

## ISLAM AND THE SEA: PARADIGMS AND PROBLEMATICS \*

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There can hardly be any doubt that the maritime history of the Islamic world is vital to the understanding of both Islamic history in particular and world history more generally. Much of the political and military course of the Islamic world hinged on or was influenced by control of sea routes,<sup>1</sup> and already in the seventh century it seems clear that one of the objectives of the expansion of the navy of the nascent Umayyad caliphate was to provide the maritime power required for campaigns against Constantinople itself.<sup>2</sup> The siting and

\* A review essay on Xavier de Planhol, *L'Islam et la mer: la mosquée et le matelot, VIII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Librairie académique Perrin, 2000). I am grateful to Mercedes García-Arenal for her comments and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Aly Mohamed Fahmy, *Muslim Sea-Power in the Eastern Mediterranean from the Seventh to the Tenth Century A.D. (Studies in Naval Organisation)* (Alexandria: Tipografia Don Bosco, 1950); Archibald R. Lewis, *Naval Power and Trade in the Mediterranean, A.D. 500-1100* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); Ekkehard Eickhoff, *Seekrieg und Seepolitik zwischen Islam und Abendland. Das Mittelmeer unter byzantinischer und arabischer Hegemonie (650-1040)* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1966); G.R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1971); Šābir Muḥammad Diyāb, *Siyāsāt al-duwal al-islāmīya fī ḥawḍ al-Baḥr al-Mutawassiṭ min awā'il al-qarn al-thānī al-hijrī hattā nihāyat al-'aṣr al-fā'imī* (Cairo: 'Ālam al-kutub, 1973); al-Sayyid 'Abd al-'Azīz Sālim, *Ta'rīkh al-baḥrīya al-islāmīya fī ḥawḍ al-Baḥr al-Abyaḍ al-Mutawassiṭ* (Alexandria: Mu'assasat shabāb al-jāmi'a, 1981); Vassilios Christides, *The Conquest of Crete by the Arabs (ca. 824): a Turning Point in the Struggle between Byzantium and Islam* (Athens: Akademia Athenon, 1984); V. Christides, S. Soucek, G.R. Tibbetts, and G. Oman, art. "Milāḥa" in *El<sup>2</sup>*, VII (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 40b-54a; Wāfiq Barakāt, *Fann al-ḥarb al-baḥrīya fī l-ta'rīkh al-'arabī al-islāmī* (Aleppo: Jāmi'at Ḥalab, Ma'had al-turāth al-'ilmī al-'arabī, 1995); Christophe Picard, *La mer et les musulmans d'occident au Moyen Age: VIII<sup>e</sup>-XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Already in 1940 Georg Ostrogorsky noted that Mu'āwīya's campaign against the Syrian coastal island of Arwād (modern Rouad) in AD 649 should be seen in the context of a broader campaign aimed against Constantinople. See his *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. Joan Hussey, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969),

subsequent development of major towns often depended on maritime considerations; the surprise Byzantine seaborne assault against Alexandria in 645,<sup>3</sup> which allowed the Greeks briefly to reoccupy the city, revealed the wisdom of choosing as Egypt's new capital the old Arab siege camp of al-Fustāt, located far inland where Arab forces could not be surprised and cut off by sea.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, considerations of coastal security later dictated that al-Fustāt and Cairo take over Alexandria's ancient role as the primary maritime entrepôt of Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Already a

116, 124. The origins and early development of Muslim sea power are well-assessed in Jorge Lirola Delgado, *El nacimiento del poder naval musulmán en el Mediterráneo (28-60 H/649-680 c)* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Leone Caetani, *Annali dell'Islam* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1905-24), VII, 105-19 nos. 74-104; Alfred J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion*, 2nd ed. by P.M. Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 465-83.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Wladyslaw B. Kubiak, *Al-Fustāt: Its Foundation and Early Urban Development* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1987), 58-61, pointing to the caliph 'Umar's command that there should be no water barrier between him and his troops; Kubiak also argues that the inland communications of a capital in Alexandria would have been obstructed by the Delta canal network and by the annual flood of the Nile, and that Babylon was a site superior to other early Arab bases because it had great stores of grain and an administrative center. On the alleged command of 'Umar it must be said that this cannot come from his time or else was of no significant authority in the era of the conquests; otherwise it becomes impossible to explain the advance of Muslim armies into Iraq and Iran (i.e. across the Euphrates and Tigris) during his caliphate. To the general strategic and logistic considerations must surely be added the factor of security from attack without warning from the sea. Cf. Caetani, *Annali dell'Islam*, IV, 543-44 no. 144; Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid, *La capitale de l'Égypte jusqu'à l'époque fatimide, al-Qāhira et al-Fustāt: essai de reconstitution topographique* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), 13-15.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Kindī (d. 360/971, attrib.), *Faḍā'il Miṣr*, ed. Johannes Østrup, "Umar ibn Muhammad al-Kindī's Beskrivelse af Ægypten", *Bulletin de l'Académie royale de Danemark* 4 (1896), 197, 205; also the ample confirmation of this trend in the Geniza: S.D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 23; A.L. Udovitch, "Time, the Sea, and Society: Duration of Commercial Voyages on the Southern Shores of the Mediterranean during the High Middle Ages", *Settimani di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo* 25 (1978: *La navigazione mediterranea nell'alto medioevo*), 521. On the role of Alexandria see, for example, Fahmy, *Muslim Sea-Power*, 27-30; Sobhi Labib, art. "al-Iskandariya" in *EP*, IV (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 135b, noting the revival of the town's international trade in the twelfth century; A.L. Udovitch, "L'enigme d'Alexandrie: sa position au Moyen Age d'après les documents de la Geniza du Caire", *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 46 (1984), 71-80; Martina Müller-Wiener, *Eine Stadtgeschichte Alexandrias von 564/1169 bis in die Mitte des 9./15. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1992), 234-61; v. Christides et al., "Milāha", 43a; George F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, rev. and expanded ed. by John Carswell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 59-61.

century before the heyday of the Geniza merchants al-Muqaddasī (wr. 375/985) arrived at al-Fustāṭ and marvelled at the vast number of ships at anchor or under sail.<sup>6</sup> Seaborne trade was vital to the prosperity not only of coastal cities such as Istanbul, but also to that of inland centers like Baghdad and al-Baṣra in Iraq.<sup>7</sup> As had already been the case in antiquity and under the Byzantine Empire,<sup>8</sup> the ability to feed whole populations could depend on maritime commerce and access by sea to food supplies that were far afield but readily available and affordable by sea. It is, in fact, somewhat surprising that while much attention has been devoted to Islamic maritime history,<sup>9</sup> Xavier de Planhol's latest work of Islamic historical geography is the first to attempt a broad comprehensive assessment over the entire span of Islamic history from its origins to the contemporary period.<sup>10</sup>

The author specifically eschews the relation of details of battles, and his agenda is rather "to envisage in its totality the confrontation of *homo islamicus* with the sea" (pp. 9-10). The argument that informs all else in the book is his conviction that Islam is essentially incompatible with maritime life and pursuits (453); Islamic history reveals a profound inaptitude and revulsion for the sea (454), and on the waves it is not really possible to be a good Muslim (461-66). Islam is a faith stressing submission, and Islamic society is a staid

<sup>6</sup> Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm ilā ma'rifat al-aqālīm*, ed. M.J. de Goeje (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1906; BGA 3), 198.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, on al-Baṣra, Charles Pellat, *Le milieu baṣrien et la formation de Ḡāḥiḥ* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1953), 234-39; Ṣāliḥ Aḥmad al-'Alī, *Al-Tanzīmāt al-ijtimā'īya wa-l-iqtisādīyā fī l-Baṣra fī l-qarn al-awwal al-hijrī*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-ṭalī'a, 1969), 223-62; 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Dūrī, *Ta'rīkh al-'Irāq al-iqtisādīyā fī l-qarn al-rābi' al-hijrī* (Beirut: Dār al-mashriq, 1974), 145-50.

<sup>8</sup> John L. Teall, "The Grain Supply of the Byzantine Empire", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 13 (1959), 87-139; Peter Garnsey and C.R. Whittaker, eds., *Trade and Famine in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1983); Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food-Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Houcine Jaïdi, *L'Afrique et le blé aux IV<sup>ème</sup> et V<sup>ème</sup> siècles* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, 1990); *Le ravitaillement en blé de Rome et des centres urbaines des débuts de la République jusqu'au Haut Empire* (Naples: Centre Jean Bérard, and Rome: École française de Rome, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> A useful bibliographical guide is A.H.J. Prins, "The Maritime Middle East: a Century of Studies", *Middle East Journal* 27 (1973), 207-19. Since then a work of particular importance has been Carswell's new edition of Hourani's classic *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean* (n. 5 above), which has, however, missed many opportunities to update the text where maritime commerce is concerned.

<sup>10</sup> The title is inspired by Michel Mollat, *L'Europe et la mer* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

society of law and precise regulation of personal conduct that rejects excess and the wanton pursuit of personal adventure. But sailors are precisely this latter type of individual: "In sum, maritime culture is on the one hand pragmatic, erratic, non-normative, ill-defined, poorly structured and weakly integrated, and susceptible to rapid adaptation; on the other hand, it is ambiguous, excessive, ostentatious and prodigal, competitive, adventurous, and irregular" (468).<sup>11</sup> So for Muslims the sea was the "throne of Satan" (89); it played a minor role as a separate topic in their literature, and in geography it was a realm of marvels and monsters (91-148). It is of course true that one does find Muslim sea trade and sea power, but when Muslims did shake off their indifference and build up their commercial and military presence on the sea, it was with foreign techniques that they did so and with non-Muslims that they manned their ships. Where Muslims assumed a major role it was as renegades from Islamic society at large that they did so (31, 50-52, 160-64, 248-51). So Muslims at more or less all levels (individual, society, culture, commerce, etc.) remained primarily ignorant of and indifferent to the sea: "At worst Islam was hostile to the sea, at best it ignored it" (42). Even such a renowned seafaring traveler as Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217) proves to have been basically a landsman who feared the sea and knew next to nothing about it (69-89). Where one finds otherwise—and the book is full of such anomalies—these cases are simply the classic exceptions that confirm the general rule and require special explanation (e.g. 371, 489). "Never has a Muslim power been able to establish an enduring presence on the seas. Never has Muslim society been able to familiarize itself intimately with the sea" (461).

The decline of Islam in modern times is largely attributable to this failing, Planhol argues, and indeed, the larger history of the world has been profoundly affected by it (470-79). The Russian Revolution, for example, was a direct consequence of Muslim neglect of the sea (305). The author associates condemnation of the sea and maritime activities with "every totalitarian and utopian con-

<sup>11</sup> This judgment is derived from A.H.J. Prins, *Sailing from Lamu: a Study of Maritime Culture in Islamic East Africa* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1965), 263-75, and Planhol reaches it immediately after an appreciation of the research of Prins, who, however, avoids the temptation to deal with his subject in judgmental terms and does not (so far as I have seen) characterize an entire local culture as "destructive, even schizophrenic".

ception of life in society” (469); if I read him correctly, he is tantalized by the possibility that the Muslim aversion for the sea is actually a manifestation of a broader monotheistic antipathy.<sup>12</sup> Both Judaism and Christianity display the same negative attitude (457-59), but in late medieval and early modern times European Christianity managed to overcome this loathing. Positive aspects were affirmed, beginning with the possibility of maritime navigation as a means for pursuing Christian evangelism; then “... the sea became an essential instrument for the elevation of the human spirit, for its very discovery and for moving beyond it. The sea was desacralized. It was definitively dominated” (460). None of this occurred in Islam, for which “the last great chance” was the Ottoman Empire, which had enormous opportunities at sea but failed to capitalize on them (256-73, 313-31, 478). Hence, when the Australian marine writer Alan Villiers in 1938 took passage on a Kuwaiti ship for a voyage along the east coast of Africa with the aim of writing a book on East African navigation, the sole reaction of the captain of the ship, who refused to believe that the earth is round, was to say that Villiers “would not find any Arab to read such a work” (131, 438-51). In the contemporary period *L’Islam et la mer* takes note of such trends as increasing interest in establishing economic exclusion zones off the coasts of Islamic nations, greater activity in such maritime products as fish and sponges, and in some cases development of modest naval power. Here as before, however, the author finds reasons for concluding that these trends, while not insignificant or devoid of possibility for further development, do not reflect any major diversion from the classical Islamic view of the sea (481-90).

These theories are of course not lacking in precedents. Hegel conceived of cultures that were by their very nature averse to the sea, or at least in practice indifferent to it, China being a prime example.<sup>13</sup> But the German philosopher, with his emphasis on the historical role

<sup>12</sup> There is precedent for this argument; see Jean Delumeau, “Le protestantisme et la peur de la mer”, in Alain Cabantous and Françoise Hildesheimer, eds., *Foi chrétienne et milieux maritimes (XV<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris: Editions Publisud, 1989), 122-28. But cf. below, n. 51.

<sup>13</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 118-19, 132, 236, 280. My thanks to Hormuz Ebrahimnejad for drawing my attention to the Hegel connection.

of the Germanic peoples,<sup>14</sup> was never likely to have made much of the sea as a determining factor when the disparate German states of his day had absolutely no tradition of maritime history to compare with that of England, France, Holland, Spain, or Venice. There is also the precedent of the Pirenne Thesis, with its emphasis on Islam as the element that prevented the Arabs from being assimilated into the Roman Empire as other invaders had been, thus turned the faith into a pathological factor responsible for the collapse of the unity of the Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup> And in a more immediate sense the thesis of *L'Islam et la mer* comes as no surprise; Planhol's book is published in a series entitled "Histoire et décadence", and having dedicated over 600 pages and nearly 30 years to his monumental work a monumental conclusion is clearly in order. The evidence for his arguments is certainly impressive. Case after case is marshalled to support his interpretation, and the book is interspersed with a series of illustrative "aventures de mer" (69-89, 135-48, 231-46, 301-12, 331-47, 373-92, 432-51). Furthermore, the book's basic thesis would apparently serve to explain numerous points that otherwise remain major historical curiosities. Why was it, for example, that the renowned Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr, a Muslim pilgrim on his way to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, made his way across the entire length of the Mediterranean and back again in Christian ships?<sup>16</sup> This problem disappears if there existed some essential Islamic antipathy for the sea, an aversion so profound that it could not even allow for the provision of Muslim shipping to carry Muslim pilgrims from al-Andalus and the Maghrib to the Islamic holy places in Arabia.

But my own conviction is that in many cases Planhol's materials could easily and with equal and often greater justification be reorganized to support different conclusions. Two examples may serve to illustrate this preliminary objection to the argument of his book.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 413, 426, his famous dicta on the destiny of the Germans as the bearers of the "Christian principle" and an intellectual tradition of pristine rationalism ("... and die Idee als den absolut vernünftigen Zweck auszuführen").

<sup>15</sup> Henri Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Paris: Le Club du Meilleur Livre, 1961), 91-93, encapsulating the larger argument.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, ed. William Wright, 2nd ed. by M.J. de Goeje (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1907), 26, 327; trans. R.J.C. Broadhurst, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), 35, 312.

First, in *L'Islam et la mer* one reads that accounts of maritime affairs and voyages in Arabic geographical literature were not actually written by mariners themselves, but rather were collected later on by scholars who clearly knew little or nothing of the sea. Similarly, stories of lands beyond the seas are often filled with fantastic and wondrous legends (*'ajā'ib*) demonstrating the extreme levels of credulity that prevailed where such matters were concerned. Though good-quality scientific literature was available, scholars of the great literary tradition in such centers as Baghdad and Cairo chose "the incredible tales of sailors and not the solid practical learning of sea captains". Why? Because, the author tells us, the learned tradition of medieval Islam was not collecting such information with the intention of making any real use of it; there was no interest in the sea, the opportunities it afforded, or the bounty it contained.

It is first of all not clear whether this argument really applies to medieval Arabic literature as such. Al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956), for example, one of the most important of the medieval Arab cultural historians, makes a special effort to incorporate the specialized learning about the sea that Planhol says the Arabic-speaking literati ignored, and finds that one must be on one's guard against the exaggerated lore of precisely the same men of the sea that Planhol sees as the guardians of real maritime knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Buzurg ibn Shāhriyār al-Rāmhurmuzī (fl. 4th/10th c.), compiler of an important collection of tales about the India trade and lands of the East, repeatedly cites sea captains and mariners for his stories, demonstrating, as one would in any case expect, that experienced and responsible men of the sea were no less prone than were sailors and landsmen to be retailers of wondrous stories about it.<sup>18</sup> And what of the Sindbad the Sailor stories? These originally comprised a cycle of tales independent of the *Alf layla wa-layla*, and modern scholarship considers that they emerged from the context of yarns told by mariners in the Indian

<sup>17</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar*, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut: Université Libanaise, 1966-79), I, 151, 177, 181-82, 184 nos. 305, 362, 374, 380. His specific criticism of mariners—including upper-echelon figures such as captains, maritime officials, and naval officers—is that they have a wildly exaggerated view of the length and breadth of the Mediterranean Sea and the complexities of its coastline.

<sup>18</sup> See Buzurg al-Rāmhurmuzī, *'Ajā'ib al-Hind*, ed. and trans. P. van der Lith and L. Marcel Devic, *Livre des merveilles de l'Inde* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1883-86), 6, 7, 8, 12, 14, 19, 29, 42, 49, 50, 60, 62, 85, 90, 93, 94, 129, 150, 168-69, 173-74, 174, 178, 179.

Ocean.<sup>19</sup> There is no reason to believe that sea captains would have been less fascinated by this lore than the sailors who worked under their command.

But let us assume for the sake of argument that at this level Planhol's argument holds true. Even so, the validity of his conclusion presupposes that of several other unargued conclusions:

1. It is of some decisive significance for our knowledge of Islam's attitude toward the sea that Arabic geographical literature chose *'ajā'ib* over the genuine maritime data of the sea captains —i.e. if Muslims had really been interested in maritime affairs their geographical literature would have opted for cutting-edge maritime data as opposed to amazing and wondrous stories.
2. *'Ajā'ib* materials in Arabic literature predominantly concern the sea and lands across the sea, as opposed to other regions accessible to the great central foci of the Islamic world by overland routes.
3. It is more generally the case that fascination with wondrous adventures beyond the seas is characteristic of cultures that know little of maritime life and thus simply substitute fantasy for genuine knowledge, lack of which is insignificant since few members of the culture in question are interested in the sea anyway.

But all three of these points are false:

1. Arabic geographical literature did not aim to guide navigators and educate sea captains, but rather to engage the general literate public; in some cases "geographies" are in fact literary works in which entertaining and edifying anecdotes are compiled and organized according to region.<sup>20</sup>
2. Where *'ajā'ib* were concerned there were wondrous tales about every land, and collectors of this lore were prepared to tell obviously false tales even about the places where they themselves lived.<sup>21</sup> What is at issue here is a suspen-

<sup>19</sup> André Miquel, "Les voyages de Sindbad le Marin", in *idem*, *Sept contes des Mille et une nuits* (Paris: Sindbad, 1981), 79-110; U. Marzolph, art. "Sindbād" in *ELP*, IX (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 639a.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulmane jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle* (Paris: Mouton, 1967-88), I, 35-68, 113-89, 153-89, 331-62.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the materials collected in René Basset, *Mille et un contes, récits et légendes arabes* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1924-26); Oskar Rescher, "Zum islamischen Folklore", *Der Islam* 14 (1925), 382-87; Bernhard Heller, "Das hebräische und arabische Märchen", in Johannes Bolte and Georg Polivka, eds., *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm* (Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1913-32), IV, 315-418; Ilse Lichtenstädter, "Folklore and Fairy Tale Motifs in Early Arabic Literature", *Folk-lore* 51 (1940), 195-203; Rudolf Kriss and Hubert Kriss-Heinrich, *Volksglaube im Bereich des Islam* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960-62); Ursula Nowak, *Beiträge zur Typologie des arabischen Volksmärchens* (Ph.D. dissertation: Universität Freiburg, 1969); Mohamed Arkoun *et al.*,



sion of disbelief across both geographical categories and literary genres, and not an inability to come to terms with the sea in particular.

3. Finally, it is not true that Islamic culture, with its alleged problem with the sea, showed any greater fascination with fantastic maritime lore than other cultures that we know were on absolutely intimate terms with the sea. The ancient Greeks, for example, eagerly devoured the *Odyssey*, where the fantastic tales of the Great Wanderings of Odysseus in Books 9-12 play an extremely important role in both the narrative structure of the epic and the heroic development of the central character.<sup>22</sup> In the age of discovery, maritime European nations were awash with wondrous tales about the sea and lands beyond it. Indeed, it was precisely because these peoples were so involved with the sea that wondrous tales about it were so fascinating to them, just as the geographical circumstances of Anglo-Saxon England, inland France, and central Europe caused those peoples to tell tales of adventure and danger in the forests.<sup>23</sup>

To Planhol's arguments one may thus object that the fact that maritime lore was so frequently circulated by landlubbers who knew nothing about the sea and probably never set foot on a ship may be taken as an indication of the vigor and breadth of Islamic literary cul-

*L'étrange et le merveilleux dans l'Islam médiéval* (Paris: Editions J.A., 1978); Barbara Langner, *Untersuchungen zur historischen Volkskunde Ägypten nach mamlukischen Quellen* (Berlin: Karl Schwarz, 1983), 121-85; Roy P. Mottahedeh, 'Ajā'ib in *The Thousand and One Nights*', in R.G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh, eds., *The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 29-39.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Gabriel Germain, *Genèse de l'Odyssée: le fantastique et le sacré* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1954). One might of course object that there are close parallels between the *Odyssey* and the earlier *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the product of a predominantly landlooking culture; see, for example, P. Jensen, *Gilgamesh-Epos. Jüdische Nationalsagen, Ilias und Odyssee* (Leipzig: Eduard Pfeiffer, 1924); Arthur Ungnad, *Gilgamesh-Epos und Odyssee* (Breslau: Arthur Ungnad, 1927). But the point is not that the Greeks wholly *invented* the materials that appear in the *Odyssey*, but rather that they were willing to adopt lore from other cultures, incorporate it into Greek culture, and thus entirely assimilate it as their own.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Frantisek Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger. Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* (Prague: Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1965); Jacques Le Goff, "Le merveilleux dans l'Occident médiéval", in Arkoun *et al.*, *L'étrange et le merveilleux*, 167-87; Heinz Rölleke, ed., *Kinder- und Hausmärchen, gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985); Felix Karlinger, *Geschichte des Märchens im deutschen Sprachraum*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988); Karl Wolfgang Becker, ed., *Deutsche Fabeln aus neun Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1991); Claude Lecouteux, *Au-delà du merveilleux: des croyances du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1995); Jeffrey Jones Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

ture, rather than as a sign of some failure, deficiency, or inaptitude. It may well be that the portrait of Sindbad the Sailor “is not that of a man of the sea, but rather of a man who has triumphed over and escaped from the sea” (134), but it does not follow that the society that produced the Sindbad cycle of tales was averse to and knew little of the sea. Indeed, as we have seen above, these stories in all likelihood emerged among circles of Arab sailors sailing in the Indian Ocean.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, one may note that in the *Odyssey* the sea is always a place of danger (the domain of Poseidon, Odysseus’ sworn enemy), but this does not suggest that the Greeks feared the sea, had an inaptitude for it, and knew little or nothing about it.

Second, we may consider Planhol’s argument that *ḥadīth* “expresses the general reprobation of Islamic society for the maritime element” (56). The evidence in *ḥadīth* literature cited for this view of things comes from a study written by the German orientalist Wilhelm Hoenerbach in the late 1940s,<sup>25</sup> and the justification for interpreting the evidence in this way appears later, where one reads that vital Islamic customs pertaining to life, death, and prayer cannot easily be observed on the sea (461-66). But the problem of death at sea typifies ways in which the other materials may perhaps better be interpreted. A lost mariner posed an important problem in that Islamic views of the afterlife included a physical recall of the body for God’s judgment—but how could this occur, and by extension how could a good Muslim seaman be awarded Paradise, if the body had not been recovered and would presumably have been consumed by fish? The drowning victim (*al-gharīq*) was thus classified as a martyr, who would as a result of this status be guaranteed entry into Paradise.<sup>26</sup> So the issue

<sup>24</sup> See above, n. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Wilhelm Hoenerbach, “Araben und Mittelmeer. Anfänge und Probleme arabischen Seegeschichte”, in *Zeki Velidi Togan’a Armağan: Symbolae in honorem Z. V. Togan* (Istanbul: Maarif Basimevi, 1950-55), 379-96.

<sup>26</sup> See A.J. Wensinck, “The Oriental Doctrine of the Martyrs”, *Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afdeeling Letterkunde*, 53 (1921), 147-74; Mahmoud M. Ayoub, “Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam”, in Richard T. Antoun and Mary Elaine Hegland, eds., *Religious Resurgence: Contemporary Cases in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 67-77; Etan Kohlberg, “Medieval Muslim Views on Martyrdom”, *Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen* 60 (1997), 281-307; Lawrence I. Conrad, “Medicine and Martyrdom: Discussions of Suffering and Divine Justice in Early Islamic Society”, in John R. Hinnells and Roy Porter, eds., *Religion, Health and Suffering* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1999), 212-36.

here is more likely God's justice than apprehensions concerning the sea.<sup>27</sup> In any case, medieval trade in the Mediterranean and along the shores of East Africa largely comprised "coasting", sailing in short hops along the coast, just at the horizon to avoid being spotted by pirate or enemy lookouts on land, but close enough to shore to reach it quickly if need arose.<sup>28</sup> Stops were frequent, and ships often did not need to remain away from land for more than a few days.<sup>29</sup> So a Muslim who fell ill and died at sea in most cases could have been transferred to land for a proper Islamic funeral without great difficulty.<sup>30</sup> If one is rather thinking of the risk of loss of the body of a drowning victim, the same fears should have prevented Muslims from living along such rivers as the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, and Ganges. But such was of course not the case, and indeed, frequent river disasters did not prevent people from exposing themselves to similar perils time and time again.<sup>31</sup> In light of these considerations one is unsurprised to find that with the burgeoning of the published corpus of *ḥadīth* literature ten-fold and more since the time of Hoenerbach, there has emerged to our view a very broad-ranging discussion among many successive generations of Muslims of questions involving mariners

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the way in which the mariner lost at sea is incorporated into the category of the *gharīq* in al-Ḥumaydī (d. 219/834), *Al-Musnad*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A'zamī (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmīya, AH 1382), I, 169-70.

<sup>28</sup> See Goitein, *Letters*, 40-42, on an early eleventh-century voyage from Palermo to Egypt, the ship was caught in a terrible storm for three days, and finally the captain ran his vessel aground in an effort to ensure that at least some of his passengers would survive. The ship was not far from shore in the first place.

<sup>29</sup> See Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, 165-66; Udovitch, "Time, the Sea, and Society", 541-45. Cf. Ibn Khurraḍādhbih (d. ca. 300/911), *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, ed. M.J. de Goeje (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1889; BGA 6), 61-64, on exactly such a route to India; also the map in *L'Islam et la mer*, 237, illustrating the route of a diplomatic mission following precisely such a route from Istanbul to Tetouan in 1589-91.

<sup>30</sup> This is not to say, however, that one could land immediately or wherever one chose, for isolated shores were simply too dangerous and insecure; see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 298.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Yaḥyā ibn Sa'īd al-Anṭākī (wr. 5th/11th c.), *Histoire de Yaḥyā ibn Sa'īd d'Antioche*, ed. and trans. Ignace Kratchkovsky and A.A. Vasiliev in *Patrologia Orientalis* 18 (1924), 82, concerning a disaster on the Nile in the spring of 349/960 in which crowds gathered to observe the launch of a large warship. Many people packed onto several adjacent ships to watch, and the overcrowded and unbalanced vessels sank with the loss of hundreds of lives, so many that "there was no lane that did not grieve for those who had perished". Cf. also the discussion of the perils of traveling on the Nile in Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 296-301.

and the sea.<sup>32</sup> The negative aspect of the debate is of course only one part of the story; the broader picture has yet to be worked out, but it is by no means clear (or to my mind even likely) that the essential issue was an “Islamic” revulsion for the sea.

Likewise to be doubted is the author’s account of the awkward (for his theory) cases of the island communities of Jerba in Tunisia and Rouad in Syria (296-301). In the former case we are told that “maritime life has in fact been nothing but a last resort”; this judgment apparently rests on no foundations other than the fact that seamen on the island are poor. Rouad, on the other hand, is dismissed as a unique case of an isolated Muslim maritime community produced by special historical circumstances and having nothing in common with the nearby mainland. Why one should believe this remains unclear, and in any case important literature has been missed in both instances: the study by Lucette Valensi and A.L. Udovitch of the Jews of Jerba on the one hand,<sup>33</sup> and much research on Rouad on the other.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from the fact that his evidence often bears alternative (and in my view better) interpretation, especially inconvenient for Planhol’s thesis are two examples to which he devotes very little attention. The first is the case of the Maldives, an island chain in the Indian Ocean where, due to the tiny size of all of the islands in the archipelago, no one lives more than a few hundred meters from the coast and all trades and means of livelihood are in some fundamen-

<sup>32</sup> E.g. ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 211/827), *Al-Muṣannaḡ*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī (Beirut: Al-Majlis al-islāmī, 1390-1407/1970-87), V, 283-87; al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066), *Al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmīya, 1414-15/1994), IV, 546-48; Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 807/1405), *Majma‘ al-zawā‘id wa-manba‘ al-fawā‘id*, ed. Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Qudṣī (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-ma‘ārif, 1406/1986), V, 284-85. More generally on all affairs of the sea, see A.J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1936-88), I, 144a-146a.

<sup>33</sup> Lucette Valensi and A.L. Udovitch, *Juifs en terre d’Islam: les communautés de Djerba* (Montreux: Editions des archives contemporaines, 1984).

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Carl Ritter, *Die Erdkunde im Verhältnis zur Natur und zur Geschichte des Menschen* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1822-59), XVII.A, 53-55; Ernest Renan, *Mission de Phénicie* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1864), 22-25; R. Savignac, «Une visite à l’île d’Rouad», *Revue biblique* 13 (1916), 574; Albert Trabaud, «Un marin gouverneur de l’île de Rouad», in Contre-amiral Forget et al., *En patrouille à la mer* (Paris: Payot, 1929), 97-135; ‘Abd el-Majyd Solaymān and Henri Charles, *Le parler arabe de la voile et la vie maritime dans l’île d’Arwād et sur la côte syro-libanaise* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1972).

tal way linked to the sea. The Maldives were Islamized by the twelfth century AD, and for as long as any written records attest the Maldivians have been Sunnis adhering to the conservative Mālikī school of law. This of course should not have occurred if Islam has some essential antipathy and inaptitude for the sea: following Planhol's thesis, Islam should not have found any favorable reception in such a sea-oriented society, or once it did, this should have made it impossible for the Maldivians to continue maritime pursuits without engendering tremendous moral, religious, and social tensions. The Maldivians, however, seem not to be aware of this; to this day their society remains devoutly Islamic, and if their participation in traditional sea-based occupations has decreased in recent years it is only on the most accessible islands and due to the rise of the far more lucrative prospects of Western tourism. Planhol refers to the Maldives and appeals to the paucity of modern literature about the archipelago (404), but in fact the available literature is considerable and quite informative.<sup>35</sup> Similar patterns, if less pronounced, are

<sup>35</sup> The fullest medieval sources are Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, I, 179-80 nos. 36671; Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 779/1377), *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā'ib al-amṣār wa-'ajā'ib al-asfār*, ed. C. Defrémery and B.R. Sanguinetti (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1853-59), IV, 110-47; partial trans. in *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354*, trans. and selected by H.A.R. Gibb (London: Routledge, 1929), 241-54; Ma Huan (wr. 1451), *Ying-yai Sheng-lan: the Over-all Survey of the Ocean's Shores*, trans. J.V.G. Mills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 49-50, 146-51; Albert Gray and H.C.P. Bell, eds. and trans., *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1886-87), indices; Ḥasan Tāj al-Dīn (d. 1139/1727), *The Islamic History of the Maldives Islands*, ed. Hikoichi Yajima (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1982-84). Modern literature includes H.C.P. Bell, *The Maldives Islands: Report on a Visit to Male, January 20 to February 21, 1920* (Colombo: Government Printing Office, 1921); T.W. Hockly, *The Two Thousand Isles: a Short Account of the People, History and Customs of the Maldivian Archipelago* (London: H.F. and G. Witherby, 1935); H.C.P. Bell, *The Maldives Islands: Monograph on the History, Archaeology and Epigraphy* (Colombo: Government Printing Office, 1940); Helmuth Hecker, *Die Republik im Indischen Ozean. Verfassungsentwicklung und Rechtsstellung der Malediven* (Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde, 1970); John Carswell, «China and Islam in the Maldivian Islands», *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 41 (1976-77), 119-98; Clarence Maloney, *People of the Maldivian Islands* (Madras: Orient Longman, 1980); K. Sarwar Lateef et al., *The Maldives: an Introductory Economic Report* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1980); Thomas Malten, *Malediven und Lakadiven. Materialien zur Bibliographie der Atolle im Indischen Ozean* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983); S.H. Mirza, ed., *Maldives* (Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1984); Christophe and Emmanuel Valentin, *Maldives: le plus beau des livres* (Paris: Richer-Hoa-Qui, 1984); Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: a Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 229-40; Thor Heyerdahl, *The Maldivian Mystery* (London: Allen and Unwin,

also to be found along the west coast of India, where Islam is an important factor almost everywhere in an environment where the sea looms very large in people's lives. There is hardly a fishing village, let alone a town, that does not have at least one mosque, and in some towns the Muslim majority is as high as two-thirds.<sup>36</sup> But again, this should not occur if there exists some deep innate antipathy between Islam and the sea.

Far more surprising is the author's reticence on the Cairo Geniza.<sup>37</sup> This rich treasure trove of Jewish documents from medieval Cairo provides invaluable insights on life in the eastern and southern Mediterranean lands and on maritime trade here and on to Europe and lands further east, not just involving Jews, but—as the corpus' most eminent interpreter S.D. Goitein spent much of his career elucidating—including Near Eastern society more generally, most particularly in the eleventh century.<sup>38</sup> The six volumes of Goitein's monumental *Mediterranean Society* are listed in Planhol's bibliography and are occasionally cited, but their rich insights on maritime trade and seafaring in the Mediterranean and connections

1986); Hassan A. Maniku and G.D. Wijayawardhana, *Isdhoo loamaafaanu* (Colombo: Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, 1986); Francis Robinson, ed., *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), indices; Norbert Schmidt, *Maldiven. Reise-Handbuch* (Köln: DuMont, 1990); Arne Skjolsvold, ed., *Archaeological Test-Excavations on the Maldivian Islands* (Oslo: Kon-Tiki Museum, 1991); Bethia N. Bell, *H.C.P. Bell: Archaeologist of Ceylon and the Maldives* (Denbigh: Archetype, 1993); C.H.B. Reynolds, *Maldives* (Oxford: Clío, 1993); Stefania Lamberti, *Maldives* (London: New Holland, 1997). There is also considerable research available in periodical literature, the most important items of which are cited in Yajima's bibliography to Ḥasan Tāj al-Dīn, as above in this note.

<sup>36</sup> John Carswell, "China and Islam: a Survey of the Coast of India and Ceylon", *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 42 (1977-78), 27.

<sup>37</sup> On the Geniza collections at Cambridge University, which holds the largest corpus of Geniza materials, see Stefan C. Reif, *Published Material from the Cambridge Geniza Collections: a Bibliography 1896-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); *idem*, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: the History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: the Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967-93), 273-52, on travel, seafaring, and maritime trade; also *idem*, "Mediterranean Trade Preceding the Crusades", *Diogenes* 59 (1967), 47-62; *idem*, *Letters*, esp. 73-143 (eleventh century), 145-74 (Nahray b. Nissīm); Eliyahu Ashtor, "The Jews in the Mediterranean Trade in the Later Middle Ages", *Hebrew Union College Annual* 55 (1984), 159-78.

with south Arabia, East Africa, and India are hardly used at all; nor are many other important Geniza publications on Mediterranean seafaring consulted, most notably Goitein's valuable collection of Geniza letters of medieval Jewish traders,<sup>39</sup> Norman Stillman's study of the Ibn 'Awkal family of traders,<sup>40</sup> and the many studies by Eliyahu Ashtor on the Mediterranean trade.<sup>41</sup> This is unfortunate, since the Geniza materials would surely have altered the author's view of seafaring as contrary to concerns for a stable, regular, orderly, normative way of life. The Geniza man of the sea was not necessarily an adventurer by choice, much less a renegade, but rather was often an ordinary individual with concerns about his future, his loved ones, and his livelihood. While he was certainly confronted by sudden challenges such as storms, shifting sand bars, rocks, pirates, and the like, in general these and other dangers obliged him to make decisions based on clear and careful planning and consideration for a wide variety of circumstances. A voyage of some twenty days, for example, could be more than tripled if the ship had to flee out onto the high seas to escape pirates or enemies,<sup>42</sup> but not unless the captain had already taken such a risk into account and had laid on sufficient supplies of food and especially water. And for present purposes the Geniza materials prove that Muslim seamen behaved in exactly the same way: variation in religion did not mean that sailing men on the same routes would have confronted the perils of the sea in different ways. In any case, the Jewish traders in Egypt and Tunisia who left us the letters of the Geniza very often used ships owned and manned by Muslims; the corpus is thus as reflective of Muslim contacts with the

<sup>39</sup> See above, n. 5.

<sup>40</sup> "The Eleventh-Century Merchant House of Ibn 'Awkal (a Geniza Study)", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 16 (1973), 15-88.

<sup>41</sup> Ashtor's most important studies are available in a number of Variorum collections: *Studies on the Levantine Trade in the Middle Ages* (London: Variorum, 1978); *The Jews and the Mediterranean Economy, 10th-15th Centuries* (London: Variorum, 1983); *East-West Trade in the Medieval Mediterranean*, ed. Benjamin Z. Kedar (London: Variorum Reprints, 1986); *Technology, Industry and Trade: the Levant versus Europe, 1250-1500*, ed. Benjamin Z. Kedar (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992). See also his *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

<sup>42</sup> See Goitein, *Letters*, 43, on a two to three-week voyage from Egypt to Tunisia that extended to 70 days because the ship was pursued out to sea and all the way up the Aegean to the vicinity of Constantinople. Even without such interruptions the length of a sea journey could easily be more than quadrupled by wind, weather, and other uncertainties; see Udovitch, "Time, the Sea, and Society", 513.

sea as those of Jews. The rich Geniza materials on “coasting” discussed above, for example, show that when modern Arab mariners practice this mode of sailing along the Arabian and East African coasts they are following a venerable tradition<sup>43</sup> and have not necessarily “lost the science that permitted their ancestors to travel long distances” (450), as Planhol thinks.<sup>44</sup>

The author’s stereotype of the Middle East mariner raises a final issue, that of a tendency for conceptualizing the subject categories of his analysis in essentialist terms, i.e. a dichotomy between religion and maritime life that characterizes and defines the relationship between “Islam and the sea”. When a historian examines an expanse of history vast in both chronological and geographical dimensions, the usual result is the discovery of variety. Common themes and patterns may well emerge, but also woven into the historical fabric is the variation born of regional difference, evolving social and cultural patterns and norms, political and economic developments, and technological change. A standard survey on Islamic seafaring, the article “Milāḥa” in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, reveals to the reader precisely this sort of picture. There it is argued that Islamic seafaring and seapower developed slowly and reached their apogee in the fourth/tenth century. Political and military considerations weakened both thereafter, and consequently, while Middle East mariners had traditionally displayed a sophisticated navigational technology in the past, they did not participate in or benefit from the great technological advances that improved navigation beginning in the seventh/thirteenth century. A combination of factors thus vitiated their ability to confront the rise of European maritime power, at first in the Mediterranean vis-à-vis the Italian cities of Pisa, Venice, and Genoa, and then later in the Indian Ocean as Portugal and Britain asserted their influence.<sup>45</sup> In opposition to this sort of framework, which is ignored rather than refuted,<sup>46</sup> Planhol offers a monolithic

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Prins’ remarks in his *Sailing from Lamu*, 16, 251-54.

<sup>44</sup> A similar judgment on coasting as a reflection of “forgotten” navigational knowledge is made in Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 84, interestingly enough, on a page facing a map showing the coasting route described in the ninth century by the geographer Ibn Khurradādhbih (n. 29 above).

<sup>45</sup> See above, n. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Oddly enough, the “Milāḥa” article in the *EI<sup>2</sup>* figures among the many useful works that Planhol never cites.



historical vision defined by an essential antipathy between “the sea” and “Islam”, with all contrary evidence explained away as exceptional. But does either side of the comparison admit of construction in monolithic terms? Why should one believe that maritime culture was “non-normative” or “ill-defined”? One might as easily argue that the requirements and exigencies of seafaring would make for a highly normative and well-defined communal culture, exactly as one finds today, in fact, at Jerba, Rouad, and the Maldives. Even if all of the attributes that Planhol assigns to nautical life in the Islamic world were accurate, on what grounds does one conclude that they apply to mariners and their communities any more than to any of a number of other more landbound pursuits? And if one has in mind to contrast “maritime life” to the religion of the society in which it is pursued, exactly what sort of “life” is at issue? Certainly not only that of sailors *qua* sailors, assuming that even that can be taken as a normative category across the length of the Islamic world and its history.<sup>47</sup> The affairs of the sea involved captains who bore overall responsibility for their craft, shipbuilders and riggers of various kinds, and such merchantile participants as outfitters, traders, brokers, agents, and so forth. Nor is that all. If we take the society revealed by the Geniza to be typical—and there seems to be no reason why we should not—then one must bear in mind that sailors could also carry goods and do business as well as tend to the ship,<sup>48</sup> that governments reserved to themselves the first rights to purchase from an arriving convoy or fleet,<sup>49</sup> and that the local population enjoyed similar advantages during the fairs held when a fleet arrived.<sup>50</sup> So it is not at all clear whether or how “maritime life” can be broken down into insulated categories or disengaged from society at large and contrasted with the latter’s religious or moral norms.

The same reservations apply to the other side of the dichotomy, where the author regards “Islam” as subject to his model regardless of variations in time and space. There is of course no *a priori* reason why scholarly investigation should not embrace the whole of Islamic

<sup>47</sup> Cf., for example, Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, 58-63, on the complex division of skills, responsibilities, and labor that could be found on a medieval ship.

<sup>48</sup> Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 313.

<sup>49</sup> Goitein, *Letters*, 10, 87.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 277; *idem*, *Letters*, 115.

history and include evidence from Syria in the seventh century, al-Andalus in the eleventh, the region of the Caspian Sea in the sixteenth, and the Egypt of Muḥammad ‘Alī in the nineteenth. The difficulty here is that Planhol reads the relevant sources in search of exactly the same thing, an “Islamic” aversion and inaptitude for the sea. But the proposition that “Islam” is incompatible with maritime life and pursuits raises a fundamental question: exactly in what sense is this so? If by “Islam” one means Islamic doctrine and structures of religious belief, the indications adumbrated above concerning matters of death and burial already serve to place this in doubt. If one has to do with Islamic society, then it must be noted that *L’Islam et la mer* is itself full of counterexamples, all of which, however, are dismissed as exceptions and anomalies that require special explanation (e.g. early Islam, 22, 92; al-Andalus, 64-69; the Turkomans on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, 371-72; contemporary interest, 481-90). But these exceptions involve entire regions of the Islamic world, in some cases for hundreds of years, and to them must be added the heavy weight of the numerous contrary cases (such as Jerba, Rouad, and the Maldives) and bodies of evidence (e.g. the Cairo Geniza) to which the book refers only in passing. The fact that Planhol finds an Islamic aversion for the sea across the whole Islamic world despite vast differences from every perspective apart from the presence of “Islam” thus suggests that his results may spring as much from his method as from his sources.<sup>51</sup>

As an illustrative example one might consider Planhol’s analysis of maritime and nautical vocabulary. At an early point in his book he studies the oldest Arabic terminology for ships and sailing terms and finds that in nascent Islamic times the Arabs had few such words that were of genuine Arabic provenance; many more were of Ethiopic, Aramaic, Greek, or Pahlavi origin.<sup>52</sup> From this he concludes that at

<sup>51</sup> It may be noted in passing that the same reservations would apply to Planhol’s suggestion for a broader monotheistic antipathy for the sea, in that it is unclear what sort of argument would lead in any convincing way from belief in one God to a negative attitude toward maritime life. Who were the medieval Mediterranean mariners, after all, if not Christians, Jews, and Muslims? See, for example, Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1972-73), I, 295-312; Raphael Patai, *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> It should be noted, however, that *fulk*, which Planhol regards as a genuine old Arabic word, springs from the classical Greek *efōlkion*. See Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign*

first the Arabs had been little inclined toward concerns of the sea; subsequently, a broad range of vocabulary from “far superior maritime cultures” entered and superimposed itself upon “old primitive foundations” (19-20). This, he argues, provides “decisive confirmation” for his vision of “the feebleness or even complete lack” of maritime life in Arabia at the dawn of Islam.

But the existence of loanwords proves nothing of the sort for sixth and seventh-century Arabia. First, the linguistic history of Arabia is complex and it is not yet known how early it would be reasonable to regard Arabic as the *lingua franca* of the peninsula: <sup>53</sup> i.e. the borrowing of foreign terminology could reflect nothing more than the indisputable fact that Arabic was a younger language than such other tongues as Greek and Aramaic. Second, the geography of Arabia itself dictated against the development of large-scale maritime trade. For all its thousand and more kilometers of coastline Arabia had almost no good harbors apart from Aden; the Red Sea was full of treacherous shoals that comprised a constant peril to navigation. For these and other reasons, including political and strategic considerations, trade involving Arabia very often passed along overland routes, and the chronology and circumstances of linguistic borrowing are thus further complicated by issues that have nothing to do with aptitude (or inaptitude) for the sea. <sup>54</sup> Third, borrowing across linguistic boundaries usually indicates a need for such loanwords; that is, if maritime life was so neglected by the Arabs, why did they bother to assimilate foreign words for activities and equipment that neither interested nor occupied them? Indeed, pre-Islamic poetry provides useful indications that seafaring was a more-or-less normal activity in Arabia, in so far as it held economic and other opportunities for both

*Vocabulary of the Koran* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 229-30; further discussion in Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: the Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), 57-60.

<sup>53</sup> See Francesco Gabrieli, “La letteratura beduina preislamica”, in *idem*, ed., *L'antica società beduina* (Rome: Università di Roma, 1959), 95-114; Johann Fück, *‘Arabiya. Untersuchungen zur arabischen Sprach- und Stilgeschichte* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1950); Régis Blachère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe* (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1952-66), I, 66-82; Wolf Dietrich Fischer, ed., *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie, I* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1982), 17-50.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: a Study of the Arabian Incense Trade* (London and New York: Longman, 1981); Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford: Blackwell's, 1987), 12-50.

the providers and users of such services. One might of course point to laments for the dead at sea, or expressions of fear of the sea, but it is not necessarily the case that these passages give voice to some general "Arab" (or "Islamic") aversion for the sea.<sup>55</sup> This same line of reasoning would allow us, for example, to point to such poems as Wordsworth's elegies for his brother, who died in a shipwreck at sea, and from this evidence conclude that there was some general paradigmatic "English" (or even "Christian") aversion for the sea in the nineteenth century, and thus that the English had no interest in or use for the sea. And finally, if maritime life really was neglected by reason of some inaptitude or aversion for the sea on the part of the Arabs of the *jāhiliya*, i.e. already before the rise of Islam, then the origins of this pattern of behavior of course have nothing to do with the religion of the Muslims.

Similar difficulties arise in this area elsewhere in the book. Planhol argues that a preponderance of Arabic words in Berber North Africa, for example, shows that while there was a substrate of fishermen, there were no sailors at all (151-52). Patterns of linguistic borrowing are thus used to confirm the author's conclusion that no land would seem to have been less predisposed to support maritime vocations, and that the Berbers had always displayed a total inaptitude and profound revulsion for the sea (150). But how does the existence of loanwords in and of itself support this conclusion? Again several reservations arise. First, Planhol himself remarks that the indigenous populations of North Africa have always been—i.e. from antiquity—susceptible to maritime invasion due to "this fundamental deficiency"; so if this is so (whether it is or not is another matter, of course) we again have to do with a pattern of behavior that predates Islam and thus cannot itself be "Islamic" in origin. Second, one finds that the Arab inaptitude for the sea, so obvious in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia according to the author, has now disappeared in North Africa, since Arabic supplies the region's maritime vocabulary. Third, patterns of borrowing are difficult to set in context because of the extremely patchy evidence

<sup>55</sup> On seafaring in the Qur'ān and in early Arabic poetry, see now James A. Montgomery, "Salvation at Sea: Seafraring in Early Arabic Poetry", in Gert Borg and Ed de Moor, eds., *Representations of the Divine in Early Arabic Poetry* (Amsterdam, 2001), 25-47.

available for the social history of the Berbers in al-Andalus and North Africa. There were important Berber enclaves in al-Andalus:<sup>56</sup> obviously they could not have got there except by sea, and would they have been viable without continuing and meaningful intercourse by sea? How did the Murābiṭūn and the Muwaḥḥidūn maintain their sovereignty on both sides of the Straits of Gibraltar, if not through maintenance of at least a modicum of sea power?<sup>57</sup> Could the lack of Berber words for the affairs of the sea not simply reflect that Berber communities had already been largely displaced inland in Roman times, or that maritime occupations were dominated by other sectors of North African society? Medical practice in Egypt and Palestine, for example, was long dominated by non-Muslim physicians, but this certainly does not mean that Muslims in the Near East suffered from an inaptitude for medicine.<sup>58</sup> Had we access to a Geniza-like corpus of documentation for the Berbers of the Maghrib the historical picture would of course be far clearer to us. But such a corpus is not now known to exist and is unlikely to appear in the future. That notwithstanding, however, enough has been set forth here to indicate that the explication of linguistic borrowing cannot be reduced to a straight-forward matter of indigenous aptitude or inaptitude. To proceed in this way is to grant model precedence over the evidence upon which it is allegedly based, and objections can be raised to all of the occasions (e.g. 156, 184, 199-202, 298, 301, 350-51, 420-22) where such borrowing is invoked in support of the author's thesis. One must also note that in Italian there is maritime vocabulary of Arabic origin, which, if one follows Planhol's rea-

<sup>56</sup> E.g. Jacinto Bosch Vilá, "Andalucía islámica: arabización y berberización", *Andalucía Islámica: Textos y Estudios* 1 (1980), 9-42; Pierre Guichard, "The Population of the Region of Valencia", in Manuela Marín, ed., *The Formation of al-Andalus, Part I: History and Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998; *Formation of the Classical Islamic World*, 46), 147-78.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Nevill Barbour, "L'influence de la géographie et de la puissance navale sur le destin de l'Espagne musulmane et du Maroc", *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 8 (1970), 45-54.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Ibn al-Ukhuwwa (d. 729-1329), *Ma'ālim al-qurba fī aḥkām al-ḥisba*, ed. Muhammad Maḥmūd Sha'bān and Ṣiddīq Aḥmad 'Isā al-Muṭṭī'ī (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-miṣrīya al-'amma li-l-kitāb, 1976), 254, which suggests—if in a rather back-handed fashion—that educated Muslims were more interested in other paths of professional advancement.

soning on such matters, ought to demonstrate that Arabic and those who spoke it played a dominant rather than inferior role in maritime life in the Mediterranean.<sup>59</sup>

It must be stressed that the above is not a critique of *L'islam et la mer* along the anti-Orientalist lines of Edward Said and his numerous followers and admirers; one would in that case expect gratuitous *ad hominem* abuse of the author, unexamined imputations of ignorance of Arabic, and accusations of links with Israeli interests—all received with tumultuous acclaim at the next annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association. So let us be clear that the author's work is a serious book representing years of careful study by one of the most eminent scholars currently active in the field of the historical geography of the Middle East. It is full of rich insights on a wide range of subjects, such as the origins of the lateen sail (33-38), the problem of wood supplies (39-41), the legend of the islands of Wāqwāq (108-15), the interplay between "scientific", technical, and popular literature (129-32), the rise of the Ottoman navy (184-231), seafaring on the Caspian (349-72), and much else that cannot be considered in detail here. The difficulty that arises with the work is the way in which all this is marshalled to argue how and why many different social and cultural systems sharing a religious affinity in Islam did *not* follow a certain course of action, i.e. how and why they "failed", by reason of "inaptitude", to take an interest in the sea and establish a continuous and assertive Muslim power over the sea, something that modern Western scholarship at the dawn of the twenty-first century thinks it would have been in their vital interest to do. Once one is seeking to explain failure and inaptitude across enormous sweeps of time and space it of course makes sense to look for the cause in some common factor. Those readers who do not consider this sort of argument problematic may find Planhol's theories convincing—certainly they are exhaustively researched and documented.

But perhaps one should not be thinking of failure in the first place. Is it all that useful, for example, to reflect upon why the great trans-oceanic voyages of discovery were *not* launched by the Umayyads of al-Andalus, the Muwahhids, or the later rulers of Morocco

<sup>59</sup> G.B. Pellegrini, "Terminologia marinara di origine arabe in italiano e nelle lingue europee", *Settimani di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo* 25 (1978: *La navigazione mediterranea nell'alto medioevo*), 797-841.

(470-71)?<sup>60</sup> One might with equal validity ask why these voyages did not first embark from Portsmouth. Or Shanghai. The methodological trap here is three-fold. First, one might of course legitimately ask whether historical circumstances in a given society or culture made it unlikely that its people would have behaved in a certain way. But it does not then follow that if they *had* behaved in that way, we should expect to find among them the same consequences as are to be observed among another people with whom that pattern of belief or behavior is more usually associated. So while it is an interesting intellectual exercise to puzzle over such matters, for the historian the endeavor is *a priori* vacuous. Second, a search for failure allows for almost any evidence to be slotted into the paradigm and interpreted accordingly, the justification coming solely from the fact that the interpretation is congenial to the quest for dimensions of inaptitude and consequent disappointment of (modern scholarly) expectations. How can it possibly be, for instance, that the attitude of “Islam” toward the sea was a major cause of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917? Planhol argues that this “Islamic” neglect was responsible for the maritime weakness of the late Ottoman Empire, which in 1914 allowed the German battlecruiser *Goeben*, fleeing from units of the Royal Navy, to steam unopposed up the Dardanelles and anchor at Istanbul. The arrival of this powerful warship was responsible for the Ottoman Empire’s entry into the First World War on the side of Germany, which in turn choked off Russia’s access to the Mediterranean and led to the disastrous and bloody Gallipoli campaign of 1915 and the final collapse of Russia and the Russian Revolution in 1917 (305). If the chronology is not in doubt, the causal links and emphases most certainly are; the whole argument is in fact conceivable only (if at all) within a general paradigm of the catastrophic consequences arising from the comprehensive failure of an entire society or civilization.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Two useful recent publications on sea power in the Muslim west are Jorge Lirola Delgado, *El poder naval de al-Andalus en la época de califato omeya* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1993); Olivia Remie Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain: the Commercial Realignment of the Iberian Peninsula (900-1500)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>61</sup> To be fair to the author here, it must be observed that he has tapped into an established tradition of modern historical writing that looks for decisive monocauses. On the *Goeben* affair from this perspective, see Dan van der Vat, *The Ship that Changed the World: the Escape of the Goeben to the Dardanelles in 1914* (London: Grafton, 1986).

Finally, and closely related to the previous point, the framework of failure decisively colors all evidence that it touches. Why, for example, was “the absence of banking structures” an “important deficiency” of the medieval Islamic commercial sector (126-27)? Apart from the facts that there *were* effective means in medieval Islamic society for pursuing banking and exchange affairs,<sup>62</sup> and that issues of how modern banking requirements can be fulfilled within the framework of Islamic belief comprise an important contemporary concern in Islamic nations,<sup>63</sup> one must ask why it is a “deficiency” for an institution associated with the West to be absent in medieval Islamic societies. The answer would seem to be that the absence of banking institutions is associated with the Qur’ānic prohibition of interest and usury (both subsumed in the term *ribā*),<sup>64</sup> and hence invites addition to the “failings” laid at the door of “Islam”. That is, “failure” is not a conclusion *emerging from* interpretation of the available evidence, but rather a paradigmatic model *forcing* the interpretation of the evi-

And Hegel once again comes to mind, with such counterfactual deliverances as his claim that had the great forests of Germany survived to the end of the eighteenth century there would have been no French Revolution; *Philosophie der Geschichte*, 113.

<sup>62</sup> See Otto Spies, “Das Depositum nach islamischen Recht”, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft* 45 (1930), 241-300; Octave Pesle, *Le crédit dans l’Islam malékite* (Casablanca: Imprimeries réunies de la “Vigie marocaine” et du “Petit marocaine”, 1942); Sobhi Labib, “Geld and Kredit. Studien zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte Aegyptens im Mittelalter”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 2 (1959), 225-46; S.D. Goitein, “Bankers’ Accounts from the Eleventh Century A.D.”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 9 (1966), 28-66; *idem*, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 229-66; al-Dūrī, *Ta’rīkh al-‘Irāq al-iqtisādī*, 157-71; Eliyahu Ashtor, “Banking Instruments between the Muslim East and the Christian West”, *Journal of European Economic History* 1 (1972), 553-73; Abraham L. Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); *idem*, “Reflections on the Institutions of Credits and Banking in the Medieval Islamic Near East”, *Studia Islamica* 41 (1975), 5-21; *idem*, “Bankers without Banks: Commerce, Banking, and Society in the Islamic World of the Middle Ages”, in *The Dawn of Modern Banking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 255-73.

<sup>63</sup> The literature on this topic is considerable. See, for example, Nabil A. Saleh, *Unlawful Gain and Legitimate Profit in Islamic Law: Ribā, Gharar, and Islamic Banking* (London and Boston: Graham and Trotman, 1992); Nicholas Dylan Ray, *Arab Islamic Banking and the Renewal of Islamic Law* (London and Boston: Graham and Trotman, 1995); Muḥammad Sa’id al-Ashmāwī, *Al-Ribā wa-l-fā’ida fī l-Islām* (Cairo, 1996); Rodney Wilson, *Islamic Financing Techniques* (London: International Bar Association, 1997).

<sup>64</sup> See Joseph Schacht, art. “Ribā” in *Et*, VIII (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 491a-493b; Udovitch, “Bankers without Banks”, 256-58; Johannes Christian Wichard, *Zwischen Markt and Moschee. Wirtschaftliche Bedürfnisse and religiöse Anforderungen im frühen islamischen Vertragsrecht* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1995), 180-221.



dence to which it is applied. To appreciate the scale of the difficulty at issue here, one need only ask where one can find scholarship finding fault for the “lack” of “banks” in classical Athens, ancient China, the Roman Empire, or medieval India,<sup>65</sup> all of which maintained lively and extensive networks of domestic and international trade and finance in the absence of the banking institutions that only began to develop in southern Europe in the twelfth century.<sup>66</sup> If anything, comparative assessment of credit techniques and institutions would reflect extremely favorably on the Middle Eastern side, since these were in place in Iraq at least three or four centuries before anything comparable appeared in Europe.<sup>67</sup> Again the Geniza is a crucial source, since of the thousands of business letters, contracts and miscellaneous commercial documents in this corpus “there is hardly a handful that does not contain a reference to some form of a credit transaction”.<sup>68</sup>

And to what is this sense of failure addressed? Presumably the author means a failure on the part of Muslim society “to establish an enduring presence on the seas” or “to familiarize itself intimately with the sea” (461). But in a pre-modern context exactly of what would such a presence and familiarity have consisted? Political circumstances were of course not what they had been under the Romans, when the Mediterranean amounted to a Roman lake. No medieval power dominated the sea as Rome had done, which for present purposes means that the failure of “Islam”—if one agrees to speak of failure—was no greater than

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Moses I. Finley, *Studies in Land and Credit in Ancient Athens* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1952); Raymond Bogaert, *Tests on Bankers, Banking and Credit in the Greek World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976); A. Dasgupta, “Indian Merchants and the Trade in the Indian Ocean”, in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib, eds., *Cambridge Economic History of India*, I: c. 1200-c. 1750 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 407-33; Paul Millett, “Maritime Loans and the Structure of Credit in Fourth-Century Athens”, in Peter Garnsey, Keith Hopkins, and C.R. Whittaker, eds., *Trade in the Ancient Economy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), 36-52; V.K. Jain, *Trade and Traders in Western India, AD 100-1300* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1990); Paul Millett, *Lending and Borrowing in Ancient Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Arbind Kumar, *Credit System in Early Medieval India, c. 650 A.D.-1200 A.D.* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 1992); and the useful comparative overview of Raymond W. Goldsmith, *Premodern Financial Systems: a Historical Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>66</sup> On the rise of banking in Europe see the classic essay of Raymond de Roover, “New Interpretations of the History of Banking”, *Journal of World History* 2 (1954), 38-76.

<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., Udovitch, “Reflections”, 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

that of any other political or economic force.<sup>69</sup> But again it must be stressed that the paradigm of failure is a model that writes its own ticket, and that a careful examination of actual historical evidence reveals an entirely different picture. The military dimension is of course atypical, since the creation, training, and deployment of a large fleet reflects not the priorities of individuals in society, but rather the collective perception of a regime that its strategic interests require the investment of resources in this direction.<sup>70</sup> Far more illustrative is the question of what risks individuals were prepared to undertake for the sake of pursuing a commitment to the sea.

For this we turn one last time to the Geniza.<sup>71</sup> Before setting out a merchant would seek the best possible information about prices and market conditions elsewhere; what were the items to which he had ready access at a good price, and where and when could he sell them for a tidy profit?<sup>72</sup> But once his merchandise was to hand he could not simply book passage on a ship and sail away. He had first to consider how many other traders had the same voyage in mind and who had already preceded him onto the high seas. What was the political situation along the route, and were pirates about? A ship had to be chosen carefully, since almost anything that would float would be pressed into commercial service. Was the ship watertight, or was it a leaky scow upon which his goods were likely to be damaged by sea water. Was the craft seaworthy? —ships often foundered or broke apart as they tried to break out through the waves onto the open sea.<sup>73</sup> The reliability of the

<sup>69</sup> It also needs to be stressed that even Rome lacked the power to secure its control over the sea in the sense that Planhol seems to have in mind, as evidenced by the continuing problem of piracy. See M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), III, index; Philip de Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>70</sup> Valuable analysis of some of the major problems is available in Vincent Gabrielsen, *Financing the Athenian Fleet: Public Taxation and Social Relations* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

<sup>71</sup> For most of the following I rely on the findings of Goitein in *Mediterranean Society*, I, 295-349; and Udovitch, "Time, the Sea, and Society", 503-46, so once again the issue of the relevance of documents concerning Jews to the situation of Muslims arises. For the answer see Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 112-14, which, long before Goitein's pioneering research, describes exactly the same circumstances, if of course in less detail.

<sup>72</sup> See Braudel, *Mediterranean*, I, 365, on the continuing high value of information in the sixteenth century.

<sup>73</sup> The problem seems to have been that planks were stitched together with cord, as opposed to being nailed onto the ribs of a skeletal frame. A hull thus built would have a

captain and crew was crucial, and not only for their skills as mariners; unscrupulous crews were known to murder passengers for the sake of their property and money. Provisions had to be purchased, carriage fees, gratuities, and official taxes had to be paid before sailing, and the final timing of the voyage was crucial. The trader had to see to his own needs in every respect—nothing was provided for him. The problem of spoilage meant that food and water had to be brought on board as late as possible before sailing, but if a good wind suddenly arose the trader could find himself heading to sea with not a crust to his name. On the other hand, he could find himself waiting for days or even weeks, since his ship could not sail until it had accumulated a full complement of passengers and cargo, and even then could not set out until a favorable wind allowed it to do so.<sup>74</sup>

certain “give” to it, but once broken the breach would be catastrophic. See Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 91-97, 151-52. This sort of situation seems to be what is intended by al-Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122) when, in describing a ship caught in a storm, he states: *‘asafat al-junūb*, i.e. “the sides bowed”. See al-Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt*, ed. with the commentary of al-Sharīshī (d. 619/1222) by Ibrāhīm ibn Idrīs al-Sanūsī (Cairo: Dār al-ṭibā‘a al-‘āmira, AH 1284), II, 231, where for *al-khubūb* read *al-junūb*.

<sup>74</sup> See Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, 311-12 (ed. Wright/de Goeje); *Travels*, 326-27 (trans. Broadhurst). The traveler describes waiting fifteen days in Acre for his ship to sail, with the result that he and other weary passengers eventually took to spending their nights ashore in more comfortable surroundings. One morning, however, they awoke to find that their ship had sailed without them and was nowhere in sight. They were thus obliged to hire an oared boat for the risky task of catching up, and by evening had overtaken and boarded their ship. Precisely the same pattern, if in lesser detail, appears in *Alf layla wa-layla*, ed. W.H. MacNaghten (Calcutta: W. Thacker and Co., 1839-42), 111, Night 556. In his arrangements for his fifth voyage Sindbad prepares his bales of merchandise (probably cloth is meant) and then prowls the docks of al-Basra in search of a fine seaworthy (*malīha*) ship. Other merchants bring on board their freight and pay their fees, and finally the ship sets sail. The only anomaly is that Sindbad finds the ship and then *buys* it himself and brings his own slaves and servants to supervise. A merchant normally would not and could not have done this (see Udovitch, “Time, the Sea and Society”, 520), as ships were astronomically expensive and the trader’s interest in the craft ended once he reached his destination. That Sindbad does so is simply a literary twist. In the adventures that follow he must be the consummate master of his own destiny; pursuit of this motif serves to highlight the paradigm and stress the extraordinary character of the hero. The antiquity of this tale is an open question, but cf. al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/947), *Kitāb al-awrāq: Akhbār al-Muttaqī wa-l-Rādī*, ed. J. Heyworth-Dunne (London: Luzac, 1935), 6, confirming that Sindbad tales (*ḥadīth Sindbād*) were circulating in the early tenth century, i.e. already a century before the heyday of the Geniza merchants. Cf. also al-Tanūkhī (d. 384/994), *Al-Faraj ba’d al-shidda*, ed. ‘Abbūd Shālījī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1398/1978), IV, 174-76, where one finds the tale of the elephants’ graveyard from Sindbad’s seventh voyage.

The voyage itself was even more precarious. Passengers on a ship were often crowded like chickens crammed into a coop, as Ibn Jubayr put it,<sup>75</sup> and the merchant simply slept on his merchandise (often bales of cloth) or in a flimsy booth set up on deck for protection from the sun. Bad weather, an adverse wind, or sudden danger from hostile vessels<sup>76</sup> could see his plans entirely upset as his ship fled to a port far from where he wanted to go, and where he may have had no assurances or guarantees for his welfare or personal safety.<sup>77</sup> If a storm arose his life depended on the condition of his ship, the skill of his crew, and the severity of the weather; traders often lost their merchandise as cargos were jettisoned overboard in an effort to save the craft,<sup>78</sup> and if the craft was in danger of course all on board would help to bail.<sup>79</sup> There were no lifeboats,<sup>80</sup> but rather only a *qārib*, or “service boat” (and that only on large ships), intended to make trips from the shore to the ship’s anchorage in the harbor.<sup>81</sup> So in case of disaster most of the crew and passengers would simply drown. The scale of the catastrophes that could occur is reflected in two Geniza letters written in Alexandria in the 1060s, describing a convoy of about 30 ships that set sail in several stages for destinations in North Africa and Sicily. Not long after departure two ships were severely damaged in a storm that caused the loss of all their cargo and many lives. At Rās al-Kanāʾis, about 100 kilometers west of Alexandria, an-

<sup>75</sup> Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, 71 (ed. Wright/de Goeje); *Travels*, 65 (trans. Broadhurst).

<sup>76</sup> The Geniza letters do not distinguish between freebooting brigands and warships of a hostile regime—all are simply “enemies”; Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 330.

<sup>77</sup> Cf., for example, Goitein, *Letters*, 330-32. The extent to which law could provide controls and sanctions can now be assessed in Hassan Salih Khalilieh, *Islamic Maritime Law: an Introduction* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998).

<sup>78</sup> Because cargos normally would have included many bales of textiles, which could triple in weight as they became saturated with rain and seawater during a storm. They would also expand, with the result that in a fully packed hold wet bales could soon become so tightly pressed together as to be unmoveable, and could further endanger the ship by forcing open the seams between the planks of the hull. See Buzurg al-Rāmhurmuzī, *ʿAjāʾib al-Hind*, 166-67.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. the famous illustration of a ship in a storm at sea painted in 634/1237 by an artist of Wāsiṭ in Iraq to illustrate a scene from *Maqāma* XXXIX of the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī: Oleg Grabar, *The Illustrations of the Maqāmāt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 87-88. The ship, a carvel-built vessel with planks stitched together, has a lookout at the bow watching for shoals and rocks; crewmen are already bailing, and merchants anxiously attend to their merchandise below decks.

<sup>80</sup> Pace Hourani, *Arab Seafaring*, 99.

<sup>81</sup> On the purpose of the *qārib*, see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 305-306.

other ship was lost to “enemy” forces. Most of the remaining ships fled back to Alexandria, and only five (i.e. about fifteen percent of the original convoy) managed to complete their voyages to their intended destinations.<sup>82</sup> As this case illustrates, all sorts of difficulties could cause the ship to return to port. The merchant’s initial investment in provisions, fees, and bribes was entirely forfeit and in some cases, depending how late in the sailing season it was, a whole year’s business was lost. If his ship was taken by pirates he could be killed with impunity, held for ransom in miserable captivity, or sold into slavery. If he sailed into a port the governor of which was on bad terms with the governor of the port from which he was arriving, there too his goods could be seized. And of course he could arrive at his destination to find that prices had collapsed, that others had beaten him to the market, or that his information had been wrong. And a life of this sort took its personal toll: traders returned months later or even after an absence of years (in the case of the India trade) to find that relatives or friends had perished or that relationships had collapsed, and waiting family members could receive word that the traveling merchant had died many months ago in a faraway land.<sup>83</sup>

Through all these travails the trader, far from being a renegade from his religious community, continually calls out to God for His succor and strength. The Geniza letters are full of this, and Muslims of course behaved no differently. In the *Thousand and One Nights* even Sindbad the Sailor recites the *Fātiḥa* and only then sets out onto “God’s pool”.<sup>84</sup> We find Ibn Jubayr crying out for God’s help when he is in danger on the sea.<sup>85</sup> Further east the mystic Abū Ishāq al-Kāzarūnī (d. 426/1033) was gradually promoted to the status of a saint protecting sea travelers. When someone was in mortal danger on the sea he would vow to pay a certain sum to the local hospice of al-Kāzarūnī should his life be spared; these vows were recorded, and once in port there were officials from the hospice who collected the promised amounts.<sup>86</sup> In *Maqāma* XXXIX al-Ḥarīrī has al-Ḥārith re-

<sup>82</sup> Udovitch, “Time, the Sea, and Society”, 533-37.

<sup>83</sup> See Goitein, *Letters*, 168-73, 224-25, 227-29, 316, 318-19.

<sup>84</sup> *Alf layla wa-layla*, III, Night 556.

<sup>85</sup> Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, 34-39, 73 (ed. Wright/de Goeje); *Travels*, 25-30, 67-68 (trans. Broadhurst).

<sup>86</sup> Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār*, II, 90-91; trans. H.A.R. Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, A.D. 1325-1354* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958-71), II, 320-21.

fer to a charm handed down from the prophets that protected Noah and would now do the same for Muslim travelers on the sea.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, the famous Egyptian mystic al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258) made the passage across the Red Sea every year on his way from Cairo to Mecca, and it was reportedly in the year of his death that he composed a famous talismanic litany (*ḥizb*) calling upon God for protection on the sea and asking Him to calm the waters as He had calmed the waters for Moses. But all this has nothing to do with aversion for the sea, and is simply about spiritual fortitude in the face of adversity. The *Ḥizb al-baḥr*, or “Litany of the Sea”, compares dangers on the sea to those of fire, war, mountains, wind, and demons,<sup>88</sup> and al-Shādhilī and others also composed numerous similar talismanic litanies appealing for protection from a wide range of other perils: plague, the evil eye, jealousy, enemies, war, accidents, illness, and so forth.<sup>89</sup>

If the dangers to life and property were so great, we might ask, why should the merchants and traders of the medieval Islamic world have run such terrible risks? In many cases the answer probably had much to do with adventure, but more to the point, I think, was the prospect of profit. The value of certain commodities, especially given factors of fluctuating market conditions, was so great that enormous fortunes could be made on single voyages: every merchant’s dream was to sail into a port with a full cargo of an item that was in high demand and short supply there.<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, this paradigm of peril and profit is a major motif in the Sindbad cycle. In all seven voyages, Sindbad the Trader sets out on a voyage and endures terrible travails and troubles, often due to the folly of those around him, but then by his own wits and acumen redeems the situation and not only saves his own life, but returns home even richer than before. When Arab mariners created this cycle of tales about perils at sea, they at the same time placed at the center an archetype of the merchants they carried

<sup>87</sup> Al-Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt*, II, 230.

<sup>88</sup> See the discussion and text in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār*, I, 39-44; trans. Gibb, I, 24-27; also ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, *Al-Madrasa al-shādhiliya al-ḥadītha wa-imāmuhā Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī* (Cairo: Dār al-kutub al-ḥadītha, 1968), 180-83.

<sup>89</sup> See Wilhelm Ahlwardt, *Verzeichniss der arabischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin* (Berlin: A. Asher, 1887-99), III, 407-14; and on the *ahzāb* of al-Shādhilī in particular, Maḥmūd, *Al-Madrasa al-shādhiliya*, 157-211.

<sup>90</sup> Examples from the Geniza in Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 301-305.

with them on their trips—a landsman, yes, but familiar with life at sea and both willing and able to confront the multifarious risks of his profession. And in real life, of course, those involved in long-distance trade did whatever they could to guarantee their security and improve their chances of success—hence the complex networks of formal and informal cooperation and collaboration that emerge with such clarity from the Geniza documents.<sup>91</sup>

That fortunes were made and great cities prospered on the basis of international commerce pursued under such conditions is a tribute to the fortitude and imagination of the medieval traders, and certainly represents nothing one could describe as failure. To the extent that readers agree with the assessments set forth in the pages above they are similarly likely to query the success with which the foil of failure allows one to resolve the complex and difficult questions that Planhol poses across a vast historical landscape. That his work offers fresh consideration of such important issues and stimulates their further discussion, on the other hand, should be taken as a measure of his enduring contribution to the field to which he has dedicated a long and fruitful career.

#### ABSTRACT

Xavier de Planhol's new book *L'Islam et la mer* represents the first comprehensive effort in Western scholarship to assess the role of the sea in the Islamic world. Avoiding such matters as details of battles, the author focuses instead on broad cultural and intellectual paradigms and comes to the conclusion that "Islam is incompatible with the sea", and explores the long-term implications of this antipathy in Islamic history from pre-Islamic times to the present. His basic thesis, however, can be challenged from various perspectives, and this review essay suggests ways in which the material he cites, as well as other important sources not used in the book, can be interpreted to reach very different conclusions.

<sup>91</sup> See Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, I, 164-69; A.L. Udovitch, "Formalism and Informalism in the Social and Economic Institutions of the Medieval Islamic World", in Amin Banani and Speros Vronis, eds., *Individualism and Conformity in Classical Islam* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977), 61-81.

## RESUMEN

El nuevo libro de Xavier de Planhol, *L'Islam et la mer* es el primer intento, por parte de un especialista occidental, de evaluar el papel del mar en el mundo islámico. No es un libro que se dedique a describir acontecimientos sino a establecer paradigmas culturales e intelectuales, llegando a la conclusión de que «el islam es incompatible con el mar». En consecuencia, explora las implicaciones de esta antipatía a lo largo de la historia islámica desde tiempos pre-islámicos hasta el presente. Su tesis, sin embargo, puede ser cuestionada desde diversas perspectivas, y este artículo, a la vez reseña y estado de la cuestión, sugiere aspectos en los que, tanto las fuentes que él cita, como otras no utilizadas en el libro, pueden ser interpretadas para llegar a conclusiones muy diferentes.