

An Historical Geography of The Persian Gulf

# **The Persian Gulf in the Geographical Views of the Ancient World**

**By**

**Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh Ph.D.**

Professor of Political Geography at Tarbiat Modares University – Tehran  
and Chairman of Urosevic Research Foundation - London

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## **Introduction**

Though the main thrust of this seminar is the study of the cartography of the Persian Gulf aimed at the production of an atlas of the cartography of the Persian Gulf in 16 to 18 centuries, I think the evolutionary process of the study requires an introduction to the emergence of image making of the Persian Gulf in mapping of the earth's surface from the earliest times to the age of modernity. This is because the historical period in question is the period of traveling and seeing places by travelers and geographers who instead of using imaginations in map-making, began to draw the actual features of the earth's surface. Thus, the period under study in reality is the turning point in the evolution of cartography in general and of the Persian Gulf in particular.

Unlike ancient Greeks who used to imagine the waters of the world in the form of four seas branching out of the global ocean or the ocean that surrounds the landmass of the earth, ancient Iranians saw the internal waters of the world in the shape of two seas branching out of the global ocean. They called these two seas *Parsa draya* or the Persian Sea, and (most probably) the *Western Sea* (the Mediterranean Sea), the first included the entire waters of the Eastern hemisphere and the second all waters of the Western half of the globe. Though many ancient maps exist from ancient Greek geographers reflecting on their image of the waters of the earth's surface, it is unfortunate that we do not have any map from the ancient Iran showing the way they imagined maritime geography of their time. Yet, it is of consequence to note that Arab and Islamic historian/geographers of the early Islamic centuries have produced many maps that show how ancient Iranians determined the internal waters of the world to be composed of two seas. It is as if they had absorbed the ancient Iranian maritime geography of 'the two seas' and worked on elaborating it.

Ancient Arab texts have gone as far as verifying that by the two seas mentioned in *Ar-Rahman* chapter of the holy Quran, the Persian Sea and the Mid-terrainian Sea (Mediterranean) are meant. Arab and Islamic historian/geographers continued studying this old-Iranian geographical perception until 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. There are many maps from this period that present the Indian Ocean as *Al-Bahr al-Farsi*, or "*the Persian Sea*". But from the 16<sup>th</sup> century the peripheries of the Persian Sea begins to draw back and be limited to the waters that Georgy Zaidan, famous Arab historian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, describes as the waters surrounding the Arab World. From 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries the appearance of the Greek term '*Sinus Persicus*' or the *Persian Gulf* gradually overwhelmed the use of the term *Persian Sea* in Arab and Islamic texts. Yet, the term *Al Bahr al-Faresi* or '*the Persian Sea*' survives in some texts until mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when the term *Al Khalij al-Faresi* or '*The Persian Gulf*' replaces the term *Persian Sea* altogether. Nevertheless, until 20<sup>th</sup> century the areas included

under the term 'Persian Gulf' was wider than the present geographical description of this term. The maps that we have from these centuries give a fair description of the evolution of the cartography of the change and geographical extent of each of the two terms: 'the Persian Sea' and 'the Persian Gulf'.

### **Maritime Cartography in Ancient World**

Unlike the fact that most of scientific, literary and philosophical works of ancient Greece have survived, there is little more than none of these legacies that has survived from ancient Persia, and this is a powerful handicap in the study of the impact of ancient Persian civilization on the science, arts and philosophy of other civilizations down to our times. It is in this situation that for the purpose of studying the extent of science, arts, technology and philosophy of ancient Iran we are left with no alternative but to rely upon what ancient Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, and Arabs have told us of old Persia. Even in doing that, some historians like Professor Ilieff tell us that we cannot rely on these sources entirely because they are in most cases from Iran's national enemies (1) and might not have given an accurate description of the real events or might have refrained from providing a fair analysis of important aspects of the Iranian civilizations.

In any event, in spite of the extent of uncertainties that exists in studying geographical views of ancient Iranians, the sources that have remained from the ancient Greeks tell us that they had a clear perspective of the maritime geography of the world. In their geographical view the waters of the world were divided into four distinct seas, which branched out of the global ocean surrounding the lands of the world. Ancient Greeks referred to these four seas as: *Sinus Persicus*, or the Persian Gulf: *Sinus Arabicus*, today's Red Sea: The Caspian Sea: and the 'Mediterranean Sea', later on referred to as the 'Roman Sea'. The two maps below from Cosmas Indicopleutes and Strabo are examples of ancient Greeks way of mapping the waters of the world. Map No

*The four seas of the world in the map of Cosmas Indicopleutes (2)*

Map No 2

*The four seas of the world in Strabo's map of the World (3)*

Compared with this clear geographical perspective, what has left from the times of the Achaemenids about ancient Iranian perspective of the world maritime geography can only help us to assume that they saw the internal waters of the world in shape of two seas: one to the east and the other to

the west. The stale “Hajar ar-Rashid” from king Darius the Great of the Achaemenid dynasty found in Zaqaziq, a place near Suez, assumed all waters of the eastern hemisphere as one sea naming it after Pars “Persia” saying *draya tya hacha Parsa aity* (4): meaning the sea that cometh forth to this place from Persia. In other word, Darius the Achaemenid names the sea that starts from Persia in the east and goes forth to Suez near the Mediterranean as the ‘Persian Sea’ which comes face to face with the sea that includes all waters of the western hemisphere.

Sir Arnold T Willson quoting ancient Greek historian/geographers states that King Darius employed Cylux a sefarer from Caryanda to explore the sea routs from India to the end of the Red Sea (5). It is undoubtedly as a result of these maritime discoveries that the Iranians formed the opinion that the internal waters of the globe are two: one to the East, which is referred to in Hajar ar-Rashid as the sea that cometh from Persian to Suez and the other that goes forth from Suez to the west, later named as the ‘Roman Sea’, later still renamed as the Mediterranean. It is also as a result of these maritime discoveries that King Darius decided to join the two seas by digging the first Suez Canal between Red Sea and the sea to the West (Mediterranean) via River Pirava (Nile). By constructing the Royal Road between Suza in Khuzistan near the Persian Gulf, and Sardis on the Aegean Sea, the Achaemenid king seems to have endeavoured to connect the two seas by road and overland connection as well.

There is no other evidence known to us in the written history of Iran or in the writings of others to tell us more of the geographical perspective of the waters of the world in ancient Persia, or to shed more light on the way this particular geographical perspective influenced formation of Arab and Islamic views of the global maritime geography in the form of two seas. Nevertheless, what matters is that the very first Arab/Islamic document, the holy Quran speaks of the two seas in *Ar-Rahman* chapter that the almighty has sent forth to meet each other and a barrier between them (the Sina desert) so that they would not overwhelm each other (6). This could not of course happen as Darius the Achaemenid had dug the first Suez Canal between the Red Sea and Pirava (River Nile) and the two seas (The Persian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea) did not overwhelm each other. Yet, Abu Baker Ahmad Ibn Mohammad known as Ibn Al-Faqih, an early Islamic geographer, says in his book *Mokhtasar Al-Boldan* edited in 279 AH (10<sup>th</sup> century AD) that the two seas referred to in the aforementioned Quranic verses are the Persian Sea and the Roman Sea.

Verily says the almighty that he has sent forth two seas, Hassan is quoted as saying they are the Persian and Roman seas (7).

Other early Arab historian/geographers have also verified this view as Shahab ad-Din Ahmad Abdol-Wahhab An-Naviri has repeated the above words in his book *Nahayat al-Arab fi Fonoun al-Adab* (Cairo 1923). The number of Arab/Islamic historian/geographers who from the early Islamic centuries down to the 16 century AD described the internal waters of the globe as being divided into two seas naming the entire waters of the east as the Persian Sea, is many. Georgy Zaidan, famous Arab historian of the twentieth century states that old Arab and Islamic historian/geographers knew the entire seas of the east as the Persian Sea. He says:

**البحر الهندي والخليج العربي والبحر الأحمر والبحر الأبيض المتوسط والبحر الأسود والبحر الكاسبي والبحر الأسود والبحر الأبيض المتوسط والبحر الكاسبي والبحر الأسود والبحر الأبيض المتوسط والبحر الكاسبي**  
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The Persian Sea: and by it they meant all seas that surrounded  
 The Arab lands from the confluence of the Tigris water to Ilah (8)  
 and included in it was what we interpret today as the Persian  
 Gulf, Arab Sea, Gulf Aden, the Red Sea and Gulf of Aqaba (9).

This method of describing the internal seas of the world became popular in early Arab and Islamic works of history and geography. There is an abundance of written works from the third and fourth centuries AH that describe the internal waters of the world as being of two seas: the great sea of the eastern hemisphere being named as the Persian Sea. Sohrab, the third century Iranian geographer, for example, calls all waters of the east of the globe as “Persian Sea” and has described it as the great sea of the south (meaning east in ancient Islamic geographical descriptions) (10). The followings are the more noticeable works of early Arab and Islamic geography which have drawn the internal waters of the world in the form of two Persian and Roman seas giving extensive description of localities in and around the Persian Sea.

- Abi Zaid Balkhi has drawn the two Persian and Roman Seas in his book *Sowar al-Aqalim*, which was edited in the year 321 AH (see map 3). He names the Zanj Sea (11), Ethiopian Sea, Qulzum Sea, Persian Sea, and Indian Sea etc. on the fringes of the map of the Persian Sea (12).  
Map 3

***The Persian Sea and Roman Sea in the map of the  
 Internal seas of the world from Abi Zaid Balkhi***

- Abu-Ishaq Ibrahim bin Mohammad Estakhri, died in 346 AH, includes in his book *Al-Masalik wal-Mamalik* most Islamic lands in the description

of the “Persian Sea” (13) (see map 4). He considers Qulzum (Red Sea) as its beginning and Obullah (on Shatt al-Arab) as its end.

#### Map 4

*The Persian Sea in the eastern half of the world as  
appears in the “map of the Persian Sea” from Estakhri*

- Abul-Qassem Mohammad bin Huqal an-Nasibi al-Baghdadi dedicated a chapter of his book *Surat al-Ardh*, completed in 367 AH, to the great Persian Sea and described it as starting from Qulzum and passing by all Arab and Muslim lands going as far as India and China (14). He has also added a map of the Persian Sea on which all places far and wide in the eastern hemisphere are named on the shores of this great sea (see map 5).

#### Map 5

Map of the great Persian Sea as appears in page 45 of  
*Surat al-Ardh*, by Ibn Huqal al-Baghdadi – 367 AH

Arab and Islamic works of geography began to show some changes in their cartography of the Persian Gulf as from late fourth and early fifth centuries AH (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> AD). Compared with the maps of the third and fourth centuries the geographical peripheries of this great sea began to shrink in the mapmaking of this period. Geographical description of Arab and Islamic writings of this period gradually speak of the great waters of the far eastern portion of the globe as China Sea or Indian Sea, whereas the Persian Sea gradually becomes limited to the Arab Sea, Gulf of Oman, and Persian Gulf.

Of the most significant of these geographical writings *Ahsan at-Taqasim fi Marefat al-Aqalim*, by Shams ad-Din Abu Abdullah Mohammad Ibn Abu Baker ash-Shami al-Maqdasi known as al-Beshari, completed in 375 AH, can be named. This book includes today’s Arab Sea, Oman Sea and the Persian Gulf within the Persian Sea and states that most people call this sea, from Yemen onward as *Bahr-e Fars* “the Persian Sea” (15).

Of the fifth century AH books of geography Abu Rayhan Biruni's (d. 440 AH) famous *At-Tafhim Le Avaye-e Sena at-Tanjim* (published in 1318 AH) and *Qanun* of Abul Hassan Ali Ibn al-Hussein Masudi (published in Heidar Abad of Dakar in 1955) also show the limits of the Persian Sea as including Arab Sea, Oman Sea and the Persian Gulf (see map 6).

### Map 6

#### The Persian Sea in the map of the world according to Abu Rayhan Biruni (16).

The most significant document from among the writings of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AH that we can consider as an example of new changes in Arab/Islamic views of the global maritime geography is *Nozhat al-Moshtaq* of Abu Abdullah Mohammad Bin Abdullah known as Sharif al-Edrisi who died in 560 AH. In that document he considers the Persian Sea as a branch of the Green China Sea (17). In this new cartographical view, Sharif al-Edrisi in effect reflects on a similar perspective of maritime geography that was once expressed by al-Aalaq an-Nafisah of Ibn Rasteh in third century AH, which was an unusual way of looking at the maritime map of the world in that period (18).

Unlike the geographical works of the sixth century AH which showed the Persian Sea as a branch of the Green China Sea, works of geography of the seventh century AH gradually recognize the Indian Ocean in place of the old Persian Sea and sixth century Green China Sea. Shahab ad-Din Abu Abdullah Yaqut Bin Abdullah Hamavi the Roman, died in 626 AH, for instance, considers the Persian Sea in his famous *Mo'jam al-Boldan*, as a branch of the great Indian Sea (19).

Other documents from the latter parts of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AH show further alteration in Arab/Islamic view of maritime geography of the world. Abu Abdullah Zakaria Bin Mohammad Bin Mahmud Qazvini, died in 682, for instance, renames the old Persian Sea in his famous *Athar al-Bilad wa Akhbar al-Ebad*, as the "Persian Gulf" (20). In his map of the world he shows the Persian Gulf along side the Green Sea and Sea of Barbari as three separate bodies of water in the eastern hemisphere (see map No. 7).

#### *The Persian Gulf in the centre of the world according to Zakaria Qazvini (21)*

This is not the only occasion among the writings in Islamic geography and cartography of the period under review, which uses the term "Persian

Gulf” instead of “Persian Sea”. The new term appears in many other works of history and geography of the seventh and eighth centuries AH (14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). In fact this term appears simultaneous with the term “Persian Sea” in many works of history and geography of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AH (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). Of the more well know books of the eighth century AH, Shams ad-Din Abi-Talib al-Ansari ad-Dameshqi al-Sufi’s work on *Nokhbat ad-Dahr fi Ajaeb al-Barr wa al-Bahr* refers to this sea both as Al-Bahr al-Faresi (the Persian Sea) and as al-Khalij al-Faresi (the Persian Gulf) (22). Another well known book of this century, *Kharitat al-Ajaeb wa Faridat al-Gharaeb* of Abu Hafz Zaid ad-Din Omar Modhaffar known as Ibn al-Wardi, refers to this body of water as the “Persian Sea”, but shows a slight change in the cartography of the seas of south -western Asian. He considers the Persian Sea as being the same ‘Green Sea’ of the old time, with the difference that it is only a branch of the larger Indian Sea (23).

Geographical writings of the ninth century AH (16 century AD) confirm the modifications in the cartographical assessment of the Persian Sea that had occurred in the preceding centuries. A famous geographical work of this century, *Sobhi al-Aash fi Senaat al-Ensha* of Abi al-Abbas Ahmad Ibn Ali Ibn Ahmad al-Qalqashandi (died in 821 AH) speaks of the Persian Sea and Gulf of Barbari (present day Red Sea) as large branches of the Indian Sea in the eastern hemisphere. He states:

Verily branching out of the Indian Sea are two major and famous seas and they are the Persian Sea and the Gulf of Barbari (24).

### Conclusion

A brief look at the history of the Persian Gulf cartography prior to the period under study in this atlas reveals that the two Persian and Greek civilizations shared a similar geographical perspective of the land areas of the world as being surrounded by a global or world ocean. But their views differed when it came to the cartography of internal seas or water branching inward from the surrounding global ocean: whereas ancient Greeks proposed the internal seas of the world being four: Sinus Persicus (the Persian Gulf), Sinus Arabicus (the Red Sea), Mare Caspian and Mediterranean Sea, each branching in from a different corner of the world ocean: the Persians assumed that the internal seas of the world similarly branching in from the global ocean were two in the eastern and western hemispheres. In the absence of first hand (original Iranian) evidence on the Persian civilization, the said Iranian cartographical perspective of the global maritime geography is largely shrouded in obscurity, an abundance of ancient Arab and Islamic sources prove that while ancient Iranians knew the large body of water in the eastern hemisphere as the “Persian

Sea”, they have left no clue as to what did they propose in naming the body of water in the western hemisphere. The same documents, in the mean time suggest that the body of water in the western hemisphere was known in Persia of early Christian centuries (centuries immediately preceding the advent of Islam) as the “roman Sea”. This name together with the name ‘Persian Sea’ completes the ancient Persian perspective of the global maritime geography in the way that is sketched in early Arab and Islamic works of geography. This particular cartography of the waters of the world was adopted from ancient Persian perspective from the start of the Islamic era. While these sources have little to say of the ‘Roman Sea’ in the western hemisphere, they provide us with an abundance of documents on the cartography of the Persian Sea in the eastern hemisphere. Some examples of these works of geography from each of the Islamic centuries down to the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD that have been presented in this work demonstrate the evolutionary process of the old cartography of the ‘Persian Sea’ covering the entire waters of the east, turning into a much limited ‘Persian Sea’ covering only the Arab Sea, Oman Sea and the present day Persian Gulf in the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD. This limited ‘Persian Sea’ or ‘Persian Gulf’ in the 16<sup>th</sup> century cartography is considered as a branch of the larger ‘Indian Sea’ the other branch being the Gulf of Barbari. The 16<sup>th</sup> century cartography of the Persian Gulf in the Arab/Islamic works of geography edges very close to the more realistic way in which the European travelers and geographers of modern era began to study the shapes of lands and seas of the world.

#### Notes and References

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- 5- Sir Arnold T. Willson, *The Persian Gulf*, George Allen & Unwin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London 1954.
- 6- Verses 20, 21, and 22 of Chapter *Ar-Rahman*, the holy Quran.
- 7- Abu baker Ahmad Bin Mohammad known as Ibn al-Faqih, *Mokhtasar al-Boldan*, Leiden 1302 AH (1885), on the order of *Maktabe al-Mothanna* in Baghdad.

- 8- 'Ilah' was a port at the north of the Gulf of Aqaba according to Al-Monjid Arabic dictionary, 1966, p. 52.
- 9- Georgy Zaidan, *Tarik at-Tamadon al-Islami* (history of Islamic civilization), Cairo 1935, p. 43.
- 10- Sohrab, *Ajaeb al-Aqalim as-Sab'ah ela Nahayat al-Emarah*, printed in Vienna 1929, p. 59.
- 11- *Zanj*, is the Arabized version of Persian *Zang*, which means, "black" as in *Zanzibar*, which means 'the port of blacks', and in this context it is in reference to "black" Africa.
- 12- Abi Zaid Balkhi, *Sowar al-Aqalim*, written in 321 AH, as quoted in *Tatawor al-Khatt al-Arabi* (evolution of Arabic calligraphy), by Naji Zaid ad-Din Iraqi, published by Al-Jam al-Elmi al-Eraqi, Baghdad 1968.
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- 24- Abi al-Abbas Ahmad Ibn Ali Bin Ahmad al-Qalqashandi, *Sobhi al-A'sha fi Senaat al-Ensha*, Cairo 1913 to 1920, Vol. III, p. 3-242.