

Kim Siebenhüner, Die Spur der Juwelen. Materielle Kultur und transnationale Verbindungen zwischen Indien und Europa in der Frühen Neuzeit, Köln (Böhlau) 2018, 425 S., 37 farb. Abb., 5 Kt. (Ding, Materialität, Geschichte, 3), ISBN 978-3-412-50929-3, EUR 62,00.

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Siebenhüner's »Die Spur der Juwelen« (English: The Trace of Jewels. Material Culture and Transnational Connections between India and Europe in the Early Modern Age) is the third volume in the series »Ding, Materialität, Geschichte« (Thing, Materiality, History) edited by Lucas Burkart, Monica Juneja, Mark Häberlein und the author.

Since the 1980s, archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians have turned their attention to the »social life of things«. In the ground-breaking volume with the same title edited by Arjun Appadurai in 1990, he sees in the circulation of commodities the actual access to their social meaning. »We must follow things in themselves«, wrote Appadurai, »for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things«¹.

Gemstones and jewellery have been one of the most treasured objects of humans across history and across regions. In terms of the value attached to them, these precious objects have been long at the zenith of valued goods cross-culturally. Their translucent colours and capacity to reflect light made them predestined to embody ideas of transcendence, to become the means of power and exchange. In the Indian subcontinent, they were an important feature of the material culture at least since the first millennium AD (and probably before that). The abundant ancient literature in Sanskrit and other Indic languages speaks not only of the astrological, medical and spiritual potencies of gemstones, but also presents legends and myths associated with them. As the author vividly exemplifies, people in the West also stylized gemstones as bearers of memory, believed in their magical powers or pragmatically used them as an important form of currency. Siebenhüner's »Die Spur der Juwelen« reveals the early modern history of these objects in their global, economic, social and cultural dimensions, shedding new light on the material culture of the early modern period.

Gemstones were not only extremely polyfunctional, but also globally mobile objects whose itinerary often began in India. The focus of Siebenhüner's *Habilitationsschrift*, however, lays not only in the trade of luxury goods in the 16th century between India



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¹ Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge 1988, p. 5.

and Europe, but also on the exchange of technologies, culture and knowledge of all sorts that were part of the network in which gemstones circulated. This monograph is, therefore, an important contribution to the study of material culture in the early modern period offering new insights into the transcontinental exchange between India and Europe.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter deals with the question of material matters and the theoretical background in the light of the »material turn« in the humanities. By focusing on the trajectories of goods and commodities, recent social and cultural theories recall that even historical societies are only partially understood when *things* are forgotten. The relevance of objects is, therefore, not only that they are valued and interpreted in specific ways, but that they are also handled and manipulated in specific ways thereby allowing for certain practices to even be possible (p. 13).

Retrieving them from the perspective of historical studies and clarifying their significance for the understanding of historical economies, cultures and social worlds is one of the concerns of historical research on material culture. It is here that Siebenhüner introduces her methodology rooted in global history advocating for an approach in which persons and things are not radically distinct categories and the transactions that surround things are necessarily invested with the properties of social relations. The commodity chain approach used by the author, originally stemming from economics and that has been fruitfully adapted by global history, is the methodological toolbox used to investigate the trajectories of gemstones. It is in this chapter that Siebenhüner starts by laying out the book's architecture, as she calls it, in which she provides the reader with the theoretical framework of her study (p. 23).

In the second chapter entitled the *treasures of the East* she provides us with an overview of the historical sources she has consulted to reconstruct both the knowledge as well as the imagination that was produced during the 16th and 17th centuries regarding the East and particularly of the wealth of the oriental courts, especially those of the Mughal Empire. The author looks closely at travelogues and ethnographic accounts about distant lands, gemmological texts, medical and scientific compendia as well as other literary forms produced during this period to argue that the entanglement of both fantasy and scientific knowledge constructed a very particular image of the East as a land of riches abundant in gemstones.

Chapter 3 investigates the Mughal court where gemstones and jewellery were used as commodities, gifts, war trophies, and display objects. It is here that the author also reminds us that because of the high demand and their polyvalent use, luxury goods and gemstones in particular circulated within South Asia without leaving the geographical area, and that therefore it is productive to consider micro-histories even when using a global history approach.

In chapters 4 and 5 the author aims to follow the path of gemstones from the mine to the European consumers using the »commodity chain approach«, while at the same time arguing



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how these »chains« were never really linear and instead were often halted or otherwise disrupted before they could reach their final destination. The author therefore concludes that neither is it apt to think of »production chains« for goods nor is the biographical approach using instead the notion of »itineraries« to follow and analyse the mobility of luxury goods. Critics of traditional commodity chain research condemn its reliance on notions of commodity flows that rely on a Eurocentric view, the author, however, aims at taking the agency of non-European protagonists seriously. In this case, by considering, not of the Indian protagonists in general, but the agency the representatives of the Mughal court. However, while presenting an impressive amount of sources, it becomes clear that despite the aim of the author to take non-Europeans seriously she does so only to a limited extent. The sources available to Siebenhüner are mostly translated sources that do not necessarily account for local microhistories written in vernaculars, but rather those produced by elites in Persian and in service of the Mughal Empire and in turn only those that translated into European languages.

The voices of the workers at the mines, the artisans, and others actors within the »chain« of production of these gemstones are, due to the nature of the sources available to the author, completely silent and is a matter little problematized throughout the book. The question of where the gemstones were sourced, extracted and processed is also not dealt with in detail; the focus is rather how the Moghuls made use of these objects. The versatile nature of gemstones as diplomatic gifts exchanged, inheritances, war trophies, treasure objects, currency and more lies at the heart of her analysis. Despite of this caveat, to which the author herself admits, these two chapters are a trove of detailed accounts on Mughal gemstones nowhere else collected and analysed.

Chapter 5, on the other hand follows the itineraries of gemstones on the European side with equal success, looking at the trade, political and kin networks in which these gemstones and jewellery circulated how they did so in different, sometimes unexpected ways. Chapter 6 looks at the European end-consumer in the early modern period and how gemstones were used as status symbols, currency, but also as cherished objects. These artifacts imprinted and were imprinted with the identity of their users and had, therefore, both a strong symbolic as well as material power.

The monograph has an impressive and very useful footnote-apparatus, as well as an extensive and very useful bibliography accompanied by an index. The book is beautifully produced and is illustrated with high-resolution colour images and maps, so that not only the excellent quality of Siebenhüner's scholarship comes to the fore, but also allows the reader to enjoy an aesthetically pleasing experience fuelling also one's imagination about the riches and beautiful craftsmanship of Indian gemstones circulated during the early modern period.



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