



## QESHM ISLAND

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**QESHM ISLAND** (*Jazira-ye Qešm*, Ar. *Jazira-al-Ṭawila*); the largest island (ca. 122 km long, 18 km wide on average, 1,445 sq km) in the Persian Gulf, about 22 km south of [Bandar-e ‘Abbās](#). Separated from the mainland by the straits of [Kūrān](#) (Clarence Strait), Qeshm runs virtually parallel to the Persian coast between Bandar-e ‘Abbās in the east and Bandar-(e) Lenga in the west (*Sailing directions for the Persian Gulf*, p. 123; *Handbuch des Persischen Golfs*, p. 155).

The toponymy of the island has varied greatly over time. Nearchus referred to an island near the mouth of the Persian Gulf as Oaracta (e.g., *Geog.* 16.3.7; Pliny, *Natural History* 6.98), where, in Arrian’s account, Nearchus was shown the tomb of Erythras (Goukowsky, p. 120), after whom the Erythraean Sea was thought to have been named (Arrian, *Indica* 27; cf. *Oracta*, *Ooracta*, *Doracta*). Portuguese sources refer to the island as *Queiximi/ Queixome /Queixume* (Tomaschek, p. 48; cf. *Quesomo* in Jean de Thévenot, and the *Kichmichs* of Sir John Chardin [Curzon, II, p. 410]), in which we easily recognize Qeshm. They also mention *Broco/Boroch/Beroho/Brocto* (Tomaschek, p. 48), which scholars have long (e.g., d’Anville, p. 149; Stein) identified with Greek *Oaracta*. (Curzon, II, p. 410, noted a village called “*Brukth/Urukth*” on Qeshm).

The *Aḵbār al-Šin wa’l-Hend* (851 CE) mentions the island of Abarkāwān (see [ABARKĀVĀN](#)) in the eastern Persian Gulf, between Sirāf and Muscat (Sauvaget, p. 7). This is identical to the island of Bani Kāwān, assigned by Abu Eshāq Eṣṭākri to the district of [Ardašir-ḳorra](#) (Eṣṭākri, pp. 106-7), also known to Eṣṭākri, Mas‘udi and Ebn Ḥawqal as Lāft, (Schwarz, p. 82, n. 13). For Yāqut (Schwarz, p. 83) the isles of Kāwān and Lāft (or *Lāfet*) were one and the same;



and Lāft survives as the name of the second largest town, historically, on Qeshm (Curzon, II, p. 411). According to Balāḍori, Abarkāwān/Qeshm was reckoned part of Kermān, rather than Fārs, prior to the Islamic conquest, a point made plausible by the fact that when ‘Oṭmān b. al-‘Aṣ landed there at the beginning of the Islamic conquest, he encountered a margrave of Kermān (Schwarz, p. 83). Later lexicographers explained Abarkāwān as a corruption of *Jazira-ye gāvān*, (cow island); this is a folk etymology, which is reflected in Ṭabari’s story of a commander in Khorasan who accused his soldiers of having ridden only cattle and donkeys on the isle of Banu Kāwān before he had turned them into competent cavalymen (Schwarz, p. 83). Ebn Ḳordāḍbeh identified the island of Banu Kāwān as a station between Kish and Hormuz on the sea-route to India and China and described its inhabitants as belonging to the ‘Ebādi sect (Sprenger, p. 79; Schwarz, p. 83).

In 1301, the ruler of Hormuz, Bahā’-al-Din Ayāz, moved his court and a large portion of his population to Qeshm following a Tartar attack (Piacentini, p. 112; Wilson, p. 104). From this period onward the island was an important dependency of the Kingdom of Hormuz, often providing drinking water to Hormuz itself (Steensgaard, pp. 195, 297). When the king of Hormuz, Qoṭb-al-Din Tahamtan III Firuz Shah, abdicated in favor of his son, Ṣaif-al-Din (1417-36) in 1417, he retired to Qeshm (Piacentini, p. 99). Qeshm’s status as a major Hormuzi mercantile center is shown by the fact that, in late September 1552, the Turkish commander Piri Re’is raided it, seizing “a great quantity of goods, of gold and silver, and of cash ... the richest prize that could be found in all the world,” according to a contemporary account (Özbaran, p. 81; Ökte, p. 157).

In January 1619, Ruy Freire de Andrade left Lisbon for the Persian Gulf with orders to disperse the English, who had established a factory at Jāsk in 1616 (Boxer, p. 58), and to put pressure on the Persians, in part by dislodging the Persian garrison on Qeshm and building a Portuguese fort there (Boxer, p. 71; Slot, p. 107; Steensgaard, p. 312). Two thousand Portuguese soldiers, supported by 1,000 Hormuzi troops, landed on 7 May 1621. They drove off the Persians; and over the next five and a half months, they constructed a strong fort (Boxer, p. 72). Beginning in the winter of 1621/22, however, Emām-qoli Khan of Shiraz for nine months blockaded the Portuguese garrison (but not their flotilla), under the command of Ruy Freire, in their recently constructed fort on Qeshm. His intention was to cut off water and supplies for Hormuz, the real object of the attack (Wilson, p. 144). The timely arrival at Jāsk on 24 December



1621 of an English East India Company squadron, due to collect silk for export, provided Emām-qoli Khan with willing partners to assist in the expulsion of the Portuguese, in return for sole English custody over the castle of Hormuz, among other things (Boxer, p. 74). On 2 February 1622 five English guns were landed; and after fruitless negotiations between Ruy Freire and Edward Monnox, the English bombarded the fort. The garrison surrendered; Ruy Freire was sent off as prisoner in the *Lion* to Surat; and a Persian force was installed on the island (Boxer, pp. 77-78). The Arctic navigator, William Baffin, was killed in this action (Wilson, p. 146).

Turning their attention to Hormuz, the Persians offered the Portuguese commander there Qeshm in return for 500,000 *patacas* and the port of Jolfār on the Arabian coast; but the offer was rejected, and within a few months Hormuz itself was lost to the Persian and English forces (Slot, p. 116). The Persian position on Qeshm, however, was tenuous. During the winter of 1629/30 the island was raided by a large Portuguese force; and Portuguese trade revived, so much so that the Persians agreed to pay tribute to the Portuguese in return for continued use of Qeshm (Slot, p. 134). The death of Shah ‘Abbās, however, followed by the execution of Emām-qoli Khan, put an end to these payments (Boxer, p. 144). Meanwhile, the Dutch were experiencing difficulties negotiating a trade agreement with the Persians, and in 1645 they attacked the Persian garrison on Qeshm (Wilson, p. 164; Slot, p. 151). Although unable to take the fort, the Dutch nevertheless succeeded in pressuring the Shah; and their trading position improved markedly. As late as 1673 however, the Portuguese continued to press their claims for tribute from the Persians for use of Qeshm (Slot, p. 204). Nevertheless, Qeshm would once again fall prey to the Dutch. As their trade in the late 1670s and early 1680s became increasingly unprofitable under existing conditions, the Dutch sent a squadron to Bandar-e ‘Abbās under Casembroot, who in 1683 captured Qeshm and its Persian garrison (Slot, p. 207).

Meanwhile, the expansion of Oman led to war with Persia. Dutch records attest to Omani attacks on Qeshm in 1712 and 1717, when the island was overrun (Slot, pp. 235, 237). Even the Portuguese, assisting the Persians in 1719, could not nullify the burgeoning Omani naval power (Slot, p. 243). A treaty between Oman and Persia stipulated the return of Qeshm to Persian control in return for a berth on the island for use as a naval repair yard (Slot, p. 244).

About this time, Sheikh Rašid, an Arab sheikh based at Bāsīdu in western



Qeshm, began to exert his influence by making Bāsīdu an attractive center for trade and attempting to secure the office of *šahbandar* “governor of the port” in several of the mainland Persian ports (Slot, p. 252). By 1726, however, English traders accused Arab vessels cruising off Qeshm of attacking English shipping; they began boycotting Bāsīdu even as they asserted the right to control all sea trade in the region (Slot, p. 262). The following year, Afghan forces pushed south to Bandar-e ‘Abbās, but Sheikh Rašīd successfully negotiated peace, in return for hefty tribute, with the Afghan *šahbandar* Sayyed ‘Ali (Slot, p. 263). Shortly thereafter, Sheikh Rašīd was imprisoned by Zabardast Khan, the Afghan general, and Bāsīdu was sacked. A sizable payment secured his release in February 1728; and now the English, having quarreled with Sayyed ‘Ali, threatened to abandon Bandar-e ‘Abbās in favor of Bāsīdu (Slot, p. 264). It was the Portuguese, however, who reappeared in 1729, seizing the customs house at Bāsīdu and ransacking Sheikh Rašīd’s belongings, but by the following year the Portuguese were gone. Sheikh Rašīd returned to Bāsīdu, and the English remained in control of Qeshm (Slot, p. 266). Anxious to assist the Afghans at the expense of their Dutch trading rivals, the English willingly landed an Afghan force on Qeshm (Slot, p. 268). Early in 1729 an uprising was staged against the Afghans by the local population, and the English and Dutch failed to come to any agreement over the fate of Qeshm. In the end, Sheikh Šabona, a pro-Afghan Arab living in eastern Qeshm, seized control of the island, decapitated some of the rebels, and sent the heads to Bandar-e ‘Abbās (Slot, p. 271). Afghan defeats in Persia created instability, however; and later in the same year ‘Abd-Allāh b. Mas’ud, *wakil* of Muscat, raided Qeshm (Slot, p. 271). Meanwhile, Sheikh Rašīd of Bāsīdu supported the restoration of Shah Ṭahmāsp II; but when the Afghans were eventually routed, Rašīd found himself blamed by Ṭahmāsp-qoli Khan’s (Nāder Shah) English and Dutch allies for the escape of the Afghan forces to Arabia. The English arrested him, and the Dutch seized his ship; but intervention by Mirzā Taqī, ex-governor of Shiraz and aide to Ṭahmāsp-qoli Khan, effected his release and return to Bāsīdu (Slot, pp. 280-81).

In 1741, as part of his wars on Oman, Nadir Shah order his governor in Bandar-e ‘Abbās to restore the fort on Qeshm (Slot, p. 315); but in 1755, eight years after Nāder Shah’s assassination, his naval commander, Mollā ‘Ali-Šah, supported by Qawāsem Arabs from the other side of the Persian Gulf, seized Qeshm from the Ma’in tribe, who then controlled it (Al-Qasimi, 1986, p. 26). Lāft was taken by the Sheikh of Ras al-Khaimah in 1756 (Slot, p. 25); and Qeshm effectively fell under Qawāsem control, strengthened in 1777 by the



marriage of the Qawāsīm Sheikh Ṣaqr b. Rašīd to the daughter of the Banu Maʿīn chief (Al-Qasimi, 1986, p. 26). In 1793, however, Sayyed Solṭān, the Imam of Muscat, occupied Qeshm and Hormuz (Badger, p. lvi), and struck a deal with the Persians which gave him control over Bandar-e ʿAbbās and its dependencies from Jāsk to Bandar-e Lenga (Oppenheim, p. 343). When the East India Company representative, John Malcolm, arrived in 1800 on a mission to bolster English trade in the region (Al-Rashid, p. 48; Al-Qasimi, 1986, p. 38), he found Qeshm under the control of a local Sheikh named Mollā Ḥosayn, who paid tribute to the Imam of Muscat (cf. Kinneir, p. 14). Malcolm’s report to the Earl of Mornington, dated 26 February 1800, singled out Qeshm as the ideal location for a trading base (Al-Qasimi, 1994, p. 14). Suspicions that the Banu Maʿīn were in league with Muscat’s enemies, the Qawāsem, led to an attack on Qeshm in 1806 by the Omanis, by now staunch allies of the English, and the restoration of the tributary relationship (Al-Qasimi, 1986, pp. 84-85). In spite of a treaty, Mollā Ḥosayn was seized by Omani forces in 1807; and the East India Company’s ship *Alert* sent to take possession of Qeshm. A Qawāsem counter-action led by Sheikh Solṭān b. Ṣaqr, however, succeeded in commandeering the fort on Qeshm and resisting the English assault (Al-Qasimi, 1986, p. 85). A year later John Malcolm entered into fruitless negotiations with Faṭḥ-ʿAlī Shah, seeking control of Qeshm, Henjām, and Khārg for the East India Company. In 1809-10, as a reaction to the seizure of the *Minerva* in 1808 (Al-Qasimi, 1986, pp. 92 ff.), the Bombay Marine sailed to Qeshm in HMS *Chiffonne* on the pretext of expelling the Qawāsem ‘pirates’ (Horsburgh, p. 257). The inhabitants surrendered peacefully, and the island reverted to the Imam of Muscat (Wilson, p. 205). Ten years later Qeshm was the rendezvous point for a joint force, composed of the Bombay Marine, under the command of Major-General Sir William Grant Keir, and Sayyed Saʿīd, the Sultan of Muscat (Wilson, p. 207), that effectively put an end to Arab competition in the Persian Gulf trade. As a result of the General Treaty of Peace signed on 8 January 1820, Bāsīdu, called *Bassadore* in English accounts of the time (e.g., Danvers, p. 404) became the base of operations for the Bombay Marine (renamed the Indian Navy in 1830) in the Persian Gulf (Curzon, II, p. 411; Wilson, p. 208) until 1863 (Tuson, p. 8); and a hospital and other facilities were erected there (Whitelock, p. 178; Lorimer, IIA, p. 267). A detachment of sepoy was stationed at Bāsīdu until 1879 (Curzon, II, p. 412), but by the late 19th century the British presence was reduced to a coal depot supervised by a Native Agent “responsible for the flag” (Lorimer, IIA, p. 267). In 1911/1912 the coaling depot was moved from Bāsīdu to Henjām (Tuson, 1979, p. 9). The population at the time was overwhelmingly Arab and was governed by a local sheikh, who was subordinate to the Persian



authorities (Lorimer, IIB, p. 1558).

The natural resources of Qeshm include salt (the purest in the Persian Gulf [Pilgrim, p. 129]), naphtha, and firewood. In the 1860s Qeshm exported blocks of salt to Muscat for re-export to Calcutta and east Africa; supplied “the whole circuit of the Persian Gulf with firewood”; and was still farmed on behalf of the Sultan of Muscat (Pelly, p. 266). It was no longer a major trading station, however, and went unmentioned in an official Dutch report on Persian Gulf trade in 1886 (Keun de Hoogerwoerd). In 1935 the British coaling station was abandoned at the request of Reza Shah (Kelly, p. 183).

In 1989 the Qeshm Free Area Authority was established with the goal of attracting substantial infrastructure investment to expand industrial, banking and tourist facilities. With a population of around 85,000, Qeshm now has four designated industrial areas, half a dozen large towns, and over 50 villages. Qeshm is located in the midst of two of Iran’s largest natural gas fields.

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