

Special Dossier

Indian Ocean Histories: Connections and Reflections

Guest Editor

JYOTI GULATI BALACHANDRAN

Pennsylvania State University

This thematic dossier on the Indian Ocean showcases the dynamism of a field that has matured in significant ways over the last quarter of a century. Employing the Indian Ocean as a category of historical analysis, for instance, has enabled scholars to flesh out historical connections that tied distant geographies together beyond the concerns of maritime trade. We now have a greater grasp of the many social, cultural, political, and intellectual exchanges that shaped Indian Ocean societies on the coast and further inland. Similarly, the Indian Ocean framework has allowed scholars to move away from Eurocentric views of historical development and challenged the inevitability of the rise of European powers in this part of the world. Indeed, by incorporating multiple archives, languages, and textures of historical materials—from manuscripts to gravestones, art, and architecture—scholars have offered new ways of thinking about and teaching the Indian Ocean as World History.¹

The articles in this dossier further demonstrate the implications of the Indian Ocean framework by challenging conventional understandings of the “medieval Middle East” and the history of Muslim societies in the region. With their emphasis on the circulation of individuals, ideas, and commodities over a wider geography, Indian Ocean histories disrupt the area studies model and bring a transregional perspective to the academic study of the Middle East. Indeed, the medieval Indian Ocean is often referred to as an “Islamic Sea” highlighting, in particular, the dominance of Muslim merchants from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf regions all the way to East Africa and South China Sea. The study of the expansion of Islam along the commercial routes of the Indian Ocean and the attendant cultural, religious, and intellectual exchanges has considerably expanded our understanding of Islam as a historical phenomenon beyond the boundaries of the traditional Islamic “heartlands.” Histories conceived within the maritime framework of the Indian Ocean—of mobile sufis, scholars, merchants, manuscripts, and the production of Islamic law and traditions—demonstrate the expansive and entangled Muslim networks that extended

1. For a recent reflection on the development of the Indian Ocean as a field of historical inquiry, see Edward A. Alpers, “Indian Ocean Studies: How Did We Get Here and Where Are We Going? A Historian’s Perspective,” *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies* 5, no. 2 (2022): 314–36.

© 2025 Jyoti Gulati Balachandran. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which allows users to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the original authors and source.

from places like Istanbul, Mecca, and Cairo to Hormuz, Ahmedabad, Aceh, and Guangzhou in the medieval period and beyond.² A growing interdisciplinary perspective that brings archaeological, epigraphical, and anthropological approaches to maritime networks has also thrown new light on material practices associated with Muslim communities along the Indian Ocean rim.³ Significantly, reorienting the Middle East towards the ocean has involved a serious engagement with Arabic historical, legal, literary, and doctrinal works produced among the maritime Muslim communities of East Africa and South and Southeast Asia as well as an increasing incorporation of textual materials produced in the diverse languages of the Indian Ocean—Swahili, Sindhi, Gujarati, Tamil, Malay, and Javanese, to name a few.⁴

As scholars have recovered the multifaceted negotiations, formulations, and debates that shaped the Islamic religious, legal, and intellectual world in cross-cultural contexts, the Indian Ocean framework has equally brought critical perspectives to the study of the Middle East beyond Islam. The Cairo Geniza records, for instance, have proven immensely valuable in the reconstruction of the history of the medieval port city of Aden on the one hand and the Jewish commercial networks stretching between Egypt, Aden, and the southern Indian subcontinent on the other.⁵ The commercial routes that linked the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean were similarly vital to the emergence of global trading networks of the New Julfan Armenian merchants.⁶ In many ways, recent studies of Indian Ocean ports and mercantile communities highlight histories of intermingling of communities

2. For a few recent examples, see Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); John W. Chaffee, *The Muslim Merchants of Premodern China: The History of a Maritime Asian Trade Diaspora, 750–1400* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Sohaib Baig, “Indian Hanafis in an Ocean of Hadith: Islamic Legal Authority between South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula, 16th–20th Centuries” (PhD diss., UCLA, 2020); Scott Kugle, *Haji to the Heart: Journeys across the Indian Ocean* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Mahmood Kooria, *Islamic Law in Circulation: Shafī‘i Texts across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); and Christopher D. Bahl, *Mobile Manuscripts: Arabic Learning across the Early Modern Western Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025). While outside the purview of this special dossier, the historiography on Islam as a globalizing force in the Indian Ocean context and its transformations through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is fairly vast and varied.

3. See, for instance, Elizabeth Lambourn, “Carving and Communities: Marble Carving for Muslim Patrons at Khambhat and around the Indian Ocean Rim, Late Thirteenth–Mid-Fifteenth Centuries,” *Ars Orientalis* 34 (2004): 99–133; and Nancy Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

4. For reflections on the importance of Arabic in the context of South Asia, see Nile Green, “Introduction: Arabic as a South Asian Language,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 55, no. 1 (2023): 106–21, and the contributions to this *IJMES* roundtable. For the importance of developing a “linguistic and orthographic geography” of the Indian Ocean to better understand cross-cultural exchanges, see Nile Green, “The Languages of Indian Ocean Studies: Models, Methods and Sources,” *History Compass*, 20, no. 7 (2022): e12703. See also the contributions to this special issue of *History Compass* edited by Nile Green for more specific examples.

5. Roxani Eleni Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Elizabeth A. Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

6. Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

beyond ethnic, religious, and linguistic boundaries even as the nature and limits of so-called cosmopolitanism continue to be empirically and conceptually refined by scholars.⁷ While recovering the varied aspects of maritime interactions until the turn of the sixteenth century, the articles in this special dossier both echo and extend the conversations that have shaped the field of Indian Ocean studies and the place of the “medieval Middle East” within it.

The first article in the dossier (Ha) adds a new dimension to the well-known topic of Indian Ocean commercial networks with a focus on two precious commodities sourced primarily from Asia, camphor and peppercorn. Ha’s goal here is not to trace the material histories of camphor and peppercorn, but to recover the interface between their “commercial and literary careers” in the multilingual context of the medieval Indian Ocean. By reading Arabic literature alongside Chinese historical materials, Ha thus opens a window into the transregional racialization of Black labor. Far from a homogenous group, the bodies deemed “black” in these sources—enslaved individuals and servants from the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, and South and Southeast Asia—were integral to the sailing vessels of the Indian Ocean. Ha’s rigorous and creative reading of Arabic poetry, books of *‘ajā’ib* (“wonders”), and related works of Chinese literature highlights the way camphor and peppercorn served as literary foils to articulate Blackness in the distant yet connected regions of the Indian Ocean. In many ways, Ha’s contribution highlights the challenging task of writing histories of the Indian Ocean that go beyond the lives and concerns of individuals who had the economic, political, and scholarly resources to traverse the transoceanic context more or less freely. By following the intertwined expressions of the material and the metaphorical, Ha offers an important interpretative strategy to “regain access to the breathtakingly rich and layered world of Black subalternity articulated translingually across the medieval Indian Ocean world.”

The present yet silenced Black labor in our archives sits in sharp contrast to the histories of the many Muslim scholars, diplomats, and chroniclers, and their legal, diplomatic, and intellectual networks, that the next two articles in this dossier elaborate. While never losing sight of the lucrative trade that traversed the Indian Ocean, the articles by Banister and Baig dwell upon diplomatic and legal exchanges between the Mamluk Sultanate based in Cairo and the Indian subcontinent. Banister demonstrates the continuing role of the Abbasid Caliph—installed in Cairo after the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258—as a source of legitimization for Mamluk sultans as well as Indo-Muslim rulers as late as the fifteenth century. By following references to embassies, gifts, and letters of investiture in Arabic and Persian chronicles produced in Egypt and India, as well as the inclusion of caliphal titles on coinage, Banister provides a comprehensive review of diplomatic exchanges between

7. For some reflections on cosmopolitanism in the Indian Ocean context, see Engseng Ho, “Names beyond Nations: The Making of Local Cosmopolitans,” *Études rurales* 163, no. 163 (2002): 215–31; Kai Kresse, “Interrogating ‘Cosmopolitanism’ in an Indian Ocean Setting: Thinking Through Mombasa on the Swahili Coast,” in *Cosmopolitanisms in Muslim Contexts: Perspectives from the Past*, ed. Derryl N. MacLean and Sikeena Karmali Ahmed, 31–50 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “The Hidden Face of Surat: Reflections on a Cosmopolitan Indian Ocean Centre, 1540–1750,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61, no. 1/2 (2018): 205–55.

Cairo and several Muslim polities in the Indian subcontinent from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. He argues that the demand for caliphal investiture by multiple Muslim rulers in Delhi and the regional sultanates not only reinforced the position of the Caliph but also helped in maintaining a “symbolic balance of power among the rival Indo-Muslim sultanates without alienating any one of them.” While attendant to the biases inherent in courtly chronicles as well as exaggerated claims of those in power, Banister’s presentation of a large number of examples of diplomatic exchange makes it clear that at least at the elite level, caliphal authority in Cairo continued to appear “potent and viable” to rulers in India seeking to bolster their political claims.

But it wasn’t only the envoys who circulated between Cairo and the cities of the Indian subcontinent carrying investiture deeds and gifts. Diplomatic ties were part of larger scholarly networks in the western Indian Ocean shaped by the circulation of Muslims of varying ethnic, legal, and intellectual backgrounds. Indeed, it is fairly well known that Muslim scholars traveled maritime (as well as overland) routes for purposes of studying with prominent authorities in their fields, performing hajj, and receiving political patronage. One such individual was Sirāj al-Dīn al-Hindī (d.773/1372), an Indian jurist who rose to the position of chief Hanafī judge in Mamluk Cairo. Through the life and works of Sirāj al-Dīn, Baig unpacks the institutional foundations of legal pluralism in the Mamluk Sultanate that enabled a Hanafī scholar from India to succeed in a transoceanic context otherwise dominated by the Shafī‘i legal school. Along with networks of Sufi practice and hadith transmission, Baig’s contribution highlights the presence of robust juristic ties between the Indian subcontinent and the Red Sea region rooted in the transregional legal framework of the four *madhhabs*.

Whether we orient ourselves to transoceanic connections in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries through the lens of the Abbasid Caliph or an Indian Hanafī jurist, it is clear that thinking of the Islamic world in terms of “core” and “peripheries” is no longer satisfactory. In the articles by Banister and Baig, Muslim rulers and scholars in the Indian subcontinent, for instance, were active participants in the formulation of political and religious discourses that unified Muslim societies across the Indian Ocean. As Banister points out, the desire of Indian Muslim rulers to receive caliphal investiture as a link to the wider Islamic world played no small role in maintaining the symbolic power of the Caliph for centuries after the Mongol conquest of Baghdad. Similarly, Sirāj al-Dīn’s success in Cairo “reverses the flow of intellectual circulation and exchange” and demonstrates how “Hanafism was effectively imported from the Indian Ocean” as a way to limit the preponderance of Shafī‘i jurists in the Mamluk Sultanate.

In light of these articles, it might seem that the question of what constitutes an Indian Ocean “world” has been well settled in modern scholarship. After all, there are varied examples of repeated patterns in which commercial inter-connectedness was not exclusive to other forms of social, political, and cultural linkage. However, as Gajewska reflects in her contribution to this dossier, the existence of connections may not be sufficient to grasp what constituted that “world”—in other words, what do we gain by employing a world framework to illuminate maritime integration? Building upon the work of a number of scholars who have attempted to theorize the Indian Ocean World, Gajewska defines it as

“a section of the Indian Ocean littoral that formed a bounded sphere of interaction, where trans-oceanic connections were a major determinant of political, economic, and cultural development.” Within this sphere, inter and intra-regional linkages further shaped the relative extent of integration into a “shared world.” As an illustration, Gajewska identifies various political, economic, cultural, and social dynamics in the western Indian Ocean between the eighth and fifteenth centuries to demonstrate the existence of, in fact, two Indian Ocean Worlds, one more integrated than the other. The relative integration of littoral societies was influenced by a variety of environmental factors, including how well connected the major maritime routes were to riverine and overland routes in a particular subregion. Gajewska’s reflective piece is a reminder that instead of assuming the entire Indian Ocean as a consistently networked space throughout history, we should be attentive to variegated levels of inter-connectedness around the Indian Ocean rim at any given time. Such attentiveness will lead to better conceptual clarity with regard to the usefulness of the Indian Ocean as an analytical category.

Overall, this special dossier builds upon the increasing historiographical recognition of the significance of the Indian Ocean framework and provides a deeper understanding of the interconnections that tied many societies across multiple geographies. By placing historical materials produced across the Indian Ocean into conversation with each other and developing creative ways of reading and engaging with them, the authors of this dossier underline the robustness of a field that continues to grow and evolve in new directions.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors of the journal Zayde Antrim and Alison M. Vacca for the opportunity to serve as a guest editor for this special issue, and for their incredible support and help throughout the reviewing and editing process.

Bibliography

- Alpers, Edward A. “Indian Ocean Studies: How Did We Get Here and Where Are We Going? A Historian’s Perspective.” *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies* 5, no. 2 (2022): 314–36.
- Aslanian, Sebouh David. *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- Bahl, Christopher D. *Mobile Manuscripts: Arabic Learning across the Early Modern Western Indian Ocean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025.
- Baig, Sohaib. “Indian Hanafis in an Ocean of Hadith: Islamic Legal Authority between South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula, 16th–20th centuries.” PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2020.

- Chaffee, John W. *The Muslim Merchants of Premodern China: The History of a Maritime Asian Trade Diaspora, 750–1400*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Green, Nile. “Introduction: Arabic as a South Asian Language.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 55, no. 1 (2023): 106–21.
- . “The Languages of Indian Ocean Studies: Models, Methods and Sources.” *History Compass* 20, no. 7 (2022), e12703.
- Ho, Engseng. *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- . “Names beyond Nations: The Making of Local Cosmopolitans.” *Études rurales* 163, no. 163 (2002): 215–31.
- Kooria, Mahmood. *Islamic Law in Circulation: Shafi‘i Texts across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.
- Kresse, Kai. “Interrogating ‘Cosmopolitanism’ in an Indian Ocean Setting: Thinking Through Mombasa on the Swahili Coast.” In *Cosmopolitanisms in Muslim Contexts: Perspectives from the Past*, edited by Derryl N. MacLean and Sikeena Karmali Ahmed, 31–50. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- Kugle, Scott. *Hajj to the Heart: Journeys across the Indian Ocean*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021.
- Lambourn, Elizabeth. *Abraham’s Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- . “Carving and Communities: Marble Carving for Muslim Patrons at Khambhat and around the Indian Ocean Rim, Late Thirteenth–Mid-Fifteenth Centuries.” *Ars Orientalis* 34 (2004): 99–133.
- Margariti, Roxani Eleni. *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Ricci, Ronit. *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. “The Hidden Face of Surat: Reflections on a Cosmopolitan Indian Ocean Centre, 1540–1750.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61, no. 1/2 (2018): 205–55.
- Um, Nancy. *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009.