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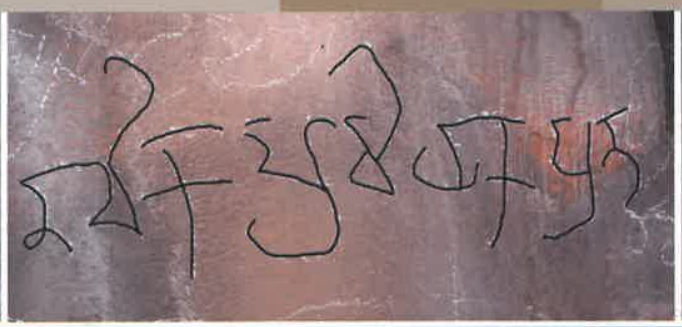
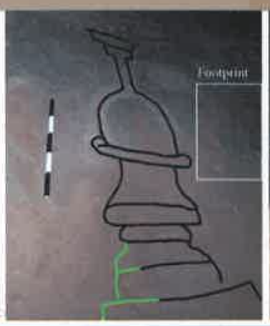

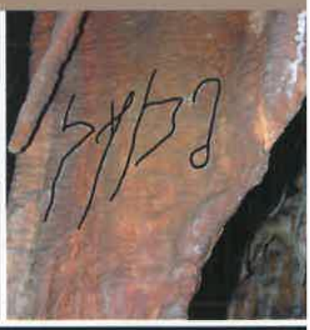


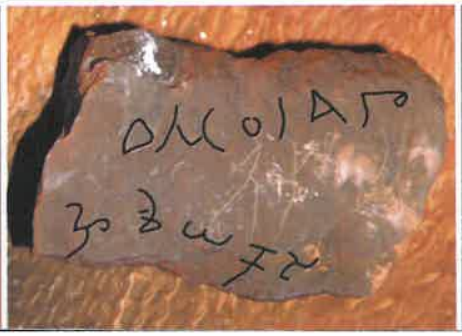
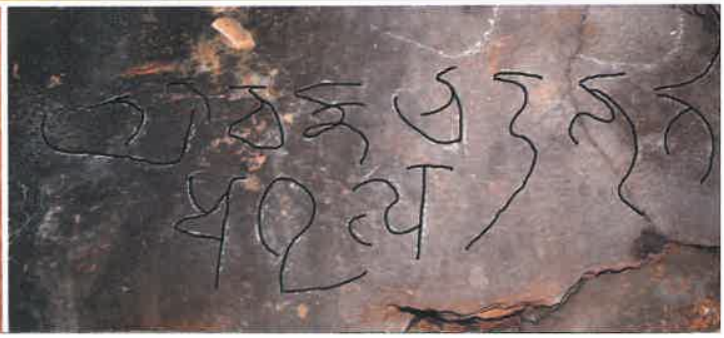



Cover photograph: The setting sun from the mouth of Hoq Cave, Socotra Island together with digitally enhanced photos of ancient graffiti discovered in the cave.
Credits: Peter Geest, I. Strauch and Paul Van Immerseel

Founding Editor
Late Dr. S.P. Gupta

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Cave of Revelations:Indian Ocean Trade in light of the Socotran Graffiti[1]

— *Kasper Evers**

First discovered in 2001, and fully published in 2012, a corpus of more than 200 graffiti from the cave Hoq on ancient Dioscourides, modern Socotra, constitutes an invaluable resource shedding a rare light on trade routes of the ancient Indian Ocean. Whereas more abundant evidence has previously been available to document the activities of Roman merchants, while evidence attesting the role of their Indian counterparts has been comparatively scarce, it now becomes possible to move beyond the traditional bias towards 'Romano-centric' narratives, thus, providing a fuller account of ancient long-distance trade in the region. Specifically, the graffiti introduce us to traders and travellers, Buddhist monks and Yavanas, hailing from Roman Egypt, Palmyra, Axum, Hadramawt, Western India, Bactria and Gandhara. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to appraise the importance of the Hoq graffiti for Indian Ocean studies, analyse the import of the evidence for our knowledge about the organisation of trade, and outline the resulting corrigenda to the orthodox picture of 'Indo-Roman trade'.

The small island of Socotra, off the Horn of Africa in the Arabian Sea (Fig. 1), has long held a certain prominence in Indian Ocean studies because of the tantalising description of it given in the mid-1st century CE *Periplous of the Erythraean Sea* (henceforth Periplous; Casson 1989 for a recent overview of research on this key source, cf. Seland 2010: 13–15). In two passages, the anonymous author of this merchant shipper's handbook gives a succinct account of the island, known to the Greeks as Dioscourides, his comments about its inhabitants and position in the network of trade routes being of particular interest. Accordingly, we are told that the island had previously been settled by 'Arabs and Indians, and even some Greeks, who sail out of there to trade'—a multiethnic diaspora of traders, in other words. Moreover, it is stated that the island was a possession of the king of Hadramawt, and that ships from Muza in western Yemen, and from Barygaza of the Western Kshatrapas, as well as from the Malabar Coast (Limyrike), used to conduct trade with the island, but that it had now, by the author's own time, been leased out (*εκμισθόω*) by the king to an unknown consortium and was kept

* Department of History, The Saxo-Institute, Copenhagen University.

[1] This article is based on two papers given at the workshop 'Rethinking the Greeks in Gandhara' at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, 27th–28th March 2014; and the workshop 'Networks and Interaction: the Red Sea region in history and archaeology' at University of Bergen, 18th September 2014, respectively. Moreover, I would like to thank Dr. Sunil Gupta (Allahabad Museum) and Vincent Gabrielsen (Copenhagen University) for their valuable advice and suggestions during the process of writing.



Fig. 1: Map of Socotra Island in Gulf of Aden, *Showing location of the Hoq cave. Courtesy: Google*

under royal guard (*Periplous* 30–31; quote from Casson 1989: 69).

Otherwise, the next ancient author to shed any substantial light on the history of the island is Cosmas Indicopleustes, who passed close by around 520 CE, reporting in the third book of his *Christian Topography* that Christian missionaries from Persia had settled on the island in the meantime, and that descendants of the old diaspora still spoke Greek (McCrindle 1897: 119). Archaeological finds from antiquity in support of both the *Periplous* and Cosmas used to be very sparse, though, with the northern site of Hajrya yielding one Roman amphora handle, some red glazed ware from the Mediterranean, and some fragments of Arab Gulf (Sedov 2007: 100) or Indian origin (Naumkin &

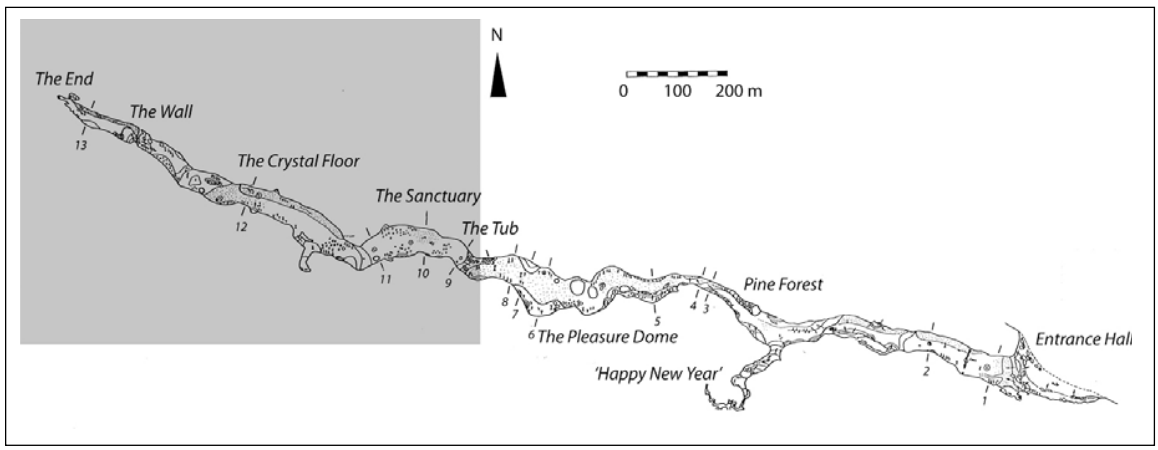

Fig. 2: Layout of the Hoq cave at Socotra Island. *Courtesy: I. Strauch*

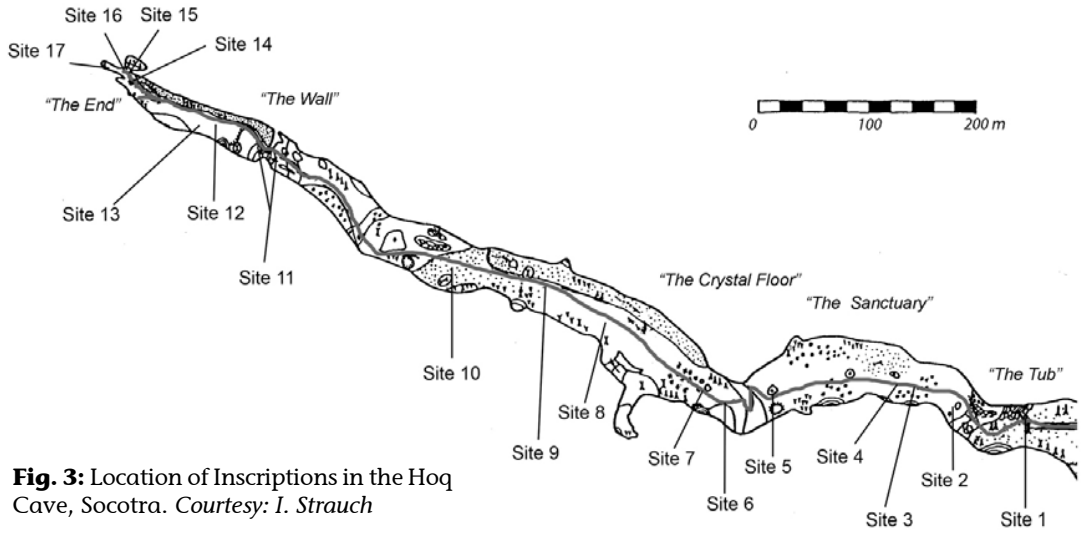

Fig. 3: Location of Inscriptions in the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *Courtesy: I. Strauch*

Sedov 1993: 605), as well as Hadramawtic pottery of the 1st–4th century CE. In 2010, however, excavations at the western end of the island did, in fact, reveal a settlement with both substantial remains of Roman pottery as well as South Asian ceramics, the latter being most numerous and prompting the excavators to emphasise that Indians, not Romans, seem to have played a paramount role on the island around the 2nd–5th century CE (Strauch 2012a: 379).

The real eye-opener, though, was when the exploration of the huge Cave of Hoq on the northeastern part of the island in 2001 (by Peter de Geest, cf. de Geest 2012). (Plates 11-14) led to the discovery of more than 200 graffiti, mainly clustered towards the bottom of the almost 2,000 meters deep grotto (Fig. 2-4, Plate 10 and Front Cover). Most of the graffiti date from roughly the 2nd–early 5th century CE (Strauch 2012a: 341; Robin 2012: 439; Gorea 2012: 452; Bukharin 2012: 497), and the majority, 192 to be exact, are written in the Brahmi scripts of Western India, while 1 is in Gandharan Kharoshthi, 1 in Bactrian, 3 in Greek, 1 in Palmyrene Aramaic, and, lastly, 8 are in Axumite, that is, Ancient Ethiopian, while 11 are South Arabian of the 2nd century BCE–2nd century CE, with two more being indeterminably Axumite or Arabian (cf. table, Strauch 2012a: 30). Accordingly, this



Fig. 4: Entrance to the Hoq Cave, Socotra © *Peter De Geest, Socotra Karst Project*

epigraphic corpus from Dioscourides, not published in its entirety until 2012, constitutes an invaluable resource, shedding a rare light on the identity of



Fig. 5: Trisula like symbol in the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *Courtesy: I. Strauch (Line drawing on photo. See plate 1 for original)*

traders, as well as other passengers on their ships, moving along the trade routes of not only the Arabian Sea and India but even Central Asia.

While one might in theory assume that the graffiti could have been left by locals and visitors to the island equally, the accumulated evidence of the entire epigraphic corpus indicates otherwise. Indeed, although the island was under Hadramawtic control throughout most of the centuries in question, with a period of Axumite rule from around 175/200–270 CE (Robin 2012: 440), graffiti by these groups only add up to less than one tenth of the total. On the other hand, there are a number of graffiti obviously left by individuals from surprisingly far-flung places, while a significant number of the Indian graffiti clearly signify that their authors were temporary visitors, seeing as they contain details linking them closely with ports and places in Western India, as we shall see below. Others indicated their itinerant status by making drawings of ships in the cave [2:16, 5:11, 6:13] (Strauch 2012a: 405; Plate 9). In addition, not a single graffito out of the corpus can be securely attributed to a permanent inhabitant on the isle, rendering it far more likely that we are here dealing with a local place of pilgrimage solely for people visiting the island for other purposes. Indeed, travellers could have been stuck on the island for prolonged periods of time due to adverse monsoon winds in the summer months, and might, therefore, have used some of their spare time on a visit to the cave as a sacred place suitable for prayers, requesting safe travels home or onwards (Strauch 2012b: 542–4).

Even then, it must be stated that we cannot, from a methodological point of view, take the Hoq graffiti as a 1:1 representation of the composition of visitors to Dioscourides generally. For there is no criterion by which we can generalise from those relatively few individuals throughout the centuries who dared to venture almost to the bottom of the grotto *and* leave at least one graffito behind, to everybody else who visited the island in the period. We can, however, allow ourselves to consider the corpus of graffiti in its entirety as diagnostic of the movements of people in the early Indian Ocean trade, that is, as a 'tracer' of some, not all, of the island's visitors.

Furthermore, it is possible to make some minor generalisations about the choices inherent in writing one of the more than 200 graffiti, for to those who came this far, to the natural inner sanctum more than one kilometre inside the cave (map in Strauch 2012a: 29; Figs. 2,3), this evidently presented itself as, crucially, a neutral sacred space created by providence. Thus, no particular god is addressed in the graffiti, instead one Greek graffito evokes 'the gods and (that/those) of the cave'[11:26] (Bukharin 2012: 499–500), one Palmyrene votive tablet seems

to refer to whomever god had brought its maker to the cave [4:6] (Gorea 2012: 456–7), while others evoke the divine in the cave within the context of their own faiths, such as Christian [2:25, 2:27. 2:34] or Buddhist [11:43, 14:28]. No one calls on the Vedic gods specifically, but there are a number of auspicious or religious Indian symbols scattered throughout the grotto (Strauch 2012a: 361) (Fig. 5,6 Plate 1,2) . Religious offerings are also attested in the guise of ten incense burners left by supplicants (Dridi 2012: 224).

Significantly, any visitor to the cave would, from the 2nd century CE onwards, have been confronted with an ever-growing number of graffiti in different scripts and languages, as well as drawings and symbols relating to different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the distribution of graffiti in the Cave of Hoq is not random at all, but tends to cluster at specific sites, deemed more important for dedications than others, on the basis of topographical characteristics such as imposing pillars, walls, or concentrations of stalactites and stalagmites. In practice, this means that each individual graffito was scrawled down within a local context of nearby graffiti and symbols specific to that particular site. However, seeing as only one Brahmi graffito [10:2] [likely 232 CE] and a Palmyrene votive tablet [4:6, 258 CE] (Plate 3) provide dates, it is, sadly, impossible to create any kind of detailed chronology for the graffiti—most simply have to be considered roughly contemporaneous within a palaeographically determined timespan ranging from the 2nd–early 5th century CE. Nonetheless, the graffiti in the Cave of Hoq can, crucially, by their very nature be considered as emic and deliberate self-identifications, signifying how each individual voluntarily chose to represent himself, employing his preferred language and script, whilst adding the additional information he considered relevant—a unique circumstance rendering this corpus of evidence incredibly useful for studies of ancient Indian Ocean trade.

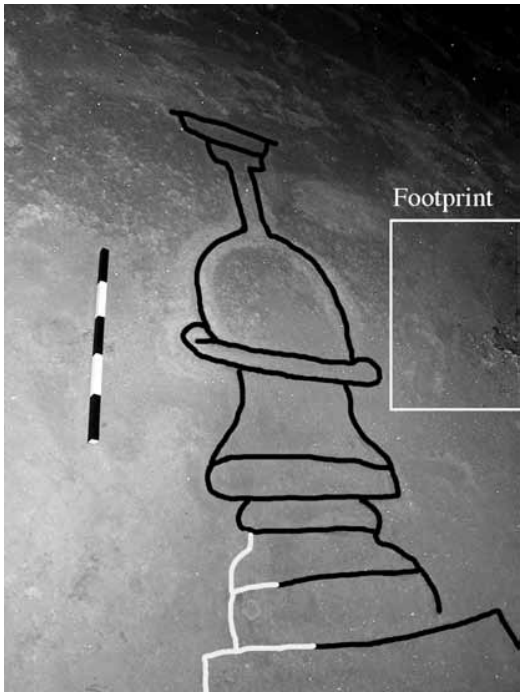

Fig. 6: A Buddhist Stupa drawn on a wall in the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *(Courtesy: I. Strach Line drawing on photo. See Plate 1 for original)*

In order to keep things brief, we will consider only the innermost part of the cave and its graffiti here: namely, from the 11th consecutive site counted from the entrance onwards, the imposing and aptly named "Wall," which at first appears to be the end of the grotto after more than 1,800 meters, and whose surface is covered by some 44 Brahmi graffiti, 2 South Arabian, and 2 prominent Greek ones [11:26, 11:28] (Plate 4). Remarkably, only two graffiti in total were left by Roman visitors: one was a Roman merchant captain, *ναύκληρος*, the other evidently a Christian, dating from, respectively, the 3rd and the

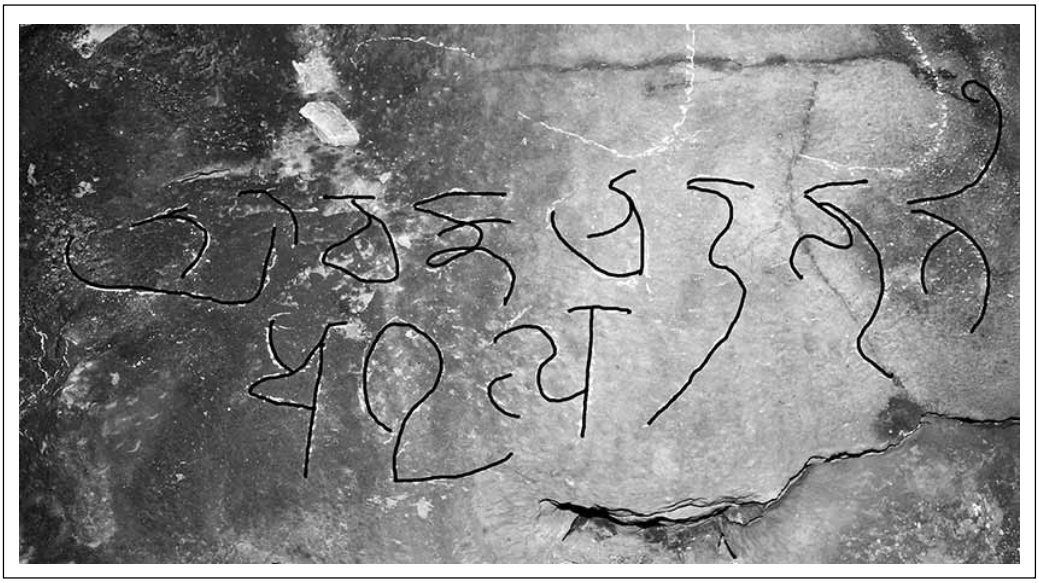

Fig. 7: Graffito in Prakrit - Brahmi commemorating the visit of a Yavana (Line drawing on photo See Plate 5 for original). *Courtesy: I-Strauch*

4th century CE (Bukharin 2012: 497). Moving on from here (through two narrow gaps in the Wall), to sites 12–17, a visitor arrived at the 'grand finale' of a cave tour, a dense cluster of 4 sites at the very bottom of the grotto, some two kilometres from the light of day. And here there is epigraphic evidence of some exotic visitors, indeed.

Starting out with one of these, there is a laconic graffito in Prakrit commemorating the visit of a Yavana [14:17] [Fig. 7, Plate 5], adding a new specimen to our slender dossier of such inscriptions from Maharashtra (Burgess & Indraji 1881: Junnar #5, 7, 33; Karla #7, 10; Senart 1905–6: Nasik #18; Vats 1925–26: Karla #1, 4, 6, 10). The Sanskrit Yavana was derived from Prakrit Yona (Ray 1988: 312), which was in turn originally borrowed from the Achaemenid Persian for a 'Ionian' and by implication any 'Greek' in general (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 2001), and is usually understood in Early Historic India to denote a 'Westerner' generally, whose specific identity depends on the local context—in the Northwest they would have been Indo-Greeks (Narain 1962), in the South to all appearances Greco-Roman merchants from Egypt (Zvelebil 1956). Accordingly, it is highly significant, and not a little surprising, that we have here a designated Westerner, who, in the deep, dark depths of the Cave of Hoq, chose to identify himself simply as a Yavana in Prakrit and with the Brahmi script. The fact of him being on an island settled by a part-Greek diaspora, and visiting a cave containing three Greek inscriptions, two of which (if they had been made at the time of his visit) he could very well have noticed en route, simply underlines this choice of expression.

Whereas the thoroughly Indian appearance of the Yavana inscriptions at sites such as Nasik, Junnar, Karla, and Sanchi (Lüeders 1912: #547), can be explained by their local context, this is not so easily done with the Hoq graffito. Here, other expressions of identity would have been plausible: after all, this cave was not an Indian Buddhist chaitya

or stupa, but a religious middle ground for all kinds of worshippers, and fellow visiting Greeks would have been able to read our Yavana's graffito. Indeed, he could just have made more than one graffito if he was bilingual, two other exotic visitors did so (a Bactrian [14:13, 16:8] and a Palmyrene [4:6, 16:15]).

Moreover, it appears at first glance that this Yavana was bad at grammar, or so the editor of his graffito comments (Strauch), for although *yavano* is in the nominative singular, the visitor's name, *Cadrabhūtimukha*, is given in the genitive singular, *Cadrabhūtimukhasa*. So, a direct translation should be—not as the editor gives it in an ironed out version: 'Of the Yavana Cadrabhūtimukha'—but, rather, as 'the Yavana of Cadrabhūtimukha.' This is, in fact, quite extraordinary, for the thing is that our Yavana visitor to ancient Dioscourides was not the only Yavana who was bad at grammar: at Junnar and Karla in Maharashtra, 8 cases out of a total 9 give Yavana in the genitive singular followed by a name in the genitive plural (Stein 1935). So, for instance, instead of the traditional, grammatically reconstructed reading of a pillar-inscription from Karla, which goes 'the gift of a pillar by Sihadhaya, a Yavana, from Dhenukakata,' (Burgess & Indraji 1881: 31) we have according to the actual syntax 'the gift of a pillar by the Yavana of the Sihadhayas, from Dhenukakata' (Stein 1935: 344, 347).

This discrepancy, between the allegedly irregular syntax of these inscriptions and their conventional straightened out translations, was pointed out by the eminent indologist Otto Stein already in the 1930s with reference to Maharashtra, but is now re-emphasised by the graffito from Socotra, which, from a distance of more than 2,000 kilometres, exhibits the very same peculiarity. Summing up for now on this Yavana, he appears to be more 'Greek' of name than of nature, and he and his fellow Yavanas of Karla and Junnar may have been part of larger kinship groups or organisations, if we are to refrain from consistently correcting their allegedly wrong use of the genitive case. Although such organisations are comparatively rare, there is the case of the *Sāgarapaloganas* attested at Kanheri, between the main Satavahana ports of Sopara and Kalliena, who seem to have been some sort of community of traders by sea (Burgess 1883: Kanheri, #23; Stein 1935: 345). Moreover, Yavanas identifying themselves as such are now attested outside India for the first time (excluding the ambiguous case of a mid-3rd–mid-4th century CE 'Yonu' from the Tarim kingdom of Kroraina; cf. Agrawala 1955: 27; Burrow 1940: #324) on the main sea lane to Roman, Arabian, and African ports, proving that this enigmatic group was not merely restricted to diasporic settlements along the inland trade routes of the Satavahana kingdom, but could also take to sea if it suited them (augmenting the conclusions of Stein 1935: 356; Ray 1988: 316-17, 322; Karttunen 1994: 332).

Second, and moving on, there is a third Greek inscription [16:15] reading simply 'Aukar,' likely a Greek rendering of the Aramaic name Abgar, conspicuously also the name of the dedicant of a wooden tablet with a dedication dated 258 CE in Palmyrene Aramaic discovered elsewhere in the cave [4:6] [Plate 3]. Hence, seeing as we have numerous instances of Greek-Palmyrene bilingualism from all over the Roman Empire—the closest examples being from Roman Berenike on the Red Sea (Sidebotham 2011: 65–66)—the Abgar leaving a dedication in Palmyrene Aramaic and the Aukar leaving a simple name-graffito in Greek are in all probability the same person. What is particularly

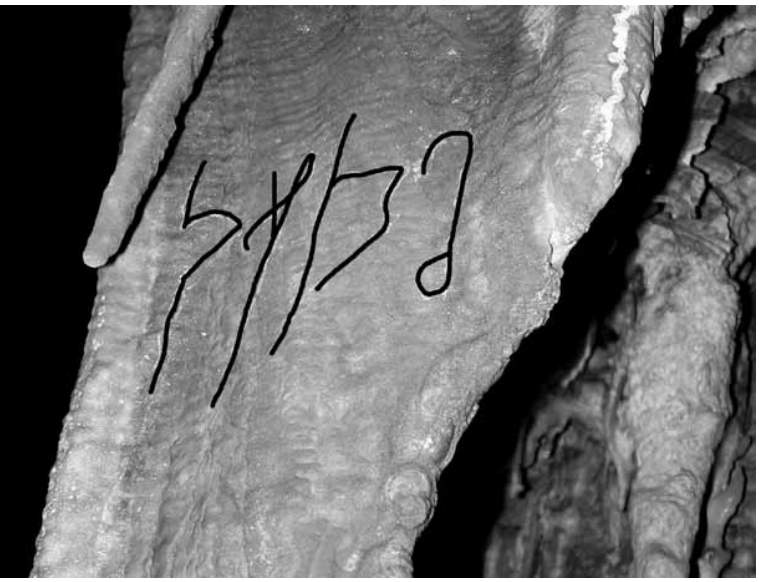

Fig. 8: Graffito in Kharoshthi Script in the Hoq Cave giving the name Upala/Upali in Gandhari (Line drawing on photo. See plate 6 for original) *Courtesy: I. Strauch*

noteworthy here, is, of course, the mere presence of a Palmyrene on Dioscourides, far from the attested maritime route of Palmyrene merchants from the head of the Persian Gulf to the major emporium of Barbaricon at the mouth of the Indus (Gawlikowski 1996; Seland 2011). However, Palmyrene (and Indian) diplomats are known from royal inscriptions outside Shabwa, capital of Hadramawt (Robin 2012: 488–91), and we know of the permanent presence of Palmyrene merchants and shippers in Egyptian Koptos, which connected the Roman Red Sea harbours with Alexandria on the Mediterranean (Young 2001: 80).

Third, and quite remarkably, there is a laconic graffito [16:13] in the Kharoshthi script giving the name Upali or Upala in Gandhari, the former being a typical Buddhist name (cf. Strauch's commentary, Fig, 8 Plate 6). Thus, although the information contained in the graffito is minimal, the fact that we have a Kharoshthi graffito on an island at the entrance to the Gulf of Aden, some 3,000 kilometres as the crow flies from the heartland of Gandhara, almost speaks for itself: Gandhara was a crossroads of the major Eurasian overland routes, and where these terminated at major ports, they were extended by long-distance maritime trade routes allowing adventurous individuals to traverse staggering distances.

Accordingly, this case brings to mind the cache of beautiful Roman glass vessels produced in Egypt but found in Kushan Begram, Afghanistan, alongside other wares from the Mediterranean, India, and China—the glass must have travelled by sea, continuing as far up the Indus as possible before the final overland trek (Mairs 2012). However, in light of the absolute predominance of Western Indian places of origin in the graffiti, it is not so likely that this Gandharan traveller had come to Socotra direct from a port in the Indus estuary, such as Barbaricon (*Periplous* 38–39), rather, it is more likely that he would have arrived on a ship from the Gulf of Khambhat like all his Indian counterparts (Strauch 2012a: 405).

Fourth, and last as concerns exotic individuals, there is the interesting case of a visitor who left one graffito [14:13] in Prakrit, using Brahmi script, reading simply 'of Humiyaka,' then further inside the cave writing two lines on a broken-off piece of stalactite [16:8], the first line being '*ΟΜΟΙΑΓΟ*' in Greco-Bactrian script and the Bactrian language, translating into (H)umeyag, the second line being simply a reiteration of his earlier Brahmi graffito (Fig.9 Plate 7). Accordingly, this visitor could have been from as far away as Bactria proper, or, at the very least, from a Kushan stronghold in the Northwest of India where Bactrian was used

alongside Kharoshthi or Brahmi, such as Mathura (e.g., Konow 1931–32).

(H)umeyag's graffiti are prime examples of bilingualism, and the exhibited language proficiencies, employing the Bactrian and Brahmi scripts, are surprising. However, from the same site where (H)umeyag left a Brahmi graffito [14:15] with his Prakritised name, we find another graffito within a couple of feet mentioning his name, this one in Sanskrit, the Brahmi reading *nāvika-humiyaka-pu*[*tra*], thus renderable in translation as either 'the son of the captain Humiyaka' or 'the captain, son of Humiyaka' (cf. Strauch's commentary) (Fig.10 Plate 8). The name Humiyaka being highly unusual in an Indian context (cf. Sims-Williams' commentary [16:8]), it would be quite a coincidence indeed, if this graffito does not refer to the same person.

Thus, either the father himself or his son was a captain, most likely based in a port like Barygaza, from which two of four captains [10:4=11:1=11:11, 11:12] attested in the graffiti came, together with three others [11:17, 11:25, 17:1] who did not designate their profession. This would certainly go a long way towards explaining how a father hailing from an area where Bactrian was in use, whether Bactria, Gandhara, or Kushan Mathura, would have been proficient in Prakrit as well, and felt the need to express himself in terms of both languages, while having sired a son who only knew, or chose to make use of, Sanskrit.

Significantly, other examples of Bactro-Brahmi bilingualism are quite rare: one example is a bilingual sealing with elements of Buddhist iconography from Gandhara (Rahman & Falk 2011: 15.06.02); another is four Brahmi-Bactrian inscribed *ostraca* dated from the 1st–5th century CE, written by three hands (one of them a monk, another possibly a

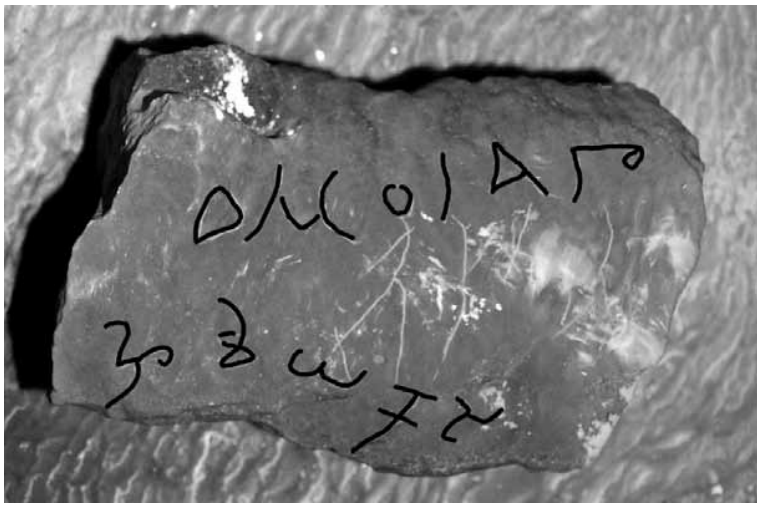

Fig. 9: Greco- Bactrian and Brahmi graffiti both reading Humeyag' found in the Hoq Cave: (Line drawing on photo, see plate 7 for original) *Courtesy: I. Strauch*

caravan leader—*sārthavāha*), from a major Buddhist monastery at Termez in Uzbekistan (Fussman 2011: #19, 22, 186, 209)—one of the most important crossings of the Oxus river with routes leading north to either Sogdian Samarkand or the Tarim kingdom of Kashgar.

Less exotic, and more to be expected, is the early presence on the island of Arabs and later Axumites, sovereignty in the Gulf of Aden passing gradually from the former to the latter as Axum rose to ascendancy in the region from the early 3rd century CE onwards (Robin 2012: 440). However, while the *Periplous* mentions Arab traders from Muza, and the presence on the island of 'locals' from Hadramawt is unsurprising [e.g., 6:3], one Arab graffito seems to give a Minaean clan name, once again providing evidence of the far-flung activities of this tribe as middlemen in Yemenitic trade

[2:33] [Robin's commentary].

Furthermore, while three Axumite graffiti of the 4th century CE or later provide early evidence

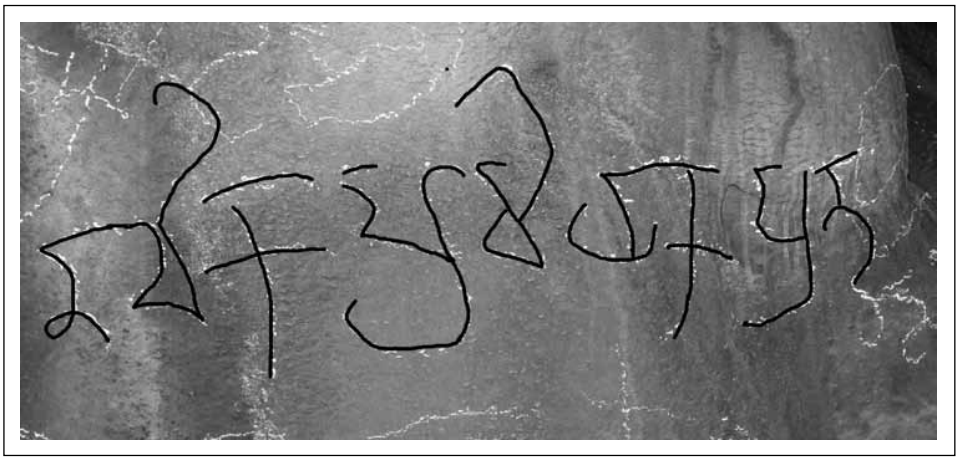

Fig. 10: Sanskrit-Brahmi graffito reading 'navika – Humiyaka –putra' found in the Hoq Cave. (Line drawing on photo. See plate 8 for original) *Courtesy: I. Strauch*

of Christianity on Socotra [2:25, 2:27, 2:34] (Robin 2012: 440), this small group of some eight graffiti in total, dated 3rd–6th century CE, is perhaps most important as a reminder of the often ignored seafaring activities and involvement in the wider Indian Ocean trade of the Axumites via their port of Adulis (also the ocean gateway for kingdoms even further inland, such as Kushite Meroe; cf. Haaland 2014). At present, evidence of Axumite trade has been reported from a number of commercial hotspots along the Ocean rim: near to the old route between Axum and Adulis has been found a hoard dated to the early 3rd century CE consisting of a hundred Kushana gold coins (Mordini 1967: 23–4); in Egypt, there is *instrumentum domesticum* from the 1st century CE in Myos Hormos and Berenike, continuing into the 6th century CE at the latter (Tomber 2008: 77); in Yemen, an Axumite coin hoard has been uncovered at Aden, as well as three coins and ceramic wares from 4th–5th century CE levels at Qana (Tomber 2008: 102, 103ff); in India, finds amount to one Axumite handle fragment dated late 4th–5th century CE from Kamrej, a mixed hoard with Axumite coins from Mangalore in Kerala, a potential coin from Pandian Madurai, and two imitations from Cheran Karur, the coins being dated to the 4th–5th century CE (Tomber 2005: 99–100); and, lastly, one Axumite coin and one imitation have come to light at Tissamaharama in Sri Lanka (Sidebotham 2011: 249). The fact by itself that imitations of Axumite coins circulated widely, not only in South Asia but also in the Eastern Roman Empire, further underlines that Axum played a major role in the later Eastern trade (Sidebotham 2011: 277).

However, the graffiti treated so far are a clear minority within the corpus, and this, it must be stated emphatically, seems to be the greatest revelation that the Cave of Hoq has to offer: that nearly 200 graffiti, almost nine out of every ten, were left at the maritime crossroads of Socotra by visitors of Western Indian origin (Strauch 2012a: 341–2). Many of these graffiti are of the simplest kind, mentioning only a name, but some visitors left more details. The briefest of overviews yields the following about the identity of Indian visitors: these were merchants [2:1 , *vanij*], captains [6:1, 10:4=11:1, 14:15 , *nāvika*; 11:12, *niryāmaka*], Buddhist monastic attendants [7:4, 11:30, *ārāmika*] and monks [*śramana*], hailing 11:32, 14:16

from ports and cities like Hastakampra [2:23], Barygaza[11:11, 11:12, 11:17, 11:25, 17:1] and perhaps Vidisha [17:2], being Śakas [6:7, 14:16] and their nobles in the guise of Kshatrapas [12:2, 15:5], as well as a multitude of individuals with Buddhist, Vaishnavite and Shaivite names (cf. table, Strauch 2012a: 356–57).

While we already knew from the *Periplous* that traders from Barygaza frequented Socotra (Periplous 31) and the Somali Coast (Periplous 14), written evidence has so far been somewhat lacking for these Western Indian traders in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area. Rather on the contrary, of the half dozen inscribed sherds found so far in Roman Myos Hormos (Salomon 1991; Tomber 2011: 8) and Berenike (Mahadevan 1996: 291), as well as at Khor Rori in Hadramawt (Subramanian 2012), five have been written in Tamil-Brahmi, while the final *ostracon* was inscribed in a South Indian variety of Brahmi, indicating 'an upper south Indian connection' such as the lower Krishna river (Salomon 1991: 733).

However, the Cave of Hoq turns this one-sided distribution upside down: here there is no trace left by South Indian visitors, at a time when Tamil epigraphy is otherwise a well-attested genre (Mahadevan 2003). Instead, there is a huge amount of Western Indian graffiti that numerically dwarfs the number of Tamil inscribed sherds found in the region. Yet, according to the *Periplous* (#31) traders from India came to Socotra from both Barygaza and, notably, Limyrike, corresponding roughly to the Malabar Coast, which, according to a recent study (Romanis 2012), probably extended beyond Cape Comorin to Korkai on the eastern side of the peninsula's tip. The evidence at Hoq leaves us to wonder why no Tamil-Brahmi graffiti were left in the cave by traders en route from Cheran and Pandian ports (such as Muziris or Nelcynda) to Egypt and Yemen where they did leave written traces.

Furthermore, in addition to providing rare tangible evidence for Indian traders sailing out of Barygaza, the epigraphic record previously had little to offer on the subject of captains of merchant ships plying the Indian Ocean, that is, the profession of *nāvika*. Some individuals are known, though: e.g., two inscriptions from the commercially vibrant Krishna estuary in Andhra Pradesh, both attesting the title *mahānāvika* and implying captains of ocean-going ships crossing the Bay of Bengal to the Malay Peninsula (Sarma 1978; Ghosh 2005), where a third inscription attesting a *mahānāvika* has been found in Malaysian Kedah, the latter according to his inscription hailing from a port town in the Ganges estuary (Ray 1989: 53).

Now, however, the title of *nāvika* crops up four times (attesting three individuals) in the graffiti from Socotra [6:1, 10:4=11:1, 14:15] (Fig. 10, Plate 8), one of these captains explicitly hailing from Barygaza, with the highly interesting addition of one *niryāmaka* also sailing out of that famous port [11:12]. As regards semantic content, *nāvika* and *niryāmaka* seem to have been in effect synonymous, both implying a senior member of the crew, either the helmsman, navigator, or captain—boundaries between these positions being blurred, anyway (Strauch 2012a: 346–48; Fig. 11, Plate 9).

Accordingly, it is striking that the *Suppāraka-jātaka* (#463; Fausbŏll 1963: 136–43), part of a corpus of Buddhist folk tales conceived in the last centuries BCE, relates a yarn about a leader of the shippers' community in Barygaza, in the Pali titled *niyyāmakajetthaka*; 'jetthaka' being a



Fig. 11: Figure of a water craft drawn inside the Hoq Cave. (Line drawing on photo. See plate 9 for original). *Courtsey: Peter de Geest, Socotra Karst Project*

traditional epithet for the presidents of associations of craftsmen (Thaplyal 1996: 42). This 'master mariner,' as his title is traditionally translated (e.g., Rouse 1901: 86f), later steps down from his office and agrees to act as ordinary captain, *niyyāmaka*, of a ship full of merchants, *vānijā*. Now, with the graffito from Socotra [11:12], the literary tradition of the Jatakas on the terminology for merchant captains sailing out of Barygaza is reaffirmed epigraphically, thus lending more credibility to the factual side of this folk tale regarding the city's maritime activities, which we would have expected to be true, anyway, on the basis of, primarily, the *Periplous* (#14, 31, 41–49, 64).

Furthermore, it needs to be underlined that the Indian graffiti do not only point to the importance of Barygaza as a major port in the Indian Ocean, but also to the roles played by nearby ports and cities of the region. Thus, there seems to be a reference in one graffito to Vidisha [17:2], an ancient inland political and commercial centre, which is renowned for the collective contribution of its ivory carvers to the adornment of one of the monumental gateways at the Sanchi stupa in the late 1st century BCE (Bühler 1894: 378, #200)—ivory being one of the major Indian exports via coastal outlets such as Barygaza and the ports of the Konkan Coast (*Periplous* 49).

Even more remarkable, though, is the graffito of a visitor stating that he hailed from Hastakavapra [2:23], modern Hathab, known to the Greeks as Astakampra (*Periplous* 41, 43), where excavations have revealed the existence of a port site with a warehouse complex yielding numerous sealings of the 3rd–4th century CE (Pramanik 2004, 2005, 2008). Likely, most carry the names of merchants—surprisingly, one name allegedly fits that of the visitor to Socotra from Hastakavapra—and a couple of seals might even, depending on their exact reading, have belonged to a customs official and a royal superintendent (however, cf. note of caution in Strauch 2012a: 344).

Other ports in the Gulf of Khambhat involved in the long-distance trade from which Indian visitors could also have sailed to Socotra, but which are not mentioned in graffiti, are Nagara at the head of the Gulf (Mehta 1968), as well as the site of Kamrej at its mouth, Kammoni of the *Periplous* (#43) (S. P. Gupta *et al.* 2004; Sunil Gupta 2007: 116). Significantly, remains of iron working on a large scale have been excavated at both Hathab (Pramanik 2004: 140; 2005: 109) and Kamrej (Sonali Gupta & Pandey 2004), which fits well with the *Periplous*' description (#6) that the Axumite port of Adulis imported steel from Ariake, the region around the Gulf of Khambhat (*Periplous* 41).

In addition, a short note is necessary on the presence of Buddhist monks and laymen on Socotra.

For while the fruitful interplay between Buddhist monasteries and merchants is well known from major trade route junctions (Ray 1994: 136–43; Neelis 2011: 12–39), it is an old truism that Buddhism never gained sufficient foothold west of the so-called Foucher line between Balkh in Bactria and Kandahar in Afghanistan (Emmerick 1983: 957). West of this line, only one substantial Buddhist establishment has been excavated at Merv, consisting of a stupa and giant Buddha statue originally thought to have been established in the 2nd century CE (Frumkin 1970: 147ff), but now re-dated to the 4th century (Neelis 2011: 169, n. 327).

Therefore, it is fascinating to find early evidence of what to all appearances seems to be Buddhist monks [11:32, 14:16 , *śramana*] and monastic retainers [7:4, 11:30 , *ārāmika*; literally 'gardener] outflanking the Foucher line by sea, to provide what is to my knowledge the westernmost epigraphic evidence of Buddhism in antiquity. Devout believers are also attested in the cave, such as Rahavasu who evoked 'the Lord' as, respectively, 'Great Sage' and 'Gotama' in two different graffiti [11:43, 14:28], while a laconic and anonymous graffito simply seems to read *samgha*, 'the Buddhist order' [16:20] and drawings of Buddhist stupas are preserved in the sand of the cave's floor [13:5-A, B] [Fig.6 Plate 2]. What were monks and their laymen helpers doing on Socotra, was it their designated destination, or were they en route to other ports even further west?—future finds may, hopefully, shed more light on this question.

Finally, it is necessary to consider how these new findings fit with the traditional picture provided by the *Periplous*, Cosmas Indicopleustes, and archaeology, as outlined at the beginning of this article. All three attest a mixed diaspora which the graffiti cannot really shed any new light on, having been left only by visitors to the island, not its permanent inhabitants. However, the two literary sources also emphasise that these settlers were seafarers conducting trade abroad, and whereas the *Periplous*' description, dating to the mid-1st century CE, is itself proof of some Roman mercantile knowledge about the island, the author emphasises that it had previously enjoyed trade connections with Arab Muza, the Malabar Coast, and Barygaza, while, in the early 6th century CE, Cosmas remarks incidentally on a religious connection with Persia and the presence of Greek-speaking, Socotran traders in Axum.

The corpus certainly attests to early visitors from South Arabia with eleven graffiti from the 2nd century BCE–2nd CE, as well as later visits by Axumite traders leaving eight graffiti dated 3rd–6th century CE, but as regards the early presence of Indian travellers on Socotra, there is merely one laconic name-graffito palaeographically datable to the 1st century CE [15:2] with visits rising sharply in the 2nd century CE (and no evidence of Tamil visitors from Limyrike whatsoever), while Greeks are only attested in the 3rd–4th century CE. Accordingly, the testimonies of the *Periplous* and the Hoq graffiti on specifically Indian and Roman trade with Socotra are not contemporaneous, but, rather, supplementary: the former addresses the situation in the mid-1st century CE through the eyes of a Greco-Roman trader, while the latter constitutes diagnostic evidence of some of the visitors to the island in the 2nd–early 5th century CE. And as regards Cosmas' claim about a late sea link with Persia, it is certainly not inconceivable in light of the earlier graffiti indicating links to far-away Palmyra, Bactria, and Gandhara.

However, some would even try to use the graffiti as evidence for the mysterious identity of the consortium, reported by the *Periplous*, which had leased the island and interrupted its former trade routes to Western Yemen and India at the time of the writing of the *Periplous*. The argument being that it must have been Indians who leased the island from the king of Hadramawt, seeing as they are allegedly attested early (in highly ambiguous earlier literary sources, but concretely in only one graffito), in the greatest numbers, and for the longest period of time (Bukharin 2012: 514), and that the lease, or 'embargo,' was in effect from the time of the *Periplous* until as late as Cosmas' account (because he did not land on the island), that is, for a thumping five centuries or so (Bukharin 2012: 497, 515–17).

This interpretation is problematic, because it attempts to couple a lease-agreement running for a number of years at some point during the mid-1st century CE with the sharp rise in Indian visitors to the cave of the 2nd century CE. In the process, it is assumed that a preponderance of graffiti by visitors from Western India throughout the period, and confused literary accounts from earlier and later dates about mysterious islands in the Eastern Sea (an archetypical literary *topos* of any ancient narrative) which *might* be Dioscourides, can support the hypothesis of settled Indian lessees upholding a pact for centuries. The latter idea thus bridging the chronological gap up to Cosmas, who could have had any number of reasons for not visiting the island in person.

One very good reason could have been that when ships set out from the Red Sea for Eastern ports, they did so around midsummer on the southwest monsoon which makes landing on the northern—inhabited—face of Socotra impossible from June until August (Strauch 2012a: 381; 2012b: 543; Fig. 11, Plate 9). Accordingly, Greek-speaking traders from Egypt (Cosmas included) would normally have had to bypass the island on their outward journey, and likely had little reason to risk a landing when returning that way in December with full cargo holds from India, seeing as Socotra also suffers strong spells of wind during December and January. Thus, the two Greek visitors to the Hoq Cave were the exception rather than the norm, and were perhaps stranded on Socotra during one of the stormy periods. Whereas Indians arriving in the Gulf of Aden region with the northeast monsoon, from December onwards, enjoyed safe anchorages all along Socotra's northern coast during February to May, returning to India with the onset of the southwest monsoon in May (for the annual, monsoonal wind patterns, cf. Doe 1992: 11).

On the basis of the Hoq graffiti, then, we are no wiser about the identity of the organisation which leased Dioscourides, nor can the corpus tell us anything about the purpose of such a setup. In all likelihood, though, the purpose was to ensure the Hadramawtic king an easy and assured annual income from a logistically far-off piece of territory, by farming out to these lessees the taxes to be collected on the island's natural produce, which was cinnabar and tortoiseshell according to the *Periplous*, but also appears to have included frankincense and myrrh (Casson 1989: 169f; Doe 1992: 39–40; Singer 2007: 7f, 22f, 24; Seland 2010: 44–5, Plate 14). These lessees could have been Arabs, such as the contemporary merchants of Muza operating just such a royal concession in East African Rhapta (*Periplous* 16), or the 'Nabataean Cave-dwellers' whose settlement on the Far-Side (Somalia) shipped expensive inland produce out to

the coast (Pliny XII.xliv), or simply a consortium constituted by entrepreneurial members of the settled diaspora on the island, in effect a motley crew with Hadramite gatekeepers (perhaps comparable to Roman economic partnerships, *societates*, cf. Broekaert 2012 for a recent overview).

This discussion aside, another valuable feature of the recent evidence from Socotra is that it augments the empirical basis for a new perspective on the later trade between India and the Roman Empire. That is to say, it supplements a growing body of archaeological evidence which does not fit with the traditional picture of 'Indo-Roman trade' as set out in the works of the last century, which would see the trade go into a marked decline from no later than the 3rd century CE onwards (Charlesworth 1926: 72; Warmington 1974: 136; Wheeler 1954: 135, 176; Raschke 1978: 678; McLaughlin 2010: 59–60, 172–74; while Young 2001 is structured throughout around a year 300 CE divide, although stressing later revival: 82–86). However, while the Roman harbour of Myos Hormos was in fact abandoned sometime after the mid-3rd century CE, this was ultimately due to heavy sedimentation gradually obstructing the harbour from the late 2nd century CE onwards (Peacock & Blue 2006: 174, 176). The southernmost harbour, Berenike, although peaking in the 1st century CE, continued to be in use throughout a prolonged downturn from the later 2nd–early 4th century CE, and seems, in fact, to have experienced an intensification of contacts with India and Sri Lanka from the mid-4th century until sometime in the 5th century CE, before its final abandonment around 550 CE (Sidebotham 2011: 221, 261, 279–80). Further north, moreover, the Red Sea ports of Clysma (Tomber 2008: 66, 69) and Aila (Parker 2009: 82–83) prospered, after centuries of stagnation, from the 4th–7th century CE (Ward 2007: 161–71).

While native ships and crews were capable of beating against the prevailing northerlies of the upper Red Sea, this would not necessarily have been the case with ships out of the Indian Ocean (Whitewright 2007), the Indian captains of which would therefore have preferred the more southern ports of Berenike and Myos Hormos, having no other choice except the former after the latter fell out of use. Both have yielded 1st–2nd century CE evidence of Indian ships' sails (Myos Hormos cf. Blue et al. 2011: 196–7; Berenike cf. Sidebotham 2011: 243), and South Asian food and *instrumentum domesticum* (Myos Hormos cf. v. der Veen 2011: 228–9; Tomber 2008: 74–75; Berenike cf. Sidebotham 2011: 75, 228f), but at Berenike there are also numerous remains attesting continued trade and cohabitation in the 4th–5th century CE. Thus, excavations have uncovered not only late trade goods from India and Sri Lanka, such as pepper, sapphires, cotton textiles, and beads, but also domestic items indicating the continued physical presence of Indians in the later period: namely, rice, sorghum, coconut husks, bamboo, and even Indian cooking pots. To the latter group must also be added some unique belts, likely camel girths, not found anywhere else in Egypt and made using a technique only known from present-day Gujarat, Rajasthan, and adjacent areas (Sidebotham 2011: chapters 12–13).

This archaeological data for the sustained long-distance trade of late Roman Berenike must now be correlated with the numerous presence on Socotra of shippers and merchants from Western India throughout the 2nd–early 5th century CE. Accordingly, late Roman Berenike might have owed much of its trade to visits by Indian ships

from Barygaza using Socotra as a stopover, proving true the hypothesis of Berenike's excavators that its strong, late involvement in the Indian Ocean trade was not due to Roman initiative as such, but rather reflected the port's inclusion in expanding Indian Ocean trade networks (Sidebotham 2011: 261).

However, while the finds at late Berenike of pepper, sapphires, and beads from South India and Sri Lanka cannot easily be correlated with Socotra, the accumulated finds of a dozen 4th–5th century CE cotton textile fragments can now, due to their style of weave and dyeing, be sourced to India (Wild & Wild 2000); western India being a particular hotspot for textile production in the early Common Era. Thus, the *Periplous* mentions the export of all kinds of cloth, especially cotton, from the areas inland from Barygaza and the cities of the Satavahanas on the Deccan-plateau (Periplous 48, 49, 51); in the later 1st century CE, two associations (*śrenīs*) of weavers enjoying royal patronage are attested in a prosperous city near one of the three passes connecting the Satavahana kingdom with ports on the coast (Senart 1905–6: #12); in the 5th century CE there is evidence of an association (*śrenī*) of silk-weavers in the hinterland of Barygaza (Fleet 1888: #18); and, finally, the Berenike cotton fragments with their resist-dyed decorations match 5th century CE paintings from Ajanta in Maharashtra (Sidebotham 2011: 243), and even appear to be similar in weave as well as dyeing to 3rd century CE cotton fragments found at equally far-away Karadong in the Tarim Basin, which must have been imported by way of Gandhara across the Pamir Mountains (Desrosiers et al. 2001).

There is, in other words, good cause to believe that the Western Indian traders attested on Socotra kept up trade with the Roman Red Sea during and after the traditional slowdown of the trade in the 3rd century CE. Moreover, the two Greek Hoq graffiti dated 3rd–4th century CE, the earlier of which was explicitly made by a *ναύκληρος*, constitute further evidence against assuming that Indo-Roman trade had largely died out by the 3rd century CE. As argued above, Socotra did not fit into the traditional monsoon circuits of Roman merchant ships, so perhaps the presence of these two Greeks on the island at this time indicates that they were tapping into a Western Indian trade circuit, meeting up with Indian merchants on Socotra rather than having to travel all the way to India. There is, nonetheless, additional late evidence for Roman merchantmen sailing out of Berenike and all the way to India, namely, finds throughout Berenike town of South Asian teak beams recycled from scrapped Roman-fashion ships, indicating repairs made to Roman vessels in Indian or Sri Lankan ports (Sidebotham 2011: 203–5, 239).

On a final note, it is worth emphasising that even when Western Indian graffiti in the Hoq Cave ceased and trade slumped in Berenike leading to its subsequent abandonment (which may well have been cause and effect), in the early 5th century and probably later 5th century CE, respectively, unknown agents kept up a brisk trade along much the same route, between Aila and Clysma in the Red Sea and Elephanta Island in the bay of Mumbai Harbour. The beaches of Mora Bander on the northeastern side of this island are strewn with not only Indian fine and coarse wares, but also what may be the greatest assemblage of amphora sherds in India (Late Roman and Aila amphorae), datable to the 6th century CE, perhaps extending into the 7th century (Tripathi 2004; Tomber 2008: 128, 165–6).

In conclusion, the new epigraphic corpus from

Socotra turns traditional Indo-Roman trade upside down: previously, more abundant evidence has been available to document the activities of Greco-Roman participants in the trade, imparting many studies of the subject a certain bias towards 'Romano-centric' narratives. Now, however, making full use of the Socotran graffiti, it becomes possible to provide a fuller account of ancient long-distance trade across the Arabian Sea, giving due attention and assigning equal importance to the parts played by all in unison (Sunil Gupta 2005: 160–62), whether from Roman Berenike or Barygaza of the Western Kshatrapas—or from Muza, Axum, Hadramawt, Palmyra, Bactria or Gandhara. This is the revelation hidden for so long in the Cave of Hoq: one kaleidoscopic glimpse, spanning a few centuries, of the world of traders and travellers in the ancient Indian Ocean in their own words, left for posterity to find.

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In the article "[x:y]" refers to site no. x, graffito no. y, from: Catalogue of inscriptions and drawings, in *Foreign Sailors on Socotra. The inscriptions and drawings from the Cave Hoq* (I. Strauch Ed.), pp. 25–218. Bremen, 2012: Hempen Verlag.

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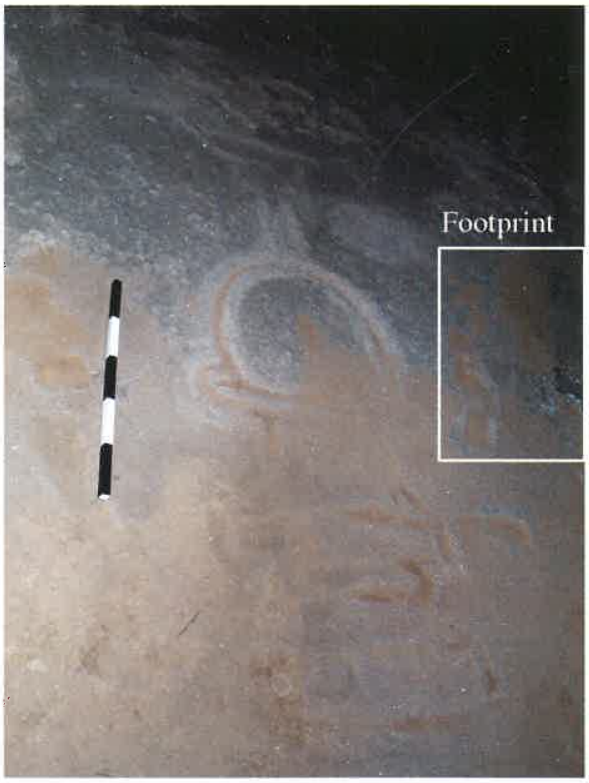
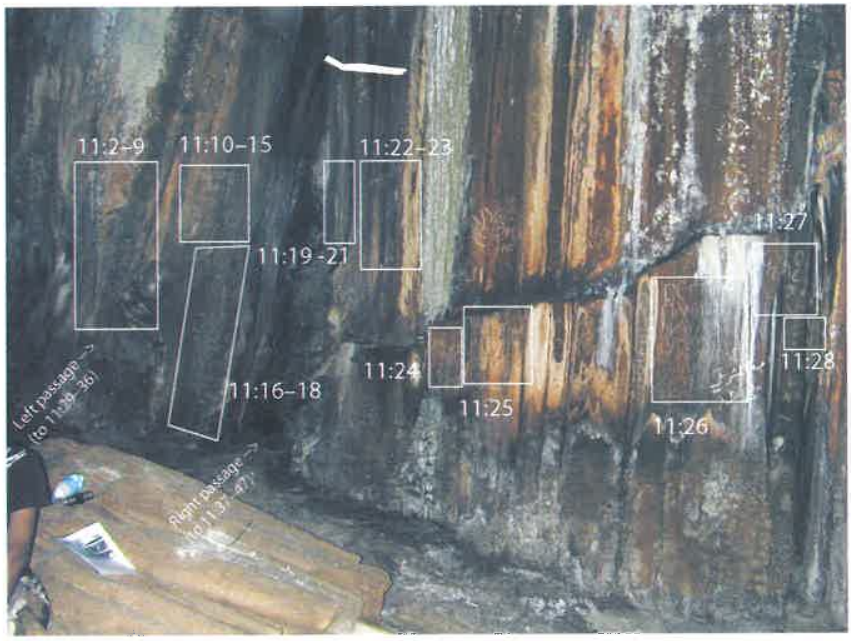
Kasper Evers, Plate 1: Trisula symbol drawn inside the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *Courtesy: I. Strauch*



Kasper Evers, Plate 2: Buddhist Stupa drawn inside the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *Courtesy: I. Strauch*



Kasper Evers, Plate 3: A wooden tablet containing a Palmyrene inscription found inside the Hoq Cave, Socotra
Courtesy: Peter De Geest, Socotra Karst Project



Kasper Evers, Plate 4: Photograph of the 'wall', a section deep within the Hoq Cave containing Brahmi, South Arabian and Greek inscriptions of the early centuries CE
Courtesy: I Strauch



Kasper Evers, Plate 5: Graffito in Prakrit–Brahmi in the Hoq Cave commemorating the visit of a Yavana. *Courtesy: I. Strauch*



Kasper Evers, Plate 6: Graffito in Kharoshthi Script in the Hoq Cave giving the name Upali/Upala in Gandhari. *Courtesy: I. Strauch*



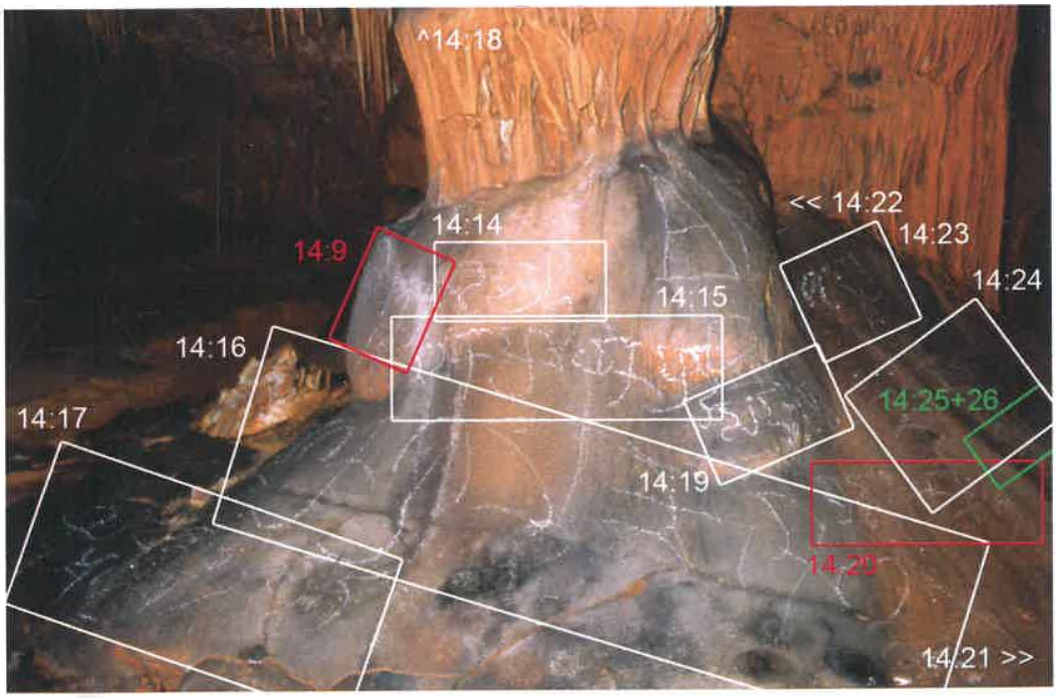
Kasper Evers, Plate 7: Greco – Bactrian and Brahmi graffiti both reading 'Humeyag' found in the Hoq Cave. *Courtesy: I. Strauch*



Kasper Evers, Plate 8: Brahmi - Sanskrit graffito reading 'Navika - humiyaka-putra' found in the Hoq cave. *Courtesy: I. Strauch*



Kasper Evers, Plate 9: Figure of a water craft drawn inside the Hoq cave. *Courtesy: Peter de Geest, Socotra Karst Project*



Kasper Evers, Plate 10: Overview of the Inscriptions in the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *Courtesy: I. Strauch*



Kasper Evers, Plate 11: Long distance view of the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *Courtesy: Peter De Geest*



Kasper Evers, Plate 12: View of the Gulf of Aden from the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *Courtesy: Dirk Van Dorpe*



Kasper Evers, Plate 13: Another view of the Gulf of Aden from the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *Courtesy: Paul Van Immerseel*



Kasper Evers, Plate 14: Frankincense trees (on right specifically) framing the mouth of the Hoq Cave, Socotra. *Courtesy: Peter De Geest*