



Historical importance of Sinbad the Sailor in Serandib: Special reference to Sri Lanka and West Asian Relations

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Abstract

When examining the relationship that existed in the period of the Abbasid empire, a significant stage in the connections between Sri Lanka and West Asia may be seen. It could be believed that during the time of Emperor Harun-al-Rashid, these relationships may have prevailed on a fairly large scale. In modern times, many scholars have begun to engage in surveys relating to historical facts in legends originating in the past. The story of Sindbad the Sailor of Arabian Nights fame too is one such a legend. However, it is a legend which portrays certain true incidents pertaining to a series of commercial activities which took place in the Indian Ocean during the early medieval period. It further reveals the traffic-in people, food and ideas-existed between Sri Lanka and Baghdad. Scholars who edited Sindbad's adventures at a later stage attached it to the Arabian Nights, and transformed the same into a fairy tale. It must however be remembered that it was a separate aspect and it was written in the 9th or 10th century A.D. But what is important in this study is not to discuss whether Sindbad was a historical figure or not, but whether the series of facts revolving around him are of historical importance or not.

Keywords: Sindbad, Indian Ocean, Sri Lankan Trade

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“The king of Sarandib(Sri Lanka) gave me a cup of ruby a span high; and a bed covered with the skin of a serpent which swalloweth the elephant, and whoso sitteth upon it, never sickeneth, and a slave-girl like a shining moon”

Sindbad the Sailor

The most important period of Arab-Sri Lanka relations was during the rule of the Abbasid dynasty (A.D.750-1260).³Very good relations were maintained during the period of the most powerful and the famous Emperor Harun-al Rashid (A.D 786-809). It is inevitable to come to the above conclusion because so many clues and evidence supported this view. The Baghdad Royal Council’s association with Sri Lanka is proved through literary and archaeological findings. The famous Arabic book *Alf Layla Wa Layla or Thousand and One Nights*(Sinhala-“*Arabi Nisollasaya*”)tales, based on the experience of navigators, was composed probably in the early Abbasid period (A.D. 750-850). It gives useful and interesting information through stories. Sindbad the sailor came to Sri Lanka when king Harun-al-Rashid was the ruler of Baghdad. The story of Sindbad, although not taken seriously by educated masses, contains much information regarding international trade at that time. Even though some stories are exaggerated and adventurous, when one goes deep into them, one could understand true and accurate incidents regarding trading systems and commercial patterns that prevailed at that time.

Merchandise used for trade, their grades, rules and regulations governing these items, close relations between traders on trust and success of business, the rules on barter system, assessment of the value of items, commercial centres and towns and great kingdoms at the time are vividly narrated in the *Thousand and One Nights*. Apart from that, sea routes and land routes,harbours and associated commercial centres, those involved with international trade, and relevant rulers and heads, the nature of ships, the nature of the sea, and the challenges of sea voyages in trade were also shown clearly. The depth of the sea, the sea current and wave motion affecting the sailing, adventurous sailing in deep and violent seas, instability of ships and lives of merchants, and with all those challenges if one succeeded he could be very rich due to great profit are all narrated in this book. Out of all the stories, the

³. All chronological dates one quoted from Dominique Sourdél, *Medieval Islam*, (trans.), J.Montgomery Watt, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983, pp. x-xv

interesting are those of how Sindbad's adventures and experiences were gained by 7 sea voyages.

According to the text, Sindbad was the son of a rich merchant. When his father died, he foolishly squandered all his inheritance in riotous living with his young friends. When all his personal fortunes had been wasted he sold his last possessions, invested in trading goods, and went to sea as a merchant. *The Thousand and One Nights* says that Sindbad lived and traded from Baghdad, then the metropolis of the Arab world and the capital of the Caliph Harun-al Rashid. But the Caliph himself was such a glittering figure of semi-mythical proportions that it was the habit of later storytellers to ascribe to the reign of Harun-al Rashid all manners of great adventures and marvels, including, naturally, the exploits of Sindbad the Sailor. Actually, there was probably no one single person who was Sindbad. It is more likely that there was a renowned foreign-going Arab merchant about whom travel stories were told. Gradually the journeys and exploits of other men were credited to him, and the hero-figure was established. This is the normal development of a story cycle. The deeds of a real person are taken, exaggerated, and then embellished with the feats of other men until the entire assembly is presented as a story sequence.

On the sixth voyage of Sindbad, his ship was wrecked and he landed in a small island. He built a small boat, and landed in Sarandib. That was the beginning of the connection between Sindbad and Sri Lanka.

At length I awoke, and found myself in the light; and, opening my eyes, I beheld an extensive tract, and the raft tied to the shore of an island, and around me a company of Indians, and Abyssinians⁴ (blackmoors⁵) When they saw that I had risen, they rose and came to me, and spoke to me in their language; but I knew not what they said, and imagined that it was a dream, and that this occurred in sleep, by reason of the violence of my distress and vexation. And when they spoke to me and I understood not their speech, and returned them not an answer, a man among them advanced to me, and said to me, in the Arabic language, "Peace be on thee, O our brother! What art thou, and whence hast thou come and what is the cause of the coming to this place? We are people of the sown lands and the field, and we came to irrigate our fields and our sown lands and found thee asleep on the raft: so we laid hold

⁴.*Modern-day Ethiopia*

⁵.*The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, (trans.) R.F. Burton, (ed.), Leonard Smithers, Vol. IV, H.S. Nicholas Pub., London, 1897, p. 402

upon it, and tied it here by us, waiting for thee to rise at thy leisure. Tell us then what is the cause of thy coming to this place”...and I told them of all that had happened to me from beginning to end, what I had experienced upon that river, and of its narrowness. Then they talked together, and said, we must take him with us and present him to our king, that he may acquaint him with what hath happened to him. Accordingly they took me with them, and conveyed with me that raft, together with all that was upon it, of riches and goods, and jewels and minerals, and ornaments of gold, and they took me to their King, who was the King of Sarandib. (Sri Lanka)⁶

This story may be taken as an allusion to Sri Lankan and West Asian relations. That Sindbad was caught by local men, that he could not understand their language, that there was a black man among them who could speak the Arabic language, that Indians and Abyssinians were present there—all these go to show that the Abyssinians⁷ were in the Sri Lankan port as recorded by Cosmas.⁸ Procopius, and *The Chāchnamāh*⁹ also confirm this.¹⁰ So the language spoken by Sindbad, was the language of the Black Moors who spoke Arabic. Black skinned men were Arab nationals. It was very important to have men who could speak Arabic. The kings of Sri Lanka employed men for security of Mahātitttha port, and for other services.¹¹ So it could be assumed that at that time there was a translator for West Asian travellers.

⁶.*Stories from the Thousand and One Nights, The Arabians Nights*, Entertainments Translated by Edward William Lane, Revised by Stanley Lane Poole Grolier Enterprises Corp, Danbury, Connecticut, U.S.A, 1909 and 1937, p. 287; *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, (trans.), R.F. Burton, (ed.), Leonard Smithers, Vol. IV, H.S. Nicholas Pub., London, 1897, p. 402

⁷. The establishment of a string of Arab trading centres along the African coasts appears to have been accompanied by a great expansion of the slave trade in general. The Arabs carried large number of black slaves (Abyssinian) across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean to Islamic Asia and to India, (to lesser extent to China), as well as across the trans-Saharan routes Andre Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World—Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam 7th to 11th Centuries*, Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990, pp. 29-30

⁸.*The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk*, (trans.), J.W. McCrindle, Hakluyt Society, London, 1897, pp. 365-369

⁹.Sri Lankan ruler sent Abyssinians—male and female—to Iraq ruler*The Chāchnamāh An Ancient History of Sind (giving the history of the Hindu period down to the Arab conquest)*, translated from the Persian manuscripts MirzaKalichbegFredunbeg, Idarah-I Adabiyat-I, (Delhi, 1900), pp. 69-70;*Chāchnamāh*,(ed.),U.M. Daudpota, Hyderabad, 1939, p. 89

¹⁰.*Procopius, History of Wars*, (trans.), H.B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann, London, MCMXVI-1961, Bk.1, Ch. 20, pp.9-13

¹¹.*Sahassavat *hupakarana*, (ed.), A.P. Buddadatta, Anula Press, Colombo, 1959, p.145

According to Cosmas, due to the arrival of more and more number of West Asian traders in Sri Lanka, the rulers were very keen to provide all possible services in those places.

Sindbad was taken to the king of Sri Lanka along with the ‘black moor’ who spoke Arabic and many more men. Sindbad saluted or respected the king according to the Indian system of kneeling. Afterwards he was allowed to sit by the king, and the king listened to all details of his voyage. The king ordered to write in gold the accounts of this voyage and kept it with the main records of the palace. Since there existed a system of record keeping of historical events in Sri Lanka, what Sindbad said could be true. The king kept an officer to guard the valuable articles of Sindbad found in his boat. Afterwards, with the king’s permission, he was allowed to go out into the city, the details of which are also recorded in the book.

Now the island Sarandiblieth under the equinoctial line, it’s night and day both numbering twelve hours. It measureth fourscore parasangs long by a breadth of thirty, and its width is bounded by a lofty mountain and a deep valley. The mountain is conspicuous from a distance of three days, and it containeth many kinds of rubies and other minerals, and spice-trees of all sorts. The surface is covered with emery where-with gems are cut and fashioned; diamonds are in its rivers, and pearls are in its river-valley. I ascended that mountain and solaced myself with a view of its marvels which are indescribable and afterwards I returned to the king.¹²

Sindbad’s records of Sri Lanka, except a few points, can be accurate, even one could guess. The navigator could have climbed Adam’s Peak since it was sacred place of worship for Muslims already in the 9th century. Not only Sindbad but all those who visited Sri Lanka after him had recorded that they did not forget to pay respect to this sacred mountain of Adam’s Peak.¹³ Like Sindbad, many Arab geographers especially, Al-Tabari¹⁴ (A.D.853), Suleiman¹⁵, Abu Said¹⁶, IbnKhurdadbah¹⁷, and Al-Beruni.¹⁸ also mention Sri Lanka and their details are similar to his.

¹². *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, (trans.), R.F. Burton, (ed.), Leonard Smithers, Vol. IV, H.S Nicholas Pub., London, 1897, p. 403

¹³. See Rohitha Dasanayaka, *Arabs In Serandib*, Colombo, Godage, 2016, Discussed in detail in the V Chapter

¹⁴. *Rifles, Ceylon: A General Description of the Island, Historical, Physical, Statistical*, Vol. II, Chapman & Hall, London, 1876, p. 14

¹⁵. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *op.cit.*, pp. 122-123



When Sindbad arrived in Sri Lanka the king after receiving him had sent a congratulatory letter to the king of Arabia, the exact words of which are not known. Sindbad came to Sri Lanka during king Harun-al Rashid's (A.D. 786-809) reign. At that time there were three kings in Sri Lanka; King Mahinda II (A.D.777-797), King Udaya I (A.D.797-804) and King Aggabodhi VIII, (A.D. 804-815) as recorded in the chronicles. S.A. Iman has suggested that this incident happened either during the reign of King Mahinda II or King Udaya I.¹⁹ It is an accepted view that, one of them had definitely sent a letter to the Caliph of Arabia, through either Sindbad or some other merchant. "Moreover, he gave me a sealed letter, saying, 'Carry this with thine own hand to the Commander of the Faithful and give him many salutations from us!'²⁰said the King to Sindbad. Then Sindbad returned by ship from Sri Lanka to the Arab country.

The king of Serendib wrote the letter in a skin of a rare animal. The old chronicle has recorded that as the skin of a *khawi* which one can not definitely identify. But it could be a properly tanned yellow skin from a goat or hog-deer (which is finer than lamb parchment and of yellow colour). The letters were written in blue colour (ink of ultra marine) and the contents of the document are as follows:

Peace be with thee, from the king of Sarandib, before whom are a thousand elephants, and upon whose palace- crenelles are a thousand jewels.²¹ But after (laud to the lord and praises to His Prophet): we send thee a trifling gift which be thou pleased to accept ...and the present was a cup of ruby a span high and a finger's length broad, the inside of which was adorned with precious pearls; and a bed covered with the skin of the serpent which swalloweth the elephant,

¹⁶. *Salsilat-u-t Tawārikh of the Merchant Sulaiman with additions by Abu Zaidu-L Hasān of Siraf, The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians*, pp. 7-8

¹⁷. *Kitāb Al-Masālik Wa' l-Mamālik, Abu'l-Kāsim Obaidallah Ibn Abdallah Ibn Khoradbeh, Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, (ed.), M.J De Goeje, Lugduni-Batavorum, Apud E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1889, pp. 42-44

¹⁸. *Tahqiq ma li'l Hind: Al-Alberuni's India*, (ed. and trans.), Edward C.Sachau, S.Chand and Co. New Delhi, 1964, pp. 307-310

¹⁹. S.A. Imam, "Ceylon-Arab Relations", in *Moors Islamic Cultural Home Souvenir*, Colombo, 1964-65, p. 11

²⁰. *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, 1897, p.404 and *Stories from the Thousand and one Nights, The Arabians Nights*, 1937, p. 288

²¹. "This had been written to the King Caliph Harun al Rashid by the King of Sarandib, having 100 tuskers (elephants) walking in front, and living in a place glittering with 1000 red gems (rubies) and possessing 20,000 crowns decorated with diamonds.", '*Arabi Nissollāsaya*', (Sinhala trans.), Albet Silva, Vol.III, S.Godage, Colombo, 2001 new print, p.396

which skin hath spots each like a diner and whoso sitteth upon it never sickeneth; and an hundred thousand miskals of Indian lign-aloes and thirty grains of camphor, each the bigness of a pistachio-nut, and a slave-girl with her paraphernalia, a charming creature like a shining moon.²²

Although excessive reports with exaggerated descriptions are given, the gifted items may be accepted as correct details. However, the gift of a slave girl²³ as recorded is not acceptable, because there is no evidence of slave trading in Sri Lanka. The slave trade²⁴ was extensive and had a high-value of exchange in ancient times. This trade, using ‘product’²⁵ from East Africa, began in the eighth and ninth centuries, and this was the most important trade from East Africa to the Abbasid capital of Baghdad from the eighth to the tenth centuries. Sometime during his journey Sindbad might have taken a slave girl from some other country. Sindbad after sailing for many days went to Balasora or Bassrah town and subsequently to Baghdad city to hand over gifts and the letter to the king.

After handing over all gifts from the King of Sri Lanka, Sindbad described in detail what all he saw in the Sarandib island. These details are acceptable and may be true up to a certain level.

...O my lord, I saw in his kingdom much more than he hath written in his letter. For state processions a throne is set for him upon a huge elephant, eleven cubits high, and upon this he sitteth, having his great lords and officers and guests standing in two ranks, on his right hand and on his left. At his head is a man holding in hand a golden javelin and behind him another with a great mace of gold whose head is an emerald²⁶ a span long and as thick as a man’s thumbs. And when he mounteth horse there mount with him a thousand horsemen clad in gold brocade and silk; as the king proceedeth, a man precedeth him, crying, This is the king mighty of great estate and high of

²². *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, 1897, p.404

²³. There is some evidence that Indian female slaves were exported to the Islamic East countries.

²⁴. See for the slave trade in Medieval period, Philip Snow, *The Raft: China’s Encounters with Africa*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1989, pp. 16-22; Anthony Reid, *The Land Below the Winds*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988, pp. 129-140

²⁵. Michael Pearson, *op.cit.*, p.85

²⁶. Read emery or adamantite spar.

dominion! And he continueth to repeat his praises in words I remember not, saying at the end of his panegyric, this is the King owing the crown whose like nor Solomon nor the Mihraj ever possessed. Then he is silent, and one behind him proclaimeth, saying, He shall die! Again I say he shall die! and the other addeth, Extolled be the perfection of the Living who dieth not! Moreover, by reason of his justice and ordinance and intelligence, there is no Kasi in his city, and all his lieges distinguish between Truth and Falsehood.²⁷

So expressed Sindbad in front of the king. Since Sindbad did not know the local Sri Lankan language, he could have obtained all details from somebody else. It is recorded that King Caliph was highly impressed by listening to all these details. Not only that, King Caliph requested Sindbad to proceed with his last voyage or the seventh voyage in order to send gifts and a letter to the King of Sarandib. Although Sindbad refused to go, the king of Caliph insisted that he was indebted to King of Sarandib, and so Sindbad agreed to go. That mutual interrelations between the countries would enhance the trade and would benefit both the countries was clearly understood by the rulers of both countries. Hence, the Caliph decided to reply the King of Sri Lanka as a duty through the sailor Sindbad. He met all expenses for the trip. So, Sindbad came back to Sri Lanka, without any changes or problems on the sea route. That showed there were frequent and well organized naval trips between these countries. Sindbad visited Sri Lanka very often carrying valuables and fully guarded. The Arabs travelled to China regularly, and enroute they stopped in Sri Lankan harbours for supplies and refreshments and trade too. At the same period there was a famous navigator called Abharah(A.D.825)²⁸ who frequently visited China. He could be compared with navigator Nandi²⁹(Nan-ti of the Chinese Annals) who sailed from Sri Lanka to China and the famous Sindbad in experience and ability.

During this era, the most dangerous challenge for maritime trade and voyages in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea was the sea pirates. That was another hazard to navigation arising out of man's greed for gold and goods. Piracy is a surprisingly controversial matter.³⁰

²⁷. *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, 1897, p. 406

²⁸. He was the first to make regular voyages to China. In A.D. 825 a large naval force was sent from al-Basrah to punish the pirates of al-Bahrayn who were raiding ships coming from Iran, India and China, Hourani, *op.cit.*, p. 66

²⁹. *Sahassavatthupakarana*, (ed.), A.P. Buddadatta, Anula Press, Colombo, 1959, p. 145

³⁰. Michael Pearson, *op.cit.*, p. 56

Some have seen pirates as macroparasites, human groups that draw sustenance from the toil and enterprise of others, offering nothing in return. Others point out that they are a sign of prosperity, for men need something to prey up on; since, only a rich port is worth plundering, piracy takes place only where there is seafaring on a large scale.³¹

Thus, this was endemic from the earliest times in both the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Not surprisingly, most rulers tried to ward them off, or even eliminate them. In the seventh century B.C. the Assyrian king Sennacherib sent out an expedition against Gulf pirates,³² and over 300 years later Alexander the Great's fleet was harassed by them. Even the distant Roman emperor Trojan led a naval expedition to the Gulf to try and root them out. In the first century of the Cristian Era Pliny noted that ships in the Red Sea and those going across the Indian Ocean to Southwest India carried archers to ward off pirates.³³ According to *The Chāchnamāh*³⁴ some tribal groups in Debal (Karachchi) had a conventional right for piracy. Most of the stories connected with sea voyages in *ArābiNissolāsaya* report threats from sea pirates. Emperor Abbasid Umar took strong measures against sea pirates during his reign. In A.D. 825, he sent a great naval fleet to Al Baharein to destroy sea pirates. Many ships sailing from China, India and Sri Lanka to the Arabian Sea were attacked and robbed by those sea pirates. The Abbasid Caliph took measures to effectively check piracy. As indicated by Hourani,³⁵ right from the mouth of the Tigris in the Red Sea (Southern part) upto Sri Lankan harbours, there were sea pirates in large numbers. The main centre for them was Socotra. Because of this, many merchants and trading ships carried with them fully trained soldiers. The Greeks had to throw Greek fire³⁶ on them to safeguard themselves and their ships.

The seventh voyage of Sindbad indicates that he went to Sarandib at the request of the king of Arabia to pay respects and express gratitude to the Sarandib king with many gifts and valuables. Even the expense for the voyage was paid by the king of Arabia. The encounter

³¹. Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, Vol. 1, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, pp. 377, 366

³². Hourani, *op.cit.*, pp. 6-11; Maqbul, Ahamed, *op.cit.*, pp. 2-3

³³. Hourani, *op.cit.*, p. 29; Romila Thapar, "Early Mediterranean Contacts with India", in F. DeRomanis and A. Tchernia, (eds.), *Crossings*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1997, p. 33; Kenneth McPherson, *op.cit.*, pp. 23, 29

³⁴. *The Chāchnamāh*, pp. 69-70

³⁵. Hourani, *op.cit.*, p. 70

³⁶. A Greek weapon

with the king reveals how diplomatic activity clearly went hand in hand with trade. The expressions of Sindbad are as follows:

Then I dropped down from Baghdad to the Gulf, and with other merchants embarked, and our ship sailed before a fair wind many days and nights till, by Allah's aid, we reached the island of Sarandib. As soon as we had made fast we landed, and I took the present and the letter; and going on with them to the king... "O my lord, I brought thee a present from my master, the Caliph Harun al-Rashid"; and offered him the present and the letter which he read and at which he rejoiced with passing joy. The present consisted of a mare worth ten thousand ducats, bearing a golden saddle set with jewels; a book; a sumptuous suit of clothes and a hundred different kinds of white Cairene cloths and silks of Suez,³⁷ Cufa and Alexandria; Greek carpets and a hundred maunds³⁸ weight of linen and raw silk. Moreover, there was a wondrous rarity, a marvelous cup of chrystal of the time of the Pharoahs, a finger breadth thick and a span wide, middlemost of which was the figure of a lion faced by a kneeling man grasping a bow with arrow (sound Sassanian) drawn to the very head, together with the food-tray³⁹ of Sulayman (Soloman) the son of David (upon whom be Peace!).⁴⁰

As shown by the gifts sent to Harun al-Rashid, Sarandib's reputation rested on its precious stones, its cinnamon, brazil wood and the site of Adam's peak-visible to sailors-where Adam is said to have rested his foot. But we are not familiar with the commodities which Harun al-Rashid sent to Sarandib. Most of the information furnished by original sources are mostly about the export of famous Sri Lankan commercial products. But here a detailed report of the imported items from West Asian countries is given.⁴¹ It is also very

³⁷. Arabic- 'Al-Suways'

³⁸. Arabic- 'Mann,' a weight varying from two to six pounds

³⁹. This article or rather the table is supposed to have been found by the Arab conquerors of Spain during the sack of Toledo, and presented to the Omniade Al-Walid bin Abd al-Malik (705-716 A.D.)

⁴⁰. *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, 1897, p.417

⁴¹. Compare with Western trading commodities, David Abulafia, "The Role of Trade in Muslim-Christian Contact during the Middle Ages", in Bionisius A. Agius and Richard Hitchcock, (eds.), *The Arab Influence in Medieval Europe*, Ithaca Press, UK, 1994, pp. 1-24

clear that those commodities were not imported from Asian countries. Therefore during the said period, there had been an exchange of commercial items between Sri Lanka and Arabia.

However, the king of Sri Lanka was highly appreciative of all those gifts and the reply from the Caliph, and gave many valuable gifts to Sindbad. In addition to this, king Harun al-Rashid sent a special agent called Sabbah to Sri Lanka, and he was accorded a red carpet reception by the king of Anuradhapura.⁴² If this report could be accepted as correct it would definitely indicate that there was a very close relationship between the royal houses of Sri Lanka and Arabia.

During the 9th and 10th centuries large number of Arab merchants did come to Sri Lanka from Arabia. Not only merchants but also explorers, pilgrims, historians, geographical surveyors and many more visited Sri Lanka. Those merchants or navigators after successfully completing a journey described in detail their adventurous trip to fellow countrymen on their return. That had been the practice, may be, in order to gain the countrymen's appreciation. Records of those stories, often with exaggerated accounts, were illustrated vividly in the book *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* or *Arābi Nissollāsaya*.

Sindbad's stories too could be assumed to be similarly narrated. But by considering carefully all the minor details one could understand that there were trade relations between these countries during that period.

The trade relation that prevailed between the two countries at the time of Sindbad's arrival in Sri Lanka could be confirmed by material evidence. As K.N. Chaudhuri has said, 'The medieval trade of Asia was founded on the economic and social acceptance of the four great products of eastern civilization: silk, porcelain, sandalwood and black pepper which were exchanged for incense, thoroughbred horses, ivory, cotton textiles and metal goods'⁴³

What was required, particularly during the Abbasid period were luxury items. The increased prosperity of the ruling classes increased the demand for precious items. A few gold coins minted during the time of Harun al Rashid in AH 180/A.D. 796-7⁴⁴ are on display in the Colombo museum, and are said to have been received from the then governor of

⁴². These details have been recorded by S.A. Iman quoting an Arabic historical report. S.A. Imam, "*Ceylon-Arab Relations*", *op.cit.*, p.12

⁴³. K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 39

⁴⁴. Venetia Porter, , "*Islamic Coins Found in Sri Lanka*", in O. Bopearachchi and D.P.M. Weerakkody, (eds.), *Origin Evolution and Circulation of Foreign Coins in the Indian Ocean*, Sri Lanka Society for Numismatic Studies and French Mission of Archaeology Co-operation in Sri Lanka, Colombo, 1998, p. 227

Khurasan along with 20 pieces of imperial Chinese porcelain in addition to 2,000 other pieces. It is difficult to obtain an accurate idea from the figures on the coins. The Governor shown on the coin could be either Sri Lankan or Chinese. Because Sri Lanka played the role of an active intermediary agent in trade, this incident could have happened in a Sri Lankan harbour and that incident recorded on the coin. This coin may have been used for the exchange of merchandise. Even if it was not so, the existence of trade relations with Sri Lanka could be surmised from their presence.

Another story included in the *ArābiNissollāsaya* is about the navigator Sobaideewho left the Persian bay and after 20 days of sailing in the Indian Ocean saw a high mountain. At the base of it, there had been a big city. As the wind conditions were perfect he entered the ship into the harbour and anchored. One is not certain whether the ship came to India or Sri Lanka. After sailing for 20 days across the Indian Ocean many Arab writers wrote that there was a land mass with a tall mountain. This mountain they called as Adam's Peak. Therefore the ship mentioned in the story could have come to Sri Lanka; it could have been a merchant ship arriving at a Sri Lankan harbour.

When reviewing the adventures of Sindbad, Tim Severin's experimental trials should be studied. He has recorded in detail the whole of his experience. (*The Sindbad Voyage*) During the period of the story about Sindbad the sailor, the ruler who reigned from Baghdad was Harun al-Rashid as shown earlier. Sindbad seems to have carried out all his adventurous voyages in the period of one and the same king. During the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries, impressions of geographical scientists and stories of adventurers and merchants confirm the facts of one another. According to Tim Severin that period could be assigned as the Golden era of Arab geography. Mention that all geographical maps and notes written during the period from 9th to 11th century compared very well with those recordings of Sindbad's voyages.⁴⁵

Tim Severin's objective of the experimental trial was to build a ship like the one used by Sindbad for his voyages during that period, and to sail in it across the Indian Ocean in the same way as Sindbad did. He conducted the above experiment very successfully. The practical application of naval technology used for sailing during Sindbad's period was in accordance with details obtained from Sindbad's voyages and other chronicles of that time. Afterwards he proved that most of the challenges and problems encountered during those bygone days are not exaggerations or falsehoods but exact truth.

⁴⁵. Tim Severin, *The Sindbad Voyage*, Hutchinson, London, 1982, pp.16-17

What is important here is not to find out whether Sindbad was an imaginary naval captain or a true person, but how the Arabs were able to carry out sea faring for international trading in the medieval times. One should pay more attention to their skill in navigation. Tim Severin refers to models of ships drawn by Arab artists of ancient times. He has also studied the map of the Indian Ocean drawn by the Portuguese in A.D. 1519, with Arab ships having flags of the Islamic symbol of the half moon (Crescent) and Portuguese ships with the cross.⁴⁶ (see fig. 3) When building his ship it was a challenge for him to find out how they fixed the planks without nails. Ancient Arab ship-builders never used nails. The danger of using iron nails was that the magnetic force at the bottom of the sea could pull out, loosen and draw the iron nails. Early navigators, when they were sea faring, followed all those precautions. But Marco Polo did not know anything about those conditions and requirements. That is clearly indicated by the information he has recorded.

“Their ships are wretched affairs, and many of them get lost; for they have no iron fastening, and are only stitched together with twine made from the husk of the Indian nut (coconut)...They have no iron to make nails of, and for this reason they use only wooden treenails in their shipbuilding, and then stich the planks with twine as I have told you”.⁴⁷

Thus by accepting the views of Marco Polo some of the historians like W.H.Moreland⁴⁸ have postulated false or wrong ideas and theories. The method of construction excited much comment, most of it negative, from European observers such as Marco Polo whom we quoted above. Sir John Mandeville claimed that they did not use nails as there were magnetic islands which would draw towards them any ship which contained metal.⁴⁹ In one of Sindbad’s voyages his ship was completely destroyed when it lost its iron nails while passing close to a magnetic hill.

According to Al-Mas‘ūdi, the Muslim navigation was divided into two separate areas, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. The types of vessels used in these two areas were quit different. In the Mediterranean, planks were nailed together whereas in the Red Sea

⁴⁶.*Ibid.*, p.19

⁴⁷.*Marco Polo, The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, (trans. and ed.), Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, Vol. 1, John Murray, London, 1921, p. 108

⁴⁸. W.H. Moreland, “*The Ships of the Arabian Sea about A.D. 1500*”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Great Britain and Ireland*, 1939, pp. 173-192

⁴⁹.*Sir John Mandeville, Mandeville’s Travels*, (ed.), M. Lettes, Hakluyt Society,(London, 1953), p. 118

and the Indian Ocean they were stitched.⁵⁰ This difference was due to traditional usage. Further he says, not using nails is ascribed to the fact that salt water might corrode the nails.⁵¹ So they used very hard wood and coir. In the earliest accounts of the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Abyssinian Sea, we find that iron nails were not used in the Arab ships plying in these seas.⁵² They were used only in the Mediterranean Sea. It was Hajjaj bin Yusuf Thaqafi, the Governor of Iraq and Basra (75-95 A.H), who first used these iron nails in ships travelling in the other seas⁵³. The reason for not using iron nails is given by Mas'ūdi who says that they rusted in water.⁵⁴ As Ibn Battuta wrote as follows:

‘The Indian and Yemenite ships are sewn together by them, for that sea is full of reefs, and if a ship is nailed with iron nails it breaks up on striking the rocks, whereas if it is sewn together with cords, it is given a certain resilience and does not fall to pieces.’ In Cambay he wrote of the Gulf that ‘it is navigable for ships and its waters ebb and flow. I myself saw the ships lying on the mud at ebb-tide and floating on the water at high tide.’ Their flexibility, thanks to the coir, meant that they were well adapted to the sandy shores of large parts of the Indian Ocean littoral. They could be driven ashore by storms, or deliberately, to unload cargo or undergo repairs or careening, and even in the breakers off the Coromandel Coast their flexibility enabled them to ‘give’ and survive, where a more rigidly built ship would have shattered⁵⁵.

Zakriya Qazwini, (died in 686 A.H.) writes that iron was not used because it was feared that they might be drawn towards magnetic hills. A similar account is given by Muhammad Bin Mahmud (living in 753 A.H.) in his book where there is a chapter on

⁵⁰. *Kitāb Muruj al-Dhahāb wama'adin al-iawhar*, (French trans.), *Le prairies d'or et les mines de pierres précieuses*, (eds.), C. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet De Courteille, Tome. I or Vol. I (Paris, 1861), p. 365; Mas'ūdi, *Muruj al-Dhahāb (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious)*, (ed.), A. Sprenger, W.H. Allen and Co., Printed for the Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, London, 1841, p. 361

⁵¹. *Ibid.*

⁵². *Travels of Sulaiman the Trader*, Paris edition, p.88. Quoted from, Syed Sulaiman Nadvi, “Arab Navigation”, *Islamic Culture*, Vol. 16, Islamic Cultural Board, Hyderabad, 1942, p.407

⁵³. *Kitāb al-a'lak an-nafisa-auctore Abu'Ali Ahmed ibn'Omar ibn Rosteh*, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, Vol. (Tome) VII, (ed.), M.J. De Goeje, Lugduni-Batavorum, Apud E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1889, p. 196

⁵⁴. *Al-Mas'ūdi, Muruj-al-Dhahāb*, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, Vol. VII, (ed.), M.J. De Goeje, Lugduni-Batavorum, Apud E.J. Brill, Leiden,, 1894, p.365

⁵⁵. *Ibn Battuta, The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, (trans.), H.A.R. Gibb, Vol. IV, Hakluyt, Cambridge, 1958, p.797

mineralogy. He writes “Magnet: it is mined in the Mediterranean Sea. The colour of a quality is jet black. They say that here they do not use iron in the boats”⁵⁶ (From a manuscript preserved in the Shibli Academy, Azamgarh). From the above details we guess that the earliest Arab navigators did not use iron nails in their ships because they feared that magnet hidden in the seas would loosen the nails.



The x-shaped marks on the hull of the stylized vessel shown in the *Maqamat of al-Harir*, an Arab manuscript of A.D.1273 indicate that this was a sewn ship. (Sindbad’s Voyage)

A considerable quantity of coir rope was needed to hold the planks together: Tim Severin built quite a small replica of a dhow, yet it used upto about 400 miles of rope.⁵⁷ The coir had to be kept in salt water to prevent deterioration, as Bowrey noted:

“The Cables and Strapps are made of Cayre, vizt. the Rhine of Coco nuts very fine Spun, the best Sort of which is brought from the Maldiva Isles. They are as Strong as any hempen Cables whatever, and much more durable in these

⁵⁶. Syed Suleiman Nadvi, “Arab Navigation”, *Islamic Culture*, Vol. 16, Islamic Cultural Board, Hyderabad, 1942, pp.407-408

⁵⁷. Tim Severin, *The Sindbad Voyage*, Hutchinson, London,1982, pp.64-65

hott climates, with this provisor, that if they chance to be wet with fresh water, either by raine or rideing in a fresh River, they doe not let them drye before they wett them well in Salt water, which doth much preserve them, and the Other as much rott them.”⁵⁸

In building the ship he had to obtain advice and assistance too from the Sultanate of Oman and its people. As Omanis were famous for building ships since ancient times they were helpful for his work. The main wind mast was 2000 square feet and weighed more than 4 tons. The symbol of the Sultanate of Oman was embossed on it.⁵⁹ The name of the ship was ‘Sohar’, and the name of the town in Oman where Sindbad was born. According to ‘Al-Isthakri’, during the 10th century the city of Sohar was highly populated, very rich merchants lived there and it was the home of many merchants who traded with other countries. His contemporary, Al-Muqaddasi, described Sohar as being ‘the hallway to China, the storehouse of the East.’⁶⁰ So, it is not intriguing to be informed that Sindbad the Sailor was a native of Sohar. It is one of those claims which is impossible to check. There is no written evidence to support it, and we have only the people believe that Sindbad of the Sea had originally been a man from the city of Sohar.

⁵⁸.Sir Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Around the Bay of Bengal*, Hakluyt, Cambridge, 1905, pp. 104-5

⁵⁹.Tim Severin,*op.cit.*

⁶⁰.*Ibid.*, p. 24



On a Portuguese atlas of 1519 A.D. a squadron of three Arab vessels (centre picture) can be identified by their straight prows as *boom*, an Arab ship type which must have existed before the first European ships arrived in the region (Sindbad Voyage)

The 6000 miles long sea voyage commenced on 23rd of November 1980, from Muscut amidst a large crowd of jubilant well wishers who came to bid him farewell. The ship sailed across the Arabian Sea via Calicut and arrived at Galle harbour in Sri Lanka on 20th June 1981. Afterwards the ship sailed via the Malacca sea passing through South China Sea and arrived at Canton on July 11th 1981 after sailing for 7 months and 15 days across strenuous and dangerous sea route. The Chinese rulers and a jubilant crowd of well wishers cordially and ceremoniously welcomed the most ambitious journey of Tim Severin at its successful conclusion. That was the very same sea route frequently used by the ancient Arab merchants for trading. He had to repair the ship on several occasions. It was always mentioned that Sindbad's ships got wrecked and underwent disasters in all his voyages. So when Tim Severin was sailing, the main part of the ship in the upper deck brokedown due to strong wind and several men were injured.⁶¹

⁶¹.*Ibid.*, pp. 128-129



Sohar (name of the ship-made by Tim Severin)

In Sri Lanka he stayed for about a month filling his requirements exactly, reminiscent of the ancient Arab sailors' normal routine procedures when sailing. The study of Tim Severin showed clearly how ancient Arab sea-traders, without modern naval technology and facing all hardships in the sea, diligently and most successfully carried out international trade between the East and the West, sailing across the Indian Ocean.

After examining all sources of information conveyed by Arab geographers and traders, it may be mentioned that Sindbad's travels could be accepted as credible. It is further confirmed that a study of the story of voyages of Sindbad offers a new light on the relationship between Sri Lanka and Baghdad. A repetition of the voyages of Sindbad undertaken for a few times to Sri Lanka proved the facts that Sindbad's voyages were historical and not legendary.



Ceremonial welcome by the Chinese officials, when Tim Severin arrived at Canton after 7 months and 18 days of sailing