

Soqotra, Between the East and the West

Klaus Karttunen

Ancient trade in the waters of the Indian Ocean has often been studied and discussed, including by me, at South Asian Archaeology conferences. We know from classical sources that the island of Soqotra played a certain role in such trade. Soqotra, now a territory belonging to Yemen, has ancient ties to South Arabia and is situated in the Indian Ocean, 240 km east of the eastern extremity of Africa (Cape Guardafui) and 300 km south of the Arabian coast. The ties to South Arabia are still seen in the fact that Soqotri remains one of the few extant survivors of the Ancient South Arabian language.

The location of Soqotra is rather favourable to sea-faring, and, from Greek sources (for example, *Periplus Maris Erythraei* and Cosmas Indicopleustes), we know that Soqotra at least temporarily played an important role in ancient international trade. But, although the main written sources of this trade – including those of Strabo, Pliny and Ptolemy – are Graeco-Latin; India, South Arabia, the Gulf countries and even East Africa were active participants; only a small portion of trade from these countries reached Roman Egypt. This fact was well known to the author of the *Periplus* and has been well demonstrated by archaeologists in recent years.¹

Nevertheless, for a long time, the archaeological evidence for activities in ancient Soqotra was rather meagre. Until recently, we could only speak of a fragment of a Roman amphora handle and some red-slipped bowls and jars, probably of Western origin and probably from the early centuries CE. These artefacts were discovered in the 1980s by the Soviet-Yemenite expedition in Qallansiya, on the west coast of the island.² The finds there also included some Arabian and possibly Indian pottery. The excavators further mention the remains of two, possibly very early, churches,³ while, from Greek sources we know that Christianity arrived there as early as the fourth century CE. At the same time, the excavations established that the island had been continuously inhabited from the Neolithic period until the present.

The situation changed drastically in 2000 when the Belgian speleologist expedition of the ‘Socotra Karst Project’, led by Peter De Geest, examined the Hoq Cave, located in the north-eastern part of the island. The cave contained a modest amount of archaeological remains and a rich harvest of epigraphy. Situated on a limestone plateau, the cave’s entrance is ca. 300 m above sea level, clearly visible from the ocean. The inscriptions are found deep inside the cave, about one kilometre from the entrance. All the evidence has now been presented in *Foreign Sailors on Socotra*, edited by Ingo Strauch.⁴

What we have here is an important corpus of inscriptions. It includes no fewer than 193 Indian texts, mostly in Sanskrit, a few in Middle Indo-Aryan. All except one kharoṣṭhī text are written in brāhmī. Furthermore, there are eleven South Arabian, eight Ethiopian (and two uncertain), three Greek, one Palmyrene and one Bactrian inscription. All texts are dated to the first half of the first millennium, and some wall drawings and archaeological remains accompany them. All of these findings were discovered by the Belgian expedition in 2000 and, in the following years, have been studied *in situ* by specialists including by Strauch himself. In the book, all inscriptions are published and analysed in detail by Strauch and other contributors, who

also consider their importance for ancient international trade in the Indian Ocean. The two longer Greek inscriptions are analysed by Mikhail D. Bukharin in the same volume with a general discussion of their evidence, while Maria Gorea discusses the Palmyran evidence.

The fact that the great majority of the Indian inscriptions are in Sanskrit is remarkable, since Prākṛit was the commonly used language in inscriptions at the time. All the inscriptions are rather short, primarily of the 'I was here' type, but, even so, they furnish important material for onomastic and linguistic studies. One important discovery is the mention of two place-names, both from the same neighbourhood. One is Hastakavapra, a port located on the western shore of the Cambay Gulf, called Astakapra in Greek in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (41 and 43) and by Ptolemy (7, 1, 60). The second, mentioned in no fewer than seven inscriptions, is the famous port of Bharukaccha – in Greek, Barygaza. When we add two inscriptions defining the person as being a Kṣatrapa, it seems clear that visitors to Hoq often came from Gujarat. This finding is also supported by the discoveries of the Gujarati Red Polished Ware on the island. The earliest references to the use of classical Sanskrit are located in Ujjayinī, the Kṣatrapa inland capital, with good connections to Bharukaccha. Thus, we have here additional evidence for the early use of Classical Sanskrit in Gujarat.

The inscriptions in the Hoq cave contain a number of personal names, including names of hometowns, ethnic and religious affiliations, and professions – four *nāvikas*, i.e. captains or steersmen, among them. All have been skillfully analysed by Strauch. Some visitors, for example, Dāraka, the son of Kṣudraka, have left several inscriptions, so that, according to Strauch, there are only 117 different scribes. As Strauch further notes, Hoq nicely confirms Fussman's conclusion, drawn from the Karakoram Highway and other inscriptions, about the high levels of literacy among the mercantile class.⁵ To this point, I might add that, in literary texts, merchants are always literate, and so, too, are their female relatives, who often write and receive love letters.

Another interesting point is the religious affiliation of the scribes. Too often it has been claimed that Indian merchants were all Buddhist, with a few Jains included, as caste regulations forbade Hindus from travelling abroad.⁶ But these regulations were only part of the Brahman theory, as stated, for example, in the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, and it is far from certain that other *varṇas* followed it. Somewhat later, for example, in Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracarita*, we also witness Hindu merchants travelling abroad. Nevertheless, it is true that Buddhism was popular among traders and craftspeople, as we see in Jātaka stories and in Indian inscriptions.

The Hoq inscriptions certainly include many Buddhists. In addition to some personal names which are clearly Buddhist, we encounter at least one śramaṇa. But there are also several Hindu names, both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva. The drawings accompanying some inscriptions include two *stūpas* and one *cakra* referring to Buddhism, but there are also no fewer than five *triśūlas*, indicating Śiva.⁷ Further auspicious symbols include two *nandyāvartas*, a *pūrṇaghata* and a *svastika*. Three drawings of ships seem to refer to the profession of the visitors. As to their social status, names belonging to each of the four *varṇas* are present, Kṣatriyas being the most common group.⁸ Strauch leaves open the question of whether Indian visitors attached some religious significance to the cave. But if it was just a common sight, the cave would, I think, bear more South Arabian and Ethiopian inscriptions. For some reason, it seems to have possessed a special attraction for Indians.

Discussing the Palmyran inscribed wooden tablet, dated 258 CE, Maria Gorea offers some interesting considerations on the trade history.⁹ It remains open whether Palmyrans came to Soqotra from Egypt or from the Gulf, as they were active in both directions. Other noteworthy contributions include the discussion of Christian-Julien Robin on the Palmyran evidence furnished by two South Arabian inscriptions of

Ḥaḍramawt mentioning two Indian visitors¹⁰ and the long and interesting contribution by Mikhail Bukharin on the Greek inscriptions¹¹ and Mediterranean contacts of Soqatra.¹²

An important question is the ancient name of the island. Strauch vehemently denies the old etymology of the Greek name *Dioscurides* as Sanskrit *Sukhataradvīpa*¹³ tracing its remarkably long, but rather unconvincing history. It was first suggested as 'Diu Socotara' by Samuel Bochart in his famous *Geographia Sacra* as early as 1646 and established with a Sanskrit etymology by Peter von Bohlen in 1830. While others have pointed out that the Greek name *Dioscorides* is hardly an inversion of *dvīpa sukhatara*, Sukhatara is often accepted for Soqatra, a name attested in early Arabic sources as *Suqūtra*. I have myself mentioned the idea a few times, but it now seems that Indian *Sukhataradvīpa* is wholly unattested, while Strauch¹⁴ notes an Ancient South Arabic name *s'krd* instead. Moreover, Strauch offers another Indian derivation, Śīkotarī Mātā, the marine goddess of Western India, attested as early as the fourteenth century and popular in Gujarat.¹⁵ Or perhaps her name rather comes from that of Soqatra. In late antiquity, the island was often simply called *dīpa* (pkt. 'island').

Strauch also takes up the possibility that the travelogues of Euhemerus and Iambulus,¹⁶ with invented utopian islands in the Indian Sea, may in fact refer to Soqatra. However, I have often wondered at the eagerness of some scholars to read Greek and Roman fiction as history, or at least as inspired by history. There are a number of competing theories attempting to ascertain the geographical locations of these islands, but it is certainly unnecessary to list them here. Even if, for instance, someone would have attempted to put Gulliver's islands on the map, I think such an attempt would no longer be taken seriously today. And even if it were, why then would we not put the Never Never Land and Narnia on a map as well?¹⁷

The first serious possibility of a literary reference to Soqatra seems to be by Agatharchides, who, in the second century BCE, wrote an account of the Erythraean, that is to say the Indian Sea, preserved in an abridged form by Diodorus and Photius. Agatharchides mentions the Fortunate Islands (νησοὶ εὐδαίμονες), visited by ships from many directions, in particular from Potana, the port established by Alexander on the Indus, i.e. the Patala of Alexander's histories. The term 'fortunate', often ascribed to South Arabia as *Arabia Felix*, comes from Arabic *yaman*, meaning both 'good luck' and 'south' (also modern Yemen).

The first unambiguous literary reference to Soqatra (now known as Greek *Dioscorides*) is then found in the mid-first century in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, chapter 30f. The author must have had rather good information about the island. It is reportedly mostly desert and has poor agriculture, the main products being dragon blood, sea turtle and land tortoise (the last of which has now disappeared). The population, which included resident Indian, Arabian and Greek merchants, lived mainly in the north, as the present population does today. In bad weather conditions, such as the south-west monsoon, landing was difficult. As this made it inconvenient for Western ships to reach land, the island was better approached from Muza in South Arabia and from India.

Among other authors dealing with Egypt's eastern trade, Strabo and Mela do not mention Soqatra at all. Pliny (6, 32, 153) mentions the island *Dioscoridu* in one short sentence. In the same way, the *Geography* of Ptolemy only offers a scant mention of the island *Dioscorides* in the Arabian sea, with a town of the same name (6, 7, 45, cf. 8, 22, 17). The *Periplus*, speaking of Soqotran trade, employs the past tense, and these scanty notes perhaps indicate that the island was no longer visited by ships from Egypt. Strauch et al. suggest as the reason for this that South Arabians kept the island closed to Romans though not to Indians. Salles has argued for a similar ban on the Somali coast and in the Gulf.¹⁸

Turning to Late Antiquity, the *Church History* of Philostorgius contains the famous account of the 'Indian Theophilus', an Arian theologian and missionary during the time of Constantius II in the mid-fourth century. He came from an 'Indian island' called *Divus*, this time probably really meaning MIA *dīpa*; it has

been variously identified as Sri Lanka, the Maldives,¹⁹ Diu and an island off the Ethiopian coast, but the majority of scholars seem now to accept the identification of the island as Soqotra. Theophilus came as a hostage to the West and grew up in Constantinople. After his baptism, Theophilus took an ecclesiastic career and was sent by the emperor to conduct an extensive missionary and diplomatic mission first in Ḥimyar (South Arabia) then on his native island, which he possibly Christianised, then to India and Aksūm in Ethiopia.

In the early sixth century, Cosmas Indicopleustes²⁰ sailed along the coast of the island, which he again calls *Dioscorides*, without landing there. But he had heard from Greek-speaking islanders in Ethiopia that there were Nestorian Christians in the island who were under the jurisdiction of the Persian church. He says that Greeks had settled in Soqotra as early as the Ptolemaic times and that the inhabitants there still spoke Greek. To this, Strauch²¹ and Bukharin,²² and others before them, have compared the accounts preserved in Arabic histories from the tenth to thirteenth centuries,²³ though these works were probably based on pre-Islamic sources. According to them, Alexander himself, on the advice of Aristotle, sent Greek settlers to Soqotra, where they expelled the earlier Indian population. While Strauch thinks that this rather refers to Ptolemaic times,²⁴ I am inclined to still greater caution. The likely pre-Islamic historical sources would have included such works as those of Pseudo-Callisthenes and other legendary sources on Alexander, which possess very little, if any, historical value.

It is a well-known fact that a large share of the ancient international trade of the Indian Ocean was carried out by those other than Greek vessels. However, the evidence for this fact is meagre, mainly consisting of the remains of ceramics and short references in the *Periplus*. The inscriptions of Soqotra are thus a very welcome addition to our knowledge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe thanks to Kenneth Lai for kindly checking my English.

NOTES

1. For the history and ramifications of this trade, see, for example, Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade. From Pots to Pepper* (London: Duckworth Debates in Archaeology, 2008).
2. V. V. Naumkin & A. V. Sedov, 'Monuments of Socotra', in *Athens, Aden, Arikamedu. Essays on the interrelations between India, Arabia and the Mediterranean*, ed. by M. F. Boussac & J. F. Salles (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), pp. 193–250 (p. 229); In Mikhail D. Bukharin, 'The Mediterranean World and Socotra', in *Foreign Sailors on Socotra. The inscriptions and drawings from the cave Hoq*, ed. by Ingo Strauch (Bremen: Vergleichende Studien zu Antike und Orient 3, 2012), pp. 494–539, Bukharin mentions two further sites with Western ceramics: Kosh (p. 498) and Hajrya (p. 515).
3. Naumkin and Sedov, p. 241f.
4. To be perfectly frank, I was not immediately aware of its appearance, and I am very obliged to Strauch himself, who recommended it to me during the International Sanskrit Conference in Bangkok in the summer of 2015. See Ingo Strauch, *Foreign Sailors on Socotra. The inscriptions and drawings from the cave Hoq* (Bremen: Vergleichende Studien zu Antike und Orient 3, 2012).
5. Strauch, p. 343.
6. Thus, for example, Warwick Ball, 'How far did Buddhism spread west? Buddhism in the Middle East in Ancient and Medieval Times', *al-Rāfidān. Journal of Western Asiatic Studies* 10 (1989), pp. 1–11 (p. 4).
7. Strauch, p. 361ff.

8. Strauch, p. 351ff.
9. Maria Gorea, 'Palmyra and Socotra', in *Foreign Sailors on Socotra. The inscriptions and drawings from the cave Hoq*, ed. by Ingo Strauch (Bremen: Vergleichende Studien zu Antike und Orient 3, 2012), pp. 447–492 (p. 447ff).
10. Appendix to Gorea, p. 488ff., by Christian-Julien Robin.
11. One is by Septimius Paniscus, a ship-owner, dated ca. 230 CE, another by Alexander Petros, who was Christian, having left his inscription sometime between the mid-third and late fourth century. The third Greek inscription contains only the five letters AYKAP, i.e. the Aramaic name Abgar.
12. Bukharin, p. 494ff.
13. Strauch, p. 397ff.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 403.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 390ff.
16. Both known from the summaries of Diodorus: 2, 55–60 (Iambulus) and 5, 41–46 (Euhemerus). See Marek Winiarczyk, *Die hellenistischen Utopien* (De Gruyter, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 293, 2011) on both.
17. There are other quite uncertain cases for possible references to Soqotra suggested by Strauch and Bukharin, such as the Seria of Pausanias (6, 26, 8f.) and the Selera of Philostratus (*V. Ap.* 3, 56f.).
18. Jean-François Salles, 'The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea and the Arab-Persian Gulf', in *Athens, Aden, Arikamedu. Essays on the Interrelations between India, Arabia and the Mediterranean*, ed. by M. F. Boussac & J. F. Salles (New Delhi, 1995), pp. 115–146 (p. 128ff).
19. A related case is Ammianus Marcellinus 22, 7, 10, on the envoys from Divi and Serendivi coming to Julian in 362 CE. These places are commonly identified as the Maldives and Sri Lanka, but Bukharin (p. 525) now suggests Soqotra and Sri Lanka as the modern geographical locations.
20. *Christian Topography* 3, 65. Strauch (p. 384) thinks that Theophilus actually visited India but not Soqotra, which he would have only known by hearsay. But his knowledge of India is also rather imperfect and, if he knows more about Sri Lanka than India, he also makes it clear (11, 17) that his information on Soqotra was culled from his friend Sopatros, who had visited the island.
21. Strauch, p. 385f.
22. Bukharin, p. 503ff.
23. Mentioned as the main sources are as-Sīrāfi and al-Hamdānī, but the tradition is also repeated by al-Bīrūnī, al-Mas'ūdī, al-Qazwīnī, Yāqūt and an-Nuwayrī.
24. Strauch, p. 385f.

