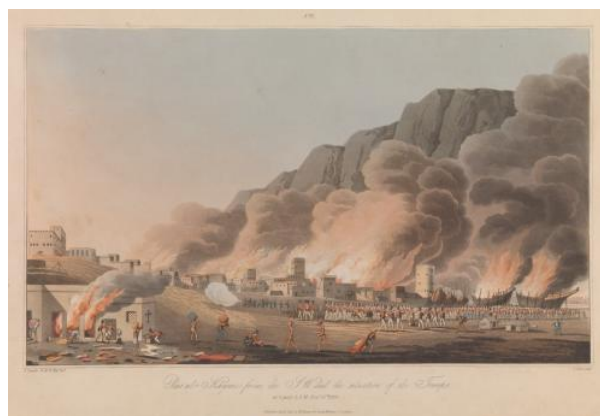


The Persian Gulf: An Imperial and Global Space During the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

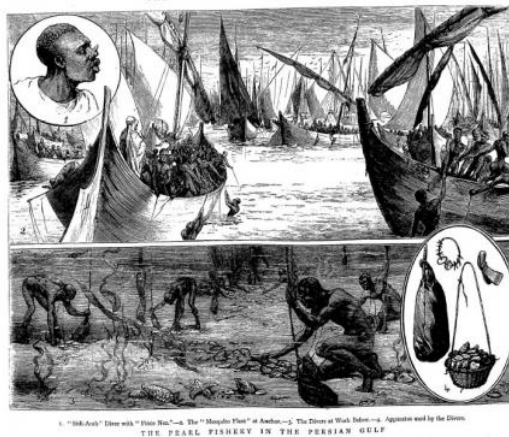
In the late eighteenth century, the Persian Gulf was a space that was fragmented politically, in which Qajar Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and the minor powers established along the Arabian coast vied for control over the seas and strategic sites, such as straits and islands. While British colonies in India transformed into a political power independent of London, the Gulf was integrated within this empire's sphere of domination, which extended from Southeast Asia to Western Asia, and from the Red Sea to the China Sea and the Indian Ocean. In the nineteenth century, the Gulf was an imperial space that played a special role in the British Empire in India, namely that of a frontier of water and sand protecting the British Raj's western flank. Far from being peripheral, the Gulf was also integrated within the dynamic of globalization and emerging global economic market, thanks to the flow of two global commodities, pearls and dates.



British attack on Ras al-Khaimah in 1809, by Richard Temple (1813). National Maritime Museum, Greenwich London.



Muscat circa 1809, by Richard Temple (1813). National Maritime Museum, Greenwich London.



Pearl fisheries in the Gulf, 1881. Taken from *The Graphic*, October 1, 1881, British Library, London.

A Maritime Space Integrated within the Indian Ocean System

The Arabian-Persian Gulf is an epicontinental sea of the Indian Ocean with a surface area of 250,000 km², and extends—if we limit ourselves to a definition based strictly on physical geography—from the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab River to the Strait of Hormuz. The Gulf stretches 1,100 km in length, and measures no more than 300 kms at its widest. Its climate is very hot and humid approximately seven months out of twelve. Its two coasts are geographically different. The Arabian coast is very arid, and morphologically is for the most part low and flat, with islands running along its length. The Persian coast, which is very mountainous, is quite different. In the south of the Arabian Peninsula, on the shores of the Indian Ocean, the Sultanate of Oman is a first geographic ensemble. There is another large geographic ensemble in the western Gulf with the Arabian Peninsula, which represents a giant desert of approximately 2,500,000 km².

Frontier of Water and Sand: The Gulf Central To the Protection System for the British Empire in India

Around 1780, the Gulf space was fragmented from a political point of view. The forces present included Qajar Persia, the Ottoman Empire, the Sultanate of Oman, the small independent states of the Gulf's Arabian coast—especially Ras al-Khaimah—and the Wahhabites. The situation evolved considerably in the early nineteenth century due to the imperialism of Indian presidencies and the emergence of India, administered by the East India Company as a political power independent of London, which orchestrated territorial conquests in the Indian subcontinent and in the Indian Ocean. In the late eighteenth century, as the consequences of the Napoleonic Wars were being felt outside of Europe, the Presidency of Bombay extended its influence in the Gulf. The growing independence of the East India Company from the government in London, and the construction of a territorial and maritime empire beginning in the eighteenth century, were two major developments that affected Western Asia, and hence the Gulf. In 1798 the British signed a treaty with the Sultan of Oman. In 1809 and 1819, two violent expeditions were organized against Ras al-Khaimah, before the signing of treaties with the powers of the southern Gulf, those of the "Pirate Coast." The East India Company's former trading posts in the Gulf—notably Bushire on the Persian coast—transformed into actual diplomatic posts taking their orders from Bombay.

In the nineteenth century, British colonies in India were obsessed by the idea, both real and imaginary, of an invasion first by the French, with Bonaparte's projects in the Indian Ocean in 1798, then by the Russians, as part of the "Great Game" starting in 1830, and finally by the Germans in the late nineteenth century, with the "Berlin-Baghdad" railroad project. The Gulf subsequently changed into a frontier for India, protecting the land and maritime empire's western flank. The Gulf played the same role as other spaces that were used as a protective buffer zone for India, such as Burma and Afghanistan. This fear of enemies that could destabilize British power in India justified Great Britain's imperialism in the Gulf throughout the nineteenth century. New treaties were concluded in 1853. On May 4, 1853, the leaders of Umm al-Qaiwain, Ajman, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Ras al-Khaimah, and Sharjah signed the Treaty of Peace in Perpetuity, which transformed the "Pirate Coast" into the Trucial Coast. During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, it was the northern Gulf, with Kuwait and Bahrain, that became central to India policy. In 1892 and 1899, Bahrain and Kuwait were respectively integrated within India's sphere of domination.

With regard to the Gulf's administration after 1819, the British Resident, who was based in Bushire on the Persian coast, was in charge of the Gulf's political and diplomatic system. He received his orders from the Presidency of Bombay from 1819 to 1858, and then from the Bombay Political Department from 1858 to 1873 when jurisdiction over the Gulf was transferred to the Indian Foreign Department, and therefore reported to Calcutta. The Resident relied on a network of agents during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There was one in Muscat beginning in 1798, as well as in Sharjah (1823), Bahrain (1834), and Kuwait (1899). In Persia, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire, the Resident collaborated with diplomatic staff reporting to the Foreign Office, and hence to London.

The Economy: Global Commodities and Globalization

The Gulf, which has often been seen as the world's periphery until the emergence of oil, was integrated early on within the global economic space being constructed in the nineteenth century, thanks to the flow of two global commodities, pearls and dates. While the Gulf's economic insertion in what historians have called the expanding world economy is

indisputable, trading ties with neighboring macroregional spaces—South Asia, Central Asia, the Ottoman Empire, and the Indian Ocean—nevertheless remained active during the nineteenth century.

Gulf pearls experienced a golden age. Pearl fishing was the only economic activity in the small centers along the Gulf's Arabian coast, thanks to the Arabian coast's oyster banks stretching from Qatar to Cape Musandam. Pearls and mother-of-pearl were harvested from April to November, when the fishing and sale of mother-of-pearl and pearls employed all of the Gulf's populations. Bahrain was a major center, as was Dubai from the early twentieth century onward. Pearls were exported to the macroregional market. Until the 1880s, Bombay was a global brokerage center for pearls, before being replaced by Paris. In the nineteenth century, global demand for pearls increased, as pearls and mother-of-pearl became indispensable fashion accessories. There was a vogue for pearls among women of the European and American aristocracy and bourgeoisie, especially after 1850. In Western Europe, the spread of mother-of-pearl buttons also offered a considerable outlet. The price of pearls continued to rise after 1880, and exports grew. The age of the pearl ended in the Gulf when cultured pearls came on the market around 1920, when Kokichi Mikimoto of Japan, who invented the process for fertilizing pearl oysters, offered cultured oysters on global markets at a quarter of the price as those caught in the Gulf.

Dates were another global commodity exported from the Gulf during the nineteenth century. They were part of considerable trade on various scales, with the two major areas of production being Shatt al-Arab and Oman. Some of the dates produced in the Gulf were absorbed by "local" consumption, while India and South Asia were two important markets on a regional scale. However, in the nineteenth century Oman and Shatt al-Arab also exported to the global market, especially toward Europe and the United States. A taste for dates developed in the United States in 1830, and continued throughout the nineteenth century. To satisfy this demand, American companies specializing in import-export established themselves in Oman around the 1860s, especially in Basrah, which became the center for this trade. The US government facilitated the development of irrigated farming for palm dates in California after 1870. Imports from the Gulf dropped markedly starting in 1925. Two economic cycles therefore drew to a close around 1925-1930, as the global economy descended into crisis. However, the age of oil had just begun.

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