he southern shore of the Arabian Peninsula is a near wasteland of igneous colors, with humbling plains and soaring, knife-edged formations of dolomite, limestone, and shale. Broad, empty beaches go on in all their undefiled grandeur for hundreds of miles. The hand of man seems truly absent. The sea, though mesmerizing, has no features to stimulate historical memory, so the vivid turquoise water suggests little beyond a tropical latitude. But the winds tell a story. The monsoon winds throughout the Indian Ocean generally north of the equator are as predictable as clockwork, blowing northeast to southwest and north to south, then reversing themselves at regular six-month intervals in April and October, making it possible since antiquity for sailing ships to cover great distances relatively quickly, with the certainty, perhaps after a long sojourn, of returning home almost as fast.*

Of course, it was not always that simple. Whereas the northeast monsoon, in the words of the Australian master mariner and unwearying Indian Ocean traveler Alan Villiers, "is as gracious, as clear, and as balmy as a permanent trade... the southwest is a season of much bad weather." So it was occasionally necessary in parts of the ocean for sailing ships to use the northeast monsoon for their passage in both directions. But the

* So dependable has been the monsoonal system that its inability to arrive has constituted a historical event. To wit, in 1630 the failure of the rains in certain parts of India—Gujarat, the Deccan, and the Coromandel coast—led to a million deaths from drought. John Keay, *The Honourable Company: A History of the English East India Company* (London: Harper-Collins, 1991), pp. 115-16.
Arab, Persian, and Indian dhows* could well manage this, with their huge lateen rigs lying as close as 55 to 60 degrees in the direction of the soft northeast headwind—sailing right into it, in other words.† This is almost as good as a modern yacht and a considerable technical achievement. The importance of it was that India’s southwestern Malabar coast could be reached from southern Arabia by sailing a straight-line course, even if it did involve the discomfort of what seamen call “sailing to weather.”

Despite the occasional ferocity of the southwest wind, the discovery of the monsoonal system, which so easily favored trip planning, nevertheless liberated navigators from sailing too often against the elements.1 So the Indian Ocean did not—at least to the same degree as other large bodies of water—have to wait until the age of steam to unite it. From a sailor’s point of view the whole wind shift in wind direction twice a year over such a large area is fairly unique. Elsewhere, the winds shift in strength and somewhat in direction with the seasons, but not to the degree of the Indian Ocean monsoons. The other major ocean breezes, the northeast and southeast trades in the tropics and the westerlies in the middle latitudes, remain throughout the year, as do the doldrums around the equator.

Thus, it may have been here off the coast of southern Arabia, with its clear starlit nights, plentiful stores of fish, and virtual absence of rivers, where the art of open-water sailing developed.2 Both East Africa and India were remarkably close in terms of sailing time. Indeed, the winds have allowed the Indian Ocean from the Horn of Africa four thousand miles across to the Indonesian archipelago—and all the barren stretches of desert and seaboard in between—to be for much of history a small, intimate community.

And that means, it was early on a world of trade.

I was in the region of Oman known as Dhofar, near the Yemeni border, almost in the middle of the southern shore of Arabia. It is an abstract can-

* The smaller dhow, used for fishing, is called a masha', a name from India; the larger kind, used for cargo and passengers is a jahazi, from a Persian word.
mixed with curry powder and the local soup flavored with chili peppers and soy sauce—again the mundane influences of India and China here in Arabia, for I was closer by sail to the mouth of the Indus than to the mouth of the Euphrates.

I visited the crumbling ruins of Sumhuram, a wealthy Dhofari port at the heart of the frankincense trail, one of the wealthiest ports in the world between the fourth century b.c. and the fourth century A.D. Inscriptions at the temple of Queen Hatshepsut in Luxor mention the Al Hojari variety of white frankincense from here, considered the best in the world, and mentioned by Marco Polo in his Travels. This frankincense was famous as far as China.

At one point the Chinese city of Quanzhou imported almost four hundred pounds of frankincense per year from Al-Baleed, another Dhofari seaside settlement near Sumhuram, whose city wall encloses the remains of more than fifty mosques from the medieval age. The ruins at Al-Baleed are more extensive than those at Sumhuram, allowing me to mentally reconstruct the great city that it was. A major settlement from as far back as 2000 B.C., Al-Baleed was visited by Marco Polo in 1285 and twice by the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta, in 1329 and 1349, both of whom arrived and departed by sea. The Chinese admiral Zheng He sailed his “treasure ships” across the Indian Ocean to Al-Baleed in 1421 and again in 1431, where he was received with open arms.* Writing much earlier, in the late tenth century, the Jerusalem-born Arab geographer Al-Muqaddasi calls ports in Oman and Yemen the “vestibule” of China, even as the Red Sea was known as the Sea of China.6 Going in the other direction, Omani from Dhofar and other regions of southern Arabia had been arriving in China since the middle of the eighth century A.D. In later centuries, a population of Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula would make the northwestern Sumatran port of Aceh, at the other end of the Indian Ocean in the distant East Indies, the “Gateway to Mecca.”

It was, indeed, a small ocean.

“Oman is everywhere, in China, India, Singapore, Zanzibar,” Abdulrahman Al-Salimi, an Omani government official, told me over a welcoming ceremony in the capital of Muscat, featuring rose water, dates, sticky glutinous halwa, and bitter cardamom-scented coffee served out of a brass pot. He wore a white turban and dishdasha. The minister of religious endowments, whom I also met, wore a bejeweled dagger (khanjar) at the middle of his waist. This is a land of consciously reinforced tradition that is not insular; rather the reverse, such customs are linked to a seaborne national identity, forged over the millennia, of interacting with—not withdrawing from—the outside world. Oman is an example of how globalization at its best is built on vigorous localisms that can survive the onslaught of destructive commercial forces. What may appear medieval to the awestruck, first-time traveler actually fits well with the modern world.

The northeastward journey from Dhofar to Muscat takes twelve hours over an unceasingly flat, gravel- and lava-strewed desert bordering the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia, parallel to the sea.* Throughout most of the past, such a journey would have been accomplished under sail. As seafarers, Omanis are in many ways the ultimate Arabs. So influential have they been throughout history that the Arabian Sea—the northwestern quarter of the Indian Ocean—was formerly known as the Sea of Oman. The legendary Sindbad the Sailor might have been an Omani from Sohar, though he was based out of Basra, in Iraq. Sindbad’s Homeric voyages of the eighth through the tenth century are another testament to the smallness of this great ocean, owing to the winds and the sailing skills of the medieval Arabs and Persians. The Kingdom of Mihraj in Sindbad’s first voyage has been likened to Borneo in the South China Sea; the monstrous bird of his second voyage has been compared to birds near Madagascar; the Island of Apes in the third voyage was considered by the twelfth-century Arab geographer Idrisi to be Socotra, between Yemen and Somalia; and the cannibal land of the fourth voyage has been thought to be the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, if not even farther-afield Sumatra.

Another great Omani seafarer, Ahmad ibn Majid, might have navigated Vasco da Gama’s ship from Kenya to India in 1498 (more of him later).† The Omani dominated the slave trade, and ran an empire along the Swahili coast in East Africa through the early nineteenth century.

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* The very waterless barrenness of the Empty Quarter was another reason that drove the Omanis to the sea.
† Though many scholars confirm this, there is still some confusion as to the identity of da Gama’s pilot; one expert identifies him as a Gujarati, Satish Chandra, The Indian Ocean: Explorations in History, Commerce and Politics (New Delhi: Sage, 1987), p. 18.
They held the port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea in Baluchistan (southwestern Pakistan) until 1958. Indonesia has Omani communities, the forebears of which helped spread Islam into the Far East.

Likewise, you can find traces of all these places in Oman. The souks of Muscat are filled with a nineteenth-century Hindu community from Rajasthan and Hyderabad. The styles of women’s dresses and the embroidered caps of the men bear influences from Zanzibar and Baluchistan. Music and dance are Zanzibari in character. Chinese porcelain is ubiquitous. The bakers are Yemeni and Iranian. Many of the businessmen are Gujaratis from northwestern India. The shields and coats of armor of Omani soldiers of old demonstrate the influence of India and of the Zulus from South Africa. Loan words from all these places influence Omani Arabic, and many Omanis speak Arabic with a Swahili accent. Globalization happened in Oman and the rest of the Indian Ocean in antiquity and in the early medieval era long before it did in other places, leading to an extraordinary level of sophistication.

The Arabs are known in the West as a desert people, susceptible to the extremities of thought to which deserts give rise. But they have also been a great seafaring race, as the frankincense trade and the historical experience of Oman demonstrate, the very harbingers of cosmopolitanism, who have been sailing these waters for thousands of years before Vasco da Gama. When looking at the entire period of Islamic expansion, “one fact stands out,” writes the Dutch-American scholar André Wink in his encyclopedial series, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, “the growth and development of a world economy in and around the Indian Ocean—with India at its centre and the Middle East and China as its two dynamic poles—was effected by continued economic, social and cultural integration into ever . . . more complex patterns under the aegis of Islam.”

The “Saracens,” as the British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder referred to the Arabs a century ago, “created a great empire by availing themselves of the two mobilities permitted by their land—that of the horse and camel on the one hand, and that of the ship on the other. At different times their fleets controlled both the Mediterranean as far as Spain, and the Indian Ocean to the Malay Islands.” The trapezoidal geography of the Arabian peninsula favored this development. Long coastlines bound Arabia on three sides: from the Gulf of Suez all the way down the Red Sea to the Strait of Bab el Mandeb (“The Gate of Tears”), then northeastward for 1250 miles to the Gulf of Oman, along what was in earlier eras the most fertile, populous parts of the peninsula (Yemen, the Hadramaut, and Dhofar); and finally back north up the Persian Gulf to the Shatt el Arab in Iraq. The Shatt el Arab led to the Tigris, and hence to Baghdad, so during the Abbasid Caliphate, from the eighth to the thirteenth century, until the Mongol devastation, Baghdad was connected via the Indian Ocean to China, since for much of the history communications were often more easily accomplished by sea than across inhospitable deserts.

Moreover, commerce in Arabia was encouraged by the nearby shores of Africa to the west and the Italian plateau to the east, for in the enclosed, protected waters of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, constant seafaring brought the Arabs into intimate contact with two antique urban civilizations—those of Egypt and Persia. The Persians, in particular, originally dominated the long-distance sailing trade with the East. In the sixth century B.C., Darius I “ordered a reconnaissance of the seas from Suez to the Indus,” for there was much sea traffic between the Achaemenid dynasty in Persia and the equally thriving Mauryan dynasty in India. Later, during the Sassanid dynasty in Persia, just prior to the coming of Islam, it is likely that Persian ships were in Chinese ports. In fact, the Persians, who under the Sassanids were a major Indian Ocean power, appear in Chinese documents throughout the late seventh and eighth centuries as owners of ships at Canton. By this time, under the Arab-Persian cultural unity effected by the eclectic medieval Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, Arab and Persian sailings across the Indian Ocean from Africa to the Far East became nearly indistinguishable, falling under the general rubric of Muslim trade and exploration.

The aptly named Persian Gulf was the oldest open-water route of humankind, from where it was possible to sail along the coast of Sindh (southeastern Pakistan) and Hind (India) without losing sight of land—that is, if one chose not to use the open ocean route from Oman to India, aided by the monsoon during half the year. For it was southern India that served as the “hinge” uniting the two great basins of the Indian Ocean—the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. From South India or Ceylon it was a straight shot with the monsoon winds all the way to the Far East, close-hauled on a port tack. From the Persian Gulf to Sumatra in the Indonesian archipelago it was a relatively quick seventy-day journey—
twice the speed of sail travel in the Mediterranean, owing again to the monsoon. And in another direction, from Yemen and Oman it was a comparatively short and easy sea journey southwestward to East Africa. Indeed, East Africa’s Swahili coast was drawn intimately into the Islamic maritime sphere after A.D. 1200, and by the end of the fifteenth century at least thirty African coastal towns had been established by Muslim immigrants from southern Arabia. It was as if every group was present everywhere around this ocean.

As noted, in classical times the towns of southern Arabia, to quote the late scholar George F. Hourani, were “the entrepots of all intercourse” among Africa, Egypt, and India. The ambassadors whom Ptolemy II of Egypt exchanged with the Mauryan emperors Chandragupta and Asoka of India, and “the Indian women, oxen, and marbles which he displayed in his triumphal procession” in 271 or 270 B.C., were likely transshipped at Sabæan, that is, at Yemeni ports. According to the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (Greek for “Sailing Around the Red Sea”), a document of the mid-first century A.D. compiled by the equivalent of a master mariner, Arab merchants were reportedly active in antiquity in Somaliland, East Africa, and near the mouth of the Indus River valley (today’s Pakistan). Seemingly desolate and remote Arabia was at the heart of civilizational contact, and it was all on account of sailing.

The coming of Islam in the seventh century encouraged this seafaring trade. Islam is an ethical faith that provides an entire framework for social and economic interaction. What’s more, as the scholar Patricia Rizzo explains, Islam is “portable.” It is “not identified with a certain locale where animistic spirits dwell, or with temples belonging to particular deities,” as has been the case with Hinduism. Thus, Islam was particularly “well suited to merchants who needed to conduct complex transactions and to travel.” It encouraged networking because it is a unifying culture that centers around elements such as the Koran, communal prayer, regulations on family life, and dietary restrictions against pork and alcohol. Such elements brought the faithful together in social groups. Indeed, in the early Islamic centuries the haj pilgrimage functioned in part as a trade fair, as Muslim merchants came together in Mecca to make deals. Islam’s “intermingling and coexistence” with Hinduism and Buddhism, writes the scholar Janet L. Abu-Lughod, lent a “coherence” to the Indian Ocean world that at times even the much smaller Mediterranean—divided rather than united by the winds—lacked. This mercantile com-

munity, which adapted particularly well to new norms and traditions, impelled Islam eastward through the Southern Seas, giving it hegemony over much of the Afro-Eurasian land mass.

Muslims dealt in slaves and ivory in East Africa, in pearls and gold in the Persian Gulf, in rice and cotton in India, and in silk, tea, and porcelain in China. Islam not only sustained far-flung Muslim merchant communities throughout the Indian Ocean, but also attracted converts in the process. This had a pragmatic side, since by converting to Islam an African or Asian merchant could raise his credit value among the Arabs. In Burma, whose western coastline the Arabs would penetrate eventually, the ethnic Arakanese of the region often would take an Arab name in the interests of commerce. Arab merchants converted Indians, too, and together, through their own peripatetic movements about the ocean, established Islamic communities from Mogadishu to Malacca—that is, from Somalia to Malaysia. (This was all in stark contrast to Christian missionary communities who would not have much to do with trade, and whose interests were at times inimical to those of European trading companies.)

Helping the expansion of Arab trade in the Indian Ocean was not just the rise of Islam, but of China, too. The Mohammedan state at Medina was established in 622; that of the Tang dynasty in China in 618. The Tang regime reinvigorated the bureaucracy, brought strong central government to China, and aggressively sought to develop maritime trading links to the south in the Indian Ocean. The situation was analogous to the moment in antiquity when the Roman Empire ruled in the west of the Indian Ocean and the Han dynasty in the east. Until the influx of Islam, Chinese merchants were comfortable dealing with Hindu and Buddhist Indians, but afterwards, under Tang tutelage, they came to be more comfortable with Muslim Indians, Arabs, and Persians. Thus began a pattern of strong commercial relations between the various medieval Muslim dynasties (the Damascus-based Omayyads and especially the Baghdad-based Abbasids) in the west, and the Tang and succeeding dynasties of the Song and Yuan in the east, a pattern lasting for hundreds of years. Only later, in the fifteenth century, when China turned inward and trading opportunities were fewer there, did Muslim merchant power begin to wane. But with the large empires at either end of the Indian Ocean commercially interdependent, peace reigned generally, along with free trade.
Besides the desire for the ubiquitous frankincense, the search for luxury items like metals and medicinal herbs spurred trade between distant parts of Asia. In addition, India sold rice and cotton to China, and China sold tea in return. When da Gama arrived in Calicut, in India, he was dazzled by the maritime traffic that arrived from “China to the Nile.” The Muslim trading system was central to this medieval process of globalization, just as American-style capitalism has been to the post-modern form.

The Muslims were truly everywhere. Within a few years of the advent of Islam in the seventh century, the explorer Sa’ad ibn Abi Waqqas, sailing from Ethiopia, built a mosque in the Chinese city of Quanzhou. In the early fifteenth century an Indian Muslim piloted Admiral Zheng He’s treasure fleet from India to Dhofar and on to Yemen, from where the admiral, a Muslim, too, became the first high Chinese official to make the pilgrimage north to Mecca.

However, though the Muslims—Arab, Persian, and Indian-dominated, the Indian Ocean was not only theirs. Traders from all countries and religions took advantage of the ocean’s unique environment. Even before the coming of Islam, Malays from the eastern seas, in present-day Malaysia and Indonesia, sailed as far west as Madagascar and East Africa at the opposite end of the Indian Ocean, bringing cinnamon and other spices. Known as Waqwaqs because of the type of outrigger canoes they used, these heathens covered the distance of thirty-five hundred miles in about a month because of the winds. Hindus, too, were also spreading their rituals, icons, and language around these littorals. A thriving trade brought Indian traders, mainly Hindu, all over the South Seas, creating a “Sanskrit cosmopolis” in the early Middle Ages throughout South and Southeast Asia. Indeed, throughout medieval and early modern history, India’s southeastern Coromandel coast was in close contact with Burma and the Indonesian archipelago, as well as Persia in the opposite direction.

The ocean constituted a web of trade routes. It vaguely resembled what our world of today increasingly looks like with its commercial and cultural interlinkages. Because the Indian Ocean is the sum of its parts,