

Qal'at al-Bahrain – Ancient Harbour and Capital of Dilmun

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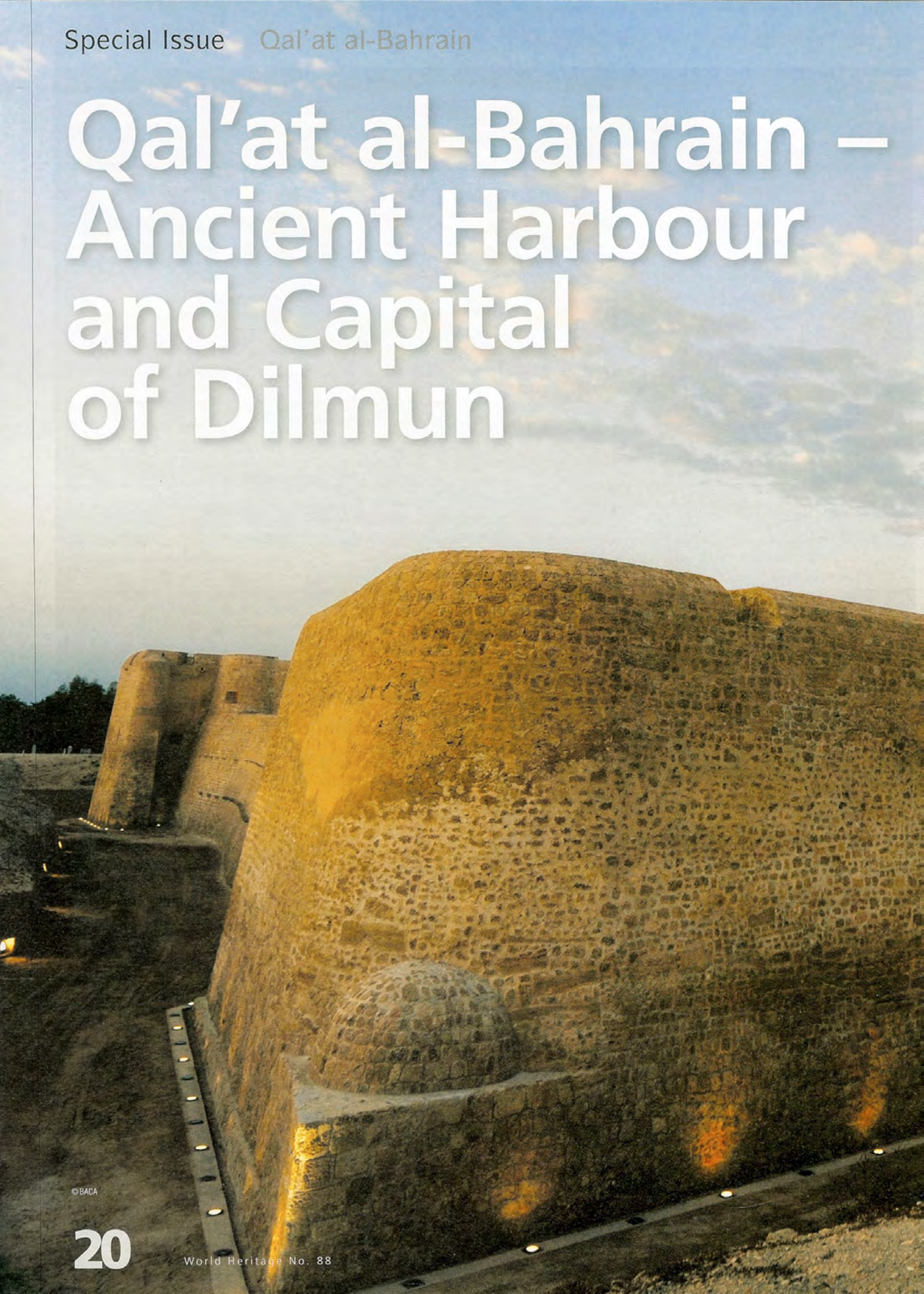
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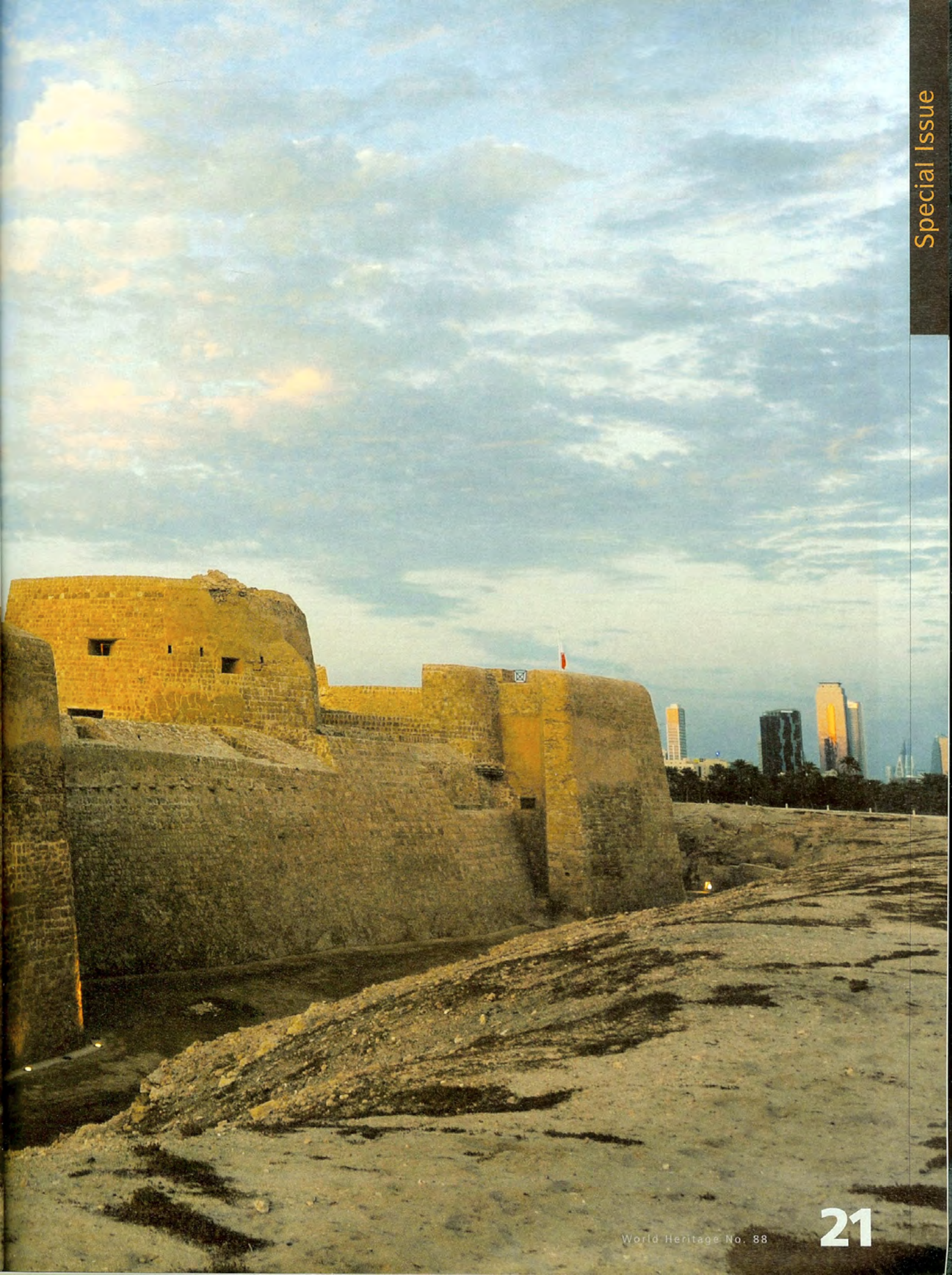
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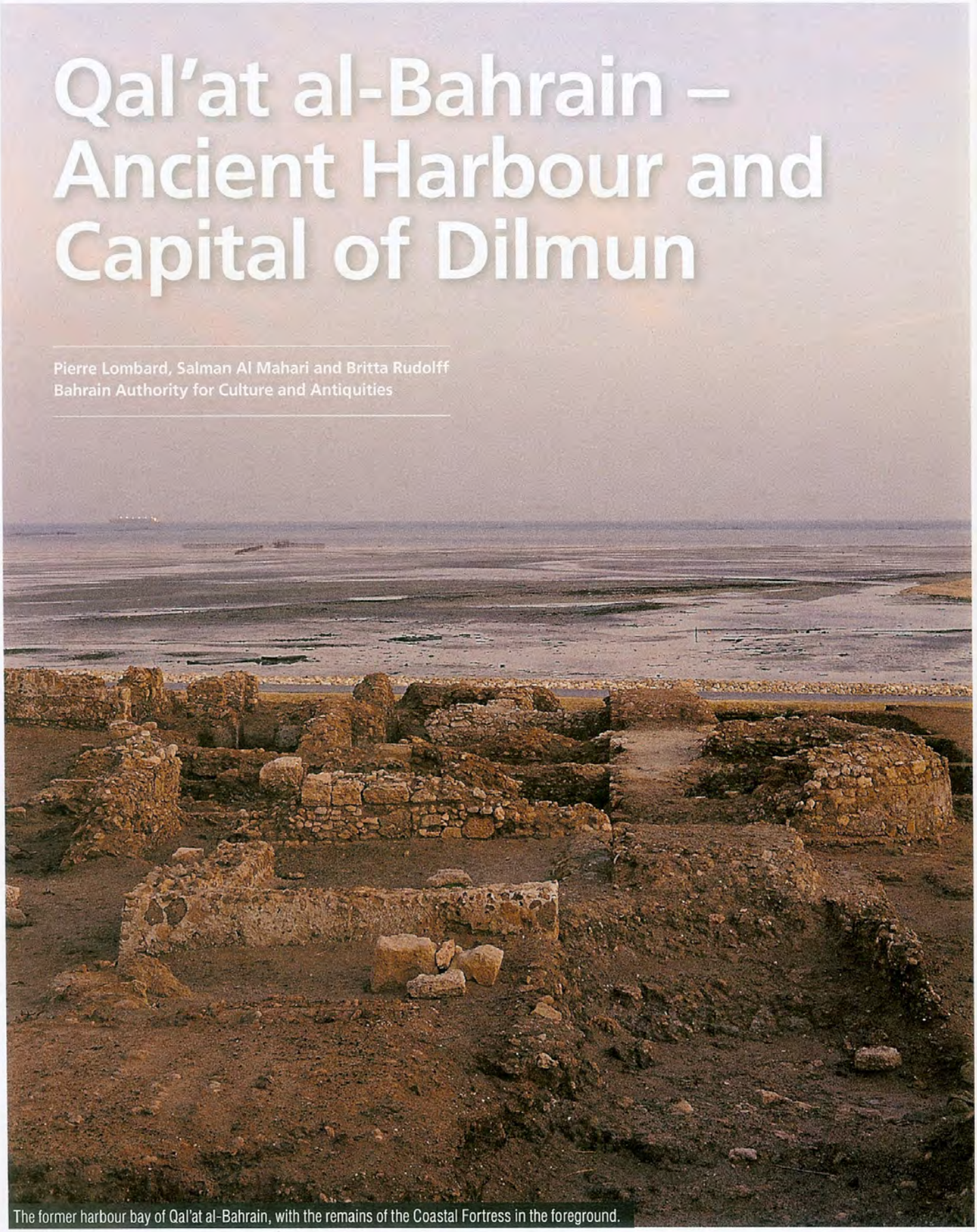


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Qal'at al-Bahrain – Ancient Harbour and Capital of Dilmun

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The former harbour bay of Qal'at al-Bahrain, with the remains of the Coastal Fortress in the foreground.

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South wall of the Main Fortress built by the Hormuzi and the Portuguese in the 15th and 16th centuries.

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Qal'at al-Bahrain is an exceptional example of more or less unbroken continuity of occupation over a period of almost 4,500 years, from about 2300 BC to the present.

The World Heritage site of Qal'at al-Bahrain: Ancient Harbour and Capital of Dilmun was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2005 during the 29th session of the World Heritage Committee in Durban, South Africa. It was initially inscribed as the capital of the Dilmun civilization. In 2008 the property was further extended and henceforth is referred to as Qal'at al-Bahrain, the ancient harbour and capital of the Dilmun civilization. The land and culture of Dilmun are mentioned in Sumerian mythology, which links Dilmun with the origins of the world. The land of Dilmun is believed to be the paradise, the Garden of Eden that Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, found when searching for immortality. Sumerian texts from the 3rd millennium BC describe Dilmun as a land blessed by the gods, graced with abundant fresh water resources and renowned as an international trade centre. Dilmun in fact was the only market place for long-distance trade via the Gulf. It was a port of transit where representatives from all parts of the then known world came to exchange their goods or sell their products.

The early capital and sea access of Dilmun remain legible until today through a combination of archaeological and geographical factors. The World Heritage property encompasses an archaeological site comprising four main elements. The first of these is an archaeological tell (an artificial hill formed over time by successive occupations) of over 16 hectares located on the northern shores of Bahrain. The next two elements are located in the intertidal zone and northern sea, within and around a fossilized coral reef. Here one finds a sea tower about 1,600 m northwest of the tell at the edge of the fossilized coral reef paralleling the shore and a sea channel through this reef, which leads from the sea tower towards the former harbour bay of the capital. The fourth element constitutes the landscape surrounding the archaeological site, which is composed of palm groves and agricultural lands, where ancient cultivation and water-distribution techniques continue to be used.

The palm groves and traditional agricultural gardens surround the site within the whole area of the land component and are particularly noticeable on the western and northern sides. The property is situated in the Northern Governorate, in Al Qalah village district on the northern coast about 5.5 km west of Manama, the present capital of Bahrain.

Unbroken continuity

Qal'at al-Bahrain is an exceptional example of more or less unbroken continuity of occupation over a period of almost 4,500 years, from about 2300 BC to the present. The archaeological tell, the largest known in Bahrain, is unique within the entire region of East Arabia and the Gulf as the most complete example currently known of a deep and intact stratigraphic sequence covering the majority of time periods in Bahrain and the wider region.

It provides an outstanding example of the might of Dilmun, and the successive Tylos and Islamic periods, as expressed by their control of trade through the Gulf. These qualities are manifested in the monumental and defensive architecture of the site, the wonderfully preserved urban fabric and the outstandingly significant finds made by archaeologists excavating the tell. These are today exhibited in the site museum, which is exclusively dedicated to the property's interpretation and excavation history.

The stratigraphy of the site is continuous from about 2300 BC to the 16th century AD. About 25 per cent of the archaeological tell has been excavated, revealing structures of different types – residential, public, commercial, religious and military.

The excavations undertaken document six subsequent layers of archaeological vestiges on site, which are illustrated in the stratigraphy wall of the recently-built site museum. The lowest four of these layers represent the Dilmun civilization, which was also the centrepiece of the World Heritage recognition. The first layer attests to the birth of the Dilmun settlement and dates back to the last quarter of the 3rd millennium BC. It consists of a number of small houses. The second layer which falls in the Early Dilmun



The central courtyard, from the first phase of the Main Fortress.

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era is the capital that witnessed the peak of the Dilmun civilization. It is surrounded by defensive walls and comprises a variety of different public, private and religious structures. The third layer coincides with the peak of prosperity and extends from around 1600 to 1200 BC. The fourth layer falls into the Late Dilmun period and its key evidence is the Palace of Uperi. The two remaining layers show the evidence of Tylos, which is characterized by Greek references and the early Islamic era, during which the name of Bahrain changed to Awal. Today, the mound is capped by an impressive fort, last occupied and developed by the Portuguese, to which the whole site owes its name – qal'a means fort in Arabic.

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A maritime city of international importance

The sea tower, probably an ancient lighthouse, is unique in the region as an example of ancient maritime architecture, and the adjacent sea channel demonstrates the tremendous importance of this city in maritime trade routes throughout antiquity. Qal'at al-Bahrain, considered as the capital of the ancient Dilmun Empire and the original harbour of this long since disappeared civilization, was the centre of commercial activities linking the traditional agriculture of the land, represented by the traditional palm groves and gardens that date back to antiquity and still exist around the site, with maritime trade between such diverse areas as the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia in the early period (from the 3rd millennium to the 1st millennium BC) and China and the Mediterranean in the later period (from the 3rd to the 16th century AD).



The north wall of the Main Fortress, overlooking the Gulf.

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Acting as the hub for economic and cultural exchanges, Qal'at al-Bahrain had a very active commercial and political presence throughout the entire region. The meeting of different cultures that resulted finds expression in the testimony of successive monumental and defensive architecture, including an excavated coastal fortress dating from around the 3rd century AD and the large fortress on the tell itself dating from the 15th-16th centuries, which gives the site its name as Qal'at al-Bahrain. Likewise, the wonderfully preserved urban fabric of the former capital and the outstandingly significant and diverse finds demonstrate a mélange of languages, cultures and beliefs. For example, a *madbasa* (an architectural device used to produce date syrup) within the tell is one of the oldest in the world and reflects a link to the surrounding date palm groves, demonstrating the continuity of traditional agricultural practices from the 1st millennium BC onwards.



Late Dilmun constructions at Qal'at al-Bahrain, c. 800 BC.

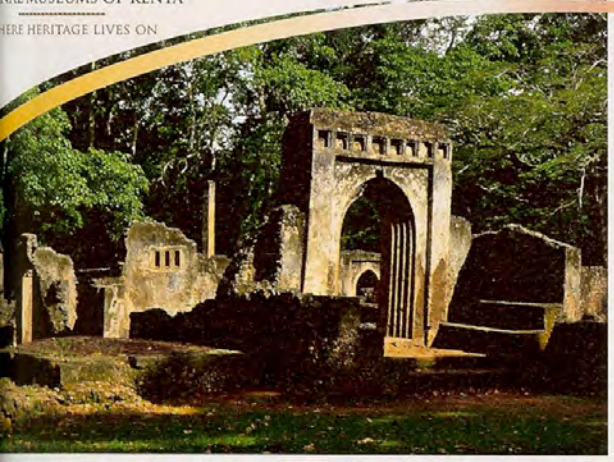
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Qal'at al-Bahrain is situated in a very strategic location. Historically, it was an extremely significant part of the regional Gulf political network, and played a very active political role through many different time periods, which left traces throughout the different strata of the tell. In contemporary times, it is located adjacent to the lively business and commercial district of Seef. Rapid urban and infrastructure expansion has at times not been the easiest context for the management of Qal'at al-Bahrain, which has become a model site for government negotiations, Heritage Impacts Assessment projects and joint planning processes between developers and various concerned government agencies.

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Welcome to Gedi

Gedi is located 16 kilometers south of Malindi and about 100 kilometers north of Mombasa. It is one of the 12th Century Swahili towns along the East African Coast that retains memories of an evolved urban culture influenced by numerous waves of migration and Inter-Oceanic trade contacts with Arabia, Persia and India.

The magnificent buildings that still exist at Gedi today represent this era. These include: mosques, a palace, residential houses, elaborate pillar tombs and a tombstone built for the revered one with an epitaph incised in plaster with the date AH 802(AD 1399).

Due to Portuguese domination and disruption of the Indian Ocean trade system, followed by invasion from pastoral warring communities and the change of water table, Gedi declined and collapsed. By the end of the 17th Century, Gedi had virtually been abandoned. Since its abandonment, the empty town remained undisturbed and trees grew between the houses. The town evolved into an indigenous forest which the local community now uses for sacred rituals.

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