Modelling Mercantilism: An archaeological analysis of Red Sea Trade in the Early Islamic Period (650-1100 CE)

Abstract

For millennia, the Red Sea has served as a bridge between the cultures of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. This legacy was epitomised with the successful expansion of Islamic rule in the 7th century CE. With Islam came a politically unifying factor that allowed the ancient economic regimes of the Red Sea to flourish. In spite of this, the region is marked by historical obscurity in the formative centuries of Islamic civilization, and the Red Sea littoral is often described as both culturally and economically inconsequential in this period.

This dissertation challenges that inference by using a theoretical framework that brings the disconnected body of archaeological data from the Red Sea region together within a scaled model. The analysis begins with the detailed archaeological profile of Aylah (modern Aqaba) – the most extensively excavated Early Islamic port on the Red Sea. From here, a socio-economic trajectory is applied to identify signature landscapes of mercantilism, and to demonstrate how these have been thoroughly structured by human experience and the resilience of social memory. In doing so, Aylah becomes a model for explaining more general patterns of mobility, exchange and cultural interconnectivity in the Red Sea and beyond.