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Towns and Maritime Activities

All the towns of the Trucial Coast lie on the seashore and have depended for their existence on the sea rather than the desert. Nevertheless, even now, in spite of all the new building that is going on, they retain a desert flavour, different from those Middle Eastern towns and cities where a large peasant population intervenes between bedouin and urban life and provides the strongest element in urban recruitment. In Eastern Arabia the desert sand runs straight down into the sand of the beaches: the coastal towns are desert towns and ports at the same time. There are towns where bedouin move with ease and confidence – bedouin who in the past played a part in the life of the sea, just as townsmen made sorties with their camels into the desert. Towns have grown up in places where there have been anchorages and some fresh water of however poor a quality. Some of them are sited in positions which afford natural defence against land attack.

The first requirement of permanent settlement has, of course, been fresh water, but it has clearly not been essential that this should be either good in quality or ample in quantity. According to an early report, perhaps near enough to the event to constitute reliable history, the town of Abu Dhabi came into being with the discovery of drinking water there about 1760.¹ There is only enough of this water for domestic uses and in flavour it is as bad as some of the worse bedouin wells. In the 1950s, before any water distillation plant had been set up, sweet water to drink was being sold in the cafés in Abu Dhabi at an anna (roughly, then, a penny) a glass. This drinking water for the cafés and some of the houses was imported from the Persian Coast or from Qatar by launch in oil drums and retained some of the flavour of the containers, but it was still much preferable to the local water. Such elaborate efforts to obtain good water were not unusual in the towns of the Gulf.

¹ P. Lienhardt, *Shaikhdoms of Eastern Arabia* © Ahmed Al-Shahi 2001
In Bahrain, some of the drinking water used to be produced by men diving with water skins to springs on the seabed. And in Kuwait, where richer people, like those in the Trucial Coast, collected rainwater in the wintertime and stored it in underground cisterns for drinking as a luxury in the nights of Ramadan, drinking water was also brought by boat from the higher reaches of the Shatt Al-Arab. As in the case of Abu Dhabi, this meant that the water had to be carried for about a hundred miles. J. H. Stocqueler, a traveller who visited Kuwait in 1831, remarked that Kuwait within the walls yielded nothing and that the water was ‘far from sweet’. He found it difficult to conjecture how such a site came to be chosen for the establishment of four hundred families, which is what the population then amounted to. Nevertheless, Kuwait’s population was to increase more than tenfold during the course of the nineteenth century. No town in the Trucial Coast is quite as barren as was Kuwait, where in the 1950s I saw only one date palm and a few eucalyptus trees. But the date palms one sees at Abu Dhabi, and even Dubai, give a deceptive impression since they suffer from the salinity of the water underground and therefore do not produce well. Substantial water supplies, then, were no condition of urban settlement.

Natural defence against land attack was clearly of importance in the siting of towns, as may be seen from examining their geographical positions. There is no high ground for defence, for the coastal land is almost entirely flat until the mountains come down to the sea beyond Shām, but some natural defence was provided by water. Little peninsulas of sand, and islands so close in to the shore that the intervening stretch of water could be forded or easily swum, nevertheless provided some measure of protection. Shandaqah, the quarter of Dubai where the old houses of the shaikhs are, is at the tip of a sandy peninsula at one side of the Dubai creek and used to be cut off completely by high tides. Dairah, the quarter of Dubai at the other side of the creek, is also a peninsula, as was the now eroded site of the main part of Ras Al-Khaimah. Abu Dhabi is an island so close in to the shore that it was possible, with the simplest techniques, to join it to the mainland by means of a causeway. But even very shallow water, or simple mud, is a defence against men mounted on camels, for the form of the camel’s foot that makes it so sure-footed in dry sand makes the animal slip or stick in wet sand and especially in mud. When approaching slippery places, camel riders have to dismount and lead their animals, and in the salt marshes which are common in the coastal area one sees the bones of many camels that have died there after slipping and breaking their legs.