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1

Beyond Indo-Roman Trade

THE PERIYAR, the Cullī of ancient Tamiḷakam, winds its way down from sources in the Cardamom Hills of southwestern India, watering a lush plain until it reaches the Arabian Sea.¹ This “big” river, as its modern Dravidian name “Periyar” evokes, carves up the region alongside other rivulets, which help to form the network of backwaters so characteristic to the tip of the subcontinent.² The waterways of the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, engorged by the perennial monsoon, have contributed to a series of noteworthy adaptations. Mangroves thrive in numerous estuaries, their elongated roots restricting movement together with sandy shoals.³ Sheltered fluvial passages, like so many along the Indian Ocean littoral, were linked to terrestrial routes inland and proved enticing stopovers for *caboteurs*.⁴ Humans have navigated them for millennia, traditionally by dugout canoe and more recently with motorized propulsion;⁵ they have also suffered the repeated devastation of floods, for instance, at the tail end of the 2018 monsoon.⁶

At the mouth of this great river of Kerala, where sediment and sea form brackish lagoons, one iteration of trade captured the imagination of writers throughout the ancient world: the exchange of gold coins for black peppercorns (*Piper nigrum* Linnaeus). This transaction serves as a proxy for a much larger series of overland and maritime links between the Mediterranean world and the Indian subcontinent, which scholars have placed under a singular label: “Indo-Roman trade.” The maritime activities of the western Indian Ocean were sustained by sailors from across Afro-Asia (including the eastern Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, south Arabia, East Africa, and South Asia), all of whom were guided by monsoon winds across the sea—the same winds that bring dependable downpour and occasional deluge to the subcontinent (see map 1.1). The Periyar rushes toward this wider oceanic world long in the making, from the movement of plant species in prehistory to the material transfers of the Bronze and early Iron ages, the networks of the Cairo Geniza, and the planetwide shipping routes of the present.⁷

We can tell the same story of the exchange of gold for pepper from multiple perspectives. The most approachable description comes from the *Periplus tēs*



MAP 1.1. Map of the Indian Ocean World, Early Centuries CE

Erythrās Thalassēs (Latinized as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* and translated in this work as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*), a gazetteer of Indian Ocean commodities composed just after the middle of the first century CE.⁸ Wielding a colloquial form of Greek, its unknown author, likely a resident of Egypt given his calendrical preferences, reveals knowledge of the emporia of the Indian Ocean littoral, from the Egyptian ports of the Red Sea to those leading up to Cape Comorin and, with a larger degree of speculation, those along India's eastern seaboard as far north as Bengal.

As is the case throughout the *Periplus*, the author presents commodities in uninspired prose, beginning with typical items brought by traders followed by those they could purchase: at the Malabar port of Muziris, foreign money is recommended “most of all” (G. *proēgoumenōs chrēmata pleista*); the main exports are pepper and malabathrum, the former of which was cultivated in the foothills of the Western Ghats no more than 50 km inland (within the ancient subregion Kottanariki/Cottonara of Greco-Roman geographies).⁹ The author notes that ships from the Mediterranean (and perhaps even northern India) carry full cargoes on account of the sheer volume of these spices available for purchase.¹⁰ This text and its lists of commodities present a robust trade, one that moves people, capital, and goods across vast distances—as well as the firsthand nautical experience of its author, or so scholars allege. An English edition of the *Periplus* by Lionel Casson, together with its commentary maintaining a similar position, has brought this text into the comfortable reach of a wider readership, and thus its words have become all the more persuasive.¹¹

At roughly the same time as our anonymous Greco-Egyptian, a citizen passes judgment on the far-off exchange from the comfort of Rome, the largest urban center of the ancient Mediterranean world. C. Plinius Secundus, known more commonly as Pliny the Elder, wrote extensively over his long career in the mid-first century CE, but only the thirty-seven books of his *Historia Naturalis*, or *Natural History*, survive in full.¹² Writing in his usual abrupt style, the author refers to Indian Ocean commerce throughout this work, particularly in his sections on eastern geography (book 6), exotic flora (book 12), and perfumes (book 13). Pliny participates within a developed literary genre of encyclopedism, as a compiler of disparate factoids from the far corners of ancient academia. With an arsenal of knowledge at his disposal, he moralizes, stacking the habits of his contemporaries against the ideals of a constructed Roman past.

A constant refrain in these descriptions laments the loss of Roman capital, in the form of gold and silver coins, to products from the “East” and the corruption of the Roman moral compass. Arguably the most cited lines by Pliny on the topic include his estimation of a Roman trade deficit with the Orient, amounting to

100 million sesterces (HS) per annum, with India receiving exactly half.¹³ Pliny notes that profiteering brought Indian products to the Roman world at the expense of its consumers, as products were sold to them at a hundred times their wholesale price in India.¹⁴ Herein lies a crisis of valuation, as Pliny cannot fathom why aromatic imports, given their inherent qualities—pepper’s pungency, for instance—could be so popular, purchased by weight as if gold or silver.¹⁵ Practicalities give way to punditry, a symbolic equation of spice and treasure at the heart of imperial anxieties; it mirrors the ultimate etymology of the English “spice” (and “specie”) from the Latin *species*, a precious “ware.” Scholars of the ancient world, so hungry for usable data, have typically granted the author’s claims credibility rather than questioning their veracity.

Pliny’s numbers have been qualified by the single most important documentary source for the trade, which entered the discussion about forty years ago. Since the initial publication of P.Vindob. G. 40822, the second-century document known as the *Muziris Papyrus* has fostered a number of conversations regarding the size and nature of Indo-Roman trade.¹⁶ Work has now turned to reconstructing its lacunae, most recently by Federico De Romanis in his comprehensive edition.¹⁷ The texts on either side of the papyrus, recording part of an agreement involving the transportation of goods from Malabari Muziris to Egyptian Alexandria and a consignment list with valuations in *drachmai* and tax calculations, have been scrutinized to determine the location of their composition, the quantity and type of the goods conveyed on the ancient Indiaman (called the *Hermapollon*), and the estimated price tag in the millions of sesterces. They reveal not just the sheer volume of light-weight, high-value commodities crossing the ocean but also the wealth to be had for investors, merchants, and the various polities that took sizable bites out of cargoes through taxes in cash or kind.¹⁸

Our most detailed Tamil sources are the Caṅkam (or “Sangam”) anthologies, which contain poems of varying meters and lengths composed between 300 BCE and 300 CE; these were later edited and compiled starting at the beginning of the second millennium CE.¹⁹ Works of classical Tamil literature, from the poems of the Caṅkam age to the fifth-century “Epic of the Anklet,” the *Cilappatikāram*, paint a vivid picture of commerce under the political hegemony of various Tamil-speaking chiefdoms that divided the south of the subcontinent, ancient Tamiḷakam. Cities of the Tamil south teem with pepper from the hill country and merchants of all nations, “whose houses know no lack of profit”;²⁰ customs officials patrol the ports, ensuring the exaction of tolls for their overlords.²¹ Among these descriptions is our iconic moment, wherein foreigners trade gold for pepper at the Cēra port of Muciṛi (known to the authors of the *Periplus* and *Muziris Papyrus* as Mouziris and to Latin geographers as Muziris). In five lines from the

Akanānūru anthology, repeatedly cited by scholars, the poet Tāyankaṇṇaṇār masterfully captures the dynamism of exchange:

...cēralar
cuḷḷiyam pēriyārru veṇṇurai kalaṅka
yavaṇar tanta viṇaimāṇaṅkalam
poṇṇoṭu vantu kariyoṭu peyarum
vaḷaṅkeḷu muciri yārppela vaḷai

... in the flourishing town of Muciri, where the large beautiful ships built by the *yavanas* came with gold, disturbing the white foams of the fair big river called Cuḷḷi of the Cēras, (and) returned with pepper.²²

The poet calls those bringing gold *yavana*, a Sanskrit formation from the Prakrit *yona*, which likely stemmed in turn from the Old Persian *yauna* used for “Ionian.”²³ The Indic variants of this word originally applied to Hellenistic Greeks in central Asia; they eventually encompass sea-faring foreigners who arrive in India or are encountered on the high seas.²⁴ These “Greeks” bear other gifts, such as wine, in which the Tamils inherently trust, but gold appears most often and participates in a larger pattern of exchange that reaffirms the Tamil social order.²⁵ Scholars have speculated about the role of these *yavanas* in commerce, pointing to their self-identifying epigraphy at Buddhist sites in the western Deccan and their potential role as “brokers” between incoming vessels and local markets.²⁶ Since the poems of the Tamil anthologies come down to us after centuries of percolation, we should be mindful of a wider cast of characters under the label *yavana* beyond those boasting a “Greek” cultural or ethnic identity, such as Muslim Arabs; in fact, a translation of “westerner” seems more appropriate in the *longue durée*.²⁷ What is clear is that foreign merchants throughout the centuries sought black pepper above all in Malabar, giving rise to the spice’s Sanskrit epithet *yavanapriya*, or “dear to *yavanas*.” All the while, the Periyar churns from human activity—an environment transformed by commerce.

The textual attestations, combined with more recent discoveries, inspired a hunt for the site of Muciri/Muziris; the resulting archaeological evidence provides yet another iteration of the Periyar exchange.²⁸ While scholars long associated the ancient port with the town of Kodungallur (formerly Cranganore, in Thrissur District, Kerala), more recent archaeological missions have sought to identify Pattanam (Eranakulam District), a site about 10 km farther south, as Muziris. After a preliminary survey in the early 2000s, the Kerala Council for Historical Research coordinated excavations initially under the leadership of P. J. Cherian, which lasted from 2007 until 2015. A small number of the finds were first put on display in a 2014 exhibition at the National Museum in Delhi and are now

in a local site museum near Pattanam under the auspices of the Muziris Heritage Project.

The most impressive of the finds from these excavations was a six-meter-long canoe, matching those described in Greco-Roman and Tamil sources, the ancestor of watercraft that still ply the backwaters today.²⁹ While very rich in Indian, Mesopotamian, and Roman ceramics, glass and stone beads, cameo blanks, and a few Tamil coins—all with their own significance for the larger discussion of Indian Ocean commerce in antiquity—the site lacks two key components so emphasized in textual sources: Roman gold coins (of which no specimen has been found) and Malabar black pepper (of which only limited waterlogged quantities may have been excavated in the “wharf”).³⁰ One might expect the celebrated pepper port of Muziris to possess large warehouses for various incoming and outgoing cargoes, or perhaps a large number of peppercorn specimens, lost from massive piles waiting to be distributed or spilt from sacks in the hustle and bustle.³¹ Despite some claims to the contrary, neither finds have been verified thus far.

This new evidence is far from conclusive. The archaeological attestations of Roman coins in India and ancient black pepper globally (or lack thereof) must be viewed with several considerations in mind: as we shall see, the distribution of hoards suggests that coins most likely moved inland to participate in economic structures of the Tamil chiefdoms; individual gold coins, so high in value, tend not to be lost by their attentive owners, who either keep them stored or melt them down for repurposing; and organic remains are always susceptible to the ravages of time and environment, especially in the tropics. We also do not possess an unfettered view of the evidence. The archaeological mission at Pattanam has faced bureaucratic difficulties that have shuttered excavations and complicated its equation with Muziris.³² The resulting trajectory is emblematic of archaeology in India and elsewhere, the most urgent consequences of which are the politicization of finds and a lack of systematic publication.³³

What Is “Indo-Roman” Trade?

The larger story of this exchange lies at the confluence of these narratives, these diverse streams situated throughout the ancient world, each with its own series of caveats and limitations that demand careful consideration. Historically, however, academic treatments have not always addressed the evidence on its own terms.³⁴ This can be said in particular of early British scholarship on the topic of Indo-Roman trade, which starts in earnest at the turn of the twentieth century. Works by scholars such as Eric Warmington and Martin Charlesworth concluded that Rome ruled the waves in antiquity and established trading posts throughout a passive, economically primitive subcontinent to secure luxuries for imperial consumers, a facsimile of empire articulated just as Britain’s was waning.³⁵

The postcolonial reaction in Indian scholarship swung the pendulum toward nationalist interpretations.³⁶ Ancient India or its Dravidian heartland in the south now served as the center of commerce in an Afro-Asian world, with the Romans buckling under their supposed trade deficit. It is a perspective that has continued even into contemporary works (regardless of nationalist posturing) through an appeal to the *longue durée* of Indian seafaring traditions, most notably accomplished by Himanshu Prabha Ray.³⁷ “Roman” participation in a trade dominated by south Arabian and Indian merchants for millennia is an inconsequential blip on the timeline. The seemingly innocuous moniker “Indo-Roman” lends itself nicely to this zero-sum dynamic, a tug-of-war from either side of the hyphen.

The body of material evidence for the trade was relatively small until the mid-twentieth century, primarily consisting of Roman coins found throughout the subcontinent. Other singular finds, such as the so-called Lakshmi Pompeiana, an Indian ivory *yakṣī* (or nature spirit) found in Pompeii (Italy), sparked cursory interest but largely confirmed assumptions drawn from Greco-Roman literary sources of a luxury trade earning great moral reprimand, but yielding minimal tangible consequences.³⁸ Further finds have elicited similar reactions, such as bronze statuettes: e.g., a Poseidon after Lysippos, excavated together with other treasures at the Marathi site of Brahmapuri (Chandrapur District);³⁹ and another, fragmentary *yakṣī śālabhañjikā* found in Khor Rori (Oman) and now on display in Washington, DC.⁴⁰ The repository of items discovered at Begram (Afghanistan) speak to the sheer diversity of goods available to consumers throughout this interconnected world. The presence of Chinese lacquers alongside Indian ivories and manufactured products from Roman Alexandria remains a unique archaeological discovery, though the exact interpretation of the space (workshop? treasury? warehouse?) remains the subject of debate.⁴¹

Since the 1950s, however, technical disciplines—archaeology, epigraphy, papyrology—have ruled the discussion. The first major discovery came at Arikamedu, a site located on the backwaters of the Coromandel just south of Pondicherry and first excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India under the leadership of Sir Mortimer Wheeler.⁴² Although it is in some ways emblematic of Wheeler’s colonialist theories about Roman trading posts in India, Arikamedu has yielded far more clarifying evidence through subsequent excavations led by Jean-Marie Casal and Vimala Begley.⁴³ Teams at the Egyptian ports of Berenike, led by Steven Sidebotham, and Quseir al-Qadim (ancient Myos Hormos), led by David Peacock, Lucy Blue, and Stephanie Moser, have provided a much clearer picture of how these sites facilitated long-distance trade.⁴⁴ This has been met by a similar increase in excavation activity across the Arabian Peninsula, not only in Yemen and Oman but also in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.⁴⁵ As we have seen, the finds from Pattanam, alongside published excavations at sites like Sisupalgarh (Khurda District, Odisha) and Paithan (Aurangabad District,

Maharashtra), may yet contribute to this new archaeological wave, though they have some hurdles to cross.⁴⁶

Newer finds have shifted our conversations in exciting directions. Our understanding of the ceramic evidence from Egypt, India, south Arabia, and the Near East has been thoroughly expanded and made more accessible, in particular by Vimala Begley and Roberta Tomber.⁴⁷ Stone and glass “Indo-Pacific” beads, found throughout the Indian Ocean littoral, have proven to be impressively international.⁴⁸ Fragmentary shipwrecks in the Red Sea and anchors off the coast of India have been recovered and offer glimpses into sailing routes and cargoes.⁴⁹ Ostraca, papyri, and amphorae labels provide additional names for onomastics, as well as key information about human mobility and oversight by authorities.⁵⁰ Archaeobotanical remains and scraps of fabric, from cotton sails to silk textiles, show us organic commodities of trade and those enjoyed by commercial agents themselves—even if their preservation in the archaeological record is uneven at best.⁵¹ Indian epigraphy always contributed to the debate, but relevant texts were few in number outside India besides graffiti in Egypt collated by Iravatham Mahadevan.⁵² However, a marvelous discovery of hundreds of Middle Indic inscriptions on the Yemeni island of Socotra roughly twenty years ago has done much to challenge our understanding of the organization of the trade.⁵³ More recent seasons at Berenike have yielded even more finds of Indic character, including depictions of Śākyamuni Buddha and a Sanskrit dedicatory inscription.⁵⁴ Inscribed objects have been found even further afield, including the Danube frontier of the Roman Empire.⁵⁵

In the wake of these discoveries, there has been an explosion of scholarship on the topic in the last three decades; some works address specific elements (e.g., spices, ceramics, prosopography, organization, etc.), but many inevitably set out to articulate “Indo-Roman” or “Indian Ocean” trade in its entirety.⁵⁶ Despite the commendable achievements of several of these works, specters of the past still haunt the discipline. Warmington and Wheeler enjoy inflated roles in current debates, especially in some works of contemporary Indian scholarship given the prevalence of accessible reprints in India, either as authoritative founders of the discipline or targets of frustration; repeated broadcast of their positions on academic airwaves has the lasting consequences of an orthodoxy based on colonial discourse. Since Gibbon, Rome, her emperors, or else her denizens have dictated the flow of goods and people across the Indian Ocean through steel, gold, commercial savvy, or, more recently, the demand for luxuries.⁵⁷ The assumed dominance of Mediterranean powers in this oceanic theater has yielded a number of unforced errors, such as notions of “thalassocracy” derived from fragmentary epigraphy with aspirational maritime jurisdictions.⁵⁸ Such notions fall flat in the face of repeated failed attempts by Roman authorities to exert military control over the marine spaces in question.⁵⁹

This posturing, developed in earnest on the wall maps of early modern empires, defies ancient realities. Most scholars engaging with the Indian Ocean on its own terms are quick to note that premodern polities never subjugated this waterway, nor were the monsoon winds at their beck and call.⁶⁰ Rome (or any other power for that matter) did not impose its will on patterns of trade—at most it contributed an “additive change”—nor did it restructure the diverse political economies throughout the wider Indian Ocean world.⁶¹ The long-term health of these connections was also contingent on centuries of investments prior to the advent of Rome’s Mediterranean empire, as well as efforts during the last centuries of the Roman Republic.⁶² Despite developments in Indian Ocean area studies in their own right, a framework that should defuse competitive attitudes, the partisanship of earlier scholarship unfortunately persists, as many working on this topic inevitably debate just who controlled the trade: Romans? Greco-Egyptians? Arabians? Indians? None of the above?⁶³

The movement of commodities over vast distances captures the imagination, conjuring up images of caravanserais along the “Silk Road” or the “cosmopolitan” ports of the Indian Ocean.⁶⁴ Scholars view the latter as almost predestined for global entanglements, with some pointing to the “isomorphism” between its geography and connectivity or its shared “littoral” culture.⁶⁵ Adam Smith was possibly the first to note how the discovery of the Americas and the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope, consequences of Europeans hunting for the treasures of the East Indies, were “the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind,” and many have followed his lead in assigning great significance to this trade.⁶⁶ These viewpoints create what are in essence commodified spaces whose connectivity is unending yet ultimately static, able to be dominated or controlled. There can be clear winners in such an arena, whose claim to the spoils may well have discursive appeal to respective disciplines, but the contest does little to improve our understanding of how this ancient oceanic world worked.

It is also easy to be swept up in the magic of the monsoon. The conceptual regularity of its winds, combined with the lowered transaction costs of maritime travel, offers a certainty whose allure masks a host of unknowns for sailors. When everything went according to plan, a roundtrip journey from Egypt to southwestern India could be conducted within a single calendar year—an ideal timeframe for Roman maritime loans or tax-farming contracts—but this included months of waiting for the winds to change in foreign lands and all the risks of failed brokerage therein.⁶⁷ Winds were never wholly reliable (e.g., the variable winds of the southern Red Sea and the consistent northerlies near Egypt made sailing to upper ports especially difficult),⁶⁸ and sudden, adverse headwinds could crop up at very inconvenient moments.⁶⁹ The rhythms of the western Indian Ocean world versus those of the Mediterranean and Bay of Bengal could complicate coordination

between them, requiring a multiyear calculus.⁷⁰ The monsoon, as the defining atmospheric phenomenon of this oceanic world, offered the productive rains and steady trade winds necessary for premodern connectivity, but the man-powered structures that relied on it—including maritime ventures—were ultimately quite fragile, subject to redress only up to a certain point by human resilience. Attempts to understand connectivity apolitically through the network map or world system end up reifying it with audaciously straight lines or mutating blobs, obfuscating the complexities and contingencies of underlying phenomena.

The overwhelming scope of many works on the trade has not helped to eradicate these legacies. Scholars often provide a totalizing, positivist view of the trade—an overarching look at all the moving parts, peoples, languages, and products in a supreme feat of erudition—as if there is still a need to prove it existed. All the while, assumptions, cultural biases, and academic priorities go unnoticed. Opinions of Roman authors escape thorough interrogation, and Indic sources are rarely deployed in a way to foster a productive dialogue with those from the Mediterranean.⁷¹ Interdisciplinarity has such promise, but heaps of evidence tend to conform to the intellectual topography noted above; factual accumulations are neither self-evident nor necessarily relevant to the wider questions posed by their compilers.⁷² Due to disparities in disciplinary training, with Greco-Roman historians familiar only with their material and Indian scholars with South Asian sources, comparisons between Greek, Latin, Indic, and Dravidian texts, often facilitated by obsolete translations, fall short of true analysis.⁷³

Cultural History Through Consumption

Behind the romance and amassing of evidence, most accounts of Indo-Roman trade lack nuance. Some fixate on the red herring of just who dominated the trade. Others end rather abruptly once goods arrive at ports of call, such as those of the Malabar coast or, say, the Roman banquet table, “end points” that Arjun Appadurai deems to be “illusions” of Neoclassical economic thinking.⁷⁴ Following commodities along trade routes, often represented by permanent lines on maps, risks understanding connectivity as an end unto itself. The wider resonance of imported products in new environments has been skirted in favor of false dichotomies—“luxury” or “necessity,” “Indian” or “Roman”—which fail to address the consequences of objects in motion. How were goods consumed after moments of exchange? Were there specific sociocultural (or merely *human*) impetuses prompting the demand for these goods in the first place? Can we better understand the people who were shaped by imports across the Indian Ocean?

This book attempts to answer these questions from a different perspective: Indian Ocean commodities themselves and the patterns of consumption that contribute to or arise from their importation. Such an approach, drawing upon

scholarly discussions of objects, their material composition, and their relationships to human activity, can expand our understanding of how an interconnected Afro-Eurasia enabled a stronger presence of imported products in ancient societies than previously assumed. The work investigates representative mineral and organic commodities (e.g., spices, aromatics, wine, gold and silver coins, gemstones), intangible goods (e.g., artistic form, style, information), and the human beings involved in the distribution of things throughout the wider Indian Ocean world.⁷⁵

Consumption, defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Economics* as “the final use of goods and services by economic agents to satisfy their needs,” reflects the process by which humans obtain and use both perishable and durable goods to meet immediate requirements of survival, provide services over a long period of time, or fulfill their personal desires.⁷⁶ It is a phenomenon that has long interested modern intellectuals—and increasingly ancient historians, particularly those of the Roman world—but also has a long history of value judgments assigned to it by moralizers keen to disparage the sumptuous and luxurious within society.⁷⁷ The tricky semantics have been defined with much care by Michael Dietler in his *Archaeologies of Colonialism*, a larger discourse that can be reduced to a series of key concepts:

- Consumption is not merely the last step in an economic process, but rather a “symbolic activity deeply embedded in social relations and cultural conceptions.”
- “Consumption is never simply a satisfaction of utilitarian needs or an epiphenomenon of production, but rather a process of symbolic construction of identity and political relations.”
- “Consumption is always a culturally specific phenomenon and demand is always socially constructed and historically changing.”⁷⁸

Given the nature of evidence for ancient long-distance trade—rich in diversity but sporadic and poorly recorded—consumption offers a wide enough framework to explore how people in antiquity could acquire Indian Ocean commodities, as well as the underlying rationales behind the choice to obtain and make use of them.⁷⁹ When we fuse a purely economic view of consumption (laws of supply and demand, price, etc.) with institutional frameworks, anthropological approaches to the structures of value, and social meaning behind consumptive acts, we get a clearer sense of the larger impact of long-distance imports on the social fabric of a given society.⁸⁰ These perspectives thus sidestep “exchange” and “trade”—increasingly vacuous terms that conceal exceedingly complex processes.⁸¹

This work benefits from rich traditions in anthropology and sociology, with which ancient historians have begun to engage in earnest. As early as Marx, there

has been acknowledgment that production yields not only commodities but modes of consumption in turn.⁸² Seminal case studies of Bronisław Malinowski and Marcel Mauss provide a foundation for later works on gift-exchange economies.⁸³ Highly influential works by Georg Simmel, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, and Arjun Appadurai have not only articulated how humans value commodities through a semiotic process of cultural signifiers and appropriate them for articulations of status and accumulations of “social capital” but also how objects themselves, in the course of their own “social lives,” undergo commodification when their exchangeability is socially relevant.⁸⁴ As a result of mutually beneficial relationships, “entanglements” between commodity and society occur (to borrow from Nicholas Thomas)—strings that, when pulled by social forces, prompt acts of consumption, sometimes beyond an economically rational calculus.⁸⁵ Here we must also acknowledge the material and ontological turns: how the entanglement of human beings and objects, in addition to metaphors that structure our intellectual wrestling with them, ultimately emanate from a constant flow of sensory encounters with physical properties;⁸⁶ how Western assumptions regarding the dominion of human subjects over material objects and even nature itself do not wholly capture lived experience and should be questioned.⁸⁷

This book moves from a fixation with individuated moments of exchange to the wider possibilities of an oceanic world, a more holistic vision of consumption. It presents commodities and human beings at meaningful cross-sections of social practice to mitigate the distortions that conceptual boundaries impose on our evidence. In doing so, it elucidates commonalities across the diverse materiality of these commodities, experiential nodes where human beings encountered (and often ceded to) “external” things: e.g., outrage (chapter 2), ingestion (chapter 3), adornment (chapter 4), imitation and intimacy (chapter 5). It also explores the vectors for consumer access to commodities and the large number of human beings who were implicated in the process of consumption (chapter 6). Finally, it demonstrates how these commodities changed patterns of thought in antiquity, a phenomenon both elucidated and suppressed by our literary sources (chapter 7). In following these treasures borne across the sea, we see how global phenomena gave rise to personal engagements with a widening array of things—and how sensuous, portable, and even comestible items from far away were especially adept at affording these relationships.

This approach from multiple perspectives comes with inherent benefits. Significant economic conclusions for antiquity are hard to come by due to paucity of data, and the ancient historian must often be content solely with orders of magnitude. However, recent work on the Roman economy has expanded our knowledge of key factors such as real wages and, as a result, degrees of access to certain commodities and levels of consumption.⁸⁸ Western and Indian scholarship that addresses the organization of ancient financial activity helps us delineate the

transaction costs of long-distance trade and how economic actors sought to minimize them; such structural efficiencies of commerce could contribute to both a reduction in commodity prices and a proliferation of exposure to previously unattainable products.⁸⁹ As argued from a critical interrogation of literary sources, prices vis-à-vis real wages, forms of indirect access, and the emergence of viable alternatives, we can observe several avenues for consumption.

Blaming consumers for their superfluous habits is a tactic with a storied pedigree in Western thought. Indian Ocean commodities—spices, textiles, ivory, and precious stones to name a few—used to be dismissed in scholarship as “luxuries” given their distant provenance from centers of consumption, their lack of caloric content, and the criticism they sustain in ancient sources, especially Greek and Latin literary texts.⁹⁰ Even after consumption was largely “de-moralized” in the West centuries ago in the pursuit of economic growth—of course, Marxists have denounced the evils of mass consumption in favor of means of production—it still possesses a sort of dark side, a dangerous insatiability that becomes increasingly harder to quench through habituation.⁹¹ Items deemed unworthy of capital expenditure are reduced to “trinkets” and “baubles,” their consumers maligned as “one-dimensional” or “sensualists without heart.”⁹² A “great debate” persists over whether luxury goods (as famously argued by Werner Sombart) or “necessities” (the sort prioritized by the “spirit of capitalism” envisioned by Max Weber) were the primary drivers of commerce.⁹³ Indo-Roman trade has endured repeated belittlement from dueling primitivists and modernists in the ancient economy, neither of whom have ascribed to it much significance as they butt heads.⁹⁴ This is not to mention contemporary instances of “ethical” consumption, another form of moralizing: boycotts against products associated with particular industries, ideologies, or nation-states; and abstentions from commodities that reflect maltreatment of animals, the environment, or (more rarely) other human beings.⁹⁵

“Luxury,” especially in a Roman sumptuary context, brings with it the semantics of excess and wantonness that go beyond a more technical understanding of “economic luxuries”: demand for them is typically elastic, but their high prices can also spur consumption. These products have been discussed in the context of notions of “luxury,” elite fantasies of “frugality,” and ineffective sumptuary laws preserved in literary texts;⁹⁶ scholars have tended to rely too much on these sources to understand the cultural perception of these commodities, regardless of larger considerations of genre or the authorial agenda expressed in the text.⁹⁷ Such sentiments can also be found throughout Early Historic South Asia. Normative texts such as the *Arthaśāstra* and religious tracts alike note the relative unimportance of luxury commodities, urging their readers to secure wealth in everyday things or the rewards of spiritual liberation.⁹⁸

Stark categories do us little good. As Christopher Berry has outlined in *The Idea of Luxury*, luxuries are pleasing “objects of desire” that carry a whole range

of shifting, culturally dependent signifiers related to personal indulgence beyond basic needs, like shelter and sustenance.⁹⁹ Peter Brown describes them as “charismatic,” things that “carried a charge of life-enhancing energy, delight, and majesty brought from the ends of the earth.”¹⁰⁰ We can look to the multivalence of these products in the maintenance of beauty, health, and ritual as the source of ambiguities in social valuation, the easy fodder for moralizers and philosophers. The (often negative) perception of certain goods as “luxuries” in ancient sources does not necessarily translate into a litmus of the *economic* consumption of said goods or their societal impact.

Through this wider lens, we will be in a better position to move away from biases against “irrational” consumers inherited from Neoclassical theory and clearly define economic luxuries vis-à-vis social conceptions of luxury. This perspective allows us to view pleasure beyond hedonism, to see the “social innovations” brought on by consumers.¹⁰¹ Human choices are always fallible—it is never possible to calculate a mathematically perfect option—and they are informed by a host of motivations beyond the rationality often assumed of ancient actors.¹⁰² This approach also realizes the flimsiness of “luxury” as a restrictive trait. Products migrate from luxurious to more mundane applications, a sort of “trickle-down” effect that potentially inflames those seeking to preserve their status, a perpetual process of becoming through exclusive consumption, or “habitus” as Bourdieu envisioned.¹⁰³

Over the past fifty years, scholars have made great strides in the study of many of the commodities involved in transoceanic commerce in antiquity, with specific interest in fixed functional roles in Roman cuisine, medicine, and personal adornment.¹⁰⁴ In some fairly recent treatments of ancient Indian Ocean trade, brief discussions of consumption and social valuation do feature, but largely in the service of explaining Roman literary conceptions (e.g., luxury, the “East,” effeminacy), archaeological or numismatic evidence, trader organization, or political economy.¹⁰⁵ However, functionalist and positivist approaches, or even object histories, overlook the fact that Indian Ocean commodities, “deterritorialized” from their initial contexts (to borrow from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) and entering into new groupings of things (*agencements*), afforded many possible roles and valuations simultaneously.¹⁰⁶ Discussing an item’s financial cost without consideration of its value in new sociocultural contexts or the amount of human activity it mobilizes in its wake is an empty affair.

Limitations and Parameters

Investigating the consumption of Indian Ocean commodities does not merely attest the presence of “Indo-Roman” trade or “luxury” but reveals far-reaching consequences of global connections in antiquity. There are also difficulties to this

approach, as with any, though they are not insurmountable. In the attempt to bring so many perspectives together, this work seeks to correct for agendas—both ancient and modern—imposed on our evidence. It acknowledges a tendency in historical studies to focus solely on human subjects as a form of “obsession with ourselves.”¹⁰⁷ However, in its focus on the material world, it runs the risk of buying too heavily into contemporary epistemic hierarchies, which champion the reductive, posthuman “sciences” over the squishy humanities.¹⁰⁸ It also tacitly accepts the “commodity fetish” identified by Marx, one that erases the modes of production underlying the process of consumption.¹⁰⁹

Amitav Ghosh has nicely described this in his recent treatment of modern globalization, *The Nutmeg's Curse*. He points to the nutmeg as a tiny planet unto itself: it possesses almost a gravitational force that attracts attention and invites dissection into a host of nested worlds, simultaneously eclipsing others.¹¹⁰ Object histories, which productively seek to reorient engagements between human beings and a wider world of things, end up putting the latter onto pedestals in sterile contexts and ignoring potential unevenness and ill effects of these relationships.¹¹¹ When institutionalized in the form of the museum, such positioning of objects can actually hide histories of violence in their acquisition.¹¹² However, the magnetism that Ghosh describes, this charisma, demands our attention and should be interrogated, not ignored, belittled, or reproduced as something lifeless or mechanistic.¹¹³ It is part and parcel of the act of consumption, as are the human beings who are drawn in by it.

No work can cover everything.¹¹⁴ Due to the nature of the evidence, the study of these commodities and their consumption will be limited to examples within two distinct geographic theaters of the ancient world: the Mediterranean Basin (including associated regions of temperate Europe and the Near East) and the Indian subcontinent (especially modern India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and, to a limited extent, Sri Lanka). Of course, there is a much wider Indian Ocean world, with other participants from East Africa, south Arabia, and the rest of Asia; and many commodities do not receive detailed treatment, such as ivory, various pigments, silk, and other textiles.¹¹⁵ These choices have been made partly because the Mediterranean world and the Indian subcontinent provide a robust and diverse enough evidentiary assemblage to conduct this kind of project but also because of the legacy of “Indo-Roman” trade—in many ways, this project demonstrates the weakness of that label by means of the very comparison it suggests. They also help to avoid the encyclopedic tendencies of works on the topic in favor of deeper dives into select commodities and forms of consumption.

Chronological scope is always as risky as it is arbitrary, especially in interregional studies. Dating schemes, including the notion of the “Roman period” of Indian Ocean trade, insidiously promote a Romano-centric view, taking systemic changes in the Mediterranean world into consideration that have little meaning

in the Indian subcontinent. World history provides more helpful frameworks for the current agenda. Jerry Bentley's periodization, based precisely on the quality and intensity of cross-cultural interaction, serves as a useful paradigm for defining a period of ancient long-distance commerce without regional biases, particularly his Age of Classical Civilizations (500 BCE–500 CE).¹¹⁶

The book focuses on a subset of this so-called Classical Age, from 100 BCE–500 CE. Such dates incorporate the final decades of the Roman Republic, the heyday of trade during the Roman Principate (27 BCE–284 CE), and the structural and economic changes in the early Dominate and the demise of the Western Roman Empire. The period also maps nicely onto the Indian context: establishment of large kingdoms in northern and central India following a series of nomadic invasions, e.g., the Kushans, Western Kṣatrapas, and Śātavāhanas; their replacement by the Guptas in the north and regional dynasties like the Ābhīras, Traikūṭakas, Vākātakas, and Ikṣvākus on and around the Deccan;¹¹⁷ and finally, upheaval from further invasions and urban decline beginning in the fourth century CE.¹¹⁸ In southern India, the timeframe roughly corresponds to the Caṅkam period, in which Cēra, Cōla, and Pāndya chiefdoms rule Tamiḷakam. Individual chronologies of Indian dynasties (many of which are still disputed) together with their Roman counterparts can be found in Appendix A. There is also an environmental rationale to this dating scheme, though palaeoclimatological trends cannot stand in place of actual weather conditions—the sort of thing that can hazard a ship at sea or an agricultural season; these can change radically year to year and are affected by further dynamics, such as the El Niño–Southern Oscillation.¹¹⁹ This interconnected world did not appear out of nowhere, nor did it disappear forever in the mid-first millennium. As necessary, we will explore evidence beyond either terminus of this temporal bound, if anything to show that such limits are necessary evils for the exposition of this topic by a single mind.

The proposed approach to consumption must rely on a multiplicity of evidence. There is a long history of interdisciplinary work on this topic, starting with the earliest British scholarship;¹²⁰ in essence, the enterprise could not be undertaken without it given its global nature and the fact that certain regions provide more of one type of evidence than others. This project engages with literary, epigraphic, archaeological, and numismatic sources from both the Mediterranean and Indian subcontinent. Careful consideration will be given to a number of textual sources in their original language, particularly those composed in ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Pali, and various Middle Indic dialects. All the while, this evidence must be read on its own terms, without the assistance of unhelpful labels.¹²¹ Sources like Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*—long a mine of facts for historians and so rarely read as a work of *literature*—must be understood with generic and authorial aims in mind.¹²² Products of the written word in South Asia are continuous seams of commentary and synthesis; literary works, such as the

Indian epics, the variations of the “great tale” (*br̥hatkathā*), or the poems of the Caṅkam corpus, have long gestation periods lasting centuries and regional varieties that make firm dates of creation unhelpful.¹²³ Textual sources are implicated in such a way that makes their particularization for the service of contemporary historical narratives quite difficult—though one might argue that by wrestling, say, texts of the Greco-Roman corpus from their longer textual traditions through the hunt for urtext, we lose something as well. Nevertheless, many of these texts do possess what Romila Thapar has described as an “embedded historical consciousness,” which can still assist us alongside “externalized” historical narratives.¹²⁴

Differences within comparative treatment must be acknowledged without suppressing commonalities, and vice versa. Disparities in cultural habits can make things difficult, such as the increasing preference of cremation as a means of burial, which means less in the way of human remains (and proxies for nutritional analysis); in the case of South Asia in particular, there is an absence of accompanying grave goods and tombstones, unlike the vast (and deceptively fixed) corpus of funerary epigraphy from the Mediterranean.¹²⁵ Similarly, we must be careful umpires in comparisons across time, acknowledging both consistency and change, not relying on calls of “anachronism” or “nothing new under the sun.”¹²⁶ There are indeed major differences between contemporary consumer culture—so sterile and full of drudgery, so contingent on rapid movement through space, advertising through mass media, and even hyperrealities—and those prior to the “consumer revolution” in the eighteenth century.¹²⁷ Even the assumption that the human body encountered sensation in the same way over the course of history has to be interrogated.¹²⁸ However, this does not mean that there are not commonalities worthy of exploration.¹²⁹ It should not stop us from attempting the reconstruction of a “multisensory” history in favor of a far more common “autonomous, de-sensorised” vision of the past.¹³⁰

Amid the hive of activity that is Indian Ocean commerce, this work posits a cultural history of consumption—not just portraits of Indian Ocean commodities, but testimonies of how their unique qualities gave rise to sensation and ideation, how they mobilized resources and transformed the lives of human beings throughout the ancient world.

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