CHAPTER TEN

CLASSIC SHIPS

It is God who has subjected the sea to you, that ships may sail through it by His command, that ye may seek of His Bounty, and that ye may be grateful.1

Al-Qur’an, Sūrat al-Jāthiya, XLV: 12.

There are intriguing references to ships and seafaring in early Islamic poetry and the Qur’an, and although set in a poetic context, they are obviously coming from contemporary experience and therefore are synchronically of value to this study.

The ship-camel parallel

In the early centuries before the emergence of Islam, Najd was the centre where East and West Arabians came together for fairs and pilgrimages; here, the poets from many tribes met at the courts of Hira on the Euphrates and Ghassan in Syria2 to recite their qaṣīdas (odes) on a number of themes, expressing them with vigour and vividness of imagination, articulated in a beautiful and rich language. Throughout the early period, the language and imagery was that of the Bedouin, and poetry was associated with nomadic life. One of the themes was animal life: addressing his fellow tribesmen, the poet drew on images from both the desert and the sea, thus he compared the sand and the sea or the camel and the ship. It is clear that desert poets were familiar with the sea, the ship and her voyage and Barthold was wrong to state that pre-Islamic poetry was generally void of descriptions of the sea.3

---

3 Barthold 1929: 37.
Alan Jones concurs that the desert and the sea “are part of the basic poetic repertoire in Early Arabic”.  

For the desert poets, the camel journey (takhallus), one of the three sections of the ode, was to illustrate metaphorical re-enactment: the desert/sea symbolising vastness—endless time while the camel/ship’s movement is depicting symmetry and coordination. Consider the imagery of the camel driver pleasantly mounted for a long journey and the dromedary’s swaying pace, compared with the mariner on the ship sailing with a favourable wind as she rocks forward, backward and sideways in the ocean.

The ode is also a reflection of the nomadic love for the journey (rahiil). ‘Arāfa b. al-‘Abd (d. c. 569 CE), one of the pre-Islamic court poets, is well known for his long and detailed descriptions of the she-camel on her journey; the comparisons he made were striking and show the unique bond between man and the animal in an environment where life itself could depend on its strength; moreover, the scenery is considered one of the finest examples of the depiction of landscape in the pre-Islamic odes. More to our purposes here, however, we learn from his ode that Arabians had well-developed nautical skills.

The ship-camel comparison, metaphorically or literally, is a classical theme. One shares the poet’s experience poetically and emotionally. There are several examples, but a general portrayal of such an identification is lively in the poem of Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā (d. after 627 CE); he compares caravan guides riding their camels in the vast desert with mariners sailing their vessels across the ocean:

The camel-drivers took them into the soft parts on the expanses of sand in the same way that fishermen cause their ships to go deep into the waves of the open sea.

\[
yaghshū l-ḥudātu bihim wa’ thawa l-kathībi ka-mā yughshū l-safā’ina mawja l-lujjati l-araku.\]

Zuhayr’s simile is extraordinarily precise; he strives to describe the sand and sea “with an equally sensitive choice of words”, Arberry

---