

eyes appeared, // and the sails barged in pell-mell to brave // the armies of the swell that charged us, wave on wave, // while there we sat, each one of us, storm-sick, // and helpless as a tick upon a stick.

Al-Maqqari would no doubt have been comforted by the following prayer. I came across it en route to the Kuria Muria Islands,

off the southern coast of Oman. It was carved on the stern of an old wooden sailing vessel, beached at the small port of Sad'h.

*A strange echo, across seas and centuries, of the last sentence of that passage from Ibn Jubayr, above.*

**I**n the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful  
O Protector of souls in hulls  
O Savior of hulls in the fathomless sea  
Protect for us this *sambuq* called *Al-Dhib*  
O God, O Sustainer, O God, O Protector

*The sambuq is the later equivalent of the jalbah. Al-Dhib means "the Wolf."*

Turning to the perils of travel in general, they are neatly summed up in a verse I heard recited while stuck in a market in Mauritania.

*The poem, attributed (I later discovered) to the 11th-century Andalusian scholar and traveler Abu Bakr al-Tartushi, is a parody of a famous verse listing five benefits of travel.*

**D**on't ever go a-roving, O my friend, if you'd  
Escape the seven circles of the traveler's hell.  
The first's a haunt of homesick thoughts and solitude,  
The second's where your fears for far-off family dwell.  
The third's a den of thieves, the fourth's the latitude  
Where rogues rip off an unsuspecting clientele.  
Then come the hells of lonely nights and nasty food.  
The last, and worst: the Hades of the Bad Hotel.

*The inscription was dated 5 Rajab 1371 (March 31, 1952). Later, by one of those beautiful coincidences of travel, I stayed with the grandson of the Wolf's owner: the owner's son—my host's father—had done the calligraphy for the prayer. The Wolf, I learned, had carried frankincense to Aden, Basrah and India, and dried shark to East Africa.*

Let us return now to seemingly minor perils that had major consequences. The first comes from the *Short History of Abu 'l-Fida*, ruler of Hamah in Syria, and recounts the story of the death in

1277 in Damascus of al-Malik al-Zahir Baybars, the celebrated Mamluk sultan of Egypt and Syria.

*The Ayyubids were the former rulers of the region.*

**A**mong the various accounts of his death, the following story was told. A total eclipse of the moon occurred, and rumors spread among the populace that this presaged the death of a man of very great rank. Hearing this, al-Malik al-Zahir decided to make sure someone else fulfilled this prediction. So he summoned a scion of the Ayyubid dynasty called al-Malik al-Qahir ... having first had some poisoned *qumizz* prepared. The sultan told the cup-bearer to pour some of this out for al-Malik al-Qahir. He did so, and the the Ayyubid drank some of it. No sooner had his guest drunk than al-Malik al-Zahir, in a moment of forgetfulness, took a swig from the same glass. Al-Malik al-Qahir died immediately. As for al-Malik al-Zahir, he fell ill with a burning fever and expired later.

*Qumizz (English "kumiss"), a drink made from fermented mare's milk, was a favorite of the Turkic peoples from whom Baybars and the other early Mamluks descended.*

*Other accounts attribute the sultan's death to natural causes or to a wound received in battle. However, Abu 'l-Fida is not alone in giving this more lurid version.*

*The earliest and most notorious of such assassinations in Arabic literature was that of the poet Imru' al-Qays in about 540 CE: He was supposedly killed by a poisoned shirt. Less well known, but equally ingenious, was an assassination in Tunis mentioned by al-Maqqari—by means of poisoned toothpaste! (Was the poison in the stripes?)*

It could of course be argued that the story illustrates a number of other perils—those of believing in superstitious *suq* gossip, of sharing tableware and, not least, those of abusing the rules of hospitality by murdering your guests.

The dangers of frequenting the courts of autocrats are well documented. As one poet said, the three greatest perils are “seas,

sultans and the march of Time.” In the case of sultans, apparently minor slips of etiquette could prove perilous, if not fatal. The 14th-century encyclopedist al-'Umari, for example, says that at the West African court of the emperor of Mali, sneezing was one of the biggest social gaffes:

**I**f one of the courtiers suddenly feels the need to sneeze, he will throw himself on the floor and sneeze in such a way that no one is aware of it. As for the emperor, if he should sneeze, then all those present hit their chests with their hands.

The consequences of a standing sneeze are not spelled out. But al-Qalqashandi, a later encyclopedist, noted the penalty for a different breach of

court manners—forgetting to take off your footwear. If anyone walks into the emperor's court in sandals, he says,