

Sindbad's Ocean: Reframing the Market in the Middle East**JOHAN MATHEW**Department of History, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, N.J.; e-mail: johan.mathew@gmail.comdoi:[10.1017/S002074381600088X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381600088X)

There are few figures as universally beloved and yet recognizably “Middle Eastern” as Sindbad. The text of Sindbad’s seven voyages travel easily across continents and languages and many of the tales blur imperceptibly into those of Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. Yet this swashbuckling adventurer is also firmly situated in the world of Abbasid Iraq and the Indian Ocean world. Sindbad is clearly identified as a good Muslim and respected Baghdadi merchant, and while fantastical, there are recognizable geographic and cultural markers that locate his voyages within the Indian Ocean world.¹ This iconic character of Arab popular culture pushes us to contemplate how easily the Arab world flows into that of the Indian Ocean.

However, Sindbad offers more than just a connection to the Indian Ocean world. He also presents the rather curious amalgamation of a brave adventurer and a wealthy merchant. Sindbad does not evoke the image of a “fat cat” or a capitalist pig; he reminds us that the mercantile life was spent not hunched over an accounting ledger, but rather engaged with strange cultures and violent situations. The markets in which Sindbad earned his profits were reached through tortuous terrains, and the markets themselves were often opaque and dangerous spaces. His exchanges were frequently unequal and permeated with violence; he needed sharp wits but also brute strength. Sindbad’s world chafes against an abstract discourse of markets that permeates neoclassical economics. The neoclassical model of the market assumes an empty, homogenous space where everyone is on equal footing. The only coercion one can exercise in this imaginary space is the power to pay more, or to sell for less. And of course, such a market has well-defined and well-monitored boundaries. This is all perfectly reasonable to assume when trying to construct a mathematical model, but it bears little resemblance to the lived experience of economic exchange in Sindbad’s world or in ours.

Sindbad and the Indian Ocean world thus offer new perspectives on the economic history of the Middle East. They push us to consider the boundaries of the economy, the physical and visceral experience of exchange, and the spaces that constitute market exchange. Economic statistics and national bureaucracies have naturalized the idea of a uniform market space or a territorial nation-state as a cohesive container of economic activity. However, if we shift our perspective from the land to the sea, suddenly these spaces don’t appear quite so natural. Markets and transactions are concentrated not in the middle of the ocean but at its edges, and the waves are not a stable terrain but an unpredictable and dangerous one that destroys trade as often as it facilitates it. It is impossible to dismiss the vast, complex, and changing geographies of the ocean littoral as a defined boundary of economic activity. The frantic negotiations in harbors, the constant regulatory triage in customs houses, and secretive landings in secluded coves belie the veracity of GDP or trade statistics. The ocean thus forces us to reckon with the *topography* of markets.

The ocean also draws our attention to the material ways in which statistical homogeneity is produced. A tremendous amount of physical and intellectual labor goes into producing a statistical vision of the economy as a flat and contained space of exchange. It requires reams of documentation, sophisticated statistical tools, and armies of customs officers. The ocean, though, is an awkward space between these territorial economies, so it must be represented as an empty void. The waters host pirates, smugglers, and a wide variety of illicit activities that impact transactions on shore. Coast guard cruisers must patrol shallow waters, and submarines stalk the deep in order to suppress piracy, catch smugglers, and ensure the freedom of trade between national economies. A great deal of expense and violence goes into eliding the complexities of the ocean so that we can maintain the image of contained and controlled territorial economies. Consequently, the ocean is not merely a different terrain of exchange; it is also constitutive of the uniform and territorial image of the free market.

Yet if economists have mostly neglected the ocean, economic historians of the Middle East have hardly ignored the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean. For well over half a century scholars have debated the identity and organization of the Karimi merchants or the trading practices of the Maghribi Jewish diaspora.² Historians of Yemen and Oman have followed the fascinating history of trading diasporas originating in Southern Arabia.³ More recent scholarship has tended to move away from this older tradition of economic history that has perhaps been tainted by association with Marxist determinism or Orientalism. While it is vital to resist the temptation to conflate different Muslim cultures along the Indian Ocean littoral or to uncritically accept the World-Systems theory model of capitalism, there is much to recommend in this historiography. These scholars were not constrained by colonial or national boundaries and thus explored what today we would call south–south interactions. They were not consumed with the question of the divergence between the west and the rest, and consequently could explore other facets of how economic and cultural exchange actually occurred.

Scholarship on diasporas and oceans could not assume a division between mobile Europeans and immobile “natives.” While the postcolonial critique has been absolutely essential to scholarship on the Middle East, it has had a tendency to emphasize colonial power. The effort to find autonomous subaltern agency has been disappointing, in part because postcolonial scholarship has tended to assume immobile subalterns. An oceanic frame decenters Europe without provincializing it. Viewed from the Indian Ocean, European empires in the Middle East are entangled in cultural and commercial links with Ethiopia, Java, and Fujian. Scholars need not seek an authentically indigenous economic sensibility by immobilizing Arabs, Iranians, or Turks. Encountering Arabs on distant shores of the Indian Ocean or Swahilis deep in the heart of Anatolia allows us to see how vectors of capital move in myriad directions. The history of economic development and exploitation in colonized territories is certainly dominated by the forms of extraction identified by Rosa Luxemburg and J. A. Hobson. However, an oceanic framing of economic history turns what can be a two-dimensional relationship of extraction into a multidimensional web of extraction, subversion, and circulation.

A small but growing literature on histories of globalization in the Indian Ocean world draws on this oceanic perspective to provide new insights into the economic history of the Middle East and indeed the mechanisms of capitalism itself. Matthew Hopper’s recent book, *Slaves of One Master*, reimagines the Gulf as deeply integrated

into the 19th-century global economy, but only through the enslavement, migration, and labor of Africans.⁴ His work suggests that globalization in the Gulf was not simply the increasing extraction of dates and pearls, but the integration of African people and cultures into Khaliji society. Similarly, Sebouh Aslanian treats the Armenian diaspora from New Julfa as neither a peculiar example of precapitalist eastern trade nor simply an intermediary capitalist network.⁵ Aslanian is able to conceptualize how the circulations and communication practices of the Armenian diaspora cut across Europe and Asia rather than simply rehashing the teleological framing of a divergence between a dynamic capitalist west and a stagnant exploited east. In framing the Middle East within the ambit of the Indian Ocean world, these works pose new kinds of questions for economic history.

We are also witnessing the emergence of a literature on cultural studies of the economy in the Middle East. This scholarship is deeply situated in particular localities and attentive to the material qualities of commodities, built environments, and human bodies. Timothy Mitchell's *Rule of Experts* pioneered this trend through a critique of the technopolitical construction of national economies.⁶ Social scientists such as Arang Keshavarzian and Julia Elyachar have offered analyses of economic life deeply situated in bazaars and informal settlements but also embedded in broader social networks.⁷ Sherene Seikaly's *Men of Capital* draws our attention to gendered and classed bodies as well as the role of basic nutrition in sustaining both bodies and the body politic.⁸ This efflorescence of scholarship explodes conventional distinctions between politics and economy or the material and the intellectual. These works begin not with an abstract model, but with close attention to mechanisms and materialities. In following particular things through space, they are able to develop concepts that travel, yet are grounded in the specificities of social life in the Middle East.

On the one hand, we have a literature that shifts our view from "the state" to microlevel interactions and materialities of economic life; on the other hand, we have a historiography that broadens its scope out into the vastness of the ocean. Unfortunately, these two literatures do not seem to speak to each other. I must stretch the ambit of this reflection to find examples of scholarship that marry a focus on materialities with a focus on large-scale circulations. Ghislaine Lydon looks not to the Indian Ocean but to the Sahara as a similarly vast thoroughfare of trade.⁹ In her telling, the material qualities of paper transformed the organization of trade across the Sahara. However, far from a simple case of technological determinism, paper and ink first had to be insinuated into legal practice and kinship networks. On Barak's wonderful book, *On Time*, is neither about the economy nor the Indian Ocean, yet it shows how looking deeply at the material qualities of particular things can provide powerful insights on a broad scale.¹⁰ His description of Egypt—poised between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean—highlights how clocks, camels, and marine insects can occasionally play as large a role in global communications as European empires. In both texts, the physicality of particular things has a powerful role in determining the shape of vast networks. Consequently, this kind of scholarship opens up the possibility of looking at micro- and macroscales simultaneously, and tracing events in an expansive geography without imposing an artificial homogeneity.

Ultimately, this kind of scholarship reframes how we approach space and how diverse spaces shape exchange. Given the structure of state archives and the assumptions that undergird economic statistics, it is almost impossible to imagine economies beyond homogenous nation-states. In order to successfully resist this framing it is necessary to

both zoom in on how it *feels* to be in a particular market and zoom out to see the work that sustains and subverts our spatial imaginaries. Oceans are spaces where no one state can be sovereign, and where officials are forced to collaborate or compete in order to govern. Coastlines become places of intense anxiety where bureaucrats seek to control flows while unwittingly revealing slippages. The ocean—as well as the desert or the steppe—ultimately sheds light on the weaknesses of bureaucracies and their anxieties; it is thus terrain in which economic statistics are ill suited.

Few scholars would dispute that national borders have had an awkward and often violently contested history in the Middle East. Yet it is easier to critique territorial borders than to offer up a different vision of political and economic space. The scholarship recounted here suggests that attentiveness to pieces of paper, insects, human bodies, and ocean waves allows for histories that are not imprisoned in the lines of colonial maps. Moreover, this approach liberates scholarship on the Middle East from abstract economic concepts that continually render postcolonial societies failures for their inability to be “modern.” Neoclassical economics provides a static and rather hopeless vision of Middle East economies; following Sindbad across the ocean might open a richer and more nuanced space to explore markets and exchange.

NOTES

¹There are, of course, many variations and editions. See, for example, Richard F. Burton, *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night: A Plain and Literal English Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments*, vol. 6 (London: Private Printing by The Burton Club, 1885); and D. Pinault, “Sindbad,” in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998).

²E. Ashtor, “The Kārimī Merchants,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1956): 45–56; Walter J. Fischel, “The Spice Trade in Mamluk Egypt: A Contribution to the Economic History of Medieval Islam,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 1 (1958): 157–74; S. D. Goitein and Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). For a more recent treatment of these groups, see Roxani Eleni Margariti, *Aden & the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³Ulrike Freitag and W. G. Clarence-Smith, *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars, and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s–1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices, & Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770–1873* (London: J. Currey, 1987); Mohammed Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: The Roots of British Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁴Matthew Hopper, *Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁵Sebouh 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, 2014).

⁶Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).

⁷Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); Arang Keshavarzian, *Bazaar and State in Iran: The Politics of the Tehran Marketplace*, Cambridge Middle East Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Koray Çalıskan, *Market Threads: How Cotton Farmers and Traders Create a Global Commodity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁸Sherene Seikaly, *Men of Capital: Scarcity and Economy in Mandate Palestine* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁹Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in 19th-Century West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁰On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2013).