



THE ADVENTURES OF AMINA AL-SIRAFI

- A NOVEL -

Shannon Chakraborty



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Excerpts © *The Book of Charlatans*, by Jamāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Jawbarī, tr. Humphrey Davies (New York: Library of Arabic Literature/NYU Press, 2022), 323.

Excerpts © *A Traveler in Thirteenth-Century Arabia: Ibn al-Mujawir’s tarikh al-mustabsir*, by Ibn al-Mujawir, tr. G. Rex Smith (Hakluyt Society, 2008).

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Map of the
GREAT
INDIAN OCEAN

Its Seas, Shores, and
Surrounding Environs

CONSTANTINOPLE

BAGHDAD

SIRAF

JERUSALEM

HORMUZ

CAIRO

MECCA

MUSCAT

CAMBAY

SALALAH

SURAT

ADEN

GULF OF ADEN

SOCOTRA

MOGADISHU

MOMBASA

KILWA

LAMU ARCHIPELAGO

SOFALA

MADAGASCAR

MALABAR
COAST

CALICUT

SRI LANKA

THE MALDIVES

Arabian
Sea

RED SEA

PERSIAN GULF



GLOSSARY

barija (pl. bawarij): a pirate vessel, frequently associated at the time with India

dunij (pl. dawanij): a smaller vessel often used as a lifeboat or to bring cargo and passengers ashore from an anchored ship

jahazi: cargo ship, particularly out of East Africa

muhtasib: a government official tasked with overseeing trade and commerce, as well as proper public behavior

nakhudha (pl. nawakhidha): a ship owner, authority at sea

qaraqir: large deep-sea cargo and transport vessel

qunbar and sunbuq (pl. sanabiq): large cargo vessels



AUTHOR'S NOTE AND FURTHER READING

The Indian Ocean is arguably among the oldest seas in maritime history, witness to over five thousand years of humans traveling its shores and crossing its expanse. Pilgrims and pirates, enslaved persons and royalty, traders and scholars. In our modern age, we are accustomed to thinking of continents and land borders; rarely do we see the sea and its littorals as places of shared culture. But long before the so-called European Age of Exploration (an age that would do more damage to existing Indian Ocean networks and indigenous populations than any such incursion before), the ports of the Indian Ocean were bustling, cosmopolitan places where one could find goods and people from all over.

Its medieval history has fascinated me since I was an undergrad, first learning of the accounts of the famous Geniza merchants, members of a Jewish diaspora that stretched from North Africa to India. There was something so relatable and human about these often mundane accounts of normal people's lives: people who weren't sultans or generals, but parents purchasing gifts for their kids' weddings, fretting about in-laws and business decisions, and mourning the sudden death of beloved siblings lost at sea—the sort of connections that make the past seem alive. It was always my dream to write a book set in this world, to pull on the stories that had resonated so deeply, and when I first began, I was thrilled to finally have a proper work excuse to throw myself into research. Indeed, I believe the phrase “I’m going to make it completely historically accurate except for the plot” came out of my mouth at least once.

Reader, I am fortunate that such a delusionally ambitious statement didn't instantly summon my own Raksh. For as I have been reminded again and again and AGAIN, history is a construct, ever-changing and

always subjective. Not only does it reveal the biases of its teller, audience, and intention, but also there is often much we simply don't know. While the past decade has seen astonishing developments in the study of the medieval Indian Ocean world, I have no doubt that by the time this book is published, some detail I believed factually sound will be disproved.

I have endeavored to make it historically *believable*, then, trying to balance scholarship with the spirit of the story. There are, of course, plenty of fantasist's touches. Would Amina have realized Aden was balanced on top of a submerged extinct volcano? Doubtful, but it is a setting too fabulous to ignore. Is the Moon of Saba a real legend? Absolutely not: one does not spend one's time reading stories of djinns and demons and then give directions to summoning such a creature in a commercial novel. However, nothing would delight me more than if you were intrigued enough by the history underlying Amina's story to learn more about this world, and so I'm sharing some of my sources. This isn't a comprehensive list—that would be a novella itself—but rather some enjoyable and accessible reads I think fellow history nerds would enjoy.

Let's start with primary accounts (I'm listing English translations here; if you are an Arabic reader, you'll have far better options). I've already mentioned the Geniza traders, and while a great number of books have been written about their lives, a good one is *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza*. Then there are the travelers. Ibn Battuta is the most famous, though slightly later; his lovely recollections of Mogadishu informed descriptions of that city in this book. Ibn Jubayr is more contemporaneous, and though his journeys kept him slightly northward, he had a *lot* of opinions about maritime travel in the Red Sea. Closer to Amina's world is the merchant and would-be geographer Ibn al-Mujawir, whose very entertaining—if occasionally quite scandalous—trips to Aden, Socotra, and the southern Arabian coast were instrumental. From the perspective of actual seafarers are Abu Zayd al-Sirafi's *Accounts of India and China* and *The Book of the Wonders of India*, a collection of

sailors' yarns credited to Buzurg ibn Shahriyar al-Ramhormuzi, a captain who was likely fictional.

If information on the lives of regular people during the medieval period is difficult to uncover, reliable accounts on the lives of criminals, those who often made a living by covering their tracks, can be even more elusive. My favorite primary source is the thirteenth-century trickster's manual *The Book of Charlatans* by al-Jawbarī, several of whose ruses made their way into this text. For felonious tales that skirt the line between fact and fiction, Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* offers some of the history behind the collection's famous rogues, and C. E. Bosworth's first volume in *The Mediaeval Islamic Underworld* translates and contextualizes numerous odes and legends about the Banu Sasan. Less whimsical but more telling is the actual criminal activity recorded and studied in works such as Carl F. Petry's *The Criminal Underworld in a Medieval Islamic Society* and Hassan S. Khalilieh's articles on piracy and Islamic law at sea. However, to better understand piracy in the medieval Indian Ocean, one must read far more widely. An entire book could be written just on the place of pirates in modern and historical lore. Both romanticized and villainized, they can be spun as heroic corsairs, justified freedom fighters, or murderous enslavers . . . it all depends on who's telling their story. But in primary accounts and historical studies, much of what I read painted a picture of various groups of people who were often just as part and parcel of the littoral society they lived in as were traders and navies. Alongside Khalilieh's articles, I found the work of scholars such as Roxani Eleni Margariti, Sebastian R. Prange, and Lakshmi Subramanian most illuminating.

To put together the lives of noncriminal citizens and the cities they dwelled in, I relied heavily on Margariti's *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade*, Elizabeth A. Lambourn's *Abraham's Luggage*, Yossef Rapoport's *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society*, and Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini's *Women and the Fatimids in the World*

of Islam. Chapurukha M. Kusimba's *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* was an excellent guide to the world from which Majed and Amina's mother hailed, and on conflicts farther abroad, I found Paul M. Cobb's *The Race for Paradise*, Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, Hussein Fancy's *The Mercenary Mediterranean*, and Graham A. Loud and Alex Metcalfe's *The Society of Norman Italy* helpful in providing context for Falco's character. For a primary source that offers a very different and personal take on Muslim and Christian interactions during the Crusades, I suggest *The Book of Contemplation* by Usama ibn Munqidh. For those who enjoy audio content, I suggest checking out the podcast series *New Books in the Indian Ocean World* and the *Ottoman History Podcast*.

Absolutely nothing bedeviled me like researching anything nautical. From ship details to sailing schedules to life at sea, what I could glean at first largely seemed to contradict other sources; while there's a fair amount of information after the fourteenth century, maritime history in the early medieval and late classical eras is less studied. I did find some gems, however. George F. Hourani's *Arab Seafaring* is a classic in the genre, and Tim Severin's account of the Sindbad voyage, in which a ninth-century vessel was reconstructed and sailed from Oman to Singapore, discusses technology that predates Amina's *Marawati* but is still a delight. Most helpful (and far more recent) is the work of Dionisius A. Agius, in particular his book *Classic Ships of Islam*. This was also a subject for which I relied heavily on academic articles, the scholarship of Ranabir Chakravarti, Inês Bénard, and Juan Acevedo being of note. Yossef Rapoport's *Islamic Maps* is a gorgeously rendered volume that helped me better visualize and understand how Amina would have conceived of the geography of her world, and for a larger overview of the Indian Ocean in history, I recommend *The Ocean of Churn: How the Indian Ocean Shaped Human History* by Sanjeev Sanyal; *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam* by Abdul Sheriff; *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* by Sebastian Prange;

and *Oman: A Maritime History* by Abdulrahman Al-Salimi and Eric Staples.

It is difficult to overstate how prevalent what we call “magic” was in the medieval world and how difficult it is as well to remove our modern biases from understanding that. Astrological predictions were the law of the land, relied upon by scholars and sultans, and folk rituals were part of everyday life, no matter a person’s religious background. I won’t attempt a comprehensive list (especially with some of the most fascinating scholarship currently being done by young academics) but will share that I found *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* by Amira El-Zein and *Legends of the Fire Spirits* by Robert Lebling very helpful. For a different perspective, I recommend Michael Muhammad Knight’s *Magic in Islam*, and for those who enjoy podcasts and Twitter, Ali A. Olomi is a treasure.

So much of this story is inspired by folktales that it’s hard to know where to start in recommending them, but I’ll begin with what I am asked most frequently: my current favorite edition of *The Thousand and One Nights* is *The Annotated Arabian Nights*. Yasmine Seale’s translation is beautiful, and the accompanying art and background information is not to be missed. *Tales of the Marvelous and News of the Strange* as well as al-Qazwini’s *Marvels of Creation* are also highly entertaining. You can read English versions of the stories of the epic figures mentioned in this book in Melanie Magidow’s translation of Dhat al-Himma in *The Tale of Princess Fatima, Warrior Woman*; Lena Jayyusi’s *The Adventures of Sayf Ben Dhi Yazan*; and James E. Montgomery’s *Diwan ‘Antarah ibn Shaddad*. For even more female fighters, check out Remke Kruk’s *Warrior Women of Islam*.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the modern authors that started me on this journey: the incomparable Naguib Mahfouz, Radwa Ashour, and Amitav Ghosh. Though I recommend all their books, for stories inspired by the folktales and history mentioned here, I suggest *Arabian Nights and Days*, *Siraaaj*, and *In an Antique Land*.

Happy reading!



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