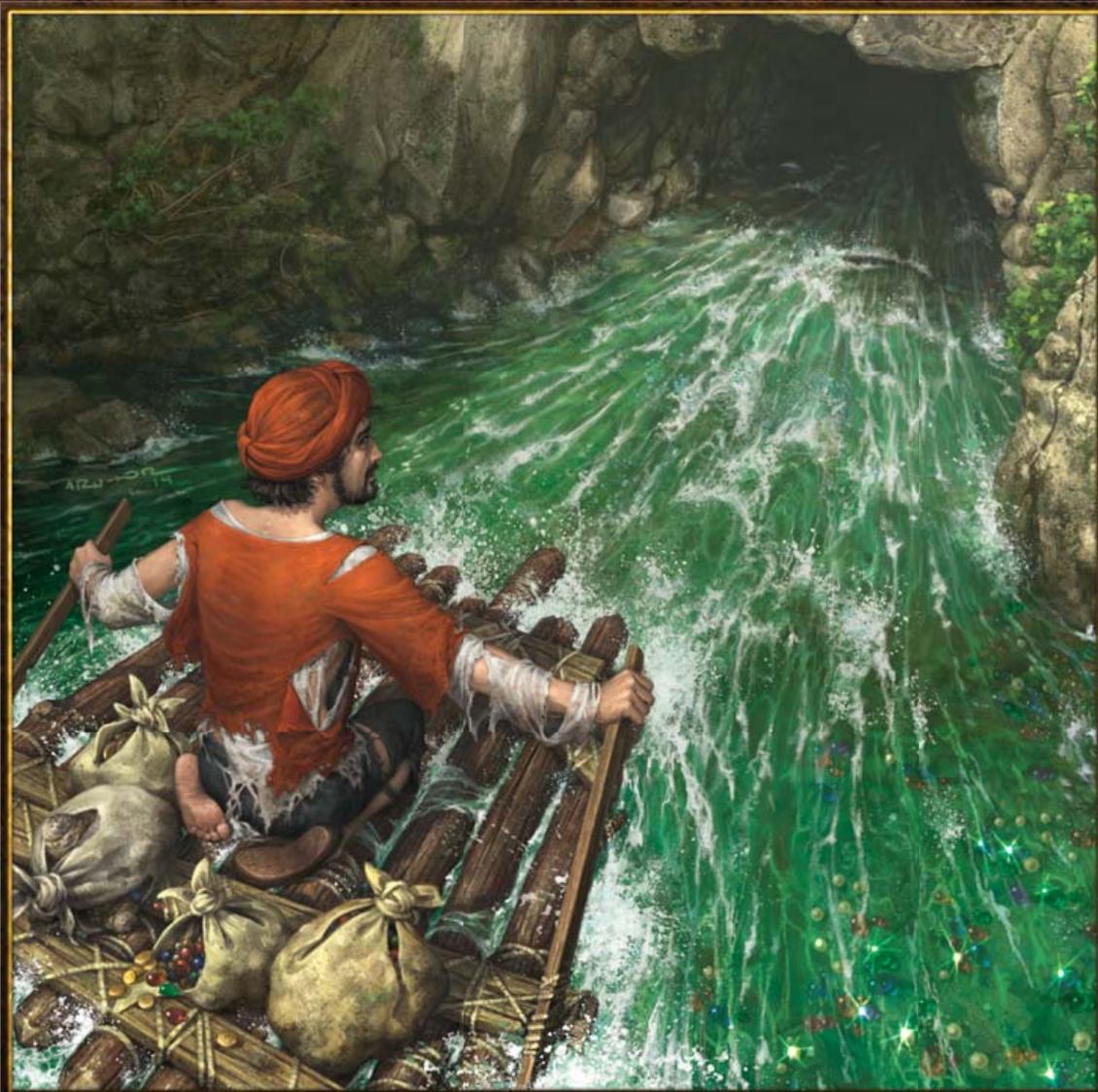


MYTHS AND LEGENDS

# SINBAD THE SAILOR



PHIL MASTERS

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ILLUSTRATED BY ARU-MOR



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# INTRODUCTION: TALES WITHIN TALES

Sinbad the Sailor is one of the great travellers in world literature. He arrived in Europe at the beginning of the 18th century, and his stories became famous as part of the great *Arabian Nights* story cycle. This was the first of many times that European readers became a bit confused about Sinbad (alias ‘Sindbad’ or ‘Es-Sindibad of the Sea’). Actually, there’s no real evidence that his tale formed part of the Nights before then. Sinbad’s history is full of strange moments.

## The 1,001 Nights

*The Arabian Nights*, also known as the *1,001 Nights*, is a collection of folk-tales, parables, legends, and anecdotes, set within a unifying framework. The collection seems to have come to the Arab world from Persia some time before the 10th century; its earliest origins vanish into lost history, although some scholars think that the story-cycle may have originated in India. These stories would have been the repertoire of public storytellers giving performances in coffee shops and on street corners in their personal styles, so they probably changed a lot over time. The earliest surviving manuscript goes back to 14th–15th-century Syria, although there is also a very small 9th-century Egyptian fragment.

The framing story is famous. A great king discovers that his wife has been unfaithful, and, enraged at all women, resolves to avoid any more betrayals by taking a new virgin as his bride every night and having her executed in the morning. Eventually, though, Scheherazade, the daughter of his vizier, volunteers to be the next bride, tells him stories in the night, and ends them on a cliffhanger which makes him spare her so that he can hear the end of the tale. She repeats this process for 1,001 nights, even giving the king children along the way, until he announces that he will spare her completely, and they all live happily ever after.

Today, the stories of Sinbad’s seven amazing voyages are often fitted into that framework. But the Sinbad stories actually have their own framework to hold them together – like that of the *Arabian Nights*, a matter of one fictional character telling stories to another. They also have their own, obscure history, perhaps going back to ancient Egypt; they certainly include scenes that can be traced back to ancient Greek epics. However, they probably owe most of their inspiration to stories of real Arab voyages on the Indian Ocean in the 8th–10th centuries.

## Arrivals in Europe

In fact, Sinbad came to Europe ahead of Scheherazade. Both were brought by a French traveller and scholar named Antoine Galland, who visited the East and then returned home to a country where local fairy tales were in fashion among well-bred readers. Around 1701, he published a French translation of the Sinbad stories. When someone then told him that they were part of a larger work, he decided that the work in question must be the *Nights*, acquired that 14th–15th-century manuscript, which still exists (at least in part) and which doesn't feature Sinbad, and published a heavily adapted French translation between 1704 and 1717. This was itself soon translated into English, although no direct English translations of any Arabic versions appeared until the 19th century.

It is actually likely that it was only after Europeans started lumping Sinbad into the *Nights* that Eastern storytellers decided that they might as well do the same. Arabic manuscripts dating from after Galland's work feature Sinbad, but there is no evidence that this was done earlier. There was certainly enough contact between East and West in the 18th century for ideas to migrate both ways. Nor is this is the only part of the *Nights* that may have flowed back to the East from Europe. It is possible that such well-known stories as those of Aladdin and Ali Baba may have been invented by Galland, or by Middle Easterners whom he employed for advice. But both the *Nights* and the Sinbad cycle developed from the first by absorbing stories from anywhere they could be found, so all this is really just part of a continuing process.

This book tells the tale of Sinbad as it appears in modern versions of the *Nights*, and then looks at how Sinbad has moved on from there. But it all starts with his story.



An illustration of one of Sinbad's many monstrous encounters – in this case, a group of giant fish. (Mary Evans Picture Library)