INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND FOREIGN DIPLOMACY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL SOUTH INDIA

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The Setting

While the tenth and eleventh centuries marked a critical stage in the recovery of medieval Europe from its "dark age" \(^1\), the same centuries assumed importance as a period of economic expansion in the Asian world, an expansion which may, in part, have affected Europe's recovery. These centuries were a period of transition in Asia as new powers emerged to assume control over the major centers of contemporary civilization: the Fatimids in Egypt (969 A.D.); the Cōlas in southern India (985); the Khmers at Angkor (944), the Burmese at Pagan (1044), and the Lý in northern Vietnam (1009) on the Southeast Asian mainland; and the Sung dynasty in China (960). Among other results, these consolidations seem to have stimulated Asia's maritime commerce and precipitated a tremendous burst of energy among the community of international traders who traveled the navigation channels connecting eastern and western Asia. These Asian merchants, directly or indirectly, focused on the wealth at both of the route's ends, the riches of the Mediterranean and the Middle East and the greatness of China. All the points in between served as a series of links carrying the goods along and feeding in local commodities at the regional entrepôts.

This paper examines the interaction between the entrepôt of one of these intermediate regions, the domain of the south Indian Cōla

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state, and international maritime trade during the tenth through the twelfth centuries A.D. During this period Côla ports were recognized as "first class" trade partners of China, and seem to have had a similar relationship with merchants of the Fatimid domain in Egypt. Past research on the international trade of Asia has relied heavily upon the historical sources of China and the West, sources which suggest economic interaction but which are in general vague lists of geographical landmarks and ports encountered while on voyages, and has thus itself been vague in its treatment of international trade, the trade's organization, and the trade's relationship to the indigenous societies with which the trade came into contact. The purpose of this paper is to reexamine these foreign sources, to substantiate them through the examination of contemporary indigenous sources, and to attempt a reconstruction of Asian maritime trade and its role within one sector of Asian society.

In the Chinese view, the waters stretching from the coast of China and the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and the coasts of Africa were in essence one ocean, the Nan-yang or Southern Seas 2). Twelfth century sources from both China and the West provide us with information about the types of commodities traded on the international route. The Coromandel coast ports of India, for instance, were said by Chinese sources to have exported pearls, coral, betel (areca) nuts, cardamons, and cotton products 3). Contemporary western records substantiate this list by their emphasis on spices, aromatics, dyeing and varnishing plants, medicinal herbs, Indian silk and especially cotton products, pearls, etc., as commodities secured in south Indian port markets 4).

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4) S. D. Goitein, "Letters and Documents on the India Trade in Medieval Times", Islamic Culture, 37, 3 (1963), p. 196. Goitein describes the letters and documents of the Cairo Geniza which have to date been utilized only by Middle