

Monsoon Islam

Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast

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Introduction

The First Indian Muslim

I am the space where I am.

– Noël Arnaud, *L'état d'ébauche* (1950)

At the turn of the seventh century, a powerful South Indian king beheld an extraordinary astronomical event. Gazing at the stars sparkling above the Arabian Sea one night, he saw the moon divide into two halves, before it once again merged back into its customary shape. The awestruck king was Cheraman Perumal, the Hindu sovereign of the Chera dynasty, one of the three ancient Tamil royal houses that ruled over southern India. His realm was the westernmost portion of the *Tamilakam*, a region known to foreigners as Malabar or simply “the land of pepper”; its limits correspond more or less to those of the present-day Indian state of Kerala (which takes its name from the Chera dynasty). Upon witnessing this unwonted celestial occurrence, Cheraman Perumal summoned his Hindu astronomers, who although competent enough to accurately forecast eclipses, could not account for this unprecedented phenomenon. Later that night, however, it was revealed to the king in a dream that what he had seen in the night sky had been a miracle, performed by a man called Muhammad from a land across the sea.

Some years later, a group of Jewish and Christian traders disembarked on the Malabar Coast. They had come for the same reason that drew most travellers to this part of India: to purchase black pepper, the most important ingredient in the Indian Ocean spice trade, on which Malabar enjoyed a near-monopoly. Granted a royal audience, these traders told the king about an agitator back in Arabia, a man called Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-Allāh who claimed to be a prophet and was said to have employed magic to split the moon. A few years later still, a group of Muslim pilgrims arrived at the Chera court on their way to Sri Lanka, where they intended to visit the venerated site of Adam’s Peak. The king quizzed these Muslims about their pilgrimage, but above all about their faith and its prophet. They related to him the miracle of the splitting of the

moon, as recorded in *sūrah al-Qamar* (“The Moon”) of the Quran. The king requested that the pilgrims return to his court on their homeward journey. When they did so, he divided his realm among his ministers before joining the Muslims on their voyage back to Arabia. There, Cheraman Perumal was converted to Islam at the hands of the Prophet himself, becoming the first Indian Muslim. After a few years in Arabia, the convert king decided to return to his native land, but died on the Omani coast before he could set sail for India. Just before his death, however, he instructed a group of Arab Muslims in whose company he was travelling to proceed to Malabar regardless, and to propagate his new faith there. It was this group of Arabs who first introduced Islam to the Indian subcontinent.

Monsoon Islam

This apocryphal account of the South Indian ruler Cheraman Perumal epitomizes a particular trajectory of Islamic history as it intersects with the history of the Indian Ocean. The story-world of the legend – made up of rulers, traders, holy men, and pilgrims who are part of the trans-oceanic exchange of people, ideas, and patronage – is not invented of whole cloth but consistent with the way in which historians have come to understand the trading world of maritime Asia. In recent years, a growing number of studies has shifted our focus onto the languages, cultural content, political projects, and personal ambitions that traversed the ocean alongside trade. During the medieval period, the most momentous of these non-material transfers was the spread of Islam along the shores of monsoon Asia.¹ As Muslim merchants established communities in all the flourishing port cities of the Indian Ocean, Islamic beliefs and practices were carried across vast distances and came into contact with diverse societies on a scale comparable only to the initial expansion of the caliphate during the seventh century. This movement along the maritime trade routes, however, was not predicated on military conquest, political hegemony, or imperial design: the expansion of Muslim communities

¹ Paul Mus recommends the term “monsoon Asia” to encompass the borderless maritime world of pre-colonial East, Southeast, and South Asia as an area that despite its rich diversity shares certain cultural traits and that since the early historical period has interacted through the participation in a common world of commerce. Himanshu Prabha Ray likewise endorses this term for its ability to transcend regional constructs that she regards as a historiographical artefact of colonialism. See P. Mus, *India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa*, trans. I.W. Mabbett, ed. D.P. Chandler (Caulfield: Monash University Press, rev. edn., 2010); H.P. Ray, “Narratives of Faith: Buddhism and Colonial Archaeology in Monsoon Asia”, Asia Research Institute (National University of Singapore) working paper (2007).

across monsoon Asia between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries took place haphazardly, incidental to the development of Muslim trade networks. The principal agents in this extension of the medieval Muslim world were not sultans, soldiers, or scholars but ordinary, humdrum traders whose main objective was not to spread their faith but to turn a profit.

It is the central contention of this book that this process was fundamentally shaped by the interaction of these ordinary Muslims – ordinary in the sense in that they were neither representatives of state power nor recognized religious authorities – with non-Muslim societies.² This dynamic informed the development of Islamic norms and practices even in those regions of the Indian Ocean that eventually came under Muslim rule and that over time developed into majority Muslim societies, such as the Swahili Coast, the Maldives, or Aceh. Islam was never a stable, monolithic entity, and in places across monsoon Asia, far from Arabia, local receptions, understandings, and practices were crucial to its historical development. The communities that grew out of the settlement of Muslim traders in port cities across maritime Asia have proved long-lasting: every major historic port-of-trade in the Indian Ocean has a Muslim community that in some way traces its history back to these premodern exchanges. The effects of the interaction between local societies and Islam, however, have differed widely. Some regions, such as East Africa or peninsular Southeast Asia, have been profoundly shaped by their interaction with Islamic beliefs, law, and institutions, while others such as southern India or southern China to a much lesser degree.

This book is a study of both these dynamics: the spread of Islam through the agency of Muslim merchants on the one hand, and the effects on Islam of their interaction with non-Muslim societies across the medieval Indian Ocean world on the other. In other words, it seeks to both look outwards, towards the movements of Muslim communities in space and time, as well as inwards, to ask how these communities understood and responded to changes in their social and political environments. The core argument is that during this period, a particular form of Islamic thought and practice emerged from these twin processes. This Monsoon Islam of the Indian Ocean was shaped by merchants not sultans, forged by commercial imperatives rather than in battle, and defined by the reality of Muslims living within non-Muslim societies.

² Throughout this book, the term “non-Muslim” is used to refer to the diverse individuals and groups who did not identify with Islam; it does not imply that they formed a single community nor that they conceived their identity in an explicit contrast to Islam.

Muslims in the trading ports of monsoon Asia observed the principal acts of their faith, the so-called pillars of Islam (*arkān al-dīn*), in the same manner as Muslims everywhere: they professed their belief in the one god with Muhammad as his messenger, performed the obligatory prayers, gave alms, fasted during the holy month, and strove to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. In other ways, however, they diverged. For example, they produced new interpretations of Islamic law designed to meet the specific needs of their heterogeneous communities; many prayed in buildings that looked like Hindu temples, and some worshipped saints outside of the Islamic tradition; some practised matrilineality contrary to the otherwise staunchly agnatic Islamic tradition; they professed new understandings of religiously sanctioned warfare (*jihād*), and to that end even re-defined what constitutes the “Muslim world” (*dār al-Islām*).

This apparent tension between orthopraxy and innovation reflects the broader challenge of reconciling Islam as an analytical category with Islam as a historical phenomenon. As Shahab Ahmed points out, any meaningful conceptualization “must come to terms with – indeed, be *coherent* with – the capaciousness, complexity, and, often, *outright contradiction* that obtains within the historical phenomenon that has proceeded from the human engagement with the idea and reality” of the Islamic faith.³ It is this human, historical engagement – in the form of religious thought, social practice, commercial connection, and political allegiance – that this book connotes as Monsoon Islam. To be sure, Monsoon Islam is by no means a discrete school of Islamic philosophy: it is an etic category that does not represent a deliberate or coherent set of doctrines. Instead, it describes how Islam was *realized* by Muslims in the context of the trading world of the premodern Indian Ocean; not as abstract principles but in specific acts, attitudes, and ideas that responded to concrete historical situations and challenges. Importantly, these acts, attitudes, and ideas, however contradictory they may appear at times, were made sense of and articulated in terms of Islamic precept, history, and law – in other words, they were understood by these Muslims *as Islam*.⁴

Monsoon Islam developed outside of the traditional Islamic heartlands and independent of the caliphate and its successor states, on the coastlines and in the trade emporia of the Indian Ocean. The term is emphatically not meant to suggest that this trajectory of Islamic history

³ S. Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 6 (original emphases).

⁴ Writes Ahmed: “Islam, meaning-making for the self by one-fifth of humanity, is *Islam* – it is not anything else – and should be conceptualized, understood and appreciated as such; in terms which cohere with its meanings and by which its meanings cohere”. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 546 (original emphasis).

was defined by the monsoon as a climatic phenomenon, that somehow the weather patterns in regions affected by the Asian monsoon account for the prevalence of certain religious beliefs and attitudes there. Nor is it intended as a rebuttal to the kind of nineteenth-century orientalism that identified Islam as the natural religion of the desert: “Le désert est monothéiste”, in the words of Ernest Renan, “[s]ublime dans son immense uniformité”.⁵ Instead, the term summons the “deep structure element” underlying Indian Ocean trade during the age of sail: the system of seasonally opposing trade winds known as the monsoons.⁶ In his survey of global maritime history, Felipe Fernández-Armesto posits ebulliently that compared to the diktat of fixed wind systems, other motors of history, be they culture, politics, or economics, pale in significance: “In most of our explanations of what happened in history, there is too much hot air and not enough wind”.⁷

On account of the persistent maritime corridors created by its wind system, Monsoon Asia formed “a natural space that favoured the long-distance movement of people, commodities, languages and ideas”.⁸ The monsoons determined when ships could travel eastwards or westwards, where merchants settled, and how far their commercial networks extended. In the words of Michael Pearson, the doyen of Indian Ocean studies: “The implications of the monsoons are endless”.⁹ In the evolution of Islam across maritime Asia, the monsoons enabled and structured the exchanges and interactions that shaped how Islam came to be understood, communicated, and applied by Muslims living on the different coasts it connected. It is in this sense, as a link that fostered interaction, exchange, and relationships across the vast distances of the ocean, that the term monsoon is used in this book.

The world of Monsoon Islam was first and foremost a commercial realm, and many of its chief characteristics were defined by the imperatives of doing business in settings that were unfamiliar (in the sense of kinship

⁵ E. Renan, *Études d'Histoire Religieuse* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1857), 66–67. While the desert remains a potent symbol of and within Arab culture – and, synecdochically, for Muslim culture as a whole – from its inception Islam was a quintessentially urban faith. (By way of illustration, different terms for “city” occur more than two dozen times in the Quran, compared to only a couple of references to the desert.)

⁶ M. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2003), 19. The concrete workings of the monsoons are described in the next chapter.

⁷ F. Fernández-Armesto, *Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 149.

⁸ A. Aciri, R. Blench, and A. Landmann, “Re-connecting Histories across the Indo-Pacific”, in A. Aciri, R. Blench, and A. Landmann (eds.), *Spirits and Ships: Cultural Transfers in Early Monsoon Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2017), 5.

⁹ Pearson, *The Indian Ocean*, 22.

ties), foreign (in the sense of political boundaries), and alien (in the sense of cultural difference). Embedded within these complex trade relations across the ocean were many other forms of exchange: of texts, for instance, but most importantly of people with their beliefs, customs, connections, and rivalries. At its core, Monsoon Islam was the product of the tension between the distant and the local, between these Muslims' role in far-flung trading networks and an Islamic cosmopolis on the one hand and, on the other, their need to negotiate the specific social, economic, and political conditions of particular trading locations. Muslim trading communities were interlinked not only by mutual commerce but also by the need for religious and political institutions that could address the particular needs of these far-flung diasporic settlements.

Many of these institutions continue to define the character and structures of Islam across monsoon Asia. One example of this is Islamic law, which is usually seen as the defining hallmark of the influence that Arabic high culture had on the religion. But Muslims in maritime Asia found themselves confronted by issues that were not addressed in the classical legal texts of Islam; so Muslim judges and legists in India and elsewhere began to issue their own legal opinions (*Ar.*, *fatāwā*) to address the specific problems faced by Muslims living in non-Muslim societies, a context that was simply not envisaged by the standard treatises. That there was a real need for such legal commentaries that addressed the everyday matters of social life within a non-Islamic society – that is, in a diaspora setting – is evident from the fact that these texts were almost immediately taken up by other Muslim communities across the Indian Ocean which faced the same situation. For example, a commentary on Islamic law composed in South India was quickly adopted in Java; in fact, in a legacy of these trans-oceanic, inter-diasporic exchanges, this same legal text continues to be used by Muslim judges in Indonesia even today.¹⁰

This example highlights that the spread of Islam across the Indian Ocean was not a unilateral transfer of a stable, fully formed prototype into new settings. To translate is to create anew: Monsoon Islam is the product of the creative, cumulative effort to translate Islam (as a set of religious beliefs, legal norms, and social practices) into new settings. This effort was rooted in the precepts of a universalist faith and its cosmopolitan idiom, but needed to be adapted and justified in ways that were intelligible and acceptable locally. The legend of Cheraman Perumal, the convert king, is another example of this creative effort to bridge the

¹⁰ This text and its trajectories are examined in Chapter 2.

divide between the global and the local, to designate a place for Islam within the social and political landscape of medieval South India.

Monsoon Islam, then, offers a framework for conceptualizing a particular trajectory of Islamic history, one which evolved in the context of trade, accommodation, and the blending of practices and traditions. Arguably, it is this trajectory that has defined the lived reality of the majority of Muslims worldwide, even though it rarely figures in popular images of, or discourses about, Islam today. The history and legacy of this Monsoon Islam is the subject of this book.

Historiography

This study is not the first to explore this history but part of an ongoing effort to decouple Islamic history from Middle Eastern studies. The primary aim of Marshall Hodgson's monumental *The Venture of Islam* is to historicize Islam, for example by focusing on culture rather than the traditional mainstay of Islamic studies, law.¹¹ Hodgson coined the term Islamicate to describe cultural elements that were not directly religious in nature but influenced by (and influential on) the historical development of Islam. This led him to pay much greater attention to the development of Islamic civilization outside of its Arab heartland, in places such as India which he regarded as primary sites of religious innovation in the post-caliphate era.¹² By tracing the development of Islamicate civilization outside of legal texts and beyond the boundaries of the old caliphate, *The Venture of Islam* offers a history of Islam that is not a narrative of the dissemination (or dilution) of an authentic (but increasingly corrupted) Islam steeped in Arabic high culture but rather the story of Muslims' interaction with a much wider, and much more heterogeneous, world.

A central strand of Hodgson's work is the interactive nature of commerce, politics, and cultural change in the expansion of Islam across the Afro-Eurasian oecumene. Hodgson draws particular attention to the special role played by what he calls the commercial community in the expansion of Islam along the Indian Ocean littoral. As a result of this mercantile influence on the spread and development of the religion there, "Islamdom in the westerly coasts of the Indian Ocean formed a political and intellectual world of its own", a world in which "the focus of power

¹¹ M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹² On this point, also see M.G.S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*, ed. E. Burke III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), ch.7.

lay in the Muslim communities of the many coastal towns”.¹³ From India, the “interregional citted commercial nexus” carried this strand of Islam from the western Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia, which came to be tied into oecumene. Across these regions, Islamic law developed in relative independence from the traditional centres of Islamic scholarship of the period.¹⁴

It is in this cultural and commercial oecumene that Shahab Ahmed seeks the answer to the question posed in the title of his provocative book *What is Islam?* Like Hodgson, Ahmed looks east, to a vast swath of territory spanning from south-eastern Europe to South Asia, what he terms the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” that is home to the majority of Muslims today:

The Balkans-to-Bengal complex represents the most geographically, demographically and temporally extensive instance of a highly-articulated shared paradigm of life and thought in the history of Muslims – it is demographically, spatially, and temporally, an (if not *the*) *historically major paradigm* of Islam.¹⁵

In focusing on the historical development of Islam in this region, Ahmed counters a scholarly tradition that has deemed it insufficiently central or authentic to be at the heart of normative discussions about Islam. Acknowledging and studying Islam as a historical and human phenomenon, rather than as divine revelation or as a closed system of theological prescription, means having to grapple with the peoples and societies that have embraced it, claimed it, and shaped it. This approach is shared by Falloum Ngom, whose *Muslims beyond the Arab World* explores the development of Islam through West African literary traditions to show that the faith must be seen as “a set of processes and practices, texts and interpretations” that were adapted to the culturally specific ways of people around the globe.¹⁶ If the study of Islam is ultimately the study of Muslims, then both the Balkans-to-Bengal region and sub-Saharan Africa form essential parts of what Islam is; this book argues that the same holds true for the world of Monsoon Islam.

It is no coincidence that Hodgson’s notion of Islamicate culture was taken up most eagerly, and most productively, by historians of India, who were seeking to describe the merger of Islamic, Persianate, and Indic culture that characterized the sultanates of North India and the

¹³ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 544.

¹⁴ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 544–545.

¹⁵ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 82 (original emphases).

¹⁶ F. Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of ‘Ajami and the Muridiyya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1. Also see J.R. Bowen, *A New Anthropology of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

Deccan.¹⁷ Studies of paintings, architecture, poetry, courtly culture, political thought, military organization, medicine, and many other facets of South Asian history have been analysed through the lens of an Indo-Islamic pattern of society and culture.¹⁸ The focal point of these studies tends to fall on North India, and especially the Mughal dynasty, as the centre of gravity of a Persianate realm of Indo-Islam. André Wink, in his magisterial study of the long-term evolution of this Indo-Islamic world, deviates from this pattern by firmly situating Indo-Islam against the history of the Indian Ocean, a sphere that otherwise tends to be regarded as peripheral to its development:

In an overview of the entire period of Islamic expansion and hegemony in the East one fact stands out: the growth and development of a world-economy in and around the Indian Ocean – with India at its centre and the Middle East and China as its two dynamic poles – was effected by continued economic, social and cultural integration into ever wider and more complex patterns under the aegis of Islam. In a word, Islamization here stands for integration.¹⁹

Wink's emphasis on the Indian Ocean, and especially on the economic connections it embodied, has been an impetus to study South Asian Islam from the perspective of seaborne connections rather than territorial empires.

Patricia Risso's seminal effort to trace these connections has shown that tracing the intersection of Islamic and Indian Ocean history can offer a more accurate perspective on both.²⁰ The general agenda laid out by Risso has been taken up in a series of detailed studies that probe different trajectories of Islam in the trading world of maritime Asia. Two themes have received particular attention: the organization of mercantile networks and the transmission of language and texts.²¹ Both strands of research

¹⁷ A representative example of the immense scholarship on this topic is D. Gilmartin and B.B. Lawrence (eds.), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2000).

¹⁸ For a recent anthology of such studies, see for instance, A. Patel and K. Leonard (eds.), *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

¹⁹ A. Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1990–2004), I, 4.

²⁰ P. Risso, *Merchants and Faith: Muslim Commerce and Culture in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

²¹ See for instance A. Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010); P. Malekandathil, *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2010); H.P. Ray and E.A. Alpers (eds.), *Cross Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); T. Tschacher, *Islam in Tamil Nadu: Varia* (Halle: Südasienswissenschaftliche Arbeitsblätter der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 2004); R. Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

emphasize circulation as the defining hallmark of oceanic networks. This interest in the circulation of people, goods, and ideas, rather than their mere transmission, has produced innovative new frameworks of enquiry that have rejected the conventional parameters of national and regional histories and have upended received chronologies. For example, Engseng Ho recovers the 500-year history of an “ecumenical Islam in an oceanic world” by tracing the material, genealogical, and imaginary exchanges of a trade diaspora that spanned between Arabia, India, and Southeast Asia.²² Ronit Ricci uses the lens of translation to reveal interconnected processes of Islamization in South and Southeast Asia, arguing for the existence of an “Arabic cosmopolis” that over centuries bound together Muslims from different parts of the Indian Ocean.²³ Nile Green takes his readers to the intersection of Islam, imperialism, and industrialization to reveal colonial Bombay as a “primary city of Islam” that complicates notions of a uniform, global form of Islam centred on the Middle East.²⁴ And Seema Alavi draws on the “easy mingling” of seafaring cultures with the religious, economic, and political networks in Indian port cities as an expression of the cosmopolitanism of South Asian Islam in the nineteenth century.²⁵ What all these studies share is an understanding of Islam that is not predicated on an Arabian identity and that emphasizes the role of maritime networks in the formation of a variegated but interconnected Islamic world across monsoon Asia.

The concept of Monsoon Islam is, of course, only as useful as the explanatory work it helps to do. It is presented here not as a dichotomy of essentialized geographies – the harsh and forbidding desert versus the fluid and encompassing ocean – nor as a simple binary between orthodoxy and diversity. Instead, it is intended to capture the institutional and practical consequences of the interaction of Islamic beliefs and norms with other beliefs and norms in the absence of a dominant Islamic political or social order. Out of this type of interaction emerged over time a different and distinct historical trajectory of Islam, one that contrasts with the historical experiences of Arabia, Persia, and North India but that was commonplace all across the medieval trading world of the Indian Ocean: an Islam that was shaped by the priorities and preferences

²² E. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 97.

²³ Ricci, *Islam Translated*, 1–21, 245–272.

²⁴ N. Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

²⁵ S. Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 4.

of ordinary Muslim merchants as they traded and settled along the coastlines of monsoon Asia.

Placing trans-cultural interaction at the core of Monsoon Islam is not to say that this interaction was always perforce peaceful. The notion of the medieval Indian Ocean as a peaceful, cosmopolitan trading world unaffected by the kind of systematic violence that is a hallmark of Europe's maritime history has come under increasing scrutiny, and rightly so.²⁶ Just like the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean too was marked by piracy, privateering, and military contests over ports, routes, and maritime sovereignty. At some moments, as Chapter 2 will show, actors explicitly conceived of such violence in terms of Islam, by imbuing it with religious meaning and authority; in many other instances, though, violence was simply part of the general milieu of maritime trade, an inescapable constituent of the commercial and political milieu in which Muslim merchants operated.²⁷ Monsoon Islam was not at odds with but a part of this interwoven history of rivalry, exploitation, and conflict.

The phenomenon that the concept of Monsoon Islam seeks to describe is well enough documented to allow for confidence in its fidelity: recent studies on specific aspects of trans-oceanic exchanges, such as pilgrimage for example, have created the impression of an interwoven network of commercial, familial, religious, and political ties among Muslim trading diasporas across maritime Asia.²⁸ On the foundation of its own comprehensive case study of the Malabar Coast, this book argues that understanding these various exchanges through the conceptual lens of Monsoon Islam makes these distinct network relationships legible as part of a broader, interrelated historical development. In doing so, this book responds to a call to move beyond static taxonomies by tracing alternative geographies demarcated by the mobilities of historical

²⁶ See for instance, P. Risso, "Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century", *Journal of World History* 12:2 (2001), 293–319; R.E. Margariti, "Mercantile Networks, Port Cities, and 'Pirate' States: Conflict and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51:4 (2008), 543–577; S.R. Prange, "The Contested Sea: Regimes of Maritime Violence in the Pre-Modern Indian Ocean", *Journal of Early Modern History* 17:1 (2013), 9–33.

²⁷ See S.R. Prange, "A Trade of No Dishonor: Piracy, Commerce, and Community in the Western Indian Ocean, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century", *American Historical Review* 116:5 (2011), 1269–1293.

²⁸ For discussions of Muslim pilgrimage networks in the Indian Ocean, see for instance, M.N. Pearson, *Pious Passengers: The Hajj in Earlier Times* (London: Hurst & Co., 1994); E. Tagliacozzo and S.M. Toorawa (eds.), *The Hajj: Pilgrimage in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

actors.²⁹ Akin to Sheldon Pollock's notion of a "Sanskrit cosmopolis" as a world of Indic literary and political culture that linked together South and Southeast Asia during the first millennium of the Common Era, the concept of Monsoon Islam can integrate different aspects of medieval Indian Ocean history into a broader narrative.³⁰ Be it the invocation of a Persian sultan in Friday prayers on the Indian coast, East African scholars giving lessons in Islamic law to South Asian students in Mecca, or mosques in Sumatra that look like South Indian temples, Monsoon Islam is the bigger picture that emerges from these finer brushstrokes.

Setting: The Land of Pepper

This book exemplifies the world of Monsoon Islam primarily through a case study of India's Malabar Coast, a historic region that largely coincides with the modern Indian state of Kerala. Much of the history of this region revolves around its role as the primary producer of black pepper (*Piper nigrum*, Linn.). Between the months of June and September, the southwest monsoon (Malay., *Edavapathi*) discharges a seemingly inexhaustible amount of rainfall over Kerala's coastal plain and the slopes of the Western Ghats, which in the northern parts can easily exceed two metres in the span of just a few weeks. As a result, Kerala's landscape is luxuriantly lush, providing, especially in the uplands, ideal conditions for the cultivation not only of the "king of spices", pepper, but also of cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and other spices.

In this book, the Malabar Coast is defined in its original sense, as the narrow sliver of land between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats where pepper is grown. Geographically, this approximately encompasses the area between the ports of Barkur in the north and Kollam in the south.³¹ This usage recommends itself for three reasons. First, and most importantly, it largely conforms to how the term Malabar is used in the

²⁹ See F.B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 2.

³⁰ S. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

³¹ That is, from approximately latitude 9° to 11° North, encompassing most of the modern state of Kerala and the southernmost part of coastal Karnataka. All the early Arab geographers are in consensus that Kollam was the southern extremity of the pepper-producing lands (and, therefore, of Malabar). The definition of Malabar's northern boundary is not as clear from these sources. Al-Dimishqī and Ibn Baṭṭūṭah agree that it begins south of Honavar, which corresponds to the limits of pepper production in the early Portuguese period. This definition also accords to that of the Portuguese; see for instance, W.d.G. Birch (trans.), *The Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque, Second Viceroy of India*, 4 vols. (London: Hakluyt, 1875), II, 77.

sources.³² Second, delineating the region by pepper cultivation reflects its defining characteristic in the eyes of the Muslim merchants who are the main protagonists of this book. And lastly, even though the word Malabar does not correspond to local Malayali usage it serves to encompass the region's different polities. From the early twelfth century, if not earlier, the Coast was politically divided among a number of small principalities. These states were tied to one another in shifting political configurations as well as through shared religious and economic bonds. This nexus has been somewhat obscured in the historiography, which is characterized by studies of individual port cities or kingdoms at the expense of a broader, regional perspective. These interconnections are vital, however, to understanding the shifting economic activities and political alliances of Muslim trading groups on the Coast.

Located at the southwesternmost limit of the Indian subcontinent and sheltered behind the towering mountain range of the Western Ghats, Malabar was peripheral to the rise and fall of India's great empires. The region's relative isolation from territorial India contrasts vividly with its orientation towards the sea. Due to its central location within the Indian Ocean, it was a natural transshipment point for long-range monsoon navigation. Crucially, Malabar was also the primary supplier of black pepper, the single most important commodity of the Indian Ocean spice trade. The Malabar Coast was absolutely pivotal to the maritime trading world of monsoon Asia since ancient times.

Situating Malabar firmly within an Indian Ocean context is not to detract from the region's role within Indian history: it was indisputably part of the nexus of South Indian history as is evident from its culture, religion, and political structure. Notwithstanding, during the period

³² The earliest Arabic geographical texts refer to the Malabar Coast not by name but metonymically as "the land of pepper" (*bilad al-filfil*). Two early Arabic texts that drew on direct experience of navigation and commerce in the Indian Ocean, the anonymous first book of *Akhbār al-Šin wa'l-Hind* from the ninth century and Buzurg ibn Shahriyār's *Kitāb 'Ajā'ib al-Hind* from the tenth, both speak of "the pepper country" and mention specific ports without using the term Malabar. With the expansion of Muslim sea trade in the eleventh century, the term *Malibār* (and variants thereof) came into regular use by Indian Ocean merchants to denote the coast and its waters. The name itself seems to be hybrid etymology. Its substantive part is derived from the Dravidian word for hill (*mala*), which also underlies the name Malayalam (lit., "the hill country") that became the designation for the local strand of the Dravidian language and as well as its speakers (Malayalis). The affix appears to be derived either from Arabic *barr* ("land") or the Persian *bār* ("country" or "coast"). Carried along the Muslim trade networks, the name Malabar was subsequently adopted by other outsiders such as the Chinese (the "*Ma-li-pai*" of Zhao Rugua), European travellers (Marco Polo's "*Melibar*"), and the Portuguese ("*Malavar*"). The area designated by the name remained largely consistent until the British period, when the term was used more restrictively to refer only to those districts under direct British rule.

considered in this study, the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, the region developed idiosyncratically in a number of important aspects. From the twelfth century onwards, Malabar was no longer ruled by any of the ancient Tamil dynasties of South India. It was neither conquered by the expansionist Muslim dynasties that established themselves in North India and the Deccan, nor was it incorporated into the South Indian Hindu empires with which they stood in competition.³³ Rather, from the twelfth century onwards, Malabar was characterized by its political fragmentation into a number of competing states. In a direct reflection of the region's orientation towards the sea, the most powerful of these polities were not primarily based on agrarian holdings but centred on port cities.

Partly as a result of this political context, the region's dominant religion, Hinduism developed along an idiosyncratic path that diverged from other parts of India, for example in terms of the role of temple establishments, notions of sacred kingship, or social practices of caste. Islam, too, developed differently on the Malabar Coast than elsewhere on the subcontinent. In all likelihood, Islam in India began on the Malabar Coast.³⁴ The Muslim faith arrived there not in the course of conquest but as a consequence of trade. And it did not reach the region after a centuries-long process of mediation and acculturation that defines the Indo-Persian tradition, but in the form of beliefs, norms, and practices carried by Muslim merchants hailing from all different parts of the Indian Ocean trading world. Although maritime commerce was closely incorporated into the political structures of Malabar's coastal states, it was overwhelmingly dominated by expatriate mercantile groups; in the period under study, Muslims came to dominate the region's all-important spice trade. In addition to the difference in agency in the introduction of Islam, Malabar also differs from the main strand of Indo-Islamic history in terms of both language (with Arabic, rather than Persian, as the *lingua franca* of Muslim elites) and religious affiliation (with the Shāfi'i school of Islamic law most prominent, as opposed to the Ḥanafī orientation of India's Turkic dynasties).

While the Malabar Coast was an outlier from the vantage point of Indo-Islam, it was very much representative of the wider world of Monsoon Islam. Malabar was a central hub for Muslim maritime networks, and Malabari Muslims set important impulses for Muslim communities in

³³ The oft-repeated claim that Malik Kāfūr conquered Malabar during his South Indian campaign in the early fourteenth century seems to stem from a confusion of *Ma'bar* (lit., "passage"), the medieval Arabic name for the Coromandel Coast, with Malabar.

³⁴ R. Miller, *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, rev. edn., 1992), 39.

port cities right across the Indian Ocean. The focus of studies of Malabar's Muslims, however, has been less on these trans-oceanic networks than on their conflict with the Portuguese. The arrival of Vasco da Gama on the Malabar Coast in 1498 marked the beginning of a century of confrontation between Europeans and Muslims in this region. A seminal study by Stephen Dale describes how this resulted in the development of an idiosyncratic Islamic community "whose most prominent cultural characteristic was religious militancy".³⁵ Studies by scholars such as Geneviève Bouchon, K.K.N. Kurup, Pius Malekandathil, or Binu John Mailaparambil have probed the European records to reconstruct Muslims' often conflictual, though at times also cooperative, relationship with Europeans on the Malabar Coast across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³⁶

This book offers a new context to that history by, first, offering an understanding of how Muslim networks were constituted, both on the Coast and within the wider Indian Ocean world, and, second, by tracing their continuities through the sixteenth century. This serves to qualify the impact of the Portuguese on Muslim networks and to highlight the continued, and in many cases even strengthened, bonds between Malabar and Muslim settlements in other parts of monsoon Asia. Muslims found themselves confronted by hostile European powers not only in South India but also in many other parts of the Indian Ocean, from East Africa to Southeast Asia.³⁷ Without question, the world of Monsoon Islam underwent profound shifts over the course of the sixteenth century; these shifts, however, played out in an interconnected way across the different regions. In other words, while the character and spatial configuration of Monsoon Islam changed, it did so as part of a recognizably interrelated, trans-oceanic process. In spite of Portuguese efforts to isolate and disperse Malabar's Muslim communities, even in the sixteenth century the history of Islam on the Malabar Coast remains part of a broader history of Islam in the Indian Ocean.

³⁵ S. Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Māppilas of Malabar, 1498–1922* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 1.

³⁶ G. Bouchon, "Musulmans du Kerala à l'époque de la découverte Portugaise", *Mare Luso-Indicum* 2 (1973), 3–59; K.K.N. Kurup, *The Ali Rajas of Cannanore* (Trivandrum: College Book House, 1975); P. Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochim and the Maritime Trade of India, 1500–1663* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001); B.J. Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea: The Ali Rajas of Cannanore and the Political Economy of Malabar (1663–1723)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

³⁷ Dale emphasizes in particular the parallel development of Muslim communities in Malabar, Indonesia, and the Philippines, not only during the sixteenth century but also beyond; see Dale, *Islamic Society*, 8–9.

In examining the life of Muslims on the medieval Malabar Coast, this book focuses primarily on the port city of Calicut (Kozhikode). From the fourteenth century onwards, Calicut was the most important entrepôt in the region. By the time of Vasco da Gama's arrival, its rulers were on course towards achieving hegemony over all the rival pepper ports on the Coast. Over the following century, Calicut became the focal point of resistance against the Portuguese and a fulcrum of Muslim commercial, political, military, and religious activity. Despite this key role that Calicut played not only in South Indian but also wider Indian Ocean history, there is no general monograph on this port.³⁸ On the basis of European sources, the other two major ports on the Coast, Cochin and Cannanore, are both subject of book-length studies; because Calicut did not become a node of European rule, its history is less accessible.³⁹ By making Calicut its central focus, this book seeks to help redress this lacuna.

Period: Shifting Frontiers of Trade and Politics

This book encompasses the period from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries. It denotes this period by the term medieval, which is used as a heuristic device without any implied claim about the nature of that period. Although the term is derived from European historiography, its original sense of *medium aevum* also corresponds to the way in which Islamic history has come to be conceptualized.⁴⁰ Hodgson, for example, frames these centuries as part of Islamdom's "Middle Period".⁴¹ The term medieval also corresponds to conventional usage within the field of South Indian history.⁴² Given the long-standing controversies

³⁸ A dynastic history of Calicut's rulers by Krishna Ayyar has become rather dated and does not make use of any Arabic sources; V.K. Ayyar, *The Zamorins of Calicut (from the Earliest Times Down to A.D. 1806)* (Calicut: n.p., 1938).

³⁹ On Cochin, see Malekandathil, *Portuguese Cochin*. On Cannanore, see G. Bouchon, *'Regent of the Sea': Cannanore's Response to Portuguese Expansion, 1507–1528*, trans. L. Shackley (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988); Kurup, *Ali Rajas of Cannanore; Mailaparamabil, Lords of the Sea*.

⁴⁰ For a take on current debates about the use of this term in scholarship on European history, see for instance, R. Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Kalamazoo, MI: Arc Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Hodgson's periodization comprises an Earlier Middle Period (c. 945 to 1250) as well as Later Middle Period (from then until about 1500); see Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 3. For critical reflections on this scheme, see N. Riecken, "Periodization and the Political: Abdallah Laroui's Analysis of Temporalities in a Postcolonial Context", Zentrum Moderner Orient Working Paper no. 6 (2012), 1–24; F. Donner, "Periodization as a Tool of the Historian with Special Reference to Islamic History", *Der Islam* 91:1 (2014), 20–36.

⁴² Kesavan Veluthat carefully weighs the historical basis for such usage in his address to the Indian History Congress; see K. Veluthat, "Into the Medieval – And Out Of It: Early South Indian in Transition", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 58 (1997), 168–205.

about periodization in South Asian historiography in general, it is worth restating that the term is used here as a chronological shorthand without advancing any particular claim about the nature of agrarian relations, “traditionality”, or the question of coevalness.⁴³

In terms of Islamic history, the period under study is often regarded as one of stagnation and decline. The violent sacking of Baghdad in 1258 marked not only the dissolution of the Abbasid caliphate but also the end of what is widely regarded as the formative period, or “golden age”, of Islamic civilization.⁴⁴ As Mona Hassan demonstrates in a recent study, the glorification of the Abbasid heritage developed into a powerful and enduring trope in Islamic historiography.⁴⁵ By contrast, the subsequent centuries, up until the rise of the great Islamic “gunpowder empires” in the sixteenth century, are usually depicted as a time of crisis and debility – it is to this period that scholars tend to look for explanations of how the Islamic world, despite its earlier advantages, came to lag so far behind Europe. By shifting the focus from Arabia to Asia, however, it becomes clear that this period was in many ways marked less by decline than by economic expansion, institutional innovation, and cultural creativity.

The formal end of the Abbasid caliphate called attention to a shift of the Muslim world’s centre of gravity towards Asia that had already been underway for some time. Hodgson speaks of a “new society” that was taking shape during this time, as “in the name of Islam a richly creative culture spread across the whole Eastern Hemisphere”.⁴⁶ This reorientation gave rise to new questions about political authority, social conduct, and religious legitimacy. These concerns were especially pressing because the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also mark the genesis of large-scale settlements of Muslims outside of the Middle East, setting in motion a long-term trend that has resulted in Asia being the demographic core of the Muslim world today. The ways in which Muslims across monsoon

⁴³ On the historiography, politics, and pitfalls of applying this term to South Asian history, see for instance H. Mukhia, “‘Medieval India’: An Alien Conceptual Hegemony?”, *Medieval History Journal* 1:1 (1998), 91–106; D. Ali, “The Idea of the Medieval in the Writing of South Asian History: Contexts, Methods and Politics”, *Social History* 39:3 (2004), 382–407; M. Torri, “For a New Periodization of Indian History: The History of India as Part of the History of the World”, *Studies in History* 30:1 (2014), 89–108. Also see K. Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ See for instance, A.K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the ‘Abbasid Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁴⁵ M. Hassan, *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History* (Princeton, CT: Princeton University Press, 2016), 68, 259.

⁴⁶ Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, II, 8–11.

Asia came to answer these questions characterize the world of Monsoon Islam to this day.

This book's temporal focus also corresponds to a long-standing gap in the historiography that is only beginning to be addressed. The overwhelming emphasis on epigraphy that characterizes studies of medieval South India has meant that the "sailors, merchants and pilgrims frequenting the Indian Ocean in the post-500 AD period became almost invisible in the historiography".⁴⁷ Because merchants are for the most part absent from inscriptions, which are concerned almost exclusively with royal edicts, dynastic matters, religious endowments, and agrarian relations, the role of maritime trade has been either dismissed as peripheral or ignored altogether. This study is part of an effort to correct this imbalance, not least by demonstrating the vital importance that maritime trade held for the societies of the medieval Malabar Coast.

From the perspective of South Indian history, the twelfth century recommends itself as the starting point for this study because it marked the end of centralized rule in Malabar, which was followed by the rise of a number of coastal states that vigorously competed with one another over the revenues of the pepper trade. Muslim merchants were able to take advantage of these rivalries to carve out a place for their trade and communities. The twelfth century was also a time of significant shifts within Indian Ocean trade. It saw a notable economic florescence, often referred to as the "Asian sea trade boom", that is observable across the entire span of monsoon Asia.⁴⁸ This notable increase in long-distance trade across the Indian Ocean created closely interconnected "borderless" zones of material, cultural, and knowledge transfers.⁴⁹ It was accompanied by a parallel growth of Muslim merchant networks, which came to dominate much of this commerce, especially the enormously profitable spice trade.

This study extends into the sixteenth century for two reasons. First, with the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean, a significant corpus of additional sources becomes available in the form of European-language sources. Many of these, especially those dating to

⁴⁷ R. Chakravarti, "An Enchanting Seascape: Through Epigraphic Lens", *Studies in History* n.s. 20:2 (2004), 307.

⁴⁸ J.W. Christie, "Javanese Markets and the Asian Sea Trade Boom of the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries A.D.", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40:4 (1998), 344–381. Also see D. Heng, "Trans-Regionalism and Economic Co-Dependency in the South China Sea: The Case of China and the Malay Region (Tenth to Fourteenth Centuries AD)", *International History Review* 35:3 (2013), 486–510.

⁴⁹ K.R. Hall, "Commodity Flows, Diaspora Networking, and Contested Agency in the Eastern Indian Ocean c.1000–1500", *Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 4:2 (2016), 387.

the early years of the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean, reflect on the pre-existing conditions that they encountered there. Moreover, Portuguese writers in particular paid very close attention to Muslims, since these were the principal rivals to Portugal's attempt to monopolize the spice trade. The second reason for extending this study into the sixteenth century is that it challenges the misleading separation of Indian Ocean history into pre-European and European periods that continues to define much of the literature. This book treats the presence of the Portuguese on the Malabar Coast not as the first chapter in a narrative of European colonial domination but rather as a test-case for the competition between, and reorganization of, trade networks in response to changing commercial and political conditions. Without question, the arrival and aggression of the Portuguese represented an unprecedented shock to Muslim merchants across maritime Asia. Their responses to this upheaval, both at the level of individual communities as well as that of trans-oceanic networks, held profound implications for the long-term development of Monsoon Islam.

Note on Sources

This book, like any historical study, is primarily defined by its sources. The lack of datable, reliable evidence is a shared frustration among historians of medieval South India. Seeking to understand a long-term historical process – the development of Muslim communities and the practice of Islam on the Malabar Coast – that was shaped in large part by ordinary traders presents additional challenges. It is inordinately difficult to access the histories and mentalities of “ordinary people” in the premodern world, all the more so when dealing with South India, a region for which even some of the basic contours of its medieval political history – the chronology of dynasties, kings, and wars – remain debated and uncertain. More focused on the rewards available to them in this life, and generally unconcerned about their legacy, traders did not produce the kind of sources that historians use to study the lives of rulers and courtly elites. In many cases, even the language used by the intelligentsia and commoners were different, as illustrated by the histories of Sanskrit and Persian on the subcontinent. In the case of traders, there was an additional linguistic barrier in that many spoke languages different to those of the local population of the places they did business in, a situation only partially ameliorated by the increasing use of Arabic (and later Malay) as a *lingua franca* of Indian Ocean trade.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ See M. Pearson, “Communication in the Early Modern Indian Ocean World”, *Transforming Cultures* 4:2 (2009), 18–28.

As a result, much of what can be known about the ports of the premodern Indian Ocean and their inhabitants is the result of fortuitous contingencies. For South India, the nature of the local writing material combined with the region's subsequent history of invasions and upheavals means that only very few endogenous records have survived. Problematic as they are, the most important of these local sources are *granthavaris*. *Granthavaris* were the dominant genre of historical writing in the region, which usually took place in the context of temple establishments and royal households.⁵¹ They were etched with iron styli onto palm leaves by specially trained scribes. The region's climate caused these palm-leaf records to disintegrate unless they were regularly copied; dynastic change or periods of political upheaval could cause irreversible interruptions to these cycles of replication. Consequently, only a few such *granthavaris* from the medieval period have survived. Most of these are temple records, dealing with the land titles and legal rights of important Brahmin establishments; the few extant palace records are of uncertain chronology and provide almost no information for the period before the seventeenth century. An important exception to this is the so-called Wye manuscript, a nineteenth-century English translation of a palm-leaf *granthavari* prepared at the royal court of Calicut. This document, which has only recently come to wider scholarly attention, offers insights into the relationship of Muslims with this Hindu state.⁵²

This source situation means that most of the records from which the history of trade on the medieval Malabar Coast can be reconstructed are in languages other than Malayalam; in fact, most of them originate from outside the region altogether. Tracing the history of maritime merchants requires a certain degree of itinerancy of the historian. In addition to archival research on three continents, this book is rooted in extensive fieldwork in India and Yemen that has examined inscriptions in mosques and on tombstones and studied Arabic manuscripts in public repositories and private hands. Among other things, this effort has resulted in some significant corrections and reinterpretations of previously reported materials.

Further to Arabic sources, of special importance to the early period covered in this book are the Judeo-Arabic records of the Cairo Geniza, which contain the correspondence of predominantly Jewish traders

⁵¹ The term itself alludes either to the ancient Grantha script, on which Malayalam is based, or to the original Sanskrit meaning of *grantha*, "book".

⁵² This source is introduced and transcribed in S.R. Prange, "The Pagan King Replies: An Indian Perspective on the Portuguese Arrival in India", *Itinerario* 41:1 (2017), 151–173.



Figure I.1 A Malabar scribe with palm leaf and iron stylus, from a nineteenth-century engraving.

Image courtesy of the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.

active in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. A new critical edition of these letters, which are dispersed across archives all over the world, allows for a much more comprehensive picture of the commercial world of the Indian Ocean during this period than has been available to any previous generation

of scholars.⁵³ The Geniza documents describe a motley world of Indian Ocean trade, in which merchants of diverse origins, religions, and languages cooperated and competed in search of profits.⁵⁴ They show that at least in the western Indian Ocean, maritime trade was organized according to common standards and through shared institutions, many of which were based on Islamic laws and customs. For this reason, the letters of Jewish merchants help reconstruct a more general sense of the practices of Indian Ocean trade at the beginning of the second millennium, especially when combined with other textual and material evidence.

At the other end of the timeframe for this study, the sixteenth century, European sources afford vital insights into conditions on the Malabar Coast. Because of their contest over the pepper trade, the Portuguese in particular were keenly interested in the organization of Muslim trade networks. Their texts, and those written by other Europeans travelling to India in the early 1500s, reflect pre-existing patterns of trade and politics, even as they attempt to fit these into the framework of their own experiences, expectations, and desires.⁵⁵ In keeping with recent efforts to revise the perception that the arrival of the Portuguese represents a decisive watershed moment – encapsulated in the Whiggish notion of a “Vasco da Gama epoch” that supposedly marks the shift to modernity – this study extends deep into the sixteenth century to highlight continuities and to situate the Portuguese within the broader currents of Indian Ocean history.⁵⁶ European sources of the sixteenth century also offer

⁵³ S.D. Goitein and M.A. Friedman (eds. and trans.), *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza (“India Book”)* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

⁵⁴ The possibilities of this corpus of sources are only just beginning to be plumbed. An especially rich study of the material world of Jewish Indian Ocean traders is offered by E. Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵⁵ See J.-P. Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 5. On the pre-history of these categories of encounter, see K.M. Phillips, *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245–1510* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

⁵⁶ K.M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498–1945* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953). For examples of revisionist scholarship, see for instance, S. Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500–1700* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); S. Subrahmanyam and L.F.F.R. Thomaz, “Evolution of Empire: The Portuguese in the Indian Ocean during the Sixteenth Century”, in J.D. Tracy (ed.), *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 298–331; T. Andrade, *The Gunpowder Age: China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

an important counterpoint to Arabic accounts of the conflict with “the Franks”, which impelled the transformation of Malabar’s Muslims from a prosperous merchant community to a militarized frontier society.

Outline of the Book

This book tests the possibilities as well as limits of the concept of Monsoon Islam to bring together the economic, social, political, and trans-oceanic histories of Muslim trading communities on the medieval Malabar Coast. It argues that the development of Monsoon Islam was defined by the tension between the global and the local, between competing impulses and imperatives of severalty and syncretism. This tension is traced through four different spaces that defined the existence of Malabar’s Muslim trading communities: the Port, the Mosque, the Palace, and the Sea. Each of these spaces is considered in both its concrete manifestations as well as symbolic signification.

The Port provides an economic history that is primarily concerned with the practical organization of long-distance trade in the medieval Indian Ocean. The port is where Muslim merchants conducted their business and serves as a useful lens through which to view the underlying relationships and institutional arrangements that made possible the regular exchange of goods across the vast distances of the ocean. The chapter is animated by the question of how trade functioned within this world, and specifically how merchants were able to trust one another in spite of the physical distances and cultural differences that separated them.

The Mosque examines the social organization of these Muslim trading communities. It parses the legend of Cheraman Perumal as evidence of the establishment of a Muslim religious elite on the Malabar Coast. The key sources for this chapter are Malabar’s historic mosques themselves, which are examined in terms of their history, architecture, and inscriptions to trace the integration of Islam into the region. These same mosques later became emblems of the Muslims’ struggle against the Portuguese, a conflict that engendered major changes not only in the composition of Muslim communities but also in the religious orientation of Monsoon Islam – not least in the emergence of a new understanding of *jihād*.

The Palace shifts the focus from the merchants to the states in which they operated. It details the politics of the multi-communal polities of Malabar, with a special focus on the growing dependence of South Indian sovereigns on the revenues and resources available from maritime trade. This chapter examines the political roles of Muslim merchants within

these Hindu states, as well as instances of conflict between Muslims and local elites that ultimately fed into attempts at autonomous state-building by Muslims on the Malabar Coast.

The Sea has its focus on the broader Indian Ocean networks in which these merchants participated. It traces three sets of network relationships: economic, religious, and political. It first follows on the trails of the pepper trade to map out the commercial connections of Muslim merchants, which highlights the particular importance of the eastern Indian Ocean to their networks. The second set of network relationships is religious in nature, revealing the circulation of Islamic scholars and mystics within the world of Monsoon Islam. The third set shows how political networks intersected with both trade and faith. It reveals the astonishingly persistent modus by which Islamic states drew autonomous Muslim trading communities into ties of affinity and allegiance, and vice versa. Together, these networks of trade, piety, and political allegiance demonstrate the different ties that produced and perpetuated the world of Monsoon Islam, and highlights how each of them was ultimately shaped by the opportunities and imperatives of Indian Ocean trade.