

# **JASSIM THE LEADER FOUNDER OF QATAR**

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## INTRODUCTION: 5,000 YEARS IN THIRTEEN PAGES

I'M GUESSING the ancient Babylonian priest and astronomer Berosus could tell a story or two. Sceptical readers may not credit his account of how a merman, Oannes, swam up the Arabian Gulf to gift its peoples with science and civilisation, but maybe they should. For though Berosus was no slave to accuracy, he demonstrated a gift for the symbolic. Qatar owes a lot to the sea, historically for what was in it, and today for what is under it. And this sea hasn't given up its treasures easily. For over five thousand years, its waters have ensured that the men living off it possess great strength of character and mind – qualities Sheikh Jassim had in abundance.

Oannes wasn't the first special visitor in a region known to antiquity as Dilmun – the Land of the Living. Should readers ever feel the urge to read Sumerian sacred poetry, they would see that there was an altogether more famous guest – the legendary King of Uruk, hero of the world's oldest surviving epic poem, *Gilgamesh*. Popping in to search for the survivor of the Universal Deluge, Gilgamesh was only doing what any self-respecting civilised human being in the fourth millennium BC would do. He was looking for the god Ea, and what better place than Dilmun – a possible

location of the Garden of Eden and Land of Paradise.

Of course, Dilmun in those days covered most of eastern Arabia – but Qatar and Bahrain have always been at its heart. It was by all accounts a fertile, arable land, rather than the present-day desert of undulating limestone. At that time it enjoyed a strategic location between the great civilisation of Sumer to the north and the Indus Valley to the east. It was only a couple of days' sailing south to Magan – today's Oman – and this easily afforded merchants the opportunity to travel between the Indian subcontinent and Mesopotamia. Naturally these merchants would also have traded in the two commodities on offer in Qatar – the beautiful, luminous pearls of the Gulf (referred to as 'fish-eyes') and the dates of the palm trees that sprang up just about everywhere at the time. A growing body of evidence suggests, moreover, that these merchants were none other than the original Phoenicians, who dominated trade along the Persian, Arab and Egyptian shores before moving into the Mediterranean. This may explain why, unlike in other Gulf territories, there is no history of any permanent inland settlement. Archaeological evidence suggests that Qatari towns and villages were only ever built on the coast.

### *Rivalries*

Perhaps the Phoenician exodus in the sixth century BC was due in part to one of the most enduring rivalries of all time. Cyrus the Great of Persia dominated present-day Iran and Turkey, and a sizeable portion of modern-day Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine for good measure. Nevertheless, despite Qatar's uncomfortable proximity to Persepolis and Babylon, it successfully steered clear of Persian power, though not, it must be noted, of Persian women. Over the centuries, there has been a considerable intermingling of the two peoples. The boundaries of their relative spheres of influence have been complicated by both Arab and

Persian travelling to opposite sides of the Gulf. Both peoples have taken it in turns to escape political or commercial exploitation right up until the beginning of the twentieth century.

But if Cyrus wasn't interested in invading Qatar, Alexander the Great certainly was, dispatching his top admiral, Androstenes of Thasos, to survey the entire Gulf. Unfortunately for Alexander, this scientist and cartographer was also a great fan of nature and would often feel the urge to divert his trireme, as he pottered round the Gulf, to investigate interesting flora and fauna. What Alexander would have had to say about this, we will never know, as the requested charts arrived shortly after Alexander was poisoned in June 323 BC.

Not to be outdone by Alexander, Rome's most powerful emperor, Augustus, appointed his own adopted son and heir – Gaius Caesar – to mount an expedition into Arabia while just nineteen years old. Clearly, Gaius was a child prodigy – a senator from the age of fourteen, he was voted Prince of Youth and headed Rome's equestrian order at the same time. Gaius ordered several strategic studies to be prepared for the proposed military expedition but promptly got himself killed while fighting in Armenia.

The Gulf was now on the periphery of a great empire rather than next to the centre of one. In effect, Qatar ceased to have the strategic importance it had enjoyed for three thousand years. What this meant for the people who continued to live there must be imagined, as there is no documentary evidence and the next major period of development wasn't to come for another six hundred years. But this was merely the lull before the storm.

At the beginning of the seventh century, Arabs were suddenly propelled to international prominence – and would soon find themselves fighting in eastern China, western Africa and even in Merovingian France. The Islamic conquests were to have far-reaching consequences for most of the world, and the Gulf was no exception. Ruling Qatar and Bahrain from his fort at Merwab in the Joghbi region, Mundhir bin Sawa al-Tamimi embraced

Islam after meeting with the Prophet Muhammad's emissary, Al Ala'a al-Hadrami, in 628. The Prophet's letter of invitation and his seal can still be viewed to this day at the Bait al-Qur'an Museum in the Bahraini town of Hura. Within a couple of years, over a hundred stone houses were built, and Qatar began to gain a reputation as a centre of excellence for its horse and camel breeding, rather than its pearls.

The establishment of Baghdad as the new capital of the Abbasid Empire was also welcome news for the peninsula. The Gulf once more became an important communications and financial centre – a newly reborn trading post. Paper suddenly became plentiful and cheap, following the Abbasid capture of Chinese paper-makers at the Battle of Talas in present-day Kyrgyzstan. Very soon afterwards there were paper mills in most large towns and cities. No doubt the availability of cheap writing material contributed to the growth of the Abbasid bureaucracy, postal system and lively intellectual life. The court of the Caliph, Harun al-Rashid – probably the richest man in the world at that time – was a luxurious one, and Qatar was superbly positioned to provide it with absolutely anything it wanted – textiles and spices from India, porcelain and drugs from China.

Pearling had certainly evolved over the centuries, but now it benefited from the scientific and technological innovations of the period. Detailed maps of the pearl banks were drawn up by the great scholars of the age, as were remarkably detailed lists of the varieties of pearls available – including their shape, weight and price. Scientist and geographer Abu al-Hasan al-Masudi, instrumental in mapping the pearl banks while writing his 365-chapter epic work *Muruj al-dhahab*, was a product of this renaissance. He wrote volumes on Greek philosophy, Persian literature, Indian mathematics and the heritage of the Gulf's ancient cultures. This was also the age of the Sindbad stories, which, while fanciful, pay tribute to the international nature of society at a time when most of western Europe was yet to emerge from its 'Dark Age'. In

short, this was an era when the Gulf was home to a natural association of scholarly-minded people in a highly civilised atmosphere.

## *Rebellion*

Sohar in Oman and Iraq's Basra were the trading ports of the age. But as their wealth and power grew, so did the social and political problems involved in their control. Labour shortages in the sugar-cane plantations of western Iran and the salt mines of southern Iraq required significant numbers of slaves from East Africa. At the same time, the minority Shia sect, which had been kept under strict control, began to take root among the poor. Slavery and Shiism combined in the person of Ali ibn Muhammad, who, initially basing himself in Bahrain and the Qatari peninsula in the early 860s, proceeded to seek out the blacks of the Basra plantations to enquire about their living conditions. More of a young Malcolm X than a Martin Luther King, Ali soon came to lead what al-Masudi referred to as one of the 'most vicious and brutal uprisings' of the ninth century. Deaths are recorded in the thousands. Baghdad was no less vicious in attempting to crush the slave revolt. When one of Ali's captains from Bahrain was captured and sent with his men to Samarra, the Caliph, al-Mu'tamid, personally watched as the unfortunate man, named Yusuf, was flogged two hundred times, had his arms and legs cut off, suffered extensive burns and then, mercifully, had his throat slit.

Rebellion at the heart of the Abbasid Empire and its Gulf dependencies didn't end once the so-called Slave (or Zanj) Rebellion was finally crushed in 881. Worse was to come at the hands of the most lethal vegetarians known to history. The Qarmatians, who were referred to as 'greengrocers' rather than 'butchers' by their detractors at the time, were another Shia sect that sought to establish a utopian paradise at al-Hasa, right on Qatar's doorstep. Famed for managing to steal the Black Stone from Mecca (it was returned only twenty-two years later after a huge ransom



was paid) and desecrating its famous well, Zamzam, the Qarmatians persisted in embarrassing the Abbasids for a whole century. They attracted many followers through their messianic teachings. In 906, Qarmatians ambushed and massacred 20,000 pilgrims on their way to haj. Under the Persian Abu Tahir al-Janabi, they came close to raiding Baghdad in 927 and sacked Mecca and Medina in 930. As they collected tribute from just about everyone in the region, and dominated the Omani coast, trade on the Arab side of the Gulf slumped. The golden age was over. From the early eleventh century, any lucrative import-export activity was more likely than not to be found on the Persian side of the Gulf.

The Gulf's sailors still ventured to India and China, but now they were likely to first make port at the newly emerging trading posts of Siraf, on the Iranian coast opposite Qatar, or the island of Kishm, some sixty kilometres farther east. But the safety provided by the Gulf's northern coastline did not extend to Baghdad – which was all but razed to the ground on 10 February 1258. It is difficult to put into words the sheer extent of the destruction wrought by Genghis Khan's grandson on the city – but it was a body blow from which a unified Muslim nation never recovered.

By 1300, Hormuz Island afforded the best protection for trading ships attempting to escape Mongol harassment. At that time, the island's population was predominantly Arab, as were its rulers. The island had salvaged some naval prestige by the fourteenth century, possessing as it did some five hundred fighting ships. Hormuz's authority extended to Qatar, whose pearls continued to provide one of the kingdom's main sources of income. The island was certainly important enough for the Imperial Chinese fleet, under the Muslim admiral Zheng He, to visit in 1414 and again in 1421. But just as Imperial China was winding up naval operations in the mid-fifteenth century, a newly emerging empire had decided to do the exact opposite. The Gulf would never be the same again.

The ship *São Gabriel* rendered the world just that little bit

smaller in 1498. Her captain, Vasco da Gama, lost two-thirds of his crew but proved to authorities in Lisbon that circumnavigation of the Cape of Good Hope was possible. Warships sailed, and within sixteen years a fleet under Albuquerque successfully took control of the Arab kingdom of Hormuz by means of a vicious ruse. Inviting the island's young monarch and chief minister to a parley, Albuquerque concluded the meeting with his guests' immediate stabbing.

Antonio Correia completed Portugal's violent domination of the Gulf by conquering Bahrain and much of the Qatari coast, even taking Qatif from King Muqrin ibn Zamil. Correia's descendants, the Counts of Lousa, still keep Muqrin's bleeding head on the family coat of arms, as the family say no Bahraini has ever asked them to remove it. The speed and violence of the invasion were matched only by the swiftness with which a centuries-old intercontinental Arab trading system was dismantled. The cargo transportation, port cities, emporia and communication centres were no more. The financial and legal services recognised throughout much of Asia and Africa were also discontinued. But Qatari woes were only just beginning. Portuguese cannon may have cleared the way in the sixteenth century, but the trading systems of Holland, France and Britain were soon to follow in the seventeenth. The Gulf was now inextricably linked with the commercial and political rivalries of the West.

Not that Portugal was to have everything its own way. Within the space of decades, two forces were to threaten Lisbon's authority and ultimately cause its withdrawal. Starting a promising career as a Mameluke mercenary, Salman Rais was the first Ottoman admiral to give the Portuguese a sound thrashing as they attempted to seize the port of Jeddah in 1517. Though his obvious talents were not recognised by Selim I, Suleiman the Magnificent certainly did recognise them, and sent Rais off on an expedition that was to dent Portuguese strength in Hormuz, Goa and Malacca. He also kept the Red Sea free of Lisbon's

warships. And where the Ottomans ventured, the Persians were never far behind. Shah Abbas, the great Safavid ruler of Persia, who had the unfortunate habit of blinding or killing the more ambitious of his sons, was determined to dominate the Gulf. His foreign policy was simple: to exploit the divisions and rivalries of western Europe as they vied for power in the East. Moving his capital from Qazvin to Isfahan, Abbas also knew how to pick his allies, and came to an arrangement with a little-known British trading company that had only just arrived in the region. Granted a charter by Elizabeth I on 31 December 1600, the East India Company was happy to make a deal with Abbas. In 1602, the Iranian army pushed the Portuguese out of Bahrain and then, in 1622, with the help of four English ships, captured Hormuz from the Portuguese, establishing a new trading port modestly named Bandar Abbas.

Concerned at English success, the Dutch and French East India companies redoubled their efforts in the region, and the next hundred years witnessed an intense rivalry between the three nations, involving all manner of political and military shenanigans with local potentates. For their part, both Arabs and Persians were gradually readjusting to the new political environment, while learning how to manipulate it. So it was that Arab tribesmen of the Yariba clan, rather than Ottoman or Persian naval forces, effected the permanent removal of Portuguese power from Muscat and the Gulf. Entering the city on a daring night attack, a small force of determined raiders brought about Muscat's capitulation on 23 January 1650. Flushed with success, the Yariba focused their attentions on Persian-ruled Bahrain – which they managed to capture in 1717 and eventually sell back to the Persians a few years later.

Oman's successes around the Qatari coast might have continued had it not been for Nadir Shah, possibly the last of Asia's greatest military conquerors. Seemingly aware of the comparisons, Nadir idolised Genghis Khan and Timur, and towards the end of his life would even make pyramids out of the skulls of his

vanquished enemies. Certainly, his military genius was as remarkable as Napoleon's – and under his leadership, Persian troops entered present-day Iraq, parts of the Caucasus, Afghanistan, Pakistan and even Delhi. He was quite determined to extend his rule to both shores of the Gulf, and was quick to build a navy strong enough to control a rebellious Bahrain and push the Yariba out of Muscat. Qatar was under a truly ominous Persian shadow. We will never know, however, what else Nadir might have conquered, for, on 19 June 1747, one Salah Bey, the captain of his personal guard, sneaked into the Shah's tent and thrust a sword into his chest as he slept. True to his great soldiering spirit, and despite a fatal wound, the Shah managed to rise from his deathbed and kill two of the assassin's accomplices before his own demise.

Nadir's assassination was also a death blow to Persian suzerainty in the Gulf. Muscat was almost immediately retaken by Ahmad bin Said Al bu Said, the Governor of Sohar. Though he was a shrewd military tactician, Ahmad had no need to fight a major battle for his success, and success it was. He went on to found the Gulf's oldest surviving royal dynasty and the first Gulf state that was never again occupied by foreign forces. Commerce flourished over the next forty years. By the time his descendant, Said bin Sultan Al bu Said (1797–1856), came to rule, the Omani navy was the most formidable force on the Indian Ocean. But while Oman was enjoying its success, two clouds appeared on the horizon. First, Britain was establishing its total control over the entire north-eastern coast of India, a situation that would guarantee London taking an unwelcome interest in the size of the Omani fleet as it sought to control the region's shipping lanes. The second was the rise of the so-called Wahhabi movement in central Arabia. Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd ul-Wahhab had died in 1792, but his ideas for an Islamic reformation and the protection afforded him by a certain Muhammad ibn Saud were to have consequences that are felt to this day. Ibn Saud pledged to implement Abd ul-Wahhab's teachings and enforce them on his

and neighbouring towns. They spread despite Ottoman attempts to subdue the movement. The House of Saud would spend the next 140 years mounting various military campaigns and religious missions to control Arabia and its outlying regions, finally taking control of the modern-day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia after the First World War.

In the meantime, while Oman's merchant navy enhanced its trade around the Indian Ocean, a more militaristic naval force was planning to control trade within the Gulf itself. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Qasimi tribal confederacy based in Ras al-Khaimah kept a remarkably large fleet, equipped for warfare as well as trade. It was said to have had around nine hundred vessels, many of which were swifter than European ships. Its naval force consisted of eight thousand fighting men. Naturally, Britain and the Netherlands took every opportunity to brand these ships, and the men who sailed in them, as pirates, though whether London or The Hague actually believed the appellation is a different matter. If one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, then surely one Qasimi 'den of thieves' was actually a perfectly legitimate trading post on the island of Kishm (where, incidentally, Arctic explorer William Baffin had died from wounds inflicted by the Portuguese in 1622). Unfortunately, Arab historians have done a very poor job of refuting the unfounded accusations flung at the Qasimi navy, and the few scholars that have tried are hampered by surnames such as al-Qasimi. In any case, the English East India Company had a major trading interest in the nearby port of Bandar Abbas and so stood to lose a fair amount of its customs revenues when competing with Ras al-Khaimah. In order to protect its profits, a British naval expedition launched an unprovoked attack on Kishm. The Qasimi-British War had begun.

Unexpectedly, Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah enjoyed nearly all of the initial success in the conflict. Indeed Qasimi power grew rather than abated right up until the beginning of the