large part of reinforced shoreline constructed around upright amphorae filled with earth and converted to ‘hards’ on the foreshore. In Roman times, the town on its small promontory was rimmed by an extensive lagoon with mangroves on its fringes that offered ships protection from the currents and sea winds on the west and the open sea to the east. After 900 years of abandonment, the Islamic town was established on the eastern portion of the Roman town and in the infilled lagoonal areas. Chapter 6 describes the beachfront structures but no built features such as the hards or docks and jetties were recorded.

Shoreline structures and rubbish deposits of both phases include extensive maritime components, from ballast and fishing gear to ship parts, pulley sheaves to brailing rings, copper tacks, lead sheathing, line, tenons, and pitch. Other components of the same deposit include hundreds of Greek documents, some written in Latin and demotic, and a number that are written in unknown alphabets, with ostraka bearing foreign names. In addition to evidence for both local non-Egyptian and non-Mediterranean highly literate individuals, the material remains of children’s clothing and shoes, gaming-pieces, incense burners and extensive jewellery finds testify to aspects of daily life that will provide a useful complement to information about economic and bureaucratic interactions. The relative prosperity of the populations suggested by earlier excavations is clear from the calibre of materials in rubbish deposits, and a single hoard of 500 Ayyubid silver- and gold-coins hints at the possibilities for successful residents.

A significant number of the illustrations are repeated presentations of the overall site plan, which is helpful for immediate reference when reading trench descriptions but some of the most valuable for visualizing the ancient lagoon and harbour do not appear until chapter 4 (4.13 and 4.14, and 4.4 for the island). The speedy publication of the site is to be commended and, along with the large number of contributing archaeologists, is the likely cause of errors in copy-editing and inconsistency in the bibliography. The careful work to define the Islamic town adds critical data to previous work by Whitcomb, and excavations further north in the Red Sea by Kawatoko contribute archive data for the design of vessels and the different uses of the dhow. The inclusion of this chapter and another on the dhow industry (Chapter 5, pp.93–109) is probably aimed at making this a ‘stand-alone’ volume for those who do not have access to the first volume in the series. It would have been preferable for these two chapters to be placed immediately after one another.

The careful and extensive excavations at Myos Hormos/Quseir al Qadim provide unprecedented access to information about life and maritime activities on the Red Sea shore. Visitors to the site can see the trenches and architectural remains described in this volume, and upcoming publications will let all of us see life there as it was, documenting one of the driving forces in the development of western economies from the Roman period through the age of exploration and beyond.

CHERYL WARD
Dept. of Anthropology, Florida State University, USA

Seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman: the People of the Dhow
(Kegan Paul Arabia Library)
DIONISIUS A. AGIUS
285 pp., 86 b&w figs, 6 maps, 24 tables

This book is the second from a trilogy of works by Agius on the maritime world of the Arabian Gulf. These three books: In the Wake of the Dhow (2002), reviewed in IJNA 34.1, 158–9; the volume under review; and a third which will focus on the maritime history of the region, are the fruit of ten years of research by the author (between 1990 and 2000) as part of the ‘Seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman’ (SFAGO) project. Although originally a linguist and historian of the Arabic language, Agius has, in the context of SFAGO, employed his exceptional skill in Arabic to record and document the oral history of the maritime people in the Arabian Gulf. This volume is a well-balanced fusion of literary sources, oral testimony and published volumes with the latter listed in a comprehensive bibliography (pp.241–62) which provides the reader with avenues for further reading in subjects that may have been touched upon by Agius.

The author starts with a brief description of his methodology and an account of how he conducted his research (pp.1–2) and proceeds with an excellent critique of the literary sources used for this volume. In itself, this critique is a significant tool for historians interested in trade, travel, navigation and geography in and of the region (pp.4–11). The last section of Chapter 1 is an attempt by the author to put his work within Braudel’s Annales theoretical framework (pp.11–12). Although it can be argued that some of Braudel’s ideas for the Mediterranean have been superseded by recent theories proposed in Horden and Purcell’s Corrupting Sea (2002), the inclusion of the environment and climatic conditions and how these influence boat design and the people who sail and operate the vessels is commendable. A chapter on the geography and oceanography of the area of study fitted in at this stage, however, would have enabled the reader better to contextualize the other chapters in the volume.

Chapter 2 (pp.13–44) is an extensive overview of the dhow including sections on regional variations in the design of vessels and the different uses of the dhow. The inclusion of this chapter and another on the dhow industry (Chapter 3, pp.93–109) is probably aimed at making this a ‘stand-alone’ volume for those who do not have access to the first volume in the series. It would have been preferable for these two chapters to be placed immediately after one another. Chapters 3 and 4 provide a geographical and historical
account of the various places in the Gulf that are included in the author’s study. These chapters also include invaluable information on the maritime crafts and practices of the region including rope making and the transport of fish to inland non-maritime zones (p.85).

The first five chapters may be considered as setting the scene for the following seven which tackle a series of themes. In Chapter 6 Agius discusses the intricate link between the export of dates and the sailing season (pp.111–16). Both pearl-fishing and date-harvesting sustained the maritime economy of the region and ‘ocean trade revolved around the export of dates’ (p.113). This section provides an insight into the sea-borne transport of agricultural produce along dispersed hinterlands in and around the Gulf. This is not dissimilar to the movement of grain and other foodstuffs around the ancient Mediterranean.

Chapter 7 provides an in-depth description of the crews which operated dhows. Agius supports his ethnographic studies with historical evidence to provide detailed descriptions of the various ranks on board and their responsibilities. This chapter provides information on the complex relationships that existed between merchants, captains and crew members. It also gives the reader a rare insight into the responsibilities of crew members involved in the manning and sailing of traditional craft including the loading and stowing of cargo and checks on tackle, hull and rudder which were carried out before the vessel set sail (pp.132–5). After describing the individual ranks present on the dhow, the author concludes his chapter by describing an uncommon picture of shipboard society and life on board. This oral history provides information that complements our knowledge on aspects such as cooking, health and entertainment at sea. It would be interesting to discover whether there existed any link between the slaughter of sheep and goats on the foredeck of dhows and rituals practiced on the bows of various vessels plying the area (Hornell, ‘The Prow of the Ship: Sanctuary of the Tutelary Deity’, Man, 1943, 121–8).

Although not quite seafarers, pearl-divers are nonetheless ‘people of the dhow’. Chapter 8 describes in detail their work-practices from diving techniques to methods of payment. Due to the nature of the activity, pearl-diving leaves minimal material evidence and researchers are therefore dependent on written sources or oral history. Chapter 8 offers a detailed overview of an ancient activity, some of it gleaned from first-hand sources, of the techniques used by the pearl-divers of the Gulf as well as the dangers they faced (including medical problems). Once again reference is made to music as a form of entertainment on board with specific mention of ‘songs of the sea’ (p.150).

Agius’s specialist knowledge of the Arabic language is evident throughout the volume and he uses his expertise to explain the lexicology of the various maritime terms used in the text. In Chapter 9 (pp.156–7), for example, the author gives a clear description of the points of the ‘star compass’ in Arabic alongside English translations. Although no ancient written sailing instructions have survived, Agius had access to ‘manuals’ written in Arabic that enabled him to build a comprehensive picture of navigation techniques in the Gulf. Despite sailing close to a featureless coast, the recognition of landfalls was important to Arabian seafarers as it was to their Atlantic and Mediterranean counterparts. Figures from a mid-20th-century document (p.177) clearly show natural features such as hills and even palm trees used to delineate areas of navigational importance. Chapters 9, 10 and 11 may be considered as a treatise on traditional navigation in the Arabian Gulf, an indispensable addition to recent publications on the history of navigation and maritime perception by the likes of Arnaud, Medas and Vella (see for example ‘A maritime perspective: looking for Hermes in an ancient seascape’ in J. Chrysostomides, Ch. Dendrinos and J. Harris (eds), 2005, The Greek Islands and the Sea, pp.33–57).

The author concludes with a chapter on ship iconography. The various maritime activities of the Arabian Gulf and Oman have manifested themselves in a variety of art forms including ceramics, wood-carvings, graffiti, reliefs and paintings. Agius goes beyond mere descriptions but also looks at the context, medium and possible relevance of these ship-representations. After the final chapter, one finds an excellent glossary of terms used throughout the text, which is a useful research tool in itself.

The main criticism of this book is aimed at the publisher. It has numerous illustrations but the reproduction quality of nearly all the black-and-white photographs is well below acceptable standards. This is unfortunate because the reader is often referred to photographs, such as illustration 32 (p.63), in which the details (in this case fishing-traps on board a dhow) are hardly perceptible. Such an oversight by the publisher does not do justice to the many years of hard work that the author put into the collection of such an important photographic archive.

To conclude, the importance of this volume cannot be over-emphasised. Besides offering the reader a comprehensive overview of the maritime world and culture of the Arabian Gulf, it is also a precious record of a fast-disappearing world. As the author astutely reminds us throughout the volume, the expansion of the oil-driven economy has brought a decline in traditional seafaring and maritime culture. A paperback copy with higher quality images and a reduced price would be most welcome. It would permit this volume to take its deserved place on the shelves and desks of those involved in the research of maritime culture and history.

TIMOTHY GAMBIN

Sliema, Malta