An archaeological and architectural evaluation of a fort in the Wadi Safad, Emirate of Fujairah

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In December of 1998 archaeologists from Trinity College, Carmarthen, University of Wales conducted research within the Wadi Safad, Emirate of Fujairah. Interest focused upon a fort (hyn) located approximately nine kilometres inland from the village of al-Qurayya (plate 1). The site was first examined by King in 1994 (King and Maren-Griesbach 1999 - in Tribulus 9:2, 10-18); an initial survey of the site was conducted by Garfi (1995) under the sponsorship of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS. The hyn originally stood on the end of a spur of rock projecting into the wadi, the construction of a road along the wadi in 1994/5, however, has truncated the spur leaving the hyn isolated on a rocky outcrop (fig. 1). The outcrop upon which the hyn stands is surrounded by the remains of abandoned settlements.

The hyn itself has two distinct areas: a defended enclosure with towers and internal rooms; and a second extra-mural area located on a platform to the south of the main defended area, containing the insubstantial remains of at least seven buildings may be discerned on the platform.

The hyn
The overall dimensions of the hyn are approximately 32m north to south, by 20m east to west (fig. 2). The hyn is largely constructed with random rubble and a mud mortar, although in places dry-stone techniques were also utilised. The main defensive elements of the hyn are two, now ruinous, towers situated on rocky outcrops, one at the northern end of the site and another in the south-west corner. The northern tower is round in form and the south-west tower is sub-rectangular in form.

The curtain wall links these two structures and follows the topography of the platform upon which the hyn was built. The curtain wall curves out broadly from the northern tower to the south-east before turning west and linking up with the south-west tower, the wall then runs directly north-east to return to the north tower. The curtain wall appears to be continuous and the presence of any entrance way into the enclosure cannot be reliably identified, and indeed the likelihood of such a feature should be questioned. The curtain walls of the hyn are in many places approximately 2m high internally, and 3m high externally, the wall varies from approximately 0.75m to 2m in thickness. The interior of the hyn, on its eastern and southern walls, are fringed with what appear to be the remains of 6 casemate rooms or chambers. A further sunken gabled room can be identified in the north-west corner of the interior of the hyn. The north-west area of the interior also contains the remains of a juss-lined sunken water cistern and a small ancillary structure, probably a sheltered hearth or storage area. Immediately to the south of the hyn the hill top has been revetted to enhance a triangular shaped level area. This platform extends to the south for approximately 40m and is approximately 25m wide at its northern end. On this revetted area are the remains of at least seven structures and a small, dry-stone

Plate 1: Hyn Safad, looking south. Picture by G.R.D. King

construction, a ‘watch station’. Below the level of the hwn, on the sides of the spur are the remains of at least two other ‘watch stations’ (fig. 1).

Discussion
The examination of the structure has revealed a previously unsuspected complexity to the construction of the hwn. It is clear that the building went through two distinct phases of rebuilding. The most significant alteration occurred in the second phase when the entire south end of the complex was redesigned. The addition of the southern tower and the suite of rooms along the interior of the south wall clearly illustrate the desire to improve the residential and defensive facilities of the structure and may represent a change in function towards a more permanent occupation. The third phase of activity at the site saw a series of minor alterations to the layout of the rooms that seems to indicate a more transitory period of squatter occupation. The relationships between the hwn and the platform to its south and the surrounding settlements are difficult to assess. No such difficulty exists in regard to the three watch stations that lie to the north, north-west and south of the main hwn complex. These small observation points are positioned so as to allow for unrestricted access down the steep slopes of the hwn hill into the wadi bed and form part of an integrated defensive system. The seven structures on the platform to the south consist of low lines of stones, that often utilise natural outcrops, these lines of stones form enclosures, 2m by 3m that are open along one axis. It is likely that these small buildings were designed to be seasonally occupied ‘dry’ covered dwellings, which were intended to complementary to the main hwn occupation.

Alternatively, these buildings may simply be utilising the level area on top of the hill and would therefore have no relationship with the hwn, ultimately only excavation will resolve this issue. From the results of the preliminary ceramic analysis of the site as a whole it is clear that most of the pottery is locally produced Jufar red unglazed ware, incised white ware and post-Jufar horizon wares and a small number of imported Persian turquoise glaze sherd (Ziolkowski pers. comm.). It is likely, therefore, that the earliest activity on the site dates from the 16th and 17th centuries and continued into the modern period.

Conclusions
The architectural and archaeological analysis of the hwn in the Wadi Safad have revealed a previously unsuspected complexity to the structure. It seems that the hwn in its final form bore close typological similarities to the nearby, and roughly contemporary site at al-Quweyya (see Note appended to this paper). Furthermore, Kennew's (1995) analysis in Ras al-Khaimah suggests that this type of complex can be found throughout the north-eastern part of the United Arab Emirates. The initial synthesis of the ceramic evidence would suggest that this type of building should be attributed to the 16th or 17th century. The form of the buildings with their provision for both storage and occupation suggests that they were intended for extended, perhaps even permanent occupation, unlike the redoubts of the coastal towers that were used as part of an integrated system of watchtowers and places of safety. Further research is required to bring greater clarity to the historical position of these buildings and also to examine in detail the way that they may have functioned in the wider social landscape, these issues are discussed elsewhere (Longden & Garfi in prep.).

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References

Recent work at al-Qurayya, Emirate of Fujairah

In December 1999 work by the Department of Archaeology, Trinity College, Carmarthen continued on the Late Islamic fortifications of the Wadi Safad. The centre of research shifted to the defended fort at al-Qurayya, colloquially known as the fort of Mohammed bin Mohammed (de Cardi 1971). The work revealed a much larger although simpler structure than the contemporary fort higher up the wadi at Safad, where the College’s research programme began in 1998. The fort at al-Qurayya is approximately 70m by 90m in size. The main feature is a massive defensive curtain wall that encompasses the entire hilltop. In many places this wall still stands to a height of over 2.5m. The construction of such a wall would have been a significant undertaking for a large population. The wall is pierced by at least two original entrances, one to the east and one to the south, a third entrance on the north is probably later. There are few internal features. The five rooms that are present are small, the average size being 3m by 2m. These are more likely to be store rooms than rooms intended for permanent occupation. There is within the defended enclosure a sunken juss-lined cistern, which if full might contain as much as 18,500 litres of water. The eastern side of the hill has approximately 50 small terraces or platforms. The function of these platforms is unclear but it is interesting to note that c.20 small (3m by 2m) platforms were found around the fort at Safad. To the south of the hill on a lower-lying shoulder are the remains of a mosque.

The large open, very public space at al-Qurayya can be contrasted with the much more private and intimate space created at Safad. The fort at Safad evokes ideas associated with a prestigious private residence. The fort at al-Qurayya offers little evidence of this type of occupation. Instead one is left feeling that the interior of the fort was intended not for permanent occupation by any group but as a temporary place of safety, somewhere where a larger population could find protection. Further work is planned in December 2001.

Reference


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Figure 2: Schematic plan of Husn Safad, looking north