

## A Sea of Sorcery: Roundtable on *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*

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When Shannon Chakraborty published *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, I realized that it may become the most popular English-language book about the medieval Indian Ocean world to be published in my lifetime. Chakraborty's novel brings the western half of this region—from East Africa to Southern Arabia to Western India—to life for its readers. It is at once a work of historical fiction and fantasy, following a band of pirates led by a roguish woman captain across the ocean we recognize and into uncharted magical territories. Chakraborty builds her version of this world by weaving together the work of historians, the perceptions and imaginations of the people who inhabited the medieval Islamic world, and her message to readers today.

Novels have long played an important role in telling this region's history, highlighting connections across a world before the militarized borders surrounding us now. Amitav Ghosh has inspired generations of readers with historical fiction about the colonial period of Indian Ocean history, showing how Calcutta, Canton, and Baltimore were part of a connected maritime world. As a work of fiction about people on the margins of society, everyday people whose voices are rarely preserved in the historical record, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* is engaging new audiences in an even earlier period of history. We hope this roundtable will help.

Academic historians and authors of historical fiction do not often converse, but we share a goal: to intervene in the present by shaping people's perceptions of the past. In this roundtable, I have asked a group of historians to read Chakraborty's novel and answer the question: **What would you want to share about history with readers of *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*?** As scholars who study the regions where this novel is set, and the themes that animate its plot, we have endeavored in our essays to provide accessible windows into scholarly conversations. To that end, we have also published audio versions of these essays with the [Ottoman History Podcast](#). Edited versions appear here in *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wuṣṭā*. Please note, the essays all contain spoilers!

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Many of our essays touch on how the novel’s narrative highlights which archives we do and do not have, and which kinds of stories historians can and cannot tell as a result. Only certain events are documented in ways that endure. In the novel’s many interludes, Chakraborty sometimes includes quotations from historical texts, like a delightful passage about women in the pirate communities of Socotra from the thirteenth-century travelogue of Ibn al-Mujāwir.<sup>1</sup> But she also crafts passages that mimic the style of a historical text. In “A Missive to the Wali of Basrah,” the author describes Amina and her lively companions in the denigrating and anxious voice of a political official.<sup>2</sup> Moments like this remind us of her characters’ distance from elite urban society, and of the power wielded by the authors of documents, chronicles, and legal treatises—the texts that survive until now—over people like Amina and her motley crew. And yet, in the novel, these characters hold their own, and we get to watch. We hope these essays will help deepen future conversations about the contexts inspiring this delightful journey across a sorcerous sea.

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1. Ibn al-Mujāwir, *Ṣifat bilād al-Yaman wa-Makka wa-ba‘ḍ al-Ḥijāz* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 1996), 296–97.

2. Shannon Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafī* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2023), 57–58.