

AL-BAHR – IL-BAHAR: ARAB-MALTESE SHARED AWARENESS OF THE CHAOTIC PRIMEVAL ELEMENT. ¹

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Abstract - This paper presents an overview of the role played by the sea in the various cosmogonies and cosmographies of the ancient Semitic peoples. It also takes into consideration the function of the Sea from the standpoint of the Semitic holy books. This is followed by a discussion of a number of Maltese and Arabic (classical and dialectal) proverbs from a number of Mediterranean countries with a view to assessing the various connotations associated with the sea, and to what extent these reflect the Semitic mythological and monotheistic heritage.

The sea from a cosmogonic perspective

Ancient Babylonian, Assyrian, and Syro-Palestinian mythologies from the second millennium B.C. onwards make frequent reference to the conflict between the ocean, being the chaotic primeval element, and the various gods of the Semitic pantheon. Most of these myths are characterized by one common *leitmotif*, namely the subjugation by the gods of the primeval ocean (or rivers, in the case of the Mesopotamian myths) and the establishment of some form of cosmic order. Thus, Marduk, the national god in Babylon, and later Ashur, the main god of the homonymous Assyrian city of the 7th century B.C., had to struggle with the ocean, personified by the primeval dragon Tiamat, before some form of order in creation could be established (Leach 1972: 989).² Similarly, Ugaritic and Canaanite myths narrate Ba'al's encounter with the sea lord Yammu, also referred to as Leviathan and Tannin. In the Ugaritic myth "Poem of Ba'al" of the fifteenth century B.C., apart from Yammu, Ba'al has to neutralize and banish to the underworld another terrible rival force, namely Mōt, the god of aridity and death. Some scholars have been inclined to believe that the eternal conflict between the gods and the ocean could, perhaps, be given an historical interpretation. Thus, Ba'al might well represent the Canaanites living on land as opposed to Yam, or Yammu, who represents the threatening peoples of the sea coming from the west, including the Egyptians (Virolleaud 1949: 81 and Kornfeld 1970: 827).

Notwithstanding the spread of monotheistic beliefs in the Near East, the ancient myths were not completely obliterated from popular memory and various sections of the Bible seem to bear witness to the mythological heritage of the ancient Semites. The story of creation, the establishment of the first humans in paradise, the fall of Man, the flooding of all creation, and the renewal of life on earth, are all familiar themes characterizing the Mesopotamian myths. The *Genesis*,

Psalms, Isaiah, Job, and the Proverbs, all echo the primeval struggle between the chaotic ocean, generally referred to as *ʿhōm*, and Yahweh (Leach 1972: 994).³ Furthermore, a number of biblical passages allude to the primeval status of the sea as against the rest of the created things that came into being at a later stage.⁴ It was this primeval status of the ocean that had made it a rival of the Creator.

References to sea-monsters as personifications of the sea are also attested in Arab cosmogonies. *Ṭaʿlabī* does refer to the great fish Leviathan, whereas *Idrīsī* and *Ibn al-Wardī* call it *tinnīn*, as in the Hebrew tradition. Moreover *Masʿūdī* writes about a sea-monster which was extracted by the angels from the sea and then cast down on the land of *Yāḡūḡ* and *Māḡūḡ* (Wensinck 1918: 3-5). Arab sources treating cosmogony refer to the universe as consisting of the primeval waters on which the Throne of God was poised. God, then, sent forth a soft wind which cleared the waters away from a piece of land. This was to become the site of the future Sanctuary, and the centre of the earth (Wensinck 1918: 8).⁵ Furthermore, *Kisāʿī* in his *ʿAḡāʿib al-malakūt* reiterated the common view which considered the mountains as coagulated billows of the ocean, and the heavens as the result of vapours formed by the foaming waves. On his part *Qazwīnī*, in his *ʿAḡāʿib al-maḥlūqāt* suggests a different, and perhaps more original, cosmogony. He states that God first created a jewel, then looked majestically upon it causing it to melt. This melting produced vapour which rose up and formed the heavens, whereas what remained of the unmelted jewel became the earth (Wensinck 1918: 8).⁶

The universal deluge is also impregnated with various mythological overtones. Indeed, the deluge might be interpreted as yet another manifestation of the struggle between the gods and the primeval waters. Having been tamed at creation, the primeval waters became violent again and drowned the whole of the earth. This necessitated another divine intervention which sought to check the advance of the waters, pushing them back and, ultimately, restoring order in a renewed creation. As regards cosmogony from the monotheistic perspective, both in biblical literature and in the *Qurʿān*, the ocean is completely dominated by the Creator. When God speaks, all the elements in creation submit to his will. God's dominion over the ocean is total and unquestionable.⁷

The sea from a cosmographic perspective

According to the Semitic cosmographic perception, the universe consists of three levels: the heaven, the earth, and the underworld. Each of these three levels has its own ocean. Alternatively, one can assert the existence of one ocean, called *ʿhōm* with three divisions, namely heaven, earth and the underworld. This ocean is made up of partly sweet and partly brackish waters. The partly sweet waters are confined to the nether sea from which rivers and springs flow out, whereas the partly brackish waters are found in the ocean around the earth. Moreover, the upper sea is the source of rain and dew.⁸

As for the Arab tradition, the most common view is that the earth is a sphere floating above the ocean. Ibn Khaldun compared the earth to a grape floating on water. In very plain terms, he stated that “*The water withdrew from certain parts (of the earth), because God wanted to create a living being upon it and settle it with the human species that rules as (God’s) representative over all other beings.*” (Rosenthal 1958: 95, vol. I).⁹ In his *‘Ağā’ib al-malakūt*, Kisā’ī makes reference to the names of different seas, stating that behind Mount Kāf is the Ponton sea. This is bordered by “*the dark sea*”, then “*the deaf sea*”, “*the immoveable sea*” and finally “*the weeping sea*” (Wensinck 1918: 24-25).

In the case of the ocean above earth, the Judaistic tradition portrays the “*upper f’hōm*” as some form of rain-holding basin. When this basin is full, rain falls onto the clouds and spread over the earth (Wensinck 1918: 20).¹⁰ As for the Muslim tradition, *sūra* 25: 53 states “*It is He who has let free the two bodies of flowing water: one palpable and sweet, and the other salty and bitter: Yet, has He made a barrier between them, a partition that is forbidden to be passed.*” This is a reference to the great salt ocean on the one hand, and the bodies of sweet water fed by rain on the other. Even though mixing freely, these two bodies of water are always kept apart, each retaining its own intrinsic properties.¹¹

The ocean’s positive and negative attributes

The ocean is generally characterized by both positive and negative attributes. To start with, the vastness of the oceans evokes the idea of primeval formlessness. This concept is echoed in the ancient mythologies, where the ocean is associated with chaos and with the underworld, and is considered the primeval enemy of the gods. With the underworld, of course, are associated images of darkness and death. The Bible and the *Qur’ān* are replete with such dreadful images.¹² The ocean is a means of destruction, as evidenced in Ezekiel’s prophecy against the city of Tyre (*Ezekiel* 26: 19). It is also the abode of the dead (*Psalms* 69: 15), of God’s enemies (*Psalms* 68: 23; *Amos* 9: 3), of unclean spirits (*Mark* 5: 13), and the land of no return (*Jonah* 2: 6). In Patristic literature, moreover, the ocean is a symbol of the human soul beleaguered by passions (Chevalier 1994: 838).

In the *Qur’ān*, the imagery connected with a swollen sea is definitely one of great impending danger, when the ocean will boil over, transgress its boundaries and inundate creation.¹³ Moreover, in *sūra* 52: 6 “*the Ocean filled with swell*” is one of the signs of the times pointing to the imminent end of the temporal world and the impending Day of Judgement.¹⁴ As regards other Arabic sources, Idrīsī makes reference to an unknown “dark sea” surrounding the ocean, where darkness, huge billows, sea monsters, and heavy winds reign supreme (Wensinck 1918: 43).

However, not all related to the ocean is gloom and doom. The three monotheistic religions share the view that the sea is also an instrument in the hands of the Almighty, who rendered it the element out of which all life originated.¹⁵ Reference has already been made to the underworld sea, the source of life-giving rivers and springs, and the upper sea which is the source of rain and dew. The sea, therefore, is a most essential natural element which enhances fertility. Furthermore, Muslim sources consider the ocean as “...*the material symbol of the universal, unlimited, comprehensive nature of the invisible spiritual world.*” (‘Alī 1989: 1367).

As regards secular symbols pertaining to the sea, perhaps the most common association is made with the “unconscious”, which has “... *currents of its own which may be either lethal or regenerative*” (Chevalier 1994: 837).¹⁶ The sea, with its successive ebbs and flows representing “... *the transitory condition between shapeless potentiality and formal reality*” (Chevalier 1994: 838), is a dynamic natural element very much reminiscent of life’s own dynamism.¹⁷ Moreover, the ocean is also associated with womanhood and motherhood “... *in both her benevolent and her terrible aspects ...*” (Cirlot 1971: 242).¹⁸ Finally, the different manifestations of the ocean, whether calm and irresistibly enticing, or stormy and frighteningly threatening, are frequently associated with analogous states of serenity or upheaval in the human psyche.

The sea in Arabic and Maltese proverbs¹⁹

Arabic proverbs are here reproduced in transcription. For uniformity’s sake, I have modified the transcriptions in Abela’s (1981, 1985) and Panetta’s (1941) publications, thus rendering them conformant with the transcription system adopted in this study.²⁰ Maltese proverbs are reproduced according to the Maltese orthography. Arabic proverbs have been translated into English, whereas French, and Italian original translations of proverbs given in the primary sources are reproduced unaltered. However, the Latin translations in Freytag (1843-73) are rendered in English. For obvious reasons of space, only succinct comments concerning the proverbs have been possible.

The old sea

It has already been stated that the sea was very often considered the primeval element, and thus older than the rest of creation.²¹ An allusion to this is found in the following proverbs which are employed, in fact, with reference to very old persons:

hāDir ġhīr ‘l-bħar. (MiSrāī) - “He was present when the sea (first) appeared.”

rġel kbīr ya‘qil ‘alā hafīr ‘l-bħar. (Ben Cheneb) - “C’est un homme âgé: il se souvient du creusement de la mer.”

In the case of the following proverb, the reference is to remote antiquity, namely when the sea was first created. Thus:

fahṭi l-baḥr. (Taymūr) - “The sea was dug out.”

The vast sea

In the cosmographic ideas outlined above, reference has been made to the vast proportions of the sea and its unfathomable depths. This notion of “vastness” is reflected in proverbs such as:

Id-dinja bla tarf u l-baḥar bla tmiem. (Aquilina) – “The world and the sea are infinite.”

ḡā’a biT-Timm wa-r-rimm. (Maydānī) “He came with the great sea and the land”: a reference to matters of big proportions.

bēnhum bḥar u barr. (MiSrātī) - “There is the sea and the land between them”: applied to big distances, both physical or otherwise.

bahrah wāsi’ (MiSrātī) - “His sea is wide”: said of a person of great knowledge, but it can also be applied to unfathomable persons whose intentions are not at all clear.

bahrah ḡārig. (MiSrātī) - “One gets drowned in his (or its) sea”: a reference to a matter which is difficult to comprehend, or achieve.

ḡaniya hattā ḡarafa l-baḥra bi-dalwayn. (Maydānī) - “He became so rich that he scooped the sea with two buckets”: a reference to inexhaustible resources. This is echoed in the next proverb:

yaḡrif min baḥr. (Maydānī) - “He scoops from a sea”: said of very rich persons.

Ix-xita fil-baḥar tinzel. (Aquilina) - “Rain falls into the sea”: this is a reference to the notion that luck tends to favour the rich.

nuqTa b-baḥrak (or *fī baḥrak*). (Abela) - “Une goutte dans ta mer”: employed when one wants to emphasise his insignificance in relation to superior persons.

'l-bahr ya 'ūz 'z-zyāda. (Taymūr) - “The sea needs the increase”: said of anything huge which, nonetheless, cannot do without smaller things. Without the smaller elements, the bigger ones would not exist.

'l-bhar ma yakrahš 'z-zyāda. (MiSrātī) - “The sea does not hate increasing”: a reference to the insatiable human nature which, no matter the riches and possessions acquired, always craves for more. This is also reflected in the following Tunisian proverb:

'l-bhar māhīd šTar 'd-dunyā wi-ylawwiğ 'alā z-zyāda. (Hmeyrī) - “The sea occupies half the world and seeks more.”

Il-baħar, fīt fīt, jiekol ix-xatt. (Aquilina) - “Little by little, the sea eats away the shore”: a reference to seemingly insignificant actions, but which have tangible results over a long span of time.

laqūtuħu Saħrata baħrata. (Maydānī) - “I met him as in the desert or at sea”, or “I met him in an open, wide field” (Freitag): said when meeting someone, with nothing, or nobody, coming in between.

At times allusions to the vastness of the ocean are made by means of references to minute and unimportant objects which happen to end up in the sea. Thus:

ħabbit bašna fī bħar. (MiSrātī) - “A grain of millet in a sea”: said of things which end up in the wrong places and are of little effect.

Notwithstanding the awesome nature of the seas, a Tunisian proverb reminds the ocean that God is even stronger than it. Thus:

rabbī 'aqwa minnak yā bħar. (Hmeyrī) - “My Lord is stronger than you, O sea”: This brings to mind the monotheistic notion discussed earlier, namely that God is the supreme Master of all creation.

Intrinsic qualities of the sea

The following proverbs refer to some of the qualities and properties of the ocean. As usual, apart from their lexical meaning, these proverbs are characterized by various underlying metaphorical connotations.

'andā mina l-baħr. (Maydānī) - “Moister than the sea.”

'a'maqu mina l-baħr. (Maydānī) - “Deeper than the sea.”

tlāt ħwāyiğ la bbawši 'alā tlāta: “Trois choses ne veulent pas trois autres:

‘l-baġla ma thibbši l-wilāda, la mule ne veut pas la parturition,
w- ‘l-bħar ma yhibbši z-zyāda, la mer ne veut pas d’augmentation,
w- ‘r-rūmī ma yhibbši š-šhāda. le Chrétien ne veut pas prononcer
 l’acte de foi des Musulmans.”

(Ben Cheneb)

No matter how much rain, streams, and rivers end up in the sea, its levels are always constant.

‘l-bħār kullhā mālħa. (MiSrātī) - “The seas are all salty”: an allusion to the natural impulses, inclinations, and desires which are common to all human beings. This notion is also expressed by the following proverb:

swā swā (zayy) mayyit ‘l-bħar. (MiSrātī) - “It is the same, like sea-water.”

‘l-bħar yiġbid u yrudd. (MiSrātī) - “The sea pulls and gives back”: here the sea symbolises life itself, with its succession of ups and downs.

Moreover, the following three Maltese proverbs refer to the ambivalent, and thus contradictory, physical nature of the ocean:

Il-baħar żaqqu ratba u rasu iebsa bħal stanga (or hatba). (Aquilina) - “The sea has a soft tummy and a head as hard as a staff.”

Il-baħar fis-sajf xih u fix-xitwa ġuvni. (Aquilina) - “The sea in summer is an old man, in winter it is a young man.”

Baħar infakħal ma jkissirx, jimborga. (Aquilina) - “A billowy sea does not break (a boat), it merely piles up (in billows).”

The invulnerable sea

The enormous proportions of the sea render it invulnerable. It overwhelms, but is never overwhelmed, if not by God’s will. Thus, it is often applied as a metaphor for persons of great worth, courage, etc.:

‘l-baħr mā yinfad fħ ‘s-siħr. (Taymūr) - “Magic does not penetrate the sea”: this is a reference to the sea’s invulnerability and a metaphor for persons of great dignity whose reputation is not tarnished by calumny.

kī-l-bhar: 'umruh mā yitlawwaD. (Ben Cheneb) - "Semblable à la mer qui jamais ne devient troublée": an allusion to a sober person who is not overtaken by problems facing him and persists in his endeavours.

ḡīfa lā tu'akkir baħr. (Freytag) - "A corpse does not render a sea turbid": a little thing does not have any effect on entities of greater importance.

'l-baħr mā yit'akkarši min tir'a. (Taymūr) - "The sea is not made turbid by a canal": the sea (i.e. the Nile) is not polluted by the turbid canal.

'l-bhar mā ddardratš 'l-kra'. (Panetta) - "La gamba non sparpaglia il mare."

Tuzz 'l-bhar. (MiSrātī) - "Pinch the sea!": this refers to a state of exaggerated audacity and self-conviction which could drive a person to resort to extreme, yet impossible and useless exploits.

'kwī l-bhar b-Tabbā'a. (MiSrātī) - "Cauterize the sea with a hot iron!"

yibbī yfallig 'l-bhar b-'aSā. (MiSrātī) - "He wants to beat the sea with a stick."

The perilous sea

The dangers of the sea are very often extended metaphorically to symbolise the various difficulties and obstacles which torment human existence.

blād 'l-wā' w-baħr 'Z-Zulumāt. (Abela) - "Au pays du wā' ou à la mer des ténèbres": this is a reference to very distant places. *baħr 'Z-Zulumāt* is usually applied to the Atlantic ocean.

laytahu bi-sāhirati l-'ulyā, wa-bis-sūsi l-'ab'ad, wa-fil-baħri l-'aħDar. (Maydānī) - "Would that he were in the high Sāhira, in the remote Sūs, and in the green sea": another reference to far off places where one would wish to confine his enemies.

yuhdur zayy 'l-bhar 'l-wagwāg. (MiSrātī) - "He surges like the Wagwāg Sea": an allusion to a very agitated person who talks vociferously.

lā taqrab as-sulTāna 'idā ḡaDiba, wa-l-baħra 'idā madda. (Freytag) - "Do not approach the ruler when he is angry, and the sea when it is rising": the meaning is obvious.

talāṭa laysa lahum 'amān: 'al-baħru wa-s-sulTānu wa-z-zamān. (Freytag) - "Three things are not to be trusted: the sea, power, and time."

'inna d-dāhila l-baħra mafqūd, w-al-ħāriġ minhu mawlūd. (Freytag) - “He who enters the sea is lost and he who goes out from it is born (again)”: the sense behind this proverb is very evident.

yā ħādī T-Tarīq, ġurta; fal-faġru 'aw il-baħr. (Maydānī, Freytag) - “O you who show the way; you have diverged. It is the dawn or the sea”: if a traveller waits for the dawn, he will be able to find his way. However, if in his impatience he decides to set out by night, he is doomed to lose his way. The sea, here, represents loss and ruin.

sāla bihim as-saylu wa-ġāša binā l-baħr. (Maydānī) - “The torrent overtook them and the sea overwhelmed us”: this is an allusion to hard luck which has hit others (i.e. just a torrent), and the great misfortune which has overwhelmed us (i.e. a whole sea).

The next proverbs advise us to keep away from the sea, as “nothing good ever came out of the sea.” (Lunde 1984: 130). Whoever earns a living on the sea, or even near it, is bound to lead a miserable life.

mā 'anā minnak yā bħar, wa-law yinbat 'alā Dahrak 'l-ħšš. (Hmeyrī) - “I do not want to have anything to do with you, O sea, even if grass were to grow on your back.”

Faħħar il-baħar u ibqa' fuq l-art. (Aquilina) - “Praise the sea but stay on land”.

Baħri u bennej la troddx il-borma (or: tlestix nar) qabel ma taral ġej. (Aquilina) - “Before you see the seaman and the mason coming back, do not place the pot on the fire.”

Baħri u burdnar qatt ma ssibu kuntent. (Aquilina) - “You never find a seaman and a muleteer happy.”

mkārī f-'l-barr w-lā rāyis f-'l-bħar. (MiSrātī) - “A porter on land but not a captain on the sea.”

Il-baħar duqu qabel ma titla' fuqu. (Aquilina) - “Before you go to the sea, taste it”: anyone who intends to embark on the sea should have a foretaste of what it is like before proceeding with his navigation plans.

Man's fatalistic belief in destiny makes him risk everything, knowing fully well that no harm will ever befall him unless it is so prescribed:

'umr a'Tīnī w-b-^ll-baħr ^lrmīnī. (Abela) - "Accorde-moi de vivre et jette-moi dans la mer."

Aghtīni xortija w itfaghni (or: ixhetni) l-baħar. (Aquilina) - "Give me my luck and throw me into the sea."

'rmīh ^ll-baħr: yaTla' w-fi bu''uh samaka. (Taymūr) - "Throw him into the sea and he will come out with a fish in his mouth": not only does he come out unharmed, but he actually ends up availing himself of that experience.

Surmounting big challenges

Notwithstanding the dangers originating from the abyssal chasms of the oceans, there will always be intrepid seafarers willing to challenge this unforgiving environment. On a metaphorical plane, these brave sailors symbolize those who are able to overcome difficulties confronting them.

mā rġāl 'illā rġāl ^ll-bħar. (MiSrātī) - "There are no men like the men of the sea": a befitting recognition in honour of the worthy seafarers.

'S-Suħba f-^ll-bħar. (MiSrātī) - "The (real) company is that of the sea": apart from their courage, sailors are also known for their pronounced sense of solidarity when on the high seas.

In their quest to secure a livelihood for their families, seafarers have no other alternative but to risk their lives:

yā ħarriTa, yā barriTa, yā qā' l-bħar. (Ben Cheneb) - "Ou cargaison, ou chapeau, ou le fond de la mer."

Inkella r-roqba, inkella l-hobza. (Aquilina) - "Either (risk) your nape, or the loaf."

man mārasa l-'umūra rakiba l-buħūr. (Freytag, Ben Cheneb) - "Celui qui manie les affaires monte sur les mers (affronte les dangers)": this refers to the inevitable difficulties one has to face when grappling with various matters.

'illī yinzil ^ll-baħr, yastahmil ^ll-mōg. (Taymūr) - "He who goes to the sea endures its waves": anybody who intends to embark on dangerous enterprises has to endure the difficulties related to them.

man qaSada l-bahra yastaqillu s-sawāqī. (Freytag) - “He who aspires to the sea cares little for the canals”: a clear allusion to the fact that when handling serious matters, one tends to ignore less important ones. This notion is reiterated in the next two proverbs:

gTa'nā l-bhar, yā bāl 'l-bhēra. (Gāder Būh) - “We have crossed the sea, let alone the lake.”

'illī yišrab 'l-bhar mā tg'SSal l-bhayra. (MiSrātī) - “He who drinks the sea is not choked by the lake.”

lā taqa'anna l-bahra 'illā sābihan. (Maydānī) - “Do not fall into the sea unless a swimmer”: that is, a person who is about to undertake some task has to be adequately prepared for it. The following is a dialectal version of this proverb:
mā gā l-'l-bhar 'illā w-huwā 'awwām. (MiSrātī) - “He did not come to the sea unless a swimmer”.

l-'awwām y'ūm bahr lā yuqās. (Ben Cheneb) - “Le (bon) nageur nage dans une mer qui ne se mesure pas”: a reference to able persons who reach their goals amidst great perils.

yhušš 'l-bhar. (MiSrātī)²² - “He enters the sea”: said of a person who is ready to risk everything in his endeavour to be of service to others.

Notwithstanding their great courage, sailors are sometimes overwhelmed by violent storms at sea. In such hopeless situations, they resort to ardent prayers accompanied, perhaps, by promises to conduct better lives should they reach home safely. However, when they do reach dry land, they tend to ignore their promises. This is reflected in the following proverb:

'imān bahhāra. (MiSrātī) - “The faith of seamen.”

Various temperaments:

Earlier on in this paper, it has been stated that the different states of the ocean may represent different psychological conditions. In the next three sayings, one comes across three graded levels of psychological agitation which give vent to great anger:

'l-bhar mālī. (MiSrātī) - “The sea is full.”

'l-bhar fāyid. (MiSrātī) - "The sea is brimming (copious)."

'l-bhar hāyiġ. (MiSrātī) - "The sea is agitated."

Apart from symbolising "violent anger", agitated seas can also represent "haste":

Ta'Ti' baħrak. (Maydānī) - "Reduce [lit. incline] your sea": this is an invitation to show restraint and curb one's violent spirits.

rābiħ zayy 'l-bhar. (MiSrātī) - "Bustling like the sea": this is usually applied to busy markets.

'l-bhar ġāmid. (MiSrātī) - "The sea is motionless": an allusion to various types of stagnation (in markets, personal relations, etc.).

bhar rāġid zayy 'z-zēt. (MiSrātī) - "A sleeping sea, like oil": a reference to psychological calmness, away from all deleterious anxiety.

Kull baħar jipplaka. (Aquilina) - "Every sea grows calm (after a storm)": an extension of the previous proverb.

Positive qualities of the sea

Up to now, the sea has been portrayed as an inauspicious natural environment. However, some Arab proverbs do extol certain positive qualities of the sea, even though, admittedly, these are very few:

'asmahu mina l-baħr. (Ibn 'Abd Rabbih) - "More generous than the sea": its sheer vastness renders it an inexhaustible source of natural resources. This notion is echoed in the next two proverbs:

ġāwir malikan 'aw baħran. (Maydānī) - "Be a neighbour to a king or a sea": one should seek prosperity where it can be found.

ġār 'l-baħr mā byi'Taš. (Abela) - "The neighbour of the sea is never thirsty": said of a person who is surrounded by resources and therefore is never found wanting.

Il-baħar sinjur. (Aquilina) - "The sea is wealthy"; or its variant:

Il-baħar sinjur iżjed mill-art; u jekk l-art tkun sinjura iżjed mill-baħar, il-baħar jitle' għaliha u jiblagħha. (Aquilina) - "The sea is richer than the earth, and if the earth were to be richer, it would rise (over it) and swallow it up".

'aSlah min mayyit 'l-bhar. (MiSrātī) - "More beneficial than sea-water": it is a well-known fact that sea-water possesses inestimable curative properties.²³

Sea depletion

Notwithstanding the huge proportions of the oceans, Arab and Maltese popular traditions do not exclude the possibility that this overwhelming natural element might, some day, recede and fade out of existence.²⁴ However, until the day when this eschatological eventuality comes to pass, the following six proverbs foresee a diminishing of the seemingly inexhaustible oceans. In this case, the sea is a metaphor for great riches, and other material resources. According to these proverbs, it is never advisable to parcel out great wealth. Hence:

farrīq 'l-bahr sawāqī byitfarraq. (Abela) - "Partage la mer en ruisseaux, elle se disperse."

qassim 'l-bhar, ywallī Taššān (or *gīdrān*). (MiSrātī) - "Divide the sea and it will become small amounts (or lakes)."

farrīq 'l-bhar yinšif. (Hmeyrī) - "Divide the sea and it will dry out."

qassim 'l-bhar, ywallī swāqī. (Murtād) - "Divide the sea and it will become canals."

'qsim 'l-bhar, yarġa' swāqī. (Ben Cheneb) - "Partage la mer et elle deviendra rigoles."

Il-baħar tqassmu jsir għadajjar. (Aquilina) - "If you divide the sea, it will become pools."

The next Libyan proverb portrays a person who is so unlucky that the unimaginable occurs to him:

law yimši l-'l-bhar yalgāh nāzih. (MiSrātī) - "If he were to go to the sea he would find it depleted."

Sea depletion can also be alluded to in connection with the much extolled Arab generosity. In the following Lebanese proverb, a hyperbole portrays one's "sea of generosity" actually depleted to his ankle:

* *'indu l-bahr l-^el-hilhāl.* (Abela) - "La mer lui arrive à la cheville."

However, as one can perceive from the following classical locution, the eventuality of the ocean actually drying up is not to be taken very seriously, at least for the foreseeable future:

lā 'af'alu kaḡā mā balla l-bahru Sūfatan wa-mā 'anna fī l-furāti qaTaratan. (Maydānī) - "I will not do such a thing as long as the sea wets wool and as long as there is a drop in the Euphrates."

Shapeless potentiality

Earlier on, it has been stated that the sea is also a symbol of "shapeless potentiality". This notion is expressed in popular culture by simple, yet very effective, imageries:

yašrī l-hūt fī l-bhar. (Ben Cheneb) - "Il achete le poisson dans la mer."

Tnejn kien u jkun, tlieta fil-bahar jghum. (Aquilina) - "Between two there was and there will be (agreement), three swim in the sea."

Improbable exploits

Very often the sea is evoked in a number of improbable, if not impossible, exploits with a view to emphasising a particular argument. Perhaps one of the most common proverb in this regard is the following:

'l-flūs ya'mlū Trīq fī l-bhar. (Hmeyrī) - "Money make a road in the sea."

byi'mal 'l-bahr Tahīni. (Abela, Taymūr) - "Faire de la mer une crème d'huile (de sésame)": a reference to very resourceful persons who are not easily put off by difficulties.

rūh balliT 'l-bahr. (Abela) - "Va donc paver la mer (le fond de la mer)": This is an original and colourful way of challenging somebody to do something useful.

y'ūm fī šibr mā'. (Burckhardt) - "He swims in a span (depth) of water": said of the resourceful person who avails himself of the smallest means available.

gham il-bahar kollu u gharaq fir-ramla (or fix-xatt, or f'xiber ilma). (Aquilina) - "He swam all the sea and drowned in the sandy bay (or on the beach, or in a span of water)": an unfortunate situation where, notwithstanding the huge efforts made, everything is lost in the last minute.

ġiriq fī šibr mayya. (Taymūr) - “He drowned in a span of water”: this is the opposite case where a good-for-nothing is helpless even in the easiest of situations.

*‘t-ta’līm fī S-Sġar, kīf ‘n-nqaš fī l-ħġar,
w-‘t-ta’līm fī l-kbar, kīf ‘n-nqaš fī l-bħar.* (Ben Cheneb)

“L’étude dans la jeunesse ressemble à la gravure sur la pierre; l’étude dans la vieillesse, à la gravure sur la mer”: this is a vivid reminder that education should start early in life.

yuSbiħu Zam’ān wa-fī l-baħri famuħ. (Maydānī) - “He becomes thirsty and his mouth is in the sea”: a reference to a wealthy miser who, notwithstanding his riches, leads a miserable life.

biyrūħ l-‘l-baħr u byirġa’ ‘aTšān. (Abela) - “Il va à la mer et revient assoiffé”: a case of inability to avail oneself of favourable opportunities.

waddāħ ‘l-baħr w-gābuħ ‘aTšān. (Taymūr) - “He took him to the sea (or river) and brought him back thirsty”: an allusion to a situation in a relationship between two persons where one of them holds total sway over the other.

išrab mn ‘l-bħar. (MiSrāfī, Ashiurakis) - “Drink from the sea”: this is another way of emphasising one’s indifference regarding how others relate to a particular matter.

The sea as a place of oblivion

A number of proverbs treat the sea as the ideal place where matters are deposited forever and are totally forgotten.

‘i’mil mlīħ w-irmīħ b-‘l-baħr. (Abela) - “Fais le bien et jette-le à la mer!”: this is an exhortation to do good for its own sake, and not in the hope of receiving favours later on. This notion is variably expressed in the Maltese proverb:

Aħmel (or imxi) sewwa u halli l-baħar iħabbat. (Aquilina) - “Do what is right (act righteously) and let the sea strike (the rocks)”.

‘l-bħar w-‘š-škāra ‘alā kidā (Ben Cheneb) - “La mer et le sac pour tel ...”: another way of saying “Let him to go to hell!”

Min jiftahar jaqa' l-baħar. (Aquilina) - “He who boasts falls into the sea”: this is the ultimate fate of the boastful.

Raj il-fqir baqa' fil-baħar. (Aquilina) - “The poor man’s good sense is left in the sea”: this proverb seems to hint that not much importance is attached to a poor man’s opinion.

Historical and social proverbs

The following are just a few examples:

šū ‘a bāl ‘akkā min hadīr ‘l-baħr. (Abela) - “Que peut craindre Akka du mugissement des flots”: the fortifications of the port city of Acre offer adequate protection against the sea and the dangers that come from it. This is a metaphor for situations where threats will not induce any fear or loss of determination.

‘ihḡar ‘t-turkī ‘idā dabbar, w-‘l-ingilīzī ‘idā baħħar, w-‘l-maskūbī ‘idā ġabbar. (Abela) - “Méfie-toi du Turc s’il vient en qualité de diplomate, crains l’Anglais sur mer, et le Russe s’il lève des troupes”: an evident reference to the exploits of various imperial powers in the Mediterranean region, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

zayy ġuzz ‘l-gīza: tamallī s-siggāda ‘a l-baħr. (Taymūr) - “Like the Turkish troops stationed at Gizah – the carpet is always by the sea”: this is said of persons who afford to lead a lazy, yet comfortable life.

kīf wlād bāb ‘l-bħar: lā yinkir, lā yiddī haqq. (Hmeyrī) - “(He is) like the children of the *bāb ‘l-bħar* neighbourhood;²⁵ he does not deny (you anything, but then) he does not fulfil (his promises)”: this is a reference to a particular trait within fishing communities characterized by a tendency to deal with others in an underhanded fashion.

Miscellanea

Quite frequently, familiar images from the maritime environment serve as the backdrop for proverbs of a miscellaneous nature:

‘addū mawġāti l-baħr: al-ġāyyāt ‘aktaru mina r-rāyhāt. (Freytag) - “They counted the waves of the sea, (concluding that) the incoming ones are more than the outgoing”: this can either allude to what Burckhardt (1830: 59) calls “... *paltry expedients to conceal ignorance or negligence*”, or a way to console oneself, or someone else, concerning lost opportunities. This proverb suggests that there will always be other chances in the future.

taqātala r-rīhu wa-l-bahr: waqa'a S-Sulhu 'alā markabi r-rā'is. (Freitag) - “The wind and the sea struggled, and peace was established in the ship of the captain”: this may mean that between two contending parties, the third one is bound to benefit. However, in the popular tradition the sense is diametrically opposite, for it is hinted that weaker subjects pay the price of their superiors’ contentions. Hence:

‘DDārab ‘r-rīh w-‘l-bahr: ‘ālīt ‘l-marākib dī nōba wi’it ‘alēnā. (Burckhardt) - “Wind and sea combat. ‘This time,’ said the ships, ‘we shall have the worst of it.’”

‘l-bahr ġurbāl ‘l-hāyba. (Taymūr) - “The sea is the sieve of the lazy worker”: said of the lazy and careless worker who, instead of sifting grain through the sieve, cleans it in the Nile. This is a reference to persons who resort to expedients in the execution of their duties.

yūġadu fī n-nahri mā lā yūġadu fī l-bahr. (Ben Cheneb, MiSrāī) - “In the river one finds what is not found in the sea”: one is bound to come across things where he least expects to find them.

qadaf ‘l-bahr (‘s-samak ‘l-mintin). - (Abela) - “La mer a rejeté (du poisson pourri)”: one resorts to this expression when hinting that an intruder has joined one’s own group.

qīs ‘l-bhar b-qaSba. (Ben Cheneb) - “Mesure (le profondeur de) la mer avec un roseau (avant de plonger)”: a reference to a prudent person who always makes his calculations before embarking on some venture.

Min ikun mimli biċ-ċomb, ma jintefax il-baħar. (Aquilina) - “He who is full of lead should not throw himself into the sea”: said of a person who is aware of his defects, or guilt, and should therefore avoid exposure to criticism.

Il-baħar bl-ġhorrief mimli. (Aquilina) - “The sea is full of learned people”: a witty saying referring to the self-confident who fail to take the most basic of precautions and end up in serious trouble.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the relatively limited references to the sea in Arabic and Maltese collections of proverbs, the ones quoted above tend to reflect faithfully the symbolism and connotations outlined in the initial sections of this paper. On the physical plane, classical as well as dialectal Arabic and Maltese proverbs abound

in references to the antiquity of the sea, its vast expanses which render it almost invulnerable, its various outward manifestations ranging from great calm to raging billows, as well as its depletion at the end of time. On the psychological plane, most of the connotations attached to the sea in the Semitic mythological and monotheistic traditions are equally attested in the classical and dialectal heritage. A number of proverbs treat the sea as the symbol of life itself characterized by its relentless dynamism of ebbs and flows, as well as a reflection of the different psychological moods which chequer human existence. Arabic and Maltese proverbs were not found lacking in their metaphorical content related to the imageries of great danger which haunt human consciousness. Furthermore, a number of proverbs relegate the sea to the ultimate abode of total ruin, loss and eternal oblivion, whereas others outline the ambivalent nature of the sea, with its opposite poles of shapeless potentiality on the one hand, and formal reality on the other.

As regards the positive aspects of the sea, these are not absent from Arabic and Maltese proverbs, but they tend to be less important quantitatively and are definitely outnumbered by the aforementioned negative connotations. The sea, in its different manifestations and symbolism, is thoroughly assimilated in the Arab and Maltese psyche. This is in line with the observation made by Abdallaoui (1985: 555), namely that "*La mer est un voyage, mais à l'intérieur de soi.*" This is the voyage I had in mind when preparing this paper, a voyage which should not stop here. Further research will no doubt produce more evidence about the discrete, yet central relevance of the sea in the consciousness of both the Arabs and the Maltese.

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Notes

- 1 This article is a revised version of a paper which the author presented at the colloquium "Man and the Sea" organized by the University of Sfax (Tunisia) on the island of Kerkenna from 7th till 9th May 1999.
- 2 These ideas are treated in the *Enuma Elish*, the Mesopotamian cosmological myth *par excellence*. It refers to a. the subjugation by the gods of the swollen river waters, b. the reinstatement of the king, and c. the renewal of life on earth. Moreover, in Egyptian mythology similar conflicts involve Ra and the sea-monster Apep.

- 3 Cf. *Psalms* 74: 13-14; 89: 10. *Rahab* is yet another appellation of the sea-monster personifying the ocean.
- 4 Cf. *Job* 38: 8-11.
- 5 He quotes 'Azraqī, Nuwayrī (*Nihāyat al-'Arab*), and Halabī (*Sīra*). After creation, God's Throne was raised to the centre of the heavens.
- 6 It is very likely that Arab cosmogonic accounts were influenced by previous Hebrew sources which account for the creation of the universe on much the same lines. Thus, for example, in the *Midrās b'rešit rabbā*, reference is made to God who orders the creation of a firmament in the midst of the waters. The drop that was in the centre coagulated and the upper and lower heavens were created.
- 7 This is evident in *Genesis* 1: 9; *Habakkuk* 3: 15; *Psalms* 104: 26; *Job* 9: 8; in the *Qur'ān* 7: 54; 21: 30; and in the Judaistic *Midrās b'rešit rabbā*.
- 8 Cf. *Genesis* 7: 11; 49: 25; *Psalms* 136: 6.
- 9 He states that Ibn Khaldun based his cosmographic comments on Idrīsī's work *Nuzhat al-Muštāq*. Cf. also *Qur'ān* 31: 27 and 18: 109.
- 10 Wensinck's source is the *Midrās Tanhumā*.
- 11 Cf. also *Qur'ān* 27: 61 and 55: 19.
- 12 Cf. *Psalms* 88: 6; *Job* 10: 21. The connection between darkness and the ocean is equally emphasized in the *Qur'ān*, with verse 40 of *sīra* 24 being one of the most evocative: "Or (the unbelievers' state) is like the depths of darkness in a vast deep ocean, overwhelmed with billow topped by billow, topped by (dark) clouds: depths of darkness, one above the other: if a man stretches out his hand he can hardly see it! For any to whom Allah giveth not light, there is no light."
- 13 *Qur'ān* 82: 3.
- 14 Cf. also *Qur'ān* 81: 6. In *Luke* 21: 25, the roaring sea is one of the signs of Christ's return.
- 15 Cf. *Isaiah* 40:12.
- 16 This is reiterated by Cirlot, 1971: 241 who refers to the ambivalent situations encompassing both positive (germinant) as well as negative (destructive) potentialities.
- 17 In Cirlot's view (1971: 241) the sea symbolises transitional states between the stable solids and the formless air and gases.
- 18 Moreover, Ayala 1985: 374 considers the sea as the "... élément féminin par excellence...", and states that "Dans le mythe, ainsi que dans la psychologie de l'inconscient, l'obscur abîme aquatique est sans doute chargé d'une puissante connotation féminine."
- 19 The basic word for "sea" in Arabic is *bahr*. It denotes a "large quantity of water, salty or sweet". It is very indicative that, according to the *Lisān al-'Arab*, the verb *bahira* (*r-raḡulu*) means "a man saw the sea and was terrified as to be taken aback", and that *bahira* also stands for *buhita*, namely "he was astonished, perplexed". These senses tend to emphasise the intrinsic dangerous nature of the ocean.
- 20 The Semitist may note the following graphemes used in this paper to transcribe the consonants and vowels of the Arabic and Hebrew alphabet: ' b t ṭ g ġ h ḥ d ḍ r z s š S D T Z ' ġ f q k l m n h w y. Vowels: a –ā, ʿ – e – ē, o – ō, u – ū, and i – ī.
- 21 This idea is captured by Stevenson 1948: 2048: "The sea drowns out humanity and time: it has no sympathy with either, for it belongs to eternity."
- 22 Cf. the Maltese idiom: *jaqbeż il-baħar għal...* "He jumps into the sea for...", that is: to do everything in one's power for the sake of someone else.
- 23 Cf. *θαλασσα κλυζει παντα τ'ανθρωπων κακα*. "The sea doth wash away all human ills." (Stevenson 1948:2048 quoting Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, I, 1193). However, in Malta it is also believed that swimming is not advisable for sick persons. Thus: *Il-baħar jikcef kolloxx* (or *il-mard*). "The sea reveals everything (or ill-health)". (Aquilina).
- 24 This is reminiscent of *Apocalypse* 21: 1: "... and the sea was no more."
- 25 This is one of the neighbourhoods of the city of Tunis.

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