

THE ANCIENT CITY OF QALHÂT



Ministry of Heritage and Culture
SULTANATE OF OMAN





Aerial view of the ancient city of Qalhât during the activities of excavation and conservation © MHC/QDP

THE ANCIENT CITY OF QALHÂT

***Qalhât is a big Arab city, with elegant and well built houses.
It included many wholesale merchants and other noble people***

Duarte Barbosa, ca. 1516 AD remembering his visit

The ancient city of Qalhât is one of the most important archaeological sites in the Sultanate of Oman. A popular lore tells about its mythical foundation at the eve of the modern era. Historically, Qalhât was mentioned in texts since the 11th century AD.

Qalhât was the twin capital of the Kingdom of Hormuz between the 13th and the 16th century AD, a cosmopolitan entrepot that controlled and fostered maritime trades across the Arabian Sea, linking the Oman Peninsula with the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia.

As mentioned in several contemporaneous sources, Qalhât was a large and modern city, but after its destruction it was totally abandoned at the end of the 16th century and never resettled afterwards. This makes Qalhât a unique occasion to reconstruct the urban planning, the way of life and the vivid commercial activities of a leading trade center of the Hormuzi kingdom. Sadly, both the old and the new cities of Hormuz in Iran have been instead completely destroyed.

LOCATION

The Ancient City of Qalhât is located at the mouth of the Sea of Oman, about 20 km northwest of the city of Sûr and 50 km from the easternmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula at Ras al-Hadd, along the coast of Ash-Sharqiyah South Governorate.

The archaeological site covers the northern area of a rocky plateau on the southern bank of Wadi Hilm, which is sloping from the foot of Jebel al-Hajjar al-Sharqi ending with a cliff over the shore. The walled city encompasses a triangular area about 900 m on each side for a total of 35 ha, but considering the extra-muros structures the entire site covers about 75 ha.

The city overlooks the ocean on its eastern side, while being enclosed by a massive fortification wall built on the edge of the wadi on the northwestern side and running from the mountain to the cliff on its southwestern side.



The ancient city of Qalhât on a rocky plateau along the shores of the Arabian Sea © MHC/QDP



One of the earliest Portuguese maps of the Indian Ocean from the Atlas Miller published by Lopo Homem and Jorge Reinel in 1519, just 21 years after Vasco De Gamas first voyage © Bibliothèque Nationale de France

HISTORY

Qalhât is considered the first legendary capital of Oman, founded at the beginning of the Common Era by Malik ibn Faham — the king of the 'Azd tribe — in the migration from Yemen to Oman. As claims of a pre-Islamic foundation are unproven, historic and archaeological records place the foundation of the city towards the end of the 11th century AD.

The fame of Qalhât began in the 13th century with the rise of the Hormuzi Kingdom. The city became the major port of Oman and the second capital of the kingdom after the new city of Hormuz. During the Kingdom of Hormuz, Qalhât prospered and became a pivotal sea-trade center for the Gulf region and the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula.

Qalhât was a cosmopolitan city, as proven also by the only hammam of the Oman Peninsula. Arab horses, dates and frankincense were probably among the most precious goods exported from Qalhât, while imports included food-stuffs, silk and spices from India and precious porcelains from China and Southeast Asia.

Mahmûd al-Qalhâtî, Prince of Hormuz, and the Governor Baha al-Dîn Ayâz and his wife Bîbî Maryam, who also ruled the city, are the most renowned historical characters linked to Qalhât. The city was first mentioned by Muhammad al-Idrisi around 1150 AD and by Ibn al-Mujawir around 1230 AD, who drew a plan of the fortifications. It was visited also by Ibn Battûta in 1331 AD, shortly after Bîbî Maryam's reign.

ARCHAEOLOGY & TOPOGRAPHY

The complete abandonment of Qalhât at the end of the 16th century AD after the earthquake and the Portuguese conquest in 1508 AD allowed to define in detail the topography and urban setting of the city, bringing back to light an exceptional number of public and private buildings, both religious and residential, as well as workshops and other productive structures, warehouses, graves, and the water supply system.

1. BÎBÎ MARYAM MAUSOLEUM

2. HAMMAM

3. CISTERNS

4. FUNERARY MOSQUE

5. SMALL MOSQUES

6. STOREHOUSE

7. MADBASA

8. POTTERY WORKSHOP

9. JEWELER WORKSHOP

10. KHAN

11. SOUQ

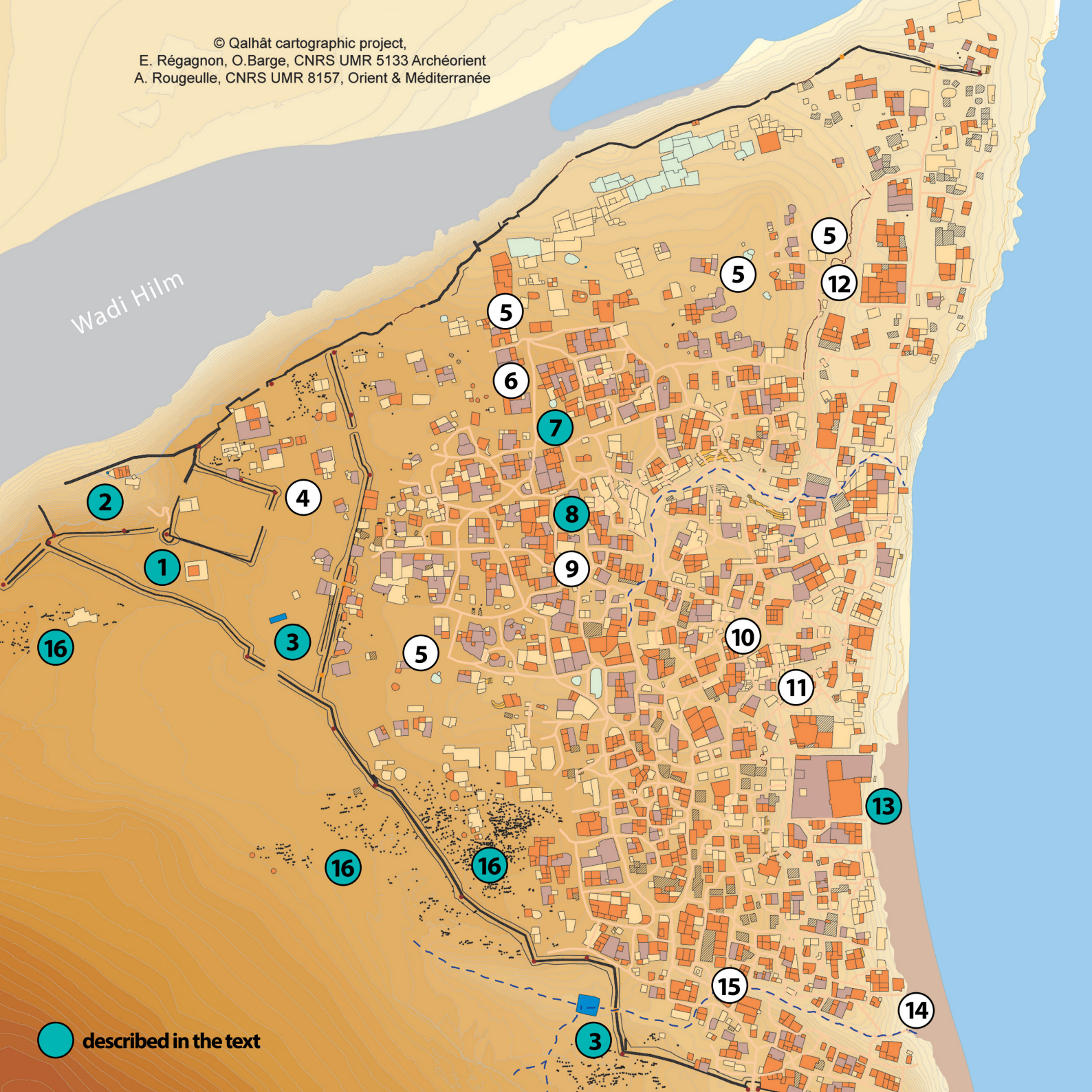
12. GOVERNOR RESIDENCE (?)

13. FRIDAY MOSQUE

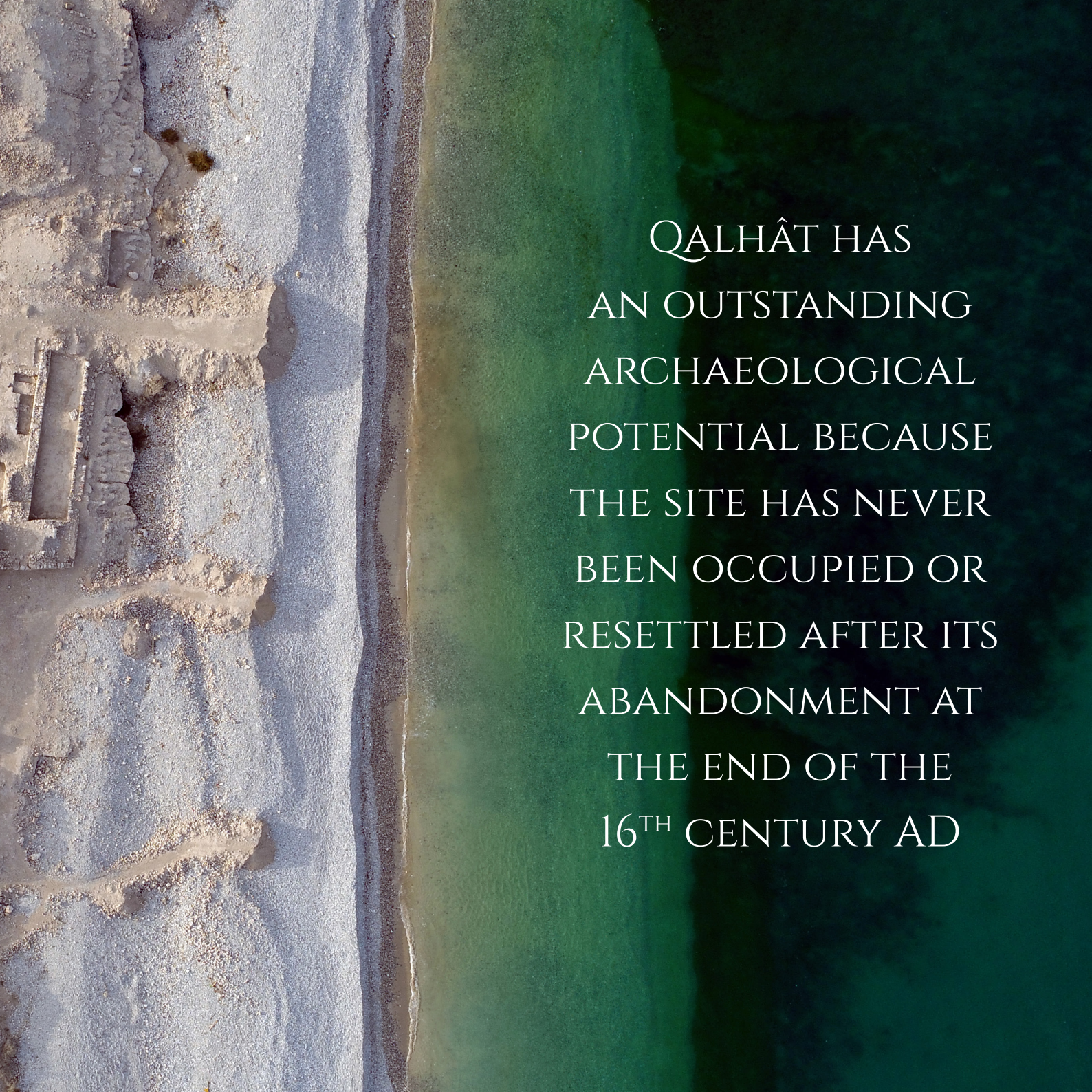
14. SEA TOWER

15. SOUTHERN WADI

16. FUNERARY QUARTERS





An aerial photograph of a coastal archaeological site. The left side of the image shows a sandy beach with several rectangular stone foundations and walls, some of which are partially buried in the sand. The right side of the image shows the turquoise water of the sea, which meets the shore in a shallow, rippled area. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image, in a white, serif font.

QALHÂT HAS
AN OUTSTANDING
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
POTENTIAL BECAUSE
THE SITE HAS NEVER
BEEN OCCUPIED OR
RESETTLED AFTER ITS
ABANDONMENT AT
THE END OF THE
16TH CENTURY AD



The Bibi Maryam Mausoleum after its conservation and restoration © MHC/QDP

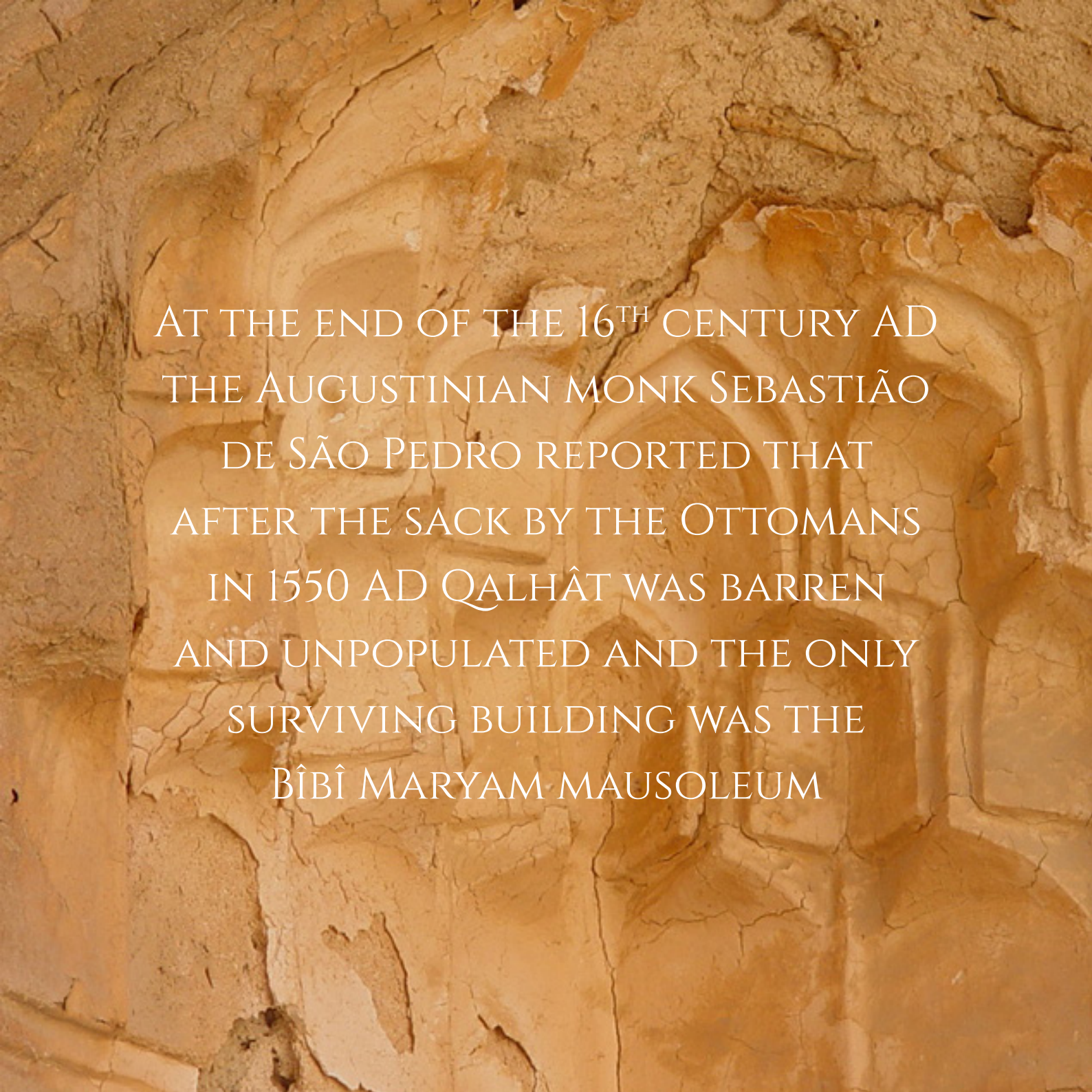
BÎBÎ MARYAM MAUSOLEUM

The Bîbî Maryam Mausoleum is the most prominent feature of Qalhât and the only monument still standing on the site. The Mausoleum was in fact not destroyed by the Portuguese in respect of Maryam, whose name was associated with Mary in the Christianity.

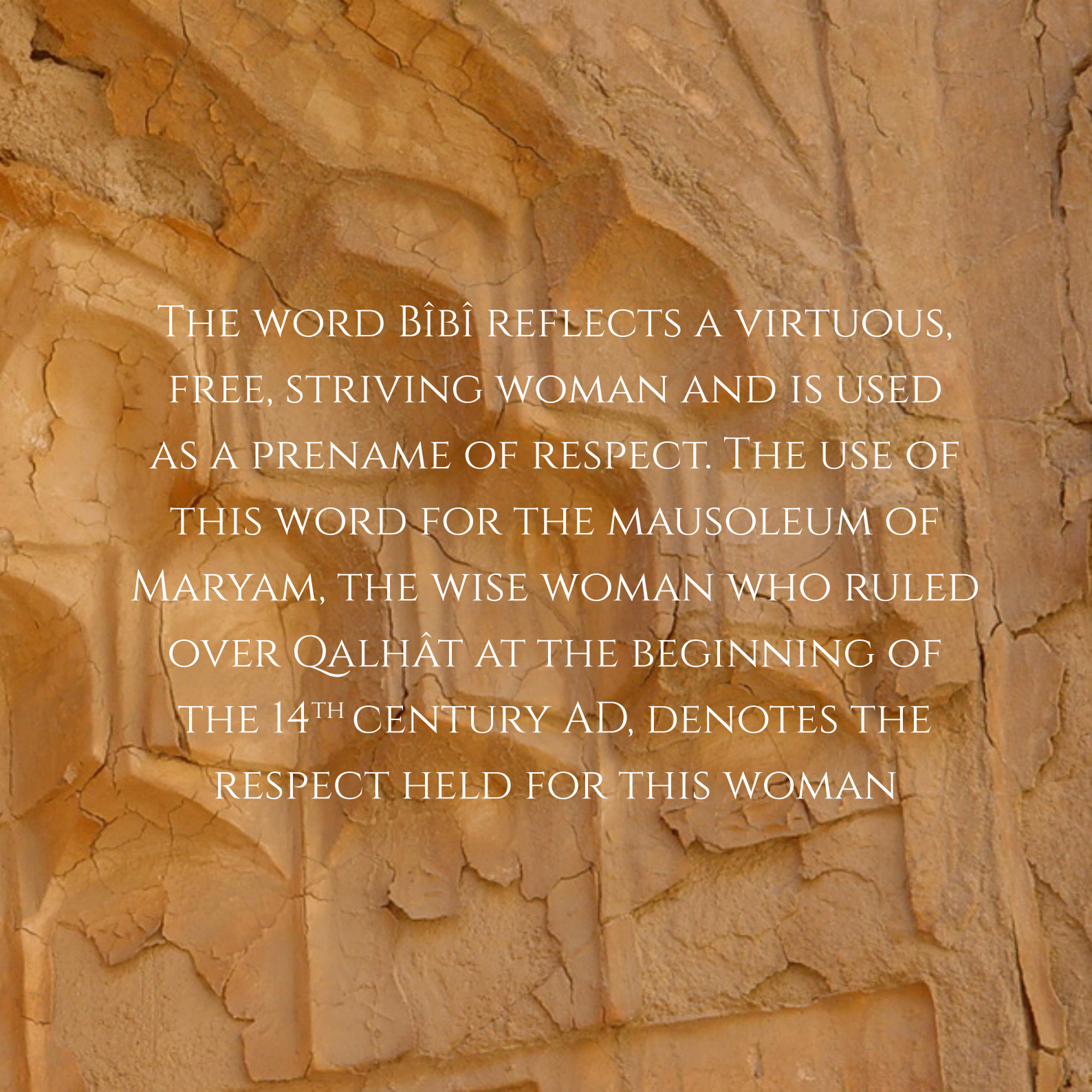
Built in the 14th century AD by Maryam, wife of the Governor Baha al-Dîn Ayâz Seyfin and Governor of the city herself, the mausoleum was a cube-shaped building originally covered with a dome that is now half collapsed. It was decorated with delicate carvings. The support of the dome had nine pavilions of lobed arches, while the arched entrance was decorated with fan-shaped floral motifs. Unfortunately, nothing is left now of this decoration except for traces of a mosaic composed of star-shaped and cross-shaped blue glazed tiles on the jamb of the southern entrance. The Mihrab was located at the center of the western wall. The mausoleum had an underground burial room.

Overall, the structure and decorations of the Bîbî Maryam Mausoleum recall the Samanid mausoleum of Bukhara in Uzbekistan, which date back to 907 AD and was probably the first example of this type of structure, as possibly also the original Mausoleum of Sheikh Younis in Mosul dating to the early 12th century.

Bîbî Maryam, together with the mausoleum of Bukhara, constitutes the unique evidence of an intact and unaltered square-shaped mausoleum that preserves its original plan.



AT THE END OF THE 16TH CENTURY AD
THE AUGUSTINIAN MONK SEBASTIÃO
DE SÃO PEDRO REPORTED THAT
AFTER THE SACK BY THE OTTOMANS
IN 1550 AD QALHÂT WAS BARREN
AND UNPOPULATED AND THE ONLY
SURVIVING BUILDING WAS THE
BÎBÎ MARYAM MAUSOLEUM



THE WORD BÎBÎ REFLECTS A VIRTUOUS,
FREE, STRIVING WOMAN AND IS USED
AS A PRENAME OF RESPECT. THE USE OF
THIS WORD FOR THE MAUSOLEUM OF
MARYAM, THE WISE WOMAN WHO RULED
OVER QALHÂT AT THE BEGINNING OF
THE 14TH CENTURY AD, DENOTES THE
RESPECT HELD FOR THIS WOMAN

THE FRIDAY MOSQUE

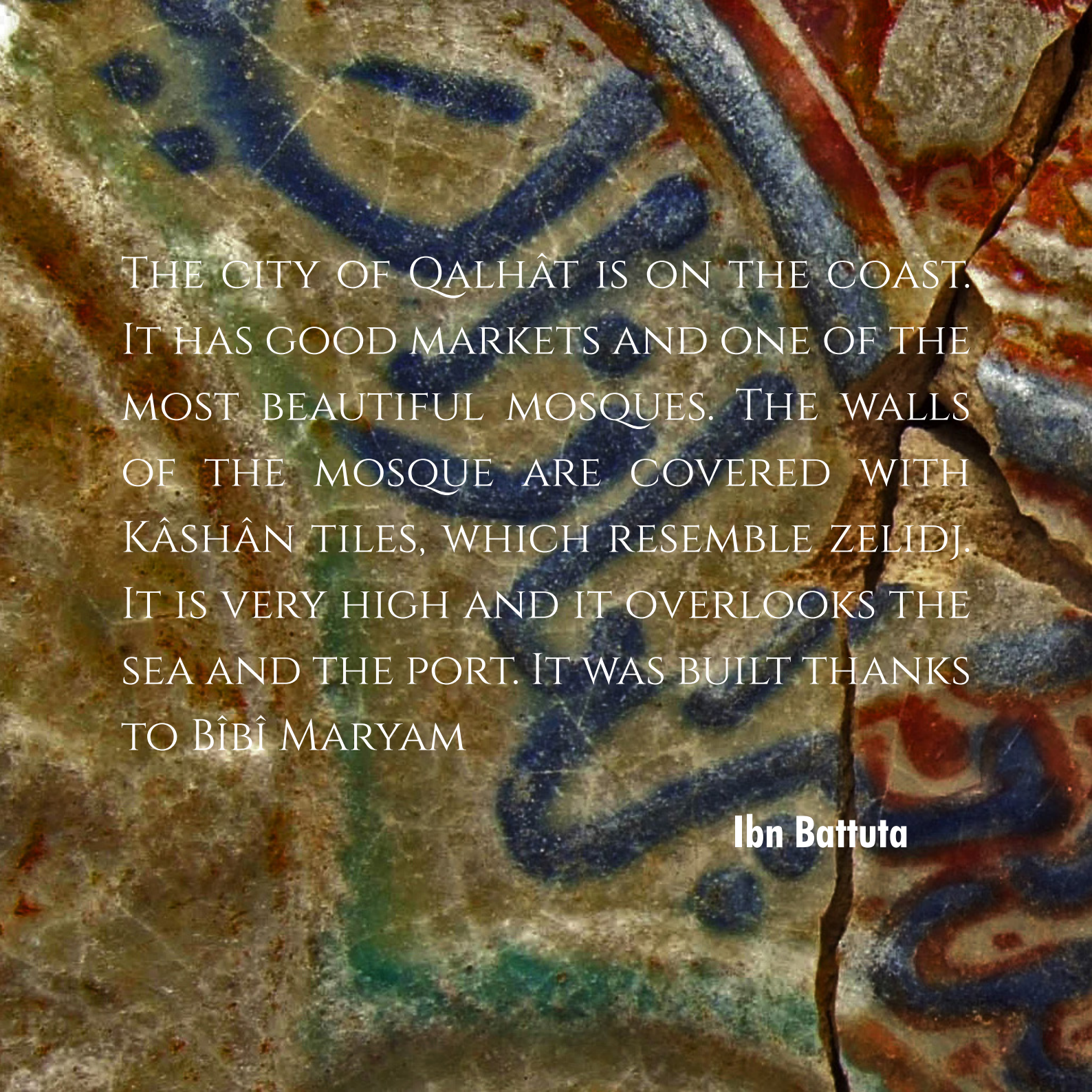
According to literary sources, the main building of the city was the Friday Mosque. The mosque was built by Bîbî Maryam around 1300 AD inside a large architectural complex enclosed by walls on the sea-shore, probably in place of an early smaller mosque. Its architecture is quite unique in the Islamic world. This richly adorned mosque – whose walls were made of coral blocks – was in fact built on a 4-meter-high basement, which included cellars and substructures, to follow the topography of the local terraced landscape and enhance its visibility.

The architectural decorations included glazed tiles of different shapes, such as monochrome stars and crosses locally made, as well as stars and rectangles of different colors, with or without reliefs, imported from the famous production center of Kashan, near Isfahan in Iran. The mosque was probably decorated also with fragments of fritware or blue-and-white porcelain bowls inserted in the walls. Decorated mortar and stones panels, sometimes with inscriptions, completed the decorations of this exceptional building.

The Friday Mosque of Qalhât was destroyed by Afonso de Albuquerque in 1508 AD.

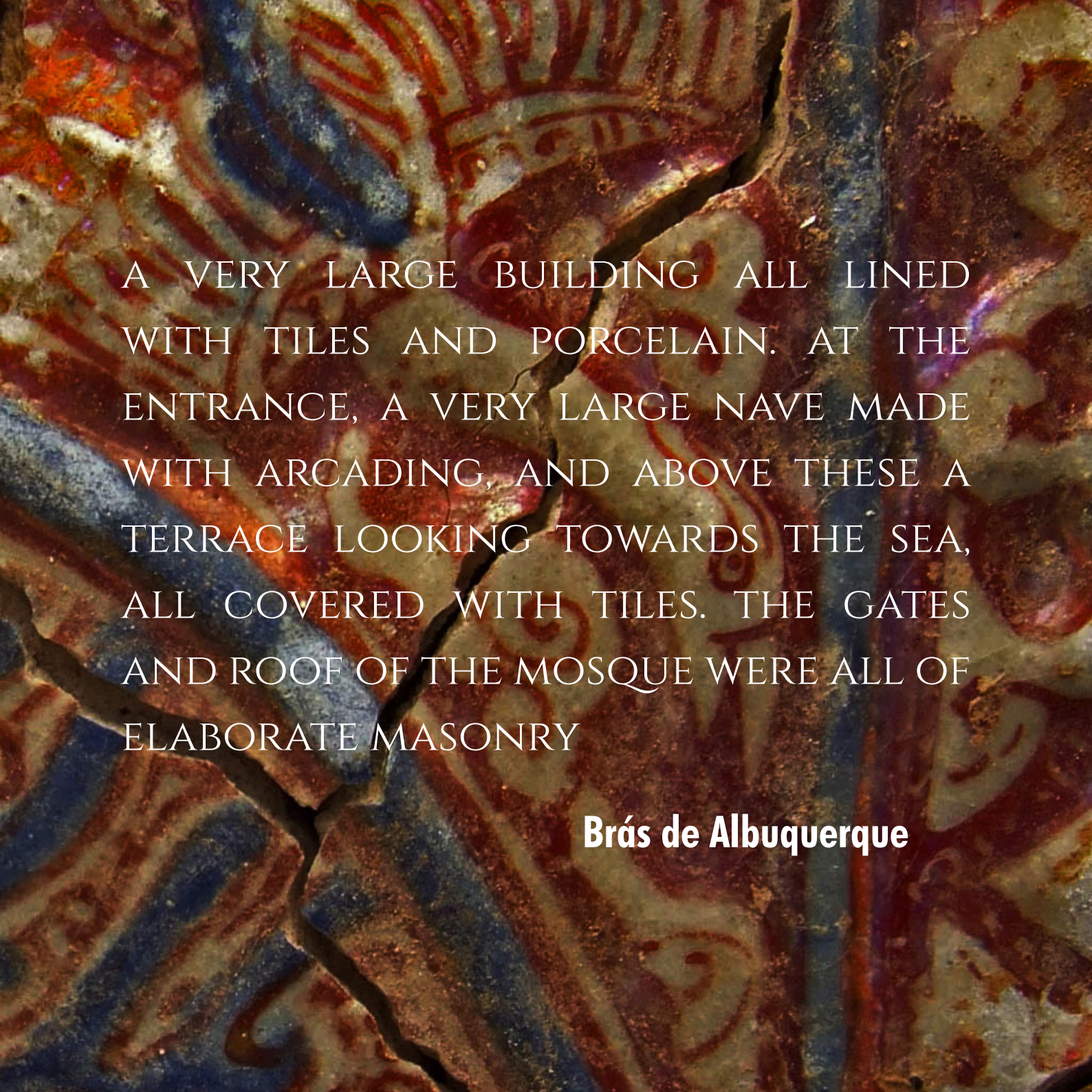


Star-shaped glazed decoration on a panel of the Friday Mosque © MHC/QDP



THE CITY OF QALHÂT IS ON THE COAST.
IT HAS GOOD MARKETS AND ONE OF THE
MOST BEAUTIFUL MOSQUES. THE WALLS
OF THE MOSQUE ARE COVERED WITH
KÂSHÂN TILES, WHICH RESEMBLE ZELIDJ.
IT IS VERY HIGH AND IT OVERLOOKS THE
SEA AND THE PORT. IT WAS BUILT THANKS
TO BÎBÎ MARYAM

Ibn Battuta



A VERY LARGE BUILDING ALL LINED
WITH TILES AND PORCELAIN. AT THE
ENTRANCE, A VERY LARGE NAVE MADE
WITH ARCADING, AND ABOVE THESE A
TERRACE LOOKING TOWARDS THE SEA,
ALL COVERED WITH TILES. THE GATES
AND ROOF OF THE MOSQUE WERE ALL OF
ELABORATE MASONRY

Brás de Albuquerque



Hypocaust (heating chambers) of the Hammam © MHC/QDP

THE HAMMAM

The Hammam (bathhouse) – the only structure of this type ever found in Oman – is located next to a large well at the north-west entrance of the city.

This building comprised eight rooms, including one cold room, one tepid room, and six smaller hot rooms with basins and bathtubs. The building rested on two 90 cm high hypocausts (heating chambers) used for heating the bathhouse. The hypocausts consisted of rows of small pillars surmounted by stone lintels or brick arches, while the walls contained terracotta pipes that connected the underground chambers to the roof above.


A large water well and a heating chamber connected to the hypocausts, likely fueled with fish remains, were located just outside the building.

The setting of the Hammam of Qalhât has a parallel in the thermal structures of the monumental Byzantine baths found at Bosra, in southern Syria, and it testifies to the cosmopolitan character of Qalhât culture during the reigns of Baha al-Dîn Ayâz and Maryam.



POTTERY WORKSHOP


The extensive surface survey carried out at Qalhât located several scatters of ceramic slags and sherds. Under the most important concentration, archaeological excavations unearthed an important pottery workshop with numerous kilns, which remained in use from the 14th century AD until the abandonment of the city. Large amounts of ceramics were found in connection to these structures, allowing the archaeologists to reconstruct the local pottery types and their distribution circuits.



Channeled floor of a room
to produce date molasses
© MHC/QDP

MADBASA ROOMS

Archaeological excavations have brought to light two rooms for producing the famous Omani *dibis* (date molasses), which has a very high economic value. The date molasses was channeled towards a pit containing a large storage jar. This is one of the most characteristic household facilities throughout the history of Oman and it is present in most residential structures across the country, from the largest cities to the smallest villages, as well as inside forts, castles and also bazaars.



Tombstone with
Arabic inscription
© MHC/QDP

FUNERARY QUARTERS

The city of Qalhât was bordered on its west, northwest and southwest sides by a wide funerary quarter, which was eventually expanded also outside the fortification walls. The two thousand funerary structures discovered are clustered in nine graveyard and include mausoleums, small platform mosques, funerary terraces, underground graves, etc. Among them, several small structures recalling the general shape of the Bîbî Maryam Mausoleum have been found in various states of conservation.

Large public
cistern with a
barrel-vault cover
© MHC/QDP



CISTERNS & WATER SUPPLY

For its water supply, Qalhât relied on the scarce rain, streams and water wells, as well as on the waters coming seasonally from the surrounding mountains and wadis. Water supply facilities included two large cisterns, likely public, as well as a number of smaller private ones. The largest cisterns were built using coral and limestone blocks plastered with hydraulic sarooj. One of them had a barrel-vault to limit the evaporation.

Early Bahla jar from
early 16th century AD



Blue and white porcelain from China, ca. 14th-16th century AD © MHC/QDP

Oman found at Qalhât
© MHC/QDP



Fragment of the inscription around the mihrab of the Friday Mosque, *ca.* 1300 AD © MHC/QPD

State Party

Sultanate of Oman

State, Province or Region

Governorate of Al-Sharqiyya South, Wilayat of Sur

Name of property

Ancient City of Qalhât

Geographical coordinates

UTM ZONE 40 (744200 E, 2512000 N)

Name and contact information of Official Local Institution

Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Sultanate of Oman

18th November / Al Wazarat Street

Al-Khuwayr, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

P.O. Box, Muscat. P.C: 100

PHONE: +968 24641515

Email contacts:

Mr. Sultan Saif al-Bakri

Director General for Archaeology

e-mail: sultan_b@mhc.gov.om

Mr. Sultan Ali al-Maqbali

Director of the World Heritage Sites Department

e-mail: sultan.m@mhc.gov.om

All photographs and images are by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture / Qalhât Development Project except otherwise indicated.

Front cover: Bibî Maryam Mausoleum (© Roman Garba)



<http://mhc.gov.om>



Ministry of Heritage and Culture



@mhc_gov



mhcgov



تراث وثقافة



info@mhc.gov.om



Ministry of Heritage and Culture
SULTANATE OF OMAN