
On one of the hottest mornings in July, pedestrians in the New York City borough of Queens witnessed a petty marvel—a pristine In-N-Out cheeseburger, fashioned in California, lying in the middle of the pavement. The Internet roiled with speculation: how could a burger assembled thousands of miles away reach New York in such prime condition? A narrative soon emerged: ¹ a young woman, returning home on an overnight flight from San Diego, brought a few In-N-Out burgers along as sustenance. She took care to maintain the integrity of the product during the five-hour journey, forgoing the application of secret sauce and storing the vegetable components separately; but, in a cruel twist of fate, the paper bag housing the precious cargo spilled open as she rushed to catch an early morning bus, and one sandwich was lost to the curb. A mundane series of events explained away the mystery, and public interest evaporated almost instantly.

Ancient historians almost never achieve such an intimate nexus of commodity and personal history—we lack detailed human testimonies accompanying an item from its production to its consumption, destruction, or loss. That is particularly true of ancient Indian Ocean studies, which focus on the transportation and consumption of products in the wider Afro-Eurasian world, well beyond where we expect to find them. In the absence of quantitative data, early scholarly treatments of Indian spices at Rome or finds of Roman coins in India presented these “luxuries” in an almost mythic vein, fueled in no small part by charged descriptions in ancient literary sources. In recent years, archaeological discoveries, documentary fragments, and discussions of the practicalities of transport in an age before steam have given us reason to question our suppositions about how ancient maritime commerce functioned. Exotica colored the initial formation of Indian Ocean studies, but untold stories lurk in the accumulation of small and grubby details that have been overshadowed by myth and assumption.

Matthew Cobb’s *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century CE*, the culmination of a decade of scholarship since he completed his dissertation, delves deep into those details. His method is both critical and positivist, challenging long-standing claims in scholarship and acknowledging “the limits of what the evidence can tell us” (p. 27). This approach to evidence and theory alike leads Cobb in productive directions: he interrogates the scholarly tradition of viewing Indian Ocean products solely as “luxuries” (pp. 8–18, 205–207); he challenges ancient numerical figures often employed in the calculations of ancient economic history, whether it be Strabo’s count of the ships leaving Egypt for India (p. 46–47) or

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Pliny’s deficit figures (p. 274–277);² he further questions the alchemy behind such calculations, claiming that quantitative tactics are inappropriate when the evidence is so sparse (pp. 79–80). Cobb’s critical rigor is matched by his consideration of terminology and scope. Cobb acknowledges a much wider Indian Ocean world in his introductory Chapter 1, but carefully delineates the focus of his work, the “Roman” participation in the trade during the first three centuries of the Common Era (pp. 4–5). The designation “Indo-Roman trade,” which in many ways represents the old characterizations and assumptions of scholarship that Cobb seeks to challenge, makes no appearance in his work outside the Bibliography.

“Roman” participation, even by Cobb’s accommodating definition, may not best reflect the image of the trade presented in the work—in fact, a good portion of Cobb’s book (Chapters 2–4) takes place in Egypt, whether at its Red Sea ports of Berenike and Myos Hormos, along the roads of the Eastern Desert, or down the Nile to Alexandria. Cobb begins before Augustus, expanding what often amounts to a Ptolemaic footnote in treatments of the Roman-period trade into a full-fledged and nuanced prologue (pp. 28–60). Cobb argues against a “Roman” or “Augustan” impetus for Indian Ocean commerce, proposing instead a Roman-period intensification of the commercial developments of the latter stages of Ptolemaic rule in Egypt, which created fortified roads, institutional frameworks, familial connections, and pathways for investment capital necessary to support the trade’s expansion in the first century CE. This is one of the more significant results of the work—that in the *longue durée*, peoples of the Red Sea littoral pursued opportunity with or without Rome’s blessing.

Other proposed examples of direct “Roman” involvement in the trade via Egypt also come under scrutiny, including the investment of Italian families in early stages of the trade (pp. 71–77) and the business activities of Imperial freedmen in the Eastern Desert (pp. 123–126). This is not to say that the Roman state ignored the trade—Cobb devotes his entire fourth chapter to the pertinent Roman military, tax, and infrastructure initiatives in the province and beyond—but wealthy Alexandrian families, situated between the seas and possessing commercial networks with deep roots, maintained a distinct competitive advantage over investors from outside Egypt (pp. 61–68). Cobb’s preoccupation with the Red Sea route makes sense in light of his inductive approach—after all, the lion’s share of relevant archaeological and documentary evidence does hail from Egypt. However, this priority has its drawbacks, namely that other significant avenues of “Roman” involvement in the Indian Ocean go largely unaddressed, such as the Persian Gulf/Mesopotamian route dominated by Near Eastern cities like Palmyra (pp. 68–71, 301–302).

The sheer quantity of data covered in Chapters 5–8 is admirable. The mechanics that underpin movement of products and peoples on the open ocean are the initial focus, from the construction methods of ancient Indiamen (pp. 84–90) to the

² Strabo *Geography* 2.5.12, 17.1.13; Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 6.26.101, 12.41.84.
seasonal sailing schedules of these vessels (pp. 128–148) and the resulting networks of traders in diaspora (pp. 149–170). Chapters 6–7 serve as a gazetteer for Indian Ocean products entering and leaving the Roman Mediterranean, including many that have received limited coverage in previous scholarship, such as textiles (pp. 182–185, 226–228), lead and iron ingots (pp. 185–187, 237–241), non-aromatic foodstuffs (pp. 181–182, 218–220), and ballast stones (pp. 189–190). Cobb’s expansive treatment of commodities typically put in the shade by the likes of gold and pepper fundamentally changes how we should understand ancient consignments, especially in light of his careful calculations of the ballast needed to navigate monsoon conditions (pp. 189–190, 280–285). It is an impressive survey. However, in his consideration of this evidence, Cobb tends to withhold endorsement of a single interpretation among multiple contending readings. The book examines many pieces of a complex puzzle but does not always fit them together: this caution may prove unsatisfying for others trying to complete the jigsaw.

There is much merit in a critical approach such as Cobb’s, but there are portions of his work where it is deployed unevenly. The hammer tends to fall more assertively on evidence from outside Cobb’s main focus in Egypt and the Mediterranean world. For instance, Cobb dismisses scholarly links between the Prakrit epigraphic ethnonym yavana, or “westerner,” and Mediterranean traders; he argues that such traders would not have left the ports of western India to engage with the inland sites containing yavana inscriptions (pp. 163–170). Here Cobb’s claim of a disconnect between ports and highland monasteries flies in the face of a substantial number of contemporary Prakrit inscriptions recording dedicants from port towns at monasteries on the Deccan Plateau alongside yavana donations. In other portions of the book, skepticism is wanting. Cobb utilizes previous cataloguing efforts of Roman coins discovered in India (pp. 249–271)—a body of evidence riddled with methodological issues and questions of authenticity that make statistical treatment exceedingly difficult—in order to substantiate his theory of a decline in Roman involvement in the trade beginning in the second century CE (Chapter 9). The largely unacknowledged presence of Indian imitations in these hoards undoubtedly affects the outcome of Cobb’s model. In such cases, Cobb’s principal aim of dissolving calcified interpretations—a noble endeavor—may have left behind some questionable remnants.


4 In one case, Cobb mentions a pendant discovered at Kampelayam (housed at the Government Museum in Chennai) alongside Roman-crafted jewelry discovered in India (p. 245)—this object is in fact an imitation most likely produced in India; the Soriyapattu hoard, listed among genuine Roman coin hoards of India in Cobb’s discussion (p. 257), contains a significant proportion of ancient aurei imitations that complicate its use as evidence in this context.
Despite the occasional drawbacks of the work’s critical approach, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade* stands out from an array of scholarship which often parrots claims without much engagement. By prioritizing fact over fancy, Cobb has produced an essential compendium of the state of the field after over one hundred years of modern scholarly engagement—what it was, where it is now, and how it can proceed with confidence.

JEREMY A. SIMMONS
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
jas2392@columbia.edu