

Trade and Christianity in the Indian Ocean during Late Antiquity

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The significance of faith as a cohesive element in the development of commercial networks in the Indian Ocean is well documented in the case of Islamic and Jewish diasporas of the medieval period, but what was the situation in Late Antiquity, when Christianity was the expanding religion in the areas east and south of the Mediterranean? Drawing on late Roman literary sources and the concept of the “trading diaspora,” this study emphasizes the interaction among trade, religion, and politics in the area of the Indian Ocean, arguing that Christianity had the potential to play a role resembling that of Judaism and Islam in later periods: Christians also were active as traders and travelers in the monsoon commerce. Fellow Christians came together for worship, company, and security, and Christian rulers involved themselves politically and militarily in order to secure the safety and interest of their coreligionists.

Long-distance trade in the ancient world posed significant challenges. There was no way for information to travel faster than people. News of political changes, fluctuating prices, or failure of harvest that would influence profits and possibilities would normally not be available before the merchant was present on the spot. Questions of credit and secure transfer of goods and money were difficult at the least, and local power relations between guest and hosts were asymmetrical, life and property of visiting traders being at the mercy of local rulers.

Trading Diasporas and the Challenges of Ancient Indian Ocean Trade

Although the potential dangers of cross-cultural trade were not restricted to the Indian Ocean, the annual pattern of the monsoon system added to the difficulties. The southwest monsoon facilitated swift travel from western to eastern destinations in April-May and August-September, most ports being inaccessible due to strong winds in June-July. Westward

departure from Indian destinations with the northeast monsoon was possible between mid-October and March. Travelers extending their journeys up or down the Red Sea or Persian Gulf also had to take account of other regional wind systems, further narrowing the potential sailing seasons. To some extent, it was possible to tack against the wind, and to utilize coastal breezes and changing winds in the transition period between the monsoons. Still, traffic between most main destinations was limited to one round-trip per year, meaning that travelers would have to stay in the ports they visited for prolonged periods of time, awaiting the right time to return.

Drawing on the work of Cohen, Curtin introduced the concept of the “trading diaspora,” permanent settlements of merchants on foreign soil, as a universal facilitator of cross-cultural trade in pre-modern history. Resident foreigners could serve as intermediaries between host communities and visiting traders, overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers and act as brokers in commercial, judicial, and practical matters. Early examples include the settlement of Assyrian traders in Kültepe / Kanesh in Anatolia in the early second millennium BCE, and the archaic-age Greek settlements at Naucratis in the Nile Delta and Al-Mina in Turkey. A vivid picture of potential hazards and institutional difficulties of ancient trade is preserved in the fourth century BCE report of the commercial misadventures of Chrysippus of Athens, who had one of his slaves winter in the Crimea in order to take care of business.

Trading diasporas in the Indian Ocean can be traced in the historical record to the mid-first century CE. At that time, an anonymous Greek merchant’s guide known as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* reported Arabian settlements in East Africa and at Socotra, Greek / Roman merchants resident at Adulis (Eritrea), Socotra, and probably southern India, and Indian merchants at Socotra. To the author of the *Periplus*, such settlements were not a main subject of interest and are only mentioned in passing, and in this respect there is no reason to consider the list exhaustive.

The seasonal character of the monsoon trade, the grim reality of shipwreck, piracy and slave trade, and the demand for people who could facilitate the process of cross-cultural trade make it likely that there existed significant settlements of foreigners from all coasts of the western Indian Ocean in all major ports of call. Whereas Jewish and Islamic trading diasporas figure prominently in the history and historiography of medieval and early modern Indian Ocean trade, little work has been done on the connection between trade and religion in the pre-Islamic Indian Ocean trade.

In Late Antiquity, Christianity was the expanding religion in the region, and arguably the faith had the potential to play much of the same role with regard to trade that other monotheistic religions did in later periods.

Trade and Religion

Ancient sea travel involved substantial risk and one way of coping with that was religion. An example may be found in the layout of Mediterranean harbors, as seen in the monumental third-century moles of Libyan Leptis Magna, where only the lighthouses greeted approaching sailors before the temples. In the pre-Christian Mediterranean, contracts would be sealed by oaths, often in temples. Sea captains would sacrifice before putting to sea and carefully observe omens *en route*. At arrival, a new sacrifice was due. Away from home, cultic fellowship could be a way of coping with a foreign environment. The Palmyrene community maintained a temple in Rome, and temples of the divine Augustus are attested at Volagesias on the Tigris and possibly Muziris in southern India, settings likely to be connected to expatriate merchants.

Christian (and Jewish) travelers had the same religious needs as pagans. From the Mediterranean we know that they relied on coreligionists for safe and friendly accommodation from an early date. In Acts, Paul prayed for safe passage before embarking on a voyage, and he frequently stayed with fellow Christians and sympathetic Jews. In one case he was equipped with a letter of introduction to ensure a favorable reception from his prospective hosts. Both religious groups always remained outnumbered

around the Indian Ocean, and Christians constituted a minority in Egypt, the Roman bridgehead on the Red Sea, until well into the fourth century. Bagnall estimates their numbers at 20% ca.313, 50 % in 337 and 80% by the start of the fifth century.

By the third century, the church had an empire-wide, hierarchical organization, which made it possible for Christians to make contact with fellow believers on their travels. Christianity was an exclusive religion in the sense that its adherents were supposed not to take part in rites of other religions. This isolated believers from polytheistic society, and together with the periodically harsh persecutions before Constantine's Edict of Milan (312), it must have fostered a sense of solidarity among fellow believers, combined with an antagonism toward non-Christians. It is reasonable to assume that these qualities endured after toleration, and were extended to Christian societies beyond the core regions in the Roman and Sasanian empires as the religion expanded.

For Christian traders in an Indian Ocean setting, religious communities in their ports of call might well have offered a "home away from home" and a point of contact with members of the local diaspora, who could reasonably be expected to be more sympathetic and trustworthy partners than pagan countrymen. On the floor of the fourth-century synagogue excavated at Qana, Yemen, a visitor named Kosmas made a short inscription in Greek, apparently wishing for the safety of caravan and ship. Although this interpretation cannot be considered certain, and although this example is not from a Christian context, the presence of a Greek-speaking Jew in the synagogue of an important sea-port and caravan destination in South Arabia remains suggestive of the symbiosis between trade and religion.

Indian Ocean Trade in Late Antiquity

Pre-Islamic monsoon trade is best documented during the first two centuries CE. In this period literary works such as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, Strabo's *Geography*, Ptolemy's *Geography*, and classical Tamil poetry, along with documents such as the Muziris Papyrus and

caravan inscriptions from Palmyra show large-scale commerce between Egypt, Arabia, East Africa and India, and the Persian Gulf and India. Chinese textiles, Indian textiles and spices, Arabian aromatics, and African ivory were among the important commodities.

Beginning in the third century, the situation changed. The powerful and self-confident Himyarite and Aksumite kingdoms in southern Arabia and Ethiopia/Eritrea seem to have established themselves as mediators between the Red Sea and Indian Ocean networks. The incorporation of Mesene in the emerging Sasanian empire ca.222 CE and the destruction of Palmyra by Aurelian in 273 closed the Persian Gulf to Roman merchants.

The recovered empire of the fourth century, however, took new interest in Red Sea and Indian Ocean commerce, and the archaeological record shows the flourishing of the ports of Berenikê in Egypt and Aila/Aqaba in Jordan. Sherds of late Roman amphorae, particularly of the so-called the Aila-Aksum type produced at Aqaba, abound at Adulis in Eritrea. At Qana, North African transport amphorae of the late second through fifth centuries gradually give way to varieties from Aqaba (fifth–seventh centuries) and Palestine (late fourth–seventh centuries). Late Roman ceramics are also attested from several Indian sites, including Kamrej near Surat, Elephanta near Mumbai and Pattanam, the probable site of ancient Muziris.

Early Christianity in the Indian Ocean

In the fourth century, Christian churches were established at all the important Roman Red Sea ports and at Adulis in the kingdom of Aksum. The early fourth-century church excavated at Aila might even be the oldest purpose-built Christian house of worship yet known. The founding of these churches need not, however, be directly connected with trade, although they certainly would have been of service to Christian sailors and merchants. Outside Aksum and the Roman Empire, the archaeological evidence of Christianity before Islam remains scant, but as shall be seen, literary sources provide a provisional framework and hints at the relationship between trade and religion.

The *Syriac Acts of Judas Thomas*, composed in the early third century, recounts the story of the apostle Thomas, who was sold as a slave-carpenter to the merchant Habban and sent to India in order to construct a palace for king Gondophares. Thomas proceeded to convert the daughter and son-in law of the king; he also distributed the money he was given for the construction work among the poor. Eventually, Gondophares was converted as well, and Thomas continued his missionary work in other parts of India and performed a number of miracles and conversions before he was martyred, according to later tradition near modern Chennai.

Although the Acts themselves must be considered legendary, Gondophares is numismatically attested to have ruled an Indo-Parthian kingdom in the Indus Valley ca.20–45 CE. The geographical and chronological context of the narrative is not implausible, and there are strong Indian traditions tracing the origins of Christianity on the subcontinent to the first century, traditions that may have resurfaced in the *Acts of Thomas*.

It remains impossible to determine historically or archaeologically when the church in India was established, but the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius (ca.324–325) provides a plausible *terminus ante quem* with its report that when Pantaenus, head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria, traveled to India in the late second century, he found that Christianity already was established there:

He displayed such zeal for the divine word, that he was appointed as a herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations in the east, and was sent as far as India. For indeed there were still many evangelists of the word who sought earnestly to use their inspired zeal, after the examples of the apostles, for the increase and building up of the divine word. Pantaenus was one of these, and is said to have gone to India. It is reported that among persons there who knew of Christ, he found the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his own arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the apostles had preached to them, and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language, which they had preserved till that time.

Pantaenus is an elusive figure, and the report of his Indian voyage has been interpreted to serve other than documentary purposes, but even if the historicity of his voyage must be considered uncertain and late Roman authors frequently confused India proper, southern Arabia and Ethiopia/Eritrea in their references to India, people from Roman Egypt regularly traveled to the subcontinent in the later part of the second century and in that respect there is nothing unrealistic with the account. A late second century “discovery” by the Alexandrian Christian establishment that their religion was already present in India also supports the Syriac tradition that the church in India originated from Mesopotamia rather than Egypt.

The church historian Rufinus is the chief authority for the conversion of Aksum in modern Ethiopia/Eritrea. In his *Ecclesiastical History* (ca.402– 403), Rufinus describes how Frumentius and his companion Aedesisus, both young boys and Christians, were kidnapped into slavery when their ship put in at the Aksumite coast on its return from India in order to replenish its water supplies. The boys went into royal service, and when the king died Frumentius became the steward of his minor heir and used the opportunity to spread his faith. When the new king came of age, Frumentius and Aedesisus were emancipated in reward of their services. Frumentius reported his work to Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, and was allowed to return as the first bishop of Aksum. The conversion itself is visible in the introduction of Christian symbolism on the Aksumite coinage of Ezana.⁴⁸ Modern scholarship places the start of the Aksumite church ca 330—340 CE, and Frumentius’ office in Aksum is confirmed by Athanasius letter of defense to the emperor Constantius II, ca.357.

Southern Arabia was an important center of Indian Ocean trade, both because of its geographic situation between the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea and because it supplied attractive commodities such as frankincense and myrrh. A Christian presence is amply attested in the Persian Gulf from the fourth century onward, not surprising in light of the probable presence of

churches in India even earlier. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, bishop Pamphilius of the Tayenoi, an Arab tribe allied to the Romans, took part, and the spread of Christianity to Roman allies in northern Arabia is well attested. The first reference to establishment of churches in southern Arabia itself, however, stems from the reign of Constantius II (337–361), who according to the church historian Philostorgius (ca.425) had his ambassador Theophilus the Indian establish churches at Saphar and Aden in the Himyarite kingdom and at an unidentified place near the mouth of the Persian Gulf,⁵³ ca.356 CE.

Although it is difficult to determine the position and influence of these churches in their respective territories, it is clear that Christian communities were present on all coasts of the western Indian Ocean by the mid-fourth century. The pattern of Christian churches emerging from these sources is echoed in the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes, who based parts of his account on his own travels in the region ca.518–519.⁵⁵ Cosmas reported Christians in Sri Lanka, southern India, Socotra, Persia, Aksum, and southern Arabia. In the case of Sri Lanka he stresses that the local inhabitants were pagans, thus indicating that the Persian Christians he reports there belonged to the local trading diaspora.

Faith Follows Trade

It is not surprising that the overseas spread of Christian religion from its early centers in Egypt and upper Mesopotamia would have followed the trade routes. Christian merchants would carry their faith with them, and people like Thomas (whether real or only realistic), Pantaenus, Frumentius, and Theophilus, although not involved in commercial activities, had to depend on merchants or captains, people like Habban and Cosmas, in order to get around. Merchant ships were the only available maritime means of passage, for overland travel along the rugged, hot and arid coasts of the Indian Ocean was impractical at the least, in many cases impossible. In this context, it is no surprise that Christianity seems to have started as a diaspora religion, and that most religious officials seem to have traveled in order to take care

of the needs of the already existing Christian diaspora rather than as pioneering missionaries. In the case of Aksum, Frumentius first acts in favor of Christians and Christianity WERE NOT to start the conversion of the court or the kingdom at large, but to undertake discrete enquiries about the presence of Christians among the Roman merchants.

This reveals three things: the Roman diaspora in the kingdom of Aksum counted both Christians and pagans among their numbers, the Christian element was not openly organized, and Christianity was at this point mainly restricted to the community of foreign merchants. Frumentius then set out to secure concessions for Roman Christians. The right to assemble and pray according to the Roman rite and to build houses of assembly were the privileges explicitly mentioned by Rufinus. Interestingly, the plural is used throughout these passages with regard to churches and their locations, indicating the presence of Roman (and Christian) merchants not only at Aksum's port of Adulis, but at various other centers of the kingdom. According to Rufinus, Frumentius went out of his way to facilitate the building of churches and the well-being of his co-religionists, but as long as Frumentius remained a royal adviser, Christianity continued to be a diaspora religion. Only on his return to Aksum, after he was sent out as bishop to "India" by Athanasius of Alexandria, did the conversion of king and kingdom commence.

Organized Christianity not only met the spiritual needs of merchants but also suited the political and religious demands of the kings of Aksum. The kingdom soon became a stronghold of Christianity in the region, and the Ethiopian church maintained its ties to Alexandria until modern times. This instigated a regular traffic of church officials on the Red Sea, utilizing merchant ships between Adulis and the Roman Red Sea ports.

The fourth or fifth-century author of the *On the Nations of India and the Brahmins* had visited "the capes of India" along with bishop Moses of Adulis. Bearing in mind the less than precise use of the geographical term "India" in this period, this might have been southern Arabia, Somalia, the Aksumite kingdom, or the Indian subcontinent. In the same work, the

experiences of a Theban *scholasticus* who probably visited India proper are related. The first leg of this journey was from Egypt to Adulis and took place in the company of a *presbyteros*, a term that in the fourth and fifth century could mean both “elder” and “priest.” *On the Nations of India and the Brahmins* is, however, clearly a Christian text, which not only refers to the bishop of Adulis but also identifies the Ganges with Biblical Pishon, one of the rivers running from Paradise, and in this context the latter meaning seems plausible.

If the literary evidence is to be trusted, the establishment of churches in southern Arabia followed much the same pattern as in Aksum. In Philostorgius’ account of the embassy of Theophilus the Indian to the king of Himyar (ca.356), the first step in Constantius II’s plan to convert southern Arabia was to get permission to build churches for visiting Roman traders. The potential needs of local converts also are mentioned, but the Roman diaspora seems to have been the excuse needed for this foreign involvement. Three churches eventually were built at the expense of the Himyarite king. One of them in the capital Tapharum (Saphar) and the other two significantly in Aden, “where the voyagers from Roman territory were accustomed to put in” and “where there is a well-known Persian Market at the mouth of the Persian Gulf.” The locations of the latter churches underline the connection between religion, diaspora, and commercial activities, whereas the involvement of Constantius II and his ambassador indicates that the mix of trade and religion also spurred political interest.

Trade and Religion in Late Roman Red Sea Diplomacy

Roman emperors from Constantine I (306–337) onward became increasingly involved in church politics, but the church was not an organization restricted by political borders, and the fortune of Christians and Christian religion beyond areas of imperial control became the concern of the eastern Roman emperors. After establishing churches in Arabia, Theophilus the Indian continued his diplomatic tour of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean to his native island of Dibos, probably Socotra, before he

proceeded to other parts of India, and after that Aksum. Along the way, he visited Christian congregations and offered advice on correct worship.

Theophilus' mission was, however, only one part of Constantius' efforts in the region. In the same year (356) he issued an edict banning Roman envoys to the Aksumite and Homerite (Himyar) kingdoms from lingering in Alexandria for more than one year, indirectly confirming that official and church communication was dependent upon commercial passage. Athanasius' *Apologia* reveals the business of one such envoy. It reports a letter from the emperor to the rulers of Aksum, demanding the extradition of Frumentius to the Arian bishop George of Alexandria (357–358) in order to ensure that he was in line with current imperial theological policy. The private initiative of Frumentius to meet the religious need of Roman merchants and the ecclesiastical sanction of Athanasius to establish churches in Aksum ca.330–340 thus had become a matter of imperial policy and diplomacy by ca.357, but a matter of faith rather than commerce.

The close connection among trade, religion, and diplomacy continued. By the reign of Justin I (518–527), the relationship between Constantinople and Aksum on one side and Himyar on the other had deteriorated sharply. In 518–19 the king of Aksum, Kālēb, invaded Himyar, deposed the Jewish ruler Joseph /Dounaas/Dû Nuwâs, and installed an Aksumite vassal. Joseph regained power in 522 and initiated reprisals against Christians and supporters of the Aksumite occupation, culminating with the event known as “the massacre at Najran” in 523. In 525 the Aksumites undertook a second invasion, this time leading to lasting control over Himyar. These events are described in a number of Syriac and Greek sources, among them the Greek *Martyrium Sancta Arethae*, which cites a letter from Justin to the king of Aksum, calling for action and threatening a Roman military expedition to Aksum as well as South Arabia if the Aksumites failed to comply. In addition to the sufferings of South-Arabian Christians, the letter explicitly mentions the murder of Roman (and Persian) believers by Joseph/Dounaas.

Although some of these might have been clergy, it is reasonable to believe that others were traders, as southern Arabia was still an important trading partner to sixth century Byzantium. Whether for fear of Roman reprisals or more likely for reasons of their own, the Aksumites backed down, and Justin never had to realize his threat; the *Martyrium* reports that ships had been sent to Gabaza, the harbor of Adulis, from the Roman ports of Aila, Berenikê, Iôtabe, and Clysma (along with ships from the Farasan islands and the ever elusive “India”) in order to take part in the expedition.

In the account of the sixth-century Byzantine chronicler John Malalas, who, most likely erroneously, placed the war between Aksum and Himyar in 528, at the start of the reign of Justinian, the martyrs of Najran were forgotten. According to Malalas, who probably was contemporary to the events he described, the conflict involved the murder of Roman merchants, the confiscation of their property, and the interruption of trade. Although the *Martyrium* and other more comprehensive sources available on the occurrences in South Arabia indicate that he was ill-informed about the actual course of events, Malalas did spend his life in Antioch and Constantinople, probably in imperial service, and his version arguably reflects the information available to the contemporary Mediterranean public. Seen from Constantinople, faith and trade seem to have been linked, and the fate of Roman traders in South Arabia might have been deemed sufficient reason for involvement in the conflict between Aksum and Himyar, notwithstanding the fate of the Christian inhabitants of Najran.

Trade and Christianity on the Indian Ocean before Islam

It has been remarked that “the different strands of evidence . . . are frustratingly vague and inconclusive”, and any conclusions on the interrelation between trade and Christianity on the Indian Ocean have to be inferred on such a basis. The literary sources do, however, hint toward a connection between the expansion of Christian religion and the existence of trading diasporas. Frumentius started his work among Roman Christians already present in the Aksumite kingdom. Theophilius and the

ruler of Himyar established churches at important ports of trade to serve both visiting Roman merchants and the local population.

In the sixth century, Cosmas still described Christianity in Sri Lanka as a diaspora religion. Similar data for India is lacking, but there is a tradition of early missionary work, which must have been greatly facilitated by the close commercial links to Mesopotamia and the Red Sea. It has been argued that the networks represented by Christian diasporas were of great value to merchants spending long periods of time far away from home. Religious communities could not only meet spiritual needs but also ease the challenges encountered with regard to information, credit, and security. In this respect, the continuity from Late Antiquity to the better documented Jewish and Islamic trading diasporas of the medieval period seems strong, although Christianity as a religion was gradually marginalized among traders in the Indian Ocean world, to the advantage of Islam.

In the age of modern imperialism, the phrase “trade follows the flag” alluded to the assumption that commerce would accompany the territorial annexation of remote territories.

Roman authorities, in contrast to this, rarely concerned themselves with eastern trade except as a source of revenue. If they were indeed indifferent to commerce, late Roman emperors did, however, take a keen interest in religion, and the examples of Theophilus’ journey to the Indian Ocean churches and Constantius’ letter to the king of Aksum ordering the extradition of Frumentius on the grounds of theological concerns, show how a religion originally spread as a result of trade in turn came to have diplomatic and political implications.

How intertwined the issues became is evident in the episode from the reign of Justin, where the persecution of Christians, some of them Roman traders, in southern Arabia, brought a response from the emperor in Constantinople. If trade did not follow the flag in the ancient world, faith certainly seems to have followed in the wake of Indian Ocean trade, and flag, in the form of imperial diplomatic initiatives, at least in some instances followed where faith had led the way.

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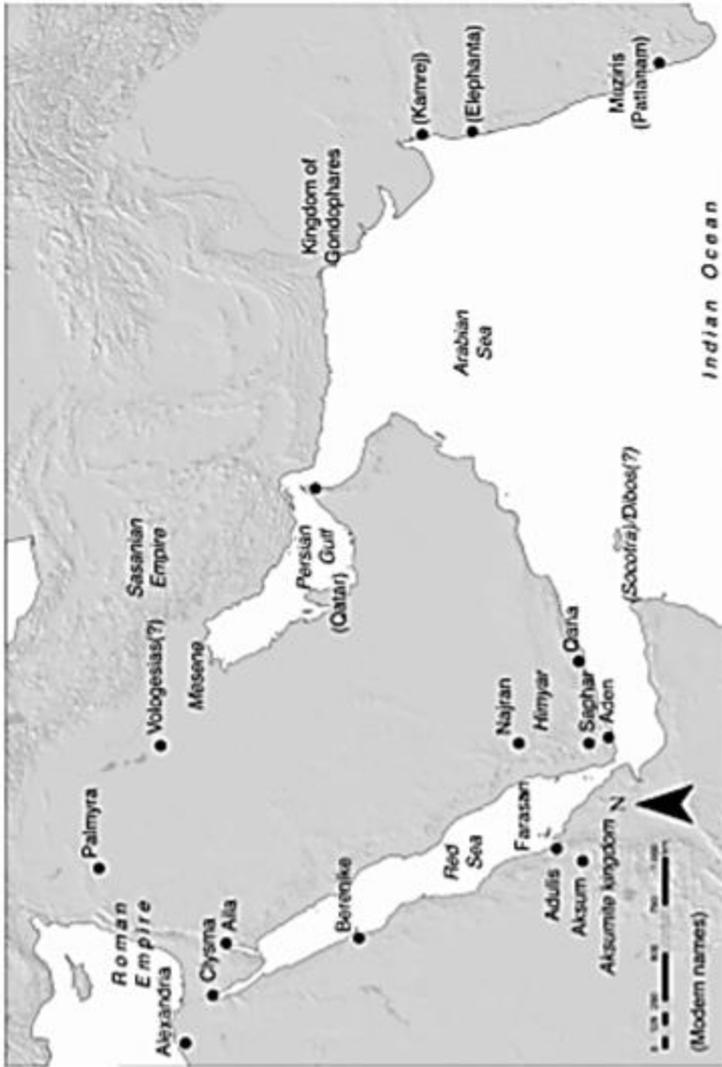
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Indian Ocean trade in Late Antiquity, with important ports and cities.