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The Virtual Indian Ocean: Documenting and Representing the Historic City of Tarim

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http://www.learn.columbia.edu/tarim/html/visual_resources.html

[**Nota Bene:** Follow this link to the interactive map. On this page you will find some background information, a brief set of instructions and plug-in requirements. To open the map, select the image or the link at the bottom of the page.]

With the accelerated development of conservation sciences, our ability to isolate and act upon the causes of deterioration in historic fabrics has improved greatly. Likewise, through engaging the social sciences, we have sharpened our understanding of the full range of cultural interactions with significant places. These two observations are emblematic of larger shifts in the makeup of our discipline: now more than ever, heritage conservation consists of a broad spectrum of actors, and we are expected to articulate our objectives to a growing diversity of specialists and stakeholders alike in greater and greater detail. Capturing and representing information then has taken on a critical position in the conservation of significant places, and documents such as the Ename Charter do well in setting guidelines as we engage these challenges. At the heart of the Charter's recommendations is the recognition of the four-way relationship between the object represented; designer; audience; and medium of representation.¹ Each of these four areas take on greater import depending on our objectives and the social context of the interpretive program. In different situations, we may emphasize one field over another to balance the interpretive program. Likewise, overemphasizing the role of a field sends the interpretive program off kilter. In documenting and interpreting the historic city of Tarim, we explored these fields—finding that balance—within the cultural context of contemporary Yemen and American Academia.

¹ Mitchell, W.J.T. "Representation." In Critical Terms for Literary Studies. Chicago, University of Chicago Press:1995.

Historic Tarim

The Hadhramaut Valley of eastern Yemen, where the city is located, has been linked to the Indian Ocean Basin for most of its history through dense social and economic networks. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Yemeni movements between South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the rest of the Middle East intensified with the first wave of globalization under British imperial hegemony.² At different instances in this period, as much as forty percent of the male population of some Hadhrami villages were working over seas.³ Some Hadhramis abroad were simple laborers, others traveled to academic centers in pursuit of knowledge and would later serve as judges and educators for Yemeni expatriate communities. Particular families became extremely wealthy through their land holdings across the region, even building international trading companies. The more successful merchants traded in spices, sugar, coffee, and European and Indian cloth, reinvesting their profits into teagardens, hotels, racetracks and other business ventures.

An especially prominent family of Hadhrami expatriates were the al-Kafs. The family patriarch, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kaf (d. 1863-64), established a solid business in Singapore which his sons, grandsons, and great grandsons would expand upon until their holding company's worth was second only to the city port. Sheikh al-Kaf (d. 1910), his youngest son, worked his way up through consignment trading. He invested wisely in real estate and the scrap iron trade, eventually taking over the entire family trading company upon the death of one of his older brothers. Sheikh's son 'Abd al-Rahman (d. 1950) was equally

² Bayly, Susan. "The Evolution of Colonial Cultures: Nineteenth-Century Asia." In The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Nineteenth Century. Porter, E. (ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

³ Boxberger, Linda. On the Edge of Empire. Albany: State University of New York Press: 2002.

successful, and became a major patron of youth organizations in Southeast Asia. He opened his estate to young men, supported several talented individuals' education in religious law, and sponsored literary competitions. 'Abd al-Rahman also supported numerous reform-minded journals and made them available to the public. One of Sheikh's nephews, Abu Bakr (d. unknown), had other interests. An engineer by training, he fancied himself a gentleman architect, gathering pattern books while abroad and sketching the buildings he saw.⁴ His designs are mostly likely the inspirations for many of the villas in Tarim. These three individuals have unique biographies, but each had one thing in common: after making their fortunes in Singapore, they all returned to Tarim, built villas for their extended families, and invested in the urban infrastructure.

The story of these three brothers tells us about one side of this world. On the other side of the Indian Ocean, in the African coastal city of Lamu, we find Sheikh 'Abdallah b. Muhammad b. Salim Ba Kathir al-Kindi (d. 1927). Ba Kathir was born in Lamu in the late 19th century, though he traced his lineage back to the Hadhramaut through his father. Lamu was an academic center for East Africa at this point in time, and Ba Kathir took advantage of his surroundings becoming a scholar of some renown despite his father's early death and his family's poverty. He supplemented his local education through the Hajj, where great Muslim thinkers and jurists would gather, making the pilgrimage several times in the late nineteenth century. While in Mecca, he was recommended as a teacher for the Yemeni expatriate community in Java. He filled this position with distinction and seems he made quit a bit of money while at it. He returned to Mecca several more times and eventually settled for good in Zanzibar in the 1890s, which had by that time eclipsed Lamu as East Africa's academic center. During these years he established a school and gained a reputation as a scholar and great ascetic. One of the first things he did upon his return from Java was visit the Hadhramaut, eventually publishing a travelogue of his experiences. It was incredibly important

⁴ Freitag, Ulrike. *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut*. Leiden, Brill: 1997; and Modini-Kesheh, Natelie. *The Hadhrami Awakening*. Ithaca, Southeast Asia Program Publications, South East Asia Program, Cornell University: 1999.

for scholars of Hadhrami descent to return to the Valley, meet with noted individuals, and interact with the *sada* (descendants of the Prophet) of Tarim. Ba Kathir had already gained a level of prominence as a scholar in the region—he studied in the Hijaz, an educational center far more important than Tarim, but it was essential for him to visit the city for its spiritual import.⁵ Already a highly recognized scholar, Ba Kathir nonetheless had to legitimize his position by making a quasi-pilgrimage to the Valley.

These two stories tell us of Tarim's significance as both a socio-economic and a spiritual center. One may trace the transnational culture of the al-Kaf's through the hybrid architectural fabric of Tarim. Hadhrami masons and plaster craftsmen incorporated the architectural languages of Neoclassicism, Rococo, Mughal, Art Nouveau and Art Deco of Abu Bakr's drawings into their tradition of earthen construction.⁶ In this way the architecture of Tarim, like its broader history, represents a dialogue between cultures both within and outside of contemporary Yemen. Likewise, Tarim was an idealized center to another strata of Hadhrami's abroad. The city functioned as an almost mythical space of a sacred community of the Prophet's descendants. The tombs and houses of pious individual monumentalize this significance.

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The significance of Tarim as an urban heritage site lies in a full range of cultural phenomena. Whether contemporary or traditional, cities are complex cultural-ecological systems. In these dynamic environments, conservation is the challenge of managing change to ensure the past has a role in the future. It entails safeguarding the urban fabric and revitalizing the patterns of life that

⁵ Hartwig, Friedhelm. "Contemplation, Social Reform, and the Recollection of Identity: Hadhrami Travelers Between 1896 and 1972." *Die Welt des Islams* 41 (3): 2001.

⁶ Damluji, Selma S. *The Valley of the Mud Brick Architecture*. Reading, Garnet: 1992.

nurture significant heritage and stimulate the development of new forms. People appeared to help, stories multiplied, and we came to understand Tarim as a complex system spreading far beyond the town limits, across the Indian Ocean to the East, South, and West. With this in mind, it might be more helpful to think of Tarim as much as a cultural landscape as a city. Our ultimate objective is, to quote Graham Fairclough, “to reveal and sustain the great diversity of the interactions between humans and their environment, to protect living traditional cultures and preserve the traces of those which have disappeared ...”⁷ We may begin with the material fabric of individual buildings and the traces of master craftsmen and informal designers, but must move on to unique urban topographies, the broader cultural and historical sphere of the Indian Ocean, and the individual narratives of the early modern era. The challenge only grows as Tarim and other Yemeni cities engage the current wave of global transformations, and their historic fabric buckles under the pressure of demographic shifts, new construction techniques, and changing expectations.

Our efforts began as a documentation-training program with the aim of catalyzing local and international support in establishing institutions to conserve the historic fabric of Tarim. We were not simply capturing and archiving information: we wanted to develop a language that would best express the significance of Tarim, and urge people to act.⁸ In this way the documentation and interpretation process was to contribute to the long-term sustainability of historic Tarim, though at an early stage than usual. To this end, we have turned to video documentation, conventional and spherical photography, computer-aided design and animation, and database technologies to better organize and interpret Tarim’s rich significance. Layering multimedia objects across this terrain has proved to be both cost and time effective.

⁷ Fairclough, Graham. “Cultural Landscape, Sustainability, and living with Change.” In Managing Change. Los Angeles, Getty Conservation Institute: 2005.

⁸ Conlon, James, Jerome, Pamela and Al-Radi, Selma. "Documentation of the Tarimi Palaces, 2002-2003: Qasr al-'Ishshah." *Yemen Update: Bulletin of the American Institute for Yemeni Studies*, No. 45, 2003, pp 9-22.

Balancing Media, Message and Audience

While the choice to use new media was clear to us, it presented some serious questions concerning the Yemeni public's ability to access our materials. In fact, the statistics on the average Yemeni's access to information technology would lead us to believe that digitization of knowledge is in effect an act of controlling and in turn locking it away. The World Bank statistics on Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) for Yemen are not encouraging. Based on statistics from 2001, personal computing and internet use is rare and expensive in Yemen. Out of Yemen's population of 18 million, there are only 1.9 people per every 1,000 who have a personal computer. Yemen has only 17,000 internet users, and the average monthly off-peak service charge for access to the World Wide Web is \$44.50. My high-speed connection in Queens, New York costs me a little less than this, and the average cost of a dial-up connection in the rest of the Middle East and North Africa is \$26.50. The region in general also enjoys more users and a more developed infrastructure than Yemen. There is no information on the ICT business and government environment available.⁹ The final consideration is of course the language issue. There are few versions of the software we use available in Arabic, while the World Wide Web is only now becoming a multilingual information medium. Even with Arabic fonts and Unicode making non-Latin alphabets more prevalent on the web, the literacy rate in Yemen is around 40%.

Why then use web-based media at all as a documentation and representational strategy for historic Tarim? As the new media theorist Lev Manovich has pointed out, "Just as there is no 'innocent eye,' there is no "pure computer." New media technologies have become so ubiquitous we forget the distance we ourselves

⁹<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/MENAEXT/YEMENEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20185670~menuPK:310190~pagePK:141137~piPK:217854~theSitePK:310165,00.html>

have from our computers. Interactions with our machines mostly occur at an end stage of selections and compositions. The programmer works directly with binary code; others may use HTML, Java, or Action Script, while most of us have become adept at manipulating drop-down menus and selecting options from an extensive, albeit finite, library. Our personal history of computing occurs through a long process of mediation, drawing on a wealth of social metaphors. Individual acumen and creativity comes as much in our presentation and adaptation of software to particular social contexts. If we are prudent enough to work with the limited infrastructure of Yemen, we may use new media to enhance the way we express the significance of heritage within the appropriate social contexts and cultural metaphors of Yemen.¹⁰ I am arguing then that a deep understanding of audience must come to the fore in this context.

With this in mind, we sought to design primarily visually-oriented resources that would complement oral presentations and group-oriented learning. Emphasizing visual over textual content helps us work through the language issue. What is more, this approach better complements traditional narrative techniques and the general emphasis on oral transmission of knowledge. It also enables us to empower local experts, needing only one person familiar with computers and English to reach a larger audience. We use Arabic in the navigation, while the majority of the English-language content covers information of more import to American students and academics. There are then practical considerations at work, but one should also keep in mind that visual perception is not a passive recording of information, but an active element of conceptualization that exercises selective, abstract and creative acts of intellectual formation.¹¹

We also pay particular attention to social spaces of presentation, again, for both practical and more symbolic reasons. Many of the merchant villas were built as

¹⁰ Manovich, Lev. The Language of New Media. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2001.

¹¹ Arnheim, Rudolf. Visual Thinking. Berkely, University of California Press, 1969.

powerful urban monuments signifying the affluence of a new elite.¹² Qasr al-'Ishshah, one of the more significant al-Kaf villas, has been adapted into a cultural heritage center. We have in turn targeted this building to disseminate our interpretive materials, attempting to reassert its monumentality while bolstering its new life as an educational center. Although we take advantage of Flash Animation and XML technologies housing our material online, there is no reason why our Virtual Indian Ocean cannot sit on an average hard drive. The boys center at Qasr al-'Ishshah has access to computers, so our partners distribute our resource off-line in their small computer lab. This allows us to take advantage of the pedagogical mission of the center, the availability of local expertise, and the inherent monumentality of the space to perform history.

Marshall McLuhan argued that the medium, independent of content, has its own intrinsic effects. It is this essence that ultimately shapes a medium's unique message, even beyond its content. The message of any medium or technology is in effect the change of scale, pace or pattern that it introduces into society. "The medium is the message" because it is the "medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action."¹³ There has been much written on the effects of new media technologies on society,¹⁴ and these technologies will undoubtedly shape Yemeni society for generations to come. At the same time, no culture is a passive object. Different people engage technologies reshaping them just as they themselves are transformed. We are still in the early stages of our project to document and interpret Tarim, but it is my hope that our use of new media technologies will also complement the nascent social and cultural elements at work to conserve the historic city.

¹² Damluji discusses this idea extensively, while Boxberger also covers the increase in the performance of affluence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹³ McLuhan, Marshall. Understanding Media, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964.

¹⁴ Castells, Manuel. Information Age. New York, Random House: 2001; Conlon, James. 2004. "Crossing into the Twisted World." In Life in the Wires: The CTheory Reader. Arthur and Marilouise Kroger (eds.). New World Perspectives Books. 2003; Gere, Charlie. Digital Culture. London, Reaction Books: 2002; Heideger, Martin. The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays. New York, Harper and Row, 1977; Manovich. The Language of New Media; and McLuhan. Understanding Media.

Postscript: The Changing Urban Landscape

The cultural sphere that defined the significance of Tarim has changed dramatically since the inception of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) in 1969. As the nations of the Indian Ocean region gained their independence, the open flow of people and money through this area decreased dramatically.¹⁵ The new communist regime in South Yemen did not help matters: in some cases they appropriated the land and assets of the affluent driving them from the country. The natural growth and innovation of Tarim's urban fabric gave way to centralized, bureaucratic planning. Considering this legacy along side the demographic changes taking place in contemporary Yemen, there is great pressure on unique urban settings in Hadhrami cities like Tarim. The social mechanisms within society that have developed and nurtured this urban heritage are in themselves threatened.

If we trace one path for Tarim into the future, even a quick study of Yemen's demographics points to potentially unchecked urban expansion, overcrowdings, and poverty. Yemen's entire population had reached about 18.5 million people by the year 2003. This number in itself is not alarming: Bombay, Cairo and many other cities are reaching this number on their own. Of Yemen's population, only about one million live in the Hadhramaut Governorate, where Tarim is located. But Yemen's growth rate falls between 2.7% and 3.5% per year, a high rate for any country.¹⁶ Hadhramis and the Yemeni government both see the quiet, open spaces of the region as a valuable resource, although to different ends. The central government is focusing development efforts on road construction,

¹⁵ Freitag, Ulrike and Clarence-Smith, William G eds. Hadhrami traders, scholars, and statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s-1960s. Leiden: Brill, 2003

¹⁶ From the World Bank country indicators, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/MENAEXT/YEMENEXTN/0,,menuPK:310174~pagePK:141132~piPK:141107~theSitePK:310165,00.html> . The Ministry of Public Health and Population estimated a population of 18,862,999 for 2001.

extending its reach into sparsely populated regions like the Hadhramaut and the Tihama in the hopes of opening new opportunities to citizens in the more crowded north. If the Yemeni population continues to increase at its current rate, and unplanned construction continues as well, we will soon witness a full demographic explosion in Tarim and the other historic cities of the Valley. It is already common to see northerners running shops and businesses in Sey'un, the largest city in the Valley, and the shape of cities like Shibam, al-Qatan, and Tarim are changing already under the earliest effects of these shifts. More changes will follow the expansion of new roads, although there are few statistics at this point. The pressures may not reach the proportions of regional mega-cities like Cairo or Bombay in our lifetime, but the patterns of change tell a troubling story.¹⁷

There is a nascent conservation movement forming amongst local stakeholders, and the national government and other local and international nongovernmental organizations are taking interest in the program. The Social Fund for Development, for one, has supported a pilot project to stabilize and restore the Qasr al-'Ishshah, one of the most significant merchant villas. Al-'Ishshah is now the local headquarters for the Yemeni Society for History and Heritage Protection, as I mentioned above. This organization has established a modest house museum and gallery as well as a boys' center. They plan on using Dar Dawil, the oldest section of the villa, for a women's center in the coming year. Although this individual pilot project has produced results, the need remains for a citywide conservation plan as well as an endowed institution dedicated to managing change in the city.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Omar al-Hallaj, Director of the Shibam Historic City Project, and Lamiya Khalidi, Director of the Zabid Documentation Training Program, for their information on these demographic changes.