

MAY JUNE 2021

# AramcoWorld





## 6 The Liverpool Effect

Written by **Ken Chitwood**

Around the turn of the 20th century, an acrobat from Morocco named Achmed Ben Ibrahim settled near the thriving port of Liverpool, UK. Forgotten until the recent discovery of his 1906 tombstone, his story foreshadows the cultural impacts of the city's most famous 21st-century resident—Egyptian soccer star Mohamed “Mo” Salah.

## 12 Preserving Arabia's Bedouin Poetry

Written by **Alia Yunis**  
Photographs courtesy of **Marcel Kurpershoek**

Throughout central Saudi Arabia, Bedouin tribal histories and folklore lie largely in oral poetry known as Nabati. In 1989 diplomat and linguist Marcel Kurpershoek set out to meet poets and record their verses. It became a lifetime project that continues to illuminate roots of the Arabic language and Arabian Peninsula cultures.

## 18 Could Phoenicians Have Crossed the Atlantic?

Written by **Tristan Rutherford**  
Photographed by **Yuri Sanada**

Two thousand years before Columbus and 1,500 before Erikson, the Phoenician maritime empire covered the Mediterranean and west to the Canary Islands. In 2019 a replica Phoenician ship set sail to find out whether they could have gone farther.

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We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

**FRONT COVER** With wind filling its single square sail, the replica 6th-century-BCE ship *Phoenicia* heads west toward the Strait of Gibraltar and beyond on what became a five-month voyage. Photo courtesy of Phoenicians Before Columbus Expedition.

**BACK COVER** “Photographing the skateparks as a skateboarder,” says Amir Zaki, “I have a bodily, visceral reaction to those forms. ... I know what it feels like to move through that space.” Photo courtesy of Amir Zaki.



## 28 The Sculpture of Skateparks

Written by **Brian E. Clark**  
Photographs courtesy of **Amir Zaki**

It takes a landscape photographer's eye to step down into a cement skatepark and turn the lens not on skaters but on the ramps, waves, valleys, bowls and tunnels that are the terrain of the park itself, and it takes a skater's experience to do so in a way that captivates both art critics and skateboard stars. California native and photographer Amir Zaki grew up skateboarding on streets in suburban Los Angeles, and recently he began visiting skateparks to produce sweeping, large-format images that offer textured meditations on the beauty of light on curved concrete.

## 34 Spice Migrations: Nutmeg

Written by **Jeff Koehler**  
Art by **Linda Dalal Sawaya**

In the Banda Islands, picking, peeling, drying and selling nutmeg to Arab and other traders was an aromatic business for centuries until the Dutch arrived. Nutmeg's early fans used it more for health than cooking, but today it's a kitchen staple, used in the West mainly in desserts but elsewhere in both sweet and savory dishes.

 **40 EVENTS**    **Online LEARNING CENTER**

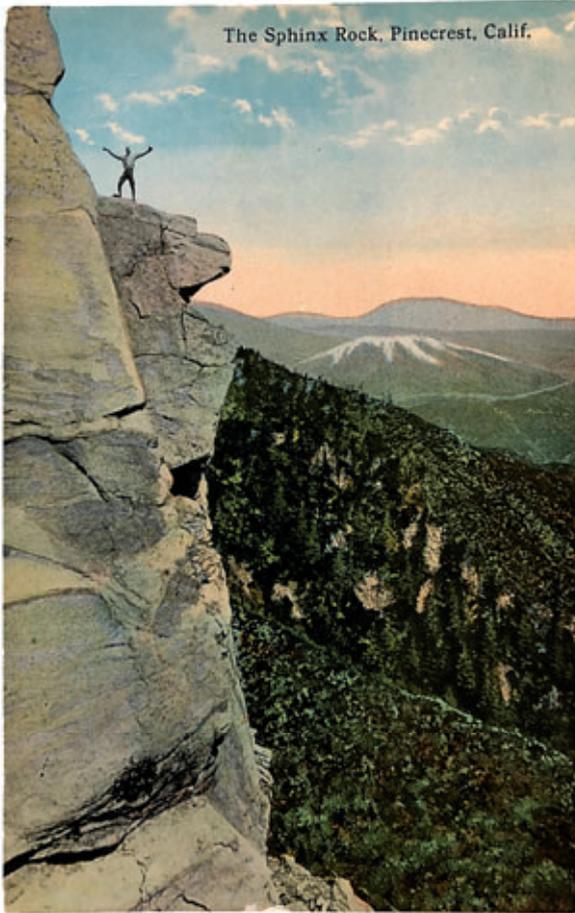
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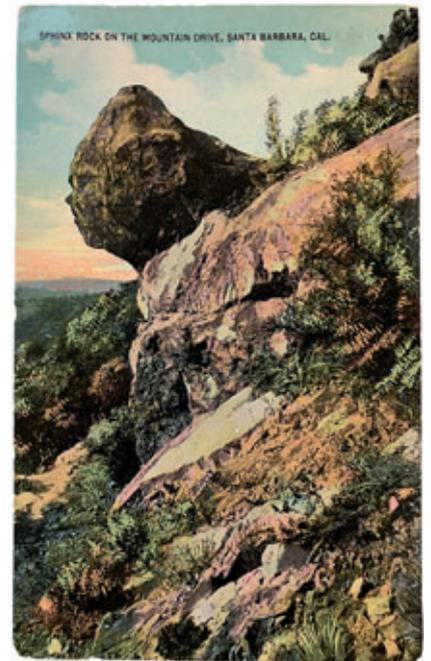
The Sphinx Rock, Pinecrest, Calif.



4607. Sphinx Head Cave, La Jolla, near San Diego, Calif.



2 LES GORGES DU TARN. - Montpeller-le-Vieux.  
Le Grand Sphinx. - LL



SPHINX ROCK ON THE MOUNTAIN DRIVE, SANTA BARBARA, CALIF.

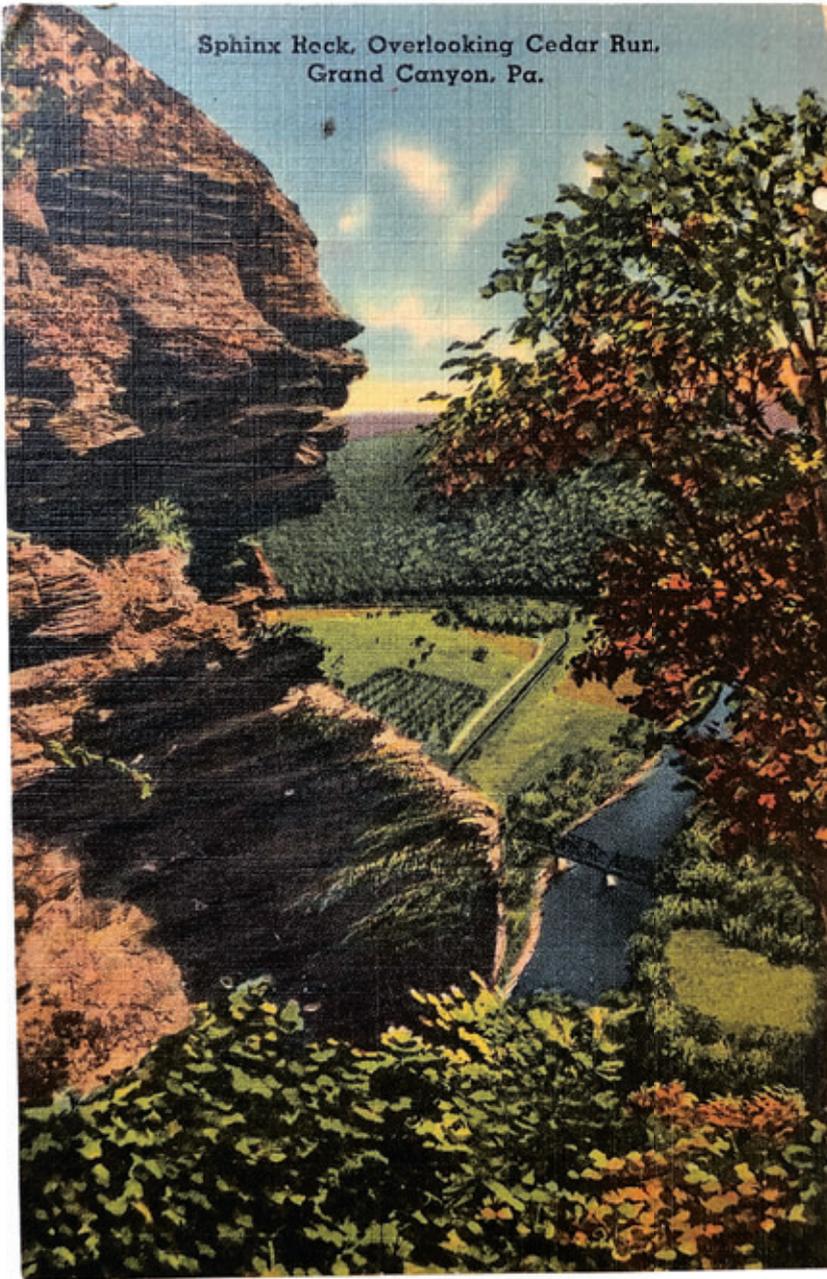


The Sphinx, Tunnel No. 31, Moffat Road, Colo.



SPHINX  
MT. TAMALPAIS & MUIR WOODS RY.  
CALIFORNIA

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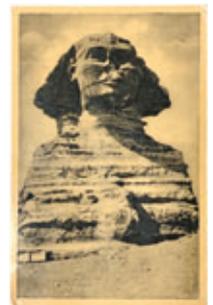
## FIRST LOOK

### The Sphinx Imagined

Postcard collection by Jonathan Friedlander

Two summers ago I was browsing several hundred vintage postcards contained in narrow boxes all piled up in a Stillwater, Minnesota, antiques store. I was searching for images of Middle Eastern architectural motifs and styles found in the American-built environment, and I came across several postcards that each featured an imagined sphinx as seen in natural rock formations. Intrigued, I checked out postcard collector sites online and found more. Now my “Imagined Sphinx” postcards, destined to be part of a much larger collection of Middle Eastern Americana at the UCLA Young Research Library, number about two dozen. They show structures and formations mostly in the US but also around the world, notably in England and France—the two colonial powers that impacted the course of Egyptian history in the 19th and 20th centuries—as well as Switzerland, Romania, Turkey, Kazakhstan and Vietnam. And while the people who named these sites may have never themselves actually visited the Sphinx of Giza, Egypt, guardian of the Great Pyramids, they knew of it through textbooks, prints, paintings, photographs and perhaps even other postcards, from which they appropriated, for novelty and profit, the iconic edifice that has become so embedded in much of the world’s collective imagination.

—Jonathan Friedlander  
oac.cdlib.org





# FLAVORS

## Fresh Thyme Pie (Za'tar Akhdar)

Recipe and photograph by  
Barbara Abdeni Massaad

Dough recipe at  
aramcoworld.com:



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**Man'oushé: Inside  
the Lebanese Street  
Corner Bakery**

Barbara Abdeni Massaad  
2020, Interlink Books,  
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www.interlinkbooks.com

**Walking down the street one day in Barbir in Beirut, I saw a baker carrying a wooden board filled with delicious pies. One of his customers shared his wife's recipe.**

Spreading the toppings evenly across the dough takes practice. Too much or too little of the topping makes a big difference. I found that the best way to spread the toppings on different pies is with your hands. Quite elementary, but very efficient.

(Serves 4)

- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 2 medium tomatoes, finely chopped                     | 1 cup (250 milliliters) lemon juice |
| 1 large onion, finely chopped                         | ½ cup (120 milliliters) olive oil   |
| 2 small red or green hot peppers, very finely chopped | 1 teaspoon salt                     |
| 1 bunch fresh thyme sprigs, chopped                   | ½ teaspoon black pepper             |

Prepare the dough according to the recipe at aramcoworld.com. In a bowl, mix tomatoes, onion, hot peppers, thyme, lemon juice, olive oil, salt and pepper.

If you are using a cast-iron crepe pan, griddle or convex disc (*saj*): Preheat over high heat. Heat the dough until small bubbles form, then lower the heat and spread on the topping. Cook until the bottom is slightly golden and the edges are crisp, about 3 to 5 minutes, depending on the heat source. Lightly spray the cooking surface with water between pies and wipe away any debris.

If you are using a conventional oven: Preheat the oven to 200 degrees Celsius (400 degrees Fahrenheit). Using the back of a spoon, spread the mixture over the prepared dough, leaving about 1 centimeter (½ inch) of exposed dough at the edges. For more even distribution, use your fingertips. Bake for 7 to 10 minutes on the bottom shelf until the edges are slightly golden, watching carefully so they don't burn.

Serve the pies hot.



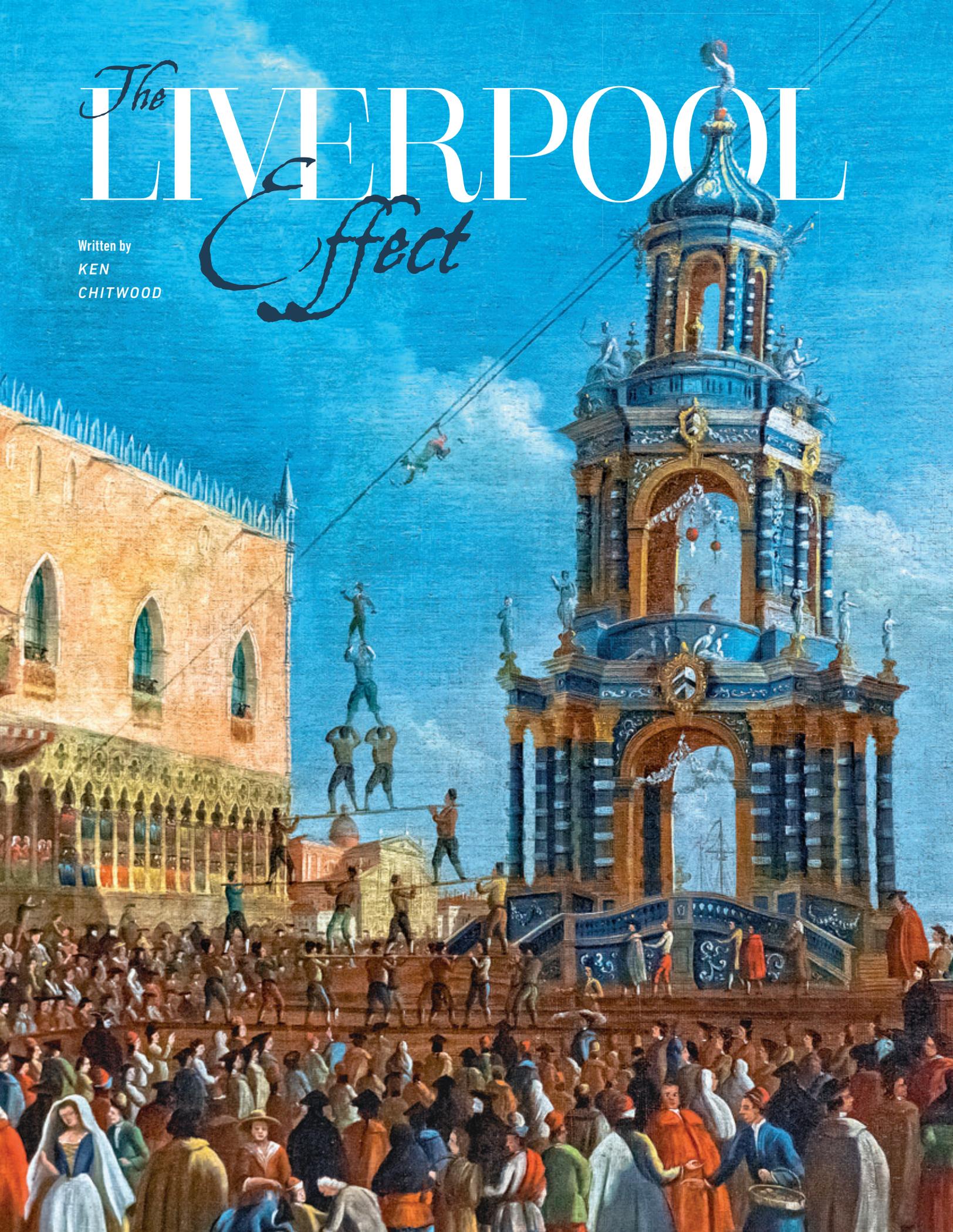
**Barbara Abdeni Massaad** is a food writer, TV host, cookbook author and a regular contributor to international cooking magazines. She won the Gourmand Cookbook Award and the International Academy of Gastronomy for *Mouneh: Preserving Foods for the Lebanese Pantry* (Interlink Books, 2018). Born in Beirut, Lebanon, she moved to Florida at a young age and gained her real culinary experience helping her father in the family-owned Lebanese restaurant, Kebabs and Things. After moving back to Lebanon in 1988 and completing university there, she decided to pursue her passion for cooking. Determined to gain proper experience within the culinary world, Massaad trained with several renowned chefs at Lebanese, Italian and French restaurants. She is also a founding member of Slow Food Beirut and an active participant in the International Slow Food movement. She lives in Beirut with her husband and three children.

BARBARA ABDENI MASSAAD



# The LIVERPOOL *Effect*

Written by  
KEN  
CHITWOOD



**I**t was sometime in the mid-1980s, Ismaeel Nakhuda recalls, that the headstone with the Arabic inscription was found. Well-worn, it lay in a far corner of the Muslim section of the cemetery in Preston, England. Nakhuda's late father, Mohammad, had that day been working with other volunteers to clear up the overgrown area.

The Arabic on the headstone translated, "Oh he who is deceased and whose mention will be forever." Underneath that, it read in English, "Here repose the mortal remains of Achmed Ben Ibrahim of Maraksh, Morocco, who died January 24th, 1906, aged 60 years." It was the oldest Muslim headstone in the cemetery.

"When my father saw the stone," says Nakhuda, a Preston native and local journalist, "it really made him think about why the stone would be there, and who this man was. We were always attracted to the grave and wanted to find out who he was."

Ben Ibrahim was buried on the margins of the yard, in what was then the section for paupers and nonconformists, apart from the sections for Anglicans and Catholics. The Muslim volunteers that day quickly noticed that his grave was not oriented toward Makkah.

The headstone, and Ben Ibrahim himself, remained something of a mystery, especially among local Muslims, who today number some 15,000 among the town's 140,000 residents. But his life was often spoken about in the Nakhuda home, where Mohammad, who had come to England from India, would muse with Ismaeel about the life and journey of this "lone Arab chap," Nakhuda says.

A few years ago, as a professional writer and amateur historian, Nakhuda decided to investigate. What he found reveals another chapter in the story of Islam in Victorian Britain, one that

has an unexpected link to the present—through sport.

Ben Ibrahim, it turned out, was a professional acrobat.

Today the Liverpool metropolitan area, where Preston lies nearby to the north end, stands as something of a pillar of diversity, a city recognized globally as one of the world's friendliest and most eclectic urbanizations. It is also a city whose most famous current resident is a professional sportsman: Mohamed "Mo" Salah, superstar midfielder for both Liverpool Football Club in the English Premier League and the national squad of Salah's native Egypt.

**W**hen Nakhuda began his research, he found no local records of Ben Ibrahim. But online, The British Newspaper Archive lit up his screen. Between 1895 and 1915, he found reviews, articles and advertisements about a group of traveling acrobats from Morocco, The Achmed Ibrahim Troupe.

He posted his findings on Twitter, and the Lancashire-based newspaper *Asian Image* used Nakhuda's findings in a story on the history of early Muslim graves in the area.

Julie Knifton, a clerk at the Preston Cemetery, reached out to him with more about Ben Ibrahim's burial. She confirmed that Ben Ibrahim was laid to rest in the outer section of the cemetery, in grave number 305 to be precise. More importantly, says Nakhuda, she explained that all the cemetery's plots were dug in an east-west direction. "This probably explains why Achmed's feet pointed west," he says, instead of toward Makkah.

Records also showed the plot was bought for Ben Ibrahim by Charles Hutchinson, a Preston iron moulder, and his wife, Mary Ann Hutchinson. Later they themselves were buried in their own

Many of the acrobats who entertained audiences and festival crowds throughout Europe from the 18th to 20th century came from Turkey and North Africa, and particularly from Morocco. In Venice the tradition of the "Flying Angel," which marks the opening of the city's annual carnival, was one particularly famous occasion. This detail of a late-18th-century painting by Gabriele Bella, **OPPOSITE**, shows a five-tier human pyramid, an acrobatic formation developed in Morocco in the 16th century to help anticolonial resisters spot Portuguese ships from a distance. **LOWER** In the UK, The Achmed Ibrahim Troupe from Morocco advertised its talents in the late 19th century by depicting seven of its stunts under the Moroccan national crescent and star, and it added to its appeal to exoticism by describing the acrobats as "10 Bedouin Arabs." **RIGHT** Preston, UK, journalist Ismaeel Nakhuda poses beside the gravestone that gives the acrobat's full name, Achmed Ben Ibrahim.



COURTESY ISMAEEL NAKHUDA (2); OPPOSITE: PINACOTECA QUERINI STAMPALLA / CREATIVE COMMONS (DETAIL)

plots not in the Anglican section but near Ben Ibrahim. The Hutchinsons's home address, 72 North Road, was also the address on Ben Ibrahim's death certificate. How, Nakhuda wondered, would a tradesman such Hutchinson come to share a home with a foreign, and Muslim, acrobat? Were the Hutchinsons among Preston's handful of English Muslims?

His search led to Abdullah Quilliam, leader of what was at the turn of the 20th century the rapidly growing, multinational Muslim community in Liverpool. It was an era when Liverpool was one of the most populous, most rapidly industrializing cities in Britain.

"To really understand Achmed Ben Ibrahim, you have to understand

Quilliam's community," Nakhuda says. Today, he explains, many people in Liverpool think their star footballer Mo Salah is, as a celebrity who is Muslim, something new. "But there is a known Islamic background and influence in Liverpool going back a very long time, long before Mo Salah."

**B**oth before and after becoming a leader of Britain's early Muslim community, Quilliam held "one of the most successful practices of law in the north-west of England," noted Ron Geaves, a specialist in British Islamic history and author of *Islam in Victorian Britain: The Life and Times of Abdullah Quilliam*



**TOP** Though it is not known when Ben Ibrahim settled in Preston, north of Liverpool, he arrived at a time when the port city's Islamic community was growing, led by Liverpool lawyer Abdullah Quilliam, who had embraced Islam in 1887 following a trip to Morocco and founded the Liverpool Mosque and Muslim Institute. In that same year, in Paris, a photo illustration, **LOWER LEFT**, promoted a "Pyramide d'acrobates arabes" as part of the first international tour of the US-based Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. This combined the allure of the American West with what the show touted as "Riffian Arabs, Bedouins, Moors, Syrians and Berbers." An acrobat also appears, **LOWER RIGHT**, on a Roman floor mosaic excavated at Volubilis in north-central Morocco. **BOTTOM RIGHT** A poster from a circus at Covent Garden Theatre in 1886 in London shows a variety of its featured acts, including an "Arab Acrobat" at the far left, poised atop a pyramid of boxes.





**TOP RIGHT** Mohamed “Mo” Salah, 28, set a one-season goal record in 2017, his first year with Liverpool FC (Football Club), and last year he helped the team win the Premier League championship. **LEFT** He plays also with the Egyptian national team, and in Cairo his portrait adorns a wall at a cafe, and his likeness can be found on storefronts, water glasses, lanterns and billboards. **ABOVE RIGHT** At a 2019 game, Liverpool fans hold up a scarf in support of “the Egyptian King” whose position as an attacking midfielder has him “running down the wing.”

(Kube Publishing, 2009). It was after a trip to Morocco in 1887 that Quilliam became a Muslim and changed his given name, William Henry, to Abdullah, which means “servant of God.” That same year he founded the Liverpool Mosque and Muslim Institute, today under restoration by the Abdullah Quilliam Society. Throughout his lifetime, Liverpool was expanding to become Britain’s beating heart of transatlantic shipping and one of the busiest ports in the entire British commonwealth. The docks drew migrants from across the world, and Liverpool became England’s leading city for immigration.

Liverpool’s Muslim community comprised newcomers and visitors from across the globe, including countries in the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, South Asia and others—enough that, with local converts, in 1896 the London *Sunday Telegraph* described Liverpool as “the center” of Islam “in the entirety of the British Isles.”

As a community they gathered for prayers on Fridays, celebrated holidays, took part in evening lectures and debates and joined picnics and the like. They also attended one another’s

**“These [human] pyramids were used to resist invasion. ... It was an anticolonial sport.”**

—Layachi El Habbouch

weddings and funerals. Unable to attend Ben Ibrahim’s funeral himself, Quilliam wrote of the acrobat and his graveside ceremony in Quilliam’s newspaper, *The Crescent*. He described Ben Ibrahim as a “sincere Muslim” who frequented the Liverpool mosque for prayers. He also noted that Ben Ibrahim was survived by “a wife, who embraced Islam”—a refer-

ence Nakhuda has, so far, been unable to attach to a name or other source. Quilliam also described Ben Ibrahim’s “active life” after “traveling in Europe for many years with a company of very clever Arab acrobats and tumblers”—The Achmed Ibrahim Troupe.

**W**hile not a competitive sport in an organized sense like soccer, acrobatic shows of Ben Ibrahim’s time were specialized circus acts that nonetheless competed for audiences and prestige. In addition to acrobats, they often included musicians, dancers, magicians, wrestlers and other various workers of wonders.

A great number of the acrobats came from Morocco. There were reasons for this, says Layachi El Habbouch, a professor at



Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Morocco. He suggests that these acrobats did more than delight audiences: They helped transform Britain’s wider relationship with the world.

“We are used to thinking that the British were fascinated with the ‘cultural other,’ and they were,” says El Habbouch. “But the experience of Moroccan acrobat troupes tells another story— one of encounter and exchange.”

Touted as “Bedouin Arabs” or “Moroccan Arabs” in newspapers such as *The Times*, *The Era* and *Bristol Mercury*, Moroccan acrobats in particular were well-known for “human pyramids,” their use of rifles and swords on stage and, as El Habbouch describes, “a spectacle of bodies, myths and mechanical devices well-suited to the Oriental curiosity and industrial capacity of the Victorian Age.”

While these played into many stereotypes of colonial ethnic exhibition, the performances also “created a whole new set of cross-cultural encounters that challenged British cultural discourse,” the professor continues.

The first-known Moroccan acrobat, he says, was Sidi Ahmad Ou Moussa, a 15th-century religious leader in the Lesser Atlas Mountains in the south of Morocco. His followers performed a mix of sport and art in preparation for both war and work. Their human pyramids, El Habbouch points out, were originally used to spot oncoming Portuguese warships.

“From the start these pyramids were used to resist invasion from foreign powers,” he says. “It was an anticolonial sport.”

Later, the acrobatics became a way to make a living in a world increasingly dominated by colonial powers. Moroccan

acrobats—sometimes known colloquially as “the children of Sidi Ahmed Ou Moussa”—performed for audiences in Spain, France, Italy, Germany and Britain.

As “spectacles of otherness,” their performances were received with great excitement. *The Illustrated London News* reported their “impossible feats” were “nightly received with shouts of surprised delight.”

El Habbouch says that many of the acrobats eventually found European and British communities in which to settle. As residents they went on to challenge stereotypes and begin a long process of redefining colonialist attitudes. It was the early effect of Muslims in Liverpool that continues today.

“Achmed stands as an example of how to live as a minority Muslim man in England,” says Nakhuda. And Liverpool, he maintains, “is a unique place in Britain. It has warm people. It’s a very welcoming city, and the football is the icing on the cake.” His own son, he

adds, is a “diehard” Liverpool and Mo Salah fan. “But I don’t want to say there haven’t been difficulties.”

“For Mohamed Salah,” he says, “with his connections and the people he knows across the world, it literally tells you there is an Islamic legacy there.”

## A 2019 study by Stanford University showed Salah has helped the relationship among Muslim and non-Muslim communities not only in Liverpool.

**I**dolized and beloved by fans across the globe, the 28-year-old “Egyptian King” has left his mark on Liverpool since joining the team in 2017. A 2019 study by Stanford University showed how Salah, as a celebrity footballer, has helped the relationship among Muslim communities and non-Muslim ones not only in Liverpool but also in Britain as a



Today's Muslim section of the cemetery in Preston, England, lies alongside the much older Protestant and Catholic sections, and it serves the suburb's Muslim community of about 15,000. It includes the marker for the final resting place of Ismaeel Nakhuda's father Mohammed, which can be seen here at center left. Nakhuda notes that these days his own son is, like so many others throughout the metropolitan area, a "diehard" fan of Liverpool FC and Mo Salah.

whole. The study dubbed it "The Mo Salah Effect."

The researchers analyzed approximately 15 million tweets from UK football fans—8,600 in Liverpool proper—and found that among non-Muslims exposure to Salah sparked more inclusive responses to Muslims and even other UK minorities. It also contributed to a 19 percent drop in hate crimes and acts of bigotry in and around Liverpool, and a 53 percent decrease in anti-Muslim tweets among Liverpool fans. The effect isn't limited to Salah, the study noted: Other celebrities "with role-model like qualities have long been thought to shape social attitudes."

Salah's role, while played out on a far larger stage Ben Ibrahim's, extends also to the civic community of which he has been a part for four years. He has become a prominent philanthropist, working with partners such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and for the Vodafone Foundation he is its ambassador for Instant Network Schools, which connect refugee youth to digital education opportunities.

"Mohamed Salah shares our passion about the importance of education as a pivotal building block for personal and societal development," says Andrew Dunnett, Vodafone's group director of sustainable development goals and sustainable business and foundations.

But long before the Mo Salah Effect, there was Ben Ibrahim and The Achmed Ibrahim Troupe laying a foundation.

"What impact Achmed had on Preston, or its residents, is hard to say," says Nakhuda. "For us second- and third-generation immigrants living in the UK, Achmed's story helps us connect to our culture in the past and others who came before us, and others who came before them who have stories we don't know about."

Preston native, social worker and interfaith-relations activist Mohammed Ali sees figures like Ben Ibrahim and Salah as agents of a stronger civil society. "People just need more time to get to know one another," he says.

"While we still recognize the importance of later migrant Muslim communities from South Asia, individuals like Achmed remind us of our deeper history in the UK," Ali says, adding that he sees this among Preston's journalists, shopkeepers, restaurant owners and others who play vital leadership roles in sustaining a healthy diverse community. "It's not just famous Muslims, but everyday Muslims like me, my father, my daughter—or even Achmed Ben Ibrahim—that help embody the multiculturalism of the country."

It is as if the effects of Ben Ibrahim and Salah are merely the most-visible tip of Liverpool's human pyramid. 🌐



**Ken Chitwood, Ph.D.**, is an award-winning writer on religion, travel and culture. He is currently a Fritz Thyssen Foundation Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Berlin Graduate School of Muslim cultures and Societies of Freie Universität Berlin. He is also a journalist-fellow with the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture's Spiritual Exemplars Project, and he lectures in Islamic science at Otto Friedrich Universität Bamberg.



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UK Muslim Trails: Jan / Feb 2021

British Islam: Jan / Feb 2007

# Preserving Arabia's Bedouin POETRY

Written by

ALIA YUNIS

Photographs courtesy of

MARCEL KURPERSHOEK

Where can I turn for a tongue, other than the one I already have,  
To help me express what this one is incapable of saying?  
I praised God that day I discovered my poetic bearings  
And my heart broke out in sobs after suffering in silence for a year.  
The verses dictated to me by the Merciful, I understood  
As they responded to one another's melody and marched on me in battle array.

—Al Dindan



Using a cassette tape recorder, Marcel Kurpershoek, left, prepares to record Nabati verses recited by Al Dubais al Ulawi, 81, in his *majlis*, or gathering room, at his home in the village of al-Suda'iyyah in 1988.



When the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, career diplomat Marcel Kurpershoek, second in command at the Dutch embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, didn't hear the news for months. That's because he was on the move amid some of the most remote reaches of central Saudi Arabia, in the region called Najd. "I didn't even have a transistor radio with me," he recalls.

What he did have was a cassette tape recorder, an expert knowledge of Arabic and a passion for meeting Bedouins renowned for Nabati poetry, the oral vernacular tradition of the desert. He had set out in his Land Rover, which he had named Hamra, after a Najd camel breed.

He quickly found that the poets who became his hosts cherished their four-wheel-drives too, and some even recited verses to them alongside more classical themes of heroes, camels, love and tribal rivalries. Some poems were humorous, some bawdy; some were critical, some heartfelt, and others were reminders of the unwritten Bedouin codes of authority, territory and honor.

When Kurpershoek set out, his wife, Betsy Udink, a well-known Dutch journalist and author, had just given birth to the couple's third daughter.

"My wife very graciously allowed me to stay behind, while she went back to Amsterdam," Kurpershoek recalls. To keep in touch then, he says, he could only place an international phone call from a post office. He wrote a weekly letter, and he would send a telegram to let her know when he could call. "I was very determined to describe in detail what I found. I was very aware that I was recording a dying culture. And a very old one."

Nearly three decades later, Kurpershoek is the author of several books of Nabati poetry translations that have their beginnings with his 1989 expedition. The books also became the focus of Arabic documenta-

ries on the satellite channel Al Arabiya: *Qamat al-Qasid (Monuments of Poetry)* in 2016 and *al-Rahhalat al-Akhir (The Last Traveler)* in 2017.

Marcel's longtime friend, Muhammad Al Otaiba, head of the Department of Archeology at King Saud University in Riyadh and president of the Saudi Society for Camel Studies, says Kurpershoek's Arabic is nearly good enough to make him a Bedouin himself.

"Almost, almost," Al Otaiba says, laughing. "He is always accurate and honest in recording what he hears. So meticulous. If he does not understand a certain word or phrase, he asks those who are fluent in it. I have had this experience with him many times."

In *al-Rahhalat al-Akhir*, Kurpershoek stars as himself, the de facto last person to record Nabati poetry before the Najd met the Internet. The documentary's title mirrored the Dutch title of his second book, published in 1995, *De Laatste Bedoeïen (The Last Bedouin)*. In 2001 this was combined with his first book, *Diep in Arabië (Deep in Arabia)*, in an English edition titled *Arabia of the Bedouins*. The book remains a popular title on traveler websites and in Saudi Arabia itself.

*I will walk to them, as though I were an honored guest,  
When the sweet-lipped one is sleeping, beside the discarded veil  
I calm the watchdog, then slip through tent ropes without a sound,  
To steal the she-camel the bull loves the most.*

—Shleiwiyh Al Atawwi

So remote were Kurpershoek's 1989 travels in Najd that for some Bedouins he was the first European they had ever met. Generations of pastoral life meant that while local features, tribal histories—and poetry—were known intimately, a place called Amsterdam was unheard of.

When asked where he came from, "I would explain using the Pole Star," he recalls. "The Bedouins measured things by *shaddah*. One shaddah was one day's march with the camels, which is about 30 to 40 kilometers a day, and I told them my tribe was 250 shaddah away following the Pole Star."

Kurpershoek soon realized the best time for poetry was after the late-afternoon prayers, and he began visiting his various hosts' *majalis*, or gatherings, at this time.

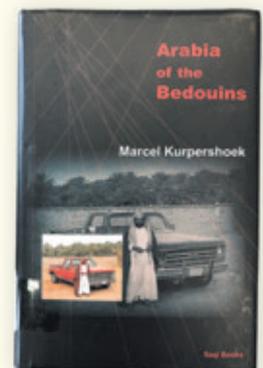
"The sand has a warm color, and you drink coffee and eat dates. It's a good time to talk about poetry and love stories," he says about his early days among the poets. Evening and night, it turned out, were "more for religious discussions."

Throughout the Najd it is customary for a poet to be invited to a majlis to recite verses, some original

*I wish he'd recall our days of old  
and how adorable he was as a toddler  
When I carried him at al Tallah gate  
in my arms, soiled clothes and all.  
When your children have grown up,  
it is best to keep to yourself.*

—Hmidan al-Shwe'ir

More than any of Kurpershoek's other books, *Arabia of the Bedouins*, his account of his 1989 fieldwork, translated from the original Dutch, remains his most popular title, both in the Arabian Peninsula and around the world.



Kurpershoek invested time and effort earning the trust of his many Bedouin hosts. Often before they would take the time to share poems with him, they would ask him detailed questions about the poetry, tribal relationships and history, waiting to be convinced that Kurpershoek's intentions were honest ones. **RIGHT** Arriving in the Empty Quarter in 1989 at a well called Litiit.



**FAR RIGHT** Al Dindan, renowned poet of Wadi al-Dawasir in the southern Najd, died in 1998.

and some remembered for generations. Unlike the Arab *hakawati*, or storyteller, most famous in the cafes of old Damascus, Nabati poets do not ask for money for their work. Of the many he met, Kurpershoek speaks with particular fondness of a poet named Al Dindan, who lived in Wadi al-Dawasir, along the southern edge of the Najd, near the great Empty Quarter. Kurpershoek was so moved by Al Dindan that he returned in 1994 just to write about him, and the two remained friendly until Al Dindan's death in 1998.

"Dindan was completely illiterate, and the last great poet," Kurpershoek says, adding that he was also

You shouldn't think, Zayd, that I lost interest;  
I am not one to forget my sweetheart's favors  
Deep inside, I treasure the story of our trysts  
and will forever, even when my hair is flecked with gray.  
If I see you walking in the street, my heart jumps  
like a man's who spots his missing camel.

—Abdullah ibn Sbayyl

a loner who, despite illness that left him barely able to walk, continued to create poems until his last. "He loved being with his camels, loved poetry, and he didn't care about anything else. He had his own camels, but he was hard up. People would help him by giving him sheep and some goats for his personal use, and a hut to live in. These things wouldn't become his property, but a 'thank you' for the poetry."

Al Dindan's verses, like so many of Nabati poets, as unabashedly earthy as they were, existed with Islam woven into the fabric of life. Dindan would often go up to a nearby mountain to compose his poetry,

## — NABATI POETRY —

No one knows where the word Nabati comes from, but it is widely understood as the bardic or lyrical poetry odes of Arab tribesmen. The words of poets past have been carried orally through the Najd, what is now Saudi Arabia's geographic center, for at least 1,500 years. Yet no one today knows what the poets of the past knew about

desert life from earlier centuries—a loss for mankind, Kurpershoek says. Modern Nabati poets, Kurpershoek says, "don't use camels anymore. They have electricity. No poet would know 20,000 verses by heart today like back then except some very old people. Because when you go to school, you lose that capacity."

To look for kind favors from misers  
is like fertilizing date palms during the harvest  
Or like boiling hoes to produce broth,  
milking billy goats instead of camel udders—  
Who ever heard of milk from testicles?

—Hmidan al-Shwe'ir

and he once told Kurpershoek he prayed for the poems he had just composed to be protected from unholy or wicked influences.

Over more than a decade, Kurpershoek transcribed the words of many of the most celebrated poets of the Najd, and their verses were published in his five-volume *Oral Poetry and Narratives from Central Arabia*. Since then, Kurpershoek has also produced two books on two renowned Najd poets who were not Bedouins, but rather village-dwellers enamored with Bedouin life. Hmidan al-Shwe'ir (*Arabian Satire*, 2017) was an 18th-century poet whose work is the most quoted in the Najd, not least because of its self-help qualities. Al-Shwe'ir was also satirically self-deprecating, often taking on the role of a downtrodden man disrespected by his family.

Poet Abdullah ibn Sbayyl (*Arabian Romantic*, 2018) died in 1933. He looked upon Bedouin life as the aristocratic way of the desert, one that he could only dream of reaching. His poetry offers some of the most passionate descriptions of the desert, including descriptions of Bedouin women who, in comparison to village women of Ibn Sbayyl's era, enjoyed more freedoms. (Kurpershoek's recorded poets were all male due to social restrictions on whom he could and could not meet.)

"Why would someone spend decades translating the poetry of an illiterate culture?" That, he explains, is the most common question he hears from skeptics, who often include Arabs from cities and towns throughout the Arabic-speaking world. Bedouins, he says, are often negatively stereotyped as "backward and uncouth rubes."

This is often how settled cultures with written literatures look at nomadic, oral cultures worldwide, he continues. "Bedouins are very cultured and have very strong unwritten rules and regulations," he says.

It was in Najd that classical Arabic poetry was born, Kurpershoek explains. "It's the pure Arabic," he says. Najd itself is larger than any other Arab country, and it has never been invaded. That is why the Bedouins of Najd, for their part, "look at the other Arabs as inferior, because their Arabic has been polluted by



In al-Zwaira, in the Wadi al-Dawasir region of southern Najd, poets of the Makharim tribe, Ibn Betla and Bkhitan, hosted Kurpershoek and recited for him. Kurpershoek later hosted Bkhitan in the Al-Arabiya television series *al-Rahhalat al-Akhir* (*The Last Traveler*). Bkhitan died in 2019.

These are the words of al-Mini'i, a tune welling up  
From a plentiful source to whose door I hold the key.  
As I bend my verses to fit meter and rhyme,  
They twist like water gushing from a spring in the sandy bed of a valley.  
I construct my verses to suit my own views and taste,  
With my tongue performing as pencil and my heart as its scroll.

—Ibn Betla



Poet Hissa Hilal, who won fame as one of the first female finalists on the televised Nabati contest *Million's Poet*, writes down a poem outside a traditional Bedouin tent that was set up for *al-Rahhalat al-Akhir* in 2016. Hilal spoke about poet Bakhut al-Murriyyah of the al-Murrah tribe, who was the first Bedouin woman to compose poetry on heavy motorized vehicles, beginning in the 1950s. It remains common for Bedouin women to drive off-road to go to pasture, collect water, firewood and the like. Al-Murriyyah used her experience metaphorically: "My heart groans like a Mack truck on a steep slope, the driver changing gear furiously."

mixing with other cultures," he says. European scholars of Arabic share part of the blame too for the long neglect of the oral poetry of the Bedouins in favor of the more conveniently studied written poetry of Arabs of towns and cities.

Kurpershoek recalls his own studies of Arabic at Leiden University in the early 1970s. Early in his coursework, he was introduced to what is regarded by Arab literary scholars as the fundamental poem of classical Arabic: the first of the *Mu'allaqat* (*Hanging Poems*), by Imru' Al Qays, a warrior and poet who lived in the sixth century CE.

"The first two lines of the poem are about locations, yet my professor, like other teachers, dismissed them as 'just some places in the desert.' But they are real places in the Najd that still exist."

Kurpershoek also points out that a great many words in Arabic are related to Bedouin life. "For example, the Arabic word for export, *tasdiir*, means 'going away from the well after drinking.' The word for import, *aistiraad*, means,

'going to the well to drink,'" he says.

Kurpershoek says, however, that while he may have been the first European some of the poets encountered, he is not the first to take a deep, preservation-oriented interest in recording Nabati poetry. Notably, Saudi anthropologist Saad Sowayan's long-time expertise in the cultures of the Najd have made him a celebrity in the kingdom. He was transcribing Nabati poetry in the 1970s. He often published Nabati poems in the Saudi newspapers that Kurpershoek, as the Dutch embassy's Arabic expert, read daily. Kurpershoek credits the newspapers with sparking his interest in Nabati poetic meters and vocabularies.

At the time Kurpershoek first read Nabati poems, Sowayan had already published a book of them. Not wanting to cover the same territory, and with admiration for Sowayan's work, Kurpershoek introduced himself. The two have been close friends ever since.

"He has taught me so much," Kurpershoek says, adding that these days, the two speak frequently on WhatsApp. "Saad was also questioning the way we look at this poetry, which existed more vibrantly than any other Arabic poetry but also got no recognition whatsoever because it was not written. People love it, they practice it, millions do. But it has no official status."

Sowayan's work focused on the poetry of the Bedouin tribes in the north of the Najd, while Kurpershoek explored the traditions of the central and southern Bedouin tribes, who tend to mix more with *hadaris* (oasis villagers). Kurpershoek still travels to the Najd for a month or two every year, and now the children of the poets he met on his first trip in 1989 often welcome him.

When they do, they greet him with the name *Mirsal*, which comes from the word *risala* (message), and his name thus means "one who carries a message." Kurpershoek's messages indeed were the poems with which he was entrusted to take home, transcribe, translate and share.

*O riders of camels like curved litter poles;*

*Gaunt animals and wasted, though not from any disease,*

*Won't you give a ride for someone crazed for longing for the Najd?*

—Mersa Al Atawwia

Philip Kennedy, the general editor at NYU Press's Library of Arabic Literature who oversaw publication of Kurpershoek's two translation books and is shepherding the third, says he has been deeply impressed with Kurpershoek's ability to learn both from Sowayan and his own long immersions.

"It is a miracle how much Marcel has achieved in so little time. It is a challenge to keep up with him," Kennedy says. "Marcel has the passion, energy and expertise to have produced a paragon of scholarly work, but [one] that is also available to the English-speaking world in a way that avoids the scholarly apparatus."

These days Kurpershoek works as a senior research fellow in oral traditions and poetry at New York University Abu Dhabi. He is also working on another book of translations, these from the 17th-century writer al-Majidi ibn Zahir, who is regarded as the oldest remembered poet of what is now the United

Arab Emirates. In recent years, Kurpershoek's work has marched in time with wider, popular-culture recognition of—and even enthusiasm for—Nabati poetry. In new contexts, unlike the segregated majlis settings in which Kurpershoek made his recordings, female poets are increasingly visible participants, including the top-rated televised poetry competition *Million's Poet*, broadcast from Abu Dhabi. This along with recent scholarship showing that women's Nabati poetry is its own deeply rooted oral tradition are all testimonies to the growing esteem the tradition enjoys. One of the episodes of Kurpershoek's own 2016 television series, his conversation on a sand dune with Saudi poet and *Million's Poet* finalist Hissa Hilal, has been viewed online more than 400,000 times.

But he also laments much of the new poetry. "The poets are talking more about social events and praising their leaders, not those fabulous detailed descriptions of desert life which don't exist anymore."

As you are on your way to visit the Khoran, salute them,  
With greetings as many as breezes stirring in the air,  
Men whose GMC trucks complain about being tested to the limit  
They are famous for their noble feats, as were their ancestors,  
Acts of chivalry so many that the pen can hardly write them down.

—Bkhitan Al Makharim

Social media too is helping keep the classics alive, Kurpershoek says. Saudi Arabia, he points out, has the highest penetration of social media of any country in the world. "I see that as an extension of the oral culture," he says. "No one in the past would go sit in the desert alone to read a book. You were with your family, or in the majlis and talking. Someone who was sitting alone reading books would be considered crazy. Everything happens in the majlis, and now we have an electronic majlis."

He tells a story about a recent discussion with some friends about passages he did not fully understand. "One was about a riddle of a 19th-century Bedouin poet, 'Adwan al-Hirbid, and they didn't know either. But one of them put it on his Twitter to probably thousands of others, and within half an hour we received the solution," Kurpershoek says. "As always with riddles, once you see the solution, you think, 'Why didn't I think of it myself?' But imagine doing research like that before: driving around and talking to people, so time-consuming, and chances are you'd never meet this person who had the answer. The only loss, perhaps bigger than the gain, is that while searching and driving around and meeting people, you learn so many other things you could never imagine when you set out, as I did."

Disputing his point, he adds with a smile, might be the herds of sheep in Najd, to whom he dedicates his one regret about his career's fieldwork. Meeting poet after poet at their homes and camps, attending recitations at majlis after majlis, "everywhere I went people would slaughter a sheep," he says. The dinner-time ritual was "part of that unwritten Bedouin code of hospitality to visitors that can be heard in the Nabati odes," he says. "A lot of sheep died in my honor." 🌐

In March 2018 an episode of Kurpershoek's Al Arabiya television series *Qamat al-Qasid (Monuments of Poetry)* about the early 18th-century poet Hmidan al-Shwe'ir featured comments from the poet's distant descendant Ahmad al-Shuway'ir, Ph.D., director of the library of the Holy Mosque in Makkah.



**Alia Yunis**, a writer and filmmaker based in Abu Dhabi, recently completed the documentary *The Golden Harvest*.



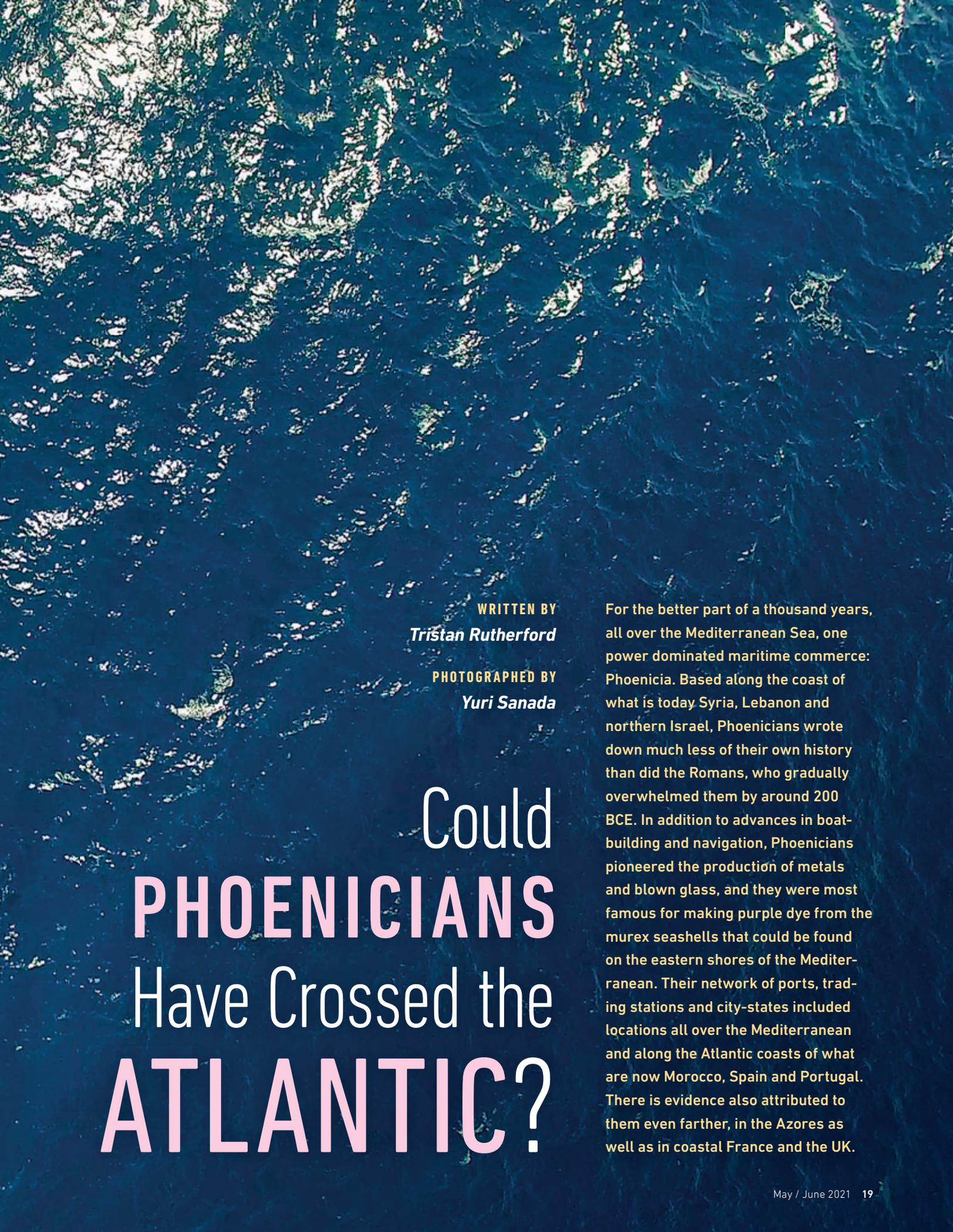
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WRITTEN BY  
*Tristan Rutherford*

PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
*Yuri Sanada*

# Could PHOENICIANS Have Crossed the ATLANTIC?

For the better part of a thousand years, all over the Mediterranean Sea, one power dominated maritime commerce: Phoenicia. Based along the coast of what is today Syria, Lebanon and northern Israel, Phoenicians wrote down much less of their own history than did the Romans, who gradually overwhelmed them by around 200 BCE. In addition to advances in boat-building and navigation, Phoenicians pioneered the production of metals and blown glass, and they were most famous for making purple dye from the murex seashells that could be found on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Their network of ports, trading stations and city-states included locations all over the Mediterranean and along the Atlantic coasts of what are now Morocco, Spain and Portugal. There is evidence also attributed to them even farther, in the Azores as well as in coastal France and the UK.



**ABOVE** Saw in hand, lead shipwright Khaled Hammoud shaped timbers for *Phoenicia* in Arwad, Syria, in 2007. The boat's design replicated that of the Phoenician merchant vessel, **RIGHT**, that archeologists named *Jules-Verne 7*. Discovered off the coast of France and now on display at the Musée d'Histoire de Marseille, the *Jules-Verne 7* was dated to 600 BCE, the period during which, according to Greek historian Herodotus, Phoenicians made their longest voyages. **PREVIOUS SPREAD** "Just a tiny ship moving through the waves," says photographer and filmmaker Yuri Sanada, who flew a drone camera to capture this image of *Phoenicia* under full sail.



In late 2019 a crew of 30 explorers, hailing from as far afield as Norway, Indonesia, Tunisia, the UK, US and Canada, set out to demonstrate that 1,000 years before the Vikings and some 2,000 years before Columbus, Phoenicians had the ability to also reach the Americas. The crew sailed a replica, single-mast Phoenician ship, built in Syria and captained by a Briton, while being filmed by a Brazilian of Lebanese descent. Braving sharks, storms, fickle winds and looming container ships, they docked *Phoenicia* in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, five months after departing Carthage, Tunisia, once the leading Phoenician port in the central Mediterranean.

The *Phoenicians Before Columbus Expedition* was captained by Philip Beale, who had already smashed a couple other historical, maritime presumptions. In 2003 the former Royal Navy sailor recreated an eighth-century-CE double outrigger based on a temple relief in Java, Indonesia. Sailing the "cinnamon route" from Southeast Asia to the Seychelles, Madagascar and mainland Africa, Beale's Borobudur Ship Expedition successfully challenged the idea that Europeans had been the preeminent explorers of the Indian Ocean. In 2008 he led *Phoenicia* on its two-year maiden voyage: a westward circumnavigation of Africa that corroborated Greek accounts of such voyages by Phoenicians.

Crossing from the Mediterranean to the Americas, Beale believes, would have posed little problem for Phoenician seafarers.

"Phoenician boats sailed easily from Tyre and Sidon," two leading Phoenician cities that produced murex purple dye, both now in modern Lebanon, to Gibraltar and Tangier, says Beale. "That 2,000-odd-mile voyage is about the same distance as across the Atlantic."

Beale points out that first-century-CE Greek historian Strabo estimated that beyond the Strait of Gibraltar, the Phoenicians had some 300 settlements along the Iberian and African coasts.

"Even if that figure was an exaggeration," Beale says, "that's a lot of contacts not to have sailed out into the Atlantic."

There also may also have been serendipity—or catastrophe—at work. Phoenician boats were square-rigged, which means they could sail only with the wind. By the time of Columbus, Europeans were rigging their boats with one or more types of triangular lateen sails, which had been developed by Arab mariners in the seventh century CE. The shape of the lateen sail allows it to act like an airfoil when it is turned at an angle toward the wind. Here is Beale's key point: "A modern yacht can sail 30 degrees into the wind," Beale says. "But on a 2,600-year-old boat, once you've been pushed out into the Atlantic, you

**Greek historian Strabo estimated Phoenician settlements on the African and Iberian coasts numbered 300.**



Twenty meters from bow to stern, with a single 15-meter mast and weighing some 45 metric tons, *Phoenicia* was built from Aleppo pine, Mediterranean oak, walnut, Mediterranean pine and Mediterranean cypress using handmade olivewood tenons and iron nails. Painting its name on the stern, **LEFT**, was among the final touches before setting sail.

was only one immediate way to test the hypothesis that Phoenicians too could have beaten Columbus: Sail a carbon copy of a 2,600-year-old Phoenician trading ship from the Mediterranean to the Americas.

That meant, first, locating a sufficiently intact Phoenician ship to replicate.

“We wanted one dated around the sixth century BCE,” explains Beale. That was when the historian Herodotus, also Greek, recorded the most far-reaching known Phoenician voyages, including those around Africa.

Beale’s network of contacts elicited a call from maritime expert Harry Tzalas of Greece.

“He started by saying, ‘We know about the *Jules Verne 7*,’” Beale says, a Phoenician trading vessel newly discovered in good condition on the seabed off Marseille in southern France. Beale

adds, still quoting Tzalas, “The wreck has not been published yet. But we can get you access.”

*Jules Verne 7* proved the perfect model, dating to exactly the period cited by Herodotus. Its planks had been dovetailed together using mortise-and-tenon joints made from olivewood pegs, a technique of joinery that was known by the Romans as a *coagmenta punicana* (Phoenician joint). It’s still used in

can’t come back” until the wind shifts. And amid the Atlantic, that can be a long time.

The captain also cites the relatively recent discovery of the Viking settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada, as evidence of other pre-Columbian voyages.

“The proof that the Vikings arrived about 1000 CE was only discovered in the 1960s,” says Beale, and it was backed up in 2016 by a replica voyage in a hand-built Viking longship from Norway to Newfoundland.

While settlement evidence supports Viking arrival in the Americas, to date archeologists have found no material evidence that points toward Phoenician landings. For Beale there

**“Building the ship in the ancient Phoenician way was a difficult task, but we were full of enthusiasm.”**

**—KHALED HAMMOUD**

shipbuilding and carpentry today. More importantly *Jules Verne 7* is “probably still the only Phoenician wreck that’s been excavated and lifted from that period,” says Beale, mentioning that Marseille served as a significant Phoenician trading center, along with Cádiz in Spain and Carthage, just north of Tunis in Tunisia.

They then had to find a shipyard that could recreate the vessel by hand. Beale’s growing team networked its way to the tiny island of Arwad, Syria’s only inhabited island. Phoenicians, Assyrians, Arabs and a half-dozen other civilizations have built up Arwad’s fortifications until every square centimeter was carpeted in stone. Here Beale met the softly spoken Khaled Hammoud, who descends from a generations-old boatbuilding family.

“It is considered a hereditary profession,” says Hammoud.

“If anyone could have done it before Columbus, it was the Phoenicians.”

—CAPTAIN PHILIP BEALE

“Building the ship in the ancient Phoenician way was a difficult task, but we were full of enthusiasm,” he says. “In Syria there is still the appropriate wood that was used to build Phoenician ships,” including Aleppo pine, cypress and cedar, as well as olivewood for the thousands of pegs that secured the planks.

His greatest modification converted the cargo hold, which might traditionally have been packed with more than 350 metric tons of incense, embroidery and other exports, into a galley and food storage area. Also in the hold, eight bunks would provide the sleeping quarters for up to 16 sailors on a watch/rest rotation. Modern additions were kept minimal, but they included a small outboard engine for emergency harbor access and large-ship avoidance, plus satellite Wi-Fi to update online followers and sponsors, advanced lifesaving gear and other modern telecommunications.

In 2008, crowds lined Arwad’s stone quays to cheer on the departure of the ship—with with her purple-striped, rectangular sail—as it embarked on her maiden voyage, around Africa. Eleven years later, in September 2019, the scene was similar as spectators, some in period costumes, and members of the heritage group Club Didon de Carthage joined Tunisian government ministers to wave off *Phoenicia* once more, this time as it set a westward course for the Dominican Republic, the country in



**LEFT** In late November, two days into what would become the 39-day sail from the Canary Islands to the Dominican Republic, Beale communicated with a passing catamaran regatta. **LOWER** Before sailing out from Carthage, Beale light heartedly donned a Carthaginian costume to join with local historical societies and dignitaries on September 29, 2019, to celebrate the beginning of the voyage to the Americas.



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE, LOWER (2): PHOENICIAN SHIP EXPEDITION



**TOP** Rocked on Atlantic swells, the crew had to repair two holes in the sail caused by strong winds and replace two ropes that had been snapped off the week before. **ABOVE LEFT** In October, just as Phoenician sailors might have done 2,600 years ago, the crew approached the Rock of Gibraltar under way to the former Phoenician port of Cádiz, Spain, where the crew paid a visit to the Museum of Cádiz, **ABOVE RIGHT**, and learned more about the city's Phoenician connections.



A single square sail caught the wind for *Phoenicia*, whose technology predated by about 1,000 years the development by Arab sailors, in the seventh century CE, of the triangular lateen sail, which revolutionized sailing by allowing boats to tack a course upwind.

which Columbus had first come to shore.

On board also was environmentalist, diver, film director and Explorer’s Club member Yuri Sanada, who came with his own Phoenician history: Along with 6 million fellow Brazilians, Sanada claims Lebanese descent.

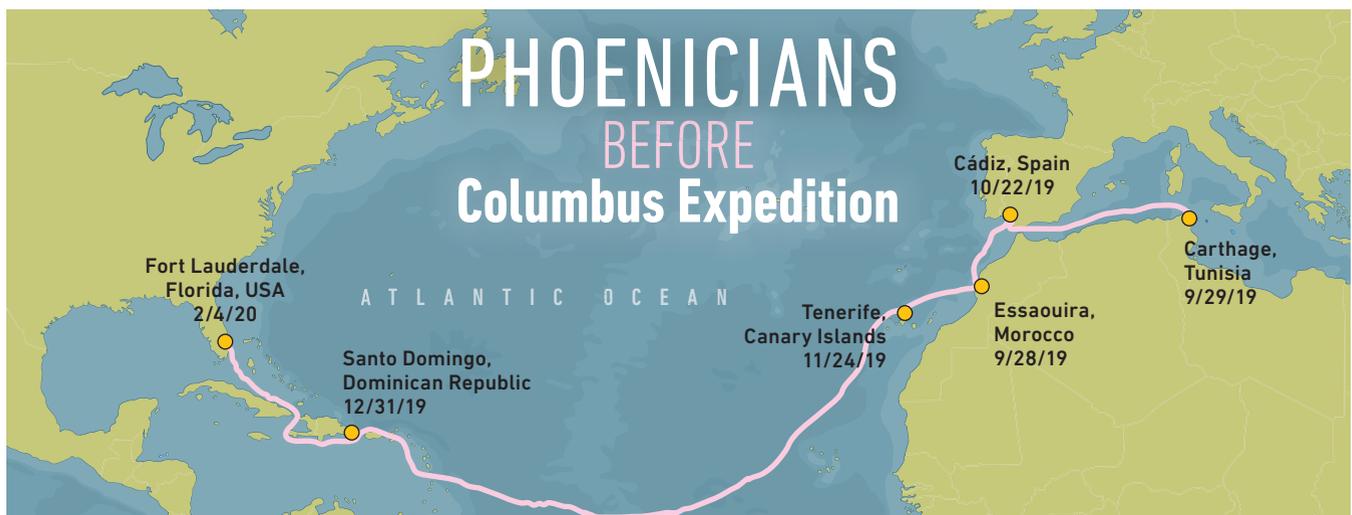
“My grandfather was from Bechara in the Mount Lebanon Range, where you have the cedar trees,” he explains.

Sanada had sailed on *Phoenicia*’s Africa voyage, and he was equally keen to understand whether early civilizations could also have sailed to his native hemisphere. He soaked in the many cultural connections in *Phoenicia*’s ports of call on the way, each place a part of the Phoenician trade network. Phoenicians were the first to bring olive oil to trading posts like Cádiz, as well as to Sicily, Malta and into the Black Sea. Everywhere they

went, Phoenicians had standardized the sizes of their amphora jars—the shipping containers of their day. Standardization added confidence to purchases ordered from other trading stations, as buyers could trust the quantity they paid for. In another seagoing first, the Phoenicians invented maritime insurance: If merchandise was lost at sea, other shipowners would contribute toward the shortfall. This encouraged more far-reaching, risky—and sometimes more rewarding—voyages.

For Sanada and the rest of the crew, life aboard *Phoenicia* was never dull.

“We had to fix something every day,” he says, remembering disembarking unexpectedly in Algeria for urgent repairs to the mast. The more treacherous jobs came out in the Atlantic, he recalls. After navigating by sail the Straits of Gibraltar, one of





Sunlight gilded choppy waters as *Phoenicia* crossed the 59th meridian west into the eastern Caribbean islands. Prevailing winds and ocean currents pushed the boat some 2,400 nautical miles from Tenerife on the longest and most-historically significant leg of the five-month voyage from Carthage.

the world's busiest shipping lanes, at one point in the journey Sanada—thanks to his diving experience—strapped on a mask and snorkel, secured himself to a lifeline and repaired the rudder under the waves.

Other days the sea was quiet and the days pleasant.

“With the ship becalmed, we’d often do some swimming,” he says. “Until somebody on deck saw a shark.”

Another port of call was at Essaouira on Morocco’s Atlantic Coast, where in centuries past Phoenicians had found another source of murex sea snails and set up a trading center to manufacture purple dye. Essaouira’s ruins may also have kept papyrus trading manifests written in Phoenician, the world’s first phonemic script and the first form of writing that would have been widely available to maritime merchants. Prior to the rise of the 22-letter Phoenician alphabet, writing involved clay tablets—not a particularly suitable medium for an essentially wet business—or hieroglyphs, whose numerous characters made them the script of elites, not merchants. Phoenician letters inspired both the Greek and Aramaic alphabets, as well as roots of both Hebrew and Arabic scripts.

*Phoenicia*’s final stop before crossing the

Atlantic came on the island of Tenerife in the Canary Islands. Here the Phoenicians had found more murex—so much that they nicknamed the archipelago the “Purple Isles,” and they left pottery behind.

The crew paid a visit there to Tenerife’s Thor Heyerdahl museum, named for the Norwegian explorer most famous for his 1947 Kon-Tiki expedition, in which he sailed a balsa log raft west from Peru to demonstrate that the ancestors of today’s Pacific Islanders could have crossed the world’s largest ocean centuries before Europeans arrived. The museum is in Tenerife because Heyerdahl studied the island’s own Pyramids of Güímar for possible links to both Egypt and Central America.

Firm evidence proved Heyerdahl’s theory seven decades after his expedition. In 2020 the scientific journal *Nature* published

results of studies showing that DNA of South Americans had been woven into that of communities on Easter Island and other Polynesian islands somewhere between 1150 CE and 1230 CE.

Similar genetic studies may also help add evidence to the Phoenician question, where some research has made claims of pre-Columbian links between people from the Levant and Cherokee tribes,

**“It was like a one-way ticket. You can only sail with the wind behind you. There was no turning back.”**

**—YURI SANADA**

which lived mostly in what are now the coastal states of North Carolina and Georgia.

The Canary Islands also served as the port of departure for Christopher Columbus, as well as countless Spanish ships that followed. For *Phoenicia*, Sanada explains, when they unfurled their square sail off Tenerife, “it was like a one-way ticket. You can only sail with the wind behind you. There was no turning back.”

And danger was ever-present.

“We had some close calls with big container vessels, which move at 20 knots,” explains Sanada. Even though *Phoenicia* was outfitted with electronics to automatically transmit location, direction and speed to ships in the vicinity, “*Phoenicia* is visually very small. Sometimes you are moving at 1 knot.”

Currents and favorable winds usually allowed the vessel to average around 4 knots, with an occasional run of 7 knots, “which was supersonic for us,” Sanada says.

One of his most memorable moments, he says, came in the mid-Atlantic when the crew spotted a pod of 20 pilot whales. Sanada donned his mask and jumped in to join them.

“I swam within 3 meters of one whale. It looked right into my eyes,” Sanada remembers.

As a filmmaker he would also circle his drone camera overhead and around the vessel.

“Just a tiny ship moving through the waves,” he says.

A larger and less visible danger provided *Phoenicia* with a secondary mission. As part of the expedition’s partnership with the United Nations Clean Sea Campaign, each afternoon Sanada reached below the waves to collect a seawater sample and seal it in a vial marked with date, time and location coordinates. The Unicamp University in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil, has offered to analyze the samples to track the levels of unrecycled microplastics at each point of the *Phoenicia*’s uniquely slow voyage.

On December 31, 2019, around 2,500 nautical miles and 39 days from Tenerife, the purple-striped sail of *Phoenicia* reached Santo Domingo harbor in the Dominican Republic. (Columbus took 36 days.) The ship’s log notes that Santo Domingo’s Lebanese-Syrio-Palestino Club welcomed and

Representing seven nations from Indonesia to Norway, the boat’s transatlantic crew struck a midocean pose. To keep *Phoenicia* on course day and night, the crew worked and slept in shifts.



## Phoenicia CIRCUMNAVIGATES AFRICA

The Greek historian Herodotus, writing 150 years after the event, described how Phoenicians circumnavigated Africa in 600 BCE, 2,100 years before Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama’s voyage in 1497. It was to show the Phoenician capability to do just as Herodotus noted that Captain Philip Beale originally had *Phoenicia* built and in 2008 organized its first endeavor, which lasted two years.

The ship set out through the Suez Canal, which in Phoenician times connected the Mediterranean and Red seas with a rudimentary waterway backed by a portage trail, and *Phoenicia* went on to call at ports in 14 countries. Along the way, Beale and the crew ran dangerously low on food while having to sail far into the Indian Ocean to dodge Somali pirates. In the Mozambique Channel, treacherous currents threatened to rip planks from the hull. Seasickness struck several of the crew. The winds around the Cape of Good Hope are hard on any sail, let alone a square-rigged one.

Atlantic currents pushed the replica vessel to nearly midocean, to within 650 kilometers of South America—close enough to add fuel to the question Beale put in his book about the voyage, *Sailing Close to the Wind* (Lulworth Press, 2012): “Had the Phoenicians reached the Americas 2,000 years before Christopher Columbus?”



On December 31 *Phoenicia* arrived in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, where the crew was congratulated by the Dominican Republic Naval Club and the Lebanese-Syrio-Palestino Club. On February 4 the boat tied up at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where it awaits installation as a museum exhibit.

entertained the elated, exhausted crew. The *Phoenicia* sailed on to round Cuba, and on February 4, 2020, the crew docked it in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where the boat awaits a permanent berth as part of a museum.

The question of Phoenician technical capability of reaching the Americas was no longer just a theory.

That leaves the question of evidence.

Archeologist Naseem Raad of the American University of Beirut uses archeology and marine science to understand human interaction with the sea. He is skeptical.

Raad points out that Phoenicia's trading settlements in Spain and Northwest Africa generally include "evidence of shelter, pottery, a place to bury the dead, religious spaces," and the like. No Phoenician evidence has been found anywhere in the Americas.

"There is evidence that Phoenicians did in fact make open-sea voyages and did not just hug coastlines," he offers, adding that other types of Phoenician ships carried oars in case the winds died. This could be of help in areas like the Doldrums, the windless mid-Atlantic zone where sailing ships can remain becalmed for weeks.

For Raad the problem is motive.

"A transatlantic voyage doesn't make sense financially," he says.

The Phoenicians were commercially skilled sailors who "tried to maximize their cargo load. To have a large crew and extensive supplies for such a daunting journey would eat up space."

Beale disagrees.

"I'm not saying there was a huge influence of the Phoenicians in the Americas, because there wasn't," he says. That's because Phoenicians were sea traders, not colonizers like the Romans or

the Spanish. Thus material evidence would be scant. In his opinion, that their brief visits did not result in stone temples or port constructions is about as important as the US landing on the Moon and not building a permanent base.

Sanada has a theory too.

"If Phoenicians arrived and found gold, the last thing they would do is shout about it," he says. Instead, "they would spread rumors about sea monsters who would destroy your ship."

The crew and ship of the Phoenicians Before Columbus Expedition showed that a transatlantic voyage was resolutely possible for Phoenicians. For now that is enough to add to an enduring historical question.

"If our volunteer crew could sail there, it would have been a walk in the park for the Phoenicians," Sanada says. 🌐



**Tristan Rutherford** is a travel and yachting writer and winner of six journalism awards. He hopes soon to return to one of his favorite work hacks: chartering bareboat yachts in the Aegean so he can swim after completing his day's writing on board. In the meantime, he continues to live in rural England. Environmentalist, filmmaker, television host and diving instructor **Yuri Sanada** is cofounder of Earth Odyssey and a Fellow Member of the Explorer's Club. He lives near São Paulo, Brazil, in a self-built, environmentally sustainable home.



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# *The* SCULPTURE *of* Skateparks

Written by  
BRIAN E. CLARK

Photographs courtesy of  
AMIR ZAKI

When Amir Zaki looks at a skate park, he sees more than a place to do tricks. He sees a geography in concrete, a landscape of hummocks, valleys, cornices, bowls, twisting riverbeds and waves.

“Now I go as an artist,” says the 46-year-old Zaki, who has skateboarded on and off over the course of his life and is now a professor of photography and digital technology at the University of California, Riverside.

Zaki’s ample body of work has been shown in museums and galleries throughout the US West Coast as well as New York and Atlanta, and abroad in Australia, China and Indonesia. Many of

“I’m a deeply curious person who loves to learn about different philosophical ideas coming from all over the world,” says Amir Zaki. As a kid with a skateboard in suburban Los Angeles, however, the early, pool-shaped skateparks were “sort of scary,” he says. “I was intimidated by the older kids who were better.”







his shots transform everyday landscape objects—houses, vehicles, towers, rocks, bushes, trees or what have you—into carefully observed, often austere, graphic compositions.

His 2019 book, *California Concrete: A Landscape of Skateparks*, looks into a world largely unknown to nonskaters and, because skateparks are created below ground level, often invisible to them. And in the skateboarding world, Zaki's images are unique for their focus on the empty, curvaceous, weathered concrete canvases upon which skaters carve their expressive, ephemeral lines.

His images contrast sharply with the action-oriented skateboard photography that helped popularize the sport in the 1970s and 1980s. Like the sport, it was imagery that came out of the visual depictions of surfing: rugged renegades adapting streets, sidewalks, handrails, plazas and pools into stunt arenas on days when they couldn't go surfing. Popularized by magazines such as *Thrasher*, the most iconic action shots—famously from photographers Craig Stecyk, Hugh Holland

and J. Grant Brittain, among others—focused on lone skaters, often shirtless, sometimes barefoot, almost always sun bleached.

Zaki's focus on the forms of the skateparks themselves has won him admiration in the fine-art world. Virginia Heckert, curator of photography at The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, says that when she first saw his skatepark images, she was drawn to the "sweeping, brutalist forms of the concrete skateparks that have an almost meditative quality."

It all started, Zaki recalls, with growing up in the 1980s in the "boring" Southern California town of Beaumont, on the eastern fringe of Los Angeles. Before becoming a camera enthusiast, he and his

friends took to zipping around the wide, smooth streets and catching air off plywood backyard ramps.

"Skating was a big part of the culture and our identity," says Zaki. His parents, he says, accepted it—as they did his decision later to pursue an art career. His late father, a plant pathologist and a Muslim, had come to the US from Alexandria, Egypt, and he met his mother, an educator and a Catholic, in Minnesota.

"Perhaps my dad—who became a teacher himself—would have liked me to study science, but mostly they wanted me to do what made me happy," Zaki says. "I grew up a freethinker with parents who were the most open-minded people I could imagine," he says.

A trip to Egypt at age 11 with his father had a particular impact, he says, on how he viewed the world. "I learned that there was much more than my suburban neighborhood. And my father's family was so welcoming and caring, especially the grandfather I'd only met once," he says. "I also learned humility by going someplace where you don't understand the language.

His images  
contrast with  
action-oriented  
skateboard  
photography.



I learned patience for people who didn't speak English, and that's carried over to my career as a teacher."

This kind of openness, it turned out, was also part of skateboard culture, where all you needed was a board to be accepted.

Yet Zaki never went to a skatepark. "They were sort of scary," he says. "The closest skatepark was in Upland, 45 miles away. I never even went because I was intimidated by the older kids there, who were way better."

In the 1980s and 1990s, the first skateparks were based on bowls, much like the empty backyard pools that, during the 1970s California drought, became the domains of early skateboarders. These first parks had fast transitions between flat bottoms and high, steep walls. Nowadays skateparks are complex, layered and infused with dimension and texture. This can be seen in Zaki's photographs,

which capture parks that have become increasingly elaborate as skateboarding has evolved toward ever-greater athleticism and technical difficulty. Now they are subterranean wonderlands of deep pools accompanied by quarter pipes, half and full pipes, handrails, snake runs, ramps, pyramids, boxes and rail slides. Each one is a unique, complex topography.

It was only after 1998, Zaki explains, that skatepark building took off. That was when California passed legislation declaring skateboarding a "hazardous recreational activity." Those words freed municipalities from liability for injuries a skater might sustain in a publicly owned skatepark. As a result, there are now an estimated 450 skateparks in the state and hundreds more worldwide, all serving as both athletic and social hubs.

Aaron Spohn, 60, is founder of Los Angeles-based Spohn Ranch Skateparks,

which over three decades has built more than 1,000 skateparks around the world. "The dynamic nature of skateboarding inspires artistic shapes that can look like standing waves or canyons or undulating riverbeds," says Spohn, who gathers input from local skaters for his designs. "Then beyond the sculptural aspect, we can add texture with brick or granite or marble to create a truly architectural space."

After Zaki earned a master's degree in fine arts from the University of California, Los Angeles, he married and had two children. It was around then, in his early 30s while living in North Hollywood, that he was drawn to photographing a skatepark near his home. Dawn, when the shadows were long and he could be alone and unconcerned about being run over by younger versions of himself, turned out to be a beautiful time to visit.

"Early in the morning was when I



could get down inside the skateparks, and that made the biggest difference in the kind of art I was able to achieve,” he says.

Some of his photographic influences, he says, have come from contemporary landscape photographers including German duo Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose photographs turn industrial constructions like water towers, warehouses or gas storage spheres into a kind of functionalist art; Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, famous for vast, luminous, minimalist black-and-white seascapes; pop and conceptual artist Ed Ruscha, who grew up in the Midwest and photographed for decades in California, and photographer Lewis Baltz, known for his formalist interpretations of suburbia and light-industrial constructions.

“I’m super interested in architecture

and how different parts of the landscape are used in contemporary times,” Zaki says. “I look at buildings, and even life-guard towers, as being sculptural.”

And in the skateparks, Zaki brought his own experience to the lens.

**“Amir does a really nice job of showcasing the unique character of a skatepark landscape. It can look brutalist, elegant, and otherworldly all at the same time.”**

**—Jaxon Statzell, lead designer, CA Skateparks**

“I was also photographing the skateparks as a skateboarder,” he says, “so I have a bodily, visceral reaction to those forms. ... I know what it feels like to move through that space with my body.”

When he finds the right spot, he explains, he sets up his robotic tripod, which he has calibrated to shoot what will become a photo in 25 to 70 sections. When Zaki downloads the images, they are arranged so he can digitally stitch them into a huge file that can be enlarged to several meters without losing resolution. “You start in the top left corner of the scene, and the camera takes a series of photos in rows and columns over a number of minutes,” he explains.

Early in the project, he noticed that while the camera was shooting, birds would often fly into one or more of the



frames. “I liked the results,” he says. “Ultimately, I decided that every series with sky would have birds in it. Some were flying through space in the actual photos, and others were imported later.”

His images also caught the eye of Tony Hawk, who is arguably the world’s most accomplished skateboarder, a pioneer of the sport and one of its most prominent advocates. Hawk wrote the introduction to *Concrete California*, stating that when he first saw Zaki’s photographs of the vacant skateparks and skies punctuated by birds in flight, he recalled the “initial idyllic sense of freedom” that first drew him to the skateboard in the 1970s, back when “we wanted to fly.”

“I’ve been skating now for several decades, and so whenever I visit a skatepark for the first time, I analyze it in a much

more sophisticated and technical way than I did as a kid. But that original feeling has remained the same,” Hawk wrote.

Today, Zaki says he has made a point to return to Egypt with his own children, too, even after his father passed in 2012. “But my identity is a conglomeration of ideas and values, not a geographical location or ethnic label,” he says.

It was while traveling to Egypt in 2016 that Zaki learned of the White Desert, famous for its natural, dramatically wind-eroded rock formations. He hopes to photograph it one day, perhaps for a future project.

Back in California, Zaki remains drawn to the skateparks. He doesn’t mention a favorite, but he muses that one day he might like to design one. It would, he says, be one that captures the light of dawn just right. 🌍



Writer and photographer **Brian E. Clark** is a columnist for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* who also contributes to publications including the *Los Angeles Times*. He lives in Madison, Wisconsin.



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Written by **JEFF KOEHLER**

Art by **LINDA DALAL SAWAYA**

**Three kilometers long and less than one wide, the island of Pulau Rhun is so tiny, says Indonesian photojournalist Muhammed Fadli, that it doesn't even appear on many older maps.**

**R**inged by reefs rough enough to shatter a ship, the volcanic atoll is the smallest and most isolated of the 11 Banda Islands, which cluster loosely amid the more numerous islands of the Indonesian province of Maluku (Moluccas). Collectively the Maluku Islands became known in the West as the Spice Islands, a maritime trading zone blessed with—and exploited for—its endemic, uniquely aromatic plants. In the Bandas, this mainly meant mace and nutmeg. And in Palau Rhun in particular, this led to a curious kinship with a very distant American island whose fortunes turned out very differently.

People in the Bandas today descend from traders, laborers and slaves who came to the islands both willingly and not, mostly from Mainland and Maritime Southeast Asia. Bandanese

today refer to their islands as *tanah banda* (land of Banda) and *tanah berket* (blessed land). Legend has it that Banda islanders were the first in the Indonesian archipelago to become Muslims. In a report written in 1512, Portuguese pharmacologist Tomé Pires noted, “It is thirty years since they began to be Moors.”

Islam had come with sailors who had come looking to buy what Rizal (“Abba”) Bahalwan, owner of the hotel and restaurant Cilu Bintang Estate on Banda Neira, the largest of the Banda Islands, describes as the fragrant seeds of the yellow-orange fruit of the tall, willowy nutmeg trees, with their laurel-like leaves and bell-shaped flowers.

Bandanese, he says, refer to nutmeg as *pala*, a word derived from the Malayalam *pāl* and generally applied to many plants



with a milky sap. Harvests of nutmeg come twice a year. Harvest workers use a *gai pala* (nutmeg picker), a wicker basket on the end of a long bamboo pole, to pull down the fruit that is, botanically speaking, a drupe. They then slice away the outer protective shell to reveal a glossy, dark-brown nugget wrapped in a *bumapala*, a saffron-red aril, or net-like caul: mace. It gets peeled away, dried, ground and sold as a separate spice.

The seed is the nutmeg.

“Nutmeg takes about a week and a half to dry, and the inner nut rattles,” says Bahalwan, a descendant of Arab spice traders who settled in Banda in the 17th century.

That was some 600 years after Arab traders first began taking pala to markets in China and Europe. They dominated the nutmeg trade during the Middle Ages, and though they guarded the location of their source, even by 1000 CE the polymath Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna), who came from Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan, identified nutmeg as *jansi ban*—“Banda nut.”

It was leaders called *orang kaya* who consolidated the nutmeg market and established commercial solidarity in the Bandas, which allowed the Bandanese to trade freely, Fadli says.

“The unique flavor of the Banda nutmeg comes from volcanic soil, sea breezes and plenty of rain,” says Bahalwan, who began working as a tourist guide at 15 years old in 1989. After attending the University of Pattimura on nearby Ambon Island, he returned to the Bandas, and in 2005 he opened his first guesthouse.

As nutmeg’s botanical name *Myristica fragrans* indicates, the spice is deeply, even profoundly aromatic. Arabic speakers refer to it as *al-jouz al-tib* (the fragrant nut). Nawal Nasrallah, food historian and author of the 2011 *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine*, describes nutmeg as having “a warm scent, pleasantly rich and woody in a very subtle way, and homey. It is inviting and does not overwhelm the senses.” Mace, she says, is “more playful, lighter, more feminine in nature, kind of addictive.”

As they did with many other spices, nutmeg’s earliest consumers often sought it out less for cooking than for medicine. Arab physicians initially promoted nutmeg as a curative-preventive aid against digestive issues and liver problems, freckles and skin blotches. In his highly regarded *Al-Qanun fi al-Tib (The Canon of Medicine, 1025 CE)*, Ibn Sina recommended “three-eighths of a dram of nutmeg with a small quantity of quince-juice” for “weakness of the stomach,” and he included nutmeg in a potent anesthetic concoction.

Nutmeg found its way into kitchens, Nasrallah maintains, during Baghdad’s “Golden Era” of the five-century Abbasid caliphate, from 750 CE to 1258 CE. As metropolitan Baghdad became the world’s marketplace, so too did Arab cuisine flourish. “They had the means to experiment with all kinds of imported spices, including nutmeg,” she says.

Yet cooks continued to keep an eye on nutmeg’s health benefits. “From the extant medieval cookbooks we have, we can see that it was used more often in foods and preparations that were more medically oriented,” says Nasrallah by email. For example, in *Kitab al-Tabikh*, written in the 10th century CE in Baghdad by Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq and translated in 2010 by Nasrallah as *Annals of the Caliphs’ Kitchens*, “its usage with savory dishes is very limited, once in a sandwich preparation and a chicken dish. The rest are all foods and drinks made for their medicinal benefits, such as digestives, drinks, jams, etc., and hand-cleansing preparations.”



## Aromatic Pumpkin Soup

Originally native to Mexico, pumpkins made their way to China in the 16th century, and from there traders imported them to many places, including the Banda Islands, prior to the arrival of the Dutch. Large and easy to grow in many climates, pumpkin is a popular ingredient in Banda Island kitchens. This simple soup adapted from the menu of Cilu Bintang Estate on the island of Banda Neira showcases how nutmeg can transform a dish in surprising ways.

Serves: 4–6

1.5 kilograms / 3.25 pounds pumpkin, butternut, acorn or other firm- fleshed, hard- skinned squash	½ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg	¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
	1 teaspoon sea salt	mace, to garnish
	ground white pepper	finely chopped celery leaves, to garnish

Peel pumpkin. Halve lengthwise. Remove seeds and discard. Cut pumpkin into pieces 1.5- to 2-centimeter (¾-inch) pieces.

In a large saucepan, cover the pumpkin pieces with 500 milliliters (2 cups) of water, place a lid on the pan and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to cook until the pumpkin is tender, 20–30 minutes. Uncover and let cool for 10 minutes, stirring from time to time.

Working in batches as necessary, transfer the mixture to a blender or food processor and blend until smooth. Return to the pan, and stir in the nutmeg, cinnamon, salt and white pepper to taste. Bring back to a simmer and gently simmer for 10 minutes.

Divide among soup bowls, garnish with mace and some celery and serve.

The Bandanese, long established as boatbuilders and mariners, controlled their mercantile interests through their orang kaya, who also sent crews to set up shop in spice markets as far as Melaka, some 2,000 kilometers away. From the early 15th century, the sultanate in Melaka developed the most extensive trade network the region had known. It was through active exporting by the Bandanese at the port in Melaka that nutmeg became a global commodity. According to maritime historian Chin-keong Ng, “islanders from Banda would row their boats laden with spices to cover the long distance.”

Despite global demand, nutmeg trees on the island remained largely inaccessible to all but those whom the Bandanese allowed to drop anchor. Others they drove off, including the first Portuguese, who showed up in 1511, the same year the Portuguese took control of Melaka. For several decades the Portuguese had to settle on sporadic visits to the Bandas and purchases from Bandanese coming to Melaka.

Nearly a century later, in 1599, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC, or Dutch East India Company) muscled its way into the region. The Bandanese initially received the Dutch as potential allies against Portuguese encroachments, but they soon discovered that the Dutch were a far more powerful adversary. The Bandanese endured a Dutch campaign of deportations, executions and enslavement that came to a head in 1621 when the Dutch slew more than an estimated 90 percent of the population.

“It is hard to pin down the real number, because there are almost no records,” says Fadli, “but from approximately 15,000, only 1,000 or so survived.” This year, after a four-year collaboration with the Indonesian journalist Fatris MF, Fadli published a documentary project called *The Banda Journal* on the 400th anniversary of the massacre.

The Dutch took control of all the Bandas except isolated Pulau Rhun, which the English had taken. The VOC resettled the Bandas with settlers, slaves, convicts and indentured laborers from other parts of Indonesia and even India, thus seeding a new society in what became an agricultural colony of nutmeg plantations. Dutch attempts to transplant it outside the islands met with failure.

It was under these circumstances that Pulau Rhun became a powerful pawn in the Dutch-English rivalry over colonial resources, which erupted into war four times. The second of these conflicts settled in 1667 by the Treaty of Breda, named for a city in the Netherlands. Under Breda’s terms, England ceded Pulau Rhun, which gave the VOC a monopoly in the Bandas. In exchange, the Netherlands ceded a slightly larger, wooded island in North America that went by the Lenape name of Manhattan. The English gave a new name to Manhattan’s Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam: New York.

Back then, says Fadli, “no one would have imagined New Amsterdam would become this economic powerhouse. And if you see Rhun Island,” it is “really a backwater.” For Palau Rhun’s 2,000 people, electricity only runs a few hours in the evening, fresh water can be scarce, and many services basic to life on the other Bandas remain out of reach.

In 1667, however, the Dutch appeared to have come out with the better deal, and within a few years they were selling nutmeg at a 60,000-percent markup. Speaking by video call from his home in Jakarta, Fadli emphasizes that for the Bandanese, “it was misery.”

The Dutch monopoly was broken in 1772 by a Frenchman who smuggled nutmeg seedlings to Mauritius and produced the first successful transplant. English incursions to the Bandas during the Napoleonic Wars also allowed them the chance to grab seedlings and transplant them to colonial centers in Penang, now part of Malaysia, and Sumatra, Indonesia, as well as in Sri Lanka, off the coast of India.

Today Indonesia is the largest nutmeg producer in the world, but it is grown largely on the islands of Java, North Sumatra and Sulawesi. Of the 44,000 or so metric tons that Indonesia produces annually, according to Bahalwan only 372 metric tons—less than 1 percent—is grown in the Bandas. And although Palau Rhun’s contribution to that is only 50 metric tons, he says, the terms of trade are better than at any time in 500 years.

After gaining independence from the Netherlands in 1949, the Indonesian government nationalized nutmeg plantations in the Bandas. In 1982 residents of Pulau Rhun took over the state-owned enterprise and divided the groves among the island’s families. Each now sells to a collective, which in turn sells to a range of global wholesalers.

“Everything is back in locals’ hands,” says Fadli.

Rhun may not have an internet connection, and its electricity may be spotty, but the nutmeg growers can once again trade as they themselves choose. 🌐



**Jeff Koehler** is a James Beard and IACP award-winning author and cook. His most recent books are *Where the Wild Coffee Grows* and *Darjeeling: A History of the World’s Greatest Tea*. His writing has appeared in the *Washington Post*, NPR.org, *Wall Street Journal*, *Saveur*, *Food & Wine*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *South China Morning Post* and many other publications. Follow him on Instagram @jeff\_koehler. **Linda Dalal Sawaya** (www.lindasawayaya.com; @lindasawayayaART) is a Lebanese American artist, illustrator, ceramicist, writer, teacher, gardener and cook in Portland, Oregon. Her 1997 cover story, “Memories of a Lebanese Garden,” highlighted her illustrated cookbook tribute to her mother, *Alice’s Kitchen: Traditional Lebanese Cooking*. She exhibits regularly throughout the US, and she is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists*.



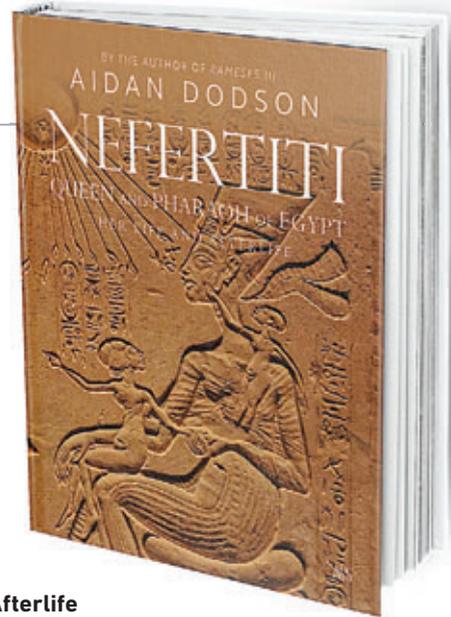


# REVIEWS

Without endorsing the views of authors, the editors encourage reading as a path to greater understanding.

**“This book is thus intended not only to explore what we can reconstruct of the life of Nefertiti, but also to trace the way in which she and her image emerged.”**

—AIDAN DODSON

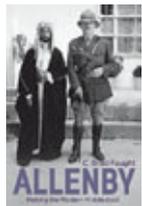


### **Nefertiti, Queen and Pharaoh of Egypt: Her Life and Afterlife**

Aidan Dodson. 2020, AUC Press, 978-9-77416-990-8, \$35 hb.

The unearthing of Nefertiti’s 3,000-year-old bust in 1912 captivated millions and helped cement her iconic status in popular imagination. Now Aidan Dodson, an Honorary Professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo (AUC), has set out to contextualize the New Kingdom pharaoh. Dodson goes beyond prior scholarship by meticulously chronicling her life and offering up new theories about her origins and significance, breaking down iconographic evidence etched in stele, tombs and other artifacts to reveal her parentage, relationships, roles and titles. His conclusions challenge the reader to view her as far more than “the shadow of her husband” Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, beyond even a royal wife and mother, or even a king’s queen: Nefertiti was a warrior, Neferneferuaten, “a fully fledged female king,” Dodson writes. In assessing her life and drawing out her connections to the historic memory of Egypt, Dodson illuminates a human—and powerful—Nefertiti, “beyond being simply a name” or a face, however famous it may be.

—ALVA ROBINSON



### **Allenby: Making the Modern Middle East**

C. Brad Faught. 2020, I.B.Tauris, 978-1-35013-647-2, \$24.26 pb.

This book presents an exquisitely

thorough biography of Edmund Allenby (1861–1936), the British military and diplomatic leader of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Recounting Allenby’s life, Faught gives us a window into the geopolitical, colonial strife of the time, including the run-up to Allenby’s conquest of Palestine in 1917 and eventual installation as Governor of Egypt in 1919. *Allenby* confirms the crucial role of biography in gaining insight into the challenges of today’s Middle East. Faught is a history professor at Toronto’s Tyndale University, and this book is just the latest in his exploration of the lives and influence of major European players in the region. The book compacts a lot of information with rich detail into its pages. Settle in for a very insightful historical recounting of the life of one of the major figures in the making of today’s Middle East. This is a history lover’s dream of a book.

—RUTH NASRULLAH



### **Coconut and Sambal: Recipes From My Indonesian Kitchen**

Lara Lee. 2020, Bloomsbury Publishing, 978-1-

52660-351-7, £26.00 hb.

Food writer and chef Lara Lee shows that with more than 17,000 islands and hundreds of spoken languages and ethnic groups, Indonesia is as vast and diverse as the culinary traditions it boasts. Lee grew up in Australia and moved to London, from where she set off on a culinary journey across Indonesia to trace the flavors that marked her childhood. Between the tantalizing introduction and the glossary of key ingredients, Lee offers more than 80 authentic recipes: from classics (beef rendang) and regional favorites (Timorese fish soup) to specialties of her Indonesian grandmother Popo (fried spicy soft-boiled eggs). The sambal of the title is the country’s ubiquitous chile-based relish. No meal is complete without some sambal, and Lee includes 10 versions, from tomato sambal to one with green chilies and salted anchovies. The engaging book will send you immediately into the kitchen.

—JEFF KOEHLER



### **Traces: A Memoir**

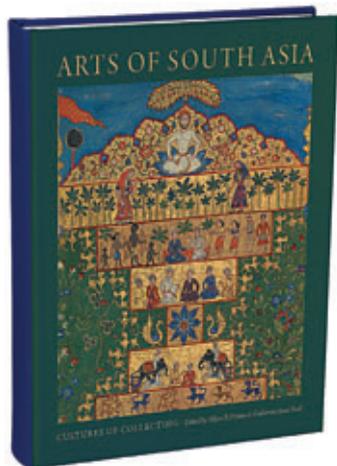
Gamal al-Ghitani, tr. 2020, AUC Press, 978-9-77416-953-3, \$25 pb.

In his 60th year, in 2005, the renowned

Egyptian author of more than a dozen novels, winner of state and international awards, recounted his life through passages of fleeting thoughts, emotions and disjointed memories. Originally written in Arabic, his sensitive pondering of life, melancholic probing of the past and existential questions are now available in English. It’s an invitation into his mind, with even the shortest instances of experience and thought recorded. Al-Ghitani, who passed away in 2015, brings to life his childhood neighborhood in Old Cairo, his favorite food vendors and explores his and his father’s parenting. *Traces* seems to transcend temporality and physicality, as al-Ghitani switches between reality, thoughts and dreams, often only hinting at locations and era. But al-Ghitani masterfully weaves his life’s vignettes together with a dream-like quality, making the memoir a pleasure to be swept up in.

—MAE GHALWASH

# AUTHOR'S CORNER



## Why Collectors Matter: A Conversation with *Arts of South Asia's* Coeditors

by LEE LAWRENCE

In *Arts of South Asia: Cultures of Collecting*, coeditors Allysa B. Peyton and Katherine Ann Paul draw us into the personal, institutional and political dynamics surrounding objects that have journeyed from South Asia—India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Bhutan—to museums abroad and, in one case, undergone repatriation. We learn how individuals and some of the many women donors of Newark Museum in New Jersey acquired works; how collectors and curators interpreted and exhibited them; and how, in a few instances, institutions returned them to their country of origin. We also meet a lively mix of collectors, from towering figures like Ananda Coomaraswamy and Chester Beatty to British civil servants and American missionaries. Whether works are carved doors, Mughal paintings, bidriware from South Central India or statuary from Hindu temples, their stories address universal questions of representation and ownership. And the timespan of these case studies—from the early 1800s to the 2010s—highlights the changes in attitudes and values. Peyton and Paul, recently sat down with *AramcoWorld* to explain more about their book and why they chose to lean in on South Asia.



Allysa B. Peyton

### Tell me why you both chose to examine collectors of South Asian art?

**Peyton:** We refer to the imprint individual collectors have on our institutions.

**Paul:** In Hyder Abbas's essay, for example, Chester Beatty is negotiating with British Museum and V&A curators, essentially divvying up certain "great works" and developing a canon that prized Mughal painting over other kinds of painting from South Asia.



Katherine Anne Paul

**Peyton:** There's Hugh Nevill in Shushma Jansary's essay: He's a botanist, an insect-lover, and he's collecting everything! So, the Nevill Collection at the British Museum has things formerly termed folk art. They were marginalized but now, for the first time, they've been properly photographed and published.

**Paul:** There's a feedback loop that once you create an authoritative volume, its images become the masterworks. That's why we were so careful to include images that were not just ones people were used to seeing. We wanted to add to, not underscore, existing masterpiece narratives.

### Was Mughal painting popular with early collectors? Why is that significant?

**Paul:** With palm-leaf manuscripts, you had to wrap your head around their being long and not bound—but illustrated Shahnamahs or Hamzanamas were akin to medieval manuscripts. Even seeing Arabic on the page was familiar from the Nasrids in Spain.

**Peyton:** Mughal painting had imperial patronage, too. You have studios bringing in regional artists who learn from each other. I think that, too, helped set the taste standard for several centuries.

**Paul:** The fact that Mughal paintings occur in a number of the book's essays demonstrates how they're woven into a greater tapestry of South Asian arts—it is useful to recognize this in these times of polarization globally.

### How is recent scholarship shaping exhibition strategies?

**Paul:** Music and dance are inextricable from, say, a carving in the South Asian context, and in the diaspora the gathering is valued so much more than having beautiful items in a gallery, inactivated. So, Gauri Krishnan's essay talks about bringing in intangible cultural environments. That's the direction in which things have to continue to go.

### What does that mean for Islamic art?

**Peyton:** Bringing in poetry, music, dance, video, maybe smells—

**Paul:** —the alliteration and cadence of Farsi poetry or excerpts from the Qur'an to provide an aural addition. I've now seen where they will have the call to prayer from five different locales, so you can hear regional differentiations.

**Peyton:** We need more of these connections between academia and museum practice. And it works out really well because it's a lot more fun and interactive, and it can bring in a range of visitors.

### Arts of South Asia: Cultures of Collecting

Allysa B. Peyton and Katherine Anne Paul, eds. 2019. University Press of Florida, 978-1-68340-047-9, \$65 hb.

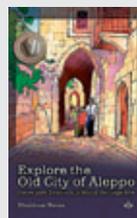


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### Building Between the Two Rivers: An Introduction to the Building Archaeology of Ancient Mesopotamia

Stefano Anastasio and Piero Gilento. 2020. Archaeopress Archaeology, 978-1-78969-603-5, £34 pb.



### Explore the Old City of Aleppo: Come with Tamim to a World Heritage Site

Khalid Fansa. 2020. Cune Press, 978-1-95108-215-4, \$24 hb.



# EVENTS

Highlights from  
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Please verify a venue's  
schedule before visiting.

## CURRENT / MAY

**Weaving the Thread of Fate in Carpet: Decorative-Applied Art of Azerbaijan** presents the best pieces from the collection of the Russian Museum of Ethnography, including ornamented copper utensils, silk fabrics, embroideries, soft chests and bags, replete with symbolism and localized motifs. The collection gives insight into the daily life of the Azerbaijanis who inhabit the mountains and valleys of the South Caucasus. Russian Museum of Ethnography, **Saint Petersburg**, through May 18.

**Painting Museum: Make an Island for Yourself** includes works created between the late 1980s and early 1990s by Azerbaijani artists who lived through the collapse of the Soviet Union. Themes of loneliness and solitude during times of crisis fill the exhibition and lend themselves to its title, a borrowing from the 1991 poem of the same name by Aydin Efendi. Museum of Azerbaijani Painting, **Baku**, through May 30.

## CURRENT / JUNE

**Exhibition 3: Alex Ayed** presents the first solo exhibition by the Brussels- and Tunis-based multimedia artist. It continues his use of materials both earthly and ephemeral, featuring an intimate selection of sculptures, audio work and a site-specific installation made of sand. Both processed and natural, his wall installations and sculptures take shape organically and unfold into their final forms as they are installed in the gallery. Institute of Arab & Islamic Art, **New York**, through June 3.

**Tears That Taste of the Sea**, by Rachid Koraïchi, presents a select sampling of the artist's works in different media created during this past year of global crisis. The works are linked together by the figures, glyphs and symbols of Koraïchi's signature style of hand-drawn characters and are related by their emphasis on the innumerable tears shed mourning the loss of loved ones or the harrowing effects of the present pandemic. October Gallery, **London**, through June 12.

**Fogs Turned Into Epic Story in My Head**, taking from the Azerbaijani song "Motherland is Better," explains through the artwork of several Azerbaijani artists the decades-long Karabakh conflict, addressing the prewar "Neither Peace nor War" years and

reflecting on the course of this complex journey into the present while also speaking of the beginning of a new stage. Yarat Contemporary Art Space, **Baku**, through June 15.

## CURRENT / AUGUST

**Exhibition 1** examines how architecture and its geometries enter an artist's consciousness and vocabulary and, in turn, the artist's work. With upbringings from the Gulf region and the Subcontinent, four artists share the experience of living with Islamic architecture despite originating from vastly different places and environments. Institute of Arab & Islamic Art, **New York**, through August 13.

**Reflections: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa** weaves together a tapestry of artistic expression from artists born in, or connected to, countries from the Arabic-speaking world. More than 100 works offer views of societies whose challenges are well-known in the press but little known through the prism of contemporary art. The British Museum, **London**, through August 15.

Readers are welcome to submit event information for possible inclusion to [proposals@aramcoamericas.com](mailto:proposals@aramcoamericas.com), subject line "Events."



**Shahidul Alam: Truth to Power** presents the first comprehensive US museum survey of the photographic work of Shahidul Alam, renowned Bangladeshi photographer, writer, activist and institution builder. More than 60 images and ephemera show the breadth of his practice and impact throughout his 40-year career. The exhibition includes portraits, landscapes and scenes of daily life, struggle and resistance in the "majority world"—a phrase Alam has used since the 1990s to reframe thinking about the global south. Through Alam's nuanced, unflinching views of Bangladesh and South Asia, the exhibit explores systems of personal and collective agency and underscores the importance of self-representation, empowerment and truth. In addition to the power of his images, Alam has made an impact in Bangladesh, across South Asia and even globally as the conceptual architect and founder of transformative institutions that include Drik Picture Library, Drik Gallery, Pathshala South Asia Media Institute, Chobi Mela biennial photography festival and the Majority World photo agency. Asia Society, **Houston**, through July 11.

"Woman in Ballot Booth," Lamatia, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1991.



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