The Countless Centuries

Contributed by Peter Goodchild
29 August 2010

I went for a five-hour walk in the desert yesterday morning and came across a second crumbling old castle out in the desert; I'd discovered one a few months ago. Close to it I found a series of stone-lined wells, about ten or twenty meters apart, with water in them about fifty meters down. But some of the land had been excavated, or perhaps recently re-excavated, between some of them, so I could see that the wells all connected underground.

Then, starting from the castle, I went back the way I came, but following an above-ground channel, covered for perhaps a hundred meters with crude stone blocks, each too heavy for one person to lift. This channel also became an underground one, marked by wells, and it led over several kilometers all the way back to the town of Rustaq.

In the whole of those five hours, I encountered only one person, a woman driving a herd of about fifty goats, and that was near Rustaq. I didn't want to frighten her, so I kept my distance, although it was hard to avoid her since we were both obviously heading in the same general direction. I suspect she was a wife or daughter of Naseer, a man I once met, who lives on the north edge of Rustaq. I had to go to his house once when I found one of his goats badly tangled in a thorn bush; I'd freed the goat, but hadn't got all the branches out of its hair.

This desert is like a fairy land, some magical, enchanted place that you might see in a dream. It's all very beautiful sometimes, if you can ignore everything that's been built in Oman in the last few decades and just look at the amazing culture that once existed out here. And it's so odd that there seems to be so little written about that ancient culture. But these wells and so on were such an enormous amount of work, all done by hand. I guess they just did it a bit at a time, over several centuries. They perhaps weren't consciously thinking of "building for eternity." It was just one well at a time.

During the Middle Ages there was more contact between Arabic and European culture than in later times. The "-al" words ? algebra, alchemy, and so on ? entered our language. It's unfortunate that the high point of that contact was the Crusades, but at least we got oranges out of it. I have no idea when my two castles were built, although it was obviously when Oman was a "green and pleasant land," to steal a line from Blake, since no one now could live a pre-industrial life in this land of unrelenting sand and stone. There was clearly once a population dense enough to provide workers. These castles were certainly built at a time of milder weather, but when I looked at papers on climate change I couldn't tell at which of many ups and downs of temperature this culture must have evolved. All I know is that the remains look like the popular depictions of King Arthur's Camelot, and I suspect that a castle in Europe and one in the Middle East looked very much the same in those days. Now all we see in the centers of population are the Toyotas, the mobile phones, and the false industrial paradise that started here yesterday and will end tomorrow.

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See fabulous pictures of Oman's transportation by Lars Brodersen, like the one above.
Thumbnail shot of a tower near Rustaq, Oman, at top, is credited to virtualtourist.com.

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Peter Goodchild's previous articles on Culture Change are

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