

مدينة الزبارة الأثرية

*Al Zubarah*  
Archaeological Site



English

## Foreword

The town of Al Zubarah, Qatar's largest archaeological site, lies on the country's northwest coast 85km from Doha. This now abandoned town was once a thriving cultural and political centre with an economy based on pearl fishing and trade. As one of the largest and best preserved examples of an 18th-19th century merchant town anywhere in the Arabian Gulf, Al Zubarah is an outstanding testament to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Gulf Arabs.

This booklet provides some basic information about the history of the site, the Al Zubarah Fort and the ongoing excavations. Qatar Museums invites you to visit and enjoy the first Qatari site inscribed into the UNESCO World Heritage List and learn about the heritage, traditions, history and development of Qatar.

Most visitors arrive at the Al Zubarah Fort which is home to a new visitor centre. We suggest you begin your tour here, before exploring the archaeological site on the coast.

Please follow the site rules and regulations to help us protect and preserve this important site for future generations.

We hope you enjoy your visit.

The Qatar Islamic Archaeology and Heritage Project is an initiative by the Qatar Museums Chairperson H. E. Sheikha Al Mayassa Bint Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani and Vice-Chairman H. E. Sheikh Hassan Bin Mohammed Al Thani

**Cover image: Al Zubarah shore from the air**



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Migratory birds over Al Zubarah

## Al Zubarah:

### The First World Heritage Site in Qatar

At the 37th session of the World Heritage Committee Session in the Kingdom of Cambodia on June 22, 2013, Al Zubarah Archaeological Site was inscribed into the UNESCO World Heritage List. Representing the first entry for Qatar, this international register comprises more than 900 natural and cultural sites across the world.

The listed site stretches from Al Zubarah Fort some 2.5km to the coast and incorporates three major features, the largest and most exceptional of which are the archaeological remains of the town of Al Zubarah, which dates to the 1760s. Connected to the early town is the settlement of Qal'at Murair, which was fortified to protect the city's inland wells. Al Zubarah Fort, built in 1938 at around the time that Qal'at Murair was finally abandoned, is the most prominent feature at the World Heritage Site. The Fort now serves as a visitor centre and showcases information about the earlier town and surrounding environment.

The inscription in the UNESCO World Heritage List is a unique opportunity for a country to build local and international awareness for a site and the values of the World Heritage Convention. It is also a strong incentive for the state to protect its local and national heritage.

*The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* is an international agreement that was adopted by the General Assembly of UNESCO in 1972. It is based on the premise that certain places on earth are of Outstanding Universal Value and should therefore form part of the common heritage to mankind. The countries that have ratified the Convention (today 190 State Parties) have thus become part of an international community, united in the common mission to identify and safeguard the world's most outstanding natural and cultural heritage sites. Furthermore, the States Parties recognize that nature conservation and the protection of the cultural properties are the duty of

the international community as a whole and that there is a fundamental need to preserve the balance between nature and culture.

The Convention defines the kind of cultural and natural sites which can be considered for inscription in the World Heritage List; sites must be of Outstanding Universal Value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria (i.e. to represent a masterpiece of human activity; bear a unique testimony to a cultural tradition; contain superlative natural phenomena of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance, etc.). The protection, management, authenticity and integrity of properties are also important considerations for the inscription.

The archaeological site of Al Zubarah and its cultural landscape are outstanding examples of socio-economic transformation of land and an exceptional testimony to an urban trading and pearl-diving tradition that has sustained the major coastal towns of the region from the early Islamic period to the 20th century. The shape of the old town of Al Zubarah is a noteworthy example of urban planning capability. Moreover, the whole site of Al Zubarah represents a remarkable example of harmonious coexistence of different cultures and ethnic groups from the Arabian Peninsula and features Qatari traditional building technique examples of which are endangered by the fast urban development of the country. In addition, the whole site illustrates a sustainable way of land use and exploitation of underground water resources and is representative of traditional Gulf cultures, as attested by the many "*madabis*" (date presses) and the series of old wells surrounding the site. The site is a notable example of the human interaction with both the sea and the desert environment of the region.



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



**Al Zubarah Archaeological Site**  
• inscribed on the World  
• Heritage List in 2013

Al Zubarah Fort  
Map no. 2



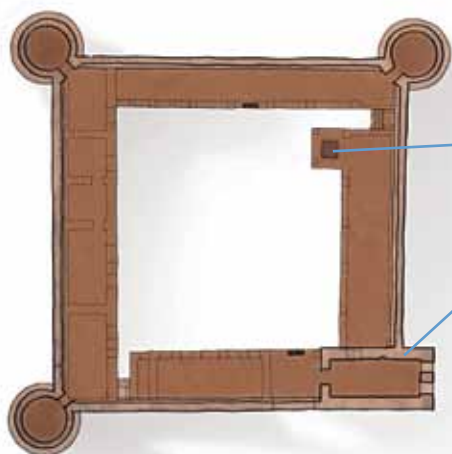
## Al Zubarah Fort

Al Zubarah fort was built in 1938 on the orders of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani to guard and protect Qatar's north-west coast. Together with a series of forts along Qatar's coastline it formed part of a complex defence system controlling the sea and the fresh water resources of the region.

The fort's design recalls earlier features common in Arab and Gulf fortification architecture including pointed crenellations, a traditional type of roof construction, a combination of both round and square corner towers, sloping walls and a square ground plan.

Until 1986 the fort was used as a military and police post and an extension was added on the southern wall of the building. Since then the premises have been used as a museum and heritage attraction. As part of renovations the modern extension has been removed and the fort returned to its original form. Today the Qatar Museums run an ongoing project of monitoring and restoration to ensure the upkeep of the fort that is used as visitor centre.





15m deep well cut into limestone bedrock to provide water

Thick walls provide protection, and help keep rooms cool in the heat of summer



Mud or cement

Small gravel

Bamboo, palm-leaves or mats made of manghrour

Danshal wood beams from East Africa



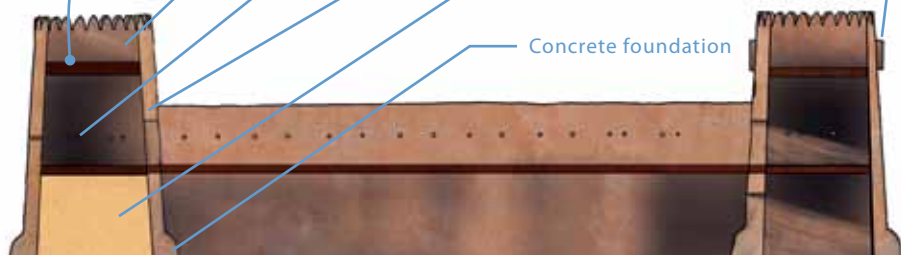
Plaster made from mud, lime and anhydrite

Holes in wall for ventilation and defence

Thick walls made from local stones and mud mortar

Sand infill

Concrete foundation



Excavation at Murair  
Map no. 3



## Qal'at Murair Archaeological Site

Across the road to the south of Al Zubarah Fort is the site of Qal'at Murair. This was a large rectangular enclosure with four corner towers, which housed domestic buildings, a mosque, cisterns and large wells. Only one well is visible on the surface today, but archaeological work has identified the location of the settlement limits and shown that remains of the structures are still to be found underground.

Qal'at Murair overlooked the coast and guarded the fresh water supply and eastern approach of nearby Al Zubarah. Once a prominent feature on the landscape, the fortified complex was part of a series of fortifications controlling wells and grazing areas in the town's hinterland.



Looking towards  
Al Zubarah from Murair



Originally a canal connected Murair with the sea providing an access route for boats to trade and collect fresh water. However, shortly after its construction the canal was partly filled in and two screening walls built over it. These walls provided a safe avenue for the transport of water from Murair down to Al Zubarah on the coast.

Qal'at Murair continued to be occupied until Al Zubarah Fort was built in the early 20th century.



Excavation area and  
well at Murair



Map no. 18

The canal is still  
visible today,  
though much of  
it has silted up  
and become dry

The town of Al Zubarah  
seen from the air

Map no. 6-19

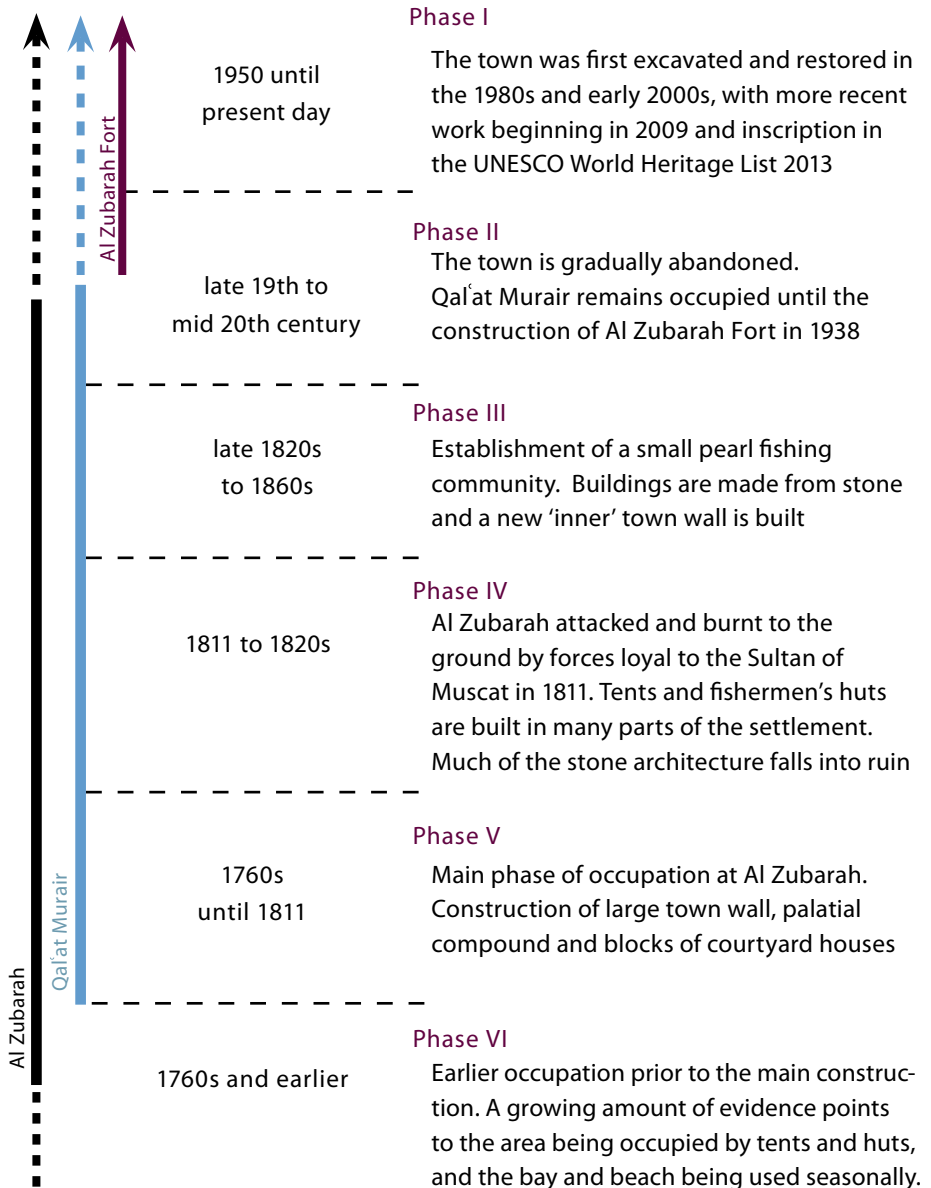


## Al Zubarah Archaeological Site

The abandoned town of Al Zubarah dates back over 200 years. It is one of the best preserved examples of a traditional pearl fishing and merchant town in the Gulf and was once a regional centre of the pearl trade. The success of the settlement attracted the attention of other Gulf powers and after several attacks the town was eventually burned to the ground in 1811. Al Zubarah never fully recovered and was totally abandoned by the early 20th Century.

Today the site covers an area of 60 hectares with remains of houses, mosques, large fortified buildings and a market (*souq*). Although no buildings remain standing, the site has been left largely untouched over the centuries and the entire urban layout and numerous day to day objects remain intact beneath the sands.

# Timeline and Archaeological Phases



The late 18th century town is defined by a large wall that encircles Al Zubarah and its bay in a 2.5km arc from shore to shore. The wall was defended by towers placed at regular intervals and access to the town was restricted to a few defended gateways, or via its harbour.

The 18th century city at Al Zubarah is well-planned with many of the streets running at right angles to one another and some neighbourhoods built according to a strict grid pattern. Blocks of housing like the one excavated in the 1980s by Qatari archaeologists are thought to represent the property of individual family groups or clans.

The regularity of the street layout suggests that the town - which may have reached a population of between 6000 and 9000 people at its height - was laid out and built as part of one major event. This was a remarkable and strategic undertaking by the merchants who settled here during the late 18th century.



**A neighbourhood  
block near the  
outer town wall**

**Map no. 7**



Courtyard house from Phase V  
Map no. 12



The domestic architecture of this 18th century town consists mainly of courtyard houses, a traditional form of Arab architecture which can be found throughout the Middle East. The buildings consist of a series of small rooms with plastered walls, organised around a central courtyard where the majority of activity took place. Sleeping quarters, kitchens with ash-covered floors and clay-lined ovens (*tabuns* and *tannûrs*), latrines/*hammams* and date presses (*madabis*) are among the rooms that have been identified by archaeologists.

Privacy seems to have been important to the early inhabitants of Al Zubarah, with alleyways separating the buildings and entrances designed so that people could not see inside.

The detailed etching of a dhow was uncovered on the plaster of a room in one of these buildings.

Green glazed oil lamp  
from courtyard  
house





While many people lived fairly comfortably in courtyard houses, it is clear that the wealth of a few of Al Zubarah's inhabitants afforded them a much grander lifestyle in huge and ornate houses. The most impressive of these measures 110 (E-W) by 100 (N-S) m in size - the largest building in the town. Built during the town's heyday in the late 18th and early 19th century, this compound follows the same form as the domestic architecture elsewhere in Al Zubarah, but on a much larger scale. Nine interconnected courtyards, each one surrounded by a range of rooms, make up the interior of this structure. The complex is enclosed by a high wall with circular corner towers capable of supporting small cannons.

This multistorey building would have risen above much of the town and was probably occupied by a family of wealthy and influential sheikhs who were important community leaders. Excavations of one of the nine large courtyard ranges have shown that it was not just a defensive structure, but that it was primarily a family home.

**Excavation of  
southeastern  
courtyard**





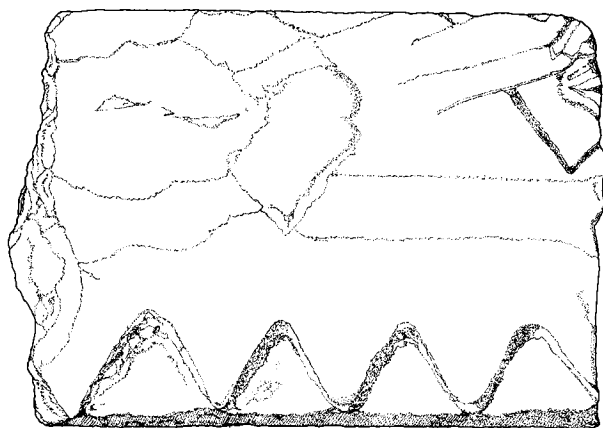
Stairs in south of  
palace courtyard



Footprint in the  
floor of a room

Excavations of a midden ([see page 23](#)) between the palatial compound and the outer town wall immediately adjacent, have produced a large number of archaeological finds. Sheep and goat are more common among the animal bones recovered from this midden than anywhere else at the site, and specialists have also identified the bones of gazelles. The rarity of gazelle bones suggest that they were not a major part of the diet, but were hunted as a leisure activity.

The walls of this building are substantially larger and better constructed than others in Al Zubarah and the carefully plastered walls and archways make this the most ornately decorated building discovered in the town so far.



Fragment of decorated  
plaster found in the  
palatial compound

Two hundred years ago Al Zubarah's *souq* area would have been bustling and brimming with activity, the centre of town life and of its economy. Traders peddling their wares, bargaining with customers, fishermen mending nets on the shore, and children running up and down the street would have been familiar sights.

This area of the town was first investigated in the 1980s by Qatari archaeologists, who uncovered a complex array of small storage rooms. The exposed walls were consolidated and can be seen today. Excavations to the south continue to reveal the commercial heart of the town and are recovering a wide variety of trade objects.



**Ceramics covering the floor of an abandoned room from Phase V**



Postholes and fire pits from Phase IV



Cannonball from Phase V street

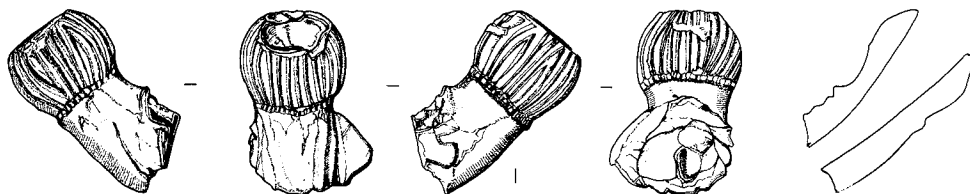
#### (Phase IV)

After the attack on Al Zubarah in 1811 the *souq* was abandoned. In the time that followed, tents and fishermen's huts were built, and then in turn were replaced by stone houses as Al Zubarah was gradually resettled. The *souq* was rebuilt, but now covered a smaller area to the north.

By carefully recording the stones and earth that are being removed and by analysing the artefacts (ceramics, coins etc) that they contain, it is possible to reconstruct the sequence of building and other events that make up the life story of the town.

This area seems to have remained a focus of activity since the founding of the site and is one of the most complex archaeological areas in the site, with many layers of occupation, abandonment and reoccupation overlaying one another. Every phase of the site is represented in this one area.

#### Clay pipe stem from Phase V *souq* building





After the short period of abandonment caused by the 1811 attack the town of Al Zubarah was resettled. Pearl diving weights have been found in buildings dating to this later period, and a substantial amount of architecture is known from the site. A new town wall with towers along its length was built in an arc around the heart of the previous settlement. This new town only covers 20% of its predecessor and there does not appear to be the same level of control and organisation in the layout of the streets and buildings.

Although houses continued to be built in the traditional courtyard form, those that have been excavated have fewer rooms, appear to be more irregular in their shape and lack the decorated plaster known from the earlier buildings.



Spiral tower of Phase III wall  
built on ruins of 18th century  
buildings



Charred remains of a  
traditionally built roof  
from Phase III house



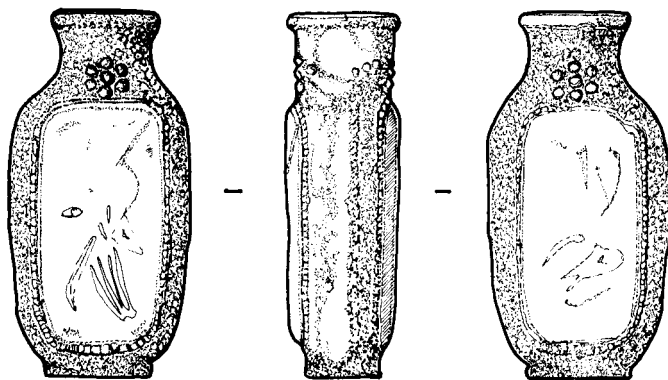


Map no. 11

Harbour fort and sea wall

A 'square' fort on the shore guarded the town's main anchorage and harbour. It is located at the point where the underlying coastal rock platform ends and the deeper shores to the south begin. It defended the town and the dhows, anchored in its harbour against seaborne attack.

The region remained a dangerous place and the town and fleet needed defending from neighbouring hostile tribes and pirates active in the area. It was an attack by British Navy ships on a large fleet of dhows anchored in Zubarah's port that eventually spelled the beginning of the town's second and final decline.



Kohl eye-liner bottle  
from Phase III building

after conservation

before conservation



Late 18th century  
jeton made in Bavaria  
and uncovered in Al Zubarah

## Trade and the Wider World

The harbour of Al Zubarah was a bustling marketplace throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, with people and goods coming from all over the Gulf region and further afield. Wood for the construction of dhows and roofs came from the African and Indian coasts and volcanic black stone used for diving weights was also imported.

Coins offer a good source of information about trade links and several have been uncovered at the site. Until quite recently Qatar and other areas in the Gulf used the British India Rupee as their primary currency, but other types of coins have also been found. The coins are often heavily corroded and need specialist attention to preserve them and make them identifiable.



**Blue and white glazeware**  
- China



**Stonepaste ware**  
- Iran



**'Julfar 2' cooking pot**  
- Arabia

The study of ceramics found at the site, their shape, style, decoration and material has helped archaeologists trace their production to centres across Arabia, as well as Iran and Iraq. Many of the finewares and porcelains found on the site come from as far afield as China, Japan and western Europe. This is evidence of the far-reaching trade networks linking East with West, of which Al Zubarah was a part.

Other imported artefacts include ornately carved ivory objects, as well as beads made from semiprecious stones. Even the copper and iron tools and ornaments are likely to have been brought in as part of the flourishing trade in the town.



**Ivory object**  
- Africa/India

## Pearling

Al Zubarah was primarily a trading and pearling settlement that took advantage of its natural harbour and central position on the Gulf. Its economy depended on the pearl diving season, which took place during the long summer months, Bedouin from the interior of Qatar as well as people from all over the Gulf would be drawn Al Zubarah to dive, trade and protect the town from attack while the town's men were at sea.

Diving for pearls was an exhausting exercise with trips lasting many weeks at a time. Boats from Al Zubarah would sail out to the pearl beds found all along the Gulf from Bahrain to the United Arab Emirates. Men would work in pairs to collect oysters, with one man diving and the other remaining on the ship to pull the diver back to safety.



Pearl oyster shell with partially formed pearl on the floor of a Phase V building in the *souq*

**Pearler's box discovered  
at Al Zubarah**



**A small pearl measuring weight  
of copper alloy**

After clipping a horn pincer to his nose, fitting a net bag around his neck or waist and plugging his ears with beeswax, the diver would attach himself to a stone weight weighing 10-14lbs (4-6kg) and jump into the sea. On reaching the sea bed he would quickly try to fill the net bag with as many oyster shells as possible. When the diver had reached his limit he would tug on a rope tied around his waist and be pulled back to the surface by his partner. Spending around a minute underwater, most divers could comfortably reach depths of 15 metres (48ft), with some able to dive 25 metres (84ft) below the surface.

Suitable pearls were extracted on the ship and placed in a special box. Because most of the shells would have been thrown overboard, archaeological evidence for pearling on the site comes primarily from the tools used by the divers. Artefacts recovered include diving weights, a pearl box, and small measuring weights used during trading.



**Diving weights  
from floor of  
Phase III building**





Excavation of a  
kitchen area



Map no. **13**

Layers of kitchen waste in a  
midden

## Food in Al Zubarah

While walls of excavated buildings, pots and other objects that are recovered can be impressive to look at, one of the most valuable sources of information for understanding how people lived in the past is their waste. Some of this waste comes from the floors of buildings, especially in kitchen areas, but a lot of it is recovered from middens - heaps of rubbish that have accumulated over the years.



Fish caught with a tidal trap (*masaker*) - a traditional fishing method found all along the Qatari coast

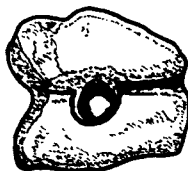
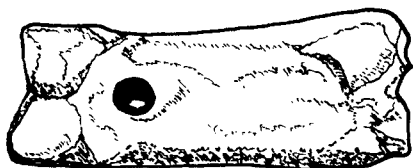
There are many large middens around Al Zubarah, most of which are just outside the town walls - away from the main areas of living. During the later phase of the town many ruined buildings were used as rubbish tips. Whatever was thrown away - be it tools, broken pots or food waste - gives us information about the day to day life and activities of the people of Al Zubarah.

By careful sieving of the deposits it is possible to retrieve even the smallest traces of food. Current analysis of the animal bones shows that people ate a wide range of Gulf fish, as well as turtles, wildfowl and several land animals.



Date and other fruit stones recovered from a midden

Rice and dates were likely to have been the main staples of the inhabitants' diets. Most of the meat remains are from sheep and goat, though bones of some wild animals, now extinct in this region of Qatar, have also been recovered.



Sheep-goat phalange (toe) with a drilled hole from floor of 18th century building

## The Importance of Dates

One of the most common and easily identified botanical remains recovered at Al Zubarah are the stones from dates. Indeed the breakfast of the Qatari pearl fisher is said to be a couple of dates and coffee while his meal at sea was likely to be rice cooked with generous amount of date syrup (*dibs*).

The large number of date-presses (*madabis*) uncovered at the site shows how important dates were in the diet and economy of Al Zubarah. These small rooms have ridged plaster floors that slope to one corner. Dates were packed in sacks and placed on the ridged floors with weights on top. The compression would make the dates release a sweet sticky syrup, which would drip into a jar placed at the end of the channels. The the syrup (*dibs*) that could be eaten on its own or used in cooking.

The presence and abundance of these rooms is tantalising evidence of the agricultural economy and past environment of the area, traces of which can be much more difficult to find than the stone walls of a town.



Charred remains of  
palm leaf roofing



Plastered channel at the  
low end of a *madbassa*





**Map no. 12**

*Madbasa in 18th century  
house*



## Community Archaeology Program at Al Zubarah

From the inception of QM and QIAH Al Zubarah project, the Community Archaeology initiative with its focus on public outreach, education and oral history was an integral component of the overall mission of the project, with clear and well defined short and long term goals and benefits both to the project and the public. The information researched, shared and gathered about the site in its cultural, historical and natural context does not only enrich our knowledge of the site, the material culture found at the site, but also helps introduce our work to the public, and bring to light the uniqueness of Al Zubarah and the NW region of Qatar and its people. The Community Archaeology Program at Al Zubarah is designed to inform and educate the public in the methods of studying the past, but also to foster an appreciation and respect of Qatari heritage in all its forms.

*Come celebrate Qatar's heritage with us!*





## Outreach and Education: Making History Matter

QM and the QIAH Project view the heritage of Qatar as a vital part of public wealth that should be documented, celebrated and shared. To raise awareness of the importance of Al Zubarah and its surroundings the QM and QIAH project is embarking on a program of public outreach that will involve schools and universities from across the country, as well as governmental and non-governmental institutions.

The Al Zubarah Community Archaeology Program focuses mainly on reaching out and working with schools, community and cultural centres, mainly in Doha and Al Shamal, to raise awareness of the site, its context and its importance. This is achieved through public lectures, workshops, presentations, site visits and practical hands-on experiences. A large number of activities are prepared for visitors and students either during their visits to the site or when the education and outreach team is able to do off-site visits. Various activities are conducted to highlight what archaeologists do, explain the kind of material found at an archaeological site and how the material is processed, and the value of preserving Qatar's archaeological and cultural heritage. These planned public education and awareness activities also target the larger Qatari community as well as visitors and interested groups.

## Oral History: Keeping Tradition Alive

Storytelling was once an important part of community life passing on meaning and continuity to the younger generations. Through the collection of oral histories we can recreate and relive the colours, sounds, sights and smells that cannot be preserved by traditional archaeological techniques. With the rapidly changing and increasingly technology driven world we live in today, stories and local knowledge and traditions are at risk of being lost forever. As a result a new initiative has been launched by the QM to record the oral histories, oral traditions and storytelling of the Qatari people. This approach will help create a more accurate and detailed record of the past, and will preserve this invaluable knowledge for future generations, as well as make a wealth of information available to share with the global community.

The collection of oral histories and oral traditions brings depth to our understanding of the past by carrying us into recollections and testimonies at an individual level. Oral traditions are, in fact, non-written stories passed down from one generation to another, and kept alive in the memories of a people.



Visit from a nearby  
Al Shamal school

For further information on the  
outreach programs contact

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To arrange a visit to the site for  
schools and groups email  
Al Zubarah Archaeological sites at:  
[visit.inquiries@alzubarah.qa](mailto:visit.inquiries@alzubarah.qa)

Both oral history and oral traditions enrich our knowledge of Al Zubarah and the surrounding villages through gathering, incorporating and highlighting the rich folklore, stories and local traditions of the northwestern region and of Qatar as a whole. Another goal of the QIAH Community Archaeology work is to place Al Zubarah and the abandoned villages closest to the site in their broader cultural, historical and natural context.



The Project is conducting live interviews with people who have knowledge of traditional lifeways in Qatar and in Al Zubarah during the pearling years and after, through the collection of stories, family histories and local knowledge. This knowledge is shared by the older generations of Qatari men and women in the hopes that the next generation of Qataris will continue to keep these memories alive!

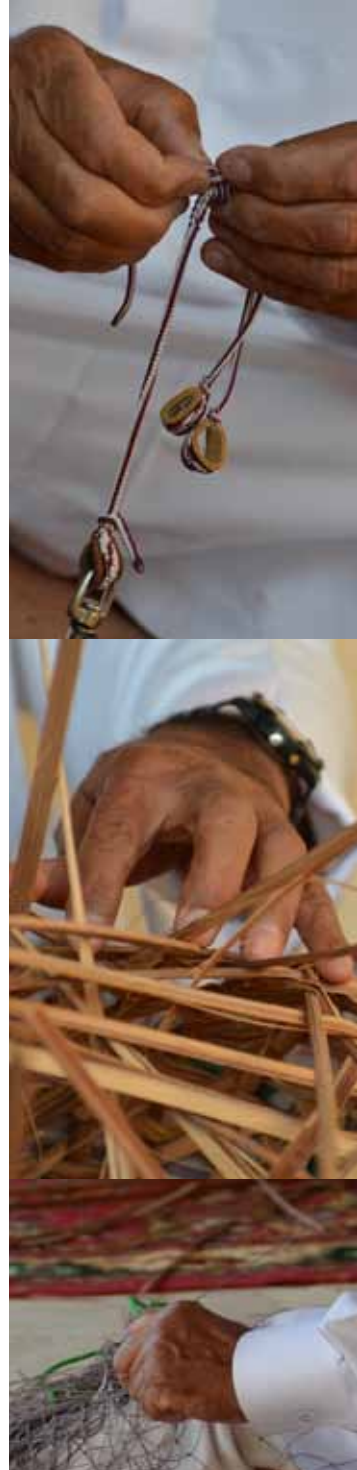
#### Why we do Oral History:

- Oral history provides depth, texture, flavor, sounds, smells and colour to archaeology and history.
- Oral history gives voice to the voiceless and provides individuals with an opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words.
- Oral History allows you to learn about the perspectives of individuals who might not otherwise appear in the historical record.
- Oral history provides the opportunity to learn about different kind of information not present in books like family histories, personal experiences, feelings and aspirations of the people interviewed.
- Oral history can also provide an older generation with a way of connecting and reaching out to the younger generation.
- Oral history provides a rich opportunity for human interaction. Such encounters have the potential to be tremendously rewarding for the researchers and interviewees.

## Cultural Tourism in Al Zubarah

Cultural tourism is one of the most important aspects of a country's touristic development. This field holds great potential for Qatar with its mission to become a cultural hub and a center for cultural exchange in the Gulf region. Over the past decades globalization had a strong impact on indigenous cultures and their preservation and has caused the neglect and even disappearance of many old traditions around the world. On the other hand, this has led to an increased effort to preserve original cultures by emphasizing their traditional legacy and their significance for contemporary culture. Without activities related to cultural tourism, ancestral traditions can easily disappear and future generations will not have the possibility to experience them. The development of cultural tourism plays for this reason a major role in safeguarding Qatar's culture and its preservation. Qatar is developing its cultural identity through protection, development and promotion of national heritage, but also by enhancing Arab and Islamic values through diverse cultural activities.

Al Zubarah's inscription in the UNESCO World Heritage list is of greatest importance for creating public awareness of the site. It will have a strong impact on tourists' decision to visit this area in Qatar's north and will most certainly increase of the number of visitors to Al Zubarah but also the development of cultural tourism in Qatar in general. This occasion is also a unique opportunity for Qatar to build local and international awareness, to emphasize the importance not only of the site but also of the country and its culture, as well as other numerous heritage sites that are yet to be discovered.



## Please help to protect Qatar's heritage for future generations



### Under the Law of Antiquities of Qatar it is a criminal offence to:

- Excavate or remove any antiquities without permission from Qatar Museums
- Deface or otherwise damage ANY parts of the site

**Any violations should be reported to the Division of Cultural Heritage at Qatar Museums or to the police without delay.**





United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Al Zubarah Archaeological Site  
• inscribed on the World  
• Heritage List in 2013



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Al Zubarah



**Directions From Doha**

Take Junction 59 on the Al Shamal  
Road and continue west towards  
Al Zubarah Fort for 37km

Doha



<http://alzubarah.qa/>