Ingo Strauch (ed.)

Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The Inscriptions and Drawings from the Cave Hoq
(Vergleichende Studien zu Antike und Orient 3), Bremen: Hempen Verlag, 2012,
589 pp. ISBN 978-3-934-10691-8. € 98.00

While exploring the Hoq cave on the northeast coast of the island of Socotra in
December 2000, a team of geologists and speleologists led by Peter de Geest dis-
covered a massive corpus of inscriptions and drawings left by ancient visitors
from India, Africa, and the Middle East. The cave extends into the cliff side for
some two and a half kilometers via a meandering path, along which were found
eighteen distinct sites bearing inscriptions and drawings, with as many as 48
inscriptions at one site (no. 11). The 193 legible inscriptions in Indian languages
and scripts vastly predominate over those in South Arabian (11), Aksumite (8),
Greek (3), and Palmyrene Aramaic (1). In this volume, the Indian inscriptions
are presented by the editor and principal author, Ingo Strauch, while the South
Arabian and Aksumite texts are edited by Christian Julien Robin, the Palmyrene
inscription by Maria Gorea, and the Greek inscriptions by Mikhail D. Bukharin.
Geological and archaeological perspectives are supplied by Peter de Geest and
Hédi Dridi respectively.

The epigraphic material from the Hoq cave is of extraordinary significance
for elucidating trade and cultural contacts between north Africa, the Middle
East and India in the early centuries of the Common Era, particularly with
regard to the abundant Indian component. In Strauch’s own words, “the newly
discovered inscriptions from the Hoq cave at Socotra gain an eminent impor-
tance. For the first time we have a source which reflects the voice of one of
the major agents in the Indo-Roman trade network—the Indian traders and
sailors” (p. 377) and “the corpus of Indian inscriptions at Hoq is a unique wit-
ness for early Indian history and culture. It offers a glimpse into a sphere of
Indian society which is otherwise not accessible to us” (p. 406).

Socotra, nowadays part of the Republic of Yemen, is strategically located in
the Arabian Sea between the Arabian Peninsula to the north and the Horn
of Africa to the west, some two thousand kilometers west of the ports on the
west coast of India. Given its location, it is not surprising that Socotra served
throughout antiquity as a stopping point for sea traders from these and other
locations, even though “Due to its difficult navigational conditions, Socotra
has probably never been an important hub in the Western Indian Ocean trade
networks” (p. 540).

The inscriptions, drawings, and other archaeological materials found in the
cave are presented in a scrupulously detailed, lavishly and beautifully illus-
trated catalogue which constitutes the first major part of the book (pp. 25–230).
The catalogue is “arranged as an itinerary” (p. 25), that is, the inscriptions are presented in the order in which they are found in the cave as one walks from the mouth to the end deep inside the cliff. They were scratched by the visitors into the walls, floor, and stalagmites of the cave with mud, pieces of charcoal, or, most commonly, broken pieces of stalactites.

Given the circumstances in which they were written—with makeshift implements and by the light of torches in the pitch-dark cave—it is hardly surprising that the inscriptions are often exceedingly difficult to read. In many cases, the inscription can hardly be discerned in the original photographs, so the editors have supplied two images of each one: first the bare image, then the image with the text drawn in by hand as they see it. When such readings are considered “highly hypothetical” (p. 25), they are indicated as such by green instead of black outlining. The texts are all the more difficult to deal with because they are often written in very informal cursive styles, quite different from the previously attested formal lapidary styles. Finally, the photography, documentation and study of the inscriptions were undertaken, primarily by Strauch, under conditions almost as difficult as those in which they were originally inscribed. That he and his collaborators have been able, not only to collect and document this material but also to present convincing readings for nearly all of the inscriptions, is truly an admirable achievement.

The Indian inscriptions in the Hoq cave are nearly all written in informal varieties of western Indian styles of Brāhmī script, and in Sanskrit or vernacularized (“hybrid”) Sanskrit. Only one is in Kharoṣṭhī script, while one other is a bispcript in Brāhmī and Bactrian Greek. Nearly all of the inscriptions record the name of their authors, often with supplementary information such as their fathers’ name, their occupation, place of origin, an indication of religious affiliation or ethnicity. In many cases a verb meaning “arrived” or the like (prāpta-, āgata-, etc.) is added at the end. A typical example is Śivaghoṣaputra rudranaṃndi [sic] prāptaḥ, “Rudranandin, son of Śivaghoṣa, arrived” (no. 11:22, p. 139). The religious affiliations, as indicated by explicit statements or more often by the names themselves, include both Buddhist and Hindu (mainly Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva). The most common professional designations are, not surprisingly, “ship’s captain” or “helmsman” (nāvika, niryāmaka; pp. 346–348), and the places of origin mentioned are the seaports of Bharukaccha and Hastakavapra, corresponding to modern Broach and Hāthab in Gujarat.

The Gujarati connection is corroborated by Strauch’s exceedingly careful and detailed paleographic study of the Hoq scripts (pp. 254–342) in comparison with the regional scripts of western India and adjoining regions. These comparisons enable him to conclude convincingly that most if not all of the Indian inscriptions were left by persons from the west coast of India between the