

## PART 2:

# ENCOUNTERS

WRITTEN BY TIM MACKINTOSH-SMITH

TITLE CALLIGRAPHY BY SORAYA SYED

This is the second of the author's six collections of eclectic, occasionally irreverent, excerpts from the vast treasure-house of Arabic literature. In each, he samples and comments thematically, seeking that which is insightful, prescient or poignant, as well as the curious, mischievous or wisely satirical. Like the original authors, his goal, and ours, is to entertain, educate and enlighten.

—The Editors



"ALL STRANGERS ARE TO ONE ANOTHER KIN," wrote the sixth-century poet Imru' al-Qays in one of the oldest surviving pieces of literature written in Arabic. It predates by a century or so the revelations of the oldest Arabic book—the Qur'an—which also celebrates meetings beyond our own boundaries: God, it tells us, made mankind into nations and tribes "so that you may come to know one another."

*The reliability of Harun's account has been questioned. To me this scene, and the details that follow it – a description of an organ and its music, the gift to each captive of the precise sum of two dinars plus three dirhams – lend it the ring of truth.*

During the early Islamic centuries, the Arabs encountered further-flung peoples through both conflict and commerce. Moving forward in time only a few years from Harun's Constantinople but south some 6500 kilometers (4000 mi), the coast of what is today Mozambique is the setting for a tale recorded by the 10th-century sea captain Buzurg ibn Shahriyar. The story calls for a certain suspension of disbelief, but it bears witness to how mobile the Arab-Islamic world had become, and also to how the Arabs themselves

*With their ablutions and prayers, the crew were performing, while still alive, the washing of the corpse and funerary prayers that precede an Islamic burial.*

The emperor came to the hall and sat in the place of honor, at the table of gold, this being the feast-day of the Messiah's birth. He commanded that the Muslim prisoners-of-war be brought in, and they were seated at the other tables ... on which was a huge variety of dishes both hot and cold. Then the emperor's herald proclaimed, "By the life of the head of the emperor, in these dishes there is not a trace of the flesh of swine!" And the platters on which the prisoners' food was served were of gold and silver.

When I made out the place, I realized we had arrived at the land of the Zanj, who eat people, and that by making landfall here our doom was sealed. So we performed our ablutions, repented to Almighty God of our sins, and prayed the prayers for the dead over each other.

From the Arabic shelves of my library, here are a few encounters beyond the borders of the familiar. The first comes from a description of Constantinople, quoted by the geographer Ibn Rustah. His informant, Harun ibn Yahya, had been captured by the Byzantines and taken to their capital. During his account of the imperial palace, Harun recalled a personal memory of Christmas dinner with the Christian emperor:

could look into the mirror of other peoples, even if it reflected unflatteringly on themselves.

Captain Buzurg heard the story from a fellow dhow-skipper, who in the year 923 had set sail on a trading voyage from Oman, in the southeast Arabian Peninsula, to Zanzibar, along the African coast. A storm, however, blew his ship far south of its destination. Eventually the skipper spied land:

*Ibn Rustah compiled his book around 900 CE. As well as geography, the seventh volume (from which the extract comes) contains some interesting odds and ends, such as a list of "The First Person To ...". For instance, the first person to make soap was none other than Solomon.*

*"Zanj" was the contemporary Arabic term for the black inhabitants of the East African coast, here in the region of Sufalah (now in Mozambique). The area was little known to the Arabs, for it lay beyond the range that could be visited in a single monsoon sailing season.*



Then canoes came out and encircled us, and forced us to enter the anchorage, where we dropped anchors. We went ashore with the natives and they carried us off to their king.

To the mariners' amazement, far from making a meal of them, the king ("a handsome young man") made them welcome. In return, at the end of their stay, the skipper invited the ruler aboard his vessel—and then proceeded to kidnap him, ship him home to Oman and sell him in the slave-market.

A few years later, the same mariners, their consciences apparently untroubled, set out on another voyage to Zanzibar, and they ran into another storm ... and they were blown again to that same land. In even greater terror than before, they were taken to the ruler. What happened next is almost too strange to be fiction:

*Al-Harawi "all but covered the Earth in his wanderings," wrote the biographer Ibn Khallikan. Once, he endured the traveling writer's worst nightmare: Straying into a battle, he lost his notebooks. They ended up in the hands of none other than the English king Richard the Lionheart, who invited their owner over to pick them up. Al-Harawi never took up the offer. What a missed encounter that was!*

For – lo and behold! – there was that very same king, sitting on his couch as if we had only just left him. When we saw him, we fell prostrate to the ground. All our powers deserted us, and we were unable to rise. The king said, "My friends! It's you again, without a doubt!" Not one of us could speak; we quivered with fear. But he said, "You may lift up your heads, for I guarantee your safety and that of your possessions." ... Then, when he saw that his promise had restored our spirits, he said, "You treacherous men! I treated you as I did, and look at the way you paid me back!" We replied, "O king, forgive us, we beseech you." And he said, "I have already forgiven you ... For it is you who set me on the path of true religion."

*The rare Arabic word translated here as "canoe," *dunij*, is derived from Indian languages and is an etymological cousin of the English "dinghy." Regarding anchors, I recently stumbled (literally) on the stone shaft of a very old dhow anchor among the shoreline mangroves on the Tanzanian island of Kilwa Kisiwani – Zanz territory. As far as I can tell, it belonged to a 10th-century anchor from the Arabian Gulf – Captain Buzurg territory, and date!*

The king had traveled a long path: from the slave-market in Oman to a master in Baghdad; from first acquaintance with Islamic observances to the awakening of a deep faith; from the Makkah pilgrimage, via Egypt and an epic journey south, to

freedom and home, where he had arrived not long before to find his throne still empty and waiting, and his people open to the good news of Islam that he brought with him. "Let the Muslims know," he concluded,

"that they should come to our land, and that we, too, have become brethren to them, and fellow-Muslims. But as for accompanying you to your ship again – absolutely no way!"

To return to conflict, and in particular the centuries of intermittent war known as the Crusades, it is remarkable how human contact persisted across the apparent divide. Here is an instance, from a guidebook to international places of pilgrimage compiled by al-Harawi.

Visiting al-Khalil (Hebron), Palestine, in 1174, al-Harawi was told that, nearly 60 years earlier, the ground had subsided at

the cave in which the prophets Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were said to be buried. The entrance to their tomb had been exposed: Inside, three corpses were found, "their shrouds in tatters." The Crusader king of Jerusalem ordered that the shrouds be renewed, the damage repaired and the cave sealed. Following up the story, al-Harawi says that

*In Arabic Abraham is often called "al-Khalil," or "the Friend" – i.e., of God. The town at the site of his burial takes its Arabic name from this epithet.*

The knight Berne, who was a resident of Bayt Lahm and well known among the Franks for his manly qualities and advanced age, informed me that he had entered this cave with his father and had seen Ibrahim al-Khalil, Ishaq and Ya'qub, and that their heads had been uncovered. I asked him, "How old were you at the time?" and he said, "Thirteen."...

The author of this book says: If this information is true, then I have seen someone who has himself seen Ibrahim, Ishaq and Ya'qub, peace be upon them – and seen them, moreover, not in a dream but when fully awake!

*"Berne" is a guess at the Frankish name the Arabic represents.*

*Bayt Lahm is the Arabic name of Bethlehem.*

*"Franks," here *finanj*, was the usual Arabic name for western Europeans.*

It is a sad irony that al-Khalil/Hebron, the site of a Muslim traveler's encounter with a Christian knight and, through him, with those long-dead prophets of the three great monotheistic faiths, has in more recent times been almost a byword for political division.

An older contemporary of al-Harawi, the Syrian aristocrat Usamah Ibn Munqidh, formed close friendships with individual Franks. In one case, though, the friendship became almost too close for comfort:



Perhaps the knight should be "reverend" rather than "revere" if he belonged to one of the religious orders of knighthood like the Hospitallers and Templars.

I'd be tempted to compare him to the supremely tetchy English traveler Smollett, who earned the nickname "Smell fungus," if Smollett weren't so much milder.

Fulk the Younger of Anjou, king of Jerusalem 1131-43.

There was in the army of King Fulk, son of Fulk, a revered Frankish knight who had arrived from their land intending to go on pilgrimage and then return home. A close and affectionate friendship arose between us; he would address me as "my brother," and we enjoyed each other's company. When he eventually decided to set sail for home, he said to me, "My brother, I am going to my homeland, and my wish is that you will send with me your son" – my son being with me at the time, and fourteen years of age – "to come to my country to see our knights, and to learn reason and chivalry. He would then come back as a man of reason."

These words of his that rang in my ears were not, however, such as would come from the head of a man of reason. For even if my son were to be taken captive in battle, no worse fate could befall him as a captive than precisely that – to be taken away to the land of the Franks. So I replied, "By your life, this is exactly what I was hoping myself, except that something prevented me from mentioning it. You see, the boy's grandmother loves him so much that she won't even let him go out with me unless she has extracted a solemn promise from me that I'll bring him safely back to her." The knight said, "And is your mother alive?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Then do not disobey her."

All the encounters so far have ended happily. Here, for variety, is the late 13th-century traveler al-'Abdari, who made the angry encounter into an art form. His journey to Makkah begins in 1289 on a sour

note ("In this age of ours, the harvest of virtuous men is blighted") and rises to a crescendo of cantankerousness in Cairo. Among its inhabitants, he tells us in rhymed prose,

We shouldn't be too hard on al-'Abdari. In overcrowded, stressful Cairo he suffered the trauma of losing his mule. It was swept away before his eyes by the press of passing humanity, and never seen again.

The generous man is meaner than a firefly with its light, / the brave more timid than a locust in a fright, / the learned man more foolish than a moth with a candle, / the eminent lowlier than a bug in a puddle, / the sedate more fickle than a gnat in a muddle. / Their handsome men look freshly risen from the grave, / their healthy men look far too sick to save, / their eloquent man's more tongue-tied than a callow lad, / their high and mighty man's more abject than a scrounging cad ...

The Alexander of legend was, among many other things, a marine innovator. In another tale, he is said to have commissioned a type of diving-bell. His historical self did in fact order voyages of exploration, but (as far as we know) only in the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf.

And so on for five pages. Whatever its other merits or demerits, the Arabic is highly picturesque.

Finally, two encounters that are neither positive nor negative but, so to speak, reflexive. The first belongs to the corpus of legends that, over the course of many centuries and cultures, attached themselves to the life of Alexander the Great. Fictional it may be, as the narrator himself admits. But it shows how the idea of a New World haunted medieval minds centuries before Columbus. Perhaps, too, it invites us all to be

open to encounters, even if we have to go that bit further than we thought.

Alexander, the story goes, having conquered the known world, decided to investigate the Encompassing Ocean: the great unexplored body of water that surrounded the Afro-Eurasian land-mass. He fitted out a number of ships, "all but unsinkable in design," and ordered them to sail for a year on different fixed bearings. They were then to turn for home and report back to him. At the end of the year,

The early 14th-century Syrian polymath Muhammad ibn Abi Talib al-Ansari.

None of the crews had seen anything but the surface of the water and the gigantic creatures which emerge from it ... So they returned the way they had come – all except for one ship. The crew of this last vessel said to each other, "Let us sail on for another month. Who knows, we may come across something to whiten our faces before the king. We can always cut down on food and drink during the return journey."

They had continued on their course for less than the month when, there before them, appeared another vessel, with people on board! The two ships drew alongside each other. However, neither crew could understand the language

"To whiten one's face" often has the sense of "to show one's honest intentions." In this context it also has an element of face-saving.



of the other. So Alexander's people handed over a woman they had with them to the other crew; in return they were given a man, whom they took back to Alexander. This man they gave in marriage to another woman on board their ship.

The demands of married life meant that by the time they got home, the woman had picked up enough of her husband's tongue to solve the mystery of the alien ship.

*Another version of the tale, by al-Qazwini, milks the suspense: We have to wait for the woman to give birth to a child who grows up bilingual.*

They said to her, "Ask your husband where he came from."

"From the other side of the ocean," he told them.

"For what purpose?" they asked him.

"Our king sent us," he said, "to discover what this side is like."

Then they said, "Are there on your side kings and kingdoms?"

He said, "There are. And they are larger in extent and greater in power than this one."

They said, "And we had not realized that there was anything there but water."

As to the truth of this story, God is the most knowing.

*As was usual with non-religious writings by the Jews of Arab lands, Habshush recorded his account of the trip in his local Arabic dialect written in Hebrew characters.*

The other mirror-image meeting takes place on more solid ground – Wadi al-Jawf, near the southwestern fringe of Arabia's Empty Quarter. In 1870 Hayim Habshush, who belonged to a prominent Jewish Yemeni family, accompanied a French scholar

there on an antiquity-hunting trip. One day, hot, dusty and extremely disheveled from a morning scrambling about the pre-Islamic city of Ma'in, Habshush decided to have a siesta in a ruined temple. He was awoken by a noise:

There, leaning over me, was a man as tall as the ruin. His mouth gaped and made strange stuttering sounds, his arms were stretched out wide, his eyes stared wildly, and his body was all atremble. When I realized that what I was seeing wasn't just a nightmare, I was utterly terrified and I said to myself, "The devils have come for me!"

As one might when confronted with a devil, Habshush drew his dagger and poured curses on the apparition's father:

This gave him such a fright that his strength gave out and he collapsed on the ground. Then he said in a thin, timid voice, "I'm a good person ... I'm not a devil!" Hearing this, I knew he was in shock, so I spoke to him as gently as I could until, gradually, his spirits were restored. I then said to him, "What scared you out of your wits like that and made you fall over?" He said, "When I saw you in such a terrible mess, I thought you were a demon, because demons are always in a mess too and they always live in ruins." I said, "But whatever made you come to a place where demons live?" He said, "I came looking for treasure, hoping God might grant me something for my daily bread." And I said to him, "And I came looking for treasure too." 🌐

*Having myself taken shelter in a nearby temple, in which the floor-level had risen with the millennia of debris, I think this is the implication of Habshush's phrase – literally, "like the ruin." It could, though, refer to the apparition's own "ruinous" state.*



*Even the best efforts at translation often entail some loss. However, the pleasing sound of the original Arabic title of this series, Tarjuman al-Kunuz, makes up for some of the literary shortfall when it becomes the syntactically accurate but less euphonious English "Interpreter of Treasures." Tarjuman is the root of the English word "dragoman," which refers to an interpreter serving in an official capacity. The full title echoes Ibn al-'Arabi's early-13th-century collection of poems, Tarjuman al-Ashwaq (Interpreter of Desires).*



**Tim Mackintosh-Smith** (tim@mackintosh-smith.com) recently appeared in *Newsweek's* list of the top dozen travel writers of the last 100 years. Following his award-winning trilogy of travels in the footsteps of Ibn Battuta, he is working on a history, a thriller set in 14th-century Spain and the translation from Arabic of an early collection of travelers' accounts from around the Indian Ocean.

**Soraya Syed** (www.artofthepen.com) is a calligrapher and graphic designer in London.