

الوثيقة

دورية تاريخية محكمة

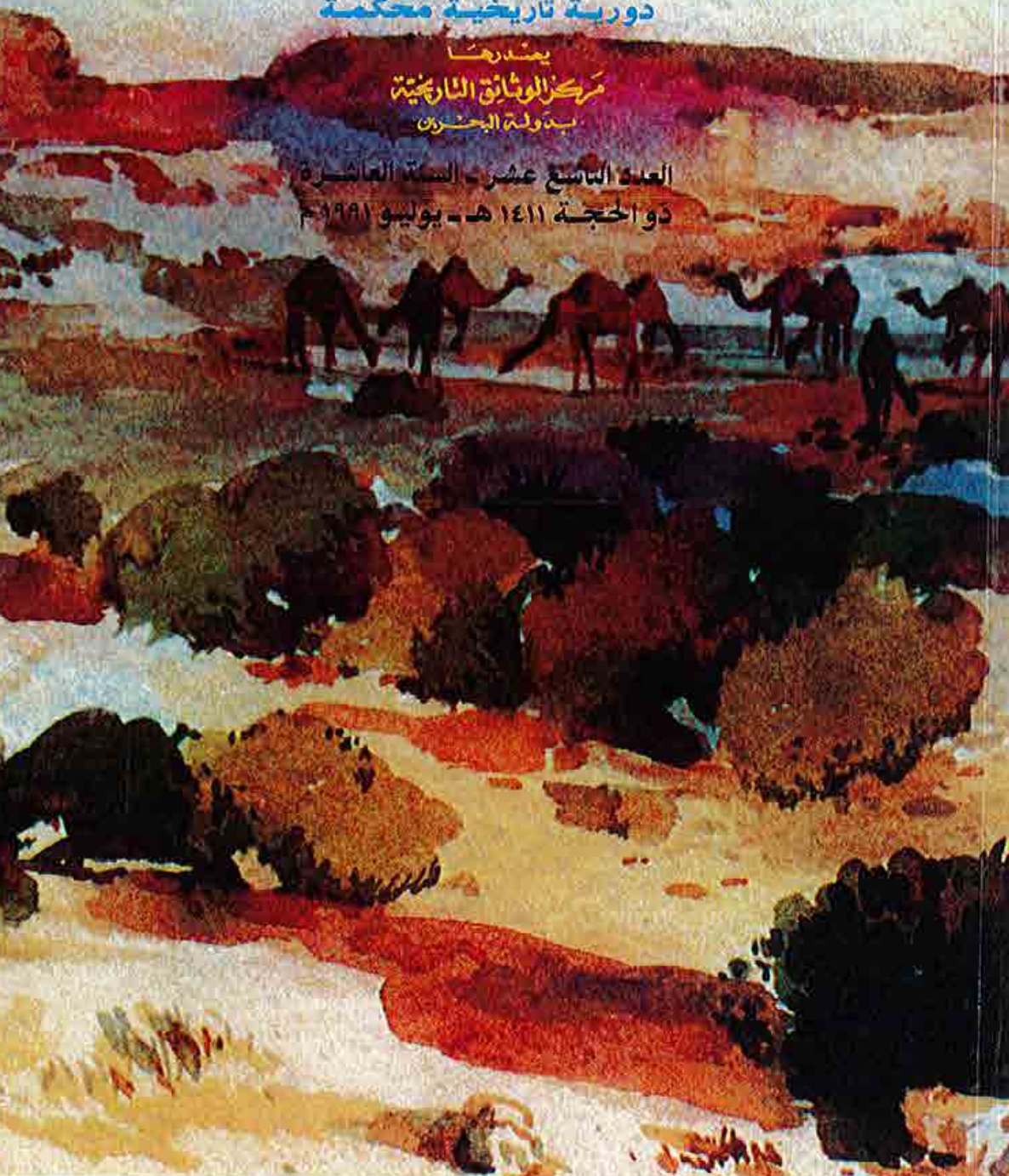
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مركز الوثائق التاريخية

بمدينة البحرين

العدد التاسع عشر - السنة العاشرة

ذو الحجة ١٤١١ هـ - يوليو ١٩٩١ م



INDO-ARAB RELATIONS



(After the advent of Islam)



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Indo-Arab relations established on the basis of trade and commerce in addition to socio-literary contacts go deep down to the remote past of history.

The Indian continent was not only known to the Arabs, but a study of the Arab writers indicates that they had a high opinion of India and its people.

Ibn Jahiz, a well known man of letters, thinker and philosopher, who was a citizen of Basra writes: "we find the inhabitants of India

proficient in astrology and mathematics. They have also developed a special script. In the science of medicine, they are far ahead of others and



13. Moreland, op. cit p. 213
14. R.K. Mookerji, op. cit., pp 158-159
15. James Wise Notes on the Races, Castes and Traders of Eastern Bengal (London, 1833) p.3
16. Jayanti Maitra, Muslim Politics In Bengal 1855-1906 (Calcutta, 1984) p. 46.
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19. H. Major, India in the fifteen century (Haklyut Society, London MDCCCLVIII) p. 7
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21. Joseph Desmogyi, History of Oriental Trade (Germany 1968) pages 17 and 16.
22. H.C. Ray Chaudhari, Studies in Indian Antiquities. p.149
23. Dr. Falih Handhal, Dictionary of Spoken Arabic of the UAE (Abu Dhabi, 1977) This book gives an interesting list of words of Indian origin which have become part of the spoken Arabic of the UAE.,
24. A.L. Basham, The Wonder that was India (Calcutta, 1986) p 498
25. Toussaint op. cit p. 57, C.G.F. Simkin, The Traditional Trade Asia, (London, 1968), p. 84
26. K.N. Chaudhari op. cit. p. 17
27. Panikkar op. cit p. 26
28. Serjeant op. cit. p. 5
29. Basham op. cit. p. 487
30. Ibid

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- 3&4. Sulayman Ibrahim Ashkhari, Al Tijara Wa Al Milaha Fi Al Khaleej Al Arabi Fi Al Abbasi (Cairo, 1972) p.p 149-150.
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9. R.K. Mookherji op. cit p. 139
10. Syed Sulayman Nadvi, the Shipbuilders and the Navigators, p413 Islamic Culture Vol 16, 1942.
11. For further details about Arab influence on the Mappillas of Malabar see Roland E. Miller, Mappillas Muslims of Kerala, a Study in Islamic Trends (Madras 1976) p. 42.
12. Ghulam Hussain Salim. The Riyazu-s-salatin translated from the original Persian by Maulawi Abdus Salam (Calcutta, 1902) pp. 9-10

skilled seamen but also proselytisers for their faith and exercised the double role of traders and preachers by spreading the message of Islam from the western coast of India to the islands of the archipelago. In their own country the Arabs often combined pilgrimage with business. "Hadjwa Hajda", according to an age-old Arab custom implied that the pilgrims to Mecca apart from fulfilling a pious duty also carried with them articles of merchandise.²⁸

A comparison of Indian maritime activities in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal reveals an interesting dichotomy. The Indians navigated the Arabian sea only for purposes of trade and not for colonizing except in Socotra where they settled long before the Christian era and named it Sukhara dwipa or the Pleasant Island. In contrast, the naval and political supremacy exercised by the Indians in the

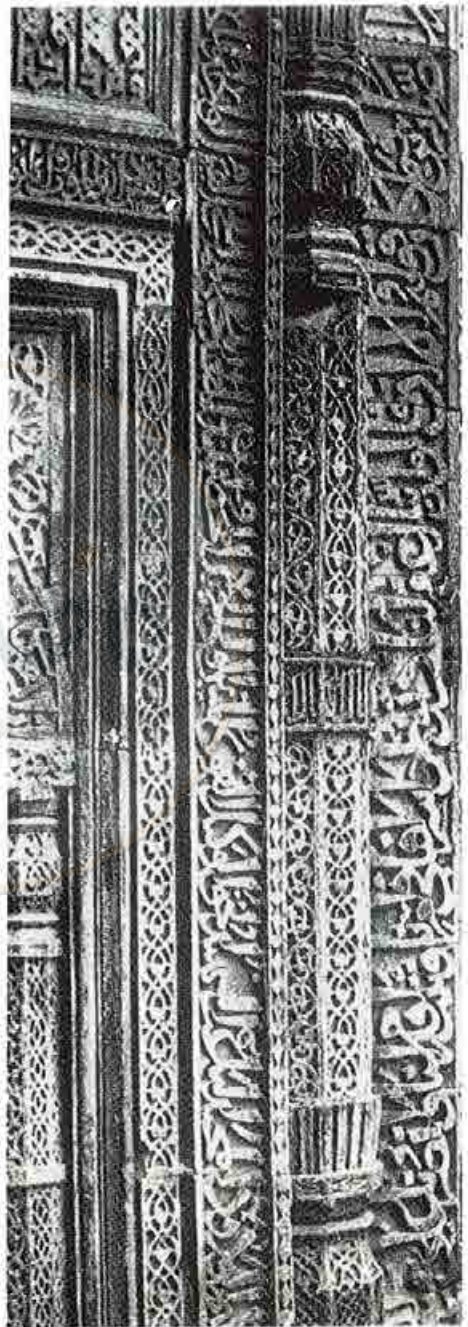
Bay of Bengal as early as the 5th century B.C. was based on extensive colonization of South East Asia by the Indian merchants and the formation of several Hinduised maritime states in the eastern region of the Indian Ocean.²⁹

Yet inspite of centuries of exchange of cultures and commodities between India and the Arab world, West Asia never came under the domination of Indian influence in the way "the indigenous culture of South East Asia received its primary impetus to civilization from India.³⁰ This however, should not be interpreted to minimise the impact of Indian Science, Literature, Philosophy, and socio-cultural traditions which had percolated into the Arab world through the centuries as a result of the Indo-Arab link being one of the most ancient in the history of human civilizations.



Arab interaction. The Arabs called Mathematics 'hindisat' or the Indian art and it appears that the decimal system of numerals with other mathematical lore developed in India were learnt by the Muslim world through the Arabs.²⁴

Seven centuries of Arab ascendancy in the Indian Ocean had certain significant effects. In the first place, the Arab Dinar by the 10th century was the only coin commonly used throughout the Indian Ocean.²⁵ It may be further added that the Arabic word 'ashrafi' derived from the expression 'al-Malik al Asraf' widely used as regal epithet came to be applied to the gold coins of Egypt and India.²⁶ It is primarily in the nautical realm that the Arabs left their mark by their innovation of the triangular lateen sail in the Indian Ocean and their discovery of the compass, though the Hindus had already in use a magnetic compass known as "Matsya Yantra" which was mentioned in a work called Merchants' Treasure written at Cairo by Baylak al Kiljaki.²⁷ And lastly the Gulf traders were not only



the Middle East, just as strictly Indian designs and motifs in decoration were also applied to fabrics and then exported to overseas markets. This two-way impact of trade is illustrated nowhere better than in the case of the Indian textile industry. Gastronomic traditions as they developed in the Indian subcontinent, Persia and the Arab world considered rice dishes prepared with the spices of Malabar, Moluccas and Ceylon indispensable to aristocratic tables and festive occasions.²⁰ It may be interesting to note in this connection that it was largely due to the Arabs that tropical products like rice, cotton and sugarcane were introduced to the West from India.²¹

The significant role played by the Arabs in acquiring, preserving and passing on human knowledge was perhaps their greatest contribution to the development of civilizations. In the field of literature the experiences of the Arab travellers and traders bore fruit in the form of some of the best known geographical writings, travelogues and descriptions of distant lands

and people which throw a flood of light on the medieval history of India and the surrounding areas. There is no doubt that if these works which are too well-known to be repeated, are properly researched may help to bridge the gulf of the centuries between Greek and Persian historians. A two-way traffic in the literature of Arabia and India is borne out by the remarkable similarities between the stories of the Arabian Nights, the Buddhist Jataka Tales and the Kathasaritasagara (Ocean of story) written by Somadeva in the 11th century on the one hand,²² and between the famous Arabic story of 'Kalila wa Dimna' and ancient Sanskrit fables of 'Panchatantra' on the other. Even in the field of language, the cultivation of Arabic as the language of the Quran and the approximation of the Perso-Arabic culture became the sine qua non of the elite Muslim society of India. This was bound to result in the reciprocal absorption of words of Indian origin in the Arabic language²³ and vice versa and constitutes is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the Indo-

occasional teachers." The recognition accorded to the newly-erected kingdom of Bengal as a part of the Muslim hierarchy by the Caliph of Baghdad long before the attainment of like honours by the suzerian at Delhi was according to Thomas due to the difficulty of communications with Baghdad over alien kingdoms and distributed frontiers that delayed the emissaries on one part, and on the other did not affect the open ocean passage between the mouths of the Ganges and the seaport of Basrah.¹⁷

Closely associated with the Arabs were the Indian traders who from the earliest time formed part of the cosmopolitan and sea-faring population of the South Arabian ports. Apart from being major traders, the Indians from the very outset served as financiers bankers, money-changers and money-lenders at Aden and other South Arabian ports as the Fatwa literature shows. As they were mostly Hindus, the Fatwa cases illustrate the position they were assigned in relation to Muslim society. The terms

'baniyan' and 'Karrani' in the context of the Indian merchant and clerks respectively were familiar with the Arab from an early date. Business was transacted in a spirit of strict impartiality as was evident from the duties paid by the merchants coming over with the Indian monsoon without regard to religion or race.¹⁸ In his description of Hormuz also known as 'Daralaman' (abode of security) Abd er-Razzak refers to persons of all religions and even idolators found in great numbers in this city, and no injustice was permitted towards any person whatever.¹⁹

The impact of trade on human culture and vice versa is well recognised by anthropologists and archaeologists. Habits associated with food and drinks, clothing and housing constitute the basis of culture system and in the period before the Industrial Revolution largely determined the composition of long distance trade. Fine cotton textiles exported from India were adopted over many centuries in their texture, pattern and colours and suit the tastes of consumers in

Even to this day, these communities of mixed Indo-Arab origin remain profoundly influenced by Arab customs and habits of food, dress, religious and social conditions.¹¹

The contact of the Arab traders however, was not confined to the western coast of India, but extended to the eastern seaboard of deltaic Bengal. Free commercial intercourse between the Bay of Bengal known to the Arabs as Bahr Harkand and the ports of Basra and Baghdad existed as early as the 8th century, long before the Muslim conquest of Bengal.¹² The presence of Arabs merchants engaged in a considerable volume of commerce in Bengal are mentioned by such 16th century writers as Barbosa and Ralph Fitch.¹³ According to local traditions preserved in some old Bengali manuscripts, several Arab merchants settled for purposes of commerce at Gauda. One of the manuscripts gives a glowing description of Gauda as the chief commercial metropolis of Bengal through the mouth of Chamban Ali, a merchant from Baghdad.¹⁴ In

the eastern half of Bengal Arab merchants carried on a lucrative commerce and disseminated their religious ideas at Chittagong and Sylhet which they respectively called Sadjam and Shilahat.¹⁵ It was mainly through these Arab traders and missionaries that Islam entered Bengal and in the course of centuries completely changed the socio-religious pattern there. In fact, Bengal became a stronghold of the Arab Sufi saints in the early medieval period and their 'darghas' became the nerve-centres of the Bengali Muslim society. The Sufis helped much in elevating the religious life and thought of Bengal and in promoting the Islamic spirit. They carried out peaceful conversions on a large scale in rural Bengal with their policy of 'sulh-i-kul' or peace with all.¹⁶ On the basis of a learned analysis of old coins of the Bengal Muslim Kings, E. Thomas has attributed the prevalence of the colloquial knowledge of Arabic in the estuaries of Bengal "to the increased facilities of intercourse by sea, while the learned of Delhi had to rely more upon books and

Portuguese. In the peaceful character of Asian trade the dominating Arabs actually perpetuated age-old traditions of the freedom of trade and security of the trader dating back to the Hellenistic and Roman times.⁷ As keen traders the Arab merchants on the Indian coast accepted the settled polity had abstained from getting embroiled in the internal affairs of the Indian rulers. In return they acquired a privileged position, the right to erect mosques and to settle disputes according to their own laws. They were welcomed by the Indian rulers owing to the fact that they could make or mar the trade of a particular port, ruin the local merchants by merely staying away, and could even cause serious loss to the administration which depended on the port dues for a large part of its revenue.⁸ The kingdoms of the south were particularly dependent on the Arab merchants for the supply of horses from Persia and Arabia.⁹ A close alliance was thus forged between the Arab merchants and the rulers of coastal India particularly with the Hindu ruler of Calicut

Samudri Raj (King of the Seas later misshappen into the Zamorin) since the income and prosperity of their kingdoms were bound up with the activities of the Arab merchants as was testified by Ibn Batutah. The extent to which the Arab traders were revered by the Indian rulers is borne out by the following instances.

Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Babshad, a proprietor of ships from Siraf living at the end of the third century A.H., was warmly welcomed by a Hindu Raja, who had his picture drawn in a circle of sailors and boatmen. Similarly the Arab sailors who had their settlements in the island of Bahrain were appreciated by the Indian rulers because of their innumerable ships and boats.¹⁰ Many of these Arabs who came to India for purposes of trade settled down, contracted marriage alliances with the women of the country and the offsprings of such marriages came to be known by different names in different areas notable among whom were the Mappillas of Malabar and the Bayasirahs of Gujarat.