

Monday, 22.04.2024; 4:15 - 5:45 pm CEST

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Lascars, Peons and Sodomy around the Red Sea in the mid-Seventeenth Century

Abstract:

In 1648, an apparent case of sodomy was discovered on an English East India Company ship on its way from Surat in India to Mocha and Suakin on opposite sides of the Red Sea (Mocha is today in Yemen; Suakin is today in Sudan). The alleged perpetrators were an Indian Muslim servant who worked for the ship's captain and a sixteen-year-old English Christian carpenter's apprentice. A special ship's council was called to uncover the truth of the allegations, and this gave rise to a series of interviews, some of them conducted in Persian, with the largely Asian and Muslim crewmembers, two Hindu banias, three English passengers, and both the accused. This talk will outline the events, known and supposed, and their aftermath, including the fate of the two accused. It will also use the testimonies of crewmembers and other sources to ask larger questions about social relations on East India ships in the mid-seventeenth century, about contemporary attitudes toward homosexual acts (especially homosexual acts between Christians and Muslims), and about the English East India Company's uneasy relations with the Mughal Empire.

Bio:

Margaret R. Hunt is professor emerita of history at Uppsala University. She is coauthor (with Philip J. Stern) of *The 1689 Siege of Bombay: The East India Company at the Height of Mughal Expansion* (2017). She is also the author of *Women in Eighteenth-century Europe* (2010) and *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in England 1680-1780* (1996). She has published numerous articles on gender history, the history of sexuality, legal history, maritime and military history, and other subjects.