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Al-Zubara – Preserving History and Making History

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Introduction

The year 2023 will mark a decade of the Al Zubarah archaeological site being inscribed into the UNESCO World Heritage List; a milestone for Qatar. In this paper we attempt to appraise the site's historical context and look at how the site fits into Qatar's vision for cultural heritage.

Al Zubara is arguably one of the best-preserved examples of an Arabian Gulf merchant town from the 18th and 19th century. The fort was built by Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani in 1938 to protect the north-west coast of Qatar. [Al Zubara](#) lies on the Qatari Peninsula's northwest coast 85km from Doha. The fort was constructed by blending and merging overlapping [raw coral stones](#), particularly limestone, and compressed mud. The now abandoned trading town, with its impressive residential palaces, city walls, houses, double defense walls, markets, mosques, cemeteries, a canal, and industrial areas, demonstrates the resourcefulness of the Gulf Arabs. It shows the emergence of a small state with all elements of human life and interactions. Preserved in the site is the entire fabric and layout of a settlement dating back to the formative period of the region. It provides [insights](#) regarding

human interactions with the sea and desert, and the sustainable way of exploiting underground water resources and land use of the respective era.

In this manner, Al-Zubara opens doors to a historical period and throws light onto the spatial organization, socio-economic history and urban life of the Arabs, prior to the discovery and advent of hydrocarbons such as oil and gas in the 20th century.

Historical Relevance: For Qatar and Beyond

Founded by the [Utub merchants](#) of Kuwait, Al Zubara was once a flourishing socio-cultural and political center with a pearling and entrepot economy positioned between the west arm of the Gulf region and the Strait of Hormuz. The Arabia, Indian Ocean, and Western Asia had [trading links](#) with the fort. Al Zubara also is a vital factor in the contemporary history of the region. The present-day rulers of Qatar, the Al-Thani family, a clan of the [Ma'adhid tribe](#), settled in Zubarah around the mid eighteenth century. The founding father of the Al-Thani family, Thani bin Mohammed was born in Zubara. He established himself as a successful pearl merchant which enabled him to

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grow his social and political stature which later, in the late 1800s, enabled the Al-Thani family to be recognized as the legitimate leaders of the people of the Qatari Peninsula.

In 1766, with the dwindling of the influence of the Bani Khalid, Sheikh Mohamed Bin Khalifa of the al-Khalifa family, a sect of the Al-Aletub tribe, settled in Al-Zubara. Before settling in Bahrain, the al-Khalifa family moved from central Arabia to Kuwait and remained in Zubara for a significant period of time. The Al-Khalifa's wealth and status grew while in Al-Zubara as the port witnessed a commercial flourishing of the diving activity and pearls trade. This prosperity can be linked to the immigration of the rich pearling merchants of Basra to Al-Zubara, who were escaping the Ottoman-Persian war ([1775-1776](#)) between the Ottoman Empire and the Zand dynasty of Persia and the Persian occupation ([1776-1779](#)) of Basra. In the late 18th century, the flourishing of trade in Al-Zubara caused a societal change that transformed many Bedouins into settlers. It was during this period that the al-Khalifa realized that Al-Zubara was no longer sufficient for their growing ambitions. Al-Khalifa looked towards Bahrain to fulfil their growing appetite and in 1783, they conquered the Bahraini islands and made it their headquarters. Even after al-Khalifa moved to Bahrain, they maintained control over Al-Zubara.

When the Al-Khalifa took over Zubara, the Al-Thani family had moved to [Fuwairiyat](#). The Emirate of Diriyah (House of Saud) launched many attacks over Qatar from 1788, until they gained control over the Qatari peninsula in 1798. Between 1811 and 1818, the Ottomans, under the command of Muhammad Ali Basha, sent many campaigns to the region in order to weaken the authority of the Emirate of Diriyah and take control. Zubara was considered a strategic and lucrative location by both parties. As a result of the clashes, in [1811](#), the walled coastal town of Al-Zubara was destroyed. The coastal town's inability to recover from the attacks, led to it being abandoned in the early 20th century. It was only in 1938 when the Al-Zubara Fort was built by Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani that it once again became a strategic location that remained in use as a police and military post until [1986](#).

History shows us how Zubara's political and socio-economic relevance is not limited to the state of Qatar. The site has a strong regional relevance in the Gulf. Up until the late 18th century, Al-Zubara features as a part of the history of the larger Al-Hasa region. The coastal town of Al-Zubara has played a significant role in the development of modern independent Gulf states, some of which were under the control of European and Ottoman empires. The concept of Qatar as an independent political unit came much later. In fact, the first British recognition of the Qatari

Peninsula as a semi-independent political unit, and the Al-Thani family as its rulers was only in 1868; a direct result of the political strife between the al-Thani and al-Khalifa.

Qatar's Entry into Cultural Tourism

Naming Al-Zubarah site as an official World Heritage site by the UNESCO was definitely a moment of pride for Qatar. According to UNESCO, four aspects [distinguish Al-Zubarah](#) from other trading towns of the Gulf region: first, the 18th century urban layout of the site has been preserved in situ due to the desert sands; second, it was abandoned; third, it lasted for a relatively short span of time; and last, the wider context of the site is still visible through the remains of nearby competing towns and small satellite settlements. The Al-Zubara Archeological site is part of the National Heritage Park and Al Reem Biosphere Reserve of Northern Qatar which are legally Protected Areas.

The conservation of the Al-Zubarah site comes closely in line with Qatar's vision of conserving and displaying its heritage and culture. Institutions such as Qatar Museum Authority and Qatar Islamic and Archeology Project's work towards Al Zubarah aims exclusively at protecting the sites for archeological aspects, as well as for future generations to enhance their national and historical understanding.

Furthermore, the Al-Zubarah site holds great significance as it aligns with Qatar's pursuit of national branding which commenced in the early 1990s. HH Shaikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the former Amir to Qatar, chose the soft power route for increasing the small state's global footprint. Culture, along with other soft power tools such as education, sports, art, fashion, and diplomacy, has helped Qatar slowly gain momentum in the international arena. The Al-Zubarah site has essentially opened the door for cultural tourism.

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About the Gulf Insights series:

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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