



Omani Empire

The Omani Empire didn't look like the large, land-based empires of Asia, but it also didn't look like the maritime empires of Europe. Was it an empire at all?



0:01

*Images of Muscat including
a map of the Arabian
Peninsula*

*Maps zooming out from
Oman to Eurasia and the
world*

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera*

*Images of coasts and
oceans*

This is the city of Muscat on the Arabian Peninsula. Today, it's the capital of a nation-state called Oman. Only two centuries ago however, it was the heart of a thriving Omani Empire, extending from Persia to Zanzibar.

When it comes to Arab and Islamic empires, most people imagine big sprawling territories stretching across the Afro-Eurasian landmass. That's because, we are normally taught that Asia had land-based empires, and Europe is where you found oceanic empires.

The Omani Empire however doesn't fit with that line of thinking.

Unlike the land-based empires of early modern Afro-Eurasia, the Omani Empire was a thriving maritime empire whose influence drifted across the waves until the mid-19th century.

0:56

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera*

*Nate Bowling and Fahad
Bishara converse, facing
camera*

*Images of the different
empires Nate lists*

*Nate Bowling and Fahad
Bishara converse, facing
camera*

*Images of the Omani
Empire of the 1600s*

Hi, I'm Nate Bowling. I wanted to learn more about this remarkable time and place in history, so I talked with two experts about the Omani Empire and its legacy and how it challenges some of our assumptions about empire and culture.

Today, we're focusing on the Omani Empire, and my guest is Fahad Bishara, and we're gonna be talking about the story of the Omani Empire.

One of the things that I think about is that, like, I know about the Roman Empire, I know about Greek Empire, Persian Empires, Ottoman Empire, but I don't know so much about the Omani Empire.

So let's just start off with this. If we're talking chronologically, which time period are we talking about and when was the peak of the Omani Empire?

Sure, we might think of the Omani Empire really as taking off in the mid 1600s. The Omani emperors were in many ways sort of the heirs to the Portuguese empire.

They slowly kicked them out of south and east Arabia and then followed them down into the East African coast and dislodged them from one port city after another.

At its peak, the Omani Empire covered most of the southeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula, parts of the coast of what's today Iran and Pakistan and then extended down into East Africa, from the northern tip of the Somali Coast all the way down to what's today Mozambique.

There were flows of people, flows of goods, flows of money between Arabia and East Africa that was facilitated by the expansion of the Omani Empire.

To what extent do you consider Oman to be an empire?

1:47

*Map showing the growth
of the Omani Empire*

*Images of trade in the
Omani Empire*

*Nate Bowling and Fahad
Bishara converse, facing
camera*

Images of the British and Ottoman empires

2:39

Maps of empires

Fahad Bishara speaks, facing camera, with a map of Omani trade networks on the right

Images of Omani sultans and their meetings with Europeans

Fahad Bishara speaks, facing camera

3:44

Images of Omani ports

Nate Bowling and Fahad Bishara converse, facing camera

Images of Omani rulers and officials

Fahad Bishara speaks, facing camera

4:44

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera, with a map of Omani trade routes on the right

It was not very imperial in the sense that we associate with say the British Empire or the Ottoman Empire.

We have a sense in the classroom of what an empire looks. Like we look at maps of empires all the time, and we see these giant sheets of sovereignty of jurisdiction that tell us these are the areas that these empires ruled.

The Omani Empire did not look like those empires. Oman did not start off as an empire but gradually came to be one. It started off as a loose collection of ports under the control of a single dynasty. We might think of it as a webby kind of empire.

Through their encounters with Europeans, they were able to reinvent themselves as an empire and were reinforced as an empire because remember the British and others wanted a single sovereign to do business with. They didn't want to do business with all sorts of different people. They wanted one person to do business with.

And so over the course of Omani expansion, as they came into contact with various other empires, they became styled as an empire, and they styled themselves as an empire.

So, it was a very sort of loosely knit collection of ports scattered around the Indian Ocean that only over time began to cohere as an empire, but even at its height did not have the kinds of armies or the kinds of bureaucracies that we associate with all of the other empires.

Would you consider the Omani Empire to be an Arab empire?

The Omani Empire was ruled by an Arab elite.

But it was categorically not an Arab empire. The Omani Empire was what I would call a multi-ethnic empire.

The rulers were often Arab. Many of the sort of political officials throughout the Omani Empire were Swahili. They were not Arab, and then many of the bankers in the Omani Empire were Indian from northwestern part of India.

And then of course, there were many Africans as well, so it's a—it's very much a multi-ethnic empire, not an Arab empire, but ruled by an Arab elite.

My conversation with Fahad was starting to challenge a lot of my assumptions about what makes something an empire. The Omani Empire didn't paint the map like the Ottoman or the Mughal empires, and it didn't have huge overseas colonies like the British.

But it did develop a strong sphere of influence, and as I talked more with Fahad, it became clear that the Omani Empire reshaped life around the Indian Ocean facilitating new networks of trade and migration.

5:15

*Nate Bowling and Fahad
Bishara converse, facing
camera*

*Images of East Africa as
part of the Omani Empire*

What was the lasting influence of the Omani Empire on East Africa?

The Omani Empire really reshaped the East African coast in incredibly important ways.

Through the Omani Empire, we see the migration of South Asians into East Africa as money lenders, as financiers, as shopkeepers. The South Asian presence in East Africa is enormous today.

We see the sort of steady flow of Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula who end up settling on the East African coast, who end up marrying locally. Their children are there. Their children move back and forth.

5:52

*Nate Bowling and Fahad
Bishara converse, facing
camera*

Map of the Indian Ocean

Images of Indian traders

Map of Omani trade routes

So how did Oman historically relate to its South Asian and other Indian Ocean neighbors?

Well, we often think of Oman today as forming part of the Middle East because we as people tend to think in terms of land categories.

But the Omanis were very much maritime people. They were oriented towards the sea much more so than they were oriented towards the land, and when we look out across the sea from Oman itself, the closest place is of course India.

As the Omanis began expanding into East Africa, the Indians were among the main beneficiaries of this. They effectively bankrolled Omani extension into East Africa.

One might say that the Omani Empire collapses boundaries between particular parts of the world.

When we start thinking of the Omani Empire, when you start telling people that the Omanis ruled the East African coast for a couple of hundred years, then we begin to think of the distinctions between say the Middle East and Africa very differently. We begin to see the connections between these places, and then once you introduce Indian merchants and money lenders into the mix, then India, Arabia, East Africa all sort of blend in with one another.

So for students of world history thinking through something like the Omani Empire challenges us to think through different geographical categories, challenges us to think beyond Africa, Middle East, South Asia and to start seeing the connections between these different places throughout world history.

7:26

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera*

As a geography and history teacher, I feel like I know quite a bit about empires. Still listening to Fahad, the Omani Empire sounded pretty different from the ones I knew about. I mean it only occupies a small amount of actual territory, but its influence extended across the waters reshaping communities from India to Zanzibar. After our conversation, I was left wondering how did this remarkable historical empire shape the modern nation-state of Oman today.

So I reached out to Kamala Russell, an anthropologist who studies modern Oman. She revealed some surprising legacies of the Omani Empire in present-day Oman.

8:07

Nate Bowling and Kamala Russell converse, facing camera

Images of coastal towns where traders stopped on their travels

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

Kamala Russell speaks, facing camera, with images of people living in Zanzibar on the left

How was the modern state of Oman shaped by its imperial history?

You can see the greatest impact of the Omani Empire today in the coastal towns and regions like Muscat, the capital, and other areas mostly in the north.

Coastal towns were mixing pots, melting pots for traders from many different places coming in and out of the area, and they were really important centers valuable to different regional powers.

So current-day Oman is really a patchwork of its imperial history, which means that there's people from all of these different communities that are of Arab descent, communities that were Persian descent, people who have ethnic origins in Africa as well.

So the historical Omani Empire had a larger footprint geographically than the modern state of Oman, so I'm wondering where do we see the influence of the Omani Empire in East Africa or elsewhere?

So there's certainly some cultural impacts of the Omani Empire in the Eastern part of Africa and in Zanzibar which was the former Omani imperial capital. It has its own kind of ethnic and linguistic diversity because it was the capital of this like huge maritime empire, and there were Arabs, Persians, Indians, and other kinds of people who were moving goods, people, ideas, and cultures all through this one island.

9:17

Map of Omani trade routes

Kamala Russell speaks, facing camera, with images of Oman's people on the left

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera, with images of Omani coastal forts

Images of modern-day Oman

Oman is a really interesting topic of study because it sat for such a long time at the crossroads of trade routes between these major empires. Oman and the Arabian Peninsula in general is really an emblem of how important the Indian Ocean has been in world history.

So it shows us that bodies of water can connect people just as much as land and really makes us think differently about how communities and networks take shape over time.

The Omani Empire rose to power over three centuries ago. It was an empire that didn't really look like one.

Nonetheless, this patchwork of ports, sailors, and merchants grew into an influential regional power that reshaped the history and cultures of the Indian Ocean.

The modern nation-state of Oman is very different from the Omani Empire that once was, and yet this maritime imperial past left enduring impressions on the streets of Muscat and other ports stretching from the Arabian Gulf to Zanzibar and India.

10:11

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

My conversations with Fahad and Kamala left me with pretty big questions. The big one of course is, was the Omani Empire actually an empire?

What do you think? When you compare with the other empires you've encountered in this course, does the Omani Empire seem imperial?

Would you group it with the maritime empires of the British, the Dutch, and the Portuguese? With the great Islamic empires of Asia, like the Ottomans and the Mughals in India? Or was it something else entirely?