

Seeing the Asian Seas

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Abstract

This keynote studies the sea's historical importance to inland territorial empires by presenting a comparative study of Indian and Chinese political philosophies pertaining to the sea from c. sixth-seventh centuries.

It argues that contrary to received history, waterscapes were not absent from Asian ideas of territoriality. Cities located far inland were, and still are, defined by seas and oceans. Hyderabad in India is called Pearl City, evoking a forgotten link with the sea through the Qutb Shahi port-city of Masulipatnam. Landlocked Yunnan, now in China, used a marine product--cowrie shells--as currency despite abundant access to precious metals.

Drawing on the globe's marine dimension which has found expression in inscriptions, literature, sculptures, coins, frescoes, paintings, epigraphy, petroglyphs, photographs and models throughout history, the keynote argues that the maritime domain found expression in the Indian political realm from c.sixth-seventh centuries, reaching a height in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. A similar process was visible, but from slightly later, in China. Thereafter, China accelerated its awareness of waterscapes, as can be seen from the geographies and gazetteers appearing in the Qing period. At the same time India's understanding of waterscapes stagnated in vernacular geographies and regional visions. In India's case literary descriptions of political selfhood whereby the sea was seen as a political space, and actual control over the sea, were widely divergent.