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Traveling through an Ocean of Wonders: Muḥammad Rabīʿ’s *Safīna-yi Sulaymānī* and Southeast and East Asian Geography

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Abstract

The *Safīna-yi Sulaymānī* (The Ship of Sulaymān), one of the foremost Persian travelogues from the Safavid period, includes a geographic description of East and Southeast Asia centered on the Indian Ocean. While the *Safīna* is well-known to scholars, secondary literature on this part of the book is scant and often characterizes it as incoherent and devoid of value. This paper challenges this interpretation through providing a new reading of this text. By casting it in a comparative framework with earlier books of wonders, this paper argues that the geographic section of the *Safīna* articulates an original view of the Indian Ocean resulting from the encounter between the traveler’s observations and experiences and the Islamic tradition of wonders, the *ʿajāʾib*. As such, it encapsulates one of the central intellectual developments in early modern knowledge production, i.e., the tension between independent inquiry (*taḥqīq*) and imitation of earlier authorities (*taqlīd*).

Keywords: Cosmography; *ʿajāʾib*; *Safīna-yi Sulaymānī*; Persian travel literature; Safavid Empire; Indian Ocean

Introduction

The *Safīna-yi Sulaymānī* (The Ship of Sulaymān, henceforth *Safīna*), the Persian official Muḥammad Rabīʿ b. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm’s account of his journey to Ayutthaya, is one of the foremost Persian travelogues from the Safavid period (1501–1736).¹ Its author, an embassy secretary, was sent by the Safavid ruler Shāh Sulaymān (r. 1666–1694) to the court of the Ayutthaya ruler King Narai (r. 1656–1688) in 1685.² Arriving there a few months later, the traveler spent nearly a year in the kingdom, finally making his way back to Iran in 1688. This book, which is dedicated to Shāh Sulaymān, was composed by the author upon his return to Iran.

The book is divided into four major thematic sections, called “gifts” (*tuḥfa*). The first three sections broach the main subjects of the work: the author’s sea journey to and from Ayutthaya, his stay in the kingdom, and the kingdom’s internal affairs. By contrast, the fourth and last section is an extensive geographic description of Southeast and East Asia, providing an overview of the Indian Ocean Rim, its most relevant islands and kingdoms from Ceylon to Japan, and their wildlife, natural wonders, and present conditions.

¹ Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Safīna*. A somewhat abridged English translation is O’Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*.

² On the exchange of embassies between Ayutthaya and Safavid Iran, including Muḥammad Rabīʿ’s, see Aubin, “Les Persans au Siam”; Marcinkowski, “The Iranian-Siamese Connection”; and Rota, “Diplomatic Relations between the Safavids and Siam in the 17th Century.”

The *Safīna* is by no means unknown to specialists. To date, however, scholars have largely approached it as a source for the history of Southeast Asia, their efforts aimed at recovering useful facts from a text perceived as fastidiously literary—“a work of considerable imagination, contrived and stylized, and littered with cliché”, to quote the distinguished historian of Thailand David Wyatt.³ As a result, scholarship on the *Safīna* disproportionately focuses on the parts of the book whose documentary value is more easily apparent, while the rest remains sadly neglected. Its geographic section is, in this respect, a case in point. Scholars have long lamented Muḥammad Rabīʿs reliance on the Islamic tradition of wonders, the *ʿajāʾib*, in fashioning his geographic account. As a result, most studies on the *Safīna* either omit it altogether or limit themselves to summarizing its contents, never failing to highlight its supposedly poor documentary value and presumed incoherence.⁴

In contrast with these interpretations, this article provides a new reading of the fourth section of the *Safīna* in order to establish its relevance to our knowledge of Safavid scholarly practices with attention to geography. Though it examines the text from various perspectives, this article focuses on the interplay between textual tradition and independent inquiry, as well as looks at the central role this plays in shaping Muḥammad Rabīʿs account of the Indian Ocean Rim. To put forth his geographic vision, it argues, the Safavid official creatively combined the Islamic tradition of *ʿajāʾib* related to the Indian Ocean with his own observations as an envoy to Ayutthaya. The result is an account of the region whose structure, vocabulary, and set of topics are closely reminiscent of traditional books of wonders, but whose contents largely derive from the author’s journey experience. Considered in this perspective, the geographic section of the *Safīna* thus encapsulates one of the foremost intellectual developments of its time: the tension between independent inquiry (*taḥqīq*) and imitation of earlier authorities (*taqlīd*).⁵ A corollary result of this paper is to show how travels and discoveries could lead to a geographic redefinition even in the Safavid world, which is often characterized as “inward-looking” and “insular.”⁶

“I Shall Bring Back News, or I Shall Sink and Drown”: Main Topics of the *Safīna* and the Place of Direct Experience

Throughout the *Safīna*, Muḥammad Rabīʿs observations and experiences in Southeast Asia play a central role as the author’s primary source of information. In the introduction, the author points out that Shāh Suleymān appointed him to compose “this journey’s official report” (*bi-khidmat-i wāqīʿa-nawīsī-yi īn safar maʾmūr gardīda*).⁷ Eager to satisfy his ruler’s command, the Safavid official “aimed at brevity, retaining relevant detail.” A verse to this effect completes the description:

Now is the time to plunge amid the swirling waves,
Either sink and drown or bring back news to thee.

As an official document written at the direct order of the Safavid ruler, the *Safīna* is perhaps best characterized as a piece of political reportage. This is a distinctly early modern field of practical travel writing describing, upon request from the ruler or court, a foreign realm or

³ Wyatt, “A Persian Mission to Siam in the Reign of King Narai,” 151. Welcomed exceptions are Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, 159–71; and the recent article by Kia, “The Necessary Ornaments of Place.”

⁴ Consider the treatment of the section by Marcinkowski, perhaps the leading authority on the *Safīna*, who regularly describes it as “rather bizarre and fantastic” (*From Isfahan to Ayutthaya*, 28–31; “The Safavid Presence in the Indian Ocean,” 385–6).

⁵ For an overview of recent scholarship on the *taḥqīq/taqlīd* tension, see Casale, “Cultures of *taḥqīq*.” For this article, I relied especially on the fascinating essay “*Taḥqīq vs. Taqlīd*” by Matthew Melvin-Koushki.

⁶ See, for example, Matthee, “Between Aloofness and Fascination”; and Sefatgol, “Farang, Farangi and Farangestan.”

⁷ Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Safīna*, 8–9/O’Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 21.

region, with a focus on information gathering.⁸ The book's limited circulation further suggests that it was meant to serve as an "information file" for the Safavid court on Ayutthaya and the neighboring countries.⁹ In this respect, it fits in a tradition of Persianate travel writing dating at least to the Timurid period. Relevant examples are the accounts of Vijayanagar and Ming China by Timurid ambassadors 'Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandī and Ghiyās al-Dīn Naqqāsh¹⁰ and the *Khatāynāma* (Book on China), the treatise on Ming China dedicated to the Ottoman Selim I (r. 1512–1520) by the central Asian merchant 'Alī Akbar Khatāyi.¹¹

Indeed, Muḥammad Rabī' mentions the travelogue by Ghiyās al-Dīn Naqqāsh, and some structural similarities between his book and earlier Persianate political reportage suggest that he may have drawn on such works to fashion his account.¹² Where the comparison is perhaps most productive, however, is in the perspective these authors take towards the object of description. In political reportage, the traveler/author is always responsible for accurate observation. As a result, these works are characterized by strong realism, systematic empiricism, and an emphasis on the traveler's observations.

The *Safīna* fits this description. While the book broaches a variety of subjects, most of its content falls under the category of "reconnaissance." The Safavid official strives to provide realistic descriptions of the cities and ports he traversed, detailing elements such as the condition of their infrastructure and buildings, their principal imports and exports, the population's ethnic and religious makeup, and the readiness of local armies. While not devoid of a sense of curiosity (as well as a discernable smugness), these excerpts convey the author's intention of gathering information of practical value. In the same vein, the traveler reports the stages of the route and the time taken between them, as well as fleshes out the geographic position of the most significant islands and kingdoms he encounters on the journey. The detailed description of bureaucratic procedures and court rituals also takes up much space. When the mission reaches any foreign realm of importance, the author recounts how the party was welcomed, explains the procedures one must go through to meet with the local authorities, and details the protocol to be observed once admitted to their presence. Moreover, much attention is paid to the latest political developments in the Indian Ocean, with an emphasis on the central role played by European colonial powers.

Traveling through an Ocean of Wonders: The Fourth Section of the *Safīna*

The fourth section of the book deserves a separate discussion. While the first three sections are centered on the mission's journey to Ayutthaya, stay in the kingdom, and the latter's conditions, thus constituting a thematic unity, the fourth section expressly excludes

⁸ On political reportage, see Elsner and Rubiés, "Introduction," 46.

⁹ To date, only two manuscript copies of this work are known to exist. One is preserved at the British Library (Or. 6942), while the other, which seems to be derived from the latter, is held at the Malik National Library in Tehran (Ms. 3696). I would like to thank Noshad Rokni from the Malek National Library for his help in accessing this manuscript.

¹⁰ The Persian text and English translation of the two travelogues are found in Thackston, *Album Prefaces and Other Documents on the History of Calligraphers and Painters*, 68–88, 53–67.

¹¹ Khatāyi, *Khatāynāma*. It should be noted that, in the preface to his book, Khatāyi explicitly inscribes it in the genealogical tradition of tactical knowledge developed by the Timurids and references one of their missions to China (*Khatāynāma*, 25–9). Furthermore, his book seems to have been influenced by the account of Ghiyās al-Dīn Naqqāsh. See Hemmat, "A Chinese System for an Ottoman State," 121–3.

¹² Muḥammad Rabī', *Safīna*, 73–4/O'Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 76. Comparable to Naqqāsh and Samarqandī, the first two sections of the book are structured as a first-person travel account; the third is organized thematically as a description, similar to the *Khatāynāma*. The existence of such a web of references, spanning from the *Khatāynāma* to the *Safīna*, points to the affirmation of political reportage as an autonomous—albeit formally heterogeneous—strand of travel writing in the early modern Persianate world. The study of its main characteristics, history, and how it relates to similar developments in the Ottoman and Mughal world remains, however, a desideratum.

Ayutthaya and takes the surrounding islands and kingdoms as its focus. Moreover, while emphasis remains on current political and economic affairs, there is also much attention paid to topics traditionally pertaining to scholarly geography.

The section opens with an explanation of the conventional division of the Indian Ocean into seven seas and several related natural phenomena, such as tides and currents. While the discussion is largely theoretical, the mission's journey experience sets the tone. A few verses on the astounding vastness of the ocean and the variety of its islands introduce the next cluster of anecdotes, which detail the unusual wildlife of the Indian Ocean. Then comes the bulk of the section, a description of the main islands and kingdoms of the Indian Ocean Rim. The traveler elaborates on the contemporary condition of each, with attention to their ethnic and religious composition, internal affairs, and relations with European colonial powers. Once more, however, the explanation also dwells on the foremost natural and man-made wonders, from grottoes and volcanoes to ancient ruins. Finally, the section closes with an account of the mission's return journey to Iran via the Indian subcontinent, which provides the traveler with yet another opportunity to describe the regions visited along the way.

The section's thematic divergence from the rest of the book is reflected in its structure. The first three sections are organized either as a journal (sections one and two) or in loosely related thematic paragraphs (section three), with little effort to provide a systematic discussion. By contrast, the fourth section has all the hallmarks of a scholarly treatise. The discussion is structured around a number of anecdotes of unequal length that form several larger thematic clusters. Since each anecdote is self-contained, much like an entry in an encyclopedia, the author can add as many as he needs to exhaustively discuss the subject. Moreover, there is a distinct attempt at authoritativeness. This is expressed notably in the author's reference to textual authorities, which, by contrast, are largely absent from the rest of the travelogue.

All of the above suggest that Muḥammad Rabīʿ intended this part of his travelogue to be an essay on the geography of the Indian Ocean. Indeed, several elements indicate that the Safavid official modeled the section on chapters addressing the seas of the world and their islands commonly found in Islamic *ʿajāʾib* writings. This is a pre-modern strand of largely geographic writing aimed at providing a general view of the natural world with an emphasis on unusual and extraordinary phenomena (*mirabilia*), which are considered signs of God's infinite power and wisdom to create.¹³ They also integrate narrative stories of important figures such as prophets, saints, or ancient rulers for educational purposes, mostly with regard to morality and theology.¹⁴ Whereas Islamic cosmographies were customarily based on textual knowledge, however, the Safavid official's description is informed by his travel experience. The resulting text is a geographic account of the Indian Ocean that combines the Islamic cosmographic tradition related to this space with the set of expectations orienting early modern political reportage, with the stated intent of perfecting the former through the methods characteristic of the latter. The following pages substantiate this claim by exploring how Muḥammad Rabīʿ reactivated *ʿajāʾib* literature to present his geographic vision.

Recovering Cosmography: Muḥammad Rabīʿ' s Geographic Account and ʿajāʾib Literature

When the Safavid official composed his *Safīna*, Islamic authors had already been describing the Indian Ocean for nearly a millennium. The first Arabic accounts of this space date

¹³ See Richter-Bernburg, "ʿajāʾib Literature"; Dubler, "ʿAdjāʾib"; and Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam*. By using the term "ʿajāʾib literature," I do not mean to imply that *ʿajāʾib* works constituted a formally defined literary genre. Rather, I refer to a heterogenous galaxy of works united by their relation to geography and the aim of providing an overview of the cosmos as a reflection of God's omnipotence. On this issue, see von Hees, "The Astonishing."

¹⁴ In this respect, they are reminiscent of Arabic *kutub al-ʿazama* (books of greatness), early collections of *ḥadīth* on creation, cosmos, and natural phenomena driven by *tafakkur*, i.e., contemplative or philosophical reasoning. On this strand of writing, see Heinen, "Tafakkur and Muslim Science."

to the ninth century.¹⁵ Thereafter, descriptions of the Indian Ocean and its islands regularly appeared in Arabic and Persian (and, later, Turkish) *adab*, geographic and historiographic literature. This resulted in the formation of a rich imaginary related to the region, conceived as a wondrous space replete with exotic islands—such as that of naked men, that of scorpions, or that of rubies—and populated with unusual forms of life.¹⁶ The stated emphasis in books of wonders on the uncanny and the extraordinary ensured that authors routinely described such wonders since the emergence of ‘*ajā’ib*’ literature as an independent strand of writing in the twelfth century, as attested by their inclusion in seminal works such as the *Tuhfat al-Albāb* (Gift of Hearts) by Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī (d. 1169), the ‘*ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt wa Gharā’ib al-Mawjūdāt* (Wonders of Creation and Oddities of Existence) by Zakariyyā’ al-Qazwīnī (d. 1283), or the *Nukhbat al-Dahr fī ‘ajā’ib al-Barr wa al-Baḥr* (Sampling of Time on the Wonders of Land and Sea) by Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī (d. 1327).¹⁷

Works of ‘*ajā’ib*’ provided readers with authoritative yet accessible compendia on the natural world useful both for education and to satisfy curiosity.¹⁸ Perhaps owing to this versatile nature, they were composed in all the major languages of the Islamicate world and at all patronage levels up to the late modern period. With reference to Safavid Iran, evidence of continued interest in books of ‘*ajā’ib*’ comes from primary sources and manuscript catalogs, which mention a number of works consistent with this tradition.¹⁹ This is in line with current scholarship on Safavid scholarly practices, which highlights their reliance on classical scientific books and the attention the Safavid educated elite devoted to their translation into Persian and constant reproduction.²⁰ By comparing groups of illustrated copies of al-Qazwīnī’s ‘*ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt*, for instance, Karin Rührdanz showed how Safavid literati generally referred to this work to satisfy their curiosity for the secrets of nature, much like Arabic readers did in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, she also identified a discernable tendency towards modernization, reflecting current scholarly trends as well as the interests of individual patrons.²¹ This indicates that works of ‘*ajā’ib*’ played an important role in the upbringing of Safavid intellectuals, who approached them actively and critically.

These considerations provide us with a useful background to discuss how Muḥammad Rabīʿ recovered and reactivated this heritage in setting forth his geographic account. We have no information regarding the traveler’s upbringing and education. His status as a Safavid state official and secretary to an embassy, as well as the text’s flourished style, however, ensure that he was familiar with the most relevant works of *adab*, history, and geography.²² Illustrating this point are the references to textual authorities scattered through the *Safīna*. As a general principle, the author relies on his observations and experiences rather than written sources and is

¹⁵ On the Indian Ocean in Arabic geography, see Tolmacheva, “The Indian Ocean in Arab Geography.”

¹⁶ Except for newly discovered or edited works, almost all Islamic classical texts on the Indian Ocean are available in French or English translation. See Ferrand, *Relations de voyages et textes géographiques*; and Tibbets, *A study of the Arabic texts*. A collection of this textual material can be found in Arioli, *Isolario arabo medioevale*. On the islands of the Indian Ocean in Islamic geographic imaginary, see Ducène, “Les îles de l’Océan Indien.” Some developments of this imaginary in the early modern period are explored in Vallet, “Entre cosmographie et cartographie”; and d’Hubert, “Living in Marvelous Lands.”

¹⁷ Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī, *Tuhfat al-Albāb*, which includes a study and partial translation; and Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī, *Cosmographie*. A complete translation of this book is available in Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī, *Manuel de la cosmographie*. All necessary references on al-Qazwīnī’s ‘*ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt*’ are provided through the article.

¹⁸ On books of wonder as encyclopedias, see Vesel, “Les encyclopédies persanes”; von Hees, “Al-Qazwīnī’s ‘*ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt*”; and von Hees, *Enzyklopädie als Spiegel des Weltbildes*.

¹⁹ Relevant examples are described in Bosworth and Afshar, “‘*ajā’eb al-Maklūqāt*.”

²⁰ Brentjes, “Safavid Art, Science, and Courtly Education in the Seventeenth Century”; Melvin-Koushki, “Taḥqiq vs. Taqlīd.”

²¹ Rührdanz, “Illustrated Persian *Ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt* Manuscripts and Their Function in Early Modern Times”; Rührdanz, “Between Astrology and Anatomy.”

²² Some preliminary considerations on the text’s style can be found in O’Kane, *The Ship of Sulaymān*, 1–14.

therefore remarkably sparing with quotations. This is consistent with the book's subject and aims, and further confirms its empirically informed nature. The few works he does mention, however, paint the picture of an educated state official whose intellectual reference points were the great scholarly compilations achieved in the Ilkhanid and Timurid period, especially works of 'ajā'ib. Except for general reference works such as Mīrkhwānd's *Rawzat al-Ṣafā'* (The Gardens of Purity), a late Timurid universal history that proved especially important to Safavid-era intellectuals, or Shams al-Dīn Āmulī's *Nafā'is al-Funūn* (Treasures of Sciences), a mid-fourteenth-century encyclopedia on the classification of knowledge, all textual authorities invoked in the *Safīna* indeed belong to this strand of writing.²³

Besides highlighting the antiquicising nature of Muḥammad Rabī's education, this indicates that the Safavid official integrated his account with textual sources upon returning from the journey. What is especially interesting for our discussion, however, is the role these works played as a model for his geographic description. To learn more about this aspect, let us turn our attention to the text itself, starting with the programmatic lines introducing the description of the islands and kingdoms surrounding Ayutthaya. Before getting to the heart of the matter, the traveler indeed acknowledges that scholars have long been considering the Indian Ocean and its islands and sketches a minimal canon of textual authorities on the subject, with which he explicitly associates himself and his work:

The authors of the 'ajā'ib *al-Makhlūqāt*, *Ṣuwar-i Aqālīm*, *Tuḥfat al-Gharā'ib*, *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*, as well as other writers on geography, have been keen in describing the various islands. Since this humble author of lesser merchandise wishes to be reckoned as a member of that learned group, in accord with the saying, "One who acts like a particular people is considered of their number", he will make suffice what has so far been reported of the actual mission and turn to facts concerning the islands in these waters.²⁴

The Safavid official does not name the author of any of these books. Their titles, however, all point to works of 'ajā'ib. The *Nuzhat al-Qulūb* (The Hearts' Bliss) is the geographic and cosmographic book by Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī Qazwīnī (d. ca 1344), which enjoyed remarkable popularity throughout early modernity.²⁵ The identification of 'ajā'ib *al-Makhlūqāt* (The Wonders of Creation), *Ṣuwar-i Aqālīm* (Figures of the Regions), and *Tuḥfat al-Gharā'ib* (Rarity of Oddities), on the other hand, is less straightforward. That these are all standard titles for works of 'ajā'ib in use since the early days of the genre leaves no doubt as to their content. Yet, it also makes their precise identification uncertain. Elsewhere in the *Safīna* the traveler refers to the 'ajā'ib *al-Makhlūqāt* by al-Qazwīnī, arguably the most popular book of wonders in Islamic history.²⁶ Therefore, this is probably intended here. Lack of other references to the *Ṣuwar-i Aqālīm* and the *Tuḥfat al-Gharā'ib*, on the other hand, makes identifying these books especially difficult. Charles Storey's authoritative bibliographical survey reports that an anonymous fourteenth-century compendium of geography on the wonders of the world (ar. 'ajā'ib *al-dunyā*) titled *Ṣuwar-i Aqālīm*—not to be confused with the homonymous work by al-Balkhī (d. 934)—was particularly popular in Safavid Iran, so this may be meant here.²⁷ As to *Tuḥfat al-Gharā'ib*, the editor of the critical edition of the *Safīna* suggests that

²³ For mention of the *Rawzat al-Ṣafā'*, see Muḥammad Rabī, *Safīna*, 74/O'Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 76. As to the *Nafā'is al-Funūn*, see Muḥammad Rabī, *Safīna*, 83, 170/O'Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 87, 170. All other authorities mentioned throughout the book are discussed through the article.

²⁴ Muḥammad Rabī, *Safīna*, 166/O'Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 167–8.

²⁵ Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī, *The Geographical Part of the Nuzhat-al-Qulub*. On the fortune of this book among early modern Persian intellectuals, see Storey, *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey*, 129–31.

²⁶ Despite the seminal importance of this work, there is still no satisfactory critical edition. For the present article, I used the oldest known manuscript of the 'ajā'ib *al-Makhlūqāt*, the Munich manuscript cod. arab. 464 of 1280. On al-Qazwīnī and his book, see von Hees, *Enzyklopädie als Spiegel des Weltbildes*.

²⁷ *Haft kishwar, yā, Ṣuwar al-aqālīm*. For an overview of this work and its fortune through early modernity, see Storey, *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey*, 131–32.

this is a book on wonders by a certain Muḥammad Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad Zamān Astarābādī, which survives in a manuscript held at the University of Tehran.²⁸

Islamic geographers traditionally conceived of the Earth's oceans as a single body, the Encircling Ocean (ar. *baḥr al-muḥīṭ*), which they further divided into several (usually seven) minor seas (*baḥr*), including the Indian Ocean.²⁹ Except for the *Ṣuwar-i Aqālīm*, which provides a description of the oikumene centered on its seven climates and thus considers each sea its connection with its climate, all these works discuss the world's various seas and the islands lying therein in a separate section.³⁰ A textual comparison between these as they appear in the two cosmographies I could identify with greater certainty, i.e., the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt* and the *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*, and the geographic section of the *Safīna*, shows that they supplied the model for the latter.

First, there is a structural similarity. As is customary in Islamic books of wonders, the description in both the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt* and the *Nuzhat al-Qulūb* is organized according to a “Chinese box” structure. This aims at making the book as user-friendly as possible, in line with the didactic aims orienting this strand of writing. Consistent with this conventional structuring, the two texts arrange the discussion around several largely independent chapters, each of which details a specific sea and the islands it embraces. These, in turn, are further divided into short paragraphs characterizing each animal or island individually. As a result, the two sections read like a collection of self-contained thematic entries akin to those that make up an encyclopedia. Similarly, the geographic section of the *Safīna* details each animal or island separately. While the description on the islands usually takes up more space, those about the flora and fauna of the Indian Ocean are limited to thematic entries comparable to those found in the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt* and *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*.

Further resemblance then emerges once we consider contents. Islamic cosmographies are typically arranged topically, with the discussion moving from the general to the particular. Consistent with this conventional structuring, the two works mentioned above both open their account of Earth's water expanses with a general explanation of the Ocean, its traditional division into seven, and its natural properties, and then proceed to detail the natural curiosities of each sea. The geographic section of the *Safīna* is centered on the same topics, which it discusses in the same order. Moreover, as the following pages make clear, the description is often carried out with reference to the Arabo-Persian vocabulary of wonders, with the Safavid official frequently stressing the awe-inspiring character of the open sea and the exotic nature of the objects of description. Last, several repeated passages suggest that the Safavid official borrowed some sentences and even longer extracts from the works he lists. His explanation of the tides, for instance, was traced to that provided in the *Tuḥfat al-Gharāʾib*, and includes the same prophetic tradition quoted in the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*.³¹

“How Is the Man Who Only Hears About a Marvel Like unto the Beholder?” An Empiric Cosmography of the Indian Ocean Rim

That a Safavid official tasked with describing the present political and economic situation in the Indian Ocean went about this with reference to textual authorities dating back as far as five centuries points to the central role played by *taqlīd* in the intellectual life of Safavid Iran. Safavid scholarship was indeed consciously antiquarian, as it predicated a textual return to

²⁸ Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Safīna*, 160, note 1. The work is preserved at the University of Tehran, Literature Department Library (Ms. 132). On this manuscript, see Dānishpazhūh, *Nuskahā-yi khaṭṭi-yi kitābkhāna-yi dānishkada-yi adabiyāt*, 7.

²⁹ Pinto, *Medieval Islamic Maps*, 147–85.

³⁰ al-Qazwīnī, *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*, 56r–78v; Muḥammad Astarābādī, *Tuḥfat al-Gharāʾib*, 40v–42r; and Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī, *The Geographical Part of the Nuzhat-al-Qulub*, 221–34. For the description of the Indian Ocean and its islands in the *Ṣuwar-i Aqālīm*, see *Haft kishwar, yā, Ṣuwar al-aqālīm*, 24–40.

³¹ Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Safīna*, 160, note 1. For the prophetic tradition attributing the tides to the work of angels, see al-Qazwīnī, *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*, 57v.

sources both Ancient and Medieval in several fields.³² Lest we misunderstand such antiquarianism for cultural sclerosis (what used to be labeled as “decline”), however, we should consider it in its historic specificity.³³ New research increasingly shows that by engaging in *taqlīd*, Safavid literati sought not to valorize textual knowledge over contemporary scholarly efforts, but instead to valorize said efforts as the perfection of classical models. As such, Safavid *taqlīd* was not declinist but progressivist, as Matthew Melvin-Koushki puts it, as it drove a boom in *taḥqīq* with no immediate precedent.³⁴ A close reading of the geographic section of the *Safīna* highlights how Muḥammad Rabīʿs antiquarianism encapsulates this development.

The traveler opens his narrative by celebrating the kaleidoscopic variety of the seas of the world and, especially, the islands they embrace.³⁵ As “scholars and men of wisdom” (*arbāb-i ḥaqīqat wa sāhibān ʿaql wa maʿrifat*) know well, he begins, these number in the multitudes and all differ. Some, God has chosen to abandon to nature, perhaps because they contain rare treasures which ought to remain hidden for safe keeping; others, he decided to bestow upon mankind, and now constitute separate realms with their own king; and others still he attributed to the spirits (*jinn*) and savage beasts. This diversity, he concedes, has long attracted the attention of “scholars of learning and insight” (*arbāb-i dānish wa bīnish*), whose books present detailed accounts of the islands of the world. However, in assessing their work, one should keep in mind that they had no direct knowledge of the subject, instead depending on the opinion of others. This, Muḥammad Rabīʿ all but says through a poetic verse opposing sight to hearing, essentially disqualifies them from providing quality information: “how is the man who only hears about a marvel like unto the beholder?” (*shanīda kay buwad mānand-i dīda*). Having established the subject of the section and elegantly yet firmly set aside textual authorities, the Safavid official then steps forth to take the spotlight: he, “this humble author”, is bold to embark on an account of “the islands and the coasts and the wonders and the miraculous sights [*ʿajāʿib wa gharāʿib*] which were encountered [*mulāḥaza shud*] during our voyage,” also including what he could “ascertain” (*taḥqīq karda-ast*) from “reliable travelers.”

By introducing his geographic account with a recollection of the variety of the natural world and framing such variety as a manifestation of God’s power and wisdom, indeed the foundational argument of *ʿajāʿib* literature, Muḥammad Rabīʿ implicitly but surely inscribes his description in this tradition. The mention of the long interest “scholars and men of wisdom” took in the subject, in particular, presents his report as the logical continuation of earlier scholarly efforts, thus rhetorically downplaying its novelty. As the second half of the introduction makes clear, however, the Safavid official’s relation to tradition is more complex than these preliminary lines suggest. By conceding that “scholars of learning and insight” have long been describing the islands, the traveler humbly affirms the primacy of textual authorities. Yet he is quick to render such primacy irrelevant by limiting it to chronology, as he provocatively asks the reader how “the man who only hears about a marvel” compares to “the beholder.”³⁶ While scholars came first, he implies, their knowledge is only based on books and hearsay, and is therefore of little quality. Muḥammad Rabīʿ, by

³² For a discussion of Safavid antiquarianism, which contextualizes it amidst the background of Western (i.e., Hellenic-Abrahamic, Islamo-Judeo-Christian, west of South India) early modernity, see Melvin-Koushki, “*Taḥqīq vs. Taqlīd*.”

³³ On the supposed decline of Safavid Iran, one could invoke the opinion of the eminent Italian scholar Alessandro Bausani, according to whom: “since then [...] ‘truth’ was no more genuinely created by Muslim thinkers but simply borrowed from others” (“Notes on the Safavid Period,” 28). For a deconstruction of the rhetoric of “decline” with reference to Islamic early modernity, see Brentjes, “The Prison of Categories.”

³⁴ Melvin-Koushki, “*Taḥqīq vs. Taqlīd*,” 241.

³⁵ Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Safīna*, 157/O’Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 159.

³⁶ This proverbial statement (and the epistemological stance it expresses) has a long history in Islamic scholarship, as attested for instance by al-Bīrūnī’s similarly provocative reliance on this opposition (*laysa al-khabar ka-l-ʿiyān*) to valorize the Indological investigations expressed in his book on India, the *Taḥqīq Mā li-l-Hind* (The

contrast, albeit wanting in scholarly credentials, can invoke direct knowledge of the region surveyed, which alone makes him more qualified than earlier scholars to describe the Indian Ocean. By virtue of the indisputable superiority of experience over textual knowledge and hearsay, sight over hearing, and *taḥqīq* over *taqlīd*, the Safavid official thus begins to compose his geographic account. Lacking any direct precedent, this is modeled after classical texts in cosmography, which provide him with an immediately recognizable and prestigious structure, a given set of topics, and a standard vocabulary to discuss them. The traveler's claim that his account focuses on "wonders and miraculous sights" is, in this regard, especially significant. Following the empiricist methodology governing political reportage, however, the content derives from what he has seen and learned from "reliable travelers," with "ascertained" being the key methodological term. The result is a geographic description of the Indian Ocean and its main islands in line with the classics, but also surpassing them because of its grounding in *taḥqīq*.

Having outlined Muḥammad Rabīʿ's intellectual program with regard to the geographic section of the book, let us now explore how such tension between *taḥqīq* and *taqlīd* actually plays out through the text. Since the Safavid official explicitly inscribes his account in the Islamic tradition of *ʿajāʾib*, I consider it once more in a comparative framework with the section on the seas and their islands from the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt* and *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*, the two books he mentions the most and whose importance in providing a model for the fourth section of his travelogue we already determined. This helps to show that Muḥammad Rabīʿ maintains continuity with textual authorities in this strand of writing, but also the extent to which he deviates from them and what exactly this deviation consists of.

The first part of the section, an explanation of the seas and their properties, provides an ideal starting point for our discussion.³⁷ As illustrated above, al-Qazwīnī and Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī both begin their discussion of the Earth's water expanses with this subject. In opening his geographic account thusly, Muḥammad Rabīʿ is therefore congruent with his models. Whereas the two literati broach the subject from a theoretical viewpoint, however, the traveler's journey experience sets the tone in the *Safīna*.

The Safavid official begins with a recollection of the mission's voyage from "the sea of Fārs and Oman" (*baḥr-i Fārs wa ʿUmān*) to "the sea of China" (*daryā-yi Chīn*), which provides the springboard for a discussion of the conventional division of the Indian Ocean in Islamic geography into a number of seas with different names and characteristics.³⁸ Then, the author proceeds to measure the distance between Iran and Ayutthaya, once more with reference to the mission's journey, and finally closes the discussion with an explanation of some natural phenomena related to the sea, such as tides and currents. Also relevant in this regard is the conflictual relation the traveler establishes with textual knowledge. As is customary in works of *ʿajāʾib*, the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt* and *Nuzhat al-Qulūb* heavily rely on textual authorities, from which they derive most of their content and whose opinion they consistently invoke to illuminate this or that point. In line with the methodological premises established in the introduction to the section, by contrast, Muḥammad Rabīʿ structures the discussion around his journey experience and, when he mentions earlier scholars, it is because he finds them at fault.

In his discussion of the division of the Indian Ocean into several different seas, for instance, the traveler notes that "scholars of travel and geography" (*arbāb-i siyāhat wa maʿr-ifat*) separate this expanse of water into seven distinct parts. Contextually, however, he contradicts this claim based on his voyage, which taught him that the seas lying between Iran and China are in fact "joined together," with no discernable distinction between them.

Book Confirming What Pertains to India). See al-Bīrūnī, *Taḥqīq mā li-l-hind*, 1. On this issue and its importance in shaping Islamic travel literature, see Touati, *Islam and Travel*, 101–55.

³⁷ Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Safīna*, 157–61/O'Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 160–3.

³⁸ Consider, for instance, the opinion of the Arabic historian and geographer Ibn Waḍīḥ al-Yaʿqūbī, according to whom "one who wishes to travel to China crosses seven seas, each of which has a color, odor, fish, and wind not to be found in the sea that follows it." al-Yaʿqūbī, *The Works of Ibn Waḍīḥ al-Yaʿqūbī*, vol. 2, 484.

Muḥammad Rabīʿ shows awareness of the fact that his experience clashes with textual knowledge. Yet, to him, there is no doubt: it is scholars who “have wandered into the discords of choppy seas, doldrums and foul winds” (*ikhtilāf-i tūfān wa sukūn wa shūrish*) as they “insist that each tract be defined as separate and distinct and have decided to ascribe a different name to every section.” Then again, this critical attitude is not necessarily confined to those elements the traveler could prove or disprove through experience. In discussing the causes of tides and currents, for instance, the traveler acknowledges that “scholars of geography and history” (*arbāb-i sair wa aṣḥāb-i tawārīkh*) have long discussed the subject. Though not incorrect, their explanations are nonetheless deemed “contradictory” (*mukhtalifa*), so it is up to the traveler to finally provide a summary that “comes closest to the truth” (*bi-sawāb aqrab-ast*). Indeed, even prophetic traditions are not immune from doubt: soon after reporting one that attributes tides to the action of angels, Muḥammad Rabīʿ remarks how the only way this make sense is for one to consider the angel as a symbol (*kināya*) for the moon—“and only God understands all the mysteries of life.”

Last, it is also noteworthy that this general explanation of the seas and their properties is drier and less centered on their wonderful nature than those provided by his models. Especially in the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*, the discussion systematically tends to show the reader how each element of the natural world testifies to God’s wisdom and power. To al-Qazwīnī, for example, that the Earth’s waters remain in their designed location rather than submerge the land demonstrates that God indeed wants all living beings to flourish, and even the tides are presented as a wonder and proof of the great wisdom underlying his creation.³⁹ By contrast, the Safavid official discusses such phenomena as entirely natural. His account of the tides is a case in point. To the traveler, these are not a marvel, but a natural phenomenon caused primarily by the sun, whose hot rays heat the ocean’s bottom and thus create underwater pockets of air, which in turn stir up waves.

On the other hand, this is not to say that his account is devoid of wonders. On the contrary, there are many, albeit of a rather different nature than those traditionally associated with the Indian Ocean in writings of *ʿajāʾib*. To illuminate this point, let us consider the following pages of Muḥammad Rabīʿ’s report, which include a number of anecdotes on the unusual flora and fauna of the Indian Ocean.⁴⁰

As is often the case in books of wonders, both the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt* and *Nuzhat al-Qulūb* enrich their accounts of the seven seas of the world with detailed depictions of their odd wildlife. In broaching the subject, the Safavid official is therefore once more congruent with its models. Some structural similarities between these excerpts as they appear in the *Safīna* and *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt* suggest that the latter, especially, provided a prototype. Muḥammad Rabīʿ indeed details each element separately, thus providing a list of items. This is reminiscent of the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*, where the explanation of each sea closes with a catalogue of its most remarkable creatures.⁴¹ Moreover, both texts introduce each element with a similar formulaic expression (*wa min al-gharāʾib*, “another oddity is,” in the *Safīna*, vs. *wa min-hā*, “among them is,” in the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*). While consistent with their models in subject matter and structure, however, the accounts of the flora and fauna of the Indian Ocean in the *Safīna* stand apart from their prototypes in several respects, starting with the concrete nature of the objects of description.

Consistent with the Islamic tradition of writing about the Indian Ocean and its wonders, al-Qazwīnī and Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī characterize a variety of extraordinary creatures as native to this sea, from dog-headed men to ants the size of a dog and fishes who can climb on land and breath fire.⁴² Frequent mentions of textual sources indicate that, for

³⁹ al-Qazwīnī, *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*, 56v–57v.

⁴⁰ Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Safīna*, 161–6/O’Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 163–7.

⁴¹ See, for instance, folia 63r–64v, which list a number of animals belonging to the Indian Ocean.

⁴² For the dog-headed men and the dog-sized ants, see Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī, *The Geographical Part of the Nuzhat-al-Qulub*, 225; For the fire-breathing fish, see al-Qazwīnī, *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*, 63v.

these descriptions, the two literati relied on earlier works on geography, *ʿajāʾib*, and travel-ogues, as well as on oral accounts by sailors and merchants. Recent scholarship on books of wonders highlights how authors in this strand of writing are especially attentive to the question of authenticity. Because the significance of the wondrous in this context rests on its veridical ontological status, retaining spurious anecdotes was considered inadmissible.⁴³ In including descriptions of the uncanny creatures of the Indian Ocean in their books, the two authors therefore presented them as true. The extraordinary content of these stories and their remote setting, however, implicitly but surely inscribed them among the “elegant tales” (*ḥikāyāt zarīfa*) and “odd properties” (*khawāṣ gharība*) al-Qazwīnī reports having retained chiefly because of their aesthetic value.⁴⁴ This is further confirmed by the care the two authors put in identifying the source of each of these tales, a notorious rhetoric device in writings of *ʿajāʾib* meant to shift blame from the author for reporting potentially spurious information. In the *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt* and *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*, the description of exotic forms of life native to the Indian Ocean is thus largely aesthetic, providing an occasion to surprise and delight the reader with descriptions of alien realities. The two authors do not want us to question the authenticity of the report, but to take pleasure in believing that, in the farthest recess of the inhabited world, life can take extraordinary forms.

The *Safīna*, by contrast, is a political portage. This ensures that, although based on the tradition of *ʿajāʾib*, its geographic section does not aim to entertain, amuse, or astonish, but to “bring back news” or “sink and drown,” as the traveler aptly puts it in the book’s introduction. Accordingly, and consistent with the methodological premise orienting this strand of travel writing, Muḥammad Rabīʿ’s gallery of wonders is derived entirely from his journey experience, limited to what he could see or learn from eyewitnesses. As a result, far from dwelling on the exotic creatures that, in books of wonders, characterize the Indian Ocean as irremediably alien, his discussion of this sea’s forms of life is limited to real plants, animals, and even peoples native to Southeast Asia. Through these pages, we meet in fact with (1) fish of various shapes and sizes; (2) the flying fish and its natural enemy, another fish called *Ābnūs*; (3) the crocodile; (4) an account of how people of Below the Winds, i.e., Southeast Asia, capture this and other animals by divination practices centered on breath (*ʿilm-i dam*), incantations (*afṣūn*), and mantras (*mantar*); (5) the stick insect; (6) a worm; (7–8) two feral cats; (9) the *Nāsnās*, a human-like creature of Islamic folklore;⁴⁵ (10) a piece of wood and some small fish; and (11–12) two indigenous peoples native to as many remote islands.

Against this background, for Muḥammad Rabīʿ, it seems these elements constitute *ʿajāʾib* not because they are signs one should contemplate to learn more about God and his creation, or exotic forms of life whose description is expected to please the reader, but because they are part of a foreign world he is appointed to detail with the precision of the reconnaissance agent. Relevant in this respect is the accurate tone of the explanation. For each “wonder,” Muḥammad Rabīʿ specifies whether the description results from his observation or that of a third party. Thus, the group “beheld many fish of the most unusual shapes and sizes” (*māh-i ki dar khalqat gharīb wa ʿajīb būd mushāhida shud*), “saw” (*dīda shud*) tortoises, “caught sight” (*mulāḥaza shud*) of curious worms, and “watched” (*mushāhida uftāda*) the

⁴³ For an in-depth discussion of this issue, see Zadeh, “The Wiles of Creation”; and Yamanaka, “Authenticating the Incredible.”

⁴⁴ al-Qazwīnī, *ʿajāʾib al-Makhlūqāt*, 2v.

⁴⁵ The mention of this creature, a staple in Islamic books of wonders, may raise the suspicion that we are faced with a product of imagination. Considering that Muḥammad Rabīʿ describes the *Nāsnās* as a creature that lives in the jungle and “in every aspect of his outward appearance is like an ape,” however, there is little doubt that this is a primate disguised as a *Nāsnās* by virtue of what Anthony Pagden (*European Encounters with the New World*, 17–50) calls “principle of attachment,” i.e., the attachment of an unknown entity to a known reference point for the sake of explanation. The attachment of apes and primates to the *Nāsnās* is indeed customary in Islamic literature. On this issue, see Kruk, “Traditional Islamic Views of Apes and Monkeys.”

flying fish try to escape its predator. On the other hand, the “flying cat” (*gurba-yi pardār*) is only “said” (*masmu‘ shud*) to look like a bat and live in the jungle, just like another is “said” (*mazkur shud*) to petrify its prey in terror with its gaze. Likewise, that some islands are home to peoples who live naked and practice foreign customs, including scarification and nose piercing, comes from a “Dutch captain” (*kapitān ulandīs*) who visited them. Moreover, to the extent permitted by the flourished style characterizing the book and indeed Safavid-literature, the language of the description is dry and the overall tone factual. The following excerpt about the crocodile shows it best:

Another fish is the *makramaj*, which men generally call the crocodile [*nahang*], and this creature is extremely large, very violent and full of strength. However, we never sighted one which was actually big enough to overturn a ship. These fish usually inhabit the fresh water of rivers in Below the Winds and India. When we were leaving Shahr Nav and sailing through fresh water on our way to the sea, we encountered a heavy *makramaj*. We hit it and caused it to roll over suddenly and in the commotion one of the crew members fell out of the dinghy. The huge crocodile carried him off into the canal of disaster and swallowed him down.⁴⁶

The traveler begins by naming the animal and explaining its foremost characteristics and natural habitat. Then, he proceeds to anchor the description to his experience by briefly recounting an encounter with the creature and its tragic consequences. In this regard, it is worth noting how the anecdote serves not only to confirm that the crocodile does indeed possess the qualities he attributes it, but also to shed doubt on the common opinion that some specimens are large enough to overturn a ship.

The most striking evidence of how Muḥammad Rabī‘ creatively expands the framework provided by ‘*ajā’ib*’ writings to accommodate the kind of content he was appointed to deliver, however, arguably comes from his description of the main islands and kingdoms of the Indian Ocean.⁴⁷ As we have come to expect, the structure is once more closely reminiscent of writings of ‘*ajā’ib*’. As in the ‘*ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt*’ and *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*, the traveler indeed depicts each island separately as in a list, with the usual formulaic expressions—“yet another island is” (*wa diqar az jazā’ir*), “among the islands also is” (*wa az jumla-yi jazā’ir*), and the like—serving as early modern antecedents of bullet points. The content, however, is significantly changed. Whereas al-Qazwīnī and Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī focus on the wondrous and the extraordinary, here the attention shifts to politics, commerce, and foreign customs.

To establish this point, let us begin by comparing the islands described here to descriptions in the ‘*ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt*’ and *Nuzhat al-Qulūb*. Consistent with the traditional representation of the Indian Ocean in writings of ‘*ajā’ib*’, the two cosmographies explore a mix of real and imaginary places. They detail Java and Sumatra, but also and especially unidentified—and indeed unidentifiable—lands. These include the Island of the castle, whose name derives from the white castle of mysterious origin that stands there, and that of the dragon, where such a creature used to live until Alexander the Great—depicted in Islamic lore as the globetrotter and cunning problem-solver *par excellence*—killed it with a ruse.⁴⁸ By contrast, Muḥammad Rabī‘ confines the discussion to a number of real islands and kingdoms. In the order in which they appear in the book, these are Ceylon, Aceh, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Philippines (which he knows as Manila), Japan, Burma (called Pegu), and China.

⁴⁶ Muḥammad Rabī‘, *Safīna*, 163/O’Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 164–5.

⁴⁷ Muḥammad Rabī‘, *Safīna*, 166–215/O’Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 167–217.

⁴⁸ For the description of these two islands, see al-Qazwīnī, ‘*ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt*’, 62r–63r; Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī, *The Geographical Part of the Nuzhat al-Qulub*, 225. Scholarship on Alexander in Islamic intellectual history is vast. For a general introduction, see Stoneman, Erickson, and Netton, *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East*. On the Islamic Alexander as the quintessential traveler and explorer, see Casari, “The King Explorer: A Cosmographic Approach to the Persian Alexander.”

That all of these, except the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, were relevant actors in the political, commercial, and diplomatic scenario of the Indian Ocean Rim is a sure indication of the Safavid official's interests. As we established, unlike the authors he claimed to emulate, Muḥammad Rabīʿ and his expected readers have little use for wonders. The court had appointed him to observe and describe a tangible world where kingdoms large and small compete for control over territory and trade routes and the danger comes from sudden changes in government, trade blockages, and pirates rather than exotic creatures. In reviewing the foremost territories of the Indian Ocean, the Safavid official was congruent to this command, in that he largely left out the wondrous narratives that characterize his models to focus on concrete details regarding politics, trade, and diplomacy.

Indeed, while different in length, these descriptions all address a consistent set of topics. First, the Safavid official introduces the island or kingdom in question by mentioning its geographic position, examining its climate, and briefly outlining its notable features as established by previous scholars. Then, he comments on its flora, fauna, and natural resources as well as on its principal places of interest, from grottoes and volcanoes to ancient ruins. Considering that this subject was common in literature of *ʿajāʾib* since its emergence as an independent strand of writing, it is unsurprising to learn that here is where Muḥammad Rabīʿ is closer to his stated prototypes. Many of these descriptions focus on valuable commodities, such as metals and gemstones, and relevant geological structures. Some, however, are reminiscent of the kind of “spurious tales” traditionally found in books of wonders. While these also result from the traveler's journey experience, in that he reports stories picked up during the voyage, they arguably serve no purpose besides making for a more pleasant reading. Then, the Safavid official usually reverts to political reportage, dwelling on the present conditions of the island or kingdom concerned with attention to internal and international politics, religion, laws, trade, court rituals, and customs.

To better illustrate how the traveler developed his discourse, I would like to consider his account of China and Japan, two countries discussed in Islamic geography respectively at length and very little at that point.

In line with the proposed scheme, the description of China (*Chīn*) opens with a brief introduction situating the country in space and mentioning the most common tropes associated to it in Islamic geography.⁴⁹ China, begins Muḥammad Rabīʿ, is a sizeable kingdom lying some twenty days away from Ayutthaya. Its foremost characteristic is its huge population. Indeed, China counts no less than 1,029 great cities and boasts an impressive capital, Khān Bāligh (modern Beijing), which alone is ten *farsakh* large. Then, the traveler recalls the Chinese's extraordinary aptitude for the arts and crafts, a popular trope in Islamic geography since the Abbasid period.⁵⁰ Upon mentioning this common theme, however, Muḥammad Rabīʿ remarks that scholars discuss the subject with “pens more elegant and graceful than the brush of Mani”—a reference to a famous Islamic lore involving the supposed preaching of the Iranian prophet Mani (d. 277) in China.⁵¹ The traveler, though, is not especially interested in looking back. To the contrary, he explains, because “the portrait of that country has been painted in all its colorful details,” there is no reason to carry its general description further. Rather, it is best to focus on some recent events in Chinese history about which he could learn during the journey; events that would surely provide men of learning (*arbāb-i hush*) with “cause of further understanding” (*baṣīrat wa āgāhī*).

The Safavid official is true to his word. What follows is in fact a detailed account of the Ming-Qing transition (1640s to 1680s), a topical issue in contemporary Chinese and Asian

⁴⁹ Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Safīna*, 202–15/O'Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 203–17. For an overview of the Islamic representation of China, see Miquel, *La Géographie Humaine Du Monde Musulman*, vol. 2.1, 75–119; and Bosworth, Hartman, and Israeli, “Al-Ṣīn”; Khālīqi-Mutlaq, “Chinese-Iranian Relations X: China in Medieval Persian Literature.”

⁵⁰ On this trope and its fortune in Mongol and early modern Eurasia, see Calzolaio, “China, the Abode of Arts and Crafts.”

⁵¹ On this issue, see Pellò, “A Paper Temple.”

history in general.⁵² The source of this news is “a certain minister’s son from China” (*shakḥṣ-ī az wazīr-zādaqān-i ānjā*) by the name of Mush, who left China for Ayutthaya after the fall of the Ming dynasty and eventually found employment in the service of King Narai.⁵³ At times, the traveler integrates the report of his informant with material drawn from traditional Islamic lore about China. Muḥammad Rabīʿ, for instance, invokes the consensus of Islamic scholars that the Chinese descend from Chin, son of Japheth and nephew of Noah, to dismiss as “sheer nonsense” (*muzakhrāfāt*) Mush’s claim that the country has always been ruled by a single royal family descending from Pangu, whom an ancient Chinese cosmological myth acknowledges as the first man.⁵⁴ Similarly, he accounts for the Chinese’s fierce opposition to the order of the governing Manchu to follow northern customs and shave their heads, explaining that the Chinese have worn their hair long since the time of Alexander, who, according to the Islamic tradition, imposed this custom on them when he conquered the region. Yet we should keep in mind that, to the Safavid official and his public, such notions were well-established facts whose authenticity was confirmed by centuries of scholarly consensus. It is, therefore, unsurprising to see him integrate and even amend Mush’s report appropriately. Overall, however, Muḥammad Rabīʿ was true to the latter’s words, providing a good description of this fundamental development in contemporary Chinese history. He correctly identifies the Qing as “Tatar” invaders from the north, explains the fall of the Ming dynasty as resulting from the weakness of the last Ming ruler, “Chung-Chin” (Emperor Chongzhen, r. 1627–1644), as well as persistent drought and famine, and recounts the events up to his own time, also including relevant details such as the suicide of Chongzhen, the note he famously left behind, and the flight of the last Ming loyalist to various Southeast Asian kingdoms.

The same concern for reporting original information with attention to the current political and economic scenario characterizes his account of Japan (*Japān*).⁵⁵ As usual, the discussion begins with a general geographic description of the country. Japan, explains Muḥammad Rabīʿ, is fifteen days’ journey from Ayutthaya. It enjoys a mild climate and is blessed with a large population and plentiful natural resources, so much so that “of all the islands that exist in the various seas, Japan is by far the richest and the most magnificent” (*‘āzam-i jazā’ir wa ma‘mūrtar*). At this point, the traveler once more invokes the existence of a textual tradition with regard to the region to swiftly move the discussion to its contemporary situation. Scholars, he claims, are already familiar with Japan, which both the *Rawzat al-Ṣafāʾ* and *‘ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt* characterize as a land abundant in gold.⁵⁶ Therefore, it is better to limit the discussion to what he could ascertain (*tahqīq kardā*) from some merchants who recently (*dar in āwān*) returned from the island. Accordingly, the following pages illustrate the present conditions of Japan with attention to politics and commerce, two subjects which his merchant informants must have considered especially important.

Japan, he begins, is rich in natural resources. Its inhabitants, while idolaters (*ba-maḥab wa kīsh-i kāfirī wa butparastī-and*), display all signs of civilization, and a single ruler is in control of most of the country. That would make it an excellent trade partner, if it were not for its strict isolationist policy. As a result of a recent attempt by the Portuguese to spread Christianity in Japan, the Japanese ruler indeed issued an edict forbidding foreigners from

⁵² A comprehensive account of the Ming-Qing transition is found in Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*.

⁵³ This is consistent with the existence of a large Ming diasporic community in Ayutthaya. See Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Ayutthaya*, 213–4.

⁵⁴ On Pangu as the first man in Chinese mythology, see Goldin, “The Myth That China Has No Creation Myth.” On the genealogy of the Chinese in Islamic tradition, see Leslie, “Japhet in China.”

⁵⁵ Muḥammad Rabīʿ, *Safīna*, 188–97/O’Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 189–98.

⁵⁶ According to Muḥammad Rabīʿ, these works refer to Japan as Zābaj. This, however, seems to be a mistake on the traveler’s part. While the precise identification of Zābaj remains unknown, this toponym indeed appears to refer to somewhere in the Western Indonesian archipelago rather than Japan (see Tibbetts and Toorawa, “Zābadj, Zābidj, Zābag”)—which, to the best of my knowledge, does not appear in the *Rawzat al-Ṣafāʾ* or the *‘ajā’ib al-Makhlūqāt*.

visiting the capital and remaining in the kingdom past the monsoon season.⁵⁷ This ensures that information on Japan is especially scant. Then, the discussion proceeds to a brief explanation of the Japanese ruler's chief functions, which involve presiding over the court of law and tending to the problems of his subjects. Some interesting facts about the country, including a commentary on its brothels and the sublime swords produced by Japanese craftsmen—which, the traveler specifies, he could see in Ayutthaya—concludes the description.

The section closes with an account of the mission's return journey to Iran.⁵⁸ This provides the traveler with yet another occasion to detail the various places the party stopped along the way. However, he also dwells on the hardships they endured on the journey, much like his account of the outward voyage to Ayutthaya. Similar descriptions are frequent in travel literature and serve to boost the traveler's authority and credibility: as the English poet Ben Jonson (d. 1637) put it, he who "passed through fire, / through seas, storms, tempests; and embarked for hell, / came back untouched. This man hath travailed well."⁵⁹ Read against the background of the Safavid official's oft-noted sentiment of cultural superiority, however, they also further characterize Southeast Asia as a foreign, dangerous place the traveler was only too happy to leave behind. A short report concerning the latest news (*akhbār-i tāza*) in Indian politics, which confirms the official's attention to disclosing the most recent developments related to the Indian Ocean world, closes the book.⁶⁰

Conclusion

As the work of a political envoy who, lacking any scholarly credentials, sets out to compose a geographic account according to the best Islamic tradition of *'ajā'ib*, but based on his travels, the fourth section of the *Safīna* can be considered emblematic of how the tension between *taḥqīq* and *taqlīd* could shape knowledge production in Safavid Iran. Textual authorities provided Muḥammad Rabī' with a ready-made model for his description. The author's reference to earlier works in geography, however, is not merely instrumental. To the Safavid official and his intended readers, the tradition of writing started by the likes of Zakariyyā' al-Qazwīnī is still very much alive. Its greatest exponents can be criticized, as the traveler in fact does, but cannot be ignored: the new is to be rooted in the antique. To the extent that such tradition is largely intended but as a stepping stone to novelty, however, the tension between *taḥqīq* and *taqlīd* is resolved with the primacy of the former, as confirmed by Muḥammad Rabī's provocative opposition between "the man who only hears about a marvel" and "the beholder."

Of course, neither a single work nor the perception of an individual is enough to make absolute claims regarding a whole historic period. Nevertheless, several elements suggest that the case at hand is far from unique. As already mentioned, the *Safīna* sits in a long tradition of Persianate travel writing focused on the precise description of foreign polities which dates at least to the Timurid period. Much like Muḥammad Rabī's book, these texts are characterized by systematic empiricism and show a heavy reliance on the traveler's observations and experiences. While such works do not seem to have ever constituted a formally defined literary genre, their very existence hints at a process of progressive valorization of personal experience in travel writing starting in the Timurid period (and possibly even earlier) and reaching its fulfillment around the time our traveler composed his book. Further evidence in this regard comes from a variety of early modern travelogues similarly centered on the traveler's experiences, several of which have recently been the subject

⁵⁷ The reference here is to the isolationist foreign policy (often dubbed *sakoku*, "closed country") enacted by the Tokugawa shogunate (1600–1868) in the first half of the seventeenth century. See Laver, *The Sakoku Edicts*.

⁵⁸ Muḥammad Rabī', *Safīna*, 215–30/O'Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 217–33.

⁵⁹ "To William Roe," in *Poems*, 74.

⁶⁰ Muḥammad Rabī', *Safīna*, 231–7/O'Kane, *The Ship of Sulaimān*, 234–40.

of analysis.⁶¹ In some of these cases, such emphasis on the author's journey experience meets with the Islamic imaginary of *'ajā'ib*, yielding geographic accounts that are strikingly reminiscent of the fourth section of the *Safīna*. The section on the wonders of the inhabited world concluding the travelogue by the late seventeenth-century Iranian bureaucrat Mirzā Muḥammad Mufid Bāfiqī Yazdī is, in this respect, a case in point.⁶² Furthermore, some of the fundamental methodological aspects underlying Muḥammad Rabī's innovative take on the *'ajā'ib* also seems to meet in books on wonders and geography from the neighboring Ottoman world. The Ottoman scholar Katip Çelebi (d. 1657), for instance, harshly criticized earlier authorities in wonder writing for reporting "absurd matters simply in order to amuse wonders" and preferred to base his monumental cosmography, the *Cihānnumā*, on the investigations of contemporary European scholars and selected Islamic sources.⁶³ Similarly, recent scholarship has shown how Ottoman literati updated and expanded earlier works of *'ajā'ib* based on their experience and eyewitness accounts even when preparing translations and copies.⁶⁴ This suggests that the negotiation between *taḥqīq* and *taqlid* underlying Muḥammad Rabī's account of the Indian Ocean is in fact a defining feature of travel writing and geography in the early modern Persianate world.

Waiting for further research in this direction, one thing is certain: upon his return to Iran, Muḥammad Rabī was promoted secretary to the grand vizier and comptroller (*mustawfī*) of the silk-producing provinces.⁶⁵ If not all his contemporaries, at least Shāh Sulaymān did share his appointed official's *taḥqīq*-fueled approach to cosmography.

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⁶¹ I am thinking here of Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, as well as Babayan, "The Topography of Travel in Early Modern Persianate Landscapes," both of which focus on the role of direct experience in early modern Persian travel writing.

⁶² Mufid Bāfiqī Yazdī, *Jāmi'-yi Mufidī*, vol. 3, 817–47. Also see the rest of the section, which continues in a similar vein. On Mufid's travels and works, see Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, 179–221.

⁶³ See the discussion in Curry, "An Ottoman Geographer Engages the Early Modern World."

⁶⁴ A relevant case study is discussed in Coşkun, "An Ottoman Preacher's Perception of a Medieval Cosmography."

⁶⁵ Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran*, 208.

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