MARITIME SKILLS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN
1368 - 1500

BY

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Between 1368 and 1500 the state of affairs which existed in the Indian Ocean presents a number of problems to the historian who seeks to understand the maritime skills and organization of those Islamic and Indic mariners who dominated these waters prior to the arrival of Portuguese flotillas. This is only in part due to the limited information which we possess dealing with these years. True, we know a great deal about this part of the world during late Sung and Mongol times, thanks to the accounts of Marco Polo, Odoric of Pordenone, John of Montecorvino, John of Marignola, and Fra Jordanus on the European side; of Ibn Battuta, Qazwini, Ibn Sa'id, Makrizi and Ilkhan historians like Juvaini and Raschid al-Din and assorted Indian Muslim chroniclers on the Islamic side and of Sung accounts like the Chau-Ju-Kua and those of Sung and Yuan histories on the Chinese side.

On the other hand, we are not lacking in significant information concerning this later period either, thanks to Swahili traditions 1), the story of the wanderings of the Venetian merchant Nicolò Conti during the early fifteenth century 2), or the accounts of the great Ming voyages into the Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433 3), all of which can be supplemented by a good deal of archeological and numismatic

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2) Travels of Nicolò Conti in the East, ed. by J. Frampton (London, 1929).
evidence). Especially as we approach the year 1500, we find our material becoming fuller and more satisfactory. For this late period we can draw upon the account of the travels of the Russian Athanasius Nikitin who may have reached Burma about 1470, of the visit of the Venetian Josaphat Barbaro to Ormuz in 1471, of the travels of the Portuguese Pedro da Covilhão to the west coast of India and the shores of East Africa between 1487 and 1493, and of those of the Genoese Girolamo (Hieronimo) de Santo Stephano, whose voyages took him to Burma in 1496. To these should be added the invaluable accounts left us by the Bolognese Ludovico di Varthema and the Portuguese Duarte Barbosa and Tomé Pires which date from the first decades of the sixteenth century.

1) For surveys of some of this archeological and numismatic evidence, especially in East Africa, Egypt, and the Persian Gulf, see N. Chittick, "East African Trade with the Orient", in Islam and the Trade of Asia, ed. by D. Richards (Oxford, 1970); J. Carswell, "Archeology and the Study of Late Islamic Pottery," ibid.; and G. Scanlon, "Egypt and China, Trade and Imitation," ibid. For South India, see B. Stein, "Coromandel Trade in Medieval India", in Merchants and Scholars, ed. by J. Parker (Minneapolis, 1965).

2) On Nikitin's possible visit to Burma, see D. Hall, Burma (London, 1950), pp. 35-36. For a full account of his travels, see V. Andrianova-Peretz, Khozhenie za tri moria Afanasiia Nikitina (Moscow, 1948). An English translation is to be found of Nikitin's Indian travels in Travels of Athanasius Nikitin, trans. by Welkokovsky in India in the Fifteenth Century, ed. by R. Major, Hakluyt Society, 1st Series, XXII (London, 1877).


4) For an account of Covilhão's travels illustrated by an excellent map, see B. Landström, The Quest for India (New York, 1964), pp. 218-221. For sources, Viagens de Pedro da Covilha, ed. by Filcato (Lisbon, 1898).


