THE BEDOUIN BOX

Jo Hirons

The dowry-chest of a long-ago Bedouin bride lands
on our kitchen table - and we set out to guess at its secrets

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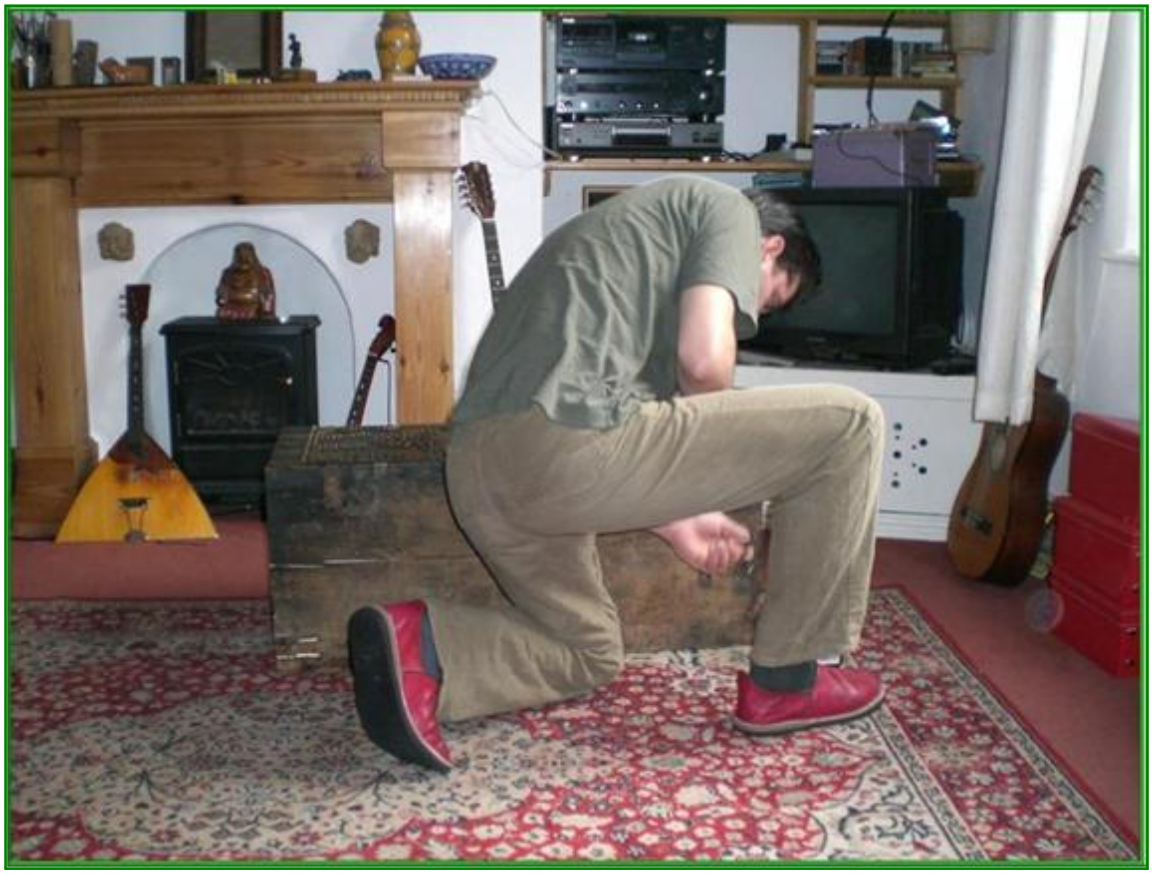
According to what little we knew, it had been pulled, battered, bruised, and broken, out of the Omani desert sometime in the mid-1960s, and had travelled widely before fetching up in Hebden Bridge. “It” was a Bedouin dowry chest, and it was now on our kitchen table. Amongst his many other talents, my partner Alex McAvoy is an experienced furniture restorer, having spent 8 years in a Wales workshop that specialised in antique and museum pieces. I too had worked on museum pieces – although in my case these were infinitely older Egyptian mummy sarcophagi, and other relics from the age of the pharaohs. Could we pool our research and restoration skills to piece together the mysterious story of this lost box and the Bedouin woman who once owned it?

As presented to us, our box measured 93cm long by 38cm high and 37cm wide. Its lid, bowed with use, was no longer attached, and split in two pieces from being used as a bench and piled high with paint tins; an accompanying 1960s Kuwaiti carrier bag contained crude hinges, an ornamented clasp, and various pieces of stray metalwork. The dovetailed corners had burst in several places, leaving their brass bindings hanging loose. Once upon a time the box had been beautiful. Several applications of a dark resin had protected the box from the heat of the sun, presenting the wood in rich shades of red, brown, and black. To enhance this pleasing appearance, numerous brass studs, rather like upholstery tacks, had been pressed into the front, forming a pattern that divided into three decorative panels. Since then, the resinous coating had been lost in decades of sand, dust, dirt, damp and other accretions and the brass studwork had become just a series of dull nodules. Moreover, several vast and burrowing beetle larvae had also munched their way into – or more probably *out of* – the underside, and there were numerous cracks and splits where the wood had dried out and broken. Our box was in a very sorry state indeed!

Alex’s first task was to patch up the worst-damaged areas with wood and glue, and to brace the box back into shape with a rope tourniquet. Whilst this was all settling in, we summarised what we already knew:

In the oldest traditions, a Bedouin groom presented his bride with a wooden chest at the time of betrothal, a few days before their wedding. Into this box would go her clothes and possessions, and, into a separate compartment, her personal wealth of silver jewellery. Most

The box arrives, old tired and broken
With its cracked lid and stains it's in a worse state than our kitchen table!



Top: Glued and braced, the box is eased back together
Bottom: Repairing beetle damage on the underside

prized was jewellery made from the purest silver of melted down Maria Theresa thalers, but the bride might also receive jewellery made from much earlier pieces belonging to her family. This jewellery would be hers to guard and wear for the rest of her life. In many ways, it was also an investment to protect her future family from hard times, as we would later discover.

At the conclusion of the wedding, great play would be made of transferring the bride and her dowry chest from her family tent. Songs refer to tying the box, amongst other wedding gifts, to the side of a white camel, and to the special tented saddle, built to protect the new bride from the sun, as she began the journey to her husband's people. For the rest of her life she would travel, dowry box and embroidered bags containing everything she owned. When she died, whatever remained of her jewellery would be melted down and re-fashioned for new brides within her family, and, according to the tradition of her particular tribe, the bridal box would either be burnt, or completely redecorated for another wedding.

We knew our box was old. It had been forty years since its discovery, and everything we had so far noted suggested long usage. It was made of cedar-wood, to be both strong, and, for its size, light for travelling. Running waves on the unpolished insides told us that the original timber had been cut in a saw-pit, before the age of mechanised saws. The joiner's work, however, was rough, and completed with just the basic tools. This didn't suggest a town carpenter with an established shop. There was also evidence that our box had spent many years travelling with the Bedouin – all along the lid's far edge were the countless scorings of many ropes tied many times. That these score-marks were only on one side told us that the box was always tied with its opening against the camel's flank. This made perfect sense, protecting the box's precious contents against chance theft. I thought of my book of David Roberts lithographs, where camel trains cross desert landscapes, dwarfed by ancient ruins, overhanging rocks, and dour Scottish skies. Somewhere under their gun-slung, red-and-white striped burdens would be boxes just like ours. There was also a suggestion that the box had once been finished with crude oil - a desert tradition to deter boring insects and protect the wood from the sun but which also made a fine contrast with bright brass studs.

Although they go by various names, a decorated Omani dowry chest is most commonly called a "*mendoos*" in Arabic. Antique dealers tend to call them "Zanzibar Chests", implying a romantic piratical origin. You can still buy them in shops and souks throughout the Gulf States, where they range from small, gaudy jewellery caskets to ostentatious pieces of furniture that would dominate even the largest room.

Top: Replacing and repairing the brass bindings
Bottom: Inspecting the dove-tails. You can just make out the slim frame of the hidden compartment beneath the score-marks left by the “jewellery-box”

Top: Repairing the lid
(Note: cheap red wine is a good stripping agent for certain stains - honest!)
Bottom: The lid is left to dry (suitably weighted) whilst we went to visit Nana

Top: Removing the last of the paint and other stains from spending the last twenty years in a series of garages
Bottom: Stop staring at the lid and go to bed, Alex!

Although hugely typical of Gulf-style furnishings, and proudly displayed as a mark of desert ancestry, most *mendoos* these days come from India and Sri Lanka, where they are made exclusively for the export market. Quite simply, the labour and timber are far cheaper. In the mid-19th century goods imported from India to the Middle East usually came by ship via Zanzibar, which is how they got their more exotic name. Modern boxes are elaborately carved with machine-stamped metal-work and elegant sweeping designs of studwork. Today's few remaining traditional Bedouin rarely use mendoos, since less expensive and more practical storage options are readily available.

As luck would have it, we knew someone else who had a dowry chest, and we decided, after another day's gluing, bracing, and patching, to pay a visit. Alex's grandparents had lived in Kuwait in the 1960s; indeed, his mother and uncle had gone to school there. Nana Beth had told him many stories of the Bedouin, not least how, during the first and mostly forgotten invasion by Iraq, the tribes came in from the desert, armed to the teeth, to honour their pledge to protect the king. Because she had never refused water to passing travellers her family also came under the protection of the Bedouin—the first inkling she had of impending trouble was waking one morning to find a silent Bedu tribesman armed to the teeth and stationed on her veranda, honour-bound to defend her to the death.

It did not need close inspection to see that Nana's dowry box was nothing like ours. For a start, it was much bigger – far too deep and long to be strapped to the rounded sides of a travelling camel. The wood was a reddish colour, and there was no sign of resin overlays. Both the front and top were decorated with broad brass plates, large studs, and raised bosses. Along the bottom were three small drawers.

Alex immediately identified it as a "city" piece. His reasoning was that it was designed for ostentation rather than practical use. Drawers would never be placed on the outside of a travelling piece – not only would they tempt robbery, but each would have to be separately secured to prevent accidental loss. In the tent of a travelling woman, her dowry box would be one of the few pieces of actual furniture, doubling up as workbench and seat. With all that impressive brass-work, Nana's dowry box would be very uncomfortable indeed!

The Kuwaiti store-keeper had told Nana that her dowry box came from India, and that it was an old box, since these days they made them with feet. (Furniture with feet is designed for hard floors, not mats upon desert sand, but Nana had preferred the more practical addition of *castors* to enable the box to be moved around when hoovering!) He also told her that the then current custom was for dowry boxes to be given to a girl by her father, so that she could save for her "bottom drawer".

This box (found on the internet) is almost identical to Nana's dowry chest
Like Nana's this has three small drawers and elaborate brass-work
It also has an intact "jewellery box"

Playing at treasure chests with a collection of Bedouin embroideries and a motley assortment of tribal bits and pieces

Over the next few days we worked on the box, repairing the lid, and stripping back the dirt to get to the colours beneath. Once the inside was cleaned, we could begin make sense of the internal fitments – and made a surprising discovery. When our box was being put together, a secret compartment had been built beneath the jewellery box – a slim opening, only a couple of fingers wide, which could not have been accessed without dismantling the dowry chest. Whatever this recess may have once contained, it had been sealed within the box before it came to the bride.

Our imaginations of course ran wild! What could it have been? Maybe some sort of document – paperwork connected with the betrothal, an accord between two desert tribes, a book, illuminated Koran pages, the pedigree for a line of Arabian horses… Maybe we'd seen too many movies! A more sensible suggestion was coinage – possibly even the famed Maria Theresa thalers – or maybe jewellery too precious to risk the passing thief. Whatever it was, it must have been of some value, and our Bedouin woman had resisted its lure for some time.

By now we felt we could present the history of the dowry chest, as evidenced by our discoveries. When first constructed, complete with its hidden compartment, sometime in the early part of the nineteenth century, our box had been simply decorated, with just its brass bindings, and six presswork medallions to glow against the dark resin. Sometime after that, perhaps for a different bride, the traditional studwork had been applied over the resin, and, in some places, over the original medallions, one of which was, by this time, quite damaged. At least two people had worked on the panels – their interpretation was markedly different – and they had changed their minds on the pattern – there were places where studs had been removed and replaced. Their design seems to show a bound book, the Koran, and a stylised incense burner, a powerful symbol in the Gulf States where it represents a long, honourable and prosperous life.

As the years passed, the travelling desert lifestyle aged both the Bedouin bride and her dowry chest. The box bears scars and bruises from being used as a work table. There's a place where a burn mark seems to suggest a casually forgotten cigarette – smoking being popular in the Middle East for almost 100 years before it caught on in Europe! Minor damage to the brass bindings is repaired with similar nails and craftsmanship; more resin is applied to mask repairs. The lid begins to bow with age. The jewellery-box now scrapes against its underside when opened: accommodating adjustments are made to clasp and hinges.

And then something seems to have happened to our Bedouin woman that drastically reduces her fortunes. Perhaps one of the devastating droughts that would, in the twentieth century, bring an end to the nomadic existence of so many Bedouin herdsman, has induced her family to part with their hoarded wealth. Perhaps she has died and her family are distributing her possessions. The brass bindings are removed from one side of the chest, the dovetails are knocked out. The box is old, and however careful their work, it splits the bottom of the trunk. They break in to access whatever the secret compartment contained.

Its treasures plundered, the box is restored once more, only now not with matched brass-work, but with roughly cut iron bindings and horseshoe nails. It is blacksmith-work, designed to render the box serviceable, but not beautiful – further clues that fortunes have changed.

Even so, the dowry chest continues to be used, until a last, fateful day comes. Who knows what happens. Perhaps a camel train is ambushed; perhaps the family group is so reduced that they fall prey to bandits. The dowry chest is stolen and taken away into the desert. The thief breaks it open with no regard for its antiquity. A thin-bladed instrument – a knife or musket ramrod – is used to quickly prise the clasp away from the wood. Who knows what they stole, and whether they knew its secret store had long since been raided. Empty and abandoned, the chest is consigned to the desert sands and forgotten.

Only sometimes lost things are found, and broken things are repaired. Under Alex's skilful hands, the dowry chest has become once more a thing of beauty, and has shared a few of its secrets. Like the Bedouin bride of so many years ago, I contemplate filling it with treasures, and wonder what the future will bring.