

Exploration & adventure at **BUCKINGHAM PALACE**

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As a mother of two young children just back from maternity leave last fall, I was definitely leading a life limited in travel, exploration and adventure, at least beyond the kind associated with vicariously partaking in a child's discovery of the world. It was thus ironic when one rainy afternoon in September a colleague hand-delivered a large expensive-looking envelope embossed with the Buckingham Palace insignia that turned out to contain an invitation to a reception in honour of "those involved in Exploration and Adventure". The reception was to be hosted by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh in December, and please could I bring photo ID to obtain access to Buckingham Palace. How exciting!

As an archaeologist who has worked in India, Sri Lanka, and Africa I suppose I have had my share of adventure as well as exploration. But perhaps most relevant to the theme of the reception and linked exhibition on Scott, Shackleton and Antarctic Photography at the Queen's Gallery is my current project, the Sealinks Project. This project, funded by the European Research Council, is interested in some of the world's earliest explorers and adventurers – the ancient seafarers who helped to create precocious bridges between continents long before Columbus sailed to America. In particular, the project is looking at early long-distance connections between Africa, India, Southeast Asia and China, some of which extend back thousands of years into the Bronze Age. These early voyages were amongst the first steps to the globalised world we live in today, and like Columbus' much later voyages, they resulted in the movement of people, ideas, technologies and

species, albeit on a more limited and gradual scale.

The Sealinks Project is interested not just in these early sea voyages but also in their impacts around the Indian Ocean world. To this end, it employs the methods of a range of disciplines – not just archaeology, but also genetics, historical linguistics and palaeoenvironmental studies. What is fascinating about working with such diverse disciplines is the way they often tell us different and even contradictory things. Indeed it is the contradictions in particular that frequently provide us with important new clues. For example, the puzzling absence of archaeological evidence for early links to Africa from Arabia, the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia – links that are nonetheless clear from textual, linguistic and genetic sources – tells us something about the kinds of people involved in these contacts. We are coming to recognise the often remarkable and surprising roles played by more mobile, non-state societies in early processes of trade and contact. States attracted commerce and cultural exchange in the ancient world, but the agents of these linkages – the people who gradually knitted the world together – were often from more mobile, non-state level societies.

Of course, attractions of 'exploration and adventure' were only part of the impetus for these early contacts. Just as important were factors of power, prestige and competition, as societies everywhere sought the exotic luxury goods that were carried all around the ancient world, and that served to define status and identity. These goods were frequently largely irrelevant to our



eyes – spices, feathers, aromatic woods and other exotica moved thousands of miles – but they also included things like new crops and animals that came to transform agricultural systems and later form the basis of 'food empires'. Less tangible things like religious movements also spread along the same routes, as did destructive agents like diseases and disease vectors such as the black rat, which the Sealinks Project is studying through archaeological and genetic studies.

And so on the 8th December I attended the Buckingham Palace reception, honouring not just the huge Sealinks team of researchers and volunteers, but also the intrepid and still in many ways mysterious voyagers of the ancient Indian Ocean world, whose exact identities and motivations will probably always elude us. And I

imagined them, ghosts of those who had braved the enormous, unpredictable and sometimes dangerous sea to move us that bit more toward the comforts and connectivity of our world today. As I mingled with princesses, politicians, journalists, writers and modern-day explorers, they followed me through the huge ballrooms and received in a small way a bit of the recognition that has so long escaped them.