



## Urban Centres in the Gulf during the Early Islamic Period: A Historical Study

Farouk Omar

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## URBAN CENTRES IN THE GULF DURING THE EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD: A HISTORICAL STUDY

*Farouk Omar*

THE shores of the Gulf region comprised several provinces in the early Islamic period, but the present paper is limited to the only two provinces on the western coast of the Gulf, i.e. Oman and Bahrain. Oman geographically extended between Jurfār in the north and al-Ashfā' in the southern part of the Arabian peninsula, while Bahrain, regionally, extended along the western coast of the Gulf between Basra in Iraq and Jurfār in Oman.

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Along the coast of Bahrain, there extends a low plain<sup>1</sup> in which there are many salty lowlands, and then come broad sandhills and waste desert.<sup>2</sup> There are also valleys, such as that of al-Sattār, the soil of which is suitable for agriculture. We find therefore more than one hundred villages, mentioned by the sources, such as Thāj and Naṭā'. In this latter village, the tribe of Tamīm captured a caravan sent by the Persian governor of the Yemen to the Sasanid Emperor. Our sources relate that this was the reason for the battle of *Yawm al-Ṣafqa*<sup>3</sup> between the Banū Tamīm and the Sasanid army in Bahrain. After the coastal and inner plains, the third topographical part in Bahrain is called al-Ṣammān. It was so-called for its hardness, but its valleys were rich in pastures, especially in rainy winters, and the rain water in this region accumulated for a long period. There are also a number of islands which belong to the province of Bahrain, the most important of which are Awāl, Ḥawārīn, Shafar and Tārūt.

At the advent of Islam, Awāl was one of the most inhabited islands in Bahrain, because its water was abundant and sweet, depending as it did on subterranean water. There was a number of towns, the largest of which was Awāl, in which there was a mosque. This island was famous for agriculture, palm trees and fishing. As for the island of Ḥawārīn, it was at a three-days' walking distance from the coast. It was conquered by Ziyād b. 'Amr b. al-Mundhir, and that is why he was connected with it. In the island there was a town of the same name.<sup>4</sup> The island of Tārūt was located east of al-Qaṭīf, and between them there was shallow water; it seems too that there was a small town with the same name of Tārūt. Our sources refer to a large number of springs and wells,<sup>5</sup> but as time passed they ceased to be usable due to negligence and to the many disturbances which the province of Bahrain witnessed.

Bahrain was, at the advent of Islam, well inhabited, on account of the availability of water, the fertile soil and the closeness of the sea. This accounts for the many towns and villages which are mentioned in historical accounts, the most important of which being:

(1) Juwāthā.<sup>6</sup> This was the first important base of the Muslims in Bahrain; it had a *minbar*, and the first Friday prayer was performed in the mosque of 'Abd al-Qays. There was also a fortress called *Ḥiṣn Juwāthā*. It was in Juwāthā that the people of the Ridda—the so-called apostates—surrounded the Muslims in 11 A.H., but al-'Alā' b. al-Ḥaḍramī, several months later, was able to defeat al-Ḥātim b. Dubay'a al-Rabī, the apostates' leader, who together with his followers retreated, leaving their arms and belongings behind them. Perhaps the most important reason for the large population of Juwāthā, besides its commercial situation, was the availability of drinkable water from a spring there, which also irrigated the date-palm orchards and vegetable gardens west of the city. The site of the old city, especially its mosque, still exists, but it is no longer inhabited.

(2) Hajar.<sup>7</sup> This was the most important city in Bahrain, whence some sources use the name of this city instead of Bahrain when they speak of the province as a whole.

In pre-Islamic times, Hajar was an important communications centre and the capital, as it were (i.e. the *qā'ida*), of Bahrain. A Persian *marzubān*, or governor, resided there. His name at the advent of Islam was Sībīkhat, who exchanged letters with the Prophet Muḥammad but did not embrace Islam. The majority of the inhabitants of this city was of the tribe of 'Abd al-Qays. After Islam, Hajar continued to be the most important town in Bahrain; the Ridda insurgents captured it in 11 A.H., but al-'Alā' b. al-Ḥaḍramī recaptured it and defeated the rebels.

Hajar was, before and after Islam, the point from which tribes moved to the Persian coast of the Gulf, and Arab tribes were to be found on both sides of the Gulf. About the beginning of the fourth century A.D. the tribe of 'Abd al-Qays, from Hajar in particular, moved to the Persian coast of the Gulf and controlled Abarshahr, Ardashīr Khurra and ports of the province of Fārs, seizing the opportunity offered by the weakness of the central Sasanid régime. The historian Ṭabarī relates that the Sasanid Emperor Shābūr II (Shāpūr, 309–79) gathered his forces and attacked the Arabs both on the eastern and western coasts of the Gulf. The Persian ruler terrified the tribes, killed thousands of men, plundered towns and destroyed wells. Many tribal groups there were taken captive and brought to the eastern coast of the Gulf. Members of Bakr b. Wā'il were taken to Kerman; those of Ḥanzala were forced to settle in Ahwāz, and sections of 'Abd al-Qays had to settle in Tawwaj and Kerman. This ruthless Persian policy took place around A.D. 350.

North of Hajar there was a fort called al-Mushaqqar, described in the sources as an important administrative and commercial centre, 'the great city'; it was also the site of an annual market before Islam. Perhaps al-Mushaqqar's importance in the view of the local historians of the Gulf comes from the fact that it was the site of a fierce battle between the Persian army and the Arabs, called the *Yawm al-Safqa*. The sources refer to this battle as one of the first victorious battles of the Arabs against the Persians.

The location of Hajar is identifiable as the town of al-Hufūf in Saudi Arabia; but al-Mushaqqar's location is now unknown.

(3) Al-Qaṭīf<sup>9</sup> was a famous town on the coast of Bahrain, at the coming of Islam, second in importance only to Hajar. Al-Qaṭīf was a fortified town surrounded by a trench and a wall with four gates; it was also the centre of an agricultural centre with plenty of water. The Ridda leader al-Hātim b. Ḍubay'a made it his headquarters during his war against the central Islamic régime in Medina. However, his supporters could not resist the Muslim army for long; they surrendered to al-'Alā' b. al-Ḥaḍramī, and their Persian allies were obliged to retreat to al-Zāra. According to our sources, al-Qaṭīf flourished in the third/ninth century. Some accounts assert that there was a *minbar* there, indicating its importance as an administrative centre, although it was not known as an important commercial town.

Al-Qaṭīf today includes the island of Tārūt and extends along the coast for ten miles; the fortress is still there, bearing witness to the past.

(4) Al-Zāra.<sup>10</sup> This was an important commercial centre and the residence of the Persian *marzubān* before Islam, remaining well known after Islam. Persian influence seems to have continued there after Islam, since the sources relate that al-Muka'bar, the *marzubān* of al-Zāra, took advantage of the Ridda wars and fortified himself in the town, with the Magians gathering round him and refusing to pay the *jizya* to the Muslim administration. The central government in Medina was determined to defeat the rebels and finally achieved this when al-Zāra was conquered in 13 A.H., at the beginning of the caliphate of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. The killing of the *marzubān* and a shortage of water contributed to the Persian defeat. Al-'Alā' b. al-Ḥaḍramī reached a negotiated settlement, which prescribed that the Persians should surrender one-third of the town, one-third of its gold and silver, and half of its outlying parts.

Al-Zāra was destroyed in the late 'Abbāsīd period when it was burnt down by conflicting tribes. Its site today bears the name al-Ramada.

(5) Al-Aḥsā'.<sup>11</sup> Al-Maqdisī relates that al-Aḥsā' is a town in Bahrain situated to the south-west of al-Qaṭīf. In 493/1051, Nāṣir-i Khusraw visited it and described it as a flourishing, fully-inhabited town with walls and a fortress. It seems that al-Aḥsā' especially developed and flourished when the Carmathians, or Ḳarāmiṭa, ruled Bahrain, as it became their capital and the most important city in the province, matching the traditional capital Hajar. The sources mention that the leader of the Ḳarāmiṭa, Abū Ṭāhir al-Jannābī (fourth/tenth century) revitalized al-Aḥsā', fortified it and built a new city near to it, al-Mu'miniyya, which nevertheless did not over shadow Al-Aḥsā'. Apart from political reasons, the development of al-Aḥsā' was due to other factors such as fertile soil and abundant water. There is no settlement by the name of al-Aḥsā' today, but it is used for the western coast of the Gulf lying within the boundaries of Saudi Arabia.

If we move to Oman during the early Islamic period, the important strategic and commercial situation which Oman had at the meeting place of the Gulf

within the Arabian Sea explains the attempts of the new Islamic state to annex this province in the very early days of Islam.<sup>12</sup>

The Arab geographer Al-Bakrī<sup>13</sup> well described Oman when he said that 'along the coast there are plains and sand, whereas at a distance we find rugged and hard ground and mountains'. Hence most of the urban centres in Oman were located on the coast, from commercial and navigational considerations, since most of these centres were either ports or market places. Others, however, were agricultural centres because of their situation on fertile productive plains; but there were also some other urban centres scattered in the interior region of Oman, where there were some fertile areas or market places.

The most important urban centres in Oman during the early Islamic period were:

(1) *Ṣuḥār*, which was the most important town in Oman, a fact which explains the abundant historical information on it in the sources. Al-Iṣṭakhrī describes it as the *qaṣaba* of Oman and the most populous and wealthy city in the province.<sup>14</sup> Historical traditions<sup>15</sup> mention that it was a very old city. Before Islam, a market was held in *Ṣuḥār* on 1 Rajab every year; the town was also famous for its textile industry. *Ṣuḥār*'s political and administrative importance increased after the advent of Islam, since it became the headquarters of the governors from the Julundā family. The city still exists as an important port in modern Oman.

(2) *Masqaṭ*.<sup>16</sup> If *Ṣuḥār* was a commercial and administrative centre in the early Islamic period, *Masqaṭ* was an important port, *Ṣuḥār*'s exit to the sea. Surrounded by high mountains, it was a natural harbour suitable for ships taking shelter from cyclones and storms, hence al-Bakrī called it 'a shelter for ships'. Our information about it as an urban centre, however, is scanty, indicating that it was less important than *Ṣuḥār* in the first/seventh century.

(3) *Dabā*.<sup>17</sup> This was a market place before Islam, with its market held annually at the end of Rajab, under the supervision of the Āl Julundā rulers of Oman. Historical traditions call it the *miṣr* and the great market of Oman, alluding to its administrative and commercial reputation before Islam. However, *Ṣuḥār* superseded *Dabā* in the Islamic period, although competition between the two cities continued during the early days of Islam. The tribes in *Dabā*, led by Laqīṭ al-Azdī, opposed the spreading influence of the Āl Julundā. This opposition seems to have been interpreted by the Islamic régime in Medina as a *ridda* (i.e. apostasy), and the Caliph Abū Bakr helped the Āl Julundā to overcome it.

(4) *Qalḥāt*<sup>18</sup> was an ancient town. It flourished a long time before Islam: Mālik b. Fahm al-Azdī and his tribe settled there when they emigrated to Oman from the Yemen about the middle of the sixth century A.D. The general chroniclers as well as local historians agree that the Arab Azd collided with the Persians who were occupying Oman's coastal plains. Many battles took place between the two parties, the most important of which was the battle of *Qalḥāt*, in which the Arabs defeated the Persians, who withdrew towards *Ṣuḥār* and

made an armistice with Mālik al-Azdī on condition that they departed from Oman for one year and paid tribute.

Our sources rarely mention Qalhāt during the early Islamic period, probably because of Ṣuḥār's increasing importance and its political influence. There was also the fact that it was some distance from lines of navigation and maritime trade. Nevertheless, Yāqūt mentions that it was again a flourishing centre during the sixth/twelfth century, populous and witnessing considerable political and commercial activity.

(5) Nazwa<sup>19</sup> was one of the most important interior towns in Oman, on a significant military and commercial site. From the description of Yāqūt, the city seems to have consisted of a group of villages, strung out in a series. The traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited and described it as 'the *qā'ida* of the country ... surrounded by orchards and rivers. It also has a good and flourishing market'.

The last decade of the first century of the Hijra witnessed the beginning of the Ibāḍiyya movement at Baṣra in Iraq. The Ibāḍiyya then spread into Oman, where an Imamate was declared as early as 132/749 under the leadership of al-Julundā b. Mas'ūd. The Imamate was to be an important phenomenon in the history of Oman, and Nazwa played a vital role in its political and ideological development. Thus in 273/885 the Imam al-Ṣalt b. Mālik was forced to abdicate, which started a sharp disagreement among the movement's adherents with regard to the legality of such an abdication; Nazwa represented a neutral point of view, which endeavoured to compromise between the conflicting parties. Such an attitude characterized the fourth/tenth century and helped to a certain extent to create a moderate and flexible atmosphere among the conflicting groups in the Ibāḍiyya movement. Nazwa is still a large, well-inhabited town in Oman.

There were other small towns and villages in Oman, which our sources either do not mention or provide only scanty information on them; al-Sīr, Samad and Jurfār are only a few examples of these.<sup>21</sup>

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In conclusion, it is perhaps possible, in the light of the information provided by our sources, to divide the urban centres in Bahrain and Oman, into three categories: first, urban centres which are mentioned by nearly all geographers and historians, who agree on their locations and provide a fair amount of data on their political, social and economic conditions; second, urban centres which are mentioned by our sources but whose location is not identified in them; most of them seem to have been destroyed due to natural factors or political disturbances; third, villages which were inhabited by particular tribes and named after them, such as the villages of the Banū Muḥārib, Banū 'Āmir of 'Abd al-Qays and Banū 'Utārid of Tamīm. The villages of 'Abd al-Qays were, for example, al-Rum, al-Naqiyya and al-Ramla, and the villages of Tamīm were al-Rāfiqa and al-Shunūn, all of them in Bahrain. This article, obviously, deals only with urban centres of the first category, which flourished during the early Islamic period.

## Notes

1. Yāqūt, *Mu'jam* (Leipzig, 1868), pp. 506–7. See also F. Omar, 'The Islamisation of the Gulf', a paper delivered at the University of Exeter Symposium on *The Gulf and the Arab World*, 1986.
2. On the geography of Bahrain see Hamdānī, *Ṣifat Jazīrat al-'Arab* (Cairo, 1954), p. 48; Kaḥḥāla, *Juġhrāfiyat Jazīrat al-'Arab* (Damascus, 1944), p. 261.
3. Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* (Leiden), I, 984; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil* (Leiden), I, 631.
4. On these islands, see al-Najim, *Bahrain* (Baghdad, 1973), pp. 22–3.
5. Iṣṭakhīrī, *Masālik* (Leiden), p. 32; Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, II, (Leiden), 23.
6. Hamdānī, p. 178; Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ, *Tārīkh*, (Najaf, 1967), I, 83; Ṭabarī, I, 1961; Yāqūt, p. 136.
7. Maqdisī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, p. 72; Yāqūt, IV, 953; Ṭabarī, I, 392; Dīnawarī, *al-Akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, p. 48.
8. Hamdānī, p. 178; Yāqūt, IV, 791; Ṭabarī, I, 984.
9. Hamdānī, p. 136; Yāqūt, IV, 143; Ṭabarī, I, 1961; Ibn al-Athīr, II, p. 368.
10. Yāqūt, III, 907; Balādhuwī, *Futūḥ* (Leiden), pp. 85–6; Khalīfa, I, 94.
11. Maqdisī, p. 93; Yāqūt, I, 148; Qalqashandī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, p. 81. On the meaning of al-Aḥsā', see Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, XIV, 177; Aḥsā'ī, *Tuḥfat al-mustafīd* (Riyadh, 1960), I, 13.
12. F. Omar, op. cit., p. 15; idem, *Tārīkh al-Khalīj al-'Arabī* (Baghdad, 1985), p. 84.
13. Bakrī, *al-Masālik wa-l-mamālik*, Ms. Library of Higher Studies, College of Arts, Baghdad, fol. 216A.
14. Iṣṭakhīrī, *Masālik*, p. 25.
15. Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh* (Leiden), I, 313 ff.; Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar* (Hyderabad 1361/1940), p. 265.
16. Maqdisī, p. 93.
17. Ibn Ḥabīb, pp. 265–6; Ya'qūbī, pp. 313–14; Ṭabarī, I, p. 1979; Yāqūt, II, 543; al-Sālimī, *Tuḥfat al-a'yān* (Kuwait, 1974), I, 51; J.C. Wilkinson, 'The Julunda of Oman', *J.O.S.*, I (1975), p. 99.
18. Azkawī, *Kashf al-ghumma* (Abn Dhabi, 1976), pp. 20–5; Yāqūt, IV, 168. See also Ibn Baṭṭūta, *Riḥla* (Beirut, 1960), p. 270; Lorimer, *Gazetteer / Dalīl al-khalīj al-'Arabī* (Arabic tr.), III, 1530.
19. Maqdisī, p. 93; Yāqūt, IV, 776; al-Ānī, 'Umān, etc. (Baghdad, 1976), p. 65.
20. F. Omar, *Muqaddima fī maṣādir al-tārīkh al-mahallī fī 'Umān* (Baghdad, 1979), p. 21.
21. al-Ānī, op. cit., p. 65.