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# At the Sea's Edge: Revisiting the Origins of Native Seamanship in Southern Arabia

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This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in form and content for publication.

*Approved by the Thesis Committee.*

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**At the Sea's Edge:**  
**Revisiting the Origins**  
**of Native Seamanship in Southern Arabia**

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**ABSTRACT**

Research into the pre-Islamic Arabs has posited an autochthonous, maritime tradition in Southern Arabia which provided the foundation for effective use of sea power within the early Islamic state. Using historical and archaeological evidence, the existence of such a tradition is reexamined within the broader cultural and historical context of the area, with focus divided into three periods; that immediately prior to the birth of Muhammad, that before the rise of Ptolemaic Egypt and that of the Mesopotamian City-States, when southern Arabia was peripheral to the earliest organized civilizations.

It is concluded that although maritime resources were always utilized to some extent, there was insufficient social, political or economic support to have allowed an independent maritime tradition to have been developed in Southern Arabia.

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“I have heard that the Syrian Sea rises higher than the highest thing on earth, and it seeks Allah's permission day and night to spread over the earth and drown it.

So how can I send forces over this terrible Kafir? By Him Who sent Muhammad with the truth, I shall never send any Muslim upon it.”

Attributed to Caliph Umar<sup>1</sup>

With this stark claim, Caliph Umar I, second of the Righteous Caliphs and leader of the rapidly expanding Muslims, only recently spreading beyond their little known peninsula, seemed to define his forces, his people, his ambitions and their future as fundamentally terrestrial. Umar’s reluctance toward nautical endeavors probably stemmed from early failures that the Muslims experienced at sea.<sup>2</sup> These defeats, like that of Al-Ala ibn Al-Hadrami in the Persian Gulf and Alqama ibn Mujazziz in the Red Sea, could not have significantly hurt the Muslim forces as a whole, but considering their overwhelming early success rate, perhaps any failure was felt out of proportion. Regardless, Umar I’s definition was one which fit well within the western imagination of the Arabians; a desert people of camels and caravans, sand and sun; “desert Bedouins of inland areas” for whom the sea was, “an element with which they were at first neither ready nor willing to cope.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that the Arabs soon spread from the center of their Peninsula to hold dominance from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, this view,

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<sup>1</sup> Seerah of Khalifas/Sahabah/Sahabiah, <http://www.islamicstudies.info/history/khalifahs/umar.htm> (accessed May 7, 2015)

<sup>2</sup>Aly Mohamed Fahmy, *Muslim Sea-Power In the Eastern Mediterranean From the Seventh to the Tenth Century A.D.* (Cairo: National Publication & Printing House, 1966), 74.

<sup>3</sup>Archibald Lewis, *Naval Power and Trade in the Mediterranean, A.D. 500 – 1100* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 54-55.

which at its basest saw them as nearly hydrophobic and at best merely allowed that, “Arabs considered it beneath their dignity to work as sailors,”<sup>4</sup> certainly held sway for far too long.

Happily, this one-sided view has since been recognized as both unrealistic and naive. The Muslims were soon able to dominate extensive areas, for long periods of time, and this would have been impractical without utilizing nautical resources. Moreover, to effectively encounter other naval powers in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean would have been impossible without utilizing some naval strategies and techniques. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that Umar I’s quotation above was, in fact, a response for permission to engage in naval endeavors, a request which though momentarily thwarted, would soon give rise to the first Muslim navy and successful victories against the seaworthy Byzantines.

This second look at the maritime history of the Arabs has been a welcome revision, yet as is so often the case, it has created just as much confusion as clarity. Part of this confusion stems from the great periods of time and space involved in exploring an issue as broad as, “Muslim Sea Power”. While it is now recognized that Muslim powers utilized, and in some cases, dominated the seas over which they stretched their influence, there is often little narrative offered to put these abilities in perspective, after all, ‘Muslim Powers’ can define states ranging over three continents for a millennium and a half. Several historians have focused on Muslim contributions in the Mediterranean however, such works often look at cosmopolitan empires, where seafaring is an age old tradition,

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<sup>4</sup>George F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring, Expanded Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 58.

continued under various regimes. Taking a different approach, historians such as Brummett and Casale have focused on the naval policies and projects of the Ottoman Empire. While they have certainly demonstrated a great deal more interest in maritime endeavor than may have been traditionally assumed, their emphasis on this relatively late conglomeration of European and Middle Eastern, Turkish and Arab, Modern and Medieval interests can hardly be seen as archetypical. Khalileh has produced a seminal work on Islamic Maritime Law; however, he has merged hundreds of years of legal thought from various parts of the globe into a single, short text which differentiates by topic, rather than time or place. In short, while the reexamination of the Muslim powers and the sea has led to some important and fascinating scholarship, its scattered approach has done little to revise the view of the Arabs as a fundamentally land based peoples. Work in this area has been largely dominated by a few authors who have attempted to revitalize the concept of Arabs and the sea, as it were, from the ground up. These scholars, notably Fahmy and Hourani have seen the Arabs themselves (rather than the potentially all-encompassing ‘Muslims’) as important seafarers, in their own right, and it is toward the work of these scholars that this paper is directed, for these authors attempt to trace Arab seafaring back to its earliest, Pre-Islamic, autochthonous roots on the Arabian Peninsula.

As a starting point, both authors noted above agree that for the ancient Arabs, the sea, surrounding them as it did on three sides, was neither foreign nor particularly daunting. Hourani notes that the Arabian Peninsula is a fundamentally harsh environment in all respects and therefore communication by sea was, for its early

inhabitants, “no more formidable than the crossing of the deserts and mountains.”<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, he notes that the, “desert is as trackless as the sea”<sup>6</sup> and that it was probably this environmental coincidence that encouraged the early Arabs to develop astral navigation, as useful for crossing a featureless expanse of land as it would be on the water. Fahmy, notes that the earliest Arabs recognized the rich potential of the sea and utilized it for fish, pearls and coral.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he notes that although there is some scholarly disagreement on the importance of such references, pre-Islamic poetry is replete with allusions to maritime ventures, with travel aboard ships being often compared to crossing the desert on camel.<sup>8</sup>

While in agreement then that the earliest Arabs were not shy of the sea, Hourani and Fahmy soon diverge in the importance of the maritime world to the Arabs, and how control was maintained over it. Fahmy stresses in particular that the important trade between India and the Mediterranean was largely within their control. He notes that although the Ptolemies were important in developing this trade, “they refrained from encroaching upon the transport of goods by sea which the Arabs considered to be their exclusive right.”<sup>9</sup> He further adds that the Ptolemies limited their own maritime involvement in this commerce to some minor boat crossings in the Red Sea, leaving the Arabs control over the Indian Ocean, “master seamen who effectively barred imperial trade between Rome and India along the sea route.”<sup>10</sup> Even after Greek merchants discovered the secret of the monsoon trade winds in the Indian Ocean around 45 A.D.,

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<sup>5</sup>Hourani, 4.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>7</sup>Fahmy, 57.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 42.

“the Arabs were still masters of much of the trade and kept the upper hand.”<sup>11</sup>

Hourani, is more restrained in his celebration of Arab seafaring, largely restricting any Arab influence to the Red Sea.<sup>12</sup> Despite his acknowledgement of maritime ventures, he considers the Red Sea, rife with troublesome winds, hidden shoals and ubiquitous reefs, to have been so difficult and dangerous to navigate that the early Arabs avoided it whenever possible. He supports this idea noting that the, “Arabs developed camel routes along the whole western side of their peninsula,”<sup>13</sup> apparently preferring the dangers of the desert to those of the waves. While he agrees that Arabs gained substantially from the ancient trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, he attributes the uniting of these two great aquarian bodies to the Persians.<sup>14</sup>

While these two authors might disagree on the extent and strength of Arab sea power then, there are a few important points in common. First, and foremost, “from time immemorial...the coastal Arab had been a sailor and trader.”<sup>15</sup> Second, the Arabs, as a people, were never fundamentally afraid of the sea. Finally, while Fahmy places the focus of Arab sea power in the Indian Ocean, and Hourani prefers the Red Sea, both agree that the root of Arab maritime expertise arose in Southern Arabia, a land today occupied by the countries of Yemen and Oman.

It is here then, that this paper begins its own course, for it seems undeniable that if one is to seek the earliest stirrings of maritime endeavors in the Arabians, Southern Arabia offers the best starting place<sup>16</sup>. Not only have previous historians found the

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<sup>11</sup>Fahmy, 43.

<sup>12</sup>Hourani, 7.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>15</sup>Fahmy, 67.

<sup>16</sup> The geographic term of Southern Arabia may require some clarification. In modern times, Southern Arabia corresponds in large part to the contemporaneous states of Yemen and Oman. Indeed, ‘Yemen’ is

champions of the Arab seamen here, the peoples of Southern Arabia seem to have formed a coherently distinct people since the beginning of the historical record, allowing for a relatively easy focus for research. Indeed, while the term ‘Arab’ itself has been traced back to 835 B.C., it seems to have only slowly spread south, and it is not until the first century A.D. that it seems to be easily applied to the peoples of the entire peninsula.<sup>17</sup> This distinction was exemplified in the past through language, religion and culture, and to some extent, still persists in modern perceptions and prejudices between northern and southern Arabs.

Additionally, the location of a land which birthed several powerful, autochthonous kingdoms immediately adjacent to two rich seas offers a geographically likely candidate for early maritime endeavor. This likelihood is enhanced by Southern Arabia’s position as a central point between the great civilizations of Ethiopia, Rome and Egypt to the west and those of India and Persia to the east, presenting opportunities for large scale, lucrative, long distance trade. Additionally, while Arabia Felix was certainly within the sphere of influence of some of Antiquity’s greatest powers, it was also far enough away for autochthonous traditions to arise and be maintained. Moreover, and in conjunction with the above, the importance of maritime trade and resources to Southern Arabia is

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an ancient appellation which in the Classical Age roughly corresponded to the area known to the Romans as Arabia Felix<sup>16</sup>, renowned for its riches, in particular incense. This area was also the birth place of several native kingdoms whose influence extended far beyond their small territory. Some caution is required however, as ‘Southern Arabia’ also has a particular meaning in modern scholarship, where it is used to distinguish this area from Eastern and Central Arabia. These areas have been established as the foci of various disciplines, the former being the portion of the Peninsula bordering the Persian Sea and early on, within the cultural sphere of the most ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, and the later rising to prominence with the preaching of Muhammad and the spread of Islam. For the purposes of this paper, Southern or South Arabia will be used to refer to the southwestern portion of the Arabian Peninsula and will be freely interchanged with Yemen, or al-Yemen, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>17</sup> Klaus Schippmann, *Ancient South Arabia: From the Queen of Sheba to the Advent of Islam* (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2001), 3.

certainly borne out by later history, thus we need only seek a starting point for these practices. Finally, it avoids many of the difficulties facing scholars of Islamic history in distinguishing between the history of Arabs and Muslims, an issue often exacerbated by the speed with which Islam spread as well as the mobility of the Arab peoples. However distinct the peoples of Southern Arabia may have been, they were clearly recognized as Arabs by the time of Muhammad, and amongst the first converts to Islam. In short, Southern Arabia presents a fairly discreet geographic area for study, with both the opportunities and resources to build a strong maritime tradition, ancient roots and connections to the advent of Islam.

Yet if indeed a home of Arabian seamanship is to be found in the southern part of the Peninsula, certain questions immediately present themselves to the careful historian. One of the great turning points of Western History was undoubtedly the arrival of Muslim/Arab forces in the Mediterranean Sea. If the Arab peoples were the expert mariners that some seem to claim, then why, upon reaching the coast as part of their early expansion, did the Arab commanders immediately turn to recently conquered Syrian and Egyptian sailors to man their ships? Difficult as the Red Sea may be to navigate, its tricky winds and dangerous reefs should only have prepared Arab sailors for the comparative ease of Mediterranean sailing. Moreover, it would seem that any lack of familiarity with Mediterranean eccentricities would have been sufficiently overcome by being loyal participants in Muslim expansion rather than more or less hired hands. Speaking to this point, in the earliest Muslim sea battles, and victories, it is well attested that, “the sailors who were Copts, as distinct from Muslim warriors, appear to have taken

no part in the actual struggle.”<sup>18</sup> In such circumstances, it would appear that no knowledge of naval tactics or combat methods would have been required but rather expertise in mere seamanship. What then, indeed, happened to this supposed nautical expertise?

To shed some light upon these questions, this work takes a different approach. While earlier historians have combed through records, focused and expanded upon tantalizing suggestions of seafaring Arabs, this work will instead look at the broader context that both historical and archaeological evidence provides. This work then, focuses less on the occasional reference to an Arab ship owner, but more on the Southern Arabian world that such a ship owner would have lived in. In order to provide a sufficient context for such a sweeping endeavor, it examines the maritime history of the Southern Arabs in three, distinctive phases. Moving backwards through time, the first spans the first century, B.C. up until the advent of Islam, and covers South Arabia’s decline as an independent power in the face of Roman, Persian and Ethiopian influence. The second section begins in the tenth century, B.C., and explores the rise of the great South Arabian kingdoms and their trade networks which reached both east and west. Finally, the third section deals briefly with the earliest archaeological record of human inhabitants of the Peninsula, essentially examining evidence gleaned from Mesopotamian sources suggesting that seafaring, at least in the general vicinity, was both common and extensive. While this backward chronology is not the orthodox layout of historical writing, its purpose is to allow each of these time periods to be treated with the greatest sympathy toward the conclusions of Hourani and Fahmy, as well as others, for if a strong

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<sup>18</sup>Fahmy, 87.

maritime tradition was present in Southern Arabia on the eve of Muhammad, there may be reasons why it has garnered less space in the preserved memory of those times. Moreover of course, if such a tradition is not found, this is not to suggest that it did not exist previously. This paper thus goes further and further back, to discover what possible maritime cultural existed in the region that may have been overshadowed by later events. Ultimately however, I conclude that the cultural, social and economic development in the Southern Arabian Peninsula never supported the rise of a maritime tradition. Instead, geographical and historical circumstances existed which kept the people of Southern Arabia fundamentally focused on terrestrial concerns, and thus while references to more nautically inspired Arabs are accurate, they do not hint at the presence of a great maritime tradition, but instead merely underscore the adaptability and resourcefulness of individuals from this region.

## Southern Arabia on the Eve of Islam

In many ways, the rise of Islam greatly redirected the focus of attention in the Arabian Peninsula. Where the Bedouin tribes of the peninsula's center soon became known the world over as the founders of a new and powerful civilization, the classical peoples of the region had long seen Southern Arabia as a power in its own right, a bastion of civilization at the edge of an expanse of sand peopled only by barbaric nomads. The Southern Arabia however, that merged with the rest of the peninsula as the inspiration of Muhammad spread was not a confident and independent region, although the traces of its former glory remained. For several decades prior to the rise of Islam, Southern Arabia, had essentially been little more than a pawn in the constant battling of the Byzantine and Sasanid states, becoming more or less a Persian vassal by around the mid-sixth century AD. As a vassal state, the area retained a certain deal of autonomy, its dependent status being primarily marked by the remittance of taxes to the Sasanid central authority however, that Southern Arabia was a unique bastion of civilization is made clear by the fact that whereas in other areas of peninsula, urbane Persia was content to rule through client kings, its interest, and presence, in the Yemen was sufficient to have created a ruling class of "*abna*, sons of Persian fathers and Arab mothers."<sup>19</sup>

While far from independent, the Southern Arabia of this time was still a rich and well- populated region. What is interesting from a maritime standpoint is that while the sources of the time consistently note the importance of trade and commerce in Yemen, there is little if any reference to the nautical aspects of this trade. Instead, what seems to

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<sup>19</sup> Abdullah al-Askar, *al-Yamama in the Early Islamic Era* (Reading, United Kingdom: Ithaca Press, 2002), 60-61.

have sustained the region was its location at one end of a trade route running *overland* from Aden to Bahrain and on to Persia. Indeed, this trade route seems to have been so prosperous that its presence led to something of a commercial peak of Central Arabia's al-Yamama region as the midpoint for this commerce.<sup>20</sup> The goods South Arabia was contributing to this commerce are not clear, one of the only specific products mentioned being Yemeni swords.<sup>21</sup> Certainly, South Arabia was one of the richest agricultural regions of the peninsula, however, al-Yamama was at this time an exporter of produce, in particular the wheat which cities such as Mecca depended upon<sup>22</sup>, thus it seems unlikely that agricultural projects represented any significant contribution from al-Yemen. If the goods sought in Persia from the region were then essentially specialized products, the above mentioned swords and incense or other luxury goods long famous from the region, this may add additional explanation as to why maritime trade was not a necessity, as small scale luxury goods would not need the bulk transport which is one of the advantages of shipping.

Notably missing from any list of commercial items are foreign goods passing through the south. As noted earlier, Hourani attributed much of the trade between India and the Mediterranean to Persian, rather than Arab seamanship and he goes so far as to comment in particular on the lack of Arab sailing expertise in the Persian Gulf.<sup>23</sup> While this may initially seem rather anathema to the idea of Aden as a great port city, it becomes more coherent if Persian consolidation of the trade routes across the peninsula *reopened* land routes that had been previously abandoned. Indeed, what trade continued in the

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<sup>20</sup> Al-Askar, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

west, on the Red Sea portion of the sea route, seems to have been taken up by Byzantine activity as Persian dominance grew in the east.<sup>24</sup> It is not an unlikely explanation that far from active mariners, the Yemeni had earlier capitalized on their geographic position as a stopping point for foreign seamen coming from both directions. If, as Hourani suggests, Persians had dominated this eastern trade before, than as the land routes opened up due to Sasanid annexation, the Yemeni would have continued to ply their own goods along these terrestrial avenues while Persian sailors now went directly from India back up the Persian Gulf. This theory is bolstered to some extent by a comment of al-Askar. “Nizar al-Hadithi asserts that in the Falaj market goods from al-Yemen were sold to by the merchants of al-Yemen to merchants of al-Yamama who then sold these goods in Iraqi markets. There is however, no explanation of why Yemeni merchants could not sell their goods in Iraqi markets themselves.”<sup>25</sup> The evidence would seem to suggest that the Yemeni, in general, were not great travelers.

If there is little evidence for a strong Southern Arab merchant marine on the eve of Islam, there is even less to suggest a strong naval military tradition. According to Ibn Hisham, an eighth century editor of Muhammad’s biography, Persian rule in Southern Arabia commenced when the Yemeni requested assistance from the Sasanid King in order to overthrow their current rulers, an Ethiopian dynasty under the leadership of one Masruq ibn Abraha. The Persians arrived in ships, and were met on land by Yemeni support.<sup>26</sup> While it may be of little surprise that the Yemeni would offer only earthbound

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<sup>24</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 121.

<sup>25</sup> al-Askar, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001), 56-57.

contingents to fight on what was, after all, their home soil, it is noteworthy that the Persian forces arrived by sea. By the mid sixth century A.D., Persian dominance already held sway in much of the southeastern peninsula, thus if land was a preferred route, little should have stood in the way of an overland trek, yet the Sasanids chose a maritime entrance. There are many arguments as to whether land or sea is a more advantageous method for military action: Two points put forward in favor of the sea, which may be relevant to this action, are the speed with which large forces may be moved (in this case, it is claimed eight hundred men in eight ships)<sup>27</sup> and the correlating lack of supplies that need to be provided for the shorter travel period. While saying little about Yemeni naval abilities, this story does support the notion that the Persians were familiar and comfortable with sea travel and its many advantages.

More perhaps, can be learned from the earlier invasion of Southern Arabia by the Ethiopian Axumites in 525 A.D. The full explanation for this invasion and the parties involved is quite complex but the forces that finally arrived on Yemeni shores are said to have done so in seventy ships which sailed from both East Africa and Aqaba at the northern end of the Red Sea and arrived in an unidentified port.<sup>28</sup> In response to the invasion, the defending Arabs stretched a huge chain across the port's entrance. The chain, it seems, was not successful in stopping the Axumite force, however it was certainly memorable, indeed, "prominent enough to leave enduring traces both in the inscriptions of that time as well as in the later Arabic literary tradition."<sup>29</sup>

The precise importance of these events is difficult to parse out and requires a great

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<sup>27</sup> Hoyland, 56-57.

<sup>28</sup> Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

deal of reading between the lines. First, a force which apparently had access to an overland route into Arabia, chose to invade by sea, suggesting some familiarity with the advantages of naval warfare or at least transport. The most obvious source for an effective maritime force in the Red Sea at this time would have been the Byzantines: According to Procopius, the Byzantines actively supported the Axumite invasion of Southern Arabia, both on religious grounds and with the hope of disrupting Persian commercial interests.<sup>30</sup> Yet the obvious nature of this assumption does not make it any less problematic. The precise nature of Byzantine support is vague. The only specific reference to Byzantine troops in the records indicate that they would have to have been brought to East Africa for the expedition and thus were not presumably, naval.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it is far from clear that the Byzantines actually did so directly support the action. The source material, both in inscriptions and later writings, seems to consider this event a decidedly Axumite invasion. Indeed, the aftermath of the expedition resulted primarily in a power struggle between Ethiopian Christians and local, Bedouin Sheikhs. Finally, the need for Byzantine forces to disrupt Persian trade in the area via a proxy invasion is difficult to understand if they maintained such maritime strength in the Red Sea.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the makeup of the invading armada, they did chose specifically to land at a port (marsa),<sup>33</sup> thus this was no mere expedient transportation of troops across the

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<sup>30</sup> Bowersock. *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity*, 24-25.

<sup>31</sup> Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis*, 97.

<sup>32</sup> It must be noted however, that it is no less problematic to attribute this strong maritime endeavor to the Axumites, who in their own right do not seem to have been historically noted as a strong naval power. Indeed, the concept of 'Persian Commercial Interests' is rather vague: Because Byzantium sought to disrupt them through naval action in the Red Sea, it is a natural assumption that they were both maritime in nature and conducted along this body of water, but this is not necessarily the case. It is possible that these interests were instead maintained through Sasanid control over land routes, both from India to Persia, and through the Arabian Peninsula. In such a case, Byzantine sea action would have served to create competition without direct, naval confrontation.

<sup>33</sup> Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis*, 98.

Red Sea but instead a naval expedition that recognized the necessity of a naval target.

Finally, and most important, while the records of this event, whether hyperbolic or not, mention such specific details as seventy ships and a huge chain, they make no mention of any attempt on the part of the Southern Arabians to defend themselves *at sea*. Indeed, the only maritime action noted was an attempt to close a port, a purely defensive effort and one which, although it might suggest some awareness of defending from naval entry, offers little in support of naval prowess. Indeed, the mere fact that this chain carried such weight in local memory argues against it. The drawing of chains across ports as a defensive measure is an ancient tactic in the Mediterranean (and other maritime areas) and would therefore seem an unlikely event to maintain such historical significance in the minds of a people well versed in naval actions.

Despite the difficulties of interpreting the exact nature of the events that occurred in 525 A.D., certain conclusions do seem clear: First, there were sizeable naval resources that could be drawn upon in the Red Sea. Second, there was some knowledge of naval combat as a distinct form of action as opposed to mere naval transport of land troops. Finally, although it is not clear who had control of these resources, of the four groups having ongoing interests in the region, Ethiopian, Byzantine, Arab and Persian, the Arabs are clearly the least likely candidate: The vessels were utilized by the Axumites, with the support of the Byzantines. If the Persian commercial interests noted were maritime, there was no military response to defend them and the Arab naval countermeasures were purely defensive.

This lack of any reference to a skilled naval force seems consistent as one goes back through the history of events in Southern Arabia. In the Classical period, Hourani

determined that the Ptolemies were in complete charge of the Red Sea<sup>34</sup> and added that commercial shipping through it was protected against Arab pirates by the presence of a Roman fleet,<sup>35</sup> and supported by a recognized guild of Red Sea captains out of Palmyra.<sup>36</sup> In his notations on the translation of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, Schoff acknowledges Ptolemaic dominance however adds that prior to Rome's expansion into Egypt, the Southern Arabs had dominated this trade, Indian ships being refused entry beyond the Bab al-Mandab.<sup>37</sup> Here we are presented with somewhat of a conundrum: On the one hand, this time period presents the best evidence of a strong, early Arab maritime tradition. On the other, such a tradition seems to be depicted as quite primitive by any standards.

The unknown writer of the *Periplus* notes that the Arab ships utilized on the Red Sea (and beyond) were not made of nailed planks but were instead of two types: Either they utilized stitched cord in place of nails or were merely large rafts floating on inflated animal skins. Ships whose planks are held together with stitched cord were common not only in the Red Sea, but also along the western coast of India.<sup>38</sup> The value of such ships is the subject of much debate, for while stitched construction provides for a very flexible hull, it is also undeniably weaker than other types of plank construction, either nailed or otherwise joined. Some authors thus favor utility as the predominant factor, claiming that stitched construction is optimal in the areas where it has predominated while other scholars consider the expense of iron nails to have been the deciding factor. The debate is

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<sup>34</sup>Hourani, 24.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Wilfred H. Schoff, Trans. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade In the Indian Ocean By a Merchant Of the First Century* (London: Longmans, Green, And Co., 1912), 89.

<sup>38</sup> Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Archaeology of Seafaring In Ancient South Asia* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 59-61.

not eased by the observation that up until modern times, both types of ship have continued in use, side by side.<sup>39</sup> Whatever the reasons for stitched construction, what is clear is that ships built in this fashion seem to have offered few, if any advantages over the Greco-Roman type vessels, at least in terms of long distance trade<sup>40</sup> for with the Ptolemaic entrance into the Red Sea, a new era of maritime trade was quickly established.

The first important change for al-Yemen was the replacement of Arab dominance with that of Ptolemaic/Roman, as noted above by Hourani, a replacement which seems to have taken place with little or no resistance on the part of the Southern Arabs. By the time the *Periplus* was written, sometime around 60 A.D., it can be assumed that this replacement was already well underway if not complete. The assumption seems fairly safe as it was perhaps less than twenty years earlier that the second major change occurred, the Greek discovery of the Monsoon Tradewinds. The regular pattern of these winds allows for a direct route across the Indian Ocean, at least for ships strong enough to withstand the rough seas created by them (i.e., not ships of stitched construction). This discovery permitted direct trade between the Mediterranean and India, thus allowing the Romans to circumvent either Arab or Persian middlemen and it was this discovery that, at least in the view of some scholars, led to the blossoming of the sea trade through the Red Sea.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps importantly, the *Periplus* notes that at the time of its writing, a major port on the Arabian Coast at the base of the Red Sea, was, “crowded with Arab shipowners and seafaring men.”<sup>42</sup> The deliberate reference of this statement is difficult to ascertain with certainty however, it can be interpreted to suggest that the Arabs, at least at this time,

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<sup>39</sup> Ray, 61.

<sup>40</sup>Hourani, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Schippmann, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Schoff, Trans., 30.

were already acting as middlemen, owning ships and shipping interests but not necessarily engaging in active travel themselves. There are also references throughout the *Periplus* to Arab vessels and rafts which might have focused on local needs: Either as longboats and loading vessels for cities which offered no convenient harbor, for very short distance, coastal trade, such as between the Southern Arabs and the Nabataeans or for internal use, such as bringing incense for distribution from government controlled market centers. The author of the *Periplus* may thus be distinguishing between a sort of small scale and protected local maritime commerce conducted by Arabs, and an international maritime commerce conducted by foreigners, with Arab (Southern Arabian) oversight. While these are certainly not inarguable deductions, they would comport well with later trends as we have seen above, where the Yemeni appear to have been more captains of commerce than journeymen per se.

The *Periplus* also mentions, again supported by Hourani, concerns of Arab piracy along the Red Sea, noting that those, “sailing off the middle course are plundered, and those surviving shipwrecks are taken for slaves.”<sup>43</sup> This seems to suggest once more a great limitation on the ability of Arab seamen as opposed to their Greco-Roman counterparts. The Mediterranean takeover of shipping in the Red Sea, occurring as it seems to have without serious contest, suggests that the Arab ships, effective though they might have been in local conditions were not much of a match for the strong hulled Greek craft. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that Arab piracy was depicted as a coastal affair which could be avoided simply by following a more open sea route. Indeed, as the coastal portions of the Red Sea are also noted as being generally dangerous

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<sup>43</sup> Schoff, Trans., 29.

due to their lack of harbors and proliferation of reefs, it may be that the greater danger was natural, rather than anthropic. In short, at least from the entrance of Greek sailors into the Red Sea, Southern Arabian maritime endeavors seem to have been easily and in a sense, willingly outcompeted. The inhabitants of al-Yemen had only ever managed to dominate trade on the Red Sea itself and with the advent of competition from the north, they were content to withhold only a position as a stopover point, through which others flowed. Furthermore, the *Periplus* also notes that Southern Arabia imported only a little wheat, it being able to produce most of what it required, and exported myrrh, alabaster, ivory and tortoise shell.<sup>44</sup> This export of luxury goods, as noted above, belies the need for shipping as an effective way to transport bulk items. Strong ships and an effective navy would have been unnecessary to make certain that such products made it to commercial ports, overland routes being available even if not preferred, and as long as trade continued to flow through South Arabia, it is understandable that the origin of the sailors transporting it would have been relatively unimportant to the Yemeni themselves. Moreover, there is the question of cost. Mediterranean interests in the area seem to have been limited to promoting and protecting trade<sup>45</sup>. Small scale and coastal trade appears to have continued and perhaps prospered under Greco-Roman protection, and if these foreign powers were willing to supply it, there would have been little reason for the Yemeni to put the effort into developing their own naval forces.

In summary, the centuries leading up to the rise of Islam offer little evidence to

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<sup>44</sup> Schoff, Trans, 285.

<sup>45</sup> It is of course possible, that the Greco-Roman naval forces referred to, protected only Greco-Roman ships, but even if this was the case, eliminating pirates would have also benefited Arab ship owners. As long as these local ships were not targeted themselves, for either elimination or plundering, by this foreign navy, and there is nothing in any source to suggest that they were, any action against pirates would have been an advantage to any maritime trading party in the Red Sea.

suggest that the Southern Arabs were great or even willing mariners. The strongest evidence in support of this conclusion is probably the failure of the rapidly expanding Muslim armies to utilize any native talent on the Mediterranean. In most other military areas, during this initial expansion, Arab might was not only tried, but preferred, yet on the sea it was considered better to pay conquered foreigners to man the ships, even if the Arabs themselves would man the weapons required for victory. This lack of nautical military prowess is underscored by Yemeni failure to defend in kind against either commercial maritime competition, or repeated invasions by sea, instead offering only the most dismal of maritime defensive moves.

Instead, while the Southern Arabs seemed to have been willing to engage in maritime commerce, this willingness seems to have been a pragmatic stopgap rather than an ingrained tradition. The natural products of al-Yemen did not necessitate a strong merchant marine: On the one hand, the land was fertile enough to provide most if not all of its agricultural requirements. On the other, its valuable and internationally sought after exports were small scale luxury items that could be transported as easily over land as by sea. Moreover, as a trading center, the region could thrive without its citizens undergoing the inherent dangers of travel required to move goods from one market to another. Situated between large capacity markets in India, the Mediterranean or Persia, trade would flow through the region regardless of who manned the helm. Moreover, without the need of a strong maritime commercial fleet, it is hardly surprising that a military one failed to develop as, for the most part Southern Arabia's battles could, and would, be fought on land. Where local need required, small but effective Arab vessels were available, but beyond this, foreign participants were willing to shoulder the risk, and

defense, of the nautical trade networks. On balance indeed, it seems almost absurd to fling oneself into the questionable forces of the sea when others were consistently willing to do so instead.

## Happy Arabia:

### Southern Arabia at Its Apex

The fact that in the centuries prior to the blossoming of Islam, little evidence can be found for a native, Southern Arabian maritime tradition does not mean that such a tradition never existed. Indeed, as noted above, prior to the arrival of the Greek Ptolemies, the inhabitants of Southern Arabia seem to have been the dominant sailors on the Red Sea and likely participants beyond. If their own autochthonous nautical efforts were eventually overshadowed, this would not be surprising given the circumstances noted and it would certainly not erase earlier achievements. Moreover, as has been discussed in the centuries already reviewed, Southern Arabia was in somewhat of a decline: Although it remained a relatively prosperous region, it was also increasingly embroiled in the struggles of the Persian and Mediterranean powers whose political and economic might were far greater. As such, many of its underlying native foundations may be viewed only imperfectly through the lens of foreign interests and observers. In contrast, this section examines Southern Arabia from the first stirrings of its homegrown, imperial ambitions in the tenth century B.C., until their eventual decline before the expanding influence of Ptolemaic Egypt. Because the history of the kingdoms that arose during this period is relatively unknown, a more lengthy summary is perhaps justified than might otherwise be necessary.

Starting in the tenth century, B.C., the history of South Arabia is on fairly firm ground, for it is at this point that the region's first, well defined, independent kingdoms arise. Whereas the vast majority of our references to the region in the previous section

are gleaned from foreign sources, much of our knowledge of these powers comes from monuments that they themselves raised, inscribed using their own languages and numbering close to ten thousand.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, whereas the later sources are complicated by often rather vague references to powers in the area, these South Arabian inscriptions offer an opposite, though no less perplexing problem, “they almost never allude to events outside South Arabia.”<sup>47</sup> This has led to furious arguments in the scholarly community regarding the formation of some kind of chronology for the area and thus, though we can to some extent trace the rise and fall of these powers, specific dates remain extremely problematic.

Regardless of the finer points of chronology, the earliest known kingdom to establish itself in Southern Arabia was that of Saba, a power that long ago entered the popular western imagination as the home of the legendary Queen of Sheba. Whether or not a contemporary of Solomon ruled there, the kingdom of Saba had its origins in the immediate environs of Marib and its oasis.<sup>48</sup> The earliest reference to the Sabaeans comes from an Assyrian document which notes that a caravan from Teima and Saba was raided near the city of Ḥindanu, near present day Abu Kemal, an event that probably took place between 1075 and 890, B.C.<sup>49</sup> These dates are drawn in part from the fact that within their span, Ḥindanu paid tribute to Assyria in goods which included myrrh and alabaster, and thus would have needed to import this rare commodity from South Arabia, in this case, Saba, and for our purposes, contain several important implications. First, it is

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<sup>46</sup> Holland, 36.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> For the edification of the reader, Breton notes that this city was most likely known as Mariaba originally, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Schippmann, 54.

interesting that from the very earliest mention of a specific South Arabian entity, luxury goods, and in particular incense, is also attested, an association that, as we have seen, would carry on for at least the next millennium and a half. Second, it also demonstrates, at an early date, the mercantile nature of South Arabia, for the caravan is mentioned as one of Saba, rather than merely one that carried myrrh. Even if Saba was at this point far removed from its later royal aspirations, the people must have been sufficiently well known in Assyria to garner specific mention. Additionally, the fact that Saba was not only trading with, but was well enough known to be mentioned in Assyria possibly lends support to the idea that South Arabia may have been connected within the Mesopotamian trade web. This final point is lent additional weight, as some scholars have posited due to linguistic similarities, that the Sabaeans may have migrated to South Arabia from an original homeland in Eastern or Central Arabia.<sup>50</sup> While all of these points lend credence to the idea of an early South Arabian presence with the trading networks of Mesopotamia, they do not support the idea of a people vested in maritime power, and in fact would seem to suggest the opposite. While the sea as a means of travel has often been cited for its relative speed and ease, the early Sabaeans apparently chose to travel by caravan, a decision which perhaps has bearing on their later comfort with land rather than sea routes over which to engage in commerce.

The lack of maritime influence only becomes more emphatic as Saba grows into a significant power. Whatever their position amongst the various peoples of the peninsula during the time of the caravan raid, they soon became a centralizing force in the region.

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<sup>50</sup>Schippmann, 54. Schippmann also notes that this claim is somewhat controversial, with other scholars positing a location for the Sabaeian homeland further southwest in the Arabian Peninsula.

It has been conjectured that the mountainous valleys of South Arabia inherently fragmented power in the region and instead encouraged the formation of small communities, communities that would have been bound together through some type of cult activity.<sup>51</sup> In support of this theory, it would seem that the name Saba never designated a particularly large area, but rather, a people in the Wadi Dhana centered around their capital Ma'rib, who exerted influence over additional tribes, either as direct dependents or as vassal states that were offered protection in return for tribute.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the leader of Saba was designated *mukarrib*, which would translate to something along the lines of 'federator' and many inscriptions refer to Saba and the Union, a union which was celebrated in formal ceremonies and to which monuments were raised inscribing various members beginning in the seventh century, B.C.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, entry into the union was not always peaceful and it seems that, at least in the beginning, Saba required military persuasion, which came early on in the form of one particular leader, Karib'il Watar. Karib'il Watar claimed to have won eight victories and to have spread the power of Saba to all the edges of the desert by the end of his reign. Of particular relevance to this work were his first two targets, the Kingdom of Awsan centered in the fertile, Markha Valley to the southeast of Ma'rib, and that of Nashshan, to the northwest, depending on the agricultural products of Wadi Madhab and Wadi Kharid. These goals provide a clear outline of what motivated Saba's expansion: Awsan controlled not only rich, agricultural resources, but incense producing territories as well. Moreover, the Markha Valley sculpted the northeast-southwest caravan route from this

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<sup>51</sup> Holland, 36.

<sup>52</sup> Schippmann, 56.

<sup>53</sup> Breton, 32-33.

wealthy region, into Saba. Nashshan likewise, was situated over a major caravan route, this one connecting Saba to the north, and of course beyond, to the great markets of Persia and the Mediterranean. After victories over both of these kingdoms, Karib'il Watar would go on to conquer more coastal areas, and possibly, to invade Eritrea, where Sabaeen inscriptions from this period have been found<sup>54</sup>, but from its first push toward regional hegemony, we see that Saba was primarily interested in control of agricultural lands, and caravan routes.

The demonstrable success of this early consolidation, quickly mitigated by the fractured geography of the region, produced rivals which sought to emulate Saba's success. While the exact relationships are somewhat unclear, the powers of Ma'in, Qataban and Hadramawt soon developed as vassals, allies, rivals and eventually independent kingdoms in their own right. During the period which stretched from around 400 B.C. to around 125 B.C., these four kingdoms existed in a state of some balance, and this stretch of time may in many ways be seen as the acme of South Arabian autonomous growth. Regardless of which kingdom may have been in ascendancy or decline at any given period, the pattern set by Karib'il Watar seems to have always dominated. Control was gleaned from terrestrial caravan routes and agricultural potential, usually realized through the maintenance of complex hydrological projects.

On the one hand, it is during this period that South Arabian influence in maritime matters must have been at its height. An inscription in the Ma'in language exists on the Greek island of Delos, attesting to the wide spread travel of the kingdom's merchants.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Breton, 39.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 97. There is evidence however, to suggest that Ma'in's reliance on commerce may have led them to be regarded as socially inferior.

Additionally, inscriptions from South Arabia note the consistent import of foreign wives into the Kingdoms, suggesting a cosmopolitan engagement with the Mediterranean and Persian powers. Finally, it was during this period that Greek influence was only beginning to infiltrate the Red Sea and thus this must be the epoch when Arab seafaring was either at its apex or still maintained some degree of balanced competition with the Hellenes.

On the other hand, many scholars of the area have considered this, “the period of “royal caravan leaders,”<sup>56</sup> where the four kingdoms essentially vied with each other over the overland incense trade routes. It may be the case then that Mediterranean trade was largely ancillary to what the South Arabians considered their primary means of wealth, trade with Persia, (at this time the Parthians). Later evidence supports this supposition: A drop in the Kingdom of Ma’in’s fortunes has been traced to their loss of control over the overland incense trade routes and a subsequent turn to maritime trade.<sup>57</sup> One of the reasons Rome was finally moved to attack South Arabia itself (c. 35 B.C.) was in order to secure direct trade of incense and silk via the sea, as the land route coming from the East was subject to numerous difficulties. Moreover, the South Arabians at this time had already begun to strengthen their ties with Persia, ties that would seem to have continued until the advent of Islam, and thus the Romans were anxious to gain an independent hold on a trade route which could be protected from their ancient rivals.

Perhaps most important of all, archaeological evidence from this period does little to promote the idea of a maritime peoples, instead illuminating a group that appear fundamentally terrestrial. Essentially, the power and independence of Southern Arabia

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<sup>56</sup> Schippmann, 60.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 90.

was built upon the complex and intricate workings of their irrigation systems, built with hydrological expertise evidenced as far back as the late third millennium B.C.<sup>58</sup> These systems allowed water to flow over crops in the long desert months and for the violent rains of the monsoon to be curtailed in the rainy season. Crops and agriculture provided for a larger population and this larger population in turn provided for the growth and power of the region, especially when compared to the sparse resources of the rest of the Peninsula. This recognition that land and agriculture was nearly synonymous with power is evident in almost every aspect of Southern Arabian life. The religion acknowledged several gods but the chief amongst these reigned over irrigation and the harvest.<sup>59</sup> Indeed beyond these larger themes, only gods of mountains, borders and oaths have been identified although there did exist a panoply of tutelary deities honored by particular communities or cities. All of these deities were supported by temples that controlled considerable wealth garnered by control of extensive tracts of land.<sup>60</sup>

Beyond religious considerations, simple identity was tied to the land itself. Southern Arabian society was divided into three tiers of identity, correlating with tribal affiliation, clan membership, and subclan identification, a system which not only appears to have been remarkably stable from the most ancient times, but to a large degree continues to the present day.<sup>61</sup> “Each tribe took its name from the territory in which it was located,”<sup>62</sup> and thus identity at the most fundamental tier, was intrinsically tied to the land. This is not to suggest that individuals could not move within this system, or even

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<sup>58</sup> Schippmann, 73.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>61</sup> Breton, 95.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

travel extensively, and still maintain a place within such a structure, but it certainly did not encourage the rise of a social group whose identity would have been more defined by roving upon the waves than owning fields. Indeed, even identifying with a city or urban center allows for a potentially greater degree of movement. One can, and often does move from place to place within urban boundaries, but it was not cities with which Southern Arabs found self-identification, for to take a single example, “A Minaean took his identity from his clan and tribe, but the city was not named for any one clan.”<sup>63</sup>

The rural repercussions of this social structure are seemingly echoed throughout Southern Arabian culture. Wealth and status of the secular elite seem to have been irrevocably tied to farming and land ownership, with the nobility engaging in warfare and agriculture, and often specifically disdaining to enter into commerce<sup>64</sup>. Even the architecture of the region reflects this concern, for the tower house, still famous in modern day Yemen, was the dominant structure in its ancestral lands as well. Such vertical architecture predominated not only in cities, but in the countryside as well, where it is recognized as ensuring, “adequate surveillance of orchards and vineyards.”<sup>65</sup>

Even if the lower end of the social ladder was not able to own land or practice agriculture as the elites did, it would appear that such things were never far from their minds. Peasants appear to have lived predominantly in the fields, rather than in poor, urban areas, where their homes mimicked the tower houses of the elites on a lesser scale. Moreover, “a number of edicts promulgated between the fourth and second centuries B.C. suggest that the fund of communally owned property gradually diminished while that of

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<sup>63</sup> Breton, 95.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 83.

individual landowners increased.”<sup>66</sup> The large tracts of land owned by elites seem to have remained relatively stable, thus this, along with the fact that in even the smallest villages, one or two larger homes would arise amongst the smaller kind, would suggest that peasants were able to move up in society. When they did so however, they emulated the nobility and any wealth accumulated through the ‘lesser’ trades of commerce or artistry was invested in land. Moreover, besides the grand inscriptions of cities and rulers, there appear numerous, so called, peasant inscriptions, which are almost exclusively devoted to agricultural concerns.<sup>67</sup>

In summary then, the kingdoms of Southern Arabia arose over control of two major resources: Agricultural lands and caravan routes. The state existed primarily to defend these commodities, most often from local rivals, whose presence was nearly assured by the fractured nature of the geographical landscape, and thus there was little wealth, or inclination, to invest in maritime commerce. Moreover, this focus on land and crop production as the basis of wealth was reiterated in every facet of Yemeni society. Identity itself was a reference to land, as was religious conviction, wealth and prestige. Some degree of maritime exploitation must have existed, but this was a means of subsistence, adequate only to gain the resources to move beyond it and enter into ‘polite’ society. Even if the occasional individual might have looked to the sea for fortune, it seems unlikely that they did so for a future. Given these circumstances, it is a fair assumption that no culturally supported maritime tradition had fertile ground in which to grow.

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<sup>66</sup> Breton, 103.

<sup>67</sup> Schippmann, 85.

## Up From the Sands of Time

There still exists however, the possibility that maritime activity played a greater role in the life of Southern Arabs, prior to the rise of independent states in the region. The history of Mesopotamia is, at least for the Western World, synonymous with the history of civilization. Not surprisingly, the earliest written records also record the earliest references to maritime power and while Mesopotamia itself may have been primarily concerned with terrestrial matters, or at the most riparian concerns, it is clear that they recognized the importance of the sea for trade and travel, especially when dealing with foreign powers. Indeed some of these records even seem to refer to a dialect or occupational jargon known as “eme-ma<sub>2</sub>-lah<sub>4</sub>” or ‘language of sailors’, although thus far, scholars have found no written examples of the language<sup>68</sup>. It would seem more likely than not then, that Southern Arabia, so close to the region, would have been encompassed in this early sea faring community and that a maritime tradition arose amongst its peoples that perhaps persisted, though later pushed to the margins of society.

Amongst the most ancient of the foreign powers mentioned in the extant texts are Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha. Precise identification of these lands remains difficult, especially as there is good evidence that the names might have been used to designate widely divergent areas over time.<sup>69</sup> Dilmun, for example, is thought to have eventually come to represent Bahrain however, archaeological finds argue in favor of the theory that originally, Dilmun referred to a portion of the eastern Arabian Peninsula west of modern

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<sup>68</sup> Hayes, John L. *A Manual of Sumerian Grammar and Texts*, Second Revised and Expanded Edition. (Udena Publications, Malibu, 2000), 8.

<sup>69</sup> It is argued that for the Babylonian scribes, the goods imported from a foreign power were of greater import than the power’s specific location thus, over time, the state a given name referred to could change as did the imports from that region. Potts, D.T., *The Arabian Gulf In Antiquity*, Vol. 1. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 134.

Bahrain.<sup>70</sup> In these early times, Dilmun was a trading partner of the highest import to Mesopotamia, supplying a variety of vital natural resources including much needed copper, building stone and timber. Of special importance is that ships from Dilmun are also specifically referenced as importing timber from foreign lands, i.e. not from Dilmun itself.<sup>71</sup> Such texts, dated to around 2500 BC, imply that at least by this time, there was some kind of international shipping network in place, a network which would appear to have included middle men, i.e. the Dilmunites, of some kind. The importation of timber into the arid Near East has remained crucial until quite modern times, with Arab dhows bringing wood from both East Africa and India.

Unfortunately, there is nothing in the texts to suggest where the ships of Dilmun were bringing timber from however, several factors might suggest that they were utilizing the same resources as their later counterparts, and thus, in heading west toward East Africa, would have been in contact with Southern Arabia. First, India and Africa are the most logical sources of timber of sufficient size and strength to make effective building materials.<sup>72</sup> Second, accepting the presence of some type of shipping network, it seems unlikely that Dilmun ships would have only traveled to the east, as even coastal sailing would have allowed them to explore in both directions. Third, limited trade goods from Southern Arabia have been identified in Mesopotamia, notably ochre and diorite, suggesting some trade was occurring with the region although whether it arrived by land or ship is as yet, impossible to tell.<sup>73</sup> And finally, general consensus considers the

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<sup>70</sup> Potts, 86.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>72</sup> Timber was also readily available of course, from the north, and there is ample evidence that this was also imported into the Mesopotamian region, but it would make little sense for ships of Dilmun to have been involved in this trade.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Bertman, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*(New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2003), 255.

kingdom of Meluḥḥa to have been located in the Indus Valley. Clearly, Meluḥḥa traded with Mesopotamia, as there is even evidence of Meluḥḥa colonies existing within the region.<sup>74</sup> It seems unlikely then, that ‘ships of Dilmun’ would have been required to facilitate this trade. It is not, of course, inconceivable that Dilmun shipping retained a monopoly over maritime transport for some time, but even if that were the case, one might expect the products of this trade to be identified as coming from Meluḥḥa, rather than merely from, ‘foreign lands’. In short, even at the early date of 2500 BC, it seems likely that Southern Arabia was part of a vast shipping network. The evidence does not support the idea of Southern Arabian shipping, but logic would suggest that they may have at least played a role similar to that they would hold in the Classical Period, as a stopover point between east and west.

Later texts offer support for the continued existence of this maritime trade system, even as the players change. Indeed, it would seem that the early emphasis on Dilmun merely gave way to a more international situation, where, “ships from Dilmun, Magan, and Meluḥḥa docked at the quay of Agade.”<sup>75</sup> Moreover, there is textual material supporting the idea that at this point, if not before, the value of naval transport for warfare was well established. The relevant text involves some type of conflict between Akkad and Magan. Like Dilmun, the exact location of Magan continues to be a source of debate however, it is generally held to have been in modern day Oman. The text claims that an Akkadian leader, Maniṣtuṣu, “had ships built to cross the Lower Sea, where a force

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<sup>74</sup> Parpola, Simo, Asko Parpola and Robert H. Brunswig, Jr. 1977. “The Meluḥḥa Village: Evidence of Acculturation of Harappan Traders in Late Third Millennium Mesopotamia?” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 20, no. 2: 129-165.

<sup>75</sup> Potts, 136.

drawn from thirty-two cities had assembled to do battle.”<sup>76</sup> Beyond its early reference to naval concerns, the text suggests two additional, important facts. First, Maniștușu travels across the Lower Sea after claiming victories in modern day Iran. The fact that he had ships built for this purpose, rather than simply marching back into Mesopotamia and down into Magan suggests clear recognition of the speed which sea travel could offer when necessary. Second, clearly, a force drawn from thirty-two cities suggests a substantial number of troops and the fact that Maniștușu was victorious suggests that he had required the transport of a significant force himself.<sup>77</sup>

It is difficult to doubt then, that a world of maritime endeavor was swirling around al-Yemen, one in which the sea was recognized for the advantages it offered to both military and commercial activity. But how fully tuned in was Southern Arabia to the larger events of the age? Inquiry into this subject has yielded only the most ambiguous of answers. Archaeological work suggests that the oldest clear sign of human habitation yet discovered on Arabian soil lies within South Arabia, a site known as Jabal Tala, where Achuelean hand-axes have been discovered dating back more than three hundred millennia.<sup>78</sup> Despite such an impressive pedigree however, archaeological interest in South Arabia has not fared as well as in other areas of the peninsula, leaving large gaps in the record which are only slowly being filled in. While much work remains, enough has been done to satisfy most scholars that South Arabia’s importance dates far back into the earliest reaches of humankind, especially as a link between Asia and Africa,

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<sup>76</sup> Potts, 136.

<sup>77</sup> It should be noted however, that Maniștușu uses ships only to transport his forces, and there is no suggestion of any actual, naval combat.

<sup>78</sup> Schippmann, 31-33.

and that it has been continuously inhabited from the earliest times.<sup>79</sup> Fortunately, other areas of the Arabian Peninsula have fared better, and excavations in these areas show that the earliest inhabitants were fully exploiting all the resources that the sea had to offer, including fish, shellfish and sea mammals. Some sites, such as Al-Markh in Bahrain, show that, “virtually all bones recovered were those of fish.”<sup>80</sup> Bahrain is admittedly far from the South Arabia forming the focus of this paper however, the fact that such exploitation was taking place, coupled with the determination that habitation in the South has been both ancient and continuous argues in favor of the fact that South Arabs were utilizing the sea for its resources from a very early date. Again, this does not imply maritime activity per se, but it is likely that in conjunction with simple fishing and sea mammal hunting, that at least small craft were being used to ply the waters of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

As noted above however, the archaeological record of South Arabia is not well developed. A number of factors have contributed to this unfortunate gap, including limited and relatively late access by the Western European archaeologists that would uncover cities such as Ur and Uruk, later marginalization of South Arabia under the Islamic powers of the Middle East and social unrest lasting up through modern times. More damaging however than these factors combined, is Southern Arabia’s geographical location, just slightly too far from the great Mesopotamian centers of civilization to share in the great discoveries that first rocketed archaeology into the academic limelight. Sadly, this situation is one that has been exacerbated by modern scholarship, rather than

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<sup>79</sup> Schippmann, 35.

<sup>80</sup> Potts, 52.

alleviated by it, for while the Arabian Peninsula has been linked more and more closely with the ancient civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, political stability as well as proximity has favored archaeological exploration of Eastern Arabia. This exploration has yielded various finds, some quite impressive, but rather than increasing the scope of excavation, these finds have thus far merely led to a heavy emphasis on the eastern portion of the Peninsula in scholarly writings. This emphasis however, should be taken in context, for if Southern Arabia has not been the recipient of the same extensive studies as its neighbors, its importance to ancient Mesopotamia may still lie beneath the sands. Such a claim might appear spurious however, early scholars, unfettered by an unequal trove of archaeological evidence, certainly suggested a greater role for Southern Arabia than is now generally recognized. Many such conclusions were fueled by the plethora of ambiguous and enigmatic texts whose discovery represented part of the great treasure caches from cities like Ur and Lagash. Part of the problem is that, while our ability to translate these documents continues to grow, even now, “Knowledge of Sumerian is still in a rudimentary, experimental stage where scholars differ on essential points, so that translations, even by highly competent scholars, may diverge so much that one would never guess that they rendered the same text,”<sup>81</sup> and indeed, that “there are as many Sumerian languages as there are Sumerologists”.<sup>82</sup>

Incomplete though our understanding may be, hints in these documents led to early claims that Southern Arabia may have figured as a maritime power in its own right,

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<sup>81</sup> *The Harps that Once...Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pg. xv.

<sup>82</sup> Igor Diakonoff, “Ancient Writing and Ancient Written Language: Pitfalls and Peculiarities in the Study of Sumerian”. In *Sumerological Studies in Honor of Thorkild Jacobsen*. Assyriological Studies 20, 99-121.

even in this ancient period. Mesopotamian texts refer, at various points, to a kingdom known simply as the Sealand. Within vague texts, the Sealand itself stands out for its ambiguity and little is known about it except for a few king lists and some possible references to conflicts with Mesopotamia. Initially, it was thought that the Sealand was simply a reference to some area in Southern Mesopotamia, near the mouth of the rivers, where reeds and marshes predominate, and indeed was perhaps some nickname for Uruk itself.<sup>83</sup> As more texts came to light however, the Sealand seemed to suggest both a far more distant, and significant power, one which Sargon of Akkad had struggled to conquer and whose kings had reigned for centuries.<sup>84</sup> Examination of these conflicts led some early scholars to posit a significant role for the nation, noting that its mention, though rare, implies a substantial power which seems to have lasted for several centuries.

Unfortunately, this early hypothesis, that the Sealand, a mighty rival of the greatest Mesopotamian city states, might denote Southern Arabia, remains the strongest claim to a maritime culture in the region. To date, there has been no discovery of large, urban ruins in the Yemen dating to this period. Furthermore, as more sites have been discovered elsewhere, the link between the historical analysis of Mesopotamia's ancient records and archaeological analysis of extent remains, has grown more tenuous. Without a site to connect definitively to the ancient references, the Sealand is largely ignored in current scholarship. To be clear, location of the Sealand has not been proven outside of Southern Arabia, but speculation has nearly ceased as other sites, such as Dilmun have been discovered and thus offer more immediately, scholarly gratification.

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<sup>83</sup> Raymond Philip Dougherty. *The Sealand of Ancient Arabia.*, Hew Haven: Yale University Press, 1932, 14-15.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.



## Flotsam

If we retrace the growth of civilization in Southern Arabia, from small groups living on the borderlands of the great Mesopotamian civilizations, gradually flowering into strong and independent kingdoms and finally being absorbed into the more powerful interests of Rome, Persia and eventually, a coherent Islamic identity, one certainly sees the development and flowering of a great and unique culture. But there is little to suggest that it was a culture that saw its fortunes or its future on the sea. Certain facts present themselves: Without question, the earliest inhabitants of the area utilized maritime resources for sustenance, and those individuals who actually lived along the coastline no doubt continued to do so, as their modern counterparts do to the present day.

Although there is still some open question on the precise location of the Sealand, current thinking and the extant archaeological evidence does not support the occurrence of a great urban civilization in the southern Arabian Peninsula at this time. This does not imply isolation however. Considering the tremendous reach of the early Mesopotamian trading networks the Yemen must have been integrated into them. The international nature of these networks, and the resources which flowed along them certainly involved passing along the Peninsula and given the preference for coastal sailing which, to some extent, remains to this day, it is a safe assumption that the Southern Arabs, or their predecessors, would have been consistently visited by Mesopotamian ships on their way past. Again, there is nothing to suggest that the inhabitants of the Peninsula were engaging in this trade as active mariners, but it is here that their future position as

middlemen must have begun to form as their geographical position would have offered a great deal to ships making the long passage from East Africa to the wealthy and resource hungry city states of Mesopotamia.

As the political situation in these city states began to change, and more powerful players arose to challenge them, either a group of early Arabs moved into the southern portion of the Peninsula from the east, or the groups already living there began to consolidate their power and develop more enduring methods of cultural expression. In either case, the relationship between this earliest Yemen and the Mesopotamian basin was fostered by the land routes which connected them across the intervening deserts and mountains and least a certain portion of this relationship was based on high end, luxury resources, such as incense, which no longer merely flowed past the region, but where garnered from it.

From this point on, South Arabia continued to develop as an independent region in its own right, with its growth centering on two foundations. The first of these was agriculture, which when combined with hydrological and engineering expertise, could support a large population, a unique circumstance in the forbidding environment of the Peninsula. Given the organization needed for the development and maintenance of these agricultural works, the rise of states within the region was perhaps inevitable, but unquestionably fast. In these early states political power, and social status, was defined by control over agriculture but was eventually transformed into military power, used to control the second foundation of growth in the region, the aforementioned land routes, which quickly expanded to encompass the Eastern Mediterranean regions as well as the Mesopotamian heartlands. The geographical nature of the region supported the rise of

kingdoms in one particular valley or another, and the balance of power often shifted, but in each case the path taken by a new or renewed state was remarkably similar: Control of agriculture led to control of the population, which led to military power, which allowed for control over trade routes.

This sketch not only explains the rise and flourishing of the independent kingdoms of South Arabia, but comports well with the archaeological and historical evidence from the region. Civilizations rose in which control over agriculture was the paramount expression of power, religions centered on agricultural deities and even the preferred architectural forms suggest a fundamental and preeminent concern over land and crops. Military exploits almost universally record the conquest and control of terrestrial trade routes and the prominence of one kingdom or another seems clearly tied to this exercise of power. Clearly, individuals engaged in maritime endeavors during this time, but these seem to have been the prerogative of just that, individuals, who either by choice or necessity chose to seek their fortunes in a way not exemplified by their larger societies.

Of course, as the civilizations in Southern Arabia continued to grow, so too did those around them and as the region became more integrated into the larger Classical world, their independence was matched against the economic and military might of Persia, Rome and Ethiopia. Initially, this led to additional wealth for the region, as Mediterranean sailors utilized the region as a stopover point in their own trade networks, emulating the actions of their ancient, Mesopotamian counterparts. This development did not fundamentally alter the workings of the Yemen. The new source of trade did not cut off the land routes, nor did it alter the agricultural needs of the population base, it simply

added, by the effort of others, to the wealth that flowed through the region. Trade was brought to region, rather than developed by it.

Under the continued growth of these foreign empires, the region became increasingly embroiled in their border politics and as a result, its ability for truly independent action became shakier and shakier. Some degree of foreign dominance was accepted, as in the de facto Roman takeover of the Red Sea; but other aspects, such as outright political control, were resisted, and when local forces were insufficient for effective resistance, the region turned east, toward Persia, and the Mesopotamian basin, for protection. Persia welcomed this control over the region, for it allowed her to expand her borders against the interests of Rome, increase control over the economic resources of the region and stop the flow of commerce to her rival. The region was sufficiently developed to be integrated into an urbanized Persian society on a level somewhat beyond that of a mere border state or foreign territory and thus the Yemen that was consolidated into the expanding Islamic world, was one which was already strongly tied to the eastern Empire.

## Jetsam

The summary offered above is essentially factual. As such, it comports well with the various threads of evidence available from the region, but does little to answer the questions posed by this paper. Offered here are some possible interpretations of those facts. As interpretations, they are, of course, far more liable to argument and counter evidence but what they lack in objective rigor, they make up for in debatable inquiry, which after all, informs the more seductive side of history. The first of these conclusions is that a strong maritime outlook cannot be considered part of Southern Arabia's foundation, because the region as an independent cultural milieu was based on fundamentally terrestrial concerns. The second conclusion is that no strong maritime tradition arose in Southern Arabia, even as it reached its apex of cultural development, because it was unnecessary for wealth, prestige or even trade. Finally, I conclude that Southern Arabs were not called upon to bolster the maritime aspirations of the new Islamic identity, because despite tantalizing suggestions to the contrary, they did not exist, at least not in a way which was recognizable to the Arab/Muslim identity then developing.

The first conclusion involves the question of whether or not Southern Arabia is a likely place for a heavily maritime oriented culture to arise. As noted early on, at first glance, Southern Arabia looks as though it should be ripe for such development. It is surrounded by rich and navigable waters, its position between large and powerful empires would appear conducive to the development of trade and exploration, and its wealth would seem to invite jealousy and invasion, necessitating a strong naval defense. Moreover, in general outline, the rise of the earliest, complex and urban civilizations in

the Mesopotamian cradle seems to have been dependent on the development of sufficient resources to support a large population. A sufficient population allowed for specialization and the development of an elite which demanded resources beyond those required for subsistence, thus leading to extensive trade networks and the accumulation of wealth on a hitherto unheard of scale. Southern Arabia seems to follow this trend and as the development of trade networks in Mesopotamia both encouraged, and were encouraged by, progressively improving nautical skill, why should the same not hold for the Yemen?

The answer, beyond first glance, is that Southern Arabia took a fundamentally different path of development than that of other regions, even those nearby. First of all, no concrete evidence shows the rise of a large, urban civilization in the vicinity, contemporaneous with that which occurred in Mesopotamia. This may be explained at least in part, by the fact that the agricultural capability of the region is not nearly as straightforward as it first appears, for although the area has both the soil and water necessary to produce an ample crop, especially in contrast to the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, the nature of its topography requires that water from the monsoon rains be carefully controlled. It must first be curtailed to prevent massive flooding and violent runoff, and then saved to nurture growing crops in the arid months following deluge. Agriculture could thus develop in the region, and eventually flourish, but this required the time for specialized engineering expertise to arise in the Yemen, and in the meantime, large and powerful states were arising to the east which would have a significant impact on the region's future.

As these states grew, they demanded more and more resources, including luxury goods from farther and farther away. The trade networks they developed to secure these goods certainly encompassed Southern Arabia, but did not focus on it, again most probably through accidents of geography. The great city states that arose at this time seem to have had two types of trading partners, similarly large and complex civilizations in other areas, from which goods were both imported and exported, and regions from which they could procure vital natural resources. As noted above, the population of the Yemen at this time could not sustain a substantial, autochthonous state and the region as a whole was not granted the type of resources which justified a significant, independent, colonization effort. Timber was worth such an effort to procure, but the superior types for building did not occur in Southern Arabia. Such timber did however, occur to the west, in Africa, thus ships from Mesopotamia would pass by the region and probably stop off for supplies and some incidental trading. At this early date then, trade, and specifically maritime trade, became something that traveled *to* the region, by the efforts of *foreign* merchants. As a resource to be exploited, incoming commercial vessels might be likened to any other migratory entity, or even the monsoon rain itself.

Of course, the potential existed for the Southern Arabs to enter into this trade as more active participants, but they did not, because the effort involved was not necessary. The region did become more heavily integrated into the sphere of Mesopotamian economic activity, but this integration came from the development of caravan routes on the landward side, which like the marine paths, were most likely established by foreign interests. The needs and economic power of the Southern Arabs themselves would have still been quite small at this time, but in the invaluable incense unique to the region, the

Mesopotamians recognized a resource which could not be garnered elsewhere. The precise impact of this integration is difficult to determine, but it is not an unlikely scenario that as the use, and value, of incense increased in the east, greater local emphasis was put on its exploitation, leading to organized efforts which could not only establish and maintain caravan routes but also develop the highly specialized hydro-engineering expertise for greater agriculture. Whether this expertise was developed locally or imported into the region through increasing contact with more experienced neighbors hardly matters: What is important is that the demand for this trade, and thus the impetus and technology for substantial population growth in the region, both came over land.

Of course, during this development, some exposure to maritime trade would have continued, as would exploitation of the sea's resources on the local level, but the future for growth and consolidation on a grand scale was seen in controlling a terrestrial resource which commanded the attention, and wealth, of the eastern city states. As noted previously, the transport of incense, a small and light commodity, was not significantly eased by water travel and in any case, a swing in power had occurred in the east, whereby more northern and landlocked cities were at the apex of influence. The organization and consolidation that would lead to the significant growth in the area, thus came from the land, and with it, the ability to support a higher population. Ironically then, for an area surrounded by such rich maritime potential, progress toward independent nationhood was inspired by a purely telluric resource.

The next phase of development in the region, which saw the rise of the small, but independent kingdoms, such as Ma'in and Qataban, again seems a promising platform upon which a strong maritime tradition might be built. But once more, this does not seem

to have occurred. While the inspiration for increasing organization and consolidation was probably the desire for the riches offered by trade with Mesopotamia, the ultimate mechanism that provided for this was agriculture-agriculture made possible by the great hydrological works still famous in the region. The development of significant production in the fertile valleys of the region led to larger populations, and these populations, once united, could be enlisted to dominate a trade route and/or incense producing region. Had a single state arisen and expanded in the region, it might have, given time, diversified and a significant portion of its population dedicated themselves to the sea, but this is not what came to pass. Instead, various states arose, the fractured nature of the landscape sheltering a relatively large potential number of population 'centers'. As fortunes turned, any one of these states might gain dominance for a time but they were each closely enough related on the fundamental cultural level that this dominance was always sought and maintained in the same way: gaining control of agricultural potential, population and finally, the caravan routes. Each state, or potential state, was essentially a player in one game, and thus shared the same goal. No state reigned supreme for long enough to diversify significantly into the maritime realm, and no state arose in far enough isolation to exist outside of this particular brand of competition.

In addition, this fierce competition probably also stifled a rise in maritime endeavor in another way. Individuals living in the small, coastal communities, could build the vessels necessary for fishing along the immediate shoreline and perhaps even for minor transport, but the construction of large ships would have required either a united, communal effort, or government assistance. Generally speaking, in Southern Arabia, the state was responsible primarily for maintaining the hydrological works within

its borders, and in a secondary capacity, for providing protection for merchants along the caravan routes. Had a single state ever gained absolute dominance, it might have garnered a sufficient surplus to invest in building larger vessels (the wealth was certainly there) but as competitors were always one valley away, the resources of the state were already otherwise allocated.

On the micro-level, because the states saw the potential for power in terms of these twin resources of agriculture and caravan routes, the same goals prevailed amongst the majority of individuals. As we have seen, cultural expressions of success and prestige were almost exclusively dedicated to land ownership and the wealth this ownership brought was sought most actively through caravan trading. There is certainly evidence that some individuals entered into maritime trade, but there is as yet nothing to suggest that these individuals were granted sufficient prestige amongst their peers for a strong nautical tradition to develop at the societal level. Moreover, as Ma'in's focus on maritime trade only when it lost control of its land routes suggests, such a step was certainly not preferred and possibly denigrated. This might be analogized to a modern comparison of a Mercedes dealer as opposed to a used car salesman. Both individuals might garner significant wealth, perhaps even trading in substantially the same product, but the former is seen as more glamorous, and indeed prestigious, the latter being the butt archetype of tackiness and low-class.

Small, coastal communities would have continued their own traditions of gathering resources from the sea, fishing and perhaps even trading in luxury goods like pearls and coral, but it is telling that they do not seem to have had the opportunity to leave much of a mark in the archaeological record. The enduring material world of South

Arabia was dedicated to agriculture and the power it provided over caravan routes. Whether it was seen as low-class or merely lacked the preeminence, maritime trading was ancillary to the point that it left little record. Moreover, as wealth was consolidated inland, it would have made it that much more difficult for even whole communities to gather the resources needed for private development of larger, ocean going craft. It is true that during this time, maritime trade going around the peninsula was at a height, and this was itself a source of great, in fact legendary, wealth for Southern Arabia but maritime trade as a resource, continued to be something that *came* to al-Yemen, rather than extended from it. It is probably for this reason that the Roman takeover of trade in the Red Sea was met with such little resistance. In the first part, no substantial naval body had been developed to resist action from this direction, and in the second, it had a minimal impact on a people whose focus was in precisely the other direction. In fact, given the *Roman* emphasis on nautical commerce, it probably only increased the flow of goods passing through the coastal ports.

If a Roman takeover of shipping opportunities was hardly worth noticing however, the attempt to grasp land was another thing entirely. The Axumite seizure of actual territory struck the Southern Arabs to their core and when they were unable to defend against this incursion on their own, they turned to their ancient inspiration, the east. The fact that Persia was the current power in this direction is probably relatively unimportant. What mattered on a very deep level was that it was the source of power at the end of the great caravan routes and as we have seen, it would appear that the region had, to some extent, always existed as a peripheral member of the eastern civilizations. To the Southern Arabs, might, wealth, and perhaps the source of their own society, had

always come from across the land, rather than the waves. Moreover, extension of Persian control in the region allowed for maintenance of the land trade which had become socially as well as economically engrained as the ‘proper’ measure of wealth for the region. If some of the trade flowing past the region was lost, this would have the least effect on the land-owning, caravan directing elites and in any case, Rome was supporting their invaders, albeit in a most ambiguous fashion.

This reliance on Persia however, in the final days before Islam, only served to further mitigate any maritime activity of the Southern Arabs. First, the preeminent trade routes with the east remained open, thus the more important sources of commerce continued. Second, Persia, was a vast and sprawling empire, in direct competition with Rome and had good reason to quash economic relationships with her rival. Third, Persia had her own successful and tested maritime forces, which could easily have served the region as needed on both a commercial and military basis. In short, there was again no encouragement or indeed, opportunity, for a maritime culture to arise as a segment of Southern Arabian society in general. This point is perhaps all the more important considering the questions which confront the scholar looking for a native Muslim element in Islam’s earliest naval excursions. The Islamic armies that first brought the words of Muhammad out of the Peninsula were based on the predominant social model in Arabian society at the time, wherein the individual had a personal loyalty to their clan leaders. As noted earlier, this model also prevailed in Southern Arabia, but it offered no place for sailors. No clan leader represented a force on the waves, and thus any individual mariner might be called upon to lend support to the Islamic cause, but not in such a way that their nautical skills could be utilized. Seamen hailing from the Yemen were not organized

socially, in a way that could be integrated into the greater Arab forces, thus this skill was sought amongst the more or less willing representatives of recently conquered Greeks, Copts and Egyptians, even while the fighting itself was left to the Arabs.

## Lagan

Hopefully, this paper underscores the conclusion that there has never been anything to suggest an inherent, cultural aversion to the sea amongst the Southern Arabs. The quotation attributed to Caliph Umar, even if it is accepted at face value, must be as, at most, the expression of a single individual, and there are plenty of examples of individuals who acted otherwise. This does not however, as some historians have argued, support the idea that there was a strong tradition of Arab sailing prior to Islam's move into the Mediterranean basin. This must be very clear here: This paper does nothing to dismiss the factual claims of previous historians working in this area, notably Fahmy and Hourani, but it does seek to limit their conclusions, and perhaps redirect the focus of further research in the general area.

Given the paucity of many historical records, there is an ingrained and perhaps understandable bias held by many researchers, that the tiniest shred of evidence is always the tip of a greater iceberg, the merest reflection of what must have been a much larger trend. If there is a reference to an Arab ship owner, surely this demonstrates a widespread, enduring and vibrant maritime community. If an Arabian inscription is found etched in Greece, no doubt it is the single remnant of a thriving, island hopping community. Hopefully, this paper has provided sufficient context of the cultural, historical and geographical circumstances of Southern Arabia prior to the rise of Islam, to show the unlikelihood that such communities existed, or perhaps, could exist in the region. There was simply no support for this endeavor, either culturally, socially, or indeed, geographically. It would seem indeed, that sometimes, an Arab ship owner, is just an Arab ship owner.

Of course, the desire among historians to find within any document a smoking gun is not the sole reason that researchers have been so anxious to provide a tradition of sailing amongst the Arabs. It was also in part to reverse the earlier assumptions regarding their capabilities and aspirations. On the one hand, there was a cultural stereotype of hydrophobic desert dwellers imposed by a variety of authors.<sup>85</sup> On the other, there was the perhaps, better intentioned, though no less misinformed, bias of writers who assumed sea power, such a prominent component in the rise of the western, European powers, must be inherent in any great power. To give credit to the Arabs for utilizing the sea was, it seems, a misguided but respectful assumption. This bias is perhaps the more interesting, as its relatively benign nature seems to have made it the more perfidious, and in the end it may say far more about non-Arabs than the Arabs themselves.

There is a Sufi story which is worth paraphrasing here at some length:

A river once traveled a great distance, seeking its final destination. It traveled over fields and down mountains, poured itself over cliffs, snaked its way through canyons and wound between the massive trees of choking forests, until it arrived at the desert and there, it could go no further. The more it dashed itself against the sands, the more quickly it was soaked up, and the more prolonged its efforts, the deeper the marsh it was creating became. Finally, in desperation, it looked skyward and howled in frustration.

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<sup>85</sup> In modern times, the most egregious of these were no doubt the colonizing, European powers however, this was a long held and widespread view amongst even native authors. Ibn Khaldun himself seems to have shared this prejudice. See generally, Hassan S. Khalilieh's, *Islamic Maritime Law, An Introduction*.

The wind heard its howl and asked what was so distressing the river, and when it heard the waters' tale, it gave a soft laugh. "Relax," said the wind, "and rise up into my arms. I will carry you across the desert, so that you can continue your journey."

As soon as the river calmed itself, it was transformed into vapor, and the wind was able to lift it in its arms and carry it across the desert, where it fell as rain upon the other side. Gathering its strength, it became a rushing torrent once more and was able to carry on toward its final home within the sea.<sup>86</sup>

The interesting thing about this story is the emphasis on both the difficulty and ease of crossing the desert, not the sea. Taking to the water proved a great step forward for many of the powers that arose in the west, and a view of the Arabs as hydrophobic thus fit into their view of an inferior group as these powers extended control over much of the Islamic World. In correcting this view though, there has been perhaps, a misunderstanding: The Arabians were perfectly able to adapt to maritime practices when the need arose, but this does not suggest a great nautical tradition inherent in their culture. The need failed to arise because in their traditions, the desert was no great barrier to cross or avoid, indeed it was itself a source of trade and wealth. Indeed, as Hourani noted, travel by sea was, "no more formidable than the crossing of the deserts and mountains."<sup>87</sup> The emphasis of this statement though, has been misdirected. In choosing one way over

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<sup>86</sup> Idries Shah, *Tales of the Dervishes: Teaching Stories of the Sufi Masters Over the Past Thousand Years*. Arkana: Penguin, 1993, 23. The version I offer here purposely removes a great deal of the metaphysical and philosophical aspects of the story, in order to emphasize the geographical aspects. No doubt, this interpretation runs against the intent of the narrators themselves, but its latent presence offers a good tableau for my point.

<sup>87</sup>Hourani, 4.

the other, it is not the Arabs were afraid of the sea, but that outsiders to the Peninsula, maintain perhaps to this day, a fear of the desert, a fear conquered by the region's inhabitants long, long ago.

At the very least then, perhaps the example of this paper can serve two purposes. First, it places the potential 'Arab seamen' within their proper context, paradigms of brave, capable and adaptable individuals, but not as exemplars of a hidden facet in Southern Arabian society. Second, it is a good example of the limits of comparative history. Southern Arabia looks so enticing as the home of a seafaring community. Moreover, the rise of complex civilizations in the area seems to so closely mimic those of nearby Mesopotamia, where strong maritime traditions did arise, that it is tempting to see a lack of such development in the area as a lacuna in the historical record. In this case however, more can be gleaned from looking at the record as it stands, and discovering how a unique and singular society managed to have such an impact on the world around it.

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