

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.*