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Title - To Each his Own Plate and Table: The Gulf during the Global Middle Age.

Abstract: The Gulf region during the “Middle Period”, from around 1000 - 1500 CE, faced the fall of the ‘Abbasids in Baghdad as well as increased competition from the Red Sea. Culturally and socially, however, Gulf ports remained vibrant centers of trade and cosmopolitanism. Geography, especially access to water and food, was a perpetual challenge to the Gulf ports. Agriculture was sparse or non-existent. Inhospitable walls of mountains, great expanses of desert and marshes cut ports off from the inland. Instead of the land, Gulf ports relied on trade, on attracting merchants and pearl fishers, who were much more fickle than landed agriculturalists. The Medieval Gulf port culture, in this respect, was more even more distinct from the hinterland than Mediterranean ports. Distinctive practices arose even as the location of major Gulf ports shifted, disappeared and re-emerged on different shores. Unlike typical maritime market cities in the Mediterranean which usually remained anchored to hinterlands and linked to ancient foundations, the Gulf, with its predominantly merchant and pearl fishing economy, were flexible and fickle and did not march in lock step with the fate and fortunes of particular agricultural production centers. Instead of William McNeill’s webs of history with their orbiting points, Medieval Gulf ports were spiders spinning silk in the wind, attaching to whatever space along the shore was most convenient. They were diffuse, detached from imperial centers and, for strict moralists, dangerous in so far as they did not fit usual religious paradigms. They were also a part of a global trend. World Historian Marshall Hodgson rightly identified the Middle Period as the crucial period in Islamic history as a whole, forming a remarkable unity that existed across the Medieval Islamic world. There was even more to the story of Medieval Gulf culture, and possibly the whole Medieval Middle East, than Hodgson’s consolidation of Islam. Unlike agrarian imperial centers, tolerance and trade was not for Gulf ports was not an option, it was often a singular means of survival. The remarkable independence of Gulf ports from agrarian political power mixed with a heavy dependence on international trade fostered a cosmopolitan ethos, creating the idea of the “*insan al kamil*” or “perfect human”: a composite of many religious and cultural traits.

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