HISTORICAL PROFILES / United Arab Emirates (Sharjah)

The end to a traditional way of life

Due to the harsh conditions of south-eastern Arabia, people living on the coasts of the Gulf and Indian Ocean have always depended on the sea for their livelihood through fishing, pearling and trade. In the 18th century key trading networks were in the hands of local powers such as the Qawasim (Al-Qasimi), a powerful mercantile confederation based in Julfar (later Ras al-Khaimah) and Sharjah, both of which are areas on the coast of the Indian Ocean and the Persian littoral. The gradual economically and geostrategically motivated British penetration of the Gulf soon threatened the indigenous status quo. Attempts by the Qawasim to defend their livelihood were denounced as “piracy” by the British in order to justify devastating naval attacks, which culminated in the destruction of their trading empire in 1819. The ensuing Peace Treaty imposed by Britain on the Qawasim and other local leaders saw the start of steadily increasing British interference in local, economic and political affairs.



Rusul Khyma with the attack of the Honorable Company's cruisers on the evening of 11 November 1809

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Rysul Khyma from the SW and the situation of the Troops at ½ past 2 pm, November 13th, 1809

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Striking a delicate balance – local sovereignty and British penetration

The 1820 Peace Treaty forced the Qawasim and other sheikhdoms along the Gulf to mark their pearling and fishing ships with red-and-white flags and carry documentation for inspection by the British. Regular subsequent treaties between rulers on the shores of the Gulf and the British ensured peace at sea during the economically crucial and highly profitable pearling season. In 1853 a Treaty of Maritime Peace in Perpetuity made these annual agreements permanent, with British India as mediator and enforcer. Participating sheikhdoms (emirates or states) now were termed “Trucial States”, their lands the “Trucial Coast”. This is a crucial step in British attempts to separate, and later segregate, the region from other political entities. Meanwhile, peace at sea brought stability and prosperity to the Gulf and increased the region’s contact with the outside world, with Sharjah – its rebuilt fort a symbol of continuing Qawasim status – quickly developing into a key economic hub in the region.



Al-Hisn Fort

First built 1820

Local economies and international power struggles

Throughout the 19th century the pearling industry and trade with India and East Africa lay at the heart of Qawasim prosperity and provided the most crucial focus for all economic activity in the Gulf. Local rulers exerted great skill in maintaining a delicate economic and political equilibrium in the face of determined British policies aimed at consolidating their hegemony and keeping competing European powers from gaining a foothold in the Gulf. In 1892, the leading sheikhs of the Gulf were enjoined to sign an “Agreement of exclusivity” in return for continuing British protection. It effectively prevented any local ruler from establishing economic or political links with any foreign entity other than Britain. This ensured Britain’s

ultimate control over all affairs relating to the Gulf coast. By 1914, British hegemony had transformed the indigenous structures of the Gulf and laid the foundation for the realities with which we are familiar today.



Reconstruction of a late AH 13th – early 14th century / AD 19th – early 20th-century trading vessel

2004

Al-Qasimiyya