

## Between Interpretation and Observation: The Image of Dhofar in the Writings of Travelers in the Islamic Era

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### Abstract

The descriptions and traditions of the peoples in the Islamic East received notable attention from travelers during the Islamic era, specifically between the 6th and 9th centuries AH (Hijri). Upon returning to their homelands, they would record the routes they took and the events they encountered. Their arrival to Omani territories, specifically to Dhofar, was driven by a desire to learn various truths—some historical and others civilizational. Dhofar's strategic location overlooking the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, in addition to the natural resources it was distinguished by, such as frankincense, myrrh, and ambergris, played a major role in it enjoying prestigious commercial and economic relations and status throughout the ages.

The study aims to highlight the image of the city of Dhofar as seen by those travelers through a critical analytical approach to the texts of travelers who addressed the city of Dhofar in the Middle Ages. This is done by distinguishing between the direct observation recorded by the traveler during their presence in the city, and the subjective interpretation through which they formulated those observations according to their cultural, intellectual, and religious backgrounds. The study departs from a hypothesis stating that the travel description does not only express the material reality of the city, but also simultaneously reflects the travelers' preconceptions and impressions about the place and the other. Accordingly, this study seeks to analyze the image of Dhofar in travel writings through a comparative critical reading, revealing the limits of objectivity in these texts and highlighting the interplay between sensory description and mental interpretation. This contributes to a deeper understanding of the city's representation in travel discourse during that historical period.

**Keywords:** Travelers; Dhofar; Islamic era; Omani lands; frankincense.

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## Introduction

Descriptions and customs of peoples in the Islamic East received notable attention from travelers during the Islamic era, particularly in the late Middle Ages. Upon returning to their homelands, they would record the routes they had taken, the events they encountered, and all the unusual matters that attracted their attention and were not present in their own countries. The subject of this study addresses an important aspect of individual travel, which throughout history was driven by various personal motives; merchants, ambassadors, religious figures, and adventurers were always present elements in travel records. The intellectual outcome of these journeys was often stimulating and, in many cases, scientifically beneficial. Although the number of individual travelers is countless, only a small portion of them documented their journeys in one way or another. Their records were not limited to describing the geographical aspects of the Islamic lands they visited; they often provided highly important civilizational information. Their arrival in Omani territories, particularly in Dhofar, was motivated by a desire to learn many civilizational facts during a period in which humanity was witnessing major transformations.

Dhofar's strategic location overlooking the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, in addition to its natural resources such as frankincense, myrrh, and ambergris, played a major role in granting it distinguished commercial and economic relations and status throughout the ages. Dhofar received a substantial share of attention in the writings of foreign travelers during that important period, especially because of its distinguished geographical and strategic position. These travelers were accustomed to recording their observations and what drew their attention in terms of customs, traditions, and other aspects of daily life. As a result, what was written about Dhofar became a record considered among the most reliable historical sources of the late Middle Ages.

Based on the above, the direction toward selecting the topic of this study emerged, entitled: "Between Description and Impression: Foreign Travelers' Vision of the City of Dhofar in the Late Middle Ages." There is no doubt that the writings of these travelers about the civilizational aspects of Dhofar during that period of human history deserve study and attention, particularly when they were written by major travelers such as the Italian Marco Polo, the Chinese Zheng He, the Russian Afanasy Nikitin, the Moroccan Ibn Battuta, and others. This topic is considered one of the important subjects that attract the attention of scholars in the field of Islamic civilization in general and Omani civilization in particular, especially during a stage in which historical events overlap and intertwine. This grants the study special importance due to the lack of an independent, self-contained research work in historical literature dedicated to this subject.

The study aims to highlight the features of Dhofar's civilization as seen by those travelers and to reach the closest possible depiction of the nature of the population during

that era. It also discusses a number of issues, most notably those raised regarding trade with the Chinese emperors, and benefits from the views of some European missionaries on this subject, including Benedict Goes. The study also seeks to answer a set of questions that will be presented in detail in its pages.

The methodology followed in this study is the scientific approach based on description and analysis, while observing chronological and thematic sequence in the research material. The study also relies on the comparative method by comparing what foreign travelers recorded during their visits to Dhofar in order to reveal similarities and differences in their descriptions of the city and its inhabitants.

As for previous studies, the writings of foreign travelers about Dhofar in the late Middle Ages have not received significant attention from contemporary historians and researchers. Only a limited number of studies have addressed this subject, most notably Xavier Beguin Billecoq's study entitled *Oman – Twenty-Five Centuries of Travel Writing* (1994), Muhammad Mahmoud Khalil's study on the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula in Chinese documents and chronicles (2021, pp. 220–275), and Salem Al-Kathiri's study entitled *Sino-Dhofari Relations during the First Kathiri State* (2016, pp. 162–188). Despite the importance of these studies, they did not give sufficient attention to analyzing the features of Dhofari civilization through the writings of foreign travelers, particularly during that stage characterized by the Therefore, this study came to shed light on a specific aspect of the historical relationship that linked Dhofar with various countries of the world in the late Middle Ages, and on the historical documentation that described important aspects of life in that period.

Before engaging in discussing foreign travelers' vision of the city of Dhofar in the late Middle Ages, it is possible to present a geographical and historical introduction about Dhofar in Oman, located in the southwestern part of the Sultanate of Oman (Zariter, 1995, pp. 10–11). It occupies an area estimated at one third of Oman's total territory and extends from the region of Ja'lan to the borders of Hadramawt. It was mentioned by Buzurg ibn Shahriyar in the fourth century AH under the name "Shihr Luban" (Land of Frankincense). In later periods Dhofar became known as "al-Balid," whose ruins still remain. Historical studies attribute its establishment to the Manjawayn rulers (Ibn al-Zubayr, 1991, p. 150), who ruled the entire region from their base in Mirbat until the late fifth century AH/eleventh century CE (Uthman, 2000, p. 17). At the beginning of the thirteenth century CE/seventh century AH, the region came under the rule of the Habudhid state (Ba'amar, 2009, p. 10).

### **The Image of Dhofar in Travelers' Writings in the Thirteenth Century**

With the beginning of the third decade of the seventh century AH/thirteenth century CE, and with the emergence of Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Habudhi, the new city of Dhofar was founded. He ordered the inhabitants of Mirbat to move to it, and it was named after him

and became known as Dhofar al-Habudhi. Its establishment coincided with the journey of the Syrian geographer Ibn al-Mujawir (d. 690 AH) (Lashin, 2019, pp. 1535–1536), who recorded in his work *Tarikh al-Mustabsir* the following: “Ahmad ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn Mazru‘ al-Haywadhi destroyed Dhofar in the year 618 AH out of fear of al-Malik al-Mas‘ud Abu al-Muzaffar Yusuf ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr ibn Ayyub. He built al-Mansurah and called it Cairo. It was settled in the year 620 AH, and the name by which it became known was Dhofar. It lies on the seashore and was surrounded by a wall of stone and gypsum, and it is also said of brick and gypsum. Four gates were arranged for it: the Sea Gate leading to the shore and called Bab al-Sahil, and two gates on the landward side corresponding to the names of the demolished gates of Dhofar. One of them, to the east, is called Bab Haqqah leading to ‘Ayn Fard, and the other, to the west, is called Bab al-Harja’ leading to al-Harja’, a pleasant town situated on the seashore near the city. Al-Mansurah was built only to secure the country and protect the people. When al-Mansurah was built, the king paid no attention to it nor reproached him for what he had done, and God’s decree was inevitable.” (Ibn al-Mujawir, 1996, pp. 285–286).

Ibn al-Mujawir praised the city of al-Mansurah, stating: “Its air is pleasant, its climate agreeable, and its water comes from a sweet fresh inlet. It produces fruits of every kind: from India pepper and coconut; from the coastal regions sugarcane and bananas; from Iraq pomegranates and grapes; from the palm groves dates; from Egypt lemons, citron, and bitter orange; from Sind the jujube; and from the Hijaz the dum palm. The principal food of its inhabitants is fish, and they tend toward engaging in trade.” (Ibn al-Mujawir, 1996, p. 294).

It is noteworthy that what Ibn al-Mujawir mentioned was confirmed by many contemporary geographical sources of that period, including what Shaykh al-Rabwa (d. 727 AH/1326 CE) stated: “After it comes the land of Mahra, whose capital is Dhofar. It was built by Ahmad ibn Muhammad and named al-Ahmadiyyah in the year 620 AH. His descendants remained there until it was taken from them. Before it there was the coastal city of Mirbat, which was ruined by the establishment of al-Ahmadiyyah.” (Shaykh al-Rabwa, 2019, p. 218).

At the same time, Dhofar witnessed the arrival of another traveler, specifically in 623 AH/1225 AD, with the presence of the Chinese traveler and merchant Zhao Rugua (Raouzong Guo) (趙汝适). He referred to it in his work *Zhu Fan Zhi* (諸蕃志), meaning “Description of Foreign Peoples,” which contained accounts of maritime trading countries that dealt with China. Dhofar was mentioned as an important city on the southern coast of the Arabian Sea and described as a significant source of frankincense trade (Chau Ju-kua, 1911, p. 121). Thus, the Chinese Zhao Rugua may be considered the first foreign traveler after Ibn al-Mujawir to visit the city shortly after its new foundation, and it was clear that the primary objective of that visit was commercial activity.

Soon afterward, Dhofar appeared in European travel writings, beginning with the Italian Marco Polo (d. 1324) (Polo, 2002, vol. 1, pp. 15–17), who visited it in 671 AH/1272 AD. He devoted a chapter in his famous work entitled “Concerning the City of Dufar” (Polo, 2002, vol. 1, p. 95). On his return journey from China through the Indian Ocean, he passed several ports along the Arabian coast, including the city of Dhofar, stating: “Dufar is a great and important city, situated twenty miles southeast of Asker (al-Shihr). Its inhabitants are Muslims, and its ruler is subject to the Sultan of Aden. It lies near the sea and has a good harbor frequented by many ships. Large numbers of Arabian horses are assembled there from the interior, which merchants purchase and transport to India, where they gain great profits from selling them. Frankincense is also produced there and purchased by Arab merchants. It is famous for the abundance of incense unequaled in the world, exported to India, China, Egypt, and elsewhere. Its people live by trade and by raising camels.” (Polo, 2002, vol. 1, p. 95).

From Marco Polo’s account, it can be said that he showed particular interest in Dhofar, clarifying the importance of its port in maritime trade and especially in the frankincense trade. He confirmed that it was a center for frankincense commerce, one of the region’s most prominent exports throughout history. He described Dhofar as an important port on the maritime trade route from East to West and noted the presence of a market for Arabian horses brought from the Arabian Peninsula for export. He also added a social dimension to his visit by stating that its inhabitants were Muslims distinguished by their skill in dealing with merchants arriving from various regions such as India, China, and Egypt. He is therefore considered the first to introduce the name of Dhofar into European writings.

Before the end of the thirteenth century CE/seventh century AH, Dhofar was mentioned by the famous traveler and geographer al-Qazwini (d. 682 AH/1283 AD), who stated: “The fine Dhofari agate is attributed to Dhofar. It is said that an ancient inscription on a stone of Dhofar’s wall reads: when Dhofar was built it was asked, ‘For whom are you?’ It replied, ‘For the virtuous.’ Then it was asked again and said, ‘For the wicked Abyssinians.’ After the Himyar it said, ‘For the noble Persians.’ Then it said, ‘For Quraysh the merchants.’ Then it said, ‘For Himyar Sanjar.’ Soon afterward destruction comes upon its people from lions that cast them into the sea and set fire to the heights of the dwellings.” (al-Qazwini, 1984, pp. 55–56).

Despite the exaggerated nature of this narrative, it reflects Dhofar’s civilizational importance, which inspired many legends. It also corresponds with what Ibn Khurdadhbih (d. 272 AH/882 CE) mentioned more than four centuries earlier (Ibn Khurdadhbih, 1988, pp. 121, 124).

Al-Qazwini added that the finest types of frankincense are produced in the southeastern region of Dhofar, especially in the Samhan Mountains. Among the areas rich in frankincense trees is Jujur, where the trees grow close together, unlike those in the region

of ‘Uyun Najd. The frankincense harvesting season usually begins in early April, when rising temperatures increase the flow of the milky resin. The harvesting process continues for about three months and may sometimes extend to October. Describing the method of collection, al-Qazwini stated: “The people of Dhofar come to the trees and cut them with knives; the frankincense flows out, and they gather it and carry it to Dhofar.” (al-Qazwini, 1984, p. 55; Husayn, 2014, pp. 291–311).

From the above, al-Qazwini confirms that frankincense grows only in the mountains of Dhofar, making it a valuable and distinctive product. His description of the harvesting process indicates that the ruler’s share of this trade was known, while the remainder was distributed among the inhabitants. Frankincense thus represented a central economic resource. Al-Qazwini supports what Marco Polo and later travelers mentioned: that Dhofar was a principal source of incense and frankincense for long periods in the history of politically utilized trade. Over time, Dhofar became an important destination for travelers arriving from distant places, not only for trade but also to learn more about it and describe its inhabitants, adding important details about its civilizational aspects. This became especially evident with the visit of Ibn Battuta (d. 779 AH/1377 AD) to Dhofar around 729 AH/1329 AD (Ibn Battuta, 1987, pp. 14–16).

### **From Ibn Battuta to the Europeans: The growing image of Dhofar in the writings of travelers**

Dhofar was included in the first of Ibn Battuta’s three major journeys, which together lasted approximately twenty-eight years. He arrived in Dhofar on 23 Ramadan 731 AH / 30 June 1331 AD, where he stayed for a period before departing toward other Omani cities and from there to various Asian lands. He later returned to Dhofar on his return route; however, it is most likely that he did not remain there for long during this return journey, but rather used it merely as a transit point from the city of Calicut (Muinis, 1987, p. 246) toward Muscat and Qurayyat, then Qalhat, from where he sailed to Hormuz. He recorded what he observed in his work *Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi Ghara’ib al-Amsar wa ‘Aja’ib al-Asfar* (A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travel)

Ibn Battuta begins his account of Dhofar by introducing the city from a geographical and climatic perspective, stating: “We embarked upon the sea from Kilwa to the city of Dhofar al-Humud. Its name is pronounced with a fatha on the *zā’* and the *fā’*, and it ends with a *rā’* pronounced with kasra. It is the last land of Yemen on the coast of the Indian Sea, and from it thoroughbred horses are exported to India. The crossing of the sea between it and the lands of India, with favorable winds, takes one month. I once crossed it from Calicut in India to Dhofar in twenty-eight days with favorable winds that did not cease, neither by night nor by day. Between Dhofar and Aden is a journey of one month through desert, between it and Hadramawt sixteen days, and between it and Oman twenty days” (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 267)

Ibn Battuta was the first among foreign travelers to speak about the political conditions of Dhofar at the time of his visit. It was well known that the rule of the al-Habuzi family, who had governed Dhofar, had ended at the hands of al-Malik al-Muzaffar Yusuf ibn ‘Umar, the second ruler of the Rasulid state in Yemen, in 678 AH. Thereafter, Dhofar became subordinate to the Rasulid state (al-Khazraji, 1911, vol. 1, pp. 268, 398). Ibn Battuta notes that al-Malik al-Fa’iz—cousin of the king of Yemen—was appointed governor of Dhofar by the ruler of Yemen, and that he was obliged to send him a gift annually (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 273). However, al-Mughith ibn al-Malik al-Fa’iz, who assumed rule after his father, seized power independently and refrained from sending the gift. Consequently, al-Malik al-Mujahid, Sultan of Yemen (721–764 AH / 1320–1363 AD), resolved to besiege Dhofar and appointed his cousin at the head of a large army to wrest it from al-Mughith—who was also his cousin. Yet when this prince departed from his residence, a wall collapsed upon him and several of his companions, prompting the king to abandon his decision and desist from besieging or reclaiming Dhofar (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 269).

From Ibn Battuta’s account, it may be concluded that the relationship between the successive rulers of Dhofar and the Rasulid sultans of Yemen was one of nominal dependency, limited primarily to the sending of gifts from Dhofar to the Rasulid king in Yemen (al-Khazraji, 1911, vol. 1, p. 268). Ibn Battuta’s reference thus provides clear evidence that Dhofar’s allegiance to the Rasulid state was largely formal and symbolic, owing to its distance from the Rasulid political center in Yemen and the preoccupation of Rasulid rulers with internal affairs.

In general, foreign travelers tended to avoid discussing political conditions in the lands they visited. Nevertheless, Ibn Battuta provides a political description of Dhofar containing numerous indications regarding its conditions, enabling us to interpret several of its civilizational phenomena.

When discussing Dhofar’s civilizational aspects, it is impossible to separate daily life and social customs from the economic activity of its inhabitants. Ibn Battuta recognized this connection in his account of Dhofar, stating:

“Markets are widespread there, especially the al-Harja’ market located in the suburb of the city. It is a market abundant in goods and bustling with commercial activity. On the coast there is a port and a market prepared for export and import. From it thoroughbred horses are shipped to India, and vessels arrive from India and elsewhere. The Sultan’s slaves go out to receive them with great hospitality and generosity, expressing this by beating drums and blowing trumpets in celebration of their arrival” He further notes that the currency used by the inhabitants of Dhofar was a dirham minted from copper and tin (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 267–268)

Undoubtedly, this hospitality reflects one of the methods employed by the people of Dhofar to attract merchants and gain their goodwill, particularly as these merchants supplied the city with necessities from India such as rice and cotton.

This indicates the strength of Dhofar's relationship with India, the nearest Asian region to it. Ibn Battuta also points to an important commercial phenomenon in Dhofar: most individuals engaged in trade were slaves and servants, including some women who participated in commercial transactions. The Sultan's slaves were entrusted with receiving incoming commercial vessels, unloading imported goods, or loading exports destined for Yemen, India, China, and other regions.

Although Ibn Battuta emphasizes the dominance of trade in Dhofar—stating, “They are people of trade and have no livelihood except through it” (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 268)—his account also indicates that agriculture and industry held a significant position. The inhabitants cultivated wheat and millet using well water, in addition to widespread orchards supplying the city with various fruits such as large bananas renowned for their sweetness, betel, and coconuts. Dhofar was particularly distinguished by coconut cultivation, which supported several industries, including honey production—whose practitioners were known as al-Fazaniyya—as well as dairy and oil production (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 271). Ibn Battuta also notes Dhofar's fame for frankincense trees, describing them as small, roughly the height of a person or shorter (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 270). Given the prevalence of horticulture, it may be inferred that orchards formed a green belt surrounding the city, aided by abundant monsoonal rainfall

Ibn Battuta then provides a detailed account of Dhofar's social classes and customs, following that, we found Ibn Battuta speaking in detail about the social classes in Dhofar and their customs, where he began by talking about the ruling family, saying: “It is the custom of the Sultan to have drums, trumpets, horns, and sirens beaten at his door every day after the afternoon prayer. Every Monday and Thursday, the soldiers come to his door and stand outside the Mashwar (meaning the outer courtyard of the Sultan's residence) for an hour, and then they leave. The Sultan does not go out and no one sees him except on Friday, when he goes out to pray and then returns to his house. He does not prevent anyone from entering the Mashwar, and the Emir of the Jandar sits at his door” (Al-Basha, 1965, pp. 195-197) And all his processions would end, and during his passage through the roads, he would not allow anyone to meet him on the road, and he would punish whoever did so with severe beatings; so much so that people would clear the way for his procession to avoid harm, which did not happen in the road processions during the Mamluk sultans, which people used to flock to see” (Ibn Battuta, 1987, Vol. 1, p. 271). In the context of his discussion of the ruling class as well as the administration of Dhofar, Ibn Battuta referred to the position of minister to the Sultan of Dhofar, during what he mentioned about the jurist Muhammad al-Adani (Ibn Battuta, 1987, Vol. 1, p. 272).

Regarding leisure activities, Ibn Battuta notes that when the Sultan went on excursions or hunting trips, he was accompanied by an armed procession and slaves, riding in a howdah atop a camel, concealed from public view. The people of Dhofar feared him to such an extent that they cleared the roads upon hearing of his departure (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 273)

We pause briefly to discuss Ibn Battuta's account of the Sultan of Dhofar and the royal court. He refers to the nature of the relationship between the Sultan of Dhofar and his subjects, describing the royal court, the ceremonies of official receptions, military parades, and other formal traditions. The significance of his account lies in the fact that he was an eyewitness and a guest at the Sultan's court itself—namely, Sultan al-Mughith ibn al-Malik al-Fā'iz ibn 'Amm Malik of Yemen. From this account, several observations may be drawn. It is evident that the ruler of Dhofar enjoyed a degree of semi-independence from the Rasulid state. The royal court in Dhofar possessed its own distinct system, based on established protocols governing royal receptions, military displays, and musical ensembles—features that reflect a notable level of cultural and civilizational advancement during that period. In addition, the existence of administrative offices such as the vizierate and the chamberlainship indicates the development of an organized administrative system. Despite the aura of prestige and authority with which the Sultan surrounded himself, Ibn Battuta also notes that he was keen to receive his subjects, listen to their grievances, and work toward resolving them

Continuing his discussion of the social strata of Dhofar, Ibn Battuta turns to the class of slaves and servants. He refers, for example, to those who accompanied the ruling elite, whom he calls mamluks, whose primary duty was service at the royal court or within the Sultan's personal guard. There was, however, another category of slaves entrusted with receiving commercial ships arriving from foreign lands, particularly from India (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 268). Ibn Battuta also identifies a third group of slaves, who appear to have suffered the greatest hardship. These individuals were employed in agricultural labor, particularly in irrigation and water-drawing. Irrigation relied not only on aflaj systems but also on wells, and this demanding task was placed upon slaves. The Moroccan traveler provides a detailed description of how they were used to extract water from wells, stating, in reference to the people of Dhofar: "As for their method of irrigation, they make a large bucket and attach many ropes to it; each slave or servant girds himself with a rope, and they pull the bucket over a large beam raised above the well, then pour the water into a cistern from which they irrigate" (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 268) This account reflects the significant role played by slaves in the productive and agricultural activities of the period.

Ibn Battuta uniquely records the moral and religious qualities of the people of Dhofar, describing them as devout and pious, citing the abundance of mosques and their customs of communal handshaking after prayers. He notes that religious devotion extended into

private homes, each containing a woven prayer mat hung on the wall (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 270)

He further emphasizes their humility, good character, and hospitality toward strangers. As an example, he recounts his stay with the judge of Dhofar, Abu Hashim ‘Abd al-Malik al-Zubaidi, who personally served him and washed his hands as an expression of respect and generosity (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 271)

Ibn Battuta also demonstrates the moral qualities he attributed to the people of Dhofar when he states “When a ship arrives from India or elsewhere, the Sultan’s slaves go out to the shore and board it in a sanbuq (boat). They bring complete garments for the ship’s owner or his agent, for the captain, and for the karrānī (the ship’s scribe). Horses are brought for them to ride, and drums are beaten in front of them from the seashore to the Sultan’s residence. They greet the vizier and the Amīr Jandār, and hospitality is sent to everyone on board the ship for three days. After the three days, they dine at the Sultan’s house. (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 268)

There is no doubt that what Ibn Battuta relates here is evidence of the generosity and warm reception shown by the people of Dhofar toward strangers—among them Ibn Battuta himself. Their conduct upon the arrival of ships stemmed from the Sultan of Dhofar’s deep awareness of the importance of these vessels to the city’s economic activity. Thus, such behavior is unsurprising, as it benefited them by attracting and encouraging trade to come to the region, motivated by the hospitality and honor bestowed by its Sultan, and—more importantly—the appreciation and respect shown by the inhabitants toward those arriving in their land

Continuing his discussion of the daily life of the people of Dhofar, Ibn Battuta speaks of their dining table, explaining that rice was a staple food, followed by fish—especially sardines—which constituted an important nutritional resource for the population, particularly since their city lay on the coast. It was therefore natural that they relied on it in their diet. He even expressed astonishment at its abundance in the markets, to the extent that livestock owners among the people of Dhofar used it as fodder for their animals and sheep—an unusual practice that the Moroccan traveler regarded as one of the marvels. He commented:

“Among the marvels is that their beasts of burden and their sheep are fed on these sardines, and I have not seen this anywhere else. (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 272).

The Dhofari table also included wheat, which the locals called al-‘alas, as well as sorghum, which Ibn Battuta notes was cultivated through irrigation from well water (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 271). In addition, he referred to Dhofari honey and expressed his admiration for Dhofari bananas. Ibn Battuta also did not forget to mention certain types of sweets common in Dhofar, such as cakes, some of which he took with him as provisions

when he departed the city by sea toward other Omani towns (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 272).

As for the clothing of the people of Dhofar, he says that he saw them wearing cotton imported from India. They wrapped loincloths around their waists instead of trousers; most of them tied one cloth around the waist and placed another over their backs because of the intense heat. They bathed several times a day and were skilled artisans in making garments and textiles, which they then exported to various parts of the Arabian Peninsula (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 268). At the same time, he notes that the people of Dhofar did not wear turbans on their heads, despite the protection they offer against the heat (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 272). It is noteworthy that in his discussion of the head turban he used the expression “most of its inhabitants

In his account of Dhofar, Ibn Battuta did not overlook women. He mentions that they generally wore black garments and points to their participation alongside their husbands in bearing the burdens of livelihood and supporting them in work. He refers to their contribution to production when describing how milk was made using coconuts (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 273). He adds that women in Dhofar used coconut to enhance the redness of the face, and that it was also used to oil the hair and increase its shine after being dried in the sun, cooked, and its oil extracted. It was also customary to use frankincense for adornment (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 272).

Ibn Battuta also addressed the state of public health among the people of Dhofar at the time of his visit. He noted their strong attachment to cleanliness, stating that he never entered one of their mosques without finding many washing facilities for bathing. Indeed, their passion for cleanliness and purity was such that he recorded that they bathed several times a day (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 268)

He further spoke of diseases common among the city’s inhabitants, such as elephantiasis, which appeared as swelling of the feet and affected both men and women alike. He also mentioned another disease known as al-adr, a swelling of a man’s testicle caused by the accumulation of fluid in its covering, adding the phrase “God forbid” (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 268–269). From this last expression, one may infer that these diseases were extremely serious in that era, not only in Dhofar but also in many regions of the world that Ibn Battuta visited during his extensive travels

One observation uniquely recorded by Ibn Battuta, unlike other foreign travelers who visited Dhofar, concerns scholarly life. Regarding education, he states that the vizier of the Sultan of Dhofar, the jurist Muhammad al-‘Adani, served as a teacher of children and taught the Sultan himself reading and writing (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 272). This was natural, given that education in the Islamic world at that time was predominantly based on the system of Qur’anic schools (kuttāb), which focused on learning to read and write

Ibn Battuta also referred to certain architectural aspects of Dhofar while describing the palace in which he was hosted, known as the fortress. He described it as grand and spacious, precisely identifying its location as being in the center of the city. He also saw there a chamberlain called the Amīr Jandār. The institution of chamberlainship itself was a manifestation of Dhofar's authentic civilization. Beside this royal palace stood the congregational mosque, where the Sultan of Dhofar performed prayers together with the Muslim community (Ibn Battuta, 1987, vol. 1, p. 273)

Thus, the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta succeeded in drawing a detailed picture of Dhofar, surpassing many medieval travelers. What he recorded about it constitutes a descriptive report on the city, especially regarding its civilizational aspects—from its system of governance, through the strata of Dhofari society, to a detailed account of daily life, customs and traditions, urban development, and prevailing institutions. This renders his account a highly significant civilizational text in the history of the Middle Ages

Dhofar was later visited by a European traveler considered the first after Marco Polo, namely Jordanus de Severac (Jordan du Servaic), a member of the Dominican order. He journeyed to Persia, Armenia, and India and played an important role in Christian missionary activity in India. Indeed, his efforts culminated in the establishment of the first Catholic bishopric there, specifically in the city of Columbum, making him its first bishop in 730 AH / 1330 AD. In his book *Mirabilia Descripta* (The Marvels Described), he records that on his return journey from the western coast of India aboard an Arab commercial vessel laden with spices, Jordanus reached Dhofar, situated on the Arabian Sea. The city was an important commercial center for the export of frankincense and was bustling with merchants (Jordanus, 1863, p.126). From our perspective, given that Jordanus stayed only a few days, it is unlikely that he engaged in missionary activity in the city, due to the brevity of his stay. Moreover, missionary activity was limited and fraught with danger, and, most importantly, it was evident that the people of Dhofar were firmly attached to their Islamic faith

Soon thereafter, Dhofar was visited by the Italian traveler and friar Giovanni de Marignolli, who came to the city on his return journey from India to the Red Sea and thence to Europe. He undertook a long journey between 739–754 AH / 1338–1353 AD, as part of a mission sent by Pope Benedict XII (734–743 AH / 1334–1342 AD) to the court of the Mongol emperor in China. Regarding Dhofar, he states

“Then I arrived at a famous port on the Arabian Sea, which is a principal center for the trade in frankincense. This frankincense is collected from the nearby mountains Although Marignolli did not describe Dhofar in as much detail as he did some other regions, what he recorded nevertheless constitutes important testimony to the city's presence along the trade routes. (Cathay, 1866, p. 292)”

### **The identity of Dhofar crystallized in the writings of travelers during the**

## ninth century AH

Dhofar became an important destination for Chinese travelers after a gap of nearly two centuries, especially following Emperor Yongle's ascension to the imperial throne in 806 AH/1403 CE. He decided to revitalize communication between China and the outside world by sending maritime expeditions. The reasons for this decision were multiple, converging on his desire to achieve commercial, political, and diplomatic goals, thereby showcasing the greatness, power, and civilizational superiority of the Chinese Empire (Muheirez, 2000, pp. 57-65). For this purpose, a naval fleet was prepared, named the "Treasure Ships" fleet, and the command of these voyages was entrusted to the Muslim admiral and explorer Zheng He (Khalil, 2021, p. 232). Indeed, between 808-837 AH/1405-1433 AD, the number of these voyages reached seven, during which Zheng He visited many countries from China in the east to the eastern coast of Africa in the west. What concerns us here is his voyage to Dhofar, relying on the accounts of his companion and translator, Ma Huan (Khalil, 2021, p. 264), who recorded the news of these voyages in his known work "Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores" (Huan, 1970).

Ma Huan dedicated many pages in his recording of Zheng He's voyages to Dhofar, which he called "Tsu-Fa" (Huan, p.151). Dhofar was visited twice during the seven voyages. The first was during Zheng He's sixth voyage, which spanned (1421-1422 AD), sent in response to an embassy dispatched by Sultan Ali bin Omar Al Kathiri (814-832 AH/1410-1428 AD), which had returned to him laden with gifts from the Emperor (Al Kathiri, 2016, p. 183). Ma Huan then mentions that Zheng He arrived with his fleet of 41 ships to Dhofar, where he met its Sultan. The latter subsequently sent another envoy to the Chinese Emperor in 827 AH/1423 AD (Huan, 1970, p.152).

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As for Zheng He's second voyage to Dhofar, it was during his final, seventh voyage, which lasted from 835 AH/1431 AD to 837 AH/1433 AD. Before Zheng He's fleet returned, Sultan Abdullah bin Ali Al Kathiri (832-850 AH/1428-1446 AD) — who succeeded his father in rule — took the initiative to send the envoy Hadi Hussein — known to the Chinese as Ha Yi-Zai Huochan — as an envoy to China accompanying Zheng He. Upon his arrival in Beijing, he indeed presented the Emperor with the Sultan's gifts, which included frankincense and an ostrich, and he returned to Dhofar laden with gifts from the Chinese Emperor in 840 AH/1436 AD (Huan, 1970, p.153).

Following this wealth of information about the beginnings and circumstances of Zheng He's journey to Dhofar, we must pause to illustrate the civilizational value of this event. Ma Huan, the chronicler of the voyage, began his account by referring to Dhofar's geography, saying: "The ship from Calicut sailed northwest with a favorable wind, reaching Dhofar after ten days and nights. This country lies near the sea and on the foothills of mountains. It possesses no walled city nor suburbs, bordered by the jungle to its southeast and mountain ranges to its northwest" (Huan, 1970, p.151). He describes the climate of this country as resembling that of the eighth and ninth lunar months, with no cold at all (Huan, 1970, p.152).

He speaks about the ruling authority in Dhofar and its relations with the city's inhabitants, saying: "Its king and all its people profess Islam. The limbs of its men are long and broad, their stature tall and upright. They are distinguished by their truthfulness in keeping promises. Their king wears on his head a fine, foreign white turban and dons a cloak covering his head, embroidered with fine silk and adorned with patterns the width of a thumb. Or he wears a garment embroidered with gold. He wears foreign boots or leather shoes, flat-toed and stitched. The king sits in a palanquin or rides a horse when he wishes to tour the city, preceded and followed by rows of elephants, camels, cavalry troops, and infantry soldiers carrying their swords and shields. All proceed in a dense throng, blowing whistles and pipes" (Huan, 1970, p.152).

Ma Huan succeeded in portraying the Dhofari person, their customs and traditions, focusing on describing their physical and moral characteristics. He drew attention to their deep religiosity, which ultimately represented the character of the people in Dhofar,

stating: "The people of the country cover their heads with cloths, wear long garments, and wear boots or shoes. On the day of worship (Friday), trading in the markets stops before noon. All people, men and women, old and young, perform ablution, then they take rosewater, heavy aloeswood oil, or other oil, and anoint their faces and limbs with it. They wear clean, freshly washed clothes. They take a small earthenware incense burner, light some heavy aloeswood, sandalwood, ambergris, and other incense, place it in the burner, and perfume their clothes and limbs. Then they go to the mosque to worship and return to their homes immediately after prayer. The fragrance of their perfume spreads in the market alleys they pass through, lingering for some time. Its people observe Islamic customs in their marriage ceremonies and burial of their dead" (Huan, 1970, p.153).

It is worth noting that Ma Huan's description in Zheng He's voyage of the economic activity of Dhofar's people is also a primary source for civilizational studies, shedding light on the city's products, available foodstuffs, the country's currency, and more. Ma Huan mentioned that this country is famous for producing frankincense; it is a gum extracted from a tree resembling an elm tree, but with pointed, long leaves. This is done by scraping the bark of this tree, causing the gum, called frankincense, to flow out. Ma Huan spoke about the moment of his arrival in the city of Dhofar, saying: "When we reached this country, the imperial edict was read, and we bestowed gifts upon all. The king (Sultan) of Dhofar sent someone to announce to the people that whoever had any frankincense, dragon's blood, aloes, or myrrh could barter with the Chinese for pure silk, their utensils, and other Chinese goods."

As for daily life in Dhofar, their main food is hulled and unhulled rice, white and yellow corn, wheat, millet, hemp seeds, and other types of vegetables. As for animals and birds in this city, they are cows, sheep, horses, donkeys, cats, dogs, poultry, ducks, as well as ostriches found on mountaintops, which some people hunt for sale. As for camels among the people of Dhofar, they have only one hump, alongside a number of camels with two humps. They are ridden until they age and their time draws near, then they are slaughtered, and all people ride camels when going to markets. Once they age and their time is near, they are slaughtered and their meat is sold (Huan, 1970, p.153).

Regarding the currency in circulation in Dhofar at the time of Zheng He's visit, Ma Huan mentions that the King (meaning the Sultan) issues a gold coin called the "Tanka" or "Tankah," with each piece weighing two chiān according to Chinese measurements. There was writing on one side and a drawing of a face on the other. The King (Sultan) also issued another small copper coin with a diameter equal to 4 Fen, used in simple commercial transactions (Huan, 1970, p.152). Ma Huan concludes his account of those voyages led by Zheng He: "When the time came for the Emperor's envoy to return to China, the king of this country sent with him a high-ranking envoy carrying gifts of frankincense, ostriches, and other items to present as tribute to the imperial court" (Huan, 1970, p.153).

The final phrase mentioned by Ma Huan—the Dhofari envoy presenting tribute to the Chinese Emperor—raised an important question: Was it truly tribute? And what is the reason behind this? In truth, a matter of utmost importance must be clarified: since the Ming dynasty took hold of power in China, its first emperors sent official, conciliatory proclamations to the rulers of foreign countries. The proclamation stated that offers of friendship and trade were intertwined, and at its end, there was an indication that if the foreign government agreed, the ruler should send tribute to the Ming court as a sign of the trade agreement and binding ties of friendship. From our perspective, and through reviewing those seven voyages undertaken by Zheng He on the orders of his lord the Emperor, which included over 20 countries in various directions, including Cochin, Calicut, and others in India, as well as Hormuz, Aden, Al-Ahsa, Malindi, and many other diverse countries, we find that the exchange of envoys laden with gifts from both sides was a reality. Also, based on what was mentioned by the Portuguese missionary Benedict Goës, who reached the Ming Emperor's court in 1650 AD as an envoy, he said: "Foreign countries send embassies to present gifts to the Emperor of China, and their envoys are reciprocated with the like" (Khalil, 2021, p.225). Therefore, the use by the Chinese, including Ma Huan, of the term "tribute" differs completely from its actual meaning; rather, it was an exchange of gifts to strengthen relations between China and other peoples.

Shortly before the end of the 9th century AH, the Russian Afanasy or Athanasius Nikitin undertook his journey in 870 AH/1466 AD from the city of Tver, where he was one of the merchants of that city located on the Volga River. He then went to the city of Baku, crossed the Caspian Sea to Persia, from there to Hormuz, then to India, and finally returned to his country in 876 AH/1472 AD, dying a few days after his arrival (Athanasius, 1857, p.32). On his return journey, he recorded that he reached Hormuz and from there to the city of Qalhat, then continued his journey until he reached Muscat. After leaving it, he mentioned reaching Dhofar, referring to it briefly as the country of frankincense (Athanasius, 1857, p.19).

## Conclusion

From the above, it becomes clear to us that what foreigners recorded about Dhofar in that period is of great importance. Undoubtedly, it confirmed Dhofar's economic importance on the maritime trade route between East and West. Those texts managed to cover multiple aspects of Dhofari society, revealing its population, social classes, food, clothing, mindset, and various customs and traditions. They also highlighted the urban planning and layout of Dhofar and its centers that have vanished. Unsurprisingly, they specified the location of the royal palace in the city center and the mosque built beside it. This form of architectural distribution is characteristic of Islamic architecture and its familiar style. Furthermore, they shed light on women, education, and other issues neglected by historical chronicles. Most of the impressions and civilizational observations these travelers concluded were accurate,

supported by contemporary sources from that period. Indeed, some of the customs and traditions they mentioned still exist to the present day.

Finally, it can be said that although some of these travelers' writings about Dhofar, especially the Europeans among them, were sometimes characterized by superficiality and brevity, what they mentioned about the civilizational aspects in Dhofar during the late Middle Ages constitutes documents of great civilizational importance, adding to the totality of documents abundant in the historical record of this city.

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