



The Persian Gulf: A Political and Economic History of Five Port Cities 1500-1730

By Willem M. Floor

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The Persian Gulf: The Economic and Political History of Five Port Cities, 1500-1730 provides the most comprehensive overview to date of the Persian Gulf at a time of major political change, including the successive arrival of the European 'trading empires'. The study emphasizes the role of the local elites and how its members manipulated and used the administrative structures for their own gain. It also delves into various aspects of the governance of the ports. Based on a large variety of sources, including the unpublished information from Dutch and Portuguese archives, it makes clear that the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman were an integrated part of the Indian Ocean network in terms of trade, culture, migration and politics. Despite that interconnectedness there were significant differences between the various competing Persian Gulf ports. These differences (as well as the similarities) in the political economy of each of the five major ports of the period (Hormuz, Bandar `Abbas, Masqat, Bandar-e Kong and Basra) are highlighted. The pattern of the local administration, the socio-economic and political structure, the morphology of each port as well as what that meant for the development and nature of trade that was carried on in each of the ports are discussed in detail. The controlling influence of the hinterland on each of these ports is stressed, while many prevailing wrong notions about the role and importance of Europeans, the nature of trade and what drove political developments in the Persian Gulf are corrected.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Willem Floor studied development economics and non-western sociology, as well as Persian, Arabic and Islamology from 1963-67 at the University of Utrecht (the Netherlands). He received his doctoral degree from the University of Leiden in 1971. Since 1983, Dr. Floor has been employed by the World Bank as an energy specialist. Throughout this time, he has published extensively on the socio-economic history of Iran. His most recent books include: *Public Health in Qajar Iran*, *Agriculture in Qajar Iran*, and *The History of Theater in Iran*. His forthcoming book published by Mage is *The Persian Gulf: A Political and Economic History of 5 Port Cities, 1500-1730*.

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FROM THE PREFACE:

Since the publication of Arnold Wilson's *The Persian Gulf* in 1930 a large number of books have been published about the history of the Persian Gulf, but very few about the period that this book deals with, i.e. the Safavid era or the period between 1500 and 1730--this despite the fact that it was during this period that intense regular contact between Europe and this region began. Books of a more comprehensive nature that offer a general overview of this region during this period are dated or do not add much new information to the existing knowledge. I will only mention a few of the most recent ones. The book by N.N. Tumanovich, *Evropeiskie derzhaby v Persijskom Zalive v 16-19 vv.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1982), for example, only has some 20 pages on this period and has nothing of interest to offer. The book by R.J. Barendse, *The Arabian Seas. The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century* (Armonk/London, 2002) is a step in the right direction, because he introduces the right orientation of how the Persian Gulf area should be perceived. However, despite his comprehensive approach, his discussion of events in the Persian Gulf ports is very flawed and uneven so that his analysis is faulty and leaves much to be desired. The book by Mohammad Baqer Vothuqi, *Tarikh-e Mohajerat-e Aqvam dar Khalij-e Fars* (Moluk-e Hormuz) (Tehran, 1380/2001) is a great improvement on what literature existed earlier on the Persian Gulf in Persian, but his analysis is flawed by his playing up of the importance of the Persian Gulf in Safavid politics and the qualification of the Portuguese as imperialists. Moreover, he mostly relies on a limited number of primary sources for the Safavid period, although for the preceding period he has made ample use of Persian and Arabic sources, some of them unpublished still in manuscript. For the Safavid period, however, he has neither used Dutch nor the major Portuguese sources or the published EIC records and thus, per force, his discussion is not comprehensive, because he had no access to the rich archival sources of the three major European powers during that era. The same criticism applies to the recently published dissertation by Gholam Hoseyn Nezami, *Naqsh-e Basrah va Banader-e Keranehha-ye Shomali-ye Khalij-e Fars dar Ravabet-e Iran va `Othmani* (1049-1263H.Q./1639-1847 C.E.) (Bushire, 1383/2004). Both books are, however, a considerable improvement on what literature existed up till then, for they bring much new information to the attention of the reader of Persian. The situation is not so positive in Arabic. There is a large number of articles in Arabic, which mainly are uncritical summaries of studies done by others, while their claim to scholarship is based on putting the Portuguese and other Europeans in the role of imperialist villains. Of the very few monographs in Arabic that exist on this period and area I only want to mention two. One is the *Kitab al-tanafus al-dawli fi Khalij al-`Arabi* 1622-1763 (Beirut, 1981) by Mustafa `Uqayl al-Khatib. The author ascribes a major role to Arabs in the developments of the Persian Gulf (such as the expulsion of the Portuguese from Hormuz), makes many and serious mistakes in referring to Safavid Persian personages and geographical names, and his account is full of historical errors. It therefore is not a book that one would recommend. The other book is `Arab al-Khalij, 1602-1784: fi daw' masadir Sharikat al-Hind al-Sharqiyah al-Hulandiyah (Abu Dhabi, 1995)

by Ben J. Slot, which is an exception to this general assessment, because he has brought together much new information, which one may expect from an archivist of the Dutch National Archives. The draw-back of this book, however, is that its focus is on Arabs and Arabia, thus explicitly ignoring the nature of the Persian Gulf as one cultural and commercial area, but then one cannot have everything. Also, it mainly uses Dutch archival material and its subject matter is therefore limited to the 17th and 18th century. Unfortunately, this book is hard to find and although originally written in English only the Arabic version seems to be available in some libraries; at least I have not been able to get hold of the original English version. However, all these books, whatever their shortcomings, have at least tried to bring the history of this region to the attention of the readers and hopefully have generated more interest in it.

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