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Bogusław R. Zagórski
Ibn Khaldun Institute / Collegium Civitas,
Poland

SEA NAMES OF THE ARAB WORLD AS A SYSTEM

1. What is a language system?

A *language system* is an arranged resourceful combination of linguistic signs and rules which together create a possibility of communication within a specific human community. *Individual elements* of a language system, concentrated within their separate subsystems, groups and subgroups, are nevertheless interconnected by multiple mutual relationship links. These elements are never independent and they compose a coherent *structure of oppositions*, by which they are defined and their semantic fields are better determined.

Grammatical system (leaving apart the *phonological system* which is not pertinent here) of a living language consists of rules that usually compose a *closed system*, or rather a nearly-closed one, because it slowly, gradually develops with the passing of time. In addition, this system is formed with a wide margin of reserve and therefore it contains a large number of *empty spaces* (still unused possibilities in excess of current needs). On the contrary, a dead language (like Sanscrit or Latin) represents a totally closed system.

Lexicographic system of a living language is a very much *open system* which undergoes permanent changes, slower or quicker, according to social change in most

diversified circumstances. Words become obsolete and fall out of use, while new words replace them or enter the system introducing new concepts into circulation. Analogically to the previous one, a lexicographic system of a dead language is naturally a closed system.

A *living language* has, by definition, an ample resource of potential elements. They may either be obsolete elements which could be still used for special purposes (like archaic style-making), or completely new elements created *ad hoc*, in proportion to and following the existing patterns, by a speaker who needs to express new concepts. It may as well happen that obsolete elements reemerge in new functions and new meanings.

Toponymic (choronymic) systems include the same two categories, grammatical and lexicographic. As such, they may be studied from two angles: *descriptive* and *normative (prescriptive)*. We should not undervalue the second method, but the purpose of this research is the first one. We shall attempt at identifying the *thalassonymy (maritime toponymy)* of the Arab World and see how much it is or used to be a coherent linguistic system.

2. The Arab World

The Arab World, as of today, encompass all countries where the Arabic language is a unique official language or at least one of the official languages. Countries that correspond to this definition include 24 independent states¹ and 2 territories of unsettled status². The uninterrupted but very heterogenous block of the Arab countries stretches from the Westernmost edges of the African Mauritanian

1 In Africa: Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Chad (the unique country in our group that remains without any access to sea), Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and the Comoros; in Asia: Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan.

2 Western Sahara in Africa and Palestine in Asia.

coast to the Easternmost parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and from the Syrian and Iraqi Northern borders to the Southern borders of Chad and Sudan in Central Africa and Somalian border on the East African coast. Separately from that block the Comoro Islands dwell deep in the Indian Ocean, off the East African coast in the direction of Madagascar.

The Arab World, with the exception of its long southern West and Central African Sahelian edges, is surrounded with waters that belong to two great systems: one of the Indian Ocean and the other of the Atlantic Ocean. The two maritime systems, even if they are connected far away from our area of interest, in the South of Africa, remain nevertheless naturally separated by a comparatively narrow Isthmus of Suez in the North.

Available information about maritime horizons and terminology of the Ancient Arabs is very scarce, but the advent of Islam in the 7th c. AD and a growing number of written testimonies supply new data and enhance s our knowledge.

3. Everything starts with the Qur'an

The first source of all knowledge and a normative pattern regulating different walks of life, including the image of the Earth and Universe, became the Qur'an, the Islamic Holy Book. In it, the Arabs found first indications as to the general system of water bodies:

And He it is who has given freedom of movement to the two great bodies of water (al-bahrayn) – the one sweet and thirst-allying, and the other salty and bitter – and yet has wrought between them a barrier and a forbidding ban. And he it is who out of this [very] water has created man and has endowed him with [the consciousness] of descent... We made out of water every living thing...[And remember] that it is God who... has made ships subservient to you, so that they may sail through the sea at His behest...

(„The Message of the Qur'an”, transl. by Muhammad Asad, S. 25:53-54, S. 27:61, S. 14: 32)

The Qur'an highlighted the vital position of seas in the Divine constitution of the Earth and that image became deeply imbibed in the minds of human beings. The Qur'an turned attention of people to bi-sided division of all waters: the sweet inland waters and the salty and bitter waters in the seas. These two entities stay in opposition to each other. The geographical setting in which the seas of the World occupy their prominent position is not only limited to the perception of Muslims and their systematization of the world, but – like the whole of the universal Qur'anic message - concerns the whole human race. However, we tend to limit present remarks to the Arab World and to such a system of *salty and bitter waters* as that which encircles our area of interest.

The Qur'an describes it also as follows: *He has given freedom to the two great bodies of water (bahrayn), so that they might meet: [yet] between them is a barrier (barzakh) which they may not transgress* (S. 55:19-20).

The idea of two main opposing seas, the dual system indicated by the Qur'an, clearly refers to the Arabian Peninsula, the cradle and the homeland of the Arabs, on whom the Qur'an was directly bestowed. Two encircling water bodies: the Indian Ocean on the East and the Mediterranean Sea on the West, oppose each other. This division, natural for the geographical vision of this particular area, should not be confused with separation between sweet and salty waters cited above.

Different meanings of the Qur'anic term *bahr*, in present thalassonymy usually translated as *sea*³, leave place to some ambiguity and can only be explained on the basis of the two occurring different contexts which are, however, quite descriptive and meaningful.

With this clear construction in mind, and with a strong persuasion of the

3 This term „bahr” may also refer, by extension, to a great river, like the Nile.

subservient seas (and new sould and lands to conquer), the Arabs started their rapid and far reaching expansion which brought them to many other seas. Then the question arised: to what degree the names of those seas could correspond to another Qur'anic concept, expressed in the following words: *And if... the sea... with seven more seas added to it...*(S. 31:27)? Actually, Arab geographers of early Medieval times devoted a lot of attention to this confrontation of the Holy Book with the living reality: which of the seas known on the Earth could be identified with the seven seas mentioned in the Qur'an?

There were different explanations but the problem remained unsolved in any definite way. We shall not repeat lengthy deliberations which lead their careful student to final conclusion that it was a figurative expression rather than a true geographical indication (likewise with other geographical and historical concepts in the Quran whose role – by its nature - is more edifying than informative).

4. New Concepts with New Names

Notwithstanding the vast expanses in Asia and Africa, or even Europe, which the Arabs conquered in such rapidity as they did they never expanded beyond the lands bordering on the two oceanic systems which initially encircled the Arabian Peninsula.

However, the necessities of religious character (fixing the *qiblah*, direction of the daily prayers), extending trade routes and administration of subdued territories, created an urgent want of detailed geographical descriptions. This, naturally, included the seas.

First descriptions of the *oikumene* known to the Arabs dwelled on the borrowed and quickly absorbed geographical knowledge of the Ancient World (Greece) and the Middle East (India, Persia). Armchair geographers of the new Muslim empire – the Caliphate – and people of practice, like merchants, spies and administrators,

combined their effort to produce a uniform picture of the world which could serve multiple purposes.

Interconnections between various written works, their free borrowings (today would be called plagiarisms) and mutual influences, lead to the creation of a picture not quite consistent and sometimes confusing. Names translocated from one place to another and on many occasions the same water body was designated with different names by different authors.

5. General naming system

The global Ocean (whatever little knowledge the Arabs had of it at the time) was called Uqiyanus, after the Greek name Okeanos and Latin Oceanus (also: Oceanus Mundi or Oceanus Globalis). Soon that Graeco-Roman name was replaced by the Arab name Al-Bahr al-Muhit, the Surrounding Sea.

Occasionally it gave place to just Al-Muhit, the affect of an abbreviation through skipping the generic term Al-Bahr and substantivisation of the adjective Al-Muhit. Alternately, it was also called Al-Iklil, the Crown or the Encircler.

The Global Ocean was divided into two opposing parts.

The first of them was the Indian Ocean: Al-Bahr al-Muhit al-Hindi (or Al-Muhit al-Hindi, or Al-Bahr al-Hindi), repeating the Latin name Oceanus Indicus or Mare Indicum (but also Mare Erythraeum). An alternate name for it, cited in the 10th c. AD, was surprisingly... Bahr as-Sin, the Sea of China.

The second part was the Atlantic Ocean, called Bahr az-Zulumat, the Sea of Darkness, repeating the Latin nickname Mare Tenebrarum. Later on the name Bahr az-Zulumat became obsolete and was replaced by the name Al-Bahr al-Muhit al-Atlasi (or simply Al-Muhit al-Atlasi). That was, in fact, the translation of Greek Atlantis Thalassa and corresponding Latin Oceanus Atlanticus.

6. The Indian Ocean system

The seas that compose the Indian Ocean, adjacent to the Arab World, are following.

The Arab Gulf (or the Arabian Gulf, or simply the Gulf) is an old name that was transferred here from another localisation, since 1960-es replacing an ages-old traditional local name Persian Gulf,. Old Arabic names Bahr Faris and Khalij Faris, later Al-Khalij al-Farisi, all repeated the Ancient Latin name Sinus Persicus and corresponded to names given to this water expanse either by the Persians living on the Northern shores of the Gulf or by foreign travellers and cartographers. Unilateral change of the name that occurred in the Arab World created a tension and hot political disputes over the issue.

The Gulf of Oman, Khalij 'Uman, is located at the Eastern entry of the Arab/Persian Gulf. It is separated from the latter by Madiq Hurmuz, the Straits of Ormuz, and borders from the East with the Arabian Sea.

The Arabian Sea or the Arab Sea, Bahr al-'Arab or Al-Bahr al-'Arabi, has had many different names, depending on the source and the language of people traversing it and/or living on its shores. One of those alternate names, in Arabic, was Bahr Faris, adding further to the confusion with the Persian/Arabian Gulf. One more Arabic name was Bahr al-Hind, the Sea of India, certainly mixed somehow with the name of the Ocean.

The Gulf of Aden, at the entry to the Red Sea, is called in Arabic Khalij 'Adan. Alternate names of it were Bahr 'Adan, the Sea of Aden, and Bahr al-Habash, the Abyssinian Sea. The Ancient called it Aualites Sinus.

The name of the Red Sea, in Arabic Al-Bahr al-Ahmar, repeats the Greek Erythra Thalassa and Latin Mare Rubrum (otherwise also Mare Erythraeum).

However, an alternate Latin name of the same was also Sinus Arabicus, the Arabian Gulf, and that name too was translated and used by the Arabs in the form Al-Khalij al-'Arabi. This Arabic alternate name, coinciding with another Arabic name, Bahr al-Qulzum, the Sea of Clysma, became obsolete in this area, changed the object and is being reused for another entity, the Persian Gulf, provoking not only toponymical, but also political differences.

It is interesting to note that the Arab sailors from the Indian Ocean, of the 15th c. AD, knew this sea under the name of Bahr Qulzum, with omission of the definite article *al-*, like if cited after a non-Arab source where the Arab name underwent a grammatical adjustment (the phenomenon frequently appearing, for example, in Persian); also Bahr Qulzum al-'Arab (the Sea of Clysma of the Arabs) and Bahr Hijaz, the Sea of Hijaz (another omission of an article from the original regional name Al-Hijaz).

Other names of the Red Sea, according to the sailors of the Indian Ocean and their nautical almanacs, are: Al-Bahr as-Saghir, the Small Sea, in logical opposition to the Great Sea, Al-Bahr al-Kabir, meaning the Indian Ocean; and, alongside, surprisingly enough Al-Bahr al-Kabir without any visible semantic opposition in another location.

In the North, the Red Sea is bifurcated into what is called now Khalij as-Suways, the Gulf of Suez (earlier also Khalij al-Qulzum, the Gulf of Clysma; ancient Heroopoliticus Sinus) and Khalij al-'Aqabah, the Gulf of Aqaba (earlier also Khalij Aylah, the Gulf of Ayla; ancient Aelaniticus Sinus). Through the Gulf of Aqaba, the Holy Land borders with... the Sea of China, Bahr as-Sin (*alter ego* of the Indian Ocean).

Far to the South, the part of the Indian Ocean stretching along the East African Coast, down to the Comoro Islands, was called Bahr az-Zanj, or the Sea of Africans. The Ancient called it Azanium Mare in Latin or Barbarikon Pelagos in Greek. Madiq Muzambiq, the Mozambique Channel, located further to the South, is a modern name.

It should be noted that in Antiquity, according to various sources, the name

Mare Erythr(ae)um was used indiscriminately to the Red Sea, or the Persian Gulf, the Arab Sea and even to the Indian Ocean at large, while Mare Rubrum could mean both the Red Sea and the Arab Sea.

This is the end of the seas of the Indian Ocean, adjacent to the Arab World.

7. The Atlantic Ocean system

The Atlantic Ocean offers much less trouble than the Indian Ocean. There are no seas distinguished by the Arab geographical knowledge to the West of the Straits of Gibraltar, Madiq Jabal Tariq. The Mediterranean Sea was and still is called in Arabic Al-Bahr al-Abyad al-Mutawassit, the White Mediterranean Sea, often abbreviated to just Al-Bahr al-Mutawassit, the Mediterranean Sea. Latin Mare Mediterraneum seems to be a mere conjecture, while the Romans called it in reality Mare Nostrum, Our Sea, and Mare Internum, the Internal Sea.

There are two historically known alternate Arabic names for the Mediterranean Sea: Al-Bahr ash-Shami, the Syrian Sea, and Bahr ar-Rum, the Sea of Byzantium. However, some authors maintained that these two alternate names were only correct in reference to the Eastern part of the Mediterranean. These could correspond to the present name of the Levantine Sea.

The name of the Alboran Sea, the Westernmost part of the Mediterranean, despite its apparently Arabic sounding and origin, cannot be easily found in Arabic sources. In Antiquity it was called Mare Ibericum.

It is noteworthy to observe the following opposition: the Sea of Darkness (the Atlantic) versus the White Sea (the Mediterranean). The Mediterranean also appears in similar oppositions among the close neighbors of the Arab World: it is called the White Sea, Ak Deniz, by the Turks, but that opposition is now directed towards the Black Sea, Kara Deniz, located in the North. And again the Black Sea, called Cherno More in Bulgarian, appears in opposition to the White Sea, Belo More of the

Bulgarians – but this time the White Sea means the Aegean Sea, just a part of the Mediterranean, not the whole of it. The game of thalassonomastic oppositions seems to unite the wide spectrum of Mediterranean nations.

8. Language systems again

A few words are due in respect of two categories of the Arabic *thalassonymic system*, which we shall shortly review from the descriptive point of view.

The *grammatical system* is very simple and includes several name construction patterns that are prevalent in the Arabic language in various applications: in the formation of other proper names and also as popular living structures that are used daily in common speech.

These are the conjunctions appearing within our corpus of 41 cited names, with a number of occurrences of each name formation pattern:

a) noun – 4 occurrences – 9.8 %:

al-bahrayn, Al-Iklil, Al-Muhit, Uqiyanus;

b) noun + adjective – 11 occurrences – 26.8 %:

Al-Bahr al-Ahmar, Al-Bahr al-'Arabi, Al-Bahr al-Kabir, Al-Bahr al-Muhit, Al-Bahr as-Saghir, Al-Bahr ash-Shami; Al-Bahr al-Mutawassit, Al-Khalij al-'Arabi, Al-Khalij al-Farisi, Al-Al-Muhit al-Atlasi, Al-Muhit al-Hindi,

c) noun + 2 adjectives – 2 occurrences – 4.9 %:

Al-Bahr al-Muhit al-Atlasi; Al-Bahr al-Muhit al-Hindi,

d) noun + noun (*status constructus* or *idafah*) – 22 occurrences – 43.7 %:

Bahr 'Adan, Bahr al-'Arab, [*Bahr] Alboran, Bahr Faris, Bahr al-Habash, Bahr Hijaz, Bahr al-Hind, Bahr al-Qulzum, Bahr Qulzum, Bahr ar-Rum, Bahr as-Sin, Bahr az-Zanj, Bahr az-Zulumat, Khalij 'Adan, Khalij al-'Aqabah, Khalij Aylah, Khalij Faris,

Khalij al-Qulzum, Khalij as-Suways, Khalij 'Uman, Madiq Hurmuz, Madiq Muzambiq,

e) noun + noun + noun (duplicated *status constructus* or *idafah*) – 2 occurrences – 4.9 %:

Bahr Qulzum al-'Arab, Madiq Jabal Tariq.

Even though it would be premature and risky to draw binding statistical conclusions based on such a small sample material, still – this reservation notwithstanding – we should remark that, at the first sight, regularities in the construction of the names to great extent remain in proportion and correspond to what may be observed in the everyday Arabic speech. And the exceptional popularity of Arabic *status constructus* (*idafah*) cannot be contested.

The *lexicographic system* remains very open and even such a small sample certifies of its great flexibility and adaptability.

One might even perhaps say that the openness of the lexicographic system goes into excess so as to endanger the communicative function of this thalassonymic corpus. Indeed, a historical research based on the written sources containing these and similar names would be hampered in its progress by many doubtful identifications.

9. Conclusions

The review of a comparatively small number of sea names, referring to open water bodies adjacent to the Arab countries, reveals a particularly complex naming system. The problem seems to arise – and we can observe it also in respect of the Ancient times – from the incoherence of apparently different onomastic layers, intermingled in time and in social space.

There are names coming – directly or indirectly - from Antique onomastic strata. Some of them were absorbed by the official science under direction of armchair experts, while others were used by the people with a very practical approach. Thalassonyms used by these and the others do not necessarily meet because of their different fields of application. The different layers reflecting diverging practical uses coexist with each other in one linguistic environment and do not interfere, but sometimes overlap in practical applications and through that create a possibility of error in identification. Occasionally, arbitrary and politically motivated changes may create additional problems of extra-linguistic nature.

This situation is not uncommon in the study of historical geography in many cultural areas either, but always requires a very careful approach and high academic competence so as to avoid easy mistakes of judgment.

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