

Al-Sūr al-Muḥīt

The City Wall of Bahla as a Case Study for the
Organisation of Communal Tasks in Central Oman on
the Eve of Modern State Administration, 1967–1977

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Cover: Figures on the cover (from left to right)
Bāb al-Silī in 2011 (s. Fig. 13, p. 35),
Burj al-ʿAqad in 2011 (s. Fig. 12,
p. 35), Bahla oasis with the citadel in
the centre and part of the wall in the
background in 1977 (s. Fig. 8, p. 26),
Sample page, list of expenditure
(no. 2) (s. Fig. 16, p. 47), Section of the
surrounding wall with Burj al-ʿAqad in
1974 (s. Fig. 11, p. 34).

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Introduction

In 1885, Samuel B. Miles (1838–1914), British Political Agent in Oman,¹ approached the oasis town of Bahla (*Bahlā*). He noted in his diary:

The first view presents a long white wall with bastions at intervals enclosing a large extent of cultivated ground with a huge white fort and lofty tower standing on an eminence in the centre, picturesquely overlooking and commanding the town beneath. Its appearance indeed is more striking than that of any other town I have seen in Oman. (IOR, R/15/6/18)²

What caught Miles's attention was indeed a very unusual architectural feature. To the present day, Bahla stands out for its impressive surrounding wall that is attested to in written sources from the 16th century onwards. It is constructed from mud brick, stone and wood, includes a sentry walkway and watchtowers and runs around the entire oasis. No other wall of such magnitude exists anywhere in the entire Arabian Peninsula and in the wider context of Western Asia and North Africa. The ensemble of Bahla's imposing citadel, which is located in the centre of the oasis (Figs. 2–3), and the wall (*sūr*) has made Bahla one of the best-known examples of Omani architecture.

Modern academic scholars such as Costa and Gaube have repeatedly stressed the uniqueness of Bahla's defensive architecture (Costa, 1983: 257; Gaube, 2013: 48–50). In 1988, the UNESCO added Bahla to its list of world heritage sites³ and subsequently Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Culture has devoted particular attention to the restoration of the citadel and several sections of the wall. A ministerial decree of 2019 contains detailed regulations for the preservation and development of Bahla's historical town centre (Wizārat al-Turāth wa-l-Thaqāfa, 2019).

At least as unique as the dimensions of the wall is the fact that no kingdom or principality was responsible for the maintenance of this monu-

¹ On Miles, see Foliard, 2017: 78.

² Cited from Limbert, 2010: 19. A short description of Miles's visit is also contained in Miles, 1910: 169–173.

³ Bahla Fort (no date) UNESCO World Heritage List. 25 November 2019, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/433/>.

mental edifice over the centuries. The people supporting these public works were the elite of a polity of tribally organised oasis dwellers and merchants, who lived in rather modest circumstances in an arid territory, quite remote from major trade routes and ports. The question arises of how this community managed to organise such substantial public works.

A handwritten document held in the manuscript collection of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in Muscat and entitled *Al-Sūr al-muḥīt*, “the encircling wall” (DaMa 2991) sheds some light on the people, processes and institutions behind Bahla’s great wall during the years between 1967 and 1977, at the very end of the wall’s long history as a means of defence.⁴ We describe the document in detail below. Here it may suffice to say that it is an account book, i.e. a register containing notes on expenses related to the maintenance of a section of the wall, as well as to the landed property (*māl*, pl. *amwāl*) that was attached to the wall and generated the income that was necessary to cover these expenses. It further provides information on the account-making that took place in irregular intervals and the people involved in wall management and account-making.

As the maintenance of the wall seems to have been a responsibility of the local community the question of the legal status of the attached “properties” arises. It may be safely assumed that they de facto constituted some sort of communal property as well. Interestingly, Omani interlocutors with whom we discussed the document often assumed the *amwāl* were in fact Islamic pious endowments (*awqāf*, sg. *waqf*). This assumption may seem natural as today in the Sultanate of Oman communal property is indeed generally categorised as *waqf* and managed by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (*Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shu’ūn al-Dīniyya*). It is also in line with a general practice in the Ottoman-ruled parts of the Eastern Mediterranean to use the concept of *waqf* in a very flexible manner as an umbrella category for the financing of diverse communal tasks, such as the operations and maintenance of mosques, but also water provision, security and street cleaning.⁵ However, this is not a matter of course, since *waqf* is a legal concept that was worked out over several centuries, spread unevenly and only gradually became a major legal institution in different parts of the Islamic world. It coexisted as a means of finance with, and

⁴ Obviously, this document has been erroneously identified as a document related to irrigation works (*aflāj*) in Nash, 2011: 9.

⁵ For an example, see Knost, 2009.

only gradually superseded, allocations by the Treasury (*Bayt al-Māl*) and other forms of communal property (Heidemann, 2009). These, like *waqf*, constituted what European jurists since the eighteenth century call “legal personalities”.⁶

In our document, it is important to note, the term *waqf* is only used in entries dating 1973 or later. In 1973, an official called “endowment supervisor” (*nāẓir al-awqāf/mushrif al-awqāf*) is mentioned to have supervised the accounting, and for the managing director, usually called “*al-wakīl li-l-sūr*” suddenly the term “*al-wakīl li-l-waqf*” is used.⁷ Only then can we safely speak of the wall’s *amwāl* as a *waqf* endowment, and it would probably be mistaken to read the concept of *waqf* into the past when it is not mentioned. So far, we lack precise information on the Sultanate’s *waqf* policy in the twentieth century, but it might be that our document reflects a decision in the early 1970s to categorise communal properties as *waqf*.

Thus, following recent research into the history of communal property and endowments in Mamluk and Ottoman Syria (Eychenne, Meier and Vigouroux, 2018), we need to ask what precisely was the understanding of the *amwāl* in our document. This is not an easy task, especially as the history of the concept of *waqf* in Ibadī law – the relevant brand of Islamic law in our case – still needs to be written. In this context, we tentatively discuss a chapter of the treatise *Minhāj al-‘adl* by the 16th-century Omani Ibadī jurist ‘Umar al-Bahlawī (d. 1009/1600-1), which explicitly deals with the rules for building and maintaining defensive walls (see below and Appendix 4). All these aspects taken together, the document provides rare insight into the workings of self-organised and self-financed public works in an oasis community during the mid-20th century. Potentially it also offers material for general discussions of communal property and *waqf* in Oman.

Another fortunate feature of the register is that it covers a decisive shift in Oman’s recent history, namely the accession to power of Sultan Qaboos ibn Sa‘īd in July 1970, which marked the swift end of the Sultanate’s isolation and the advent of modern state administration. We have

⁶ Influential early historians of Islamic law have mistakenly claimed that the concept of a legal personality did not exist and made this part of an argument of essential difference between Islamic and European law. Only recently have historians revised this judgement. See Buessow and Meier, 2018.

⁷ This occurs in the account no. 4, covering the period 19.09.1390–20.05.1393/18.11.1970–21.06.1973; see page 41 of the document.

reason to believe that what we observe in the part of the register that was written before 1970 reflects basic patterns of organisation that had been functioning since the 15th century. And that those parts of the register written after 1970 reflect the way new centralised state institutions were introduced under Sultan Qaboos. Bahla's wall thus can serve as an example of how public works were organised prior to modern state institutions and during the first years of the transition process.

In global comparison, such a transition from old, locally defined institutions of urban governance to modern centralised administration took place rather late in Oman; by contrast, the Eastern Mediterranean lands under Ottoman rule underwent such a process from the late 19th century onwards. Therefore, and with all necessary caution, the case of Bahla's wall maintenance can be understood as a case of what historians of the Ottoman Empire have called the transition from an "old regime" to a new political order (Lafi, 2019: 3–4).

Research questions and structure of the study

Our study has three main parts. Part 1 provides a historical introduction to the oasis town of Bahla and Bahla's wall, including evidence from historical photographs.

Part 2 introduces the register and analyses a sample of it in detail. The analysis identifies the people and tasks as well as monetary and material resources involved in wall maintenance and compares the situation before and after 1970. In so doing, our leading questions are: What kind of works was involved in wall maintenance and how was work organised? Which actors took part in the process and what social categories were involved? What does the document tell us about the way modern centralised state institutions were introduced after the accession to the throne of Sultan Qaboos in 1970?

Finally, part 3 will discuss the case of Bahla's wall maintenance until 1970 as an example of what has recently been termed "old regime" urban governance (Lafi, 2007; Salzmann, 2004). This part concentrates on the administrative structures and processes that were recorded in the document and the underlying legal concepts. A special focus will be the changes that occurred during the period under investigation. We will further

look into the legal status of the *amwāl*, i.e. the landed property, attached to the wall. This will include a short discussion of religious endowments (*awqāf*) as means of financing communal institutions. One aspect that we will touch upon in this context are the legal rulings that relate to communal tasks and institutions such as protective walls, as provided by ‘Umar al-Bahlawī’s legal work *Minhāj al-‘adl*. A glossary explaining the specific technical terms used in this document is provided in an appendix.