

Qeshm

The History of a Persian Gulf Island



Willem Floor & D. T. Potts

Located in the Straits of Hormuz, the island of Qeshm has had a tumultuous history. *Qeshm: The History of a Persian Gulf Island* is the first serious, book-length study of the island's history.

From the fourteenth century onward, the island was an important dependency of the Kingdom of Hormuz, often providing drinking water to Hormuz. The island remained critical as a source of water and foodstuffs for the Portuguese, beginning in the early-sixteenth century. Throughout the seventeenth century, Qeshm remained a bone of contention between Portugal, the Dutch and the English East India Companies. Later, it was a coveted tile in the mosaic of Persian Gulf domination aspired to by the Soltans of Oman, despite the pretensions of the Qajar court. The natural resources of Qeshm include salt, the purest in the Persian Gulf, naphtha, and firewood. From Nader Shah's naval ambitions to the commercial competition of the early-twentieth century, Qeshm features in innumerable mini-crises, both local and international. In 1935 the British abandoned their coaling station on the island at the insistence of Reza Shah.

Qeshm's history stands in stark contrast to the popular image of this staid, somewhat sleepy island. This book, brilliantly researched by two of the foremost scholars of Iranian history, is essential reading for anyone interested in a region whose strategic, political, economic and financial importance continues to grow.

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By
Willem Floor & D. T. Potts



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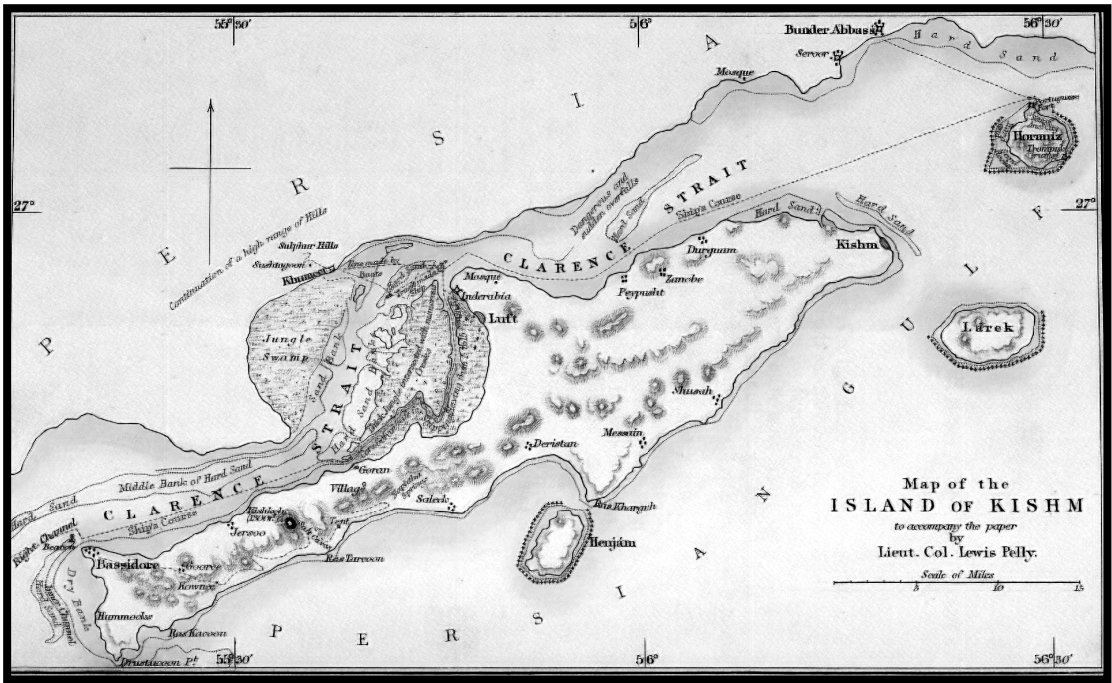
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Geographical map of Qeshm, 1864.

FOREWORD

Qeshm seemingly was just like any other inhabited island in the Persian Gulf. People lived from agriculture, fishing, some trade, and occasional maritime violence. However, what made Qeshm different from the other islands were its location and its regional function. The latter was that it supplied food and water to Hormuz, Bandar Abbas and other parts of the Hormuz kingdom. The former, situated in the Strait of Hormuz, i.e. being situated at the entrance of the Persian Gulf, made it a desirable and strategic object for those who wanted to control shipping in that body of water.

As of 1300, Qeshm was in the hands of the kingdom of Hormuz and since 1515, a Portuguese protectorate. After the fall of the Hormuz kingdom in 1621, the island was part of the Safavid kingdom. Its strategic importance was highlighted by the fact that twice the Dutch wanted to use military control over the island as leverage to force Iran to be more compliant. A similar tactic was used by the Omanis, who since the early 18th century tried to have greater control over shipping in the Persian Gulf, and they also chose the occupation of Qeshm as a means to achieve their objective. Apart from being a potential strategic tool to use against Iran, those living on the Iranian coast also used the island as a refuge whenever there was insecurity in the hinterland of Bandar Abbas. After the fall of the Safavids in 1722, the situation of Qeshm was in flux. Coastal Arabs sought refuge and a living on

the island, while the Dutch and English East Indies Companies also considered moving there to be free from oppression and harassment in Bandar Abbas.

After the fall of the Afsharid kingdom the island became the coveted treasure of rival powers, ranging from Oman to the Qawasem and other Arab groups, who just wanted to live there, and the governor of Larestan, who wanted to occupy it to control shipping. This fight between the various parties, who sometimes sided with each other, lasted almost five decades, until finally Oman was able to claim the prize in 1794. In that year, Iran leased Bandar Abbas and its dependencies (which included Qeshm) to the Imam of Masqat. However, Oman lost control over the island after Imam Sultan's death in 1804. Although some measure of control was reestablished in 1805, with British help, it would seem that until 1819, the Imam of Masqat did not have effective dominion over the leased area. In fact, between 1794 and 1820, Oman's effective occupation of Qeshm was subject to many interruptions.

Great Britain put a stop to maritime violence in the Persian Gulf in 1819 not only by destroying the major ports and vessels used by pirates, but also by having all of them sign a treaty to forego piracy. To monitor and enact the realization of this treaty the British made the village of Basidu on Qeshm Island the HQ of the Indian Navy, a situation that lasted until 1863, when this was considered to be no longer necessary. A military guard was maintained at Basidu until 1883, and thereafter a nominal presence of a coal agent and the flying of the British flag was the extent of British claim to its rights to Basidu.

Oman was able to exercise effective control over its leased jurisdiction until 1854, when due to a conflict that had arisen with Iran, the Shah ordered troops to occupy Bandar Abbas and its dependencies. The Iranian campaign resulted in a new lease agreement that lasted until 1868, when due to a succession war in Oman, Naser al-Din Shah decided to cancel the lease agreement and take direct control over the leased area.

Since then Qeshm was no longer the target of political intrigue and became merely a backwater in the Persian Gulf. Even the drilling

for oil, or interest from foreign investors in its salt did not change this. What brought Qeshm back again as a political hotbed was the so-called Basidu affair. Since 1823 Britain had stationed ships and troops at Basidu. After 1856 its military importance had dwindled and was basically reduced to a storage place for coal used by British naval ships. Because from 1823 until 1928 Persia had never challenged the British special position or right; in fact, it even had tacitly recognized this right in e.g. the 1857 Paris agreement, neither the government of India nor that of Great Britain believed that the British position at Basidu would be challenged by Iran. In fact, on several occasions Britain had referred to Basidu as British territory and its waters as British territorial waters to Persian customs officials, without any contradiction. However, in 1928 Persia insisted that Britain vacate Basidu, which led to drawn out negotiations and pinprick Persian challenges to British rights. Finally, the British government concluded that Basidu's function as a naval station could better be served by Bahrain and, therefore, in 1935 Britain withdrew from Basidu.

Thereafter, Qeshm Island remained a relatively neglected backwater. Like in the rest of Iran, after 1950 socio-economic developments also took place, albeit at a slower pace. But that part of its history is not dealt with here, as there are several studies in Persian that deal with that period and those developments in detail.

We wish to extend our thanks to Ms Arezoo Heidary, who made a special trip to Qeshm to take pictures of interesting sites, many of which are used here as illustrations.

THE ISLAND

DESCRIPTION

The largest island in the Persian Gulf, Qeshm lies between Bandar-e Abbas in the east and Bandar-e Lengeh in the west. It is separated from the mainland by the 1.5 to 25 kms wide Strait of Khuran (Tor`eh-ye Khvoran; Clarence Strait¹), and runs virtually parallel to the Iranian coast. The island's main importance was that, until recent times, it was the pantry of Hormuz and Bandar Abbas, supplying them with most of their sweet water, food and firewood. Furthermore, until the beginning of the 20th century, the sheltered anchorages offered by the Strait of Khuran constituted the chief significance of Qeshm to sailing vessels leaving and entering the Persian Gulf.² In the early twentieth century, the British military described the island as follows:

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1. Named in honor of the Duke of Clarence, the future William IV (1765-1837), King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. See Potts 2011, p. 99 and n. 1.
 2. IOR/L/MIL/17/15/27, p. 19; Gleadowe-Newcomen 1906, p. 33.

Qishm is 68 miles long from north-east to south-west,³ with a width averaging 10 miles, or an area of 1,334 sq. km. The island is almost covered with flat-topped hills without any dominant peaks, although Kishkuh, the highest summit, nearly in the middle of the island and about 18 miles from from the south-west end, reaches a height of 406 meters (1,331 feet). Ras Khargu and Laft Point project from the middle of the south-east and north-west coasts respectively. The south-east and west coasts have sandy bays, backed by irregular hills; the north-west coast which forms the south-east shore of the Clarence Strait, is flat and fringed by tidal mud flats. The island is mostly barren and in parts encrusted with salt, but some cereals, vegetables, melons and dates are grown on the fertile black loam in the north.⁴

From May to October the climate is extremely trying, although it was and is considered cooler than Bandar Abbas.⁵ Nevertheless, like the birds and other animals, human beings in the rural areas sought cooling in water tanks during the day. “Soon it was the old men’s turn, and tying their turbans round their waists, they one by one descended into the water in true biblical style. . . . One very old man remained after his companions, only his clean-shaven head above the water.

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3. According to d’Anville 1764, p. 136, the Dutch navigator Hendrik Hageenaar (fl. 1631-1638) was the first person to determine the length of Qeshm. For Hageenaar’s estimate of Qeshm’s size see Anonymous 1786, p. 13. See also the discussion in Potts 2019a, pp. 343-344.
 4. IOR/L/PS/20/C201/1, p. 51; see also Lorimer 1908-15, vol. 2, p. 1550; Whitelock 1838, p. 178; Nurbakhsh 1369, pp. 21-41; Floyer 1882, p. 127 (“The surface of Kishm Island consists principally of salt plains, intersected by low limestone ridges.”); IOR/L/PS/20/C251, pp. 111-13. For more details on the vegetation, see Kunkel 1977. For a description of the island’s natural habitat, see Nurbakhsh 1369, pp. 30-45, 46-71 (water resources and management), 72-81(vegetation).
 5. IOR/L/MIL/17/15/40, part V, p. 13; Nurbakhsh 1369, pp.42-45; Mignan 1839, vol. 2, pp. 230-31 (“hell that’s there”); Floyer 1882, p. 131; Sykes 1902, p. 290.



The Portuguese in Hormuz dine al fresco in a pool to keep cool.

... I was agreeably aroused by a tremendous chattering and much not unmusical laughter, and turning over, found the tank and well surrounded by a bevy of damsels who were the ladies of my host's establishment, *and* – who evidently wanted to bathe!"⁶ Sykes pointed out that, although the mention of "Kishma's amber vines" in Thomas Moore's poem *Lalla Rookh* (1817)⁷ suggested a delightful ambiance, the reality was just the opposite, as the island of Qeshm was one of the unhealthiest places in the world.⁸

6. Floyer 1882, pp. 128-29. According to de Figueroa, "water from there [Qeshm] is not softened by currents, nor cured by the sun like river water, it is not healthful for bathing." De Silva y Figueroa 2011, vol. 1, p. 194.

7. Moore 1817, p. 199.

8. Sykes 1902, p. 290.



People in Masqat in a pool to keep cool.

NAME

Qeshm, sometimes pronounced Jishm, was also referred to as *jazirat al-tawilah* (Arabic) or *jazireh-ye daraz* (Persian), i.e., Long Island.⁹ Its earliest attested name was probably Oaracta (var. Oracta, Ooracta, Doracta) which, according to Classical sources (Arrian, Ptolemy, Pliny and Strabo), was the name of an island located near the mouth of the Persian Gulf. In Sasanian and Islamic medieval times it was called Abarkavan as well as Bani Kavan and Ibn Kavan Island. Arab geographers such as Estakhri, Mas`udi and Ibn Hawqal referred to the island as Laft, which was the name of the main port of the island at that time, while Yaqut refers to the island both as Kavan and Laft. Similarly, the island is also referred to as Broco/Boroch/Beroho/Brocto after the town of Brukht, which some scholars, beginning with d'Anville in 1764,¹⁰ identify with Oaracta, the purported Greek

9. Monshi 1350, vol. 2, p. 980; Teixeira 1902, pp. 19, 260; Kinnier 1813, p. 14; Kazeruni 1367, p. 129; Buckingham 1829, p. 492; Lorimer 1908-15, vol. 2, p. 1550.

10. d'Anville 1764, p. 149.

name of the island. The common name in the 14-15th century was Qeshm va Brukht, *jazireh-ye* Qeshm va Brukht (Samarqandi) and *jazira* Burkhut va'l-Qeshm (Ibn Majid), who also called the island Ibn Jawan. Ibn Majid wrote about the town of Burkhut in the island's interior, which was situated four leagues from Qeshm town, according to Nimdihi. Balbi called it the island of Boreche and Teixeira referred to it as the island of Broct. The Portuguese called the island Queiximi/Queixome/Queixume, giving rise to similar appellations in other European languages such as Kismis, Kism, and Qesomo.

According to a folk etymology, Abarkavan is a corruption of *Jazireh-ye Gavan* (Island of Cows). This indicates that it is an old etymology, because Tabari relates that a commander in Khorasan accused his soldiers of having ridden only cattle and donkeys on the isle of Banu Kavan before he had turned them into competent cavalrymen.¹¹ According to another etymology, the island's name is "derived from its production of a small grape without seeds, called Kismis in Persia, and Sultana in Turkey," ... but, "as there is at its eastern end a town called Kassm, this is more likely to have given it the names of Kism, Kishm, and Kismis, than the production of the fruit mentioned.¹² In Arabic, the word *qishm*, among other things, means, "the channel through which water passes into a cistern or reservoir," while *qashm*, means "splitting palm-leaves for weaving ropes," or "breaking or bursting (as water place or reservoir containing it)," which may or may not have anything to do with the name of the island.¹³

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11. Potts 2004.; Idem 2019 b, pp. 382-83; Kasheff 1982, p. 63-64; Schwarz 1896, vol. 1, pp. 82-83; Sauvaget 1948, p. 42; Aubin 1973, p. 102; Rumlu 1349, p. 224, n. 3 (*jazireh-ye Kishm va Brokht*); Balbi 1590, p. 46; Teixeira 1902, p. 161; Lorimer 1908-15, vol. 2, p. 1548. In the 1820s, Brukht or Urtukh (the ancient Oaracta) still mentioned as being in the center of the island. Anonymous 1856, p. 34. However, Brukht is not mentioned in later sources.
 12. Buckingham 1829, p. 492.
 13. For other names, variants (Khasik, Jasik, etc.), and more conjectures about the various possible meanings of the name, see Nurbakhsh 1369, pp. 111-26.

EARTHQUAKES

Seismic activity around the northern parts of the Persian Gulf is sometimes associated with major devastating earthquakes. The island of Qeshm has a history of earthquakes; the earliest known one allegedly occurred in 1335, which caused much damage, as did the one that occurred in 1703.¹⁴ However, most information about seismic activity of the island is from the 19th and 20th century and even for that period it is incomplete. On 19-20 May 1884, Qeshm was struck by an earthquake. Some 30 villages were destroyed and 132 people died (see Annex I). Many people left the island and there was much distress. Naser al-Din Shah gave 1,400 *tumans* to help those afflicted and for the repair of mosques. He also remitted the current year's taxes and instructed the new governor of Qeshm, Sheikh Ebrahim not to levy taxes. To compensate the Sheikh for his loss of income, the revenues of the salt mines of Qeshm were assigned to him.¹⁵ A severe earthquake that occurred in the night of 11 January 1897 laid the town of Qeshm in ruins; only two mosques and 3-4 buildings were still standing. Some 1,600 bodies were said to have been recovered from the ruins, in addition to those of strangers that were not identified. It also destroyed many of the villages on the island.¹⁶

Severe earthquakes also occurred at Bandar Abbas and Qeshm on 9 June 1902; many houses were destroyed and two people died in Bandar Abbas; the damage on Qeshm was more serious.¹⁷ According to information received by the Belgian Customs official Camille

14. There was an earthquake in 1335, according to the date of the destruction of a mosque in Kusheh. Nurbakhsh 1369, p. 88. Ambraseys and Melville 1982, p. 44 (possibly one in 1361).

15. Administration Report 1884-85, p. 9. See also Nurbakhsh 1369, pp. 89-90. Sadid al-Saltaneh 1371, p. 337 mistakenly gives 1300 or 1882 as the year of the earthquake.

16. Administration Report 1896-97, p. 10; Wilson 1930, p. 107; Sadid al-Saltaneh 1371, p. 337, who gives 18 January 1897 (14 Sha`ban 1314) as the date and about 500 deaths; IOR/L/PS/20/C201/1, p. 51; Lorimer 1908-15, vol. 2, p. 1550.

17. Administration Report 1902-03, p. 5.

Dambrain from his colleague van Roosbroek in Bandar Abbas, on Qeshm no house was still standing and this while the island's inhabitants had not yet recovered from the 1897 earthquake.¹⁸ The most recent earthquakes on the island occurred in 2005 and 2008.¹⁹

18. MA, Camille Dambrain, no. 2 Documents, Dambrain to Mother. Bouchir, 23/07/1902.

19. For a list of earthquakes that occurred on the island from 1902 to 1989, see Nurbakhsh 1369, pp. 94-95. Earthquakes were not the only calamity that was visited upon Qeshm, because it also suffered its share of outbreaks of cholera and pest epidemics. Fraser 1825, pp. 29-30, 35-36, 57.

POPULATION & SETTLEMENTS

Data about population size and the number of villages on Qeshm are mostly lacking. The size of the island's population varied over time, of course, as did the number of villages, depending on the severity and frequency of earthquakes that often caused many deaths as well as on climatic, economic and political circumstances. During its history, the population experienced both emigration and immigration. Al-Muqaddasi (± 946-± 1000) mentions a place on the island called Ra's Kishm, which he described as being: "small, although it is a large bazaar, in which the mosque is located and into which one enters by climbing stairs."¹ According to Yaqut (1179-1229), Qeshm had been one of the most important islands in the Persian Gulf, and had been flourishing and had many inhabitants, but when he was traveling there it was in a desolate condition.² Around 1645, it was reported that there were 60 hamlets on Qeshm Island, each with five to six families, 60-70 date palms and two water cisterns.³ In 1752, the island was described as follows:

1. Schwarz 1896, vol. 1, p. 84.

2. Schwarz 1896, vol. 1, p. 84.

3. NA, Collectie Leupe 865. For a facsimile of this report see Floor 1980.

The land lying near the sea [was] only barren but these at a distance of three miles in some places & not less than a quarter of a mile in others are very well watered and appear from their being covered with barley, flax and date trees to be exceedingly fertile. The island has also several ports for shipping and a large dock [at Lhast *auth.*; sic] made by the Persians [for Nadir's fleet in 1732; sic] which may without much repairing be in a condition to receive a vessel of a thousand tons.⁴

There were allegedly even more small villages in the fertile northern part around the coast, although the number declined in the 18th and early 19th century due to warfare.⁵ In 1800, Malcolm reported that formerly Qeshm had 300 villages, only 150 of which were still extant.⁶ By 1816 the situation on the island had worsened. According to Buckingham:

Their deserted villages, indeed, still remain; but the inhabitants have been driven out by the Joassamees [Qawasem], who plundered them in successive debarkations on their coast, carried off all their cattle and moveables, and obliged them to seek refuge in the opposite mountains of Persia. [...] It is said to have had formerly three hundred villages upon it; and the report may be credited, for the fertility of the soil would be quite sufficient to support them. At present, however, there

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4. Barendse 2009, vol. 1, p. 281. Lhast obviously is Laft, while in 1732 there was not yet a Persian fleet; therefore, this dock must have been built no earlier than 1736 and more likely later. On the Persian fleet, see Floor 2007, pp. 1-21.
5. Anonymous 1856, p. 35. For the rural water cisterns and dams that enabled cultivation, see Nurbakhsh 1369, pp. 61-65.
6. Saldanha vol. 1, p. 451. Likewise Kinneir 1813, p. 14, wrote, "This island... had formerly three hundred villages upon it, not half of which now remain." Given that the number of 60 villages in 1643 is similar to the number of villages in the 1840s, which suggests continuity of habitation, it is likely that the number of 300 and even of 150 villages is exaggerated; see also Curzon 1892, vol. 2, p. 410. Archeological data may bring clarity to this issue.

are not a dozen hamlets that are inhabited; though the situation, the soil, and the climate, are still as favourable as ever to population.⁷

The decline in population and number of villages was due to the continued warfare by the combined forces of the Omanis and the Banu Ma`in against the Qawasem and their allies, which ravaged the island and its trade (see below). In 1808, Dupré visited Qeshm and met Sheikh Saqr b. Abdollah. He learnt that the island had 130 villages, the majority of which had been destroyed. At this time the war with the Qawasem, who still held a large part of the island, including the town of Laft, was ongoing.⁸ This conflict continued until 1819, when the British imposed a Pax Britannica on the warring Arab parties.⁹

The drop in population may have been as dramatic as described by Buckingham. In 1818, two years after his visit, Capt. Taylor reported: "It is said that before the inhabitants were oppressed by the Joasmee [Qawasem] pirates, one hundred villages flourished on the island."¹⁰ According to Fraser, who was on the island in July 1820,

It has been the scene of great disturbance and rapine, the predatory disposition of the Arab tribes in the gulf, was of itself sufficient to repress the prosperity of a place unable to keep them at a distance; and of late years the Joasmee pirates, who haunted its environs, have made many destructive descents upon the island itself; plundering and destroying every thing within its reach, and wantonly cutting down the date and fruit trees, so that it can hardly now supply the few remaining families with the food they require.¹¹

7. Buckingham 1829, pp. 489, 492.

8. Dupré 1819, vol. 1, pp. 416-17.

9. Qasemi 1986, ch. 5; Kelly 1968, pp. 139ff; Buckingham 1829, p. 492.

10. Anonymous 1856, p. 33.

11. Fraser 1825, p. 34 (he also mentions that in the past there were 360 well inhabited villages).

In 1835, Lt. Kempthorne wrote that: “the island once contained upwards of two hundred villages and towns; but now it cannot boast of one-half of that number.”¹² In the mid-19th century, according to Hajj Abdol-Mohammad, Qeshm had 360 villages and 15,000 inhabitants.¹³ Both the number of inhabitants and that of the villages are on the high side and inflated, for in the 1830s, Whitelock estimated that the population of the island did not exceed 5,000.¹⁴

From the above it is clear that, whatever the precise number of villages was at a given point in time, the prevailing impression among most observers was that, by the 1830s, the number of villages had declined significantly during the preceding 50 years or so. Moreover, for unknown reasons, this decline continued in the decades thereafter. Whereas, in the 1830s, there still were 61 towns and villages on the island, this number had fallen to 34 by 1900, a loss of 55% of the island’s settlements. (see Table 1). This may partly be explained by internal migration resulting in fewer, but larger settlements. Around 1900, the island’s population, including the town of Qeshm, was estimated to be about 13,500 persons, while the number of villages had declined by about half as compared with the 1840s.¹⁵ According to local merchants, in 1922 Qeshm had 1,300 families and 30 villages totalling about 10,000 inhabitants for the island.¹⁶ At that time Qeshm was described as follows:

Qeshm now is virtually a desert, though it once produced grain, vines, fruit and vegetables in quantity. Salt is still mined

12. Kempthorne 1835, p. 278.

13. Sepehr 1377, pp. 1364-71 (treaty articles on pp. 1366-69); Busse 1972, pp. 313-18 (treaty articles on pp. 314-17), 358. Text *farman* Tahmap Mirza 1272/1856 concerning the lease to Sayyed Sa`id. Sadid al-Saltaneh 1342, pp. 199-203. Text Naser al-Din Shah’s decree to Imam Sa`id. Sadid al-Saltaneh 1342, pp. 203-04; Soltan Morad Mirza Hesam al-Saltaneh to Thuwayni. Sadid al-Saltaneh 1342, pp. 204-09.

14. Whitelock 1838, p. 177.

15. IOR/L/PS/20/C201/1, p. 51.

16. Vothuqi 1381, p. 204.

from the great salt caverns, and there are workable deposits of sulphur and ferrous oxide, along with some naphtha springs on the south coast, near Salakh. The population, some few thousand souls, mostly Arab and Sunni, lives by fishing, limited cultivation and salt-mining. Qeshm town, at the north-eastern tip, is the only populated centre of any size.¹⁷

In 1976, the *shahrestan* of Aban (Qeshm) had a population of 38,397 people (19,146 male) forming 8,552 households.¹⁸

According to Ibn Khordadbeh (± 820-912), Qeshm's inhabitants belonged to the Ebadi sect (عباضی), although they called themselves Abadis (اباضی).¹⁹ However, by the 18th century, and quite likely much earlier, they all belonged to the Shafe`i school.²⁰ At that time, most of Qeshm's Arab inhabitants belonged to Trucial Omani tribes, in particular from Ajman, which explains Ajmani involvement in some of the fights that took place at the end of the 18th and in the early 19th century. The Sheikh of Qeshm was of the Banu Ma`in tribe which, in Qeshm town (around 1900), numbered about 100 persons.²¹

Describing Qeshm in 1818, Capt. Taylor, reported that "its peasantry is composed chiefly of Persians, who speak their national dialect, and also comprehend the Arabic, from their intercourse with the tribe Bani Main, the governors of the island, as well as with the Arab tribes who occupy the whole of the opposite or Persian shore."²² The characterization of the Qeshm population as Persian speakers may be

17. J.B. Kelly, "Kishm," *Encyclopedia of Islam*³, vol. 5, p. 183a.

18. Government of Iran 1359, p. 74.

19. Schwarz 1896, vol. 1, p. 83.

20. For the current religious situation (>90% Shafe`i) as well as mosques, religious practices and customs, see Nurbakhsh 1369, pp. 239-72, 412-37.

21. Lorimer 1908-15, vol. 2, p. 1550. The Shāqāsh "form a section of the Beni Ma'in of Qishm, and there are only a few of them. They are Ghāfiri in politics and reside at 'Ajmān town, where they have 12 houses. They are pearl-divers and fishermen." Government of Great Britain 1920, vol. 1, p. 592.

22. Anonymous 1856, p. 35.

a misnomer, because around 1900, the great majority of the island's inhabitants were Arabic speakers and Sunni by religion. At that time, Persian speaking communities also resided in Qeshm town and Diraku. They numbered about 500 persons and were Sunnis.²³ This suggests that Capt. Taylor wrongly concluded that, because his interlocutors were able to converse in Persian, they were native Persian speakers, which they were not. For "a mongrel mixture of Arabic and Persian is the language spoken in the Island. One or other of these languages was however readily understood everywhere. In Qishm Town especially, and even in the smaller coast villages individuals will be found who can converse in them."²⁴

Both non-Moslems and non-Iranian Moslems also lived on the island. In the 1830s some Jews, mainly goldsmiths, making rings and bangles for women, resided in Basidu.²⁵ Their role was taken over by Hindu and Khojah merchants and traders, whose number in 1869 amounted to four Khojahs.²⁶ By 1876 that number had increased to eight. This number probably varied over time, and their residence may have been seasonal. According to Sadid al-Saltaneh, there had previously been four Heydarabadis on the island, who had three warehouses on the seashore and two in the town, which they had tried to sell. In 1905, however, they still owned them.²⁷ That year there were two Hindu goldsmiths, who each had a shop and two apprentices. In summer they went to Minab. There was also a Hindu trader named Layla Ram, who lived in Bandar Abbas and had rented a shop in Qeshm on the seashore. His agents only lived temporarily

23. Lorimer 1908-15, vol. 2, p. 1550.

24. IOR/L/PS/20/C201/1, p. 51. For the local language of Qeshm, see Anonby 2015; see also Nurbakhsh 1369, pp. 281-92, 514-22 (wordlists).

25. Whitelock 1838, p. 179.

26. Saldanha 1908, vol. 8/III, pp. 144-47 (List II, Appendix E). Khojas (from the Persian honorific *khvajeh*) are Nizari Isma'ili Shias.

27. Administration Report 1876-77, p. 5; Sadid al-Saltaneh 1371, pp. 312-13 (with their names and details about one family from Heydarabad in the Deccan).

on the island.²⁸ In 1922, there were two to three Hindu goldsmiths, who came in winter, returning to India each summer.²⁹

The combination of a declining number of human settlements and the availability of water meant that there was much game and other animals on Qeshm. Hares, foxes, wild [more likely feral] goats, crows, doves, pigeons, partridges and rock pigeons abounded in the hills, while there were many small antelopes or gazelles (*ahu*) as well as jackals on the plains.³⁰ In the 19th and the 20th century (and quite likely also in earlier periods) people came to hunt these animals, in particular near Chahu and Guri. In the 19th century, British officers stationed at Basidu hunted gazelles with greyhounds. So active was the hunting that in 1828 Stirling noted that the gazelles were in danger of all being killed by the British troops.³¹ But even after they had left, foreigners continued to come to hunt the animals. For example, in August 1929 as well as in April 1947, the Sheikh of Dubai went on a hunting trip to Qeshm, accompanied by 30 armed followers. Some, like Indians, hunted the animals to get their skins.³²

THE TOWNS

Qeshm town was not always the island's main urban settlement. It would seem that during the time of the Hormuz kingdom Brokht and Laft were the main towns. Brokht, which had a royal palace as of the early 15th century, if not earlier, seems to have been the more important of the two. Sometimes, its name was used to identify the

28. Sadid al-Saltaneh 1371, p. 312.

29. Vothuqi 1381, p. 204.

30. Lorimer vol. 2, p. 1550; Whitelock 1838, p. 178; Shepherd 1857, p. 69, 72; IOR/L/PS/20/C201/1, p. 51; IOR/L/MIL/17/15/40, p. 13; Nurbakhsh 1369, pp. 82-87; Floyer 1882, pp. 127, 131 (hyenas, jackals).

31. Lee 1991, p. 7; Curzon 1892, vol. 2, p. 411.

32. Whitelock 1838, pp. 179-80; Sadid al-Saltaneh 1371, p. 317; IOR/L/PS/10/1177, para 73.

island, in accordance with the custom of naming an island after its most important settlement or port.³³ According to two Hormuzi revenue lists, the order of importance of the towns was: Brukht, Laft, Kharbiz, and finally Qeshm, which was referred to as a village (*lugarete*) and occupied the last place.

Table 1: Revenue of the four largest settlements on Qeshm Island in *hazars*

Name	Titolo des remdas/Name of the revenue [source]	Remdimento de Oromuz/ Revenue of Hormuz
Brukht	Broct: 1,000	Broquete: 600
Laft	Laft: 610	Llafete: 400
Kharbiz	Carbes: 200	Garpez: 130
Qeshm	Queixome: 130	Queixa: 130

Source: Aubin 1973 a, p. 102.

BRUKHT

Brukht was situated in the middle of the island and four leagues from Qeshm town. Although first mentioned in a literary source of the 10th century,³⁴ the Borkh/Barkh mosque in the village of Kusheh or Gusheh, in the southwestern part of Qeshm, has a Kufic inscription dated to 224 AH, i.e. 838-839.³⁵ Repairs were done to the Borkh/Barkh mosque in 737 AH (1336-1337) following damage by an earthquake.³⁶ After the fall of the kingdom of Hormuz Brukht seems to have become less important, and is rarely mentioned in later sources, although the name

33. Aubin 1973a, p. 102, n. 151; Floor 2006, p. 32.

34. Sauvaget 1948, pp. 201, 207, 216 (reading the name of the Zoroastrian sailor from Siraf as al-Brukhti instead of al-Barkhati); Ibn Majid 1972, p. 222 (Burkhut or Brokht is the middle of the island)..

35. Miri 2007, p. 60 with refs [citing Eqtedari 1348: 762-763; Quchani 1367: 24-27]. Sadid al-Saltaneh 1342 pp. 676-79. Broct has been identified with the village of Kusheh in the centre of Qeshm, where “there is a shrine of Shaikh al-Barkeh برکه or Barkh برخ.” Lorimer 1915, vol. 2, p. 1553.

36. Miri 2007, p. 60 with refs.

appears in Portuguese sources as Broco, Boroch, Beroho, Brocto and la isla Broct.³⁷ Although in ruins, Brukht was still inhabited in 1818.³⁸

LAFT

Laft is mentioned by various 10th century Arab geographers, such as Mas‘udi (Lāft, Lafet), usually as the name of the island of Qeshm. According to the *Hodud al-‘Alam* it was a flourishing place.³⁹ Pedro Teixeira knew Laft, or Lefete according to Duarte Barbosa and Lafetiè according to Balbi, as one of the island’s principal anchorages.⁴⁰ Teixeira called “Lapht, a seaport in the Isle of Broct, which we Portuguese call commonly Queixome.”⁴¹ In the 1670s Fryer reported that at: “Loft, the chief Place of the Island, and loaded with Oyster; there were all kinds of fish for sale.”⁴² There was a Laft-e now (New Laft) and a Laft-e qadim or kohneh (Old Laft); the distance between them was about 5 kms.⁴³ The name New Laft is mentioned in 1729 for the first time, as far as I know, because it is unknown when and why this new town came into being.⁴⁴ Laft seems to have been the main political and economic center during the 17th and the 18th century. It was here that the ruling Sheikh resided, where trade converged and where boat building and repairs took place.

Laft was essentially a large village situated on the west side of the salient from the north coast of the island, the extremity of which is Laft point. It had a fort with five circular towers equipped with gunports, which was said to have been built by Nader Shah, unless this was the

37. Tomaschek 1890, p. 48.

38. Anonymous 1856, p. 34 (“Brukht, or Urukht (the ancient Oaracta of Nearchus and Arrian).”

39. Schwarz 1896, vol. 1, p. 83; Minorsky 1937, pp. 57-58.

40. Tomaschek 1890, p. 48.

41. Sinclair 1902, p. 159.

42. Fryer 1909, vol. 2, p. 362.

43. Kazeruni 1367, p. 131.

44. NA, VOC 3168, governor of Muscat Sjeeg Abdulla Waledde Mashoed to de Cleen (Gamron - 08/11/1729), f. 465-66.

same as the old palace-fort residence of the ruling Sheikh. This small square fort measured 60 x 60 feet (*qadam*). In 1900 several iron cannons were still lying in front of the ruins of the, by then, dilapidated fort.⁴⁵

Sometime after 1737 a large dock was built at Laft, “which may without much repairing be in a condition to receive a vessel of a thousand tons.”⁴⁶ This dock was much used by both local and foreign ships for repairs and maintenance (see below).

Alongside Qeshm and Basidu, Laft was one of the island’s only three towns in the 19th century. It measured 950-1,000 paces from the fort, which was situated to the south of the town, to the pier in the north. Laft was described as a fortified village or town at the foot of a 60 m. tall hill, called Kuh-e shahr, and at the eastern entrance of the Khur Guran. Laft was accessible to local vessels via a narrow creek, which was divided from the Khur Guran by a mangrove swamp. This led Kinneir to comment that “The harbour of Luft is secure, and the place is admirably adapted to piratical pursuits.”⁴⁷ The hill behind Laft is scarped, and the scarps were strengthened at their crests with curtains and flanking works.

In February 1808, Dupré was unable to visit Laft, which he called the only harbor of the island, because it was in the hands of the Qawasem.⁴⁸ In 1809, Laft’s large and strong fort, which had many batteries and redoubts, was described as “having walls fourteen feet thick, pierced with loopholes, and only one entrance through a

45. Sadid al-Saltaneh 1371, pp. 315-16, who writes that the fort had four towers.

46. Barendse 2009, vol. 1, p. 281. Lhast obviously is Laft, while in 1732 there was not yet a Persian fleet, therefore, this dock must have been built not earlier than 1736 and more likely later. On the Persian fleet, see Floor 2007, pp. 1-22.

47. Kinnier 1813, p. 15. Likewise Whitelock 1838, p. 178 wrote, “Laft, when in the possession of the Juwásimí pirates, was a place of considerable strength, to which they resorted, and the tortuous nature of the channel and numerous shoals (then unknown) in Clarence’s Straits rendered it very difficult to follow them.”

48. Dupré 1819, vol. 1, p. 417.

small gate, well cased with iron bolts and bars.”⁴⁹ After a day-long fruitless negotiation with Molla Hoseyn, the Qawasem chief, the British landed troops and a howitzer to blow up the fort’s gate and then take it. However, the fort was strong enough to enable the defenders to repulse the British infantry attack on 27 November 1809. The British attacking force was rapidly and unexpectedly picked off by Arab riflemen firing from the loopholes, suffering a considerable loss of 27 killed and wounded, which forced the British to retreat, abandon their howitzer, and seek protection behind sand ridges and small hillocks. The next day, the British force received artillery support from the accompanying naval vessels, which were towed to within a musket-shot of the fort and battered its defenses. This led to the desired result; the town and fort were abandoned by its Qawasem defenders. The British force took both as well as 11 dhows, which were burnt. Thereafter, the town as well as £20,000 in property was handed over to Sheikh Dervish, chief of a local Arab tribe (presumably the Banu Ma`in), who was friendly to the Imam of Masqat, from whom the island had been taken by the Qawasem.⁵⁰

The town lost much of its importance thereafter and it soon fell into in a miserable state. By 1830, it had only two hundred inhabitants and a few boats.⁵¹ Thereafter, its population slowly increased as well as its economic activities. When Pelly visited Laft in 1864 he reported:

Like the rest of the island of Kishm, Luft is farmed by the Sultan of Maskat, and is sublet to a Sheikh for about 1500 rupees per annum. It may contain 400 or 500 inhabitants, who seem entirely dependent for trade on the wood, which they collect on the neighbouring islands and re-export to all points round the Gulf, for whose firewood consumption the shores of the Clarence Straits form the natural store.⁵²

49. Buckingham 1830, p. 239.

50. Whitelock 1838, p. 178. For a description of the attack, see Low 1877, vol. 1, pp. 331-32; Idem 1887, pp. 350-51.

51. Anonymous 1856, p. 606; Whitelock 1838, p. 178.

52. Pelly 1864, p. 4. In 1905, Laft was sublet to Hajj Sa`id b. Saleh Alishah Lafti for 400 *tumans*. Sadid al-Saltaneh 1371, pp. 315-16.



Close-up view of a well in Laft.

Around 1900, Laft-e *now* or New Laft had 250 houses of Arabs and Persians, who engaged in fishing, boat building, sailing, and cutting fire-wood from the adjacent swamps, while in 1922 it had 500 houses, constructed with stones and clay, but *saruj* (traditional water-resistant mortar made of clay and lime) was also used. Typical for these houses was that most of them had a *badgir* or wind-catcher. To the east of the fort were wells with sweet water that had been dug into the mountain. According to

Pelly, “These tanks all along the coast-line seem of one construction, being oblong or circular vaulted masonry reservoirs cut in the soil at the foot of slopes. At Luft fort, however, there are also several wells cut deep through the sandstone, and from which water is obtainable when the tanks are dry.” The town’s brackish water supply was from roofed tanks, but there also were wells that were used when the tanks were dry. Laft had palm groves, while the livestock consisted of a few cattle, sheep and goats. The town had four shops, two smiths, three Sunni mosques and most Shafé’i scholars (*foqaha*) were living there.⁵³

To the east of the hill, on whose slope Laft was built, were ruins of a former town, which was called Laft-e Sayyedan, because there were a number of dilapidated tombs of a number of sayyeds, such as that of Sayyed Hasan b. Mansur, whose resting places were still visited for religious purposes. Some of the inscriptions are dated to 1000 years

53. Lorimer 1908-15, vol. 2, pp. 1077-78; Kazeruni 1367, p. 131; IOR/L/PS/20/C201/1, pp. 54-55; Sadid al-Saltaneh 1371, pp. 315-16; Pelly 1864, p. 4.



Well and dome in Laft.

ago.⁵⁴ At Laft harbor, there was a dock, about 130 m long constructed with bevelled stones, which may have been built on the remains of the old pier that stretched from the mountain into the sea. Around 1900, the town's inhabitants were sailors, fishermen, farmers, and boat

54. Nurbakhsh 1369, p. 325.



Fort wall and wells in Laft.

wrights. In the early 20th century, there were about 12 carpenters (*gallaf*-گلاف), who were engaged in boat building.⁵⁵

Among British sailors Laft had a bad reputation. Admiral Somerville observed that, although Laft harbor was completely enclosed, easily accessible, fairly deep for anchorage, well-positioned and defensible without difficulty, it was avoided like the pest, because its fresh water supply was inadequate and because it had the reputation of being one of the hottest spots on earth. “Not a breath of outside air, not even the Shamal, gets into it.”⁵⁶

55. There also was a pier officer (*ma'mur-e asqaleh*) in Laft. Sadid al-Saltaneh 1371, pp. 315-16; Nurbakhsh 1369, p. 325.

56. Somerville 1920, p. 93.

QESHM TOWN

In the sixteenth century Qeshm town had a royal palace that doubled as a fort.⁵⁷ In 1604, Pedro Teixeira noted that “the point of Queixome on the outside,” meaning the town of Qeshm, “has plenty of palm orchards, gardens, and wells of good water.”⁵⁸ It would seem that it was only after the Safavid invasion of the island in 1608 that the town of Qeshm was fortified.⁵⁹ In 1621, Ruy Freire arrived at the island with a fleet bearing great masts and planks of timber. Four very strong bulwarks were constructed and filled with earth to a height of 24 feet. They had stone walls of eight spans’ breadth and mortar made of fine blue clay that bound like lime. The walls were faced with stone covered by lime plaster. Three 24 pounders were mounted in each bulwark.⁶⁰ The construction of the fortress walls was begun immediately. Made of the same stone and clay, the walls were five spans thick, faced with stone and lime plaster, and provided with walkways/supports and loop-holes. In addition, a 24 ft. deep, 20 ft. wide moat was dug down to the water table. The individual bulwarks were named ‘Madre de Deos’, ‘Spirito Sancto’, ‘Santiago’ and ‘Sancto Antonio’. Ruy Freire’s description also refers to a parade ground and powder magazine. In 1622, the English surgeon Thomas Wilson added the interesting information that “for the building of this Castle they pulled down a fine Towne with Churches [i.e. mosques] and Tombes, onely for the stones, some of which he burned and made Lime, and with the other he made the Castle wall of a great height and thicknesse, with half-moones and flanckers very artificially, which

57. Floor 2006, p. 32.

58. Sinclair 1902, p. 19.

59. Therefore, the mention of the *qal`eh-ye Qeshm* at the end of the 13th century in a Safavid text written in the 1680s is an anachronism. Monshi 1385, p. 325.

60. In 1622, the English surgeon Thomas Wilson described the fort, suggesting that Ruy Freire “brought the frame thereof ready made in his ships,” which is not what Ruy Freire himself reported. Wilson may have misunderstood the nature and purpose of the timber used to construct the bulwarks.” Boxer 1930, p. 36 n.

in five moneths and a halfe hee had finished; a thing wonderfull in so short a time to be effected and with a great deepe drie Moat round about.”⁶¹ The buildings demolished by Ruy Freire may have included the houses of the king of Hormuz and merchants attested in the days of Albuquerque and Piri Reis, noted above.

In February 1643, two Dutch merchants made a reconnaissance of the island and wrote the following report:

The island of Kismis is about 15 miles long and 4 wide and it is mostly stony. It encompasses about 60 villages of which we have visited four, situated in several valleys at about 2 hours from the fort, that produce nothing but some barley and wheat is transported at one days’ travel distance to Bandar Kong and Gamron, each one of which is inhabited only by 5 to 6 families, has 60 to 70 date palms and 1 or 2 water reservoirs. Each village has to pay, as it quota, to its Lord, which now is the king of Persia, between 2 and 3 *tumans* per year.

The inhabitants of this island in size and swarthinness [*bruijnte*] are like those of Bandar Gamron.

There is a stone fort on the east side of the island situated opposite Hormuz, which was built by the Portuguese but later seized by the Persians who have enlarged it. It is situated at about 14 to 15 paces from the sea and is encircled by a moat, deep 4 and wide 25 feet, to wit: on the sea side 4 and 45 feet and at the other sides 2 and 23 feet. Moreover, the moat between bulwarks [*punten*] A and B and C in the middle has been planted with many trees.

The entrance to the fort (which is on the landside between points A and B) is via a drawbridge, but which now is unable to be drawn up. Its length is 22 and its width 6 feet. The gate that is next (of the same width as the bridge) is not more than 2 feet deep and 10 feet high as are the walls around the fort. The space between them is not more than 4-5 paces.

Having passed the entrance and having gone about 65 paces to the right one arrives at the gate of the fort proper, which

61. Boxer 1930, pp. 46-48.