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## A Subcontinent in Enduring Ties with an Enclosed Ocean (c. 1000–1500 C.E.)

*South Asia's Maritime Profile 'Before European Hegemony'*<sup>†</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** The waning influence of a Eurocentric paradigm paves the way for a close look at the maritime situation of the Indian subcontinent in the Indian Ocean during the first half of the second millennium C.E. Situated at the centre of the Indian Ocean, the two sea-boards of the subcontinent, along with Sri Lanka, appear in a wide variety of sources—literary (including letters of Jewish merchants), epigraphic, archaeological (including shipwreck archaeology)—as sites of vibrant commerce and cultural transactions across the sea. Nomenclatures and the historical geography of the Indian Ocean also form parts of the discussion. This essay pays particular attention to the exchange in daily necessity commodities, including plant products. A survey of ports dotting both the coasts of the subcontinent suggests the dynamic character of premier ports, shaped by their relation with subsidiary ports and their respective hinterlands and forelands. The paper highlights the role of seafaring groups, especially the ship-owners, active in and beyond South Asia. The available evidence irrefutably demonstrates that Indic people did take to sea during pre-modern times, thereby driving home the inefficacy of the taboos on seafaring in Sanskrit normative texts. To what extent the Indian Ocean experienced political contestations has been discussed in the light of a 14<sup>th</sup> century Latin Crusade tract. The advent of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean in 1498 did not signal the Age of Discoveries in the Indian Ocean in the light of seafaring in this maritime zone during 1000–1500 CE phase.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Malacca Strait, monsoon, ships, shipwreck, shipwreck archaeology, ports, commodities, merchants, ship-owners, cultural interactions, maritime conflict

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### PROLOGUE

This is a story of the engagements of a subcontinent, located in Asia—the largest continent on the planet—with its surrounding maritime space, the Indian Ocean. Our narrative focuses on the first five centuries of the second millennium C.E.: the choice of this particular chronological span will be explained shortly. The Indian subcontinent, often considered synonymous with the South Asian subcontinent, is indeed a vast landmass with immense physical and natural diversity. Very large areas of the subcontinent, watered by mighty, glacier-fed rivers from the Himalayas and blessed by two monsoons (albeit not without the uncertainties of the seasonal rainfall), are extremely suitable for agricultural

<sup>†</sup>The subtitle of this essay obviously takes the cue from J. Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

activities upon which depend, even today, the lives of the largest number of people in the subcontinent. Along with the primary and predominant perception of the subcontinent as a massive landmass yielding profuse and diverse crops over a very long period of time, one needs to pay attention to other physical features. The subcontinent is bound on three sides by seas, giving it the distinct physiography of a peninsula.<sup>1</sup> It also stands (along with the island of Sri Lanka) at the very center of the Indian Ocean, which encompasses about 20% of the total maritime space of this planet. The two coastlines of the subcontinent, jutting out into the Indian Ocean, and the Himalayan range on the north, make the Indian Ocean uniquely enclosed ocean. What is significant is that the combination of the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean, along with other factors, is intimately associated with the process of the nearly predictable alterations of the monsoon wind that is inseparably associated with the making or unmaking of the life of the teeming agricultural population of India.

Without at all minimizing the importance of agriculture in the history of the subcontinent, sustained scholarly attention to agrarian society and history has resulted in the marginalization of the coastal tracts of the subcontinent and its inhabitants. This results in an historiographical haziness regarding the coasts, those who inhabit the coasts, and whose livelihoods depend on the coasts. The river valleys in different parts of the subcontinent (North India, the Deccan, and the far South), on the other hand, are projected as the theaters where the histories of complex state society unfolded, along with agrarian and artisanal resource bases, and diversified and competing belief systems and varied cultural practices.

A typical case in point is the excessive historiographical thrust on the landlocked north Indian plains in explaining the patterns of long-range historical developments on the subcontinent. Such exercises conveniently leave out even the estuaries and deltas of many of the life-giving streams of rivers. A perusal of the estuaries and deltas in the subcontinent takes one to its coastal tracts that, too, have witnessed diverse inhabitants engaged in pursuits and interactions leaving far-reaching consequences for the subcontinent's histories and peoples. The coastal tracts were and are sites of the formation of ports that are oriented no less to their adjacent sea-spaces than their respective hinterlands. The ports would require not only hinterlands but also need to reach out to their forelands in other coastal segments and/or across the sea(s). These inhabitants in coasts and ports would include, in addition to the ubiquitous merchants—including the ship-owner—the fisherfolk, the salt producer, the boat-builder, the crew, the ship captain, and the pirate.

Our present narrative takes a close look at these communities in the light of available evidence to drive home the point that the subcontinent was intimately linked to its surrounding maritime world as much as it was rooted in its vast landmass. As they needed to know the sea intimately, knowledge about the sea and coast emanated from the activities of these groups. This knowledge was handed down across generations alongside traditional practices and layers of experience that may or may not have been reduced to writing; in

1. O.H.K. Spate and A.T.A. Learmonth, *India and Pakistan: A General and Regional Geography* (London: Methuen, 1967). The *Vishnupurana* of c. 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. portrayed Bharatavarsha (an early Sanskrit name of the subcontinent) as the land between the Himalayas and the southern sea. For the Puranic account of the geography of the subcontinent, see H.C. Raychaudhuri, *Studies in Indian Antiquities* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1958).

fact, this knowledge is still mostly shared and communicated orally. Such knowledge about maritime space may belong to what is called artisanal epistemology.

### SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL PARAMETERS

The Indian Ocean, the third largest ocean on the earth, extends to the east African coast in the west, and embraces the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea as the major components of the western Indian Ocean. Its most important part in the eastern sector is the Bay of Bengal; the easternmost part of the Indian Ocean includes the Malacca Straits, but excludes the Java Sea. The southern limits of the Ocean, according to one view, extend to Australia, while a competing cartographical position places the Australian Sea to the south of the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup> The sustained seafaring in the Indian Ocean was largely shaped by the monsoon wind system prior to the advent of steam navigation, which implies that the Indian Ocean as a unit of historical study encompassed the northern sector of this maritime space. Monsoon winds are not operative south of the 10-degree south latitude line; thus, a vast chunk of the space of the Indian Ocean remains outside the scope of Indian Ocean maritime history before the advent of steam navigation. The second point is that the Java Sea, the Sunda Strait, the Gulf of Siam, and the South China Sea geographically do not belong to the Indian Ocean, as they are oriented to the Pacific Ocean. Yet, the very long history of interactions in the Indian Ocean zone with the maritime spaces stated above compels a maritime historian to go beyond the strict geographical and cartographical limits of the Indian Ocean, which therefore seamlessly merges with the Indo-Pacific rim. These cannot be left out of the Indian Ocean world that actually stretches into the Indo-Pacific rim. Thus, one has to recognize the differences between the geographical and the historical Indian Ocean. Another point of salience is the relative paucity of sea-straits in the Indian Ocean, compared with those in the Pacific and in the Atlantic. Three prominent sea-straits in the Indian Ocean are the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb (the first two in the western sector), and the Malacca Straits (eastern sector), while the fourth—the Palk Strait (the closest to the subcontinent)—is virtually unsuitable for maritime operations. The relative paucity of sea-straits in the Indian Ocean arena turns coastal tracts, deltas, and islands into coveted and strategic assets for commercial and political aspirants alike.

An unmistakable geographical feature is that at the central position in the Indian Ocean is situated the subcontinent with its two long coasts and the island of Sri Lanka. The western seaboard is marked by numerous estuaries, creeks, inlets, and channels, and with two deltas, the Indus and the Narmada. These contributed immensely to the formation of natural ports in the estuaries, creeks, and inlets, including the famous backwaters on the Malabar Coast in Kerala. The east coast, in contrast, offers a number of riverine deltas, starting from the Ganga delta (the largest delta in the world) in the north to the deltas of the Vaigai and Tamraparni in the southernmost parts of Tamil Nadu. Between

2. Michael N. Pearson, "Introduction: The Subject," in *India and the Indian Ocean 1500–1800*, eds. Ashin Das Gupta and Michael N. Pearson (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1–24.

these two extremes of the eastern seaboard stand the deltas of the Mahanadi, Godavari, and Krishna in the Odisha-Andhra coastal segment, while the Coromandel thrived on the Kaveri delta. The deltas are conducive to agricultural and artisanal pursuits and noted for fluvial linkages with the interior.

Both the seaboard experienced the formation of ports, both premier and subsidiary/feeder ports. These ports were rarely situated exactly on the seafront like in modern Mumbai or Chennai, but were located slightly inland and therefore well protected from the furies of the monsoons. It is only with the availability of engineering techniques and skills since the 19<sup>th</sup> century that harbor structures could be constructed on the seashore. Another factor of commonality in the greater parts of the Indian Ocean was the presence of the ubiquitous vessels made of wooden planks. These were held together by the stitching of the planks with coconut coir (hence the description of “sewn boats” in European documentation from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards), but without the use of any iron nails (*nil-loham* in Sanskrit). Both the raw materials for “traditional” shipbuilding were/are abundantly available in the subcontinent, especially in its coastal tracts. The subcontinent has, therefore, a special position in the history of shipbuilding technologies in the Indian Ocean prior to the introduction of steam navigation. The capability of such “sewn boats” to undertake long overseas journeys is writ large in the underwater salvaging of a 9<sup>th</sup>-century vessel that sank close to Belitung near the Java Sea. The ship, having structural affinities with the vessels plying on the Indian Ocean, was returning to its destination(s) somewhere in the western Indian Ocean from a Chinese harbor, carrying with it a large cargo of Chinese Changsha pottery. This matter will figure more elaborately in a subsequent section of this essay.

The maritime space of the Indian Ocean was already known as the *Mare Indicum* to Pliny (d. 78 C.E.). Its western sector, embracing the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, bore the epithet the Erythraean Sea according to the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (by an anonymous Greek author of late first century C.E.). The name *Mare Indicum*, equated by Pliny with the Southern Sea, continues in a much later text, albeit with a slight variation: a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Latin Crusade tract mentions the *Mari Indico*.<sup>3</sup> The rise and spread of Islam, with a pronounced orientation to commerce and urban life, resulted in a more intimate association with the Indian Ocean from the late 8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards. A perusal of the geographical texts and travel accounts of Arabic and Persian authors reveals the coining of the expression *al-bahr al-Hindi*, which is a near equivalent of the later English expression the Indian Ocean. In the *al-bahr al-Hindi* was included *bahr Larvi* (the sea of Lata or Gujarat), corresponding to the Arabian Sea.<sup>4</sup> The Arab authors show a clear awareness of the *agbbab* (“channel”) separating the southern part of the peninsula from Sri Lanka; this seems to be the same as the Palk Strait.

3. Lionel Casson, ed. and trans., *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); H. Rackham, trans., *Naturalis Historia of Pliny* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Series, 1942), section VI.26; Giles Constable, trans., *Tractatus quomodos sarracenos sunt expugnandi*, with annotations by Ranabir Chakravarti, Olivia Remie Constable, Janet Martin and Tia Colbaba (Washington DC: Dumberton Oaks, 2012).

4. For an explanation of *al bahr al Hindi* and *bahr Larvi* see the famous treatise on geography, *Hudud al Alam*, written by an anonymous author in c. 982 CE. English translation by V. Minrosky (London: Haklyut Society, 1937); see also S.M.H. Nainar, *Arab Geographers' Knowledge of Southern India* (Madras: University of Madras, 1942).

Further to the east, the maritime space was designated as *bahr Harkal* (or Harkand). Harkal is clearly the Arabicization of the name Harikela, identified with the present Chittagong region of Bangladesh (southeasternmost Bangladesh to the east of the river Meghna).<sup>5</sup> The coining of terms denoting the Indian Ocean or different segments of it, especially by Arabic and Persian authors, cannot but demonstrate their regular familiarity and acquaintance with the maritime space in question, obviously in the wake of the burgeoning commerce in the Indian Ocean. In contrast, contemporary Indian authors were content with merely using general expressions like *purva* (east) and *paschima/apara* (west) *samudra/jaladbi* (sea) to suggest their awareness of the present Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, respectively.

Chinese annals, especially since the Sung times, also speak of maritime linkages with India and various areas of the Indian Ocean, but the Chinese authors often used a generic term to point to the Indian Ocean: it was known as *Hsi-bai*, “western sea.” The varied nomenclatures of the Indian Ocean point to the frequent voyages across the vast maritime space by sailors, merchants, preachers, and travelers, all of whom offer their distinctive perceptions of this maritime space. Thus, a distinct thalassography is available through the diverse nomenclatures of this maritime space.

A statement is in order here explaining the preferred temporal span of this essay. The subcontinent’s seafaring tradition in the Indian Ocean goes back at least to the third millennium B.C.E. during the days of the Harappan civilization (c. 2600-1800 B.C.E.), as evident from the portrayal of the sailing craft on Harappan seals and other related artifacts. The bulk of the historiography of the Indian Ocean maritime profile concentrates on three or four crucial centuries, from 1500 to 1800/1900. This phase was distinguished by the presence and growing importance of North Atlantic political, economic, and commercial forces in the Indian Ocean, which experienced a sea change and a major restructuring of the political economy of the Indian Ocean zone from 1750 onwards. The results of these momentous changes are visible in the incorporation of the Indian Ocean into the world economy, followed by the subjection of many countries of Asia and Africa into European colonial empires, and finally the transformation of the Indian Ocean into a British lake in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The historiographical preference for, and emphasis on, the 1500 to 1800/1900 phase is also largely determined by the vast and voluminous records of the Portuguese *Estado da India* and those of the three East India Companies (Dutch, English, and French). The availability of, and access to, “official” records and serial/statistical data naturally encourages historians to delve deeply into these centuries, which heavily impacted diverse communities residing in the Indian Ocean zone.

Michael Pearson, on the other hand, has made it amply clear that the three or four centuries from 1500 onwards, however significant, cannot obliterate the fact that these centuries form only a portion of the very long history of human engagements in the Indian Ocean.<sup>6</sup>

5. B.N. Mukherjee, “The Original Territory of Harikela,” *Bangladesh Lalitkala* 1 (1975): 115-19; an inscription of 971 C.E. from Bangladesh (close to Dhaka) speaks for the first time of Vangasagara or the Sea of Vanga (Bengal), thus corresponding closely to *bahr Harkal* and the present Bay of Bengal; this is discussed by Ranabir Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007), 226-30.

6. Michael N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Historiographically speaking, there exists a rich and growing literature on the Indian Ocean scenario for the period extending from the late first century B.C.E. to the third century C.E., thanks largely to the availability of classical texts, numismatic, epigraphic, and field archaeological data. The hallmark of the long-distance contacts of the era was maritime trade and the connection between the Indian Ocean and the eastern Mediterranean through Egypt, which became a part of the Roman Empire in the late first century B.C.E. This has been labeled popularly, although erroneously, as “Indo-Roman” trade, and the maritime orientation of this trade through the Red Sea has been recognized in current scholarship.

The participation of diverse communities in East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and Sri Lanka in Indian Ocean affairs has of late gained considerable historiographical visibility.<sup>7</sup> However, the general tendency to look for the history of seafaring in the Indian Ocean in the phase subsequent to the 3rd century C.E. often takes one straight to c. 1500, leaving a yawning gap in that history of more than a millennium.<sup>8</sup> We propose to take a close look at the five centuries at the turn of the second millennium (1000-1500 C.E.) in order to examine the discernible shifts in the maritime profile of the subcontinent vis-à-vis the Indian Ocean.

First, from c. 1000 C.E. onwards one notes, following Chaudhuri, a preference for segment voyages between the easternmost and the westernmost termini of the Indian Ocean network, departing from the previous practice of a single ship undertaking the entire voyage between the eastern and the western poles of the maritime interactions.<sup>9</sup> This is clearly evident from the wreck of the west Asian/western Indian Ocean ship in Belitung near the Java sea, datable to c. 830 C.E. on the basis of its cargo. The second point is that 965 C.E. witnessed the emergence of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt, bringing the Red Sea network to greater prominence than the Persian Gulf sea-lane; this more or less coincided with the gradual fading out of the great Persian Gulf port of Siraf in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The pre-eminence of the Red Sea in the western Indian Ocean continued with the rise of Aden under the Ayyubid and Rasulid rulers. The Persian Gulf regained its erstwhile eminence with the advent of Hormuz in the Kirman coast of Iran in the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

7. For an overview of the state of the researches on the India and the Indian Ocean Studies, see Hermann Kulke, *History of Precolonial India: Issues and Debates*, English edition revised and edited by Bhairabi Prasad Sahu (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), 258–80. The book provides an excellent bibliography also.

8. The continuity of Indic sea-borne interactions after 300 C.E. is amply evident from the corpus of Indic inscriptions from the island of Socotra. These records have been palaeographically assigned to the first five centuries C.E. by Ingo Struach, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra* (Bremen: Hempen Verlag, 2012). The longevity of two Gujarati ports, Bhrigukachchha (modern Broach) and Hastakavapra (modern Hatab), beyond 300 C.E. is impossible to miss. It is possible to argue that the conquest of Gujarat by the formidable Gupta power of northern India in around 410-11 C.E. could have been prompted by the commercial importance of the Gujarat coast. H.C. Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India*, with a Commentary by B.N. Mukherjee (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ranabir Chakravarti, *Warfare for Wealth: Early Indian Perspectives* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1986). The 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. phase also marks the vibrant commercial and cultural ties across the Bay of Bengal linking the eastern seaboard of the subcontinent with mainland and maritime Southeast Asia. See Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani, and Geoff Wade, eds., *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia, Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange* (Singapore and New Delhi: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Manohar, 2011).

9. K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to AD 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1985.

From the late 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and more specifically in the post-1000 C.E. phase, the Bay of Bengal maritime sphere did not lag behind either. Flourishing maritime trade and cultural interactions between the eastern seaboard of India and Southeast Asia (both mainland and maritime zones) are now clearly visible. This is coupled with the emergence and consolidation of a few polities—the Cholas in South India, the rulers of Angkor, the Sung rule in China, and the rulers of Sri Vijaya (Palembang in southern Sumatra)—which were aware of and alive to the prospects of maritime trade in the eastern Indian Ocean.<sup>10</sup> This endowed the Bay of Bengal sector with a distinctive maritime profile during the first half of the second millennium, as well.

## SOURCES AND METHODS

The present exercise rests on the minute examination of various primary sources, ranging from textual (both Indic and non-indigenous, of diverse orientations), epigraphic, monetary, archaeological, and visual materials. Two relatively new sources have lately gained considerable academic attention and engagements: a) the letters of Jewish “India traders” (an expression coined by S. D. Goitein), also known as the Cairo Geniza documents—in other words, the India-bound Jewish traders from North Africa;<sup>11</sup> and b) the evidence from shipwreck archaeology that has mostly come from maritime Southeast Asia, around Java. Unfortunately, these sources rarely offer quantifiable evidence, except occasionally in the letters of Jewish merchants and some shipwreck sites;<sup>12</sup> the written sources are essentially qualitative and scattered in nature. Combining diverse bodies of evidence can partially overcome the problem of the paucity of quantitative evidence and its scattered nature, but also allows us to hear many voices of the past through a variety of sources, which are not to be seen as merely corroborative to one another.<sup>13</sup>

The direct voices of the participating and voyaging merchants, shippers, and ship-owners are available in the Cairo Geniza papers and in the inscriptions of merchants belonging to a few south Indian organizations of traders. The letters of Jewish India traders belong to the first three centuries of the second millennium, during which period, as the Geniza documents reveal, the active participation of Indic merchants in seafaring is quite apparent. Nearly contemporary to these letters are the inscriptions of various Tamil merchant groups, active in South India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia (both mainland and maritime). The Tamil inscriptions record the role of different

10. Hermann Kulke, “Rivalry and Competition in the Bay of Bengal in the Eleventh Century and Its Bearing on Indian Ocean Studies,” in *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal 1500–1800*, eds. Om Prakash and Denys Lombard (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999), 17–36.

11. Shelomo D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Shelomo D. Goitein and Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza (India Book)* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Friedman considers that “the India trade was the backbone of the medieval international economy” (p. xxi).

12. Field archaeological data, especially the ceramic evidence, from coastal sites across the Indian Ocean and the study of the potteries and other artefacts from shipwreck sites have started offering valuable quantifiable data on the Indian Ocean history in the first half of the second millennium.

13. For the multiple voices of historical sources see Romila Thapar, *Somanātha: The Many Voices of a History* (New Delhi: Viking, 2004).

bodies of merchants as donors and patrons to Buddhist and Brahmanical shrines in places far away from the subcontinent.<sup>14</sup>

A perusal of these near coeval sources conveys two clear messages. First, Indic peoples did take to the sea, contrary to the protracted perception that they did not undertake seafaring in view of the orthodox Brahmanical religio-cultural taboos on sea-voyages. Second, the Indian Ocean trade, an essential component of this survey, did not deal merely in luxury commodities; items of daily necessities were regularly shipped as bulk items across the sea. The visible remains of these items have been recovered by underwater archaeologists at a few shipwreck sites. Of the non-indigenous textual materials, there is indeed an impressive corpus of literature on travel and geography, written in Arabic and Persian, in which the subcontinent's eminence in the Indian Ocean is clearly recognized. One major problem with these texts is that only a handful of these authors actually visited the subcontinent; notable exceptions are al-Biruni (early 11<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) and Ibn Battuta (first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>15</sup> The travel accounts of Ibn Battuta can be compared and juxtaposed with the accounts of the Venetian traveler Marco Polo of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup>

Of the non-Indic impressions of India, two Chinese sources deserve mention here. The first is the *Zhufanzhi* (1225 C.E.) by Zhao ru Gua, a Chinese official supervising Sung China's external trade, thereby offering a perspective of the Indian Ocean from the point of Sung China.<sup>17</sup> The well-known accounts of Ma Huan are the principal source for reading about the celebrated Ming expeditions in the South China Sea, maritime Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean, conducted during a period of almost three decades, 1404-1433 C.E.<sup>18</sup> To the Chinese authors, the Indian Ocean was known simply as the *Hsi hai* ("western sea"), obviously called as such from the East Asian perspective. That the greater parts of the northern Indian Ocean were a well-traversed maritime space is best illustrated by the 15<sup>th</sup> century sailing manual of Ahmad ibn Majid, a literate navigator (*mu'allim*) who must have reduced the prevailing, floating oral traditions regarding seafaring in the Indian Ocean to writing.<sup>19</sup> The point that is being driven at here is that the appearance of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century cannot mark an age of discovery in terms of the protracted seafaring experiences of a vast multitude of peoples in Asia and on the eastern seaboard of Africa. In terms of seafaring, during

14. Noboru Karashima, ed., *Ancient and Medieval Commercial Activities in the Indian Ocean: Testimonies of Inscriptions and Ceramic Sherds* (Tokyo: Tokyo University, 2002).

15. E. Sachau, trans., *Alberuni's India* (London: Trunber, 1910); H.A.R. Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta in Asia and Africa* (London: Haklyut Society, 1929).

16. Henry Yule and H. Cordier, trans., *The Travels of Ser Marco Polo* (London: J. Cape, 1903).

17. F. Hirth and W.W. Rockhill, trans., *Zhu fan Zhi of Zhao Ru Gua (Chu fan Chi of Chau ju Kua)* (St. Petersburg: Academy of Science, 1911, reprint); see also the recent English translation of the same text on the Sung relations with Zhunian (the Chola kingdom in South India) by Noboru Karashima and Tansen Sen in *From Nagapattanam to Suwarnadwipa, Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*, eds. H. Kulke, K. Keesavapany, and Vijay Sakhuja (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and New Delhi: Manohar, 2010), 292-315; also see Suchandra Ghosh, "South-east Asia and the Eastern Sea Board of India through the Lens of Zhao Ru Gua," in *Convergence: Rethinking India's Past*, ed. Radhika Seshan (New Delhi: Primus, 2014), 41-54.

18. J.V.G. Mills, trans., *The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* (Ma Huan's *Ying-Yai sheng-lan*) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

19. G.R. Tibbetts, trans., *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971).



the arrival of the Portuguese and, later, of other North Atlantic peoples, the discernible distinctiveness was marked by the direct sea-route from Europe/the North Atlantic to Asia—including South Asia—by circumnavigating the tip of Africa.

### THE PREMIER PORTS OF THE SUBCONTINENT

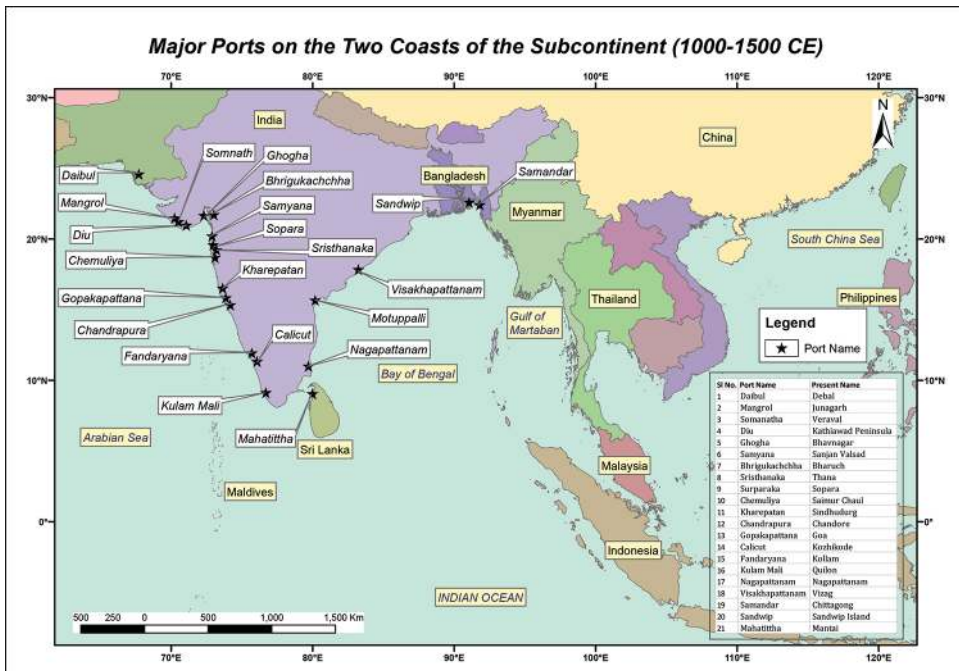
The combined testimony of diverse sources introduced above helps recover the position of a few premier ports dotting both seaboard of the subcontinent, which need to be situated in the maritime profile of the five centuries under review. Two points need to be underlined here at the outset. First, several ports of prominence emerged during the period under review, either eclipsing and/or replacing a few erstwhile premier ports. The shifts in the history of the premier ports on the subcontinent were often caused by the decay of erstwhile ports due to siltation of the navigable channels in the estuaries and deltas. Second, the pre-eminence of certain ports was often accountable to their respective hinterlands and forelands. The larger the hinterland and foreland of a port, the greater the eminence of the port. The emergent port hierarchy, therefore, depended not merely on the pre-eminence of a particular port, but on the crucial role of its feeder or secondary ports that contributed considerably to the boom or slump in the activities of a premier port.<sup>20</sup>

On the western seaboard of the subcontinent, the northernmost of the ports was Daibul, located in the Indus delta and known from Arabic and Persian sources. The remains of this port have been excavated at Banbhor, near present-day Karachi (Pakistan). The very location of this port in the Indus delta is indicative of its ties with the Persian Gulf (*darya-i-Akhsar*). Interestingly enough, Ibn al-Mujawir (d. 1291) undertook a voyage from this port to Aden in 1222 via the island of Socotra, as evident from his account of Aden.<sup>21</sup> That Daibul was linked up with the Gulf of Aden area and the Yemeni port of Aden, an outstanding port in the Red Sea network, gains clear visibility from this statement.

One of the most important coastal segments in India was the Gujarat coast, which embraced the Kathiawad peninsula and stretched up to southern Gujarat (Lata in Sanskrit sources, and Lar in Arabic and Persian texts) with its contiguous coast in Konkan (Kumkam, Kamkam, Kamkar, and Makamkam in Arabic texts). The premier port in this segment was Stambhatirtha/Stambhapura, the same as Kanbaya or Cambayat in the Arabic and Persian texts and identified with the celebrated port of Cambay on the Mahi. Noted for its steady coastal commerce along the entire western seaboard, Cambay maintained networks with Ardrapura or Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, as two Sanskrit texts, *Vastupalamahatmayam* and *Jagaducaritam*, narrate. Both the texts are from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and highlight the mercantile activities of two merchants, Vastupala and Jagadu, whose patronage to Jainism is highlighted in the texts. Cambay's links with the great Red Sea port

20. In Sanskrit, the term for port is *velakula*; the corresponding term in Tamil is *pattinam/velavulam/velapuram*.

21. Ranabir Chakravarti, "Merchants, Merchandise and Merchantmen: India and the Indian Ocean with a Special Reference to the Western Sea-board of India (c. 500 BC—AD 1500)," in *Trading World of the Indian Ocean 1500–1800*, ed. Om Prakash (New Delhi: Pearson, 2012), 53–118 and particularly 83. For Ibn al-Mujawir's account in English see Samuel Barrett Miles, "Extract from an Arabic Work Relating to Aden (Ibn al-Magawir: *Tarih al-Mustabsir*)," collected and reprinted by Fuat Sezgin, *Islamic Geography* 92 (Frankfurt, 1993), 183–96. For an overview of the excavations at Banbhor, see A. H. Dani, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries in Pakistan* (Tokyo: UNESCO, 1990).



MAP 1. Major Ports on the Two Coasts of the Subcontinent (1000–1500 CE). Map is prepared by Ms. Monalisa Rakshit.

of Aden figures prominently in the Jewish Geniza documents. Cambay was served well by a few feeder ports like Mangalapura (Mangrol on the Kathiawad coast), Diu, Somanatha, and Ghogha. One of the earliest mentions of the Gujarati port of Diu is available in a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish business letter that speaks of a voyage from al-Manjarur (Mangalore) to al-Divi (Diu) in Gujarat, from where the ship sailed to Aden.<sup>22</sup> Diu was thus connected with both the Kanara coast and Aden.

Though Somanatha is principally celebrated in Indian history as a great Saiva sacred center, it was also a port of some prominence located at the confluence of the Sarasvati with the sea (*Sarasvatisagarasamprayogavibhushita*).<sup>23</sup> Al-Biruni, in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, was one of the earliest authors to appreciate the importance of Somanatha as a port; he stated that it was a vantage point of departure for Zanz or Zanzibar in east Africa.<sup>24</sup> That Somanatha did receive ships from Hormuz is proved beyond doubt by a remarkable bi-lingual (in Arabic and Sanskrit) inscription of 1264 from Somanatha.<sup>25</sup> No less significant is the 1264 C.E. inscription

22. S.D. Goitein, "From Aden to India: Specimens of Correspondence of India Traders of the Twelfth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 21 (1980): 43–66 for the sailing from al-Manjarur to Aden via al-Divi; for an empirically rich overview of the ports of Gujarat, including Cambay, see V.K. Jain, *Trade and Traders in Western India AD 1000–1300* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1989).

23. G. Buhler, "The Cintra Prasasti of Sarangadeva of AD 1287," *Epigraphica India* 1 (1892): 271–87.

24. Sachau, trans., *Al Biruni*, II, chapter 58: 105.

25. The Sanskrit version of this inscription was first edited by E. Hultzsch, "A Grant of Arjunadeva of Gujarat, dated AD 1264," *Indian Antiquary* 11 (1882): 241–45; the same was later studied by D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, II (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1983), 402–09. The Arabic version, shorter and synoptic,

that, while giving a description of Somanatha, speaks of a merchants' quarter (*mahajanapalli*) named Sikottari at Somanatha. The name Sikottari has a remarkable phonetic affinity with Socotra, an island in the Gulf of Aden and near the Horn of Africa. The name possibly implies a settlement of merchants who either voyaged to Socotra from Somanatha or hailed from Socotra to Somanatha. This suggests that Somanatha was possibly connected with both the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden. *Hurmuji-vahana*, or ships from Hormuz, also reached the port of Ghogha (*Ghogha velakula*) in Gujarat.

Cambay also benefited from sustained commerce with the Konkan ports. At the northernmost fringe of Konkan, almost touching southern Gujarat, was the port of Samyana (in Arabic Sanjan/Sindan), figuring not only in the accounts of al-Masudi and al-Idrisi, but in five Sanskrit inscriptions (ranging from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries).<sup>26</sup> A port to the south of Sanjan was Srasthanaka or Thana, now a northern suburb of Mumbai. Thana seems to have come to prominence later than Sanjan. A Jewish business letter of 1145 narrates a coastal voyage from al-Manjrur (Mangalore) to Thana wherefrom the ship further proceeded northwards to Barus (Broach). It appears in greater prominence under the name Tana in the accounts of Marco Polo in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Out of the sixty-four Silahara epigraphic records (mostly during the first three centuries of the second millennium), several inscriptions are replete with references to ports of southern Konkan, like Chemulya (Chaul, to the south of Mumbai), Balipattana (modern Kharepatan), Chandrapura (Sindabur in Arabic texts; Chandore, near Goa), and Gopakattana (Old Goa). The ports of both north and south Konkan witnessed the regular settlement of Arab merchants who figure in Sanskrit inscriptions under the category of *Tajjikas*. Al-Masudi noted the presence of a large number of Omani, Sirafi, and Baghdadi merchants at the port of Saimur or Chaul. The long presence of these Arab merchants explains how and why their names sometimes appeared in Sankritized forms in inscriptions of 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries: e.g. Mahumata/Madhumati (= Muhammad), Alliya (= Ali), and Shariyarahara (= Shahriyar). A close study of two inscriptions of the Silaharas of south Konkan, one of 1008 and the other of 1094, strongly suggests that the ports of Konkan were engaged in looping coastal commerce, touching the ports of Balipattana, Chemulya (Chaul), Nagapura (Nagav), Surparaka (Sopara), and Srasthanaka (Thana). This coastal linkage further connected Konkan with Gujarat and Malabar. In a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish business letter, a voyage from Aden to Sindabur is described, thereby indicating that Sindabur near Goa was added to the list of ports with which Aden had direct overseas linkages.<sup>27</sup> This importance probably resulted in the inclusion of Juwa-Sindabur (the

was edited by Z.A. Desai, "Arabic Inscriptions of the Rajput period from Gujarat," *Epigraphia Indica, Arabic and Persian Supplement*, 1961–62: 17–24. English translations of both the Sanskrit and Arabic versions are also extensively quoted in Niharrajan Ray, B.D. Chattopadhyaya, V.R. Mani and Ranabir Chakravarti, *A Sourcebook of Indian Civilization* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000), 644–48.

26. D.C. Sircar, "Five Copper Plate Charters from Chinchani," *Epigraphia Indica* 32 (1955): 42–59. These are analyzed from the point of view of maritime commerce by Ranabir Chakravarti, "Monarchs, Merchants and a Matha in Northern Konkan (c. AD 900–1053)," in *Trade in Early India*, ed. Ranabir Chakravarti (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 257–81.

27. The epigraphic references to the ports in Konkan are available in V.V. Mirashi, ed., *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, VI (Inscriptions of the Silaharas) (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1978); for an analysis of coastal

hyphenated name to convey the contiguity of Chandrapura/Chandore and Goa is itself interesting) in the list of ports on the west coast in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century sailing manual of Ibn Majid.<sup>28</sup>

The southernmost segment of the western seaboard is famous as Malabar, known as Malibar, Manibar, or al-Mulaybar in the Arabic texts and the Jewish business letters. Numerous creeks and backwaters helped the spawning of many ports on this coastal segment. Three ports deserve special mention: these are Kulam Mali (Quilon), Panatalayani Kollam (Fandarina), and Calicut. The Malabar ports could be reached from both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea ports in around 30 days by utilizing the southwestern monsoon. These ports earned their celebrity status for handling the invaluable cargo of spices, especially pepper from Kerala. Calicut does not seem to have attained its great glory prior to the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. Ibn Battuta is one of the first authors to have described its immense importance. He noted that the huge Chinese junks did not sail further west of Calicut, and that Calicut provided excellent transshipment facilities for Chinese and Arab vessels. Calicut attained its eminence in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>29</sup> The famous Chinese voyages under Admiral Zheng He (from 1404 to 1433) touched Calicut as many as eight times.<sup>30</sup>

The vibrancy of maritime commerce on the Malabar coast encouraged a wide variety of merchants to converge at different ports in Malabar. A congregation of merchants at Kandyur in Kerala figures in the *Unniyatcharitam*. The author of this text was aware of the diverse areas from which the merchants hailed (including *paradesa* or abroad); moreover, he offered the image of diverse speeches being used, thereby suggesting the possibility of multilingualism among the merchants. Apart from gold merchants (*ponvaniyar*), wholesale dealers (*nira chettikal*), and ship-owners (*marikkar*), there assembled

Kannadar (people from Kanara), Malavar (Malava), Kunjarar (people from Gurjara), Tulingar (people from Telugu), Ottiyar (people from Orissa), Konkanar (people from Konkan), Chonakar (Yavana), Chinar (people from China), Turikkar (Turks?) and many others.

They sat cross-legged in the center of black carpets with huge masses of coins in front of them. One of them, in a bragging tone and mood, tried to impress upon his juniors:<sup>31</sup>

If I sell a *jonakuttira* (Arab horse) in the Cola country, I will immediately get two thousand *anayaccu* (elephant *kasu*) in cash. For my elephant I will get eight thousand. . . . If I go to Kollam (Quilon) and Kollapuram (Kolhapur) I can sell quickly all the good *karpuram*

networks see Ranabir Chakravarti, "Coastal Trade and Voyages in Konkan: The Early Medieval Scenario," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 35 (1998): 97–124.

28. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean*, 199, 359, 455.

29. Elizabeth Lambourn, "Describing a Lost Camel: Clues for West Asian Mercantile Networks in South Asian Maritime Trade (Tenth-Twelfth Century AD)," in *Ports of the Ancient Indian Ocean*, ed. Marie-Francoise Boussac, Jean-Francois Salles and Jean-Baptiste Yon (New Delhi: Primus, 2016), 351–407; Jean-Charles Ducene, "The Ports of the Western Coast of India According to Arab Geographers (Eighth-Fifteenth Centuries AD)" in Boussac et al., *Ports of the Ancient Indian Ocean*, 165–78, offers an excellent overview with analytical perspectives on the ports of the western sea-board of India.

30. Mills, *Ocean's Shores*.

31. Damodara, *Unniyatcharitam*, translated by M.G.S. Narayanan (Trivandrum: Kerala University, 1971), 68–69

(camphor). I have to get a hundred thousand *accu* by way of interest to the loan I gave to Vallabha.<sup>32</sup>

The east coast is marked by three major sectors: the Coromandel, the Andhra-Odisha coastal belt, and the Bengal coast, all three zones endowed with a few premier ports, supported by their respective feeder ports. The Coromandel saw the rise of the Chola realm (particularly during the period from 985 to 1150 C.E.), which was the most formidable regional polity in south India, marked by considerable agrarian expansion and thriving commerce. In the heartland of the Chola realm, in the Kaveri valley and the Kaveri delta, stood the premier Chola port of Nagapattanam, which replaced the earlier major port of Kaveripattinam. The outstanding position of Nagapattanam is amply borne out by the two Leiden grants, respectively belonging to the times of Rajendra Chola (1012-44 C.E.) and Kulottunga Chola (1070-1120 C.E.), both of which highlight the intimate connections of this port with Srivijaya, a dominant maritime polity in southern Sumatra, and parts of the Malay peninsula as well. At this premier port of the Cholas, the two Chola rulers, who were ardent devotees of Siva, granted landed property to a Buddhist monastery, Chudamanivihara. The request for the endowment of landed property to the Buddhist monastery came from the ruler of Srivijaya in southern Sumatra. The Buddhist monastery bore the name Chudamani-vihara.<sup>33</sup> Further endowments were made in favour of the same Buddhist monastery at Nagapattanam during the reign of Kulottunga Chola. Significantly enough, both the Chola rulers, especially Rajendra, were known for their maritime expeditions to Southeast Asia. Nagapattanam, therefore, was not only a major port, but participated in international commerce and diplomacy.

The regular cultural and diplomatic exchanges of the rulers of Srivijaya and Kamboja (Cambodia) with the Chola rulers is evident from the epigraphic records.<sup>34</sup> The corresponding Chola interests in reaching the Song court in China, obviously to promote long-distance maritime trade, are traceable in the Song court chronicles, which record that three Chola official embassies reached the Song court in 1012 (during Rajaraja I's time), 1033 (during Rajendra Cola's reign), and 1077 (during the time of Kulottunga I).<sup>35</sup> Chola interests in the maritime commerce of the Bay of Bengal are writ large in the explicit mentions of more than ten places across maritime and mainland Southeast Asia which were successfully raided by the Chola fleet (without however, any territorial annexation) in 1025-26. These are: Srivijaya (Palembang in Sumatra), Pannai (Ponnani in the east coast of Sumatra), Malaiyur (on the northern shore of the Singapore Strait), Maiyuradingam (central part of the Malay peninsula), Ilangasoka (south of Kedah in the Malay peninsula),

32. Damodara, *Ummiaticaritam*, trans. Narayanan, 68-69.

33. The Chola invasion and occupation of Sri Lanka during the reigns of Rajaraja I (985-1014) and Rajendra I (1012-44) led to devastation and plunder of many Sri Lankan Buddhist sites, including Anuradhapura. See K.A. Nilakantha Sastri, *The Colas* (Madras: University of Madras, 1955).

34. Kenneth R. Hall, *Trade and Statecraft in the Age of the Cholas* (New Delhi: Abhinav, 1980); R. Chama-pakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urban Centres: South India 300 BC—AD 1300* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Y. Subbarayalu, *South India in the Age of the Cholas* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Noboru Karashima, ed., *A Concise History of South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

35. Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations* (Singapore: Nalanda-Srivijaya Centre, 2003).

Mapappallam (Talaing country in lower Burma), Mevilingbangam (not properly identified), Valaippanduru (not properly identified), Talaitakkollam (Takua-pa in peninsular Thailand), Madamalingam (west coast of the Malay peninsula), Manakkavaram (Nicobar islands), and Kadaram (Kedah in the west coast of the Malay peninsula).

To the north of the Coromandel stands the Andhra-Odisha coastal sector. The coastal zone included the area of Vengi, located in the deltas of the Krishna and the Godavari rivers. In northern Vengi, close on the blend-zone of Kalinga and Andhra, stood the port of Visakhapatnam, which figured under the same name in an inscription of 1068 C.E.<sup>36</sup> Two years later, the accession of Rajendra of the Eastern Chalukya house to the Chola throne as Kulottunga I (1070-1120 C.E.) realized a long-cherished political aspiration for the Cholas: the merging of the Vengi coast with the Cholamandalam/Coromandel littorals. There is both epigraphic and numismatic evidence to demonstrate Kulottunga's attempts at politically and administratively integrating Vengi with the Chola heartland. Sometime between 1068 and 1090, the port of Visakhapattanam was renamed as Kulottungacholapattanam, obviously after the reigning Chola monarch.<sup>37</sup> This is a unique case of renaming an existing port after the reigning Chola king. This act of renaming Visakhapattanam must have enhanced the importance of this Andhra port. Around the same time Kulottunga is known to have allowed remissions from *sunka* or tolls and customs (hence, his title *sunganadavirttachola*), obviously to attract trade, including long-distance commerce.<sup>38</sup>

The inscription of 1090 informs us of the presence of a merchant (*viyapari*) at Visakhapattanam. Named Asavu, this merchant belonged to the Anjuvannam mercantile body of coastal Kerala (Malaimandalam) and reached Visakhapattanam (alias Kulottungacholapattanam) from Marottam or Mantai, a major port in northwestern Sri Lanka. The long reach of this coastal Andhra port with Sri Lanka, if not also with the Malabar coast, is certainly impressive. No less striking is the information that around the same time another merchant, belonging to the Anjuvannam group, arrived at Visakhapattanam from Pasay (likely to correspond to Samuderapasai in northern Sumatra).<sup>39</sup> The Anjuvannam figures in several South Indian inscriptions and probably denotes a body of non-indigenous merchants (including Jewish and Muslim Arab traders). Visakhapattanam, in fact, is the northernmost point in the distribution of the inscriptions belonging to the Tamil trading bodies.

The Vengi coast comes once more into prominence during the reign of the Kakatiya king Ganapati (1199-1261 C.E.). During his reign, a new port emerged in the Krishna delta, named Motuppalli. The port and hence the Bay of Bengal trade was given major importance in an inscription of Ganapati, found in Motuppalli itself. Issued in 1245 C.E., the inscription is a royal charter of security (*abhayasasana*) to voyaging merchants

36. V. Rangacharya, *A Topographical List of the Inscriptions of the Madras Presidency, II* (Madras: Govt. Press, 1919), 724, no. 92.

37. See Karashima, *Ancient and Medieval Commercial Activities*, 236-37, for three inscriptions referring to both the names of the port.

38. Ranabir Chakravarti, "Rulers and Ports: Visakhapattanam and Motuppalli in Early Medieval Andhra," in *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans*, ed. K.S. Mathew (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 57-78.

39. For these two inscriptions see footnote no. 36.

(*samyatrikebhayah*) with the assurance that the obnoxious practice of looting ships near Motupalli by pirates would be stopped. Ganapati clearly recognized that to the voyaging merchants wealth was dearer than even life (*pranebhyo'pi gariyo dhanamiti*). He assured that at this port only legitimate fixed duties (*kliptasulka*), which are listed in the record, would be levied. This measure of Ganapati to assure merchants safety from piracy appears to have borne fruit. Marco Polo, in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, spoke highly of Mutfili, clearly corresponding to Motuppalli, for its far-flung commerce, excellent textiles, and high-quality diamonds. What is striking here is that, like the previous Arab authors who equated Kunkan with the Rashtrakuta territory, Marco Polo also named the Kakatiya territory after the premier port on the Andhra coast. To this celebrated Venetian traveler, Motupalli was the visible face of the Kakatiya realm, which was evidently a power of interior Andhra with its apex political center at Warangal.<sup>40</sup>

Going further northwards from the Andhra-Odisha segment of the eastern seaboard, one reaches the Ganga delta, on the eastern fringe of which area arose a major port during our period of review. From the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Arabic texts on travel and geography spoke of this major port in Bengal, Samandar—the name is possibly derived from the term *samudra*, or “sea.” Located close to the sea, at the mouth of a river in the eastern part of the Bengal delta, this port is usually identified with modern Chittagong in Bangladesh. The port was labeled as Bengala by Marco Polo, as Sudkawan by Ibn Battuta, and as Shatijam by Ahmad ibn Majid (the celebrated navigator of the 15<sup>th</sup> century). The commercial prosperity of this port looms large in the accounts of al-Idrisi (around the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century), who found that excellent aloe wood, yak tails, and rhinoceros horns, all forest products from Kamarun (Kamarupa or Assam), were shipped out from Samandar. This speaks of the extensive hinterland of Samandar. Ibn Battuta (first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century) took a riverine journey from this port up to Sylhet (in north-easternmost Bangladesh); he later reached Sunurkawan (Sonargaon near modern Dhaka), from where he boarded a junk (*junuk*) for his onward journey to China. Keeping in mind that the Moroccan traveler and *qadi* reached Sudkawan from Ma'abar on the Coromandel coast, there is little doubt that Samandar/Sudkawan strongly made its presence felt in the Bay of Bengal network. Ibn Battuta further noted the presence of merchants of disparate lands on an island close to Sudkawan; the island is likely to have corresponded to Sandwip Island near modern Chittagong.

40. See Ranabir Chakravarti, “The Pull towards the Coast: Politics and Polity in India (c. 600–1300),” Presidential Address (Ancient India section), Indian History Congress, 73<sup>rd</sup> session (Patiala), 2011, which discusses the Kakatiya interests in the Andhra coastal areas. Cynthia Talbot, *Pre-Colonial India in Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) offers an excellent study of the Kakatiya state. But Talbot prefers to ignore the clear epigraphic and textual data on the importance of coastal Andhra in the making of this formidable regional power of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The interaction between trade and statecraft takes a backseat in her overall analysis. The field-archaeological perspectives of coastal Andhra, especially ceramic and stone anchors, are available in K.P. Rao, “The Nature of Maritime Trade: The Evidence of from Coastal Andhra” in *Subversive Sovereigns across the Seas: Indian Ocean Port-of-Trade from Early Historic Times to Late Colonialism*, ed. Kenneth R. Hall, Rila Mukherjee and Suchandra Ghosh (Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2018), 53–66. Rao merely mentions the Motuppalle inscriptions without assessing the relevance of the epigraphic material vis-à-vis the archaeological data.

This port was also noted for its overseas linkage with the Maldives. The most eloquent testimonies to this are available in the accounts of Ma-huan (15<sup>th</sup> century) and the *Suma Oriental* (early 16<sup>th</sup> century). Both the sources highlight that Bengal's perennial currency was cowry shells, a marine resource and a non-metallic medium of exchange in wide circulation, but not locally available in Bengal. Cowry shells were imported to Bengal in shiploads from the Maldives, which received, as return cargo, the paddy from Bengal.<sup>41</sup>

## MARITIME MERCHANTS AND THEIR COMMODITIES

This section delves into seafaring merchants and the commodities they handled. These merchants, including the ship-owners, figure most prominently in the Geniza documents and Indic epigraphic records. We have elaborately dealt with the shipowning merchants—*nakhudas* in Arabic and Persian sources, and in the Geniza papers, and *nauvittakas* in Sanskrit sources, including inscriptions. The two terms were common enough to have been used as abbreviations in epigraphic records, viz *nakhu* (= *nakhuda*) and *nau* (= *nauvittaka*). The coining of these abbreviations underlines their regular currency in the coastal societies.

Contrary to the long-standing, but erroneous, idea that Indic populations were not oriented to seafaring in view of the taboos in orthodox Brahmanical normative texts on crossing the sea, epigraphic texts and Geniza documents acquaint us with ship-owning merchants of Indic origin.<sup>42</sup> A case in point is a Tamil inscription from Lobwe Tuwa near Barus in northern Sumatra. Dated to 1088 C.E., the inscription records and eulogizes the patronage and donations by a body of merchants (often expressed as a commercial guild in current historiography) to a goddess (possibly Durga) at a temple in Sumatra. On this occasion merchants, ship-owners (*marakkals*), ship-captains (*marakkala-nayans*), and sailors/oarsmen (*kevi*) were present at Varochu or Barus, which was famous for the best variety of camphor (*karpura*), an aromate indispensable for numerous temple rituals and medicinal practices in South Asia.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the demand for Barus camphor in Aden and across the Red Sea network is captured by the duty imposed on this plant product (*kafur*) at the port of Aden. The seafaring Jewish India traders also participated in the trade of this plant product and, at least on occasion, visited Barus. This is described in

41. B.N. Mukherjee, "Commerce and Money in the Central and Western Sectors of Eastern India (c. AD 750–1200)," *Indian Museum Bulletin* 16 (1982): 65–83; Susmita Basu Majumdar, "Monetary History of Bengal: 'Issues' and 'Non-Issues,'" in *The Complex Heritage of Early India, Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*, ed. D.N. Jha (New Delhi: Manohar, 2014), 585–606. The latest update on the maritime scenario in the Bengal coast is available in Ranabir Chakravarti, "Economic Life in Early Bengal: Agrarian and Non-Agrarian Pursuits", in *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives up to c. 1200 CE*, ed. A.M. Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018), 109–97, particularly 171–77.

42. Ranabir Chakravarti, "Nakhudas and Nauvittakas: Ship-owning Merchants in the West Coast of India (c. 1000–1500 CE)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 34 (2000): 34–64.

43. Y. Subbaryalu, "The Tamil Inscription at Lobwe Tua 1088" in Karashima, *Ancient and Medieval Commercial Activities*, 19–25. Excavations close to Barus by Claude Guillot also enlighten us on the site, including the production of camphor. Daniel Parret and Heddy Surachman, "South Asia and the Tapanuli Area (North-West Sumatra): Ninth-Fourteenth Century CE" in *Early Interactions between South and South-East Asia, Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, ed. Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade (Singapore: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, 2011), 161–176.



five Geniza letters ranging in date from the very end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century to 1199 C.E.<sup>44</sup> The Tamil inscription from Sumatra, significantly enough, clearly distinguishes the ship-owners from the ship-captains and the actual sailors/crew, all of whom took to the sea to reach the destination in Sumatra from the Coromandel in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The Tamil expression *marakkal nayan* (to denote ship-captains) would subsequently appear as Maraikkar in coastal Kerala as expert ship-captains who offered stiff resistance to the Portuguese practice of armed trade in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Malabar.<sup>45</sup>

The presence of Tamil merchants in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia is borne out by epigraphic records, several of which were bilingual: Tamil-Sinhala, Tamil-Javanese, and Tamil-Chinese. This is undoubtedly indicative of the importance of bilingualism and multilingualism among mercantile groups for commercial and cultural transactions, especially when they were far from their native societies. One may look, for instance, at the Tamil-Chinese bilingual record found from Quanzhou, dated 1281 C.E. The Tamil text of the inscription tells us that one Champanda Perumal (alias Tavach-chakkaravartikal), by permission of Chekachai Kan (Chinese emperor Kublai Khan?), installed an idol of Siva there to pray for the health of the authority.<sup>46</sup> What is further significant is that the inscription was found near an almost-contemporary shipwreck site (dated to 1277 C.E. and discovered in 2007) yielding, among other things, silver ingots.<sup>47</sup>

The recovery of commodities from shipwreck sites in maritime Southeast Asia deserves some discussions at this juncture. The earliest shipwreck site here is Belitung, dated to 826 C.E. based on Changsha ware. The ship probably started from Canton intending to sail to a port in West Asia. It is possible that the ship was to call at South Asian ports too. The most significant point is that it carried 60,000 ceramic pieces, consisting of mostly Changsha ware, but also porcelain and celadon wares. These were indeed bulk items transported long-distance across the Indo-Pacific rim. Coupled with the various wares meant largely for quotidian life were extremely precious commodities like cups and plates made of gold, the latter surely meant for elite consumption. But the bulk items, like the Changsha ware, far outnumbered the luxury commodities.<sup>48</sup>

Besides Belitung, there are two more shipwreck sites, both in Indonesia and both dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. on the basis of datable wares. The Intan ship was possibly 30m long and has been dated to c. 930 C.E. on the basis of its cargo. The marine archaeological excavations have yielded a mixed cargo of Chinese ceramics, metallic artifacts, 145 lead coins, and 97 silver ingots. This was possibly a Srivijayan vessel that was undertaking a

44. Ranabir Chakravarti, "The Aroma across the Sea: Camphor to India and Beyond India," in *Early India and Beyond: Essays in Honour of B.D. Chattopadhyaya*, ed. Osmund Bopearachchi and Suchandra Ghosh (New Delhi: Primus, 2019), 377–92.

45. Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2018.

46. Noboru Karashima, "South Indian Merchant Guilds in the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia," in Kulke et al., *From Nagapattinam to Suwarnadwipa*, 135–57; John Guy, "The Lost Temples of Nagapattinam and Quanzhou: A Study in Sino-Indian Relations," *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 3 (1993/1994): 291–310.

47. I am thankful to Professor Angela Schottenhammer for enlightening me on this point.

48. Michael Flecker, "A Ninth Century AD Arab or Indian Shipwreck in Indonesia: The First Evidence for Direct Trade with China," *World Archaeology* 32 (2001): 335–54.

return voyage to maritime Southeast Asia from China before it sank in the northern Java Sea. The combination of bulk items and precious commodities, once again, can hardly be missed. The most striking point is the transportation of silver ingots, each weighing approximately 1.85kg, to a Southeast Asian destination. Of the 97 silver ingots, 18 were inscribed with the stamp and statement of the office of the salt tax in southern China. Because salt was the largest source of imperial revenue at the end of the Tang dynasty, the taxes on salt—doubtless a bulk commodity—were converted to silver ingots, which were shipped as bullion to Southeast Asian destinations to procure luxury commodities.

The Cirebon shipwreck, also of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, reveals that along with 15,000 Chinese ceramic pieces (90% of which were various types of green-glazed Yue bowls and dishes—certainly bulk cargo), coins and 14 silver ingots were also transported.<sup>49</sup> Judging the importance of the 13<sup>th</sup> century shipwreck near Quanzhou from this perspective, the yield of silver ingots can hardly be overemphasized.<sup>50</sup>

The significance of the maritime transportation of bulk items, often in conjunction with precious commodities (though the latter in less quantity), is also driven home in a large number of Geniza documents which are replete with the shipping of bulk items from India to the Red Sea network. References to the shipping of plant products like areca nuts, lac, and varieties of iron from the Malabar ports are quite ubiquitous in the documents. The coveted black pepper of Malabar, too, was a plant product, but fetched enormous price and profit to its dealers. An illustrative example is available in a Jewish letter of 1138. Writing from Aden, the Jewish trader Khalaf b. Isaac informed Abraham b. Yiju, a very prominent Jewish India trader residing in Malabar, that a ship, which belonged to an Indic ship-owner Fatansamy, floundered close to Bab-el-Mandeb. The ship was carrying both black pepper and iron. While the latter could be salvaged by employing professional divers brought from the port of Aden, the consignment of pepper was completely lost.<sup>51</sup> This is another case of the simultaneous shipping of a relatively inexpensive commodity and a precious spice.

Without going into details of the ship-owners of this period, one may dwell on two more Indic ship-owners who figure in the Geniza records. They are Mansur Ali b. al-Fawfali and PDYR who figure in the Geniza documents as ship-owners (*nakhuda*). Both were active in the western Indian Ocean shipping business in the 1130s and 1140s, as the Geniza papers unravel. Ali b. Mansur al-Fawfali is also spelled as Fofali. Both figure in the correspondence of prominent 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish India traders like Abraham b. Yiju and Madmun b. Hasan-Japhet, the latter being the representative of Jewish merchants at Aden; none of them, however, wrote or received any letter, but they figured often in the

49. Janice Stargardt, "Indian Ocean Trade in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries: Demands, Distance and Profit," *South Asian Studies* 30 (2014): 35–55; Horst Hubertus Liebner, "The Siren of Cirebon: A Tenth Century Trading Vessel Lost in the Java Sea," Doctoral Thesis submitted to the University of Leeds (2014; electronic version accessed through <http://www.academia.edu>). The Cirebon shipwreck site has also yielded an impressive number of Buddhist artifacts like Buddhist images and miniature *stupas* as portable cargoes. These have stylistic affinities to similar artifacts manufactured and available in the eastern part of the subcontinent, including Bihar and Bangladesh. Suchandra Ghosh, "Buddhist Cultural Linkages between Bengal and Southeast Asia," in *History of Bangladesh: Early Benal in Regional Perspectives up to c. 1200 CE*, ed. Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018), 647–64.

50. Angela Schottenhammer, ed., *The Emporium of the World: Maritime Quanzhou 1000–1400* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

51. Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, 587–93.

correspondence of other Jewish merchants. Goitein and Friedman rightly suggested that Mansur Ali b. al-Fawfali was a betel nut merchant, without, however, discerning a distinct Indian philological element in his name. The term *fofali* or *fawfali*, denoting a betel-nut dealer, is actually derived from the Sanskrit word for the betel or areca nut, *pugaphala*. The Sanskrit term *pugaphala* became *phuaphala* in Prakrit, from where its Arabic form *fofal* or *fawfal* was then derived. The epithet Fawfali/Fofali, therefore, is likely to have had an Indic origin and, as a *nakhuda*, he was possibly a person of Indian origin, active in the western seaboard of India.

Betel/areca nuts were widely grown in India, including in coastal western India; this was an important cash crop or commercial crop, transacted as a bulk commodity. That betel nut plantations and transactions in betel nuts yielded revenue to coastal political authorities is clearly evident from inscriptions from Konkan during the period of 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. Ali b. Mansur al-Fawfali, however, always figures in the Geniza papers as a ship-owner. One may further infer logically that our Fawfali had either himself been originally a betel nut merchant or hailed from a family of betel nut dealers. His or his family's considerable success in the betel-nut business seems to have paved the way for his investing in shipping or owning ships. Here is, therefore, a case of a remarkable transformation of a betel nut dealer to a ship-owning *nakhuda* who, in the Indian Ocean maritime context, was a very rich merchant. The Geniza letters highlight al-Fawfali's close trading interactions with three important Jewish merchants: Madmun b. Hasan-Japhet in Aden, Abraham b. Yiju on the west coast of India (Mangalore and various other parts of the Malabar coast), and Joseph b. Abraham, another prominent Jewish India trader. A letter of 1134 C.E., from Madmun in Aden to Abraham b. Yiju in al-Manjarur (Mangalore), highlights the esteem in which Madmun held al-Fawfali, the ship-owning *nakhuda*, whose ship plied between the Malabar Coast and Aden. Exactly a year later, 1135 C.E., Madmun wrote to Abraham b. Yiju with diverse instructions regarding his business ventures in India. This has important bearing on the functions of al-Fawfali, the *nakhuda*. Abraham b. Yiju was requested to take delivery of letters meant for various merchants, including "*nakhuda* al-Fawfali." Abraham b. Yiju was to "take good care of all the letters" (implying to "take this matter seriously"). Madmun further specifically wrote:

I have empowered the *nakhuda* Ali al-Fawfali to sell the goods packed and all the items (actually their gears) and to take possession of the shallow dish kept by Budah. . . . And to take possession of the copper kettle . . . and to get the sandarac and all the items which are in the store-room; he is empowered to take possession of everything which belongs to me there. Please help him in this.<sup>52</sup>

The above quote, carrying fairly elaborate instructions to al-Fawfali through Abraham b. Yiju, demonstrates the close trading ties between this Indian *nakhuda* and a Jewish India trader at Aden, the latter passing his written instruction through another Jewish friend of his, Abraham b. Yiju. The most important point here is that al-Fawfali, in addition to

52. Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, 350–51.

being primarily a betel-nut dealer and a ship-owner, was also functioning as the local representative of Madmun in coastal India, more precisely at al-Manjarur.

The other Indic ship-owner in the Geniza documents is PDYR, closely similar to the Kanarese/Tulu word *padiyara*, which was probably derived from the Sanskrit *pratihara* (a door keeper, palace guard, chief of the palace guard). So PDYR/*padiyara* is not a personal name, but an administrative term.<sup>53</sup> The term *padiyara* figures quite frequently in inscriptions from Karnataka dating to the period from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. In one inscription, the *padiyara* belonged to a family of merchants, while in another inscription of 1170 the *padiyara* functioned as an army commander. There is a third record (1196 C.E.) which informs us that two brothers from the same family held the position of *padiyaras*. Thus, the *padiyara* stood for a high-ranking administrative and military official; in a coastal society, such a person could be considered a political elite. Viewed from this angle, it would not have been difficult for a *padiyara* to enter into the lucrative shipping business by means of his administrative clout and elite position. However, it is only in the Geniza papers that a *padiyara*/PDYR figured as a ship-owner. Here, the ship-owner was in regular contact with prominent Jewish India traders like Joseph b. Abraham, Khalak b. Isaac, and Madmun b. Salim, as letters dated in 1136-39, 1138, and 1146 demonstrate. He was wealthy enough to have appointed one Ahmed as the captain of his ship, according to the letter of 1138 C.E., which also noted the transportation of cardamom from Malabar to Aden in PDYR's ship.

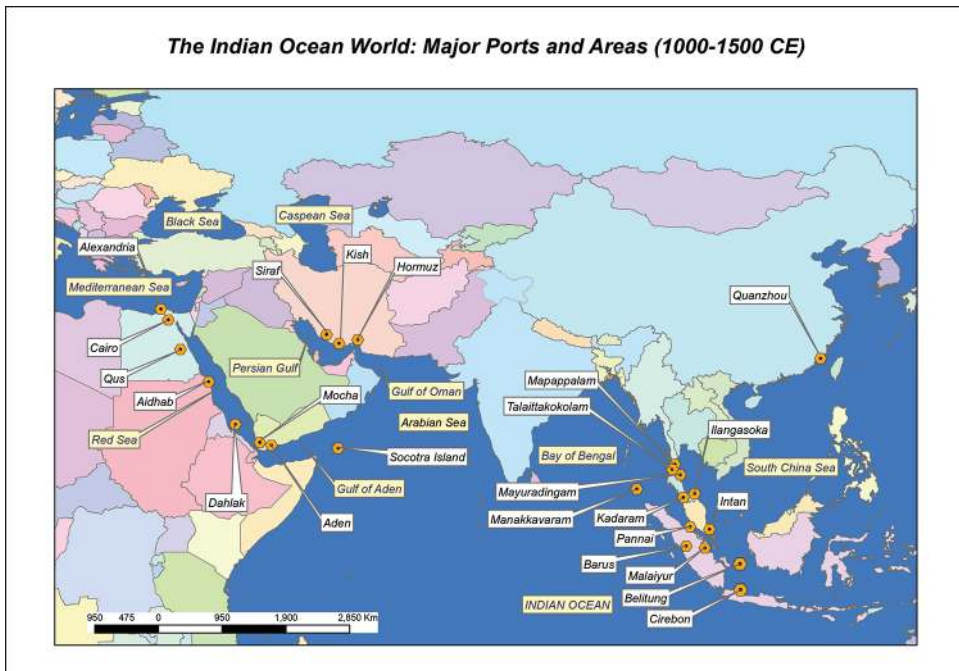
Our engagements with two Indic ship-owners demonstrate that one could enter into the Indian Ocean shipping business from diverse backgrounds. It also highlights the importance of agrarian/plant products—often as bulk commodities—in the maritime world of the Indian Ocean, thus giving us an alternative to the stereotype that the Indian Ocean network was synonymous with transactions in exotic, luxury goods.<sup>54</sup>

#### MARKERS OF COMPETITION, COLLABORATION, AND PLURALITY

We have so far tried to understand the subcontinent's orientation to its surrounding maritime space by focusing on its ports, commodities, and diverse types of merchants. These ports were the sites which linked the two seaboard with their respective hinterlands and forelands and which were witnesses to interactions among merchants, mariners, and passengers of disparate regions and communities. The two seaboard of the subcontinent were therefore areas of attraction for varieties of rulers, merchants, seafarers, and pirates. These ports, where immensely diverse communities mingled, experienced considerable

53. Like PDYR/Padiyara, the Fatanswami, who was a prominent Indic ship-owner, was an administrative officer in charge of a port (*pattanaswami* in Kanarese sources). Chakravarti, "Nakhudas and Nauvittakas."

54. Elaborate discussions on al-Fawfali and PDYR are available in Ranabir Chakravarti, "Two Men of Boats: Ali b. Mansur Fawfali and PDYR--- Gleanings from the Cairo Geniza" in *Entre mers - Outre-mer. Spaces, Modes and Agents of Indo-Mediterranean Connectivity*, ed. Nikolas Jaspert and Sebastian Kolditz (Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg, 2018), 159-178. The commercial world of the letters of the Jewish India traders wonderfully illustrates the practices of cultural plurality, especially in the use of loan words in the Judeo-Arabic language of these letters. See Elizabeth Lambourn, "Borrowed Words in an Ocean of Objects: Geniza Sources and New Cultural Histories of the Indian Ocean," in *Irrelevant Essays for M.G.S. Naryanan*, ed. Kesavan Veluthat and Donald R. Davis Jr. (New Delhi: Primus, 2014), 1-29.



MAP 2. The Indian Ocean World: Major Ports and Areas (1000–1500 CE). Map is prepared by Ms. Monalisa Rakshit.

complexities and also lively social and cultural practices. The present section illustrates a few cases related to these matters.

The port and port city have emerged as valid categories of historical analysis, as these offer a “unique lens to study the dynamics between the global and the local.”<sup>55</sup> Thus the port stands as a cosmopolitan site thriving on a networked space. The port certainly belongs to the non-agrarian sector of the economy; therefore, there is a lively interest among historians to find out the “citiness” (a term borrowed from B.D. Chattopadhyaya) of a port.<sup>56</sup> A port city by its very nature is often a conduit for international trade. Broeze and Pearson draw a distinction between a city with a port and a port city.<sup>57</sup> The former builds its piers out of necessity, while the latter develops around the piers that are the pre-eminent features of the former. The locational and strategic importance of a space does not depend merely upon geographical and ecological settings and advantages, but also on socio-economic, political, and cultural situations

55. Rila Mukherjee, “Thinking about Ports,” in *Vanguards of Globalization: Port Cities from the Classical to the Modern*, ed. Rila Mukherjee (New Delhi: Primus, 2014), 28.

56. B.D. Chattopadhyaya, “The City in Early India: Perspectives from the Texts,” in *Studying Early India*, B.D. Chattopadhyaya (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

57. Frank Broeze, ed. *Brides of the Sea. Port Cities of Asia from the 16th-20th Centuries* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1989); Michael Pearson, “Indian Ocean Port Cities: Themes and Problems,” in Mukherjee, *Vanguards of Globalization*, 63–77.

that bear the stamps of specific historical context(s).<sup>58</sup> This results in the present author's preference for the "maritime city" as an analytical category for studying maritime history.

The maritime city was proposed as a generic category by Ashin Das Gupta, especially in the context of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century subcontinent.<sup>59</sup> For Ashin Das Gupta, a maritime city need not have to be situated even in a coastal area; it could have occupied an inland locale, but with a lively fluvial network that rendered the vital linkages with the actual sea. The typical cases in point for him were Surat (on the Tapi/Tapti), Hooghly (on the Bhagirathi), and Masulipatnam (on the Krishna). Noted for their remarkable orientation to the sea, but located slightly inland in deltas or estuaries of their respective riverine moorings, these cities bore unmistakable maritime markers. Maritime cities, according to Das Gupta, were never static entities and were more open socially and culturally than other urban centers. A pre-modern maritime city in the subcontinent is likely to have been marked by the presence of a fishing village nearby. If the maritime city stood in proximity to the coast, then salt manufacturing and salt-trade would be another salient feature. Yet another distinctive marker of the maritime city was the presence of the customs house yielding tolls and customs (*sulka* in Sanskrit, *Sunkam* in Tamil/Telugu). All or some of these features of a maritime city may not be regularly visible in our sources. This is because harbor structures were not built around Indic ports prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the occasional shifting of the port sites was almost inevitable as a result of the silting of the navigable channel(s) in the estuaries or deltas with the ingress and egress of merchants, merchandise and various types of transports. If the 17<sup>th</sup>- or 18<sup>th</sup>-century maritime city was characterized by a ship-building yard, the construction of ships and sea-going crafts had already been undertaken in earlier maritime cities located in the vicinity of the fishing villages.

The premier political powers in the subcontinent during the five centuries of our study, which flourished in agrarian river valleys, seldom controlled the maritime trade, market places, and segments of the Indian Ocean. However, many of these powers were aware of and alive to the economic potential derived from maritime trade, which generated a further resource base for the state in addition to agrarian revenue. The classic illustrations of this tendency are furnished by a few powerful Chola rulers (c. 985-1150 C.E.). That the Cholas, with their stronghold in the valley and the delta of the river Kaveri, had a distinct orientation to the Indian Ocean—especially the Bay of Bengal—is amply demonstrated by the conquest and annexation of Sri Lanka (993-1070 C.E.) by sending war fleets to the island, eulogistically described in Chola inscriptions. The presence of Tamil mercantile organizations in Sri Lanka is further illustrated by epigraphic records of seafaring merchants. It is also true that the resistance to the

58. Hall, Mukherjee, and Ghosh (*Subversive Sovereigns*) very loosely employ the term port-of-trade as a label to describe any port of the pre-modern times. The expression port-of-trade was originally coined by Karl Polanyi to mean a particular exchange system before the advent of modern "market trade." For Karl Polanyi, "the port-of-trade was a global presence of the economic institution to which, for want of a better word we have given the name port-of-trade" (George Dalton, ed., *Ports of Trade in Early Societies*, in *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies, Essays of Karl Polanyi* [New York: Anchor Books, 1968], 238). The three editors never explained how and why the original connotation of Polanyi's expression port-of-trade would be changed to connote any port by using an expression "ports-of-trade." No theoretical discussion on this point occurs in this book except a casual remark: "For Polanyi the port-of-trade was a social as well as an economic necessity in pre-capitalist times, but the point to be noted here is that the term port-of-trade is now virtually synonymous with any kind of port and is used so here" (151-52).

59. Ashin Das Gupta, "The Maritime City," in Ashin Das Gupta, *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchants 1500-1800*, compiled by Uma Dasgupta and with Foreword by Sanjay Subrahmanyam (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Chola rule in the island gained visibility after 1050 C.E.; by 1070 C.E., the Chola authority over the island kingdom had become a thing of the past.

The Chola maritime expedition to Southeast Asia in 1025-26 has been much discussed. In spite of the Chola fleet subjugating as many as 12 areas—mostly coastal sites in mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, including the outstanding maritime entities of Srivijaya (Palembang, southern Sumatra) and Kadaram (Kedah in western Malay peninsula)—these areas were never annexed to the Chola realm. The principal target of this expedition was Srivijaya, which, like the Chola realm (Zhu-nian in Song chronicles), maintained regular commercial, diplomatic, and cultural exchanges with Song China. The Chola raids in maritime Southeast Asia resulted in the reduction of the numbers of Srivijaya embassies to the Song court. The Chinese chronicles also noted that three embassies from Zhu-nian (the Chola court) reached China in 1012, 1033, and 1070 C.E.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, Tansen Sen has pointed out that the Cholas, a devout Saiva dynasty, put prominent Muslim merchants in charge of these embassies.<sup>61</sup>

The complexity of the Bay of Bengal situation is also evident from the cultural practices at Nagapattanam, the premier Chola port in the Coromandel. Located in the Kaveri delta and not far away from the Chola capital Thanjavur, this maritime city emerged as the site of the construction of a Buddhist monastery at the request of the Kadaram-Srivijaya ruler; the Buddhist monastery was called Chudamani-vihara, named after Chudamanivarman, the father of the reigning Southeast Asian ruler. The Chola ruler Rajendrachola I (1012-44 C.E.) granted the necessary land at Nagapattanam for the Buddhist monastery, though it was endowed prior to the campaign of 1025-26. What is interesting is that the land grant to the same monastery was renewed by Kulottunga I (1070-1120 C.E.) in spite of the known instances of Kulottunga's sending expeditions to Southeast Asia (though less spectacular than the 1025-26 campaign). It was through this port that Chinese gold (*chinakkanakam*) and other gift objects from the Angkor court in mainland Southeast Asia reached the Chola court, obviously to strengthen diplomatic ties with this South Indian power. The competitive, yet negotiating, spirit is writ large in the Chola attitudes to the Bay of Bengal, with their emblematic maritime city of Nagapattanam.<sup>62</sup>

There are other instances of warlike engagements in the Konkan coast. Even before 1000 C.E., the Rashtrakuta rulers in the interior of the Deccan (c. 754-974 C.E., with their principal stronghold in Maharashtra and Karnataka) enjoyed political mastery over the Konkan coast. In the northernmost part of Konkan stood the port of Sanjan (Sindan of the Arab geographers and in the Geniza documents). Clearly described as a port (*velakula*), it had adjacent shrines of the goddess Durga and of Vishnu; the local administration was entrusted to one Muhammad, an Arab (*tajika*) Muslim whose name was Sanskritized as Madhumati/Mahumata. This Arab administrator was credited with defeating,

60. Noboru Karashima and Tansen Sen, "Chinese Texts Describing or Referring to the Chola Kingdom as Zhu-nian," in Kulke et al., *From Nagapattanam to Suwarnadwipa*, 292-315.

61. Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade*.

62. Hermann Kulke, "The Naval Expeditions of the Cholas in the Context of Asan History," in Kulke et al., *From Nagapattanam to Suwarnadwipa*, 1-19.

on behalf of the Rashtrakuta overlords, other political entities across all the ports (*velakulas*). Recent excavations at Sanjan have further revealed funerary structures of the Parsis. South of Sanjan stood the port of Chemuliya/Saimur (modern Chaul) where al-Masudi noted the presence of Friday mosques and many Omani, Sirafi, and Baghdadi Muslims, who must have reached the maritime city of Saimur from a few Persian Gulf ports. It is impossible to miss the obvious cultural plurality in these maritime cities, which were also coveted political assets, even for powers of the interior.<sup>63</sup>

In keeping with this rich tradition, a copper plate inscription of a Kerala ruler, dated to 1000 C.E., records a grant of a revenue-free plot of land to the Jewish trading community near Kochi (Cochin). The inscription noted the presence of the mercantile group *anjuvannam*, to which belonged Joseph Rabban, the leader of the Jewish trading group. Subbaryalu cogently argued that the term *anjuvannam* stood for the Muslim and Jewish merchants' organization. Certain privileges were also given to the Jewish trading group, suggesting their settlement in the Malabar coast with considerable support from the local society and polity.

Perhaps the most striking instance of cultural plurality in the context of a maritime city is from Somanatha in the Kathiawad peninsula of Gujarat. Somanatha's fame for simultaneously being a premier sacred center of the Saiva religion and a well-known port is remarkably captured in two inscriptions, respectively of 1264 and 1287 C.E. The combined testimony of the two lithic records leave little room for doubt that Somanatha was flourishing as a port and a sacred center in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This explodes the long-cherished myth that it was dealt a death-blow due to the Ghazanavid raid by Sultan Mahmud in 1025-26 C.E. Al-Beruni, the great scholar who accompanied Sultan Mahmud to India, not only spoke of Somanatha as a sacred center but was perhaps the first to have noticed its importance in the maritime network of the western Indian Ocean. He pointed out that the reason why in particular Somnath has become so famous is that it was the harbour for seafaring people, and a station for those who went to and fro between Sufala in the country of Zanz and China.<sup>64</sup> Al-Biruni's Zanz corresponds to Zanzibar and his account points to the possible maritime linkages of Somanatha with the east African coast. He also observed that piracy was rampant in the vicinity of the port.

The 1264 inscription records the munificence of a Muslim ship-owning merchant (*nakhuda*), Nuruddin Firuz (name Sanskritized as Noradina Piroja) for building a mosque at Somanatha with the help of his friends in the city. This inscription is bilingual, with a more elaborate Sanskrit text alongside the synoptic statement in Arabic. The obvious intention was that more people in mid-13<sup>th</sup>-century Somanatha would be familiar with Sanskrit, while the shorter Arabic version was meant for the numerically smaller

63. Chakravarti, "Monarchs, Merchants and a Matha;" significantly, the recent excavations at Sanjan have yielded Parsi funerary structures and ceramics from Sanjan. See Rukshana Nanji, *Mariners and Merchants: A Study of the Ceramics from Sanjan* (Oxford: BAR International Series, 2011); Suchandra Ghosh and Durbar Sharma, "The Port of Sanjan/Sindan in Early Medieval India: A Study of Its Cosmopolitan Views," in Hall et al., *Subversive Sovereigns*, 67-88.

64. The importance of Somanatha as a port figures in Jain, *Trade and Traders*. A more elaborate discussion on the maritime activities in an around Somanatha, with a particular thrust on the ship-owning merchant, Nuruddin Firuz, is available in Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders*, 220-42.



Arabic-speaking Muslim trading groups at Somanatha (named Sumnat in Arabic).<sup>65</sup> The maritime profile and cultural plurality at Somanatha is revealed in the 1264 record. Nakhuda Nuruddin came to Somanatha from Hurmuja or Hormuz, the premier port in the Persian Gulf. Situated at the opening of the Gulf in the Strait of Hormuz, the port enjoys a strategic importance and has the features of a choke point.<sup>66</sup> This record amply bears out that the ship-owning merchant from Hormuz visited Somanatha for some business purposes (*karyavasat*). As a pious Muslim, he constructed a mosque at Somanatha: this is the main purport of the record. His close ties with the local Indic population to purchase the plot of land and enable local administrative support are graphically described; he was particularly close to one local person named Chhada (Jada Rawat in the Arabic version). The Hurmuzi *nakhuda* and the local resident Chhada figure in the inscription as righteous/true friends (*dharmabandhava*).

Nuruddin had his mosque built in a merchants' settlement, called Sikottarimahajana-palli, located at the outskirts or fringe of the city of Somanatha. The name of the locality calls for a close study. The name Sikottari, following Ingo Strauch, alludes to the island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden. There is therefore a distinct possibility that Somanatha was visited by people from this island, in addition to its accessibility to Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. This considerably enhanced the maritime prominence of Somanatha in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Nuruddin left a clear instruction that whatever savings were made by the mosque, the amount was to be transferred to Mecca-Medina (Masha-Madina in Sanskrit). This is the earliest known categorical mention of the two foremost Islamic sacred centers in the Sanskrit language. In all likelihood, this transfer of resources could have been associated with the annual Hajj pilgrimage.

The Sanskrit inscription is remarkable for leaving specific instructions for the maintenance of Islamic preachers and the performance of certain religious festivals (*viseshapujamahotsava*) at the mosque. These religious ceremonies are explicitly stated to have been associated with the maritime merchants (*nakhudas/nauvittakas*) and the crew of the ship (*navika-karmakara*). The mundane arrangements for the procurement of the allotted plot received their due endorsement from the local town council, headed by a Saiva priest, and then came the requisite administrative approval from the local ruler and from the highest political authority, the Vaghela ruler of Gujarat. Neither the head of the town council nor the politico-administrative authorities followed Islam. That certainly did not stand in the way of a unique invocation of Allah in the form of four Sanskrit epithets: Allah was praised and saluted (*Om namastute*) as Universal (*Visvarupa*), the Lord of the World (*Visvanatha*), Formless/Aniconic (*Sunyarupa*), and as simultaneously being Invisible and Visible (*Lakshyalaksha*).

The lively image of Somanatha as a sacred Saiva center and also as a thriving business center figures prominently in the inscription of 1287. This record enlightens us to the dwelling areas, marketplaces (*mandapika*, resembling wholesale exchange centres), shops,

65. The purport of the Arabic version which is not identical with the Sanskrit text is translated in English by Z.A. Desai, *EI*, Arabic and Persian Supplement, 1961–62; it is also available in Ray, Chatopadhyaya, Mani, and Chakravarti, *A Sourcebook of Indian Civilization*, 599.

66. This is highlighted by Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 119–20.

and several Brahmanical temples. At these marketplaces staple agricultural products like paddy, pulses, coconuts, and betel nuts were bought and sold. The coconut and betel nut were plant products typically associated with the coast. These two products were also indispensable to temple rituals. Moreover, there are references to exotic items like incense, sandalwood, and soft textiles among the commodities. The central figure in this record is a Saiva priest, Tripurantaka. He had actually figured as a priest (*purohita*) in the 1264 C.E. record, but only as an incidental reference. Almost a quarter of a century later, the same Tripurantaka certainly emerged as a pre-eminent religious figure with an established pedigree, as a builder of temples and, interestingly, as a propertied person having shops at his disposal. Religious and business pursuits coexisted at Somanatha, accommodating diverse peoples of non-local origin alongside the local residents. As a maritime city, Somanatha was open in nature, cosmopolitan, and adaptive of non-local cultural traits even when Somanatha remained an emblem of a Saiva sacred center.<sup>67</sup> The sea breeze wafting into Somanatha mingled with and settled into the diverse fragrances of sandalwood, camphor, and incense—which all reached Somanatha from different shores across the seas.<sup>68</sup>

## CONFLICTS

The preceding discussions on a few maritime cities on the seaboard of India are not, however, to give the impression of merely peaceful and open transactions in the Indian Ocean. We have already indicated that there were powers in the subcontinent that were keen on controlling the coast. For example, the Silahara rulers of south Konkan regularly described themselves as the lord of the western ocean (the Arabian Sea). This perhaps has some linkage with the honorific title of the ruler of Calicut at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Samutiri raja/Zamorin, meaning the “lord of the sea.”

From Goa in coastal western India a few hero-stones showing warlike activities of fleets have come. Stylistically dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the first scene depicts a man adjacent to a large ship, being pierced by a lance-like weapon. The second sculpture, broken and damaged, portrays the scene of a sea-battle: on board the ship stand a number of persons; among them, the one with a parasol above his head may have been person of high rank; he is seen as shooting an arrow toward an enemy. The third image depicts several smaller, crescent-shaped open boats on which figures of standing soldiers with weapons are visible. Such smaller boats could have moved more swiftly and been more maneuverable in close combat on water than the larger vessels seen in the two previous specimens. It is difficult to ascertain the exact occasion of the engagement of these war fleets, but it may have captured

67. This will be evident from the description of both Nuruddin Firuz and a local elite of Somanatha, named Chhada, as righteous friends (*dharmabandhava*). The bonding of friendship between the two did not require relinquishing their respective faiths; the bonding of friendship was no less strong than their religious affiliations.

68. The vibrant cultural life, marked by socio-cultural plurality, at the maritime city of Somanatha is portrayed by both the records of 1264 and 1287 C.E. It is therefore difficult to join Margariti in doubting the accommodation of plural practices; Margariti looked only at the contents of the 1264 record. Roxani Elleni Margariti, “Mercantile Networks, Port Cities and ‘Pirate’ States: Conflicts and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51 (2008): 543–77. Ranabir Chakravarti, “Looking for a Maritime City: Somanatha in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *History, Historians and Historiography*, Ranabir Chakravarti, Harbans Mukhia, and Rajat Kanta Ray (Kolkata: Bangiya Itihas Parishad, 2018).

a sea-battle between two neighboring coastal polities: the Silharas of South Konkan and the Kadambas of Goa.<sup>69</sup>

In the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn Battuta reported that the ruler of Fakanur (modern Barkur) on the west coast possessed thirty warships that were used for plundering merchants' ships on the sea. It is not impossible that the local ruler of a coastal society acted in collusion with pirates of Malabar. Marco Polo was aware of rampant piracy around the port of Tana (Thana, near Mumbai), the local ruler of which entered into an understanding with the pirates that their plundering would be allowed provided the ruler received looted horses from the pirates. Completely different from this attitude was that of the ruler Ganapati (1199-1261), a formidable king of the eastern Deccan. In 1245, he issued a landmark charter of security to ensure voyaging merchants' safety around the port of Motupalle, near modern Masulipatnam on the eastern seaboard. Not only was the rampant piracy curbed by this monarch, he also prescribed and stipulated the tax rates which merchants and ships were required to pay at the port of Motupalle. This is a unique port document by a ruler from the interior of the Deccan thwarting piracy to promote the interests of seafaring merchants.

Prange has argued that piracy was embedded in the history of the Indian Ocean; the pirates, by taking advantage of the open sea, considered it to be their hereditary occupation to plunder ships. It depended on the policy and political attitude of the monarchical power in the interior or on the coast whether to curb piracy or to collude with the piracy in an overt or covert manner for self-interest.<sup>70</sup>

Margariti has also analyzed Islamic texts on travel and geography, coupled with two Geniza letters of 1135 C.E. that the Sultan of Kish/Qays, an island in the Persian Gulf, harbored aggressive designs against Aden, the premier port at the mouth of the Red Sea. Qays/Kish, a small island on the southern sector of the Persian Gulf, gained prominence in the western Indian Ocean—especially for its commercial linkages with the west coast of India—after the fading out of Siraf in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century and before the emergence of Hormuz. A number of geographical treatises and travel literature portray the rapacious nature of its sultan, as Margariti demonstrates. Two Geniza letters of 1135 left an eyewitness account of a naval raid on Aden by the ruler of Kish with a strength of 700 soldiers and a number of ships. Though the Kish fleet imposed a temporary blockade around Aden, the blockade was ineffectual. Two merchant ships of Ramisht of Siraf broke through the cordon; these two ships brought Adani troops to drive away the Kish ships, which did not have any galley-like war-vessels. The disruptive intent on the part of the Kish ruler is quite palpable, according to Margariti, but the preparation, planning, resources, and execution of the raid were a mismatch vis-à-vis the intent. The matter speaks of a fricative scenario, but may not be considered a typical instance of a

69. Jean Deloche, "Iconographic Evidence of Ship-building and Navigation," in *Tradition and Archaeology*, eds. Himanshu Prabha Ray and J-F Salles (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996).

70. Prange, *Monsoon Islam*, 199–200; he however draws more on the instances of post-1500 CE. Sebastian R. Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonor: Piracy, Commerce and Community in the Western Indian Ocean: Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries," *American Historical Review* 116 (2011): 1269–1293; Sebastian R. Prange, "The Contested Sea: Regimes of Maritime Violence in the Pre-modern Indian Ocean," *Journal of Early Modern History* 17 (2013): 9–23.

conflict-prone western Indian ocean. In the designs of the Kish ruler and the attitude of the Sultan of Dahlak near Aden, Margariti finds the instances of “pirate states” which require us to revisit and revise the long-drawn historiographical construction of an overall peaceful maritime system, without significant intervention by political powers, in the pre-1500 Indian Ocean.<sup>71</sup>

The trends in maritime violence prior to 1500 C.E., powerfully argued for by Margariti and Prange, still need substantial documentation beyond the occasional evidence of “pirate states” and of numerically impressive cases of political violence and inimical situations. Qualitatively different from the empirical wherewithal of Margariti and Prange is the evidence of a 14<sup>th</sup> century Latin Crusade tract, *How to Defeat the Saracens* (*Tractatus quomodo Sarraceni sunt expugnandi*), by the Domenican bishop William of Adam (Guillelmus Ade),. A widely-traveled person, the bishop was familiar with Persia and parts of India and claimed to have voyaged across the Indian Ocean.<sup>72</sup> His main purpose for writing the tract was to suggest to the Pope various strategies to defeat the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt in order to recover the Holy Land after the fall of Acre in 1291 C.E. One of his striking suggestions was to impoverish Egypt economically, and then to strike a weakened Egypt militarily. He categorically stated that Egypt’s prosperity was due to its flourishing commerce with India through the Indian Ocean. All the commercial commodities, which were coveted in Italy, were transported across the Indian Ocean to Egypt and then distributed across the Mediterranean to Genoa, Venice, and Florence. For him, India was the land of all evils.

He proposed cutting off the head of this commercial network by putting up a naval blockade at Socotra, employing only four galleys from Hormuz. He categorically stated that there was little warlike orientation to and engagements in the maritime arena of the Indian Ocean, so merely four galleys would be sufficient to ensure the naval blockade at Socotra. He suggested that as the supply of commodities through the Red Sea dried up, Egypt’s economy would be ruined and the sea trade could be diverted through Hormus and the Persian Gulf. The author also spoke of the immense importance of four ports/coastal areas on the western seaboard of India, specifically due to their commercial ties with Aden, which was proposed to be cut off by the naval blockade. These Indian ports are Collam (Quilon), Tana (Thana), Cambayat (Cambay), and Dive Insulide (possibly Diu). The tract, marked by the author’s remarkable accuracy of the western Indian Ocean and premier Indian ports, pleaded for papal approval and the financing of his naval blockade project. His proposition was not known to have been put into practice, but the political attitude to maritime commerce here emanates from the perception and claim of sovereignty over a given maritime space. This political notion is essentially rooted in Mediterranean political culture and practices; it is seldom seen, even conceptually, in the pre-1500 Indian Ocean scenario. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century manual of Ahmed ibn Majid, the thrust was on safe and convenient sailing in the Indian Ocean; the text has little to say about the use of

71. The account of the expedition by Kish to Aden is available in two letters: Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, 445–46; Margariti, “Mercantile Networks, Port Cities and ‘Pirate’ States.”

72. Giles Constable, trans., *How to Defeat the Saracens*. The Bishop’s idea for the blockade of the Gulf of Aden is available in section V of the text, 97–117.

fleet and naval power for warlike engagements in the sea, especially by the intervention of any kind of state system. There is little surprise that this manual does not discuss the maintenance of combatants on board for offensive and defensive operations in the sea, though the text enlists various crew on board the sailing crafts in the Indian Ocean.<sup>73</sup>

The bishop's blueprint for a naval blockade around Socotra was translated into a reality only in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Afonso de Albuquerque put a naval blockade there. Even then, the premier goal of the Portuguese to capture and control Aden remained an elusive milestone. It will, therefore, be difficult to construct the image of Asian thalassocracies, as Prange wishes to do, with a view to revising and rejecting the perception of a generally pacific contentment in the Indian Ocean prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. What the current essay presents are vibrant thalassographies of the Indian Ocean during the first half of the second millennium. In the near absence of thalassocracies (at the most, only a handful of instances) in the Indian Ocean world during this period, there is little to expect in the form of thalassology. That began to be produced only in the post-16<sup>th</sup> century scenario, marked by armed trade and political claims over maritime spaces, introduced and practiced by the state machinery and joint stock companies from the north Atlantic. ■

73. Ranabir Chakravarti, "The Indian Ocean Scenario in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Latin Crusade Tract: Possibilities of a World Historical Approach," *Asian Review of World History* 3 (2015): 37–58.

