

# SINDBAD THE SAILOR AND THE EASTWARD JOURNEY OF ISLAM

By Joan Brodsky Schur



A group of seventh graders at the Village Community School depicted the intertwining themes of Islam, marriage, and civilization by depicting Sindbad's homeward-bound ship within the star and crescent of Islam. The ship's flags read "Islam," "marriage," and depict two wedding rings. Along the crescent moon is the word "civilization." Photograph provided by Joan Brodsky Schur.

**T**he rapid rise of Islam is typically depicted in textbooks as the consequence of conquests made by the Umayyad and Abbasid empires and the diffusion of Islam into Central Asia along the Silk Roads. Rarely is the spread of Islam attributed to the importance of seafaring Muslim traders. Yet Muslim mariners, plying the waters of the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, and South China Sea, played a key role in transporting their religion throughout Southeast Asia. At the Village Community School in New York City, I discovered a means to help my seventh-grade students understand why today this vast region is predominantly Muslim. With the world's attention focused on the tragic consequences of the tsunami of December 2004 from the Malay Peninsula to Indonesia, the teach-

ing strategies described here seem ever more timely. They are easy to adapt for high school world history courses as well.

Like the Silk Roads, trade via the sea routes of Southeast Asia facilitated an exchange of goods and technologies from China to Southwest Asia. The many islands en route became stopovers on long journeys when mariners awaited the prevailing monsoon winds and exchanged goods in the numerous port cities that developed along the coastlines. According to Bruce B. Lawrence, "Acheh was the first region of modern-day Indonesia in which Muslim kingdoms were founded. Marco Polo observed a Muslim king on the north coast of Sumatra in 1292, more than a half century before the oceanic voyage of Ibn Battutah landed him further to the south of the same

island.”<sup>1</sup> Historical information on the spread of Islam in this region is scant until several centuries later, and until then is based mainly on the accounts of travelers to the region.

The stories of Sindbad the Sailor from *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* is an excellent vehicle for teaching about Muslim values and the far-reaching impact of Muslim seafaring. While the fantastical narrative is bound to enchant today’s students just as it has listeners and readers for centuries, there is also much to engage their intellects as students of both literature and history. Trade throughout Southwest and Southeast Asia encompassed not only goods, but an exchange of stories themselves. Those in *Thousand and One Nights* come from Persia, India, and Arabia and were collected for centuries before a final written version emerged in Cairo in the late 1700s. A simulation I developed at the end of my year-long course on the Islamic World demonstrated how trade, travel, and the exchange of scholarship were intertwined throughout Muslim domains.<sup>2</sup>

The Sindbad tales should be taught within the context of the story that frames all the tales, that of Scheherazade and King Shahriyar, the misogynistic king who pledged to bed a virgin each night and kill her in the morning. Scheherazade begs her father, the Vizier, to send her to the king so that, “. . . either I shall die and be a ransom for the daughters of Moslems, or live and be the cause of their deliverance.”<sup>3</sup> Her strategy is to spin forth stories within stories, keeping the king in such suspense as to the ending of a tale that he cannot bear to kill her. Instead, years later he ends up marrying her. By fighting despotism with words, Scheherazade not only rescues subsequent virgins from the fate she avoided, she also provides a role-model for future generations of women who are also her listeners. Through the telling of tales, Scheherazade civilizes a tyrant.<sup>4</sup>

Once students understand this interpretation of the framework story, the teacher can ask them to look for the civilizing message embodied in Sindbad the Sailor. The endeavor of reading the cycle of seven tales now becomes not only entertaining, but intellectually engaging. Sindbad tells us that he is a resident of Baghdad during the reign of Caliph Haroun al-Rashid (r. 786–809 CE), a fact that provides the teacher with an excellent opportunity to teach about Baghdad itself. Students who associate Baghdad with Saddam Hussein’s barbarism and currently know it as the capital of a war-torn nation occupied by American forces, need to understand that in Sindbad’s time, Baghdad was the center of a great civilization. The Round City was intentionally built beside the Tigris by Caliph al-Mansur in 758 CE. On each of his journeys Sindbad leaves Baghdad, travels down the Tigris to Basra, and from there out to sea. Caliph Haroun al-Rashid founded the *Khizanat al-Hakmah* (Library of Wisdom) on which the subsequent House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikmah* 830 CE) was based. These libraries attracted translators, scholars, and scientists from many faiths and countries, all of whom came to Baghdad to translate ancient texts into Arabic (including those in Greek) and make their own discoveries in the sciences, philosophy, and medicine. While Paris and London were only fledgling cities with several thousand residents, Baghdad was a major world metropolis.

Sindbad tells us that he inherited a large fortune from his father, but squandered it in profligate living. “I sold the remainder of my lands and my household chattels for the sum of three thousand

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## ESSAYS

dirhams, and fortifying myself with hope and courage, resolved to travel abroad and trade in foreign lands.”<sup>5</sup> On each journey Sindbad is the lone survivor of a series of catastrophes, survives by his wits, returns with exotic goods to sell, and resumes living a profligate life in Baghdad. But despite the fearsome dangers at sea, he is again and again lured to leave behind the metropolis to venture into the unknown.

On first read, students see what makes this Muslim mariner’s tale a work that will teach them about Islam. Although Sindbad uses his wits to save himself, he is rescued only after putting his utmost faith in God. “No sooner do I escape from one peril than I find myself in another more grievous. There is no strength or help save in Allah.”<sup>6</sup> Upon returning to Baghdad, Sindbad remembers his duties as a Muslim to give to charity: “I hastened to my old street, and entering my own house, rejoiced to see my friends and kinsfolk. I gave them gold and presents, and distributed alms among the poor of the city.”<sup>7</sup> But a closer reading of the tales yields more than this, and in turn answers the overarching question I posed to students at the start: How do these tales civilize King Shahriyar and in turn its listeners and readers?

The answer lies in watching the progression of Sindbad’s journeys. On each, Sindbad lands on an island more primitive than the next until he retraces the course of civilization back to Baghdad, the center of the Muslim world. In the First Voyage he lands on what he takes to be an island but which is actually a gigantic floating whale, “. . . floating in the bosom of the sea, on whose back the sands have settled and trees have grown since the world was young!”<sup>8</sup> On the Second Voyage he finds a gigantic bird’s egg as big as a domed building, the offspring of a roc or rukh “with enormous wings which, as it flew through the air, screened the sun and hid it from the island.”<sup>9</sup> Attaching himself to the bird, Sindbad is flown to another island replete with serpents, moving us from a primordial world into a reptilian one. On his Third Voyage, to the Isle of Zughb, Sindbad encounters ape-like dwarfs, and in the Fourth Voyage naked, wild-looking cannibals. We have moved from the animal kingdom to the human, but a humanity that is primitive and debased. The cannibals turn Sindbad’s shipmates into “gluttonous maniacs” as they regress into animalistic behavior. As the crew is fattened up the better to be eaten, only Sindbad resists the atavistic urge to eat himself into oblivion. In the Fifth Voyage we meet the Old Man in the Sea who keeps Sindbad in his clutches and enslaves him until he makes an escape. This tale suggests that the sea itself keeps Sindbad in a demeaned and abject state until he resists its grip at the very end of the cycle.

By the Sixth Voyage Sindbad finally lands on an island on which a true society flourishes. The inhabitants include Indians and Abyssinians as well as speakers of Arabic (the first mention of language) with whom Sindbad can converse. Rising in the king’s favor, Sindbad marries a princess, only to learn that the island’s inhabitants customarily bury alive a man when his wife dies, precisely the predicament Sindbad subsequently finds himself in. While language, government, and institutionalized marriage distinguish this island’s inhabitants, their customs are not civilized enough for Sindbad, a Muslim and resident of Baghdad, to remain. Once again stranded on an island, in the Seventh Journey Sindbad is befriended by a sheikh who “led me slowly to the baths of the city, where I was washed with

perfumed water.”<sup>10</sup> Sindbad marries the sheikh’s daughter, but after the sheikh dies Sindbad realizes that the island’s inhabitants cannot bear to hear God’s name. His wife informs him, “We must no longer stay among these people. Know that they are the brothers of Satan and have no knowledge of the True God.”<sup>11</sup> Leaving the “blasphemous city,” Sindbad takes his wife back to Baghdad where he settles for good. In this state we meet Sindbad at the opening of his story when he welcomes Sindbad the Porter to his home to hear his seven tales. Sindbad, now a married and civilized man, is no longer profligate, having conquered his urges to visit primeval and primitive places. He understands that his permanent home is at the heart of the civilized world, Baghdad.

## LEARNING GEOGRAPHY

As a social studies lesson, a study of Sindbad should begin with geography. Using blank topographical maps of Southwest and East Asia, students can begin by labeling the rivers and seas that provide thoroughfares linking Baghdad to China. In the days of sail, wind was key to a successful journey. Students can research wind and rain patterns in the monsoon season and predict when mariners could catch and travel an east wind and avoid countervailing winds on the return journey. Ask students to look at an unlabeled map and choose the places they think would make viable port cities along the coastlines of India, the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian archipelago, and mainland China. Where are good bays, sources of fresh water? Then ask students to compare the locations they chose to the port cities that developed in Sindbad’s time and later—such as Bombay, Goa, Calicut, Singapore, Aceh, Malacca, and Guangzhou. They can also compare the routes they chose with what we can surmise was Sindbad’s actual course. According to Professor David Kuchta,<sup>12</sup> these include stops in Salahiya (Timor), Serendib (Sri Lanka), Cape Comorin (India), Sind (Pakistan), Isle of Bells near Sumatra, and Kela somewhere in Malaysia. From here students can further study the climate of the region in relation to the equator, prevailing winds, altitude, plant life, and so forth.

## CREATING GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS AND ART WORK

It is best not to divulge the interpretation of the stories set forth here, but rather to let students discover it and arrive at others for themselves. One way to assist is to ask them to keep a graphic organizer of the stories as they read them and subsequently to create art projects depicting them. The stories are more complex than the brief summary offered here, and in several tales Sindbad frequently visits more than one island.<sup>13</sup> While discussing the stories, I frequently depicted the tales on the board by drawing islands, simplified animals and people, and by labeling where events took place. For homework, students took notes on the tales in a variety of ways. Some used computer-generated charts while others did sketches on which they wrote notes.

After we read all the tales, I assigned students to groups of three to five to work on an art project depicting the entire journey. Students used their graphic organizers to help them review the tales. One group made a ladder, with each tale occupying a higher rung as Sindbad journeyed his way back to civilization and Baghdad. Another created a poster of Sindbad at sea with the islands surrounding his ship. As a symbol of Sindbad’s reformation, they depicted him on

board his ship returning to Baghdad with his bride. On the ship's sail they drew a wedding ring and the star and crescent of Islam. In doing so they emphasized the civilizing force of Islam and marriage, a lesson Scheherazade most surely wanted to teach King Shahriyar. One group worked entirely in clay while another, working on poster board, depicted the round city of Baghdad at the center of all Sindbad's journeys. In creating their artworks students had to carefully review the stories and formulate how best to represent their interpretations of the tales. During a presentation time these were shared and subsequently put on display.

### WRITING A SINDBAD TALE

Students enjoy putting their imaginations to work by writing an eighth adventure of Sindbad the Sailor. To make it appear authentic, students should note the many literary devices used in the tales. Structurally, each journey begins and ends like its predecessor, and throughout certain phrases repeat regularly. I asked students to make lists of these phrases as they read the stories. Students need to be reminded that these tales were originally transmitted orally, and that repeating structures and set phrases served as mnemonic devices, making the tales easier to remember while providing "stalling" time as the storyteller recalled what to say next. Students of literature will enjoy comparing the Sindbad cycle to the *Odyssey* with which it shares much in common.

To write an effective story, students also need to take cognizance of Sindbad's character. After reading several tales I asked students which adjectives would most appropriately describe him. They suggested words like adventurous, resourceful, trustworthy, curious, and persistent. I then asked them to back up the adjectives they chose with examples of Sindbad's behavior. If a suggested adjective could not be substantiated with examples from the text, it was dropped from our list. In writing their own stories, students had to incorporate what they had learned about Sindbad's personality and demonstrate how these characteristics helped him survive. For teachers who want to focus on geography, students can be assigned to research an actual place in current-day India, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, or the southern coast of China and use what they have learned about its produce, climate, geography, and peoples in their tales.

### INVESTIGATING THE EXCHANGE OF GOODS AND SPREAD OF RELIGION

The Sindbad tales are enjoyable because they are fantastical. Although we cannot regard them as a source of facts, we can make reasonable deductions about the spread of Islam through trade, based upon the information they provide. I started by posing key questions during discussion and for homework, such as, What goods were imported to Arabia from South and Southeast Asia? I asked students to keep lists of the material items Sindbad finds on his journeys, such as coconuts, cinnamon, pepper, aloes, pearls, silk, ambergris, and amber, and trace them to their possible sources.<sup>14</sup>

How might Muslim mariners have impressed inhabitants of these regions, leading potentially to their conversion to Islam? Students quickly recognize that Sindbad and his fellow Muslim mariners are depicted as trustworthy. For example, in the First Voyage when Sindbad is presumed to be dead, the ship's captain plans to sell Sind-



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## ESSAYS

bad's goods, not so that he can make a profit for himself, but so that he can bring the money back to Sindbad's kinsmen. Because he is trustworthy, Sindbad is taken into the confidence of local kings, assuming the role of advisor and marrying a king's daughter. In the Fourth Voyage Sindbad is surprised to see the inhabitants of the island riding horses barebacked. When Sindbad offers to teach the locals how to make and use saddles, the king readily accepts the offer. "At once I sought out a skilful carpenter and instructed him to make a wooden frame for a saddle of my own design; then I taught a blacksmith to forge a bit and a pair of stirrups."<sup>15</sup> This incident represents the ways in which Muslim travelers spread advanced technologies throughout the region, earning the respect and admiration of local residents and impressing their rulers—among the first to convert to Islam. According to Bruce B. Lawrence, the kingdom of Samudra played a key role in the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia in just this way, "(Islam's) internal vehicle of transmission remained linked to courts, which were also located in or near the major port cities."<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the tales can be used to ask students how Muslim mariners helped link newly-converted Muslim rulers on the peripheries of the Muslim world to its center in Baghdad. In the early voyages Sindbad encounters inhabitants too primitive to express even rudimentary curiosity about Sindbad and the civilization he represents. By the Sixth Voyage this has changed. Sindbad says of an island's king, whose trust he wins, "One day he questioned me about my country and its far-famed Caliph. I praised the wisdom, piety, and benevolence of Haroun Al-Rashid, and spoke at length of his glorious deeds."<sup>17</sup> The king is so impressed that he employs Sindbad to transport a valuable gift to the Caliph in Baghdad.

From this imaginary episode, students can begin to extrapolate ways in which Muslim rulers paid tribute to the Caliph, thereby strengthening their alliances. Over time, local Southeast Asian rulers flourished thanks to their ties with later Muslim dynasties in India and Ottoman lands.


It is significant that the Sixth Voyage concludes with Sindbad in Haroun Al-Rashid's court. "Al-Rashid marveled greatly at my adventure and gave orders that the story be inscribed on parchment in letters of gold, so that it might be preserved among the treasures of his kingdom."<sup>18</sup> We can conclude from this comment that something of great significance is embodied in the folk tales of Sindbad the Sailor since they must be written down and preserved at the Muslim world's very center, Baghdad, to enlighten King Shahriyar about the meaning of civilization and to preserve for future generations an understanding about the meaning and spread of Islam. While students will thoroughly enjoy their sojourns with Sindbad, they will also take away some important lessons. ■

## NOTES

1. Bruce B. Lawrence, "The Eastward Journey of Muslim Kingship," in John L. Esposito, ed. *The Oxford History of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 422.
2. For a culminating simulation activity I developed for this course see Joan Brodsky Schur, "Trade, Travel, and Scholarship in Dar Al Islam," *Social Education* 66.7 (November/December 2002), 428–434.
3. N. J. Dawood, trans. *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 19. All subsequent quotations refer to this edition, which I used in the classroom.
4. For a discussion of this interpretation see Barbara Crossette, "Muslim Women Hear the Call of a Storyteller" (*New York Times*, February 6, 1999) downloaded from the Web. Also of relevance is the "Afterward" in Jack Zipes, adaptor, *Arabian Nights: The Marvels and Wonders of the Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Signet, 1991), 584–592.
5. N. J. Dawood, *Tales* (1973), 115.
6. *Ibid.*, 124.
7. *Ibid.*, 128.
8. *Ibid.*, 116.
9. *Ibid.*, 123.
10. *Ibid.*, 158.
11. *Ibid.*, 161.
12. David Kuchta's Web site at the University of California, San Diego shows the route Sindbad took on each of his journeys. Go to <http://humanities.ucsd.edu/courses/kuchtahum3/reference/voyage1.htm> (accessed January 21, 2005).
13. In some of the tales, Sindbad lands on one island but subsequently visits others. The sequence from primitive life to civilization is most evident when focusing on the first island on which Sindbad lands in each tale.
14. This activity appears in Susan L. Douglass and Karima Diane Alavi's *The Emergence of Renaissance: Cultural Interactions Between Europeans and Muslims* (Fountain Valley, Calif.: Council on Islamic Education, 1999), 58.
15. N. J. Dawood, 139.
16. Bruce B. Lawrence, "The Eastward Journey of Muslim Kingship," 424–425.
17. N. J. Dawood, 155.
18. *Ibid.*, 155.

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