

“The Arabian Gulf in Late Antiquity and Early Islam”

Held Friday 4th and Saturday 5th November 2022 at UAE University, al-Ain
Convened by Timothy Power & Robert Hoyland



The newly discovered monastery on Sīnīya Island, Umm al-Quwain, UAE.

The study of the Arabian Gulf in Late Antiquity and Early Islam seems now to be gaining momentum. In recent years a number of new sites have come to light, including churches in Bahrain and the Emirates as well as a Sasanian fort in Oman, while final publications and ceramic studies on key sites, including Siraf in Iran, Sir Bani Yas in the Emirates and Kadhima in Kuwait are now in preparation. New archaeological projects have been started at known sites, such as al-Hira in Iraq and al-Qusur in Kuwait, which have brought to light a wealth of new evidence. In a parallel process, new studies of key historical sources, such as the *Chronicle of Seert*, have joined a growing secondary literature on the history of the Sasanian Empire and Syriac Churches. Doctoral theses on the archaeology and history of the maritime trade of the Arabian Gulf have also been published, which serve to situate this strategic waterway in the broader Indian Ocean world. The volume of scholarship has therefore grown markedly over the past decade and the moment seems apposite for a conference bringing archaeologists and historians together, with the intention of brokering cross-disciplinary exchange towards a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the Arabian Gulf in Late Antiquity and Early Islam.

Programme

Day 1 – Rural and Urban Settlement	
09:00	Welcome & introduction
09:30	<i>Timothy Power & Robert Hoyland</i>
Session 1 – Lower Gulf	
09:30	Sasanian and caliphal imperialism in Oman. <i>Harry Munt</i>
10:00	
10:00	Occupation of the Sohar Hinterland during the Late Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods: The Archaeological Evidence. <i>Seth Priestman</i>
10:30	
10:30	An archaeological perspective on the Islamisation of Eastern Arabia. <i>Derek Kennet</i>
11:00	
Session 2 – Upper Gulf	
11:30	Nomads of the Sea? Mobile communities in Qatar in the early Islamic period. <i>Jose Carvajal López</i>
12:00	
12:00	The Early Islamic Archaeology of the Dammam region. <i>Majed Gauod</i>
12:30	
12:30	Early Islamic and Christian Landscapes in Qatar. <i>Robert Carter, Faisal Abdullah Al-Naimi, Ferhan Sakal, Andrew Petersen, Frank Stremke, Hesham Nasr</i>
13:00	
Session 3 – Mesopotamia	
14:00	Hira before Islam in the literary sources. <i>Philip Wood</i>
14:30	
14:30	Two tales of one city: al-Hira in the historical sources and the archaeological record. <i>Martina Müller-Wiener & M. Gussone</i>
15:00	
Discussion	
15:00	Hugh Kennedy to wrap up & chair debate
15:30	

Day 2 – Gulf Monasticism	
Session 1 – Gulf Monasteries	
09:00	The Early Islamic monastery of al-Qusur (Kuwait): last results of the French-Kuwaiti Archaeological Mission in Failaka. <i>Julie Bonneric</i>
09:30	
09:30	New perspectives on the al-Qusur monastery pottery: typo-chronology, functionality, and historical discussion. <i>Remi Perrogon</i>
10:00	
10:00	In Search of the Lost Islands of Beth Qatraye <i>Mario Kozah</i>
10:30	
10:30	From Late Antiquity to Early Islam on Sīnīya Island, Umm al-Quwain: A Microhistorical Approach to Gulf Monasticism. <i>Timothy Power, Michele Degli Esposti, Robert Hoyland & Rania Hussein Kannouma</i>
11:00	
Session 2 – Regional Parallels	
11:30	East Arabia and Bet ‘Arbaye in the sixth century: a fruitful comparison? <i>Robert Hoyland</i>
12:00	
12:00	Frontiers of Faith: Missions and Churches East and West. <i>Michael Decker & Adriaan De Man</i>
12:30	
Discussion	
12:30	Hugh Kennedy to wrap up & chair debate
13:00	

Abstracts

Abstracts are arranged according to the surname of the first author.

The Early Islamic monastery of al-Qusur (Kuwait): last results of the French-Kuwaiti Archaeological Mission in Failaka

Julie Bonnéricle

The first step of program of the French-Kuwaiti Archaeological Mission in Failaka (MAFKF) at al-Qusur was achieved in 2018. The excavation to the north and west of the monumental church led to the discovery of a food processing building, a refectory and what is probably a monk's cell, suggesting that al-Qusur was a monastery, at least in its central part. The study of pottery, glass, coins and stucco revealed that the main occupation of the site took place from the middle of the 7th c. and during the 8th c. A new program began in 2019 with the aim to better understand the foundation of the monastery and its abandonment, to work on the daily life of the monks and to understand the organization of the monastery.

Early Islamic and Christian Landscapes in Qatar

Robert Carter, Faisal Abdullah Al-Naimi, Ferhan Sakal, Andrew Petersen, Frank Stremke, Hesham Nasr

Qatar looms large in the Syriac sources of the Church of the East, giving its name to Beth Qatraye, the Region of the Qatars, referring to the areas surrounding Bahrain, Qatif and Al-Hasa. This geographical name is most likely derived from its association with several religious authors of the 7th century described as Qatari, strongly implying that Qatar itself once housed a prominent school of Christian learning. To this date, no churches or monasteries have been identified in Qatar, but recent work has revealed an unexpectedly dense occupation of Qatar in the 7th-9th centuries, far greater than hitherto expected. At least 20 such sites or clusters of sites, some very extensive, have been identified, mostly concentrated in the northern part of the peninsula. Detailed mapping by kite and digital photogrammetry in 2018 revealed the scale and complexity of a selection of these. The religious affiliations of their inhabitants cannot be determined without deeper investigation, and two sites will be explored in up-coming excavations. This research raises significant questions about the nature and scale of occupation in Qatar during the Early Islamic period, potentially shedding light on processes of sedentarization and desedentarization, interregional integration during the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, and religious change.

Frontiers of Faith: Missions and Churches East and West

Michael Decker & Adriaan De Man

During Late Antiquity, the Arabian Gulf and its environs was integrated into a network of Christian missionizing activities. Over the same centuries, much of the far western lands of Europe in the Roman Empire and its successor states were slowly Christianized. In this paper we will examine, through comparison of archaeological and historical material, similarities and contrasts in the establishment and practice of late antique Christianity from the Gulf to the Atlantic. Examination of nodes like al-Qusur illustrate praxis and the dynamics of missionizing sponsored by the Church of the East and other communities and further enrich our view of the Gulf and its peoples in history.

East Arabia and Bet ‘Arbeye in the sixth century: a fruitful comparison?

Robert Hoyland

We have just enough sources, especially Syriac hagiographies, to see that Bet ‘Arbeye was instantiated and consolidated as a Sasanian province in the early sixth century and that through this century there was a marked concomitant increase in the activity of the East Syrian Church in this place and time. This activity was geared towards consolidating the presence of the Church, moving from a relatively loose structure towards a more systematized organization. In particular, the monastic dimension of the Church gains a more solidified and articulated format, with monasteries built, monastic codes drafted, and hagiographies of earlier monastic “heroes” drafted. This is also the period that Philip Wood has identified as one when there is more Christian influence at the Sasanian court and possibly a rapprochement between the Sasanian imperial administration and the East Syrian Church diocesan organization. As well as documenting this argument, the question will be posed whether this model applies as well to East Arabia and whether this then provides the context for the ecclesiastical buildings that have been uncovered in this region in recent years and the substantial Christian literature that was produced in this region at about the same time.

An archaeological perspective on the Islamisation of Eastern Arabia

Derek Kennet

This paper will briefly review the increasingly large amount of archaeological evidence for settlement during the early Islamic period in Eastern Arabia from Kuwait to the UAE / Oman. A considerable number of sites of this period have come to light and / or been excavated over the past 15 years, in particular in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The paper will then examine the small number of known mosques from these sites (al-Mu’taridh, Jumairah, and Murwab) and consider their size, form and chronology, how that

relates to the chronology of the settlements more generally, and what they might suggest about the process of Islamisation in this region.

In Search of the Lost Islands of Beth Qaṭraye

Mario Kozah, Qatar University

“The islands,” (Syr. *gazrāthā*) as they are called in a number of Syriac sources, including the eighth century *Synodicon Orientale* and the seventh century patriarchal letters of Isho ‘yahb III, are a reference to those inhabited islands in the Gulf that specifically form part of the Beth Qaṭraye province. The exact identification and location of at least six of these listed islands remains a mystery although it is possible to come to certain deductions using the information available to us in the Syriac and Arabic sources including the *History of Mar Yawnan* and the *Chronicle of Seert*. Using evidence from these two sources as well as others it will be argued that the island of Ramath in the *Chronicle of Seert* and the Black Island referred to in the *History of Mar Yawnan* are today’s Failaka and Kharg islands respectively. In addition, more tentative thoughts regarding the remaining unidentified islands will be presented including the possible location of Daray, Rūḥā, and Tālūn based on a cartographic reading of the *Synodicon Orientale*.

Nomads of the Sea? Mobile communities in Qatar in the early Islamic period

Jose C. Carvajal Lopez, Lecturer in Historical Archaeology, University of Leicester

One of the most relevant aspects of the early Islamic period in the Arabian Gulf is the expansion of exchange networks, which led to the establishment of direct connections between Iraq and China in its zenith. The traditional approach of scholars to this has focused on a debate about the continuity and discontinuity of the models of trade of Antiquity, but never questioning that exchange was an activity sponsored by states and articulated through urban hubs that were often founded by rulers.

Recent research in the Arabian Gulf is providing evidence of other ways to consider this expansion of trading networks. The evidence unearthed on Christian monasteries and on rural sites of the early Islamic period shows that there is an accumulation of capital (understood in its widest sense) in social groups that are not urban nor directly connected to states, and that were in a good position to develop and expand connectivity. Recent research in Qatar suggest that nomadic groups played an important role in this accumulation and movement of capital.

In this paper I will present the results of my research in Qatar (the Crowded Desert project) and connect it to the wider scenario of the Arabian Gulf in Late Antiquity and the early Islamic period. I will argue that nomadic groups were very important in the historical developments of this time.

Two tales of one city: al-Hira in the historical sources and the archaeological record

M. Müller-Wiener (Museum for Islamic Art, Berlin), M. Gussone (Technische Universität Berlin)

The reappraisal of historical textual sources on al-Hira began 1811–1813 with a study of J. G. Eichhorn and 1899 with Gustav Rothstein's monograph, followed by numerous other studies. In the course of this long history of reception, a scholarly narrative on al-Hira has emerged that is characterised by a clear focus on the pre-Islamic city and by the primary evaluation of Arab authors of the 9th – 10th centuries. This modern scholarly narrative takes up and continues the topical descriptions of al-Hira provided by the Arabic authors. According to this narrative, "decline" sets in after the events of the 7th century. The continuity of the settlement and the existence of al-Hira until the 10th century, which is also reflected in the texts of the Arab historiographers, is not addressed. The findings of the prospections carried out since 2015 and recent excavations as well as the accompanying evaluation of the textual sources illustrate clearly that this truncated perspective needs to be adjusted.

Sasanian and caliphal imperialism in Oman

Harry Munt

There has been much debate over the past couple of decades about the extent of Sasanian involvement in southeast Arabia in late antiquity. There has been less debate about the extent of caliphal imperial involvement in that region, but the working of the Umayyad and early Abbasid empire has been an important topic of research, a topic to which studies of Arabia can offer a great deal. This paper will look at the question of Sasanian and caliphal imperialism in southeast Arabia principally through the evidence of extant literary sources to see what they can contribute to the discussion alongside the results of archaeological fieldwork that has been carried out recently in the region.

New perspectives on the al-Qusur monastery pottery: typo-chronology, functionality, and historical discussion

Remi Perrogon

Monastic settlements in the Gulf region at the end of Late Antiquity represent a complex phenomenon. Many questions remain unanswered as to the precise dates of their foundation and their relationship to the Syriac churches of Bilad Al-Sham and Mesopotamia.

Many aspects of their functioning during the following centuries up to the Early Islamic era, remain to be defined. Especially for the eating habits of the monasteries, both for religious, lay people, pilgrims and travelers.

The pottery studies of archaeological finds from these sites bring new elements to the discussion. Beyond typo-chronological indications, new studies make it possible to document this material via a functional approach. The ceramics of the Gulf monasteries are present both in the acquisition, import, transformation and conservation of resources. These new data also make it possible to nourish certain historical discussions, in particular the literary vision of al-Shabushti of the “Diyarat”, the monasteries within the Islamic world, as places of reception. This presentation aims to highlight a functional approach to ceramics, but also to promote interdisciplinary exchanges between archaeologists and historians.

From Late Antiquity to Early Islam on Sīnīya Island, Umm al-Quwain: A Microhistorical Approach to Gulf Monasticism

Timothy Power, Michele Degli Esposti, Robert Hoyland & Rania Hussein Kannouma

Recent archaeological work on Sīnīya Island in the lagoon of Umm al-Quwain has brought to light a previously unknown monastery and settlement. The monastery comprises a core cluster of buildings, including a church, refectory, and abbot's house, surrounded by outlying solitary monks' cells. The nearby settlement consists of densely packed low mounds formed of collapsed stone houses, which may have been home to a lay community serving the monks. Radiocarbon dates suggest that occupation commenced between the sixth and mid seventh centuries, while the final occupation may be placed between the mid seventh and late eighth centuries. The ceramic assemblage further points to a broadly eighth-century abandonment. This paper will present the preliminary results of our excavations and attempt to place the rise and demise of the cenobitic community of Sīnīya into an appropriate historical context. We will consider a range of factors in play between the sixth and eighth centuries. How did the local community navigate these turbulent centuries? The archaeology of Sīnīya thus becomes a platform for microhistory, inviting us ‘to ask big questions in small places,’ thereby affording new insights on the transition from late antiquity to early Islam in the Arabian Gulf.

Occupation of the Sohar Hinterland during the Late Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods: The Archaeological Evidence

Seth Priestman, Durham University

The port of Sohar emerged as one of the key centres of Indian Ocean maritime trade in the Middle East under the first Ibadi imamate during the Abbasid period. The pre-Islamic history of the port and wider Batinah coastal region remains harder to reconstruct. While there has been an important upward revision of the chronology of the archaeological excavations

undertaken at Sohar in the 1980s, the findings provide clear evidence of occupation extending back to at least the 7th and 8th centuries AD. Across the wider Sohar hinterland, there have now been a number of long-term and extensive archaeological surveys including those undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s by Andrew Williamson and then Paolo Costa and Tony Wilkinson, the Wadi Jizzi survey by Bleda Düring within the past decade, and the Batinah Expressway projects. Again, these have provided only very limited and ephemeral evidence for the late pre-Islamic occupation of the area. While we strongly suspect at least an intermittent Sasanian presence in the area, the archaeological traces of this activity remain difficult to define. The chance discovery made at the fort of Fulayj located 30km to the southeast of Sohar appears particularly significant. The site consists of a small, regularly planned, and heavily defended, stone-built fortification with projecting corner and entrance flanking towers. Fulayj bears all the hallmarks of a professional military construction linked with the Sasanian world. Its size, at 30 x 30m, is too limited to have housed a significant military detachment. It may therefore have formed part of a wider defensive system designed to control the economically important coastal Batinah and Sohar hinterland.

Excavations undertaken at Fulayj in 2015 and 2016 supported by the European Research Council confirmed our suspicion that it was built in the late pre-Islamic period around the 5th century AD. Significantly, Fulayj was then reoccupied and internally modified in the decades leading up to and immediately following the Islamic conquest of Oman. A renewed investigation of the site began in 2022 with the support of the Anglo-Omani Society and the Beatrice de Cardi Award. Recent results shed further light and detail on the complexity of the fort's occupational history. The presentation will outline the significance and importance of Fulayj, and detail some of the latest findings from our investigation. We will also consider the broader significance of Fulayj within the context of the late pre-Islamic occupation of the Sohar hinterland. No similar sites or network of fortifications has so far been identified within the region. This poses obvious challenges concerning future research and the site's wider interpretation.

Hira before Islam in the literary sources

Philip Wood

Hira was famous in late antiquity as the capital of the Nasrid kings, who supported the Sasanians in their wars with Rome. But Hira was also a significant site in the history of Christianity: it was the seat of a metropolitan and the burial place of catholicoi of the Church of the East. Syriac and Arabic sources give a vivid impression of its position as a site of competition between Miaphysite and Dyophysite missionaries who were eventually successful in their attempts to convert the kings of Hira themselves. In this paper I lay out this history of intra-Christian religious competition, before looking at some of its cultural side-effects in the growing prestige of writing in different languages.

The Early Islamic Archaeology of the Dammam region

Majed Muhammad Gauod, PhD Candidate, University of Durham

Eastern Arabia refers to the area between Oman and Kuwait, much of which was known in early Islamic historical sources as *Bahrayn*. Recent years have seen an increasing focus on the early Islamic archaeology in this region, especially in of Qatar, to some extent the Emirates and also Bahrain. In these areas the evidence suggests that there was an important increase in settlement and activity in the first century or two following Islamisation. But the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia has largely been ignored. I undertook a field survey in August and September 2022 for my PhD research at Durham University. It covered the Qatif/Dammam area as well as Hofuf. The work showed that this area also has many significant early Islamic sites that date to the later 7th, 8th and 9th centuries. At least 16 sites have been identified, mostly concentrated in the area between Qatif and Al-Hasa. This research raises significant questions about some current theories that suggest economic and agricultural decline occurred in eastern Arabia immediately post-Islamisation (e.g. Wilkinson, 1977: 133-155; Al-Naboodah, 1988: 220-235; 1992: 81-96). The work also sheds light on the nature and organisation of settlements and the developing material culture of early Muslim society.