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► **To cite this version:**

Pierre Lombard. The Qal'at al-Bahrain Site Museum. An interpretation of the World Heritage nomination criteria. World Heritage, 2018, 88, pp.26-29. halshs-01856494

**HAL Id: halshs-01856494**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01856494>**

Submitted on 9 May 2019

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# The Qal'at al-Bahrain Site Museum

## An interpretation of the World Heritage inscription criteria

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The Site Museum and its major feature, the Tell Wall.

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The Site Museum seen from the Coastal Fortress.

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Opened to the public in February 2008, less than three years after the official inscription of Qal'at Al-Bahrain on the World Heritage List, the site museum attached to the ancient harbour and capital of Dilmun obviously seeks to document and interpret, in the most educational way, the historical features of one of the major archaeological 'tells' of ancient Eastern Arabia. Built along the waterfront, on non-archaeological, reclaimed land, this institution is also the result of a wonderful collaboration for about two years between a team of architects, Wohler Arkitekter (Copenhagen, Denmark), and a team of archaeologists, the French Archaeological Mission to Bahrain, which itself has associated for many years the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and the Musée du Louvre (Lyon and Paris, France) in close collaboration with the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums of the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities.

When the museum concept was discussed between these diverse actors, it

### **The site museum attached to the ancient harbour and capital of Dilmun seeks to document and interpret, in the most educational way, the historical features of one of the major archaeological 'tell' of ancient Eastern Arabia.**

quickly appeared that the building and its display should carefully illustrate the criteria under which the site was inscribed on the World Heritage List (criteria (ii), (iii) and (iv)). In addition, all parties concurred in the belief that this museographical experience should help the visitor clarify the somewhat confusing – and restrictive – name of the site. In fact, Qal'at al-Bahrain ('The Fort of Bahrain' in Arabic) is, first of all, a major settlement site, and certainly not limited to its massive Hormuzi-Portuguese fortress facing the sea, which actually represents the very last building erected there, no more than c. 450 years ago. It is a true tell (artificial hill) extending on 17.5 ha, whose unique accumulation of about 8 m of occupation layers testifies to its long history, beginning with the first human installation in the

last centuries of the 3rd millennium BC and ending with the site's progressive abandonment during the 17th century AD. Even if the main fortress itself remains one of the most impressive monuments there, this remarkable stratigraphy constitutes the first and major element of Qal'at al-Bahrain and, more generally, the precious 'memory' of the long history of the Bahrain archipelago.

#### **A museum on the water's edge**

The Site Museum actually makes up the gateway to the archaeological tell. The present building lies on the water's edge and consists of two elements: an elongated two-storey museum wing, housing an arrival court separating the permanent exhibition area from the public





The Site Museum. The Early Dilmun section, at the base of the Tell Wall.

© BACA

café, and a one-storey square building that houses administration services and specific accommodations, lab and working areas for archaeologists, surrounding a small garden court.

The museum wing lies on a podium, which forms a dock on the Gulf. After reaching this elevated platform, the visitor enters the building through an arrival courtyard. This is covered by trellis, providing some shade and creating a transition between the very harsh outdoor light and the subdued museum lighting. A small fountain in the courtyard adds the sound of splashing water, providing a sense of tranquillity. This interior patio gives way to the various access points: toward the sea a vast terrace borders the west facade of the building, from which a ramp gradually descends to the site. To the left, the visitor is invited to enter the exhibition area itself, whereas on the right, people may enter a spacious Café.

The museum hall is primarily lit by natural daylight, both by a continuous skylight over the museum's central exhibition element, the Tell Wall (see below), and by the characteristic facade display-cases. These are recessed in the exterior walls, forming the protruding light towers characteristic of the building's facades. The Café in the north end of the building is a two-storey space, also offering outdoor service in a shaded area on the dock with magnificent views of the Gulf and the Hormuzi-Portuguese fortress. Interior colours and textures are also inspired by traditional Bahraini architecture. The ceilings are made of hardwood coffers, referring to dark, wooden traditional ceilings. Walls are in a cream render and the interior and exterior paving is Italian Santafiora sandstone, also inspired by the traditional 'juss' render and clay floors of the traditional Bahrain houses.

The exhibition space is separated into six distinct sections organized

chronologically, aiming at the concrete illustration and interpretation of the criteria under which the site was inscribed as World Heritage. In 2005, the first chosen criterion was (ii): it insisted on the particular role of Qal'at al-Bahrain as a meeting place of peoples and cultures, a place regularly 'invaded and occupied for long periods, by most of the great powers and empires, leaving their cultural traces in different strata of the tell'. The second one followed criterion (iii), mainly to emphasize the function of the site as the capital of the Dilmun kingdom and to highlight the representation of its particular material culture. The third criterion, following UNESCO criterion (iv), focused at last on the specificity of the Dilmun palatial architecture exposed at the site, and on the unique quality of the 'defence works from the 3rd century BC to the 16th century AD, all on one site'.





The Tylos (Hellenistic) section of the Site Museum.

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### The Tell Wall

The best way to display and interpret these selected features was to organize the museum around a dramatic central construction, the 'Tell Wall'. This 30-metre-long recreation of the archaeological strata, which reproduces at the scale 1:1 the various levels surveyed by the archaeologists, constitutes the main axis of the exhibition, and accompanies the itinerary of the public at every moment. From the earliest Dilmun period exhibition on the lower level, the visitor ascends to the most recent Islamic period exhibition on the upper level on the first floor through a succession of planes, following the chronological evolution of the successive cities identified at Qal'at al-Bahrain. At each stage of the path, the visitor stands facing the corresponding levels of the 'Tell Wall', which reproduces the principal features from the neighbouring excavations using natural materials: archaeological layers

made either of sand, gravel or ash, floors and walls in sections or elevation, storage devices, looting pits, etc. Each architectural specificity was systematically reproduced: evocation of the dry stone rampart of Qal'at al-Bahrain's 'City II' built around 2050 BC, dressed ashlar from the buildings erected or restored by the Babylonian/Kassite colonists of the mid-second millennium BC, characteristic plastered walls of the Late Dilmun temple and residence from the first half of the 1st millennium BC, with special attention given to the typical wall sections of Tylos and Islamic date as observed by archaeologists. This unusual, central construction not only structures the exhibition space, but provides a unique atmosphere in the building, particularly appreciated by the visitors.

The successive chronological sections bring together over 500 archaeological pieces uncovered during the excavations carried out from 1954 to 2008 by Danish,

French and Bahreini teams in various sectors of the site. These discoveries are accompanied by introductory boards and detailed caption-texts in both the Arabic and English languages. The museum display is regularly updated, and an additional exhibition room, situated below the Tell Wall, can host temporary presentations, notably for featuring important recent finds.

Among the artefacts found at the site that the visitors can discover in a sequential way figure some of the highlights of Bahrain's ancient heritage. The Qal'at al-Bahrain permanent exhibition is a useful complement to the visit of the neighbouring archaeological site, introducing local and foreign visitors to one of the most spectacular historical places of Bahrain's island. The museum also seeks to become an educational tool destined for the young generations of the Kingdom of Bahrain, for it safeguards their Kingdom's most ancient roots. ☺