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### The Lost Ships Trilogy – 3

## SAILING PAST “SAILAN” TO DISTANT CATHAY

I set sail on a personal voyage of discovery one hot afternoon in Trincomalee, in the mid-1960s. In 1990-91, when I was scrambling among the scaffolding of a traditional Arabian shipyard, it was not yet over. I doubt it will ever end.

Trincomalee’s old “dockyard mateys” – who had worked with the Royal Navy – knew that I was constantly scratching around for all things old and wonderful. That day, a Civil Engineer's Department man ran up to me saying that, while they were clearing the undergrowth in the in their backyard, they had come across a stone slab inscribed in unknown letters. It was a beautifully engraved limestone Arab inscription. This was my introduction to Arab gravestones. I had to get this deciphered. No-one in the country who could do so and, with my father's help, I sent a rubbing to Dr.Z.A.Desai, Superintending Epigraphist for Arabic and Persian Inscriptions, of the Indian Dept. of Archaeology. He identified it as the gravestone of

**"the noble, the pious (and) chaste lady....daughter of Amir Badru'd-Din Husain, son of Ali al-Halabi" who had died on Monday, the 17th. of September of the year 729 or 929 after Hijra (the slab is damaged here) which makes it either 12th. September, 1329 or 17th. September, 1523 of the Christian era.**

Published in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of 1970, it proved to be the only hard evidence that Arab ladies had come here by sea: it was long thought the Arabs left their women-folk behind at home. This, in fact, even pre-dates the literary reference in the *Gira Sandesaya* to "*yon liya*" in Beruwela.

The Navy had added a new dimension to my background of History, Archaeology and Languages. There, if one has an inquiring mind, one becomes very conscious of history, as the seaman's calling is one of great antiquity, the echoes of which constantly surround him. I had already begun to superimpose this dimension on historical references to Sri Lankan ships, maritime activities, contacts with foreign seamen, and related matters. I had sat by fishermen going about the business of caulking and re-sewing their craft and recognized and marveled at their skill. In Trincomalee – so beautiful in the 1960s, where large sailing craft silently glided pass my house, every day – the inscription and my research led me to the site of an ancient Arabic shipping community. I wondered what kind of ships did *we* build and sail? What contacts did we have with foreign ships and seamen, and especially Arabs? Did we absorb elements of shipbuilding from them?

I found out that we had Arabic inscriptions from all major areas that are, even now, connected with shipping: Trincomalee, Galle, Colombo, and Jaffna. In Trincomalee there is an

isolated (not so, now) creek, or cove in the inner harbour, presently called Nicholson's Cove where, "my" gravestone and at least two others had originally been found. It is the site of a colony of Arab sailors, which had been continuously occupied for, at least, 200 years. This is an ideal spot for sailors to ride out the inter-monsoonal storm periods, living here till the winds changed for them to resume the interrupted voyage across the Bay of Bengal, or back home. It is a narrow inlet, sheltered from the winds by hilly ridges, with a shelving beach where ships could be beached for repair, and a plentiful supply of sweet water. During the Second World War, this source of water led the British to erect a large campsite here: and it is then that the three gravestones were discovered. My older Dockyard "mateys" has dug into their memories and identified the place.

One gravestone has been quoted above. The other was read:

**the matyr Qadi 'Afifu'd-Din 'Abdu'llah son of 'Abdu'r-Rahman son of Muhammed son of Yusuf al-'Alawi" who had died on 16th. August, 1405 AD.**

The third is too defaced to read.

The springs of sweet water that had proved the magnet to both Arabs and British, yet exist. A few years ago I found the previously wooded site cleared and located a number of wells, one quite old and lined with stone, with of slabs set into the wall as footholds, spiraling down to the water level. I also saw a couple of other graves which had been inadvertently destroyed and later re-built in brick-and-mortar in a faintly Islamic style. Unfortunately, it is not yet the time to publish my photographs.

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During the years that followed, my interest focused on ship-building technology and early navigation. The few published works available did, however, give me some idea of what ancient shipping was like. I could visualize the type of ships and the life that went on aboard them; appreciate the difficulties they experienced in sailing them; marvel at their audacity in sailing across the Indian Ocean - from the East African Coast to the Straits of Malacca (and beyond, to China) - with Sri Lanka as their only landfall. In earliest days, they had sailed here following the Indian coast. Later, gaining experience, they sailed straight across to Beruwela using the south-westerly winds, traded at their many colonies round the island, to Trincomalee, and caught the next south-western monsoon to sail eastwards. Their maps record 30 coastal locations from Kalutara to Trincomalee – the coastline of the Ruhuna. Still later, they learnt to call only at the southernmost ports and, finally, to by-pass Sri Lanka altogether.

It was in the Indian Ocean that celestial navigation, or navigation by the stars, began. How did the Arabs know to do this? Celestial navigation was first applied by them, not at sea, but in the desert where, till recently, one navigated by the stars. Shepherds who watched their flocks by night, sailors who kept a weather-eye on the horizon, and even the Wise Men from the East who sought the Son of God, all followed the movement of stars. In the latter part of the ninth century A.D., Muslim scholars preserved and built upon the work of Greek and Indian scholars. They, along with the Syrians combined the theories of Science and Mathematics with

their application. Greek texts, translated to Syriac were now translated into Arabic, leading to an intellectual renaissance.

And these new Arabic works found their way to this island, too.

In 1824, Sir Alexander Johnstone, writing about the first Arabic inscription found in Colombo write a footnote:

*"One of the principal Arabic works on medicine which they introduced into Ceylon was the work of Avicenna; they also introduced Arabic translations of Aristotle, Plato, Euclid, Galen, and Ptolemy, extracts of which were frequently brought to me while I was on Ceylon by the Mohammedan priests and merchants, who stated that the works them -- selves had originally been procured from Baghdad by their ancestors and remained for some hundred years in their respective families in Ceylon, but had been subsequently sold by them, when in distress, ...."*

Johnstone's researches into the origin of these people led him to conclude that:

*" The first Mohammedans who settled in Ceylon were, according to the traditions that prevail among their descendents, a portion of those Arabs of the house of Hashim who were driven from Arabia in the early part of the 8th. century, by the tyranny of the Caliph Abd al Melek ben Merwan, and who, proceeding from the Euphrates southwards made settlements in the Concan, in the southern parts of the peninsula of India, on the island of Ceylon and at Malacca. The division of them that came to Ceylon formed eight considerable settlements in the north-east, north, and western coasts of the island: viz. one at Trincomalee, one at Jaffna, one at Mantotte and Mannar, one at Coodramalle, one at Puttalam, one at Colombo, one at Barbareen and one at Point de Galle".*

Johnstone's collection, alas! was lost in a shipwreck off East Africa

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In 1990-91, an year's work in Sharjah gave me the chance of observing work in a traditional shipyard. I photo-recorded the building of three types of craft, from keel to gunwale. In creeks I discovered 85-ft rowing galleys used for Ramadan races and cocooned for the rest of the year. I found abandoned hulks of impressive size which took my breath away – but all faithfully recorded by camera. Ships yet in use were looked after carefully. At regular intervals, they were sailed up the creeks and allowed to be beached by the ebbing tide. Then, when they are keeled over, the exposed ship's bottom was cleared of barnacles, planks damaged by shipworms replaced, caulking re-done, painted, and well-dosed with fish oil. How appropriate a haven, I realized, would Nicholson's Cove have been to these sons of Sinbad.

And, what nautical heritage did the Arabs leave behind? I had long left Trincomalee by the time I realized that this heritage had been sailing under my very nose everyday. These were the Muttur *Battal* which would transport the rice harvest from the rice-bowl there to the Trincomalee Town Jetty. And I had not even photographed them! By the time I started searching

for them, it was too late. They had not been sighted since the 1970s. After 1983, Muttur was no longer accessible. And so, the *Battal* sailed into oblivion – but for one photograph that was given to me. What a beautiful ship she is, even if was then an open-decked one sailing across Koddia Bay . What size was she? If we take the man in the bows to be 5’4” tall, she was 70 ft long from stem to stern; the mast stood 37 ft above the waterline and her distinctive Arab-type boom – suspended from a pulley-block – was 42 ft long. I remember them with regret and admiration.

But she was the last of the traditional large craft of this country to last, at least, till the in ‘70s, and perform an economically useful task. And then – like the *Yathra*, the *Thoni* and our traditional shipping lore – she sailed into oblivion.

*(This is the last of my nautical trilogy, written for ‘the serene joy and emotion’ of my countrymen, at a time when heritage is fast disappearing.)*