Any port in a storm: Unintended Anchorages in Medieval Red Sea Navigation

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Résumé

The Red Sea was frequently used as a major trade route. In the Islamic era; it became important as pilgrim route, side by side with trade routes, and Muslims have sailed on the Red Sea for centuries. The medieval travellers wrote about their journeys; starting with the early Muslim fugitives who took refuge in Abyssinia during the 7th century, then the well-known travellers – for example; Persian Nasir Khusraw (d.1088), ibn-Jubayr (d.1217), ibn-Batutah (d.1377), and the sailor ibn-Majid (d. 1500). They mentioned details of navigation and their difficulties, as well as the dangers they experienced during travels across the Red Sea. Each traveller mentioned a different form of such difficulty, the events resulted from there and how to face them depending on what they saw during their journey.

In the paper; I present cases of travellers who were forced to anchor in unknown anchorages to protect the ship during the difficult navigation in the Red Sea mentioned by travellers and discuss their descriptions of those anchorages. Most of the recent researches had poor information about those anchorages, some of these anchorages were mentioned only once by a certain traveller who visited this anchorage after facing difficulties with berthing in the main harbour. For example; Ra’s Dawe’r is an anchorage only mentioned by the traveller ibn-Batutah (d.1377) through his journey visiting Yemen from Jeddah in 1329. As a part of these difficulties of navigation in the Red Sea, sailors had to sometimes resort in small marsas (anchorages) in unknown coasts. In other cases, the difficulty to control the ship and the severe winds pushed the ship unintentionally into unknown places. The ship only had the option of berthing in an uninhabited or unknown anchorage, otherwise, it might sink, causing the death of all passengers.

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