

## **Ships Passing in the Night? Reflections on the Middle East in the Indian Ocean**

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The study of the Middle East is witnessing a sea change (excuse the maritime metaphor). The traditional geographic poles of Middle East studies (Turkey, Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq) stand firm, but are now facing a challenge from places once thought to be peripheral to the historiography: namely, South Arabia and the Gulf. The rising tide of scholarship on those areas is due in large measure to the opportunities that now present themselves in resituating them historically, and thinking about them as part of broader transoceanic worlds. This reorientation has made itself clear in the growing number of publications that wrestle with the Middle East's maritime frontiers—especially in the sister disciplines of history and anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Here I limit myself to just one of those disciplines—history—and chart out the waves of contact between historians of the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. I offer no argument, but rather a survey of where the field has been and the opportunities that lie ahead.

The field of Indian Ocean history might have existed in one form or another for many decades now, but one could argue that it came into being with the publication of K.N. Chaudhuri's *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean*—a masterful survey of Indian Ocean history from the rise of Islam to the mid-18th century whose author drew inspiration from Fernand Braudel's work on the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> From its inception, the field acted as a surrogate for the broader study of world history of the sort that scholars such as Eric Wolf and Philip Curtin had envisioned in their writings, but with a tighter focus (if one can call it that) around the trading worlds of monsoon Asia and its invaders.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the sweeping survey continues to be a staple of Indian Ocean history; every five years or so we seem to be treated to another broadly framed study of the Indian Ocean in world history.<sup>4</sup>

Why does this matter to historians of the Middle East? It matters in part because historians of the Indian Ocean immediately recognized the importance of the Middle East, from Egypt to Iran, to the stories they were trying to tell. Chaudhuri's work and subsequent surveys often anchored the flows of people and commodities that characterized the Indian Ocean world in port cities such as Basra, Muscat, Hormuz, Jeddah, and Aden—all of which historians of the Middle East would have been likely to claim as falling within their purview. Even the imperial narratives in Indian Ocean history featured common stories heard in Middle East history: Omani maritime battles with the Portuguese, Mamluk-sponsored Egyptian ships carrying coffee to India, and traveling personages such as Ibn Battuta, to take only a few examples. The difference, of course, is that while these were of critical importance to Indian Ocean historians seeking to trace out the enduring connections between Arabia, Africa, and Asia, they were generally peripheral to the concerns of historians of the Middle East.

As the historiography on the Indian Ocean came into being, and as Indian Ocean historians reached out to tether events and personalities in the Middle East into their

world, Middle Easternists remained largely silent. Whereas historians of South Asia and East Africa quickly realized the potential that the Indian Ocean world offered them in terms of broadening the boundaries of area studies, Middle East historians continued to look inward, wrestling with their own historiographical demons, rather than looking out across the sea. There were some notable exceptions, of course: John Wilkinson, Mohammed Reda Bhacker, Hala Fattah, and Thabit Abdullah all realized that it was impossible to write histories of Muscat, Basra, and the Gulf without engaging with the histories of India and East Africa.<sup>5</sup> They embraced the potential that the Indian Ocean arena offered for breaking out of the stale narratives and stagnant historiographies that characterized the study of the Gulf and South Arabia, and at a time when few others did.

The contributions of these historians went beyond redrawing the boundaries of South and East Arabia, historically considered to be marginal to the field of Middle East studies; they had a lot to say about the Indian Ocean, too. The first wave of histories of the Indian Ocean (i.e., Chaudhuri and others) relied primarily on the records of the European empires and trading companies that established themselves in the region, leading to the impression that the earlier Muslim trading networks that had once dominated the Indian Ocean gradually fell apart in the face of Portuguese, Dutch, or British hegemony. By drawing on new materials, historians of Oman and Southern Iraq pushed against the notion that European empires smothered Muslim traders into inexistence; they saw lively transoceanic connections that persisted well into the 19th century, and sketched out new arcs in the maritime history of the region. Beyond a handful of studies, however, scholars missed out on the opportunity to integrate the Middle East into the history of the Indian Ocean. As a result, the study of places such as southern Yemen and the Gulf stagnated, and they became sidelined in a growing conversation about the Indian Ocean in world history. The Arabian Peninsula writ large had yet to be fully integrated into Indian Ocean history.

Things began to change with the transnational turn in history, which swept the discipline at the beginning of the 2000s and gave rise to a growing number of studies that sought to rethink the spatial contours of the histories of Arabia and Persia.<sup>6</sup> The decade saw an explosion in scholarship bridging the Middle East and the Indian Ocean: Sebouh Aslanian's expansive study of Armenian merchant networks in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean; Roxani Margariti's deep reading of the life of medieval Aden; Nancy Um's beautifully told oceanic history of architecture in the port of Mocha; James Onley's resuscitation of Gulf history through the study of merchants, rulers, and imperial officials; and, of course, Engseong Ho's richly textured analysis of the movements and writings of Hadrami sayyids around the Indian Ocean.<sup>7</sup> These studies cast their nets into the sea from the shores of the Middle East, hauling back visible proof of the bounty that the Indian Ocean had to offer.

If the first attempts by historians of the Middle East to engage with the literature on the Indian Ocean pushed against the imperial narrative, this new work forced a rethinking of the archival mediums through which scholars might conceptualize transregional connectivity more broadly. Aslanian's work has forced historians to think much more deeply about the materiality and agency of mercantile correspondence in shaping transregional networks, while Margariti's and Um's writings have illustrated the potential for imagining how maritime trading worlds might leave an imprint on the built environments of port cities. Ho's work brings together all of these, drawing on traveling texts

and grave sites around the Indian Ocean to show how a long-standing, far-flung diaspora of Hadrami sayyids left its imprint on a transoceanic circuit of pilgrimage sites and texts.

Beyond their conceptual interventions, all of these works showed the payoff of reimagining transregional connectivity through local sources, whether in Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, or Julfan Armenian. Rather than read against the grain of the imperial archive to hear local voices, these authors eschew those archives altogether, or at least relegate them to a secondary status; instead, they get their hands dirty with local materials that were either overlooked or previously unavailable. What we end up with, then, is a Braudel-inspired narrative of Middle East history in which the rise and fall of different empires were not epoch-making transformations, but rather murmurs in the background of more enduring vectors of interregional connectivity—an approach that contrasts with trans-Atlantic histories, in which European imperial agents forged the principal routes of transoceanic migration.

And if recent work is any indication, the Middle East has lots to offer by way of materials for historians thinking about different modalities of transoceanic movement. Some are firmly established in the field of Middle East studies: Amal Ghazal and Anne Bang's studies demonstrate how Muslim treatises (including but not limited to theological and jurisprudential texts) might be used to trace connections between Arabia and Africa, while Joel Blecher's work on hadith commentaries moves from Arabia to India and back. Nile Green's book takes a different but equally evocative tack, reading religious pamphlets and other ephemera alongside more enduring treatises to sketch the contours of working-class religious communities in Bombay and beyond.<sup>8</sup> And Giancarlo Casale's study of Ottoman flirtations with Indian Ocean expansion relies primarily on manuscript histories and travel narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Others have had luck finding materials off the beaten path, in family libraries and archives within archives. My own research traces connections between the Persian Gulf, South Arabia, and East Africa through caches of promissory notes, combining them with local *fatāwā* on transoceanic transactions to map out a shared world of commerce and law. Matthew Hopper reads slave manumission petitions from the Persian Gulf to trace the modern history of the slave trade from East Africa to Arabia. And Gagan Sood's recent work draws on a cache of Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish documents found at the National Archives (UK)—a confiscated parcel of mail that ended up there owing to an act of piracy—to trace the multidimensional ties that bound India to the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> More will surely follow.

All of this and I haven't even mentioned the terrific scholarship in anthropology—particularly on the Indian communities of the Gulf.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it seems to be a good time for those of us thinking about Middle Eastern connections to the Indian Ocean. The scholarship has reached a critical mass, and there are now Indian Ocean themed panels at MESA—unheard of a decade ago. Former backwaters of scholarship such as the Gulf are now enjoying their moment in the sun. The debates and materials with which historians are engaging are broadening in exciting ways, and the pool of interlocutors now include scholars working on Africa and South and Southeast Asia.

And yet the transformation is not yet complete. Far too much scholarship on Indian Ocean history (and connections to the Middle East) is still of the old imperial variety, but dressed in a sexier garb—"old wine in new bottles," as one historian once put it.<sup>12</sup> Though this is not inherently problematic, it does miss the opportunity to push both

fields forward and realize the potential that the Indian Ocean offers for thinking about connections that transcend the boundaries of traditional area studies. Another related problem has been the tendency to tack the Indian Ocean onto what is effectively a national story; transregional connections here are an afterthought, rather than the central concern. While the oceanic dimension might enrich the national story, it does little to free us from the limitations that the nation-state has placed on our historical imagination and to help us conceptualize transregional connectivity in history—all of which was central to the Indian Ocean enterprise from early on.

Where does that leave us? Well, with a lot of promise and a fair amount of suggestive execution, but still a little short of an established position in the field of Middle East studies. Those of us who are pushing to see more of the Indian Ocean in the Middle East might be sensing a tidal shift, but perhaps still feel as if we're lagging behind the Mediterranean, which (at least from the vantage point of the other ocean) appears more iron-clad in its Middle Eastern credentials. And yet, it is difficult to imagine the Middle East today without engaging with the dense commercial, political, and religious networks that bind the Arabian Peninsula to Africa and South Asia. Recent work shows us that writing about this historically necessitates embracing the movement of people that forged these connections, but also (and perhaps more importantly) taking seriously the circulation of local texts, ideas, objects, practices, and institutions that created this shared arena, and seeking out counterintuitive (and specifically non-European) sources. For all that has already been accomplished, it is clear that there is much left to be done to write the Middle East into the history of the Indian Ocean.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Roundtable: The Indian Ocean and Other Middle Easts,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 34 (2014): 549–98.

<sup>2</sup>K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup>Richard Hall, *Empires of the Monsoon: A History of the Indian Ocean and Its Invaders* (London: HarperCollins, 1998); Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>Most recently, see M.N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Edward Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup>John C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Mohammed Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar* (London: Routledge, 1992); Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia, and the Gulf, 1745–1900* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1997); Thabit Abdullah, *Merchants, Mamluks, and Murder: The Political Economy of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Basra* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>This was not the first transnational turn in history. See “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111 (2006): 1441–64.

<sup>7</sup>Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010); Nancy Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 2009); Roxani Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Engseong Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup>Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the Western Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Amal Ghazal, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism: Expanding the Crescent from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (1880s–1930s)* (London: Routledge, 2010); Anne Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860–1925* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

<sup>9</sup>Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup>Gagan Sood, *India and the Islamic Heartlands: An Eighteenth-Century World of Circulation and Exchange* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Matthew Hopper, *Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015); Fahad Ahmad Bishara, "Paper Routes: Inscribing Islamic Law across the Nineteenth-Century Western Indian Ocean," *Law and History Review* 32 (2014): 797–820.

<sup>11</sup>See Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012); and Andrew Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community of Bahrain* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010). See also works by Caroline and Filippo Osella.

<sup>12</sup>Markus Vink, "Indian Ocean Studies and the 'New Thalassology,'" *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007): 41–62.