

BRIDGING BRONZE AGE SOUTH ASIA TO THE AEGEAN

ARNOTT (R.) *Crossing Continents. Between India and the Aegean from Prehistory to Alexander the Great*. Pp. xvi+138, ills, maps. Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2022. Paper, £34.99, US\$ 49.99. ISBN: 978-1-78925-554-6.

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Published in 2022, this book appears at a moment of major interest for interregional connections in archaeology and ancient history. A., with this work, aims to widen the horizon of the so-called Bronze Age globalisation, bringing into the picture the Aegean world. As plenty of previous research highlights, early forms of globalisation are especially visible in Indian Ocean exchanges over an extensive time span. In particular, the first peak of interoceanic contacts falls into the third to second millennium BCE, and it is on this period that most of this book is focused. Complex connectivities linked the Indus civilisation, in modern-day Pakistan and north-western India, and Mesopotamian societies at the head of the Gulf, generating an intense network of trade and cultural exchange – an early example of globalisation.

Before delving into the main arguments of A.'s work, the contents page immediately reveals a peculiar terminological choice, which would have benefited from a thorough preliminary explanation. Both the contents page and chapter titles refer to 'Prehistory'. Across the discussion, however, terms such Bronze Age or Iron Age appear frequently, further generating a sense of confusion. The book discusses the period from the third millennium BCE until the end of the second as Prehistory, even though it deals with urbanised and literate societies commonly associated with so-called Proto-History (also a contested label, but this question goes far beyond the scope of this short contribution). Since A.'s vocabulary choice is nonconformist, a preliminary note of explanation would have been helpful. In general, in historical and archaeological debate, adopting standard periodisations has its downsides. Such labels often fail when applied to interregional contexts; simply using dates would be a safer option.

The book includes five chapters, an introduction and an appendix. The general focus is on the interactions between the Indian subcontinent (the author uses the generic name India) and the Aegean across a wide time frame, from the third millennium BCE to Alexander the Great.

The first four chapters are dedicated to the period covering the development and existence of the Indus civilisation (also known as the Harappan civilisation) and its external contacts. Previous research has documented the intense exchange networks linking Harappan settlements to the Ancient Near Eastern societies of Mesopotamia and the Levant, as summarised in the first chapter. In this geohistorical context, A. reports on the possible evidence of Indus objects (Chapter 2) and commodities (Chapter 3) in the Aegean. This large section of the book also has a conclusion (Chapter 4) making the whole discussion self-standing.

The evidence is admittedly scant; however, A. goes a step further, providing a systematic excursus of objects and commodities found or used in the Aegean that could be from South Asia. This excursus for many of the categories analysed, while necessarily tentative, enables A. to delineate clearly the exchange pattern in its many nuances.

The book adopts, indeed, a bottom-up approach, highlighting the few Indus finds in the Aegean, such as the carnelian beads (p. 19) found in Aegina at the site of Kolonna and

dated to between 2150 and 2000 BCE (Early Helladic III period). These carnelian beads are indisputably of Harappan origin, and – starting from them – A. analyses the wider context that allowed such objects to be where they were found. Despite this stylistic peculiarity, such an overview also allows A. to provide a rich bibliography that is surely useful for non-specialists approaching the topic or for scholars specialised in Mediterranean and Aegean archaeology. The main themes of the book are significant for the broader academic field and demonstrate a will to think outside the box of research focused on the Graeco-Roman world. Reading the book makes one wonder if a reassessment of the findings could reveal connections unknown and unimagined when artefacts were first excavated. A. understands that only a complete study of the objects from the Aegean and the identification of any that originated in South Asia could help determine the full nature of trade and contact. While the book intends to fulfil this research *desideratum*, it ends up demonstrating that existing evidence cannot add anything more to the current understanding of the issue, reinforcing the idea that only a full reassessment of archaeological finds now buried in the warehouses of museums and research institutes – together with possible new findings – could shed new light on the topic. A., with this book, invites and fosters research into a so-far understudied field.

The core of the book lies in these first four chapters dedicated to early Indus–Near East–Mediterranean connections. The fifth chapter appears as a condensed appendix discussing Indo-Aegean contacts from the decline of Indus civilisation to Alexander the Great and could have been omitted without affecting the substance of the book. The appendix is a very appreciated English translation of *Indica* by Ctesias of Cnidus, that completes this second and final part of the book.

The presence of the fifth chapter and the appendix further makes clear that the book is addressed to an audience familiar with Mediterranean and Aegean history, while much less familiar with South Asia and Ancient Near East histories. This conclusive part reconnects a less beaten path to the well-recorded and widely received historical discourses provided by Greek writers from the sixth century BCE onwards, particularly blooming around the military campaigns in Asia of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE. In a sense, the last chapter is at the same time an appendix and an introduction since the entire discussion delving into the third millennium BCE is based on the premise that readers know about Indo-Mediterranean contacts in the late first millennium BCE.

A. is a medical archaeologist who dedicated his work to the Aegean and Anatolian Bronze Ages. In the latest part of his career, he has also authored several publications on the Indus civilisation, bringing to the table a decade-long expertise on the western end of the ancient global world. A. thoroughly explores a rich bibliography, embracing current debates and discussions. The result is a comprehensive volume that can guide archaeologists and historians in the field of Classics and Mediterranean studies to widen their research horizons.

A., while lacking archaeological proof, highlights how there was an active infrastructure and network that could support Indo-Mediterranean trade already in the third to second millennium BCE. A.'s work paves the way for students and scholars in Classics willing to venture into unknown fields, namely contacts with South Asia and, more generally, the Indian Ocean World. The book, despite its limits, remains a bold undertaking for extending and connecting the historical timelines of interactions between two far-distant regions in antiquity: the Aegean and South Asia.

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