Islamic Archaeology in the Gulf

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In this paper I will explore the archaeological history of the Gulf throughout the Islamic period. In recent years a lot of new archaeological information has come to light on the Islamic period in this part of the world, especially in Eastern Arabia. More recent excavations at sites such as Jufar, Khus, Bilad al-Qadim and Sir Bani Yas along with the publication of older excavations such as Siraf, Qalat al-Bahrain and Suwarn has added enormously to our understanding of how the region has developed since the 7th century AD.

It is important at the start to emphasise the geopolitical and economic importance of the Gulf to both global and Islamic history. The Gulf is often dismissed as something of a cultural and historical backwater during the Islamic period. This is a deeply misconceived view, as can be demonstrated by examining some of the evidence relating to the important role the Gulf has played in world history over the past 1,500 years or more. This article will present Islamic archaeology of the region period-by-period, beginning with Hellenistic/Parthian times and ending shortly after the period when Hormuz dominated the region between the 14th and 16th centuries (the locations of sites mentioned in the text can be seen in figure 1).

The Hellenistic-Parthian period (300 BC to 230 AD)

The 600 years or so between the end of the Iron Age and about 200 AD was a period of flourishing prosperity across much of Eastern Arabia. This is reflected in the number of large sites such as Thaj (Saudi Arabia), Qal'at al-Bahrain, Falaka, Mshah (UAE) and ed-Dir (UAE) – some of which are developed enough to be called true towns. In addition, in many rural sites coins and burials have been found by archaeologists, all of which attest to high levels of population and activity.

The Sasanian period to the rise of Islam (230-630 AD)

However, things began to change in the 3rd century and by the 5th century AD it seems that most of the sites mentioned above had been abandoned. Evidence for occupation during the Sasanian period is extremely rare across much of Eastern Arabia.

In fact, the only archaeological sites where there is reliable evidence for occupation at this time are Kush and Khatt in Ras al-Khaimah (UAE), Jazirat al-Gharib in the Musandam (Oman) and Qal'at al-Bahrain. At Kush, which has the best-explored Sasanian levels, the impression is of a small site with a very parochial feel. A small mud brick tower, probably built in the 7th century, may have been the work of a small-time, local ruler whose power did not extend far (figure 2).

It is not known why there was so little settlement in Eastern Arabia at this time and why population levels had apparently declined since the Hellenistic/Parthian periods. The answer might be related to changing rainfall patterns but there is not yet enough evidence to be certain about this.

The later 7th and 8th century – Christians and Muslims

Until very recently the 8th century was problematic for archaeologists because the pottery types that were used at this time were not well known and it was therefore difficult to distinguish 8th century occupation. To some extent the stratigraphic excavations at Kush in the UAE have helped to resolve this question and an increasing amount of information is now coming to light.

Across Eastern Arabia there was a notable increase in settlement and activity. This is reflected in the appearance of new occupation at settlements such as Khidma in Kuwait (figure 3), Hulaylah in the UAE and Suwarn in Oman. Interestingly, we also have evidence of a number of Christian churches and monasteries from this time, such as Akkaz and al-Qusur in Kuwait, Thaj, Jubail, Hinnah and Jabal Berri in Eastern Saudi Arabia and Sir Bani Yas in Abu Dhabi. Although it is known that the Nestorian church had had a presence in the Gulf since the 4th BC, most of these sites appear to be new foundations as they have not yielded any earlier archaeological material. This might indicate that a reorganisation of the church took place in the 8th century.

At the same time occupation continued at Kush in the UAE, although on a quite a small scale. Occasional finds of 9th-century pottery wares from rural sites indicates that there was also some activity in the countryside at this time.

The 9th and 10th centuries – the Abbasid trade boom

This is the time of great Abbasid trading, when the Indian Ocean trade boomed and the Gulf underwent some very marked changes. New settlements emerged all along the shores of Eastern Arabia, and two major trading emporia emerged in the region: Siraf in Iran and Suwarn in Oman.

The 9th century is easy for archaeologists to recognise as it is marked by the introduction of a well-known, new style of glazed ceramics that was manufactured in southern Iraq but was traded widely over the whole of the Indian Ocean. These ceramics are known collectively as the 'Samarra horizon' because they came into use at around the same time as Samarra became the capital of Abbasid Iraq in the early 9th century. The new styles include lustra ware, splashed ware and cobalt-decorated white wares (figure 4). These ceramics were inspired by imported Chinese ceramics and reflect increasing contact with China at this time.

But it was not only the wealthy and urbanised populations that participated in this booming trade. Evidence from small coastal settlements indicates that seasonal, nomadic groups – bedouin – living in tents or wooden huts were also using large amounts of Samarra horizon pottery from Iraq. At the camp site of Hulaylah in the UAE, excavations have revealed high levels of such pottery in an occupation...
area marked only by a scatter of shell, fish bones and cooking hearths. This seems strange, as these ceramics are often thought of as rich, courtly styles – but the archaeological evidence is very clear that this was not the case.

The largest and most important site of this period in Eastern Arabia is Jumeirah, which is a site of over nine hectares now located in the southern suburbs of Dubai about 600 metres from the sea shore. Occupation at Jumeirah consisted of very substantial stone buildings amongst which appear to be a fort or caravanserai and at least one palace. The nine or so excavated buildings are widely spaced with wide open areas between them. The function of Jumeirah is not clear, but its size and the high quality of the buildings suggest that it was a site of some social and political significance, perhaps the seat of a governor or local ruler or a wealthy trading station.

With the flourishing of Basra in Iraq, Siraf in Iran and Suwar in Oman as well as the numerous smaller sites that are known, this period clearly represents a very significant regional boom in trade, settlement and urbanisation.

The 11th to 13th centuries – a period of decline

The early 11th century represents a marked break from the 9th and 10th century patterns described above. The beginning of this period can be recognised archaeologically by a type of pottery known as ‘Hatched’ or ‘Style III’ sgraffito (figure 5), which appears to have been manufactured in Iran but was widely exported. During the excavations at Siraf, this ware was dubbed ‘the type fossil of decline’ and it is true that its introduction seems to mark the decline in the size of both Siraf and Suwar.

At the regional level, there is very little evidence for occupation at this time over the whole of Eastern Arabia. Only three sites are known from Bahrain; Qal’a al-Bahrain, Bilad al-Qadim and Barbar and the distinctive plain sgraffito pottery of this period is otherwise almost unknown there. No evidence at all of activity has so far come to light from the al-Hassa oasis, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia or Kuwait.

The obvious decline of this time is generally attributed to a re-directing of Indian Ocean trade away from Iraq towards Egypt as Egypt became a dominant economic and political power in the medieval Islamic world. This would have meant that Indian Ocean trade heading towards the Near East and Mediterranean would have flowed through the Red Sea rather than the Gulf, which seems to have lost its position as a seamew of international importance. The decline in wealth that this would have brought about might help to explain the decline in settlement.

The 14th – 16th centuries – the rise of Hormuz

Next we turn to the period that saw the rise of Hormuz. Between the 14th and the 16th centuries Hormuz was one of the wealthiest trading emporia in the whole of the Indian Ocean and its presence in the Gulf brought great wealth to the region. The town was located on the small, barren island of Janun, close to the entrance to the Gulf (figure 6). It became important as a link between the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean and the great cities of Persia such as Shiraz, Tabriz and Isfahan and its presence had a profound effect on the lives and economies of the communities that surrounded the Gulf.

The large and wealthy community of merchants who lived on Hormuz island needed food and other supplies that could not be provided by the island. They obtained these from the territories they controlled around the Gulf, which included parts of the UAE coastline, Bahrain and parts of Oman. Indeed, during the period of Hormuz power, we can find archaeological evidence for intense agricultural activity and high populations in these areas. Pottery scatters and settlements are to be found everywhere, as are the remains of agricultural field systems.

Under Hormuzi control Julfar in the UAE rapidly grew into a town at this time. Julfar was partly involved in pearl diving but the town’s fertile hinterland in the modern territory of Ras al-Khaimah was intensively cultivated to provide food for the merchants of Hormuz.

Coins were minted on Janun Island, and these are found in excavations of this period in different parts of the Gulf. Another interesting phenomenon related to Hormuz’s maritime trade, is the large amount of imported Chinese pottery that is found on Hormuz Island and in the areas under its control. Longquan celadons (figure 7) and blue-and-white porcelains are the most common finds. They can be found in astonishing quantities, sometimes on the most humble of rural sites. This is a reflection, not only of Hormuz’s wealth and power, but also of the growing economic influence of China in the western Indian Ocean at this time.

The 16th century and later

After the Portuguese took control of Hormuz its economic and political power seems gradually to have waned. It is not yet clear if this led to a decline in the areas of Eastern Arabia that were under its control – further archaeological work needs to be done before that question can be resolved.

What is clear is that the next big change that affected settlement in Eastern Arabia was the explosive growth of the pearl trade in the 18th century. This was caused by the increasing demand for pearls in Europe. Many new settlements were founded in Eastern Arabia by people involved directly in pearl diving and trade – Abu Dhabi is one well-known example but there are many others. Some of these new settlements have continued to be occupied to the present day, others, which were once large towns, were abandoned some time ago – al-Zubarah in Qatar is an example.

After this time, the pattern of settlement in Eastern Arabia seems to have remained largely unchanged until the discovery of oil in the 20th century.

This brief overview has shown that it is now possible to begin to reconstruct the history of Eastern Arabia throughout the Islamic period using archaeological evidence to supplement the rare historical sources. One point that emerges very clearly is the fact that settlement in the region has gone through numerous very marked periods of boom and periods of decline throughout time. Many of these dramatic changes appear to be related to the fortunes of Indian Ocean trade and this must demonstrate the importance that trade and commerce have played in the history of the region.

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About the Journal

Hadeth al-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadeth al-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 16 got underway in October 2010 and, as with previous years, is presenting scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation created to manage the loan of the prestigious al-Sabah Collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

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