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 follow-
ing 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.

In 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 sambug called Al-Dhib
O God, O Sustainer, O God, O Protector.

The sambug 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.

Don’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.

Let us return now to seemingly minor perils that had major conse-
quences. 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.

Among 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 pre-
saged 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
of this out for al-Malik al-Qahir. He did so, and the the Ayyubid
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.

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 Western African court of the emperor of Mali, sneezing was one
of the biggest social gaffes:

If 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-Qalqa-
shandi, 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,