

"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."

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:

*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.*

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.

*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.*

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

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:

*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.*

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.

*"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.*