Alexandre M. Roberts on Timothy Power’s The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate: AD 500–1000

Timothy Power, The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate: AD 500-1000, American University in Cairo Press, 2012, 377pp, $34.50

A long coastal plain called the Tihama runs along the western edge of Arabia from the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba by the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, down through the rough region of the Asir mountains to Felix Arabia, the fertile land of Yemen, and on down to the perilous strait called Bab al-Mandab. Divided in two unequal parts by an offshore island, this Gate of Lamentation — under 15 km at its widest, from the island to the Ethiopian shore — opens onto the Gulf of Aden. On the other side of the strait, the coastline runs northward alongside what were, in pre-modern times, the regions of Ethiopia, Nubia, and Egypt. Wadis, or dried-up river beds, cut across Egypt’s Eastern
Desert from the Nile to the sea and are mirrored by the wadis of northwestern Arabia, an area called the Hijaz.

This entire Red Sea rim is dotted with the ruins of ancient and medieval ports: on the western side, coast towns like Adulis in Ethiopia and Berenike at the edge of Nubia and Egypt; on the Arabian side, Yemen's Ghalafia, and Jedda in the southern Hijaz. Meanwhile, many of the hills and wadis around this rim contain the remains of ancient and medieval mines, where the rich mineral deposits of the Arabian-Nubian Shield were extracted. Also among these hills were important regional towns. Just inland from Jedda, where the road heading east and north across the Hijaz to Basra on the Euphrates meets the road running parallel to the sea up towards Medina, lies Mecca.

Timothy Power's book on Red Sea archaeology surveys what has been published about sites in the region from 500 to 1000, or “the 'Long' Late Antiquity,” as it is called in the title of his Oxford D.Phil. thesis, on which this book is based. For each of four periods his exposition moves around the sea from site to site, discussing the material evidence from each along with its historical context, frequently offering his own observations and reinterpretations. The result is a detailed monograph on Red Sea trade in late antiquity and a guide to the region’s archaeology and history.

The half-millennium the book covers was of great historical and religious importance. In 500, western Eurasia was roughly divided between two great empires and their spheres of influence: the Byzantine (Roman) Empire and the Persian Empire of the Sasanians. By around the year 1000, the Sasanian Empire had vanished. The Byzantine Empire had lost Greater Syria, Egypt, North Africa, Italy, the Mediterranean islands, and the Balkans but was expanding again, with Crete, Cyprus, and part of Northern Syria (most importantly Antioch) already back in Byzantine hands. The Islamic Empire, built by the adherents of a new monotheistic creed, controlled vast territories from Spain to Central Asia by the eighth century but had splintered into many smaller principalities by the tenth.

Where does the Red Sea fit into this grand history? Can the archaeologist make a region that dangles off the edge of modern maps of the Greco-Roman world (such as the Barrington Atlas and Chris Wickham's Framing the Early Middle Ages, maps 2 and 4) relevant to the study of Late Antiquity? Can one peer into the murky century after the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in the Hijaz but before eighth-century authors composed the first extant fruits of the rich Muslim historical tradition? Can one elucidate the causes and consequences of the military and
administrative victories of the self-styled Believers (*mu'minin*), followers of the Prophet, by scrutinizing the stones and bricks and pots the conquerors, the conquered, and their descendants left behind? Even if these material remains do not answer all the questions we might like to ask of them, Power's book shows that there is much to be gained from paying them close attention.

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Power’s *Red Sea* is an evidence-driven study. At its heart is a survey of archaeological sites in the Red Sea region, excavation reports, pertinent passages from ancient and medieval authors, and historical arguments based upon this assemblage of evidence. Each of the book’s four chronological segments receives its own chapter. After a period of Late Roman control in which Roman imperial interests reigned supreme (325-525), the Age of Justinian saw a Roman (Byzantine) withdrawal from the region, leaving a power gap filled by the Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia, then by Persian generals appointed to govern Yemen but only loosely answerable to the Sasanian king of kings in Ctesiphon, and finally by new Arab rulers (525-685).

Thereafter, slow changes in the Red Sea continued under Muslim rule as it took on a more Islamic and Arabic character, first under the Umayyad caliphs in Syria beginning with ‘Abd al-Malik’s pivotal reforms to coinage and administration, then, after 750, under the Abbasid caliphs in Iraq (685-830). Finally, the survey brings us into the age of Islamic political fragmentation, which for the Red Sea meant the growing autonomy of governors in Egypt and Yemen, and closes with the foundation of Cairo, the administrative and cultural center of an empire ruled by the Shiite dynasty of the Fatimids (830-970).

The core argument of Power’s book is that Red Sea economic history experienced a course of decline in the third century, recovery in the fourth and fifth, decline from the sixth to the eighth, and recovery from the ninth to the eleventh, and that these ups and downs were shaped by regional, interregional (the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East), and global (including the Indian subcontinent and China) factors. After reduced Roman involvement in Red Sea commerce in the third century, economic recovery began in the mid-fourth along with a revival of long-distance trade with the Indian Ocean, and then peaked in the fifth century. Non-Roman traders played an important role in this upswing: Jews and Arabs acting as Roman “agents” in northern ports like Alexandria, *Clysma* (medieval Qulzum; modern Suez) and *Aila* (medieval Ayla, not ‘Ayla; modern Aqaba), and autonomous Aksumites and Himyarites active in the ports of Ethiopia and Yemen to the south.
In the sixth century, as Roman troops ceded control to allies like the Ghassanids, Roman sites were again abandoned, especially mines. In the south, where war broke out between Aksum and Himyar, Power detects a precipitous decline in prosperity, trade, and site occupation in the late sixth century — that is, before Muhammad began receiving revelations. Disrupted further by the Persian invasion of Yemen in 570 and the occupation of Egypt in the 620s, the Red Sea became a Muslim mare nostrum over the course of the seventh century. The semi-autonomous Persian ruler in Yemen converted to Islam, according to a later Arabic report, soon after the Sasanian king of kings was assassinated in 628 (after a devastating defeat at the hands of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius). Egypt was in Muslim hands by 641. Steady shipments of grain soon began to move from Fustat (near ancient Babylon-in-Egypt and the future site of Cairo), via Qulzum (Clysma), across the sea to the Hijaz. But once Damascus became the empire's capital in the 650s and 660s, the Red Sea's absentee masters did little to promote regional prosperity: from the late seventh to the early ninth century the caliphs implemented policies favoring the provinces where their own capitals were located (Syria until 750, then Iraq) but ruthlessly exploiting the Red Sea region for taxes, minerals, and slaves, and inflicting punishment for periodic rebellions.

The region's growing autonomy in the ninth century under "governors" like Ibn Ziyad in Yemen and Ibn Tulun in Egypt was an economic boon for the region: freed from distant rulers, Egypt and Yemen were now effectively the heartlands of regional governments with a stake in cultivating the region's prosperity and fostering trade across the sea. Around this time, the reestablishment of political stability in India paved the way for a gradual return of Red Sea trade with the Indian Ocean. These trends culminated in the Fatimid era: with a powerful Shiite caliph established at Cairo after 969, trade between the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Indian Ocean flourished.

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Power's book is concerned with more than economic history, raising a number of political and social themes throughout. In his conclusion, he highlights the late antique decline of Roman involvement in Red Sea affairs; the Islamic conquests, the transition to Muslim rule, and the long-term effect of these developments on the Red Sea region; and the rise of the prosperous Egyptian and Red Sea mercantile society of the eleventh and twelfth centuries made famous by the medieval Jewish documents of the Cairo Geniza.

What, then, can Power's largely economic narrative tell us about this transition from a Byzantine-Sasanian Late Antiquity to the medieval Middle East under Muslim rule? As Power tells it, the rise of Islam did not represent a rupture in patterns of production and exchange. The armies of Believers who won over Yemeni tribes to their side and then marched on Egypt (with Yemenis leading the charge) disrupted trade no more than the Aksumite and Sasanian invaders before them, and perhaps less so.

Meanwhile, in Ethiopia, it seems that Muslim armies were not responsible for the abandonment of the Aksumite coastal city of Adulis; Power's reading of the archaeological evidence tentatively places the end of the city's occupation earlier, in the sixth century. The Aksumite king was still minting coins around 640, so we are to imagine that Aksum petered out slowly until all signs of a "functioning state" disappeared by around 700. Such gradual change is mirrored in the
administrative continuity best visible in Egypt, where the language of administration remained Greek until the late seventh century (at least). As Petra Sijpesteijn has shown, tax collectors and administrators in Egypt continued to be Christians at all but the highest levels.

Power's assembled evidence for continuity in the seventh century thus supports a picture of slow "transformation" of a Greco-Roman and Sasanian world into an Islamic world. Power explicitly follows Peter Brown, Averil Cameron, and other historians who advocate a periodization which places the end of Late Antiquity even later, in the eighth century (when the Abbasids, who seized the caliphate in 750, made Iraq the new political center of the Islamic Empire) or even the ninth.

This is not to say that Power paints a static picture of the seventh century. Significant changes were afoot. The rerouting of Egyptian grain from Constantinople (via Alexandria) to Medina in the Hijaz (via Qulzum/Clysma) was an important regional development. The ships bearing this new flow of grain pulled into al-Jar ("a day and a night" from Medina, as the medieval geographer Yaqut al-Rumi tells us).

Still, even such a dramatic change in the flow of commodities showed a certain continuity with the past. Egypt's new Arab masters seem to have built the new path of Egyptian grain upon existing sea routes with which the Arab conquerors might well have been familiar: several years before the famous Hijra of 622, a small number of the Prophet's followers fled Mecca to Christian Ethiopia in what was later called "the first Hijra" (al-Tabari, History, I, 1181), and Power points out that al-Jar was the very port to which they are said to have returned in 628. Nor did the new grain shipping lanes have immediate global consequences: the new grain shipments depended upon Trajan's Canal, freshly drained and renamed the "Canal of the Commander of the Believers," linking Fustat to Qulzum (Clysma), but Power argues that it was not yet being used for trade with the Indian Ocean. Likewise Aila's commercial activities remained on a regional scale; only later, in the tenth century, he insists, was this Red Sea traffic linked to the Indian Ocean.

But changes in shipping and other economic activity had momentous consequences for local life. Shifting patterns of trade and mineral exploitation could spell the birth and death of cities. Michael Morony has argued that the Persians' primary motivation to invade Yemen in 570 was to gain access to its silver mines. On this basis Power argues that the abandonment of Qan'il (a port) and Zafar (the Himyarite capital) and their replacement by Aden (the new port) and San'a' (the new capital) — sometimes seen as part of the Persian repression of Christian Ethiopians in Yemen which narrative sources relate — was probably the result of two unconnected economic developments: a decline in trade with the Indian Ocean (due to external factors) hurt the old port and capital because they were heavily dependent on that trade, while increased silver mining and exportation brought an economic boom to San'a' and the nearby port of Aden, through which ore coming from San'a' might have been shipped to Iran.

Perhaps an even more momentous change was the rise of the Red Sea slave trade. Already attested in the eighth century, the capture, sale, and transportation of human beings (native to Nubia and Ethiopia) across the sea increased further in the ninth century. Power suggests this was in part a response to demand for labor in the mines of the ‘Asir region. This phenomenon was to have an enormous impact, not only on the regional economy but also on Islamic society (and undoubtedly Ethiopian and Nubian society). This impact goes beyond the relatively well-studied
ninth-century revolt of African slaves, in ways that have yet to be fully explored.

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Without discounting the importance of religion, culture, or ideology, Power’s book invites us to look at the transition from Byzantium to the Caliphate as one more in a series of changes in the conditions for trade and communication. For his is a trader’s Red Sea: the main actors throughout are merchants, along with the rulers whose shortsighted ambitions set the parameters for their activities. The peasants and slaves appear as producers, commodities, and rebels; the nomads as a threat to rulers and traders; the small-time urban elites, professionals, scholars, and courtiers as the class to which authors belonged, whose books make fortuitous and passing references to goods and ships and merchantmen.

We occasionally glimpse other aspects of life in the region as well. Finds from Egypt’s Eastern Desert, Power argues, may represent the material culture of the Beja, nomads who were moving towards a sedentary existence in the fifth and sixth centuries. Here we see signs of their semi-sedentary, pastoralist life: “crude,” squarish buildings, clay pots etched with simple linear motifs, luxury goods imported from the Mediterranean and buried with the dead, the bones of “caprids,” a taxonomical category embracing sheep, goats, and antelope.

In describing the Red Sea’s role in the wider world of Eurasian communication and trade, Power tends to emphasize the impact of external developments on Red Sea commerce rather than the other way around. He argues that Red Sea involvement in “the late Roman ‘India trade’” ended in the mid sixth century as a result of “the collapse of the Gupta-Vakataka Empire and Tamilakam states” in the Indian subcontinent, which brought about conditions detrimental to trade. Late sixth- and seventh-century instability in the Red Sea region can thus be traced to this collapse. (The reader may be left wondering what, in turn, caused India’s states to collapse.)

Likewise, Power does not see the rise of the Fatimids in the tenth century as a sudden boost to the Red Sea economy and worldwide trade. Instead, the archaeological finds from Fustat he adduces (an eighth-century imitation of Chinese pottery and fragments of actual Chinese pottery from the end of the ninth century) point to gradual trends of increasing trade and connectivity with India and China (before the relative explosion of evidence in the form of the Cairo Geniza). Power associates these trends with improved conditions for trade in the Mediterranean and India, and the immigration of experts from Iraq to Egypt as a result of poor conditions for trade in the Persian Gulf.

But did changes in the Red Sea affect the rest of the world in turn? Egypt’s grain had already stopped flowing to Constantinople during the Persian occupation; redirecting it permanently to the Hijaz must have had serious implications for the Byzantine economy. Ordinary commerce between Constantinople and the Caliphate seems to have mostly died out by 700, only to seriously pick up again in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when not only Fatimid commerce was booming but also the Byzantine economy. In the case of such interconnected economies, it seems best to view correlated phenomena as parts of a causal web that cannot quite be untangled.

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Power’s material evidence and his argument about the trajectories of trade and commerce (especially when read alongside the recent studies by Hatke and Bowersock mentioned above) have the potential to provide new perspectives on a number of issues and debates that have occupied historians. Can economic developments help us understand why, as Hatke points out, the Aksumites (whose king converted to Christianity in the fourth century) invaded Yemen only in the sixth century, despite the apparent continuity of Aksumite claims on Yemen at least from the time of an earlier Aksumite invasion of Yemen in the third? Can trade patterns give us a better idea of who the Jews and Christians and pagans (to say nothing of Sabians!) of Mecca were, and why so many of them chose to follow Muhammad? Or why a Shiite movement with esoteric doctrines exerted such an influence in the tenth century throughout the Islamic world that it was able to establish a powerful Mediterranean state with its capital at Cairo?

About the late antique Red Sea wars, Hatke argues that long-standing irredentist claims and territorial ambition motivated the Ethiopian king Kaleb’s invasion of Yemen in the sixth century, but that there was also a shift toward Christian religious claims of a divine mandate to take Yemen, possibly beginning with Kaleb himself. Power, by contrast, emphasizes trade patterns: for reasons external to Aksum, the India trade declined to the point that Aksum, reliant on this commerce, invaded its neighbor across the strait as an act of desperation. Both see the conflict as internal to the Red Sea region, rather than as a proxy war between Byzantium and Sasanid Persia fought over control of the (dwindling) India trade.

As for the immediate context for the rise of Islam, Power suggests it may well have been the decline of some Arabian cities combined with a sedentarization of nomads. He builds here (with due acknowledgement) on Patricia Crone’s suggestion that the Prophet’s tribe may have been suppliers of the Roman army in Syria, which consumed enormous amounts of leather (a pastoralist product), so that they were seriously impacted by the Persian conquest of Syria and Egypt. Power hypothesizes that when nomads in the Hijaz were forced to take up a sedentary way of life, social upheaval followed, with significant consequences: “one wonders if the social ferment attending the process of sedentarization, including perhaps increasing social stratification and growing disparities of wealth, provides the context for the career of the Prophet.” But why did the Prophet’s political and religious movement take the form it took? Hatke tentatively proposes that a major legacy of the Red Sea wars between Aksum’s Christian king and Himyar’s Jewish king was the Aksumite emphasis on a religious and political ideology of holy war, combining asceticism with violent struggle in God’s name — as ascetic Muslim warriors on the Byzantine frontier would do in subsequent centuries.

The Arab conquests themselves, in Power’s view, proceeded by co-opting the conquered peoples. This model derives largely from his adoption of Fred Donner’s hypothesis that the early Believers (as the Quran calls the followers of Muhammad) were an ecumenical movement including Jews and Christians — a hypothesis with serious problems. Still, one co-opted group, the Yemenis, do seem to have shaped the conquests by their enthusiasm for the Syrian and Egyptian campaigns. Power suggests that this enthusiasm might have something to do with earlier trade contacts of “pre-Islamic Himyarite merchantmen” with Levantine and Egyptian subjects of Byzantium at the ports of Aila and Clyisma (Quzum), pointing to Late Roman amphorae found in Aththar, home to a Yemeni tribe which figures prominently in narratives of the conquest of Egypt. If there should turn out to
be further material evidence of such pre-Islamic Yemeni ties to Egypt, this would be a suggestion worth pursuing.

Bowersock insists on an even closer association of the Believers (whom we may, by anachronistic convention, call the early Muslims) with nearby Christian powers, arguing for tendencies of mutual sympathy between the early Muslims and the Christians of Ethiopia and Syria, against their common enemies, the Jews of Arabia and Palestine — whose alliances and ties of sympathy with the Persians Bowersock also emphasizes. This, he argues, makes sense of the Believers‘ joy at the victory of the Rum (the Romans) over their enemies (the Persians), as well as “the first Hijra” to Ethiopia. Bowersock’s theory would fit well with Power’s discussion of the Yemeni impetus to invade Syria and Egypt, since it could help explain why the Arab conquests (if the standard chronology is correct) began in Iraq and only shifted westward to Byzantine territory when the Yemenis signed up to fight. Are we to imagine a Christian-Muslim alliance against Persia in the 620s before Muslim armies marched on Syria in the 630s?

Power implies that one of his book’s central aims is to convince the reader that further excavations in the Red Sea focusing on the sixth to tenth century are a historical and archaeological desideratum. One cannot help but agree that there is much that cannot yet be understood. Surely Power is right that many pieces of the puzzle still lie buried in the sand — and, one might add, in the thousands of unpublished Arabic papyri still awaiting editors.

The most powerful effect of reading such a book about the Red Sea, turning from one unfamiliar toponym to another, is to bring a sharpness of focus to a map which might otherwise remain blurry in our minds. The prospect of learning something from scrutinizing this map — and the evidence Power has gathered — over a half-millennium so foundational for today’s cultures, politics, institutions, and religions is on its own enough to recommend the book.

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