

Rethinking classical Indo-Roman trade: political economy of eastern Mediterranean exchange relations

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Abstrak

The book is a critical rethinking of the nature of the classical eastern Mediterranean exchange relations with the coasts of the Indian subcontinent. It examines in the light of the extant source material and theoretical insights whether the expression Indo-Roman trade is tenable. Characterizing the nature of contemporary exchanges in detail, the book maintains that the expression Indo-Roman trade is inappropriate. It starts off with the theoretical premise that the term trade, if applied uniformly to all kinds of transactions in time and place, will lead to many anachronistic correlations, causations, and generalizations about the nature of early forms of exchange. Contemporary Mediterranean exchange of goods from the eastern world was a combination of multiple forms of exchange in which trade was just one and confined to Rome. The management of this ensemble was a heavily collaborative, extensively networked, and document-based enterprise, with precise notions of weights, measures, rates of rent, interest, price and profit accounted in terms of money. It had necessitated a stratified society, aristocracy, state system, and the entailing political economy of demand for luxury goods from far-off lands. Considering that such institutional and social structures were absent in contemporaneous peninsular India, this book dismisses the claims in south Indian historiography that early Tamil chieftains conducted overseas commerce. Neither there existed adequate naval technology to allow merchant bodies to conduct independent overseas trade nor was it necessary.