth century when direct contact with India and Sri Lanka was re-established. The argument is broadly compelling and this is a book which deserves to take its place as a core text for scholars studying the Indian Ocean in Late Antiquity. It is well presented and elegantly written. If taken as a whole, the repetition of examples and arguments in chapter introductions and conclusions can seem unnecessary, but makes this a flexible resource for teaching, as individual chapters can be set and provide coherent, self-contained units of argument.

Andrade's case is not beyond criticism, however. At times the model seems to dominate to the point of circularity. In the case of the fourth- to fifth-century CE *Letter concerning the people of India and the brahmins*, for example, Andrade argues that the author meant Arabia by India and Socotra by Taprobanê (which would usually have meant Sri Lanka) because Roman contact with and thus understanding of the Indian Ocean world had shrunk to these limits, but the *Letter* is then cited as evidence for this reduced state of knowledge. Perhaps more importantly, after superbly critiquing the sources relating to Christianity in India in the first-fourth centuries because of their much later date, insecure transmission and textual complexity, Andrade then accepts almost exclusively much later evidence for the supposed Sasanian transmission of Christianity to India in the fifth and sixth centuries. While the anonymous sixth-century text, the *Christian Topography*, does refer to Christians in Sri Lanka and India with a Persian presbyter, Andrade does not address the likelihood that the author did not himself ever travel further than East Africa. It thus seems clear from Andrade's account that Christianity was not established in south India before the fourth or fifth century, but its precise route there and point of establishment remains comparatively obscure. Nevertheless, such concerns do not detract from this work's importance, either methodologically or as an empirical contribution to understanding Indian Ocean networks in Antiquity.

Both of these works mark the continuing vitality of Indian Ocean studies. They also mark an increasing opening up of the world of Roman studies to include not just an examination of places where Romans went but also the wider world within which the Roman Empire was able to exist and in which its own changing ideas about the world were created.

r.darley@bbk.ac.uk