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Branding a Seafaring Nation: The Sailing Ship Monument on Al Wazarat Roundabout in Muscat, Oman

The cover photo of this edited volume shows a ship monument that was displayed on the central Al Wazarat Roundabout at Al Khuwair in the Capital Area of Oman, when Muscat held the title of the Capital of Arab Culture for 2006 under the Arab League's cultural capital programme.¹ The monument physically reflects the logo of the festivities, as it was also reproduced on a special stamp edition, for instance. The simplified hull and the slightly twisted sail bearing the name of the city and the year of the event in Arabic script are intended to be reminiscent of a traditional dhow. This is part of national and local branding efforts in several respects: not only the honorary title served for one year to fuel local citizens' pride in their homeland and hometown, to attract international attention, and to make the city and its rich heritage known to foreign tourists, investors, and hauliers when its opening to the world and positioning as a destination was still in its infancy. The ship representation is also part of a conspicuously recurring number of roundabout monuments in Gulf cities that show idealised items of local culture and history and of the wide display of maritime motifs.² This is intended to construct continuities from past traditions and industries like sea pearl diving and trade to contemporary endeavours to develop global connections and demonstrate cosmopolitan openness. Oman is particularly eager to show its maritime heritage.³ Like other Gulf states, the Sultanate wants to build a sustainable future, redirected from excessive hydrocarbon dependence to allegedly promising sectors like international trade and tourism. In particular, responsible actors strive to position the Sultanate as a country belonging to the economically emerging and pivotal Indian Ocean region and with centuries of experience in economic and cultural exchange with Asian, African, and Arab countries.⁴ Repeatedly, Oman's glorious seafaring past has been praised: Sinbad is presented as a seafarer of Omani origin, who already crossed the waves of the Indian Ocean and adjacent seas to distant shores;

¹ On this, see e.g. Oxford Business Group, 2007. For the cultural capital titles, cf. also the introductory part to this edited volume.

² On Gulf roundabouts, cf. also Trenka-Dalton, 2016: 120–130.

³ More broadly on the twisting of branding and spatial planning in Oman, cf. Klinger, in this volume; see also Klinger, 2022: esp. 469–474.

⁴ Cf. in more detail, e.g. Wippel, 2014 and 2017.

museums display a broad range of old dhow types; coffee table books on traditional shipping are widely available; and enterprises from diverse sectors use ships as symbols in their corporate design. Since the 1980s, the media have widely featured the reconstruction of traditional vessels, their voyages along the historical maritime Silk Road to South and East Asia, and later their display on a roundabout in Muscat or in a museum in Singapore. Finally, the huge industrial and container ports that Oman has opened since the late 1990s and that are intended to become major global transshipment hubs advertise themselves as gateways to Indian Ocean rim countries.

Bibliography

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