

Draft #2

Now in further revision;
a 'discussion' applying
generalizations mentioned
in the first paragraphs is
to come. Sweet

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PIRATES OR POLITICS?

Arab Societies of the Persian Gulf, 18th Century*

The question I attempt to answer in part in this paper is simply stated: What was the nature and potential scale of integration of Arab societies in the Persian Gulf during the 18th Century? Insofar as a fairly detailed answer is possible, I think its usefulness is clear: it provides the customary "base-line" from which to estimate the extent and nature of culture change during the past century and a half of clearly defined acculturation pressure upon Arab societies in the Persian Gulf.

This is not, however, a simple historical account, but an endeavor to see through the historical record and to conceive of this temporal and spatial sector (the Persian Gulf, 1780 to 1820) as a multi-dimensional field in which a number of particular socio-cultural systems of different types

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coexist, interact, or collide. Moreover, the environment in which these contacts occur is marked by its limited and special resources for exploitation and its distinctive habitat conditions for survival, communication, and mobility. This ecologically limited but strategic field of contact provides another testing area for such general propositions as the "law of cultural dominance" (Sahlins 1960) or Fried's hypothesis that when a more powerful system invades the habitat of a less powerful one, extinction, accommodation, or transformation will occur, depending on the specific local expression of economic and cultural ecological variables (Fried 1952).

It is first necessary, however, to ascertain the kinds of cultural systems in contact with each other in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, only one small part of my general problem is presented here, the revision of the historical image of the 18th Century Arab societies as "pirates" or organized "piratical" groups or tribes, generally lawless and indiscriminate in their predations. Such a conventional historical viewpoint implies, of course, that irregularity and unpredictability characterize the movements of societies, particularly, as in this case, societies which are little known in their structure and mode of operation, or which are aligned competitively against the society from which such verbal reactions come.

Contemporary viewers of the 18th century Gulf may be represented by a communication from the local Persian provincial power to the English East India Company factors at Gombroon (Bandar Abbas). He characterized the Arabs of the Gulf as "a People that embrace every opportunity of fixing themselves upon the most advantageous places for Navigation, and who will

soon make the whole Gulf dangerous for foreign vessels." (FR 6: Sept. 28, 1751) The contemporary British observers, officers in the East India Company or the British Navy, continue and deepen this viewpoint, some with sympathy for the Arab chiefs, (cf. Warden 1856) some with considerable understanding of the friability of the fissioning Arab maritime lineages and their mobility in literal geographic terms or in their changing political alliances (cf. Kemball 1856a and b).

Sir Arnold Wilson preserves the conventional historical view in his standard history of the Persian Gulf: "We have already had evidence that the Arab dominion in the Gulf was, at various times, the dominion of piracy." (Wilson 1954: 195) He further quotes Bennett, " . . . for it was not until the Arab tribes were welded together at the end of the eighteenth and earlier part of the nineteenth centuries, and incited to pillage and outrage by the Wahabi emissaries, who had extended their influence from Central Arabia to the coast, that lawlessness in the Gulf reached its height." (Wilson 1954: 196)

The evidence is also available, however, which indicates that this view point of an emergence of piratical or predatory Arab organizations is at best superficial and only one way of viewing the expansion of some of the Arab social units inhabiting the shores of the Gulf from ^{localized chiefdoms in} subordinate and tributary status to Persia to the point at which they ^{alliances at} ~~became~~ ^{were strong enough to seek} to control all merchant shipping moving through the Persian Gulf, including European. Certain features of the Sunni Muslim Arab groups involved enabled them to do so: their regional and ecological specialization in maritime technology

and activities relative to other contiguous areas; their control of exploitative procedures at the pearl fisheries; their ^{shared} lineage and chiefdom social structures; their armed superiority and mobility which enabled them to maintain their elite if not clearly and consistently coercive position over other peoples from whom they secured economic goods; and their use of sectarian distinctions in Islam for political purposes.

A brief historical sketch is appropriate here to present the temporal dimension. During the late 18th Century, especially after 1779 (death of Karim Khan), Persian control from the shah's court, over the ports, islands and coastal districts of the Persian Gulf declined steeply. British and Dutch trading stations or factories located at Gombroon (Bandar Abbas) at the southern end of the Gulf were abandoned by 1763. For a time the only relatively secure and profitable location for European commercial outposts was at Basra at the northern head of the Gulf, alternately under Ottoman and Persian control during this time. In the course of the 70 years with which I am concerned (1750-1820), the Gulf appears to be the scene of accelerating competition and conflict between raiding and counter-raiding fleets of Sunni Arab maritime warriors deriving from the small coastal towns and islands on both sides of the Gulf. Through this scene of internecine feuding and piracy the well-armed ships of British and Dutch commercial interests moved. It is significant to note that the European merchantmen of the 18th Century were large and deep draft vessels. (cf. MR. Misc. #529) and were able to approach the Gulf ports in only a few locations owing to the reefs and shallows of this shallow sea and to

the lack of navigation charts at that time. Arabs served traditionally as pilots through the Gulf to Basra. The indigenous craft of the Gulf, later called dhows, were generally small, shallow in draft, swift sailers and carriers of cargo to and from the many ports which large ships could not reach, whether European or the larger deep sea "dhows" of Muscat or of the Indian merchants. At mid 18th century, the Arab mariners living within the Gulf moved only in small craft which did not impress the Europeans as in any way competitive with European vessels. (FR 6: Oct. 9, 1750: "The Arabs have no forces there [Bahrain] of any consequence, and what they have by sea is in frankeys, that are vessels something like shybars." Frankeys at this time were rather small undecked or partly decked craft, propelled by either sails or oars.)

Throughout the later 18th Century, however, the maritime Arabs of the Gulf increased conspicuously the sizes of their ships, of their fleets, and of their scales of alliance in raids. Aggressiveness against each other's ships and ports intensified and ^{on the Arabian side} ~~two~~ enclaves appear, clearly extending their control of ports and of shipping: the 'Utub alliance of Shaykhly lineages dominating Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, and the Jowasin of the southern coast of the Gulf (now the Trucial States). As raiding and "piracy" extended against non-Arab vessels deemed legitimate prey, the Europeans found it necessary to arm and convoy not only their own merchantmen (those of the great national trading companies) but also those ships of the 'private trade' or country ("native") trade sailing under their protection and patronage. Ultimately the British moved to crush by force the threat to

free movement of British commercial interests into the Gulf. Twice, in 1808 and in 1818, they destroyed a large proportion of the ships of the south Arab enclave (the Jowasia) and their chief ports and attached date palm plantations. From that point begins the increasingly explicit domination of the Persian Gulf by Great Britain and the extension of continuous coercive pressure over the Arab chieftoms.

But I think it is also necessary for an ethnological approach, which aims toward ^{Testing} ~~stating~~ generalizations, to ^{recast} ~~present~~ this historical summary in terms of interacting systems of different types: the late 18th Century Gulf was a scene in which an imperial despotic state, for reasons not relevant here, lost control over the resources (pearls, tribute, customs duties at the ports, and the goods and specie entering the ports) and politics at the southwest margin of its territory, the Persian Gulf. Along this margin and across the Gulf on the coasts of Arabia, ecological conditions permitted the existence of societies with a smaller scale of political integration, chieftom alliances, but a scale which could be further depressed in scale by the imperial provincial administrative system to localized, tributary chieftoms. Intruding gradually into this area were the transport and commercial extensions of still more powerful politics, particularly the complex and ethnically diverse Anglo-Indian empire. In this interim period, during which neither the Persian nor the Anglo-Indian system moved effectively to control the key resources of the Gulf (the pearl fisheries and market, and especially the shipping lanes) the marginal or Arab systems began to expand and to consolidate in terms

of formal and adaptive properties in their structures to do so. At the point at which they crossed a boundary of control demarcated by the powerful, intruding Anglo-Indian system, but one not recognized by the Arabs, their expansion was cut off by force, and the Arab systems were compelled to return to localized structures.

Two kinds of Arab social unit appear in the Gulf during this period. In the historical record one is designated by the name of the chief only; the second bears a "tribal" label, and occasionally the chiefs or shaykhs are known, with one generally assigned the paramount leadership. Apart from the evident lineage and chiefdom structure implied, the vague impression is left that there is little more than this to the organization of the Arab polities, they were marauding bands of tribesmen, or sailors turned pirates as the opportunity arose, until stimulated by the Wahabi expansion to organized depredations against foreign shipping as well as each other.

History had remembered the solitary chiefs as notorious individual pirates, with their families, followers, fleets, and fortified retreats filled with the treasure of numerous raids and cargoes of plundered ships. Mir Mohanna of Bander Rig and the island of Kharg, his final retreat, and Ramah bin Jabir of Quatif, were such leaders of predatory units in their day. Mir Mohanna dominated native shipping in the northern part of the Gulf for about 6 years (1763-69) before he was successfully attacked and later killed. Both he and Ramah bin Jabir did not, on declared principle, attack British ships. They had no quarrel with the British, in part,

perhaps, because of the size and armed strength of their ships. But another factor can be suggested. As chiefs of polities and ports these men held offices superior in status to merchants, by Gulf tradition, and ^{as yet regarded as} the British were merchants. An earlier example of the solitary chief, so ephemeral and minor as never to have achieved the notice of standard history, appears briefly in the East India Company Factory Records between 1749 and 1752 (FR 6: entries between Jan. 25, 1749 and Feb. 20, 1752). Shaikh Ali ben Calfan was chief of the town of Charak on the Persian side of the southeastern Gulf, north of Lingah. His tribal affiliation or claim of descent is unknown; he was "at war" with chiefs of the large enclave of Huwalah Arabs, who possessed many of the small coastal ports to the north of Charak. Ultimately he was besieged in his Charak fort by a strong force of the Huwalah alliance and surrendered to them after a few days. He was "exiled" by the Huwalah chiefs, or taken hostage by them, with all his family, to another town, in the charge of one of the Huwalah victors (May 3, 1751). Within a month he had escaped, with all his family, and five or six large sailing craft of the Gulf, and had begun to support himself and his company by raids on coastal villages and passing Arab ships. Early in February 1752, well-equipped and backed by a small fleet and retinue he arrived at the port of Gombroon (Bunder Abbas), made his way to the court of the provincial Persian governor, entered his complaint for the loss of control of Charak, a right inherited in his family for many generations, and was received into the Persian court. As a pirate he disappears. But in the brief time of six months of piracy and raids, after his escape, he had successfully enlarged his fleet to nine or more fighting craft.

Shaykh Ali Ben Galfan's social unit, "all his family", rather clearly implies not only the chief's immediate household, including women and children, but all male kinsmen who acknowledge his leadership of the lineage. The size of his fleet, and its increase, further imply the attraction of others as retinue. Mir Mohanna, a little over a decade later, was reputed to have led a fanatically loyal force of two to three thousand men. (PR 16: entries of May 29, 1766 and March 8, 1769) Like the southern chief, Mir Mohanna had lost control of the port town, Bunder Rig, and hence his stable economic base of support, and retired to the island of Kharg, from which he subsequently carried out his depredations and exercised control of shipping through "his territory."

Charak, the small coastal town from which Ali Ben Galfan was driven by the Huwalah Arabs, was described in 1761 by Carsten Niebuhr as an independent, and still Huwalah controlled, settlement whose people were chiefly engaged in pearl fishing and were renowned for their skill (Niebuhr 1774: 272).

The impression that such predatory chiefs as these, or even the more powerful alliances such as the Huwalah and later the Jowasin and Utub were simply piratical bands is erroneous. The Gulf Arabs constituted, in fact, an economically specialized, ethnically distinct "caste" of the coastal populations of the Persian Gulf. All but Mir Mohanna were Sunni Muslim Arabs, and expressed their economic and political distinctiveness and superiority over ^{Shiite} ~~Sunni~~ Persians and Arabs also in terms of the superiority of Orthodox Islam over heretical sects. ^{Mir} ~~Mir~~ Mohanna, a ^{Shiite} ~~Sunni~~ Arab, was

thus excluded from support by the Sunni chiefs on these grounds. All were organized in lineages with genealogical traditions which linked them to the great tribes of Arabia. These chiefs and their kinsmen were the mariners of the Gulf, owning and controlling not only sailing craft but also engaging in or controlling exclusively the maritime activities: pearling, fishing, piloting, the coasting trade, and the long distance carrying trade to India and Africa. Niebuhr noted that, as occasion demanded, the fishing craft became a fighting ship, and the sailors and fishermen warriors. The exclusive possession of ships, arms, and of navigation skills put them in the position of advantage over other peoples in their settlements along the Gulf Coasts. The Sunni maritime chiefs and lineages did not engage in cultivation, nor in the local crafts of construction and shipbuilding, nor in the diverse service occupations. Not until late in the 18th century, if at all, do they appear as merchants owning or engaging ships to carry their commercial stock. Rather, as a brief description of one group will show, they formed an elite controlling but not clearly a ruling ^{group} ~~group~~ in each coastal settlement which possessed any economic diversity at all apart from maritime activities. They competed with each other for the control of such "most favorable places for navigation" and not infrequently moved from point to point, ~~as~~ clearly in the course of ^{the} fissioning of expanding lineages; and they also maintained their positions by raid and counter-raid. Niebuhr's account of the Arabs of the Persian side of the Gulf says that each coastal settlement had its own shaykh, elected by his kinsmen from one family, and deposed by them

when he failed his office. The shaykhs within Niebuhr's observation held no economic privileges and provided for their households from their own fishing and freighting enterprises. Each such town on the Persian shores formed a body of kinsmen who preferred their independence in poverty to unifying under a greater authority, and only by their continual raids against each other hoped to become rich (Niebuhr 1774: 269-72). In spite of the several occasions on which the Hawalah Arabs of the Persian shore did ally for collective action, it seems apparent that the pattern of their sporadic settlement among the agrarian Persians and the provincial organization of the region contributed to maintaining the Arab politics on the Persian side of the Gulf at the minimum scale of political integration.

It is on the Arabian side of the Gulf, however, that larger scales of organization by alliance were achieved. One of these, generally referred to as the Jowasin people, acquired fame as the pirates of the Oman coast of the Gulf who challenged the British for control of Gulf shipping and who were the target of the British attacks in 1806 and 1818.

The name Jowasin seems to be a corruption of the name of the founding ancestor of the shaykly family lineage of maritime Arabs who exercised control over the ports and settlements of the southeastern ^{western} shores of the Arab side of the Gulf. This home territory of the Jowasin comprised some 25 coastal towns and hamlets and their hinterlands along the Gulf shore of the Oman Peninsula from the tip beyond Rame south to Dubai. It also included a few settlements on the opposite side of the Peninsula. To some extent this was a territorial unit or putative state, although no

boundaries were clear and are not so today. Behind the coastal settlements lay pastoral tribal areas and a few oases, and the Jowasim clearly drew upon the desert tribesmen, their distant kinsmen, for warriors to man their ships or guard towers and forts. Documents from the early 19th Century and scattered contemporary references in the East India Company factory records indicate that the Jowasim settlements were not economically self-supporting even in the food staples apart from fish. Imported from Muscat, Bahrain, Basra and the Persian shore were all ^{timber} building materials, arms, hardware, cloth, and dates and grain. Teak for their ships was brought from India (Kemball 1845: 92-3 fnt.). Such needed goods were purchased, and money to purchase them came almost wholly from the sale of pearls. Exploitation of the southern pearl banks of the Gulf was the major resource of the Jowasim, and they sold directly to the merchants from their boats or home ports. By and large the pearl merchants were Banian Hindus and the market was controlled by them. Apart from the pearling the maritime peoples of the Jowasim settlements engaged in fishing, the internal Gulf coasting trade, and in each port there were one or more large sailing ships which made an annual long trading voyage to India or Zanzibar. As the carriers of economic goods in the interregional trade which supported the populations in the Arabian ports, and as the controllers of pearl fishing activities which purchased such goods, the key position in the Gulf economy of the maritime Arabs is clear. The actual organization and division of labor is not ^{clear} however, but the little known adds to the complexity of Gulf politics. Apparently most of the divers from the

Jowasin area were slaves. In the ships putting out from the Qatar ports, however, the crews were free tribesmen, often from the interior. On the islands of Bahrain and at Kuwait the divers were of more varied origin but the majority of them were clients of the ships captains and owners whose relations through debts eventually brought them into a serf-like position. (Cf. Harrison 1924: 71-94. Whether this description applies to the 18th century can be questioned. The true period of the diving season, noted below, ^{probably} does.)

Internally, the organization of Jowasin territory is best known from descriptions which seem referable to the final years of Jowasin independence, 1800-1818, and which also seem consistent with the scattered entries in the East India Company Factory Records (cf. Warden 1856; Kemball 1856a and b; FR Vols. 6-10, 1749-63, passim). The paramount Jowasin chief resided at Ras al Khayma. His economic support lay primarily in those ^{freighting} ~~shipping~~ pearling, and fishing enterprises for which he could provide the ships. The picture is by no means clear, but it seems also apparent that many ports in 'his' territory also provided a small income from customs or fees for entry, with privilege to trade in so far as they supported any commerce at all. Tribute is a term used also to designate a contribution to the paramount chief of the Jowasin from the chiefs of such smaller ports as Ajman who were not kinsmen. A few settlements of allied tribes, particularly Naim, were, on the otherhand, subsidized, or they claimed or were granted certain privileges and exemptions. Over the larger of the Jowasin settlements members of the chief's own family, especially sons,

were placed, with the proceeds of such secondary settlements as their portions. Marriages by a paramount chief extended his alliance ties and implied the obligations of mutual aid in lending ships, providing fighting men, and sharing in booty. The East India Company Factory Records clearly indicate the office of chief as representative of a group, leader of raids, negotiator of terms of settlements affecting these maritime lineages, but these functions did not necessarily have any significance for the classes of cultivators or craftsmen or merchants also to be found in the settlements in larger or smaller numbers. Kemball's 1854 description is probably also generally accurate for a half century earlier. Within each settlement the chiefs administered justice, but were markedly affected by public opinion. Sentences were passed by Qadis in accordance with Shar'ia, traditional Islamic law. The office of Qadi, the principal ecclesiastical authority, appears as an achieved one based on general recognition of superior learning, sanctity, and knowledge of the law. Actually, like the office of chief, it was most likely a familial inheritance. Lesser theologians and teachers taught reading and writing in the mosques or their homes (Kemball 1856: 297).

In the central and northern Gulf, by 1790-1800, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait were similarly structured and formed an alliance of elite controlling lineages, members of the Utub tribe, each of which had enough firmness of structure to be called by one historian a "state" (Abu Bakima 1960).

For all of these elite chiefly and ^{the} cadet lineages, however, their chief support lay in the proceeds derived from the pearl fishing and in

shipping, local or long distance. And these depended upon controlling ports with adequate facilities and having ships and arms to do so. As "pirates" their "warrior" class status is emphasized, but they were equally specialists in the productive sense in their diving, fishing and sailing activities.

There are hints that a poor year's pearl harvest for the Jowasin led to an increased rate of raiding and plundering the settlements and ships of other Arab polities, particularly the Muscatis whose ships brought desirable economic goods into the Gulf ports. ~~As~~ the Jowasin were thus "traditionally" ^{at war with} ~~and frequently~~ the Muscatis and frequently so with various Beni Main towns on the Persian side, ^{Similarly,} the Kuwait and Bahrain Arabs, partially dependent upon the northern and central pearl banks and supplemented by carrying to India the great date shipments from the Basra area, contended with the Chaab Arabs who held the northern Gulf shores near Basra. Reciprocal raids were only prosecuted against Arab polities with whom there was a recognized state of "war", and not indiscriminately, or against the Shiite Persians cultivators and other non-Arabs. There are enough descriptions of plunder to indicate that provisions were taken, meat, animals, grain, etc., and that non-perishable goods might soon find their way into the markets. But throughout the 70 year interim covered here, the chief prizes were ships and arms, and this period is characterized by the increasing size of the Arab ships and fleets within the Gulf.

Moreover, winter was the season for raiding, and during the summer, the pearling season, a mutual and traditional period of truce prevailed. The

pearl banks themselves and their exploitation were not, as the desert tribal grazing territories of the Arabian Bedouin were not, usually subject to competition, but were customarily exploited by the nearest people and theoretically were of free access to all. What was at stake were the tools of social and political superiority--ships and arms, and hence control of ports and commerce.

While economic pressure clearly plays its role in the incidence of Jowasim raiding and piracy, there are ample indications that it had also the same institutionalized aspect of the camel raiding of the Bedouin tribes of north Arabia, and that it served in part to maintain the maritime Sunni Arab chiefs and their lineages in their elite and controlling positions throughout the Gulf in respect to Shiite cultivators, ^{craftsmen} ~~and merchants~~ and merchants and vis a vis each other. In 1808 the intermediary for the defeated Jowasim, who sought to negotiate a peace treaty with the British following the partial destruction of the Jowasim fleets, presented a remonstrance to the British. To paraphrase this:

"They hoped the British would not insist on their leaving off cruising against those states who were at enmity with them; as according to the law of nations among the Arabs, blood could only be repaid by blood; that if they did not follow this kind of warfare, they would lose their rank amongst the Arab states, and that their enemies would come to their very homes to attack them; that they were, moreover, compelled by the Wahabi Chief to wage war against Mahomedan States of the Gulf, to bring them under the yoke

and religion of the Wahabis . . . their natural situation in the Gulf was such that they were compelled to be enemies to the greater portion of it . . . The negotiator also pointed out, in the name of the Jowasin, that while they had attacked and plundered ships under British flag or pass, these ships were not manned by Christian crews nor owned by British, but by Hindus and other unbelievers.'

(Farden 1819; 309)

Jowasin piracy was indeed "organized" as Wilson distinguished it from the predations of such solitary chiefs as Mir Whanna, but it appears to have a traditional depth and pattern not dependent upon stimulus from the Wahabi expansion of Central Arabia. In the Gulf these Sunni Arab seafaring lineages occupy, in their specialized maritime roles which commanded the tools in ships and skills in navigation and raiding tactics, a position analogous to the desert camel tribes the Beduin. But in the Gulf they appear as the controlling elite class or caste in coastally focussed politics and settlements with mixed ethnic or sectarian populations. Alliances between the lineages in different settlements were given by common descent attributed to the traditional genealogies and occasionally the record shows the reinforcement by marriage. With the decline of Persian imperial control of the Gulf, the Arab capacities to join for collective action emerged. But ultimately they ran athwart the intrusive and more powerful British commercial enterprises which drew a boundary unrecognizable to the Gulf Arabs: the British flag and pass superseded ethnic and religious identity.

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