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Project Summary

Landscapes of Faith Project

First Results of Excavations at Early Islamic Period Sites in North Qatar 2022-2023

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Project Summary

Glazed pottery and glass allows us date most of the sites to the 8th and 9th c. CE.

The project investigates archaeological sites in Qatar that span the period of conversion between Christianity and Islam during the 1st to 3rd centuries of Islam (7th-9th c. CE). This crucial period inspired the title of the project, Landscapes of Faith. As well as surveying Qatar to find new sites of this dates, excavations have taken place at two site in the north, during two seasons in winter 2022 and winter 2023. We hope to continue excavations in the future.

Map of north Qatar showing location of Early Islamic Period sites.

More than 30 sites of this period are now known in Qatar. Although the site of Murwab is well known and has been excavated since the 1950s, recent years have seen the identification of numerous new ones, mostly in the north of the country. Unlike later settlements in Qatar, these Early Islamic Period sites are nearly all found inland.

Cross mould from Umm Al Maradim, central Qatar. This provides good evidence for the presence of Christians in Qatar. Early Islamic period pottery was found in the same vicinity.

These sites are Early Islamic Period in date, but not all of them are necessarily Islamic in terms of the faith of their people, as the Christian presence persisted in eastern Arabia well into the 8th c. CE (the 2nd century of Islam). We know this from archaeological finds of churches and monasteries with 7th-8th century occupations in neighbouring countries. The historical sources written in Syriac also indicate a strong Christian presence, and suggest that Qatar itself contained at least one important Christian centre of learning in the 7th century CE. Many leading Christian scholars of that time are identified as "Qatari" and the whole region of eastern Arabia came to be known as Beth Qatraye – the "Region of the Qataris".

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Research Questions

Outline of building clusters at Ain Mohammed South showing their locations around a depression in the desert (rawda), which has now been converted into a farm.

Key research questions include:

Why are there so many sites of this date in the Qatari desert, and why were they located in these particular areas?

Similar sites are not found in earlier periods in Qatar. There is not such a high number of settlements again until the 18th c. CE, around 1000 years later, when coastal towns dependent on pearl fishing appear.

Unlike the later focus on coastal settlement, the Early Islamic Period sites are nearly all found in inland areas, usually around a shallow depression (rawda) where water and soil natural collects.

A traditional well in Qatar, mid 20th c. CE

Bedouin tent (bait sha'ar) next to a rawda in the desert of north Qatar, mid 20th c. CE

What were the chief activities of the inhabitants, and how did they sustain themselves in the desert?

In more recent centuries farming was very rare in Qatar, and the desert was occupied mostly by nomadic herding communities (bedouin). The nomads camped around the rawdas in the desert but only rarely built in stone and did not build permanent villages. Is it possible that the people of the Early Islamic period sites, which often have extensive stone architecture, lived in permanent villages and successfully engaged in agriculture?

Were other economic activities such as manufacturing and trade also important in sustaining these communities?

Research Questions

A natural rawda after rain.

Bronze ring with cross motif from Umm Jadar, central Qatar, where Early Islamic Period pottery was also found, along with later material.

There may be a small simple mosque at this Early Islamic site, Nahayy B, just outside the bottom right corner of the main complex. The project is not yet excavating here, but may do so in the future.

Key research questions include:

What was the surrounding environment and climate like at the time the sites were occupied?

Changes in environment, natural or man-made, often cause changes in the way of life, and in the nature and distribution of settlement. Remains found within and around archaeological sites can often tell us about the ancient environment. Was the Qatari desert more suitable for permanent settlement in the Early Islamic Period because the climate was better?

Is there are evidence for the faith identity of the inhabitants, and the process of conversion to Islam?

Such evidence might be found in the objects, architecture and ecofacts (especially food remains relating to diet) discovered at these sites. These may show whether and how life changed for the ancient inhabitants of Qatar in response to the arrival of the new religion.

A few sites already show such evidence. For example, as well as a cross-mould from Umm Al Maradim, which would have been used to make a small metal cross for Christian devotional purposes, a ring was found at Umm Jadar with a cross motif, along with pottery of the Early Islamic Period and recent centuries.

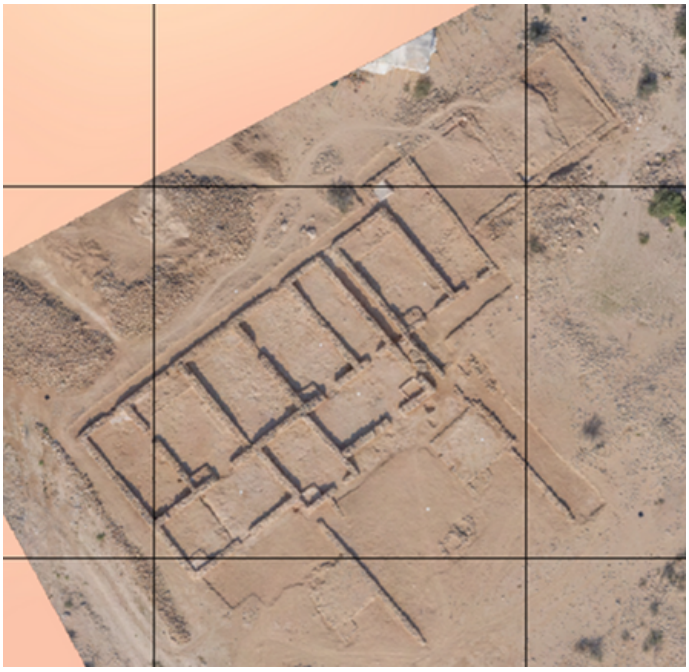
A few sites show early mosques. Two simple mosques have been excavated at Murwab, dating to the 9th c. CE, while another example is possibly found at Nahayy B, which likely dates to the late 8th or early 9th c. CE. This one has not yet been excavated.

Architecture

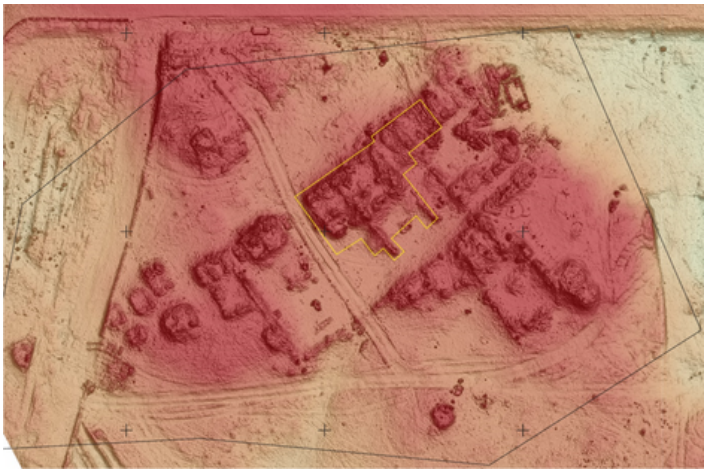
The two sites picked for excavation were Ain Mohammed North B and Mesaika A. Unlike most other sites, which consisted of long lines of small buildings separated by space, these contained large complex buildings, or smaller units clustered together, sharing walls and spaces.

The results were very unexpected. Instead of simply being villages, the central buildings were carefully planned, showing regular architecture with repeated conjoined units containing identical installations (platforms and basins) located in the same place in each unit. They resemble small industrial units rather than homes. There were no kitchen areas or facilities. However there is evidence for people lighting small fires and cooking casually on the floors of the rooms, perhaps towards the end of the life of the sites.

The beginning of work at Ain Mohammed in 2022. The site does not look obvious to the untrained eye, but the mounds of stone concealed a large complex of ancient architecture.



Kite photo of the excavated area of Ain Mohammed North B after the 2023 season. Rows of rooms contain identical features of platforms and basins with drains.

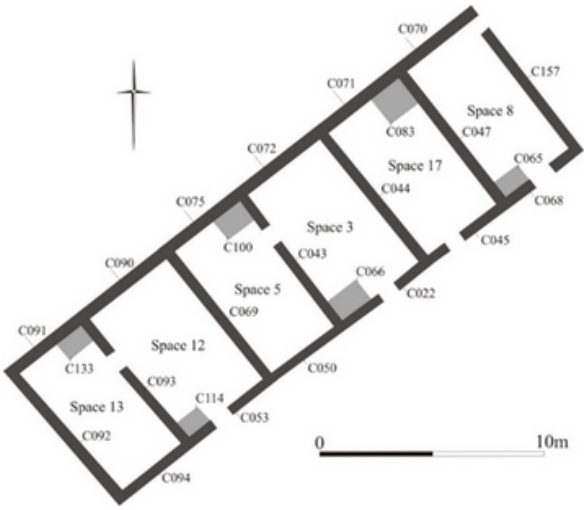


Overhead image (DEM) of Ain Mohammed North B before excavation, showing outlines of the collapsed building complex. The site is in a busy area and has already been damaged by roads, off-road driving and cable installation, so excavation and protection are a major priorities. The area excavated so far is shown in yellow.

Architecture

The buildings, platforms and basins were very carefully made. The walls and installations were covered with white gypsum plaster, and the basins were equipped with finely made drains that ran through the building walls into an external drainage pit. Arched windows were provided, suggesting that the occupants were expected to stay inside working during the day. Walled courtyards adjoined the buildings which included shaded platforms and small enclosures or sheds.

We have only found five such large, clustered sites with remains that appear similar to these. Most of the other sites consist of long lines or scatters of small, simple buildings, with occasional small clusters and a few larger buildings. Several such lines and small clusters are found in the vicinity of the large, clustered sites, including at Ain Mohammed. It is possible that some of the people who lived there worked in the large complexes nearby.



Outline plan of the first phase of the main building at Ain Mohammed. The regular placing of basins and platforms in pairs of rooms shows that it was carefully planned and consisted of three production units.. Basins were in the northeastern corners of the rooms, and platforms in the southwest corners.

The site of Mesaika A contained a large, planned building with the same kinds of basins and platforms as Ain Mohammed North. The overall site is larger and higher than Ain Mohammed North, and only a small section of the western end has been opened - more buildings like this are expected in the future.

Later on the building was modified and extended, with long benches put into the north ends of some rooms,, extra rooms with basins and platforms added to the south and east sides, a corridor inserted, and courtyards with large platforms added to the south.

Architecture

Some of the basins had high sides, like this one at Ain Mohammed, but not all. All had well-made drains that led through the wall to a drainage pit on the other side.

Carefully made basins covered with gypsum plaster contained drainage holes that led through the walls to a pit on the other side. These basins must have been used for washing, or processing something, perhaps dyeing. The platforms must have been working surfaces. They did not have drains.

Cup marks and grooves carved into a basin that had been incoporated into a corridor at Ain Mohammed.

The building at Ain Mohammed was modified during the life of the site: a corridor was driven through one of the rooms, and the plastered basin that had previously been in the corner of the room became a threshold. Interestingly, before the new corridor wall was built over one side of it, someone carved lines cup-marks and lines into the gypsum plaster. The designs closely resemble the carved rock at Jebel Jassasiya and other rock art sites in Qatar.

The walls at Mesaika are well-preserved and show that white plaster once completely covered the stone and mud architecture.

FINDS AND DATING

POTTERY (CERAMICS)

Pottery vessels and fragments (ceramics) are often the best way to date a site. At both sites a kind of turquoise-glazed pottery with pellets and ribbons applied beneath the glaze shows that they were occupied sometime between the mid 8th and 10th centuries CE (potentially 750-1000 CE). At Ain Mohammed, but not Mesaika, a finely moulded ware with thin yellow or greenish glaze was found; this first appeared in trhe Abbasid world during the late 8th century (perhaps around 780 CE or soon after). The absence of certain types is useful for dating: both sites lack a range of colourfully glazed ceramics which are common in the Abbasid world after the early 9th c. CE (from around 830 CE).

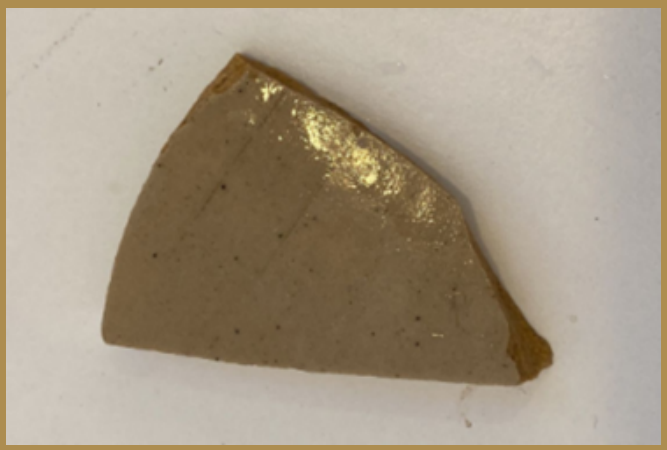
We can therefore say that Ain Mohammed B was probably occupied only during a short period (around 780-830 CE), while Mesaika A may bey slightly earlier (around 750-780 CE). Future work at the sites may provide new evidence that expands or shortens the date ranges.

All of the pottery found at the two sites, both glazed and unglazed, was manufactured outside Qatar, perhaps because Qatar lacks suitable clay sources. The glazed wares were from southern Iraq, while others were from neighbouring regions, most likely including the Iranian coast, Bahrain, the Oman Peninsula and perhaps Al Hasa or the Qatif area. A very small number of pieces are from China. Together these wares show that the communities in Qatar were very well connected to the outside world.

This piece of Turquoise Glazed pottery, found at Mesaika, has characteristic decoration beneath the glaze that indicates a date from the mid 8th century CE onwards. It would have been part of a large jar used to hold liquids.

Fine moulded pottery with possible cross design from Ain Mohammed North B. This may once have had a thin glaze. Like most of the pottery from the site this was probably imported from the Abbasid homelands of Iraq.

Pieces like this fine moulded pottery with a thin glaze allow us to date Ain Mohammed to the very late 8th or early 9th century CE.



This small piece of glazed pottery, from Ain Mohammed, is not from the Middle East but is probably from southern China. It has travelled around 10,000km by sea.

FINDS AND DATING
OTHER FINDS

A large number of crushed glass vessels were found, especially at Ain Mohammed. These consisted of small bottles and bowls, and a few pieces had coloured decoration. Like the pottery, these were imported and resemble glasswares typically found in Iraq and other parts of the Abbasid world.

One remarkable glass sherd from Mesaika was inscribed with writing, but it is not possible to read it with confidence: it might be in either early Arabic script, or in a Syriac script.

Another object with script was found on the surface at Mesaika A. This small copper disc that bears Arabic script and may be a coin or amulet of some sort. It is difficult to date because it was found lying on open ground, and objects of later periods was found on and around the surface of the Early Islamic Period site.

This small copper coin or amulet bears Arabic script, but we are not yet sure if it belongs to the Early Islamic Period or a later century.

Mould-blown glass bottles and bowls are common at the sites. Sometimes they have ribbed decoration like this.

Multi-coloured glass is rare at the sites, but this piece with white rings in bright blue glass was found at Mesaika. The manufacturing technique is unusual.

This fragment of glass bears writing in the Syriac or early Arabic script. Unfortunately it cannot yet be read but we hope to finds more examples

FINDS AND DATING
OTHER FINDS

Also found were various items relating to everyday life, including quern-stones used to grind grain, an iron key, some copper rods (perhaps kohl sticks for applying eye make-up), a few beads, and three spindle whorls.

The spindle whorls are particularly interesting as they relate to textile manufacture. They are very light, indicating that fine thread was spun. Two of them have engraved decoration and closely resembles examples from Fatimid Egypt.

Small beads of stone (banded agate) and glass.

This copper rod from Ain Mohammed was probably a cosmetic tool, a kohl stick, with a chisel at the other end to cut and grind the kohl.

We believe this is a key, because it closely resembles Roman and post-Roman keys from the Middle East and Mediterranean areas.

This grinding stone is part of a quern (grinding stone) used to grind grains such as barley and wheat into flour, to make bread.

These carved bone spindle whorls show that fine thread was spun on the site, and support the theory that textile manufacture was important in Qatar at the time that Ain Mohammed and Mesaika were occupied.

FINDS AND DATING
ANIMAL AND FISH REMAINS

The rubbish thrown out by people in the past is very useful for archaeologists, as it contains not only their broken hardware (such as glass and pottery and many other finds) but also the remains of their food. At Ain Mohammed and Mesaika we found the bones of goat, cattle, camel, duck, pigeon, fish and edible shellfish.

Despite being several kilometres from the sea, a wide range of fish was found, including many kinds that are still favoured by Qataris today, such as shari and shafi. This indicates that they relied heavily on the sea even though they chose not to live on the coast. Dugong bones were also found as well as the remains of crab and cuttlefish.

Among the shellfish we found a large amount of pearl oysters, which could have been collected both for food and in search of pearls. The regional pearl fishery was already famous at the time. Qatar was identified as an important source of pearls by the 10th century author Mas'udi, and a century later Qatari pearls were praised by Al-Biruni as among the finest in the world. The Abbasid caliphs owned several famous pearls, and the historical texts talk of pearl diving expeditions and wealthy pearl merchants in Umayyad and Abbasid times.

Animal and fish bone from Ain Mohammed.


A small pile of pearl oyster shells dumped outside a wall at Ain Mohammed.

FINDS AND DATING

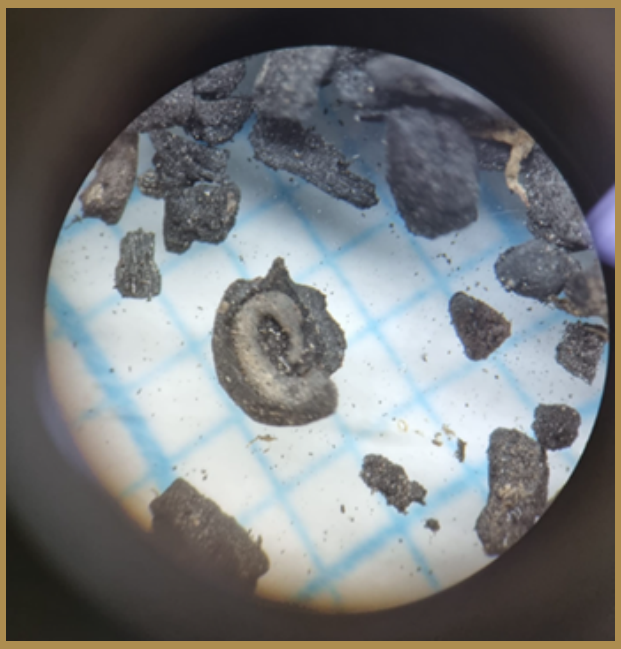
PLANT REMAINS AND EVIDENCE FOR AGRICULTURE

Unexpected results were derived from the plant remains, which survived well as burnt seeds and fragments. Date stones and grains such as wheat and barley were found, alongside a range of vegetables, fruits, spices and medicinal plants. Although further study is needed to confirm some of the identifications, edible plants include aubergine (eggplant), lentil, wheat, barley, coriander, poppy, melon or cucumber, fenugreek, flax, and mallow.

These foods and spices, particularly the aubergine, are evidence that the "Abbasid agricultural revolution" began early in Qatar. During this time farmers experimented by growing a great range of different kinds of vegetables, fruits and spices from all around the world, bringing crops to new places and developing new technologies to increase and enrich agriculture.

The presence of dates, cereal grains and quern-stones alone is not enough to prove that the inhabitants practiced agriculture because these may have been imported to feed the population, as seen in later centuries. However, chaff was found at both sites. Chaff is a by-product of threshing, i.e. the process of separating cereal grains from the stalk. When chaff is found at an archaeological site it is very good evidence that the inhabitants were growing their own crops.

It seems, therefore, that during the Early Islamic Period the people of Qatar grew their own food, perhaps because environmental conditions were better at the time, or perhaps because it made economic sense to invest effort in agriculture to support a settled lifestyle, even if the returns from farming were comparatively low.



The central object has been identified as an aubergine (eggplant) seed that had just started to sprout before it was burned. It is just 2 mm across and the photo was taken using a microscope.

Several date stones were found at both sites. Dates could have been grown locally or imported.

Archaeology and the community

The heritage of Qatar deserves to be widely celebrated, particularly when there are new discoveries that shed new light on Qatari and regional history. For this reason it is important to reach out to local and international communities.

Several activities were organized to involve the public during the field seasons, and both Ain Mohammed and Mesaika were open for visits from the public. All school groups were invited to attend the excavations after their guided tour at Al Zubarah Archaeological Site.

Junior volunteers helping a senior archaeologist excavate at Ain Mohammed.

Visitors examine finds in the excavation tent at Mesaika.

Archaeology and the community

Public days were organized during the weekends towards the end of the field seasons, when the excavations were at their most spectacular. QM volunteers were active participants, for example excavating a midden in Ain Mohammed with abundant finds, and by sieving for small items such as fishbones and seeds. A number of noteworthy artefacts were laid out for display, and explained by an archaeologists.

In December 2023 we also collaborated with Qatar Museums' Teen Council program, during which senior high school students experiences a full day in the life of an archaeologist, experiencing not only field work but visiting the lab and cleaning pottery sherds.

During the months of excavation, there was help from several impassioned adult volunteers, both Qatari and expatriate, who worked on the sites for multiple weekends and gained in-depth experience of archaeology and the sites.

Sieving for small finds.

A volunteer makes a discovery during an open day.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that the two excavated sites were purpose-built for an intensive manufacturing process – factories in other words. Although some people may have lived in these buildings, at least towards the end of their occupation, the people who worked in them probably lived in the long lines of simple buildings nearby, which look more like typical homes.

At the moment we cannot prove what was made in the buildings, but there are some clues that allow us to make an early guess that it might be **textiles**:

- Early Arabic texts only rarely mention Qatar, but when they do, they usually refer to Qatari textiles and garments, including fine cloth, reddish coats, good coats of Qatari wool, striped Qatari garments and Qatari textiles exported to the Hijaz in the time of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh).
- The Syriac Christian texts also refer to textiles originating from the wider region (Beth Qatraye), including not only coarse cloths but also fine textiles made using imported silk.
- The basins that occur regularly in the rooms were evidently used for immersing something in liquid and draining it. Their use for personal hygiene cannot be ruled out, but the process could be for washing fibres or cloth, and/or soaking in a substance to soften it or dye it.
- Spindle whorls from the sites indicate the making of thread, and therefore textiles. Weaving is a common activity on other kinds of sites, but the ones from Ain Mohammed and Mesaika support the other evidence for a textile industry.
- Nails were found embedded in the ground in the middle of several of the rooms, perhaps indicating support to anchor loom frames, or backstrap looms.
- The courtyards attached to the units at both sites are suitable for holding livestock, for example when they are gathered for shearing. Platforms with evidence of roof supports are found in the courtyards, and these could have provided a shaded place for the worker to shear each animal.

CONCLUSIONS

Future excavations could either support or disprove the textile theory. Whatever the case, our results show that something new and remarkable was happening in Qatar in the late 8th and early 9th c. CE. We know from excavations elsewhere that there was a small number of settlements in Qatar beforehand, but now people settled in unprecedented numbers, founding new villages right across northern Qatar and engaging in agriculture. It seems they took advantage of the economic boom in the early Abbasid period, and built special sites to engage in intensive production.

This connected Qatar with various regions of the Caliphate through extensive networks of manufacturing and trade, that extended beyond the region to distant parts of the world. Economic benefits would have encouraged the people of Qatar to stay in settled villages to manufacture goods for newly connected regional and international markets, probably attracting new migrants to take advantage of the economic situation. Such an economic stimulus would help explain the increase in population and high number of sites in the Early Islamic period.

The identity and faith of the inhabitants of these sites remains to be confirmed, while the environmental conditions are under investigation. We are confident that further investigation will lead to a great number of new discoveries that will enrich Qatari history and heritage, and allow us to answer these questions.

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Thank you.

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