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Oman in Western Orientalist Scholarship: Sources, Approaches, and Historiographical Transformations

Abstract

This study examines how Oman has been represented in Western scholarship across a wide range of sources, including political reports, travel narratives, translations, academic studies, and artistic productions. It traces European and American engagement with Oman from the medieval period to the present, demonstrating how commercial networks, imperial interests, and evolving scholarly practices shaped these representations. The article highlights contributions by British, French, German, Italian, Russian, and American scholars working across diverse fields, including history, philology, Ibadi theology, archaeology, and anthropology. In doing so, it charts the gradual transition from colonial-era modes of description toward more critical and academically grounded approaches, while also acknowledging the enduring influence of Orientalist scholarship on both Western interpretations of Oman and Omani historiography itself.

Keywords: Orientalism, Oman, Omani studies, Omani literature.

Introduction: Orientalism and the Study of Oman

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of how Oman has been represented by Western scholars and Orientalists, whose works span a wide range of genres, including political reports, travel narratives and memoirs, translations, academic studies, journalism, and artistic depictions such as paintings and portraits. The topic has received limited systematic attention in scholarly literature.

While Edward Said's critique of Orientalism remains an essential reference point for understanding the relationship between knowledge production and imperial power, this article does not adopt his framework as a singular or overarching interpretive model. Said's analysis is primarily focused on the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arab Mashriq, and does not fully capture the diversity, chronology, and regional specificity of Western scholarly engagements with Oman. Instead, the study adopts a multi-layered analytical approach that moves beyond rigid East-West binaries and avoids treating the "Near East" or "Middle East" as homogeneous analytical categories. Oman is approached as a historical and cultural space located at the intersection of

Arab, Islamic, Mediterranean, and Western Indian Ocean worlds – a liminal position that shaped Western writings in ways not adequately explained by classical Orientalist paradigms alone.

Within this framework, the term "Orientalist" is used in a contextual and pragmatic sense rather than as a strictly ideological label. It refers to scholars and writers who engaged with Oman under markedly different temporal, methodological, and institutional conditions, including figures operating prior to the formal consolidation of Orientalism as a discipline, as well as those whose work transcended or challenged its epistemological assumptions. By foregrounding this plurality of perspectives, the paper emphasises the heterogeneity of Western representations of Oman, ranging from early travel accounts and colonial administrative texts to modern linguistic, historical, and transregional studies. This diversity underscores the need to move beyond monolithic or Eurocentric models of knowledge production when assessing the evolution of Western perceptions of Oman.

Analyses of Western literature on Oman have often been narrow in scope, focusing primarily on specific national traditions or particular literary genres (Al-Hajri, 2006, 2011), or appearing only as peripheral components within broader surveys of the Arab world (Peterson, 1991). A notable exception is Hamilton's *An Arabian Utopia: The Western Discovery of Oman* (2010); however, this work is confined to sources prior to 1970 and does not examine contemporary contexts or engage critically with the materials. In light of these limitations, a comprehensive study of how Western perceptions of Oman have evolved over time is both timely and necessary.

In addressing this gap, the present study offers a long-term, integrative analysis of Western representations of Oman from the medieval period to the present, encompassing diverse geographical, intellectual, and disciplinary contexts. It adopts a transnational and comparative perspective that goes beyond Anglophone scholarship by including contributions from Italian, Russian, and Polish academic traditions alongside those from British, French, German, and American scholarship. This broader corpus allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Oman has been perceived and interpreted across different scholarly cultures and historical periods. The extensive chronological framework further enables tracing the evolution of interpretive approaches and narrative constructions, from early commercial and imperial engagements to more specialised and critically informed academic research.

By situating these varied sources within a single analytical framework, the paper moves beyond a descriptive catalogue of authors and texts to examine the dynamic processes through which Western knowledge about Oman was produced, transmitted, and reinterpreted over time. This approach contributes

to a historically grounded understanding of Western engagements with Oman and their enduring impact on both external perceptions and local historiography. Examining the subject from these multiple angles provides a clearer picture of the European Orientalist perspective on "the Eastern other." While Western writers' approaches evolved over time, their attitudes were often applied not only to Oman but also to other Near Eastern regions. Nevertheless, this study focuses specifically on Oman – its contemporary geographical location and borders, as well as the intersections among the various approaches outlined above, which often resist neat categorisation. When considered together, these approaches reveal shared features and patterns across different texts and periods. Recent bibliographical compilations on Oman studies (King and Stevens, 1973; Custers, 2016) provide valuable resources for contextualising these contributions and understanding their significance within the broader history of Western scholarship on Oman.

Early European Encounters and Pre-Modern Representations

European engagement with Oman and the wider Arabian/Persian Gulf evolved significantly between the late medieval and early modern periods, reflecting broader transformations in global trade, maritime technology, and imperial ambition. Scholarship on this engagement has increasingly emphasised continuity as well as rupture: while the Portuguese voyages of exploration in the sixteenth century marked a decisive shift in the balance of power in the Indian Ocean, they also built upon earlier patterns of commercial interaction and knowledge production established by Mediterranean merchants in the centuries preceding European overseas expansion.

The period between the 7th and 9th centuries AH (13th to 15th centuries CE) witnessed the intensification of maritime trade linking the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean. Italian maritime republics – especially Venice and Genoa – played a central role in this process, acting as intermediaries between European markets and the Islamic commercial world. Merchant reports, travel accounts, and cartographic materials from this period constitute the earliest sustained European references to Oman, appearing notably in Marco Polo's descriptions of Hormuz, Qalhat, and Dhofar. Although shaped by the conventions and limitations of medieval travel literature, these accounts reveal Oman's integration into long-distance trade networks and its importance as a maritime hub connecting the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and beyond.

More substantial documentation emerged from the commercial archives of Genoese and Venetian merchants, generated during an era of intense rivalry for access to Eastern goods. Genoa's establishment of a trading post in Shiraz, managed through guild structures and deliberate secrecy, illustrates

the sophistication of late medieval European commercial practices and their reliance on Islamic-dominated trade systems. As demonstrated in the work of Piacentini Fiorani and Maestri, these archives include the earliest European references to Oman as *Dār al-amān* ("The House of Safety"), a designation that underscores perceptions of political stability, legal protection, and commercial reliability.

This late medieval phase of European engagement with Oman was predominantly commercial in character and adaptive in practice. European merchants operated within well-established Indian Ocean trading systems dominated by Arab, Persian, and Indian actors, and were largely dependent on existing local intermediaries, port infrastructures, and institutional frameworks. As Abu-Lughod (1989), Chaudhuri (1985, 1990), and Subrahmanyam (1990, 2005, 2012) argue, this period is best understood not in terms of European dominance, but rather as one of asymmetric interdependence, in which European commercial participation was conditioned by the structures and norms of Islamic and Asian maritime economies. Reconstructions of Oman's role during this era, drawing on both European and Islamic sources, challenge interpretations that cast the region as peripheral, instead highlighting its active and integrative function within wider Afro-Eurasian trade networks. Early scholarly interpretations of Mediterranean and Indian Ocean commerce were shaped by the longue durée framework advanced by Fernand Braudel, whose emphasis on geographical and structural constraints provided a foundational model for maritime history. While Braudel's approach remains influential, subsequent scholarship has critically reassessed its Mediterranean-centred orientation and expanded the analytical focus to recognise the Indian Ocean as a dynamic and interconnected commercial world in its own right, characterised by multiple centres of agency and long-standing transregional linkages (Abu-Lughod, 1989; Chaudhuri, 1985, 1990; Subrahmanyam, 1990, 2005, 2012).

A major historiographical and material shift occurs with the Portuguese voyages of exploration in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The opening of the Cape of Good Hope route fundamentally altered maritime navigation, allowing Portugal to bypass Mediterranean intermediaries and inaugurating a new phase of direct European intervention in the Indian Ocean. Unlike the Genoese and Venetians, the Portuguese combined commercial objectives with military force and territorial occupation. Oman became a focal point of this strategy, culminating in Portuguese control over key ports and fortifications along the Omani coast between 1507 and 1650.

The Portuguese presence generated a far richer and more systematic body of documentation than earlier medieval sources. Early travellers, administrators, and chroniclers such as Duarte Barbosa, Tomé Pires, João de Barros, Gaspar

Correia, Afonso de Albuquerque, and Pedro Teixeira produced detailed textual accounts of Oman, Muscat, Sohar, Qalhat, and the Kingdom of Hormuz. These works provide invaluable information on maritime trade, urban life, military campaigns, and imperial strategy in the Persian Gulf. Texts such as Barbosa's descriptions of Indian Ocean ports, Pires's *Suma Oriental*, and Barros's *Décadas da Ásia* reveal how Oman and Hormuz were conceptualised as strategic nodes essential to controlling Gulf commerce. Albuquerque's correspondence further exposes the geopolitical logic underpinning Portuguese ambitions, particularly the desire to dominate chokepoints and maritime corridors.

Visual and cartographic sources from this period, including the *Códice Casanatense*, complement textual records by offering some of the earliest European depictions of Muscat and Hormuz. These images illustrate fortifications, settlements, and shipping activity, providing material evidence of the transformation of Omani coastal spaces under Portuguese occupation. Together, textual and visual materials form a foundational corpus for reconstructing the political, economic, and maritime history of Oman during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The arrival of what is often termed the Age of Imperialism (16th to 19th centuries) also ushered in more systematic and chronological record-keeping. Portuguese archives, in particular, document not only major political and military events but also aspects of daily social and urban life, rendering them an indispensable component of Oman's historical heritage. From the 17th century onward, British, Dutch, and French archival sources further expanded the documentary record. The archives of the Dutch East India Company and the British East India Company offer detailed insights into commercial practices, diplomacy, and regional power struggles, though historians have noted the methodological challenges involved in disentangling competing imperial perspectives and interests.

Modern scholarship on Portuguese activity in Oman and the Persian Gulf began to coalesce into a distinct field in the mid-twentieth century. Charles R. Boxer laid early foundations with his studies of the Portuguese maritime empire, notably *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415–1825*, which contextualised Portuguese naval power and administration within a global imperial framework. Jean Aubin significantly refined this approach through his meticulous studies of Hormuz under Portuguese and Safavid rule, drawing on Portuguese, Persian, and Arabic sources to illuminate the complex political dynamics of the Gulf.

Subsequent scholars further deepened the field. Luís Filipe Thomaz's work on the *Estado da Índia* clarified the ideological and administrative logic of Portuguese expansion, while Rui Manuel Loureiro focused on diplomatic

encounters and documentary traditions linking Portugal to the Persian Gulf. Anthony Disney contributed analyses of imperial governance and trade structures, and Giorgio Rota integrated Safavid and Persian perspectives into the study of Portuguese–Iranian relations. More recently, Sanjay Subrahmanyam has reframed historiography through a connected history approach, situating Oman and Hormuz within broader transregional networks of commerce, diplomacy, and cultural exchange.

This trend has been extended by a new generation of scholars, notably Dejanirah Couto and João Teles e Cunha, whose work emphasises intercultural diplomacy, maritime networks, and the political, economic, and social structures of Portuguese rule in the Arabian Peninsula. Collectively, this scholarship has transformed the study of Portuguese presence in Oman from a largely descriptive imperial narrative into a critical, multilingual, and comparative field. When read alongside earlier medieval merchant sources, it reveals both continuity and transformation in European engagement with Oman – from commercial adaptation within Islamic trade systems to imperial domination and, ultimately, to modern historiographical reassessment.

European and Western Engagement with Oman: From Medieval Travelers to Modern Scholarship

European interactions with Oman, spanning the medieval period to the mid-20th century, have produced a rich and multilayered body of knowledge that continues to shape contemporary understanding of the region. The earliest accounts were largely travel narratives, beginning with Marco Polo in the 13th century, who provided one of the first European descriptions of Oman's coastal regions, emphasising its strategic location within the Indian Ocean trade networks. These narratives combined curiosity, observation, and commercial interest, marking the initial European encounter with Omani society and economy.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Portuguese chroniclers such as Tomé Pires (c. 1468–c. 1540) in his *Suma Oriental* (1515), Fernão Mendes Pinto (c. 1509–1583) in *Peregrinação*, and (c. 1590–1641), along with the *Codice Casanatense*, produced systematic observations of Oman's ports, fortifications, maritime trade, and political organisation. These accounts combined textual, visual, and cartographic detail, creating some of the earliest European representations of Omani society. However, they were inevitably filtered through the perspectives of foreign merchants and colonial observers, reflecting both curiosity and commercial priorities. Dutch travellers in the seventeenth century, including Johan Nieuhof (1618–1672) and Olfert Dapper (1636–1689), extended this knowledge through VOC-sponsored reports, emphasising Oman's economic

networks, urban centres, and maritime culture. While their work was often pragmatic – designed to aid Dutch trade – it also contributed valuable ethnographic observations, laying a foundation for later European scholarship.

From the 17th through the 19th centuries, British travellers and consular officials such as Robert Lambert Playfair (1828–1899) and Samuel Barrett Miles (1838–1914) combined first-hand observation with official correspondence to document Oman's tribal structures, governance, and commercial life. Their writings reflect both systematic empirical documentation and the influence of British imperial priorities, producing knowledge that would be foundational for later Orientalist and academic scholarship. Alongside textual accounts, Enlightenment-era scientific observers such as Carsten Niebuhr (1733–1815) contributed cartographic precision and empirical methodology, while 19th-century artistic representations offered visual interpretations of Oman, further enriching European perceptions of its society, culture, and landscape.

The 20th century witnessed a diversification of perspectives, as Western engagement with Oman shifted from exploratory and administrative observation to more systematic academic and field-based study. Scholars, diplomats, and military officers-including Ronald Wingate, James Morris, John Townsend, and Donald Hawley (Wingate, 1959; Morris, 1957; Hawley, 1976, 1977; Townsend, 1977) – provided detailed accounts of Oman's social and political structures, landscapes, and modernisation processes. Military figures involved in conflicts such as Jabal al-Akhdar and Dhofar (Akehurst, 1982; Skeet, 1974, 1992; Smiley, 1960, 1975) contributed operational and strategic perspectives, documenting the interplay between local authority, insurgent movements, and regional geopolitics. These accounts, while shaped by personal, political, or imperial perspectives, offer invaluable empirical evidence for understanding Oman's social, political, and military history. Wilfred Thesiger, in particular, with his immersive ethnography in *Arabian Sands* (1959), provided a vivid and empathetic portrayal of Oman's tribal and desert societies, emphasising oral traditions, human resilience, and the lived experiences of Omanis, complementing archival and administrative narratives.

Collectively, these travellers documented Oman through a combination of narrative storytelling, empirical observation, and political commentary, producing a rich yet inherently subjective record. This record not only laid the groundwork for subsequent scholarly research but also reflected the authors' personal, commercial, and political perspectives. The combined contributions of travellers, colonial administrators, military officers, and professional scholars reveal a layered and evolving understanding of Oman. Early travel narratives and consular reports provided descriptive, ethnographic, and visual accounts, often mediated through commercial or imperial frameworks. 20th-

century scholarship introduced greater empirical rigour, archival precision, and methodological sophistication, incorporating approaches from archaeology, fieldwork, philology, and Islamic studies. Together, these works offer a multi-dimensional perspective on Oman's landscapes, societies, governance, and religious life, illustrating how Western knowledge of the Sultanate has been constructed, contested, and refined over time. Crucially, they underscore that a comprehensive understanding of Oman requires integrating observation, textual analysis, and field-based research – a convergence of perspectives that continues to shape contemporary historiography and deepen our appreciation of the Sultanate's complex history, culture, and role within the broader Indian Ocean world.

Imperial Archives and Colonial Knowledge Production

British archives contain some of the most extensive and critical documentation on modern Omani history, particularly from the late eighteenth century to the present. Extending geographically from Oman to East Africa and the Indian subcontinent, and chronologically across nearly four centuries, these records have been published in sequential series and remain an indispensable source for scholars of Omani and Indian Ocean history (Aitchison, 1909; Tuson, 1979, 1985; Tuson and Quick, 1992; Trench, 1994). Taken together, British archival materials provide multiple layers of historical knowledge about Oman, including diplomatic correspondence, political treaties, commercial networks, maritime security, and imperial administration, reflecting Britain's long-standing strategic engagement with Muscat and its rulers.

In addition to British records, French archival materials have contributed important, though more uneven, insights into Omani–European relations. Recent work by Xavier Beguin-Billecocq has brought to light previously underutilised documents from French archives that shed new light on Omani–French diplomatic and commercial interactions from the late eighteenth century onward (Beguin-Billecocq, 1991, 1994, 1995). However, because French political and strategic interest in the Indian Ocean fluctuated over time, the archival record is comparatively fragmented, offering episodic rather than continuous coverage of Oman (Germain, 1868a, 1868b).

Russian archival sources, preserved primarily in the Russian State Archive of the Navy, reflect a more limited but still significant phase of external engagement with Oman and the Gulf. These materials date mainly to the 19th century, when Russia sought access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean and briefly turned its attention to the Persian Gulf. Russian interest declined following the Bolshevik Revolution, and, as a result, the surviving

archival extracts cover only part of the nineteenth century, offering insight into diplomatic ambitions and naval perceptions rather than sustained political involvement (Rezvan, 2013).

American records, held chiefly at the American Reform Mission in Michigan, provide a different and particularly valuable perspective on Omani history. From the establishment of the American Mission in Oman in 1896, missionaries produced extensive written reports, photographs, and personal observations documenting public life, social conditions, health, education, and everyday practices, especially in Muscat. These materials may be regarded as a "general record of Oman," offering a rare social and visual complement to the predominantly political and diplomatic European archives (Scudder, 1998). In addition, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C., holds a significant collection of American documents relating to Oman, including diplomatic correspondence, trade reports, and political analyses, which can further enrich historical research. Together, these sources provide a comprehensive, multinational foundation for reconstructing Oman's political, social, and economic history across both the early modern and modern periods.

Other key sources for the modern history of Oman and the Persian Gulf include John Gordon Lorimer's *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia***,** published by the British Government in India in 1908. This encyclopaedic work remains an indispensable reference for contemporary researchers, offering detailed information on political structures, geography, tribal relations, and diplomacy across the region (Lorimer, 1908; Warden, 1856a, 1856b). At the same time, the *Gazetteer* must be approached critically, as it represents a form of colonial knowledge production explicitly designed to serve imperial administrative and strategic objectives, privileging British political interests while marginalising local epistemologies and Omani perspectives. As Fuccaro has demonstrated, such bodies of knowledge functioned "at the service of the British Empire," shaping regional narratives in ways that facilitated governance and control rather than historical neutrality. By the early twentieth century, however, imperial administrations were no longer the sole producers of systematic knowledge about the Gulf. Following the discovery of oil, corporate archives maintained by major oil companies – notably the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO), Shell, and British Petroleum (BP) – emerged as another influential layer of documentation. These companies employed specialists in historical, geographical, and political research alongside technical staff, generating extensive records on the region's social, economic, and political conditions. ARAMCO, in particular, has published some of the most comprehensive datasets on Arabian

affairs, following its concession agreement with Saudi Arabia in 1933 and its expanding presence in the region from the 1950s onward (Rentz 1974, 1997). Yet, like colonial archives, corporate oil records were produced within specific institutional, economic, and ideological frameworks, shaped by concessionary interests, resource extraction, and corporate – state alliances. Consequently, both Lorimer's *Gazetteer* and oil company archives must be read not only as repositories of information about Oman and the Gulf, but also as historical artefacts that reveal how knowledge was structured, instrumentalised, and mobilised to serve imperial and corporate power.

Translation and the Orientalist Discovery of Omani Texts

After Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1799–1801, the East began to be seen in a new light. The scholars, archaeologists, historians and philologists who accompanied imperial European military campaigns were influenced by two factors: first, Europe's Age of Enlightenment and, second, the scientific renaissance that accompanied the Industrial Revolution, which gave a boost to the development of European academic institutions, including disciplines such as history, philology and archaeology. One result of this was the emergence of a new kind of materialist interpretation of history. It was also during this period that the central German, French, British, and Dutch schools of Orientalism emerged as a distinct field of study. Imperialism became a feature of the global political landscape and took on a particularly European cultural hue. Said discusses this transitional phase in his examination of Orientalism and the power–knowledge relationship.

The academic world outside Oman first encountered Omani culture primarily through translations of European travel accounts, which described the region's ports, trade networks, social life, and political structures. Over time, European scholars also became increasingly drawn to Omani classical historical texts, such as letters of Omani Imams, chronicles of Ibadi scholars, and legal and theological writings. Translations of these works allowed scholars to access Oman's own accounts of political events, trade relations, and religious debates, providing insight into the country's role in the broader Islamic world. Importantly, these texts also conveyed the Ibadi perspective on Islamic history, highlighting doctrinal interpretations, community governance, and theological discourse that differed from Sunni and Shi'i narratives. By combining translated European travel accounts with indigenous Omani sources, scholars gained a more nuanced understanding of Oman's classical Islamic history, its religious institutions, and the social and political dynamics that shaped the Ibadi community.

The famous French Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy (d. 1838) translated the letters of Imam Said bin Ahmed bin Said to the French Consul in Baghdad, Rousseau (de Sacy, 1827, vol. 3, pp. 119–38). The Rev. George Badger produced the first work in English on Oman's history in 1871, when he published his translation of *al-Fatḥ al-mubīn* as *History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman*. His lengthy "Translator's Introduction" was an early example of Omani history viewed from a European perspective (Badger, 1871). Badger also collected many Omani manuscripts, which are still held today in his name at Cambridge University Library. The next initiative in this field was taken by Edward Ross in 1874, when he translated the historical chapters from *Kashf al-ghumma* – a work attributed to Sarḥān al-Izkawī or al-Sarḥānī – under the title *Annals of Oman*. This translation was a significant new resource for students of Omani history (Ross, 1874).

Subsequently, several scholars began to study sections of *Kashf al-ghumma* using Ross's translation of excerpts. To this day, that book remains recognised as an early source for Ibadi and Omani history. In his recent study of it, John Wilkinson raises two points: first, he doubts whether – as certain scholars claim – it was really written by Sarḥān al-Izkawī (there are still question-marks over its attribution); second, he downplays the importance of the man who wrote it, whom he regards as a copyist rather than its actual author, since his book has no proper structure. In Wilkinson's opinion, it is no more than a collection of early writings copied down by the "author" and lumped together in a single book, taking al-Qalhātī's al-*Kashf wa al-bayān* (7–8th AH /13th CE century) as its primary source. This would indicate that the collation attributed to the supposed author has been given unjustifiable precedence over the source material it comprises.

Although Nur al-Dīn al-Sālimī's (d. 1914) *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān bi-sīrat ahl ʿUmān* had not yet been translated, it attracted the attention of the French and Italian schools, and it is mentioned in the writings of the Polish Orientalists Zygmunt Smogorzewski and Tadeusz Lewicki (Smogorzewski, 1927 [publ. 1929]). In addition, Laura Vecci Vaglieri, who wrote an article entitled *The Imamate in Oman* (1949), drew much of her material from al-Sālimī's book and compared it favourably with other sources (Veccia Vaglieri, 1949; Rubinacci, 1989). The book was also reviewed in 1936 by Reginald Guest (Guest, 1936). Recently, Jerzy Zdanowski has been working on the complete translation of *Tuḥfat al-aʿyān*, which is expected to be published in 2026.

Martin Hinds translated the section on the al-Muhallab family during the Umayyad era from al-ʿAwtabī's *al-Ansāb* as part of his study of early Islamic history (Hinds, 1991). From the East African side, Samuel Arthur Strong published ʿAbdullāh. b. Muṣabbiḥ Ṣawwāfī's *Kitāb al-Salwa fī akhbār Kilwa*

in 1895 (Strong, 1895). It was later translated by Greville Freeman (Freeman-Grenville, 1966), who eventually became the leading expert on Islamic history in East Africa and published several works about Omani rulers and settlements in East Africa, including the history of the Nabhānī dynasty from Oman, who ruled the Pate Kingdom in East Africa (Freeman-Grenville, 1958, 1965, 2000).

Writing Omani History in the Orientalist Tradition

Translations, political reports and accounts of archaeological expeditions had a significant impact on the books on Omani history written by Western Orientalists. Edward Ross followed up the publication of his translation with several articles on Omani history (Ross, 1868, 1881, 1883). However, the standard Orientalist take on Omani history dates back to the publication of Samuel Miles's *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* (1919), the first European work to chronologically describe Omani history. For his primary source material, Miles used both Ross's and Badger's translations, while his secondary sources included Classical Arabic literature and reports from archaeological missions' excavations (Miles, 1966). Miles was an explorer and political agent with extensive knowledge of the region, particularly Oman, so his observations and conclusions are still regarded as valuable and valid today (Miles and Munzinger, 1871; Miles, 1877, 1880/1881, 1896, 1987).

In 1914, the Franco-Persian author Firouz Kajare published a book in Paris about the history of Omani diplomacy and the conflict between the French and British in Muscat (Kajare, 1914).

By the late 19th century, a noticeable divergence emerged between the German and British Orientalist schools in their approach to the study of Oman. The British school, shaped by imperial administrative concerns and the practical needs of colonial governance, prioritised detailed documentation of political structures, commercial networks, tribal relations, and diplomatic affairs, often drawing on official correspondence, consular reports, and travel accounts. In contrast, the German school – less tied to colonial administration – approached Omani studies from a more philological, historical, and sometimes anthropological perspective, emphasising textual analysis, classical sources, and religious studies, particularly the study of Ibadi Islam and early Omani historiography. This divergence reflects not only different scholarly traditions and methodological orientations but also the broader political and institutional contexts in which knowledge about Oman was produced: British scholars operated within an imperial framework that demanded utility and accuracy for policy, whereas German researchers were largely engaged in academic inquiry independent of immediate political imperatives. The German school began in East Africa with the famous Orientalist Eduard Sachau's translation in 1894 of

a section of al-Bisyāwī's *Mukhtaṣar*; followed by a series of studies, including Ibn Ruzayq's *History* (1899) and an excerpt from *Kashf al-ghumma* dealing with the letters from ʿAbdallāh b. Ibād to ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān (Sachau, 1894, 1898a, 1898b, 1899). In 1894, Carl Reinhardt sought a link between Oman and East Africa in the dialects of Oman and Zanzibar and examined Oman's history in Zanzibar (Reinhardt, 1894). In 1892, Rochus Schmidt published a book on the history of the Arabs in East Africa (Schmidt, 1892), followed in 1927 by Richard Vasmer's book on Omani coins, and in 1939 by Hedwig Klein's publication of the *Kashf al-ghumma* section originally translated by Ross (Klein, 1938).

The Germans also conducted several studies on the region's geography. Walther Wessler wrote a general description of the geography of the districts of Wādī al-Maʿāwil and Nakhl in 1898. Immediately after the Second World War, German contributions to Omani studies came to a halt, perhaps mainly due to the division of Germany into East and West and the Communists in the East's support for the rebellion in southern Oman. However, there remains extensive German literature on the history of Oman-East Africa (Schmidt, 1892; Pesek, 2002; Schneppen, 1999, 2006). German interest in Oman studies resumed in the early 1970s, with various approaches focusing on archaeological and geographical missions (Scholz, 1977, 1981, 1984, 1997, 2009; Scholz and Janzen, 1982; Yule, 1999).

In Britain, Orientalist studies were given a boost by Bertram Thomas, whom we may rightly regard as the founder of the "scientific" approach. He established three new fields: 1) anthropological studies, 2) philological studies of the colloquial Omani dialect, and 3) archaeological records. Thomas's writings and views offer essential insights for students in these areas (Thomas, 1929a, 1929b, 1929c, 1930, 1931a, 1931b, 1931c, 1931d, 1932, 1937, 1938a, 1938b).

Rudolph Said-Ruete (1869 –1946) was a member of the Omani royal lineage and the son of Princess Salma/Sayyida Salme bint Said (Emily Ruete). While his mother's *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* (1886, a scientific edition: 1993) – which he helped edit and publish – provided one of the earliest European-language first-person accounts of Omani court life and Indian Ocean connections, Rudolph Said Ruete made his own contributions to Omani historiography. In 1929 in London, he wrote two historical texts: one on the Āl Bū Saʿīdī family and another on Sultan Sa'īd bin Sulṭān. These works are particularly valuable because they present the history of Oman's ruling dynasty from an independent perspective, authored by an Omani figure outside formal court historiography (Said-Ruete 1929a; Said-Ruete 1929b). Together with travel narratives and archival sources, these writings enrich the Western scholarly understanding of Oman's political and social history.

The British Orientalist school's distinctive "scientific approach" to Middle Eastern history was significantly advanced by Laurence Lockhart (1890–1975), whose work combined meticulous archival research with a regional analytical lens. In his 1935 article on Nādir Shah's campaigns in Oman (1737–1744), published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Lockhart examined interactions between Oman and Iran and the involvement of European powers, especially Britain and France, within a systematic historical framework that went beyond narrative travel accounts.[1] He later expanded his research with further historical studies, including investigations into earlier Omani threats in the seventeenth century.[2] Lockhart's commitment to rigorous use of primary and comparative sources influenced a generation of British scholars, encouraging deeper engagement with diplomatic, military, and regional records rather than descriptive travel literature. This shift is evident in the work of Charles Fraser Beckingham, whose 1941 study of Imam Ahmed bin Said's reign employed similar source-based methods to reconstruct Omani political history.[3] Subsequently, scholars such as John Kelly and others in mid-20th century Gulf studies continued to build on Lockhart's model, integrating archival material with regional analysis and helping to institutionalise scientific historical practice in the study of Oman and its relations with neighbouring states.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the majority of scientific and academic Orientalist research concerning Oman and the Arabian Peninsula was published in a limited number of scholarly outlets, primarily the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society and the Geographical Journal. These journals predominantly focused on the Indian subcontinent and regions connected to the British Empire in the Indian Ocean, reflecting the broader priorities of British scholarship and administration at the time. The emphasis on these regions was not coincidental: Oman's strategic position at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, along major maritime trade routes, and its political ties to British India meant that the British Raj directly influenced the study of Oman, including through the appointment of the British representative in Muscat. Consequently, much of the early scholarly output on Oman was framed through the lens of imperial administration and regional geopolitics, emphasising trade, diplomacy, and the strategic importance of Omani ports. This focus both shaped the research's content and determined which sources and archival materials were accessible to European scholars, laying the foundation for later, more systematic, historical studies.

From Colonial Knowledge to Academic Professionalisation: The Evolution of Western Scholarship on Oman

The study of Oman by Western scholars over the twentieth century illustrates a remarkable transformation, moving from exploratory and colonial-administrative knowledge to rigorous, interdisciplinary academic research. Early engagements with Oman were often shaped by political and strategic interests, as Western governments and their officials encouraged scholarship that could support diplomatic or administrative objectives. By the post-First World War period, a significant new political and intellectual element emerged: scholars and students increasingly pursued careers in politics, colonial administration, or the military, while their academic inquiries frequently intersected with contemporary policy concerns. This blending of scholarship and state interest, while producing rich empirical data, also foregrounded questions about the influence of imperial perspectives on academic interpretations.

Within this context, John B. Kelly (1925–2009) of Oxford University exemplifies the convergence of scholarship and political engagement. Kelly first gained prominence with his study of the Buraimi border dispute in 1956, analysing competing claims over strategic northern Omani oases. This early research was followed by *The Sultanate and the Imamate in Oman* (1961) and *Eastern Arabian Frontiers* (1964), as well as later studies on Britain's early presence in the Gulf and its regional conflicts (1972, 1976). Beyond academia, Kelly served directly for the British government during the Buraimi dispute and later advised Sheikh Zayed in Abu Dhabi. These dual roles afforded him unparalleled access to archival materials and insider knowledge, enriching his scholarship while also raising questions about potential imperial or state influence. Nonetheless, Kelly's methodology – combining political, social, and regional analysis – set a benchmark for subsequent scholars, demonstrating how disciplined, source-based research could transcend the limitations of colonial narratives and travel accounts.

By the late 1960s, Oman had emerged as a focal point for a new generation of Western scholars, particularly doctoral students seeking to explore the Gulf's political, social, and religious dynamics. Robert Landen was among the first to formalise this trend. His landmark study, *Oman Since 1856* (1967), provided one of the earliest comprehensive historical accounts of the modern Sultanate. Landen's work exemplifies the Anglo-American archival and empirical approach, situating Oman within regional geopolitics, British imperial interests, and the transformations of Gulf polities. By foregrounding documents, treaties, and local administrative records, Landen established a model for studying Oman's state formation and diplomacy with methodological rigour.

In parallel, Wendell Phillips, an American archaeologist and oil magnate, introduced a complementary, field-oriented approach. His expeditions in the 1950s and 1960s, documented in *Unknown Oman* (1958) and subsequent publications (1966, 1967), combined archaeological survey, ethnographic observation, and historical commentary. Phillips' work provided vivid insights into Oman's landscapes, settlements, and material culture, bridging textual and archival history with the tangible realities of Oman's geography, architecture, and social life. Unlike purely archival historians, Phillips highlighted the interplay between environment, settlement patterns, and social organisation, contributing to a more holistic understanding of Omani society in the mid-twentieth century.

Earlier, in 1956, Elie Salem of Johns Hopkins University produced *Political Theory and Institutions of the Khawarij*, examining the theological and political foundations of Ibadism. Salem's work, though doctrinal in focus, illuminated the ideological and social underpinnings of Oman's Imamate. By tracing the intellectual, legal, and governance structures of the Ibadi community, Salem linked classical Islamic scholarship with the empirical studies that would follow in the 1960s. His research provided crucial context for understanding the continuity between Oman's medieval and modern political structures, laying the groundwork for subsequent interdisciplinary studies.

While these scholars addressed the modern and historical dimensions of Oman, John Wilkinson serves as a crucial bridge between classical Islamic sources and modern scholarly methods. Over a career spanning five decades, Wilkinson traced Oman's socio-political development from the early Islamic era to the present. His seminal works, including *Muscat and Oman* (1964) and subsequent monographs and articles (1971–1977), combined meticulous philological analysis of classical Arabic texts with historical geography, archaeology, and ethnographic observation. Wilkinson's research explored the structures of the Imamate, the role of Ibadi jurisprudence in governance, tribal networks, and the historical evolution of Omani settlements and fortifications. By contextualising textual sources within the physical and social landscapes of Oman, Wilkinson provided a comprehensive and multidimensional framework for understanding Omani history, demonstrating the value of integrating textual, field, and comparative methods.

Wilkinson's contemporaries, including Robert B. Serjeant, Robin Bidwell, Raymond Bathurst, and G. Rex Smith, extended his work by drawing extensively on Omani manuscripts, archival documents, and oral histories, forming a scholarly network that enriched empirical knowledge and fostered collaboration. Meanwhile, the English school significantly advanced philology, particularly on southern Arabian dialects and non-Arabic languages spoken in

Oman. Thomas M. Johnstone pioneered studies of southern Arabian linguistic traditions and literary folklore, connecting Oman with South Yemen (1974–1987). Later philologists, such as Peter Emery, Clive Holes, David Insall, Aaron Rubin, and Miranda Morris, continued this trajectory, demonstrating the enduring importance of language, literature, and cultural context for understanding Oman's society (Emery, 1997; Holes, 1989, 2013; Rubin, 2010, 2014; Morris, 1987).

Taken together, the scholarship of Kelly, Landen, Phillips, Salem, and Wilkinson illustrates the diversification and professionalisation of Omani studies in the mid-20th century. Archival research, ethnography, archaeology, philology, and Islamic studies converged, producing a richer, interdisciplinary understanding of Oman's political, social, and cultural history. This period marked a decisive shift away from colonial and exploratory knowledge – rooted in administrative reports, travel accounts, and missionary writings – toward academically rigorous approaches, emphasising methodological transparency, field observation, and critical engagement with sources.

The evolution of Omani studies also reflects broader trends in Orientalist scholarship. By integrating political history, material culture, theological analysis, and philology, these scholars demonstrated the interplay between empirical evidence, classical texts, and lived social realities, highlighting Oman as a key site for understanding state formation, religious governance, and Gulf regionalism. Moreover, this period laid the foundation for interdisciplinary methodologies that continue to shape contemporary scholarship, bridging history, anthropology, archaeology, and Islamic studies.

In conclusion, the history of Western scholarship on Oman underscores the complex interplay between intellectual ambition, methodology, and political context. From John B. Kelly's politically engaged historiography, through Robert Landen's archival rigour, Wendell Phillips' field-oriented observations, Elie Salem's theological analysis, to John Wilkinson's integrative philological and historical approach, the study of Oman evolved into a mature, professionalised, and reflexive academic discipline. This intellectual trajectory reflects not only a methodological evolution but also the growing recognition of Oman as a dynamic site for investigating broader historical, cultural, and political processes, from Ibadi governance and social organisation to the transformations of the modern Gulf.

Modern Western Scholarship and New Methodologies

During the late 20th century, a new generation of scholars emerged in the study of Oman, reflecting broader trends in Orientalist, post-Orientalist and interdisciplinary scholarship. This scholarship can be broadly divided into

three complementary domains: anthropological and social studies, modern Omani history and international politics, and critical or leftist approaches that interrogate imperial and state-centred narratives.

The first domain, anthropological and social studies, was led by American scholars such as Dale Eickelman, whose extensive research (1980, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993) combined ethnography with the analysis of religious, social, and political structures in Islamic societies. Although relatively few scholars have specialised in Oman from a strictly scientific or ethnographic perspective, this field gradually expanded, paying particular attention to the dynamics of Islamic societies, religious reform movements, and contemporary fundamentalist trends, including their implications for Oman. Within this socio-ethnographic domain, Western interest also emerged from Norway, Germany, Poland, the UK, and the USA, producing studies that illuminate local kinship structures, tribal authority, and everyday life. Notable contributors include Unni Wikan (1982), Christine Eickelman (1984a, 1993), Thomas Bierschenk (1984, 1985, 1988, 1989), Dawn Chatty (1983, 1984, 2005, 2006, 2009), and Mandana Limbert (2001, 2005, 2006, 2008a, 2000b, 2010, 2014). Collectively, these studies demonstrate how classical Orientalist frameworks – initially focused on textual authority and philology – evolved into ethnographic and anthropological methodologies, allowing scholars to engage with local practices, belief systems, and social organisation while maintaining critical awareness of the observer's positionality.

The second domain concerns modern Omani history and Oman's role in regional and international politics. John Peterson has been a leading figure in this field since the 1970s, producing empirically grounded studies that situate Oman within broader Gulf and international frameworks. By the early 1990s, a cohort of Anglo-American scholars further advanced this approach, emphasising archival research, fieldwork, and comparative analysis. Among them were Jeremy Jones, Francis Owtram, and James Worrall from the UK; Joseph Kechichian, Lynn Rigsbee, Miriam Joyce, Valerie Hoffman, and Calvin Allen from the USA; and Uzi Rabi from Israel (Jones and Ridout, 2005; Owtram, 2002, 2004; Worrall, 2013; Hoffman, 2004, 2012, 2015; Allen, 1981, 1982, 1987; Allen and Rigsbee, 2000; Joyce, 1995; Kechichian, 1995; Rabi, 2006, 2008a, 2008b). In Central-Eastern Europe, Polish scholars such as Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, author of the twentieth century's first comprehensive study of modern Omani poetry and prose (Michalak-Pikulska, 2002a, 2000b), expanded the field to include literary and cultural studies, while Andrzej Kapiszewski focused on contemporary socio-political dynamics in the Gulf (Kapiszewski, Al-Salimi, and Pikulski, 2006). Sebastian Żbik contributed a Ph.D. dissertation on the various aspects of the separation of Oman and

Zanzibar after 1856 (Żbik 2024), as well as research on the political positions of Abdulaziz bin Said in the context of British dominance (Żbik 2022). Jerzy Zdanowski has also made substantial contributions to modern Omani history, particularly in the fields of socio-religious Ibadism, trade networks, governance, and state formation (Zdanowski, 2022). This "modernist" school is characterised by a balanced methodological approach that combines archival research, interviews, and fieldwork. While the focus is largely on 19th- and 20th-century Oman, these scholars provide essential frameworks for understanding the country's political development, regional interactions, and modernisation processes.

In contrast, a third strand of scholarship has emerged since the 1970s, shaped by leftist or critical perspectives that challenge traditional imperial, state-centred, or nationalist narratives. Key figures in this domain include the Irish scholar Fred Halliday, the Swiss historian Sigrid Stöckli, and the French-British historian Marc Valeri (Halliday, 1974; Valeri, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2009, 2010; Stöckli, 2011). These scholars employ a broadly critical lens, emphasising the economic, social, and ideological dimensions of Omani history, rather than restricting analysis to elite political or diplomatic events. Halliday's work, for instance, situates Oman and the Gulf within global economic systems and regional power structures, foregrounding the role of social class, labour and imperial constraints in shaping local developments. Similarly, Valeri interrogates the intersection of tribal, religious, and state dynamics, highlighting how ideological discourses and social structures informed political authority and resistance, while Stöckli emphasises the transnational circulation of ideas and material resources that shaped Omani society.

The theoretical contribution of this scholarship, oriented toward the left, extends beyond Oman and reflects broader trends in modern Middle Eastern studies. It draws on concepts from political economy, Marxist historiography, and postcolonial theory to interrogate the structural conditions – economic dependency, imperial intervention, and social hierarchies – that shaped the modern Gulf. By integrating local developments with global processes, these scholars challenge exceptionalist or insular accounts, presenting Oman not as a passive recipient of external influence but as an actor embedded within asymmetrical networks of power, trade, and ideology. Moreover, their work underscores the importance of ideology, class relations, and material conditions in understanding both the formation of the Omani state and the broader trajectories of the Middle East. In doing so, they have expanded the analytical scope of Omani studies, situating it within comparative debates on modernisation, imperialism, and social transformation across the region.

Taken together, these three strands – anthropological, modern-historical, and critical – demonstrate the evolution of Orientalist scholarship on Oman. Classical European textual and travel-based studies gradually gave way to interdisciplinary, empirical, and reflexive methodologies, allowing modern scholars to critically engage with Oman's social structures, religious life, political development, and historical representation. At the same time, these approaches highlight the limits and biases of earlier knowledge, emphasising the need to contextualise historical sources – whether travel accounts, archival records, or state documents – within the political and intellectual frameworks in which they were produced.

A notable recent contribution to the study of Oman is *Sultan Qaboos and Modern Oman, 1970–2020*, edited by A. J. Fromherz and A. Al-Salimi (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), which provides a comprehensive examination of the country's history, culture, and literature. This work is particularly significant for its methodological approach, which synthesises and organises the existing scholarly research on Oman to provide a state-of-the-art overview of the field. The editors systematically collect, assess, and structure a wide range of publications, enabling readers to navigate the complex historiography with clarity and precision. The volume demonstrates a thorough engagement with both textual and archival sources, offering a coherent and up-to-date account of academic scholarship on Oman. Its extensive bibliography represents an invaluable resource for future research, underscoring the editors' commitment to consolidating and advancing understanding of Omani history and society. This contribution complements earlier historiographical traditions while situating modern Omani studies within broader scholarly debates on state-building, modernisation, and cultural development.

Ibāḍī Studies and Transnational Scholarly Networks

At the turn of the 20th century, European Orientalist scholarship on Oman began to diversify, reflecting broader intellectual trends in historiography, philology, and Islamic studies. The French and Italian Orientalist schools played particularly significant roles in shaping the study of Oman, though their approaches were framed by their respective imperial contexts. French scholarship, influenced by the Annales School, emphasised historical texts and sought to integrate the study of Islamic civilisation with social and political history. Leading French scholars, including Zygmunt Smogorzewski, Tadeusz Lewicki, Ernest Zeys, and Pierre Cuperly, produced critical research on Ibadi theology and law, as well as Oman's historical and commercial interactions with the broader Indian Ocean world. Lewicki's 1935 study on Omani merchants and early trade links with China and North Africa exemplifies how European

Orientalists combined trade, political, and religious studies to contextualise Oman within regional networks (Lewicki, 1935, 1971). Smogorzewski, in turn, bridged historical and religious scholarship by analysing the political structures and trade networks connecting Oman to other parts of the Islamic world.

Italian Orientalism, while sharing an interest in classical Islamic history, was particularly focused on textual criticism, philosophy, and belief systems, often influenced by the German philological tradition. Prominent figures include Carlo Alfonso Nallino, Mario Martino Moreno, Roberto Rubinacci, and Laura Veccia Vaglieri, whose work contributed to the understanding of Oman's intellectual and religious traditions (Van Ess, 2014; Al-Salimi and Madelung, 2014). Contemporary Italian scholarship continues this tradition through both classical and archaeological studies. Scholars such as Ersilia Francesca, Valeria Piacentini Fiorani, and Beatrice Nicolini have examined early Omani texts, jurisprudence, economic history, and Oman's connections with the Indian Ocean and East Africa, filling critical gaps left by earlier Orientalist studies (Francesca, 1998, 2002, 2003; Piacentini Fiorani, 2000, 2005, 2013; Nicolini, 1996, 1997, 1999–2000, 2004, 2009, 2012). Italian archaeologists, led by Paolo Costa, extended the study of Oman to its Islamic-era architecture and settlement patterns, training a new generation of researchers, including Maurizio Tosi and Eros Baldissera, and collaborating with German scholars such as Heinz Gaube to develop integrated approaches to oasis archaeology (Costa, 1985, 1991, 1993, 1999–2001; Baldissera, 1990–1998; Gaube, 2008; Korn, 2008).

The Dutch and Russian schools also made targeted contributions. Dutch Orientalists, including Emeri van Donzel, focused on biographical and archival studies, producing critical editions and studies of figures such as Sayyida Salme bint Said bin Sultan (1993), while scholars like Willem Floor and Ben Slot explored early Dutch-Omani interactions via VOC archives, emphasising trade and social networks in the Gulf (Floor, 1982, 1985; Slot, 1991, 1995). Russian Omani studies, largely philological and historical, benefited from German methodological influence. Vladimir Rosen and Ignati I. Krachkovski produced important works on Arab geography and navigation, including studies on Aḥmad bin Mājid, while Danylo Radivilov in Ukraine advanced the study of Ibadi epistolary literature and its historiographical implications for Oman (Rosen, 1887/1880; Krachkovski, 1957; Radivilov, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2010a, 2010b). Notably, Smogorzewski brought Ibadi manuscripts from North Africa to the John Casimir University of Lwów (currently the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv), which remain a crucial resource for historical and theological scholarship (Savchenko, 1989).

Overall, the European Orientalist engagement with Oman demonstrates the interplay of imperial interests, philology, historiography, and ethnography. French and Italian scholars foregrounded classical Islamic intellectual history, the Dutch focused on archival and biographical work, and Russian and Polish Orientalists combined philological rigour with trade and religious studies. Collectively, these efforts not only established a foundation for modern Omani studies but also revealed the layered ways in which knowledge about Oman was produced, transmitted, and framed within both regional and global contexts. The evolution from classical text-focused Orientalism to interdisciplinary, field-based, and comparative studies illustrates how European scholarship has progressively embraced methodological pluralism while maintaining an enduring interest in Omani religious, social, and economic history.

Conclusion: Western Scholarship on Oman – Trajectories, Methodologies, and Evolving Perspectives

The study of Oman by Western and Orientalist scholars has evolved remarkably over the past seven centuries, reflecting broader intellectual, political, and methodological transformations in the Middle East. From the earliest European travellers of the 13th–17th centuries – such as Marco Polo, Tomé Pires, Fernão Mendes Pinto, and Pedro Teixeira – through Dutch, British, French, and Russian travellers, historians, and administrators, the production of knowledge about Oman has always been intimately linked to wider networks of trade, empire, and diplomacy. These early accounts, though often descriptive and infused with commercial or imperial motives, provided the foundational material for later historical, philological, and ethnographic studies. They documented ports, coastal settlements, trade routes, and tribal structures, giving early European audiences their first glimpses into Oman's social, political, and economic life.

The 17th–19th centuries witnessed the consolidation of classical Orientalist scholarship, where philology, textual criticism, and historical analysis became dominant methodological tools. French, Italian, and Polish scholars – such as Smogorzewski, Lewicki, Cuperly, Nallino, and Rubinacci – focused on Ibadi theology, classical Islamic law, and Arab maritime history. These studies, while intellectually rigorous, were often coloured by the imperial and national contexts of the scholars themselves: French research drew on North African colonial experience, Italian research was influenced by philological traditions, and Polish scholars published within French academic frameworks. Nevertheless, the comparative and cross-national nature of their work allowed for a richer understanding of Oman within broader Indian Ocean and Islamic contexts. Their attention to classical texts, jurisprudence, and seafaring history

highlighted the sophistication of Omani intellectual and commercial life, even as it reflected the epistemological assumptions of the Orientalist paradigm.

The early 20th century saw a turn toward administrative and empirical approaches, particularly within the British Empire. John Gordon Lorimer's *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf* exemplifies the combination of archival precision, imperial intent, and encyclopaedic knowledge characteristic of this period. Lorimer's work, along with consular reports and corporate archives maintained by Shell, BP, and ARAMCO, provided unprecedented access to political, economic, and military data. Yet these sources were explicitly tied to imperial and corporate interests, requiring contemporary scholars to critically interrogate their biases. Similarly, the works of British administrators, diplomats, and military officers – such as Wingate, Morris, Hawley, and Townsend – remain indispensable for understanding Oman's modern political and military history, particularly in the mid-20th century, while simultaneously illustrating how scholarship can reflect the state's strategic objectives.

From the mid-20th century onward, anthropological and socio-ethnographic approaches began to reshape Western studies of Oman. Scholars like Dale Eickelman, Unni Wikan, Thomas Bierschenk, Dawn Chatty, and Mandana Limbert introduced ethnography, participant observation, and sociological analysis into the study of tribal structures, kinship, religious reform, and everyday life. This shift from textual authority to fieldwork-based methodologies marked a critical evolution: Orientalist frameworks began to incorporate reflexivity and self-awareness of the scholar's positionality, emphasising the lived experiences of Omanis rather than solely the records produced by elites or colonial administrators.

Parallel to these developments, the study of modern Omani history and international relations gained prominence. John Peterson and later scholars – including Jeremy Jones, Francis Owtram, James Worrall, Joseph Kechichian, Lynn Rigsbee, Miriam Joyce, Valerie Hoffman, Calvin Allen, and Uzi Rabi – emphasised archival rigour, interviews, and comparative regional analysis. This Anglo-American modernist school provided empirically grounded narratives of Oman's state formation, diplomacy, and modernisation, and, while largely focused on the 19th and 20th centuries, offered reliable frameworks for understanding Oman's political trajectory. Complementing this were critical and leftist-oriented scholars, such as Fred Halliday, Sigrid Stöckli, and Marc Valeri, who interrogated imperial and state-centred narratives, highlighting social justice, global economic networks, and ideological structures. Together, these schools illustrate the pluralisation of perspectives within Western scholarship, moving beyond the limitations of traditional Orientalist paradigms.

European scholarship also diversified geographically and linguistically, with Polish, Italian, Dutch, and Russian scholars producing innovative studies of Oman's socio-religious history, Ibadi thought, maritime trade, literature, and archaeology. Italian Orientalists, for example, expanded archaeological and architectural studies of Islamic-era Oman, while Polish and French scholars advanced Ibadi studies and early Omani intellectual history. These efforts have highlighted the multi-layered nature of Oman's historical record and its connections to broader Indian Ocean, Arab, and Islamic networks, enriching understanding beyond the traditional Anglo-American focus.

The study of Oman has also benefited from critical engagement with archives and corporate records, including Lorimer's *Gazetteer* and the extensive records of oil companies such as ARAMCO, Shell, and BP. These materials, while rich, reflect the strategic, economic, and ideological priorities of the institutions that produced them. Scholars must therefore navigate these sources with care, critically examining the assumptions, silences, and perspectives they embed, a process that aligns with broader postcolonial critiques of knowledge production.

Finally, contemporary scholarship has integrated insights from Ibadi and early Islamic studies, including the work of Josef van Ess, Michael Cook, Patricia Crone, and Martin Hinds, which situates Oman within the broader development of Islamic thought. Combined with Omani government publications on heritage and intellectual history, these studies illuminate the sophisticated religious, legal, and intellectual traditions of Oman's formative periods, revising older perceptions that emphasised peripheral status or marginality.

In sum, the trajectory of Western scholarship on Oman – from early travellers to contemporary postcolonial and interdisciplinary studies – demonstrates the evolution of methodologies, thematic focus, and ideological awareness. It reflects a gradual shift from descriptive, imperial-centred accounts to critical, reflexive, and multidimensional approaches that integrate textual, archaeological, ethnographic, and archival evidence. Modern Omani studies have bridged Orientalist and post-Orientalist perspectives, showing that understanding Oman requires attention to social practices, intellectual traditions, geopolitical dynamics, and historical context. The field's richness lies in its diversity: scholars with different national, methodological, and ideological orientations contribute to a nuanced understanding of Oman, illuminating not only its past and present but also the complex processes through which knowledge about the country has been produced. By engaging with these diverse perspectives, contemporary research fosters a dialogue between "the self" and "the other," enabling a fuller, more mature comprehension of Oman's social, intellectual, and political landscapes.

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