

BOOK REVIEW

Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century CE. By MATTHEW A. COBB. Leiden, NE: Brill, 2018. Pp. x + 355. Hardback, \$ 140.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-37309-9.

Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade is a fascinating monograph on a subject that has grown more and more popular among scholars over the last century. It is organized into ten chapters, the first being an introduction and the last a conclusion. The book's introduction briefly states Cobb's aims and methodology, then summarizes the scholarly debate on the topic. The following chapter, titled "The Ptolemies and the Erythra Thalassa," is structured chronologically; from the third chapter onward, Cobb structures the content by topics instead (namely – "Organisation and Finance"; "The Roman State and the Indian Ocean"; "Trade Routes and Merchant Diasporas"; "Imports; Exports"; "Rome's Trade Balance with India"; "The Peak of Roman Trade in the Indian Ocean"). Such thematic division is a comprehensible choice, and is present in many other monographs on the subject. However, it creates a synchronic presentation incapable of accurately portraying the evolution of the trade over time. Chapter 9 alone attempts to correct this distortion, as it describes the evolution of the trade diachronically during the 2nd and 3rd century AD.

Additionally, the decision to focus on the period between Augustus and the 3rd century is a highly conventional one. Although such a focus might have been the obvious choice 30 years ago, when S. Sidebotham published his groundbreaking monograph (*Roman Economic Policy in the Erythra Thalassa 30 B.C.-A.D. 217*, Brill 1986), more recent scholarship has acknowledged the arbitrariness of these chronological parameters. Cobb demonstrates his awareness of this problem in the introductory chapter but does not provide the reader with a methodological explanation for this choice, concluding: "ultimately all studies need defined parameters and the one adopted here seems as logical and coherent as any" (4), which is an insufficient justification. Furthermore, this methodology is contradicted by Cobb himself in the volume *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity* (Routledge 2019), of which he is the editor. This volume addresses the 300 BC–

700 AD period and in its introduction, Cobb states that “it is clear that there is ample reason to regard the period 300 BCE-700 CE as a logical demarcation” to study the Indian Ocean trade (4).

Overall, this book provides a very good introduction to the trade between the Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean. It will likely be of greatest interest to ancient economic historians, but the thorough descriptions and explanations of facts and concepts make the book accessible to a general, non-specialist audience. While all the chapters are well-researched and -presented, showing Cobb’s strong command of the subject, particularly of note are the introductory chapter (Chapter 1) and the chapter that focuses on the peak of Roman trade (Chapter 9), in which Cobb offers the most original contributions to the subject. As stated on page 27, the underlying aim of the book is “not only to incorporate more recent evidence relating to Roman trade in the Indian Ocean, but [also to] challenge a number of long-running theories, often originating in early twentieth-century scholarship, which continue to reappear (modified or unmodified) in more recent works.”

Undermining Cobb’s considerable skill in analyzing evidence is his tendency to be overly cautious in his conclusions when the state of the evidence is uncertain. This occurs throughout the book, but is at its most noticeable in Chapter 9 (“The Peak of Roman Trade in the Indian Ocean”), which in many ways is the most innovative. Here Cobb summarises his theories regarding the chronological evolution of the trade, arguing that there was a decline during the second century AD. After lengthy expositions of evidence that would corroborate his theories, Cobb frequently concludes with sentences such as: “the following hypotheses are based on reasoned speculation, tempered by the limits of evidence, and are not as definitive resolutions to this question” (298). While some degree of caution is of course desirable in the writing of ancient history, the repetition of sentences like these gives the (likely incorrect) impression that Cobb himself is not fully convinced of his work.

The book would have been strengthened by the inclusion of a chapter specifically discussing the impact of the 3rd-century crisis on the Indian Ocean trade, particularly given that Cobb hypothesizes that there was a steep decline in trade during the second century AD: it would have been interesting to know how he would view the 3rd-century crisis in light of this hypothesis. The book might also have benefited from the inclusion of a stronger concluding chapter tying the previous ones together. Additionally, there are a few typographical errors in the form of misspelled Greek or Latin words and incorrect figures throughout the book

(e.g., on page 115, n. 108 “a figure of 230,000,000 million *sestertii*.”; on page 121 *logotherte*, instead of *logothete*; on page 125 *Titus Flavius ... allis*, instead of *Titus Flavius ... allis*; in the bibliography, Lo Cascio’s surname spelled Lo Cassio).

However, despite these minor problems, the author is to be commended for producing a publication that is a valuable contribution to the study of ancient international trade and serves as a model for sound, well-reasoned scholarship.

DARIO NAPPO

University of Naples “Federico II,” dario.nappo@unina.it