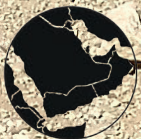


The IASA Bulletin

The latest news and research in the Arabian Peninsula

Issue 31 Autumn 2023



IASA

International Association
for the Study of Arabia

الرابطة الدولية لدراسة الجزيرة العربية

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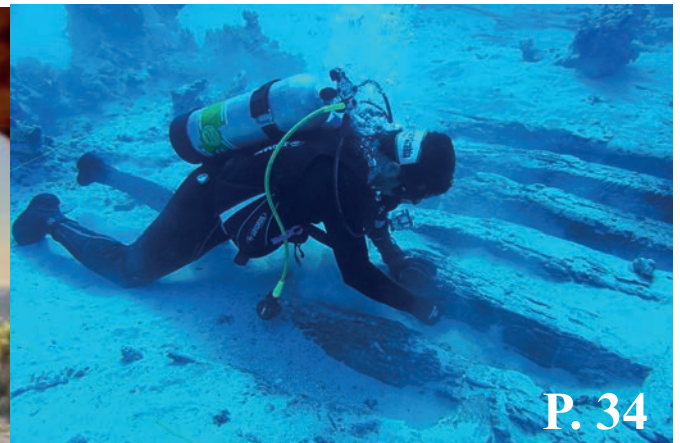
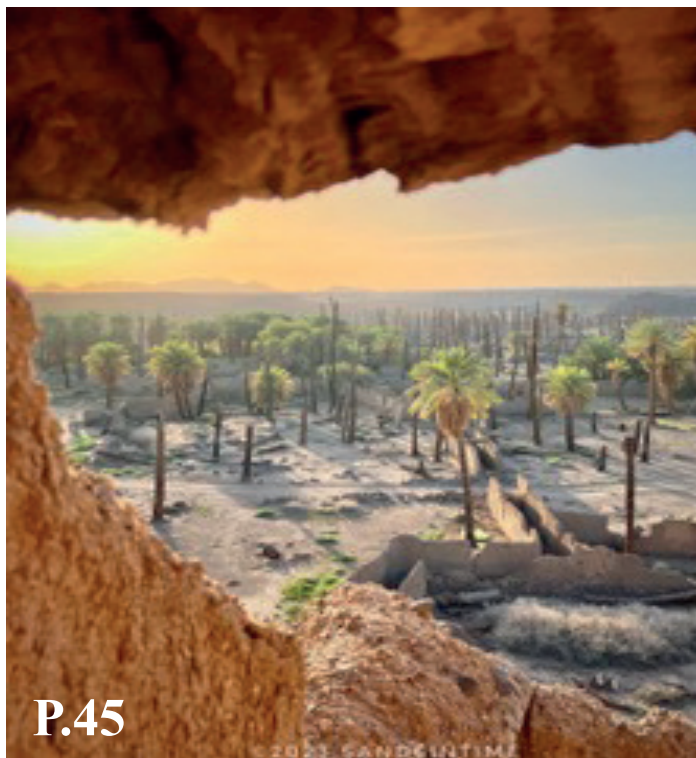
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Cover photo: A careful and informed restoration allows this defensive tower to stand watch over the Shimal Plain - recorded as part of the Ras al-Khaimah Traditional Architecture survey (Photo: D.Connolly/H. Kdolska)



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Thank you to our members for your continued support, and to all of the contributors to this edition of the IASA Bulletin.

modern state it is today. At its core, the book is a detailed examination of the intersection between architecture, environment, and society in the UAE. Ronald Hawker weaves together anecdotal evidence and personal experience with historical accounts, architectural analysis, and sociological insights to provide a comprehensive overview of the factors that have influenced the built environment of the Trucial States, now the UAE. Architecture is viewed as a material expression of social life and this book seeks to chart the factors that created unique regional architectural styles, and how these were transformed by the shift to a hydrocarbon economy in the second half of the 20th century.

The author identifies three key elements that shaped traditional architecture in the region, Islamic principles, tribal structures, and environment, and the book is structured around these elements. Historical developments, from the British subjugation of the region to the development of a modern oil economy, are illustrated through architectural change. The first two chapters of the book cover the impact of Islamic traditions and triable structures on the traditional architecture of the UAE. The preceding eight chapters provide an overview of the traditional architecture of the different regions of the UAE, emphasising how varied environments and subsistence influenced the types of structures people built. The final chapter investigates how the introduction of oil wealth in the second half of the 20th century radically changed architectural styles, construction techniques, and urban planning in the UAE.

Overall, the self-published nature significantly diminishes its academic credibility, lacking peer review and professional editing. The book's potential is marred by inconsistent, low-quality illustrations, further detracting from its overall impact. While the content provides valuable insights into the UAE's architectural heritage, the lack of scholarly rigour and presentation polish limits its effectiveness as a comprehensive academic resource. Despite these drawbacks, the book does manage to offer some redeeming qualities. Its exploration of the UAE's architectural evolution is, in itself, a commendable endeavour. The author delves into the historical and cultural factors that have shaped the architectural landscape, providing valuable insights into the societal changes that have occurred over time. The book also successfully captures the symbiotic relationship between the environment

and architectural development, offering thought-provoking perspectives on sustainability and urban planning in the region. Moreover, the author's passion for the subject matter is evident in the depth of research undertaken. The book is replete with historical anecdotes, architectural analyses, and sociocultural insights that reflect the author's dedication to unravelling the complex tapestry of the UAE's architectural heritage. These insights provide readers with glimpses of the rich architectural history of the region.

By Daniel Eddisford

Seasonal Knowledge and the Almanac Tradition in the Arab Gulf

Palgrave Series in Indian Ocean World Studies

Daniel Martin Varisco

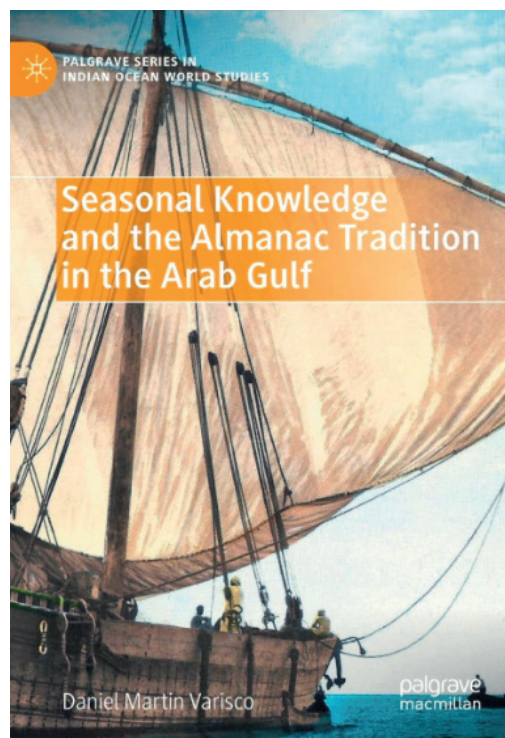
Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022

458 pp. 45 Tables. 14 Bibliographies. Index.

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Navigating the changing weather and challenging environmental conditions was a central concern for the peoples of the Arabian Gulf, especially prior to the oil and gas era. And yet this subject has been largely underexplored by western scholarship. Daniel Varisco's *Seasonal Knowledge and the*

Almanac Tradition in the Arab Gulf, however, goes some way to addressing this, presenting an extensive study of the Gulf peoples' engagement with their natural environment, and their traditional knowledge passed down through the generations and formalised in texts.

As the reader traverses this book, they are introduced to a different way of perceiving time and space, cycles of life and daily activities, through the observation of certain stars, constellations, and markers in the environment. The texts selected and presented by the author meticulously list, describe and calculate the movements of the stars and relate these to the seasonal changing of meteorological phenomena and to human activities. Through these texts, the reader really gets a sense of the extraordinary importance of wind and rain and of hot and cold seasons, for the survival of communities living in the Gulf region but a few generations ago.

Varisco's approach to the topic is that of an historical anthropologist. Viewing intangible heritage as something that is continuously changing over time, he gives particular attention to how past practices have influenced those in the present and illustrates the rich diversity of the peoples who have produced this heritage. The book's analysis centres around two main streams of knowledge: the indigenous knowledge itself, and texts produced by the scholarly elite, which are essentially adaptations of the local knowledge into more formal models.

The book is divided into two parts and fourteen chapters. Part I comprises an historical overview and analysis of data collected from texts and accounts of seasonal knowledge and almanac lore, while Part II presents a select collection of texts on the subject ranging from almanacs to poetry and proverbs. After laying out the premise and the scope of the book in Chapter 1, the author moves on to analysing the traditional knowledge of the stars, which dictated the passage of time and the navigational directions. He explains how this ancient knowledge, originally deriving from foreign and pre-Islamic cultures, was embraced in the Islamic context. Islamic scholars concerned themselves with the arts of astronomy and astrology, specifically in the almanac texts. These texts, which are the main focus of this book, contain reference to a number of astronomical phenomena which provided information on the passage of time and related specific activities to the changing seasons. Some almanacs reflect pre-

Islamic practices and also provided information on astrology, the magical connection between the planets and the constellations and other phenomena.

Traditional knowledge of the stars, discussed in Chapter 2, gives special attention to the zodiac constellations, the moon, and the planets. Their movements in the sky dictated the beginning of a new season and the corresponding activities to be conducted, as well as the maritime routes. Such constellations played a minor role in Arab folk astronomy, which was mainly based on the lunar stations and certain stars. The twenty-eight asterism of the lunar zodiac system would be plotted out over the solar year to create an annual cycle which was equal the 365 days of the year. The author explains that the Pleiades played an important role in the Arabia, as it was the most mentioned of the stations, with Canopus being a major reference point for direction, while Sirius was a star worshipped during the pre-Islamic era.

In Chapter 3, the author discusses almanac lore, explaining how such texts document the seasonal sequence of events according to a star calendar. The calendar systems of the Gulf almanacs, explained in Chapter 4, are mostly organized according to the Islamic Hijri calendar, which is lunar, while other Arabic almanacs are arranged according to the solar calendar and the stars. Here, empirical methods for telling time are also described and extrapolated from ethnographic data. In Chapter 5, traditional seasonal knowledge is presented according to the different regions of the Gulf – in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE and Oman – and how periods of wind and rain, hot and cold, are observed and recorded. Wind, rain, heat and cold have a bearing on fishing, farming, herding and survival, which form the topics discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 6 sets forth the various contents of the almanacs, which provide suggestions concerning the optimal and appropriate time for conducting a wide range of activities such as medical treatment, food, diet, sex, falconry, hunting, insects, plants, religious celebrations, family matters, and numerous other events. In Chapters 7 and 8, Varisco discusses how seasonal knowledge dictated seasonal activities on land and at sea, such as the pastoral cycle and times of cultivation, as well as maritime activities such as nautical navigation routes, pearl diving and fishing.

The final chapter of Part I (Chapter 9) addresses issues relating to the future of almanac lore and

seasonal knowledge in the Gulf. Today, the oral transmission of this intangible heritage and traditional knowledge has largely been lost, whilst the use of the almanacs lives on in new print editions and digital copies found on the web and in specific apps. With the modernisation of society and everyday activities, the almanac knowledge has faded away, as with other features of traditional Gulf heritage, such as pearling, and other practices associated with the seasonal migratory lifestyle of people in the Peninsula. By comparing this traditional knowledge with the contemporary way of life in the Gulf, the author emphasises the impact which rapid, socio-economic changes have had on the region's intangible heritage.

In Part II, Varisco presents some of the major texts concerning seasonal knowledge and provides accompanying English translations of selected excerpts from different almanacs (Chapter 10), as well as the Canopus Calendar (Chapter 11), the Pleiades Conjunction Calendar (Chapter 12), poetry (Chapter 13), and lastly, folk songs and proverbs (Chapter 14).

This book comprises some 450 pages, providing the reader with a comprehensive perspective on indigenous seasonal knowledge systems of the Arab Gulf. With its extensive exploration of the subject and analysis of wide-ranging sources – folk astronomy, ethnographic research, archival and historical records, and comparative research, Varisco's scholarly undertaking should in turn help to stimulate further and much-needed academic research and analysis.

By Chiara Zazzaro



Recorded as part of the Ras al-Khaimah Traditional Architecture survey Dhayah fort holds a special place in the history of the Emirates. (Photo: D.Connolly/H. Kdolska)