CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

What the historiography of the Indian Ocean, including the predeccessing volume, has abundantly demonstrated is that while other seas—such as the Pacific and the Atlantic—are actually recent socioeconomic creations, the Arabian seas and the “large” Indian Ocean—as Ravinder Palat and others have argued—were a singular world-economy for a long time. Though Palat can be criticized for several weaknesses,\(^1\) the term “world-economy” or économie monde is important, and I will maintain it throughout: if the Mediterranean was an économie monde centered on Venice and Florence and penetrating deep into the continental heartland of western Europe, influencing and even structuring production there, then without any doubt so were the Arabian seas—as I shall argue at length in the first part of these books. Links between the various parts of the Arabian seas were much closer than a mere transmission of a good through a long system of relay stations as was the case in the traditional “networks of trade”—the term preferred by Niels Steensgaard for the Indian Ocean.\(^2\)

The phrase “world-economy” serves to draw attention to the existence of integrated chains of production, rather than to the mere exchange of one good for another. For some items (as for much of the Indian textiles exported to the Middle East, which were reused by Persian manufacturers of textiles and household implements) there definitely existed integrated chains of production. Likewise, and more critically, the word may draw attention to the existence of integrated systems of credit and banking. Respondentia-bills could be taken up and endorsed throughout the Arabian seas, and debt certificates written out by a banker in Basra, Kilwa or even Sena were recognized in Surat and Goa, while bonds for the deliveries of provisions written out by Arabic

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merchants in Mutsamudo on the Comoros might be endorsed and paid in Cape Town.\(^3\)

Not in the least this entailed the critical commodity of trade: information, which was swift and reliable, and none more so than that available to merchants. During the 1720s virtually all official communication between Isfahan and Bandar Abbas broke down. This created a void filled by wild rumors, so the English and the Dutch in Bandar Abbas were forced to rely on the “Bania news, which we have generally found to be most reliable.” That news was rapidly briefed to Surat so that the Banias there had the most accurate information anywhere of events in Persia a mere three months afterward. Yet they had equally reliable information on happenings in such key political centers as Hyderabad, Puna, or Delhi provided by a whole guild of newsletter writers, to whose akhbarats one could subscribe, the addressee being regularly sent a weekly or monthly akhbarat, much as one would subscribe to a newspaper in Europe.

By contrast, there was definitely trade from the Delagoa Bay to the Nguni kingdoms and beyond that to Natal. This was very much a network of trade, though, quite different from the world-economy of the Arabian seas. Natal and Delagoa were only linked through a great many intermediate stations. Traders in Delagoa had no idea from where their products originated, and they had only the vaguest notions of the hinterland. Readers would do well to compare the intercontinental trade of medieval Europe: the traders of Bruges knew their wool came from English sheep, but they thought pepper was collected by men with dogs’ heads or pygmies fighting with storks, which is a reliable indication they were not in direct contact with Kerala.\(^4\) The medieval trade was definitely a network, as pepper did, after all, reach Bruges. This was not a system, however, since the various areas involved did not directly interact with each other.

In turn this world-economy was part of a wider system of connections that Barry Gillis and André Gunder Frank call the “world-system,” and that to them goes back at least 5000 years and displays common long-term economic cycles.\(^5\) A somewhat similar argument has been made

\(^3\) VOC/OB 2256, 29 May 1732, fol. 659.