

CHAPTER 37

The Persian Gulf

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Introduction

Despite the proximity of the Persian Gulf to the many successive states that have occupied some or all of the Iranian mainland, the geo-political significance of this shallow, epicontinental sea cannot be assumed in all periods. Throughout the third and most of the second millennium BCE, for example, the various incarnations of the Elamite kingdom showed little interest in the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, maritime connections between Susa and Dilmun (Bahrain) are attested in the Old Babylonian period, and the Kassites and Middle Elamite rulers, perhaps due to ties fostered by inter-marriage between their royal houses, may have had their own spheres of influence in the region, the Kassites in the north (including in Bahrain) and the Elamites in the south (including in Oman). During the first millennium CE the Persian Gulf functioned as an easily navigable trade route, but the evidence of either Parthian or Sasanian political and military hegemony is sporadic at best, and evidence from the early Islamic era is meager to say the least. In the mid-tenth century the Buyids briefly extended their rule to Oman and a century later the Seljuqs followed suit. The Salghurid Atabegs of Fars took over Kish in the early thirteenth century, quickly extending their conquests to Basra, Bahrain, al-Qatif (eastern Saudi Arabia), and Qalhat (Oman), and when Bahrain was sacked by Qutbu-'d Din in 1331/2 all of these emporia became nodes in the commercial empire of the kingdom of Hormuz, the wealth of which was immortalized

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in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (PL 2.2). But "Iranian" domination of the Persian Gulf never again equaled what the kingdoms of Kish and Hormuz had achieved and during the Safavid period, when Iran was finally unified politically, the Persian Gulf – more specifically Gombroon (later renamed Bandar Abbas), Hormuz, Qeshm, Larak, Julfar, and Bahrain – became of interest only once foreign powers (Portugal, the European trading companies, and Oman) appeared on the scene. Portugal was the principal naval power in the Persian Gulf during the sixteenth century, the Dutch (and less so the English) during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and the English during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Safavids and Qajars, for example, were far more concerned with their terrestrial neighbors – the Ottomans in the west; the Russians in the Caucasus; the Uzbeks in the northeast; and the Mughals and Afghans in the east – than they were with the Persian Gulf (Floor 1987: pp. 31–32). Thus, we should be wary of assuming that, just because it bounded southern Babylonia, Susiana, and Persis, the Persian Gulf was of major concern to the Achaemenids.

The Persian Gulf and Its Iranian Islands

In one of his trilingual (Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian) inscriptions at Suez (DZc, §3.7–12), Darius commemorated the opening of "this canal from a river by name Nile which flows in Egypt, to the sea which goes from Persia," and says that "ships went from Egypt through this canal to Persia" (Kent 1953: p. 147; Lecoq 1997: p. 248). In reality the "sea which goes from Persia" was of course the Red Sea, but in describing it in this way, Darius foreshadowed the Greek convention of using the hydronym *Erythraean Sea* to denote the combined waters of the Persian Gulf, the western Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea, all of which was conceived of as an uninterrupted body of water. Moreover, Darius' statement implies that the Persian Gulf itself was under Persian control, or at least not hostile, since ships traveling from Achaemenid Egypt to Babylonia or Susiana sailed through it.

Indeed, given what we know about the populations in mainland eastern Arabia and Bahrain at that time, it would be difficult to imagine the existence of any sort of anti-Persian resistance in this politically disunited area dominated by communities engaged in date-palm horticulture, herding, fishing, pearling, and maritime trade. In the immediately pre-Persian period there may have been a Babylonian governor in Dilmun (i.e. Bahrain, see below), and before that several kings of Dilmun and a king of Izkie in Oman had sworn fealty to the Assyrians (Kessler 1983; Potts 1985b), but no state or dynasty, that we know of, existed in the region when the Achaemenid Empire was established.

It was perhaps because of the very absence of strong political authority that the area was not constituted as a satrapy on its own but was instead absorbed by Darius into the fourteenth satrapy. This, according to Herodotus, comprised an amalgam of “Sagartians, Sarangians, Thamanaeans, Utians, Mycians, and the inhabitants of the islands in the Erythraean Sea...who together contributed 600 talents” (*Hist.* 3.93). While the first four groups were all located in continental (greater) Iran, the Mycians (OP Mačiya) lived in Oman (OP Makā). Despite the often repeated view that the region known to the Achaemenids as Makā (cf. Akk. *Makkan*, El. *Makkaš*) was located in the Makran area of southeastern Iran and southwestern Pakistan (e.g. Eilers 1983), the evidence for locating it in Oman is compelling. In brief, the Achaemenid trilingual royal inscriptions give its Akkadian equivalent as Qadē/ū, while the no longer extant Ištār Slab inscription from Nineveh records Assurbanipal’s receipt of tribute from Padē, king of Qadē, whose capital was at Is/zkie. This is, in all likelihood, identical with Izki in the interior of Oman, considered in local oral tradition to be the oldest town in Oman (Potts 1985a,b, 2010: p. 529). In addition, the Persepolis fortification tablets refer to “Arabs/Arabians” (El. *har-ba-a-be*; cf. OP *arabāya*) from Makkaš (PFa 17, PFa 29, PF 2050) who received rations for travel between Susa and Makkaš (de Blois 1989).

The Mycians, as Herodotus called them, appear as the Mačiya in five Old Persian texts from Naqš-e Rostam, Susa, and Persepolis dating to the reigns of Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes III (DNa 30; DNe 29; DSe 23–24; XPh 25; A³Pa 30; Vallat 1993: p. 164; Lecoq 1997: pp. 271–272 [attrib. Artaxerxes II but note Schmitt 2009: p. 37 who convincingly attributes this inscription to Artaxerxes III on linguistic grounds]). They are depicted on Darius I’s Šallufa stele, on his Egyptian statue from Susa, and on the tomb reliefs of Darius I at Naqš-e Rostam and Artaxerxes III at Persepolis (Schmitt 2009: p. 41) where they are shown naked from the waist up, wearing a belted kilt or loincloth. Their distinctive short sword, slung from a strap over the left shoulder, is reminiscent of examples found in many Iron Age graves throughout the Oman peninsula (Potts 1998: pp. 192–195, Figs. 5–10).

Finally, two of the Persepolis Fortification tablets (PF 679–680) confirm the presence of a satrap in Makkaš. In 505/4 BCE, the satrap Irdumašda, who clearly bore a Persian name (*Ṛtāmazdā; Tavernier 2007: pp. 297–298), received a ration of wine at Tamukkan/Taocê (PF 679; on their identity see Tolini 2008), inland from modern Bushehr, while in the second text (PF 680), the date of which is damaged, the satrap Zamašba (*Jāmāspa; Tavernier 2007: p. 220), who also received wine, is said to have gone to the king (Hallock 1969: p. 23).

As for the islands alluded to by Herodotus, none of these is mentioned by name, nor do they appear in either the Achaemenid royal inscriptions or the

Persepolis fortification texts. We learn the names of those closest to the Iranian coast, however, in Arrian's account of Nearchus' voyage from the mouth of the Indus to Susa, almost immediately after the demise of the Achaemenid empire. If we ignore those islands mentioned by Arrian that were situated off the Makran (Gedrosia) coast in the Arabian Sea and begin with those located in the Straits of Hormuz, the first inhabited island noted was **Oaracta** (Ὀάρακτα), a "large, inhabited island ... Vines and date-palms grew there and it produced corn; its length was 800 stades" (Arrian, *Ind.* 37.2; var. Δύρακτα, Δώρακτα [Strabo, *Geog.* 16.3.7]; Oracla [Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 6.28], Δῶρα [Steph. Byz., ed. Meineke 1849: pp. 250–251]; Oracea [Rav. Anon., *Cosmog.* 5.17]). The identification of Oaracta with Jazireh-ye Qeshm, the largest island in the Persian Gulf, was long ago established on the basis of the toponym Broct/Burkhut, which appears as the name of a town on the island or as the island itself, in medieval Arabic and early modern (e.g. Portuguese) sources and is cognate with Oaracta (Potts 2020 with earlier lit.).

After describing several more uninhabited islands, Nearchus reached **Cataca** (Καταία; cf. Catag(i)a, Rav. Anon., *Cosmog.* 5.17), described by Arrian (*Ind.* 37.10) as "a desert, low-lying island, said to be sacred to Hermes and Aphrodite.... Every year the people round about send sheep and goats consecrated to Hermes and Aphrodite, which could be seen, quite wild from lapse of time and want of handling." This is modern Jazireh-ye Qeys or Kish.

The next inhabited island mentioned by Arrian went unnamed and was referred to only as "another island, inhabited ... according to Nearchus there is **pearlfishing** here" (Arrian, *Ind.* 38.3–4). This is almost certainly Jazireh-ye Lavān, an island c. six nautical miles west-southwest of Ras-e Nakhilu, known to the early Islamic geographers as al-Lar and to nineteenth century writers generally as Shaikh Abu Shu'aib (Busheab, Shaikh Suaib), a place with pearl fishing (Potts 2015).

Apart from **Kharg** where, in late 2007, a rock-cut cuneiform inscription, allegedly in Old Persian, was discovered (Bashash 2007; very possibly a pre-modern forgery), there is little published archeological evidence from any of the Iranian islands. The inhabitants of these islands were, however, mentioned by Herodotus, who noted that, under the command of Mardontes, "tribes ... from the islands in the Erythraean Sea" took part in the parade of Doriscus. That Herodotus meant islands bordering Iran rather than Arabia is suggested by his description of the inhabitants who "closely resembled the Medes in respect of both clothing and weaponry" (*Hist.* 7.80). Whether the Erythraean islanders resembled the Medes because they had been equipped with Median dress and weaponry for the campaign, or because they dressed and armed themselves in this fashion in their native habitat, we do not know (Potts 2020: p. 388). Logically, it is difficult to imagine islanders from the hot, humid Persian Gulf wearing Median dress when they were at home. Much later,

contingents from the “tribes bordering on the Erythraean Sea,” which could also mean mainlanders from the coastal regions, fought alongside Darius III at Issus under the command of Orontobates, Ariobarzanes, and Orxines (Arrian, *Anab.* 3.8.5).

The islands of the Erythraean Sea also served another function. According to Herodotus, this was “where the Persian king settles the people known as the *anaspastoi*,” i.e. dispossessed (*Hist.* 3.93; cf. 7.80). Although less famous than the Mediterranean island of Elba, where Napoleon famously spent 300 days in exile, the island of Ogyris, where the tomb of the legendary king Erythras (after whom the Erythraean Sea was named according to some accounts; see Burstein 1989: pp. 42–45), performed a similar function for Mithropastes, son of Aristes, satrap of Phrygia. According to Strabo, Mithropastes “was banished by Darius III, took up his residence in the island” and joined Nearchus and Orthagoras “when they landed in the Persian Gulf, and sought through them to be restored to his homeland” (Strabo, *Geog.* 16.3.5). Seemingly banished to Ogyris by Darius III as a result of his father Aristes’ suicide following the battle of Granicus in 334 BCE, Mithropastes had already been there for a number of years when Nearchus arrived (Bosworth 1996: p. 66). Strabo also says that Mithropastes was “in company with Mazenes ... ruler (*hyparch*) of an island in the Persian Gulf ... called Oaracta” and “that Mithropastes took refuge, and obtained hospitality, in this island upon his departure from Ogyris” (Strabo, *Geog.* 16.3.7). Thus, that after escaping detention on Ogyris – presumably facilitated by the collapse of Achaemenid authority and the arrival of Nearchus – Mithropastes made his way to Oaracta, i.e. Qeshm. Strangely, although Strabo cites Nearchus and Orthagoras as his sources, Ogyris does not appear in Arrian’s account of Nearchus’ voyage, nor has it been possible to determine the identity of Ogyris with any certainty, though several possibilities (Hormuz, Lārak, and Masirah, off the coast of Oman) have been suggested (Potts 2020 with refs.).

In any case, the reference to Mazenes, styled “*hyparch* of an island in the Persian Gulf” (Περσικὸν κόλπον) by Strabo, is important, since *hyparchs* were generally in charge of sub-regions under the authority of a satrap. In this case, it is unclear which satrap (of Karmania? Jacobs 1994: p. 206; of Persis? Petit 1990: p. 214) may have had jurisdiction over the region and whether that was synonymous with the “islands in the Erythraean Sea.”

The Achaemenid Presence on the Arabian Islands

There were, of course, other islands of importance in the Persian Gulf with settled populations off the Arabian coast. In the far north, the site of Tell Khazneh on the island of Failaka, in the Bay of Kuwait, has yielded pottery

and figurines tentatively dated to the fifth/fourth centuries BCE (Salles 1986: pp. 127–128). More important, however, was Bahrain (Sum. Dilmun, Akk. Tilmun, Gr. Tylos, Lat. Tylus). Blessed with artesian springs of fresh water, Bahrain historically produced dates in abundance and served as an entrepôt in long-distance trade between Babylonia, the Oman peninsula, and the Indian sub-continent. Although ancient authors were most impressed by its vegetation (e.g. Theophrastus, *Historia Plantarum* 5.4.7–8; *De Causis Plantarum* 2.5.5; Pliny, *Natural History* 12.21.38–23.40), Bahrain was also famous for pearling (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistai* 3.146; Theophrastus, *De Lapidibus* 36; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 3.57).

That pearls – very probably from the Persian Gulf – were prized in Achaemenid Iran is well-illustrated by a late Achaemenid grave excavated at Susa, dated numismatically to c. 350–332 BCE, that contained 400–500 pearls and gold spacer beads arranged in three strands (de Morgan 1905; Tallon 1992: p. 242). Bahrain’s lucrative pearling industry, combined with its ready supply of fresh water, substantial date gardens, and cotton production (referred to by Theophrastus), must have made it of more than passing interest for the Achaemenids. Scholars have disagreed, however, on the question of whether or not the Achaemenids had a permanent political presence there.

An immediately pre-Achaemenid cuneiform text (VS 6.81) from the eleventh year (545/4 BCE) of Nabonidus, last king of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty, mentions an administrative official (^𒂗*bel pihāti*) in Dilmun. Although this may have simply been a Babylonian agent responsible for trade between Dilmun and Babylonia (Kessler 1983: p. 152), it could also denote a true Babylonian governor. If so, then with the conquest of Babylonia by Cyrus the Great, Dilmun would have become de facto a part of the empire and henceforth may have had an Achaemenid governor (Salles 1998: p. 53; Potts 2007a: p. 71). Although there is no epigraphic evidence from either Babylonia or Bahrain to confirm this, the archeological evidence is suggestive. An imposing palace built of stone at the main site of Qalat al-Bahrain (Højlund and Andersen 1997: Plan 3; Potts 2007a: Fig. 1), parts of which date to the early second millennium BCE, was occupied during the Achaemenid period (periods IVc–d). The typically Achaemenid bowl form, a shape previously unknown on Bahrain, was introduced at this time (Højlund and Andersen 1997: Figs. 658, 674, etc.; Potts 2007a: p. 59 and Fig. 16.B–8, 2010: Fig. 49.4) and manufactured there. This can be deduced by an examination of the extant examples from Bahrain which are clearly made in a local ware and were not imports from Iran or Babylonia.

Of equal if not greater interest, however, is a glass stamp seal, found just above the floor in room B6 of the palace, showing an Achaemenid “court style” contest scene between a royal hero and a winged bull (Højlund and Andersen 1997: Fig. 734; Potts 2007a: Fig. 16, 2010: Fig. 49.2). At Persepolis, impressions of similar seals were found on treasury and fortification tablets

(Garrison and Root 2001: Pls. 274–275, 279f, 280h, 285h). On the other hand, at Nippur, in Babylonia, seals showing generally similar iconography were impressed on private, economic texts by members of the Murašu family (Zettler 1979: pp. 260–263). Thus, despite the royal iconography, the presence of such a seal does not automatically imply the presence of a holder of high political office, e.g. a hyparch. It could also have been used by an affluent merchant. On the other hand, it is also possible that the élite resident of the palatial building at Qalat al-Bahrain was a merchant who may have functioned as a hyparch. Certainly the building is no ordinary house.

The Persian Gulf as a Maritime Highway for the Transmission of Knowledge

Finally, as shown by DZc, the Persian Gulf was clearly used as a maritime channel. During Darius' reign vessels sailed between Egypt and Persia, but the Persian Gulf's role as a conduit of cultural exchange was much broader. Reference has already been made to the presence of cotton on Bahrain in the early Hellenistic period, and archeobotanical evidence of cotton, in the form of seeds, as well as textile fragments tentatively identified as cotton, have been found in the palatial building on Qalat al-Bahrain (Bouchaud et al. 2011: pp. 410–411). The Indian sub-continent, where cotton was an important cultivar (Boivin and Fuller 2009: p. 162), is the likeliest original source of Bahrain's cotton. But ideas as well as commodities and cultivars circulated through the Persian Gulf as well.

It has long been noted that Mesopotamian methods and parameters were absorbed into Indian mathematical astronomy during the Achaemenid period (Pingree 1974). Specifically, works like the *Jyotiṣavedāṅga*, a manual used to determine times for the performance of Vedic sacrifices, owe a great deal to redactions of the Mesopotamian text MUL.APIN from the seventh/sixth centuries BCE, while the Pāli *Dīghanikāya*, of the fourth/third century BCE, incorporates astral omens taken from *Enūma Anu Ellil*, and the later Sanskrit *Gargasamhitā* includes omens from *Enūma Anu Ellil* and *šumma ālu* that “must have entered India during the Achaemenid period” (Pingree 1982: p. 618). Considering the clearly Mesopotamian pedigree of the esoteric knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, and divination that was transferred from Babylonia to India, it is plausible to suggest that this was facilitated by travel through the Persian Gulf. Nothing suggests that the Achaemenids played a direct role in this transmission. What the Achaemenids did do, however, was to unite these two distant regions – Babylonia and parts of India – under one political system, acting as a facilitator in the transfer of knowledge. The creation of a *pax Achaemenidica* established the conditions under which this type of cultural exchange flourished (Potts 2007b: pp. 126–127).

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