

World-Systems Theory, Globalization or Glocalization – analysing the dynamics of the ancient Indian Ocean ivory trade?

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The preliminary script for the paper; delivered at the *Ex Orient Luxuria IV* conference (L'ivoire d'éléphant), 12/3/2021

I would like to start out by thanking Pierre and Jean for all their hard work in bringing this conference together, especially in these difficult times.

Elephant ivory has been exchanged across much of the world since earliest human history. This product was used in many socio-cultural function, ranging from the ornamental and artistic, to the religious and symbolic. As such, complex systems of acquisition and distribution needed to be developed to ensure a sufficient supply. In particular, suitable environments with sufficient elephant herds needed to be located and exploited. The history of the last few centuries has led many to associate the ivory trade with over-exploitation, colonization and slavery, particularly as Arabs and Europeans encroached into the interior of Africa (Taylor 2001, Chaiklin 2010). However, it cannot be taken for granted that such dynamics were always at play across the ancient Indian Ocean world; that is to say, the period from 300 BC to AD 700.

In this paper, I consider which theoretical models can help us to try and analyse the different means by which ivory was acquired and distributed. As well as the ways in which ivory was utilised within different societies. Three models are specifically explored: namely World-Systems Theory, Globalization and Glocalization. Of course, in this one paper I cannot hope to comprehensively cover the span of 1000 years and such a vast geographic area. Nor is it possible for any one of these models to characterise all the wide-ranging activity taking place. Rather, I will apply these theories to a number of case studies in order to determine their comparative suitability.

However, before proceeding to the case studies themselves, it is worth briefly providing some contextual detail as to why ivory was so widely popular across Ancient Afro-Eurasia. A partial answer to this is that it had a number of qualities which made it well-suited to achieve the status of a luxury item. As has been made clear in earlier iterations of this conference series, luxury is not a fixed attribute inherent to any object, rather it is a socially constructed category (Schneider 2015). Nevertheless, there are a number of features which can help imbue an object with that label. These include the distances which the product travelled, its expense, and how exotic, rare and superfluous it was perceived to be in a given society (Cobb, forthcoming a).

A supply of “new” ivory is dependent upon the ability to reach and exploit different elephant herds, most of which lived in parts of Africa, India and Southeast Asia. This supply was not constant and overhunting could lead to the depletion of elephant populations, such as in North Africa in Late Antiquity. Difficult cultural demands relating to the size of ivory

tusks, aesthetics, workability and tactility would also affect the ivory sought after. For example, the desire for hard pinkish ivory in China, led to Sri Lankan ivory being an important source of this community (Chaiklin 2010). Whereas, in parts of India there was a market for softer, and less expensive, East African ivory, despite the availability of sources closer to home (Cosmas Indic. *Topogr. Christ.* 11.372; Chanda 2008).

Ivory was arguably one of a number of products that were seen as exotic in the Roman Empire or at least its origins was associated with the exotic and marvellous outer edges of the *oikouménē*. This is apparent from a number of poetic allusions, such as in the work of Juvenal, and in some iconographic representations, such as the so-called personification of India at the Roman villa at Piazza Armerina. It was also a quite prized product within the Roman Empire. Pliny (ca. 70s CE) describes ivory as the most valuable of the products furnished by a living animal. While one of the one large ivory tusk mentioned in the Muziris Papyrus was perhaps the equivalent of over three legionaries' pay for a year.

Besides issues of availability, exoticism and price, a number of physical attributes of elephant ivory have also been thought to contribute to its desirability. Among these are its smoothness (once worked) and its ability to absorb dyes. It also seems to be quite flexible and durable, making it suitable for carving into various items (Chaiklin 2010, 531; Weinstein, forthcoming). Indeed, the classical sources suggest an impressive array of uses for ivory ranging from jewellery, statuary and furniture to musical instruments, combs, and dice, among other things.

Finally, it is worth stressing that besides the physical qualities of ivory itself and its potential to achieve the status of luxury, the symbolic use of ivory was also fundamentally important to this product's history. This symbolic or prestige value is different to luxury, in that ivory could become embedded in a number of important ceremonial or ritual functions. Meaning it was not easily replaceable with another product or item. By contrast, luxuries or the status of luxury can sometimes be more interchangeable. For example, a turtle-shell comb may seem just as fancy as an ivory one, and personal preference would likely dictate which one might be owned. Whereas, ivory tusks were used as bridewealth on a number of eastern Indonesian islands, where it was vital for betrothal arrangements (Andaya 2016). Ivory could not just be easily replaced with another item. This is discussed further later on in the paper.

Given ivory's "global" appeal, it is clear that it is well-suited for studies looking at long-distance exchange and mobility. The first of the models we will examine in relation to the ancient ivory trade is World Systems Theory, a model very much concerned with the macro-historical. This model has proved popular since the late 80s among pre-modern historians and archaeologists. This is despite Wallerstein's scepticism that economic world-systems (as opposed to world-empires) could be identified prior to the sixteenth century (Wallerstein 2004; 2011). A key tenet of this model is that cores extract surpluses, often in the form of raw materials, from peripheries (with semi-peripheries playing an intermediary role), usually selling back "manufactured" goods in an exploitative relationship that transforms the economic and political fundamentals of all societies within the system.

World-Systems Theory has certainly been subject to a number of criticism in the last few decades, such as for the excessive primacy given to economic factors in explaining societal interaction and changes. It also stands accused of focusing too much on the macro-scale at the expense of localized responses to wider “global activity”. And for the tendency to underplay the agency of the different social actors involved, especially those in periphery societies. Moreover, one might add that unequal power dynamics may not always be the best means to assess the dynamics of long-distance exchange (for a summary of these critiques see Cobb, forthcoming B). Nevertheless, there is perhaps still a (qualified) place for World-Systems Theory, particular at the more regional level, such as centres exploiting hinterlands.

Early Ptolemaic elephant hunting activity may provide us with one such illustration of the core-periphery dynamic in action. The (re)establishing of routes across the Eastern Desert, the foundation of ports like Berenike Trogydytica, and the sending out of explorers, and then hunting parties, into the Red Sea was motivated by the desire to acquire live elephant for the military. However, as Burstein (1996) has noted, the desire for ivory was also an important motivating factor. Indeed, one third century BC papyrus seems to indicate that the acquisition of ivory played a role in the payment of members of these hunting parties (*P. Petrie III*, 114).

This activity can easily be understood in context of differing power dynamics and exploitation. In sending out expeditionary parties and setting up hunting bases, the early Ptolemaic rulers sought to forcibly acquire raw materials, in the form of ivory, and live elephants from parts of the African coast in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Indeed, a stele set up to honour Ptolemy III at Adulis (in modern Eretria), which glorifies his extensive military campaigns from Thrace to Mesopotamia, might reasonably be understood as an ideological projection of power.

The evidence indicates short-lived pockets of domination, rather than wide ranging control. Nevertheless, indigenous groups were compelled to respond, either through accommodation or resistance. The Pithom Stele and the comments of Strabo indicate that while soldiers were needed for Eumedes’ foundation of Ptolemais Thērōn, it was still prudent to try and win over the locals. An anecdote by Agatharchides also reveals that attempts to win over a particular group of “elephant-eaters” was not particularly successful, even when generous promises were made. Indicating that accommodations could not always be reached. Regardless, this activity will have (temporarily) impacted on the socio-economic circumstances of these local groups, even if we do not have much evidence with which to fill in that picture.

Unfortunately, what mechanisms of exchange or trade might have been in place is hard to say. As such, it is difficult to substantiate the exchange of “manufactured” products for “raw materials” that is often a key feature of the core-periphery model. Moreover, these hunting bases were short-lived (although some settlements continue to flourish as trading posts), with new bases often being established further south as the easier pickings were denuded. Thus any such core-periphery dynamic was quite temporary.

Overall, one could say that World-Systems Theory might offer a somewhat viable, if imperfect, means of articulating early Ptolemaic activity in the Red Sea.

However, when it comes to the wider Indian Ocean, it will be apparent that the core-periphery model is less suitable. The question is, does globalization thinking offers a better alternative? It perhaps has the advantage of emphasising the multidirectional nature of this trade, rather than placing too much emphasis on the binary core-periphery dynamic. It also has a number of concepts connected to it that may make it better suited to studying socio-cultural responses to the trade of ivory across Afro-Eurasia. Furthermore, it could be said to provide a more neutral frame for analysis, since it does not presuppose the existence hierarchies of power, dominance, exploitation, and winners and losers. It is not evident, for example, that the power of the Roman state was of much help to those Mediterranean traders voyaging to ports like Muziris, on the western coast of the Tamilakam region.

There is not scope in this paper to fully articulate the way that various historians and archaeologists have sought to adapt globalization thinking. Suffice to say, despite popular associations with the internet, high speed travel, and the encroachment of capitalist consumer culture, these are, in fact, partial symptoms of late modern globalization and not its core features. Globalization represents not only processes of convergence, such as homogenization and standardization, but at the same time increasing cultural heterogeneity and the re-embedding (or reinventing) of local culture—these are flip sides of the same phenomenon (for a summary of this issue, and its specific relation to the ancient Indian Ocean, see Cobb, forthcoming c). It can also be understood as representing the increasing integration of different regions of the world, which leads to them coming more inter-dependent.

We can certainly get a sense of the potential interconnectedness of different regions of the Indian Ocean, including in relation to the ivory trade and the crafting of ivory. Recent analysis of some dozen odd pieces of ivory at the port of Aila demonstrate this point. Analysis of these late Antique pieces of ivory (perhaps specifically seventh century) reveal that they come from varied north-eastern and East Africa sources, i.e. not just from one location but likely several sources. The techniques used to craft them are indicative of those seen in Axum, either suggested the spread of shared practices or the movement of specialist craftsmen (Coutu and Damgaard 2019). What this might say about the degree of integration in the wider Indian Ocean, however, is beyond the present scope of this paper.

An analysis of the *Periplus* also the trade in ivory was part of a complex multidirectional trade across the Indian Ocean, which was underpinned by mixture of economic and cultural factors. It is apparent that the range of “imported” and “exported” found at many of the ports often belies an easy division between suppliers of raw materials and suppliers of sophisticated crafted products. Thus the somewhat binary core and periphery model perhaps does not easily map onto the evidence. The port of Barygaza in northwest India is a case in point. It was connected into a series of direct and indirect networks that linked it with Egypt and the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf region, Southern Arabia, East Africa and other parts of South Asia. The range of product demanded at this site included items that might be labelled “raw materials”, like base metals and raw glass, as well as agricultural products like wine, and “crafted” or processed products like unguents and clothing. This was in addition to what might be termed luxuries, such as peridot, coral, gold and silver. One could find for sale precious materials including ivory, as well as various plant and processed products such as long pepper, costus and bdellium, crafted items like cotton

textiles and silk. Thus the division between cores supply crafted items and peripheries raw materials does not seem to work in the case of this port, or indeed others like Muziris.

Even at sites along the Red Sea coast, in which we previously discussed Ptolemaic elephant hunting expeditions, seem to belie the core-periphery model, at least by the early centuries AD. In the territory of Zôskalês, for ivory, tortoise shell and rhinoceros horn was said to be available. This was in exchange for Egyptian textiles and glassware, drinking vessels, axes, and tools. But so were base and precious metals were also sought after, the base metals being repurposed and crated into jewellery and spear points by the people of Barbaria. This movement of metals is contrary to the typical narrative of peripheries supplying metals to cores. Moreover, there is no evident hierarchy or a clear set of “winners and losers” in this dynamic. Zôskalês is explicitly reported as being able to drive a hard bargain, and make exchanges that were evidentially beneficial to his court.

Overall then, it can be argued that the multidirectional and “uneven” web of exchange networks might be better articulated with concepts from globalization. Whether we feel comfortable using the label globalization, with its potentially presentist associations is another matter. For our purposes, it is more a question as to whether it provides a more useful analytical tool. When compared to some World-Systems analysis, the answer seems to be yes. For example, proponents of the latter model can come to contradictory conclusions on the same issue. Beaujard (2005; 2009) regards the Roman Empire was one of the core regions of the ancient Indian Ocean, whereas Fitzpatrick (2011) labels it a periphery region.

It is not just the mechanisms of exchange where globalization thinking offers a useful analytical tool. The cultural and artistic dynamics of the ivory trade can also be usefully studied with globalization thinking. In particular, concepts like cultural homogeneity and cultural heterogeneity can offer some insights; the former emphasises how the increased flow of peoples, goods and ideas can lead to the widespread adoption of similar goods, habits, and practices, while the latter emphasises the differences that result from greater “global” interconnectedness, often leading to local adaptations, modifications and transformations.

Some like Chaiklin (2010) have assumed that prior to the last few centuries, where we see the manufacture of items like billiard balls, cutlery handles and piano keys, that ivory was normally traded as tusks, and not as worked objects or commodities. When crafted ivory objects are found outside an “expected” context, they are presumed to represent personal souvenirs or examples of (diplomatic) gift exchange. For example, the Pompeii ivory figurine has often been thought to represent such a souvenir (Maiuri 1939; Della Corte 1965; Asaka and Iorio 2005).

However, it has been increasingly recognized figurines or artistically crafted items are not necessarily “culturally bounded”, and we do not need to resort to earlier notions of influence or diffusion to explain the adoption of particular forms. Instead we can understand the adoption, adaptation and repurposing of “foreign” models and material culture as part of the phenomena of cultural homogenization and heterogeneity.

This phenomenon has been particularly noted in relation to the Deccan region of the early centuries AD, where small soapstone molds and terracotta figurines were imported or created for the purposes of producing “standard” artistic forms (Brancaccio 2005; 2014). In

particular, these connected to imagery and forms deriving from the Mediterranean world and the Kushana territory to the northwest. The connection between Egyptian Bes figurines and Sātavāhana yakshas is a case in point (Autiero 2017).

Parallels between a mirror bone handle found at Sirkap (in Kushana territory) and a conch shell handle at Ter (in Sātavāhana territory) reveal that appreciation of particular aesthetics forms did not remain culturally bounded. Brancaccio (2014), in fact suggests that given the existence of many ivory workshops in the Deccan region, which were usually associated with bone and shell carving industries, that it is possible that these carved ivory found markets beyond the Deccan. Indeed, we should perhaps not completely rule out that the Pompeii ivory figurine and the ivories from Begram are examples of this, rather than mere souvenirs. Evers (2017) has actually argued that the Pompeii ivory figure is indicative evidence for first century AD Roman fashion for repurposing these objects for Roman furniture.

Besides the distribution of these Sātavāhana carved ivories, the so-called Venus of Axum can also be understood in terms of the spread and adaptation of artistic forms. This ivory carving was produced in an Axumite workshop and has been found in a late third century CE Axumite grave. Despite its local production, the object clearly exhibits artistic forms commonly associated with the Mediterranean world, notably the contrapposto pose and flowing hair (Phillips 1997). We might easily understand this as a form of cultural heterogeneity or, indeed, label it as an example of glocal workmanship.

This nicely brings us to final case study: glocalization. This concept is concerned with how “local” responses to “global” phenomena can lead to the creation of new and distinct goods, ideas and practices. It seeks to understand the intersection of local and global developments. It considers the development of local variations, adaptation, and responses in the context of wider “global” phenomena. Importantly, it aims to avoid the notion of cultural ‘purity’ (cultural container thinking) or the sense that such developments take place passively, without any agency from those involved. This approach has the advantage in that tracking specific instances of glocal development is often easier than capturing the wider context. Especially when exploring the latter can often involve crossing multiple disciplinary boundaries, approaches and different sets of evidential material (for an overview, see Cobb, forthcoming b).

The aforementioned use of ivory tusks as bridewealth in a number of eastern Indonesian islands provides one such example of glocalization in action. This practice was not a timeless or fixed aspect of these societies. Instead it required wider processes of global interconnectivity for the symbolic use of ivory to develop and for it to become socially embedded. Principally, this was due to maritime economic and cultural exchange between the eastern Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia over the *longue durée*. It seems that associations with fertility and the elephant as a symbol of (royal) power originally manifested themselves in India and western Southeast Asia, subsequently becoming potent associations for betrothal practices in the eastern Indonesian societies. Andaya (2016) has suggested that this process can be traced back to some point in the first millennium AD with the so-called Indianization of Southeast Asia. This problematically labelled Indianization is often regarded as manifesting itself notably from the fourth century AD (Smith 1999). However, it is clear that

links between India and Southeast Asia can be traced back to earlier centuries (for an overview, see Cobb, forthcoming d). In any case, the salient point for our purposes is that this provides us with an example of how global connections can lead to glocal changes in eastern Indonesian societies, which in turn generated a demand for ivory, feeding back into wider networks of exchange.

A further pertinent example of the intertwining of local social practices and wider networks of global exchange relates to the means by which ivory became available on the market. That is to say, how social practices within different societies impacted on the nature, quality and volume of ivory available. Chaiklin (2010) has asserted that it was uncommon to kill elephants for their meat or tusks in those parts of India where elephants were worshiped, such as through the figure Ganesh. Instead, ivory was acquired through natural death or tipping, a process where the solid end of the tusk is cut off living elephants. She contrasts this with practices in Africa, where elephants have a long history of being hunted for meat and ivory. Of course, this is a generalization. Social practices are never static, but change over time due to a range of internal and external factors that impact on beliefs, habits and practices.

Indeed, while it is clear that we certainly have evidence from the classical sources for the hunting of elephants for meat and ivory in East Africa, a number of passages from Tamil poetic literature do allude to wild forest dwellers in the interior of the Tamilakam region killing elephants for their meat and ivory. Thus we should not take Chaiklin's dichotomy to be absolute.

Nevertheless, varied local practices did impact on the quality and nature of the ivory available in different markets. De Romanis (2014; 2020) has noted that the plentiful, but variable quality of ivory from Rhapta may indicate that it came onto the market as a by-product of hunting elephants for meat. Whereas at Adulis, further north, the higher quality ivory seems to relate to a specialised ivory trade.

Despite the references in the Sangam literature, testimony from Sanskrit and Classical sources also reveal that tipping or the sawing off of tusks from live elephants also occurred in parts of India. Indeed, De Romanis' (2014; 2020) reconstruction of the Muziris Papyrus would have the term *schidai* mentioned on the verso of the document understood as ivory cuttings. This was part of the cargo of the Hermapollon, alongside whole tusks. In weight terms, the whole tusks seem to have formed the bulk of the ivory consignment, weighing some 3,228.5 kg (or just over three metric tonnes), compared to 538.5 kg (or just over half a tonne) for the *schidai*. However, given the fact that tusks in the Hermapollon appear to have been around 20 kg each, compared to perhaps 1-7 kg for the *schidai*, we seem to be looking at about 167 whole tusks, compared to some 75 to 540 ivory pieces.

The key point for our discussion is that while we need to avoid the pitfalls of an overly broad distinction between "African" and "South Asian" practices, local variations in terms of cultural habits and beliefs, will have affected how elephants might be treated and utilised. Additionally, political structures, such as the keeping of royal herds, and modes of subsistence will also have affected the wider "global" supply of ivory. This is both in terms of availability and in quality, size and shape.

In the preceding discussion it has been argued that globalization and glocalization thinking may offer better models for the examining the ancient ivory trade, and trade across the ancient Indian Ocean more broadly. These concepts help us to better articulate and analyse the various, multidirectional networks of exchange that existed. It is apparent that these often belie easy identifications with core and periphery regions, or areas that supplied raw materials and luxuries, and those that supplied manufactured or processed products. The implicit assumptions of hierarchies and levels of sophistication in the world-systems theory is perhaps not always helpful. Moreover, both globalization and glocalization seem better attuned to analysing the numerous ways in which goods like ivory could be received, adopted and adapted in various societies. Glocalization may be the easier of the two to utilise, as it allows for a more focused, bottom up study of how the local was impacted by the global.

However, this is not to say that World-Systems Theory should be discarded. In cases where hierarchical dynamics, and issues of dominance, resistance, and exploitation are at play the core-periphery model might prove useful. Ironically, however, this may actually be more apparent at the meso or micro level, perhaps closer to Wallerstein's notion of world-empires.

Finally, however, it should be stressed that these models are merely tools for analyse, which should not be applied in a universalising fashion. Rather, they should be applied in the contexts which best suit them, with a view to seeing how the model can help frame and articulate the evidence, not how the evidence can be made to fit the model. For the purposes of this author, the application of terms like globalization and glocalization as descriptors is of secondary concern (nor is there a particular interest in trying to embed the study of the ancient Indian Ocean, within the "History of Globalization"; for discussion of the later, see Conrad 2016). It is the analytical use of the concepts connected to them which are of concern here.

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