

Will the real Sindbad please stand up!

It was wartime and the Japanese were threatening occupation of Manila in the Philippines. These were anxious times but Cynthia Valdes recalls with fondness on her webpage the times she and her siblings would gather around their mother who sat cross-legged on the floor. There were no books in the house (and, of course, no TV) but that did not matter to the children: their mother was a story-teller extraordinaire and she held them spellbound with her tales both familiar and of her own making. Now, more than fifty years on, Cynthia remembers with clarity most of the tales she was told. But the details of one, *Sindbad the Sailor*, remain elusive to her even though she remembers loving the stories of his adventures.

So it was for me. I knew I had read, or been read, the adventures as a child, but I cannot remember any of the stories as clearly as I remember so many other stories. In recent years though, my path has frequently crossed the Sindbad trail. In 1999, we lived in Sur, the most easterly city on the Arabian Peninsula. Sur boatyard is the last yard where dhows are made in the traditional design and manner – with huge logs of imported teak and without the aid of drawings. Standing on dry land on the edge of the lagoon is a high-pooped, ocean-going ‘ghanja’. This magnificent ghanja of 300 tonnes was rescued from the Yemen and restored to its former fine condition. The Fatah Al Khair, as she is known, is a cargo-passenger vessel and is probably very similar to the kind used by Omani seafarers, possibly including the legendary Sindbad.

Later, on a journey to Kerala in south India, the legend of Sindbad was frequently mentioned in the local literature I read. If he existed, then Cochin was certainly a port-of-call. Now we live in Muscat, not so far from the ‘Sohar’, the boat which was built for the adventurer Tim Severin for his Sindbad Voyage in 1980. Local folklore has it that Sindbad was a native of the ancient city of Sohar, a town we frequently pass through on our journeys along the Batinah Coast of Oman.

However, the more I have tried to pin the Sindbad character down, the more he seems to elude me. Richard Wallace’s 1947 Hollywood movie was entitled *Sinbad the Sailor*, a common misspelling of the name which seems to reinforce all kinds of Western stereotypes of Arabs. Richard Boyle, an expert on the subject, uses the form Sindbad (which I have chosen), but my Omani students refer to him as Al-Sindibad. Some authorities claim he is an entirely fictional character; others say he is based on the collective adventures of early Iraqi and Omani traders. The citizens of Sohar claim him as theirs, their greatest seafaring forefather. Another source identifies Sindbad with the Moroccan Ibn Battuta, the medieval traveller who is known to have visited the lands of every Muslim ruler of his time. Ibn Battuta lived by the motto – “never, if possible, cover any road a second time”. He left Tangier in 1325 at the young age of 21 to go on the Haj. After about 29 years of travelling he had covered some 75,000 miles, a figure unsurpassed by Marco Polo, Vasco da Gama or Magellan – indeed this distance was probably not surpassed by any traveller until the age of steam!

Tim Severin, who recreated Sindbad's voyage, described him as a "legendary Arab adventurer" and very likely "a composite of historical figures". The tales of the voyages are probably based upon a variety of Arabic travel-romances, partly upon the real experiences of Arab navigators in the seas of South Asia and East Africa, partly upon ancient poetry and mirabilia, Indian, Persian and Homeric in origin. Richard Boyle notes that the etymology of the name is ambiguous: some declare that Sindbad means "traveller in Sindh"; others say it is derived from the Sanskrit "Siddhapati", or "Lord of Sages".

One historical element provided in the story of "The Seven Wonderful Voyages of Sindbad" (later included in the "Arabian Nights") is its setting of Baghdad and Basrah during the reign of the famous caliph and patron of learning, Haroun al Rashid (AD 786 – 809). But it seems unlikely that the author and Sindbad could have been contemporaries of this great ruler of Baghdad. The story does tell us that Sindbad was the son of a rich merchant who died while Sindbad was a child. He inherited his father's wealth but when Sindbad grew up, he frittered away his fortune. In an act of remorse, he then sold his remaining possessions and set out as a merchant trader to regain his wealth.

After seven voyages, which took him as far as Canton on the Pearl River in China, and many terrifying adventures, Sindbad's wealth was restored. He was able to retire to a mansion in Baghdad. The story may have enjoyed special popularity in Europe as Sindbad's restored respect of patriarchy, his entrepreneurship and work ethic exemplified what was considered 'noble' during the rise of capitalism in Europe. This conception of Sindbad has him as a resourceful middle-aged merchant who overcame adversity through intelligence and ingenuity. This is probably more accurate than his Hollywood role. Producers and scriptwriters there have him as a young, swashbuckling adventurer, whose accomplishments are more physical than intellectual.

Perhaps if there was a single Sindbad man, he may have strong parallels with one of the great translators into English of "Arabian Nights", Sir Richard Francis Burton. Burton was an intrepid explorer himself, most renowned for his explorations into Africa in search of the source of the Nile (see Rafelson's 1990 movie "Mountains of the Moon"). Burton did spend some time in the Goa and Sindh areas of India / Pakistan where he encountered at first hand the Sindbad stories, and fell in love with them. Burton was a brilliant linguist who identified closely with the Sindbad character – and perhaps we can look to Burton if we want a profile of the Sindbad man.

Although the places Sindbad visits on his voyages seem fantastical, many can be identified geographically by the legends and stories associated with certain places. For example, the *Valley of the Diamonds* referred to in the second voyage may be a reference to the vale of Ratnapura on the island of Serendib (Sri Lanka). In the story, Sindbad finds himself trapped in a ravine where the ground is littered with diamonds and crawling snakes. An animal carcass suddenly tumbles down into the valley. Sindbad then remembers that merchants would hurl carcasses into inaccessible places where gems were to be found. The gems, especially diamonds, would adhere to the fat of the carcass. Carrion birds would swoop down, pick up the carcass and take it back to their nests. The merchants would then rob the nests and retrieve the precious stones. In the story, Sindbad, in his resourceful way, fills his pockets with diamonds,

ties himself to a carcass and is lifted out of the gully by an eagle. There is a likelihood that such episodes originated from common Asian custom. Apparently, when a new mine was opened, animals were slaughtered and their carcasses thrown into the pit as a sacrificial offering to the gods or spirits. Opportunistic carrion birds would swoop down to feed from or even remove the carcasses. Outsiders who witnessed such rituals may have believed that the carcass-throwing formed some part of a gem-retrieval system.

In another tale, the pilot of the dhow “grew white and declared that we ... should come near that mass of blackness, which is the famous Black Mountain. This mountain is composed of adamant, which attracts to itself all the iron and nails in a ship.” Many ancient writers make reference to a magnetic rock in the Indian Ocean; Palladius, the 5th Century Greek writer, claimed that such a rock existed in the islands adjacent to Serendib. The islands he had in mind may refer to the scattered archipelago which today we call the Maldives. The existence of such a rock may have offered locals an explanation for the method of boat construction then popular in India and Oman whereby components of the boats were held together with wooden pegs or hand-twisted strings. In 1980, Tim Severin needed 15 000 bundles of coconut string with a total length of 400 miles to build his ship, the “Sohar”. Good quality coconut husks came from the Malabar coast of India. The sewn vessel was oiled every six months with fish oil mixed with melted sugar and, if oiled regularly, the vessel might last for over a century.

References to physical features en route, and foods and spices obtained, have suggested that Sindbad journeyed from the Gulf to and around India to the spice islands of the Andamans, Sumatra and Timor, on to Borneo and the Philippines, finally reaching the China Sea.

It is hard to imagine Sohar as a great seafaring city and home to our legendary hero. Today one approaches the town on a dual carriageway. There are straggling suburbs of new villas under the shade of palm and ghaf trees, and one passes a Pizza Hut and a KFC on the way to the old town, which is situated on a raised mound. There is little left that recalls the past: a few broken walls reveal smooth, pinkish stones suggesting that the houses were built from local wadi stones. In fact, these small ‘stones’ are the original bricks baked in the 10th Century and re-used over the centuries so that they are smooth and only a third of their original size. There is little left of the original harbour now but water must have been channelled through creeks on either side of the town. Today the creeks are silted and small – the new wharfs at Majees serve an industrial estate several kilometres away.

Even now, living in his possible homeland, Sindbad remains for me an enigmatic character. Cynthia Valdes found that it was his very elusiveness that kept playing on her mind. She could not remember, from her mother’s stories, quite how the story went but it became for her, an obsession, a recurring thought – what happened to Sindbad in the stories? And was there ever such a man? Where did the fiction begin and where did it end? Perhaps the story eludes her because soon Manila was occupied by the Japanese - and Cynthia’s life changed.

References

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