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Zubarah: Uncovering a new history for Qatar and the Gulf

Walmsley, Alan G.

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Conservation and rehabilitation of the Old Palace of Doha

The development of the modern state of Qatar has been so rapid and comprehensive that it has left little space for the preservation of historic buildings. There is currently a growing awareness of the need to conserve and protect what is left of this built heritage. The Old Palace of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim, the father of modern Qatar, is one of the most important monuments in the country. The project for its conservation aims to set a new standard for the treatment of historic buildings and to catalyse a new movement towards architectural conservation both within Qatar and the wider Gulf region.

History
In 1880, Sheikh Jassim bin Mohamed ordered the construction of a new palace for his son Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim next to his own palace in Al Salata, east of central Doha. The complex was expanded with new houses and quarters for retainers added over the next decades. Sheikh Jassim wished to be located away from the Ottoman administrative centre near the current Amiri Diwan. After the Ottoman withdrawal from Doha, a new and grand central majlis was commissioned by a renowned Bahraini architect in 1918. The design and scale of this majlis was to showcase the emir's new position of dignity. Around 1923 the emir and his household relocated to the Amiri Diwan in central Doha and by the 1950s the complex was completely abandoned.

When Sheikh Khalifa bin Abdullah assumed power in 1972, one of his first acts was to commission the National Museum of Qatar. The palace was restored using the best techniques available at the time and complemented by a new museum building. The

project won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1980.

Now the Old Palace is to be restored to once more become the focal point of the new National Museum of Qatar designed by Atelier Jean Nouvel. The Berlin-based company Ziegert | Roswag | Seiler Architekten Ingenieure was approached to conduct the restoration to the highest standards in monument conservation using international expertise and appropriate technologies.

Restoration aims and philosophy

The palace will be restored in its original fabric without the use of air conditioning, to create a living gallery exhibiting a way of Qatari life that has almost been lost amid the rapid expansion of the last forty to fifty years.

As the building has been restored, complemented and refurbished numerous times since its construction, all these time layers are valuable in the telling of its rich history.

Its building elements are almost unique in their historical significance and the 1970s additions are also important examples of Qatari craft and skill that must be preserved and exhibited. New elements will also contribute to the living narrative of this project. They will be implemented where structurally necessary or where 1970s concrete or cement materials are damaging the delicate historic structure. At the time of the 1970s restoration these materials were the most appropriate for use in such a project, now with our enhanced knowledge it is clear that they are causing major problems for the historic structure. These include rising humidity and salinity in the walls, also the cement is much more rigid than the softer earth and lime building ma-



A panoramic view of the Old Palace.

terials used traditionally and has caused uneven loading.

With this knowledge a series of 'conservation guidelines' were drawn up, in which the original historic material from the 1920's building phase will be preserved at all costs. Decorative and constructive elements from the 1970s will be preserved as far as possible. Elements that no longer have a structural function and can be kept will be repaired appropriately, while elements that cannot be repaired or are inappropriately constructed will be replaced accordingly.

Knowledge transfer

The project will be conducted as a contemporary restoration, not a reconstruction. For a restoration, knowledge of the historic building techniques and materials are required, the aim being to strengthen and develop the local building traditions through the restoration process.

Conducting the restoration are Ziegert | Roswag | Seiler Architekten Ingenieure, an integrated office of twenty-five architects and engineers. The office focuses on the development of sustainable building solutions using natural building materials. Their projects range from earth and timber houses and a timber plus-energy workshop building in

Berlin, through earth and bamboo schools in Asia and Africa, to the conservation of historic monuments on the Arabian Peninsula. The office has already completed successful projects in Al Ain (United Arab Emirates), Amam (Jordan) and Herat (Afghanistan) (www.zrs-berlin.de).

A team of local artisans will be trained over the course of the project in cooperation with conservation and traditional building experts. The palace will be restored in a historically faithful fashion while ensuring the skills taught remain in Qatar. The training programme began during the Emergency Conservation phase and will be complemented by several other specialist workshops including wood treatment, restoration of ornaments and painted ceilings and treatment of historic plaster surfaces. All works are being closely supervised by specialists on-site and conducted in close collaboration with Qatar Museums Authority (QMA).

Work stages

During an initial visit to the site a fact-finding mission was undertaken to assess the situation and scope of work required. Regular workshops with QMA were held both in Berlin and Doha throughout the investigation and design phases.

Subsequently a detailed investigation of all buildings was carried out. This involved the making of 'findings' in order to ascertain where the different building phases come together. Specialized experts in wood, conservation and material supplemented the on-site investigation team.

This was followed by the design phase, where all the information from the investigation was used to produce a comprehensive and detailed individual design for each building. The input from other experts was used to produce a fully informed strategy.

Emergency conservation

From the outset it was clear that some parts of the palace were in a critical condition. Groundworks for the new National Museum site had already begun, including heavy draining of the ground and strong vibrations due to rock excavation using heavy machinery. It was clear that immediate action had to be taken to protect the buildings from collapse.

This consisted of the propping or partial dismantling of elements in imminent danger. Major works were required to secure the central building of the complex, the inner majlis, which contains

the most historic building elements. This included a new foundation system that transfers the building's structural loads onto a grid supported by micropiles. The deterioration of 1970's concrete elements involved dismantling the roof and arcades of the upper floor, and the staircase also required significant temporary structural measures to avoid collapse.

Main construction

During the main construction works, initially all elements that are beyond repair will be dismantled. Additionally all cement plaster, currently causing serious damage due to the ingress of humidity and salinity, has to be removed up to a certain height.

The second phase involves the rebuilding of these elements using appropriate materials. For example, stiff concrete ring beams damaged by carbonation and rusting reinforcement will be replaced with new trass lime elements reinforced with glass fibre. The trass and glass-fibre beams are more flexible and breathable, making them far more compatible with the historic building fabric. Additionally decorative elements and painted ceilings will have to be rehabilitated and all timber fittings, beams and lintels will be treated in situ against

termites and other decay mechanisms. Finally, historically accurate plasters and mortars will be developed and applied and new trass lime floor slabs installed to provide stability.

Documentation

The documentation process is running in parallel to the on-site works and forms an integral part of the project. All site activities, findings, recovered samples and removed elements are being thoroughly and accurately documented. The final documentation will contain all the knowledge gathered throughout the course of the investigations as well as a record of the works themselves. It will aim to provide a kind of 'road map' to anyone working on the palace in the future.

Following all these principles, the Old Palace will be a fitting central exhibit for the new National Museum. Displaying and preserving built Qatari heritage, it will not only complete the modern building surrounding it, but also form the link between the past and the future of this fast-changing country.

Christof Ziegert, Eike Roswag, Sylvain Rocher, Andreas Pohl, Arne Tönißen and Matthew Crabbe, Ziegert | Roswag | Seiler Architekten Ingenieure, Berlin (Germany)
Johannes Cramer, Institute of Technology, Free University of Berlin, Germany

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Zubarah: Uncovering a new history for Qatar and the Gulf

By Alan Walmisley
Professor of Islamic Archaeology and Art, University of Copenhagen

In the 1760s CE, leaders of a tribal federation known as the Utub led a migration from Kuwait and Basra to the western shores of Qatar with the intention of starting anew at a place called Al Zubarah. Seeing some advantages in a rocky, but water-poor, knoll on a sheltered harbour, within a few years a gleaming town was built to a predetermined plan replete with mosques, markets, palaces, houses, a grid of streets and communal spaces.

A settlement of over 60 hectares was created and enclosed within a defensive wall 2.5kms long. To safeguard this significant investment, the fortress of Muair was built around wells on the desert scarp some two kms inland, and joined to the sea by a hand-cut canal of massive proportions. Underpinning this activity was an economy based on regional trade, pearl fishing and pastoralism, with connections reaching both East and West.

In the lead up to and following World Heritage listing of Al Zubarah Archaeological Site in 2013, a fresh programme of archaeological excavations by Qatar Museums, in partnership with the University of Copenhagen, have explored anew the abundant material heritage of Al Zubarah. Soon it became clear that a fixation on a pearling historical narrative had considerably underestimated the dominant role of geopolitical and cultural factors in the rise and significance of Al Zubarah. As a result, its influential place in the development of the modern Gulf had been greatly undersold.

In what ways, then, have the discoveries from new excavations since 2009 led to a fresh understanding of Al Zubarah's place in Gulf history? The Qatar Museums investigations have differed in two important ways from earlier work: firstly by focusing on diverse lo-

cations (called Excavation Points -EP) to maximise our insight into different activities at the site; and secondly by applying up-to-date investigative techniques to maximise the full range of data available from modern excavations. The results have exceeded our expectations.

In EP01, two residential compounds dating to the later 18th century CE have produced architectural and cultural information on life in the town's heyday. Built of gypsum-plastered stone, concealed entrances from linear streets led into a central courtyard, around which domestic and social life took place in long rooms. Rooms were grouped according to activities: food preparation, socialising, personal hygiene, and private areas. The huge range of objects recovered reveal the tastes, preferences, economic activities, diet, and cultural contacts at Al Zubarah, including ceramics (especially Chinese and Iranian), a pearly chest, and food remains from kitchens. The uncovering of a dhow etching in one room reveals the maritime focus of the town. Insight was also gained into the contraction of Al Zubarah in the 19th century, at which time an inner defensive wall was built over demolished houses to protect the inner core of the site along the beachfront.

A different set of activities, mostly to do with commerce and manufacturing, was uncovered in EP02. Located on the beach front of the town, warehouses and production facilities have been found, with ongoing work revealing the organised nature of activities in the town's commercial heart. Here the archaeology reveals a long period of use, showing little change in the role of this area into the later 19th century CE, even if the intensity of occupation waned. Structures along a street of the later 18th century show changes in function over time, with superimposed street surfaces indicating decades of traffic. Notable is the widespread conversion into



Al Zubarah from the air.

date presses of the deep, elongated rooms along the street in their last period, perhaps reflecting attempts at economic rejuvenation after the relocation of many inhabitants to Bahrain following the expulsion of the Persians in 1783. EP02 has proven rich in material culture that reflects the full extent of commercial activity in Al Zubarah: Pearl diving paraphernalia, dhow stone anchors and a heavy stone windlass weight for securing boats, fine and coarse ceramics from near and far, glassware, traders' weights, coinage from India, Iran and the Ottoman world, and a copper Jeton (token) of the Lauer family of Nuremberg, Bavaria. It, too, had travelled a great distance from its place of production; its final destination will be the new National Museum of Qatar along with over 200 other objects of many types from the recent Al Zubarah excavations.

At the south end of the town, excavations in EP04 have investigated a fortified compound of 100 by 110 metres, revealing diverse activities. One of a number of such complexes, these were the palaces of prominent sheikhs in which cultural, political, and economic life was enacted as a microcosm of wider Zubarah society. Subdivisions within the compound were linked to each

other and the outside community by laneways. Excavations in two units have revealed a residential use for one, with a concealed entrance, an open recess for shade, a date press, kitchen and storage areas, and private rooms each with a washing alcove. Walls in the living areas were decorated with stucco, while a staircase is suggestive of an upper floor. In a second unit, a different plan and the depictions of dhows reflect a commercial function - something like EP04's own business centre. What the excavations make clear is that EP04 came to a sudden but peaceful end, with many portable and reusable materials being removed. This may reflect the organised abandonment of the building with the departure of its occupants to Bahrain; lock, stock, and barrel.

In recent decades the informative value of garbage has been recognised as offering an unmatched insight into the consumption habits of a community. The excavation of a number of middens (rubbish heaps) have expanded our knowledge of daily life during the heyday of Al Zubarah. The work is detailed, meticulous, and just a little grimy. The range of objects retrieved has been huge, including coins, worked bone, beads, wood, glass, and metal objects such as iron nails, bronze

fittings, pendants, buckles and rings. Broken pottery and the bones of sheep, goat, camel, and fish were recovered in large numbers. Prominent were pipe bowls still reeking of tobacco, hookah parts, and small handleless porcelain cups, signposts to the growing habit of smoking and coffee consumption and the burgeoning social role of these two stimulants in community life. The middens also produced perishable organic material including botanical remains (such as imported stone fruits and grains), human and animal hair, wood, rope and textile fragments.

Archaeology has done much to unveil the rich heritage of 18th and 19th century Qatar and bring it to the world stage. The work at Al Zubarah has illustrated the determined mission of the settlers who arrived from Basra and Kuwait with cultural and political ambitions equal to their commercial goals. Yet pearling and trade were nothing new in the Gulf, so why build on an inhospitable, waterless rocky knoll, and why then? To understand this we must turn to new research that is advancing our understanding of social change in the 18th-century Middle East, in which locally-based reformist groups promoted political and cultural reform in major towns, especially those with strong commercial credentials and a flourishing "café culture". Within that historical context lay the inspiration for the foundation of a new cultural and economic centre in the middle Gulf. As the grip of empires weakened in the region, political and natural pressures saw Arab tribes quit Kuwait and Basra with Al Zubarah - located beyond Ottoman and Persian influence - becoming their chosen destination. In just a few years this town was to flourish, and took on the role of an incubator of Arab political and social independence in the region; today, Al Zubarah Archaeological Site stands as a lasting testament to the beginnings of modernity in the Arabian Gulf.

Qatar's wells and springs: Clues to early settlements

By Adel al-Moslimani
Director of the Architectural Conservation Department, Qatar Museums

The Architectural Conservation Department within the Qatar Museums Authority is responsible for the preservation, conservation and restoration of tangible heritage in Qatar and, more precisely, of such historic buildings as mosques, houses, palaces, castles, forts and towers along with their decorative and artistic elements. In addition, the department is in charge of the rehabilitation of these buildings and their use for appropriate cultural and touristic events.

Owing to rapid urbanisation in Qatar, wells and springs have been neglected for a long time; located underground and often in uninhabited areas, they are no longer as indispensable as they once were. Most of them have dried up and deteriorated, while some have become receptacles for waste and other residue.

Wells and springs played and still play an important role as they are the main source of natural water since there are no perennial rivers in Qatar. They are useful in research as indicators for the location of past settlements that existed wherever there was a water source.

In 2004, a project was launched to document and preserve them as historic landmarks: wells and springs within Qatar were inventoried and recorded. Their exact locations, construction techniques (mostly built of gravel and clay), history, local names and traditions were acquired through interviews with locals and the collection of oral information. A total of 107 wells and springs have so far been documented. The Architectural Conservation Department constantly monitors their condition and when necessary takes action for their conservation.



A restored well

Ain Hleetan

The well of Ain Hleetan located on the west coast of Al Khor is an example of restoration and preservation. The well, which has a cylindrical shape and is built of gravel, clay and plaster, is connected to an external water collection basin that served as reservoir for animal drinking water. It was the main reason for the settlement of the Al Mahanda tribe in the city of Al Khor.

According to a local tradition, around 150 years ago, a group of hunters found the water source accidentally thanks to a hare that they tried to catch; the source was then encircled with stones. In addition, some old oral sources describe the exceptionally salubrious features of the water from the well that reputedly cured many illnesses to the extent that local residents used to call it 'the Doctor'. The people of Al Khor remember that the well used to be cleaned and maintained every six months, during which the well was closed to stop the water flow and, once the well was emptied, burlap was used to clean the inner walls of the well. Nowadays this water source is maintained and monitored by the Architectural Conservation Department.