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Yemeni ‘Oceanic Policy’ at the end of the 13th Century

Eric Vallet

In 1278, Yemeni troops conquered the city of Zafār (Fig. 1). They were sent by the Rasūlid sultan al-Muzaffar, son of the founder of the Rasūlid dynasty which dominated South-West Arabia until the middle of the fifteenth century.(1) The Rasūlid court historian al-Ḥazrajī describes the victory: “And when the sultan, may God have mercy on him, conquered the city of Zafār (...) and Sālim son of Idrīs [its previous ruler] was killed, the whole of the *qasīyya* countries [= distant countries] trembled through awe of the sultan, while the hearts of the Princes of Persia, as of the Lords of India and China, were filled with fear of him, from what they witnessed of his soaring ambition and his great power of retaliation.” (al-Ḥazrajī 1906, i: 198) This event certainly represents the peak of Rasūlid power, even if al-Ḥazrajī, who is writing more than hundred years after al-Muzaffar’s reign, no doubt exaggerated the implications of this annexation.(2) However, we should note that while al-Ḥazrajī includes the far China’s Mongol Khān among the rulers he mentions, he seems to forget one of the most powerful sultanates of that time: the Mamluk sultanate, which was very close by, and a permanent rival of Rasūlid Yemen. Indeed, with the conquest of Zafār, the Rasūlid sultan competed not with the Mamluks but with the rulers of Oman, Persia or India, all active in some way in the Indian Ocean area. Ḥazrajī’s report, while it does not reveal the exact balance of power, underlines al-Muzaffar’s real ambition to assert his Sultanate as a great power in the Indian Ocean.

My aim in this contribution is not to describe Yemeni foreign policy in this area. I will focus instead on the manner in which the Rasūlid sultanate used this

common space that was ocean at the end of the 13th century. I propose that Rasūlids did not have an indifferent or passive attitude in this matter. Rather, they strove to organise uses and practices; in short, to develop an ‘oceanic policy’.

Why the end of the 13th century ?

A new Yemeni source, which is a set of scattered documents related to the Rasūlid administration, has been recently edited by Muḥammad Jāzim, researcher at the French Centre for Archaeology and Social Sciences in Sanaa (Jāzim 2003). These administrative and fiscal reports were written between 1290 and 1294, most probably for al-Muẓaffar himself, and were likely to have been bound in a single volume after his death in 1295. This collection, which the editor calls *Nūr al-ma‘ārif fī nuẓūm wa-qawā‘id wa-a‘rāf al-Yaman fī al-‘ahd al-muẓaffarī al-wārif* (‘the Light of Knowledge on Regulations, Rules and Customs of al-Muẓaffar’s Glorious Time’) contains a wide range of documents on maritime trade, especially on Aden taxes (2003: 409-491) and rules of the port (2003: 492-514). This source is of great importance, as one of the rare examples known to us of state archives from the medieval Islamic period. On the other hand, *Nūr al-ma‘ārif*, as a source containing very singular material, presents a lot of difficulties in terms of its interpretation and I do not pretend to offer a definitive version here.(3)

The second reason for my chronological choice is linked with the political context at the end of the 13th century. In 1290, three great powers exerted their hegemony around the Ocean or its neighbouring seas: Mamlūks in Egypt and Syria, Mongol Ilḥāns in Persia and the Turkish Delhi Sultanate established in North India by Quṭb al-Dīn Aybāk in 1206 after Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ghūrī’s conquests. As we shall see, all these states had only a limited access to the sea. In

the West, Rasūlids controlled in large part the navigation in the Red Sea and maintained their influence on Mecca, competing with the Egyptian rulers since 629/1232.(4) In the Gulf, coasts were directly or indirectly dominated by the island of Qays, itself part of the Mongol Ilhānate since 1224 and ruled by the powerful family al-Ṭībī. The more eastern province of Kirmān and its seaport Hurmuz benefited from a certain autonomy which did not question Qays' hegemony.(5)

As for India, the majority of its ports were outside the Delhi Sultanate's authority and their control was shared between different Hindu states, often in competition with one another. In South India, the Pāndyas had overcome during the 13th century the once powerful Cholas and extended their influence over Coromandel's land and coast, even at some points as far as Ceylan.(6) Separated from the Coromandel by the Ghatts mountains, Malabar's numerous seaports maintained their autonomy under several local dynasties (Bouchon 1976: 27-31). Northward, the Pāndyas were opposed to Hoysalas, a dynasty based inland but which was linked to the ports of Fākanūr and Manjalūr (Mangalore) (Majumdar 1957: 230-232). The Konkani coast and its main port of Tāna fell under the Yadavas' rule, a dynasty which was sometimes at war with the Hoysalas (Majumdar 1957: 193, 230-231). Gujarat was also rich with numerous ports, the main being Cambay and Broach, dominated from the north by the Vaghelas, who had to face to the Delhi Sultanate's threats (Majumdar 1957: 81). This politically scattered situation, together with the geographical conditions, promoted without any doubt the multiplication of ports on the Indian western coast.

This configuration was not to last until the beginning of the new century. Under 'Alā' al-Dīn Khaljī's reign (695-715/1296-1316) the Delhi Sultanate saw a huge expansion which unified a great part of India under a Turkish Muslim authority, beginning with the rich kingdom of Gujarat in 698/1299 and followed by

Deccan. In 1335, the independent Hindu States were reduced to a very short territory in the extreme south of India and on the Malabar coast.

In the Gulf area, Qays' hegemony was challenged by Hurmuz, established since 1300 on the island of Jārūn. This fierce competition ended after 1320 by the defeat of Qays and the appearance of a new Hurmuzī political order (Aubin 1953: 99-106). The last decade of the thirteenth century is then an interesting period in the Indian Ocean area: it represents the last stage of a geopolitical configuration which emerged in the first third of the thirteenth century, but which would not survive the transformations of the beginning of the 14th century.

Maritime networks in the Indian Ocean

Any inquiry should first of all consider the differences between the maritime spaces in this area. The Red Sea and the Gulf have the very distinctive features of a sea that is almost entirely isolated, but intensely used. However, I will not study these differences in detail in this article.(7) As far as the Ocean is concerned, the sources at our disposal from the Yemeni point of view focus essentially on the contacts between Yemen and India. This does not mean that the Rasūlids did not deal with the African coast or the Omani coast, while archaeological finds attest it. But India seems to have been the main object of Yemeni Oceanic Policy.

Maritime itineraries in the Ocean are rather well-known thanks to the nautical guides of the end of the 15th century (Tibbetts 1971). Due to seasonal variations of the wind, the navigation followed a very precise calendar which differed from one region to another. This calendar was studied for Aden in several almanachs published and translated by R.B. Serjeant (1974: 216-217) and D.M. Varisco (1994 a & b). In the Indian Ocean proper, several seasons are mentioned. For Qaysī ships, the arrival in Aden had to be before the middle of November and

the departure not until the end of May. As for Indian ships (*al-Hindī*), the season was in Aden between April and August. We should here pay special attention to both terms ‘Qaysī ships’ and ‘Indian ships’. In the first case, vessels seem to come from one single port – this concentration was a result of Qays hegemony. In the second, there is no precision, unless we take into account a distinction between *al-Hindī* and *al-Ṣūliyān*, one of the names used for Coromandel. If we do, then the ‘Indian ships’ must have come from the whole western coast of India - from Malabar in the south to Gujarat in the north. But, however inclusive this term may be, it should not lead us to conclude that all the Indian ports had the same function in the Oceanic network.

India’s Trade

As for trade in precious goods, not all the regions of India played the same role – this is also well-known (Digby 1982; Jain 1988). To sum up this briefly, we could distinguish four different regions with which Aden was commercially linked:

1. Coromandel, which served as an intermediary between China and South-East Asia for aromatics, chinaware and some precious textiles;
2. Malabar, with its own production of spices (pepper, cardamom, etc.);
3. Konkan, important for some strategic materials like wood and iron;
4. Gujarāt, and its abundant cotton fabrics.

All these regions also furnished various food products, principally rice, and textiles. These last products may represent the greatest part of the freight to Arabia.

Of course, trade was not only from India to Yemen. If we now consider Yemeni exports to India, several important distinctions should be made.

For example, one of the most important exports from Aden was madder (*fuwwa*), a dyeing material used to create the colour red, the cultivation of which was

largely spread in the South Yemeni mountains (Varisco 1994b: 157; Sa'īd 1998: 308). The few hints contained in *Nūr al-ma'ārif* (2003: 178-181, 499) show that this export may have been of great volume. Following Ibn al-Mujāwir (1951: 144), it was a major source of fiscal profit. The majority of it was certainly directed to the north Indian coast, Gujarat and Konkan, for the uses of their abundant textile production.(8)

Nevertheless, the commodity which attracted the greatest attention and interest, and provided also certainly the greatest profit was Arabian horses. They were not only a prestigious commodity in India, but moreover the key to military success (Digby 1971 & 1982: 148; Chakravarti 1992). The strength of the Delhi Sultanate was mainly based on his cavalry, but horses were brought to Delhi essentially by the northern landroutes. Only a small number of Yemeni horses were carried there. Actually, horse exports from Aden were massively directed to the Hindu States of the western and eastern coast.

In addition to Marco Polo and the Persian Historian Vaṣṣāf testimonies,(9) the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* collection (2003: 189) shows that Pāndyas' Kingdom of Coromandel was an avid purchaser of Arabian horses – certainly the most important in the Peninsula, due to its numerous campaigns against its neighbours and frequent internal dissensions. But *Nūr al-ma'ārif* (2003: 265) testifies that the Yemeni horses were also sold in Malabar, particularly in both Fākanūr and Manjalūr seaports linked with the Hoysalas' State, which was regularly opposed to its neighbours Pāndyas. On the other hand, we have no precise information about supplies to Tāna or to Gujarāt. The only evidence in this respect known to me is from Marco Polo (1875: 385 & Digby 1991). The Venitian traveler reports indeed that Tāna's ruler was reduced to use the services of some pirates in order to renew his cavalry. This confirms the limitation of horse trade in this region. However, what is important to note here is a certain complementarity in the

Yemeni main exports: madder in the north; horses in the south, even though we have no sufficient information on the volume and the benefits of these exports.

Horse trade was of course of political importance. It was a source of tension between the Delhi Sultanate and horse traders who dealt with the South Indian States, their enemies. Delhi Sultans pretended even to forbid to these traders to conduct business inside of their territory (Chakravarti 1991: 180). Moreover, this must have had an impact on the relationships between Rasūlid Yemen and Delhi, but we have no information about this.

That said, in the south Pāndyas Kingdom of Coromandel, Yemeni horses were not the sole Arabian horses to be exported. They had to reckon with the Qaysī, Hurmuzī, Qalhātī, Baḥraynī horses. This trade – conducted by the Ṭībī's family which sent several thousands of horses each year, is well-known: it relied in the Kingdom of Coromandel especially on Taqī al-Dīn al-Ṭībī, brother of Qays' ruler Jamāl al-Dīn al-Ṭībī and vizier of the Pāndyas king (Aubin 1953: 94; Digby 1982: 148). One could ask how the Rasūlids managed to cope with Ṭībī's supremacy in Coromandel? Was there any sort of competition? We can perhaps find the beginnings of an answer if we consider who the Indian rulers honoured with precious presents by the Rasūlid Sultanate were. By chance, *Nūr al-ma'ārif* has preserved such a list for 1293 and 1294. On it, we read without surprise the names of the Indian princes of Fākanūr and Manjalūr, the Ṭībī vizier of the Pāndyas Kingdom at the first rank, as well as his messenger sent from Coromandel to Aden.⁽¹⁰⁾ We can therefore assume that the extension of Ṭībī's network in eastern India was not an obstacle for Yemeni trade, which was integrated into this network.

The Rasūlid naval policy

How did this political and commercial integration happen? The question of maritime transport was crucial at the time. If such a large network existed, from Yemen to Coromandel and Qays, those who maintained contact between its different heads or places – which is to say the shipowners - may have been hugely powerful.

The Rasūlid Sultan and his Administration (*dīwān*) owned ships. We find some testimonies of this in the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* book, especially as far as the Red Sea is concerned. Yemeni Administration had a fleet carrying goods and men between Aden and the Egyptian port of 'Aydhāb. Aden's rules, preserved by *Nūr al-ma'ārif*, are particularly clear on this point: no ship coming from India can have gone on to the Red Sea. All the commodities had to be unloaded in Aden, and reloaded on new boats sailing to Egypt, ships of the Rasūlid Diwan (*marākib al-dīwān*) taking priority for this (*Nūr al-ma'ārif* 2003: 492-494). Nevertheless, we do not hear about these *marākib al-dīwān* in the Indian Ocean area. We know only that galleys were used for military purposes and not to carry commodities or passengers. These galleys, called *shawānī* in Arabic, were used for example for the conquest of Zafār (Ibn Ḥātim 1974 i: 511; al-Ḥazrajī 1913 iv: 211). Moreover, a tax called *shawānī* was collected by Aden's customs.(11) It was supposed to pay for the protection - provided by the galleys - of trade ships coming from the Gulf or from India, as piracy was a constant danger around the Ocean. A document recorded in *Nūr al-ma'ārif* mentions that the crew of these galleys (*ḡilmān al-shawānī*) was composed of crossbow bearers (*karrāḥiyyīn*), rowers, soldiers (*ajnād*) and sailors (2003: 176). Another document indicates that the Rasūlid *dīwān* had to pay a 3 month-salary to each soldier going to Coromandel or to India (2003: 175). That does not mean of course that they did this journey regularly – but it indicates that they did it sometimes at least, certainly as protectors of some conveyances of ships.

If not the Yemeni galley, which was limited to a military role, then what was carrying goods from and to Aden? Following *Nūr al-ma'ārif* (2003: 500, 504, 505), horses and madder were bought in Aden by the *nawāḥid* (singular form *nāḥūda*) of India, a well-known term which means both shipowners and ship captains (Chakravarti 2000 & 2002). Thus we conclude, shipowners were also merchants. They were even important merchants, engaged in big trade - in horses, or madder. *Nūr al-ma'ārif* preserved the names of some of these merchants-shipowners, often organized in families, whether or not they favoured a particular maritime route.⁽¹²⁾ All the names are apparently related to Muslims. This does not imply the absence of Hindu *nāḥūda*, who may have been also honoured. We know from other sources that several Hindu rulers or kings possessed ships, such as the King of Sri Lanka (under Pāndyas' domination) who claimed in 1283 to own 26 ships (al-Maqrīzī 1939: i, 713), or the Hindu ruler of Jurfattān in Malabar following Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's later testimony (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa 1879 iv: 83). But these Hindu rulers may have been represented on their ships by Muslim as well as Hindu merchants.

At the time, the role of the Yemeni State in the transoceanic network between Aden and India seems to be quite clear: the ships were owned and managed principally by big Muslim merchants, and appear to have been protected sometimes by Yemeni galleys.

Yemeni oceanic policy and the islamization of the Indian Ocean area

Was this Yemeni maritime activity only meant to ensure the safety of trade? Or did it aim at more political objectives? In India at that time there were numerous Muslim communities, and Yemeni power was not indifferent to them. This is what we learn from the last document of the *Nūr al-ma'ārif*, written in 1293 (2003: 516-518). It contains several lists of annual grants sent to Muslim judges

and preachers in India, distributed across 6 territories: North & South Gujarat,(13) North & South Konkan,(14) Malabar and al-Ṣūliyyān/Coromandel. For each region the number of people awarded grants is given, as well as the name of the city or area in which they live (Fig 2).

Region	Number of cities quoted	Number of judges and preachers awarded grants
North Gujarat	12	12
South Gujarat	9	9
North Konkan	7	9
South Konkan	Unknown	9
Malabar	8	20
Coromandel	5	5

Fig. 2 Repartition of the grants sent to India by the Rasūlid administration

To analyse these lists is difficult - reading the names of Indian cities, and their locations, in Arabic presents particular problems. Nevertheless, some interesting conclusions can be drawn. First, a huge concentration of these communities on the coast is apparent, which can be related of course to trading activities. That said, the Yemeni influence was not limited to the coast, but penetrated deep into inland areas - particularly in Gujarat North and South, as far as the city of Anahilwāda, capital of the Vaghelas Kingdom (Majumdar 1957: 81). Finally, the striking fact is that this repartition overlaps directly with the political limits, since in 1293 Gujarat had not yet been annexed by the Delhi Sultanate: all the communities supported by the Rasūlid administration were outside of Delhi Sultanate's sovereignty. We must then conclude that these grants to Muslim religious leaders had a significant political dimension. This could be related to the known opposition between the two Muslim Indias: the one Turkish hanafi, where Islam entered by the northern land routes; the other Arab Shāfi'ī, where

Islam entered by the maritime southern ways (Gaborieau 1995: 431-434; Vallet 2005: 153-154). In the context of dramatic military opposition between the Turkish Delhi Sultanate and the Hindu States, it was indeed crucial for the Muslim communities living in these Hindu States that they were not assimilated to the northern Turkish enemy.

In return, this Yemeni support of the Indian Muslim communities benefited Rasūlid interests. For the Rasūlid sultan al-Muẓaffar, it was a source of legitimization, acting as a power protecting and defending Islam. Al-Muẓaffar no doubt enjoyed this reputation in the whole area. Marco Polo, who did not visit the South Arabian coast, but heard about it, testifies to this. In his account, al-Muẓaffar appears as a true enemy for Christians, may they be in Abyssinia or in Palestine. He reports that in 1291, al-Muẓaffar sent troops to the Mamlūk Sultan, contributing to the fall of Acre, the last place of the Crusader States in Palestine (Marco Polo 1875: 434-435). Let us also remember that the Rasūlid Sultan interfered with the affairs of the Muslim communities in India when the Chinese King had forbidden the circumcision of Muslim children in his kingdom (al-Ḥazrajī 1913 iv: 279).

Thus this religious and political dimension should be taken into account when considering with transoceanic navigation. From India, Aden was on the main route to Mecca. That Yemeni galleys made the oceanic circulation regular and secure was essential for these distant communities, who could stay in contact with central regions of Islam.

Conclusion

From the textual evidence referred to in this study, it is clear that the Rasūlid power had a real oceanic policy at the end of the 13th century. This policy served

not only trade but also other political or religious objectives. It relied on a controlled network of navigation, whose main actors were Muslim merchants-shipowners, supported by Muslim (Rasūlid in Yemen and Ṭībī in Qays) and Hindu powers. This implies at least good cooperation, and perhaps even an alliance between both Rasūlid and Ṭībī power at that time, a collaboration which could explain why it was so important for the Rasūlids to control Zafār, mid-way between Qays and Yemen.(15) The question remains when this system was constituted and how did survived or adapted to the drastic geopolitical changes in the first middle of the 14th century. However, from a methodological point of view, the situation described above, which is related to such a specific context, could not be extended to the previous or the following periods without a thorough examination of the changing political, economical and religious context, even if historical sources do not offer such clear evidence as *Nūr al-ma'ārif* does for the end of the 13th century. Nevertheless, it is only by doing more similarly detailed studies that we will be in a position to assess whether or not this maritime policy was a distinctive feature of the whole Rasūlid dynasty.

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Endnotes

- (1) For a general account on Rasūlids, see Smith 1994 and ‘Abd al-‘Āl 1980 (in Arabic). On al-Muzaffar: Varisco 1994a.
- (2) A detailed study of the conquest of Zafār is given in Smith & Porter 1988. On al-Ḥazrajī’s court historiography, see Smith 1969.
- (3) My dissertation will offer an annotated translation in French of parts of the book concerned with the maritime trade.
- (4) On this competition, ‘Abd al-‘Āl 1980: 333-400 (in Arabic) ; Garcin 1976: 202-204.
- (5) On Qays and Hurmuz at the end of the 13th Century, see Aubin 1953: 89-99.
- (6) For a general presentation of the Indian coast history, see Wink 1997: 265-293. On Pāndyas’ dynastic history, Majumdar 1957: 256-260.
- (7) On the Gulf maritime networks, see Aubin 1973 and Piacentini Fiorani 2000. These contributions focus on the 15th century but offer interesting insights into the previous period. As for the Red Sea, Lunde & Porter 2004.
- (8) « If madder (*fuwwa*) is carried to Tāna or Gujarāt or anywhere, the export tithe is due. » (*Nūr al-ma‘ārif* 2003: 496)
- (9) Marco Polo 1875: 364. Vaṣṣāf, a Persian Historian of the first middle of the 14th c., is quoted in Digby 1982: 148.
- (10) For ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṭībī, see *Nūr al-ma‘ārif*: 515 & 519 ; his messenger: 519. Honours to the chiefs (*ru’asā’*) of the Muslim community in Fayākanūn (read Fākanūr), Muḥammad and his nephew ‘Alī, are mentioned p. 515. But the Hindu rulers (*sāhib*) of Fākanūr and Manjalūr are also recorded p. 518. Note that unlike Muslim characters, their proper names are not quoted.
- (11) This tax is first mentioned by Ibn al-Mujāwir (1951: 141-142). The fiscal lists of *Nūr al-ma‘ārif* record it also, especially pp. 409-460 and 461-477. A study of this tax was proposed by R.B. Serjeant (1974: 218) and G.R. Smith (1995: 131).

(12) *Nūr al-ma‘ārif*, 2003: 515-516, 519: Bilāl al-Tānishī in Malabar; Muḥammad al-Salāmī and Burhān al-Dīn al-Salamī in Coromandel; Yūsuf al-Ḥalawī, ‘Uthmān b. Bakkāsh and his sons are not related to a precise place. All of them are qualified as *nāḥūdha*. Note that Ibn Bakkāsh is also recorded in *Ta’rīḥ Thaḡr ‘Adan* (Bā Maḥrama, 1936-1950: ii, 26) as a great merchant in Aden who lived until the end of his life in an Indian port.

(13) North Gujarāt (*bilād al-Juzarāt*) is presented here as the territory of al-Qaṣṣ, related to the Kutch region. South Gujarāt (*bilād al-Juz*) is the territory of Kambāya (Cambay).

(14) North Konkan is called *bilād al-Bulḡā*, an old name which is already recorded by al-Mas‘ūdī (1966: 97) and derived from the Ballahara, a dynasty which ruled between 743 et 974 on this region. What is called *bilād al-Kumkam* in the list seems to be rather South Konkan: it is presented as the territory of Lamībasūr (an unknown place which I suspect to be actually Sindābūr).

(15) Note in this regard that the origin of Zafār’s conquest was the capture by Sālim b. Idrīs, ruler of Zafār, of the ambassadors sent by al-Muzaffar to the Ilḡān of Persia (Ibn Ḥātim i: 506 ; al-Ḥazrajī 1913 iv: 208).

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