CHAPTER I

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE MARITIME LANDSCAPE

1.1 The perspective

The Indian coastline, extending for nearly 7,000 kilometres, is shared by eight of the country's largest states from Gujarat in the west to Bengal in the east. Three of the largest cities, namely Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata, lie on the coast. These statistics notwithstanding, the maritime heritage has been largely neglected in the post-colonial discourse on ancient India. Is this orientation to the sea a colonial development or do its origins lie in earlier historical processes?[1] This study certainly does not accept the former proposition and instead it examines historical processes over a long time-span that moulded the identity of peninsular India within the wider Indian Ocean world. The attempt is to move beyond land-based concerns such as agrarian expansion and trading networks and to focus on the diverse range of communities within the spheres of trade, religion and politics that contributed to the cultural identity of an Indian Ocean world.

Historians have written about the unity of the Indian Ocean determined by the rhythms of long-distance maritime trade (Chaudhuri 1990; McPherson 1993: 3). This work shifts the focus from trade to the social practice of maritime technology, which formed the substructure of maritime activity and underwrote this unity, but is by no means restricted to trade. Boat-building and sailing techniques, for example, not only have a bearing on the organisation of trade but are in turn influenced by the emergence of urban centres, increase in consumption patterns and swelling demands for revenues from the newly emerging political elite. While contemporary beliefs and religious practices mould attitudes towards seafaring, at the same time expanding channels of trade and communication provide the means for the expansion of religious and cultural influences.

Was maritime technology in the pre-modern period essentially an oral tradition where instructions were verbal and no drawings used for boat-building, as has generally been accepted? We shall refer to the prominent role of the pilot in navigation, especially in the historical period in Chapter 2, no comparable

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[1] A recent study suggests that 'merchants in the Coromandel had evolved over the centuries into a distinct class of merchant capitalists, with a conscious perception of their identity (and aspirations) both as an economic and as a social class' (Mukund 1999: xi).

data being available from the as yet undeciphered Harappan script. The debate on the language of the Harappans has, however, completely neglected the implications of the introduction and use of writing, i.e. the technologies of the intellect. Writing permitted the organisation of more complex tasks, allowed the storing of information, stimulated new types of artistic and cultural traditions and, more importantly for this study, the ordering of information under numeric and alphabetic heads as well as the use of charts and maps (Goody 2000: 144). Literate cultures, though in a minority, were able to dominate the cultural history of the region and it is here that the history and spread of writing in the Indian Ocean needs greater attention, as we shall discuss in this study.[2]

The Indian Ocean presented a unique environment to the sailor in antiquity, different from that in both Egypt and the Mediterranean. To sail in this region, the ships had to be 'good weatherly sailers, fast, good carriers, deep-drafted and able to go to windward as well. In short they had to be *real* sailing ships' (Villiers 1952: 56–7). At the same time, the region also presents special problems for the historian and the archaeologist. On the one hand, it provides a profusion of ethnographic data on local traditions of fishing and boat-building while, on the other, actual survivals of shipwrecks are rare. The ethnographic information, if used with caution, can help resolve several questions such as ownership of watercraft, relations with agricultural communities and so on, which are otherwise not available in literary sources of the ancient period. These are nevertheless of crucial importance to an understanding of maritime activity. Did the merchants who lived in inland centres own the vessels? If they did, where were these craft built or repaired and to what extent was this activity organised and controlled by the trading groups? The stitched or sewn tradition was pervasive in the Indian Ocean, as is evident from accounts left by visitors to the region. What were the reasons for its longevity?

The Indian Ocean is also a region that has undergone radical shifts and changes. Perhaps the single most significant point of disjunction was the introduction of steamship navigation in the nineteenth century. Historical evidence indicates that, as a result, the local system underwent fundamental changes. Seafaring activity shifted from being 'fair weather' to 'all weather'. Instead of the traditional maritime communities, shipping companies now dominated oceanic trade. Skilled manpower required for sailing these mechanised vessels could no longer be provided by the littoral sailing communities, and this led to coastal groups being reduced to marginal fishing activities.

The present study attempts an overview of seafaring and maritime activity in the Indian Ocean in order to explore questions concerning trade, political consolidation and religious expansion in the region. These three spheres are viewed as competing loci of power and control and located within an understanding of

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[2] Changes in modes of communication do matter and have fundamentally altered the life of mankind. However, a new means of communication such as writing does not replace what goes before, since it is based on language. One mode therefore supplements another (Goody 2000: 155).

maritime technology. Before we elaborate on the many strands through which these spheres interact, perhaps an indication of the spatial and temporal dimensions is important.

Chaudhury refers to the 'halfway-house role of the subcontinent' in the Indian Ocean as seen from the vantage position of Delhi. From this locale West Asia and Southeast Asia acquire primacy, with East Africa forming the western edge of the Indian Ocean, while China and the Mediterranean are just about visible (Chaudhury 1990: 31; figure 1.1). In contrast to the primacy of Islam and the Mughal Empire in Chaudhury's work, our concerns are different and highlight the social landscape of the coastal communities. Hence peninsular India emerges as the primary area of interest located within the wider ambit of the Indian Ocean extending from the Red Sea to the Indonesian archipelago. Though mentioned in early Greek sources and known archaeologically, the East African coast really comes into its own towards the end of our period of study.[3]

The historical framework adopted for an in-depth analysis of socio-cultural changes within South Asia dates from the third millennium BCE to the fifth century CE. This time-span reflects the relationship between structure and event, an examination best achieved by an analysis of issues of continuity and change.[4] Hodder has suggested that archaeology be viewed as 'long-term history' in an attempt to identify enduring structures that shaped the past, but also contribute to form the present world (Hodder 1987: 1–8).[5] One issue that this study does not address is the debate on the spread of Indo-Aryan languages across north India, agreeing that 'it is perhaps the biggest red herring that was dragged across the path of historians of India' (Thapar 2000: 310).

The fifth century CE forms the terminus of this work as from this time onwards there is evidence for transformation in all three spheres that this study is concerned with. In the political sphere, the period was marked by the emergence of large regional kingdoms in South and Southeast Asia, such as the Pallavas, Rastrakutas and the Calukyas of Vatapi (seventh to tenth centuries) in peninsular India. In the context of religious institutions, the Hindu temple arose as the centre for social and economic activity, while in the arena of trading

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[3] Archaeological survey along the East African coast has provided evidence for the beginnings of maritime trade around 100 BCE and this became particularly important during the first century CE. There are indications for continuity between this phase and subsequent occupation by Bantu-speaking coastal communities. Recent discoveries of early Iron Age pottery from Mafia island across 20 kilometres of open and treacherous ocean clearly indicate the maritime technology of these groups. In the latter half of the first millennium CE, these farming and fishing communities of the East African coast were able to exploit their geographical position and to act as middlemen within a developing Indian Ocean commercial world (Horton and Middleton 2000: 42).

[4] This differs from the three scales in the historical process as defined by Braudel and the Annales School, which are: the slow-moving long-term constant, the social history of the community within a slow but perceptible rhythm and lastly the individual and the event.

[5] Thapar refers to the period from *circa* 2500 BCE to 500 BCE as 'a crucial period not only because it saw the initial pattern of Indian culture take shape, but also because it can provide clues to a more analytical understanding of subsequent periods of Indian history' (2000: 310).
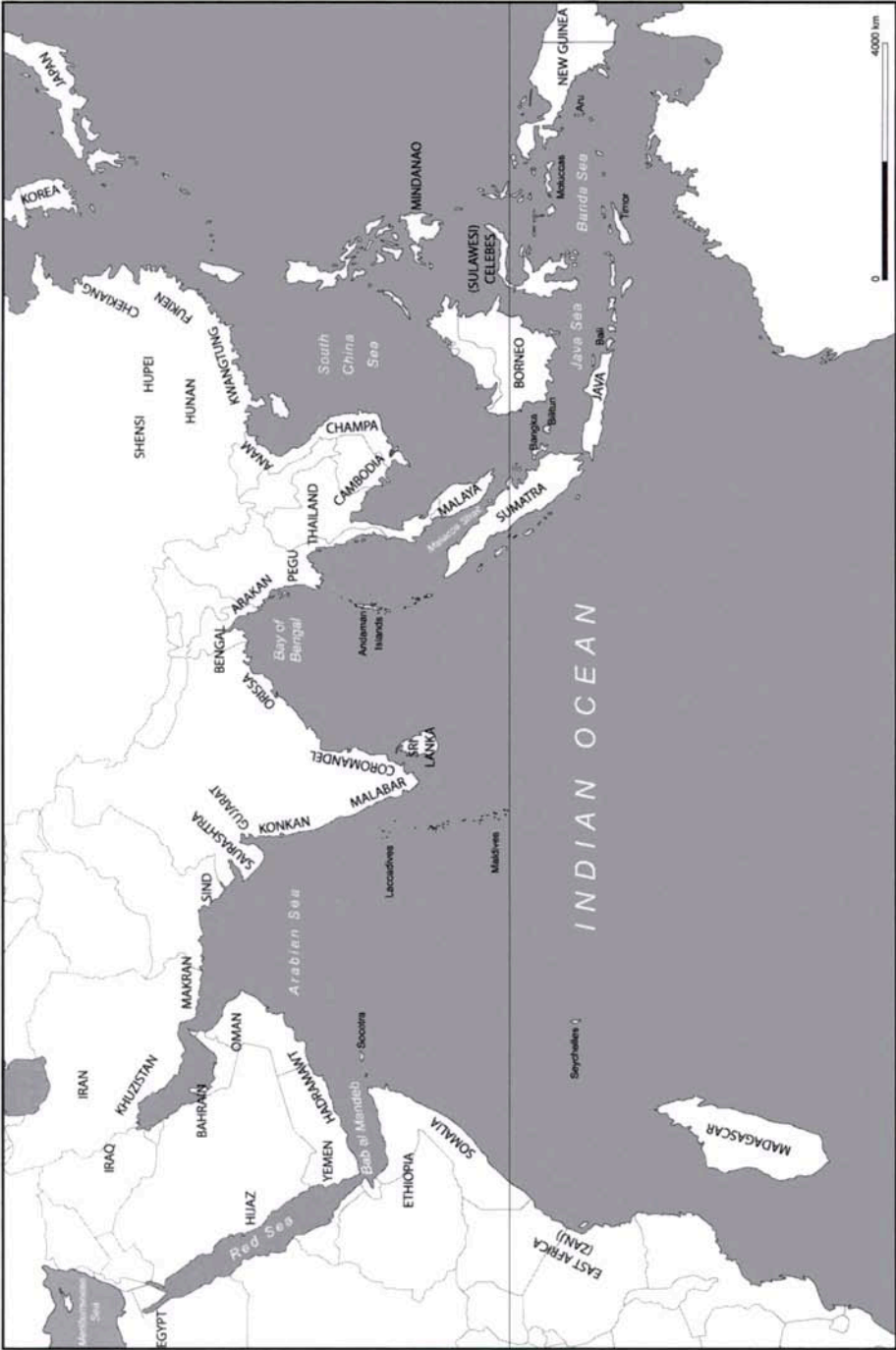
Figure 1.1 The Indian Ocean (courtesy S. Sanz)

networks we see the beginnings of merchant guilds such as the Manigrammam and the Ayyavole, with operations across the Bay of Bengal.

Let us attempt to address the question raised earlier: the strands that unite maritime archaeology with trade, religion and politics. Conventionally studies on trade have seldom addressed questions of transportation, an exception being the work by Moti Chandra (1953/1977), which is devoted more to a study of trade routes than of trade *per se*. The present study makes a distinction between shipping and maritime trade and focusses on the two separately. This distinction is important to comprehend the dynamics of trade and the several links that made it possible. The demarcation between the two is no doubt fine and often the lines are blurred. There is evidence for the *nakhoda* or master mariner transporting commodities for trade, but frequently the traders either owned the vessels themselves or bought space on them. Similarly, the nature of the commodities determined the size of the vessels and often led to technological changes. Hence, in order to understand the development and changes in ship-building and maritime technology historically, it is essential to place them within the wider ambit of cargo-carrying, fishing and exploitation of marine resources, all of which were integral to seafaring activity.

There is an interesting correlation between availability of fishing grounds and the nature of the craft used. For example, a rich variety of fish is available close to the south-east coast of India and fishermen do not have to venture out into the sea. As a result, fishing nets and other devices show tremendous variety, but the craft used are surprisingly simple and are no more than rafts made of logs tied together. These, however, are well suited to the local requirements since the wash-through raft also keeps the catch fresh. In contrast, the fishing grounds are further afield off the Gujarat coast and fishing becomes profitable only when combined with cargo-carrying. Hence the boats are larger and fitted to sustain fishermen over longer distances (Kurien 1996).

This work, then, adopts an approach that differs from earlier writings in several ways: one, it does not limit itself to maritime trade, but incorporates data on fishing and sailing communities. The endeavour in Chapter 2 is to present a survey of fishing and boat-building activities and their contribution in transporting goods and commodities. The state derived revenue by taxing incoming cargo and communities making a living at ferry crossings, and also by leasing vessels owned by it. The objective in undertaking this exercise is to highlight the inadequacy of studying maritime trade only through quantification of imported or foreign goods, *objets d'art* or through references to foreigners in literature. But the basic premise that is being questioned is the popular misconception that trade in the ancient period was largely restricted to luxuries or prestige items exchanged as gifts between empires or states or through trading expeditions mediated and controlled by the state. On the contrary, a regular sailing and maritime network was sustained historically in the Indian Ocean by traffic in timber, cloth, metal, dried fish, salt and so on.

Trade is not merely to be seen as elite activity and an offshoot of agricultural expansion, as has conventionally been postulated for ancient India. Thapar, for example, suggests a shift from a pastoral economy to a village economy based on agriculture with the emergence of the Mauryan Empire (317–186 BCE, 1961/1997: 55): 'Comparative permanence of settlement' is said to have resulted in trade and the 'establishment of a mercantile community through a system of guilds'.[6] As I have discussed elsewhere (Ray 1994/1996), trade and exchange are social products and formed integral parts of all societies. Ghosh (1973) was one of the few Indian archaeologists who argued that 'agricultural surplus' was the outcome of social processes rather than arising out of economic intensification resulting from the use of iron tools in agriculture in the first millennium BCE (Sharma 1974). Societies produced not merely to subsist but more significantly to reinforce social ties and to repay obligations both social and ritual.

There were nevertheless marked hierarchies in society. These distinguished not only the fishing and sailing communities from the transporters and cargo-carriers, but also the coastal groups from agricultural centres further inland. At the same time there is increasing integration of the littoral groups with inland trading circuits as well as the spatial expansion of the maritime networks themselves. The integration of the coastal communities with the inland networks is evident in the third- and second-millennia BCE Harappan civilisation, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. The same is not valid for centres in the Persian Gulf, where Dilmun and Magan retained their autonomy from the Mesopotamian civilisation. Much of the maritime contact at this time was between the Makran and Gujarat coasts and Oman and Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. There were also dispersed coastal settlements elsewhere across the Arabian coast and the coast of Thailand. It is generally accepted that contact between the other major civilisations such as Egypt and Mesopotamia was, however, through the eastern Mediterranean (Mark 1998). While scholars have debated the decline of the Mesopotamian and Harappan urban centres (see Chapter 4), maritime activity continued unabated along the coasts, although it lacked a wider integration in larger networks.

In the second and first millennia BCE there are indications of expanding regional circuits and Iron Age settlement encompassing many more tracts of the Indian Ocean littoral (Chapter 5). The fifth to fourth centuries BCE provide evidence of sailing across the Persian Gulf, between the west coast of India and Sri Lanka and from Vietnam to the Indonesian archipelago and the west coast of the Malay peninsula.

This maritime activity coincides with a quantitative and qualitative expansion of urban centres in a large part of north India with a corresponding increase

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[6] 'One of the more important results of the political unification of India under the Mauryas, and the control of a strong centralised government, was the impetus given to the various crafts. With the improvement of administration, the organisation of trade became easier and the crafts gradually assumed the shape of small-scale industries' (Thapar 1961/1997: 72).

in trade networks.[7] The increased trading activity was sustained by demands for a range of commodities from urban dwellers, including for imported and imitation goods. This representation of a broad cultural unity across north India is impressive. But what is equally striking is the marked contrast that the north presented with the region south of the Vindhyas, which continued to be inhabited by iron-using megalithic communities well into the early centuries of the Common Era.[8]

More recently, Kenoyer (1997a) has argued for a more central role for the city in the Harappan civilisation and has suggested continuities between the Harappan and the early historical city in north India. This question, however, remains outside the scope of this study, which focusses on peninsular India rather than the Ganga valley.[9] Urban centres emerge in a variety of contexts in peninsular India somewhat later in the third to second centuries BCE and include market centres and political centres as well as religious sites.

It is suggested that by the second to first centuries BCE many of the regional circuits were linked and at least two major systems emerged connecting the coasts of India, one across the Bay of Bengal and the other in the western Indian Ocean. The second to first centuries BCE coincide with the emergence of the Satavahana dynasty in peninsular India, but how is this political consolidation to be explained? Was the Satavahana rule a successor state impelled by the break-up of the Mauryan state (Thapar 1961/1997: 320)? What political strategies did the Satavahanas adopt for sustaining themselves? The first century BCE to first century CE has been termed the period of Indo-Roman trade in secondary sources and it is the stimulus from this trade that has been credited with introducing social change. Neither of these issues will be addressed in this work as I have already discussed them in two earlier publications (Ray 1986,

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[7] A settlement hierarchy is in evidence in the pre-Mauryan period by 400 BCE, with the largest sites surrounded by monumental earthen ramparts dominating the major arteries of communication. At the bottom of the scale were nucleated village settlements inhabited by those practising agriculture and herding. In between were minor centres and towns, which revealed evidence of the manufacture of ceramics and lithic blades, finished and unfinished beads, as well as of metal-smelting. Several of the towns were fortified, the ramparts serving both defensive purposes and also as a means of demarcating cities from the surrounding landscape. In terms of size, the largest were the capital cities and political centres. It is no coincidence that these included the capital cities of principalities known from early Buddhist sources, such as Rajgir (of Magadha, until superseded by Pataliputra), Campa (of Anga), Ujjain (of Avanti) and Rajghat (of Kasi). Perhaps the southernmost in this list were those of Besnagar near Sanchi and Tripuri in central India (Erdosy 1995: 107–10).

[8] This assertion is very different from the traditional position, which traces the beginnings of what has been termed the 'second urbanisation' to technological change and the use of iron tools for agricultural production, as evident from the writings of D. D. Kosambi, R. S. Sharma and Romila Thapar. Thapar (1984) refines the argument somewhat and suggests that these urban centres also combined political, economic and religious functions and that it was the demand for luxuries by the new rulers that led to an expansion of trade.

[9] This discussion forms part of a larger interest in defining the nature of the pre-modern state, especially the city-state. A distinction is made between the post-sixteenth-century use of the term in Europe in jurisprudence and political science and a somewhat different model of the state accepted by archaeologists and anthropologists (Hansen 2000: 12).

1994/1996), providing detailed archaeological evidence outlining internal dy-
namics for the expansion of maritime networks both in the western Indian
Ocean as well as with Southeast Asia. Instead, in Chapter 6, I shall highlight
changes within the political fabric with the focus on peninsular India, Sri Lanka
and Southeast Asia. This focus is essential to counterbalance the somewhat ex-
aggerated presence of the Seleucid and Roman Empires in secondary writings.

A momentous event in the fourth century BCE was the campaign of
Alexander across Asia into north-west India and down the river Indus back to
the Persian Gulf. After the death of Alexander (323 BCE), it was under Seleucus I
(c. 305–304 BCE) that these Greek populations reappear in history. The Seleucid
Empire is increasingly seen as an eastern empire centred in Mesopotamia,
northern Syria and western Iran. Trade between the Seleucid domains and
India was by both land and sea and included items such as teak, spices, jewels,
incense and certainly costus and cinnamon (Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993:
67). Pompey the Great annexed the Seleucid Empire in 64 BCE and between
31 BCE and 337 CE, the Near East played a significant role within the Roman
Empire (Ball 2000). The term 'Near East' has been defined as 'the area of cul-
tivable land closely tied to mountain-chains, which linked the Mediterranean
and Egypt with Babylonia, Iran and the head of the Persian Gulf' (Millar 1993:
3). Greek continued as the language of much of the Roman East, extending from
Palmyra to Dura-Europos on the middle Euphrates, though there is evidence for
other languages such as Aramaic, Nabataean, Palmyrene, Syriac, Safaitic and so
on. What did this Greek presence entail for the trading networks of the Indian
Ocean? It is the answer to this question that will be addressed in Chapter 7.

Chapters 4 to 7 thus argue for continuity of trading activity from the
Harappan period onwards, rather than viewing it in phases, as has been the
case in secondary writings so far. This changed perspective proposes that trans-
formation in trading networks of the Indian Ocean in the ancient period was a
result of internal dynamics, rather than ascribing primacy to the Mesopotamian
civilisation (Ratnagar 1981), the Roman Empire (Sidebotham 1986) or the Arabs
(Wink 1990, 1999) in initiating change. The emphasis is no longer on the state
and its requirements for luxury items and prestige goods, but on the organisa-
tion of trade which in the ancient period continued to be generally autonomous,
as detailed in Chapter 8. There was no doubt some correspondence in the na-
ture of commodities traded across the Indian Ocean in antiquity and these
may be categorised into agricultural products, textiles, metals, woods, spices,
aromatics, gems and so on. A comparison between Arab and Chinese texts indi-
cates that these categories continued to be in demand well into the pre-modern
period.

At the same time commodities such as textiles were imbued with multiple
meanings and a gradation of functions (Chapter 9). At one level cloth, especially
of the coarse variety, was required by the coastal communities of the Indian
Ocean. At the same time it could be dyed or reworked as a prestige item. Textiles
are also significant indicators of social identity and lend themselves easily to

the expression of multiple status and local styles. These different strands can only be unravelled through an analysis of the interaction between the political elite, merchants, financiers and craftsmen. Given the fact that the Harappan script remains undeciphered and there is a lack of graphic representation, the most rewarding method for understanding the socio-political and economic organisation of Indus society is through the study of craft organisation, particularly technological stages of production (Kenoyer 1997b: 263).

A major concern in recent studies has been 'dynamics of cultural frontiers' and the human agents that served as mediators across this (Bentley 1993: 6; Guy 1998; Hall 1996). Merchants and trading groups have often been seen as establishing diaspora communities and importing cultural markers for their own use in foreign lands, including priests, monks and *qadis* or Muslim clergy. These in turn are credited with the expansion of religious or cultural traditions across political boundaries. The impetus for these trading groups to cross cultural frontiers is said to have come from the requirements of 'city-based social orders that we call civilisations'. These early civilisations 'sought to extend their political authority and establish economic relationships with other peoples in ever-widening spheres of interest' (Bentley 1993: 9, 22).

Nor is this a novel argument, since the primacy of the state has a long ancestry in historical writing, especially in South Asia. In the context of the Mauryan Empire, there have been counter opinions on this and Fussman, for example, has suggested that there is no evidence for control of trade routes by the Mauryan state, especially in peninsular India. Hence he suggests that the Mauryan administration was decentralised and that control over the outlying provinces was asymmetrical (1987–8).

In contrast, an issue that has been neglected is the multiplicity of elite groups attempting to exploit a diverse resource base leading to an asymmetric control of the state over varied economic activities, which provided the much-needed revenues. For example, the emergence of the state has often been linked to the expansion and control of agricultural activity. In contrast, there has been insufficient discussion on the state's capacity to enforce control over other equally important economic activities, i.e. trade, fishing rights, exploitation of mineral resources, crafts production and so on. It is important to accept the multiple foci of integration and control in South Asia throughout the period of our study. One of the important integrating factors was religion, though it is also one which is seldom discussed in a social context in secondary sources.

Religion played a major role in transformation and social change and represented a synergy as crucial as economic and social integration. Yet data on the religious beliefs of the different communities discussed so far is woefully inadequate, except in the case of the literate groups. The influence of religion is to be seen at several levels. One facet of religion was its role in legitimising political authority, and ritual and ceremony were important factors in this, as discussed in Chapter 6. But its influence was by no means limited to dominant groups and to ceremonies.

As outlined in Chapter 10, religious functionaries often formed close links with caravans and trading groups whom they accompanied through forested tracts and on sea voyages. This is true for both Buddhism and Christianity. With their stress on conversion and propagation, both these religions spread beyond the frontiers of their homeland across the Indian Ocean. This also meant that monastic centres emerged as autonomous centres of authority and maintained their separation from the state. This expansion contributed to the development of the concept of religious identity, which linked communities and groups across political frontiers. A crucial binding factor in this was the practice of pilgrimage, to visit holy centres and also to recreate the sacred geography in different regions.

Another aspect of religion was its ability to create cultural symbols and to redefine social preferences. No doubt the setting up of stupas was important, but equally important were the objects enshrined in the relic caskets. It is no coincidence that the richest hoards of ivories in South Asia come from the urban centre of Begram[10] and the monastic site of Jetavana in Sri Lanka. The extraordinary collection of more than a thousand individual pieces of bone and ivory discovered in the two excavated rooms from Begram is unparalleled by any other single find from anywhere in South or Central Asia. A close second is the hoard comprising 400 pieces of ivory and bone objects, which was uncovered in the foundation deposit of the Jetavana stupa at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. The stupa was built in the third century CE, though individual pieces of the treasure have been dated from the second century BCE to the third century CE. The hoard contained bracelets, dice, the head of a makara or mythical animal, hairpins, reliquary spires and pins and a few of these objects can be considered analogous to the Begram ivories (Mehendale 1997: 178).

Having formulated some of the topics that we shall address in this study, we now move on to consider two other questions. First we trace available historiography on the subject and present opinions expressed by different scholars. Second we introduce the maritime landscape and a discussion on the environment of the Indian Ocean.

1.2 Historiography

1.2.1 The polity

The 1950s marked a shift in the study of political structures in the Indian subcontinent, which henceforth came to be analysed against the perspective of

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[10] Begram has often been identified with Kapisa, the summer capital of Kanishka, and excavations conducted between 1936 and 1942 have traced three stages in the history of the city. The foundations of the city were laid during the rule of the Graeco-Bactrian kings around 200–100 BCE, though attempts have been made to identify the city as Nissa, a town associated with the campaign of Alexander. Under Kanishka and his successors there were some modifications to the site and new structures and fortifications were constructed. The town was finally destroyed in the fifth century CE, though there is some debate about this date as well (MacDowall and Taddei 1978; Mehendale 1997).