

An archaeological and architectural evaluation of a fort at Qurayyah, Emirate of Fujairah

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Introduction

In December 1999 archaeologists from Trinity College, Carmarthen, University of Wales continued their research project into the Late Islamic period remains of the Wadi Safad, Emirate of Fujairah, and in the vicinity thereof.

Attention focussed upon a Late Islamic *husn* to the north of the village of Qurayyah. Qurayyah is a small coastal village around 10 km north of Fujairah City, near the debouchment of the Wadis Safad and Thayb. The *husn* was first the subject of archaeological examination when de Cardi (1971) conducted a brief survey during a much more extensive analysis of the coastal region.

The *husn* was selected for detailed analysis for two reasons.

First, the opportunity to compare the *husn* at Qurayyah with insights derived from work previously conducted at a *husn* further up the Wadi Safad (Longden and Garfi, 2000). Preliminary observations suggested that whilst broadly contemporary, these two structures possessed very different architectural characteristics and social functions. The current research was designed to examine this issue in greater detail.

Second, it was recognised that the area around the *husn* at Qurayyah had recently been subject to considerable development pressure.

It was, therefore, considered appropriate to undertake this research in order to assess the impact upon the structure and its archaeological context.

The *husn*

The *husn* is located to the north-west of the old village of Qurayyah on a projecting spur from Jebel Thayb on the seaward side of the debouchment of the Wadi Thayb. The spur is immediately to the north-west of the village of Qurayyah and separates the plain upon which Qurayyah is found from the plain to the north around the village of Qirath. Inland from Qurayyah the plain opens up into the Wadis Safad and Thayb.

The *husn* overlooks this plain and thus, ultimately, the entrance to both Wadis. The *husn* itself sits at the highest point of the spur, approximately 85 m above the surrounding coastal plain; its great size and the steepness of the slopes presents an imposing effect and provides an ideal defensive location (Plate 1; Fig. 1).

The ceramic evidence from the site has been examined on several occasions; first, by de Cardi (1971), then by Ziolkowski (*pers comm.*), the latter as part of a wider re-appraisal of the ceramics from Fujairah, and finally during the current project.

The assemblage is dominated by extensive spreads of locally produced Julfar red unglazed ware, incised white ware and by post-Julfar horizon wares. A small number of imported Persian turquoise glazed ware; mottled brown glazed ware and later *Sgraffiato* ware complete the assemblage, all of which are from disturbed surface deposits, there having been no recorded excavations on the site. The ceramic assemblage would suggest that the main period of occupation began during or after the 15th century AD, although earlier deposits may yet



Plate 1: The *husn* at Qurayyah, from west, showing curtain wall and palm gardens beyond

remain to be exposed.

The main feature of the *husn* is a curtain wall which encompasses the summit of the hill (*Plate 2*). The space enclosed by the curtain wall has two distinct levels; a lower level immediately behind the wall and a second much higher area on the very summit of the hill. The area immediately behind the wall is narrow, rarely more than 2 metres in width; it is in this narrow area that the rooms within the *husn* are found. Behind this narrow stretch of level ground is a rock outcrop, approximately 3 metres higher, which forms the highest point of the hill. It is here that the cistern and the ephemeral remains of two other rooms are found.

The scale of the structure and the investment of labour in its construction is deceptive. The wall is approximately 240 metres in length and encloses an area that is approximately 3,500 sq.m. The wall in many places is over 3 m. high and is often over 1.5 m. wide. Some of

the individual boulders incorporated within the wall are over 1 sq.m. and weigh several tons. The investment in labour involved in creating such a structure belies its apparent simplicity and emphasises the important role that the building fulfilled. The curtain wall itself is made of roughly coursed stones that were originally bonded with an earth mortar. In many places, however, this bonding has dried out and blown away to the detriment of the stability of the wall.

There appear to be two entrances into the complex, one on the north side of the hill and the other on its east side. The northern entrance is a complex arrangement of guardrooms, ramps and gateways. The entranceway to the complex begins on the coastal plain from where a winding route reaches up to the lower terrace where it is then directed through the remains of several small rooms that may originally have acted as guard-posts, and then finally up a steep ramp to enter the upper

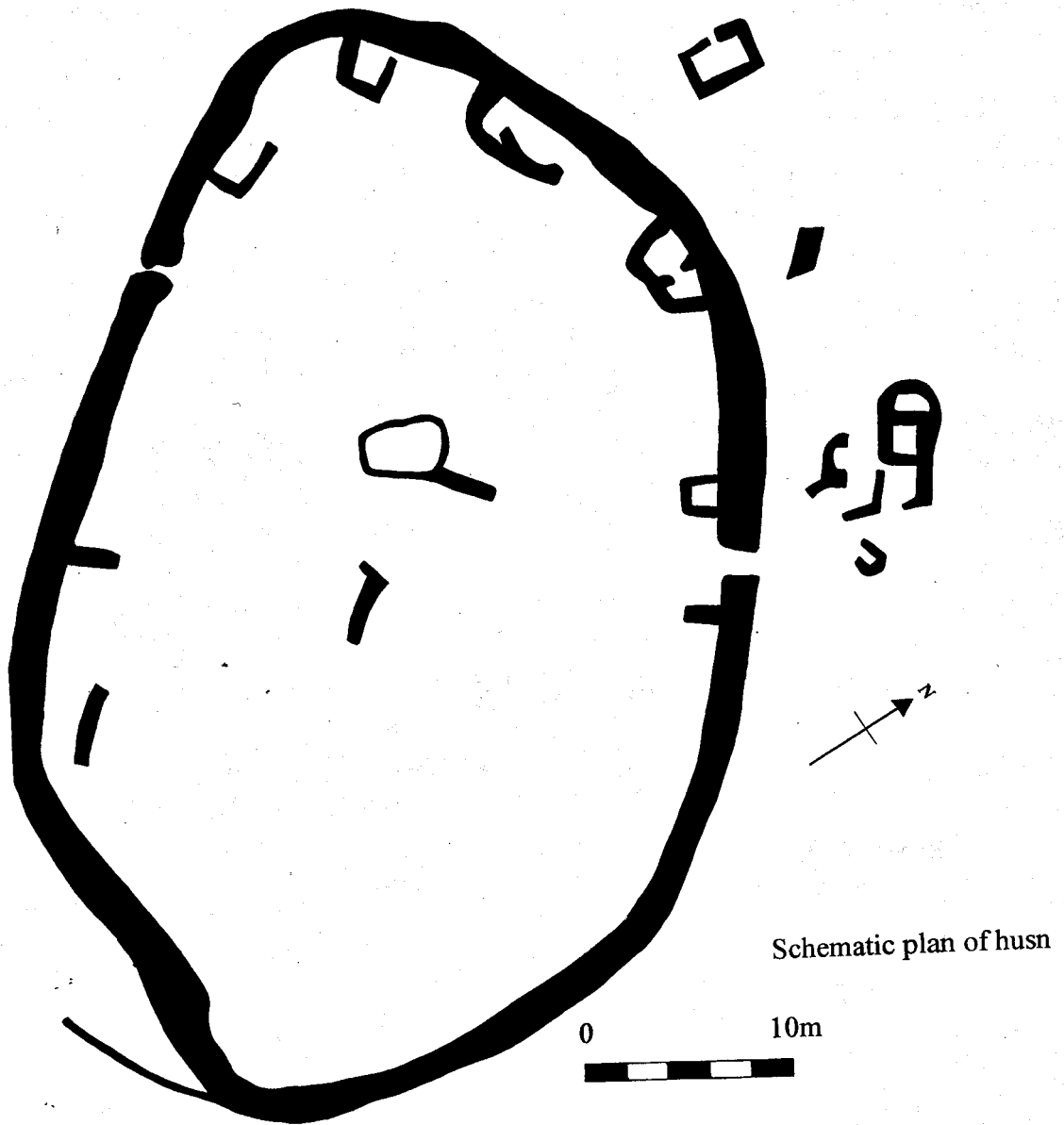


Figure 1: Schematic plan of *Husn* Qurayyah

enclosure. This is a complex and highly ordered progression through a series of defended points which would have effectively controlled access to the enclosure. Again, the apparent simplicity of the structure is beguiling.

The second entrance to the enclosure is less clearly defined. This entrance on the east of the site faces the saddle and the mosque and an area of settlement. This entrance is less formal than that on the northern side and is less well provisioned with defensive elements. It may be that this is an adaptation of the structure to enable easier access to the area of settlement in the saddle during a period when defence was less of a priority. The curtain wall at this point decreases in height to form a ramp which leads up into the enclosure. There are no rooms or guard posts at this point and access to the interior would have been unhindered. This entrance and its defensive elements are quite different in character to that on the northern side of the hill, and it is quite likely that this variation is a reflection of the entrance on the east being a later and opportunistic addition.

The interior of the *husn* contains the remains of at least 8 rooms. The largest of these rooms is no greater than 3 m. by 2 m. and it is comparable in size with those which were likely to have been located on the terraces outside of the curtain wall to the north. The rooms are all small and are either revetted into the central outcrop or are abutted onto the curtain wall, as with the curtain wall itself the rooms are constructed from roughly coursed masonry with the residue of a earth bonding. The small number of these structures strongly suggests that the interior of the *husn* was not intended for large scale permanent occupation.

Instead it is tempting to suggest, that these structures may have been occupied by families who worked in the *husn*, perhaps as guards who were concerned with maintaining the water supply and the fabric of the structure. It is unlikely that the *husn* was an elite settlement, given the simplicity of the structure when compared with the much more elaborate structure at Safad (Longden & Garfi 2000; King & Maren-Griesebach, 2000).

On the summit of the hill is a rock-cut mortar lined cistern (Plate 3). The cistern is approximately 4 metres

by 2 metres and approximately 2 m. deep. When completely full it would have contained approximately 16,000 litres. There is evidence on the surface of a superstructure which surrounded the cistern and protected the water from the elements. A similar covered cistern has been described at the hill-fort of Shimal (de Cardi, 1971: 245). The water would have been collected from a *falaj* that de Cardi (*ibid.*) observed to the east of the hill; this area has since seen considerable development and it is no longer possible to identify this feature.

The extra-mural archaeological remains

The hill upon which the *husn* is located also contains other interesting archaeological remains; a mosque, a number of building platforms and a series of small terraces on the northern side of the hill.

The mosque (Plate 4) lies to the east of the *husn* in a saddle of the hill between the main summit and a lower outcrop. The mosque is now ruined and a few courses of stones are all that remain. It is likely that this was an open summer mosque which was originally 13 metres by 7 metres, it stood alongside the remains of two other rectangular buildings. Immediately to the east of the mosque the secondary summit provides an excellent location for a small watch station within a roughly circular area.

This group of buildings is reminiscent of the structures higher up the Wadi Safad, where the *husn* was surrounded by three watch stations with a mosque lying to the north of the site at a lower level of the hill.

The second area of archaeological interest on the hill at Qurayyah is the presence of a large number of small terraces on the northern face. There are approximately 30 of these small terraces (2 metres by 3 metres) built into the slope of the hill. It is unlikely that these terraces were used for agricultural purposes due to their restricted size and the difficulties associated with irrigating them; furthermore, the easy availability of better agricultural land on the coastal plain means that such a small agricultural enterprise would be unlikely.

A more likely suggestion would be that these terraces are the remains of an extra-mural settlement, perched on the side of the hill but near to the protection offered



Plate 2: The curtain wall on the west side of the *husn*

by the *husn*. The types of structure most likely to have been constructed on these small terraces are those described by Dostal (1983) and Costa (1991) which were found throughout the region, although no footings remain. The presence of such a precarious settlement is indicative of the context within which both the settlement and the *husn* were established. Such a defended settlement must surely reflect the political instability that was present. Such an argument has been advanced for the similar and broadly contemporary site at Safad. Whilst the most likely suggestion is that these small terraces were intended for houses, it is also possible that at least some of them were produced as a by-product of the collection of stones that were to be used in the construction of the curtain wall. Alternatively some of the terraces may have been cleared to improve lines of sight along the direction of the entrance to the *husn*.

Discussion

It is interesting to compare the *husn* at Qurayyah with the *husn* higher up the Wadi Safad. The *husn* at Safad is a much smaller structure, yet it is also far more elaborate with many delicate and imaginative architectural details. It is protected by a complex series of defences including towers, curtain walls, parapet walkways and external 'watch stations'. The complex defensive features are matched by the complex residential provision within this small *husn*. A number of spacious rooms were built which would have provided elaborate and comfortable accommodation for a small number of people within a heavily defended residence. It is clear from the residential provision that the *husn* was intended to act as focus for permanent occupation for a small elite family group. This was fundamentally a private structure. The *husn* at Safad was surrounded by a large number of low status dwellings, the remains of a large and successful community from the 16th Century AD until it was abandoned around 40 years ago. The political context within which the settlement at Qurayyah was established is illuminated by the obvious emphasis devoted to defence.

The large hilltop enclosure was designed to provide temporary protection for a relatively large number of people, it was not a structure which was designed to provide permanent occupation unlike the structure at Safad. The population that made use of the enclosure presumably lived on the eastern slope of the hill on the numerous small terraces and on the shoulder of the hill near to the mosque, retreating to the enclosure only at time of need. It might also be suggested that when these difficult times abated the population centre shifted from the hillside down onto the coastal plain.

Conclusions

The architectural and archaeological analysis of the *husn* at Qurayyah has revealed a structure with a complex development with many subtle architectural devices employed in what is a deceptively simple structure. It is difficult to underestimate the investment in labour involved in not only the *husn* itself, but also the clearing of the site, the establishment of track-ways up to the site and the construction of the numerous terraces and ancillary buildings. The structure bears some close architectural similarities with the nearby structure at Safad but again there are subtle but significant differences in purpose and position within the local settlement hierarchy. Drawing upon analogies from similar sites in the area and from the ceramic assemblage, it is likely that the construction of the *husn* should be provisionally dated to the Late Islamic period of the 15th to 17th Centuries AD. Within this historical context of political uncertainties and the interplay of Portuguese, Omani, Persian and local tribal rivalries, a secure defensive retreat would have been of great value to the local population, and indeed may have been a necessity (King, 1997; d'Errico, 1983).

It is important to draw attention to the long term future of the monuments. Since 1995 considerable development has taken place in and around the Wadi Safad. Numerous cairns and buildings which were surveyed in 1994 (King & Maren-Griesebach, 2000; Garfi, 1995) on the *wadi* bottom have been destroyed due to the recent

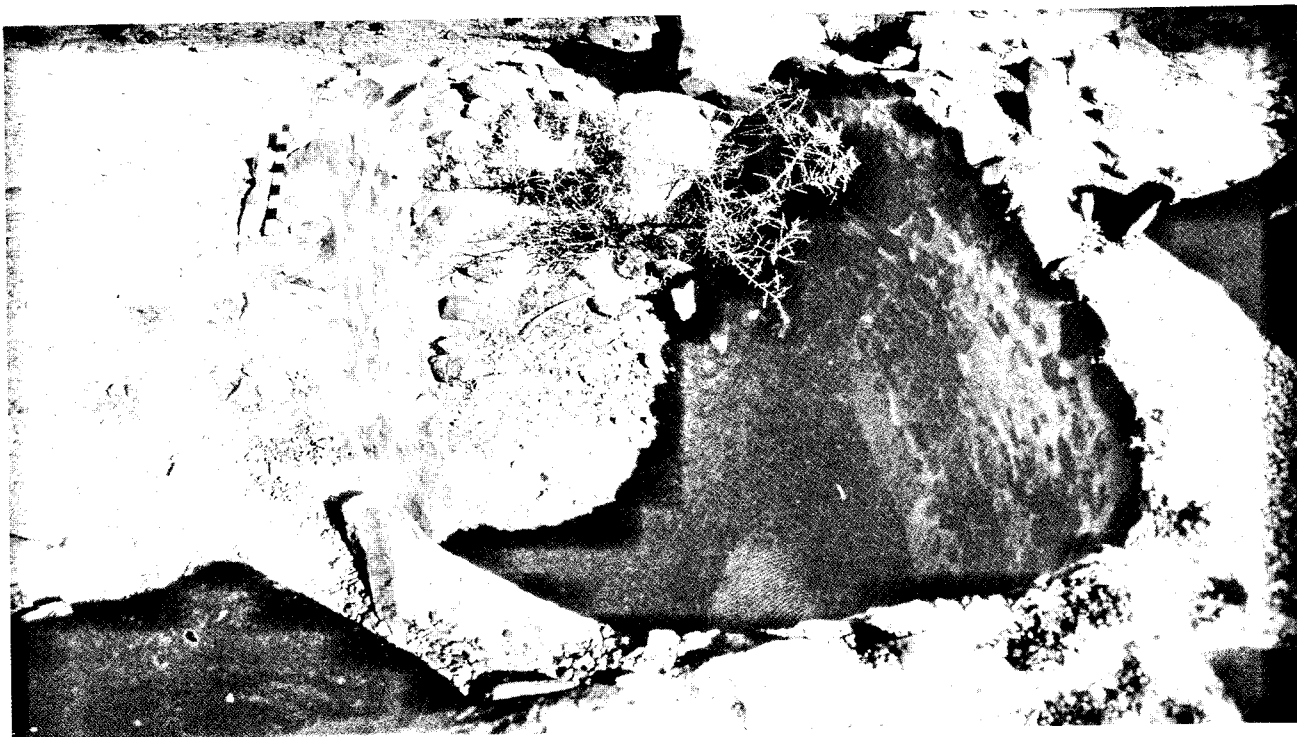


Plate 3: The cistern at the highest point within the *husn*

construction of residential and educational complexes and water management systems.

Similarly, the building of a new road up the Wadi Safad has led to extensive destruction of archaeological features, including a Late Islamic settlement (Longden and Garfi, 2000). The *husn* at Qurayyah has only just escaped destruction following the erection of an electricity pylon to the west of the site. The outlying parts of the site have, however, been affected. The long term preservation of the *husn* must be in question, and unless some stabilisation of parts of the structure is undertaken more deterioration must be expected.

The continuing research programme has demonstrated that such defensive structures are complex elements of the historical settlement patterns of the Late Islamic period, and perhaps more complex than has been previously acknowledged. Further research is required to examine the more subtle relationships that existed between these defended hilltop structures and the nearby settlements and the exploitation of the surrounding environment and the wider social landscape.

In particular, the historical context which led to these structures being built needs to be more carefully examined through a combination of excavation, architectural survey and historical research.

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Plate 4: Remains of the open air mosque at *Husn* Qurayyah, seen from the west