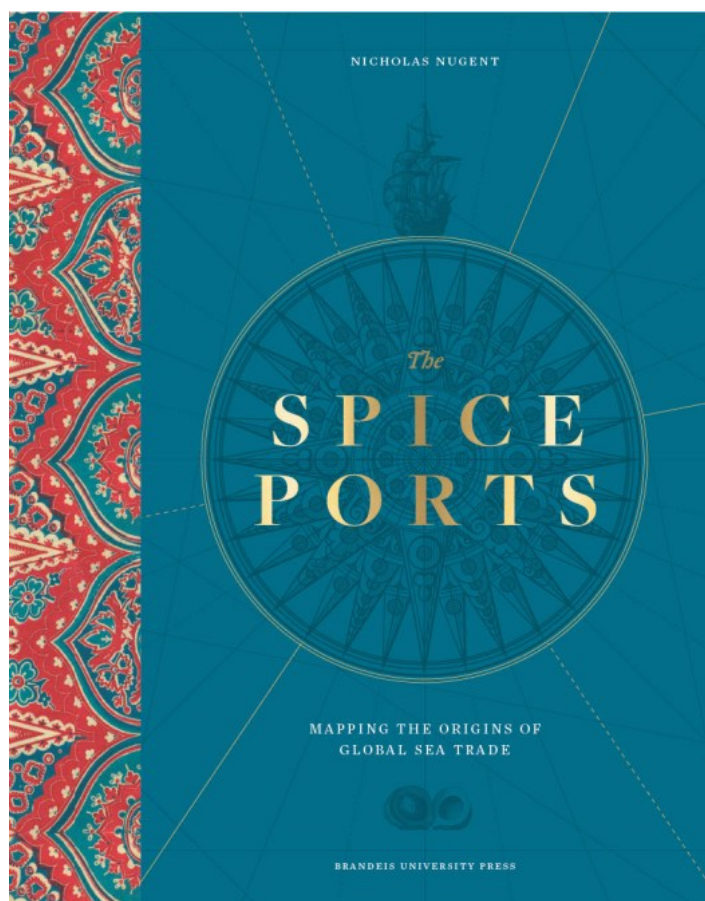




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# Book review: The Spice Ports: Mapping the Origins of Global Sea Trade

*reviewed by sam hidde tripp*



Nugent, Nicholas. *The Spice Ports: Mapping the Origins of Global Sea Trade*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2024. 288 p. \$49.95. LC: 2024936601 ISBN: 978-1-68458-244-0

The last two years have been big for books on spices. For a look on the history of individual spices, one can read Ian Anderson's *The History and Natural History of*



*Spices* (The History Press, 2023). If one is more interested in the escalating mercantile rivalry between Portugal and Spain, there is Roger Crowley's *Spice: The 16<sup>th</sup> Century Contest that Shaped the Modern World* (Yale University Press, 2024). Where Nicholas Nugent's *The Spice Ports* stands out, however, is that it is, essentially, an atlas—and a gorgeous one at that.

It's difficult to overstate how pretty of a book this really is. When you pick up *The Spice Ports*, you immediately note the sort of batik pattern spine, the gold lettering, and the faint (but still intricate) illustrations that lay underneath. As one flips through the pages, numerous illustrations, photographs, paintings and, of course, maps give the reader a sense of what people were working with during the onset of global maritime trade. The reader gets a gradual understanding of how limited the knowledge of other places was, and can watch the maps throughout the book grow and take a more recognizable shape. Yet the first images seen are paintings of ports and a watercolor illustration of clove. The latter faces the introduction, which starts with a quote from Abraham Ortelius: "Geography is the eye of history." Fittingly, Ortelius is credited with creating the first atlas.

Using historically significant seaports to organize (or, more literally, map) his book, Nugent creates an atlas not dedicated to a single area but to the several different locales, each marking a turning point in the history and development of maritime trade. While every chapter is dedicated to a particular port city (e.g. Chapter 4's "Lisbon, Queen of the Sea") or its surrounding area (Chapter 3's "Goa and the Malabar Coast") to help the reader navigate through the expansion and evolution of the spice trade, the chapters bleed into the next and follow a natural flow through time and place. Perhaps because of the lack of traditional scope in creating this atlas is why Nugent doesn't explicitly call it such, and admittedly whether it's called an atlas or not isn't a key point in understanding it—but it is a curiosity.

As for the tone of the text itself, Nugent's experience as a reporter comes through. While some of his own voice is present, the style does come off at times as "neutral" in the face of the most grievous aspects of maritime trade: the cruelty and pervasiveness of colonization and its dehumanization of indigenous peoples through conquest and slavery. Several chapters could be devoted to this. But, while it would have been thoughtful to write more on it for each chapter, Nugent is clear on the cost paid by indigenous peoples against their will and calls it out each time. In the epilogue, he specifically talks of coffee and asks the reader to consider all that it took—and still takes—for it to get into their morning cup.



As Nugent has been a collector of original maps for some time, his understanding of what they can illustrate (or obfuscate) is palpable, and the thoughtful design of the book further illustrates this. Because the book is on the physically larger side, it may not be the best “cozy” read. However, bibliophiles, librarians, and anyone enthused by history and geography would appreciate the unique path this book takes to show the great lengths (literally) gone to in order to provide something as ubiquitous nowadays as cinnamon. All in all, this is a fascinating look at the history of maritime trade, using something everyone can relate to (food) in order to map out what instigated, progressed, and currently sustains it.

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