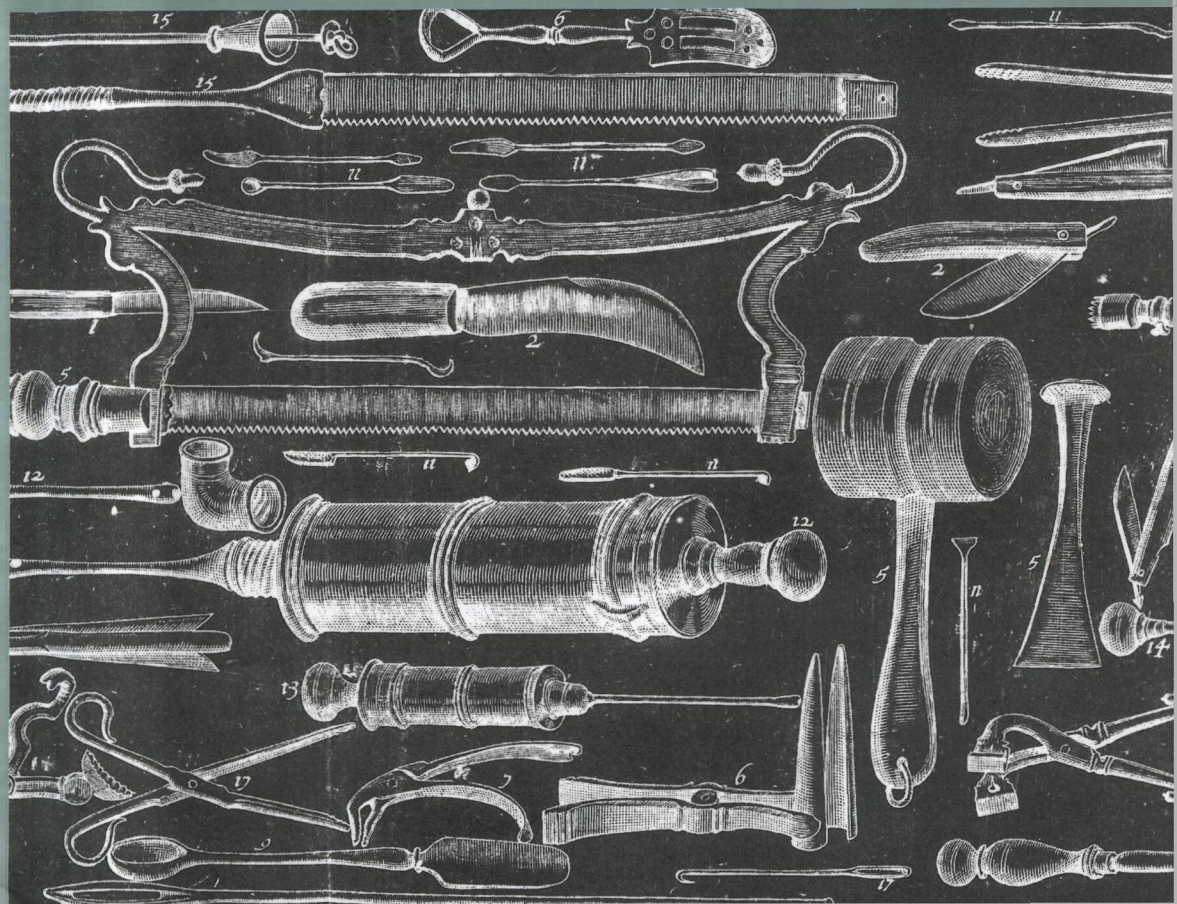




NANCY UM



# Shipped but Not Sold

## Material Culture and the Social Protocols of Trade during Yemen's Age of Coffee

Nancy Um



University of Hawai'i Press  
Honolulu



Perspectives on the Global Past

Edited by A. Yang and Koko Matsumoto

Material Culture and the

Color images were made possible by a generous contribution from the Harpur College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Office at Binghamton University.

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Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17      6 5 4 3 2 1

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Um, Nancy, author.

Title: Shipped but not sold : material culture and the social protocols of trade during Yemen's age of coffee / Nancy Um.

Other titles: Perspectives on the global past.

Description: Honolulu : University of Hawai'i Press, [2017] | Series: Perspectives on the global past | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016044210 | ISBN 9780824866402 (cloth ; alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Ceremonial exchange—Yemen (Republic)—History—18th century. | Merchants—Yemen (Republic)—History—18th century. | Yemen (Republic)—Commerce—History—18th century.

Classification: LCC GN449.8 .U4 2017 | DDC 394/.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016044210>

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Council on Library Resources.

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## INTRODUCTION

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The circulation of objects, especially across the edges of societies, civilizations, and trading regimes, is not merely a physical process but is also a movement and displacement of competing conceptions of things, a jostle of transaction forms. Global economies do not control the meanings of the commodities that their profits turn upon, even if the appropriation of these goods in the form of gifts, commodities, or prestige invaluables inevitably entangles receivers in wider relations that are not easily shrugged off.

—Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects*

Arabian stallions. Bottles of fragrant rosewater. Slivers of aromatic agarwood from Southeast Asia. Gilded porcelain coffee cups from China and Japan. Tufted Persian velvet in red, green, and blue. Translucent turban wrappers of Bengali muslin. Shimmering pieces of heavy satin from Gujarat. Bales of coffee beans grown in the mountains of Yemen. Sacks of cloves, cinnamon, mace, and nutmeg. Vials of spiced oils. Yardage of English broadcloth. Chests filled with silver pieces of eight. Chairs and tables crafted of tropical hardwoods. Casks of arrack distilled from rice and sugarcane on the island of Java.

This diverse list of colorful products includes commodities that were offered or sought in the markets of India and connected ports on the Red Sea and the Gulf around the year 1700. It also resembles a ship's manifest enumerating cargos that were shuttled around the region at the same time. Yet these items have been singled out here, not for their value as commodities to be bought or sold in the early modern marketplaces of the western Indian Ocean, but rather because they were "promiscuous objects" that also played ceremonial, social, and utilitarian roles in an intensely commercial society that was oriented toward the sea in early eighteenth-century Yemen. There these items were offered, displayed, exchanged, consumed, or utilized by major international merchants and local trade officials in a number of socially exclusive practices that affirmed their identity, status, and commercial obligations and also sustained the livelihood of their business ventures. This study looks at what happened to these goods, both local and imported

objects, when they were diverted from the marketplace for a set of directives that were seemingly quite nontransactional.

## EARLY MODERN COMMODITIES IN AND OUT OF THE MARKETPLACE

It is increasingly popular to tell the story of single types or classes of commodities that developed a global purview in the early modern era. For instance, a comestible product such as coffee inspired a wide-reaching and relatively new audience by the end of the seventeenth century, when Europeans had picked up the habit from their neighbors in Arab lands and the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> By the middle of the eighteenth century, the coffee plant was cultivated in both the Eastern and Western hemispheres, thus becoming global in its production as well as its consumption. Manufactured items, such as Asian porcelain, fostered new markets during the same period, while also inspiring many imitations worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Brightly patterned printed cotton textiles from India introduced a wave of sartorial novelty in Europe and spurred agricultural and industrial innovations that crossed world regions.<sup>3</sup>

Yet in the bazaars of Yemen, these items were far more than mere commodities. In addition to the commercial demand they inspired, they were also displayed, consumed, worn, or used in ceremonies of entry staged for major merchants who arrived at the jetty of the Red Sea port of Mocha. Some constituted the main fodder for commercial gifts that European merchants offered to local trade officials in Yemen's ports and emporia, even to the imam. Others were essential utensils brought by merchants to sustain their business endeavors on the Arabian Peninsula. As commodities, gifts, objects of display, everyday instruments, and highly potent signs, many of these goods operated in and circulated between linked commercial spheres and registers of exchange. Taking inspiration from the recent surge in historical work on global consumption that has effectively opened the door for a close consideration of the material dimensions of daily life, this study locates a whole host of Indian Ocean commodities in dense webs of social meaning among a diverse community of mobile merchants on the southern Arabian Peninsula from 1700 to 1740.<sup>4</sup>

Although today it is cast as remote and isolated, in the age when ships served as the dominant mode of long-distance travel, Yemen sat at the center of multiple intersecting oceanic networks, wedged at the meeting point of the Red and Arabian seas but also linked to the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. While the goods mentioned above were clearly subject to the global demand that activated their movement across oceans, in Yemen their meanings were not circumscribed to their commodity status, nor were they ever stable. I contend that the meaning and value of mobile and highly

sought-after commodities may be better understood when their movement is suspended (at least momentarily) and they are located in specific rather than general geographic circumstances, with the interest of highlighting the intricate relationships that early modern merchants sustained with various classes of objects, locally derived and imported.

## YEMEN'S AGE OF COFFEE

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Yemen sat at the center of an increasingly caffeinated world. As such, much of its early modern history can be narrated through its engagement with the coffee plant, bean, and drink. Although *Coffea arabica* is native to the Horn of Africa, the hot, dark, brewed beverage familiar to us today was first consumed in Yemen in the early fifteenth century. The bush was also first cultivated actively there, thus furnishing a major local product of trade for the Ottomans, who occupied the region from 1538 to 1636 and are credited with establishing Yemen's coffee industry.<sup>5</sup> Coffee plants were farmed in the mountains, and the beans were shipped over land and by sea to eager consumers in the northern markets of Jidda, Cairo, and Istanbul, but also to the east, particularly Iran.<sup>6</sup> The Ottoman governors on Yemen's coast were the first to greet European company merchants who arrived in Mocha, a port that had been developed for trade and naval activity in the early sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The English came in 1609 and the Dutch in 1616, but neither in search of coffee, which they then knew little about. Rather they sought a stake in the western Indian Ocean trade, with the goal of filling the vacuum left by the weakening of Portuguese maritime power.

The Ottomans were also responsible for tying together, under the sultan's name, Yemen's north and south, regions that had been politically split for centuries, generally along the lines of the Shi'i Zaydi highlands and the Sunni coastal lowlands. However, Ottoman ambitions outgrew the stability of their regime. In 1636 the Qasimi imams, of a local Zaydi family, ousted them, while also adopting from them a largely unified Yemen that they oversaw from the mountain highlands. The Qasimis have received little notice by modern historians of the Middle East, and when they are mentioned, they are usually sketched as relatively insular.<sup>8</sup> Yet records of the Indian Ocean trade show that the Qasimi imams of Yemen were deeply invested in global exchange and maintained close contact with foreign merchants.

If Yemen's age of coffee began under Ottoman rule, it came to fruition and full productivity under the Qasimis, who installed a centralized coffee emporium in the lowland town of Bayt al-Faqih some time in the middle of the seventeenth century (Figure 0.1). Merchants from Jidda and their local

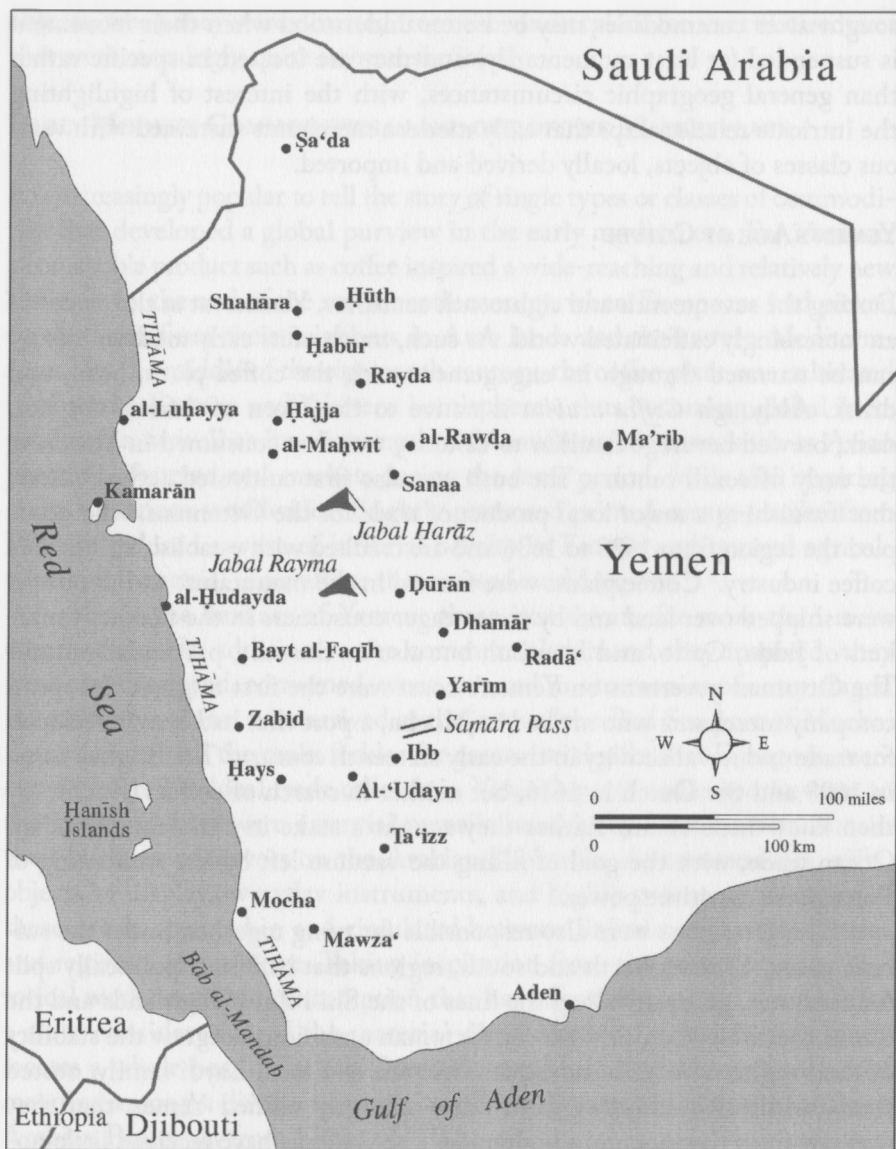


Figure 0.1. Map of Yemen. Drawn by Barry Levely.



agents frequented this market, in addition to Gulf traders who arrived from ports such as Basra in modern-day Iraq, Kung on the Persian coast, and Musqat in Oman. In the late seventeenth century, coffee also came to dominate English and Dutch interests in the Yemen trade. The French and Ostenders, who arrived in Yemen in 1709 and 1719, respectively, followed soon after.<sup>9</sup> Bayt al-Faqih was not the only coffee market in Yemen, but it was certainly the largest and the most international, with all of the above-mentioned merchants renting houses there for the duration of the coffee intake season. For this reason, Kristof Glamann, a VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, Dutch East India Company) historian, called Bayt al-Faqih the "centre of a trade of a world-embracing character," animated by merchants from the north and the south, who shipped via Red Sea, Mediterranean, and Indian Ocean channels.<sup>10</sup> The period from 1700 to 1740, which marks a high point in demand there as well as punctuating the end of Yemen's near monopoly on the bean, is the focus of the current study.

Competitors began to challenge Yemen's singular status as the world's major coffee purveyor as early as 1725, when the Dutch finally harnessed the quality and yield of the plant, with which they had experimented for many years on the island of Java.<sup>11</sup> The next year marked the first time coffee grown in Southeast Asia outweighed the Yemeni bales sold in Amsterdam. French colonial cultivation efforts succeeded soon afterward. In the 1730s coffee grown on the Caribbean island of Martinique and shipped through Marseille began appearing in the markets of the eastern Mediterranean, thus reversing the long-standing east-to-west flow of the bean.<sup>12</sup> Small quantities of coffee are still exported from Yemen, but the region relinquished its nearly exclusive role as a global coffee provider by the middle of the eighteenth century.

As important as coffee is to Yemen's trade history, one must recognize that it was one of many commodities to pass through local ports and emporia during this era. In fact, some of Yemen's major merchants, such as Mulla Muhammad 'Ali, the famous shipowner from Gujarat, did not deal in coffee at all but rather focused on selling Indian textiles in Yemen, with the goal of procuring Central American silver for the mints of the subcontinent. So coffee serves as an important but not exclusive commodity of focus as well as constituting an overarching contextual backdrop of this study because of the increasing European interest in it. Although Europeans' demand for coffee did not exceed that of Muslim merchants from both the Mediterranean and the Gulf regions in this period, the Western presence in Yemen's coffee market is important because of the copious records it yielded. In fact, the voluminous European documentation makes this era one of the best recorded in Yemen's premodern history.<sup>13</sup>

This book relies upon these materials, now housed in archives in The Hague and London, but with the understanding that Europeans were never the most numerous or active merchants in Yemen, only its most dedicated observers. Their records also narrate more than the history of the overseas trade. They provide precious perspectives on local events, some of which were wholly or partially overlooked by Yemen's historians. The few Europeans who had the opportunity to visit the highlands, such as the French surgeon Barbier in 1712, left unique descriptions of Imam al-Mahdi Muhammad's (r. 1686–1718) everyday routines and his inquisitive interest in the nature of the French monarchy. It is also through European eyes that we can add to our understanding of some of the political upheavals that originated in Yemen's interior and then trickled down to the coast. The Dutch, for instance, provide a day-by-day account of the extended 1727–1728 struggle for the imamate between two competing candidates, al-Mansur Husayn (r. 1727–1748), son of the previous imam, and al-Nasir Muhammad bin Ishaq (d. 1754), who was seen by many as more suitable for the position. Although these two rivals were based in the Yemeni highlands, they sent representatives to vie for the lucrative ports and the lowlands as strategic lynchpins in their struggle. The Dutch records of the 1728 siege of Mocha thus add to a historical narrative that has been told only from the perspective of the mountains.

Other key events directly involved the Europeans as participants and not just observers. For instance, in 1719, after prodding from the Ottomans, Imam al-Mutawakkil Qasim (r. 1718–1727) installed a ban on European coffee purchases at Bayt al-Faqih.<sup>14</sup> This ban was highly ineffective and in place for only a short period of time, but it indicates that Europeans could be a source of anxiety for other coffee merchants who were active in Yemen, namely those shipping for Cairo and the wider Ottoman world. In 1737 the French sent three warships to Yemen with the claim that the governor of Mocha, Faqih Ahmad Khazindar, had violated their trade agreement.<sup>15</sup> They ended up firing on the port, damaging the city's Great Mosque, and seized the southern fort in order to get their outstanding debts repaid. This attack was remembered and recounted in the city for decades to come and was often cited by later travellers to Mocha. Although largely one-sided, these narratives of observation, engagement, encounter, and conflict serve as key sites for the examination of the early modern cross-cultural experience in the western Indian Ocean.

## HIERARCHIES OF TRADE ADMINISTRATION

Three successive imams, al-Mahdi Muhammad, his nephew al-Mutawakkil Qasim, and the latter's son al-Mansur Husayn, were engaged players in the

Indian Ocean trade during Yemen's age of coffee. Despite the fact that he rarely left his mountain seat, the imam was deeply aware of events that took place in the lowlands and across bodies of water in connected ports. In fact, he owned a pair of ships that docked at Mocha and dispatched them yearly across the Indian Ocean to the Gujarati port of Surat. Communications between the coast and the imam's capital were maintained consistently through messengers and letters, although the journey took at least eight days. Overseas merchants in Yemen maintained close contact with the imam, occasionally visiting the court in person but more frequently through written correspondence. The large sample of translated letters in the Dutch National Archives attests to the vibrancy and consistency of these connections from the perspective of one of Yemen's foreign merchant groups. The Dutch and the English, in particular, appealed directly to the imam to settle commercial disputes, for instance to get long-standing debts incurred by other merchants paid, or even for minor domestic claims, such as a disagreement about a rental contract with a landlord in Mocha. Merchants based on the coast also sent the imam lavish gifts, sometimes annually, as I describe in chapters 2 and 3.

By contrast, overseas merchants dealt directly with a number of provincial officials on a daily basis. The imam appointed these administrators, particularly the governors of the ports and Bayt al-Faqih. Although we can not account for the full purview of their governing responsibilities, we can gather from the sources that they were expected to collect taxes and duties from their district, which were supposed to be funneled directly to the highlands. They were also concerned with local security, charged with ordering the troops stationed in their cities, and maintaining the upkeep of urban fortifications. Shaykh Salih al-Huraybi (d. 1723) held the post of Mocha's governor in the early years of the eighteenth century under Imam al-Mahdi, who also named him *wazir* (minister at court). After leaving Mocha, he oversaw Bayt al-Faqih and thus occupied some of the most lucrative administrative posts in all of Yemen during the period under consideration. His successor in Mocha, Amir Rizq, was formerly a *nakhudha* (ship captain) who led Imam al-Mahdi's ships on their yearly voyages to India. Undoubtedly his awareness of maritime affairs merited him the promotion to coastal governor under the following imam, al-Mutawakkil, in 1718. His son, 'Ali bin Amir Rizq, followed in his father's footsteps, taking the Mocha post after his death in 1721. One of the most illustrious governors of Mocha, Faqih Ahmad Khazindar, held the position twice, first in the 1720s under Imam al-Mutawakkil and then again in the 1730s under al-Mansur. The European merchants of Mocha constantly complained about his unjust policies and avaricious methods, which were cited as reasons for the 1737 French bombardment of the port, after which he was permanently removed.

Many lower-ranking officials were also involved in the trade, although their exact duties are not entirely clear from the records.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the *amir al-bahr* was the overseer of port affairs who would maintain a watch over the seashore and identify new ships as they appeared in the harbor. Presumably he would also have held responsibility over the fishermen, boat owners, and other members of the maritime populace. The chief *sarraf* (money-exchanger) of Mocha was also a key figure in the trade; he took responsibility for the collection of duties and taxes from merchants at the conclusion of each trading season. Two major merchants, Hasan Hasusa and Muhammad Yasin, who was originally from Basra but died in Mocha, held this post in the early eighteenth century. The imam maintained a *wakil* (commercial agent) at the port as well. This agent conducted trade on the imam's behalf, while also engaging in his own independent commercial enterprises. Qasim al-Turbati, a long-standing resident and merchant of Mocha who often traded with the Europeans in the city, held this position during the 1730s.

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF YEMEN'S OVERSEAS MERCHANTS

The names of these local merchants who also held official positions—Muhammad Yasin, Hasan Hasusa, and Qasim al-Turbati—appear as main characters in the pages that follow. I also identify major merchants from India as key players in Yemen's overseas trade, such as Mulla 'Abd al-Ghafur and his grandson successor, Mulla Muhammad 'Ali, shipowners from the port of Surat; Sidi Yaqut Khan, the admiral of the Mughal Navy, based at Danda-Rajpuri, south of Bombay; and the Mappila Muslim Ali Raja of Cannanore on the Malabar coast. European company merchants, namely the Dutch, English, and French, were also prominent figures in Mocha's trading world.<sup>17</sup> These merchants have been singled out of a much larger and lesser-known group as members of Mocha's major overseas merchant class, a category I refer to consistently and strategically in this study.

While relying upon the designation "major overseas merchant" as an organizing concept, my larger goal is to clarify the limits and parameters of this proposed grouping. In general, the possible measures one can use to gauge merchant status, such as relative trade volume, are unavailable or unevenly accessible for the western Indian Ocean context. Even Arabic terminology employs only vague terms to differentiate various classes of commercial actors. Historically, the *tajir* (pl. *tujjar*, merchant) was a wholesaler whose trade extended outside of local markets and who dealt in a relatively large volume of goods.<sup>18</sup> Thus the term *tajir* serves to distinguish a major trader from a *ba'i*, a retailer in the bazaar, in terms of his scope and scale of

enterprise. It also sets apart the *tajir* from a travelling peddler, of the type that might sell assorted wares periodically, while undertaking the pilgrimage, for instance. Yet scholars of trade lack more precise language to differentiate various subgroups of traders in terms of financial scale and social standing within this widely cast grouping of the *tajir*. In the absence of readily available terms, many historians have resorted to relatively generic descriptive language to gauge and convey merchant status. For instance, while being remarkably attentive to the nature of merchant identities and the social dynamics of trade, André Raymond refers to the al-Sharaybi family of coffee merchants in eighteenth-century Cairo as “great merchants” (*grands tujjar*); Jessica Goldberg describes those featured in the letters of the Cairo Geniza as the “middling sort”; and Gagan Sood designates a diverse group of early modern Indian Ocean actors as “merchants of substance.”<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, available sources are of little help in attaining more precision about the relative status of the *tajir*, particularly for Yemen. Merchants are rarely mentioned in local Arabic texts, and when they are their commercial activities are often subordinated to their pious profiles.<sup>20</sup> In one rare instance, a resident of Mocha referred to the Surati shipowner ‘Abd al-Ghafur in hyperbolic terms as “the king of merchants” (*malik al-tujjar*), which signals the high esteem in which his activities were held in Yemen but does not provide further specification.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, we have copious data about the dealings of the European company traders who were active there, which allows us to track their transactions with a great deal of accuracy. These records, comprising company archives and travel narratives, offer certain pieces of information about their Asian and local counterparts, but they are usually fragmented, uneven, and available only for the parts of their enterprises that concerned European interests.

A few examples demonstrate that social status and financial standing were not necessarily dependent categories among the overseas merchant class, which Goldberg suggests was the case with the merchants of the medieval Cairo Geniza as well.<sup>22</sup> For instance, Qasim al-Turbati was described as Mocha’s leading merchant for many years even after he incurred major losses from an Arabian Sea shipwreck in 1716.<sup>23</sup> At the time, VOC merchants surmised that this calamity would cost him dearly, estimating the hefty loss of 16,000 to 20,000 Spanish reals. Their assessments appear to have been correct. After that unfortunate occurrence, he began to accrue significant debts to both the English East India Company (EIC) and the VOC, which remained unpaid until his death in 1737. Yet his social and political standing was apparently unaffected by this blow to his financial status. Throughout the 1720s and 1730s, he continued to maintain a close relationship with the imam of Yemen, serving in appointed positions in



Mocha. He was second to the governor in the 1720s and the imam's *wakil* in the 1730s. He wielded the influence of these privileged posts and the support of local officials in order to maintain his shaky business, even as he continued to build up debt and as his aggrieved lenders tried in vain to discredit his reputation.<sup>24</sup> His case reflects the extent to which connections to Yemen's imam and his provincial administrators could override the financial dissolution of one's commercial enterprise.

In sharp contrast, one can consider the case of Mocha's Baniyan merchants, Hindu and Jain traders from the Kathiawar Peninsula in Gujarat. Operating in southern Arabia, in the Gulf, and along the eastern coast of Africa, members of this mobile trading group were key players in the world of overseas commerce and occupied many different positions in regard to it. They are best known as brokers to major traders, including the Europeans, but they also engaged directly in wholesale activities. Moreover their brokerage work usually entailed other tasks and skills, such as translation and banking, which merited many the title of *sarraḥ*. In 1719 the Dutch cited three of Mocha's chief Baniyans as the city's highest volume traders, in addition to three other Muslim merchants: al-Turbati, Muhammad Yasin, and a certain Hajji Muhammad, who was described as a Turk.<sup>25</sup> Yet the Baniyans, who were considered to be *dhimmis* (protected minorities) only by an extremely gracious understanding of Islamic law,<sup>26</sup> were socially marginalized and politically vulnerable throughout Yemen. Records from Mocha and other cities where they operated reveal that they were often pressed to surrender their profits to the local treasury through various measures of coercion that sometimes entailed the use of force.<sup>27</sup> In this case, their trading volume and impact on overseas commerce far outstripped their social and political clout in the city.

These examples suggest the difficulties in calibrating how economic standing, trade volume, and social status line up within and among the merchant classes historically in Yemen. They also suggest that the most prominent, visible, and politically connected merchants of Yemen were not always the most financially stable. For these reasons, I take up merchant class as a social category rather than one that can be determined by quantifiable means alone, thus following the call of historian Natasha Glaisyer and others "towards broadening the agenda of economic history."<sup>28</sup> In the case of eighteenth-century Yemen, we can discern a diverse yet small group of long-distance maritime traders whose cargo arrived on high-capacity ocean-going vessels each year according to the rhythms of the global wind cycle, who owned or rented large, multistory houses that were located along Mocha's coastline, who maintained close contact with the imam and his many provincial officials, and who engaged in a set of shared yet exclusive

social practices and protocols that constitute the subject of this study. These merchants operated in far-flung networks that extended across the Arabian Sea rather than along shorter distances within the bounded Red Sea or Gulf region and occupied a place of privilege in Yemen's trading society. It may be said that they were the upper social echelon of the overseas merchant class based in Mocha in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Yet this category of Yemen's major overseas merchants may not be circumscribed by a single place of origin or identity. Instead it cuts across the various groups that traded in Yemen. Notably, those Arabic verses that described 'Abd al-Ghafur as the "king of merchants" did not indicate that he was a Sunni Bohra who lived in India and rarely or perhaps never visited Yemen's shores, thus suggesting a lack of differentiation between Indian merchants and their local counterparts that may be surprising to modern readers.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, merchants associated with the Dutch, English, and French East India companies, and some private ones, should be counted among this privileged class of local traders and those based in India. By locating them on a shared social plane with major Asian and local merchants, I react particularly to the long-standing perception among historians that Europeans were a disruptive or marginalized presence in Indian Ocean markets. As a conceptual model, the work of Sood spurs me on; he has argued effectively that we need to understand convergences within the tightly interconnected Islamicate Eurasian sphere rather than allow later definitions of nation and continent to mold our understanding of early modern identities.<sup>30</sup>

In the case of Mocha, these high-volume European wholesalers occupied a shared status with major Asian and local wholesalers. Moreover they often struggled to make sense of local protocols for trade and thus sometimes mimicked the conventions, modes of consumption, and social rites of their Indian counterparts in Yemen. But in other cases, they implemented their own unique customs and modes of operating. A close consideration of their selective adoption of locally dominant social and cultural practices provides an avenue for us to further interrogate the extent to which Europeans assimilated to or served as shaping forces in Indian Ocean markets before the high age of empire, an enduring question in the study of early modern European commercial expansion.

In order to better describe the category of the major overseas merchant, I draw comparisons between this group and the *dhimmis*, religious minority communities that were governed by the Pact of 'Umar, an agreement that required Muslim authorities to provide protection for them based on their adherence to certain regulations regarding behavior and activity. In eighteenth-century Yemen, *ahl al-dhimma* (protected minorities) comprised the Baniyans but also the sizeable and long-established Jewish community. It

should be noted, however, that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represented a period of tumultuous upheavals for both, and particularly the latter, as widespread messianic movements emboldened Jewish communities across the Islamic world. In Yemen these led to heated confrontations with the Zaydi imam that were regarded as outright rebellion and a violation of their enduring relationship.<sup>31</sup> In response, Yemen's Jewish community was exiled temporarily to the lowland town of Mawza' in 1679; the imam intended ultimately to expel them from Yemen entirely. Although many eventually returned to their original respective home cities around Yemen after a yearlong deportation, some died in exile, all experienced loss and hardship, and their status was irrevocably changed after that cataclysmic experience.

As Bernard Haykel has shown, these turbulent events occurred during a time of intense debates among Zaydi religious scholars in the Yemeni highlands, who were increasingly coming under the influence of Sunnis and Sunni-oriented thinkers.<sup>32</sup> Those who leaned toward Sunni interpretation argued that religious minorities should not be permitted to live anywhere on the Arabian Peninsula, whereas the Zaydis took a much more delimited and tolerant stance on this issue. Although neither *dhimmi* group witnessed another large-scale expulsion attempt, the result of these intra-Muslim doctrinal differences and disputes was that both the Baniyans and the Jews witnessed extreme shifts in their status in the eighteenth century, swinging between periods of persecution and hostility and the granting of certain privileges by the imam.<sup>33</sup> While the Jews were not heavily involved in the international trade during this time, the commercially active Baniyans, who were granted their *dhimmi* status only in the mid-seventeenth century, serve as a useful contrast to the major overseas merchants. The Baniyans played an essential role in the success of Yemen's long-distance trade and, like the Europeans, received certain trade privileges that exceeded the expectations of their *dhimmi* status. Yet both groups were perennially perceived as outsiders, even after many years of residence and activity in Yemen's ports and emporia.

## LEARNING FROM TRADE DIASPORA COMMUNITIES

*Shipped but Not Sold* emerges from and responds to a rising interest in pre-modern merchant groups whose trading networks extended over widespread geographies. The most productive work in this realm has highlighted "trade diaspora" communities, such as Francesca Trivellato's study of the Sephardic merchants of seventeenth-century Livorno, Sebouh Aslanian's research on the Armenian traders of New Julfa during the same period, and Goldberg's reconsideration of the Jewish merchants of the medieval Cairo Geniza.<sup>34</sup> This body of work is valuable precisely because it looks at the organizational

mechanics of trade, concentrating on how commercial activities were conducted among a group of dispersed merchants across long distances during times when travel was arduous and modes of communication were slow and sometimes unreliable.

Based on meticulous readings of understudied or misunderstood archival materials, Trivellato, Aslanian, and Goldberg explore the social organization of these trading groups with the understanding that a single merchant's success often hinged upon the efforts of many agents, partners, and officials in multiple locations. They show that financial transactions encompassed only one part of the commercial enterprise by sketching premodern trade as a social rather than purely economic endeavor that was fundamentally underpinned by diverse interactions and exchanges within and across seemingly closed groups. I follow upon their lucid instruction by looking at the social world of the long-distance trade in Yemen and suggesting that a sense of belonging was constituted, at least in part, through material objects that were exchanged, consumed, used, or displayed prominently by the major overseas merchant class.

These earlier studies are important also for offering the perspective that the enterprises of overseas merchants were relatively fragile, even those of leading traders. Similarly in Yemen, merchant status was often contingent upon faraway social and political realities and subject to the vagaries of sea travel, as in the case of al-Turbati. Trivellato, Aslanian, and Goldberg effectively call into question the notion that family, ethnic, and religious networks were independently self-sustaining and thus advocate the need to look closely at how the social fabric of the long-distance trade was nurtured and developed. By denaturalizing the assumed robustness of merchant relations, especially within relatively tight-knit yet geographically dispersed communities, and calling into question any implicit sense of trust that bound them together, their work allows us to understand that merchants were constantly in the process of crafting and honing their identities, cultivating relationships with agents, partners, and officials, and negotiating their delicate legacies over expansive distances and across diverse cultural, religious, and political spheres.

These lessons are crucial to understanding the maritime trade in the Indian Ocean, particularly after the arrival of Europeans, who introduced new commercial codes that joined rather than replaced much longer established regional codes. Moreover, while looking within the bounds of a single community, Trivellato's work especially sheds light on early modern merchant interactions that cut across a wide spectrum of groups, as was the case in eighteenth-century Yemen, with its ties that stretched from London and Amsterdam to Surat and Batavia (Jakarta) and thus required multiple

means and objects of mediation to communicate across social, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.

### THE MATERIAL PRACTICES, PROTOCOLS, AND ROUTINES OF TRADE

We may understand this diverse grouping of Yemen's major overseas merchants not only by the scope of their trade activity, the overlapping maritime routes they travelled, and their shared social standing, but also by the privileges they received, the common activities they participated in, and the reoccurring objects they utilized within them. As the following chapters show, their exclusive status was conferred and confirmed yearly through their involvement in repetitive rites and routines that, as I argue, were closely associated with the cycles of maritime trade. Participation in these rites was restricted to certain merchants at the invitation of or with approval by local authorities and officials. By taking part, these merchants were set apart from the brokers, low-level merchants, and retailers in Mocha, but also from the nameless masses of the maritime proletariat. So although European merchants often cast certain rites, such as the requirement to bestow annual gifts to local trade officials, as burdens, they were actually privileges of the local trade system to which only a limited membership was invited.

The trade records of the EIC and VOC devote a certain amount of energy to the description of these practices, particularly the lavish ceremonies that were staged for merchants who arrived on Yemen's shores each year to trade, the gifts that were expected of all major merchants each season and also accompanied most written inquiries and official visits, and the small and often impromptu receptions that took place within merchants' houses and always entailed rites of welcome, such as the sprinkling of rose-water and the offering of coffee. While attesting to the pervasive need to engage in such practices in order to assimilate to local norms and expectations, our European narrators just as readily dismiss many of them with the assumption that lavish ceremonies were indicative of the excesses of Eastern governance and that requisite gifts reflected the corrupt system of trade dominated by Oriental despots. Predictably, many modern scholars have followed the tone and tenor of these sources by generally ignoring or sidelining these practices in more recent studies of maritime commerce. On the whole, with their deep and structural reliance on economic measures of interpretation, Indian Ocean historians have been uninterested in the social life of trade, understanding commerce within the narrowest possible light of its transactional processes and restricted to those exchanges that resulted in a tangible loss or profit.



As sketched here, the cycles of trade began as soon as merchants appeared in the harbor of the port and not from the instance of their first commercial transaction. Moreover, much of the wider social activity that merchants engaged in, such as ceremonial receptions and the practices of merchant tribute, may be counted as steps in the extended commercial process and the associated aspects of long-distance shipping. Along with many everyday tasks, such as record keeping and letter writing, these various rites and routines must be considered the actual substance of commercial activity rather than its peripheral excess.

This initiative to look at the social and material activities of long-distance merchants draws upon a long-standing historical interest in abstract concepts of trust and reputation as key to the structure of cross-cultural trade. Inspired by or in reaction to the pioneering work of economist Avner Greif, recent historians, such as Trivellato, Aslanian, Goldberg, and others, have made a case for looking at how trust was constituted and sustained in and across various commercial contexts.<sup>35</sup> Yet Greif and those who followed him have looked primarily at the behavioral aspects of merchant conduct to examine how traders viewed their commercial partners and agents and how they all presented themselves in the far-flung spheres within which they operated. As such, the material, physical, and tangible dimensions of what Greif called "the reputation mechanism" have not been explored seriously.<sup>36</sup> I suggest emphatically that material objects, many of which mirrored the ones held in Yemen's warehouses and the cargo holds of ships docked in Mocha's harbor, also played a role in the maintenance of merchant relations as legible and weighty social markers.<sup>37</sup> As Greif and others have shown, one's reputation was never set in stone but required constant renewal and was subject to reevaluation over time. This prevailing instability, along with the cyclical nature of the maritime trade, allocated an important place to material objects as essential tools in the yearly assertion and confirmation of a merchant's standing and reliability, which were not determined entirely by "intangible attributes."<sup>38</sup>

As a crucial model, historians of the Dutch overseas empire, particularly the Cape, have been attentive to the roles that material objects played in representing social hierarchies in inherently diverse trading communities. In fact, practices of consumption were so extreme among the Dutch in their Asian capital of Batavia that they inspired the establishment of a number of sumptuary codes regarding dress and display in the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>39</sup> As a pioneer in this regard, historian Robert Ross has looked closely at how clothing, housing, carriages, the seating program within the church, and ceremonies staged at weddings and baptisms were calibrated and modulated as crucial and highly visible sites when and where social

status was represented in Cape Town under the VOC and then the British. He posits a fundamental intersection among material display, social standing, and evolving concepts of respectability.<sup>40</sup> Gerald Groenewald goes even further by showing how material culture, consumption practices, and the protocols of display were key to the development of “social capital” among a rising group of merchants in eighteenth-century Cape Town.<sup>41</sup> Both highlight the importance of material objects as major constituents of merchant identity in port cities and maritime trading societies, with their mixed and itinerant populations. Even so, both portray horses, jewels, and houses as reflections of identities already formed, relatively static symbols of respectability, or examples of bald ostentation. While bolstered by these provocations, I attribute a much more dynamic role to objects as key tools of the trade that aided in the ongoing processes of commercial activity and engagement rather than simply reflecting the endpoint of its financial proceeds.

Port cities and emporia in Yemen were complex sites where multiple languages were spoken, several currencies were used, and various calendars were employed. With this backdrop, merchants and trade officials used material objects conspicuously as important communicative tools and visually legible signs. Rather than seeing them as inert recipients of meaning or static status markers, I suggest that these goods were active mediators of the cross-cultural encounter, structuring the nature of commercial exchange and sustaining merchant relations in a rapidly transforming and increasingly diverse Indian Ocean world.

## THINKING ABOUT EXCHANGE

By looking at commodities within the overlapping realms of gift, display, and consumption practices, I follow a long line of scholars who have explored the dynamic world of commodities, gifts, and exchange. Although this lineage has been amply traced by anthropologists, and to a certain extent art historians, before me, these salient ideas have not yet been fully engaged for the study of goods in the early modern Indian Ocean.<sup>42</sup> Of key importance is anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who argues that “things” must be suspended within a dynamic understanding of the conditions of exchange.<sup>43</sup> Pushing back against the iconic legacy of Marcel Mauss, Appadurai undermines the conception of gifts and commodities as exclusive categories of objects, offering the alternative of thinking about both as temporal stages that objects could move in and out of fluidly. In the commercial environment of eighteenth-century Yemen, certain goods were exceedingly pliable in their roles as commodities, gifts, and objects of display and consumption. These mobile goods were exchanged or utilized at particular

moments within the trade encounter, thus punctuating its significant stages and requisite imperatives. These aspects of timing and temporality, which were articulated initially by Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>44</sup> are particularly crucial to an understanding of the processes of the western Indian Ocean trade, which was governed by the strict tempo of the global wind cycle that brought major overseas vessels into the city from January to April and facilitated their departure in August and September each year.

According to anthropologist Annette Weiner in regard to Oceanic societies, "the work necessary to produce social identities in things and people is a tremendous burden."<sup>45</sup> This burden is even weightier in a diverse merchant community in which most participants bring their own sets of assumptions and understandings about the meaning and value of the goods they trade and carry. Her focus on women as social actors and the inalienable objects they held sway over may seem to have little to do with the profit-oriented and extremely male-dominated commercial world of the Indian Ocean. Yet with the underlying assumption that no system of exchange is independent or fully self-sustaining, Weiner shows how networks of giving and taking, but also keeping and preserving, fundamentally informed each other. This sensitivity to different but often simultaneous registers of exchange helps us to understand the pressures placed on items that were shipped but not sold, essentially the objects that were reserved from trade in this deeply commercial society that was engineered precisely to move goods quickly and vigorously in the interest of profit. Weiner's legacy pushes us to look seriously at how various modes of exchange worked in parallel operation with the wholesale trade, in this case those of gift exchange, diplomatic engagement, and the local network of informal favors.

Thomas takes these notions even further, suggesting that "objects might be introduced into a particular situation as commodities or gifts and transmitted into a particular domain of exchange in another form," thus insisting that we look closely at the ways items are bestowed and the variability of their meanings within mutable yet clearly linked contexts of exchange.<sup>46</sup> Following his directives, one can see that certain items, such as those imports that Yemen's merchants deployed widely in social rites, were indeed more "promiscuous" than others, appearing both in and out of the wholesale and retail marketplaces, but they were also sometimes held back from them for the purposes of gift exchange or ceremonial display and presentation. Thomas provides a platform for asking how the gift form of an object may have derived or diverged from its commodity state, whose agendas it may have served, and how that gift may be read in different ways by the giver and the receiver. Although Thomas is fully invested in the colonial context, his framework is still extremely useful to the student of early modern

(and noncolonial) Yemen. There, objects that moved through and between these registers actively accumulated complex and multiple social meanings, which could be deployed quite differently among the various groups that participated in the overseas trade. Thomas has argued forcefully that we must look at each exchange as regionally specific, with the understanding that European-introduced commodities in the Pacific did not unequivocally convey colonial agendas but could be read and appropriated by their users according to a deeply particular local logic.<sup>47</sup> The objects featured in the following pages were charged social signs that were legible to merchants from around the globe, but they also attained a localized set of uses, meanings, and significance within the social and material entanglements of Yemen's ports and emporia. Following Thomas' lead, I explore the "full range of transaction forms" that these goods participated in.<sup>48</sup>

## SOURCES

Many different types of objects travelled across long distances to arrive on Yemen's shores or left the region by way of the jetty of Mocha. Some were valuable items made of high-quality materials and manufactured with specialized technical knowledge, such as silk textiles, Asian porcelain, and ebony chairs. Others were quite ordinary, including reams of paper, quills, scales, and wax candles. Yet relatively few illustrations of these objects appear in this book, although some contemporary pictorial sources and comparable items are deployed as visual tools of reconstruction. This imbalance of image and text is the result of the poor survival rate of historic material culture in Yemen and more generally around the Indian Ocean. For that reason, we must derive our understanding of these goods from textual references or comparative material rather than from an extended corpus of extant objects.

So, like many other studies on the early modern Indian Ocean, this one relies upon the voluminous archival materials left by the European East India companies, namely the EIC and VOC. These records include many different types of writings: logbooks of everyday activities at the port of Mocha and the coffee emporium at Bayt al-Faqih; letters written by merchants in Yemen to those in other trading ports, particularly to offices in Bombay and Batavia; translations of missives sent to the imam and his provincial officials; ledgers of prices and purchases; and charts detailing local company expenditures and gift registers. These records have formed the foundational cornerstones of Indian Ocean history, with their copious data about the trade. In this case, they have also structured the chronological limits of this study, particularly the VOC *dagregisters* (daily logbooks), which

constitute an almost continuous record from 1701 to 1740, when Dutch merchants were posted at the port with relative consistency.

EIC and VOC sources are particularly valuable because local records in Arabic are almost silent about the workings of commerce in the region. In fact, most of the historical records of Yemen were written far from the coasts and thus tend to focus on the intrigues of the highland court or inland happenings. When Arab chroniclers and biographers mention the coastal trade, it is usually in the context of a specific conflict, such as the French bombing of the port of Mocha in 1737.<sup>49</sup> Yet these brief accounts must be brought into dialogue with the much more voluminous European sources. By doing so we can derive an understanding of a diverse and dynamic maritime trading world that responded to both internal and external stimuli, while also providing more than one perspective on events that are narrated primarily by Europeans.

Although these European sources have constituted the core material for the study of the wider Indian Ocean trade, it is universally recognized that they pose significant challenges as historical documents. The VOC and EIC records for Yemen are not neutral accounts of trade activity that may be exploited unconditionally for data. To the contrary, they are fundamentally underpinned by the perspective that the local system of trade was rampantly unchecked and that Arabian Peninsula governance was implicitly corrupt. Moreover these records were not meant for the eyes of inquisitive modern historians but were penned as reports to home offices for the scrutiny of supervisors who were always concerned that far-away employees could mishandle company funds or abuse their trade privileges. For that reason, one must read these documents carefully and along with other types of sources in order to tease out their dominant, although sometimes inscrutable subjective positions and fundamental biases, as well as to highlight the patently defensive posture they embody.

So I call upon EIC and VOC sources regularly, but rarely in isolation. Rather I read them in productive tension with related sources, whether from other European merchants and travellers or Arab writers. However, my motivation to work across English, Dutch, French, and Arabic sources does not emerge from the simple desire to discount certain conflicting facts, figures, narratives, or interpretations on the basis of majority agreement. Rather they are combined to underscore and understand the implicit structure and logic of the sources at hand, and hence to use them more effectively. I follow the approach to documents that underpins historian Sanjay Subrahmanyan's notion of "connected histories," which can be achieved only by reading across a variety of sources closely to penetrate the "fine grain of events" without privileging any single voice.<sup>50</sup>



I also follow on the impulses of the anthropologist Ann Stoler, who, like me, spent much time in the reading room of the National Archives in The Hague and suggests that archival documents have “itineraries of their own.”<sup>51</sup> By assimilating her directive to conceive of “archiving-as-process” rather than “archives-as-things,”<sup>52</sup> I use the documents of the EIC and VOC with the understanding that their writers were compelled to flatten the experience of trade into the restrictive space and predetermined format of the company document or letter, but that these tightly conceived systems of documentation also disclose subtle ruptures and fissures that must be examined closely. As Atlantic historian Toby Ditz has proposed, commercial letters, when read discursively, reveal “the matrix of social relations within which the writing takes place” and thus can be useful to scholars beyond the structured lists of prices, products, and ship names that they offer.<sup>53</sup>

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 begins at the moment of arrival in the harbor of Mocha, delving into the ceremonial receptions that the local administration of the port staged to welcome high-profile merchants when they arrived from their extended sea journeys. Described in detail by some European observers, these ceremonies involved drummers, musicians, flags, and parades of decorated horses as well as the appearance of the city’s notables splendidly dressed in imported textiles to welcome new arrivals at Mocha’s jetty. Afterward the ships’ authorities were brought to the governor’s house for a formal reception with coffee, the burning of incense, and the sprinkling of rosewater. The *nakhudhas* (ship captains) from western India received quite elaborate ceremonies and made the most demands regarding the size and nature of their receptions, sometimes refusing to come on land until their requests were met. Inspired by historian Paula Sanders’ meticulous work on processions in the Fatimid city of Cairo, I explore these visually dynamic ceremonies and the material objects that were deployed in them.<sup>54</sup> The merchants’ expectations about these ceremonies sometimes led to disputes, which could be quite heated but also provide compelling evidence that welcome rituals were not just empty, extravagant displays of pomp. Rather they constituted a requisite stage of commercial initiation when the local maritime administration, in addition to other merchants, vetted and sized up new arrivals. Material objects, such as flags, sumptuous robes, Arabian horses, various items of reception, and architectural spaces, played a key role in this process of selection and the conferral of local approval.

All major overseas merchants were obligated to offer gifts to local officials in order to establish or sustain their trading rights in Yemen. Yet most

European observers cast the local preoccupation with such offerings as an example of the insatiable appetite that fickle Oriental despots had for trinkets. Drawing on VOC and EIC gift registers, I contend in chapter 2 that these material exchanges must be understood as meaningful and necessary aspects of merchant protocol that overlapped with the processes of trade in a highly structured manner and that the gifts bestowed by European merchants in Yemen may not be collapsed indistinguishably with other types of offerings, such as diplomatic bestowals, imperial gifts, and acts of pious charity, which were markedly more unique in character and have received a considerable amount of recent attention from historians and art historians. By contrast, merchant gifts were remarkably formulaic in nature and were relatively routine items that overlapped with Indian Ocean commodities in uneven ways, thus drawing their power and meaning from their association with extended commercial geographies. Some were even brought into the realm of local ceremonial by the imam. This close perusal of European commercial gift practices also reveals that these merchants became quite adept at the local grammar of giving, even if they decried its legitimacy in their letters to home offices.

While chapter 2 focuses on the content of European gifts, which are copiously documented in VOC and EIC registers, chapter 3 turns to the gift practices of the major merchants from India who traded in Yemen. Unlike their European counterparts, some major Indian merchants delivered their yearly gifts to Yemen's imam at the beginning of the trade season, expected reciprocal offerings in return, and sent off their bestowals (the contents of which were often kept secret) with a great deal of ceremony. As such, Asian gifting practices, which have a much longer but more fragmented history than those of the Europeans, shed considerable light on local expectations for merchant tribute as well as the tight relationships that Yemeni officials sustained with Indian entrepreneurs. I also argue that the presentations surrounding yearly gifts, which were visually impressive, exceeded the value of the gifts themselves, inscribed within a language of public display. These bestowals were consumed not only by their intended recipients but also by those who observed their conveyance and passage, which were awe-inspiring in their size and scope.

Chapter 4 delves into the objects that English and Dutch merchants imported from Bombay, Batavia, London, and Amsterdam for their daily use. These were transported as pieces of cargo destined for the Arabian Peninsula, but unlike the majority of imported goods, they were diverted from the cycle of commercial exchange after arriving at their destination and used to sustain the European merchant enterprise in Yemen. Imported scales, basic writing materials, and the company seal were essential for their

trade and suggest a pervasive suspicion of local measures and modes of accounting. Medicine from abroad and copious supplies of alcohol were more liminal. Rather than simply differentiating European from local lifestyles, these imported items were doled out as gifts to local officials or administered to gain commercial favor in this site of relative isolation for European traders. Indian manufactured furnishings circulated as hybrid objects that allowed Europeans to maintain their conventional dining, seating, and documentary customs but were wholly unmatched to the floor-oriented construction of Yemeni buildings. When considered along with the cargo that was transported to be sold at the port, these objects were far more than utilitarian goods. In fact, they allow us to reflect on the dynamic and multifaceted character of the import, which was intended for the purposes of exchange and to sustain the very structure of the overseas trade enterprise.

### SCOPE OF THE STUDY

It is perhaps more fashionable now to think in terms of wide bodies of water rather than circumscribed land masses. Even so, my readers will not find a comprehensive study of the Indian Ocean trade, its volume, products, and major events. Yet some of the content of the following chapters will seem familiar to those who have read sources and studies on other Indian Ocean, Asian, or Arab ports: elaborate ceremonies staged for new arrivals, quibbles and debates over the content and distribution of requisite gifts, and complaints about the hardships of living in a foreign and remote port. However, rather than making bold assertions that pertain to a broad context, I focus on Yemen while offering a modest provocation to others working on related sites around a vast linked geography of ports, emporia, and islands to ask similar questions in order to bring the wider maritime region into focus in a multisited manner.

To that end, I draw comparative information from varied sites, such as the Mediterranean cities frequented by the merchants of the Cairo Geniza, the coastal emporia of India, the Dutch colonial cities of Batavia and Cape Town, the kingdom of Ayutthaya in Thailand, and Tokugawa Japan. However, comparison is not used as a tool to make larger arguments about the wider Arab world, the vast Indian Ocean, or the early modern era in general. Rather I use comparison in order to make interpretive points sharper and to gain critical leverage on the Yemeni case. Grounded firmly in current debates in early modern Arab studies, European expansion, and Indian Ocean history, this book operates as what Trivellato has called "global history on a small scale," which looks closely at the structural mechanics of cross-cultural encounters that were rooted in a single place, albeit one that was tightly connected to other locations around the globe.<sup>55</sup>

Although European company merchants, namely of the EIC and VOC, figure prominently in the following pages, I wholly reject the format of a company history. My goal is to read across sources for a materially attentive and socially inclined understanding of the Yemen trade. Thus Dutch narrators are asked to provide insight on the activities of local merchants, and English sources are used to better understand the motivations of their French counterparts. While company policies and trade strategies are important, I strive to locate each merchant within the commercial world of eighteenth-century Yemen and to avoid wide-sweeping generalizations that aim for similarities rather than subtleties and particularities.

Each year in January, galleys, frigates, and galleons of various or three-masted ships used in the Arabian Sea, populated by Arab sailors as guided would arrive at the Red Sea port of Mocha from India, Persia, and Southeast Asia. Elaborate ceremonies were staged to welcome the arrivals of these vessels that were owned by the city's major merchants and firms. They included local Arab traders who were either from Yemen or were long established there, Muslim shipowners from India, and those associated with the Dutch, English, and French East India companies. From Yemen's interior, who lived in the mountain interior, owned a caravan, he was in Surat yearly. His two vessels were celebrated yearly and celebrated within in Yemen's coast.

Arrival in Mocha

The first account describing the arrivals of these ceremonies was offered by the French voyageur Godfrey de la Merveille of *Le Carillon*, which arrived at Mocha from Beirut in January 1791. This pioneering mission, schooled by the French Compagnie des Indes, was dispatched with the hopes of initiating a trading relationship with the Qawasim and providing the French with access to the region's coffee. When *Le Carillon* along with the ship *Le Carillon* arrived in Mocha, east their anchors, the forts around the city with up to 100 cannons. All the VOC trading establishment on shore, "in order to do us honor," according to La Merveille. After exchanging salutes, the governor of Mocha sent a boat with a flag and a messenger waiting to *Le Carillon*. There were a large number of boats. The first was the *gouverneur* (the admiral) of the Mocha, dressed in a robe of pleated green fabric with long hangings and a yellow striped underrobe. With him was *Vin*, a Frenchman of Portuguese descent. It was noted that *Vin* wore a white robe with a red sash and a black turban and a multicolored *alla scarf* on his shoulder. He was a Dutch merchant who spoke French well and was "known as the French captain." The captain and the *gouverneur* about their