



# Taqah Castle

## Experience History

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## THE CASTLE

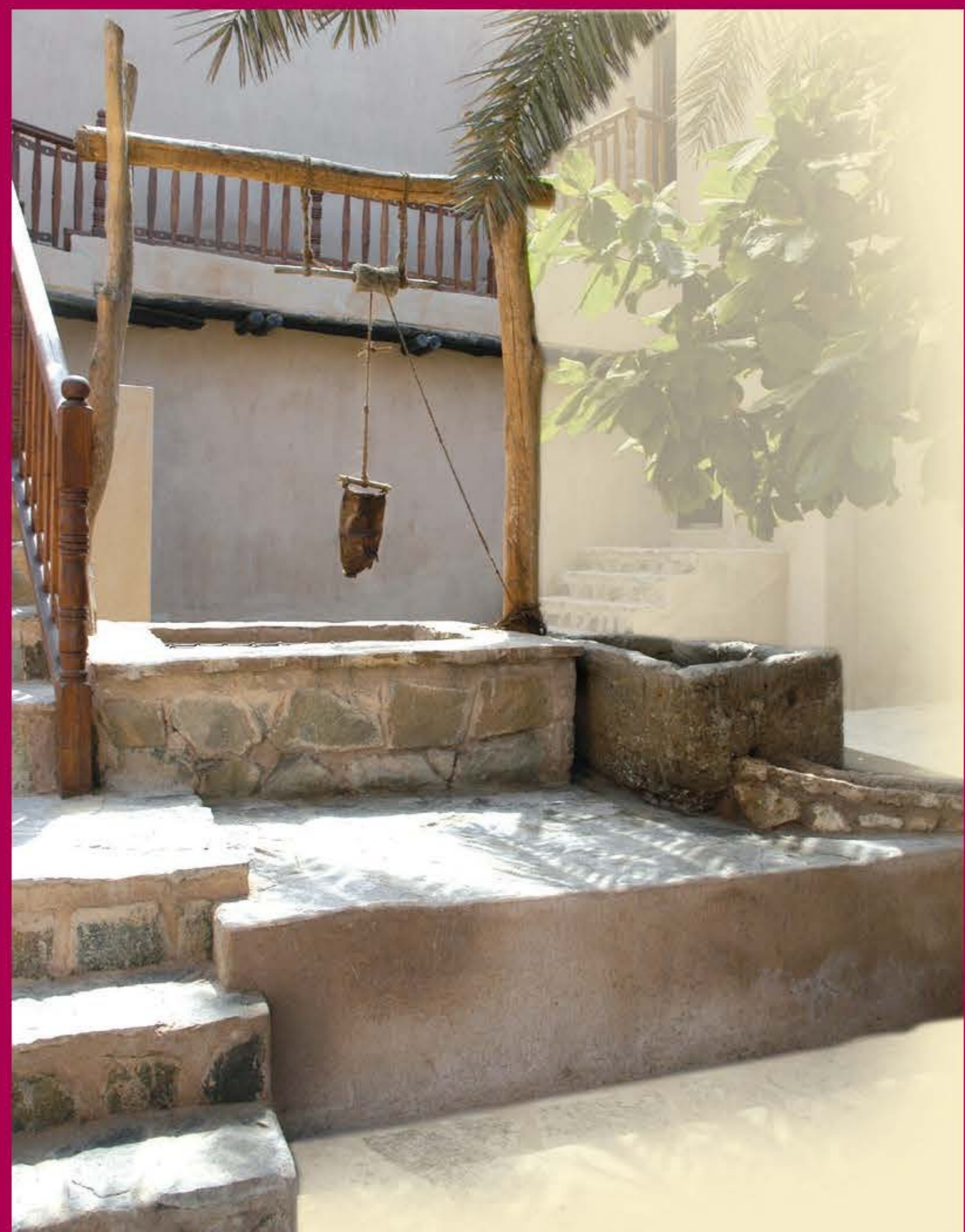
Taqah Castle is one of Dhofar's most distinguished landmarks. Built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a private stronghold for Sheikh Ali bin Timman Al-Ma'ashani, the castle was converted to government use during the reign of Sultan Taimur bin Faisal (1913-1932). It served until 1984 as the official residence and administrative centre for a succession of local governors (walis) who received members of the public in the castle's main entrance hall, or 'barza'. Here, they would greet dignitaries, discuss local issues and arbitrate in the case of disputes.

The castle was designed to withstand time, enemies and the annual onslaught of the khareef. Its walls were constructed from solid blocks of 'Taqah stone', a local limestone material composed chiefly of fossilised shells and corals, which was used extensively in ancient times and can still be seen at many archaeological sites in the region. The blocks were hand cut from shallow quarries using pikes and wedges, and sealed with a protective layer of plaster.

In keeping with the defensive requirements of the day, the castle's ground floor rooms were occupied by a large retinue of soldiers and servants who protected the wali and tended to the needs of his visitors. As a further measure of protection, large quantities of dried fish, grain, dates and other vital supplies were stockpiled in the castle's food stores. There were also special stores for weaponry and firewood.

A well (tawi) in the courtyard of the castle ensured an abundant supply of fresh water for drinking that could be not be poisoned from outside. Nearby, an outdoor oven (tannur) provided for the well-ventilated roasting of meat or fish and the daily baking of bread.

Adjacent to the courtyard stood a small roofless jail where prisoners were kept under the watchful eye of the wali's soldiers. Bent offered this depiction of a Dhofari castle prison in the 1800's: "Also, there are here kept a consider-





able number of state prisoners. They are all bound with iron fetters, and the worst characters are chained to blocks of wood. Every night these prisoners say their prayers in a corner, led by an imprisoned mollah, and bewail their misdeeds into the small hours of the night ...” 2

An elegant suite on the upper level of the castle was reserved for the use of the Wali and his family and an airy lobby with interconnected bedrooms provided space for close friends and family members to take light refreshment and share the news of the day. Adjoining the family suite was a formal sitting room or ‘majlis’ where the wali entertained favoured guests and held private discussions.

On the rooftop of the castle there were special morning, afternoon and evening resting places which were used during the cooler months of the year. Yet, even here, the threat of danger was present, and sentries were posted along the battlements and in the corner towers to keep constant watch over the landward and seaward approaches to the castle.



## THE EXHIBITS

Despite its stronghold character, Taqah castle retains the intimate atmosphere of a real, lived-in home and the principal rooms are furnished with an opulence befitting a state residence.

The alcoves of the rooms are filled to overflowing with traditional weaponry, jewellery, treasures of trade and everyday household items. This fascinating collection, added to with each passing generation, constitutes an important record of regional culture.

The town of Taqah is renowned for its





artisanry, and locally made terra cotta pottery commands pride of place alongside porcelain plates and bowls obtained through trade with China, India, Europe and Zanzibar. Colourful incense burners in an array of shapes and sizes are displayed throughout the castle. Exquisite hand embroidered cushions and draperies conjure a time when silk was among the world's most coveted commodities. Handwoven palm mats, each the work of many months, beautify the floors.

## A WINDOW TO THE WORLD

The word 'Taqah' is associated with round or arched shapes, and is also used to describe an aperture or a window to the outside world. Archaeological remains above Taqah Bay confirm the antiquity of the name, which is rooted in old Arabic.

Taqah's most important archaeological site is the ancient port city of Sumharum where Arabs, Greeks, Persians, Indians and Africans converged from as early as the 1st century to trade in frankincense, myrrh and 'goods of many gorgeous kinds'. From Sumharum these goods were transported eastward and northward, under sail, to the shores of India and the Gulf, or southward to Yemen and onward via the Red Sea routes to Egypt and the lands of the Greek and Roman empires.



## THE GREAT AGE OF ISLAM

In the brief span of one hundred years, between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, the ancient world was transformed by a new force in world affairs; the unified brotherhood of Islam. While Europe was suffering through the Dark Ages, Muslim societies flourished under the protection of the Umayyad and 'Abbasid Dynasties (late 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century).

Dhofar continued to prosper as a trade and transshipment centre for African, Indian and Chinese goods, but with the fall of the 'Abbasids in the 12<sup>th</sup> century smaller Muslim dynasties began to emerge throughout the Muslim world, each seeking to expand their dominions. Dhofar, with its prized location on the incense coast, was a prime objective. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Muslim kingdoms in Yemen and southern Arabia had recognised the full extent of Dhofar's wealth and influence and were seeking to annex the region.

The struggle continued with the arrival of the Ottomans on the political landscape in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and for intermittent periods during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the interests of the Ottoman Caliph's were represented through appointed Dhofari rulers.

It was in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that the people of Dhofar embraced the powerful and stabilising influence of the Al Bu Said dynasty.





## GEOLOGY AND CLIMATE

The mountains of Dhofar were created by great upheavals of the earth's crust between 30 and 40 million years ago. Formed primarily from tertiary limestone, they comprise a giant, tilted slab that rises to over 2,100 metres at Jabal Samhan.

Inland, the mountains give way gradually to gravel hills and finally to desert but on the seaward side they fall sharply, forming a steep escarpment that averages almost 1,000 metres in height. It is this escarpment that captures the dense, moisture-laden clouds of the south-west monsoon, giving rise to an annual climatic phenomenon known as the 'khareef' and a lushness of vegetation unparalleled in the rest of Arabia. This phenomenon has had a profound influence on the course of history in the region, for the conditions that prevail are uniquely suited to the growing of *Boswellia sacra*, the frankincense tree.



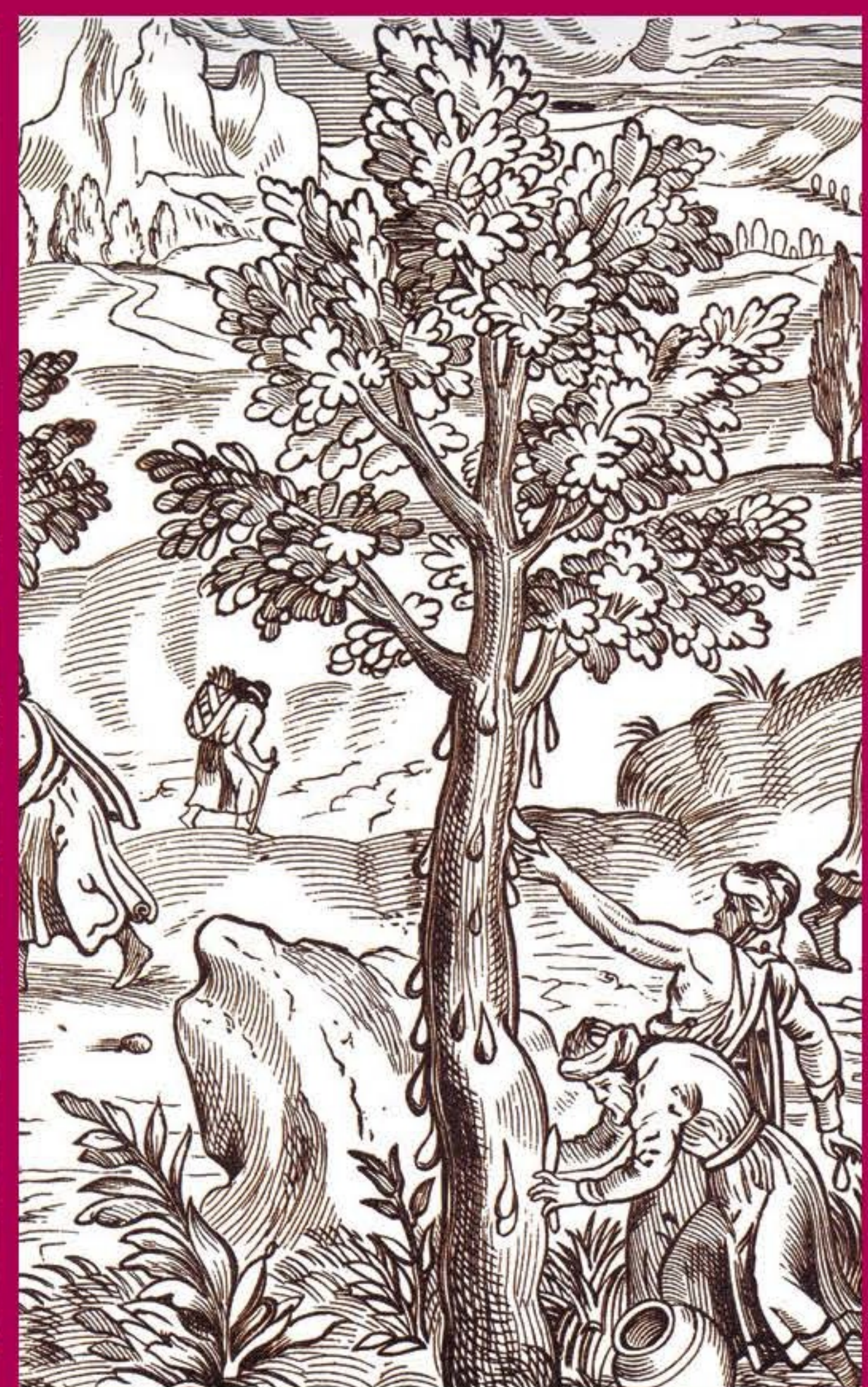
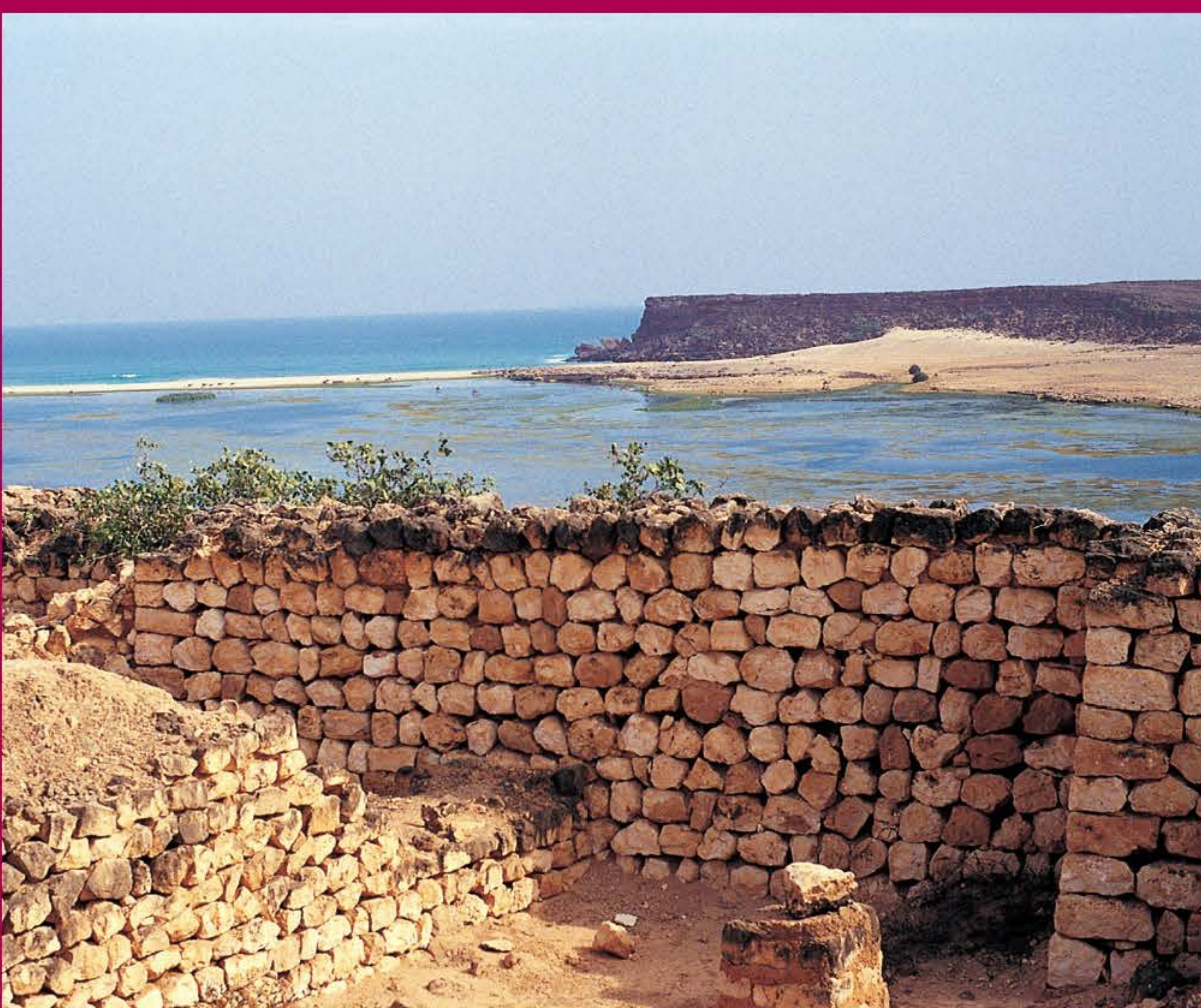
## DHOFAR THE VICTORIOUS

Dhofar was known to the ancients by many different names, including 'Dhafar', 'Zafar', 'Saphar' (Pliny), 'Zamar' (Ibn Khaldoun) and 'Sapphara' (Ptolemy).

Reknowned not only for frankincense, but also for its Arabian horses and monsoonal climate, Dhofar enchanted many famous travellers through the ages. The 10<sup>th</sup> century Arab geographer Al-Masaudi praised Dhofar in his treatise on the Indian Ocean. Three centuries later, Marco Polo described the region with utmost enthusiasm.

The celebrated Arab traveller Ibn Battuta, writing in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, also provided a joyful, detailed account of his visit to Dhofar, remarking on the pleasant disposition of its inhabitants and on their hospitality to strangers. Other early travellers to Dhofar, including Al-Ishtakhri and Al-Maqdisi, mentioned the richness of the culture and the diversity of peoples that coexisted peacefully in the region.

If these favourable impressions mirrored those of others, such impressions sometimes had deadly results, for the region was repeatedly besieged and the Portuguese were to attack with dreadful monotony in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Dhofar – where the battle for domination of the sea was repeatedly waged on land – was undoubtedly the site of many triumphs worthy of its name, which means 'to win' or 'to be victorious'.





## MODERN OMAN

The accession of HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said to the throne in 1970 marked a turning point in Oman's modern history. Overcoming daunting challenges, HM Sultan Qaboos succeeded in uniting the country and went on to build a national identity, providing an infrastructure for human development and consolidating Oman's position in the international community.



## THE BARZA

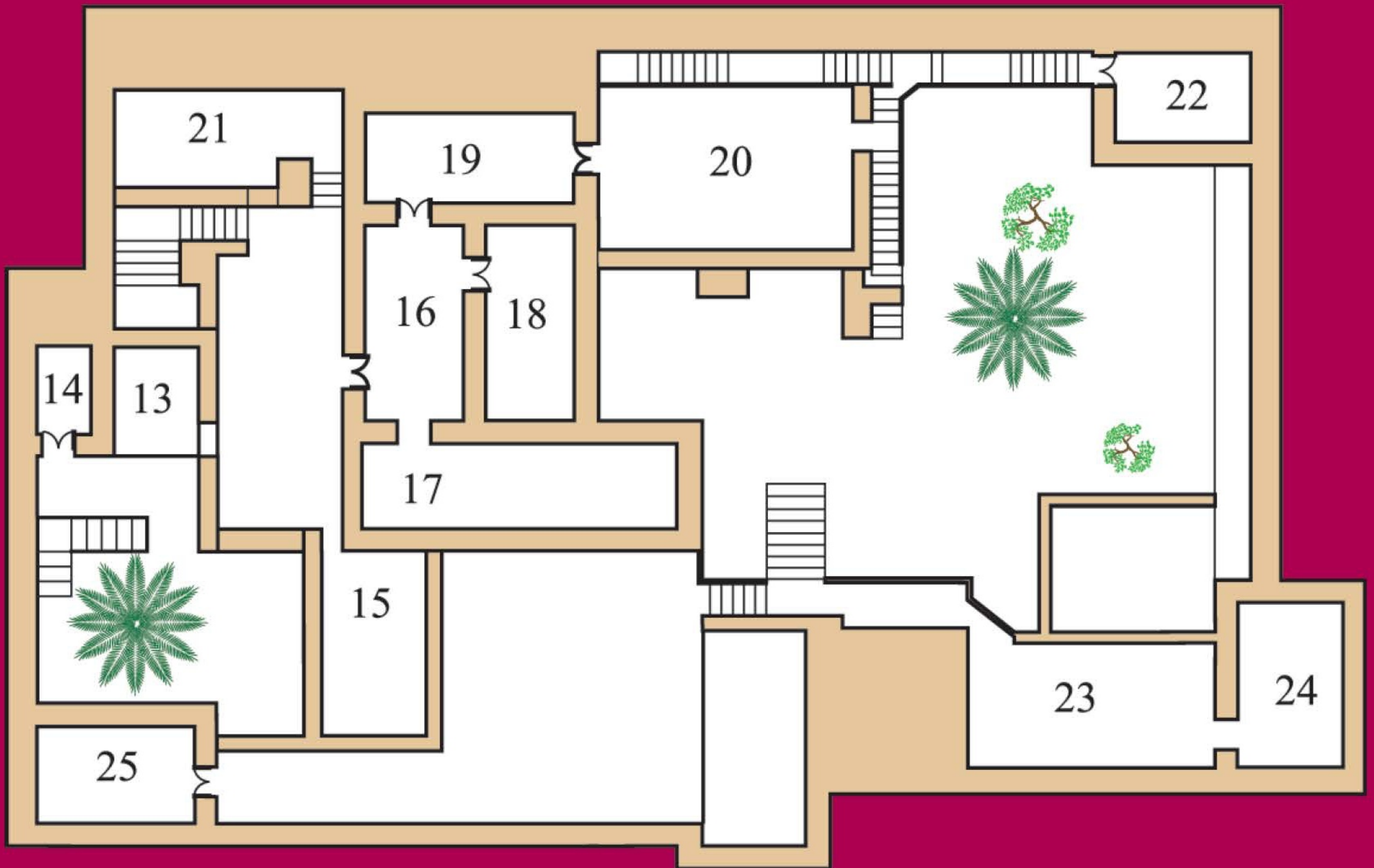


Describing a Dhofari barza in the 1800's, early visitor James Theodore Bent wrote:

A fine gateway leads into a long dark passage, lined on either side by stone benches, where the Wali's soldiers recline, and where sheikhs from the mountains are regaled with coffee out of a huge coffee pot with a bird-like beak when they come to visit him ...



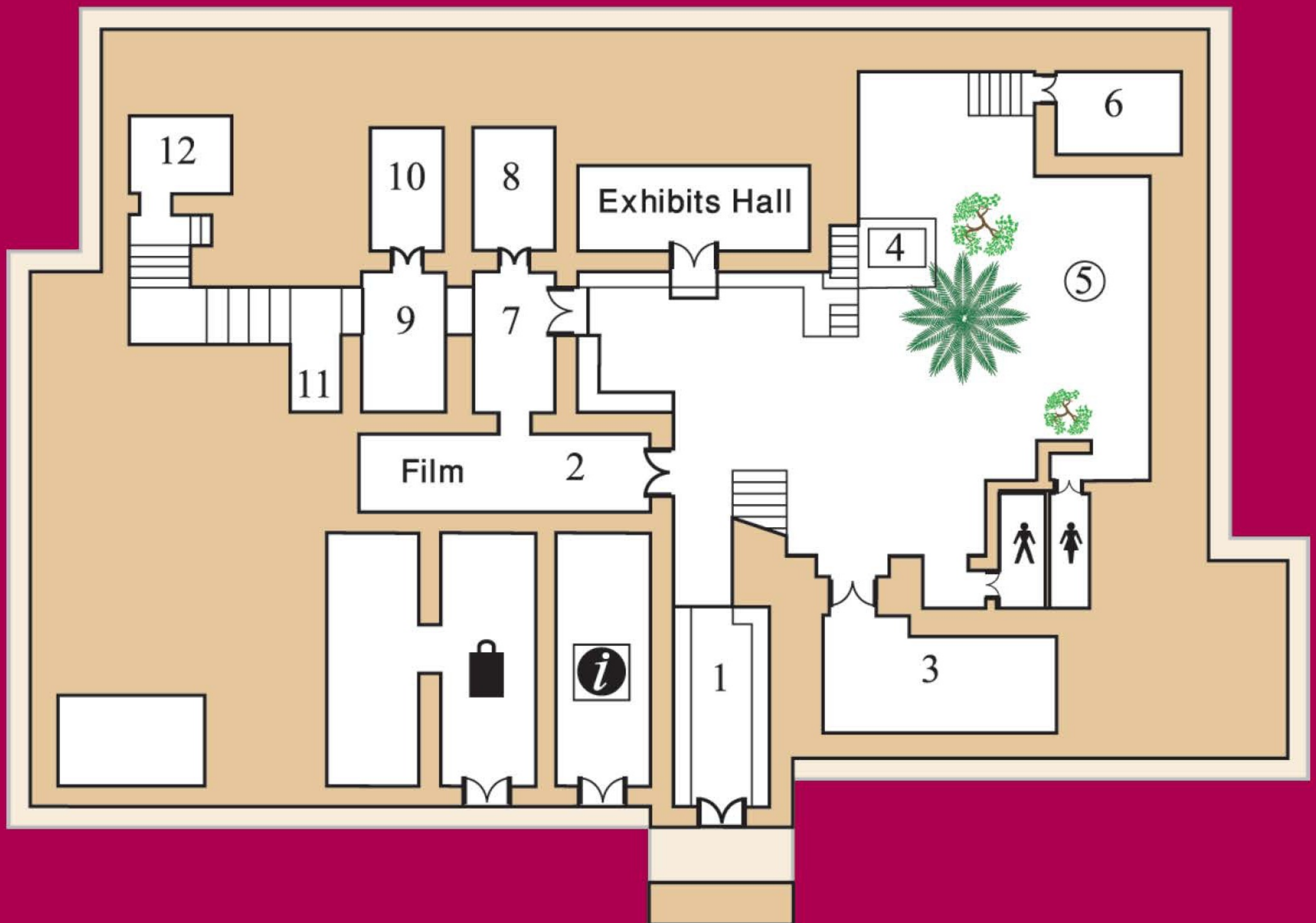
# First Floor Plan




- |                      |                      |    |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|----|----------------------|
| 13                   | Kitchen              | 20 | Nighttime Rest Place |
| 14                   | Ablution Room        | 21 | Morning Rest Place   |
| 15                   | Afternoon Rest Place | 22 | Southeast Tower      |
| Wali's Private Suite |                      | 23 | Soldiers' Rest Place |
| 16                   | Lobby                | 24 | Southwest Tower      |
| 17                   | Wali's Bedroom       | 25 | Northwest Tower      |
| 18                   | Children's Bedroom   |    |                      |
| 19                   | Majlis               |    |                      |



# Ground Floor Plan



- |   |                 |   |                 |
|---|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| 1 | Barza           | 8   | Weapons Store   |
| 2 | Guard Room      | 9   | Household Store |
| 3 | Prison          | 10  | Equipment Store |
| 4 | Well            | 11  | Firewood Store  |
| 5 | Tannur Oven     | 12  | Food Store      |
| 6 | Bath            |  | Gift Shop       |
| 7 | Household Store |  | Toilets         |
|   |                 |  | Office          |

## Opening Hours:

Saturday - Thursday (9 Am-4 PM), Friday (8 Am- 11 AM, 2 PM- 4 PM)