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Two Pre-Islamic Places of Worship in the Tourism Landscape of the UAE

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Abstract: As suggested by the title, this paper explores two of the several archaeological sites that configure religious loci in the territory of the current United Arab Emirates. It does so by assessing their relevance, by refining their nature and historical context, and by analyzing their positioning as components of a tourism mix. The core research question is whether or not integration is accomplished. Both structures are quite well known in the academic literature and underwent excavation and conservation investments that allow their proper use and promotion. Discussion and conclusions identify challenges for achieving an appropriate integration with conditioning supply factors.

Keywords: archaeology; Abu Dhabi; Umm Al Quwain; heritage tourism; commodification



Citation: De Man, Adriaan. 2022.

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Religions 13: 715. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080715>

Academic Editors: Fátima Matos Silva, Isabel Borges and Helena Albuquerque

Received: 25 June 2022

Accepted: 4 August 2022

Published: 8 August 2022

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1. Introduction

The archaeological remains of ed-Dur and Sir Bani Yas represent two major inactive religious sites. Their precise location, historical meaning, current preservation, and tourism integration are dissimilar to all but two intertwined extents, namely an international scientific relevance that spills over to a cultural tourism purpose. Institutional and private stakeholder involvement differs as well, which reflects on specific branding and entrepreneurial dimensions. The conservation of heritage, within a rationale of public interest, is also a widely shared objective and, as such, becomes comparable in the light of socioeconomic development and, more specifically, in that of the cultural tourism industry.

2. Results

Through a heuristic approach and a comparative conclusion, cultural tourism potential for the sites is established, and important levels of integration, although asymmetric from a comparative viewpoint, were achieved. Further attention needs to be given to archaeological research and commodification.

The interdependencies between archaeological research and leisure have been studied for quite some time now and converge within the broad field of cultural tourism (Campbell 2004; Pinter 2005; Richards 2016; Walker and Carr 2016; Timothy and Tahan 2020). Religious heritage plays a defined role in this outline, from the perspective of pilgrimage, indeed of all sites that welcome tourists and, more specifically, of the ones that do no longer function as locations for worship (Nolan and Nolan 1992; Hernández Espinosa and Ontiveros 2020; Burgess 2021), which is the topic of this paper. The precise archaeological references to both temples under examination, one from the 1st–2nd centuries AD to an eastern Arabian deity and one Christian, dating from the 6th century, are provided below, but their integration in regional tourism development plans finds support in comparable case studies (Butler and Suntikul 2018; Scarce 2020; Chaddad 2021). Economic growth and archaeology are often perceived as mutually beneficial yet are not naturally aligned and do generate multiple colliding interests (Gould and Pyburn 2016), although edited volumes on capacity building (Srivastava 2021), local development (Girard and Nijkamp 2016),

and place regeneration (Wise and Jimura 2021) offer wide-angle insights on benefits and opportunities for community-centered heritage tourism. The UAE is fertile in examples that simultaneously integrate dynamics common to the MENA region (Seyfi and Hall 2021) and others that are profoundly local, with regard to narratives on the use of architectural heritage (Auji 2022), historic building restoration (Somhegyi 2019), sustainable conservation practice (Best 2022) and their integration in cultural tourism proposals for specific local destinations (De Man 2018; Longart and Iankova 2022).

Ed-Dur is a major archaeological site in the emirate of Umm Al Quwain, with successive consistent occupations since the Bronze Age, but it is especially significant as an academic reference because of its classical development into a commercial coastal hub. The main excavated structure, and the core argument for a World Heritage inscription application, is a rectangular temple that was identified in and has been studied since the 1980s by a team from Ghent University, led by Ernie Haerinck, following initial joint seasons with other European teams (see Boucharlat et al. 1988, 1989). The prolific, multidisciplinary outputs from this Belgian mission (Haerinck et al. 1991; Haerinck 1992; Van Neer and Gautier 1993; Vrydaghs et al. 2001; Daems 2004; De Waele 2007; Rutten 2007, to mention just a few) and subsequent spinoff projects in the region by original and new team members (e.g., the excavations at Mleiha, now directed by Bruno Overlaet; e.g., Overlaet and Haerinck 2014; Overlaet 2015; Overlaet et al. 2016) remain fundamental as source material for the local domestic and defensive architecture, and indeed the material expression of this important classical settlement in which Roman, eastern Mediterranean, southern Mesopotamian, Iranian, and Indian imports from the first centuries BC and AD have been recovered. The temple itself is, in fact, a sanctuary to a solar deity and is about eight square meters, erected in large, well-cut stone and covered in a geometrically decorated gypsum (Figure 1). Several altars surround the temple, while combustion areas and hydraulic infrastructures are connected to it in some way, in addition to a funerary area (Haerinck 2011). A large Aramaic inscription identifies the deity Shamash, hence the attribution of the complex to this sun god, an observation strengthened by further architectural details and by the widespread evidence of solar cults in this Arabian region (perceptible through multiple coin emissions and a reference by Ptolemy to a sacred sun promontory, plausibly located just north of ed-Dur, see Potts 1991 and Groom 1986, respectively). In structural terms, the temple is a balanced result of superposed, well-cut ashlar with corner and entrance pillars, as well as plaster decorations, originally painted, including the addition of hemicylindrical imitations of columns and pedestals on each side of the monumental entrance, which would have supported statues (Haerinck et al. 1993; see Figure 2).

Despite its quasi-isodomic configuration, the temple lacks any foundations and is built directly on the sand. Precise ritual practices at ed-Dur have been subject to some speculation, given the lack of direct written or iconographic sources, with the exception of some local coinage and funerary epigraphy (Haerinck et al. 1998). Yet, as pointed out by Haerinck (2012), it seems fair to assume a tradition that links to the reality described in a 9th-century source, the Kitab al-Asnam (Faris 1952), in which the adoration of idols is presented as ubiquitous in Arabia, and the process includes the circumambulation of temples, where stones representing deities, as well as animals, would be offered—a plausible interpretation for the many fireplaces, pebbles, stones, and altars around the temple of ed-Dur.



Figure 1. Temple of Shamash, at ed-Dur (Umm Al Quwain), during conservation works.



Figure 2. Entrance to the temple (note the pedestals and gypsum).

Sir Bani Yas is a small island just off the coast of the emirate of Abu Dhabi, in front of Al Dhannah, some 430 km southwest of Umm Al Quwain, in the direction of the Saudi border. The archaeological significance of the entire coastline was validated by a multiyear initiative, the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, or ADIAS, which identified thousands of sites during its operational period. Sir Bani Yas was one of the first surveyed islands, and its Christian structures were quickly recognized and published (King and Hellyer 1994). At

that point in time, a few Nestorian churches had already been identified in the northern Gulf area, as well as in Saudi Arabia, but not in the eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula (King et al. 1995). Current archaeological systematizations have gathered more comprehensive data but still depend on local fieldwork. Subsequent research and Sir Bani Yas, partly through a geophysical survey (Křivánek 1997) and partly through test trenches and open area excavation (Figure 3), defined the perimeter of a monastery containing a number of small units, interpreted as individual cells organized in blocs with their own cistern, and a church. This building follows a rather standard plan (central nave, two aisles, and a narthex). Architectural elasticity conferred by the stucco allowed for the creation of curved interior surfaces (niches, domes) and decorative elements, such as Greek and Latin crosses, geometric motifs, vine scrolls, and floral patterns (Elders 2003), which, together with radiocarbon and formal indicators, provide a 6th- to 7th-century chronology with some opportunity to establish constructive and abandonment phases (Carter 2008), fully aligned with the timeframe of the unsuccessful late antique attempts to evangelize the Arabian Gulf. The monastic nature of daily life is well reflected by very modest material culture, of which perhaps the glass fragments become most indicative (Phelps et al. 2018), in addition to some pottery provenance studies, which amplify the idea of Gulf-wide connections (Carter et al. 2011).



Figure 3. Aerial view of the Nestorian church, in the courtyard of the monastery at Sir Bani Yas, during excavation (2009).

3. Discussion

The development of archaeological sites for public use, be it community-based, educational, commercial, tourism-oriented, or still in the scope of a multipurpose transversal strategy, depends heavily on the ability to ensure the conservation of the resource. This equation is theoretically straightforward, but, in practice, one always detects a collision between cultural usufruct and physical deterioration, and the metrics of sustainability become progressively social instead of academic. Visitors are entitled to a reasonable return on their expectations, which depends not only on the site itself but on the integrated experience, including the enveloping cultural landscapes of the emirates (De Man 2020). Leaving aside the detailed stratigraphic specificities of a site such as Sir Bani Yas, what matters to consumer satisfaction is the production of uniqueness, which starts with conservation planning. Following the initial excavations mentioned above, 2009 marked the beginning

of renewed fieldwork, articulated with the development of a tourism project on the island. As part of a hiking trail, the fully excavated monastery is to serve as part of a natural and archaeological heritage product. In addition to stabilization of mortars, removal of vegetation, and reburial of selected areas, the construction of a shelter covering the site constitutes a preventive action to cope with severe environmental conditions (Goodburn-Brown et al. 2012; see Figure 4). Indeed, the unforgiving local climate often dictates conservation options that heavily restrict visitor engagement. In the case of the Shamash temple at ed-Dur, the building was not reburied and suffered greatly from three decades of exposure to the elements (Hellyer 2019). A recent conservation project carried out by ICCROM's ATHAR (Architectural and Archaeological Tangible Heritage in the Arab Region) program and the Umm Al Quwain Department of Tourism and Antiquities dealt with the rehabilitation of plasters, and the site now requires a long-term solution for its preservation.



Figure 4. Current perspective on the site, incl. shelter and walkway.

The commodification procedures put in place at both sites integrate tendencies explored by a vast body of literature, ranging from theory to case studies (see Timothy 2011 or Bhowmik 2021, for general synopses, and Baillie et al. 2010, for constructive practicalities). Given the purpose of this paper, the following ideas may provide a supporting background. One mainstream notion is that religious sites may function as embodiments of the past, through leisure and education activities, and therefore lose, or have already lost, part of their original meaning (Olsen 2003). This directly connects with a second fundamental concept (Ashworth 2000) that insists on the need for considering the place as a primordial element in the creation of heritage tourism. It is, of course, impossible to disentangle ed-Dur and Sir Bani Yas from their territories without losing basic layers of authenticity. But it is the very perception of sacredness, as coined by Levi and Kocher (2013) that, even in purely staged contexts, stimulates consumer interest. A third key notion is socioeconomic, as impacts of religious heritage commodification come over as encouraging in circumscribed or niche destinations (Shepherd 2018; Aldyan 2020) as well as in major archaeological attractions, where temples or sacred spaces are fully desacralized features. In such cases, managing levels of authenticity is massively important to the commodification effort, in

parallel with the notion of public heritage ownership (Gill-Robinson 2007), to be treated in a reasonably similar manner in the optics of consumer participation.

The use of heritage tourism has become central to UAE policy, producing a number of challenges to the sector, from promotion to preservation (Seraphim and Haq 2019). They emerge in a national leisure market that counts on significant investment in tourism infrastructures and events and that selectively taps into segments such as heritage (Bodolica et al. 2020). Archaeology, in particular, has been a vigorous accelerator to the sector, with emirates heavily increasing the conservation of heritage tangibles, keeping tourism growth in sight. This effort is, however, not exclusively concentrated on sites and is part of larger ecosystems that integrate museums, creative arts, and cultural landscapes. The precise forms through which the past is to be amalgamated with the present are, however, wrapped in some ambiguity, not only practical but also substantial. On the one hand, the importance of UAE archaeology has a long-lasting specificity (Blau 1995) that shares conflicting levels of interest with other countries. On the other, the associations between archaeological heritage and tourism often produce pressures on the sense of identity, particularly in a nation with a majority of expat residents, and with pervasive monetization of traditions for tourism consumption. Institutional support for heritage preservation as an end in itself (Szuchman 2012), not specifically as an ingredient for the tourism industry, does promote meaningful social awareness of tangible heritage. Two correlated dimensions further uphold commodification from a pedagogical standpoint. First, the association between historical forts and archaeological sites or museums as places of convergence, innovation, and social entrepreneurship (Eid 2019); second, the capitalization on archaeology-based UNESCO World Heritage, unequivocally understood as beneficial, promoted as such by tourism agencies and companies (e.g., Bidaa Bint Saud, Hili, Jebel Hafeet). Both realities provide society with cognitive references on heritage. The recent work on the Sir Bani Yas monastery constitutes a visible offshoot of this strategic cultural model, of which archaeological tourism is a quintessential component.

4. Materials and Methods

Distribution may be achieved fundamentally by concentrating either on isolated tangibles or on aggregated tourism products. While, in theory, the latter would seem a fine choice, this depends on the variables mentioned above, namely their immediate leisure potential, their location, and their impacts. Not all religious historical sites present the same inherent tourism qualities, which also do not necessarily align with other strategic goals, in purely scientific or political terms. Assuming assimilation into larger economic development platforms, primary benefits need to merge with multiple local stakeholder interests, which are inherently nonlinear and oftentimes problematic (e.g., Chen and Chen 2010; Seyfi et al. 2019; Li et al. 2020). The relationship between heritage and residents is generally positive at the abstract level but frequently leads to “not-in-my-backyard” attitudes (Qiu et al. 2019), and it has been empirically demonstrated that residents living farther away from sites have a more favorable perspective on heritage tourism than the ones living in close proximity to the heritage attraction itself (Rasoolimanesh et al. 2019). In the particular cases of ed-Dur and Sir Bani Yas, the lack of adjacent urban pressure invalidates any severe unenthusiastic response to begin with. This does not mean that civic and practical visitor reservations are implicitly nonexistent. Other inconvenient geographical considerations can arguably be factored in, unrelated to issues such as real estate development and rather due to the absence of infrastructures. Heritagization has become such a common reality in any tourism experience that up to 80% of all travel nowadays includes some sort of cultural pursuit, such as gastronomy or shopping (Timothy 2014), not only historical heritage, which means that visitors expect a coherent and varied experience, and that excessive marketing emphasis on archaeology may in fact become counterproductive to leisure demand.

Heritage clusters in the UAE reveal different levels of densification, and specifically, micro-clustering may represent a suitable response to territorial challenges in places away

from large hubs (De Man and Hassan 2022). While niche products do offer interesting branding and marketing opportunities, they always need to be packaged in terms of hospitality. With very few exceptions worldwide, the vast majority of standalone archaeological sites cannot anchor quality supply through intrinsic value alone. Ed-Dur is located a few kilometers from the Khor Al Bidiyah peninsula, where the Umm Al Quwain beachline displays several hotels and resorts and is easily accessible at less than a 1 h drive from Dubai, the main UAE tourism center. Conversely, Al Dhannah, from where one crosses to Sir Bani Yas, is a 250 km highway drive from Abu Dhabi city. The island resorts are located amidst a wildlife reserve within walking distance to the archaeological site. In both cases, the heritage sites enhance an existing leisure product, not the opposite, and are not economically crucial to demand, although they integrate an authentic and sustainable proposition. On the other hand, restoration projects of historical sites attract global investors (Chhabra 2015) and, unsurprisingly, overall visitor satisfaction depends heavily on the quality of cultural heritage destinations (Huh et al. 2006; Domínguez-Quintero et al. 2020). Sir Bani Yas has positioned itself as a nature-based, family-friendly luxury destination. A proposition augmented by the notion of island exclusiveness and the geographical remoteness from any major urban center. It is home to the Arabian Wildlife Park, with an announced 17,000 free-roaming animals and five-star retreats, to which the monastery becomes a marketable addition. While clustering is observable in the example of ed-Dur, integration is less coherent due to perceived distances, city articulations, commodification, and tourism promotion, which can be optimized in the scope of multi-level place branding (Hartman 2022). In which case, all relevant stakeholders would be required to come together and take ed-Dur as a key argument.

Apart from partaking in archaeological and conservational solutions, governmental involvement with both the temple and the monastery comprises tourism branding ventures. The promotion of the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Umm Al Quwain is designed on strategic axes, plugging into a common federal vision whilst offering location-specific distinctiveness. Destination branding has been instrumental to the successful diversification policy of the UAE (Ahmed et al. 2022) and to the individual emirates (Balakrishnan 2008; Westwood 2012; Kotsi and Michael 2015; Al Saed et al. 2020), which offer singular tourism value propositions based on their cultural landscapes. The national economic vision embraces the diversity of the respective tourism potential, which is very noticeable in the northern emirates, where the added value of local heritage does not gravitate around the large distribution structures of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. In fact, Umm Al Quwain, Ajman, Fujairah, and Ras Al Khaimah are exemplary dimensioned, emirate-level tourism systems, and they have been promoting their unique territorial attributes (Daleure 2017), as is the case in Sharjah (Alsalamy and Al-Zaman 2021), a much larger, coast-to-coast emirate with a capital city in logistical and physical contiguity with Dubai, and with solid heritage destination branding activity (Saji 2017). In fact, the tourism authorities of all emirates provide digital outreach channels that reflect, precisely, archaeological and historical destinations blended with natural heritage. Ed-Dur is central to the cultural offerings on the government of Umm Al Quwain's Department of Tourism and Archaeology website and is presented as vastly significant, albeit detached from the hotel and investment-related section. Potential forthcoming commodification, either private or public, might densify partnerships between hospitality stakeholders and not only the temple of Shamash but the entire site. In turn, the monastery at Sir Bani Yas is managed by the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism, and the emirate's dedicated tourism site highlights the island, suggesting a Desert Islands Resort and Spa Culture Tour that includes the archaeological site. Along with immediate commercial interest and archaeological research, the long-term return on investment is multilayered, based on a longstanding policy of tolerance within the United Arab Emirates. In 2017, some thirty Christian ecclesiastics from the Gulf region and the then Minister of State for Tolerance, Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, gathered at the monastery of Sir Bani Yas, in the context of the government's Tolerance Agenda, representing a particularly symbolic convergence between religion, archaeology, and heritage tourism. Subsequent

activities, such as the official reopening of the site in 2019, during the Year of Tolerance, included the presence of the Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia, which occurred in the wake of Pope Francis' historic visit to the UAE a few months earlier. These protocolar events do considerably enhance the public significance of the site.

Comparative regional results reveal a need for tackling management concerns, with multiple Saudi, Omani, and Qatari sites facing not only environmental, conservation, and interpretation challenges but also generic tourism-related issues and, more precisely, the use of religious sites for heritage tourism (Kessler and Raj 2018; Al-Tokhais and Thapa 2020; Rico 2020). In addition to integrated online communication and business-related platforms, digital data acquisition of the building features and ensuing processing, for instance, as 3D models, empowers both academic and societal actors and leads to a more refined construal of archaeological realities. This ultimately becomes critical for composing outreach and cultural tourism products (e.g., Egger and Neuburger 2020; Liritzis et al. 2021; Ugwitz et al. 2021; Yin et al. 2021).

5. Conclusions

The original sacred and religious dimension of the two practical cases is understandably not a social obstacle to current tourism development. Such structures are perceived as archaeological resources, and sensitivities relate primarily to urban development, conservation, and access rather than ancient and late antique worshipping practices. Even to the significant Christian population in the UAE, Nestorian monasticism remains a foreign unfamiliar reality. No living communities feel religiously attached to the temple of the sun god at ed-Dur. This contrasts with comparable religious buildings and sites elsewhere, given that tourism may interfere with current religious practice.

Opportunities for further developing the two archaeological sites described in this paper need resourcefulness from two intersecting players, the institutional and the entrepreneurial. The former has ethical responsibilities, and prevalent socioeconomic interest, in overseeing the preservation, study, and management of archaeological sites. The latter is able to capitalize on cultural hospitality, and downstream on a variety of ancillary service industries, by building competitive advantages through the idea of heritage uniqueness.

Pre-Islamic religious heritage can also be promoted as a trans-emirate cultural itinerary. Sir Bani Yas is not the only identified late antique church, and a second one, on Marawah island, also in Abu Dhabi, has been known for several decades. Ongoing fieldwork on Siniya Island in Umm Al Quwain, co-directed by Dr. Timothy Power, has just months ago identified yet another church. Similarly, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf area would be able to articulate the religious archaeology of other cultural and historical periods, and successfully commodify them, from a regional microscale to the level of international cultural tourism networks.

Funding: Research was funded by the UAEU College of Humanities and Social Sciences and UPAR grant 12H012.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author wishes to thank Rianne Norbart (DCT Education & Outreach Department), Mariam Al Nuaimi (DCT Destination Marketing Department), and Zaki Aslan (ICCROM), for the photographs.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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