



Malta  
Classics  
Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. 10  
2024

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. 10

2024

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing by the publisher.

**Melita Classica**

Vol. 10, 2024

Text © Malta Classics Association  
Design and layout © Book Distributors Limited

ISBN: 978-9918-21-332-0

**Malta Classics Association,**

The Department of Classics and Archaeology,  
Archaeology Farmhouse, Car park 6,  
University of Malta, Msida

[info@classicsmalta.org](mailto:info@classicsmalta.org)

[www.classicsmalta.org](http://www.classicsmalta.org)

# CONTENTS

<b>Views on Treason in Ancient Greece: Supporting Philip II of Macedon in Fourth-Century Athens</b> <i>Nikolaos Anargyros Cheimaras</i>	9
<b>Rethinking Indo–Mediterranean Relations: New Approaches to the Roman Indian Ocean Following the 3rd Century Crisis.</b> <i>Jon Mateo Gabilondo Gutierrez</i>	28
<b>Creating Roman Identity: Caesar’s <i>Bello Gallico</i> and the Enfranchisement of Cisalpine Gaul</b> <i>Lars Sheppard–Larsen</i>	52
<b>Virginity and Purity: Implications of the Vestals’ Sexual Status</b> <i>Sisi Xie</i>	68
<b>Lil Nas X and the Classical Tradition: Exploring Classical Imagery in the Montero (<i>CMBYN</i>) Music Video</b> <i>Yentl Love</i>	97
<b>Between Personal and Institutional Devotion in Mesopotamia: The Divine Feminine in the Diyala’s Glyptic (3rd Millennium BC)</b> <i>Vera Gonçalves</i>	114
<b>Contact and Exchanges between Babylon and Ḫattuša: The Influence of the <i>āšipū</i> and the <i>asû</i> on the Hittite Healing Tradition (14th and 13th Centuries BCE)</b> <i>Ana Satiro</i>	134
<b>Communicating Power and Legitimacy? Dynastic Display in Ancient Persia and the Near East</b> <i>Clare E. Parry</i>	156
<b>The Colosseum on the Silver Screen: The Allure of Hollywood Gladiators for the Alt–Right</b> <i>Alexandra Sills</i>	184

## **The Malta Classics Association Executive Committee 2024**

Hon. President	Dr Carmel Serracino
Executive President	Mr Samuel Azzopardi
Vice President	Mr James Farrugia
General Secretary	Ms Claire Bugeja
Treasurer	Mr Nico Muscat
Executive Member	Ms Skye Vassallo

## ***Melita Classica* Editorial Board 2024**

Editor	Mr Samuel Azzopardi
--------	---------------------

## Editorial

The *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in Ancient History* brings together students from all over the world with an interest in the ancient world. This broader scope does not restrict itself to considering only Greek and Roman cultures and civilisation or even to those other cultures and communities with which the Romans and Greeks interacted directly, but casts its interest even wider, gathering together other perspectives and approaches on cultures that we as Classicists would generally consider fully external to our interests.

In 2023, the Malta Classics Association was honoured and privileged to host this *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in Ancient History* here in Malta, with the support of the University of Malta's Department of Classics and Archaeology. The conference was held in hybrid format, with in-person attendees gathering within the welcoming rooms of the Malta Society of Art's Palazzo de La Salle between the 23rd and 24th of March. During these two days twenty-five speakers shared their research and exchanged reviews and ideas in a celebration of the ancient world and the various aspects of the study of these cultures.

The proceedings of nine of these presentations are now presented here, and we thank the authors for entrusting us with their work. We trust that these works will inspire you and encourage within you the desire to pursue your own research into these ancient cultures and their people, and our ongoing interaction with these materials.

Once again, this collection of research is being brought to you with the steadfast financial support of the Farsons Foundation, who have our enduring thanks.

Later this year, the Malta Classics Association will be hosting the *Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in the Reception of the Ancient World*, and we look forward to bringing you more research by promising scholars from all over the world in future editions of our *Melita Classica*.

In the meantime, we thank you for your ongoing interest in and support of our work.

Samuel Azzopardi

Executive President and Editor

*In Memoriam*

The Malta Classics Association wishes to salute the memory of our dear friend, colleague teacher, mentor, former treasurer of the MCA and former editor of this same *Melita Classica*, Victor Bonnici, who left this world earlier this year. He is sorely missed.

# Rethinking Indo–Mediterranean relations: New approaches to the Roman Indian Ocean following the 3rd century crisis.

*Jon Mateo Gabilondo Gutierrez<sup>1</sup>*

## **Abstract:**

The present day globalised and interconnected world has caused a shift in how we face interconnectivity when studying the Ancient World. New methodologies and new horizons have risen to challenge this new outlook on ancient civilizations. In this regard, Global and World History perspectives allow us firstly to analyse the different processes of interconnectivity of the past, and secondly to analyse a wider and miscellaneous geographical area which has not been explored yet by traditional historiography. In this vein, this paper aims to focus on the Indo–Mediterranean relations in Late Antiquity.

Although the topic of Indo–Roman relations has become increasingly popular, it has rarely been analysed in the time–period suggested. In this context we will look at the turbulent transitionary period that the crisis of the 3rd century produced, not only within Roman frontiers, but also in the Indian Ocean, which had previously seen an unprecedented increase in connectivity with the Mediterranean world. Illustrated by the Sassanid expansion in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, the “Late Antiquity” of the Indian Ocean suffered from several transformations that added new Central Asian influences, but that conversely also helped consolidating previous economic and social structures.

As a participant in these changes, the Roman Empire was forced to adapt a new policy towards Indian Ocean, in which its influence shrunk, but did not disappear. As a result, we shall explore how religious, economic and diplomatic policies become crucial for the interactions between the main powers of the Indian Ocean’s “Late Antiquity”.

---

1 Jon Mateo Gabilondo Gutierrez is currently pursuing a PhD thesis on trading communities of the Late Antique Indian Ocean at the University of Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona.

## Introduction:

The crisis of the 3rd century in the Ancient World has been considered as a traumatic event traditionally associated with the later fall of the Roman Empire and the classical world. However, after this moment of stress, scholars agree that a new period of economic and urban growth initiated all around the Empire.<sup>2</sup> In an equal way, the Indian Ocean and the kingdoms bordering it shared a similar destiny.

In fact, there have been recent attempts trying to enlarge the boundaries of what scholars have called the period of Late Antiquity beyond the Mediterranean. These studies have flourished due to the cross-fertilization between the French Annales School and the World System analysis that has opened boundaries to a wider analysis of regions in contact and that had a common historical share.<sup>3</sup> In this same line, Michael Morony has seen the necessity of including Sassanid Iran as part of the Late Antique world.<sup>4</sup> Equally, the latest studies made through the entire Red Sea have shed light on the matter, making most scholars acknowledge that the region was fully connected and in constant relation with the Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Works as Shahid's *Byzantium and the Arabs in the 6th century* (1995) Hoyland's *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (2001) and Timothy Powers' *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate AD 500–1000* (2012) all point out how Arabia must be included in narratives that should analyse events from a wider geographical scope.

Thus, following these new data the present article pretends to investigate the Roman connection with the Indian Ocean posterior to the events of the 3rd century, that profoundly transformed the political and economic policy of the Indian Ocean trade (although political and economic policies in the classical world tend to mean the same).<sup>6</sup> For instance, these transformations, both military and civic, would profoundly affect the region of the Red Sea and would influence the participation of new actors as the Aksumites or the Arabs. In fact, this alteration would finally break the Roman connection with the Indian Ocean after the Islamic conquest of Egypt in 646 CE. Although this date should not be considered as a hard chronological barrier, the present article will limit itself chronologically until

---

2 Brown (1971) and recently Power (2012).

3 Vink (2007) 42.

4 Morony (2008).

5 Power (2012) 89–90.

6 Sidebotham in his PhD thesis of 1981, later published in 1986, and on pages 113–114, argues that “In antiquity there was usually no clear boundary between economics and politics; economics was a branch of politics”.

646 CE, this being the date in which direct access to the Indian Ocean was cut for the Byzantines.

Considering the argument that the present article wants to develop, world history and global history approaches can be more than a useful tool in order to understand how wider events affected the Roman policy for the Indian Sea, or *Erythra Thalassa* as some authors have named it.<sup>7</sup> However, due to the complex and diverse data we have for the epoch, we should take a breve outlook to the events preceding the 3rd century crisis.

### The Golden Age of Roman Expansion in India

With the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE, the Roman empire gained access to the coast of the Red Sea which had been engaging in Indian trade for centuries. Significant relations between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf and India date to the Bronze Age, while a systematic connection was established only under the Ptolemies. Greek sailors managed to learn and dominate the wind patterns that enabled ships to sail those dangerous waters. Hence, a system of ports and elephant hunting stations was developed providing the Ptolemaic rulers with elephant units for their armies.<sup>8</sup> However, this same system enabled merchants and embassies to sail to India more frequently and taking fewer risks.

Despite Ptolemaic efforts, commerce with India was never so regular as it would be in Roman times, and in fact the turning point came with the Roman arrival to Egypt. Strabo, writing during the Roman expansion towards India, reports that in his time every year “as many as 120 vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India” while during the reign of the Ptolemies “scarcely anyone would venture on this voyage and the commerce with the Indies” (Strabo, *Geography* 17.1.13). Even if all the different societies participating in the Indian trade were constrained by the tyranny of distance,<sup>9</sup> the irruption of the Roman merchants and its administration boosted long–distance connections both in time and in quantity. The latest archaeological excavations conducted in the Eastern Desert of Egypt have shown that it was the Roman engineers and architectures who made possible the handling of such a flow in commodities.

7 Sidebotham (1986) 182–186, for more information about the meaning of the term *Erythra Talassa* for the Romans, who most of the times also differentiated it from *Mare Rubrum* (Red Sea).

8 For elephant hunting see Desanges (1978), who explains the possible organizations and strategies involved.

9 Blainey (1966) uses the phrase for the first time to claim that pre–industrial societies were limited by technology and geology in matters of distance travelling.

Thus, thanks to Roman public investment, the old and new roads connecting the port cities of Myos Hormos and Berenike were reinforced with different *hydreuma*, water stations, normally surrounded by a *praesidium*. Thanks to these stations merchants could cross the desert without problems and could receive aid from the numerous patrols in a short time (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 6. 26. 25–26). Additionally, the mentioned ports were also fortified and enlarged so as to be able to hold hundreds of people in such an arid condition. In addition, public investment was accompanied by the interest of the investors and bankers who expected to make large profits based on established market rules and the extensive use of loans. The *Muziris Papyrus* (PVindob. G40822), a treasure of papyrology, helps us understand the nature of this trade. Investors could directly invest in the Indian trade without having any direct contact with the commodities or the merchants. The organizational infrastructure was provided by independent merchants, shipowners and other men working on transport and dockers.<sup>10</sup>

This system enabled Graeco–Roman merchants to obtain funds for their investments in long distance trade, creating a profitable business in which everyone wanted to participate. Thus, every year Roman merchants sailed towards Arabia and the western coast of India loaded with gold and silver bullion, Roman glasses, wine, olive oil and dozens of other products. In return, the Arab and Indian merchants nourished the Empire with all kinds of resins, spices, and other highly demanded commodities like Chinese Silk.<sup>11</sup>

Military investments played a prominent role in the initial success that the Romans enjoyed when trading throughout the Indian Ocean. Not only did the different stations of the Eastern Desert need to be secured and maintained with military units, but even the vessels sailing towards the East had to be armed with archers (Pliny, *Natural History* 6. 26. 4). In the same line, the Farasan Islands have recently provided evidence of a Roman military unit being stationed on the island during the reign of Antoninus Pius.<sup>12</sup>

Considering all this, Sidebotham, who had been carrying intensive research in the port of Berenike and the Eastern Desert, found enough evidence to demonstrate that the Romans did have a specific policy for the *Erythra Thalassa* during the first two centuries, although it might have changed throughout this time.<sup>13</sup> Gallus' famous expedition to Arabia Felix was part of the Roman policy for

10 De Romanis (2010–2011) 75–105.

11 A more detailed description of the commodities being traded can be found in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* a merchant guidebook written in the mid first century and one of the main sources related to the Roman trade in the Indian Ocean.

12 *AE* 2005, 1638; 1639: The original text with its translation had first been published in Villeneuve 2004.

13 Sidebotham (1986).

the Indian Ocean; although it failed in acquiring territories, the expedition had profound effects on the region. The Romans had demonstrated their might and had secured the Red Sea region making the different kingdoms respect Roman authority. Again, Sidebotham argues that embassies arriving from the Indian Ocean only started to be constant after Gallus' expedition.<sup>14</sup>

The rulers in the region in subsequent times adopted a more pacific attitude towards the neighbours in the Red Sea. This enabled further expansion towards the Indian Ocean, with Roman merchants arriving to Sri Lanka, Bengal and further on. Under Trajan however, in order to exploit trade and logistics, changes were introduced to the *Erythra Thalassa* policy.<sup>15</sup> Among the different measures taken by Trajan we note the re-opening of the canal that connected the Red Sea with the Nile since the times of the Pharaohs,<sup>16</sup> that was unnavigable at the time (Ptolemy, *Geography* 4. 5. 54). Moreover, according to Eutropius, writing during Late Antiquity, Trajan must have established a fleet in the Red Sea that could assist the Roman wars against the Parthians (Eutropius, *Breviarium Historiae Romanae* 8. 3). Whether this fleet really existed or not is again quite difficult to ascertain. However, it does seem that there was an actual fleet working in the Red Sea in the times of Trajan, as the inscriptions in the Farasan Islands have attested.<sup>17</sup> People working at this point of the Red Sea necessarily needed to be supplied and transported by some fleet. Furthermore, two ostraca from the archive of Nikanor mention two Roman fleet officers receiving provision in the ports of the Red Sea.<sup>18</sup>

In the prelude to the Antonine Plague, the Indian Ocean is said to have facilitated the first direct encounter between the Romans and the Han dynasty in China. The *Hou Hanshu* reports that in 165 C.E. "Antun (Marcus Aurelius or Antoninus Pius) the ruler of Da Qin (Rome) sent envoys from beyond the frontiers to reach us through Rinan" and that "This was the very first time there was communication" (Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 88. 12). This encounter is not surprising since at the time Roman merchants were frequent in the ports near the Malay peninsula and Thailand (Ptolemy, *Geography* 7. 5).<sup>19</sup> In fact, Chinese authorities had already been informed of the presence of merchants coming from Da Qin through an embassy of a Burmese king some decades earlier (Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 5).

14 Sidebotham (2011) 13.

15 Sidebotham (1986) 146–147.

16 If the Canal was made navigable again is still much in debate among scholars. See for example Aubert (2011) 42.

17 First published in Villeneuve, Phillips and Facey (2004).

18 *O. Petr.* 296; 279.

19 Ptolemy obtained this information through a periplus, nowadays lost, written by a Roman businessman named Alexandros during the 2nd century CE. In addition, we also have several archaeological findings confirming the mentioned presence, for this see Borell (2014).

Whether the embassy was specifically organized by a Roman Emperor or not is controversial and might never see a clear answer. However, it is plausible to think that if so, this embassy would not have had mere commercial intentions. It might not be a coincidence that the Antun embassy, as it has been named, occurred at the onset of a new escalation in hostilities between the Romans and the Parthians. It could indeed have been an opportunity for finding allies beyond the eastern frontiers of the Arsacid realm.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Indian Ocean could have played an equal role as it did during Trajan's reign when war was planned against the Parthians. The sea could have again become a playground for political and military manoeuvres for the Roman Empire, a situation that would repeat itself several centuries later with the Byzantines and the Sassanids.

Nevertheless, this Roman understanding of the Indian Ocean and its benefits would change in the following decades. The menace of a pandemic coming from the East would announce the beginning of a change in Roman–Indian trade. The Antonine Plague, possibly smallpox, became one of the first “global” pandemics that affected most of Eurasia and parts of Africa.<sup>21</sup> With it, long and short distance commerce collapsed recovering slowly and with new characteristics. Hence, Roman politics in the Indian Ocean were forced to transform and adapt to the new circumstances.

### Changes towards a New Polycentric Indian Ocean

There certainly were different commercial poles in the Indian Ocean during this Roman expansion. However, it is also true that Roman merchants seem to have been important dealers with great acquisition power as the archaeological remains found in different ports attest.<sup>22</sup> However, the crisis of the 3rd century produced substantial changes in the Roman economy. The Roman Indian trade was articulated through various intermediaries like producers, bankers or transporters. Ceramics came mainly from Hispania, Italy and to a lesser extent Greece, while wine and olive oil seems to have had mainly Hispanic origin.<sup>23</sup>

---

20 McLaughlin (2014) 208, citing a fragment of Tacitus in which a diplomatic embassy was dispatched to the Red Sea in order to avoid the Parthians (Tacitus, *Annals* 14. 25), also agrees with the possibility of an Imperial organized embassy.

21 Duncan–Jones (2018).

22 Consult the article of Seland (2014) for more information related to the latest archaeological discoveries in the Ancient Indian Ocean. Here most of the findings for the first centuries are clearly of Roman origin, even if imports from Arabia and the Gulf might also be found there. Among the artefacts that have been found we note Roman pottery containing olive oil, garum or wine, and coins.

23 See Tomber (2017) 381–394 for more information related to the amphorae found at the site of Pattanam and its classification. According to the author, the site of Pattanam has given 10 times more

After the crisis hit these regions, production patterns changed, population decreased, and international trade became a secondary issue. In addition, despite the breakdown of commercial routes inside and outside the Mediterranean,<sup>24</sup> one of the worst hits to the Indian trade came from the gold and silver reserves. The mining industry of the Empire had been severely affected by disease, raids and the lack of a strong central authority in general. For example, McLaughlin mentions an inscription from the gold-mining district of Dacia dated 167 CE mentioning that more than half of the miners of the town of Laburnum stopped paying insurance protection.<sup>25</sup> Another wax tablet series, in this case from Dacia, arrives to an end abruptly after 166 CE.<sup>26</sup> Equally, in other regions such as Britain (IAP 121, n.118) and Mauretania mining data series ends with the arrival of the pandemic.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, the quantity of gold and silver that the Empire was able to produce shrunk during the disease. As seen, many mines were abandoned, while others did not resume production until some decades later. All of this produced a shortage in the bullion which was one of the main exports Roman merchants used in their Indian Ocean affairs.

Despite a general crisis affecting commerce, we should not assume that a drastic transformation occurred; eastern commodities did not disappear from the Roman Empire. Even during the Antonine Plague, the Alexandrian Tariff shows that the flow of eastern *luxuria* did not stop. This document, issued by Marcus Aurelius and Commodus was collected in the *Digest* and mentions the tariffs that must have been charged on products arriving to Alexandria, including Indian spices, iron and even eunuchs (Justinian, *Digest* 39. 4. 16. 6–7).

Another major change was related to the people participating in seafaring and military activities in the Indian Ocean. During the previous centuries the inland Palmyra–Charax Spasinu trading route was dominated by Palmyrene merchants, who imported oriental commodities from the Persian Gulf to the Empire. Nevertheless, the plague and Lucius Verus' war might have made the Palmyrenes shift their activities to the Red Sea. During the 3rd and 4th centuries, Palmyrene

---

Roman ceramics than the previous biggest accumulation ever known, which was the one of Arikamedu, therefore making the Pattanam site the biggest evidence of Roman trade in all India.

24 Duncan Jones (2018) relies on different papyrus found at Egypt to show how the death of different emperors started to arrive in delay at the time of the Antonine Plague. Thus, while Hadrian's death took a week to be reported from Rome, the assassination of Commodus was reported after fifty-six days.

25 McLaughlin (2014) 213–214.

26 Russu (1975) and Duncan–Jones (2018) 55.

27 Hirt (2010) 402–209.

inscriptions start to appear in Egypt, the Eastern Desert and the Indian Ocean.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it seems that Roman sailors did not retreat after any sudden event, but simply adapted to the new conditions that the international trade offered. We must also be aware that other kingdoms participating in the Indian trade were also affected by the pandemic and that several kingdoms as the Han or the Chera also suffered from economic and political crisis.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, it is difficult to know if there was any real Imperial policy for the Indian Ocean in this period. During the 3rd century crisis, the Roman governors were constantly changing, and political instability did not help international politics, that were not relevant anymore. Merchants and investors could not continue investing as they did before, and gold and silver bullion and other commodities exported might have also been substituted for other items. The lack of archaeological findings through different ports in the Indian Ocean might answer to this shift in trading commodities; otherwise the reason of their absence continues to be uncertain. It is also however clear that Roman vessels did continue to sail the Monsoons using similar routes, considering that two other embassies or at least groups of merchants arriving from Da Qin (Rome) visited China in 226 and 284 CE as recorded in the *Liangshu* (Yao Silian, *Liangshu*, 54).

Due to the lack of further evidence, it is difficult to know which was the exact relationship shared by the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean during the 3rd century. However, outside the Empire new commercial poles started to rise, getting their own share in the Indian Ocean trade and expanding their influences through seafaring and military activities. Apparently, the different societies in the Red Sea that had been secondary participants in the Roman Indian Ocean trade started to play a more important political role. The Aksumite and Himyarite kingdoms started to compete for local supremacy, while in the Persian Gulf the Arsacid rule of Parthia was overthrown by Ardashir I in 224 CE, giving birth to the Sassanid dynasty. The new rulers, starting with Ardashir himself, would revitalize their maritime possessions on the Gulf and invest in new infrastructure that would help merchants trade with India, Arabia and even China.

---

28 Both at Berenike and at Koptos shrines of the Palmyrene god Yarhibol/Hierobol have been discovered confirming the presence of a detachment of Palmyrene archers in the Eastern Desert IGRR I.1169 = OGIS 639. See Cobb (2018), p. 291. for two Palmyrene inscriptions outside Roman frontiers. The first dates 220 C.E. and mentions two Palmyrene envoys to a royal ceremony at Al Uqla near the Gulf of Aden. While the second potentially dating 258 C.E. coming from Hoq at the island of Socotra also attests Palmyrene presence.

29 Sreedhara Menon (2007) p. 118

## The Red Sea in Late Antiquity

During the Roman commercial expansion into the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea region was used as a corridor taking merchants from the Mediterranean to the profitable trade spots of Arabia and its incense incenses and India. Even the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* recommends that sailors and merchants sail as fast as they could through the Red Sea: “to set a course along the coast of Arabia is altogether risky, since the region with its lack of harbours offers poor anchorage, is foul with rocky stretches, cannot be approached because of cliffs, and is fearsome in every respect” (*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* 20). Several centuries later, the Arab geographer and historian al-Mas‘ūdī (896–956 C.E.) would similarly describe the Red Sea as “barren and wretched” (al-Mas‘ūdī, *From the Meadows of Gold* 61).

Despite these negative views of the Sea, during the period of Late Antiquity the region started to give responses as a dynamic region and not as a simple obstacle. After centuries of Greek and Roman influence, the different societies living on the shores started to develop more complex economies.<sup>30</sup> Archaeological evidence is clear at this point that not only did these societies trade and accumulate wealth, but that they even copied Graeco-Roman styles, and adopted Mediterranean political language and Mediterranean beliefs.<sup>31</sup>

While Roman authority in the Red Sea started to decline, the people of Aksum started a series of military campaigns against their neighbours. From the *Monumentum Adulitanum*, recorded by Cosmas Indicopleustes when visiting Adulis in 6th century CE, we know that during the 3rd century CE the Beja and the Sesea were conquered by different Aksumite kings (RIE 277).<sup>32</sup> In this sense, Hatke argues that the Aksumite army pushed its frontiers as far north as the south-eastern frontier of Roman Egypt while the wars to the West carried its frontiers to the modern Sudanese–Ethiopian borderlands.<sup>33</sup> But Aksumite influence was not limited to the East African mainland; some expeditions were also organized across the Red Sea to Arabia. Apparently, the *Monumentum* might also mention other expeditions towards the coast of Arabia, maybe the Hijaz, dominating the locals to their benefit.<sup>34</sup> One is tempted to see these maritime actions as a wider project

30 Seland (2010) interestingly correlates Roman commerce as a stimulus for kingdom building in the region during the 1st century CE. Power (2012) 16–20, agrees that for the Period of Late Antiquity the region was highly Hellenised first by politico-economic exchanges and then socio-cultural interaction.

31 Munro-Hay (1991) 13 stresses the influence that Roman trade had in the Red Sea and how it affected the Aksumites. Equally the Eritreo-British project of 2004–2005 working in Adulis confirm the close relationship Aksumite production had with the Byzantine world, from Peacock and Blue (2007).

32 Munro-Hay (1991) 222–223.

33 Hatge (2013) 37–66.

34 Munro-Hay (1991) 222–223.

for establishing a maritime supremacy in which merchants from Adulis, the main port, could navigate safely, extend their influence, and become active participants in the Indian trade.

Indeed, by the 5th and 6th century CE, the Aksumites had established their own commercial networks and their merchants visited various ports starting from the Roman Berenike to Deccan and Sri Lanka. Excavations at Adulis have recorded a great variety of ceramics; local ceramics seem to emerge exactly during this period.<sup>35</sup> The same ceramics have been discovered in South Arabia, attesting the direct influence that the Aksumites had in that region.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the port of Berenike seems much more connected with Aksum and its merchants than before. Sidebotham reports several graffiti and inscription of Aksumite origin. In addition, Aksumite pottery confirms the Roman–Aksumite relation, which is not limited to the port of Berenike, but also to other sites such as Aila or Myos Hormos.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Aksumite currency has been found all around the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>38</sup>

The initial economic success achieved by the Aksumite merchants was due to their adaptability to the new circumstances. While the Romans were suffering a severe economy crisis that made the export of golden coins in exchange of items difficult, Aksumite merchants started to replace Roman merchant activities. In order to achieve such objectives, it seems that the rulers of Aksum consciously imitated the Byzantine golden coins. Aksumite golden coins roughly equivalent to the Byzantine *solidus* coins weighed 4.53g and had Christian symbols, issues and busts following the Roman style.<sup>39</sup> The monk and traveller Cosmas Indicopleustes records that Roman merchants were preferred by the ruler of Sri Lanka because their coinage was standardized and made of gold in contrast to the Sassanid silver coins (Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography*, 2.77). Thus, as in Early Roman times, it seems that golden coins were still the favourite currency for trading in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, by imitating Byzantine coins Aksumite merchants could easily usurp the role that the Roman empire had had in the Indian Ocean.<sup>40</sup>

In another vein, religious realities became another playground in which the Red Sea as a whole participated. The spread of monotheism throughout the Red Sea from Egypt starts to be remarkable during the 4th century both in the forms

---

35 Zazzaro (2013) and Zazzaro and Manzo (2012).

36 Sedov (2010) 453–474.

37 Sidebotham (2011) 75 and 231.

38 See Munro–Hay (1999) for most of the Aksumite coins known, which can be found in the British Museum Collection. Pankhurst (1961) for Aksumite coins found outside Ethiopia.

39 Day (2011) 17–18.

40 Day (2011) 17.

of Judaism and Christianity. Religious buildings such as Synagogues and Churches have been discovered in all major ports of the epoch in both sides of the Sea.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Ethiopia, Christianity is supposed to have been introduced during the reign of King Ezana (320s–360 CE) by means of a Christian called Frumentius who was enslaved in the kingdom while travelling to India to learn philosophy with his teacher (Rufinus from Tyre, *Church History*, 10.9).<sup>42</sup> Although Rufinus wrote 80 years after the narrated events, his narrative clearly relates the introduction of Christianity in Aksum to its participation on the Indian Ocean trade. Seland has gone further and has demonstrated that it was the need for safe locations and solidarity in the sea of the Christians that enabled the spread of the Christian faith successfully.<sup>43</sup> Hence, monotheism entered Aksum as a grassroots movement through Christian merchants.

Similarly, the same merchants might have something to do with the further spread of monotheism in Arabia, although maritime influence should be considered for Arabia Felix.<sup>44</sup> Judaism might have been introduced to the Hijaz through the Nabataean–Idumaeen commercial nexus.<sup>45</sup> The historian Al–Tabari (839–923 CE) mentions that Jews had been present in the Hijaz since Nebuchadnezzar II had conquered Jerusalem and massacred the Jews (*The History of Al–Tabari* 4.647). Furthermore, Persian Judaism is also sometimes considered to have had some influence in the region due to their active participation under the Sassanid dynasty in the Indian Ocean trade.<sup>46</sup> This connection with Judaism increased to the point that the Himyarite kingdom adopted it as its official religion some years after the Aksumites had done the same with Christianity. Adopting monotheism, we could say, became a necessary social practice for the different societies in the Red Sea, that were living an intense period of cross–cultural relations. Trade might have been the leading reason for these encounters being possible; hence adopting such beliefs was an effective strategy with which local rulers and merchants could engage in this trade.

It is particularly interesting to analyse all these processes of conversion, especially the moment and the context in which they developed. In fact, by the

---

41 Sidebotham (1994) 136–146 and Tomber (2007) 2020 in Power (2012) 38–39.

42 It should be clarified that the term “India” during Late Antiquity did not necessarily mean India as we know it today, the word was quite vague and used to reference both India and the Red Sea, Mayerson (1993).

43 Seland (2014) 645.

44 Power (2012) 40; the author also identifies that the first Synagogue found in Arabia is in the port of Aden dated in Hellenistic and Roman dates. Thus, this introduction of Judaism might be related to the first Graeco–Roman merchants trading in the golden era of the Roman Indian trade.

45 Power (2012) 40.

46 Silverstein (2007) 94–95.

5th century, Christianity and Judaism were well established in the region and this was enabled by a particular historical context. It was a period in which different monotheist beliefs travelled among merchants from different origins, and religion served to protect mercantile interests in such conditions of commercial competition.<sup>47</sup> One could be tempted to relate conversion as a semi-conscious strategy to engage in the political and economic conditions of the time.

Aksum, being in the periphery of both the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, exhibits a dynamic participation in international trade and politics in this period. It seems that being part of the periphery of those two worlds stimulated the region until it rose as an independent economic, political and religious pole. But for these to happen the Aksumite merchants and rulers needed to adopt a known language for the Indian Ocean, one that could link them with the Byzantines and the Mediterranean World. Only through imitation, adoption and conversion did the Aksumites manage to pass from being the periphery to being their own centre.

On the other side of the Bab al-Mandab strait, Judaism was successfully adopted by the Himyarite kingdom. This was a confederation of tribes that by the 4th century CE had under its control all of Southern Arabia. Hence, the profitable production of frankincense and myrrh was now under a sole political entity. The region seems to have been in contact with Judaism since the times of Solomon, who is supposed to have received the visit of the queen of Sheba from Southern Arabia (1 *Kings* 10). Moreover, the mentioned Nabataean-Idumaeon terrestrial route and the Persian Jews coming by ship might have induced local rulers and merchants to adopt Judaism by the 4th century CE or even earlier.<sup>48</sup> As in the case of the Aksumites, we must understand these changes under the same logic. Conversion was the best strategy for securing trade in an increasingly economic sector of the Indian Ocean. The demand for incense in the Mediterranean world also seems to have decreased considerably in the 4th century, meaning that securing trade and any strategies towards that aim became all the more important.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, during the 6th century the region was dragged into an important conflict. The Byzantines had established friendly relations with the Aksumites as both shared the same faith and economic objectives. In addition, the Aksumites,

---

47 Bentley (1993) 9, brilliantly describes the patterns for assimilation and conversion that pre-modern societies used to use. He also explains how important trade was for this decision to occur; whether the locals adopted a new faith by pressure or by voluntary association economy played a major role in these transformations.

48 Power (2012) 41.

49 Some scholars have pointed out that demand might have shrunk due to the rise in Christianity in the Mediterranean; rituals in Christian temples are supposed to have used less incense than during polytheism Caseau (2007) 75.

were religiously dependant on Egypt and the Patriarch of Alexandria and would follow Egypt in the division that the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE had created.<sup>50</sup> Despite this difference the rulers of Aksum maintained a positive attitude towards the Byzantine Imperial order. If we base our assumptions on Greek and Syriac hagiographical sources, it seems evident that Aksumites and Himyarites got involved in conflict due to religious issues.<sup>51</sup> An inscription found at the capital city of Aksum made by king Kaleb itself reports that “I sent my general Hyn (Heyona) to make war on Himyar and to establish the church there” (*HYWN*).<sup>52</sup>

Although religion must have contributed to the decision, scholars have claimed that other political and economic aspects must be considered. Rubin was one of the first to connect the Aksumite and Himyarite war with a wider Romano–Sassanid war.<sup>53</sup> Power has accepted Rubins’ claim but criticises his arguments that claim that Anastasius (491–518 CE) launched a specific policy to restore the declining Indian trade. New archaeological work has demonstrated that the Roman trade was prosperous at the time. Economic decline in the Red Sea only started at the beginning of the 6th century and thus for Power this could have been the moment in which “economic change forced political action.”<sup>54</sup>

Later writers, possibly citing Nonnosus, affirm that the King of the Ethiopians made war on the Jews because these had killed Roman merchants that were doing business in Arabia, consequently also harming the Aksumites.<sup>55</sup> Equally, John Malalas, citing Procopius, mentions that Justin I (r. 518–527 CE) sent an embassy to promote the invasion of Southern Arabia arguing that the Romans would benefit commercially if this were successful (Procopius, *The History of the Wars* 1.20.9).<sup>56</sup> In this context a first campaign was launched in 518 CE that succeeded in establishing a pro–Christian rule. However, autonomous rule was restored by Dhu Nuwas. It was not until the massacre of Najran in 525 CE that a full–scale war was launched by the Aksumites and Byzantines. This war can be considered a swan song for the Aksumites, who would see the decline of their kingdom some

50 According to Munro–Hay (1991) 13, this event marked the position of Aksum within the rest of the Christian world: “After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 the international church was divided, and Aksum, with Egypt and much of the East, split from the so–called *melkite* or imperial church and followed the Monophysite interpretation of Christ's nature, which Ethiopia still retains”.

51 Powert (2012) 109. Some of the Christian writers that admit the religious essence of the conflict are: Theophanes, 223 (1997), John Malalas 432–34 (1986) and Chronicle of Zuqnān 54–56 (1999).

52 Translation found in Beeston F.L. (1984) 7.

53 Rubin (1989) 400.

54 Power (2012) 116.

55 Theophanes, 223 (1997), John Malalas 432–34 (1986), Chronicle of Zuqnān 54–56 (1999) and Michael the Syrian 4.273–77 (1901).

56 John Malalas 457–58 (1986). Apparently Theophanes the Confessor wrongly attributes this embassy to Justin II using John Malalas as its informant.

decades later. Despite gaining control of the Himyarite kingdom, direct rule lasted less than a decade; an Aksumite general called Abraha would depose the viceroy previously appointed, helped by the Ethiopians living in South Arabia. Although initially Aksum did not recognize the authority of the usurper, King Kaleb was eventually forced to accept his authority as a subject of the Aksumites.<sup>57</sup>

Overall, the control of the Bab al-Mandab strait by Christian allies might have benefited Byzantine economy for some decades. However, in the context of new hostilities between the Sassanids and the Byzantines, the first would manage to conquer Southern Arabia and establish their own administration there. Scholars have argued for different reasons to explain this campaign. According to Rubin, Islamic Medieval tradition affirms that a Himyarite prince was responsible for convincing Khosrow (r. 531–579) to free their kingdom from the Ethiopians.<sup>58</sup> On the contrary, Theophylact of Simocatta explains that the Sassanids had previously tried to incite riots among the Himyarites and that invasion followed only the failure of these covert attempts (Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 3. 9.6). Thus, we might suspect that the Sassanids had already had an eye on this strategic region.

As in the case of the Aksumite invasion of Southern Arabia, secondary literature has seen the Sassanid conquest as a consequence of a political and economic strategy to harm the Byzantine Empire. As we will see later, the Sassanids had developed their own interests in Indian Ocean trade and were forcing the Romans to pay high prices for access. Procopius is clear on this when speaking about the role the Aksumites must have played: “purchasing silk from India and selling it among the Romans, might themselves gain much money, while causing the Romans to profit in only one way, namely, that they be no longer compelled to pay over their money to their enemy” (Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1. 20. 9). Moreover, Southern Arabia was also seen as a permeable frontier from which the Byzantines or their Aksumite allies could attack Mesopotamia. Consequently, the Sassanids had seen the conquest of Himyarite territories as a means by which to both damage Roman economy and secure their Arabian frontier (Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1. 20.12).<sup>59</sup>

In the aftermath of Khosrow’s campaign in Southern Arabia, both the Aksumites and the Byzantines found themselves exceedingly dependant on Sassanid merchants for the acquisition of Eastern commodities (Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1. 20.9–12). However, according to Power, Aksumite merchants could have sailed without problems to Sri Lanka, where they could have had an advantage by

---

57 Munro–Hay (1991) 80–83.

58 Rubin (2008) 190–91.

59 Although Procopius also admits that the Aksumites weren’t attracted to a invasion.

buying silk and other spices with golden coins, which were still preferred by the local rulers to the Sassanid silver coins.<sup>60</sup>

Be that as it may, by the end of the 6th century most Roman ports were in decline and Aksumite economy shrunk during this period.<sup>61</sup>

## Sassanid Expansion in the Indian Ocean

As mentioned, the 3rd century crisis was not limited to the Mediterranean, and many kingdoms across Eurasia were affected whether by disease, economic decline or political instability. In the case of the Parthian kingdom, this harsh period culminated in Ardashir I (r. 226–242) rebelling against the Arsacid rulers, giving birth to the Sassanid dynasty in 224 CE. Unlike their Arsacid predecessors, the Sassanid rulers paid much more attention to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In fact, Ardashir himself tried to increase infrastructures that could connect the Gulf and its inner land with the construction of roads and cities in the region.<sup>62</sup> However, the territory was not pacified until the end of the 4th century when both the Eastern and the Western coast of the Gulf were secured militarily.<sup>63</sup>

Commercial flows in the Persian Gulf must have increased after these Sassanid efforts. Ammianus Marcellinus some centuries earlier, writing in the 4th century, mentions the Persian Gulf and reports: “There are numerous towns and villages on every coast and frequent sailings of ships” (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 22.6.1). The Sassanid strategies were successful in stimulating the flow of merchants and commodities from India towards the Gulf from the very beginning. Indo–Sassanid trade increased considerably during this time, the eastern coast seeming to be especially connected to the Indian trade, where Indian Red Polish Ware is more frequent. In addition, according to archaeological excavations in the region of Pattanan in India, Roman ceramics are replaced by Sassanid jars during the same period.<sup>64</sup>

---

60 Power (2012) 126–127.

61 Power (2012) 124.

62 Whitehouse and Williamson (1973) 32. While the famous Charax Spasinu was simply refounded as Astarabath Ardashir, other cities and ports were new foundations such as Rev Ardashir, Kujardn Ardasir, Batn Ardashir, all three of which were situated along the Gulf itself, or Bahman Ardashir and Wahasht Ardashir on the riverbanks of the Tigris and Euphrates.

63 Whitehouse and Williamson (1973) 32–33. Shahpur II (r. 309–379 C.E.) and his campaign against the dwellers of the Western Coast of the Gulf helped gaining control of the sea. In addition, it is believed that he raided the desert as far as Medina to punish the Arabs that had been raiding the region.

64 Tomber (2008) 159–160.

Like the Red Sea, the Gulf also became an important space of religious contest. Christianity was quite important in the Sassanid Empire, to where Christian believers used to flee from the Roman Empire whenever they were persecuted.<sup>65</sup> In turn the Sassanid rulers also organized institutional persecutions against Christians, compelling them once again to flee eastwards in order to find secure places.<sup>66</sup> As a consequence, due to the maritime trading activities and the different persecutions against Christians, it was the same Christians who ended up conducting business in the Indian Ocean. Christianity in India, especially on the Malabar coast has been well attested since the very beginning of Christianity.<sup>67</sup> But during Late Antiquity, the Christians living in India would become closely related to the Sassanid commercial networks in the Indian Ocean. These Nestorian communities had been welcomed by the local Indian rulers, who encouraged them in transforming the land towards the production of spices which were in high demand, mainly pepper.<sup>68</sup> These agricultural farms would produce large quantities of pepper which would be exported to the Gulf by the Christian merchants of Fars and Seleucia–Ctesiphon. The dominance of these Christian merchants in the Indian trade was such that when pirates started to attack Sassanid sailors in the 5th century, King Yazdigird I (r. 399–421 C.E.) asked for help from the Nestorian *Catholicos* (ruler) named Ahai.<sup>69</sup>

This increase in trade with India was also noted by Procopius who, speaking about the difficulty Aksumite merchants had in competing with the Persians, admits that: “it was impossible for the Ethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always place themselves at the very harbours where the Indian ships first put in, since they inhabit the adjoining country, and are accustomed to buy whole cargoes” (Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1. 20.9–12). If we understand that the Nestorian Christians in Western India were closely related to the Christian communities in the Gulf, Procopius’ words make total sense. Indian Christians had their own farms where they produced pepper; a commodity that became highly demanded in Persia during Late Antiquity.<sup>70</sup> Thus, consumers and

---

65 Lieu (1986).

66 Malekandathil (2002) 157–161. Thanks to an inscription found by the Portuguese during the 16th century, we know that a Christian called Thomas of Cana scaped the Sassanid persecutions in the year 345 CE and fled towards Cranganore in Kerala with other seventy–two families. All were amicably received and were granted privileges and lands.

67 Thomas the Apostle is believed to have been preaching in the region and had constructed several churches; Slapak (1995) 27.

68 Malekandathil (2002) 158–159

69 Malekandathil (2002) 159.

70 Malekandathil (2002) 161.

costumers had established their own market, possibly creating a semi-monopoly in trade which could be traced in Procopius' words.

A different situation has been suggested for the island of Sri Lanka. During Late Antiquity the island became the major crossroad for international commerce in the Indian Ocean. At this location, the Byzantines and Aksumites tried to break the Sassanid monopoly in Eastern commodities. Although the majority of archaeological material discovered in the different excavations conducted on the island is of Sassanid origin, thousands of Roman third brass ceramics have also been excavated in the Eastern part of the island.<sup>71</sup> This market for Roman goods might be the one referenced in Cosmas' story of the Roman golden coins being preferred to the Sassanid silver ones (Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography* 2.77). Nevertheless, the Sassanid merchants must have been the most active on the island, where Mesopotamian torpedo Jars are very abundant both in the coastal ports and in the inland capital of Anuradhapura.<sup>72</sup> Even Iranian influence has been identified in the way that pleasure gardens were built, imitating those of the Achaemenid gardens of Cyrus at Pasargadae.<sup>73</sup> Based on the discoveries of a Nestorian cross in Anuradhapura and a seal from Manthai, we could argue that at least some of the trade was organized by Christians coming from the Gulf. The presence of Nestorians from Persia can also be found in the *Christian Topography* (Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography* 11.14). Moreover, Arab sources mention that in the time of Khosrow a Sassanid fleet managed to seize the whole island of Sri Lanka.<sup>74</sup> This claim is totally absent in other sources. The Chinese, who frequented the island, would surely have reported such an event if it ever happened. However, Dmitriev suggests that this allusion might be a consequence of the Sassanid commercial influence on the island.<sup>75</sup>

The position that the Sassanid merchants gained in the Indian Ocean trade was such that indirect trade with China was common. Sri Lanka must have been the centre of this trade, and it functioned as a place in which the Chinese could buy products from India, the Gulf and the Red Sea in exchange for silk. Such zones during the 4th and 7th centuries formed part of regional networks of maritime commerce which stretched from Alexandria to Chiang-h'ang.<sup>76</sup> Regional nodes

---

71 De Saxce (2017) 68. Findings from the site of Kuchchaveli

72 Schenk (2007) 62; 116 sherds of Blue-glazed wares and 59 sherds of torpedo jars have been found in total.

73 De Saxce (2017) 68.

74 Dmitriev (2017) 734. The authorities that mention this event are Hamza al-Isfahani, Ṭabarī and Tha'alibi.

75 Dmitriev (2017) 735.

76 Power (2012) 93.

and networks developed and connected with each other, creating a net of direct and indirect trade of global significance.

Thanks to the Christian Nestorian expansion in Late Antiquity, Christian merchants of Fars and Seleucia–Ctesiphon managed to control a great part of the Western Indian trade. Consequently, the Red Sea axis started to decline in importance as the Ethiopian and Roman economy started to stagnate.

The case of Southern Arabia seems more complex. All historical sources agree that the Sassanid conquest of the Himyarite kingdom had negative effects due to the destructiveness of the campaign. Theophylact Simocatta confirms that the Sassanid attack had caused irreparable damage to the Himyarites (Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 3. 9.6) while Photius, citing Theophanes of Byzantium, also mentions that the capital Zafar was pillaged (Photius, *Bibliotheca* 4. 270–71). Modern scholars such as Michael Morony understand the relationship between Southern Arabia and Persia through a colonial paradigm, in which the periphery served the centre for economic extraction.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the conquest brought with it Persian communities who established themselves in strategic positions from which they could engage in logistical planning. These communities were more prominent at Ṣan‘ā’ and Dhamār in the inner land from where they could control agricultural and mining exploitation.<sup>78</sup> The port of Aden also received Persian migrants who had probably engaged in direct trade with the Gulf.<sup>79</sup>

Despite some logistical innovations conducted by the Persians newcomers in agriculture and mining, the situation in Southern Arabia became quite delicate. Arabic historical tradition tells us that at the outset of the Islamic expansion in Yemen, the regional authority had crumbled and was fractioned into smaller political factions.<sup>80</sup>

These changes indicate that the main economic axis of the Indian Ocean switched from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf due to the activity of the Sassanian traders in the Ocean. Christian Nestorian traders seem to have been effective in expanding their commercial networks in competition with the Roman and Aksumite merchants. Even the Himyarite economic force seems to have

---

77 Morony (2001) in Power (2012) 128.

78 Power (2012) 130. These Persian communities were named Abnā’ or ‘sons’. The Yemeni geographer al–Hamdānī writing in the 10th century mentions that all the miners of the region were from Persian origin, attesting the implication that the Sassanid migrants would have had in such industries.

79 Power (2012) 130. It has been suggested that the increase in silver minting in Fars might be due to the imported silver from Yemeni mines. Nevertheless, until any of the samples are tested, we cannot argue in favour of such an argument.

80 Power (2012) 130. Power suggests that this division might have been part of a divide and rule strategy for controlling the region, although this tendency seems to have been noted already under the Himyarite kingdoms last phase.

been subjected to work for the Sassanid centres and no longer constituted an independent power. In addition, the profitable Indian trade would find new ways to overpass the Sassanid control towards the Mediterranean.

For instance, according to Rubin the Byzantines benefited from a geopolitical change in Central Asia. Turkish tribes managed to defeat Chinese forces forcing them to open the silk trade. As a consequence, Sogdian–Turkish diplomats arrived in Constantinople in 569 CE offering the Byzantines access to Silk and an alliance against the Sassanids.<sup>81</sup> Hence, the Black Sea region started to gain importance for the acquisition of eastern commodities to the detriment of the Red Sea.

## Conclusions

During the centuries before the onset of the Muslim expansion, the Western Indian Ocean was directly connected with the Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity. New competitors entered the Indian markets after the international crisis of the 3rd century, hence bringing an end to Roman superiority in the sea. Aksumites, Himyarites and Sassanids competed with each other for eastern commodities such as spices, silk or other precious items. However, this new polycentric ocean saw an increase in regional connectivity. The nascent Sassanid empire developed a strong commercial policy never seen before in the Persian Gulf, while the Red Sea basin maintained itself as an important economic region. From here, eastern commodities could arrive to the Mediterranean markets thanks to the help of the Aksumite intermediaries.

Moreover, religious affiliation would have a significant role in this new contested sea. The expansion of Christianity, both in the Gulf and in the Red Sea, predicted a change in spiritual values; monotheism spread through the seas. Roman Christians from the Red Sea helped Christianise the Aksumite kingdom, creating economic, military and religious bonds that would last for long.<sup>82</sup> Equally, the spread of Christianity would be crucial for the Sassanid Empire, which would use Nestorian merchants as mediators with the Indian markets of the Malabar coast. After the Muslim conquest of the Sassanid empire, the Christian communities living in the Gulf would survive and prosper until the 10th century with an increase in missionary activities towards India and China.<sup>83</sup> On the contrary, their participation in economic activities decreased.

During the 6th and 7th centuries the Western Indian Ocean also became a space of political and economic contest. Sassanid merchants managed to

---

81 Rubin (2008) 195

82 Note again that the religious bonds between Egypt and Ethiopia have lasted until our days.

83 Carter (2008).

control a big share of the international trade of Arabia, India and Sri Lanka. As a consequence, the attempts by the Byzantines and Aksumites to counterbalance the situation were concentrated in the conquest of Himyarite kingdom of Yemen. Despite initial success, the territories of Southern Arabia ended up in the hands of the Sassanids, hindering the Byzantine–Aksumite alliance’s access to the Indian and Arabian markets.

It must be mentioned that this confrontation devastated both shores on either side of the Bab el–Mandeb strait. In fact, the South Arabian prosperous commerce in incenses that had made the region famous since the mythical times of King Solomon was severely affected. Only the region of the Hijaz survived these terrific events, from where Islam would emerge some decades after. Inland caravan routes passing through Mecca, ruled by the Quraysh tribe to which Muhammad himself belonged, did not stop, and continued to benefit the region’s economy. The consolidation of oasis agriculture and the spread of the Arabic language outside its borders would contribute to the Islamic expansion.

The rise of Islam from this world would once again transform the Indian Ocean. However, as had happened with the crisis of the 3rd century, the new Arab Sea would re–adapt the previously existing networks. Thus, from a *long durée* perspective, the Indian Ocean was continuously entering phases of expansion and contraction in which the re–adaptation of trading networks became the main pillar of change. This is well illustrated by the case of East Africa, one that is rarely mentioned. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea gives valuable information with respect to this phenomenon. When the Roman merchants started to sail the coast of East Africa, they followed an existing trading network that connected the mentioned coast with the Yemeni port of Muza. Although the Periplus refers to Arab merchants as the ones in charge of this trade, we do not know to whom in particular he is referring (*Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, 16). In addition, it seems that the ruler of Muza also had some kind of political control over the African port of Rhapta. Thus, this same trade route would be adapted by the Romans to their own networks and sailing seasons until at least the crisis of the 3rd century. Furthermore, archaeologists suspect that the route might have been adapted again by merchants from the Sassanid empire due to the findings of some Mesopotamian torpedo jars. Finally, with the Islamic expansion, the route would be re–adapted one more time under the Arabs, establishing ties that would lead to the Islamisation of the region. Similar processes happened at different points of the Western Indian Ocean, from India to Gulf or from Sri Lanka to the Red Sea.

With the conquest of Egypt by Amr ibn al–As and his troops in 646 CE, Roman pretensions came to an end after seven centuries of active participation in the Indian Ocean trade system. However, its impact should not be overlooked, because it shaped and influenced international politics and economics for several centuries. With the advance of Islam new scenarios and competitors would appear.

## Primary Sources:

- Berggren J.L. & Jones A. (trs.) (2000) *Ptolemy – Geografia* (New York: Princeton).
- Bostock J. & Riley H.T. (trs.) (1855) *Pliny the Elder – Natural History* (Cambridge University Press).
- Casson L. (tr.) (1989) *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton University Press).
- Chabot J.B. (tr.) (1899–1924) *Michael the Syrian – Chronique de Michel le Syrien* (Paris).
- Church A.J., Brodribb W.J. & Bryant, S. (trs.) (1942) *Tacitus – Annals* – (New York: Random House)
- Dewing H.B. (tr.) (1914) *Procopius – Persian Wars* (New York: Cosimo Classics).
- Freese J.H. (tr.) (1920) *Photius – Bibliotheca* (SPCK).
- Hamilton H.C. & Falconer W. (trs.) (1903) *Strabo – Geography* (London: George Bell Sons).
- Harrak A. (tr.) (1999) *Chronicle of Zuqānīn* (Toronto University Press).
- Hill J.E. (tr.) (2003) *Fan Ye – Hou Hanshu* (University of Washington) Seen at: [https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou\\_han\\_shu.html](https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou_han_shu.html).
- Jeffreys E., Jeffreys M. & Scott R. (trs.) (1986) *John Malalas – Chronicle of John Malalas* (Melbourne).
- Mango, C. & R. Scott (trs.) (1997) *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford University Press).
- P. Lunde & C. Stone (trs.) (2007) *Al-Mas'ūdī. Murūj – From the Meadows of Gold* (London).
- Rolfe J.C. (tr.) (1935–1940) *Ammianus Marcellinus Res Gestae* – (Cambridge, Oxford University Press).
- Rosenthal F. (tr.) (1989) *Al-Tabari – The History of Al-Tabari Book IV* (SUNY Press).
- Watson A. (tr.) (1998) *Justinian I – Digest* (University of Pennsylvania Press).
- Watson J.S. (tr.) (1853) *Eutropius – Breviarium Historiae Romanae* (London, Convent Garden).
- Winstedt E.O. (tr.) (1909) *Cosmas Indicopleustes – Christian* (Cambridge University Press).

## Bibliography:

- A. M. Hirt (2010) *Imperial mines and quarries in the Roman world: organizational aspects 27 BC – AD 235* (Oxford).
- Aubert J. (2011) 'Trajan's Canal: River Navigation from the Nile to the Red Sea', in De Romanis F. and Maiuro M. (eds.) *Across the Ocean: Nine Essays on Indo-Mediterranean Trade* (Boston: Brill) 33–42.
- Ball W. (2001) *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London & New York).
- Beeston F.L. (1984) 'The Martyrdom of Azqir. Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies', *Archaeopress* 15, 5–10.

- Bentley J.H. (1993) *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern times* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Blainey G. (1966) *The Tyranny of distance: How distance shaped Australia's History* (Sun Books).
- Borell B., Bellina B. and Chaisuwan B. (2014) 'Contacts between the Upper Thai-Malay Peninsula and the Mediterranean world', in Revire N and Murphy S.A. (eds.) *Before Siam was Born: New Insights on the Art and Archaeology of Pre-Modern Thailand and its Neighbouring Regions* (River Books) 99–117.
- Brown P. (1971) *The World of Late Antiquity* (London: Thames & Hudson).
- Carter R.A. (2008). "Christianity in the Gulf during the first centuries of Islam". *Arabian Archaeology and epigraphy* 19, pp. 71–108.
- Caseau B. (2007) 'Incense and fragrances: from house to church. A study of the introduction of incense in the early Byzantine Christian churches', in Grünbart M., Kislinger E., Muthesius A. and Stathakopoulos D.C. (eds.) *Material culture and well-being in Byzantium (400–1453)* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press) 75–92.
- Day R. (2011) 'Imitation in Aksumite coinage and Indian imitations of Aksumite coins' *Rosetta* 9.5, 16–22
- De Romanis F. (2010–2011) 'Playing Sudoku on the Verso of the Muziris Papyrus: Pepper, Malabathron and Tortoise Shell in the Cargo of the Hermapollon', *Journal of Ancient Indian History* 27, pp. 75–101,
- De Saxce A. (2017) 'Local Networks and Long-distance Trade: The Role of the Exchanges between Sri Lanka and India during the Mediterranean Trade', in Mathew K.S. (ed.) *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean regions and Muziris: New perspectives in Maritime Trade*, 53–73.
- Desanges J. (1978) 'Recherches sur l'activité des Méditerranéens aux confins de l'Afrique (ive siècle avant J.-C. – ive siècle après J.-C.)', *Coll. de l'Ecole Française de Rome* 38.
- Dmitriev V.A. (2017) 'The Sassanid Navy revisited: An unwritten chapter in Iran's military history' *The International Journal of Maritime History* 29 (4), 727–737.
- Duncan-Jones R.P. (2018) 'The Antonine Plague Revisited', *Arctos* 52, 41–73.
- Hatke G. (2013) *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (New York University Press).
- Hoyland, R.G. (2001) *Arabia and the Arabs. From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*. London & New York.
- Lieu S.N.C. (1986) 'Captives, Refugees and Exiles: A Study of Cross-Frontier Civilian Movements and Contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian' in Freeman P. and Kennedy D. (eds.) *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East 2* (Oxford: BAR International Editions) 475–505.
- Malekandathil P. (2002) 'The Sassanids and the Maritime trade of India during the Early Medieval Period' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 156–173.

- Mayerson P. (1993) 'A confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine sources', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (2), 169–174.
- McLaughlin R. (2014) *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean: The Ancient World Economy and the Kingdoms of Africa, Arabia and India* (Great Britain, Pen & Sword Military).
- Morony M.G. (2001–2002) 'The Late Sasanian Economic Impact on the Arabian Peninsula'. *Name-ye Iran-e Bastan/ The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies* 1, 25–37.
- Morony M.G. (2008) *Should Sasanian Iran be included in Late Antiquity?* Lecture delivered as part of the Oxford Centre for Late Antiquity lecture series. 20th May
- Munro-Hay S.C.H. (1991) *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*. Edinburgh.
- Munro-Hay S.C.H. (1999) *Catalogue of the Aksumite Coins in the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum)
- Pankhurst R. (1961) *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia from Early Times to 1800* (London: Lalibela House).
- Peacock D. and Blue L. (2007) *The Ancient Red Sea Port of Adulis, Eritrea: Report of the Eritro-British Expedition, 2004–2005* (Oxford: Oxbow).
- Power T. (2012) *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate AD 500–1000* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press).
- Power, T. C. 2009. The Red Sea Economy during the 'long' Late Antiquity, AD 500 – 1000. D.Phil. Thesis, Univer – sity of Oxford.
- Rubin Z. (1989) 'Byzantium and Southern Arabia: the Policy of Anastasius', in French D.H. and Lightfoot C.S. (eds.) *The Eastern Frontiers of the Roman Empire, Proceedings of a Colloquium held at Ankara in September* (Oxford) 383–420.
- Rubin Z. (2008) 'Islamic Traditions on the Sassanian Conquest of the Himyarite Realm'. *Der Islam* 84.2, 185–199.
- Russu I.I. (1975) *Inscriptile Daciei Romane I* (Bucarest).
- Schenk H. (2007) 'Parthian Glazed Pottery from Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean Trade' *Zeitschrift für Archäologie Aufereuropaischer Kulturen* 2, 56–79.
- Sedov A. V. (2010). 'Place of Qa`ni', in the Rome-Indian sea-trade in Salles J. F. and Sedov A. V. (eds.) *Qani: le port antique du Hadramawt entre la Méditerranée, l'Afrique et l'Inde Fouilles russes 1972, 1985–1989, 1991, 1993–1994*, (Turnhout: Brepols) 453–474.
- Seland E.H. (2010) *Ports and Political Power in the Periplus: Complex Societies and Maritime Trade on the Indian Ocean in the First Century AD* (British Archaeological Reports).
- Seland E.H. (2014) 'Archaeology of Trade in the Western Indian Ocean 300 BC – AD 700', *Journal of Archaeological Research* 22, 367–402.
- Sidebotham S.E (2011) *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route* (Berkeley: California University Press).
- Sidebotham S.E. (1986) *Roman Economic policy in the Erythra Thalassa 30 B.C. – A.D. 217*. (Mitchigan: University of Mitchigan).

- Sidebotham S.E. (1994) 'Preliminary Report on the 1990–1991 Seasons of Fieldwork at Abu Sha'ar (Red Sea Coast)', *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 31, 133–58.
- Silverstein A.J. (2007) 'From Markets to Marvels: Jews on the Maritime Route to China c.850 – c.950 CE'. *Journal of Jewish Studies* 58.1, 91–104.
- Slapak O. (1995) *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities* (Muzeon Yisrael: University Press of New England).
- Sreedhara Menon A. (2007) *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kerala, D C Books).
- Theophylact Simocatta. *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes*. M. & M. Whitby (trans.) 1986. Oxford.
- Tomber R. (2007) 'Bishops and Traders: The Role of Christianity in the Indian Ocean during the Roman Period', in P. & J. Starkey (eds.) *Red Sea III: Natural Resources and Cultural Connections of the Red Sea* (Oxford: Papers presented at the British Museum 27 & 28 October 2006) 219–228.
- Tomber R. (2017) 'The Roman Pottery from Pattanam', in Mathew K.S. (ed.) *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean regions and Muziris: New perspectives in Maritime Trade* (New Delhi) 381–394.
- Villeneuve, F., Phillips, C. & Facey, W. 2004. Une inscription latine de l'archipel Farasan (sud de la mer Rouge) et son contexte archéologique et historique. *Arabia* 2: 143–190.
- Vink M.P.M. (2007). "Indian Ocean Studies and the 'new thalassology'. *Journal of Global History* 2, pp. 41–62.
- Whitehouse D. and Williamson A. (1973) 'Sasanian Maritime Trade', *Iran* 11, 29–49.
- Zazzaro C. (2013) 'The Ancient Red Sea Port of Adulis and the Eritrean Coastal Region: Previous Investigations and Museum Collections' *BAR International Series* 2569 (Oxford: Archaeopress).
- Zazzaro C. and Manzo A. (2012) 'A preliminary assessment on the pottery assemblage from the port town of Adulis (Eritrea)', *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* 18, 233–246.

# Contents

## Views on Treason in Ancient Greece:

### Supporting Philip II of Macedon in Fourth-Century Athens

*Nikolaos Anargyros Cheimaras*

## Rethinking Indo–Mediterranean Relations: New Approaches to the Roman Indian Ocean Following the 3rd Century Crisis.

*Jon Mateo Gabilondo Gutierrez*

## Creating Roman Identity: Caesar’s *Bello Gallico* and the Enfranchisement of Cisalpine Gaul

*Lars Sheppard–Larsen*

## Virginity and Purity: Implications of the Vestals’ Sexual Status

*Sisi Xie*

## Lil Nas X and the Classical Tradition: Exploring Classical Imagery in the Montero (CMBYN) Music Video

*Yentl Love*

## Between Personal and Institutional Devotion in Mesopotamia: The Divine Feminine in the Diyala’s Glyptic (3rd Millennium BC)

*Vera Gonçalves*

## Contact and Exchanges between Babylon and Ḫattuša: The Influence of the *āšipū* and the *asū* on the Hittite Healing Tradition (14th and 13th Centuries BCE)

*Ana Satiro*

## Communicating Power and Legitimacy? Dynastic Display in Ancient Persia and the Near East

*Clare E. Parry*

## The Colosseum on the Silver Screen: The Allure of Hollywood Gladiators for the Alt–Right

*Alexandra Sills*



Malta  
Classics  
Association

[classicsmalta.org](http://classicsmalta.org)



THE  
FARSONS  
FOUNDATION

ISBN: 978-9918-21-332-0



9 789918 213320