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The economy of the United Arab Emirates today is based on two key components — the exploitation of oil and gas, and utilization of its strategic location between East and West to act as an international transhipment point for goods, this latter now being complemented by its fast-developing airborne tourist industry. In both of these components, maritime commerce plays a crucial role, one that can be traced back to the early days of recorded human settlement in the country, in the Late Stone Age, a little more than 7,000 years ago.

The earliest evidence of human occupation is now known to date back to the Paleolithic period, perhaps 100,000 years ago or earlier. Little is yet known of that period, however.

Excavations at the earliest known substantial settlement, a Late Stone Age village on the western island of Dalma, have shown that trade was already an important component of the economy. Among finds from the excavations are pearl oysters, testifying to the antiquity of the pearling trade, which lasted until the 1950s. Also found were numerous shards of pottery made in southern Mesopotamia (Iraq), and imported to Dalma by sea, the earliest evidence of the UAE’s involvement in maritime trade.

The importance of trade is evident throughout the recorded history of the Emirates. Cuneiform tablets excavated in Iraq show, for example, that during the Bronze Age, from around 3200 BC to 1300 BC, copper mined in the UAE mountains was exported by sea to the Sumerian and Assyrian empires. Other exports included
pearls and diorite, a hard rock from the mountains used for making statues.

Imports during the same period included pottery from Iran and the Harappan civilization of Pakistan’s Indus Valley, as well as fine gold and silver ornaments and carved ivory decorations from Central Asia and northern Afghanistan. Similar trading connections continued throughout the Iron Age period, from around 1300 BC to 300 BC, and by this time, the sailors of the Emirates had succeeded in developing the lateen sail, an innovation that permitted them to make use of the winds to sail back and forth across the Indian Ocean. By around the beginning of the Christian era, sailors from the Gulf had succeeded in making their way as far as China.

Links extended westwards, too, towards the Mediterranean. The navy of Alexander the Great sailed through the Gulf in the late 4th century BC, and by the 3rd century BC, the UAE was trading with Greece, as shown by the discovery of amphorae from the island of Rhodes at a site in the emirate of Sharjah. Luxury glass, metal goods and coins from Rome, dating to the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, have been found at the coastal site of Ad Door, in the emirate of Umm al-Qaiwain, while by the 7th century, the Nestorian Christian Church, one of the Eastern churches, had established a monastic settlement on one of the UAE’s Gulf islands, probably using this partly as a way-station on a well-attested trading route from Mesopotamia to India.

The arrival of Islam in the Emirates in the early 7th century AD provided further impetus for trade, with Julfar, in the emirate of Ra’s al-Khaimah, emerging as one of the leading ports of the region from the 7th to the 17th century. Its most famous son, Ahmed bin Majid, who lived in the 15th century, was a sailor and navigator who wrote manuals of seamanship that continued to be used by sea captains in the Indian Ocean well into the 19th century.

The tradition of seamanship has lasted until today, with large trading dhows built locally of wood imported from India and Sri
Lanka still being used for trading with other Gulf states, Pakistan, India and East Africa, although replaced by modern, and much larger, vessels, for the longer routes. The goods being traded have changed, of course. The copper industry died out after nearly 5,000 years in the 17th century AD, being replaced in the late 17th and 18th century by the mining and export of raw sulphur from mines at Jebel Dhanna. The pearling industry finally ended in the 1950s after some 7,000 years, only a decade or so before the first export of crude oil, although dates, first consumed in the UAE in the Late Stone Age, and recorded as being exported in the 12th century AD, are still an important agricultural export.

The stereotype image of the United Arab Emirates is one of an arid land with few natural resources until the relatively recent discovery of oil and gas, a land whose people played little part in the development of civilization in Arabia and West Asia as a whole. In fact, the contrary is true. The resources may have been limited, but the trade over thousands of years in copper, pearls and other goods, such as dates and sulphur, was by no means negligible, except by comparison with today’s oil and gas riches. In terms of their involvement in maritime trade throughout the Indian Ocean, moreover, the people of the United Arab Emirates have, for millennia, played a role of enormous significance, linking East to West, as they continue to do today.