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Chapter 7

Sohar to Dhofar

Urbanization in Oman

By Peter Webb

For the transregional trading networks that connected China, India and the Middle East over the past 2,000 years, Oman was the facilitator, the nodal point that enabled the connection to happen. The vast expanses of ocean between Iraq and China were too great and too long for premodern ships to cover by direct sailing and, without stopping points for water and supplies, long-distance trade would have been impossible. The month-long crossing of the open sea between Arabia and India was particularly challenging, and it was to Oman – the furthest shore of Arabia in the direction of India – where sailors looked for water to load their ships before venturing out, or to quench their parched throats coming in. Patterns of urbanization in Oman responded to the needs of merchant sailors and, as soon as long-distance maritime trading networks were established in the second century BCE, Omani ports became key conduits for the seasonal patterns of ships plying the monsoon winds across continents. Over the centuries, Omani towns grew as they converted their geographically favourable position into becoming emporia for world trade and, eventually, the seat of maritime empires in control of the trading networks themselves.

For the past 2,000 years, Oman's major urban settlements have looked outwards to the sea. Geography has made this so. Much of Oman's interior is composed of sandy deserts, many with dense ridges of high dunes which inhibit crossing – the kind of terrain that Bedouin do their best to avoid. While there are some habitable deserts, where camel-herding nomads can pasture, Oman's land access to the rest of Arabia is constricted by the sandy desolation of the Empty Quarter, known in Arabic as *al-Aḥqāf*, the 'land of rolling dunes', and only a thin stretch of more benevolent desert near Oman's present borders with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) enable a corridor of connection to the rest of Arabia. But mountains conspire against this trading route as well. Oman is ringed across its northern and southern territory by tall, jagged peaks with few passes, and only one track near Sohar connects with what is now the eastern UAE (Figure 1). The general difficulties in crossing Oman's mountains have meant that peoples on one side of the ridges can live quite apart and be remarkably independent from populations on the other side.

Figure 1 Jabal al-Akhḍar in the Ḥajar Mountains of Northern Oman



© Peter Webb.

Between desert and cliffs, long-distance caravan routes through the land of Oman were arduous to establish. Thus, while Oman is geographically part of Arabia, it was not easy to maintain close connections with the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. This leaves Oman's coast: a narrow strip of land between the mountains and sea where felicitously-placed sandbanks, lagoons and bays enabled locals to construct safe harbours and utilize the sea to explore connections with other peoples. Muscat is, after all, nearer Karachi than to Riyadh, and while very challenging deserts stand in the way of a would-be traveller into Arabia from Muscat, favourable sea breezes and monsoon patterns make the India-Oman journey reliably smooth sailing.

Across history, the principal drivers behind Oman's urbanization are therefore to be found as a result of maritime trade. Of necessity, the coastal settlements needed friendly relations with populations in the mountainous and desert hinterlands and, in certain periods, rulers from behind the mountains unified tracts of the coast into cohesive political entities, but land empires in Oman are the historical exception, not the norm. Wealth was more usually concentrated in the port cities with their connections spreading outwards onto the sea lanes across the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean that emmeshed Oman's coastal centres in networks of mercantile populations linked to Iraq, Iran, Yemen, East Africa, India and beyond. The business in Omani cities was the transshipment of goods to richer markets beyond the seas, as well as some exports of more locally sourced aromatics, horses and pearls. It is the exchange occurring from shipping activities that inspired the architectural features and cultural connections that shaped Oman's urban civilizations.

Oman: its place and people

The term 'Oman' and the precise geographical place it specifies has shifted in meaning over the course of time. Today's nation state of Oman is oriented predominantly on a north-south axis, occupying the whole eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, essentially covering all the territory that borders the Arabian Sea. In premodern times, however, 'Oman' referred to an east-west oriented geographical region, which encompassed just the northern part of today's Omani state and the territory which is now the eastern and northern parts of the UAE. For medieval writers, 'Oman' meant the coastal cities that look out onto the gulf that connects the Arabian Sea with the Strait of Hormuz and the southern shore of the eastern part of the Persian Gulf, along with the settlements in the mountains immediately behind that strip of coastline. The lands south of that strip, the vast deserts that form the centre of today's Oman, were so scarcely populated and infrequently travelled that they were not considered within the sphere of premodern Oman. As for the far south of today's Omani nation, the province of Dhofar, it was connected in premodern times to the networks of trade and political power that spanned the long southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Dhofar was much easier to reach by sea from Yemeni ports than it was overland from Oman, and up until the modern period, Dhofar was usually under some nominal control by states based in Yemen.

Today's Omani nation therefore contains an array of regions that were historically distinct, and a portion of the territory which used to constitute Oman is now part of the UAE. This chapter explores the broad area of Eastern Arabia as a whole: the traditional heartland of historic Oman of the northern coast (from the UAE to the Arabian Sea), and Dhofar, the far south of today's Oman, which was involved in its own networks of maritime trade and exhibits its unique architectural and cultural exchange too.

Though the northern and southern edges of Eastern Arabia were not previously united politically, their favourable outlets to the Indian Ocean opened them up to transregional maritime networks of mercantile and cultural exchange, and both regions have important stories to tell.

Oman and Dhofar's historic significance stems from the combination of their geographical position and the occurrence of annual monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean. Both the northern and southern shores of Eastern Arabia catch the south-west monsoon winds, which can transport boats with relative ease straight across the Indian Ocean in about one month of sailing. From India's western shores, the ships can continue towards further legs of the journey around Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Sumatra and Java. From there, the ports of southern China are but one further leg of sailing away, though the precise route and time taken was dependent on particular monsoon winds. For the return to Oman, boats would also use the monsoon winds in the winter, meaning a round trip of trade from the Middle East to Southeast Asia and back again could be completed by Omani sailors within one year. Ships that did not originate in Oman would still need to stop at its harbours as its ports offered the last opportunity to take on water before venturing into the Indian Ocean. Oman's coast was effectively a natural gateway for all Indian Ocean trade to the Middle East.

The northern coast of historic Oman was also well placed to benefit from the patterns of urbanization following the spread of Islam from the seventh century CE onwards. As the Muslim Caliphate established itself across the Middle East, many of its most important cities were constructed in Iraq and Iran, concentrating a tremendous wealth and demand for luxury goods in markets connected to the western edge of the Persian Gulf. As Islamic civilization developed, ships plying the seas to India and China continued to increase. Maritime trade via the Persian Gulf satisfied the vast demand for ceramics, aromatics, silks and other wares such as Chinese lacquer, becoming a lucrative business. The northern coast of Oman was the natural channel for this trade. Not only was Oman directly on the sea passage between India and Mesopotamia, but it also seems that Oman was a necessary transshipment hub. Hourani's *Arab Seafaring* (1995) reports that in the premodern period, vessels suited to Indian Ocean seafaring were different from the boats that could best navigate the shallows of the Persian Gulf and, if this was indeed the case, the northern Omani ports were well located for the transfer of goods between ships.

For long-distance maritime traders, the harbours of Oman's northern coast were obvious stopping points, but those traders could also have availed themselves of ports on the opposite side of the Strait as well. Such ports lay in the territory of present-day Iran where precisely the same patterns of shipping and monsoon winds applied. Hence, for ship captains over the centuries, there was no fundamental difference between the harbours on either the Omani or the Iranian sides of the Strait as both were conduits to the same Middle Eastern markets and both could supply freshwater. Competition could therefore have emerged between the ports of Oman and Iran, but geopolitics did not quite play out as a rivalry across the Strait.

Like the situation in Oman, the mountainous Iranian coastline around the Strait of Hormuz separates its coastal cities from the usual heartlands of Iranian empires, and rulers in Shiraz, Isfahan or Tehran often found it difficult to maintain continuous and effective control over the southern coast. The highly lucrative node of trade on both sides of the Strait of Hormuz therefore did not experience interference from land-based empires through much of history. Iranian and Iraqi-based states made periodic attempts to control the coast but, frequently, without significant long-term success, allowing the coastal towns on both sides to manage their own affairs. The span of history is not without conflict and attempts to unify both sides of the Strait, and patterns of trade and local political power, sometimes favoured one side of the straight over the other. However, for much of recorded time, the region enjoyed relative peace, with regular integration and negotiation between small-scale states and the harbour towns.

As a result of the macro political trends that protected the Strait of Hormuz from most land-based empires, the region's demographics were complex and cosmopolitan. The coastal towns operated within a broad network of Indian Ocean mobility, and peoples moved freely on both sides of the Strait, which resulted in mixed populations who absorbed influences from afar. Neither strictly 'Iranian' or 'Arab', the coastal towns had hybrid identities for much of their history, which were fashioned more on the trends of the maritime networks than the lifestyles of the land-based communities of the interior. The towns of Oman's northern coast melded Arabian, Mesopotamian, Iranian and other influences, and the southern coast also had the added proximity of Yemen to shape its cultural production. The ways in which the hybrid cultures of the coasts expressed themselves in material and architectural forms is the subject of this chapter.

Effusive trade but elusive material culture

Seaborne merchants learned to navigate the monsoons of the Indian Ocean in the later centuries BCE, and coastal sites in Oman were serving those links more than 2,000 years ago. Oman's trade with India must have continued ever since; archaeologists have uncovered Indian-made ceramics in Omani ports dating to the first centuries CE, and Arabic texts from the medieval era attest to the major influx of foodstuffs such as rice from India to Oman. Maritime trade with China would have also started to develop in the first century CE when conflicts between Rome and the Parthian Empire in Iran and Mesopotamia blocked the easy movement of land caravans. Transport of Chinese goods took to the seas, and ships established routes to Mediterranean markets either through sailing up the Red Sea or by unloading their cargo on the Persian Gulf, handing over their goods to camel caravans that crossed Arabia. Either way, after their month-long crossing of the Indian Ocean, the merchant ships had to call at Eastern Arabian ports for water. Yet, despite all the shipping activity that would have passed through Oman, the settlement patterns of the region were intriguingly ephemeral.

Few sites in Eastern Arabia were continuously occupied for the entire sweep of history, and very few developed sizeable urban areas, especially before the fourteenth century CE. The location of ports also shifted over time, both along the Omani coast and across the Strait of Hormuz. This was because the natural harbours created by sandbars, bays and lagoons are prone to silting, but also because changing political circumstances ensured that no one town enjoyed a monopoly over trade nor an extended period of urban expansion for very long. Furthermore, Oman itself was not typically the main market for the most valuable long-distance goods, rather, it served as a conduit through the Persian Gulf to the ultimate goal: the rich markets in the urban centres of Iraq and Iran. We therefore need to ponder the extent to which Omani settlements profited from the luxury-laden ships that visited their shores. Did ships merely stop for water and perhaps transshipment into the Persian Gulf, or did the locals manage to tax the incoming goods and/or capitalize further by shipping them to more lucrative markets? The lack of powerful states on the Omani coast for much of history likely limited the harbours' ability to extract wealth from merchant vessels, and the surprisingly scant architectural remains of Oman's settlements, particularly from the early periods, prompts speculation that the ports were benevolent safe harbours for merchants whose merchandise was destined for elsewhere.

Literary texts provide evidence that some Omani merchants physically sailed to China on a regular basis and had links with the Iraqi markets in Basra, meaning that individual traders must have been very wealthy. However, we need to wonder whether the wealth was amassed on an individual level, sponsoring the construction of a few mansions, while – in contrast – the rulers of Omani settlements were less able to divert a share of the trading revenue into the public purse and, therefore, were less able to construct on a large scale (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Ruins at Old Hasik, including a mosque and cemetery in Dhofar Province, Oman



© Peter Webb.

The extent of urban development in Oman, and the resources needed to construct grand architectural edifices, relied on local capabilities and opportunities to convert the shipping traffic into revenue.

The history of urban settlement in Oman is therefore one of flux, both in terms of location of the cities and their fortunes. For example, Muscat, the present capital, is mentioned in medieval texts, but it appears not to have been a significant port until the sixteenth century when the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean and developed Muscat to rival and displace the other local ports. The Portuguese held sway for over a century and their efforts did bend trade towards Muscat, so much so that when the Portuguese were displaced, the newly-triumphant Omani rulers opted for Muscat as the seat of their own power. However, the Omani Dynasty soon split thereafter, with the more vigorous and prosperous branch based in Zanzibar during the mid-nineteenth century, relegating Muscat once again to a period of relatively modest means until the modern Omani state again sponsored Muscat as the national capital from 1970. In the previous centuries, port cities such as Qalhat to the east of Muscat, or Sohar and Julfar, farther to the west, had been much bigger and more important centres of commerce and politics. However, each of those cities had their own staccato history of urbanization, and by the time of Muscat's early development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the other centres had either fallen into decline or ceased to exist altogether (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Ruins at Qalhat (thirteenth to fifteenth century CE)



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Overall, little remains to attest to the two-millennia of Oman's key position in Indian Ocean trade. The warehouses, shipyards, captains' houses and merchants' mansions constructed from mudbrick, coral and the local adobe-style mortar (known as *ṣārūj*) have now almost all disappeared. While archaeology is currently uncovering the outlines of some former trading hubs, much of what had existed lies buried beneath the expansive urban development of today's Oman.

With only rare exceptions, the earliest of the large standing monuments in Oman date from the late seventeenth century when a vigorous dynasty from the mountainous interior established control over the entirety of the northern coast and constructed imposing fortresses and citadels to guard access to their ports and strongholds. As for the preceding two millennia, we know that monsoon winds brought countless sailors with merchandise from every port, from China through to Indonesia and India onto Oman's shores, yet only the tiniest fragments of the Oman they knew survive to this today. This chapter proceeds chronologically, uncovering the evidence to reveal the cosmopolitan connections of Oman's historical architectural fabric.

Oman in the early period of trans-Asiatic trade (100 BCE–600 CE)

Omani maritime connections with Eastern Iranian shores and onwards to India were likely already progressing more than four millennia ago. Fragments of Persian pottery from ca. 3500–3000 BCE have been excavated on the eastern coast of Oman but, in the earliest period, sailors would have hugged the shores of what is today the Iranian and Pakistani coastline, keeping land in sight and stopping at intermediate ports while risking the perils of piracy. Security would have been a major concern, as no large imperial navies patrolled those coasts, and some (perhaps many) opportunistic local communities and gangs would have found that raiding passing ships was more profitable than trading. The route straight across the Indian Ocean would have been much safer as pirates lacked the technology to venture so far from their local shores, and the ocean route would also have been faster as it could follow the monsoon winds. But this maritime highway was slower to develop since it required the ships' captains to trust their knowledge of the stars and monsoons to take them far from any sight of land or landmarks as they headed straight into the vast open sea towards India. These bold steps into the middle of the ocean only developed into a common route about 2,000 years ago, and maritime trade flourished as a result, but the nature and architecture of Oman's urban settlements at this juncture is unclear.

No extant standing structures attest to the early harbours in northern Oman, and geographical texts do not provide sufficient detail of the names and locations of ports to facilitate any specific identification. However, thanks to archaeological excavation, one port from this early period at Sohar has been identified, situated at the head of the northern sweep of Oman's coastline towards the Strait of Hormuz. Sohar was first developed around the first or second century CE, and it still remains a port today. It is one of the few urban centres to have enjoyed occupation throughout the past 2,000 years, though its importance fluctuated considerably and there seems to have been a few periods of relative abandonment. Sohar is a natural port thanks to a lengthy strip of sand surrounded by lagoons, which makes for safe harbours, but the site is difficult to spot from the sea: the ultimate cause of Sohar's longevity as an urban centre is the 500-metre tall solitary limestone peak that sits a few kilometres inland, offering a conspicuous landmark for sailors at sea and keeping Sohar town in business.

What that business entailed, however, is hard to visualize since the earliest Sohar is buried underneath today's Sohar. Archaeological soundings have discovered Indian ceramics dating from the first to third centuries CE, a clear testament to long-distance maritime exchange at an early period, but no substantive structures survive to shed light on architectural exchanges. The identity of the city's first inhabitants and the nature of their connection to the wider world is lost but for conjecture based on a small quantity of broken pottery, coins and fragmentary outlines of dwellings.

More substantial finds – from what was likely the main port of Oman in the early period – are at the site of al-Dur (Ed-Dur) situated in the Umm Quwayn Emirate of today's UAE. Al-Dur, which flourished from ca. 100 BCE to 200 CE, lies slightly south of the Strait of Hormuz on the Persian Gulf at the westernmost extremity of the premodern definition of Oman. It was closely connected to a conglomeration of agricultural and iron-producing communities in the nearby hills around present-day Meliha and, together, these sites constitute the most urbanized area at the beginning of the Common Era in the entire region. Given the lack of comparable, sizeable sites in eastern Arabia in this era, al-Dur may in fact be the town known by Greek and Roman geographers as 'Omana', an emporium for pearls, purple dye, silks, wine, gold, and many local dates. Material finds reveal that al-Dur certainly was a conduit for the transshipment of Indian and Chinese goods into the Middle East from 100 BCE to 100 CE.

Al-Dur's urban settlement has survived only as fragments of several rock- and coral-constructed buildings and now-empty spaces within the town, which formerly housed modest dwellings constructed of palm fronds. These building materials are typical of the Persian Gulf region, but the scant survival of the buildings precludes more detailed conclusions about the architectural influence brought about by the trading ships which moored at its harbour. The most prominent edifice of al-Dur that survives lies in the remains of a rectangular temple, with plastered external walls and entrances adorned in geometric decoration; it appears to have been dedicated to sun worship, as attested by a fragmentary Aramaic inscription and the remains of a pit used for fire rituals. Architecturally, little more can be adduced, but the ceramics and coins found on the site indicate steady connections with Parthian-era Iran and Mesopotamia. Roman and Nabataean coins also suggest that the goods shipped to al-Dur by sea from India and beyond were offloaded and transferred by camelback caravans, which plied the overland route through northern Arabia to reach the Mediterranean. However, the greater volumes of material related to the Parthian Empire indicates that the city was primarily oriented towards Mesopotamia and absorbed most cultural influences from the Persianate world.

Al-Dur's location on the Persian Gulf shore of today's UAE, and not on the ocean-facing Arabian Sea coastline of today's Oman, is a likely testament to the logistical challenges with which Oman's mountains confronted would-be traders.

Given that the lucrative markets for exotic wares were in the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, it is logical that merchant sailors would desire to bring their goods as close to market as possible and, given the difficulties of crossing the mountains between the Arabian Sea coast and the hinterland of Arabia, it is little surprise that the merchants preferred to go around the Strait of Hormuz by boat and seek a harbour on the farther side of the mountains. From al-Dur, no further mountains impeded the movement of goods: they could be loaded onto caravans bound for the inland Arabian trading kingdom at Thaj, from where they would be transported further across northern Arabia and into Syria and the Mediterranean where Roman buyers would be waiting. Cities in what is today's Oman could not enjoy such direct access to Thaj due to the difficult passes through the mountains, which would have likely slowed the pace of urbanization on Arabia's far eastern seaboard.

The finds at al-Dur, together with an abiding lack of comparable urban centres on the eastern part of Oman's shore, indicate that the Persian Gulf trade during the Roman era had a considerable land-based component. Ships arriving from across the Indian Ocean took harbour beyond Oman's mountains, directly connecting to desert caravan routes which then completed the northern Arabian journey overland. Archaeological finds from the caravan cities of Thaj, Hatra, Petra and Palmyra further afield, reveal that they were much richer urban settlements than al-Dur, Sohar and the rest of Eastern Arabia in this era. These inland caravan cities have more elaborate architecture, opulently emulating the Roman and Parthian styles. It would therefore appear that the closer proximity of the land-caravan centres to the ultimate markets of the luxury goods generated significantly more wealth than the harbours in Eastern Arabia which first greeted the goods before their transshipment. The economic reality was that the land-based caravan centres controlled access to markets and monopolized the wealth, and this likely explains why there was only limited urbanization in Oman in the early centuries CE.

It also appears that the Omani towns suffered material decline in the third century CE. Al-Dur was largely abandoned after 200 CE. A fort occupied by the Sasanians at Meliha was similarly abandoned by 300, and finds from Sohar also taper off, suggesting a similar decline. It may also be the case that sailors grew more confident about reaching the Mediterranean via the Red Sea, which meant that commercial networks could avoid the extra steps of offloading in Oman and organizing camel caravans across such large stretches of Northern Arabia. In support of this notion, the caravan cities on the routes through Mesopotamia, such as Palmyra and Hatra, which had been the key nodes for conveying goods towards the Mediterranean in previous centuries, also fell into decline in the late third century CE. Scholars debate the reasons behind the lack of urban remains in Oman between 300–600 CE; whatever the case, it is the most silent moment in Oman's archaeological record.

One extant monument stands as an exception. It is a fortress at al-Fulayj, set inland 30 km to the south of Sohar. Constructed in the late fifth century CE, the fort is a square, a regularly planned and defended stone-built fortification with projecting corner towers.

Since its area is only 30 m², it was too small to serve as a major garrison, and its excavators suggest that it served as a regional observation base to keep guard on the mountains and protect the coastal plain. Thus, a larger military camp and, perhaps, a series of other such observation posts remains to be found. At present, what is clear is that the fort was not constructed by locals but by the army of the Sasanian Empire from Iran. The fort's corner towers and the narrow entrance flanked by buttress towers resemble Sasanian fortresses on their northern frontier in the Caspian region, for example, the fort at Pānkān in northern Iraq, thereby demonstrating the architectural arrival that accompanied political expansion from Iran. Later, Arabic literature recorded a handful of campaigns that were launched by the Sasanians to control the harbours on both sides of the Strait of Hormuz and, although these accounts are problematic, as there does not appear to have been any major bustling or wealthy ports in the region for the Sasanians to control at the time, the evidence of the fort at al-Fulayj proves that the Sasanian army was present at least for a period before Islam.

In sum, urban settlement in Oman during the early centuries CE, when trading networks were established across the Indian Ocean, is limited. Archaeologists can point to evidence of connection to Iran and India via fragments of ceramics, but the number of sizeable towns was small. The region's main port was at al-Dur, not facing the Arabian Sea and not in the territory of present-day Oman, it was instead situated on the Persian Gulf for caravan routes through Arabia. Aside from activity in Sohar in the first and second centuries CE, there does not seem to have been any large settlement with significant merchant exchange on Arabia's eastern seaboard. The remains of a Sasanian military presence at al-Fulayj are tantalizing indicators that the north was more intimately involved in maritime trade and Persian culture than we are currently able to determine, as clearer conclusions are hard to draw at present. The name 'Oman' is at least sufficiently documented in literary sources from this period as a known transshipment point, but its main port was on the Persian Gulf and its cultural connections point most obviously towards Iran. Influence came via trade with the northern ports of Hormuz, with the Persian-controlled Iraq, and – at least for part of the Sasanian period – actual territorial control by the Persian military over pockets of the coast.

Early Islam (630–1200 CE)

The fortunes of the harbours on Oman's northern coast were transformed thanks to events flowing from the rise of Islam in the mid-seventh century CE. The caliphs did not directly build in Oman, but their interest in developing Iraq and the great prosperity that soon followed created a new demand and commercial energy at the head of the Persian Gulf, which the northern Omani ports were ideally placed to assist. Populations from Oman's coast participated in the early Muslim conquests, using their connections in southern Iran to help secure both sides of the Strait of Hormuz and southern Iran for the caliphate.

Many of these Omanis were settled in the great Iraqi port city of Basra, and other groups of Omani sailors, prompted by the promise of sure profits in Iraqi markets, ventured ever further and also to the East, establishing trading communities on the coast of China by the late eighth century. It is in the eighth and ninth centuries that the archaeological record across the northern coast of Oman begins to present evidence of trading activity and urban settlement, though, once again, concrete indicators of cultural exchange and architecture are elusive.

From Arabic literary sources it is clear that the trading opportunities and the active role of Omanis in Basra, the Persian Gulf and beyond reinvigorated the harbour at Sohar. It must have been a hub for trade by the eighth and ninth centuries CE, growing to 73 hectares by the tenth century when it was the largest settlement in Oman, as evidenced by Arabic geographical texts from the ninth and tenth centuries. However, most of early Islamic-era Sohar is buried beneath the modern city, and while soundings reveal the presence of Chinese and Indian pottery from this period, no major architectural structures survive. More detailed archaeological surveys in the hinterland of Sohar did uncover an extensive network of wells and systems of irrigation canals (Arabic: *falaj*) in the ninth and tenth centuries, evidencing the development of an agricultural hinterland to support the town on the coast; this confirms the literary accounts of Sohar's growth in early Islam to serve Abbasid-era Iraq's demand for overseas luxury items. One *falaj* canal also seems to have been designed to serve the one mountain pass that connects Sohar to what is now the UAE, indicative of the increased economic activity and the maintenance of wider networks of communication. This land route is also attested in literary sources, but it was not an easy route and, by the medieval period, travellers' accounts indicate that it was hardly in use. The mountains, as per usual, conspired against the connection of Oman with the rest of Arabia, but Sohar must have made up for this in the volume of its maritime traffic – unfortunately, little survives to reveal itself today.

Contemporary with Sohar's expansion, the name of Muscat first clearly emerges in literary sources during the early centuries of Islam. Like the pattern of so many Omani settlements, there are no surviving monuments of early-Islamic Muscat, though it is unlikely that a large-scale town was established on the site, from which we could expect significant architectural monuments. Arabic texts do not laud Muscat for its size or splendour, instead, it was famed as the last watering place for ships bound for India and Yemen. It was a vital link in maritime trade, allowing sailors to replenish their supplies before setting off for up to one month into the depths of the Indian Ocean, but Muscat itself was so distant from the usual markets for luxury goods that there would be little sense in developing it as a trading centre. We can imagine that a cluster of buildings of coral stone and palm-frond construction, a modest market for foodstuffs, a reliable network of water infrastructure (*falaj* channels through the mountains and cisterns), and perhaps some fortification towers constituted the Muscat known to sailors of early Islam.

Muslim-era Omanis also rejuvenated activities on the Persian Gulf side of the Omani coast (now in the UAE) by expanding a harbour at Julfar. Approximately 70 km to the north of the then-abandoned port at al-Dur, Julfar is attested in Arabic literary sources as having been one of the principal political centres of early Islamic Oman, yet there are scarcely any remains today. The site seems securely identified as the ruins uncovered in an area known today as Kush, just north of Ras al-Khaimah, in the UAE. The earliest traces of settlement at this site, which date to the fifth or sixth century CE, accord with the fact that Arabic literature describes Julfar as having already been founded before Islam. The expansion of the site into a more sizeable settlement in early Islam is attested by the large numbers of pottery sheds, including a sizable group of high-quality glazed ceramics from China, as well as pottery from India. The Chinese wares only began to appear in significant numbers from the tenth century CE, though this does not mean that Julfar was not involved in earlier trade with China, since the Chinese began to produce increasing volumes of ceramics for export only in the ninth century. Before this period, China was a major exporter of silk and lacquer, and such materials do not survive in the archaeological record. The Indian pottery, found consistently in early-Islamic and medieval periods, is not high-quality, and archaeologists surmise that they were utensils carried by Indian merchants and sailors who took residence in Julfar (and Sohar, where similar finds have also been discovered). Presumably, they may have constructed dwellings inspired by the Indian architecture of their homelands (as is evidenced in more recent periods of Indian traders in Arabia and Zanzibar), yet the lack of surviving vernacular architecture leaves this to conjecture.

One hundred and twenty kilometres down the Persian Gulf coast from Julfar, and amidst today's urban metropole of Dubai, is the site of Jumeirah, founded in the ninth century and likely the most westerly settlement of the area known in premodern times as Oman. The original name of this city is not clear, but its reach was substantial: its architecture consisted of buildings constructed from courses of small stones, some of which were replete with columns and intriguing stucco decoration on the doors and windows. The town had a palace, a modest mosque, and what appears to be a rectangular caravanserai. There is also an abundance of open space in the site, likely the location of palm-frond huts, of which nothing survives today. Because few of the stone ruins stand more than one metre high, the nature of architectural exchange is not immediately obvious, but the high-quality pottery found on the site evidences of extensive connections with Iraq, India and China.

The settlement at Jumeirah is datable as contemporary with the prosperity of Sohar. We can clearly see a network whereby harbours on the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf side of Oman began to emerge and were engaged in regular long-distance trade. Literary sources indicate that the passage of ships through Omani ports from Sohar to Muscat was brisk in early Islamic times such that the geographer, al-Muqaddasi (d. 911), called Sohar the "entryway to China" (*dahliz al-ṣīn*).

However, by the twelfth century, the geographer and cartographer al-Idrīsī (d. 1166) remarked on the collapse in China-bound trade due to political insecurities in the Gulf, and the fourteenth-century historian, Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī (d. 1326), offered a cryptic indication that Sohar had declined very considerably. Throughout the medieval period, the Omani towns were in competition for business with ports on the Iranian side of the Gulf, notably Siraf, and hence the fortunes and possibilities for architectural flourish for Omani cities was in flux. The ceramics reveal that some luxury items shipped towards the Persian Gulf from South and East Asia were purchased and circulated among the wealthy of the Omani coast, but their cities did not obviously emulate the high-style decoration and architectural forms favoured at the major palaces and religious monuments of the central Islamic lands in this time. The opulent and grand architectural features of Baghdad, Samarra, Isfahan, Cairo and the other capitals – the ultimate destinations of the luxury goods traded through Oman – are of a different order than those that can be reconstructed from the remains of the contemporaneous architecture of the Omani harbours across the first 500 years of Islamic history (from the seventh to the twelfth century CE).

Medieval Dhofar

Contemporary with the brisk uptick in Persian Gulf trade during the Islamic period, which enabled settlements on the northern coast of Oman to expand, the far south of today's Oman (present-day Dhofar province) also witnessed a contemporaneous urban development through its integration into the network of ports on the coast of South Arabia. South Arabia was the home of frankincense and myrrh, shipping vast quantities in Antiquity up the Red Sea and by caravan route, tracking through western Arabia to the Mediterranean. The major archaeological site at Sumhuram (Khor Ruwi) in the Dhofar province was a conduit for this frankincense trade, though it was abandoned before 200 CE. In the Islamic period, Chinese markets were increasingly keen to acquire Arabian aromatics, in part on account of the significant spread of Buddhist rituals in China from the sixth and seventh centuries onwards, and new ports in South Arabia emerged to facilitate this trade, most notably the city of Dhofar near Salalah in southern Oman.

The precise location of the premodern town of Dhofar is convoluted. In the ninth and tenth centuries the settlement known as 'Dhofar' (*Ḍafār*) in Arabic sources may have been slightly inland at a presently unexcavated site located under a twentieth-century royal palace belonging to Oman's current dynasty. Over the years, and two regime changes in the thirteenth century, the city of Dhofar moved and, by 1200, it was right upon the sea, as revealed by the rich archaeological site discovered at al-Balid located to the east of today's Salalah. Excavations at al-Balid uncovered a veritable urban settlement: 1.6 km long and 800 m wide, constructed between the sea and a lagoon-formed inland waterway that encircled the town. These dimensions are essentially as large as Sohar at its peak, thus, al-Balid represents the remains of the main medieval port of southeast Arabia.

The town had a very large central mosque measuring 40 x 48.5 m, materially larger than any mosque remains so far uncovered in the early Muslim-era settlements of northern Oman. Al-Balid also had a multitude of smaller mosques (50 were reported in a medieval travellers account, and the partial excavation of the site has revealed many), as well as a palace citadel commanding the site. This city was abandoned between 1500–1600, likely as a consequence of the forcible reorganization of trading centres when the Portuguese established a maritime empire across the Indian Ocean. Over the succeeding centuries, much of al-Balid's stone construction was stripped away for vernacular dwellings for the local population, yet what remains still reveals a palpable grandeur when the city was at its height. The main Friday Mosque had a large columned (and likely arched) hall, carried by 144 pillars with octagonal capitals (Figure 4). The design typifies the hypostyle mosque layout with columned-hall found across the Muslim world, though the characteristics of the columns' height bears a good resemblance with the overall design of the main mosques of Sanaa and Zabid, revealing the Yemeni connections in the architectural fabric of medieval Dhofar. This is natural: the town was conquered in 1279 by lieutenants of the Rasulid Kingdom, which was based in western Yemen, and the previous regime that had ruled Dhofar in the early 1200s had hailed from eastern Yemen. We cannot be sure which regime constructed the main mosque at al-Balid but, either way, it was a Yemeni polity which sponsored the building. Nonetheless, the Dhofar mosque does differ from the usual pattern on account of its side doors: most mosques are entered via the wall opposite the direction of prayer, whereas the Dhofar Mosque has doors on all sides, which seems to have been a local innovation to provide a cross-breeze to combat the stifling temperatures and humidity from May to August.

Figure 4 The Friday Mosque in Dhofar



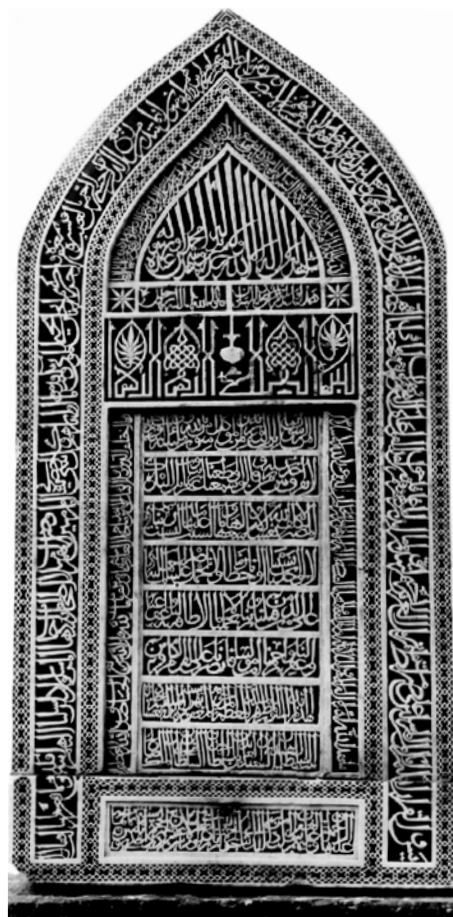
© Peter Webb.

The medieval civilization at Dhofar has also given us three lavish items of particular interest on the question of architectural exchange between East Arabia and the wider Indian Ocean. In the 1930s, British army officers purchased three elaborate tombstones that had been standing in a graveyard one kilometre or so inland from the site of al-Balid (Dhofar). One of the gravestones marks the tomb of a revered local religious figure, and the other two pieces were originally a pair, marking both ends of the grave of one of the Rasulid Yemeni rulers of Dhofar who died in 1311 (Figure 5).

The tombstones are remarkable, not only for their elegant and dense calligraphy that ranks high in the aesthetics of Muslim funerary carving of the time, but also because they are completely unlike any other tombstones from the region. The type of stone, the decorative patterns, the calligraphic style, and even the complexity of the texts selected for carving are manifestly different from the traditions seen elsewhere in eastern Arabia. Stylistic comparison reveals beyond doubt that these particular tombstones

were imports from the city of Cambay in Gujarat. India's Gujarat region had been conquered by Muslim armies in 1300 and, immediately upon its integration into a Muslim sultanate, its local craftsmen were employed by patrons with a new faith, resulting in a felicitous merger of the Hindu carving traditions of vegetal and architectonic forms with a signature style of Arabic calligraphy developed by Muslim patrons in India. The three Cambay tombstones in Dhofar thus neatly encapsulate the possibilities of connectivity. Thanks to the maritime network, which linked Dhofar with the coast of Gujarat via a 3-4 week sailing journey, the Rasulid rulers in Dhofar in the early 1300s were up-to-date with the newest styles of carving that were just developing in India. The Dhofari Rasulids must have seen an example of the work, or had it described to them in detail, and they were sufficiently impressed to place an order.

Figure 5 Headstone commemorating a daughter of Sultan Zayn al-'Abidin, d. 1428



White marble, imported from Cambay in Gujarat.

© Leiden University Library, Legatum Warnerianum. Or.23.481, photograph 79.

Part of the dedicatory inscription of the ruler's marker was carved separately to the rest of the tombstone, suggesting that a nearly-complete Indian piece was purchased and then finished in Dhofar, but the religious figure's tombstone was completely carved in one place. This suggests that it must have been made to order in Gujarat, then shipped across the ocean to Dhofar to adorn the tomb, which became a site of local pilgrimage by the 1340s.

As portable objects, the tombstones were capable carriers of aesthetic taste and cultural production between geographical regions and across wide seas, but the same portability that enabled their long-distance import to Dhofar also facilitated their export. What must have been a much more considerable show of imported wealth has now been long removed from Dhofar's cemeteries, palaces and mansions. Nonetheless, the tombstones are a small window into a world of the long-distance exchange of high-value cultural objects, and the Rasulids – and their outpost in Dhofar – usher in a new flavour to our survey of Oman.

Prior to this period, whether on the northern or southern shores of the Arabian Sea, we have seen that archaeological sites yield little to suggest great opulence. The harbour cities certainly acquired some of the expensive goods that were being transhipped through them, but their rulers and residents did not appear to take major strides towards emulating the high style and architectural opulence of the towns in which the luxury goods were ultimately intended. Instead, their towns took the form of modest networks of coral, stone, mud-brick and/or palm-frond houses, a central mosque from which very little adornment is evidenced, and a fort, showing no evidence of the latest trends of palace building from Iraq or Iran. Other than Sohar, the expansion of agricultural hinterland was also limited in the Omani settlement patterns from 650–1200 CE. But the Rasulids and their building at Dhofar represent a shift. They were from Yemen but they actively conquered the southern shore of Eastern Arabia and forcibly incorporated Dhofar into a larger empire. In turn, their outpost in Dhofar acquired a more distinctive imperial style that seems to be a ramification of the growth of more assertive political entities in the region. The Rasulids had a greater network of exchange with Egypt, Syria and the wider Middle East because of their control of Red Sea ports. Their interest in conquering Dhofar in 1279 was part of an attempt to control all of southeast Arabia in order to link their harbours in western Yemen with outlets on the Indian Ocean. This was a regime which had the power to tax ships and distribute wealth between the important urban centres. While only a narrow window into the architectural spaces of their world is open for us to see at the ruins of Dhofar today, we can perceive new levels of grandeur making their entrance into the region. The Rasulids would not advance to the northern coast, but another vigorous state was also emerging there, and soon Oman's archaeological record was also about to transform.

The Hormuzi boom

Around 1300, both sides of the Strait of Hormuz were unified under one political entity known as the Kingdom of Hormuz (or Ormus). Its principal settlements began on the Iranian shore in the twelfth century and, by the fourteenth century, they established a capital on the Island of Hormuz. It is from this stronghold that the dynasty takes its name in history. They were contemporaries of the Rasulids in Yemen and Dhofar, and – like the Rasulids – the Hormuzid rulers were ethnically mixed. Literary sources indicate their Omani origins from the northern shores of eastern Arabia, but the Hormuzids also had very considerable Persian connections. They established their state around 1100 on the shores of the Iranian-side, and then expanded their control to much of southeast Iran, where they also mixed with the Turkic military elite who held sway across much of the Iranian Plateau. Fluctuating fortunes and competition between ports at the entrance to the Persian Gulf saw a gradual consolidation of ever more power and territorial control under the kings of Hormuz and, by 1300, they established themselves as controllers of the entire region with authority over a much wider scope of the northern and southern shores of the Arabian Sea in Iran and Oman than any previous state had achieved. With such a belt of control, the kings and their family members, ensconced along the length of the coasts that entered into the Persian Gulf, could enforce more serious policies of taxation, as ships had no other options for harbour and water resupply than the Hormuz kingdom's network. The time was also propitious for the kings. The height of their power from the mid-thirteenth to fifteenth century corresponds to the heyday of the Muslim Turko-Mongol states in Iraq, Iran and Central Asia, who were exceptional patrons of the arts, ambitious builders, and keen purchasers of luxury items. While these land-based kingdoms could procure goods overland from China, heavy goods such as high-demand ceramics still had to travel by sea to reach Turko-Mongol courts in Iraq and Iran. Moreover, as the various Iranian and Central Asian kingdoms entered violent competition with each other through the thirteenth century across Iraq, the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia, maritime trade became a more secure means to provide the courts in Shiraz, Isfahan, Tabriz, Mosul and Baghdad with South and East Asian luxury goods. Thanks to the region's geography, which narrows the shipping lanes through the Strait of Hormuz, the kings of Hormuz found themselves as gatekeepers. With fabulously rich patrons behind them and the incoming merchandise in front of them, their efforts to reorganize trading networks and tax goods created the wealthiest state the region of Oman had yet seen.

A key part of the success of the kings of Hormuz was their ability to control both sides of the Strait of Hormuz, thereby compelling ships to use their harbours. As such, Oman was also the heartland of their polity, and the ports on Oman's northern shores, including Julfar in today's UAE, witnessed much urban expansion thanks to their participation in what is now called the 'Hormuzi boom' from 1300–1500.

It was a period of economic prosperity attested by the unprecedented growth of the region's archaeological sites, as well as massive increases in the finds of coinage, indicating the novel appearance of cash economies whereby cities bought food from the agricultural hinterland as opposed to what previously had been more of a barter-based economic regime.

Perhaps most important in the plans of the kings of Hormuz was that they sought to create a new port city of their own by radically transforming a harbour at Qalhat, which lay nearly 200 km further down the coastline from Muscat, meaning that it was materially nearer the Indian ports, shaving a day or two off the trans-Indian Ocean sailing route. This would slightly reduce the amount of water that ships needed to take with them, a load they could replace with more merchandise. The ocean between Qalhat and India is still vast, thus the saving in water is overall limited, nonetheless, there was an advantage, and by developing Qalhat, the kings of Hormuz created a more advantageous harbour than anything previously known on the Oman coast.

With the wealth of the Kingdom of Hormuz behind it, Qalhat stood to benefit mightily from their patronage, and it is one site where very important architecture remains in evidence. Similar to several of the key sites we have encountered so far, Qalhat was a victim of the sixteenth-century arrival of Portuguese power in the Indian Ocean, and it suffered significant damage when the Portuguese endeavoured to replace the monopoly of Hormuz with their own and caused the abandonment of Qalhat in favour of Muscat. Nonetheless, what remains at Qalhat is substantial. On the one hand, the city followed the local architectural traditions by building houses from coral stone: the remains of a dense network of streets with coral stone foundations attest to the size of Qalhat at its height. However, on the other hand, Qalhat also exhibited the striking import of architectural ideas hitherto not encountered on the Omani coast.

Most spectacular is the structure known today as Bibi Maryam, a high-domed tower built in the precise architectural traditions of the Turko-Iranian tomb towers that proliferated across Iran and Central Asia from ca. 1000 CE onwards (Figure 6). Bibi Maryam was the name of one of the Hormuzi queens of Qalhat, though it is unclear whether the building is properly dedicated to her as earlier records do not associate her name with it and, overall, the structure's function is enigmatic. It is set on a platform and seems to have had a number of related buildings around it, leading some archaeologists to consider it as part of a mosque, but the evidence for this is scant. It is perhaps better to imagine the structure as a mausoleum with a number of pious foundations around it, such as a *khanaqah* or other structures for visiting Sufis, a pattern known from contemporary mausolea in Central Asia of the Timurid-era. The extant building was constructed out of coral (the local building material), though it was covered in a layer of stucco and then elaborately tiled, though only remnants of the green-glazed tiles remain today. It also has ornate *muqarnas* decoration in the dome squinches, which is prototypical of the Iranian/Central Asian domes of the period.

The Bibi Maryam Mausoleum is therefore a testament to the direct import of Turkomanian architectural and funerary traditions onto the coast of Oman.

Figure 6 The Bibi-Maryam Mausoleum in Qalhat



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Architectural exchange is also evidenced in Qalhat’s central mosque. Though the mosque was obliterated, partly by war and partly because its building materials were cannibalized after the site fell into disuse, there are remnants of a startlingly-rich array of glazed tiles that were likely the original adornments of the fourteenth-century mosque (Figure 7), some of which are now housed in the Omani National Museum.

Figure 7 Tiles from the central mosque in Qalhat



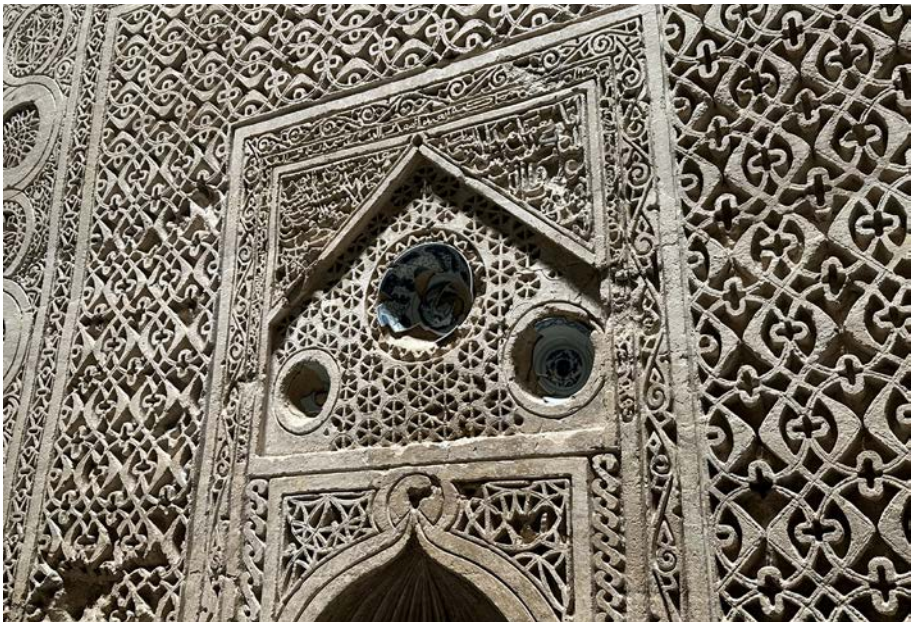
Photos © Peter Webb.



The majority are turquoise glazed, but more elaborate tile fragments have also been found, and the *qibla* wall (Mecca-facing) appears to have been decorated with deep blue tiles made from ground lapis lazuli (*lajvardina*). While some of the green-glaze tiles may have been made locally, many of the tiles bear the handiwork of the artisans of Kashan. Just as the Rasulid rulers of Dhofar had commissioned tombstones from India, the rulers of Qalhat also sourced their luxury decorations from afar, utilizing their trading contacts with the wealthy courts of the Iranian Plateau.

Qalhat's decorative style also made use of Chinese pottery imports. Although the city's builders could commission flat tiles for architectural decoration directly from the masters in Kashan (who had perfected such works over two centuries of service to Turko-Mongol patrons), they also clearly appreciated the fine Chinese porcelain, which they were shipping to the wider Middle East, seeking to incorporate it into their architectural setting. They did not acquire tiles from China, but they did embed Chinese bowls directly into the walls, creating circular white and blue patterns to enliven the stucco wall façades. Qalhat seems to have led the way in developing this practice in the region and, in the centuries that followed, the use of Chinese porcelain found its way into the interiors of Oman. The traditionally austere and unadorned architecture of the Omanis on the interior side of the region's mountains became enlivened with Chinese bowls, notably in the prayer niches (*mihrab*) of mosques (Figure 8). The idea also caught on across the Indian Ocean trading network, and later examples of this decorative technique were also found in Zanzibar and the Swahili coast of East Africa (Figure 9).

Figure 8 Mihrab of the Al-Uwayna Mosque with Islamic stucco and Chinese porcelain decoration



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Figure 9 Tomb with Chinese porcelain decoration in Kizimkazi, Zanzibar



© Peter Webb.

The remainder of the Qalhat site today is ruinous. However, near the city wall, the outlines of a hammam have been uncovered, consisting of six rooms with *ṣārūj* mortar-lined basins around a central courtyard and underfloor water pipes. This type of hammam is prototypical of the Turko-Iranian style and is unique in the archaeological record of eastern Arabia, again revealing the direct import of an external architectural feature, a transplant of a bathhouse culture from Iran to the shores of Oman under the patronage of the Hormuz rulers. Travellers' accounts and conjectural architectural hypotheses also consider that the city's urban layout was designed with Iranian techniques in mind with their very narrow streets and, perhaps, with wind-towers (*bād-gīr*) to cool the dwellings of Qalhat, which further suggests the architectural exchanges across the Persian Gulf and further into the Iranian plateau in the high-point of Qalhat's fortunes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Towards the modern era: the Portuguese and Ya'āriba sultans

From the evidence of Dhofar and Qalhat, the southern and northern edges of eastern Arabia developed newfound prosperous integration into transregional trading networks during the 1300s. The former small-scale settlements with modest local architectural and decorative traditions in the first five centuries of Islam, gave way to visibly more opulent constructions and urban development as both shores were incorporated into larger and more vigorous empires than hitherto.

The emergent powers of Dhofar and Hormuz in the thirteenth century had the means to organize trade more concertedly and seem to have generated more centralized wealth to spend on lavish constructions and urban adornment and two centuries of affluence followed, from 1300–1500. But both the Rasulid and Hormuz kingdoms then gradually succumbed to the maritime expansion of Portugal in the sixteenth century, and while the Portuguese continued the trend towards greater centralization of maritime trade, they deliberately damaged the old harbours, and they directed trade to their own cities which they were developing in East Arabia. This is both the origin of Muscat's central position on the Omani coast, but also the collapse of Qalhat and Dhofar.

The Portuguese brought new implements of war with their galleons and canons, and these also influenced local architecture. The Portuguese built their own harbours in a fashion that could defend against canon fire, and powerful towers and forts with tremendously thick *ṣārūj* and stone walls began to appear. The military defence equipment and designs soon spread inland, with the Omanis of the interior – where the Portuguese had no control – beginning to construct similar fortifications of their own in the seventeenth century, most of which survive to this day and are among the iconic monuments of Oman's architectural heritage (Figure 10).

Figure 10 Barka Fort, Yarubid and Busaidi construction, seventeenth to eighteenth century, Oman



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We can now appreciate Oman's impressive forts and castles as a heritage constructed through exchange (Figure 11). As Oman became increasingly integrated politically in trading empires, it caught the attention of the wider world, and the experience of the Portuguese occupation of much of the coast from 1500–1700 prompted the local population to adopt the new technology and building techniques, which they would eventually use to oust the Portuguese.

In the wake of crumbling Portuguese power, a dynasty from the interior of Oman, the Ya'aruba (Yarubids), embarked on their own maritime empire, taking the hybrid Portuguese-Omani styles far abroad, notably to their trading centres in Zanzibar and Mombasa on Africa's eastern shores. After a dynastic struggle, the Ya'aruba fell to a new dynasty of Omani rulers, the Āl Bū Sa'īdī (Busaidis), who maintained the maritime empire through the nineteenth century, and who are still in power in the current nation state of Oman.

Figure 11 Yabrin (Jabrin) Fort, late seventeenth century, Oman



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Conclusion

The architectural traditions of Oman in the wake of the Portuguese and the Omani Yarubid and Busaidi dynasties are beyond our chronological scope, yet they usher in an entirely novel situation whereby rulers from the interior of Oman asserted firm control over the coast, bringing ideas in an opposite direction than what had usually been the case. This chapter has traced the emergence of eastern Arabia onto the world stage over the course of 2,000 years prior to their rise. As trans-Indian Ocean shipping opened up in the third century BCE, the harbours of Oman's coast were well suited to provide water for passing ships, but most of the wealth was directed elsewhere, particularly towards the caravan cities that distributed the luxury wares to the wealthy markets of Rome and Parthian Iran. Although the development of new shipping lanes through the Red Sea, as well as political instability on the Iranian-Roman frontier in the centuries before Islam put a damper on even the modest settlements of eastern Arabia, the rise of Islam and the emergence of tremendously-rich markets in Iraq during the eighth century reinvigorated Eastern Arabian trading opportunities.

Oman generally evaded the control of large states and remained autonomous from the caliphate for most of its history, which had the advantage of local independence, but it perpetuated regional fragmentation and division among small states and left the local rulers less able to maximize the potentials of their location. Accordingly, the early Muslim-era settlements do not show evidence of great architectural opulence. But growth seems to have been inevitable, albeit gradual, and by 1300 the principal Omani cities began to resemble the splendours of the wider Muslim world. On the cusp of the Portuguese arrival in 1500, the full network of Omani commercial connections with Iran, India and even China could be felt simply by gazing upon the walls of the great building projects of the two empires controlling either side of the Arabian Sea coast. Oman was trading with the world and reflecting its transregional connections, and by 1700 it was embracing an active political role in expanding outwards and spreading its architectural influence across the African and Indian shores of its economic and political operations.

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