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Between Interconnectedness and Insularity: Soqoṭrā from the Sixth to the Sixteenth Century CE

Abstract

The history of the Yemeni island of Soqoṭrā from Late Antiquity to the European Age of Exploration is the history of an alternation between interconnectedness and insularity. On the one hand, Soqoṭrā was linked through commerce with other regions in the Indian Ocean, as well as with regions as far afield as the Mediterranean. Additionally, the Church of the East had, by the sixth century, put down roots on Soqoṭrā, a development that afforded the island a connection, however tenuous, to a wider world of eastern Christianity. A further link with the outside world was established in the mid-eighth century, when the Ibāḍī imamate of Oman briefly established rule over Soqoṭrā. On the other hand, Soqoṭrī history is also characterized by the equally strong pull of insularity. As a case in point, the indigenous islanders speak their own, unique Soqoṭrī language, which belongs to the Modern South Arabian branch of Semitic. As for Omani rule, this was ultimately overthrown through a revolt by Christian Soqoṭrīs, and while foreign merchants continued to visit the island, Soqoṭrā gained something of a reputation as a haven for pirates and an abode of magicians. It was also widely known as an outpost of Christianity. Over time, however, Soqoṭrā lost contact with the normative Christianity represented by the Church of the East, such that, by the time that the Portuguese first made contact with the island in the early sixteenth century, they found the indigenous inhabitants practicing a vestigial form of Christianity that centered on a veneration of the cross, but retained little else that could be deemed Christian.

Keywords: Soqoṭrā, Christianity, magic, piracy, Indian Ocean commerce, oral tradition

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Introduction

When the Portuguese first landed on Soqoṭrā at the turn of the sixteenth century, they were intrigued to find that the island was home to a community of what they believed to be Christians – intrigued; but also puzzled. They were by no means the first Europeans to learn of, or interact with, indigenous Soqoṭrīs, though they were the first European nation that maintained prolonged ties with the community. What puzzled the Portuguese was that the putative Christianity that they encountered on Soqoṭrā bore little resemblance to the faith that they knew back home. On the one hand, the indigenous islanders revered the cross, which occupied a prominent place in the structures that the Portuguese took to be churches. On the other hand, Soqoṭrī "Christians" also appeared to revere the moon, in addition to which they maintained the practice of male circumcision – familiar enough to the Portuguese through their interactions with Muslims and Jews in the Iberian Peninsula but alien to western Christianity. What the Portuguese did not know – and, indeed, *could* not have known – is that the religion that they had encountered on Soqoṭrā was the final, dying vestige of what had once been a vibrant Arabian Christianity whose influence had extended across a broad swath of the Near East. Centuries before the rise of Islam, the Christian faith had gained a following in South Arabia, i.e. the area more or less covered by present-day Yemen, as well as in northern Oman, along Arabia's Persian Gulf coast, and, to a lesser degree, in West Arabia. During the same period, many of the Arabic-speaking communities, nomadic as well as sedentary, that inhabited the Fertile Crescent and its desert borderlands had also embraced Christianity.[1]

That Christianity – however nominally – managed to survive in Soqoṭrā as long as it did, long after it had died out on the Arabian mainland, can be attributed to the insularity of Soqoṭrī society. Yet it was likely as a result of the island's interconnectedness through trade to the other lands of the Near East that Christianity had found its way there in the first place. This oscillation between interconnectedness and insularity is characteristic of the history of Soqoṭrā. The present article examines this phenomenon for the period extending from the sixth century CE to the sixteenth, a period in which the indigenous population of Soqoṭrā was, at least in name, Christian. It is the story of Christian clerics and Muslim overlords, merchants and pirates, pastoralists and sorcerers, a story involving Yemenis, Mahra, Omanis, Indians, Portuguese, and, of course, the indigenous Soqoṭrī islanders themselves. Several key themes hold this narrative together. One is the Church of the East, a sect of Christianity based on belief in the differentiation between the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ that found a significant following beginning

[1] On Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula and among the Arabic-speaking communities of more northerly regions during Late Antiquity, see Françoise Briquel-Chattonet, 'L'expansion du christianisme en Arabie', *Semitica et Classica* 3, pp. 17–87, 181–182; Greg Fisher et al., 'Arabs and Christianity', in: *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, ed. Greg Fisher, Oxford 2015, pp. 276–372; Philip Wood, 'Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula and Possible Contexts for the Qur'ān', in: *Early Islam: The Sectarian Milieu of Late Antiquity*, ed. Guillaume Dye, Brussels 2023, pp. 225–248; Ilkka Lindstedt, *Muḥammad and His Followers: The Religious Map of Late Antique Arabia*, Leiden–Boston 2024, pp. 96–119.

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in Late Antiquity, primarily in the Sāsānid Empire, but also in regions as far afield as Central Asia and even, by the seventh century, China. As we shall see, this aspect of Soqoṭrā's history has vanished from Soqoṭrī collective memory. Another key theme is the interaction with the Arabian mainland. When Christianity first reached Soqoṭrā during the late pre-Islamic period, the island was a rather loose appendage of the South Arabian kingdom of Ḥimyar. During the mid-eighth century, Oman briefly ruled the island, though Omani attempts to re-establish control there a century later sparked a revolt by the locals. Although various Muslim polities ruled, or tried to rule, Soqoṭrā in later centuries, it was not until 1480 that sustained rule by a foreign power was established by the ʿAfrāriyya Sultanate of the Mahra, an ethnic group hailing from the Arabian mainland, that held sway over Soqoṭrā down to 1967, interrupted only by the Portuguese occupation from 1507 to 1511. Trade is yet another key theme in Soqoṭrī history. In addition to serving as a way station for seafaring merchants operating in the western Indian Ocean, Soqoṭrā offered such products as frankincense, dragon's blood resin, aloes, ambergris, and pearls. To reiterate, trade likely facilitated the diffusion of Christianity to Soqoṭrā, and was equally, no doubt, a factor in the island's annexation by the Omanis – not to mention also a reason for the regular visits to the island by pirates.

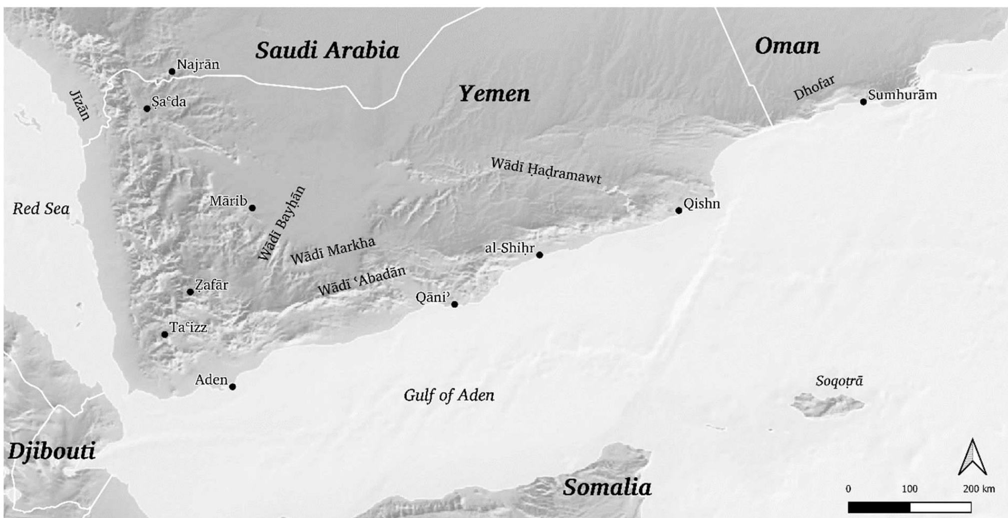

Fig. 1. South Arabia
(map by Matthias Adelhofer, made with *Natural Earth*)

It should be stated at the outset that Soqoṭrā is in fact not a single island but rather an archipelago consisting of: 1) Soqoṭrā proper, i.e. the main island, which, with a surface area of 3650 km^2, is the largest island in the Arab world; 2) the smaller islands of ʿAbd al-Kūrī, Samḥa, and Darsa; and 3) the two rocky outcrops of Ṣābūniyya and Kaʿl Firʿawn.[2]

[2] Julian Jansen van Rensburg, *The Maritime Traditions of the Fishermen of Socotra*, Oxford 2016, p. 3.

Unless otherwise noted, all references in this article to “the island” will be understood as denoting the island of Soqoṭrā proper. Of the smaller islands and rocky outcrops in the Soqoṭrī archipelago, only ʿAbd al-Kūrī and Samḥa have historically been inhabited. The total population of the archipelago is currently estimated at 60,000.[3] The island of Soqoṭrā proper is ringed by coastal plains, the inhabitants of which earn a living through fishing and small-scale trade.[4] From the coastal plains there rises a limestone plateau, dominated by the Ḥágəher Mountains, the highest peaks of which reach some 1500 m above sea level.[5] To a large degree, this plateau defines the island, which is known in the Soqoṭrī language as *ḳéś’ur* “the rocky place”, *ḳáśirhən* “the rocky places”, or *ḳáśirhən di-ṣáḳóṭeri* “the rocky places of Soqoṭrā”.[6] The interior of the island is inhabited by the Soqoṭrī *badū* (i.e. Bedouin), so called after the nomadic pastoralists of mainland Arabia. In contrast to the latter, whose economy has traditionally been based on the herding of camels, Soqoṭrī *badū* herd mostly cattle, sheep, and goats. Periodically, they visit the northern coast of the island to exchange animal products for foodstuffs, manufactured goods, and other necessities.[7] Historically, overseas commerce was handled by the community of Muslim merchants of foreign extraction that developed along this coast over the centuries, rather than by the indigenous Soqoṭrīs themselves.[8] The Soqoṭrī climate is semi-desert and is heavily influenced by wind patterns over the Indian Ocean. Although the weather is calm enough between February and May to allow the use of any anchorage on the northern coast,[9] the hot, dry winds of the southwestern monsoon, which lasts from May to September, create harsh conditions at sea that render sailing and fishing unfeasible,[10] thus effectively cutting Soqoṭrā off from the outside world. The winds of the northeastern monsoon between November and March, by contrast, are much milder and bring the much-needed rain, though also storms.[11] The transitional

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[3] Kendra Sirak et al., ‘Medieval DNA from Soqotra points to Eurasian origins of an isolated population at the crossroads of Africa and Arabia’, *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 8/4 (2024) https://doi-org/10.1038/s41559-024-02322.

[4] For an excellent and very detailed study of fishing traditions on Soqoṭrā, see van Rensburg, *Maritime Traditions*, passim.

[5] Miranda J. Morris, *The Oral Art of Soqoṭra: A Collection of Island Voices*, Leiden–Boston 2021, p. 1.

[6] Ibidem, pp. 80, 1693.

[7] On the Soqoṭrī *badū* and their interactions with communities along Soqoṭrā’s northern coast, see Serge D. Elie, ‘Ecological Primordialism: The Human-Environment Nexus in Soqotra’, *GeoJournal* 83 (2018), pp. 897–913.

[8] Before the 1950s, few Soqoṭrīs and even fewer Soqoṭrī *badū* ventured overseas (Nathalie Peutz, *Islands of Heritage: Conservation and Transformation in Yemen*, Stanford 2018, p. 203). In traditional Soqoṭrī poetry, the sea is portrayed as something alien and worthy of fear, while the pastoralist *badū* are contrasted with the well-traveled Omanis and Mahra who regularly cross the sea (Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, pp. 1109–1120). Writing in the 1440s, the Timurid chronicler ʿAbd ar-Razzāq Samarqandī (d. 1482) lists Soqoṭrā among the places from which hailed seafaring men who came to the port of Hurmuz to trade (Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Across the Green Sea: Histories from the Western Indian Ocean, 1440–1640*, Austin 2024, p. 4), though such individuals would undoubtedly been the Arab, Mahrī, and Iranian men who had settled in Soqoṭrā, or else those who were descended from such individuals.

[9] D. Brian Doe, *Socotra: Island of Tranquility*, London 1992, p. 11.

[10] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, p. 1; cf. Peutz, *Islands of Heritage*, p. 72.

[11] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, p. 1.

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period between the two monsoons is the hottest and most humid time of the year, and while there is some light precipitation during this period,[12] the *wādī*s in some parts of the island fill with sand, wells dry up, and many small coastal settlements are abandoned.[13]

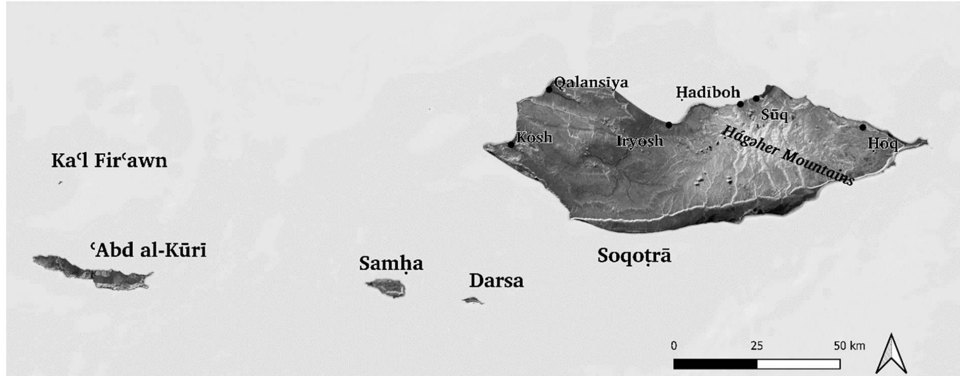

Fig. 2. The Soqoṭrī Archipelago
(map by Matthias Adelhofer)

A study of very early stone tools discovered on Soqoṭrā indicates that the island was first colonized by homo erectus hominins as early as 500,000–1 million years ago.[14] However, analysis of the mtDNA and Y-chromosomal genetic variation among the population of the interior of the island dates the arrival of modern humans to about 11,000 years ago and indicates that this was followed by a further migration approximately 3000 years ago.[15] Incomprehensible to Arabic-speakers, the Soqoṭrī language (*mέtal di-ṣáḳóṭeri*) Soqoṭrī belongs to the so-called Modern South Arabian branch of West Semitic, to which the Mehrī,[16] Ḥarsūsī, Śḥerέt, Hobyōt, and Bəṭaḥrēt (i.e. Baṭḥarī) languages spoken on the Arabian mainland in eastern Yemen and southern Oman also belong.[17] With the spread

[12] Ibidem.

[13] Douglas Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, London 1958, p. 74.

[14] Daniel L. Everett, *How Language Began: The Story of Humanity's Greatest Invention*, London 2015, chap. 3, viewed 21 March 2025, EBSCO Publishing: eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

[15] Viktor Černy et al., 'Out of Arabia – The Settlement of Island Soqotra as Revealed by Mitochondrial and Y Chromosome Genetic Diversity', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 188 (2009), p. 445.

[16] I.e. the language of the Mahra people who currently inhabit eastern Yemen and southern Oman. For the purposes of this article, "Mahrī" will be understood as denoting those individuals who belonged to the Mahra ethnic group, while "Mehrī" denotes the language that said ethnic group speaks.

[17] For useful introductions to the Modern South Arabian branch of Semitic, see, inter alia, Leonid Kogan, *Genealogical Classification of Semitic: The Lexical Isoglosses*, Boston–Berlin 2015, pp. 467–597; Simone Bettega and Fabio Gasparini, 'Modern South Arabian Languages', in: *Arabic and Contact-Induced Change*, ed. Christopher Lucas and Stefano Manfredi, Berlin 2020, pp. 351–369. On the Soqoṭrī language more specifically, see Leonid Kogan and Maria Bulakh, 'Soqotri', in: *The Semitic Languages*, ed. John Huehnergard and Na'ama Pat-El, London–New York 2019, pp. 280–320. The appellation "Modern South Arabian" is a bit misleading in that the languages thus designated are not descended from Ancient South Arabian – i.e. the group of the now extinct Sabaic, Qatabānic, Minaic, and Ḥaḍramitic languages once spoken in mainland Arabia – but instead constitute a distinct branch

of education, Islamic institutions, and media in recent decades, increasing numbers of Soqoṭrā's indigenous inhabitants are now bilingual, speaking both Arabic and Soqoṭrī, though there are still some, mostly women and the elderly, who remain monolingual Soqoṭrī speakers.[18] Thanks to the recent growth of the tourism industry in Soqoṭrā, a number of Soqoṭrīs have even acquired some knowledge of English. Like the other Modern South Arabian languages, Soqoṭrī has historically been an oral language, one that has spawned a rich tradition of stories, poetry, and proverbs.[19]

Although there is no evidence that the Soqoṭrīs ever had their own writing system, a handful of curious inscriptions have been found at Iryosh in northern Soqoṭrā.[20] Similar inscriptions are encountered in mainland Arabia over a wide area extending from the eastern Ḥaḍramawt to the Ǧabal Aḫḍar region of northern Oman.[21] The version of this writing system that was used in southern Oman's Dhofar region would appear to be derived from an Ancient North Arabian prototype that underwent local modification.[22] Although the distribution of the inscriptions in question, both on Soqoṭrā and in mainland Arabia, corresponds to the historical distribution of Modern South Arabian-speaking peoples,[23] recent decipherment of the Dhofari script – to which the Iryosh inscriptions appear related

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of West Semitic. Mehrī, Ḥarsūsī, Śḥerέt, Hobyōt, Bəṭaḥrēt, and Soqoṭrī can, however, be regarded as modern languages in the sense that they have endured as spoken languages into the modern period, albeit in varying degrees of endangerment. As a side note, Śḥerέt is commonly referred to in the literature as Jibbālī, though since the latter term is regarded as somewhat derogatory by Śḥerέt speakers, it is best avoided (Fabio Gasparini, personal communication).

[18] Kogan and Bulakh, 'Soqotri', p. 280.

[19] For collections of this material, see Vitaly Naumkin and Leonid Kogan, *Corpus of Soqotri Oral Literature*, Leiden 2014; Vitaly Naumkin and Leonid Kogan, 'More on pre-Islamic reminiscences in the oral literature of Soqotra', *Semitica et Classica* 7 (2014), pp. 273–278; Vitaly Naumkin et al., *Corpus of Soqotri Oral Literature*, Leiden–Boston 2015; Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*.

[20] For line drawings of these inscriptions, see Doe, *Island of Tranquility*, pp. 43 (Fig. 4), 54 (Fig. 12), 56 (Fig. 13).

[21] Doe, *Island of Tranquility*, p. 57; ʿAlī Aḥmad al-Shaḥrī and Geraldine M. H. King, *The Dhofar Project: A Description of the Inscriptions Recorded in 1991 and 1992*, Oxford 1993; ʿAlī Aḥmad al-Shaḥrī, *Kayfa Ibtadaynā wa-Kayfa Irtaqaynā bil-Ḥaḍāra al-Insāniyya min Šibh al-Ǧazīra al-ʿArabiyya*, Dubai 1994; Paul Yule, 'Pre-Arabic Inscriptions from Wādī Saḥtan, Wilāyat al-Rustāq, Governorate of the South al-Bāṭina Region, Sultanate of Oman', in: *Nicht nur mit Engelszungen. Beiträge zur semitischen Dialektologie: Festschrift für Werner Arnold zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Renaud Kuty et al., Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 399–402; Giuliano Castagna, 'South-east Arabian inscriptions: The current state of research', *Kervan* 28/2 (2024), pp. 83–108.

[22] Ahmad Al-Jallad, 'The Decipherment of the Dhofari Script – Three *halḥam* abecedaries and the first glimpses into the corpus', Zenodo.org (2025), DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15716682.

[23] In the case of the Arabian mainland, this historical distribution can be deduced from the distribution of Mehrī-type toponyms, characterized by the suffixes *-ūt*, *-ōt*, and *-īt*, across not only the eastern Ḥaḍramawt and Dhofar – i.e. the current Mehrī-speaking region – but also central and even northern Oman (Walter Dostal, *Die Beduinen in Südarabien: eine ethnologische Studie zur Entwicklung der Kamelhirtenkultur in Arabien*, Vienna 1967, p. 133 [Abb. 19]), the latter two regions including areas that at present are uniformly Arabic-speaking. This indicates that Mehrī was once spoken over a much wider area than is the case today. That Modern South Arabian were in earlier times spoken even further north, perhaps as far as Arabia's Persian Gulf coast, has recently been suggested, with due caution, by Ahmad Al-Jallad (Ahmad Al-Jallad, 'Qatrāyīṯ and the Linguistic History of Ancient East Arabia', *Bulletin of the American Society of Overseas Research* 393/1 [2025] https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/735184).

– by Ahmad Al-Jallad indicates that the language represented by this writing system was related, though not ancestral, to the Modern South Arabian languages.[24] The conditions under which writing was adopted – and abandoned – in these regions remain unknown. In view of the apparent affiliation of the script used at Iryosh with the Dhofar script, however, it would seem that the Iryosh inscriptions were left by visitors from mainland South Arabia, rather than by locals. Whatever the case, it bears mentioning that at no point has Soqoṭrā produced any chronicles or other historical documents of its own in any language, with the result that we are almost entirely dependent on foreign sources when attempting to reconstruct its history. The author of the present article follows this methodological approach to Soqoṭrī history to an extent, to that end drawing primarily on Classical Arabic sources for the period before the sixteenth century, while also making use of Soqoṭrī oral tradition, culled mostly from the recent research of Miranda J. Morris,[25] as well as the analysis of early modern Portuguese sources published by Zoltán Biedermann.[26] Before venturing further, however, a few words about the terminology commonly used for the period treated in this article are in order.

The Middle Ages: A Concept and its Discontents

The timeframe covered in this article corresponds roughly to what many scholars and laymen alike call the Middle Ages. Since the period so called witnessed an increasing engagement with the sea,[27] it would seem all the more appropriate, then, to interpret the sixth- to sixteenth-century history of an insular society like that of Soqoṭrā through the lens of medieval studies. But to speak of Soqoṭrā during the "Middle Ages" is to posit a partition of the island's history in a manner that would be wholly unfamiliar to its indigenous inhabitants. For them, the period before the establishment of Mahrī rule in the late fifteenth century is remembered as a single era stretching back to the time when Soqoṭrā was first settled.[28] In other words, no distinction is made between what a western observer would call ancient and medieval. The fact that "Middle Ages" is a concept that would not resonate with Soqoṭrā islanders raises broader questions concerning the appropriateness of using terms like "Middle Ages" or "medieval" when speaking of non-European cultures in the first place. Here it is worth pausing to consider what these all too often taken-for-granted terms actually denote. In a European context, the era referred as "medieval" or as the "Middle Ages" is generally understood as the period between the

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[24] Al-Jallad, 'Decipherment of the Dhofari Script'. The author wishes to thank Ahmad Al-Jallad (personal communication) for sharing his thoughts on the affiliation of the script used at Iryosh with that used in Dhofar.

[25] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, passim.

[26] Zoltán Biedermann, *Soqotra: Geschichte einer christlichen Insel im Indischen Ozean vom Altertum bis zur frühen Neuzeit*, Wiesbaden 2006.

[27] This much is evident from the studies published in Elizabeth A. Lambourn (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Sea in the Medieval Age*, London 2021.

[28] For a discussion, see below, §The Soqoṭrīs' View of their Island's Past.

fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of Renaissance, with some scholars adding or deducting a century or two at either or both of the limits of that timeframe. As for the terminology used to describe this period, John Monfasani writes that,

> [a]s a name, 'The Middle Ages' is absurd. Every age is a middle age, between what preceded and what will follow. Indeed, from early on in the Middle Ages, and even more insistently from the twelfth century on, people often and rightly referred to themselves and their activities as modern. So the *via moderna* in philosophy and the *devotio moderna* in religion were quite accurate appellations in their own time.[29]

Jacques Le Goff argues in a similar vein with respect to the way in which medieval Europeans conceived of themselves as "modern", noting that

> [à] partir de la fin du 13e siècle une certaine idée de progrès et de combat contre le passé se fait jour. L'*ars nova* valorise la musique nouvelle contre celle des époques antérieures au 14e siècle, les *logici moderni* et les *theologi moderni* affirment le rejet de l'aristotélisme qui avait été le ferment de la scolastique universitaire du 13e siècle, Marsile de Padoue dans le *Defensor Pacis* (1324) où il esquisse les fondements d'une politique séparée de la religion, d'un Etat distant de l'Eglise, emploie moderne dans le sens d'innovateur.[30]

Monfasani nevertheless retains "Middle Ages" as a useful concept on the grounds that "history cannot do without periodization".[31] So too does Le Goff – ostensibly – although he advocates "un long Moyen Age" stretching from the fourth century to the nineteenth, in his words "entre la fin de l'Empire romain et la révolution industrielle",[32] on the basis of phenomena shared by European societies during the period thus defined, such as the belief in the healing power of kings, the anointment of kings, and the overriding power of Christianity as both a religion and an ideology[33] – phenomena, however, that are so generic and so widespread cross-culturally as to render the very concept of "Middle Ages" effectively meaningless. For his part, Monfasani adds the caveat that the Middle Ages ought to be seen as a "series of surges" that he identifies as Renaissances in their own right, namely the Carolingian Renaissance, the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, the Renaissance of the Thirteenth Century, the Italian Renaissance, and the broader European

[29] John Monfasani, 'The Renaissance as the Concluding Phase of the Middle Ages', *Bullettino dell'Istituto storico Italiano per il Medio Evo* 108 (2006), pp. 170–171.

[30] Jacques Le Goff, 'Pour un long Moyen Age', *Europe* 61 (1983), p. 19.

[31] Monfasani, 'Renaissance', p. 170.

[32] Le Goff, 'Long Moyen Age', p. 22.

[33] Ibidem, passim.

Renaissance.[34] He argues, then, that what is commonly regarded as the "Renaissance", conceived as a break from the medieval past, is in fact nothing but an extension of it. Seen from this perspective, the sixteenth-century Portuguese interactions with Soqoṭrā would certainly qualify as "medieval" encounters in that they occurred in the context of Renaissance-period European expansion. That said, other scholars are less sanguine about the use of the term "medieval", at least in non-European contexts. Worthy of note in this regard is Daniel Varisco, whose views on the matter are particularly relevant for the present study, given that he is both an anthropologist and a historian specializing in South Arabia. In his words,

> the Italian humanist hubris of an antiquity followed by the Dark Ages until the Renaissance set things right again is an absurd historical grid to place over the events that unfolded before and after the formation of Islam in situ.[35]

Varisco illustrates this point by citing publications that deal with what purports to be the "medieval" Islamic world, but that include chapters that would have made even Le Goff proud, treating as they do historical periods as late as the mid-nineteenth century![36] Varisco is by no means the first scholar to object to the application of the concept of "Middle Ages" to non-European societies. Writing more than half a century ago on the subject of periodization in African history, Ivan Hrbek specifically referred to "Middle Ages", "Antiquity", and "Modern Times" as terms reflecting a model of the past that, while well suited to Europe, are "hardly applicable to Africa".[37] More recently, Thomas Bauer begins the first chapter of his aptly titled volume *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab* by contrasting the statement that Charlemagne (r. 768–814) was an important European ruler of the Tang period with the statement that Hārūn ar-Rašīd (r. 786–809) was an important Near Eastern ruler of the Middle Ages[38] – the first being a patent absurdity, despite the fact that Charlemagne's reign does indeed overlap in part with the period of China's Tang Dynasty (618–907), while the second is taken for granted in many circles. That an ʿAbbāsid caliph like Hārūn ar-Rašīd should be claimed for the Middle Ages reflects, in Bauer's opinion, the problems inherent in an essentially Eurocentric term like "Middle Ages" (*Mittelalter*). Of this term, he writes:

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[34] Monfasani, 'Renaissance', p. 184. This idea would certainly suit the conception of the period in question as a series of "ages", thus Arabic *al-ʿuṣūr al-wusṭā*, though, as a caveat, this phrase is clearly a modern calque on English *Middle Ages*. In other languages, however, the same period is understood as a single "Middle Age", thus, for example, French *le Moyen Âge*, German *das Mittelalter*, and Maltese *iż-Żmien Nofsani*.

[35] Daniel Martin Varisco, 'Making "Medieval" Islam Meaningful', *Medieval Encounters* 13 (2007), p. 397.

[36] Ibidem, p. 392.

[37] Ivan Hrbek, 'Towards a Periodization of African History', in: *Emerging Themes of African History: Proceedings of the International Congress of African Historians held at University College, Dar es Salaam, October 1965*, ed. Terence Osborn Ranger, Dar es Salaam 1968, p. 38.

[38] Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: Das Erbe der Antike und der Orient*, München 2018, p. 11.

> Schließlich ist er in Europa für spezifisch europäische Verhältnisse geprägt worden, und hier wurde beschlossen, in der Historiographie die Epochen Europas als universell gültig und wichtig anzusehen und nicht diejenigen Chinas.[39]

The mere fact that ʿAbbāsid caliphs and Tang emperors were the contemporaries of European monarchs whom convention deems "medieval" is purely coincidental and tells us nothing historically salient about the rulers involved, for, as Bauer reminds us, "Gleichzeitigkeit allein muss nicht auf ähnliche Lebensverhältnisse und gleichgestimmtes Wahrnehmen, Denken und Fühlen hinweisen".[40] Bauer also highlights some of the negative connotations of "Middle Ages", associated as the term is in the popular imagination with an era dominated by religion in a manner that modernity brought to an end, when in fact so-called medieval farmers, craftsmen, and seafarers need not have been more pious than their modern counterparts – to say nothing of the fact that reformations and religious wars continued to plague the supposedly more rational early modern period.[41] That the media speak of such countries as (post-Revolution) Iran, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia as having retreated to the Middle Ages, having only recently emerged from the Middle Ages, or being stuck between the Middle Ages and modernity respectively, serves to substantiate this association of "medieval" with religiosity, dogmatism, and superstition in the minds of many.[42]

These – in the opinion of the author – legitimate criticisms of the application of "medieval" and "Middle Ages" to lands outside Europe have not, however, prevented the development of scholarship on what many now call the "Global Middle Ages".[43] On the one hand, such scholarship is of great value, given its emphasis on the interconnectedness of otherwise disparate and widely separated peoples and cultures. In other words, the efforts to construct a "Global Middle Ages" emanate from a good place. Commenting on the tendency of many to associate the Middle Ages exclusively with western Europe, Peter Frankopan posits that

> [t]aking a more global view of this period raises important questions about the exploitation of natural resources, about the role of technological change in raising agricultural yields or about the adoption of crops or of new strains […]. It also raises questions about the role played by climatic

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[39] Ibidem, p. 23.

[40] Ibidem, p. 29.

[41] Ibidem, pp. 15–16.

[42] Ibidem, pp. 19–20, 24.

[43] For a representative outline of this paradigm, see Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction*, Cambridge 2021. To her credit, however, Heng is careful to stress that "those of us who would embrace a Global Middle Ages need to acknowledge and respect the fact that the zones and cultures of the world are asynchronous, and follow different timelines of description, naming, change, development, recurrence, and transformation. Different temporalities characterize the many zones of the world" (ibidem, p. 19).

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> shifts and about the distinction between changes in weather conditions and the challenges posed by their variations.[44]

Frankopan's treatment of the sixth-to-sixteenth-century period in his masterful volume *The Earth Transformed: An Untold History* provides many examples of events, whether human or natural in origin, that took place in one part of the globe but impacted societies in another, thus illustrating the fact that even societies that were not in direct contact might be linked, if only by their having been affected by the same global events.[45] A similar sentiment is expressed by Valerie Hansen in her volume *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World – and Globalization Began*, in which she makes the case that

> the Europeans didn't invent globalization. They changed and augmented what was already there. If globalization hadn't begun, Europeans wouldn't have been able to penetrate so many regions so quickly.[46]

This global approach – so to speak – to globalization is well suited to serve as a corrective to a common, taken-for-granted assumption. Hansen proceeds to illustrate this point with examples of interregional contact drawn from various parts of the globe ca. 1000 and, in so doing, presents a compelling case that globalization was, indeed, a global, as opposed to a specifically European, creation. As contributing factors to the development of globalization she identifies a number of broad trends, such as an acceleration in long-distance travel, an agricultural surplus that allowed many to engage in other forms of economic pursuits, and various technological innovations.[47] Here too, a more global understanding of the sixth-to-sixteenth-century period reveals the extent of Afro-Eurasian interconnectedness, in addition to highlighting interesting analogies with societies in the Americas and the South Pacific during the same period. On the other hand, the so-called Global Middle Ages project suffers from an at times relentless insistence on imposing the label of "medieval" on peoples and cultures for whom such a label is wholly inappropriate. It leaves one wondering, why *must* this or that people/culture/society have a "Middle Ages" of its own? Are we to assume that possessing a "Middle Ages" confers some special status? Or that, by implication, those without a "Middle Ages" are in some way lacking? Surely those scholars involved with the Global Middle Ages project would make no such claims.

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[44] Peter Frankopan, *The Earth Transformed: An Untold History*, London 2023, p. 287.

[45] Most notably the so-called Medieval Warm Period (ca. 900–1250), a phase characterized by a stable, warm climate that allowed the expansion of agricultural production, population growth and concomitant migrations, and intensified trade in various societies throughout the globe (ibidem, pp. 257–287). However, while a cross-cultural comparison of such societies during this era is entirely apt, this is true only by virtue of their having been affected by the same climatic phenomenon, not by virtue of their being "medieval", a term that in any event encompasses a much longer span of time than the approximately three and a half centuries of the Medieval Warm Period.

[46] Valerie Hansen, *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World – and Globalization Began*, New York 2020, p. 5.

[47] Ibidem, pp. 9, 10.

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In a different publication, Frankopan highlights the importance of "the idea of inter-connected worlds where influences and borrowings are normal", one in which we find "cultural, political, and economic exchange between empires, states, towns, and communities – sometimes across long-distances".[48] The author could not agree more with Frankopan's emphasis of this point, not least given that interconnectedness is a major theme in the present article. Frankopan goes on to stress the value of providing a platform for dialogue between historians of different parts of the world, stating that

> models of kingship in the Khmer world may – or may not – strike a chord with those studying similar topics in the Seljuk empire or in Norman Sicily; those working on the administration of justice in frontier-society Spain in the 1000s may see what questions are being asked, and what answers suggested, for Qarakanid Central Asia in the same period. How agricultural production is assessed in the Chola empire may well spark new ideas about the subject in Moche society in South America; or how the manufacture of metals in west Africa compares to those of the nomadic peoples across the steppes north of the Black and Caspian Seas.[49]

Here too the author has no quarrels with Frankopan, save only that he questions whether such a dialogue is best pursued within the framework of a "Middle Ages", when the comparative study of societies is perhaps better approached through a strictly thematic framework, one in which kingship, agriculture, and metal-working, for example, are studied through the comparison of societies separated not only in geographical space but also in time. A good example of such an approach is Bruce Trigger's *Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study*, which compares seven civilizations in precisely this manner, namely Old- and Middle-Kingdom Egypt (i.e. 2700–1780 BCE), southern Mesopotamia between 2500 and 1600 BCE, northern China during the Late Shang and Early Zhou Periods (i.e. 1200–950 BCE), the Valley of Mexico in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries CE, the Classic Maya civilization (i.e. 250–800 CE), the Inca Empire of the Andes in the early sixteenth century CE, and the West African kingdoms of the Yoruba and Benin from the mid-eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century.[50] Comparative studies of societies that existed anywhere along the sixth-to-sixteenth-century CE timeline incidentally coterminous with the European Middle Ages are of course entirely legitimate, but only insofar as one can make a case for why that particular timeframe – and not some other – is historically salient. *Gleichzeitigkeit* alone, to return to that point made by Bauer, is not sufficient.

To conclude this discussion, it bears mentioning as a caveat that there are in fact a few cases in which use of the label "medieval" in a non-European context – geographically

[48] Peter Frankopan, 'Why We Need to Think About the Global Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1/1 (2019), p. 9.

[49] Frankopan, 'Global Middle Ages', pp. 9–10.

[50] Bruce Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge 2003.

speaking – is warranted. For example, the society of southwestern Greenland can usefully be regarded as "medieval" during the period between the initial Norse settlement of the region in the late tenth century and the Norse colony's disappearance from the island sometime in the early fifteenth century. In this instance, however, the label of "medieval" is fully justified, if for no other reason than by virtue of the fact that Greenland's Norse settlers were themselves medieval Europeans who retained a strong cultural and commercial connection with medieval Europe – a connection, moreover, that they also fostered to no small degree through actively shunning contact with the indigenous Inuit.[51] Far less evident, by contrast, are the grounds on which the Amerindian Mississippian Culture, during more or less the same period in which the Norse occupied Greenland, can usefully be called "medieval", as it has been in one volume on the subject,[52] when in fact this culture had no ties whatsoever with medieval Europe.[53] In the introduction to her monograph on Polynesia between 900 and 1600 CE, a period roughly coterminous with the European Middle Ages, Madi Williams pushes back against the concept of the "Global Middle Ages" in a manner not dissimilar to the critiques voiced by Daniel Varisco and Thomas Bauer of the application of "Middle Ages" and "medieval" to non-western societies, arguing that

> [a]ttempts to globalize the Middle Ages remain somewhat inevitably Eurocentric, whether in focus or by taking the categories that define the European Middle Ages and trying to apply them to non-European cultures. This need not be the case, as medievalists often pride themselves on their ability to understand societies and cultures alien to their own by viewing the Middle Ages from the perspective of those living in the period.[54]

In this article, the author will resolutely strive *not* to refer to Soqoṭrā during the sixth-to-sixteenth-century period as "medieval", if for no other reason than that such a label is both ill-suited to the island and foreign to the manner in which the inhabitants of said island conceive of their past. The term "medieval" will instead be reserved for European peoples and cultures. The choice of a particular millennium that happens to correspond to what is regarded as the "Middle Ages" in a European context might strike some readers like an attempt to fashion a Soqoṭrā-specific medieval period but is in no way intended as such. In fact, the sixth-to-sixteenth-century timeframe is entirely appropriate for the

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[51] For a detailed historical overview of Norse Greenland, including its links with Europe, its resistance to Inuit influence, and the possible reasons for its demise, see Arnved Nedkvitne, *Norse Greenland: Viking Peasants in the Arctic*, London–New York 2019; cf. Hansen, *Year 1000*, pp. 27–52. As evidence for the shunning of contact with the Inuit on the part of the Norse, one may note osteological and DNA data indicating that intermixing between the two groups was essentially non-existent (Frankopan, *Earth Transformed*, p. 285).

[52] Timothy R. Pauketat and Susan M. Alt, *Medieval Mississippians: The Cahokian World*, Sante Fe 2016.

[53] The author wishes to stress that these quibbles about terminology are not in any way intended as a disparagement of the quality of the volume in question.

[54] Madi Williams, *Polynesia 900–1600*, Leeds 2021, p. 1.

study of Soqoṭrā, as the earliest unequivocal written evidence for a Christian community on the island dates from the sixth century, while this community re-established contact with Christendom, following a prolonged period of isolation therefrom, in the early sixteenth century. In other words, the timeframe selected for this article is perfectly suited to the study of the Christian phase of Soqoṭrā's history. Medieval Europeans, it is true, were aware of Soqoṭrā and some even visited the island, thus making Soqoṭrā in effect medieval-adjacent, as it were. If, then, one accepts Monfasani's argument that the "Renaissance" as commonly understood is but the final stage of the Middle Ages, the brief occupation of Soqoṭrā by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century would represent an instance in which the medieval did indeed intrude upon Soqoṭrā – *intrude*, in that it was essentially external to the island.[55]

A Christian Island in the Gulf of Aden

Sometime around 518, an Egyptian merchant boarded a ship that sailed into the Gulf of Aden. His name is unknown, though sources from the ninth century onwards refer to him as Cosmas Indicopleustes, i.e. "Cosmas Who Sailed to India", an appellation that we shall retain here for the sake of convenience. He had just come from Ethiopia, then

[55] Some might argue that use of the term "Late Antiquity" or the qualifier "Late Antique" in a Soqoṭrī context is every bit as inappropriate as "Middle Ages" and "medieval". Such an argument might be sustained if it could be demonstrated that the field of Late Antique studies was conceived from the start as a project devoted exclusively or primarily to the study of a specifically European Late Antiquity, in the way that medieval studies for many years focused more or less exclusively on Europe. It is true that the concept of Late Antiquity as a distinct and historically salient period of time was first posited in a frame of reference primarily suited to European history, namely in the work of the Swiss art historian Jacob Burckhardt, who in 1853 was the first to speak of a specifically "spätantike Zeit" (Andreas Kirchner, 'Geist ist Leben: Lebensbegriff und Philosophenbiografie in der Spätantike', in: *Praxis des Philosophierens, Praktiken der Historiographie: Perspektiven von der Spätantike bis zur Moderne*, ed. Mario Meliadò and Silvia Negri, Freiburg–Munich, 2018, p. 105 [n. 3]). Forty years later, however, another art historian, the Austrian Alois Riegl, managed to break free from the Gibbonian decline-and-fall paradigm associated with the late and post-Roman periods in his *Stilfrage*. In that volume he championed "die Späte Antike" not as an era of decadence and decline but rather as one whose artistic traditions were worthy of study in their own right – and as a period in which the artistic traditions inherited from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome were transmitted to the Muslims (Arnaldo Marcone, 'Late Antiquity: Then and Now', in: *Antiquity and its Reception: Modern Expressions of the Past*, ed. Helena Trindade Lopes et al., London 2020, pp. 13–14). This inclusion of non-European actors in the grand narrative of Late Antiquity was even more forcefully exemplified by Peter Brown in his seminal work *The World of Late Antiquity* (Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750*, London 2006) which, even more than a half century after its initial publication in 1971, remains an invaluable introduction to the subject. In it, Coptic and Syrian Christians share space with their European coreligionists, as do Zoroastrian Sāsānids and Muslim Arabs with Christian Romans. Given that Brown is widely, and rightfully, recognized as the father of Late Antique studies, his framing of Late Antiquity in this manner has set the tone for subsequent research in the field, one that has allowed the admission of other non-European actors to the broader narrative of Late Antiquity (e.g. the Ḥimyarites of South Arabia and the Aksumites of Ethiopia). In view of these points, the author of this article sees no reason to deny the indigenous inhabitants of Soqoṭrā membership in Late Antiquity during the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods.

dominated by the Christian kingdom of Aksum, which at that time was about to launch a military campaign against the South Arabian kingdom of Ḥimyar in defense of the latter polity's persecuted Christian population.[56] Years later, having by then become a monk, Cosmas wrote a treatise known as the *Christian Topography*, in which he sought to refute the "pagan" notion that the earth was a sphere, arguing instead that it was shaped like the Tabernacle of Moses. Dubious though his credentials might be as a cosmographer, Cosmas did manage to incorporate in his treatise some useful information that he had gleaned during his years as a merchant. He recalls, for example, that he and his traveling companions had at one point coasted around an island that he calls Dioskouridēs. While they were not able to land there, Cosmas states that he had encountered some Greek-speaking inhabitants of the island while in Ethiopia.[57] Indeed, it is most likely from these individuals that Cosmas acquired information about their homeland. One such bit of information might have been the point that the Ptolemies of Egypt had established a colony on the island, and that the island was home to a "a multitude of Christians" (χριστιανοὶ πλῆθος), whose pastoral care was entrusted to clerics dispatched to the island from Persia.[58]

There is universal agreement among modern scholars that Dioskouridēs is the Greek name for Soqoṭrā. Some years ago, Walter Müller suggested that this name is derived from *Ḏū-Śakūrid (*ḏ-s³krd*) "That which is of/belongs to Śakūrid".[59] Although Ḏū-Śakūrid is not actually attested as such in any Ancient South Arabian inscription, Śakūrid is attested as an ethnonym in two Sabaic inscriptions,[60] BR-Yanbuq 47 and CIH 621, both dating from the early sixth century CE.[61] In these inscriptions, the group so called is listed among

56 Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie chrétien. Tome I (Livres I–IV)*, trans. Wanda Wolska-Conus, Paris 1968, p. 368 (=§2.56.1–7).

57 Ibidem, p. 504 (=§3.65.11–13).

58 Ibidem, pp. 502, 504 (=§3.65.10).

59 Walter W. Müller, 'Zeugnisse über Sokotra aus antiken und mittelalterlichen Quellen', in: *Sokotra: Mensch und Natur*, ed. Wolfgang Wranik, Wiesbaden 1999, p. 188.

60 Sabaic being the now obsolete Semitic language spoken in the pre-Islamic South Arabian kingdoms of Saba' (the Sheba of the Old Testament) as well as Ḥimyar.

61 Walter W. Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften nach Ären datiert: Bibliographie, Texte und Glossar*, Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 93, 106. Despite the superficial similarity between the names Śakūrid and Soqoṭrā, there is no evidence that the two are etymologically related. To argue otherwise, one would have to explain not only the metathesis of /r/ and /d/ in the course of the supposed transition from Śakūrid to Soqoṭrā but also the peculiar shift of /d/ to /ṭ/. For one attempt to explain the origins of the name Soqoṭrā, see Friedrich Ernst Beyhl, 'Anmerkungen zum Drachenblut und zu den Namen der Insel Soqotra', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 148/1 (1998), pp. 35–82. Worth noting in passing is the proposed derivation of both Soqoṭrā and Dioskouridēs from Sanskrit *dvīpa sukhatara/sukhadara* "blessed island", a theory first proposed by the German Indologist Peter von Bohlen in 1830 (Müller, 'Zeugnisse über Sokotra', pp. 187–188) and since then accepted as fact by many scholars (e.g. Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Princeton 1987, p. 35 [n. 101]; Ranabir Chakravarti, 'The Indian Ocean Scenario in the 14th Century Latin Crusade Tract: Possibilities of a World Historical Approach', *Asian Review of World Histories* 3/1 [2015], p. 49). In fact, no such name is attested in Classical Indian literature, while what references to Soqoṭrā exist in post-Classical Indian texts employ such forms as *śīkotara*, *śīkottara*, *śīkhotara*, and *sīgotar* – none of which can be traced to Sanskrit *sukhatara/sukhadara* (Ingo Strauch, 'India and Socotra', in: *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The inscriptions and drawings from the cave Hoq*, ed. Ingo Strauch,

vassals of Yaz'an, a tribal confederation based in Wādī ʿAbadān in mainland Yemen whose political influence extended across the Ḥaḍramawt region and into Dhofar in southern Oman.[62] The name Śakūrid, then, denotes the indigenous inhabitants of Soqoṭrā, who in Cosmas' day were loosely tied to the kingdom of Ḥimyar through a system of proxy rule by the Yaz'anids.[63] Tangible evidence of links between the Ḥaḍramawt and Soqoṭrā during the late pre-Islamic period is provided by surface-level ceramic sherds recovered from the site of Kosh on Soqoṭrā's western coast that display similarities with pottery found in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt, as well as pottery recovered at the sites of Qāni' (modern Bi'r ʿAlī) on Yemen's southern coast and Sumhurām (modern Ḫawr Rūrī) on the coast of Dhofar in strata dating between the second and fifth centuries CE[64] – both sites beings ports founded by the kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt.

Cosmas' reference to Soqoṭrā's Christian population is particularly worthy of note. For this community to have grown to such a size as to qualify as a "multitude" by the sixth century would imply that it developed over a long period, beginning perhaps as early as the fourth century, when we encounter the earliest evidence of Christianity in the southern Red Sea region,[65] and increasing in the fifth century, at which time we find evidence for

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Bremen 2012, pp. 397–403; cf. Beyhl, 'Anmerkungen zum Drachenblut', pp. 50–51, 53). Nor indeed should one expect to find a form like *dvīpa sukhatara/sukhadara* given that, in toponyms incorporating *dvīpa* "island", this substantive occurs postpositionally (Müller, 'Zeugnisse über Sokotra', p. 188), thus *male-dvīpa* > Maldives and *lakśa-dvīpa* > Laccadives, as well as the Sanskrit name for Sri Lanka, *siṃhala-dvīpa*, whence Arabic *sarandīb* (and, by way of Arabic, English *serendipity*).

[62] As indicated by the lists of tribes and places administered by the Yaz'anids in the Late Sabaic inscriptions MAFRAY-Abū Ṯawr 4/3–5, BR-Yanbuq 47/3–6, CIH 621/2–6 (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, pp. 85, 93, 106) which, in addition to Sa'kalān (i.e. Dhofar), included such places as Ḍayfatān, Girdān, Mayfaʿ, Raḫiyat, Raṯhum, and Saybān, all of which are to be found in the Ḥaḍramawt region. On the identification of these names, see Abdallah Hassan al-Sheiba, 'Die Ortsnamen in den altsüdarabischen Inschriften', *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen* IV, Mainz am Rhein 1987, pp. 22, 30–31, 33, 35, 40, 55–56.

[63] Similarly in Central Arabia, Ḥimyar maintained a loose protectorate not through Ḥimyarite governors but rather through Kinda, an Arab tribal confederation that was a vassal of Ḥimyar (Christian Julien Robin, 'Les rois de Kinda', in: *Arabia, Greece and Byzantium: Cultural Contacts in Ancient and Medieval Times*, ed. Abdulaziz Al-Helabi et al., Riyadh 2012). Doing so would have relieved the authorities in the Ḥimyarite capital of Ẓafār of the difficult and costly task of maintaining control over the vast, far-flung territory under its jurisdiction. Similar concerns might well explain why the task of governing the Ḥaḍramawt, Dhofar, and Soqoṭrā fell to Yaz'an.

[64] Aleksandr Vsevolodovič Sedov and Yuri A. Vinogradov, 'An Important Archaeological Discovery on the Island of Socotra (Republic of Yemen)', in: *Arabie – Arabies: Volume offert à Christian Julien Robin par ses collègues, ses élèves et ses amis*, ed. Iwona Gajda and Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, Paris 2023, p. 350.

[65] On the introduction of Christianity to Aksum during the fourth century, see Philip R. Amidon (trans.), *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia, Books 10 and 11*, New York 1997, pp. 19–23 (=§10.9); Jan M. Szymusiak (trans.), *Deux apologies à l'empereur Constance pour sa fuite*, Paris 1987, pp. 161–163 (=§31); Wolfgang Hahn, 'Äthiopische Religionsgeschichte im Zeugnis der Münzen', in: *Äthiopien: Kunsthandwerk und Münzen aus österreichischen Sammlungen*, Linz 1995, p. 39. Also worthy of note are the explicitly Christian references in RIÉth 271, a Greek inscription dating from the reign of ʿĒzānā (ca. 330–370), the first Christian king of Aksum (Étienne Bernand, 'Les inscriptions de la période axoumite: B. Les inscriptions grecques', in: Étienne Bernand et al., *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite. Tome I: Les documents*, Paris 1991, pp. 370–372), as well as the recent excavations of a fourth-century church at Bēta Samʿatī (Michael Harrower et al., 'Beta Samati: discovery and excavation of an Aksumite town', *Antiquity* 93/372 [2019], pp. 1534–1552). Less

a growing Christian presence in mainland South Arabia. Thus, for example, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, writing ca. 444, states that there were a number of Homerites (i.e. Ḥimyarites) among the Christian pilgrims who visited Simeon Stylitēs, the famous ascetic saint who spent some thirty-seven years on a small platform atop a pillar near Aleppo.[66]

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information is available for the introduction of Christianity to South Arabia during the fourth century, the chief source being Philostorgius (d. post-433) (Philip R. Amidon [trans.], *Philostorgius: Church History*, Atlanta 2007, p. 43 [=§3.6]). Some scholars (e.g. Mikhail Bukharin, 'The Mediterranean World and Socotra', in: *Foreign Sailors on Socotra*, ed. Ingo Strauch, Bremen 2012, pp. 522–526; Nathanael J. Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity: Networks and the Movement of Culture*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 75–79) have argued that the fourth-century evangelist of Ḥimyar, one Theophilus Indus, was in fact a native of Soqoṭrā, and that he played a role in correcting the habits of those Christians already inhabiting the island. According to Philostorgius, Theophilus' island home was called Dibos (Latin *diua*), which Mikhail Bukharin plausibly derives from Prakrit *dibba* (Sanskrit *dvīpa*), meaning "island" (Bukharin, 'Mediterranean World', p. 523). Although this is not the place to present a full discussion of the issues surrounding the identification of Dibos with Soqoṭrā, several points are worth emphasizing. One is that, while similar names are attested in South Asia – in addition to those referenced above (see n. 61) one might also note Dēb, i.e. modern Daybul in Pakistan (Michel Tardieu, 'L'Arabie du nord-est d'après les documents manichéens', *Studia Iranica* 23 (1994), pp. 61–62 [nn. 11–13], 65; Werner Sundermann, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, Berlin 1981, pp. 56–57) – it is curious that such a name would be applied to Soqoṭrā. One would have expected instead Dioskouridēs, particularly given that this was the name by which Soqoṭrā was known to merchants active in the Red Sea/Gulf of Aden region, such as Cosmas Indicopleustes. The latter, it will be recalled, even met some Greek-speaking inhabitants of Soqoṭrā while in Ethiopia, something which cannot be said for Philostorgius. Another point concerns the position of the narrative of Theophilus' return to Dibos in the text. This follows the narrative of his evangelizing efforts in South Arabia and precedes the narrative of his visit to Ethiopia, the latter beginning with what Philip R. Amidon translates as "[f]rom there in Great Arabia he set sail for the land of those Ethiopians who are called Aksumites" (Amidon, *Philostorgius*, p. 43 [=§3.6]). On the surface, the wording would seem to imply that Dibos was part of Greater Arabia, which would favor an identification of the island with Soqoṭrā. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that what remains of Philostorgius' *Church History* is not the original text but rather an epitome by the ninth-century patriarch and scholar Photios, in which case it is not inconceivable that portions of the original were lost or wrongly placed. The bit of text describing Theophilus' visit to his home island could potentially fall into the latter category. Finally, according to Philostorgius, Theophilus had been sent by his people as a hostage to the Romans (Amidon, *Philostorgius*, p. 40 [=§3.4]). Typically, the Romans took, or were given, hostages from other state societies, or else at times from nomadic groups like the Sarmatians whose territories bordered the Roman Empire. On hostages in the Roman Empire, see Joel Allen, *Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge 2006. Since Soqoṭrā was home to neither a state society nor any group, nomadic or otherwise, whose territory bordered that of Rome, it seems more probable that Theophilus hailed not from Soqoṭrā but had been sent instead from somewhere in India, where a number of highly-developed state societies were based, and which had been in diplomatic contact with Rome since the time of the emperor Augustus (r. 27 BCE–14 CE) (Michael Speidl, 'Wars, Trade and Treaties: New, Revised and Neglected Sources for the Political, Diplomatic, and Military Aspects of Imperial Rome's Relations with the Red Sea Basin and India, from Augustus to Diocletian', in: *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris: New Perspectives on Maritime Trade*, ed. K. S. Mathew, London–New York 2017, pp. 111–119). Gianfranco Fiaccadori suggests that Theophilus' hostage status can be explained from his membership in "a prominent, if not princely, [Indian] family", and that he had been sent to the Roman Empire to guarantee trade with Roman merchants (Gianfranco Fiaccadori, 'Theophilus the Indian', in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Alessandro Bausi and Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 5, Wiesbaden 2014, p. 530).

[66] Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia Religiosa* §26.25 (cited in Andrew S. Jacobs, '"I Want to Be Alone": Ascetic Celebrity and the Splendid Isolation of Simeon Stylites', in: *The Garb of Being: Embodiment and the Pursuit of Holiness in Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Georgia Frank et al., New York 2019, p. 150).

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Then in 486, a bishop of Ḥimyar (Syriac ܚܡܝܪ) named Moses attended a synod of the Church of the East, as documented in the *Synodicon Orientale*.[67] Another reference to the spread of Christianity in South Arabia around this time is found in an account – admittedly of a hagiographical nature – that is preserved in a series of Syriac manuscripts, the earliest of which dates to the sixth century, and which relates the tale of one Paul, an Italian bishop who in the first half of the fifth century supposedly moved to Edessa, working there as a laborer and giving his wages to the poor.[68] In time, Paul is said to have gained a follower, a priest of Edessa named John, after which the two men were captured by Arabs while in Sinai and taken as slaves to Ḥimyar, where Paul managed to win over the locals to Christianity. Despite the miraculous elements in the text,[69] and despite the fact that the text makes no mention of a specific place within the Ḥimyarite kingdom, this story closely parallels the account of the evangelization of the oasis of Nağrān transmitted by the Yemeni scholar Wahb Ibn Munabbih (d. 728/732) and preserved by Muḥammad Ibn Ǧarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923) in his *Tārīḫ ar-rusul wa-ăl-mulūk* "History of the Messengers and Kings".[70] For its part, the *Gadla 'Azqīr* "Struggle of 'Azqīr," a Gəʿəz translation of a now lost Christian Arabic hagiography recounting the life and martyrdom of a Christian priest named 'Azqīr, indicates the presence of a sizeable Christian community in Nağrān during the reign of the Ḥimyarite king Shuraḥbi'īl Yakkuf (ca. 468–485).[71]

That the fifth century marks a watershed for the spread of Christianity in the Nağrān region, and by implication in other parts of South Arabia,[72] is confirmed by a series of

[67] Jean-Baptise Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale, ou Recueil de synodes nestoriens*, Paris 1902, p. 53 (Syriac text). On the identification of ܚܡܝܪ with Ḥimyar, see Yuri Arzhanov, 'Zeugnisse über Kontakte zwischen Juden und Christen im vorislamischen Arabien', *Oriens christianus* 92 (2008), p. 85 (n. 29).

[68] Hans Arneson et al., *The History of the Great Deeds of Bishop Paul of Qentos and Priest John of Edessa*, Piscataway 2010. The timeframe of Paul's career is indicated by a reference in the text to his having arrived at Edessa during the episcopacy of Rabbūla, i.e. 411–435 (ibidem, p. 33).

[69] Paul's healing powers are said to have attracted the attention of the Ḥimyarite king, whom Paul challenged to a trial. Upon invoking the name of Jesus, a palm tree worshipped by the Ḥimyarites is alleged to have been miraculously uprooted, whereupon the king and his subjects accepted baptism (ibidem, pp. 52–57).

[70] Muḥammad Ibn Ǧarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, Leiden 1879–1901, Vol. II, pp. 920–922.

[71] The *Gadla 'Azqīr* speaks of some thirty-eight Nağrānī bishops, priests, deacons, monks, and lay people, in addition to 'Azqīr himself, who accepted martyrdom for their faith, not counting the fifty fellow prisoners whom 'Azqīr managed to convert to Christianity (Carlo Conti Rossini, 'Un documento sul cristianesimo nello Iemen ai tempi del re Sharâhbîl Yakkuf', *Rendiconti della Accademia dei Lincei* 5/19 [1910], pp. 729–730, 736–737). Even if one acknowledges an element of hyperbole here, together with the likelihood that the text is telescoping the history of Nağrān's Christianization, the fifth-century timeframe of the events described, when viewed in the context of other texts that speak of the Christianization of the oasis during the same period, indicates that the fifth century was indeed a very fruitful period for the growth of Christianity in South Arabia. The name of the Ḥimyarite ruler, the period of whose reign allows us to date the events described in the *Gadla 'Azqīr*, ap pears in the text in the form ሰረብሂል ፡ ዳንክፍ, which is clearly a corruption of Shuraḥbi'īl Yakkuf, Gəʿəz *ሰረሀቢል ፡ ይንክፍ /sarahbīl yənkəf/ (< Sabaic *s^{2}rḥb'l ykf*).

[72] The *Chronicle of Seʿert*, an Arabic text based on earlier Syriac sources, credits one Ḥayyān of Nağrān with converting many of his fellow Nağrānīs to Christianity (on which, see the main text), some of whom went on to

Christian inscriptions, written in an early form of the Arabic script but containing Aramaic vocabulary, that were discovered some years ago in the Ḥimā desert (located some 100 km north-northeast of Nağrān) and that date from this period.[73] Nağrān's role as an important early center of Christianity in South Arabia can be explained by its location at the juncture of two major caravan routes, one leading via the Ḥiğāz to Syria-Palestine, the other via Yamāma to the Persian Gulf. In addition, the oasis was easily accessible, via the Ğīzān region, to those merchants crossing the Red Sea from the Horn of Africa. From the anchorage of Gabaza on the Eritrean coast, this crossing could be easily achieved by making stopovers in the Dahlak and Farasān Archipelagoes. Such a strategic location made Nağrān an important trading center that was well connected to the outside world. It is hardly surprising, then, that one of the agents of Christianization in the oasis and neighboring regions, a local Nağrānī named Ḥayyān, was himself a merchant who had embraced Christianity while visiting Mesopotamia during the early fifth century.[74]

The role of trade in the spread of Christianity has long been known,[75] and was likely a factor that facilitated the spread of Christianity to Soqoṭrā as well. This should come as no surprise, given that the island, in addition to serving as a way station for seafaring merchants passing back and forth between the Red Sea and the Indian Subcontinent, offered to such merchants a number of products of its own. Soqoṭrā is home, for example, to no fewer than seven species of frankincense tree,[76] as well as the famous dragon's blood tree (*Dracaena cinnabari*).[77] The latter produces a ruby-colored resin, known in Soqoṭrī as *ʼídəḥa*ʼ~*ʼīda*ʿ and in Arabic as *dam al-aḫawayn* "Blood of the Two Brothers", which was historically used as a dye and a varnish, as well as a compound

aid him in converting Ḥimyar and those regions near Ethiopia to Christianity (*ʿāwanūhu ʿalā naql ahl balad ḥimyar wa-nawāḥīhi al-muqāriba li-balad al-ḥabaša ilā al-naṣrāniyya*) (Addai Scher, 'Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert): Première partie (II)', in: *Patrologia Orientalis* 5/2, Paris 1910, pp. 330–331 [218–219]). Whether Soqoṭrā was included is conceivable, if not explicitly stated.

[73] Christian Julien Robin et al., 'Inscriptions antiques de la région de Najrān (Arabie Séoudite méridionale): nouveaux jalons pour l'histoire de l'écriture, de la langue et du calendrier arabes', *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 158/3 (2014), pp. 1039–1044, 1052–1054, 1087–1107, 1111–1115.

[74] In his edition of the *Chronicle of Seʿert*, Addai Scher restores this individual's name as Ḥannān (حَنَّان), though it seems better to emend this to Ḥayyān (حَيَّان) on the basis of the sixth-century *Book of the Ḥimyarites*, a Syriac text that attributes the evangelization of Nağrān to one Ḥayyān (ܚܝܢ) (Axel Moberg, *The Book of the Himyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work*, Lund 1924, pp. 31a, 32b). According to the *Chronicle of Seʿert*, Ḥayyān converted to Christianity at the Naṣrid capital of al-Ḥīra in Mesopotamia during the reign of the Sāsānid emperor Yazdegird I (r. 399–420) (Scher, 'Histoire Nestorienne', pp. 330–331 [218–219]).

[75] Roberta Tomber, 'Bishops and Traders: The role of Christianity in the Indian Ocean during the Roman Period', in: *Natural Resources and Cultural Connections of the Red Sea*, ed. Janet Starkey et al., Oxford 2007, pp. 219–226; Eivind Heldaas Seland, 'Early Christianity in East Africa and Red Sea/Indian Ocean Commerce', *African Archaeological Review* 31/4 (2014), pp. 637–647.

[76] Bruno A. Mies et al., 'Frankincense on Soqotra Island (Boswellia, Burseracaeae; Yemen)', *Cactus and Succulent Journal* (U.S.) 72/5 (2000), pp. 265–275.

[77] Beyhl, 'Anmerkungen zum Drachenblut', pp. 38–42.

in medicines.[78] Locally, the pigment produced by the dragon's blood tree has long been used by Soqoṭrīs to decorate pottery,[79] and as a medicine to treat hemorrhages (usually in parturient women) and a variety of skin conditions.[80] The very word *cinnabari* (Greek κιννάβαρι), though believed by some scholars to derive from Old Persian *si^{n}kabru-*, might in fact have its source in Soqoṭrī *šenέbhεr* "fruit of Dracaena cinnabari", a hypothesis that is supported by the fact that palatalized **k* is one of the sources of Soqoṭrī /š/, allowing us to reconstruct an original **kinabar*.[81] Aloe (*Aloe perryi*) is yet another plant for which Soqoṭrā is famed, one that, in addition to serving as a product for export,[82] has traditionally been used as a medicament on the island itself.[83] In addition, a small quantity of agricultural products was available on the island,[84] together with dairy products, in particular clarified butter, that pastoralists from the island's interior would likely have traded with merchants in exchange for foreign products.[85] Already in the mid-first century CE, an anonymous merchant most probably

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[78] Deepika Gupta et al., 'Dragon's blood: Botany, chemistry and therapeutic uses', *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 115 (2008), pp. 362–363.

[79] Robert Bertram Serjeant, 'The Coastal Population of Socotra', in: *Socotra: The Island of Tranquility*, ed. D. Brian Doe, London 1992, p. 136.

[80] Miranda J. Morris, personal communication.

[81] Shahina A. Ghazanfar and Leonid Kogan, 'A Botanical and Etymological Approach to Plant Names in Southern Arabia', in: *Language and Ecology in Southern and Eastern Arabia*, ed. Janet C. E. Watson et al., London 2022, p. 138.

[82] Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad al-Marzūqī (d. 1030) lists aloes among the products available at the marketplace of Aš-Šiḥr on the Ḥaḍramī coast (Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad al-Marzūqī, *Kitāb al-azmina wa-ăl-amkina*, Bayrūt 1996, p. 384) during pre-Islamic times. Given that Aš-Šiḥr historically served as the main departure point for Soqoṭrā (Lynne S. Newton, *A Landscape of Pilgrimage and Trade in Wadi Masila, Yemen: al-Qisha and Qabr Hud in the Islamic period*, Oxford 2009, p. 72), it is not unreasonable to assume that the aloes on offer at the port's marketplace came from the island.

[83] Miranda J. Morris, 'The Aloe and the Frankincense Tree in Southern Arabia: Different Approaches to their Use', in: *Herbal Medicine in Yemen: Traditional Knowledge and Practice, and Their Value for Today's World*, ed. Ingrid Hehmeyer and Anne Schönig, Leiden–Boston 2012, pp. 114–121.

[84] Although the anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (ca. mid-first century CE) claims that Soqoṭrā produced no agricultural products, such as vines and grain (Lionel Casson [trans.], *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, Princeton 1989, p. 69 [=§30.10.6–7]), the thirteenth-century Iranian traveler Ibn al-Muǧāwir reports that the island possessed gardens, as well as fields of durra and grain (*basātīn wa-zurūʿ ḏurra wa-ḥinṭa*) (Ǧamāl ad-Dīn Yūsuf Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman wa-Makka wa-baʿḍ al-Ḥiǧāz al-musammā Taʾrīḫ al-mustabṣir*, Leiden 1951, p. 266).

[85] While Graeco-Roman and Arabic sources make no mention of the involvement of pastoralists in Soqoṭrā's trade, the trading by Soqoṭrī pastoralists of clarified butter for foreign goods is well documented during the modern period (James Raymond Wellsted, 'Memoir on the Island of Socotra', *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 5 [1835], p. 215; Theodore Bent and Mabel Bent, *Southern Arabia*, London 1900, p. 346; Elie, 'Ecological Primordialism', pp. 898–899, 903–904) and would undoubtedly have taken place during earlier times as well. In fact, during the period of Mahrī rule, clarified butter also served as a form of tribute (Gerald R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese*, London 1971, p. 223), and by the end of the nineteenth century, it had become almost the sole export of Soqoṭrā, and as such was ships to destinations as far afield as Masqaṭ and Zanzibar (Bent and Bent, *Southern Arabia*, p. 346). Ibn al-Muǧāwir also notes the presence of camels, cattle, and sheep on Soqoṭrā (Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, p. 266) but says nothing about dairy products derived from them.

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hailing, like Cosmas, from Egypt, states, in a Greek text that has long been known as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, that Dioskouridēs was inhabited by Arabs, Indians, and Greeks who had sailed there to trade.[86] That Soqoṭrā received many visitors from abroad during antiquity is confirmed by investigations in the grotto of Ḥōq in northeastern Soqoṭrā, which have revealed a large number of inscriptions left by foreign visitors, including some 193 North Indian inscriptions in Sanskrit and Middle Indic (192 in the Brāhmī script and one in Kharoṣṭhī) dating between the second and fifth centuries CE, smaller numbers of Ancient South Arabian and Gəʿəz inscriptions, several Greek inscriptions, and one inscription in Palmyrene Aramaic dating from July 258 CE.[87] Whether the Ptolemies had actually settled Greek colonists on Soqoṭrā, as claimed by Cosmas, remains an open question. Ptolemaic Egypt maintained commercial, and even diplomatic, ties with South Arabia, and since this connection survived into late Ptolemaic times[88] it is not inconceivable that at least some of the island's Greek population to which the *Periplus* refers was descended from colonists hailing from Ptolemaic Egypt. In later centuries, Arabic authors similarly mention that Soqoṭrā was once populated by Greeks, though most claim that it was Alexander of Macedon (r. 336–323 BCE), rather than the Ptolemies, who had the idea of colonizing the island.[89] On the other hand, the Arab

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[86] Casson, *Periplus*, p. 69 (=§30.10.7–11).

[87] Strauch Ingo (ed.), *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The inscriptions and drawings from the cave Hoq*, Bremen 2012.

[88] Joseph Patrich, 'Caravan Trade: The "Nabataean" Fortresses in the Negev Re-Examined', in: *Arabie – Arabies*, pp. 437–438 (and the sources cited therein); Mikhail Bukharin, 'New evidence for diplomacy between the Mediterranean and South Arabia', *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 31 (2020), pp. 473–477. As a particularly salient example of contact, one may note a certain Zayd'īl Ibn Zayd Ḏū-Ẓayrān, who hailed from the South Arabia kingdom of Maʿīn, located in Wādī al-Ğawf, and is recorded as having "brought (measures of) myrrh and calamus for the temples of the gods of Egypt" (*s¹ʿrb 'mrrn w-qlymtn k-'bytt 'l'lt mṣr*) in the Minaic inscription on the wooden sarcophagus in which he was buried in Egypt during the reign of either Ptolemy VIII Euergetēs II (146–117 BCE) or Ptolemy X Alexander I (114–113/107–88 BCE) (RÉS 3427/1 [Christian Julien Robin, 'L'Égypte dans les inscriptions de l'Arabie méridionale préislamique', in: *Hommages à Jean Leclant. Volume 4: Varia*, ed. Catherine Berger et al., Paris 1994, pp. 291, 294–296]). A few decades thereafter, inscriptions from the so-called "Punt Chamber" in a temple at Athribis in Upper Egypt, built by Ptolemy XII Auletēs (r. 80–58/55–51 BCE) or possibly Ptolemy XV Caesarion (r. 44–30 BCE), list aromatics imported from Qarnaw (*g3r-nw*), capital of the kingdom of Maʿīn; the kingdom of Qatabān (*g3r-dbn*/*ḳy-tbn*) in Wādī Bayḥān; and possibly the kingdom of 'Awsān (*3wš*) in Wādī Marḫa (Christian Leitz, 'Aromatische Substanzen', in: *Altägyptische Enzyklopädien. Die Soubassements in den Tempeln der griechisch-römischen Zeit. Soubassementstudien I, 1*, ed. Alexa Rickert et al., Wiesbaden 2014, pp. 511–512). That the Ptolemies established the office of "*stratēgos* of the Red and Indian Sea" by 62 BCE, or perhaps as early as 78–73 BCE (Jehan Desanges, *Recherches sur l'activité des méditerranéens aux confins de l'Afrique, VIe siècle avant J.-C.–IVe siècle après J.-C.*, Rome 1978, p. 304), similarly testifies to the increase in Egyptian activity in the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean during the late Ptolemaic Period.

[89] E.g. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Jacut's Geographisches Wörterbuch*, Leipzig 1868, p. 102; ʿAlī Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī, *Murūğ aḏ-ḏahab wa-maʿādin al-ğawhar*, Bayrūt 1965, p. 440; Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad al-Idrīsī, *Opus Geographicum sive «Liber ad eorum Delectationem qui Terras Peragrare Studeant»*, Leiden 1970, p. 51; Abū ʿUbayd al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-masālik wa-ăl-mamālik*, Tūnus 1992, p. 327; Tim Mackintosh-Smith in Tim Mackintosh-Smith and James E. Montgomery (trans.), *Two Arabic Travel Books: Accounts of China and India/Mission to the Volga*, New York–London 2014, p. 122. Curiously, Cosmas feels the need to mention that

navigator Aḥmad Ibn Māǧid an-Naǧdī (d. post-1500), better known as Ibn Māǧid, says simply that Soqoṭrā's Christian population was descended from Greeks.[90]

The clerics sent from Persia to Soqoṭrā of whom Cosmas speaks would have hailed from the Sāsānid Empire, the last of Iran's pre-Islamic polities, and one in which the predominant Christian sect was the Church of the East or East Syrian Church, a denomination to which Cosmas himself belonged. That Soqoṭrī Christians were members of the Church of the East is similarly confirmed by later sources. Among these one may note the Arabic *Collectio Canonum*, written by the East Syrian primate of Damascus Īliyā al-Ǧawharī at the turn of the tenth century, which speaks of the East Syrian community of South Arabia in a list of bishops under the authority of the Persian metropolitan. In this list, Soqoṭrā is mentioned by name, together with an enigmatic and otherwise unattested سيران /sīrān/, which Gianfranco Fiaccadori emends to سمران /simrān/,[91] i.e. the Middle Persian name for mainland South Arabia.[92] An anonymous Arabic source, *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-ʿuyūn* "The Book of Scientific Curiosities and Marvels for the Eyes", written in Egypt in the first half of the eleventh century, also describes Soqoṭrā's population as Christians belonging to the sect of the Nestorians (*naṣārā ʿalā maḏhab an-nasṭūriyyīn*),[93] employing a common, albeit incorrect, byname for East Syrian Christians.[94] For his part, Marco Polo (d. 1324) also states, as related by Rustichello da Pisa in his *Il Milione*, that the Soqoṭrā (*scotra*) of his time had a bishop who was subject to the archbishop of Baghdad (*baudas*),[95] a city that had served as the patriarchal see of the Church of the East since the patriarchate of Timothy I (780–823).[96]

As far as we know, the social, political, and military upheavals that shook mainland South Arabia during the early sixth century – at which time South Arabia's Christian community was persecuted by Ḥimyar's Jewish elite, before being liberated by the Aksumites of Ethiopia[97] – had no impact on Soqoṭrā. That the island is not mentioned

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the Ptolemies who settled Greek colonists on Soqoṭrā were successors to Alexander of Macedon (Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographie chrétien*, p. 502 [=§3.65.8–9]) though it is by no means clear that this side-comment can be linked to Classical Arabic references to Alexander's supposed colonization project.

[90] Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, p. 223.

[91] Gianfranco Fiaccadori, 'Yemen nestoriano', in: *Studi in Onori di Edda Bresciani*, Pisa 1985, p. 195.

[92] Henrik Samuel Nyberg, 'The Opening Section of Dēnkart Book V', in: *Dr. J. M. Unvala Memorial Volume*, Bombay 1964, pp. 106–107.

[93] Al-Mahdī ʿĪd Mūsā ar-Rawāḍiyya, *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-ʿuyūn li-mu'allif maǧhūl (Dirāsa wa-taḥqīq)*, ʿAmmān 2008, p. 257.

[94] On the problematic epithet "Nestorian", see Sebastian Brock, 'The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer', *Bulletin of the John Ryland Library* 78/3 (1996), pp. 23–35.

[95] Henry Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, London 1871, p. 341.

[96] Joshua Mugler, 'Recent Constructions: How the Churches of Classical Baghdad Were Built', *The Muslim World* 107/3 (2017), p. 501.

[97] For a useful overview of these events, see Iwona Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar à l'époque monothéiste: L'histoire de l'Arabie du Sud ancienne de la fin du IVe siècle de l'ère chrétienne jusqu'à l'avènement de l'islam*, Paris 2009, pp. 73–115.

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in any of the extant Sabaic, Gəʿəz, Greek, or Syriac sources that document the conflict would seem to bear this out. One reason for this could be that Soqoṭrā, aside from, and perhaps because of, its being relatively far removed from the Arabian mainland, was of lesser strategic importance compared to those places that witnessed the most violence, such as the Ḥimyarite capital of Ẓafār, the Red Sea coast of Yemen, and the oasis of Naǧrān. Another reason could be the very fact that Soqoṭrī Christians were members of the Church of the East, a denomination that seems not to have been targeted for persecution by Ḥimyarite Jews.[98]

The Christian population of Soqoṭrā is referred to in multiple Classical Arabic sources.[99] Based on what he had heard from informants in the Yemeni port of Aden, the tenth-century Yemeni scholar Al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī, in his *Ṣifat Ǧazīrat al-ʿArab* "Description of the Arabian Peninsula", mentions a monastic community on Soqoṭrā in earlier times that had since disappeared.[100] Worthy of special mention, however, is a tradition related by Al-Hamdānī, to the effect that one of the Sāsānid emperors had expelled a group of Romans (*al-rūm*), literally "Greeks", to Soqoṭrā, and that there later settled among them Mahra from the Arabian mainland, some of whom embraced Christianity (*tanaṣṣara*).[101] Although this tradition might be a variant of the old topos of Greek settlement on Soqoṭrā, it might alternatively, if it contains a historical kernel, reflect memory of a forced settlement of prisoners-of-war from the Roman Empire. Settlements of this sort were official Sāsānid policy,[102] and since the Sāsānids conquered South Arabia ca. 570,[103] it is not inconceivable that they controlled Soqoṭrā in some loose way and even established a penal colony there – perhaps like the one that the Umayyads would later establish in

[98] In fact, East Syrian Christians appear to have collaborated with the Jewish Ḥimyarite king Yōsēph 'As'ar Yaṯh'ar (r. ca. 522–525) in his persecution of South Arabia's other Christian communities, in addition to which Yōsēph held East Syrian Christians in a certain degree of esteem. For a discussion, see Arzhanov, 'Zeugnisse über Kontakte', passim.

[99] E.g. Al-Ḥasan Ibn Aḥmad al-Hamdānī, *Geographie der arabischen Halbinsel*, Leiden 1884, p. 53; Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, p. 266; Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ aḏ-ḏahab*, p. 440; Al-Idrīsī, *Opus Geographicum*, p. 51; Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, p. 223; Al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik wa-ăl-mamālik*, p. 327.

[100] Al-Hamdānī, *Geographie*, p. 53.

[101] Ibidem. Al-Hamdānī's use of the word *ṭaraḥa* "to expel" when describing the emperor's actions vis-à-vis the Romans implies the use of force, which would suit the scenario of prisoners-of-war being resettled on Soqoṭrā. The name Kisrā that Al-Hamdānī gives to the Sāsānid emperor in question is the standard Arabicized form of the Iranian name Ḫusraw, borne by several Sāsānid rulers, not least Ḫusraw I Anūširwān (r. 531–579), during whose reign the Sāsānids conquered South Arabia. Since, however, Kisrā is also employed in Arabic sources from the eighth century onwards as a generic title for Sāsānid emperors (Michael Morony, 'Kisrā', in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Clifford Edmund Bosworth et al., Leiden 1986, p. 184), it cannot be taken for granted that al-Hamdānī's Kisrā is in fact Ḫusraw I, as opposed to some other Sāsānid ruler. Whatever the case, the Romano-Sāsānid War of 572–591 provides the most plausible context in which the Sāsānids might have acquired Roman prisoners-of-war during this period.

[102] For a detailed study of deportations of prisoners-of-war by the Sāsānids, see Erich Kettenhofen, 'Deportations II. In the Parthian and Sasanian Periods', in: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, Costa Mesa 1995, pp. 298–308.

[103] On the Sāsānid conquest of South Arabia, see Iwona Gajda, *Royaume de Ḥimyar*, pp. 157–161 (and the sources cited therein).

the Red Sea's Dahlak Archipelago.[104] Presumably, the prisoners-of-war were Christian, which might explain in part how those Mahra who settled among them converted to Christianity.[105] As it happens, one of the Greek inscriptions from the grotto at Ḥōq reads μνηθῇ Ἀλέκσανδρος Πέτ[ρ]ος, which, according to Mikhail Bukharin, might be translated "Let Alexandros, [son of] Petros, be remembered", "Let Alexandros, [baptized] Petros, be remembered", or "Let Alexandros be remembered. Petros".[106] Whatever the case, the name Petros indicates a Christian origin,[107] the use of Greek a Roman connection. Whether this inscription can be linked to the Romans whom the Sāsānids supposedly banished to Soqoṭrā is uncertain, and it is possible that the inscription dates as far back as the fourth century,[108] i.e. well before the Sāsānids gained control of South Arabia. In his *Kitāb al-iklīl* "Book of the Diadem", Al-Hamdānī relates a somewhat different version of the aforementioned tradition, stating that the Mahra crossed over to Soqoṭrā and conquered the island and its Roman inhabitants.[109] Whatever the case, the Mahra presence in Soqoṭrā is, as we shall see, a recurrent theme in the island's history.[110] For all that, those Mahra who settled on Soqoṭrā appear to have adopted a haughty attitude towards the indigenous inhabitants of the island for, according to Al-Hamdānī, a Mahrī would become angry if he were addressed as a Soqoṭrī.[111]

Most of the Arabic authors who describe Soqoṭrā also have something to say about such locally available products as the aforementioned dragon's blood, aloes, and ambergris, and to a large extent appear to recycle the same inherited set of tropes.[112] Chau Ju-kua (d. 1231), an inspector of maritime trade at the port of Ts'ün-chóu under China's Song Dynasty, similarly reports in his *Chu-fan-chï* "A Description of Barbarous Peoples" that Soqoṭrā supplied aloes, dragon's blood, ambergris, and tortoise shell.[113] Since, however, there is to date no evidence for direct Chinese contact with the island, this information would likely have reached China through Muslim merchants.[114] Marco Polo claims that merchants purchased gold on Soqoṭrā,[115] though this is not mentioned in any other source, in which case it would appear that the Venetian traveler is misinformed here.

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[104] George Hatke, 'Northeast Africa', in: *Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, ed. Erik Hermans, Leeds–Kalamazoo 2020, p. 321.

[105] Other Mahra might have embraced Christianity through contact with indigenous Soqoṭrī Christians.

[106] Bukharin, 'Mediterranean World', pp. 494–495.

[107] Ibidem, pp. 496–497; Lindstedt, *Muḥammad and His Followers*, p. 109.

[108] Bukharin, 'Mediterranean World', p. 498.

[109] Al-Ḥasan Ibn Aḥmad al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-iklīl min aḫbār al-Yaman wa-Ansāb Ḥimyar*, Ṣanʿā' 2004, p. 193.

[110] See below, §Christendom Re-Establishes Ties with Soqoṭrā.

[111] *Idā qīla li-mahrī yā suquṭrī ġaḍiba* (Al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-iklīl*, p. 193).

[112] See, inter alia, Yāqūt, *Geographisches Wörterbuch*, p. 102; Al-Hamdānī, *Geographie*, p. 52; Al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-iklīl*, p. 193, ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Ḥumayd as-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān bi-sīrat ahl ʿUmān*, Al-Qāhira 1931, p. 138; Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, p. 266; Al-Idrīsī, *Opus Geographicum*, pp. 50–51; Al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik wa-ăl-mamālik*, pp. 327, 362; Ar-Rawāḍiyya, *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn*, p. 257.

[113] van Rensburg, *Maritime Traditions*, p. 10.

[114] Ibidem, p. 10.

[115] Yule, *Book of Ser Marco Polo*, p. 341.

Although a number of *ḥadīṯ*s attributed to Muḥammad allude to aloes (*ṣabir*),[116] there is no indication that Islam's founder was aware of their origin.[117] Much less did he or any of his caliphal successors attempt to annex Soqoṭrā. While some of the early Mahrī settlers on Soqoṭrā are likely to have been at least nominally Muslim, the first Muslim polity to take an interest in Soqoṭrā was the first imāmate of the Ibāḍī sect based in Oman. An outgrowth of the broader Ḫāriǧī movement that first developed during the caliphate of ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib (656–661),[118] the sect takes its name from a rather shadowy figure known as Ibn Ibāḍ, i.e. ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Ibāḍ at-Tamīmī of al-Baṣra,[119] though its core doctrines were codified by Ǧābir Ibn Zayd al-Azdī (d. 711/712), a jurist from Nizwā in northern Oman.[120] Taking advantage of the political turmoil that weakened the Umayyad Caliphate in its final days, the Ibāḍīs established an imāmate in northern Oman in 749,[121] one of several such polities that took form around the same time in South Arabia and North Africa.

One reason for Omani interest in Soqoṭrā was its aforementioned utility as a way station at which merchants could take on provisions and engage in a bit of small-scale trade, perhaps before heading further south to the Swahili Coast, a region with which Oman established trade relations at an early date.[122] Al-Ǧulandā Ibn Masʿūd (r. 749–752), the

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[116] E.g. Abū Dāwūd 2298; *Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Buḫārī 468, 544; *Ṣaḥīḥ* Muslim 2742, 2743, 6755, 6796, 6797.

[117] Patricia Crone states that Classical Muslim authors were familiar only or mainly with the species of aloe native to Soqoṭrā (Crone, *Meccan Trade*, p. 59), in which case it is likely that the aloes available in the seventh-century Ḥiǧāz came from the island. If so, these would have been obtained not directly from Soqoṭrā but rather from mainland South Arabia, a region with which Muḥammad's tribe of Quraysh traded (ibidem, pp. 120–124, 141–144). On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that *Aloe vera* grows in southwestern Yemen and Saudi Arabia (Ghazanfar and Kogan, 'Botanical and Etymological Approach', p. 123), which might suggest an alternative source of the aloes to which Muḥammad referred.

[118] Still useful as an overview of the Ḫāriǧī movement is Giorgio Levi Della Vida, 'Khāridjites', in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Emeri van Donzel et al., Leiden 1978, pp. 1074–1077.

[119] In his summary of what both the primary sources and modern research have to say on the matter, John C. Wilkinson notes that, while early Ibāḍī sources make no mention of Ibn Ibāḍ, "it is difficult to believe that he was a complete invention", and that some sources indicate that he was active into the mid-eighth century (John C. Wilkinson, *Ibâḍism: Origins and Early Development in Oman*, Oxford 2010, pp. 151–152).

[120] Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in research on Ibāḍī Islam. To name but a few recent publications on the subject, see Wilkinson, *Ibâḍism*; Cyrille Aillet (ed.), *L'ibadisme dans les sociétés de l'Islam médiéval. Modèles et interactions*, Berlin–Boston; Yohei Kondo and Angeliki Ziaka (ed.), *Local and Global Identities*, Hildesheim–Zürich–New York 2019.

[121] On the rise and fall of the first Ibāḍī *imāmate* in Oman, see Isam Al-Rawas, *Oman in Early Islamic History*, Reading 2000, pp. 109–127.

[122] John C. Wilkinson, 'Oman and East Africa: New Light on Early Kilwan History from the Omani Sources', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14/2 (1981), pp. 272–305 (cf. Newton, *Landscape of Pilgrimage and Trade*, p. 72). Not coincidentally, some of the earliest mosques in coastal East Africa, dating back to the beginning of the ninth century, appear to have been built by Ibāḍīs (Stéphane Pradines, 'Early Swahili Mosques: The Role of Ibadi and Ismaili Communities, Ninth to Twelfth Centuries', in: *Muslim Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Diversity and Pluralism, Past and Present*, ed. Stéphane Pradines and Farouk Topan, Edinburgh 2023, pp. 215–245). In addition, Soqoṭrā was still trading directly with Zanzibar well into the twentieth century (Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, p. 135).

first Ibāḍī *imām* of Oman, is recorded as having concluded a treaty with the Soqoṭrīs,[123] through which he effectively established Omani rule.[124] Little is known of this phase of Soqoṭrī history, and it is not clear if there was a specific settlement on Soqoṭrā that served as the Omanis' headquarters. Describing the Soqoṭrā of his day, Al-Hamdānī states that the island had at least one mosque, and that this was located at a place called Sūq.[125] A settlement by this name, known in Soqoṭrī as Šiḳ, served in later centuries as the political headquarters of Soqoṭrā's Mahrī rulers and might well have had a similar status during the period of Omani rule, in which case the mosque which Al-Hamdānī mentions could have been founded by the Ibāḍīs. Since, however, Al-Hamdānī refers to Sūq as a mere "place" (*mawḍiʿ*), rather than a town or city, it might, during the period before Mahrī rule, have been nothing more than a seasonally occupied marketplace – marketplace being, of course, the very meaning of the Arabic word *sūq* – rather than a permanent settlement.[126] Trading centers of this type, occupied at set times during the year but abandoned during the off-season, are documented along the neighboring northern coast of Somalia from antiquity to the nineteenth century.[127] Alternatively, it is possible that the Ibāḍīs established Sūq as their headquarters in Soqoṭrā, but that the town ceased life as a permanent settlement after their rule was overthrown, until it was resettled centuries

[123] Abū Bakr Aḥmad al-Kindī, *Al-Muṣannaf fī ăl-adyān wa-ăl-aḥkām*, Masqaṭ 1984, p. 145.

[124] As evidenced by the fact that, in accordance with the treaty, the Soqoṭrīs became "people of the covenant" (*ahl aḏ-ḏimma*) (ibidem), i.e. non-Muslims living in a Muslim-ruled polity that bestowed on them legal protection.

[125] Al-Hamdānī, *Geographie*, p. 53.

[126] Douglas Botting, a member of the Oxford University expedition to Soqoṭrā in 1956, describes the Sūq of that time as "a poor, disheveled village", while noting that "its inhabitants were well aware of its importance in the past" (Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, p. 105). Unfortunately, he neglects to give any specific information regarding what the modern inhabitants of Sūq remembered of their town's early past. Nevertheless, Botting observes that "[t]here were numerous mounds around the village, covered with occupational debris, and [that] some of the present houses were built on mounds" (ibidem). Mounds of this sort, known in Arabic as *tilāl* or *atlāl* (sg. *tall*), are formed through the accumulation of occupational debris over prolonged periods. Since, however, none of these mounds have been excavated, it is unknown whether occupation of the site dates back to the period of Omani rule. Botting posits that early Sūq would have been a small settlement – smaller, indeed, than the Ḥadīboh of the mid-1950s, whose total population he estimates as 400 (ibidem). Regardless of size, however, he notes that Sūq in times past possessed an important natural advantage, in that "[i]ts lagoon, now much silted up, must once have been navigable by small ships and perhaps, many centuries ago, deep enough for larger ocean-going vessels to anchor in" (ibidem). During his own visit to Soqoṭrā a decade after Botting, Robert B. Serjeant was similarly informed that at Sūq, ships had once anchored at a spot where, at the time of his visit, palms grew, but which in the past had been a lagoon (Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', p. 134). Evidently, the accumulation of silt in the lagoon at Sūq was a perennial problem, for some elderly Soqoṭrīs still remember how the Mahrī sultans used to impose an annual corvée on those living around the lagoon that involved digging out the sandbar so that strong waves during the monsoon season could rush in and restore the lagoon's link to the sea (Miranda J. Morris, personal communication).

[127] C. J. Cruttenden, 'Memoir on the Western or Edoor Tribes, Inhabiting the Somali Coast of N.-E. Africa, with the Southern Branches of the Family of Darrood, Resident on the Banks of the Webbe Shebeyli, Commonly Called the River Webbe', *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 19 (1849), pp. 54–55; Alfredo González-Ruibal et al., 'Asia in the Horn. The Indian Ocean trade in Somaliland', *Archaeological Research in Asia* 27 (2021), p. 2; Alfredo González-Ruibal et al., 'Nomads Trading with Empires: Intercultural Trade in Ancient Somaliland in the First to Seventh Centuries CE', *American Journal of Archaeology* 126/1 (2022), pp. 120, 123, 132.

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later. Whatever the case, Russian excavations at Hağriya, a site located in the vicinity of Sūq, have revealed the remains of a fairly large settlement that was occupied between the tenth and thirteenth centuries,[128] indicating the development of a more permanent settlement in this area during and after the period described by Al-Hamdānī.

When Al-Ǧulandā was killed in battle with an ʿAbbāsid force that invaded Oman in 752,[129] the short-lived first imāmate of Oman that he had established died with him. The confused period that ensued, during which the ʿAbbāsids strove to maintain control of Oman, would last until 793, when Muḥammad Ibn Abī ʿAffān was elected *imām*, thereby establishing Oman's second imāmate.[130] With no *imām*s in the interim to enforce Al-Ǧulandā's treaty with Soqoṭrā, the island's Christian population appears to have severed ties with Oman, such that, when the *imām* Aṣ-Ṣalt Ibn Mālik al-Ḫarūṣī (r. 861–888) sought to restore Omani rule, his efforts were met with violent resistance. A key source for this turn of events is the chronicle *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān bi-sīrat ahl ʿUmān* "The Gift of the Notables Regarding the Story of the People of Oman" by Nūr ad-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Ḥumayd as-Sālimī (d. 1914). One of Oman's leading religious scholars of the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, As-Sālimī wrote this history of the Ibāḍī imāmates of Oman with the aim of providing a societal model as part of his efforts to reform the Omani society of his time.[131] Indeed, As-Sālimī can be considered the intellect behind the final Ibāḍī imāmate, which emerged in the interior of Oman in 1913 and endured until 1955.[132] To that end, As-Sālimī wrote his chronicle, in the words of Amal Sachedina, as

> not merely a chronological history but also a political and moral treatise that brought past actions, characters, and events under an analytic lens through which to designate the realizable goals toward which the true Muslim community in Oman needed to strive toward in order to restore the imamate.[133]

Valerie J. Hoffman compares the text to that of the book of 2 Kings in the Hebrew Bible in that As-Sālimī portrays the reigns of pious *imām*s as periods in which prices are low, rains are abundant, crops flourish, and people are happy, while reigns of bad *imām*s

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[128] Sedov and Vinogradov, 'Important Archaeological Discovery', p. 342.

[129] As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, pp. 78, 81; Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, Vol. X, pp. 78–79.

[130] As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, pp. 79–80; 87–89; G. Rex Smith, 'ʿUmān. 2. History', in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Peri J. Bearman et al., Leiden 2000, p. 816.

[131] Anke Iman Bouzenita, 'A Reading in the Applied Ibāḍī Fiqh of International Relations: The Directive of Imām al-Ṣalt (d. 275/888) to his Army Concerning Socotra', *Ilahiyat Studies* 10/1 (2019), pp. 8–9.

[132] Amal Sachedina, *Cultivating the Past, Living in the Modern: The Politics of Time in the Sultanate of Oman*, Ithaca–London 2021, p. 38. For a discussion of As-Sālimī's role in the revival of the Ibāḍī imāmate in Oman, as well as his views of history, see ibidem, pp. 38–51.

[133] Ibidem, p. 38.

see the rise in prices, widespread drought, and death from starvation.[134] The Christian uprising on Soqoṭrā likely struck a chord with As-Sālimī, writing as he was at a time when the British, whom he categorically calls *an-naṣārā* "the Christians", exerted political influence in Oman, as well as in that country's former territories in East Africa.[135] His correspondence with Ibāḍī Muslims based in Zanzibar make clear his uncompromising hostility to Christian/European influence in everything from clothing to education.[136] While As-Sālimī himself is obviously a very late authority, he made use of much older Omani sources, including material traceable to one Muḥammad Ibn Maḥbūb ar-Ruḥaylī, an influential Ibāḍī jurisprudent who had served as judge (*qāḍī*) of Ṣuḥār during the reign of Aṣ-Ṣalt himself.[137] The essential reliability of As-Sālimī, at least as far as his account of the Soqoṭrī uprising is concerned,[138] is also independently confirmed by the Omani scholar Abū Bakr al-Kindī (d. 1162) who, in his *Al-Muṣannaf fī ăl-adyān wa-ăl-aḥkām* "The Compilation Concerning Creeds and Judgments", quotes a portion of the letter sent by Aṣ-Ṣalt to his troops[139] on the authority of the ninth-century scholar Abū al-Ḥawārī that corresponds quite well to the text of the letter preserved by As-Sālimī, with only minor variations.[140]

According to As-Sālimī, the Christians of Soqoṭrā revolted against their Omani overlords, killing Aṣ-Ṣalt's governor, Al-Qāsim Ibn Muḥammad as-Samadī, along with his children (*wa-fitya maʿahu*), and plundering the island's Muslim population.[141] For

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[134] Valerie J. Hoffman, 'The Articulation of Ibādī Identity in Modern Oman and Zanzibar', *The Muslim World* 94 (2004), p. 205; cf. Sachedina, *Cultivating the Past*, pp. 40, 46.

[135] Amal N. Ghazal, 'Omani Fatwas and Zanzibari Cosmopolitanism: Modernity and Religious Authority in the Indian Ocean', *The Muslim World* 105 (2015), pp. 236–250; Hoffman, 'Articulation of Ibādī Identity', pp. 210–211.

[136] Hoffman, 'Articulation of Ibādī Identity', p. 211; Ghazal, 'Omani Fatwas and Zanzibari Cosmopolitanism', pp. 242–249.

[137] Bouzenita, 'Reading in the Applied Ibāḍī Fiqh', p. 10 (n. 7).

[138] Note, however, As-Sālimī's apparent misconception regarding the origin of the Christian rebels (see n. 141) and his erroneous assumption of an Omani victory in suppressing said rebellion, on which see below in the main text.

[139] For the full version of the text, as preserved in *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān bi-sīrat ahl ʿUmān*, see As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, pp. 139–153.

[140] Bouzenita, 'Reading in the Applied Ibāḍī Fiqh', p. 11. In fact, this same excerpt is not to be found in the *Jāmiʿ* "Compendium" of Abū al-Ḥawārī, though this work has ample material on the dicta of Muḥammad Ibn Maḥbūb (ibidem).

[141] As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, p. 137; Bouzenita, 'Reading in the Applied Ibāḍī Fiqh', p. 20 (n. 47). According to As-Sālimī, "the Christians acted treacherously and violated what had been established between them and the Muslims and attacked Soqoṭrā" (*ḫānat an-naṣārā wa-naqaḍū mā baynahum wa-bayn al-muslimīn wa-hağamū ʿalā suquṭrā*). This wording would seem to imply that the Christians in question hailed from outside Soqoṭrā, as opposed to their having mounted an insurrection within it. A footnote to this passage in the 1931 edition of *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān* (As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, p. 137 [n. 2]) suggests that the Christians were Ethiopians (*al-ḥabaš*), and a number of scholars have taken this identification as a given (e.g. Al-Rawas, *Oman in Early Islamic History*, pp. 174, 175; Kevin McNeer and Sarali Gintsburg, 'Transmuted memories: Slavery and its Shadow on the island of Soqotra', in: *Slavery in the Modern Middle East and North Africa: Exploitation and Resistance from the 19th Century – Present Day*, ed. Elena Andreeva and Kevin McNeer, London 2024, p. 161), even though As-Sālimī himself says nothing about the Christians' ethnicity. At most, he refers to the body of water between Soqoṭrā and

a bit of context, Al-Hamdānī claims that the Christian population of Soqoṭrā in his day included some 10,000 fighting men (*ʿašarat ālāf muqātil*),[142] and while this might be an exaggeration, the implication is that the indigenous islanders were both numerous and armed, in which case they could easily have overwhelmed a group of foreign occupiers. A Muslim woman who resided on Soqoṭrā at the time of the revolt wrote a plea for help to the *imām* Aṣ-Ṣalt in verse form, in which she describes the depraved state into which the island had fallen. As-Sālimī says nothing of the identity of this woman apart from stating that she was named Az-Zahrā' "the radiant one". This might in fact be an epithet, as other Omani authors identify her with one Fāṭima Bint Ḥamad Ibn Ḫalfān Ibn Ḥumayd al-Ǧahḍamiyya, who hailed from the village of Samad aš-Ša'n in Oman's aš-Šarqiyya region, and who had gone with her father to visit Al-Qāsim, who happened to be a relative.[143]

A key theme in this woman's poetic appeal to Aṣ-Ṣalt for liberation is Islam's replacement on Soqoṭrā by lack of faith (*kufr*), i.e. lack of Islam. In her words, Soqoṭrā "has replaced guidance with lack of faith and insubordination, the call to prayer with wooden clappers" (*istabdalat bi-ăl-hudā kufran wa-maʿṣiya wa-bi-ăl-aḏān nawāqīsan min al-ḫašab*).[144] This comment lends a bit of cultural authenticity to Az-Zahrā''s references to conditions in Soqoṭrā, for in many regions of eastern Christendom, the striking of

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Oman as the "Sea of Ethiopia" (*baḥr al-ḥabaša*) (As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, p. 138). As it happens, Ethiopian pirates are indeed known to have attacked Muslim territory during the seventh and early eighth centuries, though their activities were limited exclusively to the Red Sea region and targeted positions within relatively easy reach of Africa's Red Sea coast (Hatke, 'Northeast Africa', p. 319 [and the sources cited therein]). At no point did they venture as far as the Gulf of Aden, much less are they known to have done so as late as the ninth century, during a rather obscure period in Christian Ethiopia's history when that land was relatively marginal politically (ibidem, passim). That Aṣ-Ṣalt ordered his forces to pursue the Christian enemy as far as Cape Zanǧ (*ra's az-zanǧ*) if need be (As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, pp. 151–152) has no bearing on the origin of said enemy. Aside from the fact that Classical Arabic sources typically refer to Ethiopia as *bilād al-ḥabaša* rather than *bilād az-zanǧ* (the latter denoting the Swahili Coast), the *imām*'s statement is likely rhetorical, its intended meaning conveying something akin to the need to pursue the enemy to the ends of the earth, if that was what it took to defeat them – to say nothing of the fact that the Swahili Coast had no Christian population during this period. Also significant is the fact that, while As-Sālimī speaks of a Christian attack on Soqoṭrā, the only ships that he mentions were those that the Omanis used in their campaign to capture the island (ibidem, p. 139). In addition, there is no evidence that the early Omani imamate established a pact with Christian Ethiopia, which is unsurprising, given that Oman's main trading partners in Africa were based on the Swahili Coast, well to the south of Ethiopia. Also worth noting is the fact that the aforementioned footnote in *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān* posits, as an alternative to the Ethiopian hypothesis, that the Christians who broke their pact with the Omanis were the original inhabitants of the island (*kānū hum min sukkān al-ǧazīra*). For these reasons, it seems best to identify the Christians in question as indigenous Soqoṭrīs, in which case As-Sālimī's claim that they had attacked Soqoṭrā, as if from abroad, reflects a misunderstanding on his part. Alternatively, As-Sālimī, or the source(s) on which he relied, might have accidentally omitted a word in the phrase *haǧamū ʿalā suquṭrā*, which could conceivably have originally read *haǧamū ʿalā madīnat suquṭrā* "they attacked the town of Soqoṭrā" (i.e. the town on the island at which Omani Muslims had settled) or perhaps *haǧamū ʿalā ḥiṣn suquṭrā* "they attacked the fortress/citadel of Soqoṭrā".

[142] Al-Hamdānī, *Geographie*, p. 53; Al-Hamdānī, *Kitāb al-Iklīl*, p. 193.

[143] Bouzenita, 'Reading in the Applied Ibāḍī Fiqh', p. 20 (n. 47). It is to be noted that the feminine personal name Fāṭima is often accompanied by the qualifying element Az-Zahrā', thus Fāṭima az-Zahrā'.

[144] As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, p. 138.

wooden semantrons (*nawāqīs*, sg. *nāqūs*) takes the place of church bells.[145] The use of such devices by the Christians of the Arabian Peninsula – a region of which Soqoṭrā is, of course, a detached extension – is confirmed by a verse in the *Dīwān* of Labīd Ibn Rabīʿa al-ʿĀmirī (d. 660/661), a poet from the West Central Arabian tribal confederation of Banū ʿĀmir Ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿa. In it, Labīd recalls that, in the course of a journey from Yamāma to the Persian Gulf coast, he heard the beating of a wooden clapper (*ḍarb an-nāqūs*) when approaching Hağar,[146] a town located in the East Arabian oasis of Al-Hufūf that was home to a community of East Syrian Christians and had its own bishop at least as late as 676.[147]

That wooden clappers were used in Soqoṭrī "churches" down to the very end of Christianity's history on Soqoṭrā is even hinted at by Portuguese observers. Thus, for example, Sebastião Gonçalves, who visited the island in 1593, reported that the locals, not possessing bells, instead employed (wooden?) rods for the purpose, laying one rod on the shoulder and striking it with another rod.[148] In a similar vein, Frei António de Gouveia wrote, in his 1606 report on Soqoṭrā, that local Christians were in the habit of striking a rod, measuring two to three hand-spans, with a shorter rod as part of their religious rituals.[149] In view of these points, the reference to wooden clappers in Az-Zahrā''s letter to Aṣ-Ṣalt would appear to reflect actual ritual practice among Soqoṭrī Christians. As it happens, the Soqoṭrī language still employs *nə́ḳaš~nóḳoš* as a verb meaning "to strike" in a variety of contexts, such as to strike hard with a stick to signal the end of a ritual, to hit on the top of the head, and to knock on something close to a house to warn the inhabitants of one's arrival. It is also used in reference to a bridegroom's act of striking the lintel of the door of his bride's home before entering, thus *wə-b-ḳānə dhí di-gέhɛ ḳáriṣ̌hīyo wələ məḳəláʿa wələ mə́rḳaḥ* ***nʸúwḳaš*** *biš məṣ̌ī́fo lal imāsaḥ* "and tucked into his chest he has a stout stick, a cudgel or a herding stick with which **he will hit** the lintel of the bride's door when he enters to 'stroke' her' (i.e. take possession of her)".[150] The root of this verb, in the sense of striking, is not attested in any of the other Modern South Arabian languages, but is identical to that of the term for wooden clappers employed

[145] Siegmund Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen*, Leiden 1886, p. 276. As a symbol, wooden clappers are invested with particular significance in an unpublished homily by Jacob of Serūg (d. 521) entitled "On the Knocker and the Exhortation to Prayer" (Salam Rassi, 'Justifying Christianity in the Islamic Middle Ages: The Apologetic Theology of ʿAbdīšōʿ bar Brīḵā (d. 1318)' (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2015), p. 249). In fact, throughout Syriac and Christian Arabic literature, wooden clappers have a symbolic importance, one recurrent theme being Noah's striking of wood against wood, during his construction of the Ark, as a coded means of summoning humanity to repentance (ibidem, pp. 250–253).

[146] Labīd Ibn Rabīʿa al-ʿĀmirī, *Dīwān Labīd al-ʿĀmirī: Riwāyat aṭ-Ṭūsī*, ed. Yūsuf Ḍiyā' ad-Dīn al-Ḫālidī al-Maqdisī, Vienna 1880, p. 137 (§19.6).

[147] Christian Julien Robin and Alessia Prioletta, 'Nouveaux arguments en faveur d'une identification de la cité de Gerrha avec le royaume de Hagar (Arabie orientale)', *Semitica et Classica* 6 (2013), p. 137.

[148] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 135.

[149] Ibidem, pp. 134–135.

[150] Miranda J. Morris, personal communication.

by Az-Zahrā' in her letter to Aṣ-Ṣalt, which itself is a loanword from Syriac *naqōšā* "knocker" < *nqaš* "to knock".[151]

Regardless of the ritual practices of the Christian Soqoṭrīs, however, a revolt was a revolt. So it was that, in response to Az-Zahrā''s letter, Aṣ-Ṣalt assembled an armada of 101 ships to recapture Soqoṭrā at some point between 863 and 867.[152] As commanders of this armada, he appointed Muḥammad Ibn ʿAšīra and Saʿīd Ibn Šamlāl, instructing both that, should anything happen to one of the pair, the survivor would take his place.[153] If, on the other hand, both perished, a triumvirate consisting of Ḥāzim Ibn Hammām, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Ibn Yazīd, and ʿUmar Ibn Tamīm was to assume command of the campaign.[154] In a letter quoted in full by As-Sālimī, Aṣ-Ṣalt instructs the members of the expedition on how to conduct themselves while in Soqoṭrā. If pitched battle were to take place, for example, no children were to be killed, nor women or the elderly, save those women and elders who aided the Christians in combat.[155] As for those Muslim women who had been taken captive and impregnated by the Christians, any and all children born from these unions were to be regarded Muslim like their mothers, while captive Muslim women who had renounced Islam were to be compelled to return to the Muslim fold.[156] In addition, any Muslim Soqoṭrīs (*ahl suquṭrā min ahl aṣ-ṣalāt*) who wished to depart with the Omani force for Islamic lands would be free to do so, and were to be materially provided for until they reached said lands.[157] Aṣ-Ṣalt also lays

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[151] Cf. Biblical and Babylonian Aramaic *nəqaš* "to clap, to strike, to bang"; Jewish Neo-Aramaic *n*V*q*V*š* "to hurt, to touch"; and Qaraqosh (Christian Neo-Aramaic) *n*V*q*V*š* "to strike". (The author wishes to thank Geoffrey Khan for bringing this last example to his attention.) In his lexicon of Soqoṭrī, Wolf Leslau cites as a cognate of Soqoṭrī *nəḳaš~nóḳoš* the Hebrew verb נָקַשׁ /*nāqaš*/, which he glosses as "battre" (Wolf Leslau, *Lexique Soqoṭri (Sudarabique moderne) avec comparaisons et explications étymologiques*, Paris 1938, p. 276), though this is misleading, as the primary meaning of נָקַשׁ is "to lay snares", an action that can only with difficulty be related to beating or striking. By contrast, instances in which נָקַשׁ denotes striking represent Aramaicisms (Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English*, Jerusalem 1987, p. 427). As for the Arabic verb *naqasa* "to strike", this is a denominal derivative of *nāqūs*, as it typically denoted the act of striking the device so called. Since Soqoṭrī *nəḳaš~nóḳoš* displays the same /š/ attested in Syriac, as opposed to Arabic's /s/, and given that the root **nḳš* has not (yet) been detected in any of the other Modern South Arabian languages, one is tempted to posit that we are dealing here with a direct Syriac loanword into Soqoṭrī, introduced, perhaps, by those clerics dispatched from the Sāsānid Empire, who would have been familiar with Syriac. Here, however, due caution is in order, as Soqoṭrī retains two verbs with similar meanings, both of which share the first two consonantal radicals with *nəḳaš~nóḳoš*: *nāḳaḥ* "to hit a single blow; to knock on a lintel, a door; to strike, hit hard (e.g. a tree for foliage); to chase something away to dispel fear"; and *nāḳaʿ* "to hit, tap, strike something (with a stick), to strike with a stick to mark the end of a ritual" (Miranda J. Morris, personal communication). That consonantal roots sharing the same first two radicals often have similar meanings is a phenomenon attested elsewhere in Semitic, e.g. Arabic *ǧazara* "to slaughter" and *ǧazama* "to cut, to clip" or *faraǧ* and *faraḥ*, both meaning "joy".

[152] On the date, see Bouzenita, 'Reading in the Applied Ibāḍī Fiqh', p. 19.

[153] As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, p. 139.

[154] Ibidem, pp. 139, 146.

[155] Ibidem, p. 149.

[156] Ibidem.

[157] Ibidem, p. 151. Presumably, this refers to those foreign-born Muslims residing on Soqoṭrā, as well as, perhaps, those indigenous Soqoṭrīs who had converted to Islam.

out rules regarding conduct after Muslim rule in Soqoṭrā was restored, stipulating, for example, that Muslims were not to sell weapons on the island – presumably so as to prevent another armed insurrection – nor consume wine (*nabīḏ*).[158] Likewise, Muslims were allowed to marry only those Christian Soqoṭrī women who read the Gospel (*yaqra'na ăl-inǧīl*), i.e. who adhered to normative Christianity, and then only Christian women from among those Soqoṭrīs with whom a formal pact (*ʿahd*) had been established.[159] As for those Soqoṭrīs who did not fall into this category, their women were off limits for marriage, as was their food for consumption.[160] This last statement suggests some doubt on the part of Aṣ-Ṣalt as to how truly Christian certain elements among the indigenous population of Soqoṭrā were – a topic to which we shall return below.[161] For the time being, it bears mentioning that modern visitors to Soqoṭrā have often been struck by the laxity in religious observances among the indigenous, ostensibly Muslim islanders, particularly those inhabiting the interior, coupled with their lack of knowledge of even the most fundamental of Islamic practices.[162] That this was also the case with Soqoṭrī Christians in centuries past is conceivable.

Although As-Sālimī speaks of how the Omani force successfully routed the rebels and recaptured the island,[163] he is suspiciously vague as to exactly *how* this victory was achieved and furnishes no details on the course of the campaign. If such blind spots in As-Sālimī's account do not go far in inspiring confidence, As-Sālimī's claim of an

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[158] Ibidem, p. 150. As a cultural aside, the reference to wine suggests that Soqoṭrī Christians produced this beverage (pace the *Periplus*: Casson, *Periplus*, p. 69 [=§30.10.6–7]) – assuming, of course, that it was not imported – which is something not mentioned in other sources. Although wine production was officially, if not always consistently, proscribed in Yemen during the Islamic period – a noteworthy exception being made for the Jews – the Ancient South Arabian epigraphic record provides abundant evidence for viticulture and wine production during the pre-Islamic period (Mohammed Maraqten, 'Wine Drinking and Wine Prohibition in Arabia before Islam', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 23 [1993], pp. 97–101; Alexander Sima, *Tiere, Pflanzen, Steine und Metalle in den altsüdarabischen Inschriften: eine lexikalische und realienkundliche Untersuchung*, Wiesbaden 2000, pp. 189–196, 210–211, 250–263). The mid-first century CE *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* similarly alludes to South Arabian wine (Casson, *Periplus*, pp. 65, 67 [=§24.8.5–6, §28.9.13–14]), and it is likely that the Arabian wine which the anonymous author of that text states was exported to India (Casson, *Periplus*, p. 81 [=§49.16.20–21]) was produced in South Arabia.

[159] As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, p. 151. The allusion to reading the Gospel is undoubtedly a metaphor for adherence to normative Christianity, as it is highly unlikely that any indigenous Soqoṭrīs were literate during this period, much less possessed copies of the Bible. The marriage of Muslim men to women from among the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*), i.e. the Christians and Jews, is permitted in Islamic law, as per Qur'ān 5:5. For a discussion of this matter, see Uriel Simonsohn and Oded Zinger, 'Kinship Encounters: People and Ideas in the Medieval Islamicate World', *Medieval Encounters* 30 (2024), pp. 153–156 and passim.

[160] As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, p. 151.

[161] See below, §The Last Gasps of a Vestigial Christianity.

[162] Bent and Bent, *Southern Arabia*, pp. 351, 366; Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, p. 214. Miranda J. Morris (personal communication) notes that, as late as the 1990s, most of the indigenous inhabitants of Soqoṭrā's interior were Muslim in name only.

[163] He says merely that "they (i.e. the Omanis) seized the land, vanquished the enemies, and returned triumphant and cheerful" (*aḫaḏū al-bilād wa-hazamū al-aʿdā' wa-raǧaʿū ẓāfirīn mustabširīn*) (As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, p. 139).

Omani victory is further undermined by other Omani authors, who regard the Soqoṭrā campaign as a failure. In the *sīra* of the ninth-century scholar Ibn Abī Rūḥ, criticism is levelled at Aṣ-Ṣalt for having not successfully defeated the Soqoṭrī Christians after the latter had broken their treaty with the imāmate, while Muḥammad Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Kindī (d. 1111) states that one of the arguments posited by those who ultimately forced Aṣ-Ṣalt abdicate was his failure to liberate the (Muslim) population of Soqoṭrā.[164] Since Arabic sources are silent on Ibāḍī rule in Soqoṭrā during the period after Aṣ-Ṣalt's reign, it is difficult to evaluate the situation objectively, though it could be that the very reason for this silence is that the campaign to recapture the island was indeed a failure. To this it should be added that civil war broke out not long after Aṣ-Ṣalt's abdication, a turn of events that led to military intervention on the part of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate in 893, and when the Ibāḍī *imām* ʿAzzān Ibn Tamīm al-Ḫarūṣī fell in battle that year while fighting the ʿAbbāsid invaders, the second imāmate died with him.[165] For the next four centuries, Oman was subjected to multiple invasions from abroad, while what remained of the Ibāḍī imāmate struggled to retain as much of the country's interior as possible.[166] Given such conditions, staging a reconquest of Soqoṭrā would have been out of the question.[167]

So much for the narrative of Oman's intervention in Soqoṭrā as presented by the Ibāḍī sources. One non-Ibāḍī source, namely Al-Hamdānī, hints at memory of what might have been the same series of events. In the account of Soqoṭrī history that he had heard from his Adeni informants, the island was re-populated, following the disappearance of its monastic community, by two groups, the Mahra and the *šurāt*.[168] The latter term (sg. *šārī* "vender") is a holdover from the period of the earliest Ḫāriǧī revolutionaries and denotes those young men among the Ibāḍīs who were willing to literally sell themselves, body and soul, for the establishment of Ibāḍī rule and the elimination of injustice and oppression.[169] It was at this time, so the account claims, that the call to Islam first appeared on Soqoṭrā (*ẓaharat fī-hā daʿwat al-islām*) and the *šurāt* had increased in number.[170] In a somewhat unclear passage, Al-Hamdānī states that the *šurāt* attacked the Muslims, slaughtering all but ten of them, by which he presumably means that they slaughtered those non-Ibāḍī

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[164] Bouzenita, 'Reading in the Applied Ibāḍī Fiqh', pp. 22–23. Among the other arguments for Aṣ-Ṣalt's abdication was his senility (Michael Cook, *A History of the Muslim World: From Its Origins to the Dawn of Modernity*, Princeton 2024, p. 291).

[165] Al-Rawas, *Oman in Early Islamic History*, pp. 175–197; Smith, 'ʿUmān. 2. History', p. 816; Cook, *History of the Muslim World*, p. 291.

[166] Smith, 'ʿUmān. 2. History', p. 816.

[167] That said, the Omanis would attack Soqoṭrā again in 1669, and they even succeeded in annexing it outright five years later (Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', p. 162).

[168] Al-Hamdānī, *Geographie*, p. 53.

[169] Adam R. Gaiser, 'The Ibāḍī "stages of religion" re-examined: Tracing the history of Masālik al-Dīn', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 73/2 (2010), pp. 208, 214, 219; As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, pp. 113–115. For a detailed study of the institution of *širā'* "vending, selling" in a Ḫāriǧī and Ibāḍī context, see Adam R. Gaiser, *Shurāt Legends, Ibāḍī Identities: Martyrdom, Asceticism, and the Making of an Early Islamic Community*, Columbia 2016. The *imām* Aṣ-Ṣalt Ibn Mālik al-Ḫarūṣī also refers to Ibāḍī soldiers as *šurāt* in his missive to the expedition force charged with recapturing Soqoṭrā (As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, pp. 142, 143).

[170] Al-Hamdānī, *Geographie*, p. 53.

Muslims from among the Mahra.[171] Although Al-Hamdānī makes no mention of the Ibāḍīs by name, his use of the term *šurāt*, so closely linked with the Ḫāriǧīs, but not with Sunnī or Šīʿī Muslims, indicates that he is indeed referring here to the Ibāḍīs. That he appears to distinguish the Ibāḍīs from the Muslims suggests that he regarded them as beyond the pale doctrinally. In that case, he likely believed, or wished to believe, that, of the two groups that populated Soqoṭrā after the disappearance of the island's monks, it was the Mahra who introduced Islam. Al-Hamdānī makes no mention of the time at which the massacre by the *šurāt* took place, though obviously it can only have taken place sometime before the first half of the tenth century, when he was writing. While no mention is made of specifically Christian involvement, it is quite likely that the massacre to which Al-Hamdānī alludes occurred in the context of the uprising by Soqoṭrī Christians against their Omani overlords during the reign of the *imām* Aṣ-Ṣalt. If this is correct, it would appear, based on what Al-Hamdānī tells us, that this uprising was more than the simple Soqoṭrī Christian-Omani Muslim conflict described in Ibāḍī sources, but would also have involved those Mahra who resided on Soqoṭrā. Conceivably, these might have included some disenfranchised Mahrī (non-Ibāḍī) Muslims, together with those Mahra who might have still clung to Christianity. As we shall see, indigenous Christian Soqoṭrīs and Muslim Mahrī expatriates would make common cause against the Portuguese occupiers of their island in the early sixteenth century,[172] so a similar alliance against the Omanis seven centuries earlier is entirely possible.

A Haven for Pirates and a Den of Sorcerers

If Aṣ-Ṣalt Ibn Mālik al-Ḫarūṣī was unable to reassert Omani rule over Soqoṭrā, it would appear that no other polity was able to do so either for most of the period covered in this article. As to why other foreign powers – or at least very few – did not seek to permanently occupy Soqoṭrā during this period, this might have been because the island was not deemed economically attractive enough, despite the variety of products it offered, to warrant such an occupation.[173] Thus, while it functioned as a place at which mariners could halt in order to take on water and other provisions, and perhaps engage in a bit of trade with the locals, it never developed into a major center of trade in its own right. In other words, one did not settle in Soqoṭrā to get rich. In the words of Serge D. Elie, the island

> seems to have mutated into a settlers' colony, at least on the northern coast, made up of a mosaic population of immigrants, and seasonal vagrants, who shared the island with an indigenous people inhabiting the mountainous

[171] Ibidem.

[172] See below, §Christendom Re-Establishes Ties with Soqoṭrā.

[173] Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', p. 133.

> interior. These settlers turned it into a quasi-stateless peddlers' emporium that was loosely linked to various mainland and foreign political overlords and subjected to occasional raiding parties and temporary occupation from state and non-state actors of all provenances, until the island's final re-incorporation into the South Arabian Sultanate of Mahra during the 15th century.[174]

Roxani Margariti similarly notes that "[s]hores and islands were often no state's land, a politically ambiguous zone often out of the reach of terrestrial political authority"[175] – an observation that certainly applies to Soqoṭrā. This state of affairs effectively left the island open to whoever had the means to take advantage of it. Oftentimes, such individuals were pirates. ʿAlī Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), who was born only three decades after Aṣ-Ṣalt's campaign against Soqoṭrā, wrote in his *Murūǧ aḏ-ḏahab wa-maʿādin al-ǧawhar* "Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems" that in his day Indian warships (*bawāriǧ al-hind*) took shelter on the island and that these preyed on those Muslim seafarers who sought to visit such countries as China and India.[176] Although Al-Masʿūdī does not appear to have visited Soqoṭrā himself, he no doubt would have passed by the island on his voyage to Zanzibar.[177] The impact of these sea raids must have been fairly significant, for Al-Masʿūdī compares the activities of the Indian pirates with those of the Byzantines (*ar-rūm*) who, with their galleys (*šawānī*), interfered with Muslim seafarers from the coasts of Syria and Egypt.[178] In his *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm* "The Best of Allotments in Knowledge of the Climes", Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī (d. 991) also states that Soqoṭrā was frequented by Indian pirates, whose predations cast fear into the hearts of those sailing past the island.[179] Several centuries later, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 1229) more or less repeats Al-Masʿūdī's description of Soqoṭrā in his *Muʿǧam al-buldān* "Dictionary of the Countries", adding, however, to the latter's reference to depredations by Indian pirates the comment that this problem no longer occurred in his day.[180]

As it happens, Indian piracy was a perennial problem. Already in the mid-first century CE, the anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* speaks of the Malabar Coast as a region infested with pirates,[181] a description that is independently corroborated

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[174] Serge D. Elie, 'Soqotra: The historical formation of a communal polity', *Arabian Humanities* 10 (2010), §1., Viewed 04 October 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240536279_State-Community_Relations_in_Yemen_Soqotra%27s_Historical_Formation_as_a_Sub-National_Polity.

[175] Roxani Eleni Margariti, 'Islands and Shores: Janus-Faced Cultures at the Interstices of Land and Sea', in: *A Cultural History of the Sea in the Medieval Age*, ed. Elizabeth A. Lambourn, London 2021, p. 127.

[176] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ aḏ-ḏahab*, p. 440.

[177] Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', p. 136.

[178] Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūǧ aḏ-ḏahab*, p. 440.

[179] Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī, *Descriptio imperii moslemici*, ed. Michael Jan de Goeje, Leiden 1906, p. 14.

[180] Yāqūt, *Geographisches Wörterbuch*, p. 102.

[181] Casson, *Periplus*, p. 83 (=§53.17.25–26).

by Pliny the Elder (d. 79 CE) and Ptolemy (d. post-160 CE).[182] The Syriac *Vita* of the seventh-century monk Bar Sāhdē, a native of Dārīn in Bēṯ Qaṭrāyē (i.e. Tārūt Island, off the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia), similarly states that, in his youth, this man had embarked on a voyage to India in the company of some merchants (ʿ*am taggārē ḇ-yammā nāḥeṯ* (*h*)*wā l-aṯrā ḏ-hendwāyē*), only to be attacked by pirates (*lesṭāyē*).[183] From As-Sālimī we learn that the Omani *imām* Muhannā Ibn Ǧayfar (r. 841–851) formed a navy of no fewer than 300 ships was to combat enemies at sea,[184] and it is not impossible that Omani rule was established in Soqoṭrā in part as a further measure to curb piracy, as well as out of a desire to establish a way station for seafarers bound for East Africa, as suggested above.[185] The famed Moroccan traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1368/1377) likewise speaks in his *Riḥla* "Travelogue" of Indian pirates (*luṣūṣ al-hunūd*/*luṣūṣ al-hind*) multiple times in his account of his journeys through South Asia,[186] as well as brushes with raiding vessels (*aǧfān ġazawiyya*),[187] and in one instance a ruler who engaged in piracy himself.[188] At one point, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa himself fell victim to Indian pirates off the Malabar Coast, who seized the jewels and precious gems that the king of Sri Lanka had given him.[189] The anonymous author of *Kitāb ġarāʾib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-*ʿ*uyūn* also alludes to pirates operating in and around Soqoṭrā, to whom the indigenous folk pledged their utmost loyalty (*akṯar mubāya*ʿ*atihim*), but whom he identifies not as Indians but as Zanǧ,[190] i.e. inhabitants of the Swahili Coast (Arabic *bilād az-zanǧ*).[191] Since this is the only known reference to African pirates in association with Soqoṭrā in the pre-modern period,[192] one might dismiss this as a one-off instance of East Africans engaging in piracy in the Gulf of Aden. On the other hand, the association of – or confusion between – Indians and black Africans is not without parallel in Classical Arabic literature,[193] as is also true in

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[182] Cited in ibidem, pp. 216, 217.

[183] Paul Bedjan, *Liber superiorum seu Historia Monastica, auctore Thoma, Episcopa Margensi*, Paris–Wiesbaden 1901, p. 487.

[184] As-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-a*ʿ*yān*, p. 123.

[185] See §A Christian Island in the Gulf of Aden.

[186] Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, Bayrūt 1964, pp. 553, 574 (cf. 570).

[187] Ibidem, p. 570.

[188] Ibidem, p. 593.

[189] Ibidem, pp. 608–609.

[190] Ar-Rawāḍiyya, *Kitāb ġarāʾib al-funūn*, p. 257.

[191] For a discussion of this group, see David Goldenberg, 'It Is Permitted to Marry a Kushite', *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 37/1 (2013), pp. 29–49 (and the sources cited therein). On the possible identification of Indians as blacks in Zoroastrian tradition, see Dan Shapira, 'Zoroastrian Sources on Black People', *Arabica* 49/1 (2002), pp. 117–118.

[192] It would not, however, be the only instance of African piracy in the region, given that pirates operating out of Somalia are known to have attacked British pearl fisheries off Soqoṭrā during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (James E. Wadsworth, *Global Piracy: A Documentary History of Seaborne Banditry*, London 2019, p. 249).

[193] As a case in point, Muḥammad Ibn Ǧarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923), citing Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767/8), relates an incident in which the Ḥimyarite prince Sayf Ibn Ḏī-Yazan approached the Sāsānid emperor Kisrā, i.e. Ḫusraw I Anūšīrwān (r. 531–579), for help in liberating South Arabia from Ethiopian rule. Sayf is alleged to have informed the emperor that "ravens" (*al-aġriba*) had overwhelmed Ḥimyar, whereupon the emperor asked him whether he meant the

Syriac[194] and indeed Graeco-Roman literature,[195] in which case one might entertain the idea that the "Zanǧ" to whom the anonymous author refers were in fact dark-skinned (South?) Indians.[196] In that case, however, *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn* would be the only source known to the author of the present study that applies the term Zanǧ to Indians. As another alternative, the pirates in question might have hailed from the island of Dahlak al-Kabīr in the southern Red Sea, which was not only an important center of trade but also, beginning in the late eleventh century, the center of a sultanate that engaged in piratical activities.[197] However, while the term Zanǧ is at times vague and might denote black Africans in general, including, potentially, those inhabiting Dahlak al-Kabīr, the Dahlak sultanate emerged during the late eleventh century, i.e. a few decades after *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn* was written.[198] In view of these points, it seems best to conclude that the pirates operating in and around Soqoṭrā to whom the author of *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn* refers really were of East African origin.

In addition to the anonymous author of *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn*, a number of other commentators allude to Soqoṭrī involvement with the pirates who frequented their island. Marco Polo, for example, makes it clear that the Soqoṭrīs had no objections to the pirates' activities. In fact, he claims, booty seized by pirates found a ready market on Soqoṭrā, for the local Christians knew that the goods were stolen from "idolaters and Saracens", i.e. Hindus and Muslims, rather than from fellow Christians, so they bought them all up.[199] Polo does not identify the origin of these pirates, and while an Indian origin is certainly possible given the testimony of other sources, it cannot be excluded, for reasons outlined above, that some hailed from other regions, including East Africa. The thirteenth-century Iranian traveler Ibn al-Muǧāwir similarly states that the coastal inhabitants of Soqoṭrā maintained close ties with foreign pirates (*as-surrāq*) who, he claims, would spend up to

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Ethiopians or the Sindīs (*al-ḥabaša am as-sind*) (Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, Vol. II, p. 947). Whether or not these exact words were ever spoken, the allusion to ravens clearly functions in the text as a metaphorical reference to the feature of dark skin shared by Ethiopians and Sindīs and illustrates the association of these two groups.

[194] For example, in the Pšīṭṭā (i.e. the Syriac Bible), "Ethiopian" in Jeremiah 13:23 (Hebrew *kūšî*, Greek Αἰθίοψ) is glossed as *hendwāyā* "Indian".

[195] Philip Mayerson, 'A confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine sources', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113/2 (1993), pp. 169–174.

[196] Although correct in identifying Soqoṭrīs as Nestorian (i.e. East Syrian) Christians, the author of *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-ʿuyūn* errs in stating that Soqoṭrā was located "close to the cities of the Zanǧ" (*qarība min mudun az-zanǧ*) (Ar-Rawāḍiyya, *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn*, p. 257), suggesting that not all of the information on Soqoṭrā that he imbibed was accurate. His identification of the ethnicity of the pirates who frequented Soqoṭrā could be another case in point.

[197] Roxani Eleni Margariti, 'Mercantile Networks, Port Cities, and "Pirate" States: Conflict and Competition in the Indian Ocean World of Trade before the Sixteenth Century', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51 (2008), pp. 561–566. For some important qualifying remarks regarding piracy in this context, see ibidem, pp. 545–546, 566.

[198] Roxani Eleni Margariti, 'Thieves or Sultans? Dahlak and the rulers and merchants of Indian Ocean port cities, 11th to 13th centuries AD', in: *Connected Hinterlands: Proceedings of the Red Sea Project IV held at the University of Southampton, September 2008*, ed. Lucy Blue et al., Oxford 2010, pp. 158, 159.

[199] Yule, *Book of Ser Marco Polo*, p. 341.

six months on the island, during which time they sold their ill-gotten wares (*al-kasb*) to the locals.[200] Like Polo, he says nothing about the origins of the pirates. Not only, so Ibn al-Muğāwir tells us, did the Soqoṭrīs share food and drink with said pirates, but they also offered their own wives to them for sexual relations![201] These remarks are not without significance, given that Ibn al-Muğāwir actually visited Soqoṭrā, and thus had something of an insider's perspective. For his part, Ibn Māğid remarks on the hospitality of the Soqoṭrīs, stating that, when they encounter a stranger, they offer him water, provisions, clothes, and even their own wives.[202] Such references to the offering of wives by the locals has a ring of authenticity in that so-called sexual hospitality of this sort is well documented in mainland South Arabia during the modern period.[203] Similar liaisons between indigenous Soqoṭrī women and foreign men are reflected in a few lines from a Soqoṭrī poem in which a poor woman dreams of riches, even those gained illicitly, from those overseas traders who visited the island's capital, Ḥadīboh:

lə-d-iʿáḳob firīmə /	Would that I were a girl
ṣifíri di-ol tədīni	who was barren and could never fall pregnant!
wə-loṭ ʻid bilád əḳofəd /	For then I would go down to the town and,
ṭaf di-ho ki íno tāmer	if there were dates to be had, would give what is mine (i.e. my body).[204]

But for all the activities of Indian pirates in and around Soqoṭrā, a recent study indicates that a mere 2% of the DNA recovered from skeletons in Soqoṭrī burials dating between ~650 and 1750 CE is of South Asian origin, as compared to ~86% that can be identified as Ḥaḍramī in origin.[205] What this suggests is that, insofar as those Soqoṭrī women offered to foreign visitors – piratical or otherwise – were impregnated by the

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[200] Ibn al-Muğāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, p. 268.

[201] Ibidem. Douglas Botting claims that, as late as the seventeenth century, Gujarati sailors were contracting temporary "marriages" with Soqoṭrī *badū* women (Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, p. 160 [footnote]) – a reference, perhaps, to the *ʿurfī* or *misyār* marriages of Sunnī Muslims or the *mutʿa* marriages of Šīʿī Muslims, depending on the sect to which these Muslim(?) Gujaratis belonged. Regrettably, Botting fails to mention how he came by this information, though it is true that Gujarati inscriptions dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have come to light at Delisha and Rās Ḥawlef in northern Soqoṭrā (Bharati Shelat, 'Appendix I. Gujarati stone inscriptions from Rās Ḥowlef (Socotra)', in: *Foreign Sailors on Socotra*, ed. Ingo Strauch, pp. 407–432; Julian Jansen van Rensburg, 'Appendix II. Inscribed stones from Delisha in the journal of Ormsby', in: *Foreign Sailors on Socotra*, ed. Ingo Strauch, pp. 433–436). For his part, Botting notes a further Gujarati inscription which was discovered in Soqoṭrā during World War II, and which he claims was kept in the Aden Museum (Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, p. 160 [footnote]). Here too, however, he neglects to furnish any details.

[202] Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, p. 223.

[203] Walter Dostal, *L'univers de Machreq: Essais d'anthropologie*, Paris 2001, pp. 67–111.

[204] Miranda J. Morris, personal communication.

[205] Sirak et al., 'Medieval DNA from Soqotra', passim. For comparison, the same study indicates that ~86% of the DNA obtained from the same sample is of Ḥaḍramī origin, suggesting that migration from the Ḥaḍramawt, perhaps by the Mahra but also, no doubt, by Ḥaḍramī Arabs, had a dominant impact on the Soqoṭrī gene pool between ~650 and 1750 CE.

latter, the majority of these visitors hailed from the Arabian mainland. This genetic evidence also implies is that, if East African pirates were also active in the region, as suggested in *Kitāb ġarā'ib al-funūn*, their genetic impact was negligible. Conceivably, then, South Arabian pirates had an impact on Soqoṭrā that far exceeded any which the Classical Arabic sources would have us believe.[206] Given that Ibn al-Muğāwir would have visited Soqoṭrā not long before Yāqūt died, it would appear that the cessation of piracy in Soqoṭrī waters to which the latter refers did not last long. If anything, piracy got worse, as Ḥaḍramī chronicles examined by Robert B. Serjeant reveal that, during the fourteenth century, raids by Indian pirates reached as far as the coast of mainland South Arabia, such that the pirates besieged the town of Ẓafār (modern Al-Balīd) in Dhofar[207] in 1356 and seized the vessels anchored there until the locals paid them sufficient money.[208] For his part, the (probably) French-born William Adam (d. 1338), who in the early fourteenth century seems to have spent time on Soqoṭrā when trying to reach Ethiopia, reports that the locals would welcome anyone from anywhere, whether a pirate or a merchant (*siue pirata siue mercator*), and that those visitors with piratical intentions made raids on merchants from Aden and elsewhere who sailed through the Gulf of Aden.[209] He too makes no mention of the ethnicity of those pirates who frequented Soqoṭrā, though he does note that their activities did not help endear the Soqoṭrīs, guilty as they were perceived to be by association, to the Muslims (*sarraceni*) who conducted trade in the region.[210]

For their part, the Soqoṭrīs themselves have preserved memory of the pirates (*ṣərbə́ṭəhon*, sg. *ṣə́rbaṭ*) who used to visit their island in times past, though it is not a positive one. Such attitudes are part and parcel of more general feelings of unease with regards to the sea.[211] Thus the phrase *min rínhem* "from the sea", said of both people and goods from outside the island, often has connotations of danger or malevolence.[212] Similarly, while the Soqoṭrī *badū* might envy foreign sailors,[213] malicious forces associated with the sea are believed to occasionally rub off even on locals, with the result that the wives of fishermen, for example, are at times feared as powerful sorceresses.[214] In fact, while the accounts of Marco Polo, Ibn al-Muğāwir, and the anonymous author of *Kitāb*

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[206] Roxani Margariti names the port of Aden alongside Qays (Kīš) in the Persian Gulf and Dahlak Kabīr as one of the "independent polities using a combination of maritime expertise, force, and commercial infrastructure to claim and safeguard their share of the India trade" during the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Margariti, 'Mercantile Networks', pp. 566–567). Suggestive though this is for the present discussion, Aden lies far to the west of the Ḥaḍramawt region, in addition to which its impact on life in Soqoṭrā during the period in question is unclear.

[207] Not to be confused with the Ḥimyarite capital.

[208] Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', p. 143.

[209] Giles Constable, *William of Adam. How to Defeat the Saracens: Guillelmus Ade, Tractatus quomodo Sarraceni sunt expugnandi. Text and Translation with Notes*, Washington D.C. 2012, pp. 112–115.

[210] Ibidem, pp. 114, 115.

[211] For examples of such sentiments in Soqoṭrī oral tradition, see Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, pp. 1113, 1117, 1119.

[212] Miranda J. Morris, personal communication.

[213] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, p. 1109.

[214] Ibidem, p. 1151.

ġarā'ib al-funūn wa-mulaḥ al-ʿuyūn suggest amicable relations with the pirates, a Soqoṭrī poem portrays the piratical visitors to Soqoṭrā as a rather rapacious lot:

ʿóyug il šə́rḳaḥ mən	Men who emerged from the sea, from a sewn
rinhəm	boat[215] which they left on the wet fore-shore.
/ b-šə́rxa b-ḥiźiźítin	Men who went up two passes: a single one
il bíḳil təro śigiríti	was not large enough to take them!
/ ṭə śígerə ol sạ́ ġətútšən	Men who drank up the water of two springs:
il šírid təro ḥilmíti	a single one was not enough to quench their
/ ṭə ḥélmi ol ʻerəḥútšən	thirst!
ṣilibút ʻíləhe di-náḥar	A full-grown cow of the very best breed was
/ b-xah ol kə́no təbə́bə	slaughtered (by them), yet provided barely
	a drop of saliva for (each) mouth!
	(i.e. so vast were their appetites.)[216]

Another version of the poem hints that relations between foreign pirates and indigenous Soqoṭrīs could at times turn violent, adding the line *iyhen il-škó wə-ḥan ilmárḳaḥ* / *wə-yəhúdirin ʿan lātaġ* “They had swords and we had (only) sticks, and they were prepared for a fight to the death”.[217] That locals did not always hold pirates in high regard is suggested in another poem, one in which the poet curses an opponent believed to be descended from marauding foreigners, saying: *lə-d-ináḳer mok ʿáyni* / *ber di-gə́mbəṭo di-fúwṭax*! “I wish I could poke out your eyes, you son of a thieving pirate foreigner! Son of a parent with white between the horns.”[218] This reference is of interest, given that *ṣə́rbaṭ*, in addition to serving as a term for pirate, also denotes those who speak no language understood by the Soqoṭrīs.[219] Soqoṭrī oral tradition similarly highlights the foreignness of the pirates in such matters as their cooking habits, noting how these perplexed the locals. Thus, for example, the pirates are said to have roasted their meat on hot stones (*mə́ṣ́əbə*), a method of cooking which was regarded by the islanders as quite extravagant and wasteful,[220] albeit a method of cooking meat and fish that is still practiced

[215] A *šə́rxa* is a wooden rowboat made from planks bound together by twine (ibidem, pp. 83, 1433), the traditional manner in which sea vessels were assembled in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea regions (Abdulrahman Al Salimi and Eric Staples, *A Maritime Lexicon. Arabic Nautical Terminology in the Indian Ocean. English-Arabic Edition*, Hildesheim–Zürich–New York 2019, pp. 63–64, 65 [Fig. 27], 107–108, 152–153, 196 [Fig. 129], 202, 216) – and a very old tradition at that, as indicated by the archaeological evidence of this boat-building method as early as Egypt's First Dynasty, i.e. around the end of the fourth millennium BCE (Cheryl Ward, ‘Boat-building and its social content in early Egypt: interpretations from the First Dynasty boat-grave cemetery at Abydos’, *Antiquity* 80 [2006], pp. 118–129).

[216] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, p. 1433.

[217] Ibidem.

[218] Ibidem, p. 1599.

[219] Miranda J. Morris, personal communication.

[220] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, p. 1433.

in southern Oman and eastern Yemen.[221] Soqoṭrī oral tradition, then, preserves memory of certain aspects of Soqoṭrī-pirate relations that went unrecorded in the written sources.

In view of the threat posed by pirates operating in and around Soqoṭrā, one might well ask why the major Muslim powers of the time did not attempt to establish some semblance of control over the island, even if the economic prospects were not the best. The fact of the matter is that a few foreign powers did indeed make such attempts. Ibn Māǧid relates that, during the period of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate (i.e. 750–1258), the island was briefly ruled by a man whom the islanders overthrew by intoxicating him and his companions, whereupon they slaughtered the lot of them.[222] Unfortunately, Ibn Māǧid is quite vague about the whole affair, his reference to the period of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate simply providing a timeframe, which should not be taken to imply that the ʿAbbāsids actually ruled Soqoṭrā. The would-be ruler of Soqoṭrā is more likely to have been some freebooter, though of what origin is uncertain, given that Ibn Māǧid says nothing about his identity, apart from the fact that he was a non-Arab, possibly Iranian (*ʿaǧamī*).[223] Ibn al-Muǧāwir states that, at the time he visited South Arabia, Soqoṭrā paid a levy (*qiṭʿa*) to one Ibn al-Ḥabūḍī, i.e. Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Mazrūʿ al-Ḥabūḍī.[224] This individual, so Ibn al-Muǧāwir informs us elsewhere in his text, destroyed Ẓafār in 618 AH (i.e. 1221) and founded the new town of Al-Manṣūra in its place.[225] Little is known of the Ḥabūḍī family, apart from the fact that it hailed from the town of Ḥabūḍa near Šibām in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt and ruled the area around Al-Manṣūra until the region's

[221] Bent and Bent, *Southern Arabia*, p. 250; Aharon Geva-Kleinberger, 'Maritime terminology in the Mehri-language of the east coast of Yemen', in: *Philologisches und Historisches zwischen Anatolien und Sokotra: Analecta Semitica In Memoriam Alexander Sima*, ed. Werner Arnold et al. Wiesbaden 2009, p. 60; Marielle Risse, *Foodways in Southern Oman*, London–New York 2021, pp. xiv, 13, 107, 124, 159, 183; Miranda J. Morris, 'Harvesting the Sea among the Bəṭāḥira', in: *Harvesting the Sea in Southeastern Arabia. Volume 1: Regional Studies*, ed. Janet C. E. Watson et al., Cambridge 2025, pp. 229, 232–233. Cooking with heated stones is similarly alluded to in a Ḥarsūsī folktale (Aaron D. Rubin, 'A Ḥarsusi text re-examined', *Brill's Journals of Afroasiatic Languages and Linguistics* 13 [2021], pp. 336, 340).

[222] Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, p. 223.

[223] Gerald R. Tibbetts alludes to the questions surrounding this individual's identity in a footnote to his translation of Ibn Māǧid's text but translates *ʿaǧamī* as "Persian" all the same. For his part, Robert Bertram Serjeant links the individual in question with the Horn of Africa, known in Classical Arabic sources as *barr al-ʿaǧam* "Land of the ʿAǧam" (Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', p. 144), an interpretation adopted more recently by Kevin McNeer and Sarali Gintsburg (McNeer and Gintsburg, 'Transmuted memories', p. 162). While conceding that such a scenario is certainly possible, the author of the present study is of the opinion that, given the common application of the term *ʿaǧam* to non-Arabic speakers more broadly, though most commonly to Iranians, there is not enough data in Ibn Māǧid's text with which to establish the geographical (and ethnic) origin of the ʿAbbāsid-period freebooter, even though an Iranian origin seems the most plausible. On the term *ʿaǧam*, see Francesco Gabrieli, 'ʿAdjam', in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. 1, ed. Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb et al., Leiden 1979, p. 206, wherein it is noted that the term is the equivalent of Greek βάρβαροι, the epithet "barbarians" denoting primarily the Persians, as much for the Arabs as for the Greeks. With respect to the use of the term in geographical names like *barr al-ʿaǧam*, it is noteworthy that ʿIrāq ʿAǧamī denotes Iranian Media, while ʿIrāq ʿArabī denotes Iraq proper (ibidem).

[224] Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, p. 266.

[225] Ibidem, pp. 263, 264.

conquest by Yemen's Rasūlid Dynasty in 1278.[226] Ibn al-Muǧāwir says nothing further of Ḥabūḍī rule in Soqoṭrā though, judging from the fact that pirates continued to frequent the island, Ḥabūḍī control must have been quite loose.

As for the Rasūlids themselves, their actions against Soqoṭrā are documented in Ḥaḍramī chronicles, which state that in 1355 the officer Aḥmad Ibn ʿAbd Allāh Abā Duǧāna plundered the islands of Soqoṭrā, presumably meaning all inhabited islands of the Soqoṭrī archipelago, and imposed the poll-tax (*ǧizya*) on the locals.[227] Little evidence for foreign rule in Soqoṭrā survives from this period, however, and here too the reason could be that Rasūlid rule sat lightly on the island.[228] On other occasions, attempts to conquer Soqoṭrā failed outright. As an example, Ibn al-Muǧāwir states that the Ayyūbid Dynasty, which conquered Yemen in 1173, tried to annex Soqoṭrā during the governorship of the Ayyūbid *amīr* of Yemen, Ismāʿīl Ibn Ṭuġtakin (1197–1201).[229] To that end, one Sayf ad-Dīn Sunqur, a client (*mawlā*) of Ismāʿīl, organized a naval expedition with five galleys. When, however, these vessels approached the island, it is said to have mysteriously vanished from sight, forcing the expedition, after several days' and nights' worth of futile sailing back and forth, to return to Yemen. Although adverse weather conditions were the likeliest cause of the Ayyūbids' inability to capture Soqoṭrā, Ibn al-Muǧāwir holds Soqoṭrī sorcerers responsible.

Indeed, the reputation of Soqoṭrīs as magicians was widespread, reaching even as far as China.[230] Ibn al-Muǧāwir refers to the Soqoṭrīs in the same breath as Christians and sorcerers (*naṣārā saḥara*), citing the failed Ayyūbid attempt to conquer Soqoṭrā as an example of their prowess in the art of conjuring.[231] The Soqoṭrī proclivity for sorcery was also known to Marco Polo, who states that the archbishop of Soqoṭrā's Christian community sought to stamp out his flock's practice of sorcery – all to no avail, however, since the islanders insisted that, as their forefathers had practiced sorcery, so too must they.[232] Like Ibn al-Muǧāwir, Marco Polo speaks of the ability of Soqoṭrīs, whom he calls the best enchanters in the world, to ward off unwanted visitors, though in his case he claims that they did so by raising winds at sea that forced the seafarers to turn back.[233] As an aside, Polo states further that the Soqoṭrīs performed other sorceries, the nature of which, he claims, was better left unsaid.[234] This association with magic extended

[226] G. Rex Smith, 'Ibn al-Mujāwir on Dhofar and Socotra', *Proceedings of the Seminar for South Arabian Studies* 15 (1985), p. 84.

[227] Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', p. 143.

[228] In general, while the Rasūlids were intimately involved in maritime activities, their direct control over the coastal regions of their realm, as well as the islands off the South Arabian seaboard, was minimal (Margariti, 'Islands and Shores', p. 127).

[229] Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, p. 266.

[230] Chau Ju-kua refers to the Soqoṭrīs as sorcerers in his *Chu-fan-chï* (van Rensburg, *Maritime Traditions*, p. 10), though he likely learned of this through Muslim informants, or else informants in contact with Muslim merchants.

[231] Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, p. 266.

[232] Yule, *Book of Ser Marco Polo*, p. 341.

[233] Ibidem.

[234] Ibidem.

to other Modern South Arabian-speaking peoples as well. Writing of the Mahra, Ibn al-Muǧāwir says that they are called "the sorcerers" (*as-saḥara*) on the grounds that they possessed a mixture of ignorance and intelligence, with a bit of insanity (*fī-him al-ǧahl wa-ăl-ʿaql wa-min al-ǧunūn*).[235] Although Ibn al-Muǧāwir's choice of words might be colored a bit by confusion – or perhaps a play on words – with the ethnonym Śḥerī, denoting those who spoke the Śḥerɛ́t language,[236] there is no reason to doubt that the Mahra were, like the Soqoṭrīs, practitioners of magic. Similarly, oral tradition among the neighboring Bəṭāḥira people of southern Oman relates how witches belonging to that ethnic group played a decisive role in wars against the Portuguese, whipping up storms to wreck their ships and turning the only available drinking water into blood so as to torment them with thirst.[237] One cannot but think of the similar magical feats that Ibn al-Muǧāwir and Marco Polo attribute to Soqoṭrīs for the purpose of thwarting would-be aggressors, in addition to which the water-into-blood trope is also attested in Soqoṭrī oral literature.[238] In her recent monograph on Soqoṭrī oral tradition, Miranda J. Morris documents a poem in which curses are directed at a witch, wherein the poet refers to the witch in both the second and third persons. He begins by invoking God in the first two stanzas and explaining that a witch is plaguing the local community, after which he addresses the witch directly.

<table>
<tr><td>mitīnik tok di-ho áḷḷah
/ ʿa-l-ingé ḥé d-íkun ə́nhe</td><td>I beg you, my Lord, and hope my prayers will be answered:</td></tr>
<tr><td>diš ʿižə šin məʿidəbə
/ bilá zillə wə-mə́nhərə</td><td>This woman is a torment to us, yet she has no reason to be so angry; she has nothing to complain about.</td></tr>
<tr><td>íblig diyol išrɛ̄bunš
/ w-iśiní ḳōmo b-di-šəbʿélis</td><td>May you send someone to do something for you and he refuse to listen or do as you ask! May you see disaster staring you in the face, you and everything you own!</td></tr>
<tr><td>tígdaḥš nəḳāmə kən áḷḷah
/ wə-tóṭrib ʿiš b-śeryómo</td><td>May you be punished by God, and may His retribution descend on you with the utmost severity!</td></tr>
<tr><td>l-iṭəhór ḥígəhel lə-kəndīyo
/ l-iśtórəx moš məlʿábihun</td><td>May the protective wall (around you and yours) be destroyed, right to its very foundations! May your young ones be torn from you, root and branch![239]</td></tr>
</table>

[235] Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, pp. 271–272.

[236] G. Rex Smith, *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia: Ibn al-Mujāwir's Tārīkh al-Mustabṣir*, Aldershot 2008, p. 269 (n. 2).

[237] Miranda J. Morris, *Ethnographic Texts in the Baṭḥari Language of Oman*, Wiesbaden 2024, p. 18; cf. Morris, 'Harvesting the Sea', pp. 249–250.

[238] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, p. 2397, 2399.

[239] Ibidem, p. 1725.

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This last stanza reflects the widespread belief that even those curses directed at individuals often had implications for the targeted individual's kin.[240] Worth pointing out as well is the association of specifically women with witchcraft, a phenomenon that we have noted above in the case of those wives of fishermen who are feared as sorceresses in modern Soqoṭrī society. Ibn al-Muǧāwir similarly remarks that the female inhabitants of the town of Al-Manṣūra in Dhofar were sorcerers capable of walking to Java in a single night, attributing these magical talents to the proximity of Soqoṭrā with its famed sorcerers[241] – this despite the fact that the entirety of the town's inhabitants were Ḥaḍramī Arab settlers (*ǧamīʿ sukkāni-hā ḥaḍārim intaqalū min bilādi-him wa-sakanū bi-hā*).[242] Given that much of Soqoṭrā's economy, particularly in the island's interior, was based on pastoralism, it comes as no surprise that livestock, valued as they are, are regarded by islanders as especially vulnerable targets of witches. Thus, the poet who composed the verses quoted above continues,

wə-diš ʿižə di-xódumš to' / mən 'ə́rəhon kənš ʿaf ibáṣ́ok	And this woman (i.e. the witch): what you have done to me, reducing my goats to so few in number!
wə-kunš 'úwihər di-xarhən / əbáṣ́ok kənš mən éghəmo	Because of you, I follow behind only a handful of goats, and I hardly need to round them up in the morning to milk them (i.e. because they are so few).
ol ʿak kənš ḳāṣʿak b-mískīn / w-ol ʿak ḳə́ṣəʿa əgēmilin	Because of you, I can no longer offer hospitality to the poor and needy, nor do the right thing by guests.[243]

As we have seen, when it comes to seeking vengeance, the poet pulls no punches. In addition to divine retribution and loss of children, physical harm is also wished upon the witch.

l-éndəm ʿaš mánṭiḳ mən ṭáfḥa / wə-idəríʿ ṣerfə mitigāmo	May a huge boulder crash down the slopes and land right on top of you! May you be trapped under a slab of rock and never be able to get out![244]

[240] For a discussion of this phenomenon, with a focus on Aksumite Ethiopia, see George Hatke, 'May He and His Kin be Eradicated and Uprooted…: Curse Formulae in Aksumite Royal Inscriptions', *Folia Orientalia* 60 (2023), pp. 41–98. In an Aksumite context as well, the uprooting of kin is a common theme in curses.

[241] Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, p. 266.

[242] Ibidem, p. 265.

[243] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqoṭra*, p. 1729.

[244] Ibidem.

Poetic compositions such as these serve as reminders that the belief in witchcraft and its efficacy has continued in Soqoṭrā into the modern period. This is confirmed by Douglas Botting, who participated in the Oxford University expedition to Soqoṭrā in 1956, and who states that witch trials took place on the island at least as late as the 1950s. Botting describes in detail the manner in which such a trial took place, quoting directly from an unpublished report entitled *Witch Trials in Socotra*, written in 1955 by one Colonel I. E. Snell, the assistant adviser at al-Mukallā who at the time was residing in Soqoṭrā.[245] According to this report, the legal process would begin with the Mahrī sultan or his deputy hearing a case in which a woman was accused of witchcraft. Were he – sultan or deputy – to decide that the case was strong enough, he would then appoint an interrogator, whom Snell dubs a "tester". This tester's expert knowledge, we are told, was usually coupled with his ability to exorcise evil spirits from possessed individuals. If the accused did not plead guilty to the accusation, she would be bound hand and foot by the tester and his assistants and, at dawn the following day, would be taken by boat to a point about a mile to the east of Ḥadīboh, whereupon she was transferred to a dugout canoe that was paddled out to the open sea. At this point, the accused would be lifted out of the canoe and, long rope tied to her waist, with bags of stones to weigh her down, dropped into the sea. Were the accused to sink straight down to the seabed, she would be hauled back up and examined to see if any particles of sand from the seabed adhered to her. If they did, the process would be repeated twice thereafter. If on both occasions she sank to the bottom, she would be proclaimed not guilty. If, on the other hand, the accused were to float to the surface of the water, she would thereupon be declared a witch and taken before the sultan to be formally sentenced. In what Snell calls "the old days", the sentence for those who were declared witches was always death by being hurled from a cliff at Rās Qur to the west of Ḥadīboh, though, by the time he was writing, the accused would be merely taken to the town of Qalansīya on Soqoṭrā's northwestern coast, from which she was deported on the first departing dhow-ship, regardless of the vessel's destination. Soqoṭrī women accused of witchcraft were regularly banished to the port of Ṣūr in eastern Oman, as well as to ʿAğmān, Šarğa, and Dubayy in what is now the United Arab Emirates.[246] For his part, Snell says that whatever children such women had at the time of sentencing would remain on Soqoṭrā. Ironically, some of the women banished to the Arabian mainland became wealthy enough, on account of the economic growth generated by the petroleum industry, to support their families back home in Soqoṭrā through remittances.[247]

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[245] Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, pp. 182–184; cf. Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', p. 141.

[246] Miranda J. Morris, 'The Soqotra Archipelago: concepts of good health and everyday remedies for illness', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 33 (2003), p. 320.

[247] Peutz, *Islands of Heritage*, pp. 71, 208, 209.

Christendom Re-Establishes Ties with Soqoṭrā

Thus far, we have seen that Soqoṭrā was home to a society that, while linked to the outside world through trade, piracy, and the at times tenuous ties with the Church of the East, also liked to keep its distance from authority. The uprising against Omani rule in the mid-ninth century is a case in point. We have also seen that Classical Arabic authors were well aware of Soqoṭrā, its Christian population, and its resources. Medieval Europeans also knew of Soqoṭrā – oftentimes by such corrupted names as *Scara*, *Scorea*, *Secutera*, or even *La Locatra*[248] – as a distant, mysterious land that was populated by Christians and exported various exotic and much sought-after products. Marco Polo's travelogue was to a degree responsible for fostering such notions. Another factor was the availability of at least some of these products in European markets, among them the dragon's blood pigment mentioned in a list of imports at Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik in Croatia) dating from 1458, as well as the Soqoṭrī aloes documented at Marseilles in 1227 and at Florence in a list dated 1310–1340.[249] There is no doubt, however, that these products reached Europe not through direct contact with Soqoṭrā but by way of Muslim middlemen. Some Muslims, in turn, were aware that Soqoṭrā was known to westerners. Thus Ibn al-Muǧāwir states that, in the books of "the accursed Byzantines" (*ar-rūm al-malāʿīn*), Soqoṭrā was known as a "protected island" (*al-ǧazīra al-maḥrūsa*) in the territory of the Arabs.[250] One such "accursed Byzantine" whom Ibn al-Muǧāwir had in mind might have been Cosmas Indicopleustes, whose *Christian Topography* continued to be copied by scribes throughout the Middle Ages[251] and was regarded an authoritative source in Eastern Orthodox Christian circles as late as the seventeenth century.[252] Similarly, the significance of a community of Christians on Soqoṭrā was not lost on medieval European Christians, ever ready as they were to find eastern co-religionists with whom they might unite against the Muslims.[253]

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[248] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 53.

[249] Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', p. 135.

[250] Ibn al-Muǧāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman*, p. 267.

[251] Vassilios N. Manimanis et al., 'The Contribution of Byzantine Men of the Church in Science: Cosmas Indicopleustes (6th Century)', *European Journal of Science and Theology* 9/2 (2013), pp. 25–26.

[252] Russian geographical literature continued to be dominated by the theories of Cosmas Indicopleustes down to the end of the sixteenth century, while some amateur cosmographers in Russia still adhered to his views as late as the seventeenth century (Leo Bagrow, 'An Old Russian World Map', *Imago Mundi* 11 [1954], pp. 169, 170). Likewise, the *Christian Topography* was translated into Serbian in 1649 (Vassilios N. Manimanis et al., 'Contribution of Byzantine Men', p. 26).

[253] Hence the popularity of the myth of Prester John, a legendary Christian king in whom the Christians of Europe placed their hopes of an ally against the Muslims, on which see Andrew Kurt, 'The Search for Prester John, a Projected Crusade and the Eroding Prestige of Ethiopian Kings, c. 1200–c. 1540', *Journal of Medieval History* 39/3 (2013), pp. 1–24. Initially identified as a monarch who reigned somewhere far to the east and later associated with Ethiopia (but see Marco Giardini, 'The Quest for the Ethiopian Prester John and its Eschatological Implications', *Medievalia* 22 [2019], pp. 60–61), the figure of Prester John first appeared in the written record during the mid-twelfth century, when a letter supposedly written by him was sent to the Byzantine emperor Manuel I

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In this regard, William Adam, whom we have met above, went further than most, as this Dominican missionary, who traveled extensively in the east between 1307 and 1316 and was appointed archbishop of Sulṭānīyeh in northwestern Iran in 1318, claims to have spent no fewer than nine months on Soqoṭrā.[254] Although he never mentions Soqoṭrā by name in his *Tractatus quomodo Sarraceni sunt expugnandi* "Treatise on How to Defeat the Saracens (i.e. the Muslims)", the fact that he locates his insular place of temporary residence in the Gulf of Aden[255] leaves no doubt that it is indeed Soqoṭrā to which he refers in his treatise. In addition, William's account is not only completely free of legendary accretions but is also accurate with respect to Soqoṭrā's physical geography and topography.[256] For example, William refers to Soqoṭrā as a group of three islands (*tres insulas*),[257] by which he presumably means the three historically inhabited islands of the archipelago, i.e. Soqoṭrā proper, ʿAbd al-Kūrī, and Samḥa. He also observes that the indigenous inhabitants would flee into the mountainous interior of the main island[258] if threatened by outsiders, explaining that

> *habent* […] *non castra fortia nec ciuitates munitas et fortes, ad quas possint cum necessitas imminet confugere et defendi, sed quedam antra subterranea et petrosa foramina in preruptis montibus et inaccessibilibus, ad que habent pro singulari defensione intuitum, in quibus latitant et imponunt omnia sua mobilia et abscondunt, cum a suis hostibus inuaduntur. Hostes uero ibi moram non adessent contrahere, propter multa que causa breuitatis obmitto.*[259]
>
> […] they have no strongholds or fortified and strong towns to flee to and to be defended when necessity requires but certain underground caves and rocky chasms in precipitous and inaccessible mountains on which they rely for their only defense and in which they lie hidden and put and hide all their moveable possessions when they are invaded by their

(r. 1143–1180). Elements of this mythos draw on older apocalyptic traditions current among Eastern Christians (ibidem, pp. 64–76).

[254] Constable, *William of Adam*, pp. 102–105.

[255] Ibidem, pp. 104, 105.

[256] Charles Fraser Beckingham, 'Some notes on the history of Socotra', in: *Arabian and Islamic Studies: articles presented to R.B. Serjeant on the occasion of his retirement from the Sir Thomas Adam's Chair of Arabic at the University of Cambridge*, ed. Robin L. Bidwell and G. Rex Smith, London–New York 1983, p. 173.

[257] Constable, *William of Adam*, pp. 112, 113.

[258] Strictly speaking, William refers here to the inhabitants of all three islands (Constable, *William of Adam*, pp. 114, 115). However, while it is true that Ǧabal Ṣāliḥ on ʿAbd al-Kūrī reaches an altitude of over 473 m, and might thus have provided a mountain refuge of the sort described by William, the Dominican visitor is likely to have spent most, if not all, of his time on the main island of Soqoṭrā proper, in which case the local inhabitants' flight into the mountains to which he alludes would pertain specifically to that island.

[259] Constable, *William of Adam*, p. 114.

enemies, who do not stay there, however, for many reasons which I omit here for the sake of brevity.[260]

This is a fairly accurate description of the mountainous interior of Soqoṭrā, as well as of the use by Soqoṭrī *badū* of caves as habitations, a tradition that is well documented in modern sources.[261] William describes the indigenous folk as Christian, and while this was common knowledge among educated people of the time, he also displays awareness of the role of Aden in the network of maritime trade linking Egypt with India, as well as of Soqoṭrā's role as a way station in this network,[262] two points that lend further credence to his having actually visited the island. By virtue of the very fact that Soqoṭrā served in this capacity, William felt confident that the archipelago could function as a base for the galleys with which European powers might block the flow of maritime traffic from which Egypt derived its wealth and thereby financially cripple the Muslims.[263] Given the papal authority's inability to blockade such ports as Alexandria and ʿAyḏāb at the northern end of the India-to-Egypt route,[264] a blockade in the Gulf of Aden must have seemed to William like a viable alternative. William believed moreover that Christian Soqoṭrīs would be favorably disposed to the use of their islands in this manner, and that advice, assistance, and support would be similarly forthcoming from the potentates of India, in whose lands there was an abundance of timber with which the galleys might be built.[265] Although nothing ultimately came of this project, William's tract clearly indicates his grasp of the geostrategic importance of Soqoṭrā within the broader context of trade networks in the Indian Ocean.

William's sojourn in Soqoṭrā and his subsequent writings on the subject of a maritime blockade were the product of a more general interest in Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade on the part of medieval Europeans, a development that began with – or at least was greatly facilitated by – the Crusaders' intervention in Egypt during the mid-twelfth century. Although short-lived, this experience afforded direct insight into Egypt's role as a market for the riches of Arabia and India, as well as the importance of the Red Sea as a conduit for these riches.[266] This was not lost on Reynald of Châtillon, the baron of Oultrejourdain and erstwhile ruler of the Crusader principality of Antioch, who in 1183

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[260] Ibidem, p. 115.

[261] See, inter alia, Bent and Bent, *Southern Arabia*, p. 356; Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, pp. 169–172; Vitaly Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix: An Ethnographic Study of the People of Socotra*, Reading 1993, p. 153 (Fig. 5.5), 154, 230; Elie, 'Historical formation', p. §8. Images of cave dwellings can be seen in Botting's volume in the photographs facing Pages 160, 161, and 225. In fact, caves remained the most prevalent form of residence in Soqoṭrā's interior as late as the 1980s (Elie, 'Ecological Primordialism', p. 898).

[262] Constable, *William of Adam*, pp. 96, 97, 98–105, 112–115.

[263] Ibidem, pp. 100–105, 114, 115.

[264] Chakravarti, 'The Indian Ocean Scenario', p. 49.

[265] Constable, *William of Adam*, pp. 108–111, 114–117.

[266] Bernard Hamilton, 'The Crusades and North-East Africa', in: *Crusading and Warfare in the Middle Ages: Realities and Representations. Essays in Honour of John France*, ed. Simon John and Nicholas Morton, London–New York 2016, pp. 169–170.

dispatched an invasion of the Red Sea from the port of Ayla (modern ʿAqaba). Although Muslim sources claim that the sole purpose of the campaign was to attack Medina – and possibly Mecca, too – and to exhume Muḥammad's body, Reynald's interests seem to have been of a purely commercial nature, and to that end he attacked the port of ʿAyḏāb on the African coast, a major hub of Red Sea commerce and an entrepôt at which Nubian gold could be acquired.[267] The coast of the Ḥiǧāz was also attacked and, according to ʿAlī ʿIzz ad-Dīn Ibn al-Aṯīr al-Ǧazarī (d. 1233), better known as Ibn al-Aṯīr, the Crusaders intended to continue southwards as far as Yemen.[268] In the end, nothing came of this plan, as the Crusaders were soundly defeated by the Ayyūbids, while Reynald himself was personally beheaded by Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn in 1187. While the killing of Reynald, and the Crusaders' loss of Transjordan to the Muslims shortly thereafter, brought European activities in the Red Sea to a halt, an alternative route to the Indian Ocean opened up with the Īlḫānid Dynasty's diplomatic outreach to western powers beginning in 1262, for the purpose of forming an alliance against Mamlūk Egypt.[269] Much like Reynald de Châtillon's long-term goals in the Red Sea, nothing came of this grand scheme,[270] though the *rapprochement* with the west that the Īlḫānids established in the process nevertheless allowed Europeans to travel through Īlḫānid-controlled Mesopotamia and thereby reach the Indian Ocean by way of the Persian Gulf.[271] This, indeed, was the very route by which William Adam managed to reach Soqoṭrā. With the benefit of hindsight, we can appreciate that one of the most important consequences of William Adam's journeys, as well as those of other European travelers like Marco Polo who availed themselves of Īlḫānid protection, was the discovery that the so-called torrid or tropical zone, feared since Classical antiquity as an uninhabitable region, could in fact be safely traversed.[272] This insight would in time prove useful once the Portuguese began sailing down the western coast of Africa, and ultimately into the Indian Ocean.

Two other late medieval European authors are worthy of note here, even if the validity of their testimonies is suspect. The first of these is the Italian merchant and traveler Niccolò dè Conti (d. 1469) who, as an adolescent, had learned Arabic in Damascus and

[267] Alex Mallett, 'A Trip down the Red Sea with Reynald of Châtillon', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18/2 (2008), pp. 146–150; Margariti, 'Mercantile Networks', p. 567; Adam Simmons, 'Red Sea Entanglement: Initial Latin European Intellectual Development Regarding Nubia and Ethiopia during the Twelfth Century', *Entangled Religions* 11/5 (2020), §31–§33. DOI: 10.46586/er.11.2020.8826.

[268] ʿAlī ʿIzz ad-Dīn Ibn al-Aṯīr, *Chronicon Quod Perfectissimum Inscribitur = al-Kāmil fī ăt-tārīḫ*, ed. Carl Johan Tornberg, Bayrūt 1966, p. 490.

[269] A development of which the Mamlūks were keenly aware (Reuven Amitai-Preiss, 'Mamluk perceptions of the Mongol-Frankish rapprochement', *Mediterranean Historical Review* 7/1 [1992], pp. 50–65).

[270] *Pace* Hamilton, 'Crusades and North-East Africa', p. 174. In the words of Reuven Amitai-Preiss, "[t]he word *rapprochement* captures the true nature of the relations between the Īlḫāns and their western European counterparts", adding that it would "be an over-statement to claim that these negotiations led to a real alliance, except in the loosest sense of the word" (Amitai-Preiss, 'Mamluk perceptions', p. 51). For a useful overview of Īlḫānid relations with Europe, see Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410*, London–New York 2018, pp. 203–224.

[271] Hamilton, 'Crusades and North-East Africa', pp. 174, 178.

[272] Ibidem, pp. 168, 178.

later, starting in 1414, spent three decades traveling throughout the Near East, India, and even Southeast Asia.[273] On his return to Europe from this last region, Conti supposedly stopped at Soqoṭrā (*sechutera*) while traveling by sea from the Malabar Coast to Aden.[274] Although Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini (d. 1459), who penned a Latin account of Conti's journeys based on interviews with the man, states that Conti spent two months on the island, the most that he has to say about the place is that it produced aloes and had a Christian population.[275] Since this information was readily available in the central Islamic lands which Conti visited, and since the dimensions of 600 miles that Conti gave for Soqoṭrā are wildly exaggerated, there is reason to doubt that he ever visited the island.

The other late medieval European individual who claims to have visited Soqoṭrā is the fifteenth-century German traveler Arnold von Harff (d. 1505), who states that he had sailed to the island, which he calls *Schoyra*, from Aden. In his travelogue, he even includes illustrations of what purport to be indigenous Soqoṭrīs, along with what a supposed Soqoṭrī abecedary.[276] Von Harff describes the islanders as Christians, for the most part wealthy, and states that they "baptized" by branding crosses on the body.[277] Whether any of this derived from direct observation is, however, highly dubious. That the indigenous Soqoṭrīs of the time were Christian is more or less correct, though this was again common knowledge among educated Europeans of the day. As for the peculiar manner of baptism through branding, this may in fact have been influenced by reports of a similar practice among Ethiopian Christians that circulated in late medieval Europe.[278] Indeed, while it is generally accepted that von Harff visited Egypt and Palestine, there is no good reason for believing the account of his supposed travels to regions beyond.[279]

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[273] For a useful summary of Conti's life and career, see Ingrid Baumgärtner, 'Conti, Niccolò dei (c. 1395–1469)', in: *Travel and Exploration: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jennifer Speake, Vol. 1, New York–London 2003, pp. 277–279.

[274] John Winter Jones, 'The Travels of Nicolò Conti in the East in the Early Part of the Fifteenth Century', in: *India in the Fifteenth Century, Being a Collection of Narratives of Voyages to India, in the Century Preceding the Portuguese Discovery of the Cape of Good Hope, from Latin, Persian, and Italian Sources*, ed. Richard Henry Major, London 1857, p. 20.

[275] Ibidem.

[276] For a reproduction of the abecedary, see Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 56.

[277] Ibidem, p. 55.

[278] Verena Krebs, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe*, London 2021, p. 28; cf. Konstantin Winters et al. 'Paride de Grassi's Account of the 1481 Ethiopian Delegation to Rome', in: *Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity in a Global Context: Entanglements and Disconnections*, ed. Stanislau Paulau and Martin Tamcke, Leiden–Boston 2022, p. 68. Traditionally, Soqoṭrīs have treated various bodily ailments through cauterization (Soqoṭrī *siḥir*) (Bent and Bent, *Southern Arabia*, pp. 348, 349; Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, p. 62; Morris, 'Soqotra Archipelago', p. 321; Biedermann, *Soqotra*, pp. 1055, 1947). Sick livestock would receive similar treatment (Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, p. 679). Various ailments are likewise treated with cauterization on the Arabian mainland (Morris, *Ethnographic Texts*, p. 17). Although this is a cultural rather than a religious custom, it is not impossible that von Harff was aware of such a practice on Soqoṭrā through Muslim informants, but that this later fused in his mind with rumors of Ethiopian forms of "baptism".

[279] Quite apart from his dubious claim of having passed through Mecca – a town that was (and remains) strictly off limits to non-Muslims – while traveling overland from Palestine to Aden, von Harff gives names to Arabian places that come straight from Graeco-Roman literature, rather than from the Arabic counterparts that one would expect from a traveler who had actually journeyed through Arabia (Beckingham, 'Some notes', p. 172).

When it comes to von Harff's description of Soqoṭrā, his statement that the island paid tribute to India is demonstrably false, while his representation of Soqoṭrī costume is wildly implausible, not least given its striking resemblance to late medieval European costume![280] As for his reference to the supposed wealth of the islanders, this claim contrasts with sixteenth-century Portuguese reports, which emphasize the extreme poverty of the Soqoṭrīs. Finally, the alleged Soqoṭrī abecedary reproduced by von Harff is nothing more than a clumsy attempt to replicate *fīdal*, i.e. the syllabic script used to write such Ethiosemitic languages as Gəʿəz, Amharic, and Tigrinya![281] That von Harff heard second- or third-hand information about Soqoṭrā in the course of his travels in the east is quite likely, while the sample of *fīdal* script might be the product of an encounter with members of the Ethiopian communities in Jerusalem or Egypt – both of which were places that, to reiterate, one can confidently say that he visited.[282]

It was not until the turn of the sixteenth century, nearly two centuries after William Adam's visit, that Europeans re-established direct contact with Soqoṭrā. The Europeans in question were Portuguese, to whose exploits in the east a bit of background must first be given. After nearly four centuries, during which the Christians of Portugal gradually recaptured territory from the Muslims, King Afonso III (r. 1248–1279) finally brought an end to Muslim rule through his capture of the Algarve region in southern Portugal in 1249. Although Portuguese royalty allowed the continued presence of non-Christians in their realm for the next two and a half centuries, this came to an end in 1496, when King Manoel I (r. 1495–1521) expelled all remaining Muslims and Jews who were unwilling to accept baptism. During the fifteenth century, as Muslim and Jewish life in Portugal became ever more precarious,[283] a parallel development took place on the maritime front as Portuguese navigators began exploring the coastline of West Africa and exploiting the region's resources, human as well as mineral.[284] By the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese were shipping some 700 kg of gold each year from West Africa to Lisbon,[285] which, in turn, enabled the funding of ever more ambitious maritime expeditions.[286] While Portugal's westward expansion would lead eventually to its colonization of Brazil,

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[280] For a reproduction of the illustration in question, see Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 55.

[281] For a critical treatment of von Harff's account of his alleged Arabian journey, with a discussion of the points made above, see Charles Fraser Beckingham, 'Some Early Travels in Arabia', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 81/3–4 (1949), pp. 161–162.

[282] On these expatriate Ethiopian communities, see Samantha Kelly, 'Medieval Ethiopian Diasporas', in: *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. Samantha Kelly, Leiden–Boston 2020, pp. 428–434.

[283] Although generally more so for Jews than for Muslims (François Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal: King Manuel I and the End of Religious Tolerance (1496–7)*, Leiden–Boston 2007, pp. 253–255, 258).

[284] Jean-Paul Lehners, 'Die Anfänge der portugiesischen Expansion', in: *Von der mediterranen zur atlantischen Macht: Geschichte der europäischen Expansion bis in die frühe Neuzeit*, ed. Peter Feldbauer et al., Vienna 1999, pp. 126–129.

[285] Hansen, *Year 1000*, p. 140.

[286] John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405*, London 2007, p. 52; cf. Peter Feldbauer, 'Portugal in Asien', in: *Von der mediterranen zur atlantischen Macht: Geschichte der europäischen Expansion bis in die frühe Neuzeit*, ed. Peter Feldbauer et al., Vienna 1999, p. 190.

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at present the largest Portuguese-speaking nation, it was in the east that Portugal really came into its own as a naval power.[287] Here too, the reign of Manoel I marks a turning point, as it was during this time that a Portuguese fleet under the command of Vasco da Gama, having departed from Portugal in July of 1497, rounded the Cape of Good Hope and, by March of the following year, had made contact with the Swahili Coast, there encountering wealthy Muslim ports with long-established ties to the other countries bordering the Indian Ocean.[288] Then, in April of 1498, da Gama's fleet set sail from the town of Malindi, located on the coast of present-day Kenya, and in just under a month reached Calicut in southwestern India. With this, the Portuguese established a direct maritime link with the source of India's much sought-after spices[289] that they hoped would allow them to effectively circumvent the Muslim – and Venetian – powers of the Mediterranean basin that had long dominated the trade in spices and other eastern luxury items.[290] Not only that but, in 1500, a mere three years after da Gama had set sail from Portugal, the Portuguese established their *Casa da Índia* "India House", a commercial conglomerate that was soon replaced by the *Estado da Índia* "State of India".

Given Soqoṭrā's interconnectedness with other lands in the Indian Ocean region, it was only a matter of time before the Portuguese would make contact with the island. Already in the spring of 1503, Vicente Sodré, a captain in the first Portuguese naval patrol in the

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[287] Felipe Fernández-Armesto, 'Portuguese Expansion in a Global Context', in: *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400–1800*, ed. Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Ramada Curto, Cambridge 2007, pp. 480–481.

[288] Still useful as an introduction to the history, culture, and society of the Swahili Coast, as well as its maritime connections, is Mark Horton and John Middleton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Maritime Society*, Oxford 2000. For a shorter, more recent study on the subject, see Mark Horton, 'East Africa', in: *A Companion to the Global Middle Ages*, ed. Erik Hermans, Leeds–Kalamazoo 2020, pp. 15–39.

[289] An earlier (failed) attempt to reach India via the Strait of Gibraltar had been made in 1291 by the Genoese brothers Ugolino and Vadino Vivaldi, though it is not clear whether they attempted to do so by sailing around Africa or sailing across the Atlantic (Peter Jackson, *Mongols and the West*, pp. 263–264). It is worth noting that the earliest Portuguese maritime expeditions were not motivated by the search for spices and other eastern luxury items, the interest in which only became an important factor during the late fifteenth century (Feldbauer, 'Portugal in Asien', p. 190; Lehners, 'Anfänge', pp. 129, 139–140). Rather, expeditions in the earlier part of that century sought to scope out new routes to long-known parts of the world (ibidem, p. 129), particularly in Africa.

[290] Feldbauer, 'Portugal in Asien', pp. 204, 208. Of course, whether the Portuguese actually succeeded in this venture is quite another matter. In fact, while they did manage to regulate maritime commerce in the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese never monopolized the spice trade, nor did they succeed in cutting off Muslim merchants' access to trade routes (Feldbauer, 'Portugal in Asien', pp. 208, 211; Fernández-Armesto, 'Portuguese Expansion', p. 504; Michael N. Pearson, 'Markets and Merchant Communities in the Indian Ocean: Locating the Portuguese', in: *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400–1800*, ed. Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Ramada Curto, Cambridge 2007, pp. 98, 99–100, 101, 105; Rudi Matthee, 'The Portuguese Presence in the Persian Gulf: An Overview', in: *Imperial Crossroads: The Great Powers and the Persian Gulf*, ed. Jeffrey R. Macris and Saul Kelly, Annapolis 2012, p. 9). Likewise, Venetian long-distance trade was not weakened by the opening of a route around the Cape of Good Hope (Luciano Pezzolo, 'The Venetian Economy', in: *A Companion to Venetian History, 1400–1797*, ed. Eric Dursteler, Leiden–Boston 2013, p. 265). One reason why the Portuguese failed to achieve their goals in the Indian Ocean might have been the lack of numerical strength, there being only six or seven thousand Portuguese between Sofala and Macao in the 1540s and perhaps twice as many a half century later (Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, p. 54).

Indian Ocean, reached Soqoṭrā, though not long before perishing in a storm off Oman's Ḫurīyā Murīyā islands.[291] Then, in April of the following year, the navigator Diogo Fernandes Pereira landed on Soqoṭrā, where he waited out the season of the southwestern monsoon, during which time weather conditions make navigation dangerous.[292] Since Pereira lived to return to Portugal, he was the first explorer to provide the Portuguese court with eye-witness information on Soqoṭrā, including the claim that the indigenous inhabitants were Christians, albeit subject to Muslim Arabs, i.e. the Mahra of the ʿAfrāriyya Sultanate.[293] This regime, based at Qišn on the Ḥaḍramī coast, had established control over Soqoṭrā in 1480 with a force of a thousand men.[294] One reason for their having done so might have been to forestall expansion in that direction by the Kaṯīrids, a rival dynasty based in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt that had already, in 1462/3–1463/4, annexed the port of Aš-Šiḥr,[295] a town that had historically served as the Mahrī political headquarters (*qaṣaba*).[296] At Sūq in northern Soqoṭrā the Mahra built a fort from which they controlled the island, from whose inhabitants they collected a tribute of clarified butter from the men and woven cloaks from the women.[297] Describing the earliest period of Mahrī rule, Ibn Māǧid claims that the governor of Soqoṭrā was a woman, on whose advice the local Christian priests acted.[298] This suggests that Mahrī rule was, at least on occasion, represented by a local proxy who knew the language and customs of the island.[299] Upon hearing of Soqoṭrā and recognizing its potential, Manoel I dispatched a naval expedition in April 1506, consisting of three fleets under the command of Captain Tristão da Cunha, with Afonso de Albuquerque as second in command.[300] The expedition was charged with the tasks of: 1) consolidating the Portuguese hold on southern India; 2) controlling the ports of trade along the South Arabia coast from the Bāb al-Mandab to the Strait of Hormuz, as well as those along the East African coast; and 3) occupying Soqoṭrā, which meant maintaining a fortress there and leaving a garrison behind for the protection of the indigenous Christians.[301]

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[291] Vitaly Naumkin, 'Tribe, family and state in Mahra and Socotra: Traditional identities in the changing world', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 25 (1995), p. 39; Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 67.

[292] Beckingham, 'Some notes', p. 173; Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 67.

[293] Beckingham, 'Some notes', p. 173.

[294] Ibidem.

[295] Dostal, *Beduinen in Südarabien*, p. 106.

[296] Muḥammad Abū al-Qāsim Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, ed. Johannes Hendrik Kramers, Leiden 1967, p. 38.

[297] Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, p. 223.

[298] Ibidem.

[299] That this proxy happened to be a woman at the time when Ibn Māǧid was writing testifies to the high status enjoyed by women in traditional Soqoṭrī society. On this topic, see Naumkin, 'Tribe, family and state', passim; Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 160.

[300] Doe, *Island of Tranquility*, p. 21; Serge D. Elie, 'Soqotra: South Arabia's Strategic Gateway and Symbolic Playground', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 33/2 (2006), p. 142.

[301] Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix*, p. 39; Elie, 'Strategic Gateway', pp. 142–143.

To summarize the main course of events that followed,[302] the Portuguese roundly defeated the Mahrī garrison stationed in the fortress at Sūq in April 1507, at which point all forty survivors, out of an original force of some 100–130 men, fled into the interior of Soqoṭrā. The fort was then rebuilt and manned with a Portuguese garrison of 100–200 strong, while the local mosque was converted into a church that was named Nossa Senhora da Vitória.[303] This achieved, da Cunha sailed for India and Albuquerque for Oman in August of that same year. Once the defeated Mahra had fled inland, the Portuguese did their best to convey to the indigenous Soqoṭrīs that they were fellow Christians, that they had come to liberate them from Muslim rule, and that they were open to trade so long as the locals provided the garrison with food. The task of helping these locals reclaim their Christian faith was delegated to the Franciscan António de Loureiro, who had accompanied the Portuguese expedition, and who now set about preaching to and baptizing the Soqoṭrīs. Whether the Soqoṭrīs themselves were seriously interested in reconnecting with their Christian roots or – exceedingly poor as they were – simply feigned interest as a way of acquiring material rewards from the Portuguese is difficult to say. Whatever the case, it was not long before the Mahra, many of whom had indigenous Soqoṭrī wives, persuaded the locals that the Portuguese intended not to liberate but rule the island, and that they should cease sending food to the garrison at Sūq. Thus, following the departure of da Cunha and Albuquerque, and with the supply line to local products severed, the Portuguese garrison was eventually reduced to eating dates, jujube apples, palm-cabbage, and the occasional goat.

When word of this resistance reached Albuquerque, who had in the meantime managed to capture a number of key towns in and around the mouth of the Persian Gulf, among them Masqaṭ and Hormuz, he returned to Soqoṭrā in 1508, whereupon he went on a violent rampage, after which he imposed a punishingly high tribute on the locals, amounting to six hundred head of goats or sheep, twenty cows, and forty bags of dates, to be paid annually to the Portuguese garrison at Sūq. Unsurprisingly, this did not help ingratiate the Portuguese with their Soqoṭrī hosts, who increasingly sided with the island's resident Mahra. In the end, Albuquerque, having obtained authorization from Manoel I, sent one Diogo Fernandes de Beja to Soqoṭrā in 1511 with instructions to dismantle the fort and evacuate the garrison, along with any locals who wished to leave with it. In the end, over 200 men and as many women – mostly the Soqoṭrī mistresses of Portuguese soldiers – were shipped off to Goa. The Portuguese occupation of Soqoṭrā, then, was doomed to failure from the very beginning and, since the Portuguese realized that the island was

[302] Based on Beckingham, 'Some notes', pp. 173–177; Doe, *Island of Tranquility*, pp. 21–24; Serjeant, 'Coastal Population', pp. 160–161; Naumkin, 'Tribe, family and state', pp. 40–44; Biedermann, *Soqotra*, pp. 68–76; Elie, 'Strategic Gateway', pp. 142–144.

[303] Archaeological reconnaissance at Sūq, first conducted in 1956 by Peter Shinnie and then in 1967 by D. Brian Doe, brought to light a structure measuring 12.2 x 15.2 m and containing twelve columns, which both investigators identified with the mosque that the Portuguese converted into a church, and that the Mahra had then converted back into a mosque when they recaptured Soqoṭrā in 1511 (Doe, *Island of Tranquility*, pp. 88–90; Vitaly Naumkin and Aleksandr Sedov, 'Monuments of Socotra', *Topoi* 3/2 [1993], pp. 615–617).

actually not as well placed to control Red Sea trade as they had initially thought, the venture was never attempted again.[304]

For all the initial animosity between the Portuguese and Mahra, relations between the two sides were quickly normalized following the former's withdrawal from Soqoṭrā. Although the Portuguese lost interest in the island as a strategic base, the Mahra made no effort to prevent them from calling there to take on water and other provisions.[305] Albuquerque himself was allowed to stop there in 1513 while on his way to attack Aden, and with the Ottoman annexation of Yemen in 1517, the Mahra came to view the Portuguese as a force that could lend them assistance against, or at least serve as a counterweight to, the Ottomans.[306] Validation of this belief came in 1546, when the Kaṯīrids annexed Qišn with Ottoman assistance and massacred part of the family of the Mahrī sultan.[307] Once the Mahra teamed up with the Portuguese in April 1548, however, they succeeded in recapturing Qišn and expelling the Kaṯīrids from the town.[308] In this way, a wary friendship developed between the Portuguese and the Mahra that would last into the seventeenth century. As a token of this friendship, the Mahrī rulers of Soqoṭrā allowed the Portuguese to maintain contact with, and even preach to, the island's Christian population – though not, of course, to the local Muslims.

The Last Gasps of a Vestigial Christianity

In 1546, the Portuguese monarch Dom João III boasted in a letter to Pope Paul III that no fewer than 15,000 lapsed Soqoṭrī Christians had been converted and baptized through the agency of the Portuguese.[309] This is undoubtedly an exaggeration, however,[310] and, while further missions were sent to the island down to the turn of the seventeenth century,[311] these ultimately had little impact. Likewise, although a few Soqoṭrīs (*sacotorini*) are documented at the Jesuit College of Goa as late as November 1564, there is no indication that this project to educate the Soqoṭrīs and train them in normative Christianity bore any fruit.[312] But if Catholicism never took root on Soqoṭrā, what sort of Christianity

[304] Unsurprisingly given its brevity, little remains from the period of Portuguese occupation. When James Wellsted, a lieutenant in the Indian navy, visited Soqoṭrā in 1834, locals told him stories of treasures hidden by the Portuguese, though he observed that these "treasures" were nothing more than hilts of swords and broken fragments of armor that, once discovered, were shipped off to Masqaṭ or Zanzibar for sale (Wellsted, 'Memoir', p. 137). On the other hand, it is believed that the Portuguese were responsible for introducing oranges to Soqoṭrā (Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 93).

[305] Beckingham, 'Some notes', p. 177; Naumkin, 'Tribe, family and state', p. 46; Biedermann, *Soqotra*, pp. 76–89.

[306] Beckingham, 'Some notes', p. 177.

[307] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 79.

[308] Ibidem, p. 79.

[309] Ibidem, p. 119.

[310] The estimated total population of Soqoṭrā at the time was around 15,000! (ibidem). At the end of the nineteenth century, it was somewhere between 12,000 and 13,000 (Bent and Bent, *Southern Arabia*, p. 370).

[311] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 125.

[312] Ibidem, p. 122.

did the Portuguese encounter on the island? Indeed, *can* the religion of the indigenous Soqoṭrīs during the sixteenth century be called Christianity in any real sense? Since contemporary oral tradition in Soqoṭrā preserves no memory of the island's Christian past, our only sources for the final days of Soqoṭrī Christianity are the writings of Portuguese travelers, chroniclers, and clergymen. These sources, however, are not without problems of their own. Indeed, when assessing Portuguese descriptions of Soqoṭrī religion, one cannot but suspect that much of this material was influenced by a generous amount of wishful thinking, fueled by a desire to see traces of Christianity even in places where there were none to be found. To give an example of this phenomenon in a very different geographical context, some medieval Spanish reports on the Guanche, the indigenous, Berber-related[313] inhabitants of the Canary Islands, insist that this group believed in a single, supreme deity, the authors of said reports being driven by a desire to see in this religion similarities to European religion.[314] As Nandini Das notes, "the encounter between the traveler and the world is rarely a discrete event [but] is shaped by existing memories and expectations", one of which is "the need to find connection, however fleeting and tenuous that might be".[315] It should be noted that the desire to find the familiar in the distant and exotic, more specifically in an Indian Ocean context, has a long history in Christianity, as evidenced by the interest shown by Late Antique Christian authors, for example, in Indian ascetics, the rigor of whose spiritual and physical discipline invited comparison with the asceticism of Christian holy men based in the Mediterranean basin and the Near East.[316] The desire on the part of the Portuguese to find commonality with the religious traditions of the Indian Ocean region, including those of Soqoṭrā, is but a later iteration of this tendency.

Since Portuguese sources make no mention of Soqoṭrī contact with the Church of the East, it would appear that ties were severed sometime before the sixteenth century. As we have seen, Marco Polo states that Soqoṭrā was still receiving East Syrian bishops from Baghdad during the late thirteenth century.[317] It should be noted that this fleeting reference is also the last (known) evidence for contact between the Church of the East and Soqoṭrā. Some Portuguese authors claimed that Soqoṭrī "Christians" bore apostolic names, which said authors transcribed in such forms as "Pedros", "Joannes", "Amdres", "Tomés", and "Maria".[318] Whether these names were correctly identified is, however,

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[313] David Abulafia, 'Neolithic meets Medieval: First Encounters in the Canary Islands', in: *Medieval Frontiers*, ed. David Abulafia and Nora Berend, Burlington 2002, pp. 259, 260; Ricardo Rodríguez-Varela et al., 'Genomic Analyses of Pre-European Conquest Human Remains from the Canary Islands Reveal Close Affinity to Modern North Africans', *Current Biology* 27/21 (2017), pp. 3396–3402.

[314] Abulafia, 'Neolithic meets Medieval', 263; cf. Alexander Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters in Goa: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity*, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2014, pp. 20–21.

[315] Nandini Das, *Courting India: England, Mughal India and the Origins of Empire*, London 2023, pp. xxi, xxii.

[316] This is evidenced, for example, by the fifth-century *De gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus* (Wilhelm Berghoff, *Palladius de gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus*, Meisenheim am Glan 1967).

[317] As Marco Polo traveled across Asia between 1271 and 1295, it would have been during this time he acquired knowledge of Soqoṭrā and its people, as well as its connections to the patriarchal see of the Church of the East.

[318] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, pp. 138–139.

highly questionable. In fact, even some Portuguese authorities had their doubts, among them Frei António de Gouveia, who criticized the Portuguese historian João de Barros (d. 1570) for imputing apostolic origins to Soqoṭrī names.[319] As an example, Gouveia pointed out that the reason why Maria appeared to be such a popular feminine name was simply because the local Soqoṭrī term for woman sounded similar![320] This is an interesting point in that, while the most common word for woman in Soqoṭrī nowadays is *ʿažeh*,[321] the plural form *méʼerhéten* "women" occurs in a poetic text recorded by the Austrian Expedition to Soqoṭrā in 1898,[322] while the form *merhḗtin* (sing. *márо*) is attested as an archaism in Soqoṭrī oral traditions recently analyzed by Miranda J. Morris.[323] The term itself, deriving from the root **mrʼ*, has a number of cognates in Semitic, among them Arabic *imraʼa* "woman", Akkadian *mārtu* "daughter, girl", and Sabaic *mrʼt* "mistress, woman, girl". It could be that the Portuguese heard some form of this word used in connection with women, and tendentiously identified it with the feminine name Mary.[324]

It bears mentioning that this was not the first time that the Portuguese mistook a local word or name for "Mary" in the course of their eastward expansion. When, for example, Vasco da Gama and his men reached Malabar in May of 1498, they entered a temple at Calicut and, upon hearing what they thought was the cry of "Maria, Maria", assumed that they were in a church and knelt to pray before what they took to be a statue of the Virgin Mary – but was, in fact, a representation of the Hindu goddess Māri![325] To quote Alexander Henn,

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[319] Ibidem, p. 145.

[320] Ibidem.

[321] Leslau, *Lexique Soqoṭri*, p. 307.

[322] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 145 (n. 316).

[323] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, pp. 96, 1819, 2319.

[324] As an aside, it is customary in Soqoṭrā, when a goat is unable to give birth, that its owner will sit down behind it and pronounce a birth incantation. David Heinrich Müller transcribes this incantation as follows: *tefórigs míryam mitfirígoh teḳáʿa ítror wu-tnéfos ʿaygémoh*, which he translates as "Öffne sie, Maria, ein Öffnen; Es mögen sich öffnen die Tore und es gebäre die Verschlossene!" (David Heinrich Müller, *Die Mehri- und Soqotri-Sprache II*, Vienna 1905, p. 344). A very similar formula has been documented in Soqoṭrā in recent years: *tfərɛgš máryam təḳʿáš aʿgέmo* "May Mary open you up, May she open you, the stopped one!" (Vitaly Naumkin et al., 'Three Etiological Stories from Soqotra in Their Near Eastern Setting', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74/2 [2015], p. 292). Although Müller suspected that this formula could have been a relic of Soqoṭrā's Christian past (Müller, *Mehri und Soqotri*, p. 344 [n. 1]), this appears unlikely, given the lack of any other Christian religious or ritual relics in Soqoṭrī religious tradition. Commenting on this incantation, Vitaly Naumkin, Leonid Kogan, and Dmitry Cherkashin note that "a detailed, dramatic description of Mary's labor pains is one of the key features of the Quranic Mary/Jesus cycle (Q 19: 22–26), so that an appeal to Mary as a birth helper would be quite logical also in a popular Islamic context (except, of course, for the fact that any prayer to a human being is highly unorthodox for the strict form of Sunni Islam practiced by today's Soqotrans)" (Naumkin et al., 'Three Etiological Stories', p. 292 [n. 7]). Thus, what might initially appear to be a genuine link with Soqoṭrā's Christian past proves, upon closer examination, to be a false lead.

[325] Shaikh M. Ghazanfar, 'Vasco da Gama's Voyages to India: Messianism, Mercantilism, and Sacred Exploits', *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective* 13/1 (2018), p. 26; cf. Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters*, pp. 19–20.

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> [t]he episode in the Calicut "church" caused great sensation at its time. Even though this was not fully unexpected, the assumption of finding Christians in this faraway region of India was news of greatest significance for the king and the people of Portugal and was immediately communicated to other European nobles and the pope in Rome.[326]

This point is particularly relevant for understanding Portuguese engagement with Soqoṭrī religious traditions. Practically from the moment that Da Gama set foot in India, the Portuguese sought out local Christians, or at least those whom they suspected might be Christian, and continued to do so in the course of their eastward expansion.[327] Consequently, when they first arrived in Soqoṭrā, they were already predisposed to find Christian influence. Not only that, but there was something of a demand back in Europe for reports of Christians in the east. Indeed, many in Europe, from the general populace in Portugal to the pope himself, followed the news of such encounters with keen interest. That said, some remained skeptical of the supposed evidence of Christianity that some Portuguese believed they had found in eastern lands, hence Gouveia's reservations about the supposedly apostolic names borne by local Soqoṭrīs noted above. Similarly, historian Fernão Lopes de Castanheda (d. 1559) mentions in his account of the Calicut "church" episode that one João de Sá, a member of Da Gama's party, was concerned that the "saints" that he was ordered (by Da Gama) to worship were not actually Christian.[328]

Turning to the matter of religious leadership on Soqoṭrā during the sixteenth century, Portuguese authors state that religious affairs on the island were overseen by local priests whom they call *hodamos* or *cacizes* (sg. *caciz*, alternatively *cacique*(*s*)). According to the Jesuit missionary Gaspar Coelho (d. 1590), *hodamos* held office for a year and were sustained by alms, as well as by church tithes, consisting primarily of dates.[329] Citing correspondence with Walter Müller, Zoltán Biedermann posits that the title *hodamo* is derived from Arabic *ḫuddām*, the plural form of *ḫādim* "servant", a term that in Christian Arabic parlance can denote deacons,[330] to which a superfluous plural marker -*s* has been added in Portuguese. Independently of Müller, Federico Corriente notes *hodamo* in his study on Arabisms in Portuguese, claiming that, while no such term is attested in Soqoṭrī, positing its derivation from Arabic *ḫaddām* "servidor" poses no problems on phonetic or semantic grounds.[331] In fact, Soqoṭrī possesses several close cognates with the aforementioned Arabic terms, namely *ḥādim* in the central and eastern dialects of

[326] Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters*, p. 20.

[327] As it happens, there were actual Indian Christians in Malabar at the time of Da Gama's visit, as indeed there are today, though it is not clear what – if anything – the Portuguese at the time knew of them, or how awareness of their presence might have influenced the Portuguese search for Christians in India (Henn, *Hindu-Catholic Encounters*, pp. 21–22).

[328] Ibidem, p. 24.

[329] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 112.

[330] Ibidem, p. 111 (n. 179).

[331] Federico Corriente, 'Los arabismos del portugués', *Estudios de dialectología norteafricana y andalusí* 1 (1996), p. 57.

Soqoṭrī and *xādim* in the western dialect, along with *xídəhem*, a contemptuous diminutive in the western dialect – all of which mean "servant (m.)".[332] Moreover, the consonantal root from which these substantives are derived is well attested in Modern South Arabian verbs, thus Soqoṭrī *xédom* "to work",[333] Mehrī *xədūm* "to work",[334] Ḥarsūsī *xedōm* "to do, to make, to work",[335] and Śḥerέt *xódúm* "to work".[336] Even if one allows that deacons are referred to as *ḫuddām* in an Arabophone context – something that hardly applies to indigenous Soqoṭrī society in the sixteenth century – there is no compelling reason to suppose that the word that the Portuguese transcribed as *hodamo* denoted anything more than "servant", with no explicitly Christian connotations.

As for *caciz*, this term is derived ultimately from *qaššīšā*, a Syriac term for priest,[337] and is also attested as a loanword in Arabic in the form *qissīs* (pl. *qissīsūn*, *qasāwisa*, etc.). In Soqoṭrī, however, this term has left no trace whatsoever. Nevertheless, Ibn Mājid, writing only a few decades before the sixteenth-century Portuguese commentators on Soqoṭrī matters, uses the term *qissīs* when referring to Christian priests on Soqoṭrā.[338] Here, however, one must take care not to fall into the same trap into which some Portuguese fell when perceiving a Christian connection where none actually exists. Given that Syriac served as the liturgical language of the Church of the East, with which Soqoṭrī Christians were traditionally affiliated, it is certainly tempting to conclude that usage of the term *qaššīšā*, or some variant thereof, persisted in Soqoṭrā as late as the sixteenth century. That this term was already used during the pre-Islamic period in mainland South Arabia is indicated by CIH 541, a lengthy Late Sabaic inscription erected at Mārib during the reign of the Ethiopian-born king of Ḥimyar ʼAbrəhā (post 531–ca. 560), which at one point states that the king took time off from overseeing repair work on the local dam to celebrate Mass in the church of Mārib that, we are told, had its own priest (*qs*^{1}*s*^{1}*m*).[339] However, it is by no means clear whether adoption of the Syriac term *qaššīšā* in Sabaic should imply that this term had similarly gained currency in Soqoṭrā. Finally, early modern Portuguese authors apply the term *cacizes* not only to individuals charged with religious duties on Soqoṭrā but also to Muslim religious leaders,[340] despite the Christian origin of the term. This being the case, one can only assume that the Portuguese had heard the

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[332] Miranda J. Morris, personal communication.

[333] Leslau, *Lexique Soqoṭri*, p. 195; Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, pp. 955, 957.

[334] Thomas M. Johnstone, *Mehri Lexicon and English-Mehri Word-List, with index of the English definitions in the Jibbāli lexicon, compiled by G. Rex Smith*, London 1987, p. 437.

[335] Thomas M. Johnstone, *Ḥarsūsī Lexicon and English-Ḥarsūsī Word-List*, London 1977, p. 139.

[336] Thomas M. Johnstone, *Jibbālī Lexicon*, London 1981, p. 297. Cognates are similarly found in Maghrebi (i.e. North African) Arabic and Maltese in the verbs *xdem* and *ħadem* respectively, both of which also mean "to work".

[337] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 111 (n. 179).

[338] Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation*, p. 223 (n. 27).

[339] CIH 541/66–67 (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, p. 114).

[340] João Teles e Cunha, 'Oman and Omanis in Portuguese in the Early Modern Period (ca. 1500–1750)', in: *Oman and Overseas*, ed. Michaela Hoffmann-Ruf and Abdurahman S. Al Salimi, Hildesheim–Zürich–New York 2013, p. 229.

Arabic term *qissīs* at some point, presumably in the course of contact with Arabophone Muslims in Portugal,[341] and came to apply it indiscriminately to religious leaders of all stripes, including Muslim religious leaders who themselves never claimed such a title. Thus, there is reason to doubt that sixteenth-century Soqoṭrī Christians were still using a term derived from Syriac *qaššīšā* when referring to their "priests", which would explain why no comparable term has been identified in Soqoṭrī. As for other potential relics of Syriac in Soqoṭrī, João de Castro (d. 1548), an author and fourth viceroy of Portuguese India, claims that local Christian services were conducted in "Chaldaean" (*caldeu*).[342] While this might be construed as a reference to Syriac, it is unlikely that any of the Portuguese who visited Soqoṭrā would have recognized Syriac had they heard it. If anything, the language that the Portuguese heard in Soqoṭrā's "churches" would most likely have been Soqoṭrī.[343]

Moving now to Soqoṭrī religious structures, these are referred to in Portuguese sources as *mocamos*,[344] a term for which many Semitic cognates are attested, e.g. Arabic *maqām* "tomb of a saint, sacred place" and *maqāma* "session"; Gəʿəz *məqʷām* "place where one stands, location"; Sabaic *mqmt* "sanctuary, part of a temple"; Qatabānic *mqm* "assembly"; Minaic *mqmt* "place, seat"; Hebrew *maqōm* "place"; Ugaritic *mqm* "place, ground"; and Phoenician/Punic *mq*(*w*)*m* "location, place". Soqoṭrī also retains a cognate, *məḳām*, though this denotes a gathering of the sort ordered in times past by the Mahrī sultan to

[341] The earliest known use of the word *cacizes* occurs ca. 1468, i.e. twenty-eight years before the edict ordering the expulsion of Muslims (and Jews) from Portugal, in the chronicle of Dom Duarte de Meneses by Gomes Eanes de Zurara, in which *cacizes* denotes those "priests" who preached the teachings of Muḥammad (ibidem). Similarly, one Aḥmad Caciz and his wife Fāṭima were among those Portuguese Muslims who are documented as having sold their leases to Christians in 1497 (Soyer, *Persecution*, p. 246) – *caciz* in this instance serving perhaps as a title or epithet. Judging from the vocalization of the Portuguese term, and bearing in mind that *c* in Portuguese is pronounced as a velar consonant when followed by *a* (thus /k/) but as a sibilant (thus /s/) when followed by *i*, the Arabic word for priest would have been pronounced colloquially as *qas*(*s*)*īs*, cf. Gəʿəz *qasīs* (Edwin B. Williams, *From Latin to Portuguese: Historical Phonology and Morphology of the Portuguese Language*, 2nd Edition, Philadelphia 1962, p. 60 [§62.1, §62.2]; Corriente, 'Arabismos', p. 43).

[342] Beckingham, 'Some notes', p. 180 (n. 5).

[343] Worth noting here is the fact that Gəʿəz, the Ethiosemitic liturgical language of Ethiopia's Tawāḥədō Church, was also for a long time referred to in European circles as "Chaldaean" (ibidem, p. 180 [n. 5]; Samantha Kelly, 'The Curious Case of Ethiopic Chaldean: Fraud, Philology, and Cultural (Mis)Understanding in European Conceptions of Ethiopia', *Renaissance Quarterly* 68/4 (2015), pp. 1227–1264), while the Portuguese chronicler Gomes Eanes de Zuara (d. ca. 1474) claims, albeit in a passage attributed to the Moroccan Sīdī Abī al-ʿAbbās as-Sabtī (d. 1204), that the name of the city of Ceuta is Chaldaean and means "beginning in beauty" – when, in fact, the name derives from Latin *septem*! (Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Europe's India: Words, People, Empire, 1500–1800*, Cambridge, Massachusetts–London 2017, pp. 61, 340 [n. 36]). In view of these points, there is no reason why a language like Soqoṭrī should not have also been similarly misidentified as Chaldaean. With respect to the language used by sixteenth-century Soqoṭrīs in their religious rituals, the Spanish missionary Francisco Xavier (d. 1552) states in a letter that, during his visit to Soqoṭrā in 1542, he wrote down two or three prayers chanted by local Christians (Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 136). Unfortunately, much though such transcriptions would help settle the matter of the language used in Soqoṭrī religious ritual, not to mention the form of the (presumably) Soqoṭrī language spoken in the sixteenth century, Xavier's notes on Soqoṭrī chants have yet to be found.

[344] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, pp. 129–130.

resolve disputes between claimants,[345] rather than a built structure, and so it is closer semantically to Qatabānic *mqm*. However, a related form, *muqāma* or *mugāma*, is attested in the Arabic dialects of northwestern Yemen and the Dathīna region as a term for a pagan temple.[346] Worth noting in this regard is the fact that *mkrb*, the Sabaic term for synagogue (cf. Gəʿəz *məkʷrāb* "synagogue"), underwent a similar semantic shift, as *mikrāb* in Yemeni Arabic also denotes pagan temples.[347] Portuguese records indicate that Soqoṭrī places of worship possessed altars consisting of blocks of stone on which crosses rested, sometimes smeared with butter.[348] The Portuguese also found local Christians wearing crosses on their chests,[349] further indicating that this symbol had a special importance for them, even though they seemed unable to explain precisely *why* it was important.[350] Portuguese authors offer conflicting accounts of how congregants were accommodated in Soqoṭrī sanctuaries. Some authors claim that men and women entered these structures through separate doors, while others state that only men were allowed entry, while women and children were left to assemble outside.[351]

Remains of what might be churches have been identified in archaeological surveys of Soqoṭrā,[352] though it should be stressed that the identification of these structures as such is somewhat speculative. In their article "Monuments of Socotra", Vitaly Naumkin and Aleksandr Sedov claim that the valley in which one such alleged church is located is known as Wādī Qalisan, a name that they associate with Greek ἐκκλησία "church".[353] Walter Müller similarly endorses this etymology.[354] If correct, this would be quite significant, as Qalisan recalls the term *qls¹n* /qalīsān/ "the church", attested in sixth-century Sabaic inscriptions[355]

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[345] Miranda J. Morris, personal communication.

[346] Carlo Landberg, *Glossaire Daṯînois*, Vol. 3, Leiden 1943, p. 2544; Peter Behnstedt, *Glossar der jemenitischen Dialektwörter in Eduard Glasers Tagebüchern (II, III, IV, VII, VIII, X)*, Vienna 1993, p. 178; Peter Behnstedt, *Die nordjemenitischen Dialekte. Teil 2: Glossar. Fā' – Yā'*, Wiesbaden 2006, p. 1043.

[347] Behnstedt, *Glossar*, p. 182.

[348] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 132.

[349] Beckingham, 'Some notes', p. 174; but see Biedermann, *Soqotra*, pp. 148–149.

[350] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 162. In the Dahaisi cave, located in the eastern interior of Soqoṭrā on the western end of the Mōmī Plateau, cruciform motifs are attested in what Julian Jansen van Rensburg calls Phase 3 (Julian Jansen van Rensburg, 'The Rock Art of Dahaisi Cave, Socotra, Yemen', *Rock Art Research* 35/2 [2018], p. 185). While admitting that "it is tempting to assign all of these cruciform motifs to the well documented presence of Christianity on the island" and even that "it is highly probable that some of these cruciform motifs are related to the arrival of Christianity on the island", van Rensburg urges caution, noting that some of the cruciform motifs bear a similarity to the camel brands documented on Soqoṭrā by Theodore Bent (ibidem). In that case, it is possible that the cross is not always a religious symbol in a Soqoṭrī context.

[351] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 134.

[352] D. Brian Doe, *Socotra: An Archaeological Reconnaissance in 1967*, Coconut Grove 1970, pp. 42–43, 91; Naumkin and Sedov, 'Monuments of Socotra', p. 617.

[353] Naumkin and Sedov, 'Monuments of Socotra', p. 617.

[354] Müller, 'Zeugnisse über Sokotra', p. 189.

[355] Ja 1028/3; Ry 507/4.5; Ry 508/3.4 (Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften*, pp. 98, 101, 103) – all of them dating from the reign of the Jewish Ḥimyarite king Yōsēph 'As'ar Yaṯh'ar (ca. 522–525).

and deriving ultimately from Greek ἐκκλησία.[356] Arabic sources similarly refer to the church built by ʾAbrəhā at Ṣanʿāʾ as Al-Qalīs,[357] the Arabic definite article *al-* corresponding to the suffixed Ancient South Arabian definite article *-n*. However, the Soqoṭrī valley in question, located in the eastern part of the island, is in fact properly known as Kilissan. The etymology of this toponym is uncertain,[358] as the only derivative of the root **kls* in Soqoṭrī is *kólus* "to lie (as a woman) with legs open (for sex)" – a far cry indeed from anything having to do with churches! – but also "to hold the hands flat and open for henna to be applied".[359]

In summary, then, nothing explicitly Christian appears to have survived in the language of those Soqoṭrīs whom the Portuguese encountered in the sixteenth century,[360] an observation that further illustrates that the religion practiced by the indigenous population of Soqoṭrā was a far cry from anything that can usefully be called Christianity. In terms of symbols and rituals, we have seen that the cross retained great symbolic importance for Soqoṭrī Christians, who wore it on their chests, and who attended services in sacred structures that the Portuguese felt confident enough to call churches, on the grounds that they contained crosses. If the rods employed during religious ceremonies, as described by Portuguese observers, are indeed related to the wooden clappers of the sort alluded to by Az-Zahrāʾ in her letter to the *imām* Aṣ-Ṣalt Ibn Mālik al-Ḫarūṣī,[361] this would constitute a further link with Christian tradition elsewhere in the Near East. But for all that, the traditional religion encountered by the Portuguese on Soqoṭrā is best characterized as a vestigial Christianity – a Christianity, in effect, without Christ, one in which only the most basic ritual practices were retained, and which was heavily overlaid by pantheistic traditions that had reasserted themselves, perhaps because they had never been totally stamped out in the first place.

It will be recalled that some Portuguese regarded a few of the claims about the supposedly Christian traits of the Soqoṭrīs, such as their names, rather spurious. Other Portuguese, such as the Jesuit missionary Gaspar Coelho (d. 1590), emphasized instead what was perceived as the Jewish character of Soqoṭrī religious ceremonies, noting the

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[356] Alfred Felix Landon Beeston, 'Foreign Loanwords in Sabaic', in: *Arabia Felix: Beiträge zur Sprache und Kultur des vorislamischen Arabien. Festschrift Walter W. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Norbert Nebes, Wiesbaden 1994, p. 43.

[357] On this church, see Christian Julien Robin, 'La Grande Église d'Abraha à Ṣanʿāʾ. Quelques remarques sur son emplacement, ses dimensions et sa date', in: *Interrelations Between the Peoples of the Near East and Byzantium in Pre-Islamic Times*, ed. Vassilios Christides, Cordoba 2015, pp. 105–129. For a somewhat different interpretation of the available textual evidence, see Werner Daum, 'Abraha's Cathedral: Change and Continuity of a Sacred Space', in: *South Arabian Long-Distance Trade in Antiquity: "Out of Arabia"*, ed. George Hatke and Ronald Ruzicka, Cambridge 2021, pp. 245–259; Romolo Loreto, 'Textual Sources and Archaeological Evidence for the Study of Christian Architecture in Pre-Islamic Yemen: Notes on the Great Church of Abrāha [sic] at Ṣanʿā'', in: *Arabie – Arabies*, pp. 445–473.

[358] That the name Kilissan derives from Greek ἐκκλησία is unlikely, given that Greek *kappa* is typically rendered not /k/ but /q/ in such Semitic languages as Arabic, Syriac, Sabaic, and Gəʿəz, in which case one would expect not Kilissan but Ḳilissan if this Soqoṭrī toponym were indeed derived from the Greek word for church.

[359] Miranda J. Morris, personal communication.

[360] At least as far as those Soqoṭrī words recorded by the Portuguese are concerned.

[361] See above, §A Christian Island in the Gulf of Aden.

important role of animal sacrifice.[362] Although Coelho is apparently thinking here of ancient Israelite tradition, rather than the traditions of rabbinical Judaism, he clearly had doubts that Soqoṭrīs were Christians in any real sense. That Soqoṭrīs have traditionally practiced male circumcision might have also contributed to the association with Judaism.[363] Indigenous Soqoṭrīs were, however, by no means the only Christian community to maintain this practice. Among Ethiopian Christians, for example, male circumcision is effectively obligatory.[364] In the case of Soqoṭrā, however, the rituals associated with circumcision, as well as the terms for it, reflect very old traditions that undoubtedly predate the introduction of Christianity to the island by many centuries.[365] Present-day Soqoṭrī oral

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[362] Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 150.

[363] In contrast to mainland Yemen, Soqoṭrā has never had a Jewish community. Although the idea of resettling some five thousand European Jews from Palestine on Soqoṭrā was proposed by the British Colonial Office in 1939, this was dismissed by colonial officers with experience in South Arabia and the project never saw the light of day (Peutz, *Islands of Heritage*, pp. 121–122).

[364] On circumcision in a Christian Ethiopian context, see Steven Kaplan, 'Circumcision. Male circumcision', in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, Vol. 1, Wiesbaden 2003, p. 748.

[365] The Soqoṭrī terms for circumcision and those who undergo the operation, *ḥétin* and *məḥaytin* respectively (Leslau, *Lexique Soqoṭri*, p. 195), have numerous cognates in Semitic. In Arabic, one finds the verb *ḫatana* "to circumcise", whence the substantive *ḫitān* "circumcision", but also in the verb *ḫātana* "to ally oneself through marriage". Turning to Northwest Semitic, one similarly finds cognates in the form of *ḫtnm* "son-in-law" in Ugaritic (Aicha Rahmouni, *Divine Epithets in the Ugaritic Alphabetic Texts*, trans. J. N. Ford, Leiden–Boston 2008, pp. 184–185), as well as *ḥaṯnā* "son-in-law, bridegroom" and *eṯḥaṯan* "to marry, to be married, to become related through marriage" in Syriac, while in Hebrew the verb *ḥāṯan* means "to give one's daughter in marriage, to take in marriage", whence the substantives *ḥāṯān* "bridegroom, son-in-law", *ḥōṯēn* "father-in-law" (i.e. wife's father), and *ḥăṯūnnāh* "marriage". The term *ḫtn* "son-in-law" is also attested once in Ḥaḍramitic (Ja 957 [Albert Jamme, *The al-ʿUqlah Texts*, Washington, D.C. 1963, p. 51 (Pl. IV)]), while *ḫtn*, attested in one Minaic inscription as a patronym (Ṣanʿāʾ MM 3630 [Christian Julien Robin, 'Vers une meilleure connaissance de Kaminahū (Jawf du Yémen)', in: *Studies on Arabia in Honour of Professor G. Rex Smith*, ed. John F. Healey and Venetia Porter, Oxford 2002, pp. 196, 210–211 (Figs. 3–6)]), might also be related. The semantic link between circumcision and marriage likely dates back to a time when a youth was circumcised immediately before his marriage, and as a necessary stage in the marriage ceremony, presumably to demonstrate his bravery and calm endurance of pain in the presence of his soon-to-be bride. In fact, the book of Exodus alludes to just such an association of circumcision and marriage when it speaks of how Moses' Midianite wife Zipporah took up a piece of flint and cut off (*tiḵrōṯ*) the foreskin of her newborn son, to whom she then said, "Truly a bridegroom of blood (*ḥăṯan-dāmîm*) you are to me" (Exodus 4:25), adding, as if for clarification, "A bridegroom with regard to the circumcision (*mûlōṯ*)" (Exodus 4:26). Nick Wyatt argues, on the basis of the Hebrew Bible, that the Israelites had similarly at one point performed circumcision on individuals of more advanced age, noting that Abraham was said to have been circumcised at 99 years of age, Ishmael at 13 years, and Isaac at a mere eight days, which, in his words, "looks like an aetiology for infant circumcision (a birth rite), as a transformation of older patterns" (Nick Wyatt, 'Circumcision and Circumstance: Male Genital Mutilation in Ancient Israel and Ugarit', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33/4 [2009], pp. 411–412). In earlier times, before Islamic law made inroads into indigenous Soqoṭrī life, youths, usually aged around 14–15 years, were indeed circumcised as a prelude to marriage (Naumkin, *Island of the Phoenix*, p. 333; Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, p. 42; cf. Botting, *Island of the Dragon's Blood*, p. 187). To quote Miranda J. Morris, this procedure "was the most important rite de passage for a young man, and how he comported himself on this very public occasion would be the subject of comment and long remembered" (Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, p. 42). Likewise in mainland South Arabia, the circumcision of males was traditionally carried out when they were already young men with facial hair, as, for example, among the Dhofari Bəṭāḥira (Morris,

tradition similarly contains many archaic, pre-Christian tropes. One Soqoṭrī folktale, for example, includes the motif of the sun disguised as a woman, who might originally have been conceived as a solar goddess, together with an allusion to an oath given in the presence of the rising sun, which is also likely a relic of pantheistic tradition.[366] Discernibly Christian elements, by contrast, are conspicuously lacking, as they are as well from modern Soqoṭrī cultural and spiritual traditions.[367] In view of this, it is likely that rituals associated with pantheistic tradition were current in Soqoṭrā until fairly recent times. This impression finds some support in Frei António de Gouveia, who, writing at the turn of the seventeenth century, states that the Soqoṭrīs worshipped (*adoram*) the moon, and that they claimed that the moon was the cause of all things (*a causa de todas as causas*).[368] Likewise, traditional (i.e. pre-Arabic) Soqoṭrī names for God display parallels to pre-Christian South Arabian tradition, and even in cultures as old as that of Late Bronze Age Ugarit,[369] but again lack counterparts in Christianity. One should bear

Ethnographic Texts, p. 17 [n. 37]). In view of these links with customs in the ancient Near East, the practice of male circumcision on Soqoṭrā is clearly very old.

[366] Naumkin and Kogan, ‘Pre-Islamic reminiscences’, passim.

[367] Naumkin et al., ‘Three Etiological Stories’, p. 292 (n. 7).

[368] Quoted in Biedermann, *Soqotra*, p. 152. Douglas Botting claims that “[a]s late as the 19th century the *badū* remembered clearly and in detail the rites of their ancestors’ moon-worship” (Botting, *Island of the Dragon’s Blood*, p. 215). Since, however, he again neglects to cite his source(s), whether written or oral, Botting’s assertion must be treated with caution.

[369] One such name is *di-mənʿalētin* “He of the Highest Places”, often employed in prayers and invocations (Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, p. 88), which recalls a number of pre-Islamic deities in mainland South Arabia associated with mountains, such as ʿAṯar ʿAzīzum, Ḏāt Ẓahrān, Šams ʿĀliyat, Ta’lab Riyāmum, Ḥugrum Qāḥimum, Sāmiʿ, Šay’ān, ʿAmm Ḏū-Labaḫ, and even ‘Almaqah, the state god of the kingdom of Saba’ (Christian Julien Robin, ‘Les montagnes dans la religion sudarabique’, in: *Al-Hudhud: Festschrift Maria Höfner zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Roswitha Stiegner, Graz 1981, pp. 267–272). Of these deities, Shams and Ta’lab are qualified by adjectives that literally mean “high”; cf. *ʿly* “the supreme one”, an epithet borne by the Ugaritic god Baʿlu (Rahmouni, *Divine Epithets*, pp. 258–259). In fact, ʿĀliyat and *mənʿalētin* derive from the same root, **ʿly*. Two other Soqoṭrī names for God are *di-ġaləlinítin* “He of the Many (Small) Rainclouds” and *di-gīrhiyítin* “He of the Many Rainclouds” (Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, p. 88). The association of God with rainclouds in these two epithets recalls the association of the god Baʿlu with clouds in Ugaritic literature, hence that deity’s epithet *rkb ʿrpt* “charioteer of the clouds” (Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*, trans. and ed. Wilfred G. E. Watson, Leiden–Boston 2015, p. 181). The god of the Israelites is similarly invoked as *rōḵēḇ bā-ʿărāḇôṯ* “He who rides the clouds” in Psalm 68:5 (Alan Cooper, ‘Divine Names and Epithets in the Ugaritic Texts’, in: *Ras Shamra Parallels: The Texts from Ugaritic and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Stan Rummel, Rome 1981, pp. 458–460; Rahmouni, *Divine Epithets*, pp. 288–291). The */p/ > /b/ shift, incidentally, poses no problems when it comes to relating the Hebrew phrase to the Ugaritic, as this phonological shift is attested elsewhere in Semitic (Wolf Leslau, ‘The Parts of the Body in the Modern South Arabian Languages’, *Language* 21/4 [1945], pp. 237, 241). A similar association of a pre-Islamic South Arabian deity with clouds is found in X.BSB 191, an oracular text in Sabaic, written on a strip of wood in the cursive zabūr script during the Ry IVa Period (i.e. first century BCE–fourth century CE). The short text reads as follows:

1. *’lmqh yhs²ryn ‘mt-hw ḥm=*	’Almaqah will protect his maidservant Ḥami-
2. *yt k-b-ġymtm hml’-hw w-l-t=*	yat, since he fulfilled for her (her request) in a cloud. And may
3. *rʿn bn s¹y’ ydy mrb*	she be aware of the evil of the hands of Mārib (adapted from Peter Stein, *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelinschriften auf Holzstäbchen Staatsbibliothek in München. Band 1. Die Inschriften der mittel- und spätsabäischen Periode. 1. Teil: Text*, Tübingen–Berlin 2010, p. 623).

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in mind as well that, while many authors over the centuries noted that the indigenous inhabitants of Soqoṭrā were Christians, many of these also remarked on the islanders' reputation as sorcerers – likely another link to a pre-Christian past. In other words, their Christian identity was not the sole, or most salient, aspect of their overall identity, at least to foreign observers. Even the *imām* Aṣ-Ṣalt Ibn Mālik al-Ḫarūṣī seems to have been aware that the Christian credentials of at least some Soqoṭrīs were dubious.[370] All this is to say that Christianity likely never put down very deep roots in Soqoṭrā. From time to time, the island received clerics from abroad, but ultimately, once these ecclesiastical ties ceased, any formal trappings of Christianity that remained, such as they were, were all too easily swept away.

The Soqoṭrīs' View of their Island's Past

The version of the past preserved in Soqoṭrī oral tradition differs considerably from the past that can be reconstructed through foreign written documents, a fact that serves as a reminder that framing the sixth- to sixteenth-century phase of Soqoṭrā's history as "medieval" on the basis of such documents would not resonate with the archipelago's indigenous inhabitants. To give one particularly salient example of the disparity between oral and written sources, any recollection in oral tradition that Soqoṭrā had once been Christian has been lost, while those educated Soqoṭrīs who have heard from foreigners that this was indeed the case will emphatically deny it.[371] Soqoṭrīs have retained instead a conception of the past in which their island was only superficially touched by the outside world. So, despite the diverse range of peoples who visited Soqoṭrā over the centuries, Soqoṭrī oral tradition is characterized by a very marked insularity, preserving memory of some foreign actors but not others. In some cases, this is understandable. Given its brevity, and the fact that it occurred well over a thousand years ago, Omani rule of Soqoṭrā during the period of the first and second Ibāḍī imāmates has left no trace in the Soqoṭrī collective conscience. By contrast, Mahrī rule is still remembered, though this is unsurprising in that Mahrī rule continued down to 1967 and is thus within living memory of the older generation. As we have seen, the pirates who frequented Soqoṭrā in the period before the establishment of Mahrī rule have also retained a place in Soqoṭrī oral tradition.[372] More curious, however, is the fact that the Portuguese are barely remembered in this tradition. Although the Portuguese occupation was, like that of the Omanis, short-lived, the Portuguese continued to visit Soqoṭrā, and preach among its non-Muslim population, long after the evacuation of the Portuguese garrison in 1511. Not only that but the Bəṭāḥira of southern Oman, a region much less affected by Portuguese

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[370] According to Islamic law, as noted above (n. 159), Muslim men are permitted to marry women from among the People of the Book. That Aṣ-Ṣalt made an exception in the case of some Soqoṭrī women suggests that their claim to be People of the Book was dubious.

[371] Miranda J. Morris, personal communication.

[372] See above, §A Haven for Pirates and a Den of Sorcerers.

activities than Soqoṭrā, have preserved stories of conflict with the Portuguese (*burtəġāliyīn*), often involving the thwarting of the latter through magical means.[373]

Soqoṭrī oral tradition does, however, preserve memory of one Raḥábhən, a hero of the Di-Kíšən people, about whose exploits many stories are told, and who is alleged to have tricked some Europeans (*afráng*, sg. *frángi*) who had settled near his territory, causing them to leave Soqoṭrā.[374] This Raḥábhən, we are told, had learned that a European man and girl used to go walking by themselves and, with the help of his son and a servant, he managed to capture both. Concealing the girl in cloth before the man, Raḥábhən surreptitiously slaughtered a billy-goat, spraying its blood before the man to make it look as if the concealed girl was being slaughtered, after which the three Soqoṭrīs cooked the goat meat and ate it. Raḥábhən then released the European man, who fled back to his companions with word that he had seen the girl being slaughtered and eaten, whereupon the party promptly left the island. As for Raḥábhən, he is said to have married the girl, who in time bore him children, the descendants of whom became the tribe of Di-Kíšən. There is no doubt that this makes for some good storytelling, the point of which was to illustrate the Soqoṭrīs' ability to outwit foreign invaders.[375] (One will recall Ibn al-Muǧāwir's recounting of the story of how they supposedly made their island disappear when confronted by the Ayyūbid invasion force.) Quite apart from the question as to whether this tale has any kernel of historical truth,[376] however, there remains the question of the identity of the Europeans encountered by Raḥábhən. In some versions of the story, the girl who became Raḥábhən's wife is described as Portuguese (*burtuġālīya*), which would suggest a connection with the Portuguese occupation of Soqoṭrā between 1507 and 1511, though in other versions she is said to have been British (*bərīṭānīya*)![377] Consequently, the extent to which this story reflects genuine memory of the Portuguese occupation is at best questionable. Indeed, it is not impossible that the story began life as a tale of Raḥábhən's having acquired a wife from among some generic foreign visitors, the modification of whose nationality reflects a "learned" tradition acquired through contact with westerners (or with others who remembered a former Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean) in relatively recent times.[378]

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[373] Morris, *Ethnographic Texts*, pp. 601–604, 605–607.

[374] Naumkin et al., *Corpus*, pp. 94–99.

[375] Peutz, *Islands of Heritage*, pp. 56–57.

[376] In their South Arabian travelogue, the British travelers Theodore and Mabel Bent, who visited Dhofar in the winter of 1894–1895, note a similar instance of a foreigner integrating into local society, albeit one in which the roles were reversed. During their visit, the couple were told that an American ship had wrecked on the Dhofari coast around the beginning of the nineteenth century, whereupon the local Gara (=Qarā', i.e. Śḥɛrī) people killed the entire crew – save for the cabin boy, whom they kept as a slave. Over the years, this individual gradually gained influence, eventually becoming the shaykh of the Gara, among whom he lived, married, and died, leaving behind two daughters (Bent and Bent, *Southern Arabia*, pp. 246–247). Like the story of Raḥábhən's foreign wife, that of the foreign-born shaykh of the Qarā' is likely apocryphal.

[377] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, p. 2399.

[378] In the past at least, certain ruins in Soqoṭrā were attributed to the Portuguese, albeit on rather dubious grounds (Bent and Bent, *Southern Arabia*, pp. 363, 384). On local traditions claiming that some Soqoṭrī *badū* are

What is striking about the oral traditions associated with Raḥábhən is their concern with highly parochial matters, the story summarized above being an exception. Thus we find within this corpus of oral texts bits of advice given by Raḥábhən regarding local places and dangers to avoid, as well as accounts of Raḥábhən's relations with other Soqoṭrīs.[379] What military conflicts involving Raḥábhən are remembered by Soqoṭrīs invariably involve local actors, not foreigners, whether Portuguese or otherwise.[380] In other words, Raḥábhən belongs very much to the insular world of the Soqoṭrī *badū*.

What other memories of this past are remembered? According to Soqoṭrī tradition, the earliest inhabitants of the island are referred to as the *məšóḳdihim*, a term deriving from the pan-Semitic root **qdm*, meaning "before, first, to precede". This group is remembered as having been the first to divide up and share out the land and, as they are credited with great wisdom, many sayings and words of advice are attributed to them.[381] Of the *məšóḳdihim* it is said:

ḳedəm mos d-ífon kʰol xāren / seré lə-ġaṭhḗtin	(The wise men) of old knew everything worth knowing; they spoke of precious and valuable things (*lit*. fresh, ungrazed pastures).
ḳedəm bilīnhítin / il-sé ʿa-l-aġtirḗn	They predicted things which no-one had ever spoken or considered (before).[382]

Present-day Soqoṭrīs remember this early period as a "golden age" when the islanders ruled themselves, and from which are derived many *təmḗtil* (sg. *təmtīlo*; cf. Arabic *maṯal* "simile, parable, proverb"), i.e. stories told around, or based on, one or more poetic couplets that are sung or recited, along with *šənɛ̄biyo*, i.e. wisdom poetry attributed to those who bore the title of *nébihi*. This term is best approximated by "wise man" and denotes those who possessed spiritual power and moral authority.[383] The term *nébihi* itself is cognate with Hebrew *naḇî(ʾ)*, Biblical Aramaic *nəḇî(ʾ)*, Syriac *nḇīyā*, and Arabic *nabī* – all meaning "prophet"; cf. Akkadian *nabû* "to name, to invoke, to call" and Arabic *nabbaʾa* "to inform, to announce, to reveal". This is significant in light of the Soqoṭrī belief

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descended from the Portuguese, see Wellsted, 'Memoir', p. 214; Elie, 'Strategic Gateway', p. 145. How old such traditions are is impossible to tell. "Updating" stories about folk heroes in the manner suggested above is not without parallel elsewhere in the Near East. As an example, ʿAntara Ibn Šaddād al-ʿAbsī (d. 608), a late pre-Islamic half-Arab-half-Ethiopian poet from the Ḥiğāz, was later transformed by Arabic tradition into a mighty warrior, anachronistically contemporary with the Crusaders, whose military exploits took him to Yemen and Ethiopia, across Sudanic Africa, and even as far as Spain. For a discussion of the fictional *sīra* "biography" of ʿAntara, which was compiled in Egypt over a period extending from 1080 and 1350, see Harry Thirlwall Norris, *The Adventures of Antar*, Warminster 1980 (with a focus on those portions of the text dealing with Africa).

[379] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, pp. 2369–2403.

[380] Ibidem, pp. 2379–2387, 2397–2405.

[381] Ibidem, pp. 90, 1825.

[382] Ibidem, p. 1825.

[383] Ibidem, pp. 53–54.

that the *nébihi* was able to foretell the future, interpret dreams, and divine such things as where lost animals were to be found.[384] It is also significant given that the Soqoṭrī causative verb *šenébi*, from which *šənɛ̄biyo* is derived, means “to reflect, to prophesy, to tell the future”.[385] The oldest attestations of a cognate term are found in cuneiform texts from Mari (in eastern Syria) dating from the first half of the eighteenth century BCE and containing many references to prophetic activity using a variety of titles, one of which is *nabû* “diviner(?)”.[386] As can be seen in the saying quoted above, the ability to foretell the future is also associated by Soqoṭrīs with the *məšóḳdihim* more broadly.

Sayings attributed to the wise men of bygone times in Soqoṭrā, much like those attributed to Raḥábhən, are concerned exclusively with the society and lifestyle of Soqoṭrī pastoralists. None of them refer to the outside world or to events that can be linked to the outside world. Instead, as befits a pastoral society, many such sayings are concerned with rainfall and the rising of stars associated with rainfall,[387] general weather patterns and seasons of the year,[388] pasturelands and care for livestock,[389] and the date harvest;[390] while others are concerned with personal character, relations between the sexes, and family.[391] These sayings are regarded as more than mere quaint maxims handed down from olden times. Rather, the words of the wise men of the past are believed to be invested with great powers capable of influencing nature itself. This sentiment is reflected in a petition in verse form for rain and good health for livestock and their owners, in which it is said:

ṣ̌ɛ̄bi tərōgum b-xéyhur / nəxudəm wə-l-išíṣəbhin	Let the sky be completely obscured by dark rainclouds! We shall work hard and be overjoyed!
il-ol taʿśíśən moyh il-góš / il-ṣéfrur wə-di-ġārdəhən	(May it be the kind of rain) that does not bring up harmful plants like the *ṣéfrur* and *di-ġārdəhən* ones!
il-ol ḥarídən moyh ʻə́rəhon / išíṣəbhin lə-merʿéyo	May the goats not develop cysts and sores in the intestine from them, but instead enjoy and profit from the pastures!
ʿan ol di-nébihi diš kə́ləmo / w-ol ber ʸhɛ̄wan di-ʿámeris	But these words (of mine) are not those spoken by the *nébihi* of old; they are not those of Ber ʸHɛ̄wan.

[384] Ibidem, p. 90.

[385] Ibidem, p. 54 (n. 5).

[386] Herbert B. Huffmon, ‘Prophecy. Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy’, in: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Vol. 5, New York 1992, pp. 478–479.

[387] Morris, *Oral Art of Soqotra*, pp. 1777, 1778, 1783, 1785, 1787.

[388] Ibidem, pp. 1781, 1783, 1795, 1797, 1799.

[389] Ibidem, pp. 1787, 1789, 1791, 1793, 1797, 1799, 1801.

[390] Ibidem, pp. 1823, 1825.

[391] Ibidem, pp. 1801–1815, 1817–1821.

il təḳuʿdən mos ṣīref / məṭəro di-zirəkəno	(Whose words caused) the rainwaters to cascade down the deep ravines and the wooded tributary of Di-Zirəkə́no,
il təḳuʿśən lə-di-gʸúwśiś / wə-tənhéren lə-kímʿid	To flow across the pastures of Di-Gʸúwśiś, and to continue on their way down to Kímʿid.[392]

For a bit of context, Ber ʸHɛ̄wan was a famous man from the Bísri people of Soqoṭrā who, among other miraculous exploits, is reputed to have on one occasion summoned a curse upon a date-palm garden belonging to the sultan of the time, when the latter imposed an unreasonably high tax in the form of a hundred goat skins. According to some Soqoṭrīs, a number of date-palms at the same spot still sicken or die each year.[393]

Of the political system that prevailed on Soqoṭrā in the period before Mahrī rule, indigenous oral tradition recalls that the island was governed by a regime of despotic rulers known as *məkóhin* (sg. *mákun*) who are believed to have possessed supernatural powers and great building skills, and to whom those ruins of particularly impressive size that dot the island are attributed.[394] These structures are regarded with a degree of angst by modern Soqoṭrīs, as they are thought to be the haunts of spirits of the dead, known as *ḥádbəho* or *íṣməho*.[395] Such attitudes to ruins have themselves a long history in Soqoṭrā. Thus, in the account of his visit to Soqoṭrā in 1615 while en route to India, Sir Thomas Roe cites the experiences of another English traveler, Humphrey Boughton, who had also visited the island, and who had found there "an Alter with Images and a Crosse upon yt" in what he took to be a church on the way to "Tamara" (i.e. Tamarida, a byname of Ḥadīboh).[396] Supposedly, Boughton's Soqoṭrī guide was unwilling to enter the structure, out of fear of the spirits that dwelled there, and dismissed its religious relics as belonging to the people of "another religion", such that he was "very loathe to haue them much enquired after".[397] During his visit to Soqoṭrā in 1896–1897, Theodore Bent similarly found himself unable to persuade locals to excavate a ruined structure, so afraid were they of the evil spirit that they believed resided beneath it.[398] Although the *məkóhin* are remembered as wielding temporal rather than spiritual power, the etymology of the name by which they are known suggests that they too had spiritual responsibilities similar to those of the *nébihi* in Soqoṭrī society during times past. Deriving from the root **khn*, the word *məkóhin* is cognate with the term for the priestly caste of *kōhănîm* (sg. *kōhēn*) among the Israelites, whose members claimed descent from Moses' brother Aaron, and

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[392] Ibidem, pp. 1843, 1845.

[393] Ibidem, p. 89.

[394] Ibidem, pp. 90, 215–216.

[395] Ibidem, pp. 213–214, 216, 219–220.

[396] Sir Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to the Court of the Great Mogul, 1615–1619, as Narrated in his Journal and Correspondence*, ed. William Foster, London 1899, p. 33.

[397] Ibidem. For a recent account of Roe's mission to India, see Das, *Courting India*, passim.

[398] Bent and Bent, *Southern Arabia*, p. 375.

who were charged with the task of performing the sacrificial offerings in the Temple in Jerusalem.[399] A cognate term for priest, *khn*, is also attested in Ugaritic and Phoenician/ Punic. Syriac yields a further cognate in the form of *kāhnā*, which similarly designates priests, though for Christian priests the aforementioned term *qaššīšā* is preferred.

Soothsayers in pre-Islamic Arabia were similarly known as *kuhhān* or *kahana* (sg. *kāhin*). In addition to serving as the custodian of a temple or shrine, the *kāhin* was called upon to predict events, interpret dreams, and provide advice regarding difficult situations.[400] Oracular statements pronounced by the *kāhin*, purporting to derive from a familiar spirit (*tābiʿ*), were couched in rhythmic cadences (*sağʿ*).[401] Although the Qur'ān stresses that Muḥammad was a prophet (*nabī*) rather than a *kāhin*,[402] descriptions of his state at the time when he supposedly received divine revelations closely parallel the state of the *kāhin* upon receiving inspiration from a familiar spirit.[403] In other words, the line between soothsayer and prophet was a blurry one in ancient Arabia. In view of these points, as well as the semantic field of terms derived from the root **khn*, it is likely that the *məkóhin* of Soqoṭrā at one time had religious or cultic duties alongside their political responsibilities. That the related Soqoṭrī terms *kέhin* and *kέhinə* denote sorcerers and sorceresses respectively would seem to support the hypothesis that the *məkóhin* were originally political overlords who were also invested with religious, cultic, and/or magic powers. To cite a possible parallel, the rulers of Qatabān, a pre-Islamic kingdom based in mainland Yemen's Wādī Bayḥān region, performed priestly tasks as part of their duties as kings, as is evident from the titles that they bore during the late first millennium BCE.[404] That the *nébihi* came to be linked with spiritual powers in the

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[399] See, inter alia, Exodus 27:21, 28:1–4; Leviticus 1:5–11, 8 passim, 9 passim, 10 passim, 14:24; Numbers 6:11, 16–17, 19–20. On the *kōhănîm* and their relationship to other priestly classes in ancient Israel, see Shubert Spero, 'The Levites: A Tribe for All Seasons', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 49/4 (2021), pp. 213–240. On the relevance of Modern South Arabian lexicography for the Hebrew Bible, see Aaron D. Rubin, 'Genesis 49:4 in Light of Arabic and Modern South Arabian', *Vetus Testamentum* 59 (2009), pp. 499–502.

[400] Devin J. Stewart, 'Soothsayer', in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Vol. 5, Leiden–Boston 2006, p. 78.

[401] Ibidem, pp. 78–79.

[402] Q52:29, Q 69:42.

[403] Q2:97, Q53:5–10, Q66:4, Q73:1, Q74:1. Of course, in the Qur'ān the role of the familiar spirit is occupied by the angel Gabriel (Arabic Ğibrīl). For a discussion, see Stewart, 'Soothsayer', p. 80.

[404] One form of the title in question is "Ruler of Qatabān and all the Children of (the god) ʿAmm and ʾAwsān and Kaḥid and Dahasum and Tabnū, the First-Born of (the deities) ʾAnbay and Ḥawkam, He of ʾAmīr and Šammar, Harvester, Custodial Servant, Universal Rashaw-Priest for a second time, Enchanter and Rabay-Priest (of) ʿAmm Rayʿān, Lord of Land-Properties, in charge of Sacrifices, together with Sacrificial Animals, in the Temple of Qanay Hawrān" (*mkrb qtbn w-kl wld-ʿm w-ʾws*^{1}*n w-kḥd w-dhs*^{1}*m w-tbnw bkr ʻnby w-ḥwkm ḏ-ʾmr w-s*^{2}*mr qẓr qyn rs*^{2}*w ʿmm ṯntm s*^{3}*ḥr w-rby ʿm ryʿn bʿl ẓrbt ltk b-ḏbḥtm w-b-ʿm ʻḏfrm b-byt qny hwrn*). Of interest, in light of the supernatural powers associated with the məkóhin of Soqoṭrā, is the Qatabānian king's role of "enchanter" (*s*^{3}*ḥr*, cf. Arabic *sāḥir* "enchanter, magician"). For this and other forms of the Qatabānian royal title, see Christian Julien Robin, 'Inventaires relatifs aux souverains de Qatabān', in: *Tamnaʿ (Yemen): Les fouilles italo-françaises, rapport final*, ed. Alessandro de Maigret and Christian Julien Robin, Paris 2016, pp. 87, 91, 92, 96. On the priestly duties of Qatabānian kings, see Giovanni Mazzini, *The Ancient South Arabian Royal Edicts from the Southern Gate of*

Soqoṭrī collective conscience, while the *mákun* was associated with temporal powers, suggests a desacralization of the latter, together with a concomitant promotion of the spiritual responsibilities of the former.[405]

Conclusion and Discussion

The history of Soqoṭrā, not least during the millennium from the sixth century to the sixteenth, is the history of an island society oscillating between, on the one hand, an interconnectedness with the wider world of the Indian Ocean – and at times regions beyond – and, on the other hand, a deep-seated insularity. Although never a major trading center in its own right, Soqoṭrā nevertheless offered a number of natural products, such as frankincense, dragon's blood resin, aloes, ambergris, and pearls, in addition to serving as a convenient way station at which seafaring merchants could take on provisions and engage in small-scale trade with the locals. In fact, trade likely facilitated the introduction to Soqoṭrā of Christianity, the last, heavily paganized vestiges of which were observed by the Portuguese during the European age of discovery. Owing to the lack of written sources that speak of the matter, as well as the lack of any memory of this aspect of Soqoṭrī history in local oral tradition, we know nothing of those who first introduced Christianity to the island nor when exactly they did so. What we do know is that, by the sixth century, Soqoṭrā was home to a Christian community that adhered, at least nominally, to the Church of the East, a sect with a significant following in the Sāsānid Empire. Commercial interests, such as trade with East Africa and maintaining security for merchant vessels in the face of piracy, were likely also at the root of the interest, on the part of the early Ibāḍī imāmates in Oman, in establishing control over Soqoṭrā, first in the mid-eighth century and again a little more than a century later. At the same time, indigenous Soqoṭrīs often resisted foreign involvement in their island. For example, they overthrew not only Omani rule but the later Portuguese occupation, not to mention the short-lived rule of the nameless ʿAbbāsid-period interloper mentioned by Ibn Māǧid,

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Timnaʿ and the Ǧabal Labaḫ: A New Edition with Philological and Historical Commentary, Wiesbaden 2020, pp. 93–94, 103–106, 175–176, 380.

[405] A similar development, whereby the responsibilities and status of one group were at least partially appropriated by another, has been noted by Robert B. Serjeant in the Ḥaḍramawt region, where two groups, the *mashāyiḫ* and the *sayyid*s, are treated with veneration by the local tribes. The former, whom Serjeant regards as a relic of a pre-Islamic sacerdotal class, are typically descendants of those holy men interred in cupola-mausolea (*qibāb*, sg. *qubba*), which said descendants maintain, and are sought out as healers, prospectors for water sources, and individuals to whom those in distress can turn for help (Robert Bertram Serjeant, 'Société et gouvernement en Arabie du Sud', *Arabica* 14/3 [1967], p. 289). As for the *sayyid*s, these are the descendants of Muḥammad's younger grandson Ḥusayn and began settling in the Ḥaḍramawt in the tenth century CE. In the words of Serjeant, "[e]n raison de leur prétention à être supérieurs, et du fait qu'ils revendiquent un don religieux grâce à leur ancêtre, les Sayyid-s se sont, en de nombreux endroits, arrogé les fonctions des Mašāyiḫ et souvent, mais pas toujours, une rivalité acerbe règne entre les deux sortes de familles saintes" (ibidem, p. 290).

though in the end acquiescing to rule by the Mahra. The very fact that the Soqoṭrīs have managed to preserve their own language and unique oral tradition is similarly a result of their island's relative isolation. The effects of insularity on Soqoṭrī Christianity are curious in that, while relative isolation from the increasingly Islamicized Arabian mainland allowed Christianity to endure far longer in Soqoṭrā than on the mainland, it also served to isolate the island from the main centers of the Church of the East to which Soqoṭrī Christianity was historically tethered.

The erosion and eventual disappearance of Christianity on Soqoṭrā is thus likely due, at least in part, to a cessation in the dispatching of East Syrian clergymen to the island sometime after the thirteenth century. Why this cessation occurred is unclear. As we have seen, piracy was a perennial problem in and around Soqoṭrā, which might conceivably have hindered contact with the rest of the East Syrian world. Yet piracy never brought trade on Soqoṭrā to a complete standstill and, in fact, could only have persisted insofar as trade persisted,[406] so why should it have had such an effect on ecclesiastical links with the island only after the thirteenth century? A more plausible explanation as to why Soqoṭrā stopped receiving clerics is the Black Death, which is believed by some scholars to have first appeared in North China in 1331,[407] though recent research suggests that its ultimate origins can be traced to the Tian Shan mountains straddling the modern China-Kyrgyzstan border.[408] Whatever the case, the plague swept across Eurasia from 1346 to 1353, popping up sporadically thereafter until the 1530s. Its spread was likely aided by the very networks of trade born of the acceleration of inter-Eurasian contact that followed in the wake of, and was facilitated by, the Mongol wars of expansion during the previous century.[409] While accurate data are at times difficult to obtain, research suggests that this plague caused a population decline of 25–33%,[410] though some scholars estimate a mortality rate of up to 40–60%, making it the most lethal large-scale catastrophe in

[406] Writing of the Mediterranean – though the points that they raise in this instance are equally applicable to the Indian Ocean – Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell make the case that, while they are often imagined as the predatory "other" vis-à-vis the world of trade, much as nomadic pastoralists are imagined vis-à-vis sedentary communities, "pirates *actually* flourish only in profound symbiosis with that world" (Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, Oxford 2000, p. 157 [emphasis theirs]), much as pastoralists flourish in a symbiotic relationship with sedentary folk. Evidence of piracy, they note, "is also evidence for persistent exchange; and reports of the repeated devastation of coastal settlements, the pirates' other chief target [after trade] are signs of resilience, not collapse. Raiders clearly have no interest in permanently eradicating sources of livelihood" (ibidem). Seen from this perspective, piratical activities in and around Soqoṭrā are to be interpreted as evidence of the continuity of long-distance trade, not attempts to sever commercial ties.

[407] E.g. Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*, Princeton 2009, p. 195.

[408] Maria A. Spyrou et al., 'The source of the Black Death in fourteenth-century central Eurasia', *Nature* 606/7915 (2022), pp. 718–724, Viewed: 05 October 2025, https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-04800-3; James Belich, *The World the Plague Made: The Black Death and the Rise of Europe*, Princeton 2022, pp. 54–56.

[409] Ahmad Fazlinejad and Farajollah Ahmadi, 'The Impact of the Black Death on Iranian Trade (1340s–1450s A.D.)', *Iran and the Caucasus* 23 (2019), p. 224; cf. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, p. 195.

[410] Boaz Shoshan, 'Wabāʾ. 1. In the mediaeval Islamic world up to the 10th/16th century', in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Peri J. Bearman et al., Leiden 2002, p. 3.

history aside from the impact of smallpox and measles on the indigenous peoples in first-contact events during the early modern period.[411]

Although evidence for its impact on Soqoṭrā is lacking, the Black Death is known to have had a devastating impact on the more northerly Near East,[412] i.e. the very region whose well-developed ecclesiastical infrastructure had helped sustain Soqoṭrī Christianity. In the case of mainland South Arabia, direct evidence is limited, though the Yemeni historian ʿAlī Ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ḫazrağī (d. 1410) notes that in 1351 up to seventy people died in a single day in the town of Taʿizz in southwestern Yemen, adding that a *šarīf* from Ṣaʿda named Sulaymān Ibn al-Hādī who had spent but a few days in Taʿizz similarly fell ill and died.[413] Although al-Ḫazrağī does not elaborate on the matter, it is reasonable to suppose that plague was the cause of these deaths. That the Black Death also impacted Soqoṭrā's African trading partners is suggested by the archaeological evidence of demographic disruption in the form of the abandonment, reduction in size, or halting of growth of settlements along the Swahili Coast, as well as, possibly, signs of decline in northern Madagascar, during more or less the same period,[414] together with allusions to plague in Gəʿəz hagiographies describing events in fourteenth-century Ethiopia.[415] Given that Soqoṭrā was linked through maritime commerce with the Swahili Coast, one suspects that it too was affected by the plague. Even if Soqoṭrā was less affected by the plague than other regions, the impact of the plague on those regions from which the island's ecclesiastical leadership was recruited would have been dire. In fact, it is likely that, once the Black Death had subsided, the Church of the East would have found itself in a much weaker position,[416] one in which the number of its members had

[411] Frankopan, *The Earth Transformed*, p. 306; cf. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*, Oxford 1989, pp. 94–95, 126, 170, 237–238; Monica H. Green, 'Taking "Pandemic" Seriously: Making the Black Death Global', *The Medieval Globe* 1 (2015), pp. 30–31. On the mortality rate among Amerindians as a result of European contact, which at times reached an estimated 80%, see Peter Frankopan, *The Earth Transformed*, p. 347.

[412] Michael Walters Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton 1977. For a different interpretation of Muslim attitudes to the Black Death, albeit with a focus on the western Mediterranean rather than the Near East, see Justin K. Stearns, *Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Premodern Islamic and Christian Thought in the Western Mediterranean*, Baltimore 2011, pp. 160–167 and passim. For a detailed study of the Black Death from the vantage point of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, see Claudia Maria Tresso, 'A Two-year Journey under the Arrows of the Black Death: The Medieval Plague Pandemic in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's Travels', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 21 (2021), pp. 137–189; cf. Belich, *The World the Plague Made*, pp. 43–44.

[413] ʿAlī Ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ḫazrağī, *Kitāb al-ʿuqūd al-lu'lu'iyya fī tārīḫ ad-Dawla ar-Rasūliyya*, ed. Muḥammad Basyūnī ʿAsal, Al-Qāhira 1914, p. 89. (The author wishes to thank Daniel Varisco for bringing this reference to his attention.)

[414] Green, 'Taking "Pandemic" Seriously', pp. 44–45; Monica H. Green, 'Putting Africa on the Black Death map: Narratives from genetics and history', *Afriques: Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire* 09 (2018), §36, Viewed 04 October 2025, https://journals.openedition.org/afriques/2125.

[415] Marie-Laure Derat, 'Du lexique aux talismans: occurrences de la peste dans la Corne de l'Afrique du XIIIe au XVe siècle', *Afriques: Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire* 09 (2018), §11–16, Viewed 04 October 2025, https://journals.openedition.org/afriques/2090; cf. Belich, *The World the Plague Made*, p. 46.

[416] As suggested in Lois Farag, 'The Middle East', in: *Christianities in Asia*, ed. Peter C. Phan, Chichester 2011, p. 243.

greatly decreased, and in which rebuilding local communities and institutions would likely have taken priority over the dispatch of clerics to a far-off island in the Gulf of Aden.

Another possible explanation for the decline and eventual disappearance of Soqoṭrī Christianity, one that need not conflict with the Black Death thesis, is that the Christian faith never put down particularly deep roots in Soqoṭrā in the first place. This might explain, for example, the islanders' historical amnesia regarding their Christian past. As we have seen, Christian elements are similarly lacking in Soqoṭrī oral tradition, much as they are from traditional Soqoṭrī names for God. The latter, by contrast, have parallels in pre-Christian South Arabian tradition, and even in cultures as old as that of Late Bronze Age Ugarit. To this it should be added that, while foreign commentators in centuries past were quick to note Soqoṭrā's Christian community, none of these have anything to say about Soqoṭrī saints, for example, in contrast to the prominent indigenous Christian saints in the not too distant region of Ethiopia.[417] Nor, for that matter, did Soqoṭrā ever produce its own authors, as did the region of Bēṯ Qaṭrāyē in East Arabia which, like Soqoṭrā, was affiliated with the Church of the East.[418] Finally, it will be recalled that the Islamization of the indigenous inhabitants of Soqoṭrā remained quite superficial well into the modern period,[419] in view of which there is little reason to doubt that this was also the case with Christianization.

Worth reiterating here is the attitude of educated Soqoṭrīs of the present day who, while aware of foreigners' association of their island with Christianity, outright deny that their ancestors had ever been Christian, even if only in name. Nowhere is this better illustrated than by the work of Aḥmad Saʿīd Ḫamīs al-Anbālī, a Soqoṭrī historian residing in the United Arab Emirates, who has devoted an entire book to the poem of Az-Zahrā' mentioned above,[420] entitled *Suquṭrā, al-ḥulal as-sundusiyya: šarḥ qaṣīdat Az-Zahrā' as-Suquṭriyya* "Soqoṭrā, the Garments of Silk Brocade: A Commentary on the Poem of Az-Zahrā' the Soqoṭrī Woman".[421] In the face of all evidence that the woman named Az-Zahrā' who wrote her poetic appeal for help from the *imām* Aṣ-Ṣalt was of Omani heritage, Al-Anbālī insists that she was Soqoṭrī, albeit an *Arab* Soqoṭrī, and that the narrative of Christian aggression conveyed by her poem serves as an allegory of what he views as the near-global oppression of Muslims in the present day.[422] By reinventing Az-Zahrā' in this manner, Al-Anbālī has, in effect, identified the Soqoṭrī people as the Arab Muslim victims of an uprising by Christians descended from Greek

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[417] On Christian Ethiopian saints and their cults, see, inter alia, Steven Kaplan, 'The Ethiopian Cult of the Saints: A Preliminary Investigation', *Paideuma* 32 (1986), pp. 1–13; Denis Nosnitsin, 'Saints, Christian', in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig and Alessandro Bausi, Vol. 4, Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 478–479.

[418] On the Syriac literary production of Bēṯh Qaṭrāyē's Christian community, along with other aspects of Christian culture in Bēṯh Qaṭrāyē – which, like Soqoṭrā, adhered to the Church of the East – see Mario Kozah et al. (ed.), *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Piscataway 2014.

[419] See above, §A Christian Island in the Gulf of Aden.

[420] See again §A Christian Island in the Gulf of Aden.

[421] Aḥmad Saʿīd Ḫamīs al-Anbālī, *Suquṭrā, al-ḥulal as-sundusiyya: Šarḥ qaṣīdat az-Zahrā' as-Suquṭriyya*, Al-Qāhira 2001. For a discussion of this work from an anthropological perspective, see Peutz, *Islands of Heritage*, pp. 210–216.

[422] Ibidem, pp. 210–211.

settlers,[423] when in fact the uprising in all probability took the form of a revolt by (nominally) Christian Soqoṭrīs against their Omani Muslim overlords. That the story of Az-Zahrā' has been modified to suit present-day political interests is further illustrated by its adaptation as a theatrical piece that was performed in Masqaṭ, one in which the victims calling out for help were not Soqoṭrīs but Palestinians.[424]

For the sake of historical analogy, let us look to Malta, another island society whose history is, like that of Soqoṭrā, characterized by an oscillation between interconnectedness and insularity. Similarly, Malta is, like Soqoṭrā, an archipelago, its constituent parts being: 1) the main island of Malta proper; 2) the smaller islands of Gozo, Comino, and Manoel Island; and 3) a number of uninhabited islets. Here, to pick up on a point raised above regarding periodization,[425] we will see that the comparison of Soqoṭrā with one particular medieval European society is entirely appropriate, though not on account of Soqoṭrā and Malta somehow sharing an experience of being "medieval". Strategically located between Sicily and Tunisia, and about midway between the Levant and the Strait of Gibraltar, Malta, once again like Soqoṭrā, has long been a meeting-place of different peoples and cultures. At the same time, there is a definite insular element in Maltese society, most notably in rural areas but also, at least to a degree, in the very Maltese language itself. Despite Malta's staunchly Catholic identity and cultural orientation towards Italy, Maltese is derived from Maghrebi Arabic, a product of Muslim domination from 870 to 1127.[426] The Maltese have stubbornly clung to their language over the years, even as the Arabic dialect spoken on neighboring Sicily, as well as the dialects spoken in the Iberian Peninsula, withered away and died following the Christian reconquest.

During the period of Muslim rule, Malta seems to have been an agricultural society and a relative backwater.[427] On the one hand, the Maltese word for shop or bar, *ħanut*, is derived from the synonymous Arabic *ḥānūt* (< Syriac *ḥānūṯā* "chamber, stall, booth"), while Maltese *flus* "money" finds its origins in the synonymous Arabic *fulūs* (sg. *fils* < Latin *follis*).[428] For that matter, Maltese *suq* "market" is derived from the Arabic word for marketplace, a term noted in our discussion of the Soqoṭrī town of Sūq above. Thus,

[423] Ibidem, pp. 213–214.

[424] Ibidem, p. 214.

[425] See §The Middle Ages: A Concept and its Discontents.

[426] For a detailed history of the Maltese language and the various languages that have influenced it over the centuries, see Joseph M. Brincat, *Maltese and Other Languages: A Linguistic History of Malta*, Sta. Venera 2011. Regarding the end of Muslim domination in Malta, it should be noted that, while the Norman expedition against the archipelago in 1091 is best characterized as a raid, the campaign of 1127, orchestrated by the Norman king of Sicily Roger II (r. 1105–1130) and his grand admiral George of Antioch, can be seen as a true conquest (Mark King, 'Muslims in Malta: Epigraphic Evidence from a Cemetery in Rabat', in: *Archaeology of the Mediterranean During Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Angelo Castrorao Barba et al., Gainesville 2023, p. 185).

[427] For a useful and up-to-date overview of Muslim-period Malta, see King, 'Muslims in Malta', passim.

[428] The discovery of a gold quarter *dīnār* minted in Malta in 1079 and bearing the name of the Fāṭimid caliph Maʿadd al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh (r. 1036–1094) (Stanley Fiorini and Martin R. Zammit, 'Οἱ Παῖδες Ἄγαρ Ἀθέου. The Arabs in Malta: 870–1150', *Melita Classica* 3 [2016], p. 185; King, 'Muslims in Malta', p. 183) provides tangible evidence for not only the circulation but also the production of currency in Muslim-period Malta. In addition, a hoard of no fewer than 2000 coins, of which the majority similarly bear the name of Maʿadd al-Mustanṣir bi-llāh,

there is good linguistic evidence for economic activity during the period of Muslim rule. On the other hand, while these linguistic relics indicate small-scale commercial activity during the era of Muslim rule,[429] the famous Judaeo-Arabic letters from the Cairo Geniza are silent with respect to Malta during the period between 950 and 1250, despite their having a fair amount to say about Sicily and Tunisia at that time. Not until after the Christian reconquest, when Malta found itself on the frontier between Islam and Christendom, did the Maltese archipelago come into its own as a strategic base.[430] In the process, and as a result of its increased interconnectedness to Europe, the Maltese language has undergone considerable relexification since the Middle Ages, largely through contact with Sicilian and Italian but also, due to British rule (1814–1964) and continuing apace today, English.[431] In that sense, the Maltese language itself, in its current form, is very much the product of tensions exerted by the alternation between interconnectedness (relexification) and insularity (Arabic-origin vocabulary and morphology).

Despite the fact that Malta was Muslim for a much shorter period of time than Soqoṭrā was (ostensibly) Christian,[432] relics of its Islamic past have survived down to the present in the form of several religious and cultural words in the Maltese language – of Islamic origin. To give but a few examples, Lent is known in Maltese as *Randan*, a word deriving from *Ramaḍān* (pronounced /ramḍān/ in Maghrebi Arabic), i.e. the Muslim month of feasting, while the Vespers Prayer is called *l-Għasar* /lāsar/ after the Islamic afternoon prayer, *al-ʿAṣr*. As for the standard Maltese word for God, this is *Alla* < Arabic *Allāh*, and, while Allāh is by no means an exclusively Islamic name for God, the Maltese byname *Mulej* /mūlē/ "Lord",[433] is certifiably Islamic in origin, deriving from Arabic *Mulāy* "my

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was discovered at Mdina in 1698, though these coins originated from an Egyptian mint, rather than a local one (Fiorini and Zammit, 'Οἱ Παῖδες Ἄγαρ Ἀθέου', pp. 199–200).

[429] On this subject, with a focus on trade, see King, 'Muslims in Malta', pp. 182–183.

[430] This was illustrated most dramatically during the Great Siege (Maltese *L-Assedju l-Kbir*) in 1565, during which an attempted Ottoman conquest of Malta was thwarted by a Christian force consisting of the Order of the Knights of Saint John (which had taken up residence in Malta only thirty-five years earlier), some 3000 local Maltese, and reinforcements from Sicily. For an eyewitness account, see the diary of Francisco Balbi di Correggio (d. 1589), an Italian arquebusier who served with the Spanish contingent during the siege (Francisco Balbi, *The Siege of Malta: 1565*, trans. Ernle Bradford, London 1965).

[431] Brincat, *Maltese and Other Languages*.

[432] Malta had been home to a Muslim community since the Aghlabid conquest in 870, while the last Muslims were expelled from the Maltese archipelago beginning in the 1220s and continuing through the 1240s (King, 'Muslims in Malta', p. 187). As we have seen (n. 317), Marco Polo, to whom we owe the last (known) reference to bishops being sent to Soqoṭrā, traveled across Asia between 1271 and 1295, during which time he would have acquired knowledge of the island and its people, who by that point had been at least nominally Christian for no fewer than seven centuries. By contrast, the Maltese would have been Muslim for only about half that time.

[433] The two names are often used interchangeably, as, for example, in the national anthem of Malta, *L-Innu Malti* "The Maltese Hymn", composed in 1922 by Carmelo Psaila, AKA Dun Karm. The relevant portion of the anthem runs as follows:

*Ħares, **Mulej**, kif dejjem Int ħarist:*	Guard her, **Lord**, as Thou hast always guarded:
Ftakar li lilha bil-oħla dawl libbist.	Remember her, she whom Thou hast cloaked with the fairest light.
*Agħti, kbir **Alla**, id-dehen lil min jaħkimha*	Grant, great **God**, good judgment to the one who governs her […]

lord", an honorific title common in North Africa, often used in reference to Muslim holy men.[434] Another interesting linguistic relic is *kiefer* "cruel, ungrateful", deriving from Arabic *kāfir* "(non-Muslim) infidel, ingrate", which would likely have been used by Muslims, at a time when they were still politically dominant in Malta, as a polemic term directed at non-Muslims, the association with cruelty being perhaps a secondary development.[435] Finally, the Maltese verb *sella* "to greet, to send one's regards/best wishes", derives from Arabic *ṣallā* "to bless",[436] a verb used in Islamic tradition in reference to Muḥammad and/or his immediate family, as in the expression *ṣallā ăllāhu ʿalayhi* (*wa-ālihi*) *wa-sallam* "May Allāh bless him (and his family) and grant him peace" – but repurposed in Maltese as a generic verb for greeting or wishing one well. Clearly, what has happened here is the co-opting by Muslim converts to Christianity of Islamic-heritage vocabulary to suit a Christianized cultural setting. Although many Maltese to this day downplay or even outright deny their Islamic past,[437] much as Soqoṭrīs disavow their Christian past, the fact that Islamic culture has left traces in the Maltese language, while no comparable traces of Christianity are preserved in Soqoṭrī, indicates that Maltese society was Islamicized to a far greater degree than Soqoṭrī society was ever Christianized.

In closing, one can infer that Christianity's impact on Soqoṭrā was ultimately limited, such that it was all too easily eroded once Soqoṭrā lost contact with the rest of Christendom and its normative standards, leaving behind the vestigial shell of Christianity encountered by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. In the case of Soqoṭrī Christianity, then, insularity ultimately prevailed and spelled the end of that religious tradition and, by implication, the end of the final vestige of a once vibrant Arabian Christianity whose history extends as far back as the fourth century. As for Soqoṭrā's interconnectedness with the outside world, however, this, much like the relexification of Maltese, has continued apace, and in fact has rapidly accelerated in recent years, all the more so with the occupation of the archipelago by the United Arab Emirates and the Emiratis' development there of an infrastructure for tourism. Looking forward, only time will tell whether this ever-increasing interconnectedness will have an impact on the Soqoṭrī language and culture comparable to that which insularity exerted on Soqoṭrī Christianity.

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[434] While *mulāy* "my lord" is a title popularly reserved for Muslim holy men, God is often called *mawlānā* "our Lord" in Arabic literature (Patricia Crone, 'Mawlā', in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Clifford Edmund Bosworth et al., Vol. 6, Leiden 1991, p. 874). For references to God as *mawlā*, see Qur'ān 3:150, 8:40, and 47:11; cf. the related term *walī* "protector" (Qur'ān 7:196, 42:31, and 45:19).

[435] Similarly, among the Bəṭāḥira of Oman, the sea (*rawnə*) is described as a *kε̄fərət* "non-believer", i.e. without mercy (Morris, 'Harvesting the Sea', p. 182).

[436] Joseph Aquilina, *Maltese–English Dictionary*, Valletta 1990, p. 1289.

[437] This denial or downplaying of an Islamic past reflects the popular conception of Malta as a bulwark against Islam, coupled with the belief that Christianity has had an unbroken history in the archipelago, going back all the way to Saint Paul, who is alleged to have been shipwrecked on an island called Melite in 60 CE (Gerold Gerber, 'Doing Christianity and Europe: An Inquiry into Memory, Boundary and Truth Practices in Malta', in: *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other*, ed. Bo Stråth, Brussels 2000, pp. 239–245, 251–253, 255, 258; Jon P. Mitchell, *Ambivalent Europeans: Ritual, Memory and the Public Sphere in Malta*, London–New York 2002, pp. 28–32; Chiara Cecalupo, 'Maltese antiquarians of early-modern age and the cave church of Mellieha – Reflections on Christian sites dealing with Islamic presence throughout the Mediterranean', *Revista de História da Sociedade e da Cultura* 23/2 [2023], pp. 21–27).

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