Where Facts and History Meet Myth and Legend
Groups or Communities in the *Marvels of India* Stories Model

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Abstract

The *ᶜAjāʾib al-Hind* (Marvels of India) is a collection of sea stories allegedly compiled by Captain Buzurg Ibn Shahriyār (d. 399/1009) which belong to an Arabo-Islamic literary genre called the *ᶜajāʾib*, containing themes of entertainment - of things that are marvellous and strange. But these stories are not merely entertaining, they are an additional resource for the modern researcher because they also reflect the realities of daily life in seafaring communities of the Indian Ocean in the ninth and tenth century. In amongst the tales of the fantastic and the marvel, we find the simple humanity of the seafarers, something lacking in the purely factual medieval geographical and historical texts. A complementary model to the understanding of the maritime landscape of a group or community is proposed here. The stories model in this article demonstrates the relationship of an occupational group with other seafarers in a trans-regional Indian Ocean trade.

Keywords: stories model; Marvels of India; maritime landscapes; community or groups identity; nautical data; fact and fiction

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Introduction

The stories of the *ᶜAjā'ib al-Hind* (Marvels of India) are a collection of stories uniquely centred on the sea. They are ascribed to Buzurg Ibn Shahriyār (d. 399/1009)[1], a sea captain, and were collated in Sīrāf on the coast of the Persian Gulf among a society of religious, ethnic and linguistic variety. They are stories of marvel and wonder in a maritime landscape of the Indian Ocean where facts and history meet fiction, based in a reality which provided entertainment as well as moments for religious reflection by the audience. They are mainly narrated by captains, ship owners and merchants but it is Buzurg who introduces the stories.

Information on the everyday life of groups or communities in Medieval Arabic historical and geographical texts are generally wanting, and even when that information is offered, we are many a time left with no real knowledge of their thinking and awareness of the environment they lived in. Complementary to the Arabic texts, a stories model is proposed here: to explore how stories can be utilized in an examination of the construction and shaping of the life of a community or group in a maritime landscape.

Story-telling is uniquely human and our brains are receptive to the taking in of information through stories (Cole 2020, 1). Many a story, oral or written, has the purpose of communicating information as well as entertainment, and such is the *ᶜAjāib al-Hind*. The stories are of adventures and surprises, wonders and mystery, but also of facts and history. They are set in the Indian Ocean, recounted by mariners and merchants, often or not whimsical but also instructional on such diverse matters as geography, seamanship, people, and cultural practices. They may draw on myths and legends which were known at the time. The book contains 136 tales, of these 29 are dated (between 900 and 953 CE) or they provide the

names of the ruling caliphs which allows us to place them in a recognizable reality (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, xviii)[2].

The stories of the *Marvels of India* belong to the *ᶜajā'ib* genre of Arabic literature. The word *ᶜajā'ib* stands for anyone who has a curious mind, a craving for unusual things or a lust for stories which go beyond mundane life. However, *ᶜajā'ib* also refers to God's creation, as Buzurg declares, 'His miracles … have spread everywhere, his marvellous works on land and sea, the marvels of his perfect works in every direction and every country' (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 1). Witnessing the wonders of God's creation is, therefore, the theme of the *Marvels of India*: '[He] has created different kinds of people and nations. He, by his creative genius, has made them differ in character and appearance' (ibid). Thus, the marvels of creation and the marvels of the far-away countries existing in the geographies of the time are manifested in the *ᶜajā'ib* literature, showing 'an admixture of real observations' (Dubler 1960, 203) interacting sometimes with an imaginary world as facts collide with fiction.

There are compelling stories relating to occupational groups of captains/ship owners and mariners, their life and their relation with other seafarers on land and sea. Other stories on coastal and island communities have less substance pertaining to the identity of the inhabitants. A striking feature is that eyewitnesses are identified, as Buzurg addresses the audience with introductory words such as 'I was told' or 'they say'. He invokes real people, sailors of the time, such as the story told by Ismāᶜīlawayh, an esteemed ship owner, which gives an authority and veracity to the tale being told (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 5, 31; Shafiq 2013, 63). The question of what is true or not in the stories is directed to the person narrating the story to Buzurg, as in the story of Captain Zarābakht's 'A Giant Lobster': 'Do you guarantee the truth of this story?', says Buzurg, and Zarābakht replies: 'I heard it myself' (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 5). Buzurg seems to be talking to his fellow mariners and an audience familiar with maritime life, addressing them with conversational gambits such as 'we were talking', indicating that this is 'clearly a group talk' (Shafiq 2013, 63).

Framework for study: the community identity in the stories model

The stories of the *Marvels* were collated at a time when works of physical and human geography were describing the regions and the maritime landscapes, the shipping routes, the global Indian Ocean trade, and the coastal peoples around this vast ocean. Worthy of note is the *Akhbār al-Ṣīn wa l-Hind* (Accounts of China and India), re-edited by a merchant, Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī (fl. 4th/10th c). Other contemporaneous works of geography are those of Ibn Khurradādhbih (d. c. 300/911), *Kitāb al-masālik wa l-mamālik* (Book of Routes and Provinces), al-Iṣṭakhrī (fl. c. 340/951-2), *Kitāb masālik al-mamālik* (Book of the Routes of Provinces), Ibn Ḥawqal (fl. 367/977-8), *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ* (The Book of the Configuration of the Earth) and al-Muqaddasī (fl. 4th/ 10th century), *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fi maᶜrifat al-aqālīm* (The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions); and for history there is al-Masᶜūdī (d. 282-3/896), *Murūj al-dhahab* (The Golden Meadows), and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922-3), *Kitāb Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa l-mulūk* (The Book of the History of the Prophets and Kings). These works, though briefly touched upon in this article, corroborate the time and place of events in the stories.

In this borderless world of a globalized Indian Ocean, the sea captures the imagination of an audience through stories of seafarers often caught in the fury of a storm in sometimes uncharted waters, a timeless theme. Sensational though these stories may be, it is a fact that for the seafarers the sea was a risky venture. But sea transport had great rewards as trade was carried out trans-regionally to India, the Land of Pepper, Sumatra and Java, the Lands of Gold and the Moluccas, the Lands of Spices (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 4-5, 24-5, 42-3, 63-4; Ibn Shahriyār 1883-1886, 231-64, map). Indian Ocean trade between Mesopotamia, India and China was at its peak during the caliphate of al-Manṣūr (r. 136-158/754-775) who declared to his courtiers that: 'There is no obstacle between us and China, everything on the sea can come to us [in Baghdād] on it' (Al-Ṭabarī 1965, X (iii): 272).

Within this trans-regional world of trade, the sea stories hold much truth about historical place-names of ports and islands, names of caliphs, and those of the

occupational groups - the maritime and mercantile communities of the time. The sea is central to the stories and integral to the time and space of a cosmopolitan Indian Ocean society, bound together by trade from coast to coast and island to island. They tell of a homogenous mercantile system led by ship owners and captains exposed to the monsoonal winds, as both the *Marvels* stories and the *Accounts of China and India* report (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 5-8, 41-4; Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 13, 49, 66, 94, 97, 111), during which time travel was made in many stops at ports for disembarking and embarking of merchants and passengers, loading and unloading cargo, replenishing the ship with water, and waiting for fair weather. Their voyages were long and often perilous; their ship could be struck by gales or rocks, they could perish in the sea or, if marooned, they could be confronted by strange creatures or communities.

These stories reveal a sense of 'belongingness' among groups or communities of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. The model here is to go beyond the fixed notion of identifying people and their movements with particular boundaries, but one exemplifying cross-cultural exchange in a trans-regional Indian Ocean. The larger picture could be attained through Medieval Arabic texts but these are often incomplete as context is not always present and we are left to wonder how a community of people lived or what they did. An alternative model here is to explore how stories like the *Marvels of India* can provide details, not of a wider community as this is absent, but rather to examine a smaller occupational group (captains, ship owners, mariners and merchants), part of a community, and their thinking and awareness of the environment in which they live. The question being asked here is what can be extracted from these stories about individuals and occupational groups and their interaction with the communities in the ninth and tenth century?

Centrality of India

In the introduction to the *ᶜAjā'ib al-Hind*, it is said that, of the marvels God created, China and India are designated eight of ten parts (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 1), marking

the significant importance of travel to these lands by sea to reveal 'a legendary, rich and mysterious world' (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, II: 708). Indeed, both India and China are central to the vast Indian Ocean. When labelling the Indian Ocean, the Greek and Roman geographers called the western zone the Erythraean Sea while the Muslim geographers of the tenth century identified it as the Sea of Fārs (Persia); thus, in the map of al-Iṣṭakhrī it includes both halves of the Indian Ocean, showing India and China as one territory and Arabia lies opposite (1927, 28-9). Ibn Ḥawqal, also mapping the whole ocean as the Sea of Fārs, extends it to include the Red Sea (1992, 50). However, their contemporary, al-Muqaddasī, rejected this concept of the Sea of Fārs and considered the whole Indian Ocean as the Sea of China (1906, 9-11). Important as this conceptualizing was in Antiquity and Early Medieval Islam, India stood in the middle of this extensive ocean and was, therefore, a vital commercial hub in all directions.

The name al-Hind in the book title translates as India. For Islam, however, the continent was divided politically into two halves – the Sind province in the north and all the west coast was Muslim while al-Hind, the eastern half, was non-Muslim (*An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide* 2014, 500, fn. 9). The *ᶜAjā'ib al-Hind* embraces both halves, a country steeped in marvels, magic and mystery. But irrespective of the geographic division, the Arabians and Persians were generally fascinated by Indian stories and tales that went back to pre-Islamic times. As Houari Touati argues: 'Indian wisdom possessed an aura rivalled only by the Greek scientific and philosophical corpus and the Persian and literary traditions' (Touati 2010, 6).

 But there is something else which Van Der Lith considered culturally and geographically important: He says that al-Hind included the South-East Asian Islands - Sumatra, Java and Malaya (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, xxii, 5, 9, 11, 42, 44; Ibn Shahriyār 1883-1886, 231), otherwise called by the Europeans, the East Indies. This is a plausible proposition as the islands were 'Hinduized' at the time the *Marvels* were collected, and, therefore, part of that mysterious world that the Muslim mariners and merchants were exploring. They were strategically connected with China, and

were renowned for their produce of gold, ivory, ebony, tin, scented woods, spices, aloes and camphor (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 26, 29, 38, 42-4, 60, 67-8, 73).

As a neighbour to Persia and close to Arabia, India (the whole country) would have been familiar to Muslim historians and geographers even though they may not have travelled there, such as the Persian al-Bīrūnī (d. 442/1050), a polymath who knew India closely but did not visit the continent; he relied on what he read and was reported to him. In contrast, the encyclopaedist and merchant, al-Mas^cūdī travelled to all parts of India and reported about Indian communities in fair detail.

Some historical sources highlight the sea trade route from Sīrāf or Ṣuḥār on the Persian and Arabian Gulf respectively, to Khānfū, China, and point to a well-established link that goes back centuries (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 5, 6, 8, 10, 52). India was at the centre of this global Indian Ocean trade, and records of sea links from the Mediterranean to the west coast of India are well attested in historical and geographical Arabic texts as previously discussed. This is reflected in the *Marvels of India* which documents a busy sea traffic to China in many of its stories (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 13-18, 27-9, 49-52, 58-9, 62-4, 84, 99, 103, 111).

India was 'the greatest of all countries' claims Strabo (d. 23 CE) (Bk 2.5.32), and it was, according to Herodotus (d. 426 BCE), known for its gold (Bk III. 98). A mercantile record, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* in around 60 CE, shows the trade network of the Greeks and Romans, from the Red Sea to the west coast of India (1989, 283). And also, using the West Indian ports as a base for long distance trade with the islands of South-East Asia, the Sāsānians (c. 224 – 651 CE) commanded the sea route to China for many centuries before Islam, a fact well established by the Muslim geographers, al-Iṣṭakhrī (1870, 133) and al-Muqaddasī (1906, 629-30). Additionally, Chinese chronicles such as those of Chau Ju-Kua (d. 1228) reporting about the fourth to the seventh century CE, mention goods from Persia going to India, East Africa and Arabia (1911, 7-8).

It is evident from the *Marvels of India* that Sīrāf was for many stories the starting point for sea traffic in the Indian Ocean. It was an ancient Sāsānian port, and a great

commercial entrepôt (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 118), wealthy and prosperous, according to al-Iṣṭakhrī (1870, 131-2, 170) and al-Muqaddasī (1906, 426). Its trading partner, Ṣuḥār, also included in the *Marvels* stories and often referred to as Oman (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, Index 118-9), was well positioned against the monsoon winds; it was 'the gateway to China' receiving goods for Mesopotamia and Yemen (Al-Muqaddasī 1906, 92), while al-Iṣṭakhrī describes it as a wealthy, populous sea town (1927, 25). Indeed, the West coast of India was a meeting point of routes where Arabian and Persian ship owners and merchants settled in Gujarat, Goa, Mangalore and Calicut on the Malabar Coast (Agius 2008, 86-9). Malabar's merchants on its coast set up store houses at Calicut, Cochin and Quilon, for the distribution of spice, aromatic woods and timber, teak in particular.

Looking, therefore, at Chinese and Arabic texts together with the information in the *Marvels of India*, the long distance trade from the Persian Gulf via India was deep-rooted in the ninth and tenth centuries. The route to China, recorded by the Tang annals (c. 620-650 CE), speak of the merchant voyages taken from Khānfū (Canton) via Malacca and India. It is understood that Chinese ships sailed as far as Ṣuḥār and Sīrāf, and that Chinese merchants throughout the Song and Yuan dynasties (960-1368) would have settled there. Meanwhile, the Arabic texts report of Chinese ships putting in at Ṣuḥār, Sīrāf, and Baṣra (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 7, 8, 10, 30-3, 36, 40-2, 52; Ibn Rusta 1892, 94; al-Ṭabarī 1965, IV (i), 2023), and reaching ᶜAdan (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 63, 64; see Kindermann 1934, 21).

One story, of a hero sailing to China, retold in the *Marvels*, is of Master Captain ᶜAbhara who told Buzurg that he 'went to China seven times.' Buzurg tells us that no one was expected to reach China without any mishap. This seems plausible, given the length of the journey; the voyage from and to Sīrāf could have taken up to twelve months because of the number of stops needed to repair the sewn-planked ships. He goes on to say: 'If a man reached China without dying on the way, it was already a miracle. Returning safe and sound was unheard of'' (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 50). This is clearly an exaggeration but it underlines the dangers of the voyage, something that would have been only too well known to his audience and an acknowledged

reality. The story goes on to give a vivid account of Captain ᶜAbhara's competence as he instructs the crew of a becalmed ship to continue their voyage to China. The details of how ᶜAbhara directs the ship give us a clear insight into the seamanship of the time. Because of the length and danger of the journey some captains or ship owners who operated as merchants would have stayed for some time in China, possibly even settling there, as in the case of Isḥāq b. Yahūda, an Omani Jew, who made a voyage on his own ship in 300/912 from China to Oman after thirty-two years away (ibid 1981, 62).

Taking these accounts together with those of geography and history, we have Mesopotamia, India and China, three great trading powers at a time when Sīrāfī and Ṣuḥārī mariners and merchants were two groups who were among the leading occupational communities, transporting people and goods to and from the Indian Ocean ports. Sīrāf appears to have been totally cosmopolitan as the Arabic texts and the *Marvels* confirm. So were other port cities in the ninth and tenth century and, though both sources are perhaps less informative, we could draw a general picture of the migratory movements in the Indian Ocean. Those that settled in a new port could have formed a new colony or joined one of Arabian or Persian settlers, thus, conducting business with the new settlers and/or fellow merchants that passed by on their way to China. Khānfū, on coastal South China, was inhabited by mercantile colonies of Persians and Arabians (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 48, 52).

It is necessary to state that existing bonds between Arabians, Persians and Indians were in place long before Islam, though with the coming of Islam, trade was accelerated as it became sanctioned by the Qur'ān: '(But) let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual good-will' (Sūrat al-Nisā' [The Women] IV: 29). Through facilitating trade, mercantile communities were carrying on missionary work, converting hundreds of people at every port their ships put in. South of Sind, the Gujaratis settled in Cambay, a cosmopolitan city with a community as ambitious as the Arabian and Persian merchants. Consider the regular trade with the Hindu merchants of Gujarat and Hormuz (Digby 1982, I: 100), and the Gujarati merchants on the Malabar Coast and the rest of the Western Indian Ocean. Together with the

Gujaratis, there were the merchants and craftsmen of the Parsee community who had settled from Gujarat to Sind. There is a general lack of the Gujarati presence in the *Marvels* tales but India is frequently referenced (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 1-3, 8, 20, 25, 27, 30, 37, 60-71, 75, 95). This trans-regional global trade was for the most part of this early medieval period, cosmopolitan, but in many instances Islamic in nature. However, although the Persian and Arabian merchants were fired by a missionary zeal to reach many ports in the Indian Ocean, the Indians led the way in the sea trade to Burma and Malaya, Bengal, Hormuz, Aden and East Africa (Chaudhuri 1985, 100).

Given this migratory movement of people on the west coast of India and the South-East Asian Islands, it should be stated that the *Marvels* contain little specific or direct mention of colonies or communities be they Arabian, Persian or Indian, and that is where Muslim historical and geographical texts are important sources such as Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī's *Accounts of China and India* and al-Masᶜūdī's *Murūj al-dhahab*, which enhance our understanding of the maritime cultural and economic landscapes.

Historically, these medieval Muslim sources, including the *Marvels*, convey information on port towns from which we can work out, albeit sometimes in a limited way, the communities that lived there, with some idea of how wealthy or poor they were, the language they spoke, and the religion they practised. The Sīrāfī society was a composite of different ethno-cultural-religious coastal communities. Alongside the Persian and Persianized community there was the Arabian community who had settled in Sīrāf while a dominant Persian community was found in Ṣuḥār in Oman. Within the larger society there was an organized occupational community of mariners and merchants highlighted in the *Marvels*, while craftsmen, spoken of in the other medieval texts, are hardly noted in the stories. It is difficult to classify sea captains and merchants as two clear-cut groups; often a skipper was a merchant and/or ship owner and this is never made clear either in the Arabic texts or the *Marvels* stories, a dual occupational group which persists today as I recorded in the Arabian Gulf (Agius 2009, 128).

The language in contact with the groups or communities in and around the ports and landing places is of particular note. Wherever the communities were united under the Islamic *umma* (see below), Arabic was the *lingua franca*. While a Standard Arabic operated as a religious language for prayer and legal practices, this should not exclude the fact that in the ninth and tenth-century, Persian was still an active maritime repertoire. That a Persian nautical language was applied by the maritime communities is evidenced in the nomenclature of technical terms still exercised today by the mariner groups (Agius 2008, 361-6,370-2). Persian continued to survive as a maritime trading language from Sāsānian times. Consider its continuance as one of the *lingua francae* in a trilingual tablet in the fifteenth century erected by the Chinese Muslim Admiral Zheng He (d. 1433) in Sri Lanka in 1411 (Levathes 1994, 113; Sheriff 2010, 83), with 'inscriptions in Chinese, Tamil and Persian prais[ing] Buddha, Shiva and Allāh in equal measure'[3].

Conceptualizing group or community identity

Group, here, is defined as a company of people sharing ideas and an occupation, and/or working together while community is a class of people, living together in the same place and engaged in some work or another. By this easily understood definition, there is no intention to follow a psychological approach on a group identity concept (see Spears 2011, 201-24) though some attempts at analysis are made with inferences to the self and relation to others (see Pietromonaco and Barrett 2000, 155-75), and Stets and Burke's views on social identity and roles are worth noting (Stets and Burke 2000, 224-37).

Community in Medieval Islam was perceived through the *umma* concept which in a general sense envelops 'the people community', a term shared with Semitic cultural thought (Denny 2000, 859-62). It is 'a fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings'[4] (Pearson 2003, 76-7). Thus we read in the Qur'ān: 'We made of you an *umma* justly balanced that ye might be witnesses over the peoples' (Al-

Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Baqara [The Heifer], II: 143)[5]. The intended meaning of 'peoples' is a reference to all communities, Muslims and others. In such a way, the *Marvels of India* brings together in its stories, people of ethnic-religious and cultural diversity; the leading character though, is a Muslim by birth or a convert to Islam. On conversion, the characteristic spirit of an egalitarian society and the universality of Islam attracted members of other beliefs in that they did not need to desert their old customs and practices (Khalilieh 2019, 79): 'This georeligious and geopolitical unity', expounded Houari Touati, 'become a space that dogmatically guaranteed the truth of a "living together" willed by God' (2010, 3). That said, community identity in the *umma* concept incorporates the 'People of the Book', not just the Jews and Christians, but also the Sabians and Magians (i.e. Zoroastrians)[6] who receive Allāh's protection too (Al-Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Ḥajj [The Pilgrimage] XXII: 17). Even polytheism is not excluded from the Qur'ānic verse. In Yusuf Ali's view: 'All forms of faith that are sincere (and not merely contumacious) are matters in which we as men cannot interfere' (*The Holy Quran* 1946, II, 854, fn. 2788). Hinduism is represented fourteen times in the *Marvels* (Ibn Shahriyār 1981 2, 62, 67-9, 71-2, 84, 86, 89, 91-5).

But a true definition of identity becomes more complex as we start categorizing an individual's or group's religion, race or type of occupation involved. On this basis, regardless of race and religion, the focus of group identity, as pointed out earlier, is the sharing of a common interest or a common profession such as, in the case of the *Marvels*, the ship owners, captains and merchants, the protagonists of a number of its stories. The interesting part of the stories model concept in this study is that there is a common characteristic in the occupational groups, Sīrāfīs in particular, in that they are all story-tellers, notables of a sea town, knowledgeable on nautical matters, and with a message to proclaim (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, xviii, 118). Their stories disclose the thinking and awareness of maritime communities through their life on land and at sea at a time when Islam was in its golden period.

Community identity

With respect to communities in the *Marvels*, the information is not always directly obtainable; many a time it is guess work through inferencing the context of events and activities. At the time the *Marvels of India* stories were brought together, the two port cities, Sīrāf and Ṣuḥār attracted seafarers from South-East Asian islands, mixing with the local communities, sharing common attitudes and interests. In the case of Persian communities, they were dotted all around the Arabian Peninsula coast, according to historians al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892-3) (1866, 78, 431-2) and al-Ṭabarī (1965 IV (i), 2021-3, V (i), 2545-8, 2560-4). A dominant Persian community, mainly mercantile families, was living in Ṣuḥār long before Islam, to the point that, al-Muqaddasī reports, Persian was the main language of the sea town. Moreover, he says that the Persian population in ᶜAdan and Judda outnumbered the inhabitants of the cities (1906, 92, 96), and the Persian presence on the west coast of India and East Africa is also noted, stretching as far as Khānfū in China (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 52). In fact Persian navigation in the Indian Ocean lasted for centuries (Sheriff 2010, 156-63), and the numerous nautical nomenclatures of Persian origin in Arabic testify to this even in modern times as I have shown elsewhere (Agius 2008, 370-2).

It may be speculated from the *Marvels* stories that Hindu mercantile communities, mentioned above, were spread in different coastal towns of the Western Indian Ocean. Some activity, reported in the *Marvels* by Sīrāfīs living on the West Indian coast, reflect an understanding of their manners and customs and their tales on subjects from ravens, snakes and bewitched crocodiles to thieves, Hindu ablutions and Hindu holy men (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 6, 7, 8, 62, 69, 84, 86, 88-9, 91-4). Other communities such as the Zoroastrian groupings, are not unusual. One particular story told by Abū al-Zahr al-Barkhatī, a sea captain, speaks of fire worshippers on an island where Zoroastrians, rulers and people, gather to worship the fire that burns all night (ibid 1981, 13, 17). It describes an activity which the story-teller knows very well as he himself was once a Zoroastrian before he converted to Islam. An indication by the same story-teller of varied communities living in Sīrāf, tells of a captain who sailed from Sīrāf to China with a large number of merchants from different countries. A gale that rose in the middle of the sea gave them no hope of

rescue, so 'the passengers said farewell to one another, and each prayed according to his religion' (ibid 1981, 13-14) because there was on board a mixed group of merchants from Persia, India, South-East Asia, and China (ibid 1981, 14), which echoes the cosmopolitan mix of Sīrāf. Here we have something unlikely to be found in medieval history or geography: it is its empathetic nature, the ability to comprehend the sufferings or trouble of communities of different ethnic-religious groups is striking as is the information that he perceives it as his duty to calm and reassure the passengers (ibid 1981, 14).

The population community mix in Sīrāf is further illustrated with a story told by a merchant about three ships which set off in convoy in 306/918 from Sīrāf to Ṣaymūr on the West Indian coast, carrying 1200 passengers. On board, there were ship owners, merchants, traders, sailors and other passengers (ibid 1981, 97). There is no mention of their country of origin but it may be surmised from the large number mentioned that there was a diverse mix of ethnic-religious groups on board ship. The story ends with a tragedy as the three ships were wrecked, and all passengers, except for a small number who escaped in a lifeboat, lost their lives. There was, however, a caveat to the story as the narrator announces that this large-scale and violent event marked 'the decline of Sīrāf and Ṣaymūr' (ibid 1981, 97-8). Historically, a decline in Sīrāf was reported by the geographer al-Muqaddasī (1906, 426) in the tenth century, saying that Sīrāf was being abandoned by the communities to establish themselves in Ṣuḥār (Wilson 1954, 94; Aubin 1959, 297 and Williamson 1973, 22). The information is vague but he does speak of an earthquake that 'shook [Sīrāf] violently for seven days' (Al-Muqaddasī 1906, 426). While the events may differ, this is an example of how the information in the *Marvels* and that of the Muslim geography and history support each other.

Stories are not always specific about the name of a community nor where it is located. Consider Al-Ḥasan b. ᶜAmr, possibly a merchant, who gathered stories from India and Zābaj (i.e. Java) among other places; not only are place-names not given, but neither the names for rulers, because in this instance the story-teller was more preoccupied with things of the fantastic (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 37). And information,

when provided, could be peripheral: A Sīrāfī merchant speaks of a Maharaja, the King of Zābaj but nothing about the people. The story line, nonetheless, is about 800 money changers operating on the island (ibid 1981, 80) which is probably an exaggeration but not too far from reality when one realises that the island was known for its gold, and was an important commercial hub for rich merchants amongst whom were Sīrāfīs.

Several stories are about islands with communities serving passing ships, frequently set around the South-East Asian Islands, also recorded in the *Accounts of China and India* (2017, 8-10). Many an inhabited island was visited by the seafaring communities: the Lajabālus-Nicobar Islands, north of Sumatra; Mayt Island near Ṣanf and Sarīra, south-east off Sumatra; and Zābaj Island, that is Java (Ibn Shahriyār 1883-1886, 231-47; 1981, 59, 74, 80; Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 9-10). Yet there is a lacuna of information as to what communities do on these islands except for sensational and gruesome stories of a cannibal society on Fansūr and Nīyān Islands (Ibn Shahriyār 1883-1886, 233, 245; 1981, 73-4; Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 5).

The larger islands of Sumatra, Java and Malaya were of strategic importance for the global Indian Ocean economy. But even so, the *Marvels* are vague on sea trade, and a fuller picture of this lucrative commerce can only be sought in the geographies of Medieval Islam as pointed out in the *Accounts of China and India*, examples of which are numerous (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 3-6, 5, 8-9, 13-15, 41-3, 44-5, 47, 63-5). Most of the stories of the *Marvels*, therefore, only reveal a partial picture of life on the islands as, in general, the intention is to entertain an audience with tales of geographically confined and sometimes imaginary communities such as those on the Island of Women and the Wāqwāq Islands (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 6-8, 13-18). Both stories are examples of geographical myth, meant to be humorous, but, this must be stressed, not lacking in nautical facts. Examining these legendary myths, the seas that surround the islands are, as Marzolph and Van Leeuwen marvellously describe them, 'boundaries between different realms, gates to strange and miraculous worlds, and territories in which man is subject to the arbitrariness of fate' (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, II: 697). Fate, a power that controls events cannot be managed or

changed. In the story of 'The Island of Women', Captain Abū al-Zahr al-Barkhatī speaks of one of his captain companions who went out sailing to the Sea of Malaya. Surviving a ferocious sea, the crew and passengers landed safely on an island. The story is straightforward and believable up to now, with facts about seamanship that a maritime historian and geographer would find of benefit. The second part of the story, however, moves into the realm of fantasy. It is about the men's survival in an island community of thousands of women. The sailors and merchants die after having sex with the women except for one who does not join in the orgy – an old man (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 13-18). What is interesting in the story is how the narrator is playing on the male fear of female dominance. The island community has been created by a society in which females greatly outnumber males, and the surplus women have been shipped to this island. It appears that the community they come from are sun-worshippers.

In the story of the Wāqwāq Islands Captain Buzurg speaks of fellow merchants that reported there were 12,000 inhabited islands. The Islands are, according to the story, located off Zābaj, that is Java, the Land of Gold. A ship owned by Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan ibn ᶜAmr was blown close to the islands. The islanders fled away as they saw the ship because they thought that they were going to be attacked, and after a few attempts to disembark, the captain sent one sailor who spoke Wāqwāqī. The narrator speaks of two communities, each had a king and they fought against each other, until a crew member scared them off by performing magic. Then the story takes a new turn – the slaves' flight to freedom. It happened that the ship owner tricked the king of one community by capturing one hundred slaves and chaining them on board ship. The slaves cut themselves free, tying up the sailors who were guarding them, and leaving the rest of the crew stranded in the village (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 6-8), a victory for the slaves and punishment to those who enslaved them. The Islands of Wāqwāq appear to be real to the audience; they have an organized government of communities who may or may not get along with each other. They are islands of marvels as can be seen in other stories about them: one tells of 'scorpions that fly like birds', according to Captain Muḥammad b.

Bābishād. He also recounts that a huge tree bears fruit as large as human beings which speak as the wind blows; he heard from men who visited the island that a sailor picked one of its fruits and it burst and there was nothing left but a dead crow (ibid 1981, 30, 39). But features of the marvellous and mystery do not always surround the Wāqwāq Islands: One story is of a sailor sailing between Lāmurī Island northṢof Sumatra and China when he was caught by a gale lasting many days. He and his crew got water from the island and continued their voyage to Ṣanf, Vietnam (ibid 1981, 30, 39, 95, 111). The story is rich in nautical matters that are still relevant today. Fetching water from islands is a subject often mentioned by my informants in the Red Sea (Agius 2019, 119, 145-6, 225).

Although Master Captain Buzurg recounts tales of marvels such as cannibal communities, dog-headed people and human-headed trees, of grim tragedy and humour such as the story of the Island of Women and A Slaving Adventure; yet there are a number of accounts based on a recognizable reality that the mariners and merchants of Sīrāf would have experienced in India, Sumatra and Java Islands, and China (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 120-2; Shafiq 2013, 64-5).

Occupational groups

Identity is a concept that has had many different interpretations of its social categories. Here, the group, as a category, accepts the individual's personal identity and interaction with other groups in the context of the stories. Some interesting theories on individual identity are around but there is no intention here to cover any of them (see Deschamps and Devos 1998, 1-12; Worchel and Coutant 2004, 182-202). However, in the *Marvels of India*, within the larger communities I discussed above, we come across groups as dynamic units, and examining their attitudes will help us to understand individual identity. Our focus is on the occupational groups - the Sīrāfī ship owners, captains and merchants, and here, the information is much more forthcoming. We have short biographies of the story-tellers, the captains/ ship owners and merchants with their nautical skills and knowledge.

Although several occupational groups in the *Marvels* were from the Sīrāfī community, a number, not often mentioned by name, were Omanis, possibly from the Ṣuḥār community. Interestingly, the historian and merchant al-Masᶜūdī claims to have met some Omanis on his voyages to West India, East Africa and China. He may have been suggesting that there were in these regions Sīrāfī settlers at different ports. Others with seafaring skills were the Yemenis (Al-Iṣṭakhrī 1870, 138; al-Masᶜūdī 1983, I: 123; Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 150).

The captain grouping held a prominent position among the Sīrāfī communities for their exceptional knowledge and skills in navigation and management of the ship from start to its final destination. They were considered professional in their mastery of the sea as they sailed from Sīrāf to India and China: For instance, Captain Buzurg eulogizes Abū ᶜAbdallāh Muḥammad ibn Bābishād b. Ḥarām b. Ḥammawayh who was, 'one of the principal shipmasters … one of the best informed of God's creatures in nautical matters, and one of the best and most respected sailors' (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 4), a powerful compliment to a captain of the sea from a fellow captain (Buzurg). Then there was Ismāᶜīl b. Ibrāhīm b. Mirdās, known as Ismāᶜīlawayh who knew the Island of Java very well, significant as it was for the mercantile communities, being the Land of Gold (ibid 1981, 5). The famous Abū al-Zahr al-Barkhatī, a notable captain and a righteous man, as noted above, reassured the crew and passengers that he would not abandon ship, saying, 'All us captains, when we board a ship, stake our lives and destiny on it. If it is lost, we die with it' (ibid 1981, 14). This is interesting as it is an example of one of the twelve principles of navigation (*siyāsāt*) recorded centuries later by the navigator, Aḥmad Ibn Mājid (d. after 966/1500), (Tibbetts 1981, 387-91). It also gives an insight into the relationship between a captain and the seafarers for whom he makes an oath that he will not abandon them, something I have not come across in medieval geographical or historical texts.

The ability of Master Captain ᶜAllāma, sailing from India to China, is celebrated when he foretells the coming of a gale by looking at the formation of the sea. Amongst the mariner grouping, there was Mardawayh b. Zārabakht, 'one of the captains on the

China and Land of Gold [route]', and another was Jaᶜfar Ibn Rashīd Ibn Lākis, well known on this route (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 5, 28, 102-3, 105). These were all real people who would have been known to the audience which gave authority to their stories.

In explaining the identity of occupational groups, it is essential to look at the individuals' status, their place in the social and professional structure of their occupation and their contribution to the society to which they belonged. The people and the vessel they sailed on, their relation to the sea and their use of celestial navigation are all clearly exemplified in the *Marvels* as true seamanship. Admittedly, not in much detail but they could be at times more informative than Medieval Arabic texts, thus, complementing rather than competing. An essential point is the skippers' individual identity as a professional in his relationship to the crew and the passengers.

Celestial navigation was crucial, a practice still found in the Red Sea today (Agius 2019, 146-7, 175-6): Captain Abū al-Zahr al-Barkhatī tells us how sailing in the Malay region, their ship ran into strong winds which took them under the Canopus star, claiming that 'at its zenith [man] must abandon all hope of return' (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 13). He displays an emotional connection as he recounts a gripping tale of the travellers' endurance as the ship survived the onslaught of the ferocious storm. Experience is, of course, crucial to these stories and valuable to the understanding of the individual identity within the maritime society. The same captain relates a story he heard from his maternal uncle, Ibn Anshartū who set off on a large ship to Fansūr, off Sumatra Island. On their way he and the sailors studied the stars all night in order to determine the route either way (ibid 1981, 19), a detail that reinforces the group identity of professional sailors out at sea, again a feature I did not find in Medieval Arabic sources. Nonetheless, it must be said that both Arabic texts and the *Marvels* stories are short of information on such things as describing a craft's hull design, types of sails, rigging configuration, steering, pilotage and so forth. Interestingly, the *Accounts of China and India* does document boatbuilding on some Indian Ocean islands (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, 4, 41, 61), an early medieval glimpse into

construction techniques. Although not much is known through Medieval Arabic sources of ship-types of the Western Indian Ocean, here we can turn to archaeological evidence which suggests that the Arabian-Persian-Indian ships constructed of sewn planks, shared a common hull design (Flecker 2000, 101-119; Vosmer 2010, 121-35), unlike the nailed planks of a Javanese, Sumatran or Chinese junk. We do not know how seaworthy were the Persian-Arabian-Indian ships but we do know that the junks had a large draught and a good floating capacity (Levathes 1994, 43, 78; Agius 2008, 166, 225-6).

In the stories the professional community conveys information on anchoring or when to jettison the cargo to save the ship and passengers. Captain ᶜAllāma, an extraordinary sailor, sailing from India to China, on seeing the force of a storm ordered the merchants to throw the cargo overboard. When the winds abated and they went to collect their cargo at a nearby island, not only did they recover their cargo but they gathered cargoes of shipwrecks that had been deposited there. This is a story that is void of lore and marvels. It is believable, with a happy ending that 'the merchandise they had recovered brought them wealth and happiness' (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 28); an ordinary story of a captain whose identity was portrayed to be exemplary to the audience, demonstrating the merchants' trust in their captain. Then we have a story related by Captain Bābishād returning from Fanṣūr near Sumatra to Raysūt on the Southern Arabian coast of Oman. He knew exactly when they were approaching land by observing the seascape at sunset: 'At that time, if you are opposite a mountain or an island, you will see it distinctly.' No nautical instruments were used, just reliance on the naked eye. The merchants on board had made a bet of 20 dinars that the captain would be right. When the look-out man cried out that Raysūt was close, 'they congratulated one another, and wept with joy and happiness' (Ibn Shahriyār 1981, 53-4). Knowledge of the sea and experience is a recurrent theme in the stories but one thing that makes these stories unique is the humour and humanity as shown in this story of the engagement of the captain with the seafarers, and their trust in the captain. At the end we are told that the money went 'for distribution in alms to the poor.'

We have copious evidence in the *Marvels* of the nautical skills the mariners displayed on hazardous voyages such as when approaching a landing place or an island; navigators had to show expertise in steering their way through coral reefs and submerged rocks. There is mention of voyaging from one island to another and it is a fact that, in the days of sail, island hopping was a necessary strategy because islands gave a safer anchorage, something my informants of the Red Sea corroborated (Agius 2019, 145-6).

Reflections and conclusion

Sharing a cultural landscape, the stories of fact and fiction in the *Marvels* highlight the way individuals and communities lived, their social identity and the roles they played. This is particularly true of the occupational groups who have ideas and technology in common, in this instance, a class of captains/ ship owners and merchants that share their lives at work or rest. The examples we have seen in the *Marvels* are of thirty-one members of an occupational group, underlining their status in the community, their family background, travel and achievements. Their adventures are supported by the nautical data they impart, details of which are sometimes found in medieval historical and geographical texts, but by engaging with the coastal and island communities and seafarers, the tales go further; they contain a self-other understanding.

The stories model as epitomized by the *Marvels* is a valuable adjunct to understanding the maritime landscape of the ninth and tenth century. As has been shown, several of these stories are told from the viewpoint of eyewitnesses who would have been recognizable to the audience as eminent captains, ship owners and merchants, suggesting that the facts they contain on seamanship are true. The stories may be mainly fictional and often sensational in content, but whatever the veracity of events in the *Marvels* tales, their accounts furnish us with a glimpse of what these prominent people knew at the time and how they thought. While the geographical texts may be knowledgeable on the physical nature of the seas and

oceans, they present, as far as I am aware, few particulars about the occupational groups of a port town.

Much of the geography in the tales is corroborated by Medieval Arabic texts and strengthens our knowledge of, for instance, the islands of the East Indies. There is no imaginary geography except for such oddities as the Island of Women which has echoes of Homer's Greek tales (Hall 2008, 1) and the Wāqwāq Islands which have proved to be unidentifiable so far, first mentioned by the geographer, Ibn Khurradādhbeh (Maqbul 1995, Appendix)[7]. Eventful as these stories are, they also offer the ninth-tenth century audience some opportunity for moral and religious reflection which gives us in the twenty-first century a window into the cultural thinking of the times. They are usually based on a recognizable reality and it is this rich maritime landscape which we are able to access. Like Sindbād's Seven Voyages in the *Arabian Nights*, the *Marvels* may also be described as 'the archetypes of human imagination, where history and geography mingle with literary and legendary images' (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, II: 605).

As we have seen, Arabic was the *lingua franca* and would have been shared with Persian, the native language in Sirāf where the stories were collected. If bilingualism were the case, would the stories of the *Marvels* have been communicated in Arabic or Persian? An intriguing question. The Arabic of the stories contains a lot of dialectal usages, as some other works of the ᶜajā'ib do, such as in the *Arabian Nights*. So it could be argued that they were delivered directly in Arabic by the bilingual story-tellers; but there is a second, and more likely possibility, that they were recounted in Persian and then translated by Captain Buzurg using a final written version in dialectal Arabic.

The stories model takes away from the belief that history, geography, and archaeology are the only sources to rely on for recreating the medieval maritime past of the Indian Ocean. Looking at the maritime landscape of the ninth and tenth century, the *Marvels* stories with their mixture of fantasy and reality, fact and fiction, enable us to better reconstruct the realities of the lives of the occupational groups of

the vibrant sea ports and their voyages across the Indian Ocean. Because, unlike medieval texts of geography and history, the *Marvels* tell a story, a sequence of events, set in a recognizable context, this enables the audience through time to identify and relate to the protagonists of the story and to better understand the maritime landscape they inhabited. The lively interaction between these captains/ship owners, merchants, seamen, and passengers, enables us to empathize with them just as the audience who gathered to listen to the tales was gripped by their adventures. There are psychological insights embedded in the stories such as the relationship between the self and the community whether that be a captain interacting with his passengers or members of different faith groups coming together in the face of tragedy. Their humanity speaks to us across the centuries, giving a voice to long forgotten communities. As Tim Mackintosh-Smith has so rightly said, 'the yarning sailors are finally given their say' (Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī 2017, xxviii).
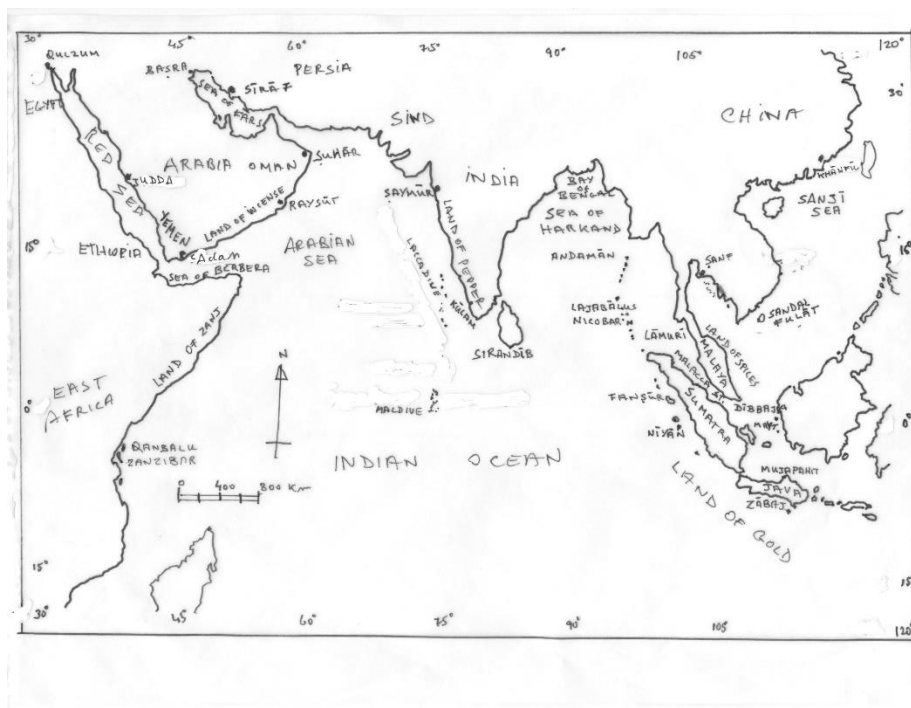
Map: The Indian Ocean according to the ninth-century *Marvels of India*

Image: Fact and fiction: A sewn plank ship (left) drops anchor at Wāqwāq Island of Islamic myth with human heads in animal bodies (credit al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* – Schefer Collection in Ibn Shahriyār 1883-1886)

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[1] Jean-Charles Ducène debated the *Marvels*' authorship as not being that of Buzurg but of Abū ͨImrān Mūsā ibn Rabāḥ al-Awsī, a Sīrāfī who lived in Egypt in 397/987, see, Jean-Charles Ducène 2015, 3. Similar sea stories were found in a work by al-ͨUmarī (d. 749/1348) written in the fourteenth century, see al-ͨUmarī 1427/2006, II, 335-411.

[2] An English translation of the Arabic *Kitāb ͨAjā'ib al-Hind* was produced by G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville in 1981, based on an Istanbul Arabic version (Aya Sofia 3306) which was reproduced by L. Marcel Devic, and translated by P. A. Van Der Lith into French in 1883-1886. To note recently, two critical studies by the late maritime historian Ḥasan Ṣāliḥ Shihāb published in 2010 using as his base the Arabic-French edition and Suhanna Shafiq's philological study published in 2013.

[3] http://nakkeran.com/index.php/2018/03/21/the-trilingual-inscription-of-admiral-zheng-he-cheng-ho-3/ (accessed 12 March 2020).

[4] http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2427 (accessed 5 March 2020).

[5] See translation with a slight alteration, *The Holy Quran* 1946, volume I, 57.

[6] The Zand-Avesta is the Pārsis' holy book. The Pārsis lived, at the time of the prophet Muḥammad, in the Mesopotamian valleys and Persian and Median highlands, see *The Holy Quran* 1946, volume II, 854, fn. 2789.

[7] Wāqwāq is one that its location, let alone its mythical tale, has long baffled researchers even though attempts were made to geographically position them with the East Indies. There is an early possible tradition that goes back to Alexander the Great (r. 356-323 BCE) where the islands are a sanctuary of both the sun and moon and a place where speaking trees grow (Marzolph and Van Leeuwen 2004, II: 735); also some connection with Ptolemy's (fl. 2nd century CE) idea of the East African coast being linked with South East Asia (Sheriff 2010, 205).