

The Great Sea in Microcosm: What Evidence is there for Seleucid Presence and Expansion in the Persian Gulf, 324-64 CE?

The suggestion of Lombard in 1985 that the arrival of the Macedonian and Seleucid powers may have acted as a catalyst towards technological innovation fails to identify the point in time or the location(s) for the occurrence of such a paradigm shift. It is my belief that even now in the 21st century a true understanding of the Persian Gulf (PG) in antiquity remains oblique. The intent of Alexander for his Arabian campaigns can only be imagined rather than ascertained as a result of his untimely demise yet the evidence for his successors' engagement, establishment and ambition in the region continues to emerge. There is some clear evidence to be discussed and much to still be discovered and considered in a region that remains entangled in pervading geopolitical tensions in the modern era.

The modern perspective of the UAE can offer an intriguing prospect to the ancient historian looking towards the era of Seleucid power in the region. The globalised hub that we see today could share some symmetry with the region in antiquity with it being somewhat of a crossroads, existing between the Indian subcontinent and central Asia. Similarly in the era preceding Alexander there were sea faring connections and land-based following the domestication of the dromedary camel. This is evident from the range of evidence for the Iron Age II era leading up to the Hellenistic at sites such as Muweillah. The death of Alexander poses intrigue as to the continuity of the desire to expand control in the PG and Arabia. Strabo tells us via Aristobulus:

*For he contemplated making himself master of this country; and he had already provided a fleet **and places of rendezvous**; and had built vessels in Phœnicia and at Cyprus, some of which were in separate pieces, others were in parts, fastened together by bolts. These, after being conveyed to Thapsacus in seven distances of a day's march, were then to be transported down the river to Babylon. He constructed other boats in Babylonia, from cypress trees in the groves and parks, for there is a scarcity of timber in Babylonia...*

*The pretext for the war, says Aristobulus, was that the Arabians were the only people who did not send their ambassadors to Alexander; but **the true reason was his ambition to be lord of all**. (Geog. 16.1.11)*

The main scope to be assessed here then is as to the extent of Seleucid control of the PG that emerges, evolves, and is retained. Are we dealing with 'pockets of power' as can be ascertained to have existed on the land-based portions of the empire, varying in extensiveness over the course of the Hellenistic era. Alternatively, is the PG actively being controlled via naval garrisons (*places of rendezvous*) as a part of the XIVth Satrapy via the islands and ports of the PG? Beyond the consideration at regional level can we consider the PG itself as a part of the *oikumene* and have some symmetry with the Great Sea?

The Boundaries

The extent of Achaemenid maritime control can be seen as being confined to the PG or Gulf of Oman according to Potts.¹ The promontory/cape of Maceta/Macae (Strait of Hormuz) presenting a convenient entrance and exit bringing to mind some symmetry with the Great Sea at the Pillars of Hercules. Pliny the Elder provides a depth of knowledge to the Persian Gulf:

“The Promontory of Carmania, from which the distance across to the opposite coast, where the Macæ, a nation of Arabia, dwell, is fifty miles.”²

Furthermore, Pliny provides us with some key references as to the bounds to have been understood:

“The Persian Gulf, at the entrance, is only five miles wide; some writers make it four. From the entrance to the very bottom of the gulf, in a straight line, has been ascertained to be nearly eleven hundred and twenty-five miles... Onesicritus and Nearchus have stated in their works that from the river Indus to the Persian Gulf, and from thence to Babylon, situate in the marshes of the Euphrates, is a distance of seventeen hundred miles.”³

What is apparent from the ancient sources is that inhabitation and understanding of the northern regions of the PG and the islands within it were well-integrated into the scope of *Oikumene* of the Seleucids. What has remained less understood into the modern era is the role of the southern fringes of the PG during the Hellenistic era, an area that is more accessible to archaeology than perhaps the north is today, aptly described by Salles in 1987 as ‘*Terra Incognita*’ and this remains true today.⁴ Potts makes the point that even if Arabs had inhabited the northern regions, then the area would not likely have been designated as ‘Arabia’ due to it being a part of the Persian continent.⁵ To put this point to the test from Potts then further archaeological exploration into the region of Carmania and along the northern satrapies could produce a clearer picture of a PG that was perhaps more active, innovative and interwoven than we can understand from the current state of evidence. Cohen has identified a range of cities (some of which have been explored to some extent since) that could provide such evidence including but not beyond extensivity: *Gabai, Hermoupolis, Ionaka Polis, Laodikeia, Portus Macedonium, Bahrain, Larisa, Ikaros and the controversial Arethousa*.⁶ It is without doubt that evidence from the northern fringes of the PG would enhance understanding of the scope of PG history.

¹ Potts, 2019, 377.

² Pliny, 6.26.

³ Pliny, 6.28.

⁴ Salles, 1987, 76.

⁵ Potts, 2019, 379.

⁶ Cohen, 2013, 109-177

The Fleet

Following the culmination of his campaign it is quite apparent from ancient sources (Strabo, Arrian, Quintus Curtius) that Alexander began to establish a fleet at Alexandria-on-Tigris (Selucia-on-Tigris) in preparation for exploration and expansion in the PG. The extent as to which the Seleucids maintained such a fleet requires consideration here. Indeed, perhaps scholarship has moved forward since Tarn in 1929 CE suggested that all Seleucid expansion in Arabia was done so via the PG with some recognition of settlement existing across the region.⁷ The extent to which this 'naval' fleet was maintained throughout the era of the various Seleucid rulers remains a point of debate with there being four main arguments for the existence of such a force according to Salles:

- The return of Antiochus III from his Anabasis
- An expedition of Numenius
- The XIVth satrapy
- The archaeological and nautical evidence.⁸

The most convincing of the arguments by Salles is perhaps the archaeological evidence that is made of sense of with the consideration of the nautical nature of the PG. The requirement for points of resupply along the coast on the voyage towards India is most certainly a requirement in an environment that is extreme in the summer and can be affected by more challenging maritime conditions in the winter months. The requirements for entrepôts along the coast that contain natural defences and are secure harbour locations that do not require significant construction/maintenance makes absolute sense and when considering the sites that have emerged over the last 40 years then this matches with many of the excavations to this point. I would thus argue that we are reaching a position where we might confirm the thoughts of Salles "*that the history of the Gulf during the third and the second century BC was exclusively Seleucid.*"⁹

Further consideration can be apportioned as to whether there was a main naval base in the PG at the upper area discussed earlier or can we now consider more of a series of smaller naval garrisons along the southern coast. Smaller garrisons at multiple locations could provide more of a strike capability as opposed to a more cumbersome deployment that would be required from a main base located far away from the key pinch point in the PG at the Strait of Hormuz, we still see this in the projection of regional power today.

⁷ Tarn, 1929, 11.

⁸ Salles, 1987, 96-98.

⁹ Salles, 1987, 99.

The Southern Coast: Uqair/Ed Dur

The location of Uqair provides continued intrigue as to the role of this mid-southern PG location and can perhaps be considered alongside the island of Tarut as offering good sites for further archaeological investigation as to Seleucid operations. The brief Danish excavations of Tarut in 1968 provided evidence of Hellenistic occupation suggested from the discovery of “*stone structures*” related to a Seleucid presence, dated rather vaguely as the last centuries BCE by Mouton.¹⁰ Further to this in Figure 1, from Mouton, we can see some firm locations assigned to sites across the region that remain somewhat requiring clarity. This area around the modern Gulf States of Qatar and Bahrain provides a great deal of intrigue towards the picture of Seleucid operations. It has yielded a range of evidence for occupation in the run-up to the era and upon closer consideration would seem to provide an excellent location for a fleet harbour. According to Mouton’s map we can see that the coastal region from modern Qatar along the coast northeast to Ed Dur doesn’t have any apparent sites of significance.

The early Nestorian monastic site on Sir Bani Yas Island at the site of al-Khawr provides a location that could challenge the lack of significant sites in the entirety of the region. The pottery discovered was initially compared with examples from Iraq/Iran yet further comparisons can be drawn to sites further afield that could also be linked to deeper into antiquity as well as the Hellenistic era. According to King, following on from the excavations in “*recent years at Mleiha (al-Milayha) in Sharjah and at al-dur in Um-al-Quwain. It now seems that there are close parallels between corpus and certain ceramics from the later period at Mleiha and at al-Dur*”¹¹ Although this evidence does link the sites to an era that is perhaps slightly beyond that of the Seleucids we can certainly conclude the continued importance and expansion of settlement in the region.

This continued trend then can draw some parallels with the expansion of the region in the last centuries BCE as a realisation of the available markets for pearling, frankincense, cinnamon and possibly, and most importantly, the availability of resupply on the route to Barygaza, India. The 2022 excavations at Siniyah Island in Umm-al-Quwain can add further substance to this importance with the discovery of another monastic complex that is almost directly opposite the more inland site of Iron Age/Hellenistic Ed Dur.¹² This could certainly draw some consideration as to the movement of the ancient port towards a more offshore location in conjunction with sea level retreat. The PG is a shallow epicontinental sea covering 24,000KM that has sparked much debate about sea level fluctuation with some consensus being found around a change of 1-2M since antiquity.¹³ This fluctuation then provides thought as to where further sites of significance could be located along the shorelines of both the northerly and southerly regions of the PG.

¹⁰ Mouton, 2009, 192.

¹¹ King, 1997, 231.

¹² <https://www.gulftoday.ae/culture/2022/11/03/ancient-christian-monastery-found-in-uae>

¹³ Kaissler, 1973, 11.

The Islands: Tylos (Bahrain)

Bahrain island is the site of significant PG history reaching back into the fourth millennium BCE and with this richness in past comes some continuity into the Hellenistic era. The intensively cultivated northern plain was studied by Larsen in the 1980s with a population of 8,000-19,000 estimated to have been supported by the 65 KM squared of cultivated land by the Seleucid era.¹⁴ Potts has drawn some links between the significant sites of the region utilising Larsen's work and further to this takes up some dispute with the interpretations. The key aspect that Potts takes issue with is that Seleucid control of Bahrain was not established and that the island was subject to attacks surmised to be from the interior originating out of Gerrha. According to Potts via Larsen this was the reason for diminished Seleucid control of the island based on a lack of surface pottery finds following survey.¹⁵ Tylos clearly has a great deal of significance preceding the Seleucids and undoubtedly continues to operate as not only a location of cultivation and provision of sustenance to sailors engaging in PG trade activity. Beyond this the island has significance as an entrepôt towards the ever-emergent coastal and inland areas, potentially offering new enterprise and opportunity yet also potentially some threat from independent kingdoms or those seeking to move away from Seleucid sponsorship, after all this regime was quite different in origin and character to the Achaemenid predecessors.

*According to Potts "The pottery shows strong similarities to published material from other "Hellenistic" sites, to use the commonly accepted term, in the Gulf" Potts elaborates that there are "clear parallels with finds from the Seleucid settlement on Failaka;" and the Middle Hasaeen period occupations at Thaj, Ayn Jawan, and Fariq al-Akrash. Further afield, Susa, Seleucia, Uruk, and Nimrud offer additional material for comparison. Ceramic ties to contemporary sites in the lower Gulf, specifically to sites in the U.A.E. or Oman, are relatively rare."*¹⁶ Although there are ties with ceramics found at Ed Dur, but the point here is that these are a minority in terms of evidence collected to provide explicitly clear parallels. This is confirmed by Salles with reference to the Danish excavations that revealed a city firmly dated to the 3rd/2nd centuries BCE, established via contemporary comparisons with the sites mentioned by Potts.¹⁷ Unpacking Potts' thinking here about the pottery finds at Bahrain provides some further points for consideration as it is clear here that the use of "*Hellenistic*" sites is somewhat of a point of contention for Potts.

During this 1980s era of investigation perhaps Potts was navigating towards Seleucid control via the use of the PG and maritime means being an unlikely conclusion to make. It seems he was perhaps trying to insinuate here that the southern PG was independent of the Seleucids. Alternatively, is it that Potts is of the opinion that the term "Hellenistic" cannot be utilised in the region as although the area might have been under some alliance with the Seleucids this was not assured nor was it culturally cemented. The

¹⁴ Larsen, 1983, 55-58.

¹⁵ Potts, 1985, 703.

¹⁶ Potts, 1985, 702.

¹⁷ Salles, 1987, 81.

differences of Arabia are too stark to draw comparisons with the traditional Persian areas of the empire that have been labelled as such, perhaps we can even consider this in a modern context by considering the changes following Macmillan's "Wind of Change" speech for the British Empire: Following the demise of Persian control of the PG then perhaps an inextricable opening for independent control of *Tylos and the islands* was provided before the region could be consolidated or the potential for resources and prosperity even realized by Seleucus and his successors. Indeed, even Potts has drawn some similarities between the stability of the PG prior to the cultured pearl or the discovery of oil via the effects of the control of the East India Company on regional shipping.¹⁸

The numismatic evidence provides some considerable intrigue as to not only the role of Tylos and the islands but also towards the centre(s) of power for the region. Salles makes particular note of the silver coin hoard found at Tylos that was buried between 245-215 BCE. This then refers to the so-called 'Arabian Alexanders' about which there has been a considerable amount of scholarship yet there also remains a somewhat convoluted understanding of where this evidence fits into the overall picture of Seleucid interaction and control of the PG. Salles attests that the coinage is consistent with the attic weight standards and identifies the coinage as containing aspects that are culturally connected to the southern PG region such as the *shin* that relates to the Shamash deity. Beyond description Salles states that "*there is nothing to indicate that the series was produced by a Seleucid royal mint*" and instead was minted by local rulers "*probably of a Hagar kingdom in eastern Arabia whose capital may have been Gerrha*."¹⁹ Here we have further assumptions during this era of scholarship that would appear to the modern reader to insinuate that Tylos and the surrounding region was not associated with the Seleucids nor was it "Hellenistic" but rather an entity outside of the precedent influence. Yet beyond this numismatic hoard, suggested to have originated at Gerrha, Salles does pick out some points of consideration about the Danish excavation of the city that has been labelled as City V, the stratigraphy being identified at this level for 300 BCE-250 CE, a considerable time span that Salles suggest should indeed be further broken down. The era of 300-100 BCE is the first such aspect of the City V stratigraphy that Salles identifies as requiring further chronological dissection in line with the "Hellenistic" period. The material at this level shows Seleucid influence yet less so in cemeteries, can we therefore devolve from this that there was substantial transaction with Seleucid maritime activities centred around Tylos yet not so much of an 'occupation' or 'colonisation' as such.²⁰

Since the somewhat linear scholarship of 40 years ago it would seem that modern thoughts about the Seleucid role in the PG have begun to shift, to some extent. The 'New Inscription' from Tylos is a key piece of evidence that has begun to shift thinking towards some sort of Seleucid integration and perhaps even settlement of the regions under somewhat of a neo-XIVth Satrapy, perhaps it could be suggested as the XVth satrapy? The *strategos*' inscription is extremely significant in demonstrating Seleucid

¹⁸ Potts, 2009, 43.

¹⁹ Salles, 1987, 81.

²⁰ Salles, 1987, 82.

control of Tylos in the 160s BCE as well as providing evidence of a Greek speaking community on the island.²¹ Kosmin in his analysis of the 'New' Greek inscription (discovered in 1997) seeks to challenge some of the key scholars of the 1980s and 1990s (Salles and Potts) in order to demonstrate that rather than the southern coastal regions being beyond the control of the Seleucids it is most certainly time for a reanalysis of the region and its role, I would certainly argue from the time of Antiochus III but extending back to the beginning of the 3rd century. Kosmin suggests that the inscription can go as far as confirming the existence of a specialized infrastructure of dockyards and anchorages to support the *cursus maritimus* in line with the thoughts of Constantakopoulou and Morton in attempting to draw comparisons in PG navigation with the Aegean. Although, how far this comparison can be successful is a point for further consideration by debating the use of ships of Mediterranean origin versus the dhow (sewn ships) variety of the PG that are still in use in the region today extending to east Africa.²² The 'New' inscription does not confirm that Tylos is completely occupied by the Seleucids but instead points towards a garrison in the north of the island and is somewhat similar to the situation on Ikaros, according to Kosmin this conclusion can be drawn by considering the range of material evidence. The suggestion that Tylos can be viewed as a "*military and cultural node within the broader system of the Seleucid Gulf*" is an interpretation by Kosmin that could potentially be applied at other sites (Ed Dur and Mleiha?).²³

Beyond the implications of this inscription for the island of Tylos there is a wider consideration here as to the Anabasis of Antiochus III and the mention of the visit to the island following the tribute at Gerrha as attested by Polybius. Kosmin alludes to some of the implications of the inscription:

- Did Antiochus visit the island to consolidate it as a military outpost?
- Did Antiochus establish the garrison himself?
- Was the visit intended to re-establish imperial control over formerly subordinated regions?²⁴

When we combine the variety of evidence available i.e. archaeological, literary, and epigraphic then upon consideration it becomes more and more difficult to envisage that this outpost had not been in existence for a considerable time. Pliny (HN 6.28.147-152) furthers this thinking by informing about activity to the north beyond the site at Ed Dur towards the cape in an expedition by Numenius to assert control over the straits. Kosmin argues that this offensive could not have been achieved without the use of Tylos, I would suggest that the distance from that location is even too far for such a naval victory and looking closer towards the cape for a site that could provide such a strategic harbour such as the mangroves at Ed Dur could assist in making more sense of the battle described by Pliny. Perhaps we can assert, from the requirement of dominion of this important waterway, that it became increasingly significant as the realization of trade potential grew and with this came a threat of piracy or even Parthian

²¹ Kosmin, 2013, 62.

²² Kosmin, 2013, 64.

²³ Kosmin, 2013, 65.

²⁴ Kosmin, 2013, 67.

expansion. The opening of a land route towards the coast on the Gulf of Oman would help to mitigate this threat, can we therefore envisage the growth in importance of Ed Dur and Mleiha as a result of this move away from the sea route through the straits?

The Islands: Ikaros (Falaika)

Perhaps the most significant of all of the islands in the PG can be considered as Falaika, operating possibly in tandem with Tylos along the coastal shipping lane. Evidence for neo-Babylonian settlement is a possibility via a range of evidence from ceramics and cylinder seals to Aramaic inscriptions and temple structures dedicated to Shamash.²⁵ Potts suggests that the most significant site of settlement founded following Alexander's conquest was Alexandria/Antiochia which could be seen as an "intended base for a Seleucid navy" and capital of the XIVth satrapy.²⁶ It is certainly worth further consideration on both of these possibilities put forward by Potts as one has to question whether it would make tactical sense to have such a location at the head of the PG rather than at a central location such as Tylos/Uqair. Consideration of this could go further by questioning whether a lack of Seleucid ability to truly effect control of trade with India and the east was a symptom of naval capability being tied to a location such as Antiochia. At such a location strike capability would have been limited to the upper PG as opposed to radiating across it and projecting power as necessary and as would befit a true naval superpower.

The significance of Ikaros is attested in the archaeological record via excavation work in the 1950s and 1980s uncovering fortifications, Greek temple structures along with an inscription referring to gymnastic games on the island in the form of a letter from Anaxarchos to the inhabitants of the island.²⁷ Salles provides some further clarity on the chronology of this settlement by interpreting the archaeological work conducted and agrees that there was some influence on the island prior to the Greek settlement proper. A picture of a settlement that grows in power, importance, and influence under the Seleucids to 150 BCE is clear and can therefore be linked with the consolidation and expansion of naval activities of which the island would hold strategic value. This is also clear in the numismatic evidence that provides contemporary evidence from the Gerrha mint that could be associated with Antiochus III's return from India via Ikaros.²⁸

The range of Greek inscriptions from Ikaros provides insight into an island that was clearly Greek in terms of settlement yet the extent as to which this was extensive and consolidated remains somewhat obscure. When we consider the interpretations of the inscriptions by Roueche in the 1980s then, like with other scholarship from the era, there is a lack of clarity on the interactivity of Ikaros with the rest of the PG. The grant of *ateleia* from Ikadion's letter is an intriguing aspect of one inscription highlighted by Roueche as demonstrating a reorganization of the settlement via the king. When this is combined with the material evidence from F5 (Ikaros site) then Roueche, as a relatively

²⁵ Potts, 2009, 37.

²⁶ Potts, 2009, 40.

²⁷ Potts, 2009, 40.

²⁸ Salles, 1987, 84-85.

minor suggestion, points out the “*mingled cultural traditions*” of the material evidence countering the view of ‘us and them’ in terms of Greek settlements in the PG.²⁹ Beyond the letter of Ikadion other inscriptions from Ikaros provide evidence of Seleucid occupation of Ikaros from the early 3rd century, the epigraphic evidence combined with archaeological as well as the indirect evidence of Seleucus’s gift to the Milesian sanctuary at Didyma of Frankincense, myrrh and Indian spices attests to an access to the eastern trade routes at least from the founder of the dynasty.³⁰

The Ikaros inscriptions can assist in illuminating the question of Seleucid control of the PG as it would appear that establishment of the settlement went some way to impose influence on the routes via maritime means. However, it would appear that the success of this was somewhat limited as by the era of Antiochus III (the date of Ikadion’s letter is 203 BCE) the overland routes centred on Gerrha remain the most significant in control of the trade, perhaps mostly in relation to incense from the southerly caravan route (Sabaean Marib). The role of Ikaros as an entrepôt towards the Babylonian homelands and beyond serves it only as an intermediary in this trade triangle and one could envisage a role of imposing taxation on imported goods before them then being punted on to the inland kingdoms. Ikadion’s letter serves to inform us that by 203 BCE affairs on Ikaros had been somewhat regulated by the crown and therefore Seleucid expansion into the PG more firmly taken up than in previous generations.

Conclusion

It is without doubt that the significance of the PG became more concerted over the centuries of the Seleucid dynasty, what is still emerging is the impact that the dynasty had on actual control of coastal shipping and the peoples of the region. A people who are perhaps too enfranchised in caravan trade routes and pastoralism to be subjected to any centralised control.³¹ The array of evidence available to modern scholarship certainly seeks to challenge the thoughts of previous generations on the role, extent, and range of Seleucid influence. Whether this influence can be considered as control of the PG in its entirety seems improbable and instead what emerges are attempts at pockets of control changeable over time in a manner that befits the former Persian empire in its vastness. Kosmin identifies the thoughts of Potts as still being of relevance in the modern picture whereby the PG can be considered as both fragmented (regionally) and unified (globally) via the interactions by sea rather than overland due to the harsh and sparse nature of the Arabian coastal region, an environment somewhat unchanged in 6,000 years according to Potts. This conclusion arrived at due to the apparent lack of nucleated settlements on the land itself, however made without acute consideration of the Geoarchaeology in relation to sea level change. Instead of control via a systemic land-based regional colonisation policy, trade in the region should be considered as being via nodes of influence on the islands (Tylos/Ikaros).³²

²⁹ Rouche, 1985, 37-38.

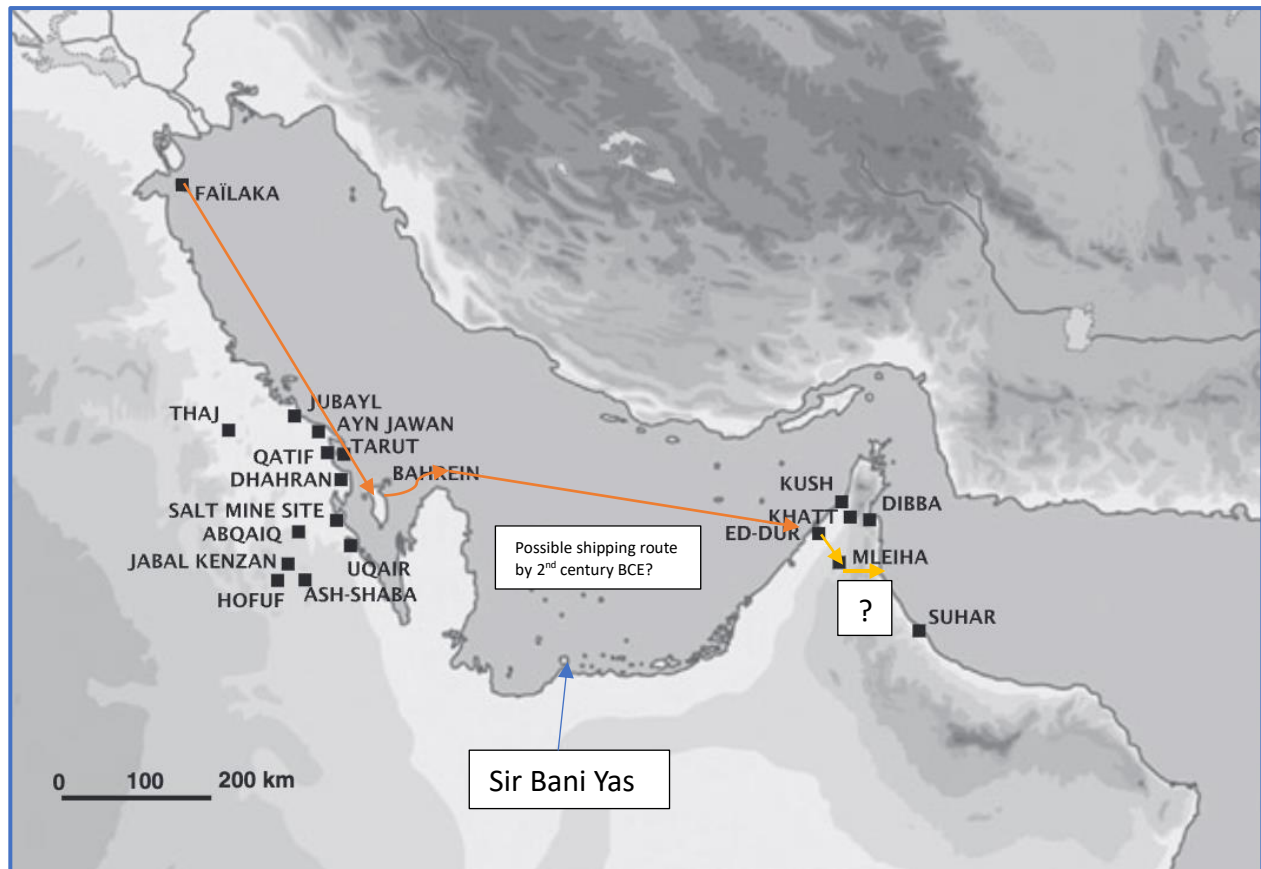
³⁰ Rouche, 1985, 38.

³¹ Salles, 1987, 108.

³² Potts, 1978, 29-32.

I would seek to suggest that the view of Potts and others from the 1970s/80s era of scholarship on the PG should now undergo some evolution and instead modern thinking should traverse towards an interwoven Gulf community of sorts under influence but not direct control of the Seleucids. Indeed, the conclusions of Salles still remain that Seleucid ambition for the Gulf was not about 'colonisation' and conquest but rather about controlling the sea route/long-distance trade, this being the best option due to the environment at play where resources are limited, at least to those without intimate local knowledge.³³ The site of Mleiha could provide a key to further our understanding of the interplay between the regional and Hellenistic powers. The location of the site (Figure 1) provides a great deal of strategic value in the security of regional trade, indeed perhaps more value than modern scholarship has asserted thus far. It is potentially now a point of prominence to assess the existence, expansion, and significance of the Mleiha site emerging due to existential threat or disruption and instability of trade security possibly via piracy or the ambition of others in the Straits of Hormoz maritime route. The site then emerges as an attempt to bypass the traditional regional overland control and enterprise of the Gerrhaens. The entrepôt of Ed Dur followed by an inland route via dromedary camel through the Hagar mountains to a port on the Gulf of Oman would indeed provide security from the attack/plunder of precious cargo. The utilisation of harbour locations on the Gulf of Oman for onward trade/reception of goods via Barygaza and Socotra would present quite the entrepreneurial enterprise through the establishment of this bypass route. What is clear is that the views of scholars of the previous generation can be considered as somewhat confuddled and something of a paradigm shift in views about Seleucid interaction and expansion beyond the islands and on into the Arabian hinterlands is now more of a concise cynosure of thought on the region.

³³ Salles, 1987, 108.

Figure 1

Map of north-east and south-east Arabia. Arrows and text boxes are secondary additions.³⁴

³⁴ Mouton, (2009), 187.

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