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4

Indian Inscriptions on Socotra: New Evidence for Indian Maritime Trade in The Western Indian Ocean

INGO STRAUCH

INTRODUCTION

The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed the remarkable discovery of epigraphical documents on the island of Socotra, situated between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Although they belong to two different genres and to two rather distant historical periods, both give important information about the presence of Indian sailors on the island. Both groups were found along the northern shore of the island, facing the South Arabian peninsula and even today, the more populated part where most of the settlements and villages are concentrated (see map in Figure 4.1).

The first group is represented by a large number of graffiti, which was discovered in one of the impressive karst caves on the island, called the Hoq cave. These short texts can be dated on palaeographical grounds between the first and fifth centuries CE and are related to the period of India's intensive trade activities along the so-called maritime Silk Road.

The second group belongs to a much later period. During construction works on a Muslim cemetery in Rās Ḥawlef village local inhabitants discovered a series of inscribed coral stones. As later analysis showed, these stones were left by Gujarati sailors, who visited the island in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries CE.

In this essay, I will introduce these two groups and highlight their value as unique historical sources for the maritime activities of Indian sailors between the first and the eighteenth centuries.

A comprehensive catalogue and study of the Socotran inscriptions and a detailed evaluation of their historical importance can now be found in the recently published volume *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The Inscriptions and Drawings from the Cave Hoq*, which combines the research of an international group of scholars on this outstanding new material (Strauch 2012).¹

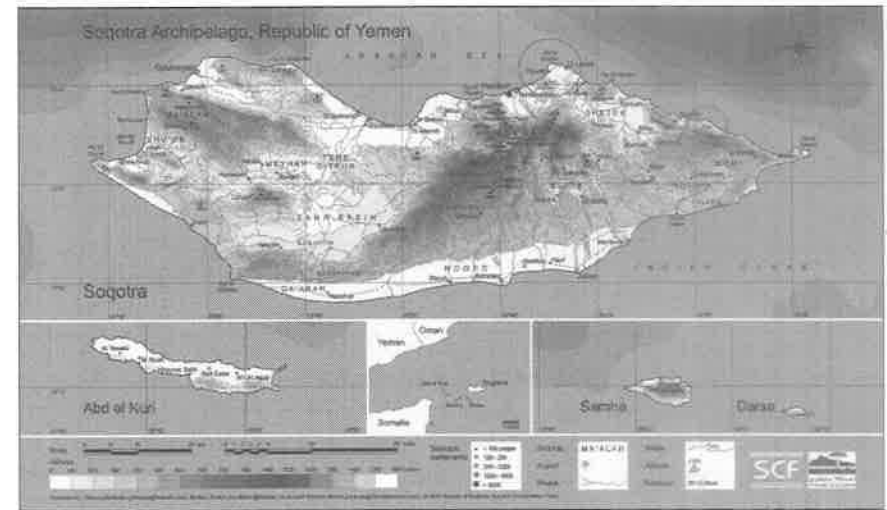


FIGURE 4.1: The island of Socotra with the find-spots of epigraphical material indicated

Source: Courtesy Friends of Socotra

THE INSCRIPTIONS FROM HOQ

While exploring the huge natural underground cave Hoq, Belgian speleologists under the guidance of Peter De Geest discovered in 2000 a large number of archaeological remains, graffiti, and drawings on the walls, floors, stalagmites and stalactites of the cave. All the inscribed texts are found in the back of the cave, which is nearly one kilometre away from the entrance (see map in Figure 4.2). This part of the cave is relatively hard to access and presupposes a considerable effort to get there. This is certainly the main reason for the fact that the inscriptions and drawings could survive nearly untouched until the present day. The Hoq cave is situated below the limestone plateau at the northeast coast of the island. Its entrance rises nearly 300 m above sea level and the entrance can be reached by an hour's walk from the seashore from where it is clearly visible. The cave is about 2.5 km. long, up to 100 m wide and 30 m high.

Further research showed that the archaeological and epigraphical remains belonged to different ethnic groups, visiting the cave more or less in the same period and participating in maritime activities on the island. It was possible to identify the graffiti as South Arabian, Ethiopian (Aksūmite), Greek, Bactrian and Indian inscriptions. A wooden tablet which was found *in situ* leaning against a stalagmite bears a Palmyrene inscription which can be dated to the year 258 CE (Gorea 2012). This dating has been confirmed by a C14 analysis of the tablet's wooden material (Dridi 2012).

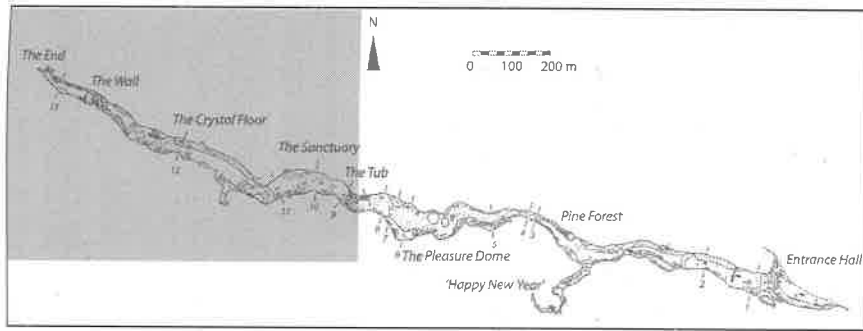


FIGURE 4.2: Map of cave Hoq with inscribed part indicated

Source: Strauch 2012: 29

According to the preserved epigraphs the cave attracted sailors from different regions of the Indian Ocean, but the majority of the documented texts belong to those from India. Altogether 193 Indian inscriptions could be clearly identified—192 of them in Brāhmī, and only one in Kharoṣṭhī, the script prevalent in north-west India. The actual number of Indian graffiti is certainly somewhat higher. In some cases only illegible traces of Indian letters could be identified which are documented in the catalogue, but not counted as independent texts.

The numbers of non-Indian texts are considerably less: 11 South Arabian, 8 Aksūmite, 2 South Arabian or Aksūmite, 3 Greek, 1 Bactrian and 1 Palmyrene. It can be cautiously suggested that this relation also reflects the actual share of participants in trading activities on Socotra. As far as the palaeographical and epigraphical analysis allows, all the graffiti at Hoq can

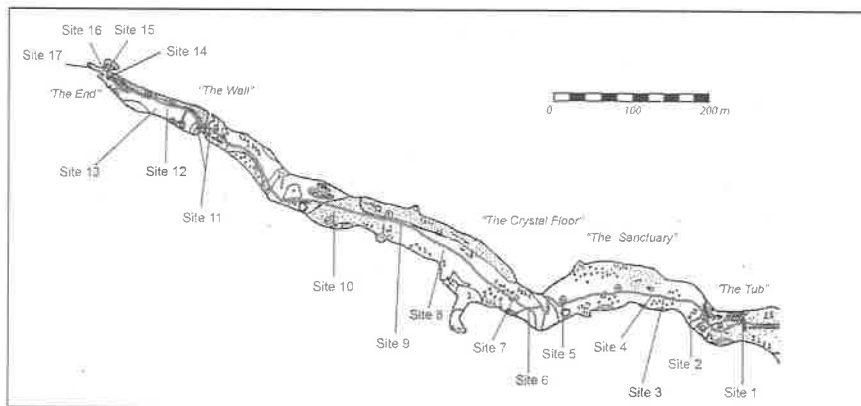


FIGURE 4.3: Distribution of epigraphs within the inscribed part

Source: Strauch 2012: 29

be dated to the first half of the first millennium CE. The only exception is the South Arabian text 6:3, which can be dated to the first century BCE (Robin 2012: 439). There is no evidence for any visits of the inscribed part after the fifth century CE.

This presence of foreign sailors on Socotra—among them a great number of Indians—is not really a surprise. The first-century anonymous *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* refers to the island under its Greek name Dioskourides:

30. On this bay is a mighty headland, facing the east, called Syagros, at which there are a fortress to guard the region, a harbor, and a storehouse for the collection of frankincense. In the open sea off it is an island, between it and the Promontory of Spices across the water but nearer to Syagros, called Dioscuridēs; though very large, it is barren and also damp, with rivers, crocodiles, a great many vipers, and huge lizards, so huge that people eat the flesh and melt down the fat to use in place of oil. The island bears no farm products, neither vines nor grain. The inhabitants, few in number, live on one side of the island, that to the north, the part facing the mainland; they are settlers, a mixture of Arabs and Indians and even some Greeks, who sail out of there to trade. The island yields tortoise shell, the genuine, the land, and the light-coloured, in great quantity and distinguished by rather large shields, and also the oversize mountain variety with an extremely thick shell, of which the parts over the belly, whichever are useful, do not take [sc. regular] cutting; besides they are rather tawny. On the other hand, whatever can be used for small boxes, small plaques, small disks, and similar items gets cut up completely. The so-called Indian cinnabar is found there: it is collected as an exudation from the trees.

31. The island is subject to the aforementioned king of the frankincense-bearing land, just as Azania is to Charibaël and the governor of Mapharitis. Trade with it used to be carried out by some of the shippers from Muza and also by those sailing out of Limyrikê and Barygaza who by chance put in at it; these would exchange rice, grain, cotton cloth, and female slaves, which found a market because of a shortage there, for big cargoes of tortoise shell. At the present time the kings have leased out the island, and it is under guard (tr. Casson 1989: 67–9).

The author makes it clear that Indians carrying out trading activities were present on the island. The favourite products which were looked for at Socotra were tortoise-shell and ‘Indian cinnabar’, is the latter also known as dragon-blood (*Draecena cinnabari*) and found and sold on the island even today as one of its major products beside several varieties of aloe and frankincense.

There seem to have existed direct routes to Gujarat (Bharukaccha) and the Malabar Coast. The information given by the *Periplus* is confirmed by several other classical accounts—both earlier and later ones—including the *Periplus* of the Ptolemean officer Agatharchides of Cnidus (Burstein 1989:

169) and Diodorus' description of the mythical island Panchaea in his *Bibliotheca Historica* (cf. Strauch 2012: pp. 379–85).

This impressive and quite explicit literary witness is hardly corroborated by archaeological evidence. Although the *Periplus* and other works clearly indicate Indians playing an active and considerable role in Indo-Roman trade, there is only a limited amount of archaeological data available pointing to the presence of Indians in the West, including some impressive remains of Indian goods such as pepper and coconut or Indian ceramics (cf. Strauch 2012: 367–77). When it comes to epigraphic evidence, the situation is even worse. There are altogether five inscribed objects in the West, which can be attributed to Indian sailors of the first centuries CE: four of them are written in Tamil and one in Western Prakrit (Salomon 1990; cf. Strauch 2012: 369).

The evidence on Socotra itself is even more meagre. Despite the discovery of a few archaeological sites, which could be dated to the pre-Muslim period of the island's history (Strauch 2012: 377–9), there were practically no remains that could be ascribed to Indian visitors to the island. It is, however, possible that a more systematic archaeological exploration of the island will change this situation. Thus according to the excavators' preliminary report, recent excavations at Kosh at the extreme west of Socotra brought to light ceramic wares of South Asian origin (Vinogradov 2011).

Due to these rather limited data on Indian agents in the Western Indian Ocean trade, the corpus of the inscriptions from Hoq fills an important gap making for the first time the Indian voice clearly audible.

Of course, the amount of information, which can be deduced from such a source is limited. The inscriptions from Hoq are graffiti, left by persons who visited the cave. Most of them are names, sometimes accompanied by patronyms, religious and official titles or other indications of the person's origin. In many texts these elements are supplemented by a verbal form with the meaning 'has come, has arrived'. According to these formal features the graffiti from Hoq belong to the category of so-called 'pilgrims' and travellers' records' (Salomon 1998: 121f.), which is well attested to on the sub-continent. The most impressive corpus of such documents, which belong to the same historical period as our material from Hoq, comes from the numerous inscribed rocks along the Karakorum Highway (cf. von Hinüber 1989) and shares a number of common features with the material from Hoq.

Only few graffiti seem to bear a different character, including two short texts dedicated to the historical Gautama Buddha (11:43, 14:28) and an isolated number (10:2), probably representing a date calculated in the Śaka era. If this interpretation is correct, the figure contained here ('154') would correspond to the year 232 CE—indicating a date which is in general

TABLE 4.1: Survey of the inscriptional genres of Indian epigraphs discovered at Hoq cave

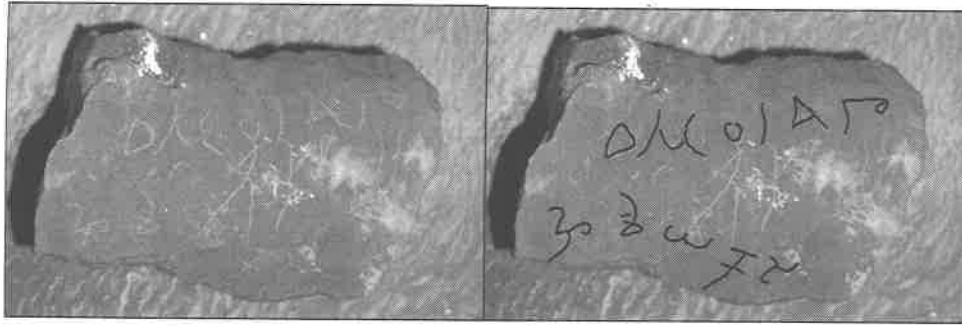
<i>The Indian inscriptions of the cave Hoq</i>	<i>Texts</i>		<i>Scribes</i>	
	Σ	%	Σ	%
Total	193	100	117	100
A. Personal inscriptions	172	89	104	89
(1) Name only	90	52	55	53
(2) Name + patronym	34	20	21	20
(3) Name + (patronym) + provenance/ profession/title	19	11	15	14
(4) Name + (patronym) + (provenance/ profession/title) + verbal form	33	19	21	20
B. Religious inscriptions	7	3.5	3	2.5
C. Miscellaneous inscriptions	3	1.5	3	2.5

Source: Strauch 2012: 279

accordance with the results of the palaeographical analysis and the dating of the Palmyrene wooden tablet 'De Geest' mentioned above.

According to the palaeographical evidence all Indian graffiti from Hoq can be ascribed to a period between the first and the fifth centuries. The majority of them belong to the second to fourth centuries CE. If we compare the scripts used at Hoq with stylistic varieties of Indian Brāhmī scripts, it can be quite safely stated that most of the scribes come from western India (Strauch 2012: 286–342). This geographical information is supported by a number of inscriptions mentioning the visitors' origins. While five of the scribes point to Bharukaccha as their hometown, a single text refers to Hastakavapra (cf. Strauch 2012: 344f.). This latter evidence is of particular interest. The harbour of Hastakavapra is known to the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Chapters 41, 43, tr. Casson 1989: 77, 200) and Ptolemy's *Geographia* (VII.1.60, tr. McCrindle 1885: 146) under the Greek name Ἀστακάμπρα/'Αστακάμπρα. It has been identified with the modern Hāthab near Bhavnagar (Yule 1876, McCrindle 1885: 150). According to recent excavations carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India the place was occupied between the fourth century BCE and the sixth century CE (Pramanik 2004: 136f.). A large number of inscribed sealings with personal names and datable to the third to fourth centuries CE underlines its function as an important trading centre (Pramanik 2005: 108).

Besides these little texts, which point to Gujarat as the home of the Indian sailors, there are a few graffiti, which seem to indicate a different origin. The generic terms *yavana* and *śaka* were probably used by persons with an Iranian



PLATES 4.4 and 4.5: The Greco-Bactrian-Brāhmī biscriptual text 16:8
(right with hand-drawing by the author)

Source: Strauch 2012: 202

background, but living in western India (cf. Strauch 2012: 348f.). Their texts are supplemented by two particularly interesting graffiti: the first is by a person calling himself in a short bilingual text Humiyaka (in Brāhmī script) and OMOIAGO (in Greek script) (16:8, see Figs. 4.4 and 4.5). According to N. Sims-Williams, both spellings represent the Bactrian name (H)umyag or (H)umeyag (Strauch 2012: 202f.). From where this Bactrian originally came is unclear. That he used a variety of Western Brāhmī script for the Indian part of his bilingual text, might point to western India as his homeland.

The second text mentioning a person named Upali (16:13) is the single instance of an Indian graffiti written in Kharoṣṭhī, the script characteristic of the region called ‘Greater Gandhāra’, i.e. the north-west frontier of ancient India and parts of modern Afghanistan and Central Asia. Thus, Upali certainly did not belong to western India. Whether this evidence allows us to conclude that there was a direct trade between Socotra and the Indian north-west via one of the Indus harbours is, however, far from certain. It is also possible—and in my view even more probable—that Upali, a north-westerer by origin, used to live in western India where he joined one of the naval expeditions to Socotra.

It is not surprising that some of the visitors attach to their names the professional designation *nāvika*. In the specific context of these inscriptions, this term probably refers to an elevated member of the ship crew, most probably the captain. A closely related term is *niryāmaka* (11:12) (cf. Strauch 2012: 346–8). A different professional background is indicated by the use of the title *vani*, which can probably be traced back to the Sanskrit *vaṇij*—‘merchant’ or one of its derivatives (Strauch 2012: 265).

According to the names attested in the inscriptions the visitors from Hoq belong to different religious communities of early historical India. As the elements of their names show, they were Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas and Buddhists (Table 4.2).

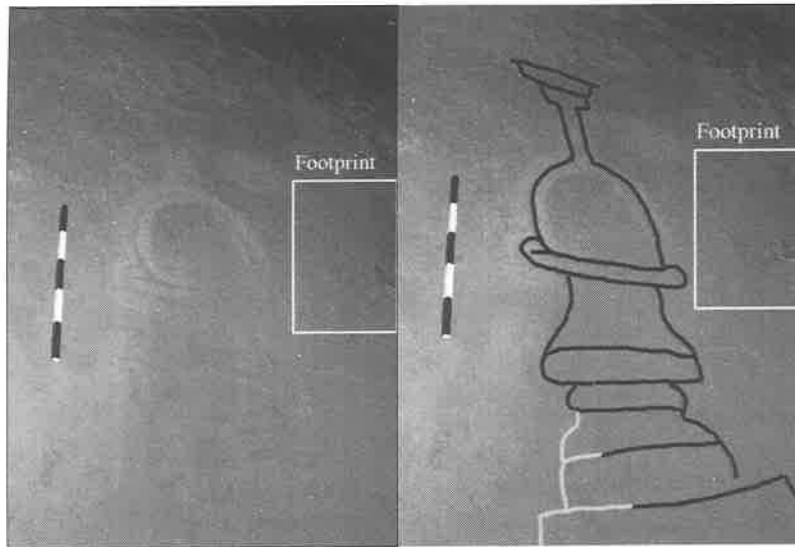
TABLE 4.2: Religious affiliation of personal names attested in Hoq
(names of visitors are given in normal print,
names of their fathers in italics)

Religious term	Indian names from Hoq
Buddhist 6 names (3 visitors)	
Buddha	Buddhanandin, <i>Buddhamitra</i>
Dharma	<i>Dharma</i>
Samgha	Samghadāsa, Samghanandin, <i>Samgharaṅgin</i>
General 1 name (1 visitor)	
Deva	Devila
Vaiṣṇava 7 names (5 visitors)	
Viṣṇu	Viṣṇu, Viṣṇudatta, Viṣṇudhara, <i>Viṣṇupati</i> ,
	<i>Viṣṇubhaṭṭi</i> , <i>Viṣṇula</i> , <i>Viṣṇuṣena</i>
Śaiva 8 names (6 visitors)	
Śiva	<i>Śivaghoṣa</i> , Śivaba+pava, <i>Śivamitra</i>
Rudra	Rudradatta, Rudranandin, Rudrendra
Īśvara	Īsaradasa (Skt. Īsaradāsa), Īsaraskanda
Other Hindu deities 9 names (8 visitors)	
Skanda-Kumāra	Īsaraskanda, Skanda, Skandabhūti,
Skandamitra, Kumāraṣena,	
Bhaṭṭikumāra	
Sūrya	Sūryasiṃha
Vedic deities	<i>Aryamabhūti</i> , <i>Prajāpati</i>

Source: Strauch 2012: 356–7

These religious affiliations are confirmed by some of the drawings, which were probably left inside the cave by Indian sailors. Several of them show tridents (*triśūla*), which can be interpreted as Śaivite symbols. Another rather interesting group are two drawings of *stūpas*, which are found in the sand of the cave’s floor (13:5, see Figs. 4.6 and 4.7). They were obviously done by one of the Buddhist visitors to the cave. Although one might feel tempted to interpret such types of drawings as substitutes for ritual objects creating a kind of ‘ritual space’, there are no traces of their ritual use. Thus, the sand surrounding the *stūpa* drawings is completely untouched and seems to have never been used for any kind of circumambulation (*pradakṣiṇa*).

Although the corpus of graffiti from Hoq is certainly an impressive witness of the activities of Indian traders in the west of the Indian Ocean, its information must remain limited, mainly due to the character of the



FIGURES 4.6 and 4.7 Drawing of a *stūpa* 13:5–A
(right with hand-drawing by the author)

Source: Strauch 2012: 167



FIGURE 4.8: Main gallery of Hoq at the end of 'The Sanctuary'

Source: Dirk Vandorpe (Socotra Karst Project)

texts. Thus we hardly get to know why the Indians came to Socotra or why they entered the cave during their stay on the island. It has been suggested that they considered the cave as a kind of maritime sanctuary, seeking the presence of a local deity there (Dridi 2002). Although the texts left behind by the Palmyrene and Greek visitors refer to the cave's gods, such an idea cannot be traced in any of the Indian texts (cf. Strauch 2012: 542f.). It is possible that rumours about the sacred character of the spot attracted foreign visitors. However, it is also not inconceivable that they simply used their stay on the island to visit one of its most beautiful and astonishing natural wonders. According to the Belgian speleologists, Hoq is one of the most impressive natural caves worldwide (Fig. 4.8). One can imagine that its magic also impressed past Indians.

THE GUJARĀTĪ STONE INSCRIPTIONS FROM RĀS ḤOWLEF²

In 2004, the inhabitants of the coastal village Ḥowlef on the northern coast of Socotra discovered five inscribed coral stones during repair works on the local cemetery. The village is situated not far from Sūq, the island's main port in the Portuguese period. It could have been that the stones once belonged to one of the parts of this harbour.

The outer appearance of the inscribed objects resembles modern gravestones, but as their contents show, they are of a distinctively different character. Due to the soft surface of the coral, the stones are heavily eroded and the texts partly abraded and difficult to read. They are written in a variety of Old Gujarātī and in Gujarātī script (Fig. 4.9). As a reference in a nineteenth century expedition account shows, there were many more such objects in the area which are now lost (Jansen van Rensburg 2012).

All of them are composed according to the same formula and contain the following elements:

1. Auspicious phrase
2. Date
3. Main body

- Part 1 (a) Shipowner
(b) Details of the route (home port, duration, destination)
(c) Duration of the stay on Socotra
- Part 2 Names of the captain and other officers
- Part 3 Names of participating merchants
- Part 4 Total figures of the members of the expedition



FIGURE 4.9: Stone with Gujarati inscription no. 9

Source: Julian Jansen Van Rensburg

Dates given in the texts vary between (Vikrama) Śaṃvat 1729 and 1775, i.e. 1672 and 1718. One of the ships obviously belonged to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (inscription no. 3). Its text says: *pādasāho śrī 5 Avara[m]gajebanu vāhāṇa* ‘ship of the king, the illustrious Aurangzeb’. According to the preserved portions of texts, all expeditions reported here came from Ghogha, the famous Gujarati port of the Portuguese period. It took the ships around 50 days (inscription no. 1: 49, inscription no. 2: 52) to reach Socotra, which is mentioned in the text by different names: *śrī sākātara*, *śrī sīkotara*, *śrī sākotara*. The expeditions stayed on the island between four and five months before they returned to India. The main portion of the documents is represented by long descriptions of the crews’ composition. Besides the captain (*nākhuda*) and other officers (*mālama*, *taṃḍela*, *karāṇī*, *kāji*, *bhaṇḍārī*) a number of participating merchants (*va = vaṇij*, *sā = sāhu*, *vepārī*, *sodāgara*, *māhājana*) are enumerated with their titles and names. The texts are concluded by a summarizing statement that gives total figures for the different groups participating in the maritime expedition. They include merchants (*sodāgara/śodāgara*, *māhājana*), soldiers (*laśakara*) and mendicants (*fakīra*). The total numbers of members range from about 100 persons up to 705 in the case of the expedition financed by the Mughal emperor.

These inscribed stones from Socotra are rather unique among sources attesting to Indian Ocean trade in the early modern period. As far as I was able to ascertain, there are no inscribed stones in other parts of the Indian maritime network comparable to the coral stones from Rās Ḥowlef.

However, the testimony of these stones, which bear witness to the strong presence of Gujaratis in the western Indian Ocean trade contacts, is confirmed by a number of other sources. A rather interesting group among them are Gujarati pilot maps, which usually mention Socotra as an important navigational point (Strauch 2012: 389–90).

Although belonging to rather different historical periods, both groups of inscriptional documents discovered on Socotra show intense contacts between this island and western India. The historically authentic and close relationship between Socotra and the Indian subcontinent had even evoked the rather adventurous, but quite persistent theory about ‘Socotra’s Indian name’. Based on an assumption expressed in 1830 by Peter von Bohlen, the island’s Arabic and Greek toponym is repeatedly associated in scientific and non-academic literature with a Sanskrit expression (*dvīpa*) *sukhātara*. However, such a toponym is not attested in any Sanskrit source and seems quite artificial from the perspective of Sanskrit word-formation and topological terminology. Although the toponym still resists an undoubted etymological explanation there is no reason to assume a Sanskrit source for it (Strauch 2012: 397–403).

However, it is possible that the toponym of Socotra did indeed leave its traces in India. According to literary and art-historical sources the name of the goddess Śīkotarī Mātā that is venerated in western India—and particularly in Gujarat—as a goddess of seafaring and fishing can perhaps be connected with the name of Socotra. Available sources indicate the fourteenth century CE as the earliest date of the introduction of this cult to western India (Strauch 2012: 390–97).

It seems that Socotra has played a crucial role for Indians in navigation in the western Indian Ocean throughout the functioning of maritime networks. Socotra acted as a navigational point, as a stopping place and station on the way to South Arabia and harbours further west and as a source of different products such as dragon-blood and tortoise shell. Although the island has certainly never been a ‘hub’ in maritime routes connecting the subcontinent with the West, the multitude and variety of sources attesting to Indo-Socotran relationships can indicate the intensity and manifold dimensions of Indian sailing activities in the western regions.

NOTES

1. The numbering of the texts used in the present article refers to the system followed in this publication.

2. This part of the essay is based on Bharati Shelat's article 'The Gujarati stone inscriptions from Rās Ḥowlef (Socotra)' (Shelat 2012).

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