

Mongol Eurasia at Sea: Peninsular South India in Networks of Maritime Trade and Tribute (Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries)

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The impact of Mongol Eurasia on the wider Indian Ocean area is frequently overlooked in world history analyses, which tend to privilege landed exchanges and to adopt perspectives that are implicitly “terracentric,” as Rila Mukerjee terms it. The rapid expansion of the Mongols across Eurasia inevitably brought them into contact with key maritime regions such as the Persian Gulf and China’s eastern ports. The merchant groups and economies of these two regions were integrated into their respective Mongol polities (Il-Khanid and Yuan) in very different ways, however, the fact of a larger Mongol Eurasia also had a significant impact along the sea routes connecting the Middle and Far East, stimulating the volume of commercial exchanges but also leading to the development of new relationships and new forms of interaction. While there exist significant bodies of scholarship on the Il-Khanid vassal states in Fars, and on West Asian merchant communities at Yuan ports, it is fair to say that few scholars have explored the impact of Mongol Eurasia through the intervening maritime spaces and networks, particularly in Peninsular India and maritime Southeast Asia.

Marshalling a wide range of textual and material sources, this paper proposes a more connected history of Mongol Eurasia at sea. Within the limitations of this workshop paper I focus on an in-depth study of the Pandya polity located in the south of present-day Tamil Nadu and its complex relations with both the Il-Khanid vassal states of the Gulf and the Yuan state to its east. Acculturated West Asian merchant groups and individuals were at the heart of these interactions and my paper will explore in particular the operation of the Tibi “merchant princes” of the island of Qa’is in the Gulf and their exploitation of a variety of regionally specific administrative positions and institutions to further their control of trade routes and diplomatic exchanges in the region.