

**ARAB NAVIGATION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN
BEFORE EUROPEAN DOMINANCE IN
SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA:
A HISTORICAL STUDY**

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Until comparatively recent times (mid 19th century) winds shaped navigation over seas. From simple boats, rafts and canoes they developed ships with masts which made it possible for human beings to roam around the various parts of the known world. Naturally the coastal people indulging in seafaring played a significant role in bringing nations closer to different races and creeds. With this association among various peoples through overseas trade began between different parts of the globe, particularly in the littoral lands of the Indian Ocean. The lands along the Oceania (littoral of the Indian Ocean) Arabia, India, Malaya and Indonesia enjoyed unique importance since the dawn of civilization. From the very beginning Arabs and Persians were linked through the lucrative maritime trade with the people of East Africa, the Western Indian coast, even upto Southeast Asia upto the coast of China. The coastal region of the Indian Ocean was an area of social and cultural diversity enriched with four different civilizations: the Perso-Arabic, the Indian, the Malayan / Indonesian and the Chinese. The seaborne trade, enhanced by the land routes, generated a strong sense of unity between the peoples of different geographical regions.

South and Southeast Asia have been an amazing and fascinating region through the ages though its role in shaping the entire human civilization has not been adequately studied. The important region of Malaya lies on the busy Indian and Chinese maritime route, which attracted traders from all over the world because of its lucrative spice trade. It

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was the source of a large quantity of spices and drugs, which were commonly used by the Arab, Persian and Indian physicians. There is no specific date of the arrival of Arabs in this important region, but most likely they came much earlier than any other known traders, and their contact with this region goes far back in history. This article attempts to emphasize the great significance of this region that accelerated the process of understanding between the far-flung groups of people. Arabs, through their navigational skill and knowledge of the sea, since ancient times, familiarized themselves with the vast region of South and Southeast Asia. Naturally they became prominent as navigators in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, producing travel books and navigational guides for traders and seafarers. The role of early Arab navigators and their commercial activities in this part of the world, and their pioneering work in showing its importance in the history of international trade are particularly highlighted here.

The Arabian Peninsula surrounded by the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea on three sides and due to the arid conditions of its land and its isolated location came to be known as *Jazīrat al-Arab*.^{*} As Yāqūt puts it in his famous dictionary, the *Mu'jam al-Buldān* (627/1229), that this region is known as the *Jazīrat al-'Arab*.¹ Furthermore, its arid soil apparently triggered people to choose nomadic tribal life with trade as their means of livelihood. As Saiyid Sulaiman Nadvi suggests, Arab caravans were frequently visiting Egyptian soil since 2,000-1,500 B.C.² Moreover, since very early times Arabs were engaged in land and sea journeys, and they had trade links with neighbouring states like Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt and some other African kingdoms. However, the coastal regions of Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Hadramawt, Yemen and Hijaz were located between the lands bordering the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Due to this strategic location, maritime trade became a common occupation of these regions. Arab ships sailed from India to the Yemeni ports, where they unloaded their merchandise. From there these goods were transported by the overland caravan routes all the way along the Red Sea coast to Syria and Egypt, then shipped to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea.³

The ancient Indian and Arabian trade links between Bahrain and the cities of the Indus Valley might be traced back as early as the 3rd and 2nd millennia B.C. The unearthing of a true Bahraini seal in the port of Lothal located at the top of the Gulf of Cambay, may suggest that this

^{*}*Jazīrat* means an island, land in the sea or river, from which the water has flowed away. It also refers to a peninsula. See Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, part II, Edinburgh, 1865, p. 419 - *Ed.*

city was vital for this trade. Thus Indus traders lived in southern Mesopotamia and India, and they dealt with Bahrain and Oman, while those staying in Ur did business with other countries using their exceptional script and seals.⁴ The major items of trade, including copper, ivory, gemstone, cotton (*katān*) and beads, were from the Indus valley whose close link with Bahrain demonstrated intimate commercial and cultural connections between the two regions as early as the 3rd and 2nd millennia B.C.⁵

G.R. Tibbetts articulated the history of early navigation in the Indian Ocean in the following words:

“Navigation in the Indian Ocean goes back to very early beginnings. Accounts appear of sea trading in the Ocean in early Indian and Chinese texts, and it seems that early Sumerian inscriptions refer to ship-building in Oman catering for this early trade. Certainly Indian wood has been found in Sumerian sites. Thus from at least 2,000 B.C. ships have crossed from Arabia to India and at least from the time of Solomon’s Ophir expedition Indian products have been available at the mouth of the Red Sea.”⁶

Necessity triggers people of different lands to get closer to each other through trade and commerce. A notable example of this contact was old Yemen, the southwest part of Arabia, which was not only a seat of power of the Himyarites in the seventh century B.C. but also a significant commercial centre. Its strategic location on the Arabian shore made it a vital port for India, Africa, the Euphrates-Tigris valley (Mesopotamia), and the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea.⁷ The importance of Yemen lies also in the fact that it was a major supply centre on land as well as by sea. The eastern route of its chief market, San’a, passed in the direction of Ḥaḍramawt and to the north was connected to Makkah-Damascus road via Petra and Busrah (Bostra). This route further split into two branches, one from Dumat al-Jandal to Iraq, and the other continued via Gaza to Egypt. Due to these trade links with the outside world the people of Yemen had a good sense of geography. Since ancient times they established contacts with India and East Africa in particular.⁸ From the very beginning the people of Makkah, already involved in long distance trade, inherited the traditional money-changing and barter trade of the *Jāhiliyyah* (the Age of Ignorance) period, and acted as intermediaries in international trade. They carried leather, raisins (of Taif), and dates, and they reached Aden through the mountainous Taif-

Najrān and San'a route. But some of the essential commodities brought from Yemen, e.g. gold, pearls, precious stones, silk, indigo, spices, sandalwood, musk, ambergris, saffron, lapis lazuli, frankincense, woollen and cotton textiles, leather, ivory and herbs of all kinds, were originally the products of India, Sri Lanka, the Malay archipelago, and China, which were subsequently transported to Damascus, Egypt, Palestine and other western termini through the oasis town of Dumat al-Jandal.⁹

A study of the early activities of Arabs, who showed their keen interest in trade and commerce, demonstrates that they used to visit Syria and Egypt, even as early as the days of Prophet Yusuf (Joseph 约瑟). Similarly, they controlled the lucrative Indian maritime trade until the 15th century C.E. long before the arrival of European merchants in the Asian waters. The prosperity of the region of Southwest Arabia was largely due to its commercial ties with India and Egypt whose goods were brought to the Yemeni ports, from where they were later transported by land along the western coast to Busra and Alexandria. But the previous trading arrangements were discontinued due to the discovery by the ancient Egyptian rulers of an alternative trade route to India.¹⁰ Later the Greeks, after their conquest of the Nile valley, controlled the entire and relatively safe trade route from Egypt to Syria. Ultimately, the Arabs had gradually lost their previous ascendancy in trade.¹¹

Abū Zayd Ḥasan al-Sīrāfi (264/877) testifies that after their conquest the Greeks established a colony on the island of Socotra/Soqotra (at the mouth of the Red Sea), which they called "the Happy Isles", i.e. their version of Sanskrit *Dvipa Sukhatārā* (Socotra).¹² Similarly, it is apparent from a statement by the Greek author Agatharchides (fl. 110 B.C.) that ships sailed from the Indian coast, especially Patala at the mouth of the Indus, and called at the Yemenite ports from where the goods were further transported to Egypt. It is assumed that the cities of South Arabia and Socotra were at this period the entrepots of all trading activities between Egypt and India. Therefore, the town of Socotra gained international reputation, bustling with foreign merchants like the Arabs, Indians, Greeks, and, most likely, Persians and Africans as well.¹³ However, an account of the Arab navigator Ibn Mājid sheds abundant light on the population and the political control of Socotra Island. According to him Socotra was of square shape (50x50 square *farsakh*), prosperous with a mixed Muslim and Christian population of 20,000, and ruled by the Arabs.¹⁴

As stated earlier the Arabs had been interested in seafaring activities long before the advent of Islam. According to Nadvi there were several

references in the *Torah* which indicated that the Arabs exported as early as 2000 B.C. many items from India to Egypt. This trade was of course mainly confined to the coastal cities of India.¹⁵ It is further explained by Jawwād Ali that Southern Arabia and India had developed strong trade links before the 2nd millennium B.C.¹⁶ During the 1st millennium B.C. Indian sailors benefited from and used the monsoon winds to guide sea route to Arabia.¹⁷ Hourani also suggests "that the Arabs were plying some part in the seafaring life of their times for many centuries before Alexander (d. 323 B.C.)."¹⁸ The same author concludes, "Thus there existed at this period a regular commerce by sea from the Persian Gulf to the mouth of River Narbada in one direction and Southwest Arabia in another; and in this commerce the Arabs and Persians of the Gulf were probably playing a leading part."¹⁹

The anonymous merchant author of *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (50-60 C.E.) mentions the overseas commercial activities of the Arabs during the middle of the first century C.E. He maintains that Northwest Arabia was a growing market of the Nabataeans for local shipping and further highlights the uncertainty of the Arabian coast because of the Bedouin raids. But after crossing this region they reached Yemen, where the people were more hospitable, and anchored off Muza, a market town. In his account he records: "And the whole place is crowded with Arab ship-owners and seafaring men, and is busy with the affairs of commerce; for they carry on a trade with the far-side coast [Eritrea and Somaliland] and with Barygaza [Broach, Gujarat], sending their own ships there."²⁰

We have sufficient evidence to argue that Arab ships from Muza and Cana undertook normal commercial trips to Barygaza, but no reliable data is available in the *Periplus* to support the contention that the Arabs went farther south than Barygaza. However, it is most likely that they had been sailing (further south) to Malabar for centuries to obtain timber for building their own ships.²¹ Pliny (23-79 C.E.) records the activities of the Arab traders in the Muzris port²² on the Malabar coast along with their counterparts from Persia and Byzantium.²³ This led to the peaceful settlement since the first century C.E. of many Arabs on the seashores of Malabar and Sri Lanka.²⁴ Moreover, Ptolemy (c.100-c.170 C.E.) and Cosmas (fl. 535 C.E.) further record the extended call of Arab ships at the ports east of Sri Lanka.²⁵ The Arabs had, moreover, sailed as far as Bengal, Southeast Asia and China in the 1st century C.E.²⁶ Similarly, al-Himyarī records the planting of palm trees by the people of Sarandīp (Sri Lanka) who freely interacted with the foreigners.²⁷

Abū Zayd Ḥasan al-Sīrāfi maintains that the Omāni traders sailed to these islands, which had enormous coconut trees. After cutting and making planks, and sewing them together with palm leaves, they finally built their ships, and loaded them with coconut that they brought to Arabia, an activity from which they earned considerable profit.²⁸ An ancient Arabic inscription clearly demonstrated that the king of Ḥaḍramawt received embassies from various regions, including an Indian delegation in 19 C.E.²⁹

The Arabs took advantage of their expertise on the major sea routes to frequently roam around many destinations in the world. There are many words related to ships and navigation in the pre-Islamic poetry of Arabia. The early maritime activities of the Arabs have also been recorded in the holy Qur'ān, which often refers to ships, and shipbuilding. It also provides a glowing perception of the sea, and demonstrates Allah's bounty by numerous references to its advantages and risks.³⁰ However, while Hourani asserts that "Pre-Islamic poetry of the desert Arabs seldom contains more than a passing reference to the sea", Saiyid Sulaiman Nadvi had conversely maintained that it did record ample material regarding the sea, navigation, and sailing.³¹

During the early days of Islam, Arab traders had frequently sailed to Ḥabshah (Ethiopia), and, by the year 615 C.E., Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) had himself ordered some of his *Companions* to migrate to this land.*³² Subsequently, following the treaty of Ḥudaybiyah of 6/628, he embarked on sending various religious missions to spread Islam in the neighbouring countries, including southern Arabia.³³ One such mission was dispatched to the Persian King Khusraw Parvaiz (590-628), but he ignored the Prophet's messenger, and instructed the governor of Yemen to send two men to arrest the Prophet (ﷺ) and bring him to Persia. However, Khusraw himself was soon assassinated by his son Sherweh who also sent an embassy to Madinah with presents. His successor and sister Purān Dukht, sent another emissary to the Prophet (ﷺ).³⁴

According to Buzurg ibn Shahriyār (c. 339/950), "the people of Sri Lanka and its adjacent areas heard about the Prophet's call, and they sent an intelligent person to Madina to find out who Muḥammad (ﷺ) was and what he called for."³⁵ After a long and difficult journey, the envoy finally reached Arabia during the Caliphate of 'Umar (634-644). He became closely associated with the Muslims and learnt much about Islam. On his return trip he died on the Makran coast, but his servant,

*See for relations between "Pre-Islamic Arabia and its Early Contacts with the African world - A Prelude to the Future Islamic Bonds" by Prof. Mohammed B. Sillah in the *Hamdard Islamicus*, No. 2 issue of vol. XXXII, 2009 - Ed.

who arrived safely, gave a favourable report about the Prophet (ﷺ), Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. Hearing of the admirable modesty of ‘Umar that was symbolized by his ordinary patched-up clothes, the people of Sarandīp started to adopt this humble dress code.³⁶

The Sāssānid and Roman empires were two great centres of maritime and overland trade in the ancient world, which drew merchants to their ports and cities. Most likely, Chinese ships had sailed up to the Persian Gulf even before the advent of Islam. During the Caliphate of ‘Umar, the enterprising Arabs had soon controlled Persia, the Persian Gulf, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. In 636 A.D. the Muslims conquered the famous Persian port of al-Ubullah, which became a centre of Indo-Chinese trade, while Alexandria became an important trading centre for the Western countries. Al-Ubullah port, whose population was a mixture of Persians and Arabs, had earlier become the frontier town of the Persian Empire on the Arabian border.³⁷ Ibn Rustah (290/903) records that ships sailed, long before Islam, from India to the Tigris as far as al-Madā’in (Ctesiphon), while al-Ṭabarī notes the pre-Islamic contact between India and this port which he called by its early name “Farj al-Hind” i.e. “the marches of India.”³⁸ Most probably al-Ubullah before Islam was a focal point for Persian shipping to China and vice-versa. Ṭabarī reports that the Muslims, who controlled Iraq at the beginning of the second decade after *Hijrah* found a Chinese ship at the northern tip of the Arabian Gulf.³⁹ Soon after, the Arab ships on their eastward journey laid anchor at the ports of al-Bahrain and Omān. Moreover, the enterprising Arabs occupied the entire coast of the Persian Gulf, and, for several centuries brought radical changes in every field of life e.g. warfare, commerce, architecture, history and geography.⁴⁰

The importance of the Indian goods and their commercial value in the Arab world may be seen in the following hyperbolic response of an Arab traveller to a query by Caliph ‘Umar regarding India: ‘Its rivers full of pearls; its mountains of ruby and its trees of perfumes.’⁴¹ Soon afterwards ‘Uthmān al-Thaqafī, the Arab governor of al-Bahrain, started his own vigorous sea raids on the Indian coastal town of Thane near Bombay. He dispatched two of his brothers on a similar naval mission: Ḥakam, at the head of a contingent to Barauz (Broach), and Muḡhīrah to the bay of al-Daybul (near modern Karachi) at the mouth of the Indus in 636 A.D. Like his predecessor, the dynamic governor of Bahrain, al-‘Alā Ibn al-Ḥadramī raided without specific orders from ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the Persian Gulf in 638 A.D., but his ships were destroyed. He was, however, reprimanded by the caliph for this insubordination.⁴²

Due to the piracy in the Indian Ocean, the Arabs looked for a safe

coastal base for their trading ships. The merchants of Sirāf embarked on voyages towards China each year, to Daybul, Mālābar, Coromandel Coast and Sarandīp. Gradually these traders explored the famous Southeast Asian trading routes and finally reached China.⁴³ The developing trade and commerce of the Indian Ocean in the eastward direction had encouraged Arabs to covet the productive resources of the lands. This brought Muslims closer to the local people and later many of them settled in these regions. Eventually, the major portion of the exotic and essential imports from India, the islands of the Malay archipelago, and China were all consumed within the Muslim world. The eastern items most in demand in these markets – silk, porcelain, sandalwood and black pepper – were bartered for incense (Arabian gum resins), pure-bred Arab horses, ivory, cotton textiles, and metal objects.⁴⁴

The earliest available account on Indian, Malayan and Chinese coastal regions had been recorded in the famous book *Akhbār al-Šīn w'al-Hind* by Sulaymān Tājir in 237/851.⁴⁵ It was the earliest known source that referred to the Bay of Bengal as Baḥr-i-Hargand (also Harkand), a name that was later adopted by the Arab writers. Sulaymān maintained that there were about 1900 islands between the sea of Larwi (Arabian Sea) and the sea of Hargand which were full of coconut palm and ambergris and ruled by a female ruler.⁴⁶ The distance between these isles was two to four *farsakhs*,* and their business transaction was made in the form of cowry (shell).** Even the queen's treasury was full of such cowries. The residents of the region wove their long shirts together with the sleeves and the upper and lower parts of it, and were acquainted with the art of shipbuilding. Sarandīp was the island on the fringe of the Baḥr-i Hargand, and other islands were called *Dīp*.⁴⁷ The footprints of Adam*** were popularly believed to have been on the mountains of Sarandīp, which, to many Muslim writers, was the earthly abode of Adam (آدم) in which he requested Divine forgiveness for his act of disobedience.⁴⁸ The island had two kings, and its main products were gold, ruby and aloeswood. There the water was full of pearls and conch and people extracted these from the sea.⁴⁹

Ramni (Acheh) believed then to be an island in the Indian Ocean,

*Arabicised versions of *farsang* or *parsang* equal to a league or about 3¼ English miles - *Ed.*

**Cowries or shells served as coins in South Asia and were imported from the isles of Maldives etc. - *Ed.*

***The Buddhists regarded it as the footprint of Buddha. Marco Polo stated that some Chinese pilgrims cut off the imprint of its toe and took it to China. Muslim *ṣūfis* laid great emphasis on visiting the site. For the *Alqadem* (Footstep) see Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Riḥlah*, Arabic, Tangier, 1917, vol. IV, pp. 88-90 - *Ed.*

had an extended area of eight to nine hundred square *farsakh*, and was ruled by many kings. Its forests were full of elephants as well as brazilwood and bamboos. The island was reportedly inhabited by cannibals, and the region had been washed by two seas i.e. Hargand and Salahit (Straits of Malacca). Other isles in the same area, like Fansur and Nias, had gold mines, camphor, and immense plantation of coconut. The people depended on palm plantation, frequently used coconut in the making of their dishes, and massaged their bodies with its oil. If a man desired to marry a woman, he would be expected to bring one human head for her as a bridal gift. If many heads were provided, the supplier would be entitled to marry an equivalent number of ladies.⁵⁰

Andaman and Langabalus (Nicobar): Sulaymān maintained that there were other islands in this chain that were inhabited by cannibals, vicious and dark people, who were usually completely nude, though the womenfolk covered their private parts with tree leaves. They had fuzzy hair, ugly faces and long legs. The people had no boats, otherwise they would have posed a great danger to the passing ships. Off the route there were mountains which had enough silver mines. The people of the coastal region of south India wrapped a small piece of cloth round their waist.⁵¹

Sulaymān Tājir says that the long journey from the Persian Gulf to China passed through two familiar routes, both touching India. After taking their supply of water from the ports of Suhar and Masqat (Maskat/Muscat), sailors directly crossed the Indian Ocean for Kolam Māli in southern Mālābār. They also journeyed from Qays Island, old Hurmuz, Tiz, Daybul and Maṣūrah. The gulf of Cutch and Kathiawār were directly menaced by the Mayd (also Med) and Kurk pirates. After paying 1000 *dirhams* at Kolam Māli, the Chinese traders sailed towards Sarandīp and stopped en route at the Island of Langabalus for provisions and fresh water. But the dues from other traders were between one and ten *dirhams* only. The next port of call was Kalah Bar (Kedah), which was under the kingdom of Zabaj, whose king and subjects alike wear the *futa* (sarong), which indicated equality between the ruler and the ruled. The distance between Kolam Māli and Kalah Bar was covered in a month and ten days' journey to each of the Straits of Malacca, Tioman Island and Kandarang. After another ten days' journey they called at Sanf Fulaw in Champa, where the people put on two *futas* (sarongs). They sailed through the South China Sea at Sankhai as far as the "Gate of China" to Khanfu (Canton).⁵²

Sulaymān noted an island known as Malhan that was located between Sarandīp and Kalah, on the eastern shore of the Indian Ocean,

and inhabited by black naked people. If a stranger fell in their hands, he would be hanged with his head downward, cut into pieces and eaten uncooked. They also ate fish, banana, coconut and sugarcane. There was no king in their island.⁵³

Abu'l Qāsim 'Ubayd Allah Ibn Khurdādhbih's *Kitāb al-Masālik wal-Mamālik* (250/864 and rewritten in 272/885) recorded that the jungle of Ramni (Bengal?) had rhinoceros, tailless buffaloes, bamboo, and brazilwood, and its inhabitants were naked and uncivilized with an average height of four spans. Another group of fair skinned people lived in the sea region, and they exchanged ambergris for iron with the foreign merchants. In its forests, lived dark-skinned curly haired cannibalistic people who slaughtered their victims into pieces. The mountains of Zabaj (Palembang) were full of giant reptiles that swallowed human beings, buffaloes, and some of them had even devoured elephants. This region produced an enormous amount of camphor from the sap of the trees.⁵⁴

Ibn Khurdādhbih maintained that the route from India to China passed via Bullin,⁵⁵ leaving Sarandīp on the right, and after ten to fifteen days' journey one would reach Langabalus. The natives of this island, according to him, were naked and ate bananas, fish and coconuts. After a journey of six days, the ships anchored at Kalah (Kedah), which was famous for its tin mines and bamboo plantations. They passed through the islands of Jaba, Salahit and Harang, which produced coconuts, bananas, sugarcane, fish, and sandalwood. From Jaba, sailors sailed for fifteen days to Spice Islands (Moluccas). Then they embarked from Mait (one of the Riau islands) to Tiyuma (Tioman), which took five days, landing at Qamar. From there after a journey of three days, they arrived at Sanf from which they moved to Luqin, which was the gateway to China.⁵⁶

The *Silsilat al-Tawārīkh* of Abū Zayd Ḥasan al-Sīrāfī (264/877) recorded the location of the town of Zabaj as opposite to China at a distance of a one-month journey by sea. The title of the king of this region was Mahārāja, and the area of his capital was nine hundred square *farsakhs*. The area of the island of Ramni was eight hundred square *farsakhs*, and it produced brazilwood, camphor and other plants. Similarly, the land of Kalah with an area of eighty square *farsakhs*, was a centre of trade and commerce for aloeswood, camphor, sandalwood, ivory, tin, ebony, baqamwood and all kinds of spices.⁵⁷

Unlike Sulaymān and Ibn Khurdādhbih, the important Arab geographer and traveller, Abī Bakr Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Hamādānī Ibn al-Faqīh, had maintained in his *Mukhtaṣar Kitāb al-Buldān* (290/903), that Zabaj's various-coloured parrots were easily trained to speak

Arabic, Persian, Greek and Sanskrit languages. Large white ox-tailed monkeys were found there as well as flying cats with wings like those of bats and civet-cats, which were imported from Sind, and whose females gave a musk fragrance. Zabaj and Fansur, the lands of the Mahārāja, produced cloves, sandalwood, camphor and nutmeg, while ambergris and brazilwood were found on the island of Salahit.⁵⁸

Abī ‘Alī Aḥmad bin ‘Umar Ibn Rustah (290/ 903) noted, in his book *Kitāb al-‘Alā’iq al-Nafisah*, that Zabaj was the farthest point of the Eastern Sea. If someone wished to go there, he had to first travel to Kalah from which he would journey to Zabaj. From there traders used to sail to Zanj (East Africa) that constituted a regular trade link with Palembang and East Africa.⁵⁹

Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 345/956) recorded, in his book *Muruḥ al-Dhahab wa-Ma’din al-Jawhar* (334/945), that Zabaj, the empire of the Mahārāja, divided China from India. The traders would sail via Basra, Sirāf, Oman, India, the islands of Zabaj and Sanf till they arrive at the mouth of the river of Khanfu in China. They also embarked at the port of Kalah on a Chinese ship in order to go to the port of Khanfū. Kalah is about halfway to China, the junction for Muslim ships from Sirāf and Omān, and the Chinese ships. The bay of Zabaj was full of crocodiles, and the region of Kalah and Sribuza had gold and silver mines.⁶⁰

Al-Mas‘ūdī noted that the distance between Sarandīp and the island of Ramni, a well-populated territory, was about a thousand *farsakhs*. Ramni was full of gold mines, and ruled by a Mahārāja. Fansur, a nearby island, was known for its camphor. The sea of Kalah was dangerous and difficult to navigate due to shallow waters, and Kalah itself was rich in gold, tin mines, and in the words of al-Mas‘ūdī “mountains of silver.” There were also mines of lead, which could however, be exploited with great difficulty. The Fanjab (Panhang/Pahang) people had wavy hair and strange figures, and they settled at the sea coast of Kandrang. They sailed out in their small boats, from which they threw poisoned arrows at passing ships.⁶¹

Abū Dulaf Misa’r Ibn al-Muḥalhil Yanbū’i in 331/943 made his land journey through Turkistan to China accompanied with the envoy of the Sāmānid Sulṭān Abū Naṣr bin Aḥmad (914-943) of Bukhāra. While on his voyage back to India via Kalah, he reached this walled city which he found studded with beautiful gardens and springs. There they mined tin (*qal’ī*), which was used in the manufacture of swords. The distance between Kalah and China was three hundred *farsakhs*, and the main

diet of the people there was wheat, dates, vegetables, which were all sold by weight, as well as flat cakes of bread, sold by number. Their currency was *fahri*, valued at $2/3$ of a *dirham*, while a smaller coin, *fulus*, was commonly used in business transactions.⁶²

Abū Dulaf went to the Land of Pepper, and saw there one of its plants, a community tree from which people gathered fruits of which a portion was given to the king. Then Abū Dulaf proceeded towards the Land of Camphor which was on the high mountain. The town of Qamrūn which produced Qmari aloeswood, was also called *Mandal al-Qamrūni*. On the northern side of this mountain there was a city called Saimūr, whose people, a hybrid of Chinese and Turks were famous for their beauty. Here they acquired Saimūri aloes-wood. They had different places of worship including synagogues, churches, mosques and houses of fire (fire-worshippers' temples).⁶³

Abū Dulaf reached the town of Jajulla, on top of a mountain, where the common diet of the people was wheat and eggs, but they did not eat fish, nor slaughtered animals. They produced large quantities of eggs and cinnamon, which was exported to different countries. They usually dressed like the people of Kalah, except on special occasions when they put on Yemeni robes (*hibara*).⁶⁴

Aḥmad ibn Mājid, an Arab pilot (*mu'allim*) of considerable repute, wrote in simple poetry a technical manual, entitled *Hawiyat al-Ikhtisār fi 'Ilm al-Biḥār* (866/1462), which included *al-Fawā'id fi Uṣūl 'Ilm al-Baḥr wal-Qawā'id* (893/1489), for the guidance of other sailors. He describes the major islands in the Indian Ocean e.g. Sumatra, Java and Sri Lanka. Non-Muslim rulers ruled Sumatra, famous for white elephants, camphor, mace and musk, while the smaller island of Java produced huge quantity of spices and sandalwood. Its inhabitants were mainly Hindus and Muslims. Similarly, the island of Sri Lanka was circular in shape and ruled by a number of non-Muslim chiefs. According to Ibn Mājid, one needed ten days for a round journey. It produces ivory, cinnamon and precious stones (rubies). It was a common belief among the Muslims that Prophet Adam's footprints were found there.⁶⁵

Sulaymān Tājir took to the sea for trading purposes, and left a detailed account of places, people, and merchandise. On the other hand, Aḥmad ibn Mājid in his manuals offered little by way of information on the seaborne trade in South and Southeast Asia in the 15th and 16th centuries.⁶⁶ He wrote about ships and how they could safely sail the eastern seas. It is possible, though not very probable, that he was the same Aḥmad ibn Mājid, who served as a navigator to Vasco da Gama

from Malindi on the east coast of Africa to Calicut on the western coast of India. The coming of the Portuguese to the Indian Ocean, however, marked the near demise of Arab seafaring.* Da Gama himself burnt alive 200-400 passengers on an Arab ship in Cannanore, north of Calicut, after seizing their cargo on his second voyage to India. There, he also seized and massacred 38 Hindu fishermen to overawe the Zamorin.⁶⁷ The Portuguese occupation of Malacca in 1511 and of Hormuz in 1515 sealed the fate of Arab navigation and seaborne commerce until Arab sailors reached an understanding with the new lords of the sea, the Portuguese under admiral da Gama and his successor Albuquerque.⁶⁸

It has been suggested that the Portuguese were fortunate to control the weaker Hindu rulers of Mālābar before confronting the more powerful Muslim rulers and Arab traders.⁶⁹

[However, the Arab traders and navigators who were also noted for religious and cultural changes on the eastern coast of Africa, leading to Sawahili language and raising living standards of people, were also noted for spreading the message of Islam in the islands of Indian ocean upto Malaya and Indonesia. They brought with them Shāfi'ī *maslak* to these regions from Mālābar, Maldive and Sri Lanka to the East Indies. This process was going on when the Portugese arrived and were able to establish their hold and religion particularly in the islands on further east e.g. Philipines.]**

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*See Dr. Abdul Azeem Islāhī, "Mercantilism and the Muslim States, Lessons from History", *Historicus*, No. 4, 2009, pp. 7-26 – Ed.

**For a seventeenth century detailed account of the seas, ocean, islands etc. see Maḥmūd b. Amīr Balkhī's book the *Baḥr al-Asrār fī Ma'rifat al-Akhyār* (pbd. 1984, Karachi) who visited India in the first decade of Shāhjahān's rule and returning to Balkh in the reign of Nadhar Muḥammad Khān wrote his seven volume book. Maḥmūd wrote about the islands on the authority of Maḥmūd b. 'Abd Allah Nishāpūrī's *Jāmi' al-Bar wa'l Baḥr*, who reported about the spread of Islam in some of these islands upto 1025/1611 (pp. 176-177, 240). He also refers to the cunning way of the Portugese in capturing Manila from its heathen rājah – Ed.

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