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The Medieval Persian Gulf

Brian Ulrich

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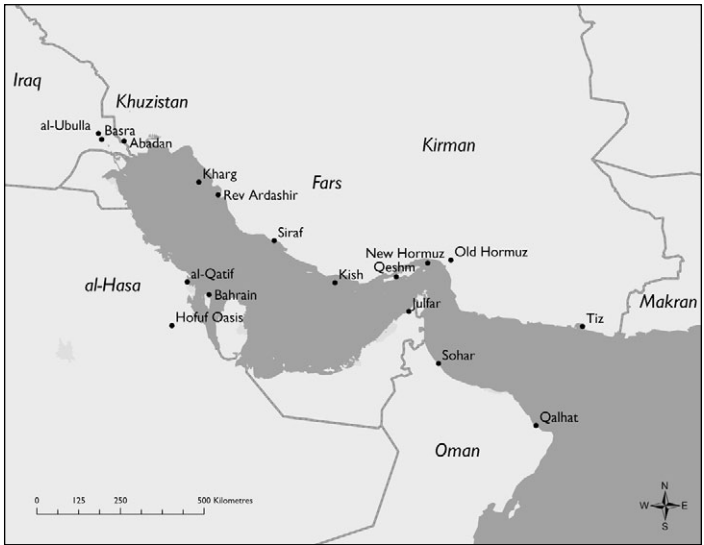
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Map 1. The Persian Gulf, showing major places mentioned in the text. Map by Jacob Hockenberry. Used with permission.

Timeline

622	Muhammad's flight to Medina, beginning of Islamic calendar
632	Death of Muhammad
635–636	Traditional date for founding of Basra
656–661	First Civil War of Islam, involving the caliphate of 'Ali and including origins of Shurat
685–692	Second Civil War of Islam, when Muhammad is first mentioned in Muslim profession of faith and there were Shurat states in Khuzistan, Fars, and al-Hasa
700s	A general rise in prosperity leads to an increase in archaeological remains and the rise of the <i>tujjar</i> class; the Ibadis develop out of quietest Shurat in Basra
750	Beginning of Abbasid dynasty of caliphs
793–885	Stable Ibadi imamate in Oman
ca. 800	Building of Siraf's main mosque
800s	Clears signs of cultural islamization
ca. 830	Belitung shipwreck
869–883	Zanj Revolt led by 'Ali b. Muhammad
890s	Formation of Qarmatian state in al-Hasa
900s	Sunnism begins to spread in northern Oman
930s and 940s	Establishment of Buyid rule in Iran and Iraq
Late 900s	Earliest Shi'ite funerary inscriptions in Siraf
977	Earthquake devastates Siraf
1000s	Kish displaces Siraf

1040s and 1050s	Iran, Iraq, and Oman come under rule of Seljuqs, who develop greater trade infrastructure; ^ʿ Uyunids rise in al-Hasa and Bahrain
1051	Nasir-i Khusraw visits the Qarmatians and a diminished Basra
Early 1100s	Earliest evidence of Twelver Shi'ism on Bahrain; Banu Nabhan rise in Oman's interior
Late 1100s	Kish battles ^ʿ Uyunids for influence in Bahrain and al-Hasa; Benjamin of Tudela reports on the Gulf's Jewish communities
ca. 1200	Horses were regular part of Gulf trade by this time
1226	Beginning of the reign of Abu Bakr, under whom Salghurids rise in Gulf and defeat Kish, develop Bahrain
1250s	Mongol invasion of Iran and Iraq led by Hulegu
1260s-1306	Career of Jamal al-Din al-Tibi
1300	Baha al-Din Ayaz moves Hormuz's centre to Qeshm, and later Jarun
1329-1332	Ibn Battuta travels through the region
1332-1333	Qutb al-Din Tahamtan II makes Hormuz the Gulf's dominant power by defeating Kish
1335	Fall of the Ilkhanate
1400s	Height of Hormuz
1507-1515	Portuguese subjugate Hormuz

Introduction

In 2003, the American animation studio Dreamworks released as an intended summer blockbuster *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*. One movie preview described it as “fortuitously set in the Mediterranean,” although the title character’s name was that of *The Arabian Nights*’ seafaring merchant who lived in Baghdad and set out on journeys from Basra. Although voice actor Brad Pitt was concerned that his Missouri accent was inappropriate for a Middle Eastern character, the filmmakers embraced it as a “mood lightener.” Sinbad’s heritage was thus obscured behind a story involving the Greek city-state of Syracuse on Sicily and Eris, Greek goddess of discord.¹

It is no accident, however, that even in the contemporary United States the paradigmatic legendary seafarer would come from the Persian Gulf. It is, after all, the oldest body of water for which we have clear evidence of human sailing, as it connected the southern reaches of Mesopotamia with Bahrain, then known as Dilmun, which figured in myth as a paradise. Also connected by sea was Oman, a source of copper, and ultimately the valley of the Indus River in modern Pakistan, itself a land of great seafarers and important trading partners of the Gulf. Just as today over one third of the

¹ “Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas (2003),” *EW.com*, April 25, 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120927152532/http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,444346,00.html>.

world's crude oil passes through the Gulf, throughout ancient and medieval times the waterway was a crucial conduit for Indian Ocean luxury products.

The purpose of this book is to acquaint readers with the history of the Gulf as it relates to themes of cultural and religious diversity and that often hemispheric long-distance maritime trade which is the precursor to globalization. It will show that the Gulf has had people of diverse ethnic backgrounds since long before the age of oil, and that people adhering to different religious traditions have sometimes been in conflict in the region, but also easily coexisted, especially at the level of common believers. It will also show the importance of the region's long-distance trade to its culture and economy, as well as its significance for the Middle East more broadly.

Those whose image of Gulf history is focused on Bedouin and fisherfolk with small settlements along deserted coasts will, in fact, find those within. They will also, however, find Christian monks pursuing devotions in well-supported monasteries, enslaved people of African origin clearing agricultural land and harvesting crops, small-scale merchants with ambitions of becoming great traders, seafarers spinning yarns in cosmopolitan ports, and soldiers of fortune enlisted for defence and conquest. As a work of synthesis, this book will contain little that is new to specialists in the different topics touched upon. However, as the different time periods, research languages, and methods are too seldom considered as a whole, some new ideas may emerge from bringing them together.

Geography and Nomenclature

For the geographers and mariners of the Islamic Middle Ages, the Gulf was one of a string of seas connecting the Middle East ultimately with China. The earliest Arabic name we have for it is "Sea of Fars" (Persia), from an anonymous trader writing in 851, and that or similar names recur in the 900s. In these naming conventions, what mattered was not who controlled the sea, but rather the countries to which they distinctively