

Discussion

Indian raw materials and skilled labour have been, and still are, required in Middle Eastern countries which lack indigenous materials and skills (Hourani 1951: 89-91). An example is Oman (Facey, 1979). There Indian materials and expertise have been imported in recent years to build sewn seagoing sailing ships, a borrowing perhaps initiated by the earliest Arab traders. In the 20th century West Coast forests and palm groves continued to be a source of timber products which enabled wooden shipbuilding to survive in the region.

It would appear that the potential performance of sewn-plank construction has been consistently underrated by influential scholars as widely separated in time as Marco Polo and John Coates. From his description dictated to Rusticello it is clear that Polo must have witnessed a craft under construction at Hormuz, since he was aware that the strakes were fastened together with treenails before being stitched, and the planking was coated with fish oil (Yule and Cordier 1920, I: 110-11)¹. A surviving Omani kambari happens to preserve this construction (Vosmer 1997, fig. 25). Polo observed untreated imported coconut husks being pounded to separate the fibres before they were twisted into cord. The ships lying at Hormuz and of which he had a poor estimation were single-masted, single sailed and undecked vessels where horses stood on the hide covers protecting the cargo below. The information that these craft sustained losses in stormy seas en route to India seems to have deterred him from sailing there himself and determining upon an inland route. In addition to the shipping of water in an open vessel, the loss of stability conferred by the elevated body weight of horses stalled above the cargo was likely to have endangered the small vessels his description implies. However Polo assumed that the failure of stitched planks were responsible. It should be noted that the remarks