

Africa and the Indian Ocean

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The papers presented in this special issue of the *African Archaeological Review* all explore interactions between particular African regions and the Indian Ocean from prehistory to the present. The scholarly interest in this theme is manifested in numerous conferences and seminars that have taken place over the last 20 years. These seven articles present different kinds of empirical material and analytical approaches. Exploration of our empirical theme had to confront a particular bias that seems inherent in our discipline: namely the way area-study specialization tends to narrow our search for wider culture-historical influences. Africanists become inclined to search for African connections while Indologists focus on Indian connections. This may even lead to different conceptual orientations that may serve to limit scholarly exchanges between archaeologists working in Africa and in Asia. This becomes particularly problematic with the development of scholarship focusing on various classical traditions characterizing the complex societies of Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent.

The first paper, by Nicole Boivin, Alison Crowther, Mary Prendergast and Dorian Q. Fuller, “Indian Ocean Food Globalisation and Africa,” covers a long timespan, from 4,000 years ago to the recent period. The authors explore the patterns of food globalization *vis-à-vis* Africa, focusing especially on the arrival of new food crops and domesticated animals in Africa and also touching on flows from Africa to the broader Indian Ocean world. They use archaeological, archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological materials, as well as historical and ethnographic sources. Drawing on data from the interdisciplinary Sealinks Project, they explore how seafaring activities in the Indian Ocean changed over time and how this had impact on dispersals of plants, animals, material objects, people and ideas. More than 4,000 years of seafaring between the Indus and Mesopotamian civilizations was well established. In the first centuries BCE, Indians had discovered that they could sail across the Indian Ocean by using the seasonal changes of the monsoon. According to the account of the *Periplus* from the first century CE, this stimulated increased open-sea seafaring between India and the Red Sea.

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Next, Himanshu Prabha Ray's "The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia" describes how institutional mechanisms facilitated trade from the Indian side on the basis of Indian sources. These institutional mechanisms show the close interconnection between movements of goods, political power and religious establishments (particularly Buddhism). The Indian Ocean maritime trade was based on such institutional mechanisms and involved not only movement of material goods but also the spread of symbolic forms relating to religion. From the ports of western India, a variety of goods—particularly pepper and textiles—were exported across the Indian Ocean. Such goods are highly perishable and therefore not likely to be found in the areas of their destination. In the present article, Ray argues that this trade may be linked to Red Sea and eastern African Swahili trade. Maritime intercontinental contacts involved diverse people who traversed the sea-lanes as sailing crew, merchants and religious clergy and who led to the establishment of immigrant diasporas of South Asian settlers in African trading posts, Berenike being of special significance (see below). The history of these communities is evident from archaeological data and inscriptions recording donations they made to religious establishments.

Steven H. Sidebotham presents material from the famous Red Sea site of Berenike that supports Ray's argument of trade between India and the Red Sea. The site is unique in terms of its very well-preserved organic material, which shows the presence of diverse materials ranging from elite goods to those used in everyday life. Most importantly for our theme, in the Serapis temple there, a large cache of black pepper was recovered in an Indian-made pottery jar. However, Sidebotham does not see manifestations of Indian symbolic influences in the archaeological inventory from the site. Most of the deities honoured at the port throughout its 800-year history were similar to those venerated elsewhere in the wider Mediterranean world and in Egypt at that time, *i.e.*, Greek and Roman divinities, Egyptian gods and Greek-Hellenistic-Egyptian hybrids. There is also evidence for honouring a god from the Syrian Desert caravan city of Palmyra, as well as evidence of Christianity. However, the presence of ceramic objects of Indian origin shows cross-ocean connections and may be related to the settling of people from South Asia at Berenike.

Eivind H. Seland takes up a theme from Ray in the fourth paper, namely the religious dimension of intercontinental trade. He argues that the spread of Christianity around the Indian Ocean rim took place within the commercial relations spanning the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Adulis was the main port of the Axumite kingdom and had been involved in Red Sea exchange since the first century CE. African ivory was of higher quality than Indian ivory and was in high demand in India. From the *Periplus*, it is known that ivory was exported to India. Movements in Africa of material goods, as in India, were facilitated by institutional mechanisms that involved political power relations as well as religious establishments. It was in this politico-economic context that Christianity spread to the Red Sea coast, Horn of Africa, Yemen and India. Trade facilitated the spread of Christianity not so much because of activities of missionaries and church officials, but because Christian merchants were connected in social networks that met needs for social security and solidarity in their risky operations.

In the fifth paper, Randi Haaland explores Indian influences on the civilization of Meroe, the Kushite state that ruled the Middle Nile region between 400 BCE and CE 400. Politically, economically and symbolically, Egyptian impact dominated in this region. It is thus understandable that culture-historical developments have been seen

from an Egypt-centric perspective. No doubt the growth of Meroitic kingdoms was heavily influenced by Egypt. However, there are some puzzling facts which indicate that Indian trade may also have played an important role. Like in Axum, Meroe had access to a rich supply of ivory that was also exported from Adulis. Some of the most important indications of Indian connections are found in symbolic representations of decorated elephants with trainers (*mahouts*) similar to those found in India, and iconography showing gods with attributes resembling iconographic representations in India. This supports Ray's argument that maritime activities took place in the context of religious beliefs and that rituals related to Hinduism and Buddhism may have served Indian Ocean trade. Furthermore, it indicates the Meroitic rulers also tried to legitimate their rule by drawing on Indian symbolism. This may have stimulated settlements of Indian craftsmen at Meroe.

In the sixth paper, Roger Blench discusses Indian Ocean connections by focusing on the distribution of particular objects, namely the musical instruments zither and xylophone. These types of instruments are found both in Africa and Southeast Asia. Blench argues that regional variations in the forms of these instrument types are caused by diffusion, not by independent innovation. However, he argues that it does not make sense to try to understand the diffusion of the instruments by seeing them in isolation from the larger cultural traditions of which they were part. Musical instruments, embedded in musical traditions, are intimately connected to deeper human concerns acted out in singing and dancing on festive, ritual and political occasions. Blench emphasizes the need to look at the role of slavery in the dispersal of musical culture, food and myth, as we have seen in research in the Atlantic slave trade. Blench uses a wide range of data—archaeology, iconography and ethnography—in discussing patterns of cultural exchange, ranging geographically from Southeast Asia to West Africa.

In this last paper in the special issue, Shadreck Chirikure discusses connections between southern Africa and the Indian Ocean from CE 700 to 1700. The paper looks at the impact of Indian Ocean connections on southern Zambezia and coastal eastern Africa. Goods imported through Indian Ocean connections, *e.g.*, ceramics and beads, were highly sought after as prestige items along the coast. However, there is a marked difference in the way these goods diffused to the hinterland. While beads circulated widely, probably in exchange networks, the distribution of imported ceramics is confined to the coast. Although important practical problems involved in overland transport of ceramics must be recognized, Chirikure draws attention to aspects of social organization that may have served to reduce inland communities' interest in imported ceramics. A main factor, he argues, was that in hinterland communities, pottery carried great symbolic significance in daily life as well as on ritual occasions. Chirikure draws attention to the importance of variations in local institutional mechanisms affecting the differential geographic spread of particular goods from ports of import, to wider hinterland communities.

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