

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," duniy, 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 – Zanj 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 firanj, 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: