

AL HABTOOR RESEARCH CENTRE

The Arabness of Hormuz Strait

The Name, the Land, and the People

*A Historical, Toponymic, and Demographic Analysis of Sovereignty
and the Continuity of Arab Presence on Both Shores, from Antiquity to the Present*

For Distribution

Prepared by the Al Habtoor Research Centre

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Executive Summary

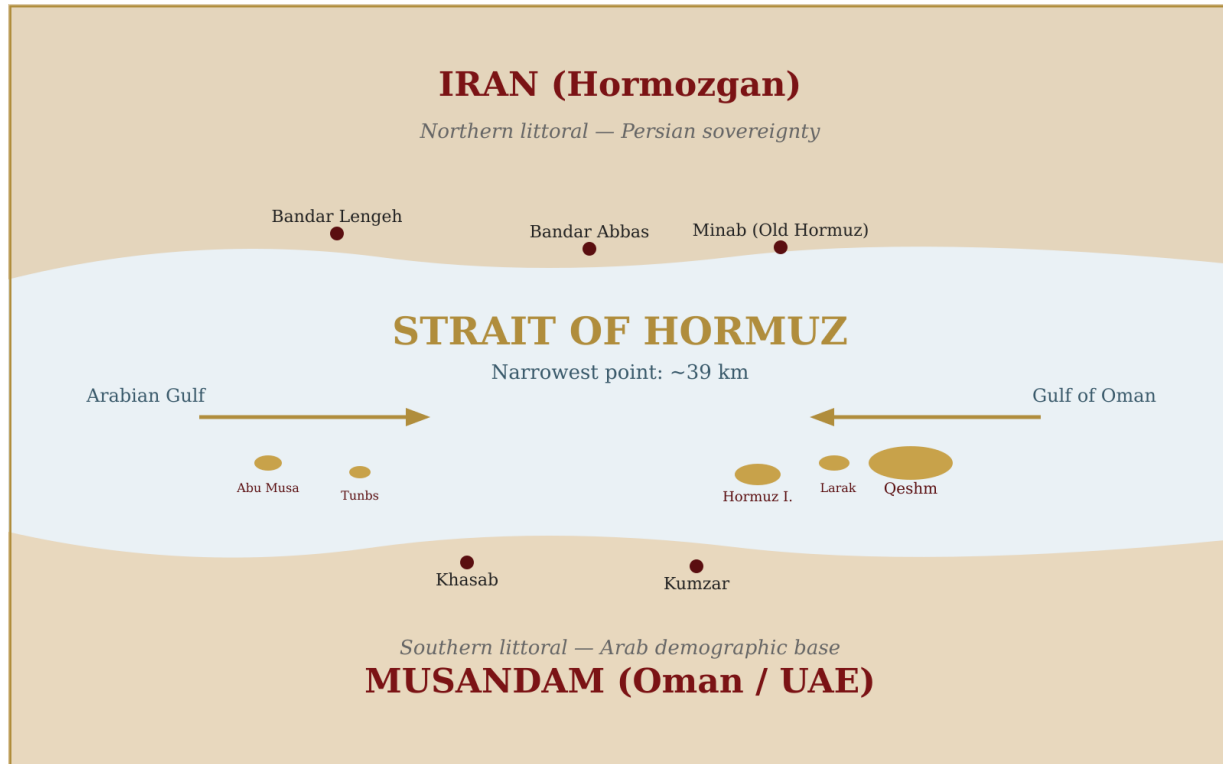
The Strait of Hormuz is, in the modern imagination, an energy chokepoint through which roughly a fifth of global petroleum and a comparable share of liquefied natural gas transit. Yet this narrow waterway carries a far older and more contested significance, one bearing directly on questions of identity, sovereignty, and historical legitimacy in the Arabian Gulf.¹ This study addresses three questions and resolves each on the basis of the documentary and archaeological record.

First, it traces the origin of the name “Hormuz”, surveying the principal etymological theories, subjecting each to critical scrutiny, and arriving at a reasoned synthesis. **Second**, it reconstructs the history of the Arab population on both shores of the Strait, marshalling demographic and documentary evidence to show that the enduring human substrate of the region was Arab throughout recorded history, while Persian authority was characteristically a governing superstructure rather than a settled population. **Third**, it situates the Battle of Chains and the defeat of the Sasanian commander Hormuz in its correct chronological place within that continuum and corrects the popular but mistaken belief that the Strait was named after him.

The central finding is that the Strait of Hormuz, far from being a frontier dividing an Arab world from a Persian one, functioned for five millennia as a *connective maritime highway* whose permanent population was overwhelmingly Arab in character, even during the long intervals in which a Persian imperial umbrella claimed nominal sovereignty over its northern littoral.

¹Throughout this paper the body of water west of the Strait is termed the Arabian Gulf, where cited works use “Persian Gulf,” titles are reproduced as published.

Figure 1. The Strait of Hormuz and its two littorals. The northern (Iranian) shore was the locus of intermittent Persian sovereignty; the southern (Musandam) shore and the wider Gulf coast formed a continuous Arab demographic base. Islands shown include the three (Abu Musa and the Tunbs) under occupation since 1971.



1. Introduction

The historiography of the Gulf has too often been written backward, projecting the rigid territorial nationalism of the twentieth century onto a pre-modern world that did not know it. The waters between the Arabian Peninsula and the Iranian plateau have been read as a border, and the peoples on either side assigned to mutually exclusive national categories. The premise of this paper is that such a reading distorts the evidence. The Gulf was, for most of its history, less a barrier than a thoroughfare, and the relationship between its Arab and Persian elements is best understood not as a contest between two populations but as the superimposition of a fluctuating imperial administration upon a stable demographic base.

The paper proceeds in three parts, in strict chronological order so that each episode appears in its true historical place. The method is deliberately conservative: claims are anchored wherever possible in primary sources — Arrian's *Indikê* preserving Nearchus, the Sasanian inscriptions, the Arabic chronicles of al-Tabari, the travel accounts of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, and the Portuguese records redacted by Pedro Teixeira — and in the modern peer-reviewed scholarship that interprets them. Popular and tertiary sources have been set aside in favour of the standard reference literature of the field, above all the *Encyclopædia Iranica* and the monographic studies cited throughout.

Three caveats are entered at the outset. Etymological judgments in a region of such deep linguistic stratification can rarely be certain; the paper therefore argues for the most probable reconstruction rather than asserting a single definitive origin. Demographic claims about antiquity rest on a combination of

textual report and a still-incomplete archaeological record, and are framed accordingly. And questions of historical sovereignty are presented as the weighing of evidence, not as legal conclusions, which lie beyond the scope of a historical study.

1.1 A Note on Sources and Historiography

The evidence for the Strait's history is uneven across periods, and the report weights its sources accordingly. For classical antiquity, the indispensable witness is Arrian's *Indikê*, which preserves the first-hand report of Nearchus; it is read here through the critical apparatus of the *Encyclopædia Iranica*, whose entries on Hormuz, on the Sasanians and Arabia, and on the peoples of pre-Islamic Iran represent the consensus of the field. For the Sasanian period, the report relies on the work of Touraj Daryaee on late-antique geography and on the archaeological reassessments of Derek Kennet and D. T. Potts, which have substantially revised older assumptions about the depth of Persian settlement on the Arabian coast. For the mediaeval kingdom, the foundational studies remain those of Jean Aubin, supplemented by the Portuguese chronicle of Pedro Teixeira. For the early modern and modern Gulf, the archival reconstructions of Willem Floor are without rival, and the linguistic evidence is drawn from the fieldwork of Erik Anonby and Christina van der Wal Anonby on Kumzari. Tertiary and crowd-sourced encyclopaedias have been deliberately excluded.

This source base matters to the argument. The thesis advanced here — that the Arab presence was demographic and continuous while the Persian presence was administrative and intermittent — is not a polemical assertion but a reading that the standard scholarship itself supports: Kennet's material evidence for Sasanian-era decline, Daryaee's account of Mazun as a trade-orientated imperial outpost, Floor's documentation of Arab tribal governance over Iranian ports, and Anonby's analysis of Kumzari as a genuinely mixed language all point in the same direction.

2. The Origin of the Name “Hormuz”

2.1 The Toponymic Question

The origin of the name “Hormuz” — rendered across the centuries as Hormoz, Ormus, Ormuz, or, in the earliest Greek, Harmozeia — has been debated by historical linguists for more than a century. Toponymy frequently preserves deep layers of linguistic evolution, religious change, and ecological adaptation, and Hormuz is a textbook case. What is not in dispute is the antiquity of the name and its remarkable mobility: it was applied first to a mainland district and port, then transferred to an offshore island, and finally to the waterway. Any adequate account must explain both the etymological root and this geographic migration. As the *Encyclopædia Iranica* notes, the settlement of Harmozia “must have existed by the late Achaemenid period,” and there is no warrant for the older view that Nearchus founded it.²

Three principal theories command attention: the theophoric theory, deriving the name from Ahura Mazda, the supreme deity of Zoroastrianism; the topographical-botanical theory, positing an endogenous origin in the dialectal phrase Hur-Mogh, “the waterway of the date palm”; and the Hellenistic theory, tracing the root to the Greek hormos, “a cove or safe anchorage.” Each is examined below before a synthesis is offered.

²D. T. Potts, “HORMUZ i. Pre-Islamic Period,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*. The article reviews the classical attestations (Arrian, Ptolemy, Pliny, Mela) and the surveys of Williamson and Prickett identifying Iron Age sites in the Minab region.

2.2 The Earliest Attestation: Nearchus and Harmozeia

The foundation for the entire debate is a single decisive datum. In 325 BCE the admiral Nearchus, commanding the returning fleet of Alexander the Great, sailed up the coast from the Indus and anchored at the mouth of the river the Greeks called the Anamis — the modern Minab — in a fertile district the local population already called Harmozeia. The account is preserved by Arrian, drawing directly on the now-lost *Indikê* of Nearchus, who describes a kindly and fruitful land producing every crop save the olive.³

The significance is hard to overstate. The Greeks did not coin the name; they recorded one in existing use, Hellenising it with the standard geographic suffix '-eia'. Later classical geographers corroborate the record. Ptolemy in the second century CE notes the urban settlement as Harmouza and the nearby cape as the Harmozon promontory — the latter also attested by Eratosthenes (via Strabo) and Ammianus Marcellinus — while Pliny and Mela record the river under the variants Ananis and Sandis.⁴ The toponym was therefore firmly established in local usage during the Achaemenid era — nearly a millennium before the events with which it is sometimes confused and centuries before the Sasanian dynasty that several theories invoke.

Table 1. Classical attestations of the toponym and its geographic referents.

Author / source	Rendering	Date	Feature described
Nearchus, via Arrian	Harmozeia	325 BCE	Fertile coastal district
Eratosthenes, via Strabo	Harmozon	3rd c. BCE	Coastal promontory
Pliny the Elder	Ananis	c. 77 CE	River (variant)
Claudius Ptolemy	Harmouza polis	c. 150 CE	Urban settlement
Ammianus Marcellinus	Harmozon	4th c. CE	Promontory / cape

2.3 Theory One: The Theophoric Origin (Ahura Mazda)

The most academically robust theory holds that Hormuz is a theophoric toponym derived from Ahura Mazda, the supreme creator god of Zoroastrianism. The *Encyclopædia Iranica* sets out the documented phonological sequence: the Avestan *Ahura Mazdā* yields the Old Persian *Auramazdā* of the Achaemenid inscriptions, which contracts in Middle Persian to *Ōhrmazd*, and settles finally into the New Persian *Hormoz*.⁵ Each stage is attested in Zoroastrian texts, Sasanian coinage, and monumental rock reliefs such as the inscription of Shapur I at the Ka'ba-ye Zartosht.

Several lines of contextual evidence reinforce the reading. The Middle Persian *Ōhrmazd* was borne by five Sasanian monarchs, from Hormizd I to Hormizd V, the royal name being identical to that of the deity.⁶ In the Zoroastrian calendar the first and most auspicious day of every month was itself named Hormoz, for

³Arrian, *Indica* 32–33, trans. E. Iliff Robson (Loeb, 1933). The Anamis is identified with the Minab by most scholars; see Potts, “HORMUZ i,” and the discussion in IRAN v. Peoples of Iran, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, which places Carmania within the “date palm zone” extending from Babylonia through Persia (citing Strabo 16.1.5).

⁴Potts, “HORMUZ i. Pre-Islamic Period,” citing Strabo, *Geog.* 16.3.2; Ptolemy 6.8; Ammianus Marcellinus 23.6; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 6.107; Mela 3.75.

⁵M. Boyce, “AHURA MAZDĀ,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. I, fasc. 7, pp. 684–687: “Old Persian Ahuramazda, Parth. Aramazd, Pahl. Ohrmazd/Hormizd, NPers. Ormazd.” See also “OHRMAZD,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

⁶On the regnal name as the Middle Persian form of the Avestan Ahura Mazda, see the prosopographical entries in the *Encyclopædia Iranica* and M. R. Shayegan, *Aspects of History and Epic in Ancient Iran* (2012).

the creator god. Most telling is the regional toponym *Mughistan*, by which the mainland country of Hormuz was long known: in classical Persian *mugh* denotes a Zoroastrian priest, a magus, so that Mughistan can be read as “the land of the Zoroastrians.” That the surrounding region was defined by reference to the Zoroastrian priesthood lends strong circumstantial support to the proposition that its principal city was named for the supreme Zoroastrian god.

The Zoroastrian character of the region in late antiquity is independently documented. The mainland of Old Hormuz served, according to the Parsi textual tradition preserved in the *Qissa-i Sanjan*, as a refuge and staging-point for Zoroastrian communities before their migration by sea to Gujarat in the early Islamic centuries — the ancestors of the modern Parsi community of India.⁷ The theophoric root, moreover, travelled far along the maritime trade routes the Strait commanded: the name in the form Hormizd appears among the Syriac-speaking Christians of the Sasanian world and is preserved to this day in the given name *Hormis* among the older generation of Syrian Christians of the Malabar coast — a linguistic fossil of the Gulf’s reach into the Indian Ocean. Taken together, the calendar, the royal onomastics, the regional name Mughistan, and the documented Zoroastrian demography make the theophoric derivation the most strongly supported of the three theories.

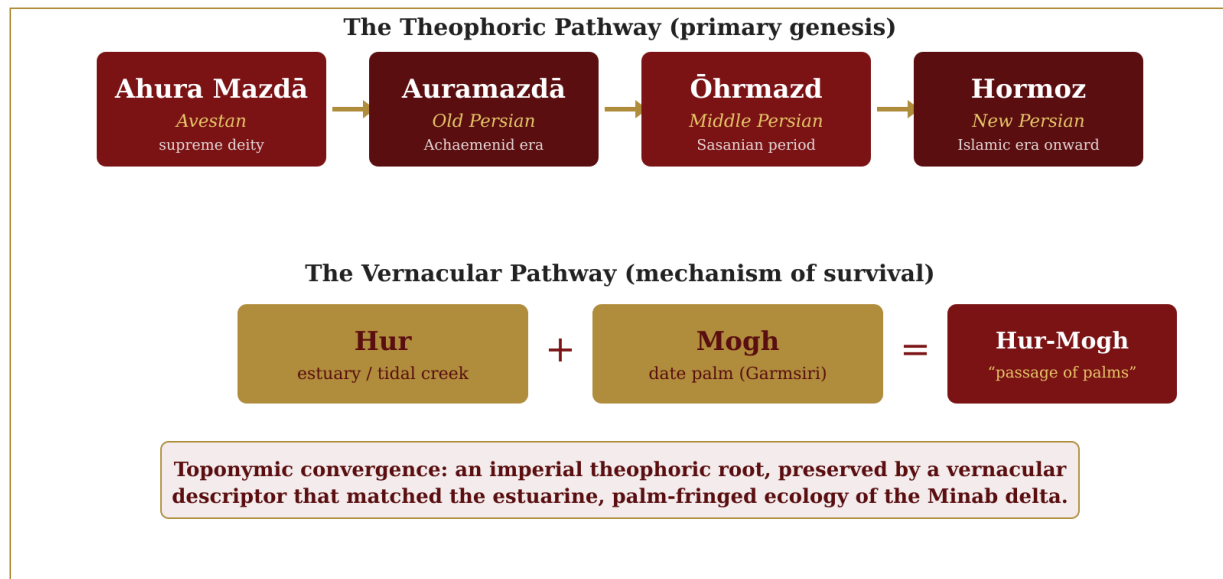


Figure 2. The two pathways of the name. The theophoric chain (top) supplies the imperial genesis of the root; the vernacular Hur-Mogh compound (bottom) supplies the mechanism by which the name survived phonetic erosion and religious change.

2.4 Theory Two: The Topographical-Botanical Origin (Hur-Mogh)

A resilient alternative arises from the micro-geography and dialects of the southern Iranian coast. On this account the name is a contraction of the descriptive phrase Hur-Mogh, in which hur (also khur, khor) denotes a tidal estuary, creek, or narrow navigable waterway, and mogh denotes the date palm in the Garmsiri dialects of Hormozgan. The compound thus reads “the passage of the palm groves”. The reading is striking for its topographical accuracy: the mediaeval geographers record that Old Hormuz stood not on the open sea but on the banks of a navigable creek connecting to the Minab river, and the Encyclopædia

⁷On the *Qissa-i Sanjan* and the Zoroastrian migration to Gujarat via the Hormuz coast, see A. Williams, *The Zoroastrian Myth of Migration from Iran and Settlement in the Indian Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

Iranica notes that the remnants of the old port still lie on such a creek, now silted, some ten kilometres south-west of Minab.⁸

The reading is grounded in ecology as much as in linguistics. Carmania — the classical name for the region adjoining the Strait — lay squarely within the “date palm zone” that Strabo and Arrian describe as extending from Babylonia through Persia, and the Encyclopædia Iranica entry on the date palm records the dense cultivation of the species along this coast.⁹ Notably, the same ambiguity attaches to Mughistan: in the local Garmsiri dialect, the element “mogh” can equally mean “date palm”, so that the regional name may be read as “the region of date palms” rather than “the land of the Magi”. Indeed, the 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica, reflecting an older scholarly tradition, preferred precisely this derivation, connecting the name to khurma, “a date”.

2.5 Theory Three: The Hellenistic Origin (Hormos)

A third and considerably weaker proposal derives the name from the Greek *hormos*, “a cove or safe anchorage” — precisely what Nearchus sought for his battered fleet. Proponents point to the Hellenistic practice of founding ports with such names, most famously Myos Hormos on the Egyptian Red Sea coast, and to the substantial Greek presence in the Gulf after Alexander.

The theory is nonetheless rejected by the standard scholarship as a “false friend” — a coincidental resemblance between unrelated words. The decisive objection lies within the Greek text itself: Arrian, following Nearchus, states that the fleet anchored in a district *already called* Harmozeia, and the *Encyclopædia Iranica* is explicit that “nothing suggests that the settlement itself was first founded by Nearchus.” The Greeks recorded and adapted an existing indigenous name; the resemblance to *hormos* was likely perceived as an auspicious coincidence, but it was not the source of the toponym.

2.6 Adjudication: Toponymic Convergence

Weighed against the evidence, the three theories are not of equal standing, nor are the two stronger ones simply mutually exclusive. From the standpoint of historical linguistics, the theophoric derivation from Ahura Mazda holds the firmer claim to primacy: the root demonstrably predates the phonetic decay required to produce the modern word, the imperial practice of theophoric naming is well documented, and the surrounding region was defined by reference to Zoroastrian religion. The Hellenistic *hormos* theory is best discarded as coincidence.

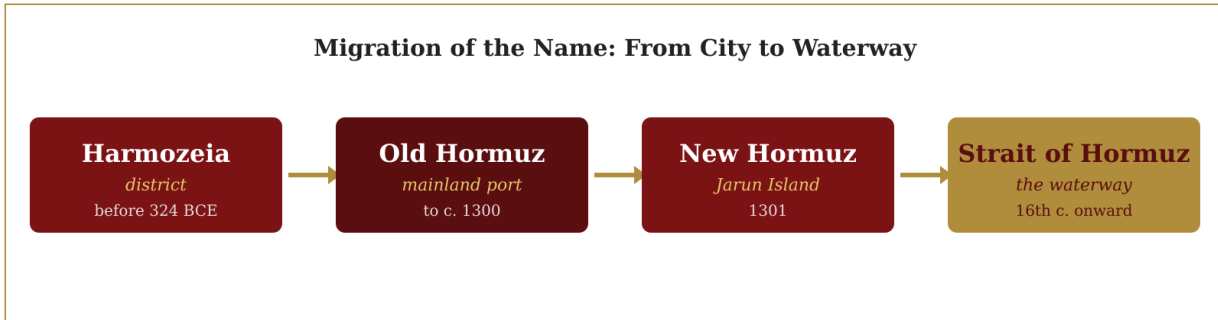
The most defensible position is therefore one of toponymic convergence. The original mainland settlement was in all likelihood named in honour of Ahura Mazda, the form the Greeks recorded as Harmozeia in 325 BCE. As the polysyllabic Auramazdā eroded phonetically over the following centuries, and as the religious resonance of the name faded after the Islamic conquests, the surviving toponym was reinterpreted by local fishermen and date-farmers as the wholly familiar Hur-Mogh, which precisely described their estuarine, palm-fringed environment. Ahura Mazda thus supplies the imperial genesis of the name; Hur-Mogh

⁸J. Aubin and others, “HORMUZ ii. Islamic Period,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*; the article locates the remnants of Old Hormuz on a partially silted creek communicating with the Minab river.

⁹“IRAN v. Peoples of Iran (2),” and “DATE PALM,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*. Arrian (Ind. 38.1) records of Carmania that the people “live like Persians,” situating the region ecologically and culturally within the date-palm belt.

supplies the vernacular mechanism of its survival. Both, in this sense, are correct — sequentially and functionally so.

Figure 3. The geographic migration of the name across two millennia, from an Achaemenid-era district to the modern waterway.



2.7 The Migration of the Name Across the Landscape

The transfer of the name from land to water can be reconstructed in detail. The mainland port — Old Hormuz, near Minab — flourished through the early Islamic centuries as the chief outlet for the inland provinces of Kerman and Sistan. From around 1060 it became the seat of a dynasty of southern Arab (Omani) origin, whose history is preserved through the chronicle of King Turan Shah, redacted by the Portuguese traveller Pedro Teixeira.¹⁰ Around 1300, under sustained Mongol (Chaghatay) raiding, the ruler Baha al-Din Ayaz evacuated the entire population to the offshore island of Jarun — the Organa of the Greeks — which he purchased from the rulers of Fars. The island took the prestigious name of the abandoned mainland city, becoming New Hormuz, and the strait it commanded came, by the sixteenth century and the arrival of European cartography, to bear the same name.

Table 2. The geographic migration of the name, from city to waterway.

Era	Entity bearing the name	Context
Before 324 BCE	Harmozeia (district)	Fertile coastal district at the mouth of the Anamis (Minab)
10th–13th c. CE	Old Hormuz (Naband/Minab)	Prosperous mainland port linking India, Persia, and Arabia
1301 CE	New Hormuz (Jarun Island)	Capital relocated offshore to escape Mongol raids
16th c. CE onward	Strait of Hormuz	Waterway named for the island that monopolised its traffic

¹⁰P. Teixeira, *The Travels of Pedro Teixeira; with his 'Kings of Harmuz,'* trans. W. F. Sinclair and D. Ferguson (Hakluyt Society, 1902). Teixeira translated the lost chronicle of Turan Shah during his residence at Hormuz, 1593–1597.

3. The Arabs on Both Shores, from Antiquity to the Present

3.1 The Gulf as a Connective Highway

The Arabian Gulf is conventionally imagined as a rigid border between the Arabian Peninsula and the Iranian plateau. The historical reality is closer to the reverse: for millennia the Gulf functioned as connective tissue — a porous maritime highway across which migration, trade, intermarriage, and political alliance flowed continuously. The demographic landscapes of the two shores were never sealed from one another. The analytical key to the whole of this history is a distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of presence. The Arab presence was popular and demographic: a rooted human substrate of seafaring tribes, pearl-divers, and date-cultivators. The Persian presence, where it existed, was administrative and military: an imperial superstructure imposed from above, robust when the central authority was strong and absent when it was not.

3.2 The Deep Antiquity of Gulf Exchange

Long before any Persian or Arab polity was documented by name, the Strait was already a working artery of inter-regional exchange. The archaeological record of the third millennium BCE places it at the centre of the Bronze Age trade that linked Mesopotamia to the Indus. Cuneiform sources name three trading partners reached by sea — Dilmun (Bahrain and the eastern Arabian coast), Magan (Oman and the lower Gulf), and Meluhha (the Indus) — and the copper of Magan, ferried across the channel, supplied the metalworking industries of Sumer.¹¹ The point of recalling this depth is not antiquarian. It establishes that the human geography of the Strait — a populated, productive Arabian coast trading across the water with the lands to the north and east — was already in place two millennia before the Sasanian province of Mazun and that the later imperial administrations were latecomers to a pattern of settlement and exchange they did not create.

3.3 The Pre-Islamic Foundation: The Azd Migration

The Arab demographic foundation of the southern shore was laid in deep antiquity. Following the decline of the irrigation systems of South Arabia — the event remembered in tradition as the bursting of the Marib dam — the Azd tribal confederation, led by Malik bin Fahm, migrated northward at the close of the first or the opening of the second century CE and settled the highlands and interior of Oman.¹² This was no transient incursion but a permanent settlement that the later Sasanian administration found impossible to dislodge. Recognising the futility of eradicating an entrenched mountain population, the Sasanian governors negotiated: they granted the head of the Azd confederation the administrative title of Julanda and delegated to him the collection of taxes and the management of the interior, retaining for themselves only the strategic coastal ports.

The arrangement is documented in the scholarly literature on late-antique Oman. As one study of Sasanian imperialism in the region puts it, the Persians directly controlled “the full Persian territory of Mazūn,” while

¹¹On Dilmun, Magan, and the Bronze Age copper trade, see D. T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, vol. I (Oxford, 1990), and the syntheses in Potter (ed.), *The Persian Gulf in History*.

¹²On the Azd migration and its dating see J. C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (Cambridge, 1987), and the discussion in “ARABIA ii. The Sasanians and Arabia,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

“through a Julandā appointed from the ... Azd clan” they directed affairs in the semi-autonomous interior.¹³ The template thus established — Arabs holding the land and the population, Persians holding the coastal garrisons and the apparatus of taxation — would recur, with remarkable consistency, for the next thousand years.

3.4 The Sasanian Province of Mazun: Administration Without Settlement

In approximately 240 CE, Ardashir I, founder of the Sasanian dynasty, conquered Eastern Arabia and organised it as the imperial province of Mazun, encompassing the northern half of modern Oman, the territory of the United Arab Emirates, and the islands of the lower Gulf.¹⁴ The province served as an outpost for the Sasanian effort to dominate Indian Ocean trade and to project power toward the wealthy regions of Yemen and the Hadramaut.

The administrative architecture of Mazun is revealing. It rested on a network of fortified coastal centres — Suhar served as the principal headquarters — governed through a Persian hierarchy of margraves (*marzbān*), heavy cavalry (*aswārān*), and lesser officials. Crucially, this was an administration of garrisons and tax-collection, not of demographic transformation. The interior remained Arab; the Persians governed it, when they could, through Arab proxies such as the Lakhmid kings of al-Hira, whom they appointed precisely because they could not manage the Arab population directly.¹⁵

It is important to note that the archaeological record does not support a picture of Persian demographic flourishing on the Arabian coast. In a careful review of the material evidence, the archaeologist Derek Kennet has argued that the Sasanian period in eastern Arabia shows, if anything, signs of economic decline and local stagnation relative to the Parthian and early Islamic periods — a finding difficult to reconcile with any notion of dense Persian settlement and consistent instead with a thin governing and garrisoning presence over an Arab population.¹⁶

This reading is reinforced by what is known of Sasanian aims in the Gulf, which were commercial and strategic rather than colonial. Daryaee has shown that the Sasanian interest in the Gulf was bound up with the control of the lucrative Indian Ocean trade in late antiquity — the empire sought to dominate the sea lanes and the entrepôts that fed them, not to populate the Arabian shore.¹⁷ The province of Mazun is best understood in this light: as a forward position for the projection of naval and commercial power toward India and Yemen, garrisoned and taxed but not settled. The distinction matters, because an empire that wants trade routes needs ports and fleets; an empire that wants land needs colonists. The Sasanians, on the

¹³“Oman and late Sasanian imperialism,” White Rose Research Online (University of Leeds eprint), summarising J. C. Wilkinson’s reconstruction of the dual administrative structure; cf. D. T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, vol. II (Oxford, 1990), pp. 336–337.

¹⁴T. Daryaee, “The Persian Gulf in Late Antiquity: The Sasanian Era (200–700 C.E.),” in L. Potter (ed.), *The Persian Gulf in History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 57–70; and Daryaee, *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2002), which lists Mazun among the provinces of the empire.

¹⁵On the Lakhmids as the indispensable Arab buffer of the Sasanian frontier, see C. E. Bosworth, “Iran and the Arabs before Islam,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3(1) (1983), pp. 593–612.

¹⁶D. Kennet, “The decline of eastern Arabia in the Sasanian period,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 18 (2007), pp. 86–122; and Kennet, “Transformations in late Sasanian and Early Islamic Eastern Arabia: the evidence from Kush,” in J. Schiettecatte and C. Robin (eds.), *L’Arabie à la veille de l’Islam* (Paris, 2009).

¹⁷T. Daryaee, “The Persian Gulf Trade in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of World History* 14, no. 1 (2003), pp. 1–16; the maritime dimension is also treated by D. Whitehouse and A. Williamson, “Sasanian Maritime Trade,” *Iran* 11 (1973), pp. 29–49.

evidence, pursued the former — and left the demographic character of the Arabian coast essentially untouched.

3.5 Shapur II and the Inverse Proof of Arab Demography

The single most striking demonstration that the Gulf littoral was Arab by nature comes from the campaigns of Shapur II in the fourth century CE. When Arab tribes raided the Sasanian heartland during the king's minority — striking, according to the sources, the province of Pars, the district of Ardaxšīr-xwarrah, and the regions of Meshan and Mazun — Shapur II responded on reaching his majority with a campaign of such severity that it earned him the epithet *Dhū al-Aktāf*, “he who pierces shoulders”.¹⁸

But the most consequential element of his response was not slaughter; it was a deliberate, state-sponsored policy of forced demographic engineering. Shapur II deported entire Arab tribes across the Gulf and resettled them within Sasanian territory, where they would serve as agricultural labour and as buffer populations. The logic of this policy carries an inescapable implication. The Sasanian state had to transport Arab populations onto the northern and interior lands precisely because those lands required populating, and because the Arabs were the available human material. Far from indicating a Persian demographic presence on the shores, the deportations indicate the opposite: the Persians were a governing stratum redistributing an Arab population to suit imperial needs.

The Arabs subsequently found on the northern shore of the Gulf were, in large measure, the descendants of these forcibly relocated tribes — placed there by the Persian state itself. The construction of a long defensive barrier near al-Hira, the *Khandaq Sābūr* or “Wall of the Arabs”, to block further incursions completes the picture: it was the Persians who fortified themselves against the Arabs, not the reverse.

The scholarly assessment of these events has evolved in instructive ways. Nöldeke's foundational nineteenth-century study read the Arabic and Middle Persian sources as recording a genuine, large-scale Sasanian intervention; later scholarship, while questioning the more epic embellishments of the tradition, has accepted its essential historicity. Piacentini, in her study of the Sasanian hold on the Gulf, treats Ardashir's and Shapur's campaigns as real assertions of imperial power over a fundamentally Arab periphery, undertaken precisely because that periphery was both valuable and not natively Persian.¹⁹ The convergence of the textual tradition and the archaeological record is therefore mutually reinforcing: the sources describe an empire intervening forcibly in an Arab land, and the material evidence shows no Persian demographic substitution in its wake. Both point to the same conclusion the deportations themselves imply — that the Gulf littoral was Arab by nature and Persian only by administration.

¹⁸Th. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (Leiden, 1879), remains the foundational study; Nöldeke argued the epithet originally connoted Sasanian strength and was later literalised in Arabic tradition. See also “ŠĀPUR II,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

¹⁹V. Piacentini, “Ardashīr i Pāpakān and the Wars against the Arabs: Working Hypothesis on the Sasanian Hold of the Gulf,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 15 (1985), pp. 57–77; and Piacentini, “La presa di potere sassanide sul Golfo Persico tra leggenda e realtà,” *Clio* 30 (1984).

Table 3. The forced deportations of Shapur II (4th century CE), after the Arabic and Middle Persian traditions.

Arab tribe	Resettlement destination	Strategic purpose
Banu Taghlib	Bahrain and Al-Khatt	Fracture tribal cohesion
Banu Abd al-Qays; Banu Tamim	Hajar (interior)	Break maritime power
Banu Bakr bin Wa'il	Kirman (deep interior)	Provide agricultural labour
Banu Hanzalah	Near Hormizd-Ardashir	Frontier buffer population

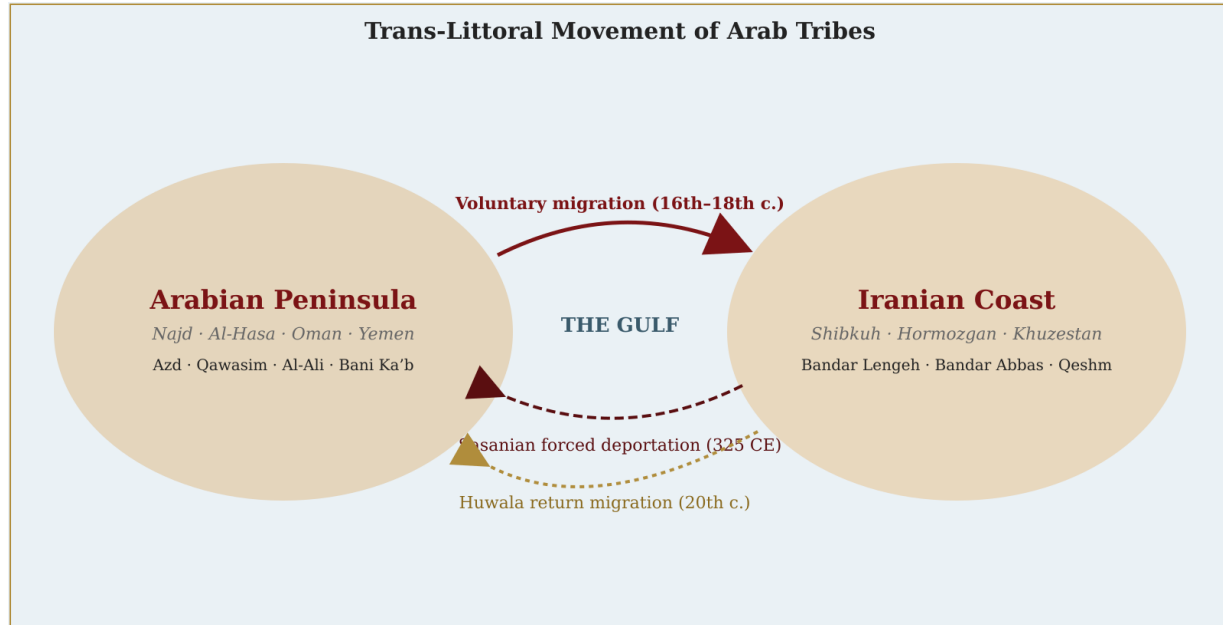


Figure 4. Trans-littoral movement of Arab tribes across the Gulf: voluntary commercial migration (16th–18th centuries), Sasanian forced deportation (4th century), and the twentieth-century return migration of the Huwala.

3.6 The Islamic Conquests: The Arabs Expel the Persians

When the Sasanian order collapsed under the Islamic conquests of the seventh century, the political structure of the Gulf did not so much change hands as revert to type. In Oman, the Arab Azd — who had embraced Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet — mobilised under the sons of the Julanda, besieged the Persian governor and the garrison at Suhar, and forced their surrender.²⁰ The point bears emphasis: the Arabs did not arrive in the region from elsewhere. They were already its population, and it was they who expelled the Persian garrisons. What fell in the conquests was the Persian administrative and military apparatus, not a Persian population, for there was no substantial Persian population on the southern shore to displace.

A comparable episode unfolded in Bahrain, where a Zoroastrian insurrection — led by an ethnic Persian and supported by those who refused to pay tax to the new Islamic state — was besieged and suppressed. The resistance to the new order came from the Persian administrative and Zoroastrian element, not from the Arab inhabitants, who formed the vanguard of the conquering armies. The conversion of the region's

²⁰On the conquest of Oman and the expulsion of the Sasanian garrison, see the account of the Battle of Dibba in the Arabic tradition, and F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981).

Arab governors, recorded in the diplomatic correspondence of the late 620s, transferred the territory peacefully from Sasanian vassalage to the nascent Islamic state, confirming that the underlying allegiance of the population had never been Persian.

The pattern repeats in the wider conquest narrative. At Dibba, on the Musandam coast, one of the largest engagements of the *Ridda* (apostasy) wars was fought — an internal Arab struggle over allegiance to the new state, not a contest between Arabs and Persians, which itself presupposes an overwhelmingly Arab population on the southern shore. Donner’s analysis of the early conquests emphasises that the Gulf coast of Arabia was incorporated through the submission and mobilisation of its existing Arab tribal leadership rather than through demographic replacement.²¹ The contrast with the northern, Iranian heartland — where the conquest did entail the gradual displacement of a Zoroastrian Persian ruling order — is precisely the contrast this report draws between an Arab south and a Persian-administered north.

3.7 The Battle of Chains in Its Proper Place (633 CE)

It is at this precise chronological juncture — after the unification of the Arabian Peninsula under Islam and the expulsion of the Sasanian garrisons, and immediately before the conquest of Iraq — that the Battle of Chains belongs. In April 633 CE the Caliph Abu Bakr dispatched Khalid ibn al-Walid toward the Sasanian frontier. Guarding the approaches to the vital port of Uballa was the Sasanian Marzban of Dast-i-Maysan, a commander named Hormuz, whose elite status was signalled by a ceremonial cap valued at one hundred thousand dirhams, a distinction reserved for princes and the highest officers.

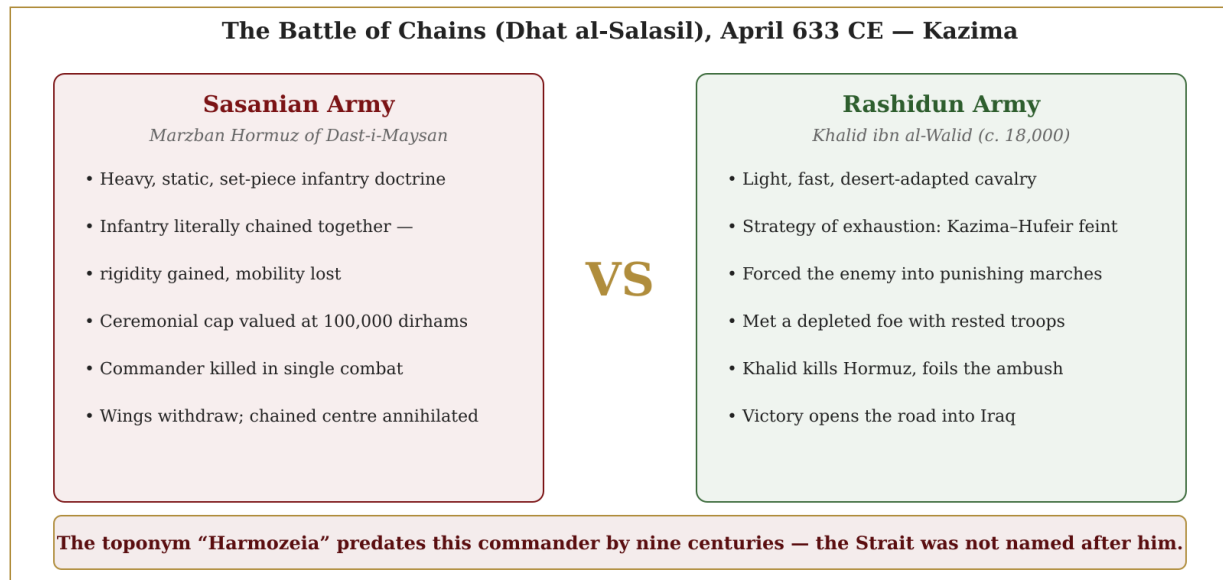
Khalid recognised that a frontal assault on the heavily armoured Sasanian infantry would be ruinous and devised instead a strategy of exhaustion. By feinting toward the direct route at Kazima and then bypassing it through the deep desert toward Hufeir — threatening Uballa itself — he forced Hormuz to march his cumbersome army back and forth across punishing terrain. When the Sasanian force, depleted, finally arrived to give battle at Kazima, Khalid’s rested troops were precisely positioned. The engagement takes its name, *Dhat al-Salasil* (the Battle of Chains), from the Sasanian practice of linking the infantry together with iron chains to prevent flight and present an unbroken front — a measure that lent rigidity at the cost of all mobility, and whose historicity the Arabic chroniclers record while later historians have read it variously as literal fact or as a metaphor for disciplined, interlocking ranks.²²

The battle opened, in the custom of the age, with single combat. Hormuz challenged Khalid by name and arranged for a body of his men to fall upon Khalid mid-duel; Khalid, anticipating the treachery, killed the commander before the trap could be sprung, and the sight of their champion’s fall broke the Sasanian ranks. The wing commanders withdrew their cavalry and abandoned the chained infantry, which was enveloped and destroyed. The victory unlocked the road to Iraq, and Abu Bakr is said to have presented the famed cap of Hormuz to Khalid. In the continuum of this report, the Battle of Chains is not the origin of any legend of naming; it is the moment at which the last Persian military barrier on the Arab shore was broken.

²¹F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), on the incorporation of eastern Arabia through tribal submission; the Battle of Dibba is treated in the Arabic *Ridda-war* traditions.

²²The principal narrative source is al-Tabari, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk*, vol. XI (The Challenge to the Empires), trans. K. Y. Blankinship (SUNY Press, 1993). On the contested literalism of the “chains,” see the discussion in the modern military-history literature on Sasanian infantry doctrine.

Figure 5. The Battle of Chains (633 CE): a contrast of military doctrines. The rigid, chained Sasanian infantry under Marzban Hormuz against the mobile, desert-adapted cavalry of Khalid ibn al-Walid.



3.8 The Name and the Commander: A Persistent Misconception Corrected

A widespread popular belief holds that the Strait was named in commemoration of this Sasanian commander, Hormuz. The belief is decisively false, and the evidence against it is threefold. Chronologically, Nearchus had documented the district of Harmozeia in 325 BCE, nearly nine and a half centuries before the Battle of Chains in 633 CE; the name was ancient long before the commander was born. Linguistically, the name Hormuz is itself the Zoroastrian theophoric Ōhrmazd — the commander was named after the deity, as were five Sasanian kings, so that it is the man who bears the name of the god, not the waterway that bears the name of the man. Historically, Ptolemy had recorded Harmouza in the second century CE, before which the Sasanian dynasty did not yet exist. The true relationship between the battle and the name is therefore the inverse of the popular one: the battle did not create the name but marked the collapse of the Persian military presence in a region whose name, and whose people, long predated that presence.

3.9 The Kingdom of Hormuz: An Arab Dynasty on the Persian Shore (1060–1622)

The medieval Kingdom of Hormuz furnishes the clearest single illustration of the report’s thesis. The kingdom was founded around 1060 by Muhammad Diramku, a leader of southern Arab (Omani) origin who crossed the Strait to the Iranian coast and established his authority on the mainland. Here was an Arab dynasty, drawn from the southern shore, founding and ruling a maritime state on the northern, Iranian shore. The standard modern study of the kingdom’s early centuries is that of Jean Aubin, whose work on “the princes of Ormuz from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century” remains foundational.²³

The internal structure of the kingdom captures the relationship between the two presences with unusual precision. The ruling monarchy was Arab, tracing its origins to Oman. The administrative bureaucracy,

²³J. Aubin, “Les princes d’Ormuz du XIIIe au XVe siècle,” *Journal Asiatique* 241/1 (1953), pp. 77–138; and Aubin, “Le royaume d’Ormuz au début du XVe siècle,” *Mare Luso-Indicum* 2 (1973). See also L. Potter and M. Vosoughi in the scholarship on the kingdom’s relocation to Jarun.

however, was largely Persian, and the viziers who often wielded the real executive power were frequently recruited from the Fal district of Fars; Persian served as the language of statecraft. The arrangement was thus the exact inverse of the conventional picture of Persian dominance: Arab sovereigns governed through Persian administrative instruments on Iranian soil. The Persians staffed the chancery; the Arabs held the throne.

When, in 1301, the threat of Mongol cavalry made the mainland untenable, the ruler Baha al-Din Ayaz — originally a *ghulām* (military slave) who had risen to power — evacuated the entire population to the barren island of Jarun, which became New Hormuz and, within decades, the wealthiest emporium of the Gulf.²⁴ It was a cosmopolitan society of Arabs, Persians, Indians, Armenians, Jews, and Christians, presided over by an Arab dynasty and described with admiration by Ibn Battuta, by the envoys of the Ming treasure fleets, and by the Portuguese chroniclers who would later destroy it.

3.10 The Thalassocracy and Its Fall: Portugal, the Safavids, and 1622

New Hormuz became, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, one of the wealthiest commercial entrepôts on earth — a thalassocracy whose power derived not from territory or agriculture but from the capacity to tax everything that passed through the Strait. A medieval chronicler famously described the island as the “ring-stone of the world”. Its prosperity rested on a sophisticated fiscal apparatus: a customs regime levying duties on maritime imports, and a security royalty paid to mainland rulers to guarantee the safe passage of caravans inland. The horse trade to India, the pearl fisheries of Bahrain which the kingdom controlled, and the redistribution of Indian textiles, spices, and Chinese porcelain made it the indispensable node between the Indian Ocean and the markets of Persia and the Mediterranean.

This wealth drew the heavily armed maritime empires of Europe. In 1507, and decisively in 1515, the Portuguese commander Afonso de Albuquerque subjugated the island, reducing the once-independent kingdom to a tributary of the *Estado da Índia* governed from Goa. For over a century the Portuguese exploited the customs house and manipulated the kingdom’s factions. Their dominance was ended in 1622 by an alliance between the resurgent Safavid empire of Shah Abbas I — which possessed a formidable land army but no deep-water navy — and the English East India Company, which supplied the warships. The joint campaign captured the island, and Shah Abbas, unwilling to let an offshore power again accumulate independent wealth, deliberately dismantled the emporium and transferred its commerce to the mainland port he renamed Bandar Abbas in his own honour.²⁵ The episode is instructive: even at the height of Persian imperial resurgence, the destruction of Hormuz required a European naval partner, and what was destroyed was an Arab-founded commercial dynasty, not a Persian one.

3.11 The Qawasim and the Omani Lease: Arabs Governing Iranian Ports

The pattern persisted into the modern era, and here the documentation is at its richest, thanks to the detailed archival reconstructions of Willem Floor. From 1779 onward the Qawasim — a powerful Sunni Arab tribal confederation based in Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah — extended their authority directly onto the Iranian coast, governing the port of Bandar Lengeh. The Persian Zand and later Qajar authorities formally

²⁴“HORMUZ ii. Islamic Period,” Encyclopædia Iranica, drawing on Wassaf and the Teixeira redaction of Turan Shah; Marco Polo, who visited in 1272 and 1293, remarked on both the flourishing trade and the harsh climate.

²⁵On the Portuguese conquest and the Anglo-Persian capture of 1622, see the accounts drawn from the Portuguese sources and W. Floor’s Persian Gulf volumes; on the redistribution of trade, “BANDAR-E ‘ABBAS i. The City,” Encyclopædia Iranica.

recognised a Qasimi sheikh as the local governor, so that the principal Iranian port at the mouth of the Strait was administered by an Arab maritime dynasty for more than a century.²⁶

Simultaneously, the Sultan of Oman secured a formal lease from the Qajar government to administer Bandar Abbas, the island of Qeshm, and the surrounding coast — territories where, in practice, the garrison, the language of the markets, and the apparatus of authority were Arab. The contingency of the Persian claim is revealed by how these arrangements ended. The Qajars did not displace a Persian population; they reclaimed administrative sovereignty by force when circumstances permitted — cancelling the Omani lease in 1868 and marching troops into Bandar Lengeh in 1887 to arrest and exile the Qasimi sheikh. That direct Persian administration of the coast had to be imposed in this manner, and so late, is itself evidence that it was not the natural demographic condition of the region.

3.12 The Pearling Economy and the Society of the Two Shores

Beneath the level of dynasties and garrisons lay an economy that bound the two littorals into a single social world: the pearl. From antiquity until the collapse of the natural-pearl market in the 1930s, the banks of the Arabian Gulf were the richest pearling grounds on earth, and the seasonal *ghaus* (the great dive) structured the life of every coastal community from Kuwait to the Shibkuh. The crews who manned the pearling fleets, the captains (*naukhadha*) who commanded them, the merchants (*tawawish*) who financed and traded the catch, and the boat-builders who sustained the fleets were drawn from the same Arab tribal networks on both shores. The Hula tribes of the Iranian coast, as Floor documents in detail, were precisely “sailors, traders, fishermen, pearl divers, and cultivators” whose competition over access to the pearl banks shaped their politics for centuries.²⁷

The social significance of this shared economy is that it produced a unified maritime culture that paid little regard to the political line dividing the shores. A pearling captain might be born on the Persian coast, dive on banks claimed by Bahrain, sell to a merchant in Lingah, refit his vessel in Sharjah, and marry into a family in Kuwait. Tribal affiliation, not imperial subjecthood, was the operative identity, and that affiliation was Arab. When the natural-pearl economy collapsed under the double blow of the Japanese cultured pearl and the global depression, the communities of the Iranian coast that had depended on it were among the first to migrate back to the Arabian shore — carrying with them the maritime skills, commercial networks, and capital that would underpin the merchant elites of the future Gulf states. The pearling economy thus illustrates in miniature the report’s central claim: a single Arab social fabric stretched across a waterway that politics, but not society, treated as a border.

3.13 The Northern Gulf: The Banu Ka’b and the Emirate of Mohammerah

The northern Gulf presents a parallel narrative. In the riverine environment of Khuzestan — historically known as Arabistan — the Banu Ka’b confederation established, from the sixteenth century, a powerful agrarian and trading polity that functioned as a virtually autonomous border state between the Safavid/Qajar Persians and the Ottomans.²⁸ Under Sheikh Khaz’al (r. 1897–1925) the Emirate of Mohammerah reached

²⁶W. Floor, *The Persian Gulf: The Rise and Fall of Bandar-e Lengeh, the Distribution Center for the Arabian Coast, 1750–1930* (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 2010); and Floor, *The Persian Gulf: The Hula Arabs of the Shibkuh Coast of Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 2014).

²⁷W. Floor, *The Hula Arabs of the Shibkuh Coast of Iran*; on the pearling economy more broadly, see R. Carter, “The history and prehistory of pearling in the Persian Gulf,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48/2 (2005), pp. 139–209.

²⁸On the Banu Ka’b see W. Floor, *The Persian Gulf: The Hinterland Bushehr, Borazjan, Kazerun, Banu Ka’b, & Bandar Abbas*; and the study of the “rise and fall of the Banū Ka’b” as a borderer state in southern Khuzestan.

the height of its international standing, cultivating close relations with Britain in the expectation of recognition as a sovereign state. The gamble failed: with the rise of Reza Shah, Iran annexed Mohammerah in 1925, dissolved the sheikhdom, arrested Khaz'al, and renamed Arabistan as Khuzestan — the same pattern of belated, forcible Persianisation seen on the southern coast.

3.14 Living Witnesses: The Huwala, the Shihuh, and the Kumzari Language

Three living phenomena testify to the continuity and depth of the Arab presence. The Huwala are the Sunni Arab tribes — among them the Qawasim, Al-Ali, Al-Marazeeq, Bani Hammad, and Al-Haram — who settled the Persian coast between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, retaining their Gulf Arabic dialects, tribal structures, and Sunni faith while dominating the maritime economy.²⁹ Their very name derives from an Arabic root denoting “changing over,” marking them as the Arabs who shifted to the opposite shore while preserving their peninsular genealogy. Under the centralising and Persianising pressure of the Pahlavi state in the twentieth century, the great majority of the Huwala undertook a mass return migration to the Arabian Peninsula, where they form a foundational demographic pillar of the modern Gulf states.

Most eloquent of all is the Kumzari language, spoken by a few thousand people in Kumzar on the Musandam Peninsula and directly across the Strait on Larak Island in Iran. The definitive modern study, the Leiden doctoral grammar of Christina van der Wal Anonby, classifies Kumzari as a *mixed* language — in the strict technical sense of a dual grammar — carrying “well-developed Arabian and Persian components at all levels.”³⁰ It is the only language with Iranian grammatical structure indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula, and its formation is placed by the linguistic evidence among the descendants of Arab settlers in sustained interaction with the Sasanian administration. A language of this hybrid character does not arise at a sealed border; it arises on a highway of continuous human exchange — and the substance of that exchange, the grammar confirms, was Arab.

The same syncretism is legible in the broader material culture of the two coasts, which form a single cultural zone rather than two. The wind-tower (*barjeel*) architecture of passive cooling, the dhow-building traditions, the pearling economy and its seasonal rhythms, and even culinary signatures such as the fermented fish sauce *mahyawa* are shared across the Gulf and were carried back to the Arabian shore by the returning Huwala in the twentieth century. The Shihuh of Musandam, who trace their lineage to the early Azd migrations and maintained overlapping allegiances to the Qawasim of Sharjah and the sultans of Muscat, are a further instance of a population whose identity is intelligible only in terms of the continuous, two-shore Arab world the Strait connected. None of this fits a model of two sealed national populations divided by water; all of it fits a model of one Arab cultural sphere straddling a waterway under intermittent Persian administration.

²⁹W. Floor, *The Hula Arabs of the Shibkuh Coast of Iran*, characterises them as “a disparate group of small tribes of sailors, traders, fishermen, pearl divers, and cultivators,” fiercely competitive among themselves — a portrait that underscores their Arab tribal character.

³⁰C. A. van der Wal Anonby, *A Grammar of Kumzari: A Mixed Perso-Arabian Language of Oman* (PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2015); and E. J. Anonby, “Kumzari,” *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 41/3 (2011), pp. 375–380 (Cambridge University Press).

Figure 6. The two presences compared. The Arab presence is demographic and continuous; the Persian presence is administrative, intermittent, and dependent on the strength of a distant centre.

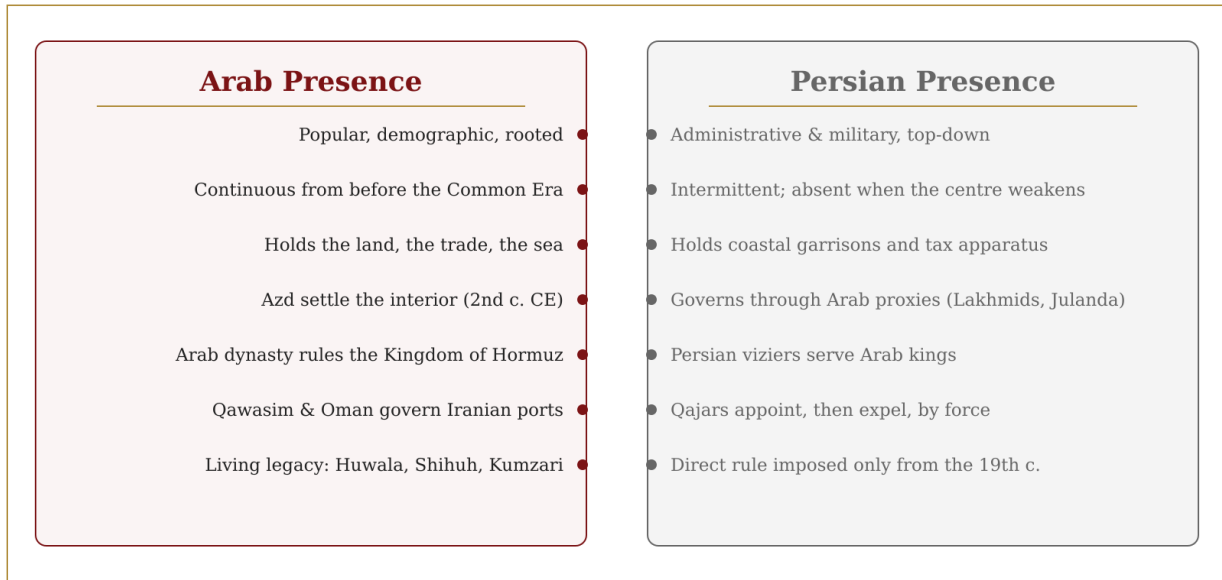
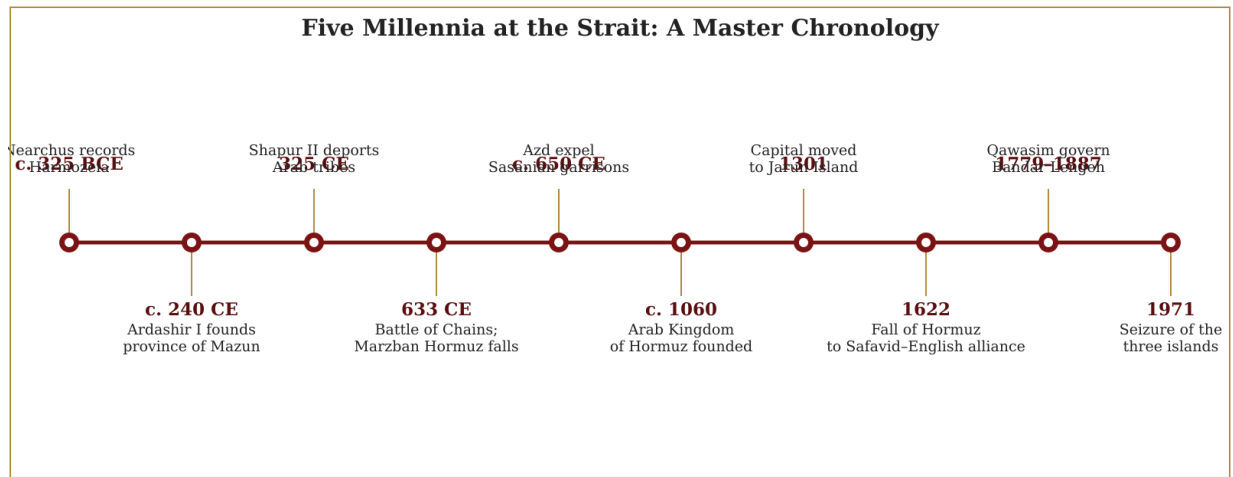


Table 4. The two presences compared across the historical record.

Period	Arab presence	Persian presence
Nature	Popular, demographic, rooted	Administrative and military, top-down
Continuity	Continuous from before the Common Era	Intermittent; absent when the centre weakened
224–651 CE	Azd and allied tribes form the majority	Coastal garrisons of Mazun only
633 CE	Khalid opens the road to Iraq	Marzban Hormuz defeated and killed
1060–1622	Arab dynasty rules the Kingdom of Hormuz	Persian viziers serve Arab kings
18th–19th c.	Qawasim and Oman govern Iranian ports	Qajars appoint, then expel, by force
20th c.	Huwala return to the Arabian shore	A national state imposes a Persian identity

Figure 7. A master chronology of the Strait, placing the Battle of Chains (633 CE) in its true position within an unbroken sequence of Arab presence.



4. The Contemporary Dimension

4.1 The Occupied Emirati Islands

The historical contest over the Strait finds its contemporary expression in the occupation of three islands — Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb — situated near its principal shipping lanes. On 30 November 1971, in the final hours before the independence of the United Arab Emirates and the withdrawal of British protection, Iran occupied the two Tunbs and established a dominant presence on Abu Musa.³¹ The United Arab Emirates, as the political heir of the Qasimi confederation, maintains that the islands fall under a continuous tribal administration reaching back through the nineteenth century; the Iranian claim rests on an intermittent administrative history.

The historical irony is pointed and directly relevant to the argument of this paper. The Qawasim were themselves the governing authority over the Iranian port of Bandar Lengeh well into the nineteenth century. A claim of inherited Persian sovereignty over islands administered from a port itself governed by an Arab dynasty illustrates, with some precision, the central difficulty of reading the modern nationalist map back into the pre-modern Gulf. Schofield has noted that Iran, despite asserting continuous dominance for over two millennia, has produced little in the way of its own documentary records to substantiate the claim before the modern period.³²

The documentary basis of the competing claims repays closer attention, because it crystallises the paper's thesis. The Emirati case rests on the well-attested nineteenth-century administration of the islands by the Qawasim — the levying of dues; the licensing of fishing and red-oxide mining on Abu Musa; and the exercise of jurisdiction recorded in the correspondence of the British political residency. Mattair's comprehensive study assembles this record in detail and argues that the islands passed, by ordinary succession, from Qasimi

³¹T. R. Mattair, *The Three Occupied UAE Islands: The Tunbs and Abu Musa* (Abu Dhabi: ECSSR, 2005), the most comprehensive documentary study; and R. Schofield, "Border Disputes in the Gulf: Past, Present, and Future," in G. Sick and L. Potter (eds.), *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

³²R. Schofield, as cited; the observation is discussed in N. S. Al-Mazrouei, *The UAE and Saudi Arabia: Border Disputes and International Relations in the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

administration to the crucial sheikhdoms that became the United Arab Emirates.³³ The Iranian case, by contrast, leans on the assertion of an ancient and continuous imperial sovereignty — the same projection of a modern, absolute conception of territory onto a pre-modern reality that this report has questioned throughout. The seizure itself, executed on the eve of British withdrawal and of the federation’s birth, was a unilateral act that several Arab and non-aligned states brought before the United Nations Security Council, which deferred the matter without resolving it.

4.2 Implications for the Reading of Gulf History

The analysis carries a methodological implication beyond the particular case of the islands. The recurring error in popular and even some scholarly treatments of the Gulf is to read the categories of the modern nation-state — fixed borders, exclusive national populations, continuous territorial sovereignty — back into a pre-modern world organised on entirely different principles. In that older world, sovereignty was layered and negotiated rather than absolute; a dynasty could be ethnically Arab and administratively Persian at once; a tribe could hold ports on both shores; and a population could remain stable for centuries while the imperial flag flying over its harbours changed repeatedly. To ask whether the Strait was “Arab” or “Persian” in the modern sense is to pose a question the sources cannot answer, because the sources describe a reality the question does not fit.

Read on its own terms, however, the evidence is not ambiguous about the matter that does admit an answer: the identity of the people. Across five millennia, the human substrate of both shores was Arab, and the Persian role was that of a periodically present governing power. This is the distinction the report has sought to make precise — between the population and the administration, between who lived on the land and who, at any given moment, taxed it.

4.3 Strategic Postscript: History and the Present Significance of the Strait

The historical findings of this paper are not merely of antiquarian interest; they bear on the way the contemporary significance of the Strait is framed. Through this waterway passes a substantial share of the world’s seaborne crude oil and a comparable proportion of its liquefied natural gas, making it the single most important energy chokepoint on earth.³⁴ Control of, and access to, the Strait is therefore a matter of acute strategic consequence for the Gulf states whose economies depend on it, and the historical record of who has held, populated, and governed its shores is regularly invoked in the diplomatic and legal arguments that surround it.

Two implications follow for the analyst. **First**, the deep historical association of the southern shore and the wider Gulf littoral with continuous Arab settlement provides a substantive foundation for the heritage claims of the Gulf states, distinct from — and longer than — the imperial-administrative claims advanced on the other side. **Second**, and more cautiously, the layered and negotiated character of pre-modern sovereignty counsels against any simple projection of ancient possession into modern legal title; the historian can establish the demographic continuity of a population and the intermittency of an administration without thereby resolving a twentieth-century question of state sovereignty. The value of the

³³T. R. Mattair, *The Three Occupied UAE Islands: The Tunbs and Abu Musa* (ECSSR, 2005), which reproduces the relevant British residency records and the 1971 Memorandum of Understanding concerning Abu Musa.

³⁴Estimates of the volume of petroleum transiting the Strait are published periodically by the U.S. Energy Information Administration and the International Energy Agency; the figure has consistently been placed near one-fifth of global seaborne oil.

historical record, properly used, is to inform and discipline contemporary debate rather than to settle it by assertion.

This is the spirit in which the present report has been prepared: to set out, on the basis of the best available scholarship, what can responsibly be said about the name, the land, and the people of the Strait of Hormuz, and to distinguish carefully between what the evidence establishes and what it leaves open.

4.4 Conclusion: What the Strait Reveals

Five millennia of evidence converge on a single conclusion. The Strait of Hormuz was never, in any meaningful demographic sense, a frontier between an Arab world and a Persian one. Its permanent human population — on both shores — was Arab throughout the recorded past, while Persian power, where it existed, was an administrative and military superstructure that rose with the strength of the central authority and vanished with its weakness. The name of the Strait preserves, in a single word, the layered character of this history: a Zoroastrian theophoric root, anchored by an ancient imperial religion, sustained across the centuries by the vernacular speech of Arab date-farmers and fishermen who reinterpreted it as the passage of the palm groves.

The Battle of Chains, correctly placed, is not the origin of the Strait's name but the moment its Persian military veneer was stripped away to reveal the Arab substance beneath. And the living testimony of the Kumzari language, the Huwala tribes, and the Shihuh of Musandam confirms what the documentary record establishes: that the waterway bearing the name of a Persian god has been, in its human essence, continuously and enduringly Arab. The modern, rigidly nationalist division of the Strait is, in the long view of its history, the anomaly — not the rule.

Appendix: Consolidated Chronology

The following table consolidates the principal events discussed in this paper, presenting the etymological, demographic, and military threads in a single chronological sequence. It is intended as a reference companion to the narrative analysis above.

Table 5. Consolidated chronology of the Strait of Hormuz.

Date	Event
c. 2300 BCE	Bronze Age sea trade links Mesopotamia (via Dilmun and Magan) to the Indus; the Arabian coast is already populated and productive.
325 BCE	Nearchus, admiral of Alexander, records the district of Harmozeia at the mouth of the Anamis (Minab) — the earliest attestation of the name.
c. 150 CE	Ptolemy records Harmouza polis and the Harmozon promontory, confirming the toponym centuries before the Sasanian dynasty.
c. 240 CE	Ardashir I conquers Eastern Arabia and organises it as the Sasanian province of Mazun — an administrative and garrison presence.
325 CE	Shapur II deports Arab tribes across the Gulf and builds the Khandaq Sabur; the deportations are the inverse proof of Arab demography.
April 633 CE	Battle of Chains: Khalid ibn al-Walid defeats and kills the Marzban Hormuz, opening the road to Iraq.
c. 650 CE	The Azd of Oman expel the Sasanian garrisons; the Persian apparatus, not a Persian population, is what falls.
c. 1060	Muhammad Diramku, of Omani Arab origin, founds the Kingdom of Hormuz on the Iranian coast.
1301	Baha al-Din Ayaz relocates the capital to Jarun Island; New Hormuz becomes the wealthiest emporium of the Gulf.
1515	Afonso de Albuquerque subjects Hormuz to Portuguese tributary status.
1622	A Safavid–English alliance captures Hormuz; trade is redirected to the newly renamed Bandar Abbas.
1779–1887	The Qawasim govern the Iranian port of Bandar Lengeh; Oman leases Bandar Abbas and Qeshm.
1925	Reza Shah annexes the Emirate of Mohammerah and renames Arabistan as Khuzestan.
1971	Iran occupied Abu Musa and the Tunbs on the eve of UAE independence; the issue remains unresolved.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
1. Introduction.....	3
1.1 A Note on Sources and Historiography.....	4
2. The Origin of the Name “Hormuz”	4
2.1 The Toponymic Question	4
2.2 The Earliest Attestation: Nearchus and Harmozeia.....	5
2.3 Theory One: The Theophoric Origin (Ahura Mazda)	5
2.4 Theory Two: The Topographical-Botanical Origin (Hur-Mogh).....	6
2.5 Theory Three: The Hellenistic Origin (Hormos).....	7
2.6 Adjudication: Toponymic Convergence.....	7
2.7 The Migration of the Name Across the Landscape	8
3. The Arabs on Both Shores, from Antiquity to the Present.....	9
3.1 The Gulf as a Connective Highway.....	9
3.2 The Deep Antiquity of Gulf Exchange.....	9
3.3 The Pre-Islamic Foundation: The Azd Migration	9
3.4 The Sasanian Province of Mazun: Administration Without Settlement.....	10
3.5 Shapur II and the Inverse Proof of Arab Demography.....	11
3.6 The Islamic Conquests: The Arabs Expel the Persians	12
3.7 The Battle of Chains in Its Proper Place (633 CE).....	13
3.8 The Name and the Commander: A Persistent Misconception Corrected.....	14
3.9 The Kingdom of Hormuz: An Arab Dynasty on the Persian Shore (1060–1622).....	14
3.10 The Thalassocracy and Its Fall: Portugal, the Safavids, and 1622	15
3.11 The Qawasim and the Omani Lease: Arabs Governing Iranian Ports.....	15
3.12 The Pearling Economy and the Society of the Two Shores	16
3.13 The Northern Gulf: The Banu Ka’b and the Emirate of Mohammerah	16
3.14 Living Witnesses: The Huwala, the Shihuh, and the Kumzari Language	17
4. The Contemporary Dimension	19
4.1 The Occupied Emirati Islands	19
4.2 Implications for the Reading of Gulf History.....	20
4.3 Strategic Postscript: History and the Present Significance of the Strait.....	20
4.4 Conclusion: What the Strait Reveals	21
Appendix: Consolidated Chronology	22
References.....	23