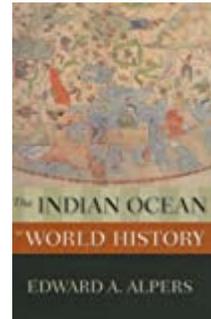


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Edward A. Alpers.** *The Indian Ocean in World History.* New Oxford World History Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Illustrations, maps. 172 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-533787-7; \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-516593-7.



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This slim volume appears in a series (New Oxford World History) that aims to publish histories that emphasize connectedness, present the narrative from various perspectives, and ultimately analyze and reconstruct the significant experience of all of humanity (series editors' preface, p. ix). The book addresses the vast Indian Ocean, which might nowadays be defined as stretching south to Australia, east to the South China Sea, and west to the east coast of Africa. But Edward A. Alpers cautions us that both the idea and reality of the ocean have changed through the millennia.

The book is divided into six chapters: the first discusses how the Indian Ocean was apprehended as a single entity. Logically enough, such conceptions were formed by travelers who journeyed through it rather than abided in one spot on its coast and that topic opens chapter 1. Experience of the sea is shaped by the vessels used to traverse it and the navigational and cartographic knowledge of the seafarers. The regular use of the monsoon winds around India, beginning perhaps 2,500 years ago, changed the outlines of the ocean as experienced by travelers by closely connecting certain harbors of eastern Africa with their counterparts in India and skipping others altogether. Alpers elegantly presents evidence from Roman, Arab, and European sources to illustrate this.

He also introduces archaeological evidence of settlement, trade, and migration by sea from very ancient times and uses both descriptions and images of the seacraft that traversed it.

This chapter transitions into one on the Ancient Indian Ocean, which spans the period from 5000 BCE to the expansion of Islam after 700 CE. The movements of resources that deeply affected everyday life, most especially many cultivated plants and a few domesticated animals, receive due attention. The unobtrusive but dramatic expansion of the Austronesian languages, today found from Madagascar to Hawaii and Easter Island, is explained in terms of the development of oceanic nomadism and its associated navigational techniques and knowledge (p. 26). This is a refreshing corrective to textbooks that focus exclusively on navigation between the early civilizations of the Old World. These too are, however, treated at appropriate length, though the largely inland campaigns of Alexander of Macedon are discussed too extensively in this chapter. It ends with what Alpers describes as a mid-sixth-century collapse of oceanic networks and major states, perhaps related to the spread of bubonic plague.

The next phase of the life of the Indian Ocean was

marked by its becoming an Islamic sea (chapter 3). Here the narrative begins at the eastern margin of the ocean. Older Buddhist circuits remained active but Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) harbors now had sizable settlements of Arab traders who had come around the coasts of India and southeast Asia, where culturally Indian states had been emerging through the first millennium CE. The narrative then shifts to the far west, the land of the wealthy Abbasid Caliphate, which drew commodities from across the ocean and sought to establish large-scale slave-worked farms in southern Iraq. The African slaves imported to toil here successfully rebelled (869-883 CE) and the system had to be abandoned. Large-scale slaving, Alpers notes, did not return until the eighteenth century. This chapter makes good use of the great travelogue of Ibn Battuta, but also of Marco Polo and Nicolo Conti. It ends with a discussion of the famous voyages of the Ming admiral Zheng He between 1405 and 1433. The representation of imperial power is then balanced by a discussion of those irrepressible subalterns, the various pirates who raided throughout the ocean.

Chapter 4 introduces the well-known story of Portuguese navigation and conquest in the Indian Ocean, which Alpers describes as a form of *state piracy* (p. 75). But these depredations did not go unchallenged; they were confronted by regional seamen from East Africa to Indonesia, and also the newly arriving Ottoman Empire that only retreated at the end of the sixteenth century. The Portuguese then consolidated their rule of the sea with strong coastal fortresses, just in time to meet attacks from Protestant nations seeking to break into the Indian Ocean trade. The result for a period was that *every player regarded ... its rivals as pirates* (p. 86). Lesser-known participants emerged too: the peoples of Madagascar with a few European expatriates formed states based on slave raiding and piracy. Nearby French plantations stimulated demand for the slaves the Malagasy captured. The establishment of the Siddi (Ethiopian) naval state at Janjira (Jazeera) near Mumbai finds mention, as does the rise of Oman as a militant empire that drove the Portuguese from several bases in East Africa between 1643 and 1698. Through all this, however, Gujarati merchants managed to deal with multiple powers and spread around the harbors on both sides of the ocean. This epoch ended gradually with the establishment of the British predominance over both local powers and European rivals that marked the *the long nineteenth century* (the title of chapter 5).

The dynamics of the ocean changed dramatically during the nineteenth century. Steam ships and the asso-

ciated coal depots altered sea routes, while ancient staples, like cloves, began to be grown outside their original centers and New World crops, such as rubber and cinchona, changed regional agriculture. Large epidemics of cholera spread across land and sea, killing tens of thousands. The Industrial Revolution overturned the world industrial order that had been based for centuries on the export of Indian cotton textiles. Imperial effort, especially British, reduced slave trading to minimal levels. Testimonies of slaves and slave catchers add an extra dimension to this chapter, which also rejects the glib identification of indentured labor with slavery. Alpers selects three groups of people who were prominent migrants in this century: Chinese, Indians, and Hadramis. The resident populations of the first two numbered 430 million and 250 million in 1850 respectively,[1] but the Hadramis came from a very small population. Those labeled such, however, filled the niche of Islamic religious leadership around the Indian Ocean. By the 1930s, 140,000 *could claim Hadrami origins* (p. 122). The operative word here (I think) is *claim*: high-status niches are very attractive. For example, the Arab tribe of the Quraish has multiplied enough to staff innumerable halal butcher shops in India. The nineteenth century thus saw more rapid transformations in the Indian Ocean world than any before the yet more transformative twentieth century, which is the subject of chapter 6.

Oil was struck in Khuzistan (Iran) in 1908, and then at various sites around the Gulf. Five other themes of the twentieth century can, Alpers argues, all be linked to it: air travel, the continued expansion of Islam, the threat of environmental catastrophe, resurgent piracy, and the renewed geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean. Postcolonial nationalism inevitably is featured in this chapter, both by way of new boundaries and ethnic discrimination against immigrant communities who had grown up under earlier imperial suzerainty. The expansion of pilgrimage networks and new strains of religious purism are duly analyzed. Oil wealth has led to a massive demand for labor and millions of expatriates have moved to toil in small Gulf states, dwarfing local populations. Enormous increases in trade alongside more vulnerable ships navigating marine bottlenecks, such as the Straits of Melaka, have allowed a resurgence of piracy. The better-known case of piracy off the coast of eastern Africa naturally figures prominently in this narrative. Then we move to a mention of museums and exhibitions showcasing maritime and migration histories. The chapter ends with a return to the experiences of ordinary people with memories of recent migration and dislocation.

This is an enormous span to cover in 146 pages of text. The book is nonetheless clear and readable, and the author unobtrusively but insistently brings in the tales of common folk and seafarers, both as victims and as perpetrators of violence. People's imaginings of the great ocean are presented in the first chapter, but are less prominent in the last, though surely it is significant that at the creation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, nineteen countries from South Africa to India joined, but not the Comoros, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan, or Myanmar, or any country on the South China Sea—a different imagination of the ocean was evidently at work in those parts (p. 143).

Not unexpectedly, there are a few misstatements which I correct here. Nearchos came to India *overland* from Persia with Alexander of Macedon, built a fleet on the Jhelum River, and sailed it to Babylonia on the return (p. 28). The Maurya Empire was founded in Alexander's time by Chandragupta; the Gupta dynasty reigned five hundred years later (p. 30). The name "Yava-dvipa" (modern Java?), if Sanskrit, means "Island of Barley," not of gold (p. 33).

The real weakness of the book for classroom or general use is the quality of the maps. There is no list of maps and some are confusingly drawn. For instance, in the "Ancient Indian Ocean" map (pp. 20-21), modern

names and ancient ones are juxtaposed in the same font as though they coexisted and successive empires are presented together but are geographically separated (e.g., "Persia" and "Sassanian Empire" or Gupta Empire and Maurya Empire). On another map (pp. 42-43), "Dwarka" (Gujarat, India) has been placed in Baluchistan (Pakistan or Iran); in the early modern map (pp. 72-73), Janjira is placed south of Goa whereas it lies a full two degrees north. On pages 100-101, "Plassey" has shifted about three hundred kilometers and a mysterious "Tanga" has appeared on the Brahmaputra River; several regions have moved to accommodate the labeler's convenience. Even the twentieth-century map is characterized by misleading labeling and spelling. Perhaps political correctness requires that each state get the same font, but it results in, for example, Kuwait lying partly in Iranian territory. Maps of unfamiliar regions are vitally needed to give students a sense of the spatial organization of the narrative. All the maps in this book could do with careful re-editing. It is a pity that this aspect of such a well-written volume with an excellent apparatus of references and suggestions for reading did not receive any attention.

#### Note

[1]. Sumit Guha, *Health and Population in South Asia from Earliest Times to the Present* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 4.

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