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The Origins of Doha Project

Online Digital Heritage Remediation and Public Outreach in a Vanishing Pearling Town in the Arabian Gulf

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Abstract: The Origins of Doha project explores the foundation and the historic growth of Doha, its transformation into a modern city, and the lives and experiences of its people through a combination of archaeological investigation, historical research and oral testimony. This project employs a variety of outreach strategies, including re-photography, social media, and multimedia-enhanced, online GIS to raise awareness about the increasingly threatened urban heritage beneath the modern landscape. These strategies address the challenges of conducting archaeological outreach amongst a rapidly changing and diverse population with widely varying perceptions of heritage. In this paper we discuss digital archaeology, outreach and contested heritage from the first urban excavations in the Arabian Gulf, with an emphasis on pragmatic, modular, and adaptable strategies for meaningful, multivalent archaeological interpretation.

Keywords: Online GIS; public outreach; digital archaeology; social media; blogging

Introduction

The Origins of Doha Project (ODQ) is a multi-year investigation of the history and archaeology of Doha, Qatar, a pearling settlement in the Arabian Gulf that has rapidly transformed into a metropolis. Beginning in 2012, ODQ is based at University College London - Qatar and made possible by NPRP grant no. 5-421-6-010 from the Qatar National Research Fund (a member of the Qatar Foundation). Members of the project have engaged in extensive recording of the swiftly disappearing historic buildings of Doha, conducted the first major urban excavations in the Arabian Gulf (with Qatar Museums as the Joint QM-UCL Qatar Old Doha Rescue Excavation, directed by Robert Carter and Ferhan Sakal), recorded oral histories from local residents, investigated historic documents related to the founding and growth of the city, and conducted a detailed GIS analysis of the pre-oil and early oil town. This research has revealed an archaeological sequence going back to the foundation of the town in the early 19th c., including a particularly well-preserved series of building levels dated to the late 19th to mid-20th c. AD. The sequence documents the material culture of the townspeople across a boom in the pearling industry, which spiked dramatically between the 1880s and 1920s (CARTER 2012: 157, fig. 6.10), through a phase of economic depression in the 1930s and 1940s, and into the revival of the town in 1950-60s under the impact of oil revenues. The archaeological work provides materials and economic proxy data that document the changing lives of the inhabitants of Doha throughout these radical changes. Additionally, the GIS analysis reveals how the town grew and how its architecture, communication routes and districts were articulated, while the oral history work records personal recollections and phenomenological data relating to life in the town, thus populating Doha with the memories and lived experiences of its people.

Central to all of these activities is a program of outreach and engagement, both in person and online. In addition to customary outreach activities such as appearances at local schools, hosting booths at local events, public conferences, and reaching out to local newspapers and magazines, ODQ has also employed outreach online. This project uses a variety of online outreach strategies, including re-photography, social media, and multimedia-enhanced, online GIS to raise awareness about the increasingly threatened urban heritage beneath the modern landscape. These strategies attempt to address the challenges raised while conducting archaeological outreach amongst a rapidly changing and diverse population with widely varying perceptions of heritage. In this paper we discuss the ODQ as an example of multi-sited outreach conducted within a contested heritage landscape, and emphasize pragmatic, modular, and adaptable strategies for meaningful archaeological interpretation and engagement.

Public archaeology and outreach

“Public archaeology” has been defined as simply “any area of archaeological activity that interacted or had the potential to interact with the public” (SCHADLA-HALL 1999:147) yet has been deeply implicated in “sophisticated debates which have now emerged around heritage in general” (MERRIMAN 2004:4). Rather than presenting archaeology for archaeology’s sake, that is, to understand public archaeology as fulfilling a deficit in public understanding of archaeology, Nick Merriman situates public archaeology as a way to “encourage self-realisation, to enrich people’s lives and stimulate reflection and creativity” (MERRIMAN 2004:7). This understanding of public outreach has been present in archaeological outreach since the relatively early days of the World Wide Web (MCDAVID 2004; LAW and MORGAN 2014). Since that time, archaeological outreach online has accelerated through the wide adoption of social media to broadcast archaeological information, though early claims of the successes of online outreach have come under scrutiny (RICHARDSON 2013; WALKER 2014).

The Origins of Doha team designed an outreach strategy that is cognizant of criticism in both online and in-person public archaeology while accounting for the specific context of Qatar. Understanding that there are multiple publics and stakeholders who engage with archaeological interpretations of the past is key to shaping a more effective outreach strategy. As of August 2015, there are over 2.2 million people in Qatar: 1.7 million men and 537,000 women. The last census published in 2012 by the Qatar Information Exchange reveals that the population at that time was comprised of 166,000 Qataris compared to 1.6 million Non-Qataris. Qataris are employed primarily in high levels of business or state bureaucracy while non-Qataris fill a wide variety of roles. This pattern of a non-indigenous, seasonal workforce has historic roots in Qatar and in the wider Gulf region, as does the presence of longer-term expatriate communities forming a multi-ethnic population (CARTER 2012: 212-3; FUCCARO 2010; HEARD BEY 1982: 200-2; GARDNER 2011: 6-5; SAID ZAHLAN 1979: 17-8, 22). As members of that workforce, ODQ aims for an inclusive in-person outreach strategy, one that does not centre on a top-down, Qatari-only historic narrative, but that is meaningful to the diverse population inside Qatar. The ODQ online outreach mixes local interest with global connections. This multi-modal strategy emphasizes a preservationist ethic that engages with both local and global interest.

As there is a limited season for investigation by the ODQ, local, in-person outreach has been restricted. This outreach is characterized by school visits, public lectures, newspaper coverage, interaction with local television media, and appearances at local festivals. ODQ has been involved in training Qataris in historic buildings recording, but further local involvement in archaeological excavation, beyond employing Asian expatriate workers, has been limited due to the location of archaeological sites within construction zones. In this, the ODQ is not innovative in the methods of public archaeology, but is unique in the application of these techniques in the Arabian Gulf.

Digital Outreach

The Origins of Doha team has employed an array of digital outreach methods to complement this in-person outreach and to raise awareness of local heritage to a global audience. These methods include re-photography, social media, and multimedia-enhanced, online GIS to raise awareness about the increasingly threatened urban heritage beneath the modern landscape. Connectivity in Qatar is high, even among developed nations. As of 2013, eighty-five percent of households in Qatar have access to the Internet and of that, ninety-three percent use social networking platforms. One-hundred percent of the population has a mobile phone, with sixty-three percent owning smartphones (Qatar ICT Landscape 2014). With this broad adoption of internet and connective services in Qatar, digital outreach considerably augments other efforts.



Fig. 1 – Re-photography of the urban landscape in Doha; on the left is a photograph by the Danish expedition led by P.V. Glob and G.T. Bibby between 1957-1964, Moesgård Museum, on the right, photograph by Colleen Morgan, 2014; both taken from the same viewshed

Reflecting this widespread connectivity in Qatar, ODQ has diversified digital outreach efforts to accommodate a range of technological abilities and interest. A relatively low-tech, yet evocative and popular method of outreach is re-photography. Re-photography is a widely employed technique partly based on Prince's Principle: the use of historic photographs to investigate the landscape by locating specific viewsheds, taking a digital photograph from that viewshed, then using photo-manipulation software to blend the two photographs together (PRINCE 1988). Prince's Principle has been used by historical archaeologists to locate sites; recent advances in photographic manipulation has enabled non-specialist use of re-photography to produce compelling composite photographs that evoke past uses of landscape while providing a familiar modern referent. ODQ team members used re-photography by locating several historic photographs of Doha, yet this technique has had limited success as the historic fabric of the city has been radically altered and it is difficult to locate or access viewsheds. Even when these are located, it is usually impossible to re-create the viewshed through physical limitations imposed by the new landscape. In Fig. 1, we combined a photograph taken by one of the Danish expeditions led by P.V. Glob and G.T. Bibby between 1957-1964 with a photograph taken in 2014 of the same viewshed. This viewshed was particularly difficult to rephotograph, as much of the cityscape had been reconfigured. The view was located by lining up a very small surviving minaret and the street on the edge of the market. Though re-photography can inform archaeological investigations regarding the changing fabric of buildings and the landscape, it can also be an important part of outreach; infusing this radically altered landscape with past buildings and people is a reminder of threatened archaeological remains under the ground. These blended photographs have been uploaded to the team photographic catalogue on Flickr (<http://flickr.com/photos/originsofdoha>) and used extensively by the project in promotional literature, both online and in print media.

THE ORIGINS OF DOHA PROJECT

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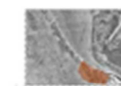


Fig. 2 – The Origins of Doha Wordpress Blog Page

These images have also been distributed on social media; ODQ has a Wordpress blog (<http://originsofdoha.wordpress.com>) and a Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/OriginsOfDoha>) to announce news and research outcomes. Created at the inception of the project, the Origins of Doha blog hosts extensive information about the project, including a staff list, excavation and building recording reports, updates regarding field seasons, a Qatar history and archaeology bibliography, and a detailed history of Qatar drawn from historic sources. This history is cited extensively in Wikipedia entries for Qatar (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qatar>) and Doha (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doha>). As of October 2015, the blog has received 36,600 views, the majority, 17,198 from Qatar. The second-most was from the United Kingdom, perhaps reflecting the hosting institution, University College London – Qatar. There were 3,991 visitors from the United States and 840 from the United Arab Emirates. The referrers overwhelmingly came from Facebook. The Origins of Doha Facebook page has 2,335 “likes,” the majority of which, 869, came from Qatar. Unlike the Wordpress blog, the Facebook page has more attention from India (157 likes) and Egypt (133 likes). Unfortunately we cannot discern ethnicity or nationality within the residents of Qatar from the demographic data Facebook provides to precisely identify the in-country audience. While the Facebook posts are “liked” and shared, most of the comments are on the Wordpress blog. These comments have been very informative, providing detailed insights regarding the historical timeline of the region and have identified individuals in archival photographs.



Fig. 3 – DOHA: the Doha Online Historical Atlas

Finally, we have created the Doha Online Historical Atlas (DOHA: <http://originsofdoha.org/doha/>), an online historical Geographic Information System (GIS) (BODENHAMER, 2010). DOHA presents research from the Origins of Doha team as visualized on an interactive map of Doha. Users of the interface can overlay historic aerial photos and increase and decrease visibility of these photos on the modern landscape. Aerial oblique imagery is also noted on the map, complete with location and angle of the photograph.

Photographs and video records taken from the ground are similarly annotated. It is also possible to chart historic growth of the city tied to population. Places that are mentioned on Wikipedia are also included in an optional layer. Beyond this historic research, archaeological and buildings recording sites that have been investigated by ODQ are located on the map. Each location links to a description of the site, photo gallery, drawings, and a field report. DOHA fully integrates the historical and archaeological research carried out by ODQ and geolocates this research on Doha's landscape. DOHA also provides links that highlights specific content through social media including Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus. Beyond this passive sharing, there is a provision for users to add media geolocated media content. DOHA is in beta release at this time, but we look forward to a better understanding of how it is accessed and used to understand Doha's heritage.

Challenges of Outreach in Qatar

The Origins of Doha team employs a variety of both in-person and online outreach strategies to interact with both local and international audiences. There remain several challenges to this outreach, and these have not been completely mitigated by this wide-ranging approach. Our first challenge has been finding ongoing and adequate Arabic translation for the project outcomes.

Ideally the translations should use a Qatari register of Modern Standard Arabic to be considered a legitimate presentation of regional heritage, or at least one that is not recognizably from outside the Gulf region, and such translators are difficult to retain. The Origins of Doha Wordpress site is slowly being translated into Arabic, but hosting tools make this difficult, as many WYSIWYG editors created for English speakers will reverse word order from right-to-left to left-to-right.

There are similar issues with many other basic digital design programs like the Adobe publication suite.

Yet the challenge of language translation goes beyond one of software design flaws. Many Qataris are educated in English as the main pedagogical structures within the country emphasize English language learning (KANE 2014). While English-only websites may not be a problem among educated Qataris, most Qataris do not read English-language resources. Additionally, only a minority of expatriate workers are literate in English. Our research for ODQ indicates that the current cosmopolitan composition of the population of Qatar has some historical precedent (see also MACLEAN and INSOLL 2014), insofar as seasonal migrant labour was highly significant at the time of the pearl trade, while economic activity was mediated through both local and international merchants. As such, the current, shifting community of expatriate workers arguably has as much connection to Doha's past as the Qatari population and should have access to the archaeological research performed by the project. Further, today's expatriate workers are often employed on archaeological excavations. Though there is little doubt that these workers are alienated from their labor, ignoring their connections to the region in the past and their current contributions toward understanding archaeological remains through excavation through inaccessible interpretation is a disservice.

While Arabic language translation is certainly the biggest challenge for ODQ outreach, other difficulties include presenting a nuanced heritage that does not tie into state-led linear narratives or a romanticized ideal of a Bedouin past (see also EXELL and RICO 2013) and carefully negotiating existing power

structures that prevent the preservation of heritage either through developmental pressures or political infighting. Finally, though presenting a unified heritage discourse is troublesome, multivocality is also fraught with difficulty. For example, when collecting oral histories, the origins of individuals or their families can be a sensitive topic: regional origin, sect, the length of time settled in Qatar, and population group or tribal affiliation are tied in with status and politics to a degree that make them uncomfortable topics in a modernized Qatar.

Addressing these challenges has been part of an ongoing process of adapting ODQ outreach strategies. While there was no initial budget or remit for outreach, it has become a key element of the project and integral to future planning and funding strategies. The popularity of ODQ resources online, its integration into Wikipedia as an authoritative source for the history of Doha and Qatar, and the intense local interest have been rewarding for the project. Diversifying digital outreach has drawn different audiences through Wordpress and Facebook. Finally, a UCL-Q student, Fatma Abdel Aziz has critiqued the outreach programme as part of her dissertation, calling for greater efforts to recruit full-time Arabic-speaking team members, more engagement at local schools, and developing community archaeology aspects to augment public outreach.

With the release of DOHA, we are planning to implement supporting syllabi to guide teachers in using the resource.

Conclusions

The Origins of Doha project has endeavored to create a diverse strategy that incorporates both online and in-person outreach, with the intention of engaging both the national and expatriate populations in the heritage of the town and its people. These different strands of outreach are mutually supportive; re-photography is posted online, used to illustrate reports, and reproduced as postcards given out on open days. Content written for reports and for webpages has been repurposed as interpretive layers in DOHA. DOHA is purely a web-based historical GIS at this time but we are working to implement a version that will act as an augmented reality application accessible on mobile devices throughout the city. In this way, an active strategy of public outreach in archaeology remains fluid, changing and adapting with technologies and circumstances. The core of ODQ's success in public outreach has been creating meaningful resources based on grounded archaeological interpretations and historical evidence that can be implemented on a variety of platforms. This ensures a long life for information gleaned during the project, and has been instrumental in a growing consciousness of threatened heritage in Qatar.

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