

Towards a World History of the Medieval Gulf

Distinctive Cosmopolitanism and Trade

ABSTRACT The Gulf region during the “Middle Period,” from around 1000 - 1500 CE, faced what seemed to be two insurmountable challenges: the fall of the ‘Abbasids in Baghdad in 1258 CE as well as increased competition from the Red Sea. Despite these two threats to the prosperity of trade in the region, however, Gulf ports remained vibrant and important centers of trade and cosmopolitanism. The Gulf, with its merchant economy and its relatively tolerant port cities, did not march in lockstep with the fate and fortunes of metropolitan cities such as Baghdad. Instead of William McNeill’s webs of history with their orbiting points, medieval Gulf ports were spiders spinning silk in the wind, attaching to whatever space along the shore was most convenient. Gulf port polities were diffuse, detached from imperial centers and, for dogmatists, sometimes dangerous, as they do not fit usual religious paradigms. Marshall Hodgson rightly identified the Middle Period as the crucial period for the Islamicate world. The centuries between 1000-1500 CE were characterized by a remarkable unity that existed across the Medieval Islamic world despite political divisions. However, there was far more to the story of medieval Gulf culture, and possibly the whole medieval Middle East, than Hodgson’s narrative of the consolidation of Islam, which focuses on trade, religious thought, and cultural influences setting out from agrarian, urban centers. The remarkable independence of Gulf ports from agrarian political power mixed with a heavy dependence on international trade fostered a distinctive cosmopolitan ethos directed beyond Hodgson’s Islamicate world. **KEYWORDS** Arabian Gulf, Persian Gulf, Ports, trade, Indian Ocean, Arabia, Persia, global history

The medieval Mediterranean, the North Sea, the Black Sea, and other bodies of water have seen a publication boom in the past decades. In contrast, the Gulf, which shares many aspects of the Mediterranean, as well as several, important distinctions, remains much less studied or understood.¹ While several accounts exist of the ancient and modern periods, the medieval Gulf remains an era and a place ripe for study and reexamination. The challenge of medieval Gulf historiography is not that different from the one faced by medievalists of European regions that similarly lack rich and continuous chronologies. Even the notion of “Dark Ages” has entered into the language of Gulf historiography, borrowed from the early years of medieval historiography in Europe. Only now, however,

1. I am grateful to Edward English as well as the anonymous reviewers of this article for their many important insights and invaluable suggestions. Elements of this article, especially the idea of distinctive cosmopolitans, will appear in an upcoming book *The Global Gulf, A History* under contract with Harvard UP. I want to thank the Mediterranean Seminar led by Drs. Brian Catlos and Sharon Kinoshita. Their conference at Ohio State University, “The Global Mediterranean,” April 24, 2020, has helped me frame this study of the Gulf and Mediterranean, <https://u.osu.edu/globalmediterranean/mediterranean-seminar-2020/> Dr. Hussein Fancy, Paula Curtis, Amanda Respass, at the University of Michigan invited a draft version of this paper for their conference “De-Centering the Global Middle Ages,” February 8–9, 2019. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/globalmiddleages/>

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the “Dark Ages” approach to the period is being reconsidered in the context of archaeology, poetic and literary sources and a wider interdisciplinary approach to historical research. Still being sketched out in many ways, the medieval history of Gulf dynasties, many of which are almost unknown to scholars outside of the Gulf (such as the Nabhanis, Makramids and Jabrids) remains an opportunity for research and the application of some of the lessons learned from Mediterranean and European historiography.² Recent discoveries make clear that the medieval Gulf was not a backwater and what many assumed to be a blank page in history has turned into an archive of interdisciplinary sources. From around 1000–1500 CE the Gulf provided important nodes in a network of trade linking markets throughout Eurasia and Africa. While medieval Arabian and Persian Gulf ports were vulnerable to shifts in world trade and larger events, such as the fall of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate to the Mongols in 1258 CE, they persisted in their role as transit points in global trade. It is possible to argue the Gulf adapted successfully to the decline in Baghdad. Like the city-states of medieval Italy, which thrived despite the fall of Rome and the weakening of Constantinople, Gulf ports maintained a decentralized separation from surrounding imperial powers. Mainly, a distinctive form of relative, cosmopolitan tolerance, extending not only to monotheists but also to all faiths of the Indian Ocean, was a *sine qua non* of success. Twin features of Gulf ports, their independence and openness to all comers—a necessity for existence in the extreme geography of the Gulf—made them especially fertile grounds not only for economic opportunism but also for expressions of the Gulf merchant ethos.

This distinctive cosmopolitanism was different from modern cosmopolitan identities. Instead of being borderless and without roots, distinctive cosmopolitans often had a home base or community that established their identity. The diversity, not the sameness, of different groups allowed for comparative advantages and niches of commerce to prosper. Even as they were able to travel, they maintained that core identity, rooted in a geographic hinterland, sometimes far from shore. For the Ibadis of Oman, famous for their merchant and maritime prowess, for instance, this hinterland was the Green Mountains and Rustaq. For Indian Banians, it was the Subcontinent.³

Distinctive cosmopolitanism was often a necessity, since merchants not tolerated in one port could simply leave for another. Suleiman the Merchant wrote in the ninth century, during the heyday of the port of Siraf on the Persian shore. He spoke of the cultural understanding and tolerance needed for business in such an international marketplace:

“There is, in India, a caste in which members do not eat at the same plate or at the same table; they find this a defilement and an abomination. When these Hindus come to Siraf and when one of our great merchants invite them to eat a meal with them, even if the meal is attended by one hundred persons . . . he makes certain that each of these has their own plate and table.”⁴

2. Abdulrahman al Salimi, “The Nabhanis: A Sketch for Understanding,” *Studi Magrebini*, 18/1, 2020, 85–10 and “Makramid Rule in Oman”, *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, vol. 32, 2002, 259–68.

3. This theory of distinctive cosmopolitanism in the Gulf is the starting argument of my upcoming volume, *The Global Gulf, A History*.

4. *Voyage du Marchand Arabe Sulayman*, trans. G. Ferrand (Paris: Bossard, 1922), 138–9.

Sometimes, this merchant cosmopolitan ethos went beyond pragmatism. It became rarified, turning into literary expression of “humanistic” ideals that went beyond the pragmatic to a recognition of a philosophy of universal human experience. The Brethren of Purity, a merchant community in Basra that traded throughout and Indian Ocean, in their dialogue between Animals and Man before the King of the Jin even formulated the notion of a “Perfect Human,” one who was a combination of Christian, Muslim, Arab, Greek, Persian. This was not a human in which all differences were smoothed out; it was one in which they were still present, but combined.⁵ A similar idea is expressed in the *Maqamat* and cosmopolitanism emerges in the poetry of Saadi Shirazi, who traveled the region,

All men and women are to each other
the limbs of a single body, each of us drawn
from life’s shimmering essence, God’s perfect pearl;
and when this life we share wounds one of us,
all share the hurt as if it were our own.
You, who will not feel another’s pain,
you forfeit the right to be called human.⁶

Several scholars, including Sebastian R. Prange in his book *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast*, have amassed evidence attesting to merchant cosmopolitanism in the medieval Indian Ocean. The Gulf was an integral node in the medieval mixing of faiths and goods.⁷ Horses, raised in Arabia and prized for their endurance as far away as Bengal, were one of the most important exports from the Gulf to the subcontinent.⁸ Moreover, Ranabir Chakravarti shows how Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim ship captains and merchants, called Nakudas and Nauvittakas, “illustrated remarkable cooperation and social amity” from 1000–1500 CE. Nuruddin Firuz, from the port of Hormuz, at the narrow opening of the Gulf, traveled and traded in the Kathiawad Peninsula of India in 1264 CE. His career is a case study of pragmatic interactions between Hindus and Muslims. He worked with Hindu contacts and friends in the building of religious establishments and a mosque. Moreover, he was highly successful at his business. Nuruddin’s fellows called him *Malik ul Tujjar*, “King of Merchants;” trade was still vibrant between the Gulf and India, just six years after the fall of Baghdad in 1258 CE.⁹

5. Lenn Goodman and Richard McGregor, *The Case of the Animals vs. Man Before the King of the Jinn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

6. Richard Jeffrey Newman trans, *Selections from Saadi’s Gulistan* (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2004). President Obama used this poem in remarks to the people of Iran celebrating Nowruz (March 20, 2009). https://web.archive.org/web/20090328151311/http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/VIDEOTAPED-REMARKS-BY-THE-PRESIDENT-IN-CELEBRATION-OF-NOWRUZ/.

7. Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam. Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, reprint edition, 2019).

8. Ranabir Chakravarti, “Early Medieval Bengal and the Trade in Horses: A Note,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42/2 (1999): 194–211.

9. Ranabir Chakravarti, “Nakhudas and Nauvittakas: Shipowning Merchants in the West Coast of India 1000–1500 CE,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* vol XLIII (2000): 34–64, 53.

For some western historians, global cosmopolitan conceptions, especially those of the Brethren of Purity that seem verge on the “modern,” were not supposed to emerge until well after 1500 CE.¹⁰ What explains the world of Nuruddin Firuz, the “social amity” and remarkable expressions of universal human experience that seem to verge on the modern “global” concept in the writings of the Brothers of Purity, a medieval Gulf society of merchants? Two tentative answers come to mind. First, there was Hodgson’s grand thesis: the consolidation of medieval Islamicate culture allowed for a flowering of humanistic expression. Second, there was something else I hope to add here: the nature of the cosmopolitan culture of Gulf society that went beyond the Islamicate and that expressed an awareness of humanity born in the boom and bust towns of medieval Gulf trade and carried onto the crowded ships with their many tongues and faiths and rites.

Marshall Hodgson, the world historian of what he termed “Islamicate” culture, rightly identified the medieval period, in particular the period from around 1000–1500 CE, as crucial for the formation of Islamic culture. During this period an increasing cultural unity, based on Arabic literature and religious legal practices, existed across the Muslim world.¹¹ While Hodgson focuses on the great, urban intellectual centers further inland, medieval Gulf history and the nature of trade and politics in the Gulf during this period also had a role. In fact, the decentralization of power and the expansion of merchants into the Indian Ocean world provided an awareness of humanity itself, beyond even the cultural and religious category of Islam or Islamocentric points of view. The merchant communities of the Ikhwan al Safa, the Jews, Persians, Mongols, Armenians, Sabians, Banyan, the Ibadis, and others shaped this medieval Gulf ethos in their writings, literature, and ways of doing business. Fortunes would rise and fall. Ports would emerge from the desert shore and then fall back into the sands in response to regional power as well as more distant global demands, including trade with the Mediterranean. Despite the potential richness of its history, the medieval Gulf has received far less attention than Europe.

Cordoba and Granada, while seemingly Ornaments of the World in the west, were not nearly as cosmopolitan as ports on the Indian Ocean and the Gulf. Maronite, Sabean, Jew, Armenian, Hindu, Greek, Buddhist, Arab, Shiite, Sunni, and slave rubbed shoulders. Such was the diversity, scholars tried to understand the varieties of religious experience. The study of comparative religion flourished via such scholars as al-Shahrastani (d. 1153 CE), who wrote *The Book of Sects and Creeds*¹² and Benjamin of Tudela (d. 1173 CE), whose account of the number of Jewish traders at European ports is highly instructive. While he described a mere 30–40 families as large for Latin Europe, a community of hundreds in the Gulf region is treated as small and thousands of Jews is considered

10. For the rather fruitless and, at times, Eurocentric debate on when “global” vs. “world” history starts, see Sebastian Conrad’s balanced analysis in *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). One can also see the same title by Pamela Crossley’s equally insightful *What is Global History?* (Boston: Polity Press, 2008).

11. Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (University of Chicago Press, 1977).

12. *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, trans. A. K. Kazi (London: Routledge, 2013).

normal. In Basra, there are 10,000 Jews engaged in various forms of commerce and worshipping at the shrine of Ezra. In Rome there are a mere 200. Benjamin can only name two Jewish heads of household from Genoa. It would appear by Benjamin's calculations that there were more Jews in one Gulf city than in the entire Christian, Mediterranean littoral.¹³ He was also aware of the many tongues, peoples, and faiths that could be found in Gulf ports.

While much less cosmopolitan than the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean still had important commercial links with the Gulf world during the Middle Period. The port of Qays Island linked trade with the Ilkhanids and Genoa through the Black Sea.¹⁴ The port of Hormuz, at least before the Portuguese period of the early sixteenth century, traded pearls primarily with Venice.¹⁵ The Gulf in this period was a crucial part of the Global Middle Age: betraying the same political decentralization paired with social and cultural vibrancy of many other world regions in this period. Gulf culture and society persisted and sometimes even flourished, creating unique literary expressions and celebrations of a non-imperial form of cosmopolitanism, typically without the direct interference of overweening powers inland.

One issue in the historiography of the medieval Gulf is that World History's two favorite visitors to the Gulf, Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo, do not really give the region justice. A dependence on their accounts, although interesting when read in context, has provided a somewhat limited view when focusing on the decline of Baghdad as the cause of an irretrievable decline of the whole region. Ibn Battuta of Tangier (d. 1377 CE) described what he said was the decline of literary and cultural sophistication in Basra, the once-great city that linked Baghdad to the Gulf. Although it was tinged with nostalgia, he felt pretty smug. Rather like an English or American traveler in nineteenth-century Italy, here he was, roaming through the ruins of a once-great city, but feeling superior to the fourteenth-century descendants of Sibawayh, al-Farahidi, and other great scholars of Basra's Islamic Golden Age, those ones who wrote the rules of Arabic grammar, who set the standards of literary eloquence. Ibn Battuta must have imagined the great literary lights of Islam turning in their graves at every gross error made by the Imam of Basra.

“As we approached the city, I had remarked at a distance of some two miles from it is a lofty building resembling a fortress. I asked about it and was told it was the mosque of 'Ali. Basra was in former times a city so vast that this mosque stood in the center of town, whereas now it is two miles outside of it. Two miles beyond it again is the old wall that encircled the town . . . no place on earth exceeds it in quantity of date palm groves . . . I was present once at the Friday mosque and when the preacher rose to deliver his discourse he committed many gross errors of grammar. In astonishment at this

13. Trans. Marcus Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907). For numbers for Basra see p. 51; Rome and Genoa p. 5.

14. V. F. Piacentini and E. Maestri, “Rise and Splendour of the Sahil 'Umam al-Shamal within a New Order (13th-16th Centuries),” in *New Perspectives in Recording UAE History* (Abu Dhabi: National Center for Documentation and Research, 2009), 155–82.

15. For an excellent overview of the global medieval pearl trade and the Gulf, see chapter 2 in Robert Carter's *Sea of Pearls: Seven Thousand Years of the Industry that Shaped the Gulf* (London: Arabian Publishing, 2012).

I spoke of it to the Qadi and this is what he said to me, ‘In this town there is not a man left who knows anything of the science of grammar.’ Here is a lesson for those who will reflect on it - Magnified be He who changes all things! This Basra, in whose people the mastery of grammar reached its height, from whose soil sprang its trunk and its branches, amongst whose inhabitants is numbered the leader whose primacy is undisputed - the preacher in this town cannot deliver a discourse without breaking its rules!’¹⁶

The only person left to redeem Basra, in Ibn Battuta’s mind, was a young ascetic Sufi he saw praying his life away in an abandoned mosque. Although he admired the young man, joining him briefly in his practice and wishing he had the same piety, his own adventurous spirit aroused Ibn Battuta. He left the Sufi to his ruin.

Ibn Battuta and his ilk, although from thousands of miles away, were champions of a faded ideal of Arabic culture that perhaps never existed in reality. It seemed to him, as it did to many Muslims of the West, as if the time of Basra and Baghdad had come and gone, along with that of other towns tied with Gulf trade. It was a feeling, in fact, shared by Maghribis who travelled to the Middle East during this period, a belief that the periphery was now outdoing the center, as the central lands of Islam declined due to the excess and luxury and irreligiosity. Ibn Tumart, the Mahdi and founder of the great Almohads and his disciple ‘Abd al Mu’min, took advantage of this to declare a new Caliphate in the Land of the Setting Sun in the twelfth century, more than a century before the Mongols killed the soon-to-be last ‘Abbasid Caliph.¹⁷ The lack of confidence in the decadent Mashriq was shared even in the Islamic heartland, creating incidents that would be unheard of during the period of ‘Abbasid ascendancy. In the early 1250s, for example, Mecca’s religious leader would declare Muhammad Al-Mustansir, ruler of Tunis, 2000 miles from Baghdad, as the new Caliph of the Muslim World.¹⁸ The last ‘Abbasid Caliph, Al-Musta’sim, was still alive in Baghdad. The fall of this last ‘Abbasids seemed fated by God and the stars as a punishment for excess and luxury. Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), the great Tunis-born historian, said that many had predicted the end of the ‘Abbasids. He claimed Al-Kindi, astrologer of Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma’mun, composed a book on the future of Islamic empires. “It indicated that the end of [the Abbasids] and the ruin of Baghdad would take place in the middle of the seventh Hijri/twelfth century and that its destruction would be a consequence of the decline of Islam.” The book disappeared, said Ibn Khaldun, “without a doubt because it perished along with the books thrown into the Tigris by Hulagu [1258 CE] . . .”¹⁹ So famous was the fall of Baghdad, it entered even into both Islamic and medieval European history as a morality tale. Marco Polo repeated the story of Hulagu forcing the last ‘Abbasid Caliph to be locked up in his tower of gold and treasure without food.²⁰ Interestingly, while the Caliph had fallen into his piles of

16. Ibn Battuta, trans. H.A.R. Gibb, *Ibn Battuta: Travels in Asia and Africa* (London: Routledge, 1953), 86–7.

17. Allen Fromherz, *The Almohads: the Rise of an Islamic Empire* (London, New York: IB Tauris, 2011).

18. An special section Ed. Allen Fromherz in *Journal of North African Studies*, “The Hafsid and the Axial Western Mediterranean,” will be dedicated to the Hafsid Caliphate. It is scheduled for publication early 2021.

19. Ibn Khaldun, *Livre des Exemples*, trans. A. Cheddadi (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 693.

20. Sharon Kinoshita, in her translation of Marco Polo’s *The Description of the World* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2016), 21 note 21, informs us that there were in at least two other versions of this story about Hulagu and the last Caliph that made their way into French, one by Hayton, an Armenian prince who presented a work *La Flor des*

misplaced wealth, Marco Polo still described Baghdad as a great city, even after its sacking. He also points out the typical Gulf trade route. “Baghdad is a very great city; the caliph of all the world’s Saracens is [was?] just as the head of the Christians of the world is in Rome. Through the city flows a very large river, and on this river one can well reach the Indian Sea . . . merchants who wish to go to India follow this river down to a city called Kish [Qays] and from there enter the Indian Sea . . .”²¹

It is possible, however, to balance Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo with a less-known source closer to the Gulf. Ibn al-Mujawir, probably a businessman from Khurasan, Persia traveled through Arabia in the thirteenth century and wrote between 1226–30 CE as the Rasulids of Yemen were coming to power. While he mentions important Gulf ports, he seemed to focus almost all of his account on the Red Sea, giving the impression that the western side of the Arabian Peninsula was becoming more dominant. Nonetheless, he still provides important information on Qays, Qalhat, Bahrain, and Basra. He also shows how Red Sea trade was, in fact, connected with Gulf trade and both may have seen benefits from the emergence of Aden and the Rasulids. In his description of the island of Qays, for instance, he claimed that in addition to being a place where “women dominate” the men, “they are a people who have great esteem for strangers and take great care of them.”²² While he was not able to reflect on the fall of Baghdad, and does not provide as much information on the Gulf as on the Yemeni perspective, Ibn al-Mujawir did not expressly indicate the beginning of decline in Gulf commerce.

Another reason for this relative lack of information on the Gulf is the nature of our sources on the Nabahina dynasty in Oman. While powerful and influential and undoubtedly involved in Indian Ocean trade, the scholar of Ibadī Islam John Wilkinson has called the eleventh- to seventeenth-century Nabahina period a “Dark Ages” in Omani history. Yet we do know that the Nabahina formed an alliance with the Gulf ports of Hormuz and Qalhat on the Gulf of Oman. A shifting pattern of musical ports meant the end of Qays/Sohar and the rise of Hormuz and Qalhat after Qays was raided by an Atabeg from Persia and the Prince of Hormuz Sayf al Dian Nader in 1230 CE. Hormuz and Qalhat “became dominant in the Gulf-Omani trading patterns, and Qays’ days were numbered.” No wonder Nuruddin, our merchant from Hormuz mentioned earlier in this article, could become a “King of Merchants.” Hormuzis seemed to triumph not only from eliminating a rival in Qays but also from a strong alliance with the powerful Nabahina dynasty, which brought the relatively rich agricultural products of Oman to the trading table.²³ Ibn al-Mujawir may have favored descriptions of Yemen simply because the commerce nearer his homeland of Persia, from Hormuz, was simply better known. In the same way, our North African traveler Ibn Battuta provided relatively little on the

estoires d’Orient to Pope Clement V in 1307, and the second by Jean de Joinville in his *Vie de Saint Louis*, completed in 1309.

21. Marco Polo, trans. S. Kinoshita, *The Description of the World*, 20.

22. Ibn al-Mujawir, ed. and trans. G. Rex Smith, *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 2008), 289.

23. John Wilkinson, *Ibadism: Origins and Early Development in Oman* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 403–406.

conditions in Tangier, his birthplace, but much on the remote Maldives. Sources on the Kings of Hormuz before the Portuguese similarly provide important insights into the rise of the later medieval Gulf port as it moved from the mainland to the island of Hormuz for both greater security and autonomy.

Archaeology provides another important source for Gulf history. Scholars such as David Whitcomb have surveyed the “contribution of archaeology” to the early medieval period in the Gulf. Work on Siraf and other important ports has provided ample evidence of trade and contacts.²⁴ Timothy Power has studied the role and impact of trans-regional trade at ports such as Julfar as well as interior sites such as Buraimi, now on the border between the UAE and Oman.²⁵

While Mediterranean writers such as Marco Polo and Ibn Khaldun could not seem to resist turning 1258 into a morality tale, the Gulf region had already moved on long before last Caliph took his final, muffled breath. In fact, the ‘Abbasids, even at the height, barely controlled the ports of the Gulf. Basra itself, the port closest to Baghdad, was often in a state of revolt, slave rebellion, or de facto autonomy, separated from the imperial center by sometimes-impassible marshes. While the Mongols crushed and dismembered ‘Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad, the culture and economy around the Gulf region shifted, but remained fairly steady.

Much has been written about the rise of Egypt in this period, beginning with the consolidation of the Ayyubids and continuing with the Mamluks, who defeated the Mongols and transferred the Caliphate to Cairo. In addition was the rise of the Rasulids of Yemen, who made Aden a great port in the south, and the Venetians on the northern end of this route, which did focus power, commerce, culture, and trade to the Red Sea. Famed Karimi Jewish merchants, some rose to ministerial rank under the Mamluks, made the Red Sea route highly prosperous.²⁶

However, the Gulf was far from bypassed; it was not pushed irretrievably into obscurity, factionalism, and decay. As Marco Polo himself indicated, Qays Island, off the shore of Persia, prospered. Even Baghdad, while demoted, continued to be a great center for the boring of pearls. Ibn Battuta admitted that things improved after the successors to Hulagu, the Mongol conqueror of Baghdad, converted to Islam and created a cultural center in Persia. Archaeological research and a study of the sources, both historical and literary, shows the “Middle Period” was not one of doom and gloom in the Gulf.²⁷ Even European crusaders, shocked by the loss of Acre in 1291, were aware of the importance of Gulf trade. While he might not have been aware of the granular complexities of Gulf ports, William of Adam in his tract *Tractatus quomodo Sarraceni sunt expugnandi* suggests

24. Donald Whitcomb, “The Gulf in the Early Islamic Period: the Contribution of Archaeology to Regional History in Lawrence Potter,” in *The Persian Gulf in History*, ed. L. Potter (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 71–88.

25. Timothy Power, “Julfar and the Ports of Northern Oman,” in *The Ports of Oman*, ed. Abdulrahman al Salimi and Eric Staples (Hildesheim: Olms, 2012), 219–244.

26. E. Ashtor, “The Karimi Merchants,” *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* No. 1/2 (April 1956): 45–56. Roxani Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade* (University of North Carolina Press), 2007.

27. Andrew Williamson, “Hormuz and the Trade of the Gulf in the 14th and 15th Centuries A.D.,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* vol. 3 (September 1973): 52–68.

the “Tartars of Persia” might help in a war against Mamluks in the west and subvert Red Sea Mamluk trade.²⁸ This role of the Gulf and Persia in the Mediterranean imagination, not just the Red Sea Egypt trade with India, deserves further study.²⁹ The Gulf remained an attractive site for Eurasian trade.

Over the past few decades scholars have been working to encourage a reconsideration of both medieval Gulf primary sources and archaeological sites. John Wilkinson, Abdulrahman al-Salimi (on the Nabhanis of Oman), Fadal bin ‘Ammar ‘Ammari (on Bahrain), Paolo Costa (on Qalhat), and Valeria Piantentini (on Hormuz and Sohar) have shown that the Gulf was more economically vibrant than previously assumed.³⁰ What has emerged from this research is a new understanding of the medieval Gulf, not as a period of inevitable decline, but as one of continuity and even relative prosperity. There is also the growing realization that the medieval Gulf must be read with thin the context of medieval East African history and archaeology, a connection that has been the focus of archaeologists since H. Neville Chittick published his discoveries from the Lamu archipelago off the coast of Kenya in 1967 and continuing today with the work of Mark Horton, who is calling, rightly, for a “new thalassology” of the Indian Ocean that better incorporates the Gulf-African economy into world history.³¹ Other scholars, such as Robert Carter, have focused deeply on the economy of the pearl trade in the medieval Gulf, revealing evidence for a narrative of resiliency, not collapse. Trade with India and China in pearls seemed to increase in the century of Baghdad’s decline. In 1225 an observer from the Song Dynasty, a customs official from Canton, described the rich sources of pearls and horses from Qays and Oman. In 1259, one year after the fall of the Caliph of Baghdad, Ch’ang Te described pearl fishing and pearl trade continuing in the Gulf. According to Carter, “The Gulf . . . gained a reputation and the leading provider of the most and the best pearls . . . with Bahrain being the premier market and fishing ground . . .” Such was Bahrain’s success; competitors were emerging on the Persian shore as well.³² Instead of being a period beset by problems due to the decline of Baghdad, independent rulers and migrant merchant communities prospered, setting the stage for great trading cities and ports such as Siraf, Qays, Julfar, Qalhat, and Hormuz. These were, in many ways, the Dohas and the Dubais of their age.

28. William of Adam, *How to Defeat the Saracens*, ed. and trans. Giles Constable (Harvard University Press), 2012.

29. *Entre Mers – Outre-Mer: Spaces, Modes and Agents of Indo-Mediterranean Connectivity*, ed. Nikolas Jaspert and Sebastian Kolditz (Heidelberg University Press, 2018), has started this conversation. Nonetheless, more can be done on the Gulf side of the equation.

30. J. C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition in Oman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Paolo M. Costa, “The Great Mosque of Qalhat,” *Journal of Oman Studies* vol. 12 (2002): 55–70; Valeria Piorani Piantentini, “Shohar and the Daylami Interlude,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* vol. 35 (2005): 195–206; Fadal bin ‘Ammar ‘Ammari, *Ibn Muqarib wa ta’rikh al-dawla al-‘uyunniyya fi bilad al Bahrayn*, (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Tawba, 1985)

31. H. Neville Chittick, “Discoveries in the Lamu Archipelago,” *Azania* Vol. 2 (1967): 37–67; Mark Horton, “East Africa, the Global Gulf and the New Thalassology of the Indian Ocean” in *The Gulf in World History: Arabia at the Global Crossroads*, ed. Allen James Fromherz (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 160–84.

32. Robert Carter, *Sea of Pearls*, 59.

Gulf Port cities created a cosmopolitan ethos that put profit before the whims of dogma and despot. Out of plan or necessity, they were often freed from concerns of centralized powers and cultural conformity. This created fertile ground for literary, philosophical expressions of a form of medieval humanism based on experiences and encounters more diverse than more diverse than the Aabrahamic cultures of the Mediterranean. Instead of William McNeill's webs of history with their orbiting points, medieval Gulf ports were spiders spinning silk in the wind, attaching to whatever space along the shore was most convenient.³³ Gulf port polities were diffuse, detached from imperial centers and, for dogmatists, sometimes dangerous, as they do not fit usual religious paradigms. Although by the early modern period they were shaped by Ottoman and Portuguese imperial interventions, the underlying cosmopolitanism continued almost subversively under the imperial rule of the Portuguese, thwarting attempts at forced conversion and centralized control of trade.³⁴ The Gulf has long compelled imperial powers to bend to its unique economic, cultural, geographical, and social conditions. Perhaps the world's most strategic, shallow, and bitterly contested sea, the medieval Gulf confounds empire builders and world historians alike. ■

33. William McNeill and J.R. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of World, History* (New York: Norton, 2003).

34. D. Couto, ed., *Revisiting Hormuz: Portuguese Interactions in the Persian Gulf Region in the Early Modern Period* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag and Gulbenkian Foundation, 2008).