REVIEWS

Roderich Ptak, *Die Maritime Seidenstrasse. Küstenräume, Seefahrt und Handel in vorkolonialer Zeit*. Munich, C. H. Beck, 2007, 368 pp., 46 ills, 14 maps (Historische Bibliothek der Gerda Henkel Stiftung).

Literally translated, the title reads 'the maritime silk road, its coastal areas, seafaring and trade in pre-colonial times'. This, as in the original German wording, does not reveal the book's rather seminal approach and gist, which challenge the European-trained perspective and, much more importantly, almost close a gap while studiously pinpointing certain lacunae.

The coastal area of present-day China is dotted with entrepôts that established and operated maritime links across the oceans, roughly between the longitudes of 35ºE (the Red Sea) and 132ºE (Kyushu, Japan and Moluccas, Indonesia). The researcher and author, professor of sinology at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich, Germany, draws a parallel between Rome reaching out towards the East, in succession to the Greeks, at a time when China began to make westward seaborne contacts with India, in the epoch covered by Pliny the Elder (p. 73). On the choice of the term 'maritime silk road', the author refers to the recent publication by Liu Yingsheng titled *Silu wenhua. Haishang juan,* presented in two volumes, one covering maritime routes and the other land routes (p. 18). As pointed out by Ptak, 'silk' is only one of several possible similes, such as 'spices' or 'ceramics'. While the vast ocean is an entity defined by physical conditions, its numerous various segments are distinguished by cultures and histories of exchange. The segmentation recorded in texts of the Song Period (960–1281) is apparently based on Arab categorization. European advances connecting the Asian, Atlantic and Pacific regions of the globe confine the time frame of this presentation.

Through an essay rather than an introduction, the author offers a discourse of the Mediterranean model by Fernand Braudel (*La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*), a seminal work that has reinforced interest in historical research into maritime relations elsewhere. Though triggered by this academic stimulus, the Asian physical, geographical factors require a distinctively different approach, coupled with a perspective originating from the East. In great detail, ocean and drift currents as well as wind directions are described in relation to challenges posed by reefs and atolls, and examples given of the time required for certain sea passages.

Research findings are presented in chronological order, however, in an east-west direction, to probe how and in which way the sub-regions traversed by the 'maritime silk road' grew together, which structures emerged, which changes occurred, and what particular perceptions were kept on record.

The maritime space covered by this book encompasses Asia's eastern oceans

with the Gulf of Bohai, the Yellow Sea, and the East China Sea; the South China Sea and Sulu Sea; the East Indonesian Seas; the Melaka Straits, the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Bengal; the Arabian Sea and the coast of East Africa; and the Persian Gulf and Red Sea.

Likening this maritime space to an (oriental) tapestry carpet, the author traces what evolved from the early beginnings to the turn of the present era AD, with foci on East Asia's coasts into the Han Period (206 BC–220 AD); the virtually *terra incognita* of Southeast Asia; the underrated South Asia; and the seemingly known coasts of West Asia and East Africa. Han sources describe vessels designed, built and used in warfare, implying technical expertise, knowledge of logistics, and navigation skills (p. 60). After all, the settling of migrants from present-day Indonesia on Madagascar did, in all likelihood, depend on proven navigation skills, suitable vessels, and rigid organization (p. 62).

The growing together, ca. 1–600 AD, of the 'Eastern Ocean' (*Dongyang*) and the 'Southern Ocean' (*Nanyang*), followed by the unfolding of the Western Ocean (*Xiyang*), as recorded in Chinese annals, and encompassing in the Western Ocean, first, the Eastern Indic / Indian Ocean and, then, linking-up to the Western Indic / Indian Ocean, complete with the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, resulted in what the author paraphrases as the *Mare Euro-Asiaticum*.

During the span of time of the Tang Empire in China (ca. 600–950/1000) and the Caliphate of the Sassanids, followed by the Omayyads, then Abbasids, Asia's eastern oceans were dominated by the Tang. Seaborne trade reinforced the spread of Buddhism towards the east, while the South China Sea became the scenario of encounters between Southeast Asians, Chinese and 'Persians'. Also, across the Eastern Indic / Indian Ocean trade and cultural transfer between India and Southeast Asia intensified. From the west, Islam spread across the lands bordering the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, from where it reached out into the Western Indic /Indian Ocean region (p. 138).

Around 950/1000, the maritime space became absorbed by the pull of the Far East, which held sway until 1350, under the leadership of the Song and Yuan, initially in Asia's eastern oceans and expanding across the South China Sea and the East Indonesian Seas, and then reaching further east. At the same time, trade links were extended across the Eastern Indic/Indian Ocean and beyond into the Western Indic/ Indian Ocean, as far as the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, within the coordinates of Aden and Hormuz, Gujarat and Kerala, as depicted on the *Jiuling shouling tu*, a map dated 1125 (p. 170). Period sources report on improvements of the compass and inventions for navigating. For the Song economy, profits from overseas trade were substantial. Its pull effect made Hangzhou probably the biggest maritime entrepôt worldwide. The use of Song coins in Southeast Asia signals the start of monetization (p. 165).

Among the travellers and geographers was Wang Dayuan who, in the 1330s, reported in his *Daoyi zhilüe* about a Chinese pagoda built in 1267, during the Song Period, near Nagapattinam on India's Coromandel Coast (pp. 191–192). Towards the end of the thirteenth and early in the fourteenth centuries, when the Mongols ruled over China and Persia, the coasts of East Asia and Iran were under the control of one and the same power. Early in the fourteenth century, there were virtually no obstacles to maritime traffic between Quanzhou and the ports of West Asia (p. 204).

The following 150 years are characterized as an epoch of turning points in the course of fragmentation after the end of the Mongol domination (ca. 1350–1400). Of great significance was the Ming state-run seafaring, beginning early in the fifteenth century, upon the ascension of Emperor Zhu Di, known as the Yongle Emperor, in 1403, and the start of an enormous ship-building programme, resulting in numerous fleets, complete with 'treasure vessels' (*baochuan*) (p. 234). Among several admirals, Zheng He and Wang Jinghong gained lasting fame. Zeng He commanded seven large fleets across the 'Western Ocean' (*Xi yang*), 1405–1433. Most probably, priority was given to trade and diplomacy, with occasional military interventions of secondary importance. This is substantiated by the surge in tributary embassies received by Emperor Yongle, which characteristically also entailed private transactions. The author highlights innovations created by that first-ever statal might ruling the seas of Asia, including political interventions far away from the power base, logistics, control of rear links, and state-run depots called 'official places' (*guanchang*) in such locations as Palembang, Kalikut or Melaka, or 'official islands' (*guanxu*) (pp. 241–242).

While the first to fourth decades of the fifteenth century saw the grand and mighty seaborne missions of the Ming crossing the oceans and calling on ports near and far, other seafarers also plied the various maritime segments from early in the fifteenth century onward. Increasingly, the Ryukyu Islands and Ayutthaya gained in importance.

A conspectus highlights two distinctive though related matters: the fundamental trends germane to Asians and Portuguese in the maritime world after 1500, and a comparison of the Ming state-run seafaring with the *Estado da Índia* of the Portuguese.

Virtually contravening the author's resolve to highlight the whole, precisely because it is more than the sum of its parts, a few salient points with a focus on the part of Southeast Asia that eventually constituted early Siam are highlighted here.

The Gulf of Siam was probably one of the busiest maritime trading zones for several centuries (p. 36). Chinese texts report on sea links across the 'Little Western Ocean' (*Xiao Xiyang*) with the east coast of the Malay Peninsula and onward via overland connections to its west coast, reasoning that vessels

from China could not directly navigate around its southern tip, owing to equatorial calms (pp. 38–39, 46). The Nan Yue Kingdom was in contact with the Malay Peninsula via seagoing vessels (p. 61). Han sources relate trade with Southeast Asia. References to the tanned seafarers of Southeast Asia (*Kunlun ren*) in Chinese texts attest to early Chinese scholars' interest in the maritime world and seaborne exchange (p. 65).

Chinese records contain intensive references to Srivijaya from the end of the seventh century (p. 122). Srivijaya re-activated older tributary contacts with China in the Early Song Period (p. 126). Song sources report on tribute embassies from Srivijaya during the tenth and eleventh centuries (p. 175). Zhu Yuanzhang sent delegations and received embassies from Zhenla, Angkor and Xianluo, the latter identical with the central region of present-day Thailand (pp. 221–222). These delegations presented sapan wood, elephants, ivory and spices, among other items (p. 222). In 1390, an embassy from Xianluo arrived with 80 tons of 'aromatic substances' presented as tribute, not including the huge volume of commodities for private transaction (p. 222).

This book is elegantly written and presented. Its content is structured for ease of comprehension of the enormously complex subject matter. Thematic maps focusing on essentials elucidate routes, linkages, activities and events, supplemented by attractive reproductions of illustrative historical maps. Pictures and sketches of boats, ships, or vessels enhance the reader's perception. Two appendixes enrich the presentation, one describing commodities in great detail, and another introducing various types of ships and ship-building, complete with illustrations. Commodities discussed *in extenso* include cloves, nutmeg, camphor, various woods, spices, precious stones, animals, and many more. The reference literature (pp. 334–351) is categorized into larger regions and epochs, and compendia on themes or regions such as commodities and geographic areas. An elaborate index (pp. 355–368) listing topographical names, individuals, dynasties, empires, commodities and select subjects makes for a well-rounded presentation.

This is a superb book. It deserves to be translated into English for a certainly keen and large readership of scholars and interested lay persons.

Karl E. Weber