Self-Portrait of the Ottoman Red Sea, 20th of July 1777

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Osmanlı Kızıl Denizi'nin Otoportresi, 20 Temmuz 1777

Öz ■ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi'nin Mühimme-i Mısır defterlerinden çıkan resmi bir belgenin yakından yapılan bir tefsiri, idarecileri ve onu bire bir deneyimleyenler tarafından geç onsekizinci yüzyılda yaşandığı ve tahayyül edildiği şekliyle Osmanlı Kızıl Deniz'inin özel doğasını gözler önüne seriyor. İçeriği ve şeklinde yerleşik çeşitli uzamsallık ve zamansallıkların araştırılması, yerel ve küresel siyaset, ekolojik ve coğrafi olasılıklar, insanlar ve emtianın hareketini içeren karmaşık bir evreni ortaya çıkarıyor. Mekanın çok yakından çizilmiş bir eskizini sunmanın yanında, bu makale, denizde hareket eden ve metinlerden inşa edilmiş bir zanaate binme şeklinde yeniden tahayyül edilmiş bir tarih pratiği üzerinde, bizatihi yazı yazma eyleminin altını çizerek düşünüyor.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kızıl Deniz, *Bahr-ı Süveyş*, *Mühimme-i Mışır*, uzamsallık, zamansallık, yazı yazma.

For a number of reasons, there was no Ottoman conception of that bounded totality now called the Red Sea prior to European imperial expansion in the area. This does not mean that Ottoman subjects and officials of various sorts did not crisscross its waters in administrative, military, economic, religious and other guises. But just as the 'sea of islands' evoked by Epeli Hau'ofa is not the same as the small islands of the Pacific ocean,[1] historiography and cartography cannot conjure up a naturalized Ottoman Red Sea: perspectives from the Porte were both more bounded and more far-flung. And it is not our purpose here to preach any type of immanence to the construct, for there cannot be any. Nonetheless, this largely 'Ottoman lake' reaches out and asks for a type of holistic

1 Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, ed. by E. Hau'ofa, V. Naidu and E. Waddell (Suva: University of South Pacific, 1993): 2-16.

representation of which the academic literature is frustratingly replete. Indeed, despite the recent fashion of sea-centered studies, the Red Sea remains conspicuously absent from the literature as historical actor. It is therefore a challenge to be met, and this article endeavors to plumb the depths of the Red Sea, wresting from them a unit which in Ottoman times was not one, by exploring the variety of implicit and explicit temporalities and spatialities raised through a close reading of an official document. Like any accused placed under cross-examination, it is seen to yield up a type of triangulation in the form of a spectral self-portrait: the Ottoman Red Sea. In the process, it will be shown that the historian's craft can go from the broadest to the most pointillistic strokes in its quixotic quest to give shape to that which until the ink has dried had none.

Setting the Stage

In order to be treated historically, a particular object needs to be transformed into a coherent *subject* of history. This occurs through a variety of devices and maneuvers, an essential one being the act of naming. The Mediterranean, for example, has long been conceptualized in its plenitude, holding a conspicuous and coherent place at the center of the world, as its name so clearly enunciates. The T-O (orbis terrarum) maps of the medieval imagination are perfect examples of its special character: the world is represented as a circle with the Inner Sea at its center, while the surrounding lands consist of peripheral appendages to the maritime space, preceding Fernand Braudel by centuries. Such cumulative visual imagining made it easy to transform the Mediterranean into a commonsensical notion, and from there, into a historical personage.

By contrast, the Red Sea has over the centuries had a great variety of names attributed to it, and this has contributed to the dearth of scholarship regarding that body of water as a unit. Adding to the obstacles facing any formulation of the Red Sea as subject of history has been its longtime identification as a simple corridor. Small, narrow, elongated, the Red Sea is often described as a tract connecting one uniform world (the Mediterranean, Europe, the West) to another (that of the Indian Ocean, of India, of the Orient). One can only agree with Braudel, responding to the description of the Mediterranean as a lake: from such a conception of the sea, the historian must detach himself at all costs. The 'Red Sea' of Selîm I, of Mehmed 'Alî or of Şerîf Surûr, was one hundred, one thousand times its dimensions as conceived based on today's modes of transportation. It too once was, in itself, a universe.[2]

2 These sentences are loosely translated and fitted from a paragraph by Fernand Braudel in *La Méditerranée – L'espace et l'histoire* (Paris : Flammarion, 1985 [1977]): 48.

But what kind of universe? Can one imagine the Red Sea as a cogent historical actor? It would need for this to possess coherence both in the long term, giving a potential narrative consistency and depth, and in the short term, extracting that narrative from mere geographic description. Before it merits a history of its own, the subject needs to go native, as it were, and assume anthropomorphic features. It has now a commonly ascribed name, that is a start, but it requires a firmer body and fuller mind. Only then can it have a (hi)story.

Too often, the *longue durée* frame of historical works rests on a geographical panorama composed in a thoroughly realist and naturalist tone as though written by an objective scientist with panoptical vision of both extended space and elongated time. The *longue durée* is emphatically *not* a place for an analysis grounded in archival material, normally the essential stuff of history-writing. This is evident, for example, in Braudel's first part of *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* where, despite the enormous archival excavations that were made by the author in working towards his thesis, rather few archival documents are cited.[3] The present formulation of the Red Sea world as subject of history, by contrast, is anchored in one single document from the Ottoman archives. For the long span to be articulated to the short, it must be ensconced in the historical artifact itself. There is no avoiding, otherwise, the treacherous split between reality and representation, nature and humanity, space and society, either of which (or a combination whereof) one would then have to choose from. It is not a matter of attempting to 'let the archival record speak for itself' with the scholar as simple vehicle, as too many historians still claim their role to be. There is no fetishism of the 'primary source' here. The document will be investigated, examined, interrogated and tortured into confession, as Carlo Ginzburg might be abused into saying.[4] This, I venture, allows one to avoid a certain geographical determinism without seeking refuge instead in an illusory rationalist world of voluntarist closure, thus formulating the potentiality of the history of the Ottoman Red Sea by presenting a sketch of its self-portrait.

The arraigned document is not particularly remarkable in appearance. Dating from 1191 A.H. (1777 A.G.[5]), it is simply a record among many others in the

3 English translation by Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

4 The theme of *making* the archive speak is a recurrent one in Ginzburg's work, from his classic *The Cheese and the Worms* (London: Routledge, 1980) to the more recent *The Judge and the Historian: Marginal Notes on a Late-Twentieth-Century Miscarriage of Justice* (London: Verso, 1999).

5 Throughout the text, dates in the Gregorian calendar are referred to as A.G. (*Anno Gregoriano*) as opposed to the conventional C.E. (*Common Era*) or A.D. (*Anno Domini*).

compilation of noteworthy commands and reports relevant to the governorship of Cairo and its environs that are collected in the *Mühimme-i Mısır Defterleri* (MMD), located at the Prime Minister's Ottoman Archive (*Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi*, BOA) in Istanbul.[6] Labeled number 227, the entry appears on the lower and upper halves, respectively, of pages 129 and 130 in the ninth *defter* (tome). Totaling 15 in all, running from the year 1119 A.H. (1718 A.G.) when the first tome begins and the year 1333 A.H. (1915 A.G.) when the last ends, the *defters* of the *Mühimme-i Mısır* vary in length, ranging from a shortest of 128 pages (the second *defter*) to a longest of 400 (the ninth). The style of the script, the rather difficult shorthand replete with unexpected ligatures between letters and missing many diacritical marks used in much official literature in the Ottoman bureaucracy known as *dîvânî*, is more or less the same until the middle of the nineteenth century, when codes of writing were standardized into a distinctly regular, simplified and limpid handwriting.

Closely resembling the rest of the entries throughout the tome, the writing is monotone and slashed by every possible abbreviation, betraying clear signs of the haste and boredom, perhaps even annoyance, of the copyist, but also his distinguished training as a scribe. The combination in these texts of the adherence to strict formal rules and the distinct expressions of the personal style of the scribe is astonishing, especially considering the obvious rapidity of the writing. Clearly written by different people, the various entries display unmistakable similarities.

The entry – let us call it Document 227 – begins, as these texts generally do, with the address:

This has been preferred in order to disrupt uncritical normativity by distinguishing this calendar from other solar calendars widely used in the Ottoman world until the early twentieth century (such as the Julian calendar of the Orthodox Christian church or the Coptic calendar most current in Egypt of the period), as well as from numerous other calendars in use before the hegemony of Western Christendom. The intent is thus to express a certain parity between all these (and especially between the *Anno Gregoriano* and the *Anno Hegirae*), and thereby underscore the basic fact that the different dates simply relate to different calendars, instead of further othering 'Islam' (and other others) by assigning it a dating system alien from the normative universal, whether in a theological (A.D.) or its secular variant (C.E.). *Anno Hegirae* is based on lunar months, beginning with the flight of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.G.

6 BOA, MMD 9, 129-130, 227. The document will be quoted in translation in the text with the transliteration added in footnotes. Of course, the original has neither capital letters nor punctuation. These have been added as seen fit to facilitate the task of the reader.

> To the governor of Egypt, former chief minister, my vezîr ʻİzzet Meḥmed Paşa, and to the judge of Egypt and to the *şeyḫ'ül-beled* and the officers and elders of the Seven Corps, may their power be increased, has been ordered.[7]

Above the address, but in all evidence added subsequently, are two marginal notes, written, in typical fashion, at a sharp, here almost right, angle to the main body of the text. The first of these indicates that "news and information [of the order] was given to the chief treasurer's office."[8] The second, dated a full year and half a month later than the order itself, affirms that "the order was repeated in writing."[9] Written after the fact, these notes were conscientiously highlighted to the attention of the reader, by being placed before the beginning and by their divergent directionality.[10] The very first impression given, then, is one of recurrence and sedimentation. This provides a sense of order, continuity and urgency to the issue at hand. It extracts it from its specificity, conferring upon it a higher order of abstraction, longer in time and larger in space.

The crux of the matter is addressed from the very first line. The rest of the text is essentially a rhetorical reinforcement, accumulating weight and depth along the way. Indeed, the primary figurative-analytical mode of the piece as a whole is iterative (including even some use of alliteration): both its melody and argument are produced by incessant repetition. Directly following the address, then, comes the laying out of the essential concern:

> It has been reported and communicated that the majority of the ships belonging to the Murâdîye *vaḳf* located in the Cairo of Egypt and to the other *evḳâf*, which are meant for the transportation from the Port of Suez to Yanbu and to the Port of Jiddah of the grains intended for the inhabitants of the Two Noble Sanctuaries, have, with the passing of time, suffered adversity and destruction, and, as a result, the ships still in existence today are extremely few and these are insufficient for the transportation of the designated grains. The abovementioned matter is of those affairs that are to be given great attention.[11]

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7 *Mışır vâlîsi ṣadr-ı esbaḳ vezîrim ʻİzzet Meḥmed Paşa'ya ve Mışır ḳâḍîsina ve şayḫ ül-beled ve yedî ocâḳ ḍâbiṭân ve iḫtiyârları zîde ḳadruhumâ hüküm ki.*

8 *Bâşmuḥâsebe'ye ʻilm u ḫaberi verilmişdir.*

9 *Tekrâr emir yazılmışdır. Evâḫir-i C[umâdâ 'l-]â[ḫire], S[ene] [11]92*

10 It is fairly common for the orders to have marginal notes of this format and content.

11 *Ḳâhire-i Mışır'da vâḳiʻ Murâdîye vaḳfı ve evḳâf-ı sâ'ireden Bender-i Süveys'den Ḥarameyn iş-Şerîfeyn ahâlîsi içün Bender-i Cidde ve Yenbûʻ'a ġılâl naḳline maḥṣûṣ olan sefâyinin ekṣeri mürûr-i ezmân ile şikest ve fenâ-pezîr olduġundan el-yevm mevcûdu eḳall-i ḳalîl ve*

The rest of the text is entirely constructed upon its articulation to this initial passage by way of the conjunction *-a binâen*, meaning 'building upon' in the sense of 'considering the fact that,' which comes at the end of the sentence.

Close Up: Seascape of Necessities

The opening problematic also provides the first, and dominant, stroke for a portrait of the Red Sea: it is a world largely dependent on the external provisions of foodstuffs. Its surrounding shores are unreceptive to agricultural production of any sort due to extreme aridity and elevated temperatures.[12] Rainfall is sparse, varied and irregular, and there are simply no significant coastal rivers. There is no sizable permanent sweet-water inflow towards the sea. These conditions have also caused the waters of the Red Sea to be some of the hottest and most saline in the world. This, in turn, has significant consequences for the order of life both under the sea, with a uniquely rich and diverse palette of bio-ecological features and fierce unpredictable currents, and upon it, in terms of the problems for navigation deriving therefrom. These circumstances also impose the need for incessant navigation in the first place. There were, all around the Red Sea, important cities, whose significance was based on various factors: commercial, first and foremost, but also political and religious, with the twin holy cities of Mecca and Medina not too far from the coast, as well as strategic and symbolic – perhaps the most crucial in an age of global struggle for hegemony. None of these cities could survive in autarky, and most were unsustainable in isolation from the sea itself, whence came the goods essential to their physical sustenance. The major purveyors of these primary necessities were the agricultural lands along the Nile, and thus the traffic in foodstuffs across the Red Sea was heavily oriented in the direction of the Arabian shore.[13] Indeed, the entire Hijaz was utterly reliant on grains coming from the opposite shore of the sea, and originating for the most part in the Egyptian delta.

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mu'ayyen olan ġilâlin naḳline ġayr-i vâfî olduġu iḫbâr ve inhâ ve mâdde-i merḳûme i'tinâ olunacaḳ umûrdan olduġuna binâen.

12 This is a most common trope concerning the region, from the classical accounts of the Roman general Aelius Gallus' disastrous campaign in Arabia to Romain Gary's almost delirious *Les trésors de la mer Rouge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

13 On this subject, see especially Michel Tuchscherer, "Les échanges commerciaux entre les rives africaine et arabe de l'espace mer Rouge-golfe d'Aden aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles," in Paul Lunde and Alexandra Porter (eds.), *Trade and Travel in the Red Sea Region* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004): 157-163.

This state of dependence was not limited to the Hijaz: accounts of the market of the Yemeni city of Mocha from the same period, for example, often remark on the obvious presence of goods from the opposite shore, especially of the edible kind (and usually described as "Abyssinian" in origin by Western writers). Eyles Irwin noticed this when passing through the area in the late 1770s, describing the predicament of the Red Sea world well:

> To survey the desart on which it stands, a stranger must be surprized at the plenty which reigns in the markets. There is not a tree within ken, that produces any fruit, but the date, or herbage of any kind, to support the cattle which are daily exposed for sale. (…) And indeed, when we are informed that the sheep which are sold here, are all brought from the opposite coast of Abyssinia, and the simplest vegetable, at no less a distance than fifteen miles from Mocha, conjecture would lose itself in accounting for such plenty, were a clue not given to unravel the mystery.[14]

There is evidence that this had been the case already in Antiquity: the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* mentions the export of grain from the ancient emporium of Berenike, seemingly close to the border between modern Egypt and Sudan, to ports on all sides of the Red Sea, notably to its south-eastern coast.[15]

In the opposite direction, the most important movement of agriculture in the Ottoman period concerned the trade in coffee. For the first two centuries of its consumption, this was an exclusively Red Sea commodity. Grown in the elevated hills of the Yemen, it would be, for the most part, shipped off from any one of the port-cities of the Tihamah coast, most notably Hudaydah, Luhayyah, and Mocha.

It was the special responsibility of officialdom to assure the smooth and constant flow of these goods from their regions of production across land and sea to their various points of consumption and exchange dotted along the coast. Regular navigation was thus absolutely necessary for the very survival of its surrounding population. And the existence of these populations and cities was of paramount importance to the central state and *its* subsistence. The Red Sea world was one

14 *A Series of Adventures in the Course of a Voyage up the Red-Sea, on the Coasts of Arabia and Egypt, and of a Route through the Desarts of Thebais hitherto unknown to the European Traveller in the year M.DCC.LXXVII. in Letters to a Lady* (London: J. Dodsley, 1780): 4.

15 See René Cappers, "Trade and Subsistence at the Roman Port of Berenike, Red Sea Coast, Egypt," in Marijke van der Veen (ed.), *The Exploitation of Plant Resources in Ancient Africa* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999): 195.

in which the sea was vital and pivotal – the beating heart of its long, narrow and desiccated body.

This all points to another important characteristic of the place: its shores are contained by a series of mountain ranges of significant altitude. On all sides of the sea, the coastal plain suddenly ascends along steep rocky mountains, separating the Red Sea world from the lands further afield. The Sinai Peninsula almost in its entirety is formed by rugged mountains usually rising up from the shore and reaching an altitude of over 2600 meters at the top of the twin summits of Mount Zebir and Mount Catherine.

Along the eastern shore, the coast abuts the Sarawat mountain range that runs from Jordan in the north to the Gulf of Aden in the south, cutting off the Red Sea from the oasis-spotted desert and the lush plateaux. The altitudes vary considerably, with maximums of 2100 meters in the Hijaz and over 3300 further south, near the Yemeni capital of Sanaa but everywhere the range falls abruptly onto the coastal plains. In striking symmetry, the 'Red Sea hills' of Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea run almost continuously along the western shore, southwards leading up to the beginnings of the highlands of Ethiopia, and disassociating the salt-water universe of the Red Sea from the sweet-water ecosystem of the Nile.

These physical features had important consequences, in terms of water flows certainly, but also with regard to mobility and exchange: travel by land tended to follow the coastline in order to avoid the more dangerous and tiring escarpments. One clear example is found in the yearly pilgrimage caravan from Egypt to Mecca which followed a series of set halts along the coastal plains.[16] The presence of steep mountains hugging the coast all around the Red Sea made the area difficult to control. The pilgrimage caravan routinely suffered assaults from marauding bands, usually referred to as *'urbân* in Ottoman documents. It was a logical prey, for to the spiritual pursuits of its constituents were added commercial ones, ranging from big business involving global networks of trade to small-scale trading to finance the pilgrim's travel and stay. But it was also a risky prey, since the pilgrims were always accompanied by a sizeable armed escort. So difficult was the route to secure that the role of safeguarding the caravan, heavily subsidized by the state, was one of the most prestigious and lucrative official positions to be obtained in Ottoman Egypt, that of the *emîr ül-hacc*. Moreover, records show that the Ot-

16 See Chapter VI: "L'itinéraire du Caire à La Mecque" of Jacques Jomier's *Le Maḥmal et la caravane égyptienne des pèlerins de La Mecque (XIIIe-XXe siècles)* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1953): 170-204, as well as the accompanying map of the same title that immediately follows the conclusion of the text.

toman state calculated into its budget significant payments to local dignitaries along the way for guarantees of safe passage.[17]

Background: Labyrinth of Mirrors

But all this is leading the narrative somewhat astray from Document 227, to which it must now return. Following the introductory statement of the actual problem (a need for more ships), the text moves on to recurrent past embodiments of it, beginning with a similar situation almost thirty years previously. This example thus serves both as a reiteration of the problem as an endemic one, having been formally noted already, as well as a presentation of a past occurrence of it. Hence its awkward placement before an otherwise linear chronological list of events that commences with a date preceding it.

"In the year [one thousand one hundred and] sixty-five," document 227 continues,

> an official report was presented concerning how many of the said ships were left, and how many were left remaining during the deceased Kâmil Aḥmed Paşa's governorship of Egypt, as well as the requirements and modalities of the possible paths and easiest ways to build and prepare ships so as to reach sufficient levels. Following on the exalted edict that appeared based on its clauses, and upon consultation of the records of the chief treasury, an exalted command inscribed with the imperial mark was issued concerning the construction of a ship in the place of the two accident-befallen ships meant for the dispatching and transporting of the grains that are sent by custom every year from the Cairo of Egypt to the inhabitants of the Two Noble Sanctuaries and belonging to the Ḫâṣṣekîye-i Kubrâ *vakf* located in the said Cairo. Also, as it became evident upon the communication of the governor of Egypt that the construction of a ship in the port of Suez is difficult in many ways, it has been judged suitable to purchase at a reasonable price an existing and ready ship in order to transport the grains of the Two Sanctuaries in a timely fashion. In conformity with the treasury records, since it is registered that in the past ships carrying nine thousand *erdebs* and more were bought with sixty-two and sixty-five Egyptian

17 Fees dedicated for payments to personalities along the pilgrimage route are often explicitly listed in the *ṣurres* (for examples from the same period as Document 227, see BOA, MAD 4980 and MAD 7396, in which the recipients are described as "*'urbân ve 'aṣâ'ir shayḫleri*"). See more largely, Stanford Shaw, *The Financial and Administrative Organization and Development of Ottoman Egypt 1517-1798* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962) as well as Suraiya Faroqhi, *Pilgrims & Sultans: The Hajj Under the Ottomans* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994).

> purses a piece or at the very most the cost did not exceed seventy purses, and on the condition that the required price, comparable to the old ones, be deducted from the treasury of the annual remittance of Egypt, a ship should be bought at a reasonable price for the abovementioned *evḳâf*.[18]

The issue, then, had already undergone formal inscription. In fact, it had already elicited numerous written and active responses from highest authorities (including the notable weight of the *ḫaṭṭ-i hümâyûn*, by hand of the sultan himself). Beyond setting a clear legal and administrative precedent, this passage is about the performance of repetition, about engraving a sense of depth and continuity on the question. It also points to the difficulty of the resolution of the problem, something to which the text returns repeatedly. It is not by any means a problem without its proper answer, as the paragraph and indeed the entire text, do come to a certain sense of closure in the order to the governor, thereby providing the sultan with a confirmed aura of legitimacy. But it is described as a difficulty nonetheless, in order, no doubt, to give a gloss of inevitability to the problem, and displace the guilt for its continuance away from the authorities responsible for the well-being of the population and onto the natural order of things in the *longue durée*. It thus provides another feature of the portrait of the Red Sea. A world that does not yield sufficient foodstuffs, it is also one that does not contain the material required for the construction of ships.[19] Yet it was also

18 *Altmış beş târîḫlerinde sefâyin-i merḳûmenin ḳâç ḳıt'a olduġunu müteveffâ Kâmil Aḥmed Paşa'nın Mıṣır tevlîyeti eṯnâsında ḳâç ḳıt'a bâḳî ḳâlmışdır ve rütbe-'i kifâyede olacaḳ sefâyinin tedârük ve inşâ ėtdirilmesinin ṭarîḳ-i imkânı ve vech-i sühûleti nevechle ise ṣûret-i nizâm ve iḳtiḍâsı bâ taḳrîr 'arḍ olunmaḳ bâbinda fırmân-ı 'âlî ṣudûr etmekden nâşî Bâşmuḥâsebe'den ḳaydları lede'ṣ-su'âl Ḥarameyn-i Muḥteremeyn ahâlîlerine Ḳâhire-i Mıṣır'dan beher sene mu'tâd ül-irsâl olan ġılâlın naḳl ve tesyîrlerine maḥsûs Ḳâhire-i mezbûrede Ḥâṣṣekîye-i Kubrâ Evḳâfı'ndan ḳaḍâ-resîde olan iki ḳıt'a sefînelere bedel bir ḳıt'asının inşâsı bâbında ḫaṭṭ-i hümâyûn ile mu'anven emr-i 'âlî ıṣdâr ve Bender-i Süveys'de sefîne inşâsında vücûhla ṣu'ûbet derkâr olup vâlî-i Mıṣır inhâsıyla ġılâl-ı Ḥarameyn'in vaḳt ü zamânıyla naḳliyçün mu'tedil bahâ ile ḫâḍır ve mevcûd sefîne iştirâsı münâsib görüldügüne binâen defter-i ḫazîne lede't-tetebbu' sâbıḳda dokuz bin erdeb dâḫî zîyâdeye müteḥammil sefîneler altmış ikişer ve altmış beşer Mıṣrî kîse ile iştirâ olunup nihâyeti yetmiş kîseyi tecâvüz ėtmediġi muḳayyed olmaḳdan nâşî evḳâf-ı mezbûre içün sâbıḳlarına muḳâyese ile îcâb ėden bahâsı irsâlîye-i Mıṣır ḫazînesinden maḥsûb olmaḳ şarṭıyla mu'tedil bahâ ile sefîne iştirâsıyçün.*

19 This too was a problem on the very long term: in ancient Berenike, the Romans imported wood into the Red Sea area through an extensive network of global exchange. See Caroline Vermeeren, "The Use of Imported and Local Wood Species at the Roman Port of Berenike, Red Sea Coast, Egypt," in Marijke van der Veen (ed.), *The*

a sea, as shown above, that just *had* to be navigated consistently and efficiently: the grains destined for the Two Noble Sanctuaries, for example, simply could not be left unattended for fear of dramatic consequences. It was a matter of life and death for the people living there, but also a founding pillar of legitimacy of the state.

This thorny dilemma was compounded by the fact that the sea and its environment presented grave dangers to navigation. Alluded to in the passage above (the two destroyed ships that had to be replaced had suffered accidents), the theme of the hazards faced by shipping re-appears throughout Document 227.

At the core of the Red Sea world thus lay a tense paradox: lacking the appropriate conditions, namely the presence of trees, it could not produce ships, of which it had urgent and recurrent need, in sufficient quantities. Document 227 intimates this in passing in the segment cited above: "it became evident that ship-building in the port of Suez was difficult in many ways." This issue will be elaborated upon at length later in the text, so here too it will only be mentioned fleetingly. Ships were built at Suez, which functioned throughout the Ottoman period as a major port, shipyard and arsenal. But such activities involved enormous effort and capital.

This leads to the second difficulty brought up by the command, involving petty finance. It is impossible not to notice in the text the repeated, almost obsessive, injunctions to obtain a reasonable or moderate price for things.

The Ottoman state was undergoing economic difficulties. It had been defeated recently in a devastating and draining war with Russia. The severe treaty of Küçük Kaynarca in July 1774 led to the transfer of significant portions of Ottoman territories to direct or indirect Russian domination, including access to warm-water ports and areas with large Muslim populations, ending the sultan's hegemony over the Black Sea and increasing the Czar's influence in the region and beyond. Moreover, it consecrated the authority of the Russian state as the representative of Ottoman subjects of Christian Orthodox confession. But in addition to these issues of sovereignty over territories and populations, the treaty also imposed a heavy financial burden on the Ottoman treasury to pay for the exacting war reparations. At the same time, the Ottomans were incessantly involved in border disputes and military hostilities with Karîm Ḫân Zand in Iran, Sultan ʿAbdülḥamîd even declaring all out war in 1776.

Exploitation of Plant Resources in Ancient Africa (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999): 199-204.

Moreover, precisely because of the lack of local resources to sustain the construction of ships, the bargaining power of the state was now minimal. It was, rather, concentrated in the hands of the merchant navies that incessantly crisscrossed the sea in search of profit. "As it became evident that the construction of a ship in the port of Suez was difficult in many ways," the sentence continues, "it has been judged suitable to purchase at a reasonable price a ready and existing ship in order to transport the grains of the Two Sanctuaries in a timely fashion." The implications of the formulation are three-fold. Firstly, it implies that it is only as a result of unavoidable conditions that the state is forced to resort to the option of buying. Secondly, that there existed enough "ready and existing ships" docked at Suez simply to decree the purchase of one, effective immediately. And finally, the injunction to economize "*at a reasonable price*." This is, let it not be forgotten, the Ottoman sultan, that alleged pinnacle of Oriental despotism, here speaking, and he is requesting a "*reasonable price*"! The text then goes on to define what it considers such a value to be rather precisely ("in conformity with the treasury records," no less), but then, in the same breath, undermines that precision by offering a range of prices differing by almost 9%, betraying surprising insecurity, timidity and flexibility for a state said to be so controlling over its internal economy. The text seems almost to be pleading for an acceptable price, one that "at the very most (...) did not exceed seventy purses." In fact, the rest of the paragraph is entirely devoted to financial matters, repeating again, that the cost of the ship ought to be "reasonable" and "comparable to the old ones." It also sets the particular budget from which the cost should be deducted – in this case, the *irsâlîye-i Mışır*, accountable yearly to the central imperial treasury in Istanbul, but mostly disbursed locally on various state-related matters. The sultan would thus pay for the purchase of the ship for the charitable goals of a *vakf* from his own coffers, but the payment had to remain circumscribed to locally generated returns.

It was therefore not a case of an imperial center asserting its sovereignty over distant lands by certain public displays of spectacle. The Red Sea was the arena of complex webs of relations, networks and nodes of power, which spanned the space of the local *and* the imperial (and even the global), and the time of the immediate *and* the long-standing (and even the eternal). Thus, the emerging portrait sketched here, while drawn from the archive of the imperial center and later productions of data, was also lived as such, in some way or another, by a plurality of people, involved in these networks that defined the Red Sea world.

Profile View: Centripetal Networks, Centrifugal Fissures

Such a multiplicity of active perspectives is made even clearer in the section of Document 227 that immediately follows. "Also, in the beginning of *Muḥarrem* of the year [one thousand one hundred and] fifty-four," the text reads, beginning now a linear chronological list of affairs all reproducing a variation on the general theme,

> upon the communication and request from the former *Şerîf* of Mecca the Venerable to the Sublime Porte concerning the inadequate number of ships that would become sufficient if one additional unit were renovated, and in accordance with this, and on the condition that the necessary payments be deducted from the transfer money of the tax farmed villages, a solid and reliable unit from the Indian ships present at the Port of Suez should be bought, by way of the above-mentioned governor, at a price to be bargained strictly to the boundary of reason. In the case that a ready ship is not found in the said place, after consultation with the governor of Jiddah, one should be bought from the Indian ships available at the Port of Jiddah.[20]

The elasticity of the webs entwined in the Red Sea world is here quite evident. The narrative flows seamlessly from one shore to the other, from one position to another, from one time to another, for they are all implicated and invested in the dynamics at hand. The complaint concerning the insufficiency of ships is here attributed to another major political personality of the region, the Şerîf of Mecca. Once again, it is concluded that a ship should be bought, to fill the deficiency. And again, the issue of financial matters takes center stage, and is repeated in a form strikingly similar to the previous segment. The problem of the weak bargaining power of the state vis-à-vis the merchants on the ground is further exposed, as it is ordered that the purchase be only made "at a price to be bargained strictly to the boundary of reason." And finally, the origin and/or type of the ships, if not the merchants themselves, is referred to, dragging into the world of the Red Sea the larger universe of the Indian Ocean. The vessel is to be purchased from the "*Indian* ships" readily available in the region. The wording

20 *Elli dört senesi evâ'il-i Muḥarremi'nde başka ve sefâyin kifâyet etmeyüb bir ḳıṭ'ası dâḫî tecdîd olunsa kâfî olduġu muḳaddeman Şerîf-i Mekke-i Mükerreme ṭarafından Der-i 'Alîye'ye inhâ ve iltimâs üzere sâbiḳî mûcebince îcâb eden bahâsı Ḥulvân-i ḳurâ akçesinden edâ olunmaḳ şarṭıyla vâlî-'i muşârun ileyh ma'rifetiyle Bender-i Süveys'de mevcûd bulunan sefâyin-i Hindîye'den metîn ve müstaḥkem bir ḳıṭ'a sefîne baḥâsı ḥadd-i i'tidâl üzere ḳaṭ'-ı bâzâr ile iştirâ ve maḥall-i mezbûr'de ḥâḍir sefîne bulunmadıġı ḥâlde Cidde vâlîsi ile ḫaberleşüp Cidde İskelesi'nde mevcûd bulunan merâkib-i Hindîye'den bir ḳıṭ'ası iştirâ olunmaḳ üzere.*

is clear enough: so present were these around the Red Sea, that if by misfortune, such a unit – and a "solid and reliable" one at that, echoing again the risk involved in navigation – could not be found at Suez, then for sure the docks of Jiddah lodged some. Although the text does not at all imply that the merchants on these boats themselves were "Indian," the presence of traders from the various parts of the Indian Ocean in the Red Sea region is well attested. Moreover, it was not only "Indian" traders that were pulled into the Red Sea world. A few months before the issuance of Document 227, another important problem, interlacing both global and local politics, had troubled the sultan's court.

A sultan from Malabar, under threat from the British armies already well implanted in the surrounding areas, had sent an envoy to Istanbul to appeal to his fellow Muslim potentate for assistance against the European invaders. The Ottomans, it has been noted already, had just emerged from an exhausting and draining war and were in the midst of unending hostilities on their eastern borders, so their assistance could only be negligible. Moreover, having been on the wrong end of British support during the last war, and considering the increasing power of the British crown throughout the world, the Ottoman state was invested in not bruising its newfound amity. Still, it is simply incorrect to assert, as does Azmi Özcan in the introduction to his study on Ottoman-Indian-British connections that the ambassador from Malabar returned empty-handed, except for words of sympathy and regret.[21] When the envoy of Sultan 'Ali Râca from Malabar was ready to return home, the Ottoman government sent word to wardens and officers all along the way from the fortresses on the Bosphorus to Alexandria, as well as to the appropriate figures in Cairo, to ensure his safe passage along with the (rather limited) arms and munitions offered to him by the sultan.[22] The order is addressed to the "Current governor of Egypt, former chief minister, the *vezîr* 'İzzet Meḥmed Paşa, to the judge of Egypt, and the judges and deputies of the places and to the wardens and deputies of the fortresses along the coast from the Bosphorus to Alexandria." The offered weapons are described as such: "three imperial canons and their munitions" [*üç 'aded şâhī topları mühimmâtıyla*]. The sultan in question is undoubtedly Ali Raja Kunhi Amsa II of Kannur and Arakkal, ruler of the small sultanate on the south-western coast of the peninsula and the neighboring islands. Their capital-city of Kannur was completely overrun by the troops of the East India Company in 1790, and the dynasty continued to rule only as a dependency of the British. Another official document further orders the

21 Azmi Özcan, *Pan-Islamism: Indian Muslims, the Ottomans and Britain, 1877-1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1997): 11.

22 BOA, MMD, 9, 149, 260.

governor of Egypt to take the responsibility for arranging sea-travel for the envoy and having him escorted safely to Jiddah by ship.[23]

The wording of the command is clear, and made even clearer by the use of alliteration: the Egyptian authorities were to make sure that the envoy embark on an "adequate vessel" [*münâsib sefîneye irkâb*] at Suez and arrive "safe and sound" [*emînen ve selîmen*] at his local destination (namely Jiddah).

This episode, along with the other documents relating to the region in the Ottoman archives, adds another theme to the portrait of the Red Sea, one that also relates to space, but internally this time. Sultan 'Ali Râca's embassy highlights the expansive global networks within which the Red Sea was articulated, but its treatment in the Ottoman records demonstrates how internally divided the sea was. Indeed, the order makes it clear that the governor of Egypt was accountable for the safe arrival of the envoy to Jiddah only, suggesting that it was, in a sense, the limit of the maritime sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan (since his guest was to continue his voyage all the way home). Of course, most of the shores of the Red Sea were under Ottoman control, and Ottomans were in fact present all around. But the sea itself was divided into two halves, with the separation line running more or less through Jiddah. Implicitly expressed by all relevant Ottoman documents by the focalization on Suez and Jiddah as polar reference points (beyond which, therefore, other dynamics were at play), the division was formalized with the scientific charting of the sea with oceanographic explorations almost always divided into two separate missions for each half. Thus, the very first expedition sent to survey the sea in systematic fashion (in 1829, by the British authorities) consisted of two ships with different commanders and crews, one for the part of the Red Sea north of Jiddah, the other, south. Only in the process of writing were the halves conjoined, to produce the *Sailing Directions for the Red Sea*. Over one hundred years later, the Egyptian government sent out the *Mabâḥiṯ* research ship to examine the northern part of the sea, in order partially to palliate the focus of immediately preceding oceanographic expeditions on the southern half.[24] In between these two dates, an Austrian expedition of reconnaissance had been sent, and, although it was executed by a single ship (named *Pola*), its work was divided into two segments separated by a year-long hiatus, and its preliminary conclusions were entirely devoted to outlining the differences between the northern and southern parts of the sea split along the latitude of Jiddah.[25]

23 BOA, MMD, 9, 147, 253.

24 A. F. Mohamed, "The Egyptian exploration of the Red Sea," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences*, 128/852 (Feb. 1940): 306-316.

25 J. Luksch, "The Austro-Hungarian Expedition to the Red Sea," *The Geographical Journal*, 12/6 (Dec. 1898): 571-572.

The division is ostensibly quite total. The underwater worlds differ significantly, with the characteristic diversity of corals dominating in the north, and seagrasses in the south. Salinity decreases the closer one gets to Bab al-Mandab, from which the Red Sea exchanges with the less salty waters of the Gulf of Aden. This all leads to variations in ecosystems more largely, and notably in the assemblages of fish species (of which the Red Sea carries probably the highest diversity overall). Above the waves, the partition is defined, firstly, by varying wind patterns. The northern portion was governed by a unique wind regime that arranged the naval shuttle service between Suez and Jiddah on a cyclical basis (roughly from December to May, the winds favored the navigation to Suez from Jiddah while the rest of the year, it was the other way around). The southern parts of the sea, by contrast, were subject to wind patterns derivative from the monsoon seasons. Ships from beyond Bab al-Mandab were therefore unlikely to pursue their travels north of Jiddah for fear of missing the return winds. Along the shores themselves, the rock formations are dominated by limestone in the northern part and volcanic material in the south.

But over and above these compelling natural phenomena, the difference lies primarily in the political, discursive and historiographic realms. Clearly, the Ottomans projected a special kind of power (political, military, economic, symbolic) over the area between Suez and Jiddah, and more precisely over the routes connecting Suez to Jiddah – as attested by the order concerning the return voyage of ʿAli Râca's envoy. Control over the sea lanes between Jiddah and Suez, between the Hijaz and Egypt, and the public display of such control, was crucial – hence the name *Bahr-i Süveys*, ubiquitous in Ottoman documents to refer to that space. This points to another factor in the production of the north-south division of the Red Sea, namely, the almost complete absence of mention of the southern portion of the sea from the Ottoman records for the period. Indeed, the region of the Yemen on one side and the shores of *Ḥabeş* on the other have a forceful presence in the Ottoman archives only in the earliest period following the conquest of those lands in the sixteenth century, and then after the *Tanzimat* of the mid-nineteenth century. In the period in between, by striking contrast, they only make rare, fleeting appearances, most of which have escaped the attention of scholars, who base themselves upon a different set of sources (such as chronicles and, mainly, European travel narratives, with Carsten Niebuhr, James Bruce and John Burckhardt most common). Cengiz Orhonlu, an unequalled master of the Ottoman archives, is forced to rely, in his account of the province of *Ḥabeş* and the southern policy of the Ottoman Empire, almost exclusively on

travel narratives for his discussion of the eighteenth century.[26] His sources of information here even include an Ottoman travel account, the *Tercüme-i Risâle-i Sûdân*, which is a fascinating document in its own right, but its authenticity has been strongly put into doubt.[27]

The common assumption concerning this intriguing archival absence is that it reflects the superficial nature of Ottoman sovereignty over these lands; but such logic needs to be questioned. All sources indicate that, if perhaps 'weaker', Ottoman presence was significant and continuous (with the special exception of Yemen of course). Burckhardt's account is often used to dismiss Ottoman rule as merely nominal, yet he himself reports, for example, the presence at Sawakin of an Ottoman governor, a garrison, and a customs chief to whom everyone in the region paid proper dues.[28] Moreover, he repeatedly signals the departure from there of numerous ships to different destinations across the sea, especially Jiddah, and mentions of sea-bound trade litter the account. The maritime connections were constant and easy. "No week passes without some vessel arriving from Djidda, or sailing for that port," writes Burckhardt, and Sawakin traders even had their own quarter in Jiddah, with huts resembling their own.[29] The cultural contact across the seas was so pervasive that people in the Hijaz could recognize he had been through Sawakin simply from the style of the sandals that Burckhardt had bought there.[30]

Also, it is important to note that these areas *do* make an occasional appearance in the archives for the period, in however rare and circumspect ways. For example, a record of the Chief Treasury's office in Istanbul mentions the revenues derived from Sawakin and Massawa for the year 1198 A.H. (around 1784 A.G.).[31]

Is this not sufficient evidence to warrant some form of full Ottomanity? And who is entitled to grant it? Is the historical imagination so limited as to being incapable of conceiving forms of politics and sovereignty outside of either the despotic or the disciplinary regimes of power? Can analytical categories only host either direct and massive presence or complete autonomy/anarchy? These

26 *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunun Güney Siyaseti: Habeş Eyaleti* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1996 [1974].

27 See P. M. Holt's review of *Le livre du Soudan* in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 45/3 (1982): 582-3.

28 John Lewis Burckhardt, *Travels in Nubia* (London: John Murray, 1822).

29 *Ibid*: 398, 399.

30 *Ibid*: 281.

31 BOA, D.BŞM.d 5213A.

questions are all the more relevant considering the fact that the major references for the 'only nominal sovereignty' view often had vested interests in the conclusions, since most were agents of foreign governments seeking footholds in the region.

Surely the reasons for the absence of the southern part of the Red Sea world from the Ottoman archives must lie at least in part elsewhere, although they will remain largely mysterious until further explorations can be made, notably on the question of the archive itself. Perhaps they may have to do with the fact that "the majority of pre-Tanzimat documents have been lost" as a result of decay and destruction, especially in the early years of the Turkish Republic.[32] It is not difficult to think of scenarios by which documents emanating from the southern parts of the sea were more likely to fall among the records that disappeared: if, for example, they were more often single sheets rather than bound in *defters*.

Foreground: God and Man at Sea

Coming back to those documents that do exist, the repeated insistence on making sure the guest from Malabar made it through the voyage to Jiddah safely highlights the dangers of Red Sea navigation, something about which Document 227 has much to say. The very next paragraph, in fact, speaks once more to the issue:

> Also, again in the same year [1154], a unit from the state flotilla named Maḥmûdî and reserved for the transportation of grains was destroyed by calamity in the Port of Suez due to the strength of the winds. Upon the request of the governor and chief judge of Egypt, a ship should be built in replacement of the ship by the name of Maḥmûdî, which in its old state carried a load of eight thousand five hundred erdebs of grains, on the condition that its price, reaching fifty Egyptian purses for all the equipment in addition to the remaining debris of the old ship, be deducted from the money of the treasury of the annual remittance.[33]

32 Yoichi Takamatsu, "Formation and Custody of the Ottoman Archives During the Pre-Tanzimat Period," *The Memoirs of the Toyo Bunku*, 64 (2006): 144.

33 *Yine sene-'i mezbûrede başḳa ve Maḥmûdî ta'bîr olunur ve naḳl-i ġılâla maḫṣûṣ sefâyin-i mîrîyeden ḳaḍâen Süveys Limanı'nda şiddet-i rüzgârdan şikest olan sefînenin yerine Maḥmûdî nâmıyla sekiz bin beş yüz erdeb ġılâla müteḥammil vaḍ'-ı ḳadîmî üzere 'atîḳ sefînenin enḳâḍ-ı mevcûdesinden başḳa mecmû' âlâtıyla elli Mıṣrî kîseye vâlî ve ḳâḍî-'i Mıṣır iltimâslarıyla bahâsı irsâlîye mâlından maḫsûb şarṭıyla kezâlik bir ḳıṭ'a sefîne inşâsıyçün.*

The text here makes a point of indicating that the ship was destroyed "*ḳaḍâen*," that is, 'by calamity', in the Port of Suez, thereby seeking to explain the recurrence of such destruction, which is once more placed under the domain of the natural, and supernatural, order of things. This particular catastrophe is analyzed further as being "due to the strength of the winds" [*şiddet-i rüzgârdan*] – the force of divine nature *par excellence* when it comes to navigation, both predictable and yet ultimately unknowable.

The next allusion to the problem, in the following sentence, reinforces these same, unmistakable elements of the state's self-legitimizing argumentation:

> Also, in the year [one thousand one hundred and] fifty seven, a ship belonging to the Muḥammedîye named *vaḳf-ı şerîf* of Sultan Meḥmed Ḫân who dwells in paradise, mercy and compassion be upon him, burned in the Port of Suez. In replacement for this *vaḳf* ship, a vessel should be bought at a reasonable price from the merchant ships, on the condition that it be disbursed from the transfer money of the tax farmed villages.[34]

Here again a clear transfer of culpability is made from the all too human powers that be to a (super)natural order of things, nonetheless accompanied by a distinct assumption of responsibility on the part of the Ottoman state (on certain financial and budgetary conditions, of course, and in particular the incessant repetition of the need for the price to be reasonable, with the two possible treasury chests changing from paragraph to paragraph).

The references to the natural and supernatural were not unwarranted. Indeed, the difficulties of Red Sea navigation were notorious throughout the age of sail (and beyond, as will be discussed below in reference to the development of regular steam travel in the area). Travelers who left an account of their crossing of the sea invariably included mention of a traumatic experience, from Ibn Jubayr in the late twelfth century to Eyles Irwin in the late eighteenth century. The celebrated navigator Aḥmad Ibn Mâjid al-Saʿdî chides the common pilots of the Red Sea, who would follow routes hugging the coast in order to avoid the hazards of the high seas. This was "not the path of the true navigator," thus bringing greater honor onto himself and his fellow master captains [*muʿallims*]

34 *Elli yedi senesinde başḳa ve cennet-i mekân Sulṭân Meḥmed Ḫân ʿaleyhi'r-raḥmetü ve'l-ġufrânın Mıṣır'da vâḳiʿ Meḥmedîye nâm vaḳf-ı şerîfinden Bender-i Süveys'de muḥterik olan bir kitʿa vaḳf sefînenin yerine bahâsı Ḫulvân-i ḳurâdan edâ olunmaḳ üzere tüccâr sefînelerinden muʿtedil bahâ ile bir ḳitʿa sefîne iştirâsıyçün.*

by affirming the dangerous intricacies of the venture.[35] Shipwrecks were all too common, something Document 227 recurrently suggests and to which most relevant sources attest.

There was, first of all, the serious issue of the abundance of corals and shoals, which caused incessant worries to pilots, and provides another important feature to any portrait of the Red Sea. The concentration of such treacherous underwater protruding formations made it unique, with perhaps the greatest concentration of reefs in the world.

It was in fact the damage done by coral reefs to yet another ship that ostensibly spurred the decision by the British government and the East India Company to chart the waters of the Red Sea. In 1829, an experimental steam-powered journey via the Red Sea was attempted: the collier that was sent to supply it with coal was wrecked by a reef, having barely escaped another.[36] Thus were sent, that very same year, Robert Moresby and Thomas Elwon of the Bombay Marine (later, the Indian Navy), aboard ships of the East India Company, to survey the sea. This, they did over the next three years and more, a venture that culminated in the publication of the *Sailing Directions for the Red Sea*, saturated with references to reefs and shoals.

In fact, the coral of the Red Sea has always been one of its distinguishing characteristics, an essential element to any portrait. And this, not only because it was the bane of the captains and crews of the ships that dared to navigate its waters. Today, it is mainly the object of aesthetic enjoyment for tourists of its underwater world and amateurs of jewelry (and also in some cases as potential reservoirs of fossil fuels), but it was once a crucial feature of the local architecture throughout the shores of the sea, and this, in the very *longue durée*, from the structures of the ancient port-city of Berenike to the Ottoman-era buildings of Sawakin, Jiddah, Massawa, Hudaydah, Luhayyah and other coastal towns on the Red Sea. These were labeled by Derek Matthews as belonging to a 'Red Sea Style' of architecture that blends various types of corals into the buildings, and beautifully sketched by Jean-Pierre Greenlaw in the case of specimens from Sawakin.[37] In the early nineteenth-century already, John Lewis Burckhardt had noticed the cross-Red Sea

35 G. R. Tibbetts, "Arab Navigation in the Red Sea," *Geographical Journal*, 127/3 (1961): 325.

36 Sarah Searight, "The Charting of the Red Sea," *History Today*, 53/3 (2003): 44.

37 Derek Matthews, "The Red Sea Style," *Kush*, 1 (1953): 60-86, Jean-Pierre Greenlaw, *The Coral Buildings of Suakin* (London: Oriel Press, 1976).

architectural commonalities, especially in the use of corals for building, speaking of the architecture of Sawakin, which he relates to that of Jiddah.[38]

The corals of the Red Sea served its coastal communities as a source of material for construction, but also of income, via a trade that stretched enormous distances, and even of food. It should not come as a surprise, then, that its coral reefs have been associated with the origin of the sea's name (although a reader of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, in his correspondence to the journal concerning his own theory about the name of the Red Sea, flatly dismissed such onomatological meanderings with a flat "there is no red coral found in the Red Sea"[39]). Still, the standard modern dictionaries of Ottoman language list *Şâb denizi*, the sea of corals, as a common name for the Red Sea.[40] Such Ottomanist corals, admittedly, need not be red, but it cannot be denied that corals hold a special, unique place in the portrait of the sea, and in its very definition as a historical object.

Besides reefs and shoals, there was the problem of the fierce and capricious currents and tides. In this matter too, it has been suggested that the Red Sea deserves a special "variety" of its own, the prime specificity of which seems to relate to their variability and irregularity.[41] As Captain Moresby had explained already in the *Sailing Directions*: "The currents in the Red Sea, from Jiddah to Ras Mahommed, are various all the year; no particular direction can be assigned to them…"[42]

The perniciousness of the currents and the abundance of corals are intimately connected in ways inherent to the Red Sea, and not only because they feature as prime tormentors of navigators and their passengers. They also have a common origin, as both result from the particular climatic and geological conditions of the region: the high temperature and salinity of the waters provide an ideal setting for the nurture of various species of corals, just as they provoke differentials of density that lead to erratic underwater flux. The currents had another source, determining both their strength and unreliability, and that was the vicious wind-factor.

38 *Travels in Nubia*: 389.

39 J.S. King, "The Red Sea: Why So Called," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (Jul. 1898): 617.

40 See the entry for *şâb* in the dictionaries of both J. Redhouse and Ş. Sāmī.

41 Alexander Brownlie, "Varieties of Tides. The Red Sea Variety," *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*, 35/1 (1903): 17-23.

42 Horsburgh, *India Directory*: 347.

Thus, and finally, the most spectacular threat to ships sailing the Red Sea were the often violent and impulsive winds that would regularly, although unpredictably, sweep through the narrow waterways that had to be navigated between the many reefs, islands and coasts. Of course, there were, to begin with, the general wind patterns that derived from the extensive monsoons of the larger Indian Ocean world, well known for millennia – and these were, in fact, what allowed and modeled the very navigation of the sea in the first place, determining sailing seasons, paces and even the disposition of ports. But there were also the more variable and intense winds that could not be mapped either in time or space, for they did not follow any sensible, uniform configuration at all. This is evoked by Document 227: "destroyed by calamity (…) due to the strength of the winds."

It is often claimed that the advent of steam in the Red Sea world made such geographical and climatic factors irrelevant, the progress of science and technology having defeated the debilitating forces of nature once and for all. Thus, Jomier states:

> Steam navigation was starting to upset age-old traditions; the Red Sea was assuming a new importance. The winds blowing from the north nine months a year considerably impeded sail-drive movement; the reefs along its coasts paralyzed coastal navigation. Thanks to steam and modern instruments, the wind and reefs were no longer insurmountable obstacles.[43]

This appears to be mainly a retro-projection from the standpoint of the modes of transportation of the second half of the twentieth century. Contemporary accounts of the beginning of steam in the region are much more circumspect. The *Sailing Directions for the Red Sea* writes of the "Gulf, or Sea of Akabah," for example, in distinctly less vainglorious terms:

> This part of the Red Sea, so little known formerly, has now been found to afford no advantage for a sailing-ship: the advantages which might offer for steamers, in landing their packets at Akabah, is in a measure counteracted by the almost constant and violent northerly winds which prevail here. These winds are drawn to the southward by a very high range of mountains, bounding close both sides of the sea, and opening like a funnel to the northward in Syria; from which cause the cooler atmosphere of the northern regions is drawn into this part with such violence, that it raises the sea into a deep and turbulent swell, so that no vessel could make way against it; the place also is void of soundings and anchorages,

43 Jomier, *Le Maḥmal*: 148-9.

> except one or two spots. No native vessels ever navigate this sea; and such a dread have they of this place, that in crossing the Red Sea, near the Sea of Akabah, the Arabs always offer up a prayer for their safety. Numerous vessels have been lost hereabouts, and four attempts were made before we succeeded in surveying it, the Palinurus having been blown away three different times: once while at anchor, having two bowers down, with 50 fathoms of chain on each.[44]

Parallax View: Knowledge and Power, Global and Local

All of these factors combined to create particular conditions that concentrated the knowledge and power over navigation into the hands and minds of local pilots and captains, who had the unique training, skills and perception that comes from organic rearing in a place and profession. Navigating the Red Sea constituted their *habitus*, and only within particular parameters of altered power-knowledge dynamics could this be transferred onto modes of operating that bypassed these intermediaries. The reliance on local pilots and captains is manifest throughout the ages, making it also a distinctive feature of the personality of the sea in the *longue durée*. When the crusader knight Reginald of Châtillon launched his infamous maritime raid on the Hijaz in the winter of 1182-83, contemporary sources indicate that he was dependent upon locals, especially at sea.[45] Six hundred years later, even as the essential difference between European and non-European or modern and primitive was articulated by the topos of progress in science and technology, navigation and discovery, Eyles Irwin repeatedly refers to the dependence on indigenous pilots in narrating his grueling travels and travails on and around the Red Sea.[46] Most revealing with regard to the reliance on local captains is the fact that the very scientific charting of the Red Sea itself rested entirely on the use of local intermediaries as pilots. The expedition was ordered by the most powerful state of its time, which controlled the most advanced technical, military and discursive tools and mechanisms, and dominated the sea-lanes essentially of the entire globe (and certainly of the Indian Ocean). And yet, betraying an enormous dependence on their local guides, the *Sailing Directions for the Red Sea* announce at the end of the section on "Winds and Currents between Suez and Jiddah":

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44 Horsburgh, *India Directory*: 341.

45 See Gary Leiser, "The Crusader Raid in the Red Sea in 578, 1182/83," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 14 (1977): 87-100.

46 *Series of Adventures*.

> [T]he native pilots being acquainted with the reefs and anchorages from eyesight are always able to take a vessel among them with safety; a stranger, not acquainted with the localities, would feel alarmed in navigating among the reefs; they are all safe to approach, taking the precaution to be on the fore-topsail-yard with the native pilot, and keeping a good look-out for sunken rocks, the eye, and not the lead, being the only guide.[47]

The deference to "native pilots" is omnipresent throughout these *Sailing Directions*. Suffice it here to say that the overall reliance on local intermediaries as a locus of power (to sail) and knowledge (of sailing) was so complete that the author-surveyors are made to admit that their empirical data remains inferior to that locally produced and transmitted. More than once, the text dutifully acknowledges that it found itself incapable of charting this or that reef, and even an entire area or another, that were said to exist by their informants. And this knowledge is not simply dismissed, or even just acknowledged. It is integrated wholesale into the very empirical dimension of the charting of the sea. The approach to Mocha from the south, for example, is described thus:

> Ships having entered the Straits of Bab-el-mandeb and passed Perim Island, should steer along the Arabian coast about N. by W. ½ W. or N.N.W. (true), keeping without the depth of 12 fathoms, in order to avoid a shoal said to exist between Cape Bab-el-mandeb and Zee Hill, but which the surveyors could not discover; and also to keep clear of the sand and rocky banks which project from Mocha Roads.[48]

What is *said to exist* (by the native pilots) is included on par with the actual soundings made to chart the passages safe for navigation. As in the case of the census map of Egypt carefully analyzed by Timothy Mitchell,[49] the *Sailing Directions*, by their authors' own admission, did not constitute an advance in the precision of knowledge along the linear path of progress that the very idea of scientific charting conjured. It consisted, rather, in a new arrangement in the production of knowledge, and therefore a novel configuration of power.

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47 Horsburgh, *India Directory*: 347.

48 *Ibid*: 281. Such deferral of authority, it should be repeated, is not an uncommon occurrence in the text. It re-appears, in fact, on the very next page, when the authority of "the pilot" is appealed to in reference to the presence of inhabitations inland off of Billool Bay, which appeared from the boat to be completely deserted. (282)

49 See especially Chapter Three "The Character of Calculability," in *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 80-122.

In fact, local knowledge is at one point in the text explicitly and favorably compared to previous European accounts. Concerning the "Centurion Shoal," the *Sailing Directions* writes that it is "mentioned by Horsburg to be situated in lat. 25° 20′ N., and lon. 35° 56′ E."[50] By "Horsburg", it should be added, is meant the previous editions of the very same *Directory* in which the *Sailing Directions for the Red Sea* are reproduced as the vanguard reference on the Red Sea.[51] This supposed "Centurion Shoal," they continue,

> certainly does not exist in this situation, or near it; having been on the spot assigned to it, and often about it, nothing has been seen. Once, when on the situation assigned to it, a shoal was reported from the masthead, and it was not until we sailed over the spot that we found it was not a shoal, but a strong rippling, caused by currents, appearing in light winds exactly like a shoal. When in the rippling we sounded 200 and 400 fathoms, but found no bottom; on the North side of this rippling, which extended several miles to the N.E. and S.W. in a narrow line of breakers, we found the current setting to the S.E. one quarter of a mile per hour, and on the South side of the rippling 1½ miles per hour to the N.W., the wind then very light or nearly calm. This appearance, so deceitful to us, having been three years constantly in sight of coral shoals, at once proves that former navigators must have seen the same, and placed them down as shoals, without examining them; which fully accounts for the numerous dangers in the old charts. None of the Arab pilots have any oral information of this shoal, nor do they believe it to exist…[52]

Thus, in one clear stroke, the *Sailing Directions* dismisses, and almost ridicules, the previous standard European accounts, which are thus recast as basically prescientific, and, in stark contrast, celebrates the more empirically precise "information" of the "Arab pilots," which is, however, compromised by being "oral." Thus does this text establish itself as the new ultimate center of knowledge (and power, of course, which is never far away: many of the descriptions of places along the coast discuss matters that can only be of value for military purposes, and it should not be forgotten, the author-surveyors were commanders in a military navy).

It should come as no surprise, then, that the *Sailing Directions* would conclude with instructions for practical arrangements with regard to obtaining native help, complete with precise price range and explicit tropes of colonial self-entitlement:

50 Horsburgh, *India Directory*: 343.

51 At least in the edition under examination here, the name is actually written with a final [h].

52 *Ibidem*.

> The hire of a native pilot from Jiddah to Suez is about 25 or 30 German crowns, besides their food. If possible, do not take an old man; they have little inclination to go aloft, and are generally indolent; it is necessary to keep them on the alert, and never place too great a dependence on them; they know nothing when in the midst of the sea and out of sight of land.[53]

As for Document 227, it too raises the issue of the captaining and piloting of the ships, as well as the ever-thorny question of the responsibility for the recurrence of wreckage and destruction, in the very next segment. Departing from the appeal to the 'natural order of things', it explicitly and directly orients itself, this time, to the most personal and individual of realms. "Also, in the year [one thousand one hundred and] sixty," Document 227 continues,

> the cause of the ruin of the ships meant for the transport of grains has, upon examination, been found to originate in the appointment of the ship captains on the basis of the receipt of improper bribes and in the ill-considered greed of the governors and notables of Egypt.[54]

Responsibility for the destiny of the ships lay firmly in the hands of the captains [*re'is*], then, as logic would impose. This theme of avarice and corruption being at the origin of the high rate of shipwrecks is a common one. It is echoed in Burckhardt's account:

> The avidity of the masters in thus overloading their vessels often causes their ruin; about six months ago, two ships on their way from Djidda to Souakin, with a number of Negro pilgrims on board, were wrecked on the coast at a short distance to the north of Souakin; a few lives only were saved, and the cargoes were entirely lost.[55]

But culpability, at least in Document 227, was a more complex matter, relating to the political, social and economic conditions of the region and the empire more largely. It was in the appointments of the ship captains, and in the operations behind them, that the problem lay. It was the extraordinary selfishness, the *tam'-i ḫâm* (an ill-considered or crude greed), of the region's dominant political

53 *Ibid*: 347.

54 *Dâḫî altmış senesinde başḳa ve naḳl-ı ġilâla maḥṣûṣ sefâyinin sebeb-i telefî leda't-tafaḥḥuṣ vülât ve a'yân-ı Mıṣır'ın ṭam'-ı ḫâma teb'iyet ile nâ-ehlî rüşvet aḫzıyla re'îs naṣb eylemelerinden neş'et ėdib.*

55 *Travels in Nubia*: 413.

class that caused the disasters at sea, along with the concomitant designation of ship captains on the basis of their compliance (through bribes) rather than efficiency or security. It is revealing that the text includes both the political elite appointed directly from Istanbul (the governors, *vülât*) and the locally groomed ones (the notables, *a'yân*), for the conventional narrative is one of fierce dichotomy between these two groups and orientations. The correct choice of ship captains was the crucial human element involved in the destiny of Red Sea navigation, and the Ottoman government therefore assumed its own responsibility to assure that proper procedures were followed in this regard. How better to achieve this than by directly threatening the greedy where it hurt them most – in their pockets, as the popular expression goes? This solution had the added benefit of deflecting potentially heavy costs away from the state treasury. Thus, Document 227 announces, upon the heels of the discovery of the immediate reasons for the recurrent destructions,

> Two vessels from the merchant ships that can each carry loads of ten thousand *erdebs* and above should be bought, and labeled Mekkî and Medenî. By way of an imperial command, the Mekkî ship will be committed to the charge of the governors of Egypt and the Medenî one to the Seven Corps. They will be entrusted, upon the time of their departure, with the condition that their merchant loads be superior to ten thousand *erdebs* each, and also, upon their return, with the money of the merchants and the servants, and they will see to the maintenance costs of the coming and going. A certificate, sealed with the stamp of the judges of Mecca and Medina and the governor of the province of Medina, should be brought to Egypt that accord with the ones that are brought from Egypt, and from there they should also be sent to my Sublime Porte. With the said conditions, precautions are taken against the appointment of improper ship captains. And if destruction must come, the governor of Egypt will bear the indemnity of the Mekkî ship and the Seven Corps that of the Medenî. On such condition, and as per the request of the governor of Egypt, with imperial permission two large vessels should be bought from the merchant ships available at the Port of Suez, on the condition that they be new and reliable. So that their price be calculated from money of the annual remittance, the legal title-deeds should be sent to the Gate of Felicity.[56]

56 *Onar bin erdebden ziyâdeye müteḥammil bâzargân sefâyininden iki ḳiṭ'a sefîne iştirâ ve Mekkî ve Medenî ta'bîriyle sefîne-i Mekkî Mıṣır vâlîlerine ve Medenî'si ocâğ-ı seb'aya bâ ḫaṭṭ-ı hümâyûn tefvîḍ ḳılınıb ḫîn-i 'azîmetlerinden onar bin erdebden ziyâdesi bâzargân ḫamûlesi olmaḳ üzere taḥmîl ve 'avdetlerinde dâḫî ḳûl ve tüccâr mâlı taḥmîl ve iyâb ü żihâblarında me'unet maṣārīfleri rü'yet ve Mıṣır'dan getirdikleri nümûneye muvâfıḳ Mekke ve Medîne ḳâḍîları ve Şeyḫ'ül-ḥarem mührüyle memhûr Mıṣır'a nümûne getirip ve ondan dâḫî Der-i 'alîyeme irsâl ve şurûṭ-i meẕkûre üzere nâ ehl re'îs naṣbından ḫaẕer*

Betraying annoyance and a certain loss of control over essential matters of state, the order exposes here the broad social and political networks implicated in the Red Sea, bringing in a panoply of officials and functionaries to serve as checks and balances over each other in order to ensure the proper conclusion of affairs. Ultimate authority, of course, lies, here and everywhere, in the person of the Sultan himself and his court – but it is a distant authority, and the execution of the state's will must therefore borrow indirect and highly sophisticated channels, with a paper trail traversing lands and seas and ending up, always, in Istanbul.

As the high rate of destruction was found to be due to local corruption, it was decided that the *financial* responsibility for the ships, and especially the cost of their potential indemnity, would rest with those culpable: on the one hand, the governors, appointed from Istanbul and eternally attempting to gain access to the revenues of the province that were increasingly monopolized by the Mamluks and their dependents; on the other, the Seven Corps, the locally groomed militiamen who formed the basis of the Mamluks' system of power and of their extensive social and economic networks. This ought to prevent the appointment of faulty ship captains, in addition to enforcing closer and stricter surveillance of the assets on board. Furthermore, the examiners themselves were to be examined by way of the exchange of precise official documentation with various functionaries in the Hijaz, whose natural interests (unlike those of the officials in Cairo) would have made them favorable to the smooth and regular arrival of the customary provisions (upon which their fortunes and the sustenance of the local population were dependent), and therefore likely to enforce the required inspections. Finally, the certificates were all to make their way to the imperial capital. This was the imposition of an additional locus of ultimate surveillance for the actual transactions, of course, but also a performative affirmation of the emanating source of symbolic power, both in the flow of the text itself and in the regular dispatches that it calls for.

This segment once again calls forth the varying spatialities that are implicated in Document 227's idea of the Red Sea, but it also points towards the differential temporalities that it appeals to. Indeed, in the Red Sea conjured by this text, just as in the case of Braudel's Mediterranean, the (super)natural and eternal flows through the socio-political and conjectural and into the petty and personal.

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olunmaḳ ve eger telef olmaḳ lâzim gelir ise sefîne-i Mekkî'yi vâlî-i Mıṣır ve Medenî'yi yedi ocâḳ taḍmîn eylemek şarṭıyla Mıṣır vâlîsi inhâsıyla bâ iẕn-i hümâyûn cedîd ve metîn olmaḳ üzere Bender-i Süveys'de mevcûd tüccâr sefînelerinden iki ḳiṭ'a kebîr sefîne iştirâ ve bahâsı mâl-ı irsâlîyeden maḥsûb içün hüccet-i şer'îyesi Der-i sa'âdetime irsâl olunmaḳ üzere.

These combined themes of eloping time and expanding space return in the next segment as well, in what is perhaps the most interesting and revealing passage of all, as Document 227 dwells on the important question, to which it had alluded before, of the difficult and intricate modalities of ship-building on the shores of the Red Sea.

"In the year [one thousand one hundred and] seventy-four also," the following sentence begins, driving the text closer and closer to its date of production (and completing an initial full circle by reaching the time of the very first example elicited),

> during the period of the above-mentioned deceased Kâmil Aḥmed Paşa's governorship, noble decrees were repeatedly sent on the part of my Imperial Chancery. In the years seventy-five and seventy-six, as per the command issued by the Grand Vizier, in the harbor of the Port of Suez, by way of Aġâ Vekîli 'Osman Aġâ from Egypt's Cairo, one unit worth sixty-seven Egyptian purses and two other units worth each seventy-two and a half Egyptian purses of the state galleons type, reserved for the transport of grains for the Two Noble Sanctuaries, should be built for the *vaḳf* of Sultan Meḥmed Ḫân who dwells in paradise, mercy and compassion be upon him. Their costs were disbursed from the treasury of the yearly cash revenue of Egypt. During the said two years, by way of the governor of the district of Rhodes Süleymân Paşa, the necessary timber was cut from the mountains of Rhodes and Gökciğez and the necessary tar, pitch and resin were purchased from Mount Ida and its environs for the purpose of the said ships. The total costs, twenty six thousand one hundred and eighty seven and a half *ġurûş* including transport to Alexandretta, were sent. In addition to these, the necessary anchor, wool string, linen for the sails, and other required equipments have been arranged for from the material existing at the Imperial Dockyard, and two thousand *ḳınṭârs* of crude iron have also been arranged for from the material existing at the Imperial Arsenal. Loaded onto ships, they were immediately sent to Alexandretta. In addition to that given from the storage of the Arsenal, two thousand *ḳınṭârs* of pure iron were also purchased from Kavala and Praveste and Zihne and those environs and loaded onto a ship in the Port of Salonika and sent to Rhodes.[57]

57 *Yetmiş dört târîḫinde müteveffâ-yi müşârun ileyh Kâmil Aḥmed Paşa'nın müddet-i tevlîyetinde dâḫî başḳa başḳa Dîvân-ı hümâyûnum ṭarafından evâmir-i şerîfe vèrildigi ve yetmiş beş ve yetmiş altı senelerinde Bender-i Süveys iskelesinde ġilâl-ı Ḥarameyn-i Muḥteremeyn naḳlına taḫṣîṣan bâ irâde-i 'alîye Ḳâhire-'i Mıṣır'da Aġâ Vekîli 'Oṣmân Aġâ ma'rifetiyle cennet-mekân Sulṭân Murâd Ḫân 'aleyhi'r-raḥmetü ve'l-ġufrân vaḳfından altmış yedi Mıṣrî kîseye bir ḳıṭ'a ve yetmiş ikişer buçuḳ kîse-'i Mıṣrî'ye dâḫî iki ḳıṭ'a mîrî ḳâlyûn inşâ ve maṣârifları irsâlîye-'i Mıṣır ḫazînesinden i'ṭâ olunmuş olduġu ve sefâyin-i meẓkûre içün seneteyn-i meẓkûreteynde Rodûs Sancaġı Mutaṣarrif Süleymân*

This passage gives a good sense of the extensive efforts involved in the construction of ships on the Red Sea. It was clearly an affair that implicated impressively wide and efficient organizational networks in order to coordinate the necessary undertakings covering enormous distances during a significant period of time. Over the course of no less than two years, Suez was at the center of a costly business involving the lands of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea coast, where lumber was plentiful, as well as the Balkans, which produced the necessary steel. The imperial center, by necessity stocked with gigantic productive capacity, also contributed to the material (and not only to the cash funds). Shipped from the various locations, the equipment was all centralized in Alexandretta on the southernmost Mediterranean coast of today's Turkey, before making its way to Suez (although this part is left to the reader's imagination). The breadth of the effort seems astounding – and that is exactly the rhetorical effect desired by the text. The time involved (two years) is mentioned twice, and the geographical stretch is sketched out in detail.

But most important, clearly, were the financial expenditures that such Red Sea ship-building set in motion; a point driven home yet again in the sentence immediately following, which goes back in time against the chronological flow of events precisely so as to mention once more the potential capital that the venture entailed:

> And in the year [one thousand one hundred and] sixty, by way of the chief of the reservist corps, and at the cost of one hundred and forty-five Egyptian purses, two galleons were constructed.[58]

Paşa ma'rifetiyle iḳtiḍâ ėden kerestesi Rodûs ve Gökcigez cibâlından ḳaṭ' ve zift ve ḳaṭrân ve reçinesi Ḳâẓṭâġı ve ḥavâlîsinden mubâya'a ve İskenderûn'a ba'de'n-naḳl bi'l-cümle maṣârifi olan yirmi altı bin yüz seksen yedi buçuḳ ġurûş havâleten i'ṭâ olunmuş olduġu ve bunlardan mâ 'adâ iḳtiḍâ ėden lenger ve tûl-i ṣâf ve kıtpâs-i bâdbân ve sâ'ir âlât-ı lâzimesi Tersâne-'i 'Âmire mevcûdundan ve iki bin ḳinṭâr tîmûr-i ḥâm baḥî Cebeḫâne-'i 'Âmire mevcûdundan tertîb ve sefînelere taḥmîl birle İskenderûn'a tesyîr ve mevcûd-ı Cebeḫâne'den vėrilenden mâ 'adâ iki bin ḳınṭâr tîmîr-i ṣâf Ḳavâla ve Preveşte ve Ẓiḫne ve ol havâlilerinden mübâya'a ve Selânîk İskelesi'nden sefîneye taḥmîl ve Rodûs'a irsâl [olunmuş].

58 *Ve altmış târîḫinde mustaḥfiẓân ocâġı ketḫudâsı ma'rifetiyle yüz kırk beş Mıṣri kîse maṣârıf ile iki ḳıṭ'a ḳalyûn inşâ olunmuş*. The final conjugated verb here serves as auxiliary for the entire preceding segment as well. The whole passage is connected with the following section by the phrase of conjunction [*olmaġla ba'd-ı ezîn*], in the sense of 'on the basis of the preceding…'

Fall of the Curtain: Writing Space and Time

In this way, Document 227 finally reaches the immediate issue at hand. Ships were needed for the provisioning of the Hijaz, as the flotilla dedicated to this task had suffered losses of units, and it was the responsibility of the state to ensure their replacement. At the heart of the concern, then, was the question of the source of the new ships.

The first reaction, surely, would have been to appeal to the most logical solution at hand in terms of productivist protectionism, and build the ships at the Suez dockyard. It is, of course, anachronistic to speak of productivism or protectionism concerning this time and place. The terms are used here in full cognizance of this important problem, and should not be seen to imply the fully-fledged espousal by the Ottoman government of these economic and fiscal ideologies. Still, it is impossible not to notice the sense of need, on the part of the Ottoman state, to justify, along a most long-winded and convoluted argumentation, the decision to purchase private, and even foreign, ships rather than construct them within Ottoman domains and under public auspices. This strongly suggests the existence and weight of an ideological spirit akin to some sort of productivist protectionism, which counters the standard trope regarding the 'Ottoman economic mind.'[59]

The iterative accumulation of the recurrently mobilized cases and precedents, however, led to the conclusion that financial and political necessity produced its own logic, especially in the case of a state suffering severe economic duress and highly concerned by the symbolic weight invested in the problem.

> On the basis of the preceding, the manner by which the costs for the construction of the said ships not be caused to increase was made clear by the summary of the receipt account submitted by the Chief Treasurer's Office to the Imperial Chancery in the year [one thousand one hundred and] eighty-one. Thus, since it is of the oldest of matters, it needs no demonstration that utmost care and attention should be given to the building of ships in timely and proper fashion and to the procurement of the requisites and necessities at favorable costs.[60]

59 For the standard narrative on the subject, see Halil İnalcık, , "The Ottoman Economic Mind and Aspects of the Ottoman Economy," in Michael Cook (ed.), *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970): 207-218, and Mehmet Genç, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Devlet ve Ekonomi* (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 2000). For a critical revisionist account, from which I have derived great inspiration all around, see Palmira Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

60 *Olmaġla ba'd-ı ezîn bu maḳûle sefâyin inşâsi iḳtiḍâ eyledikde ziyâdeye tecâvüz ėtdirilmemek*

Ultimately, or even unfortunately, one senses Document 227 wanting to say, it was probably cheaper and certainly quicker and easier to purchase the ships, as opposed to building them. And the issue was a pressing, and absolutely crucial, one. "In any case," the text asserts with grand solemnity,

> that the poor among the population of the Two Noble Sanctuaries be free of the binds of scarcity through the preparation of ships and the transportation of provisions is among the necessary corollaries of the glory and magnificence of my exalted sultanate.[61]

Thus has the text come full circle, addressing once again the fundamental problematic, which it had opened with: the Red Sea and its coasts formed a world utterly reliant upon the importation of foodstuffs from the outside. Furthermore, it was the noble responsibility of the state to assure the constant flow of goods around the Red Sea. And finally, these were elements belonging to the natural, and supernatural, order of things – that is precisely why it is such a great source of its legitimacy and symbolic capital. It is purposefully inscribed in the *longue durée*, and this is another effect of the rhetorical flourish of examples. That is why the stylistic and symbolic weight of the constant principle of precedence and the recurrent appeal to the past is so integral to the text, not only in its prose, but also in its argument and meaning. Iterative diction here constitutes the very embodiment of time. It performs the space for time to grow. "Time does not pass," says literary critic Ian Baucom, "it accumulates."[62] The Ottoman state knew this. It discovered, further, that time in fact needs to be *made* to accumulate, for in order to accumulate, it requires a structure, a body, a narrative. It is the accumulation of time, then, that is repeatedly inscribed in, by and as Document 227. Thus, the place of the past, its authority, its burden, is not, contrary to common wisdom, retrovisionary. It neither looks nor seeks to go back to a pristine golden age. It is about placing, grounding time so as to look forward.

Baucom credits Martiniquan author Édouard Glissant as primary inspiration for the idea of the accumulation of time and the past, whose temporal perspective

üzere seksen bir senesinde Dîvân-ı Hümâyûn ṭarafına ʿilm ü ḫaber ḳâʾimesi vėrildiġi Bâşmuḥâsebeʾden ʿalâ vech ʾil-ḥulâṣa derkâr olunmaġla bu ṣûretde muḳteḍâ-yi vaḳt ü ḥâl inşâ-ʾi sefâyin tedârükât-i mühimmât ve levâzimât ile iḫtiyâr-ı tekellüfâtı müʾeddî ve bu emr-i vâcib ʾül-ihtimâmın temşîyeti dâhî aḳdem-i umûrdan idügü muḥtâc-i beyân olmayıb.

61 *Beher ḥâl tedârük-i sefâyin ve naḳl-ı ġılâl ile fuḳarâ-yı ahâlî-ʾi Ḥarameyn-i Muḫteremeyn vâreste-i ḳayd-i muḍâyaḳa olmaları lâzime-i şân ü şükûh-ı salṭanat-i ʿalîyemden.*

62 Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 34.

he contrasts with Walter Benjamin's more famous remarks on time, its past and its present, as a flash, a sudden image. Baucom, following Glissant, is, in the last instance, speaking about modernity and its temporality. The borrowing of the image of accumulating time here is a free one: it is not meant to engage the question of modernity, however conceived. Still, Glissant's vision as recaptured by Baucom, is not completely absent from the issues at hand with Ottoman Document 227, which may have found itself intimately relating to the following for example:

> Glissant regards the lightning flash as a figure of desire, the not-yet, and the impossible. Accumulation, conversely, exists in his work as a figure of necessity, the unending, and the unavoidable. Under his reading, in other words, the flash of the Benjaminian image may illuminate a ruinous past and cast its light on a future which will constellate itself with that past and take some property in it, but that future has not yet come. It is instead dreamed or invoked. The past with which a poetics of duration corresponds does not, however, await the future advent of a coming practice of historical materialism in order to detonate the charge of what-has-been. Rather, for Glissant the what-has-been is, and it is lived, and it is lived as the total environment linking together the "histories of peoples."[63]

The expanse of time covered by Document 227 is in fact not particularly long – not even forty years, actually, from 1154 A.H., the earliest moment mentioned, to 1191 when the text itself was composed (or 1192, taking into account the marginal note indicating the repeat of the order). But the sheer repetition in writing of the recurrence of the problem gives it a depth and breadth that far outweigh the chronological span. There was, of course, no strict analytical need to bring up previous cases, and certainly not with such detail of exposition. The order easily could have limited itself to the first paragraph before introducing the actual command. The significance of repetition lies elsewhere, in the symbolic and rhetorical spheres. On the one hand, it underlines how intimate a feature of the Red Sea's *longue durée* the problem was, how much people's lives and actions were constrained by it, and how everyone was conscious of the ensuing dilemma. On the other hand, it highlighted how repetitively and extensively the Ottoman state was performing its noble duty by getting involved in the matter. The former element is necessary for the sustenance of the latter, since, if ultimately the problem could not be solved once and for all, it was not as a result of a deficiency on the part of a state that was doing its utmost, but precisely because it was an endless predicament. And conversely, the former depends on the latter, for it is only part of the *longue durée* because the state and the society were invested in it

63 *Specters of the Atlantic*: 319.

as a problem in the first place. Life, in the abstract, is not unsustainable in the Red Sea world at all, as demonstrated by the simple fact that most areas subsisted without support from any state structure. It was the particular form of life that the state and society supported, most notably urban agglomerations, which was unsustainable without external intervention.

The rest of Document 227 is the actual command, articulated mainly in the form of an assemblage of snippets from the previous segments, thereby embodying in its very structure the crucial element of precedence, and culminating in the order to purchase the ships so as to assure the subsistence of the Red Sea world – the order itself involves a self-reiteration almost word for word (something that is not unusual in the genre):

> As it was done in the past, appropriate ships should be bought in those parts, and their costs transferred from the money of the treasury of the annual remittance of Egypt. The well-versed ship captains should see to the loading and carrying and transporting of the provisions as well as the maintenance and costs of the coming and goings. They should pay attention to follow the olden procedures and precedents. In the case of destruction having to come, the modalities of the compensation should be carried out. On these conditions, the required number of ships should be purchased and bought from the merchants vessels, if available, at the Port of Suez at a cost not exceeding the old ones. To this end, upon the notification made by my present Chief Treasurer Ḥasan, may his grandeur be enduring, my Imperial Chancery issued my noble command that you, who are the above-mentioned *Vezîr* and *Şayḫ ül-beled* and Officers of the Seven Corps, should jointly pay attention and care to the advancement of the matter. Thus, in respect of the fact that the due attention to the matter of organizing and advancing this issue within the time and conditions required is of the oldest issues that require attention, and as you know that in any case the poor from the population of the Two Noble Sanctuaries be free of the binds of scarcity through the preparation of ships and the transportation of provisions is among the necessary corollaries of the glory and magnificence of my exalted sultanate, appropriate ships should be bought in those parts as it was done in the past, and their costs transferred from the annual remittance of Egypt. The appointed captains of manifest proficiency should see to the ships' cargo, to the loading and carrying and transporting of the provisions as well as the maintenance and costs of the coming and goings. They should pay attention to follow the olden procedures and precedents. In the case of destruction having to come by God's decree, and on the condition that the modalities of the compensation be carried out according to the old practices, the required number of ships should be purchased and bought from the merchant vessels, if available, at the Port of Suez at a cost not exceeding

> the old ones. You should act accordingly, use your knowledge, judgment and ability, and devote paramount attention and care in buying and purchasing. Thus, you are to avoid and evade at the extreme utmost the negligence and carelessness that leads to the population of the two illustrious cities being subjected to hardship, which is contrary to my sovereign approval.[64]

At the very end, providing the ultimate signal of termination of the order and separation from the text, comes the date: "in the middle of *Cumâdâ 'l-âḫire*, year 1191."[65] Thus, as if to provide a symmetrical contrast with the repetitive temporality and iterative style of the body of the text, the finale strikes a single, utterly simple note, trumpeting the direct authority of the command, which is so transparent that it is reducible to a pointillistic temporality. After the wearisome journey along the lane of the past littered with pitstops of varying length and differing meanings, many of which have been engaged in some detail throughout this article, the terminus arrives with the thump of a precise date. The differential effect is perhaps most visible on the level of analysis. Indeed, the final element gives reason to be interpreted, in evident distinction from the long-winded exegesis of

64 *Ve sâbiḳda olduġu vechle ol cânibde münâsib sefâyin iştirâ ve bahâları irsâlîye-'i Mıṣır ḫazînesi mâlından havâleten i'ṭâ ve mütefennin rü'esâ vaḍ' ve taḥmîl ve teşḫîn-i ġilâl ve iyâb ve ẕihâblarında me'unet ve maṣârifları rü'yet ve nünûmeleri taṭbîḳ ile şerâ'it-i nizâm-i sâbıḳaya ri'âyet ve telef olmaḳ lâzım geldigi ṣûretde taḍmîn keyfîyeti dâḫî icrâ etdirilmek üzere Bender-i Süveys'de mevcûd sefâyin-i tüccârdan ḳâç ḳıṭ'a sefâyin iḳtiḍâ eder ise bahâları sâbıḳını tecâvüz etdirmeyerek siz ki vezîr-i muṣâr ve şayḫ ül-beled ve yedi ocâḳ ḍâbiṭânı mûmâ ilayhimsiz ma'rifetleriniz ile iştirâ ve mübâya'a ve temşîyet ḫuṣûṣuna bi'l-ittifâḳ ihtimâm ü diḳḳat eylemeniz içün Dîvân-i Hümâyûnum ṭarafından emr-i şerîfim taḥrîri bâbında bi'l-fi'l bâşdefterdârım olan Ḥasan dâme 'ulûvuhu i'lâm ètmeġin i'lâmi mûcebince 'amel olunmaḳ bâbında fermânım olmaġın imdi ber muḳteḍâ-yı vaḳt ü ḥâl bu emr-i vâcıb ül-ihtimâmın tanẓîm ve temşîyeti aḳdem-i umûr-i lâzım ül-ihtimam olduġu cihetden beher ḥâl tedârük-i sefâyin ve naḳl-ı ġılâl ile fuḳarâ-yı Ḥarameyn-i Muḥteremeyn vâreste-'i ḳayd-i muḍâyaḳa ve ihtiyâc olmaları lâzime-'i şân ü şükûh şalṭanat-i 'alîyemden idügü ma'lûmunuz olduḳda sâbıḳlarda olduġu vechle olcânibde münāsib sefîne iştirā ve bahāları irsālîye-'i Mıṣır ḫazînesi mālından havāleten i'ṭā ve derūnuna müte'ayyin ve mehâreti ẓâhir rü'esâ vaḍ' ve ta'yîn ve teşḫîn ve taḥmîl-i ġılâl ve iyâb ü ẕihâblarında me'unet ve maṣârıfları rü'yet ve nümûneleri taṭbîḳ ile şerâ'it-i nizâm sâbıḳaya ri'âyet ve bi-ḳaḍâ'-i 'llâhi ta'âlâ ḳaḍâ-resîde olmaḳ lazım geldigi ṣûretde taḍmîn keyfîyeti dâḫî şürût-ı ḳadîmesi üzere icrâ ètdirilmek içün Bender-i Süveys'de mevcûd sefâyin-i tüccârdan ḳâç ḳiṭ'a sefâyinin lüzûmu var ise bahâları sâbıḳını tecâvüz ètmemek vechile iḳtiḍâsına göre inḍimâm-ı re'y ve ma'rifet ve ihtimâmınız ile iştirâ ve mübâya'asına ṣarf-ı vus' ü diḳḳat ve bu bâbda muġâyir-i riḍâ-yi mülûkânem tekâsül ve tesâhülü tecvîz ile bundan böyle ahâli-'i Beldeteyn Münîfeteyn'in ġılâl ḫuṣûsında giriftar-ı muḍâyaḳa olmalarından ġâyet ül-ġâye ḥaẕer ve mubâ'adet eylemeniz bâbında.*

65 *Fî evâsıṭı Ca. S 1191*

the body of the text above, as follows: on Sunday, the 20th of July 1777 A.G.,[66] the Ottoman government ordered its functionaries in the province of Egypt to purchase as many ships as necessary to assure the continued provisioning in grain of the Holy Cities in accordance with tradition.

Thus must this Inquisition (in the form of a disquisition) of Document 227 come to a close as well, and with it, too, the (self-)portrait of the Red Sea presented here. It is, admittedly, an impressionistic portrait; conspicuous are both its absences and presences. Among the former, first and foremost comes the lack of a coherent narrative of an embodied space along chronometric time. As for the latter, most noticeable surely is the crossing and overlapping of various spatialities and temporalities, which fold into the world of the Red Sea a multitude of places from Malabar to Istanbul (and via, among others, Cairo, Alexandretta, Rhodes and Kavala) according to a variety of rhythms: the immediate time of the command, the potential time of the purchase of the ships, the intermediate time of the construction of ships, the seasonal time of sailing, the cyclical time of pilgrimage, the eternal time of provisioning the Holy Cities, the catastrophic time of shipwrecks, the natural time of the dangers of navigation, the political time of provincial rebellion, the social time of bandits, the repetitive time of inscribing. As in the case of the Ottomans and their Red Sea, but in contrast to the age of the world picture, it is not an absolute claim over time and space that is asserted here, but a fundamentally mediated one, overdetermined by the effusive-yet-diffuse space of reading and the endless-yet-finite time of writing, with Document 227 as pilot, reference, native informant and victim all in one.

Self-Portrait of the Ottoman Red Sea, 20th of July 1777

Abstract ■ A close exegesis of an official document (extracted from the *Mühimme-i Mışır* series of the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi) reveals the special nature of the Ottoman Red Sea world, as it was lived and imagined by its administrators and practitioners in the late eighteenth century. An exploration of the various spatialities and temporalities embedded in its content and form unveils a complex universe, involving local and global politics, ecological and geographical contingencies, the movement of people and commodities. Beyond presenting an intimate sketch of the place, this paper also reflects upon the practice of history, re-imagined as an embarkation upon a sea-borne craft made of text and emphasizing the act of writing itself.

Key words: Red Sea, *Bahr-ı Süveyş*, *Mühimme-i Mışır*, spatiality, temporality, writing.

66 This conversion into the Gregorian calendar is of course a dramatized approximation.