

Photographic essay: The versatile date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*)

by Michele C Ziolkowski

Abstract

The following essay was inspired by the work of art critic John Berger. "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak" (Berger 1972: 7)¹.

This essay quite literally depicts the importance of the date palm in Southeastern Arabia. It also illustrates the high degree of ingenuity on the part of those who developed and constructed the following creations. In no way does this essay attempt to illustrate the multitude of uses for the date palm. It does, however, aim to depict the diverse nature in which it was used.



Plate 1: The date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) with fruit.



Plate 2: Kerin type house, Madha, Sultanate of Oman².

¹ This is not a purely pictorial/photographic essay. An abstract, captions and references have been used.

² The date palm was used extensively throughout Southeastern Arabia in building construction. It is especially notable in such structures as the *khaimah* and *'arish*.



Plate 3: Sohar, Sultanate of Oman, weaving a braid of date palm leaves.



Plate 4: Mr Ali Ahmed Sa'adi stitching together braids to form a basket used to collect dates, Sharm, Fujairah, U.A.E³.



Plate 5: Ma'ahlaj boat, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman⁴.

³ This basket type is called *mizmah* in Arabic.

⁴ A small boat made from woven date palm leaves and wood. This boat was attached to the side of a small fishing vessel (sometimes a *shasha*). It was partially submerged in water and contained live bait.

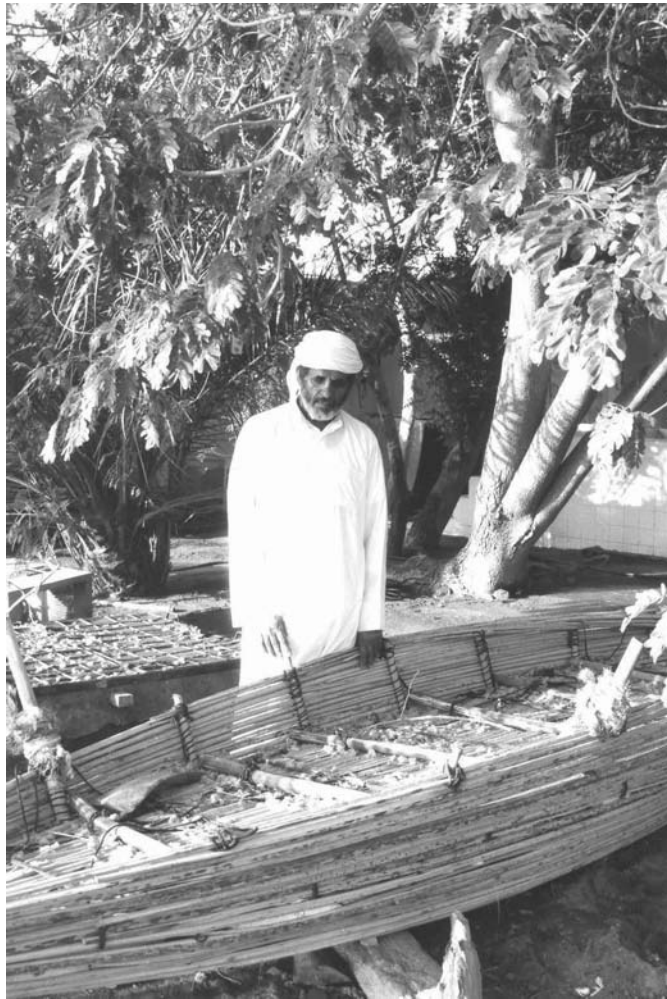


Plate 6: Master Shasha builder, Mr Abdullah Mohammed Sulaiman, with one of his craft, Fujairah, U.A.E.



Plate 7: Colourful woven braid, Social Development Centre for Women, Fujairah, U.A.E⁵.



Plate 8: A brightly coloured braid, Social Development Centre for Women, Fujairah, U.A.E.

⁵ The colourful braids shown in Plates 7 and 8 are later stitched together to form various utilitarian objects such as baskets, mats, food covers, fans etc.

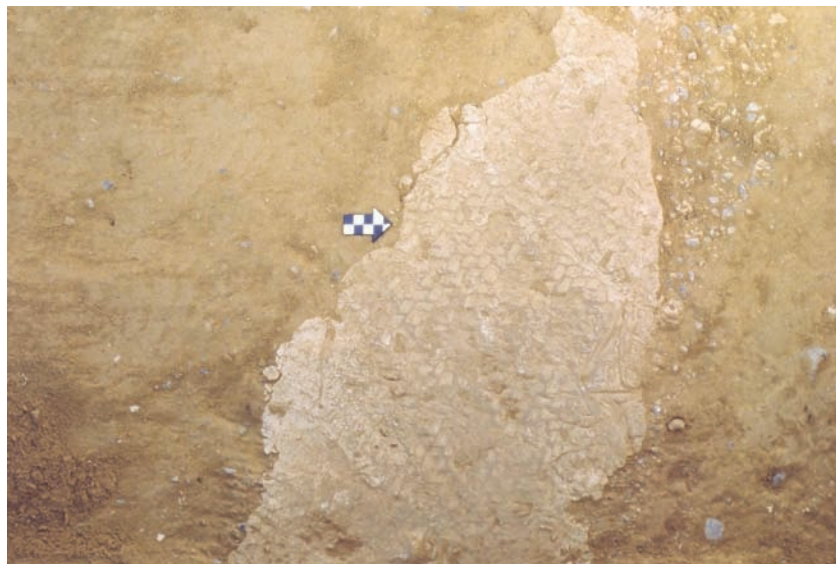


Plate 9: Woven mat-weave impression in plaster, Bidyah Portuguese Fort, Fujairah, U.A.E⁶.



Plate 10: Small woven mat, Fujairah Fort, U.A.E⁷.



Plate 11: Woven mat fragments, Fujairah Fort, U.A.E⁸.



Plate 12: Baskets for storing and transporting dates, Sohar Souq, Sultanate of Oman⁹.

⁶ Kennet has noted evidence of palm-frond matting at the Sasanian-Islamic period site of Kush in Ras al-Khaimah, U.A.E. For details see, Kennet 1997: 285.

⁷ These small mats, used for the placement of food, are known as *ak-Far/sarood*.

⁸ These large mats are known as *haseer/simah* in Arabic.

⁹ This basket type is known as *khasaf* in Arabic.



Plate 13: Islamic grave marker with petroglyph of a date palm tree, Wadi Bih (Musandam Peninsula), Sultanate of Oman.

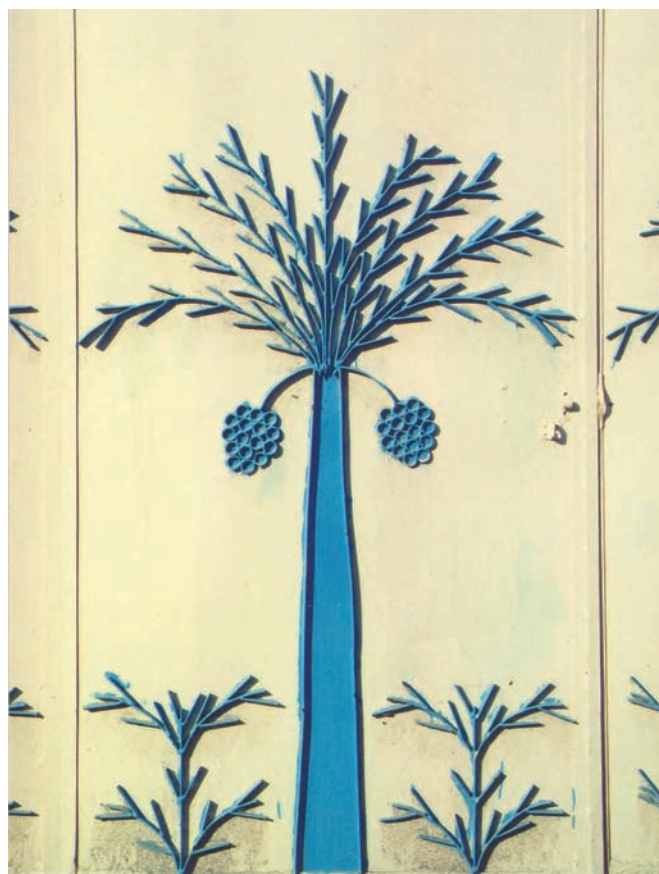


Plate 14: Detail of decoration on a metal gate, Fujairah, U.A.E.

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