

## Suakin - Time and Tide

Written by Robert Berg

Illustrated by Lorraine Berg

At dusk, in the lapping of the wavelets at the old sea wall, one can almost hear the voices of Suakin's past: the Egyptian of Pharaoh's officers, the classical Greek of Ptolemy's seafarers, the Arabic and Hindi of the Red Sea merchants, the tribal tongues of West African pilgrims bound for Makkah, the Portuguese of European explorers, the To Bedawie of Osman Digna's dervishes, and the English of Kitchener's embattled soldiers.

Those are only some of the languages that once rose above the sounds of loading and unloading at the wharves of this island town. Today, few voices mention this remote Red Sea port whose name, Suakin, nonetheless hints at the mystery of its past.

Suakin is first mentioned in the early 10th century by the South Arabian scholar al-Hamdani, who describes the port as an ancient location. Sawakin, the town's name in Arabic, literally means "dwellers" or "stillnesses," and suggests haunting by jinn. According to one legend, Suakin served as a prison to which the prophet Sulayman ibn Daud - known in the Old Testament as King Solomon - banished demons, and the town's name derives from *sawajin*, a fanciful plural of the Arabic *sijn*, or prison. Another possible origin of the name points to the Arabic word *suq*, or market. Borrowed by the Beja nomads, whose name for Suakin was U Suk, *suq* reappeared in the To Bedawie locative case as *isukib*, from which the name Suakin may have evolved.

Whatever the origin, it is certain that Suakin is truly a *mina min zaman*, a port of old, whose beginnings lie far back in time. Its sheltered harbor, connected to the Red Sea by a long, narrow channel, was the finest anchorage on the African Red Sea coast between present-day Quseir in Egypt and Massawa in Eritrea, both ancient moorings themselves. Only with the advent of the modern freighter, too large to maneuver in the close confines of Suakin's harbor, did the port slip out of use and into quiet decay.

Given their commercial expeditions to the land of Punt - which lay somewhere near the Horn of Africa - the ancient Egyptians undoubtedly knew this fine harbor and its lucrative trade in aromatics, ivory and gold. By the time Queen Hatshepsut of the XVIIIth Dynasty dispatched the most famous of these ventures, trade with Punt was well over a millennium old. Suakin's own hinterland once contained rich gold deposits, with remains of ancient workings in the Red Sea hills reaching to just north of the port; pharaonic attempts to exploit these deposits may have begun as early as the Vth Dynasty (2745-2625 BC). The Egyptians also looked to the Red Sea for other luxury items: peridot, chrysolite and tortoise-shell.

Coming from the other direction, seafaring peoples of Yemen and Hadramawt reached across the Red Sea to the African shore from their kingdoms of Saba' - better known as Sheba - and Himyar. While their most important colonies were established farther south near Massawa, known to the ancients as Adulis, these early Arabians too must have been familiar with Suakin.

The history of trade in the Red Sea area is a story of peaks and valleys: Activity increased when the power of dynastic Egypt waxed, and shrank as that central power waned. The region was sometimes

a crossroads, sometimes a backwater, but after 1085 BC and the end of the XXth Dynasty, Suakin's fortunes entered a long decline as commercial activity in the region ebbed."

After the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, the port's fortunes began to rise again. When Alexander died, his empire was divided up among his generals, with Egypt going to Ptolemy. The Greeks were a maritime people; under Ptolemy and his successors they devoted themselves to establishing commercial entrepôts south along the Red Sea coast to revive the already ancient, still unbelievably rich, Indian and Arabian trade with its myriad of luxuries: frankincense, myrrh, gold, ivory and spices.

Despite Suakin's oppressively hot and humid weather - Greek chronicler Diodorus Siculus recorded that the midday heat was so intense that two men standing side by side could not see each other because of the air's density - 300 years of adventurous Ptolemaic exploration and exploitation certainly left an imprint along the coast, where folk legends about the energy and ability of these intruders circulate to this day.

In this period, Suakin has been identified with Limen Evangelis, Ptolemy's Port of Good Hope. The port is described as lying partly on a circular island, roughly a kilometer and a half (one mile) in circumference, at the end of a long inlet. The countryside supported substantial numbers of wild animals including elephants, which were captured by the Ptolemies for military use. The sight of these behemoths being loaded on board ships at Suakin must have prompted much excitement and apprehension among the townspeople.

The diversity of the merchants and seafarers arriving at Suakin was already extensive in ancient times and would only grow as years marched by. But the coastal plain surrounding the port belonged, and still belongs, to a Hamitic people known as the Beja, among the oldest pastoralists on the African continent. Through the ages, they have absorbed successive waves of Semitic immigrants from Arabia, and also confronted waves of intruders intent on exploiting or seizing their lands. They have always outlasted their opponents, incorporating little that changed their way of life. Still speaking a dialect of their ancient To Bedawie language, the Hadendowa, present-day Beja residents of Suakin, are a living link to antiquity.

The centuries after the Ptolemies succumbed to Roman authority are an obscure period for the Red Sea littoral between Egypt and Ethiopia. One thing we know is that the Beja were die-hard enemies of Roman authority for much of that time. We also know that to the west, along the Nile, lay the Nubian kingdom of Kush (See *Aramco World*, July-August 1981). To the south rose the Ethiopian kingdom of Axum, with its extensive ties to South Arabia - possibly an outgrowth of Sabaean power based along the frankincense trail in Yemen. In this period also is a legendary invasion of the Atbai region, north of Suakin, by the Yemeni Abu al-Malik ibn Shamnar-Yerash, whose armies perished in their attempt to seize the emerald mines of the Eastern Desert.

Surrounded by shifting balances of power, this must have been a time of great upheavals, perhaps disaster, for Suakin - mixed with periods of flowing riches. Except in the direst of times, however, the great trade routes that now extended from northern Europe deep into the Orient kept Suakin in touch with the wider world.

Contacts between Arabia and the African Red Sea coast rose to a new level with the advent of Islam in the early seventh century. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in ad 632, Muslim power expanded from the Arabian Peninsula north and east into Asia (See *Aramco World*, November-December 1991), and west into Africa. The Arab penetration of the Sudan followed two main routes: overland via the Sinai, and across the Red Sea to ports on the African shore. This influx led to the

creation of the port of Badi' and brought the ports of 'Aydhab and Suakin into roles of prominence; they were the major points of contact with Arabia over the next several centuries.

For a time, both Badi' to the south and 'Aydhab to the north eclipsed Suakin, but Suakin's geographical location was better than Badi''s, both in relation to the Sudanic and Nilotic commercial centers and to Jiddah, Makkah's port and the major arrival point for Muslim pilgrims. Badi' declined.

'Aydhab, near the present-day village of Halaib on the Sudanese-Egyptian border, was stimulated by the flourishing of Muslim culture and commerce and evolved from an insignificant anchorage to a major harbor for international commerce. While Suakin's commercial hinterland looked to the Sudan and Upper Nile, 'Aydhab's fortunes were directly linked to the rich trade between a resurgent Muslim Egypt and the far-flung lands of the Orient. Disruptions caused by the Crusades and Mongol onslaughts increased the importance of the Red Sea as a commercial avenue for trade with the East. By the end of the 12th century, 'Aydhab was one of the busiest ports in the entire Muslim world.

Unlike the swift expansion of Badi' and 'Aydhab, Suakin's commercial evolution was incremental; it was also to last longer, extending into the early 20th century. Compared to ports south of it, Suakin's location was more favorable for inland trade, and relative to the north, it was a less convenient target of wrath or direct control. While there are no detailed records of the town for the first seven or eight centuries of the Muslim era, its rulers appear to have wisely pursued policies that kept the town economically competitive but isolated from political controversies of the type that doomed 'Aydhab. Only in 1264 did Suakin face major retribution from the Mamluks. At that time, Suakin's ruler, 'Ala' al-Din al-Asba'ani, was accused by the sultan Baybars I - the celebrated Mamluk ruler known as The Crossbowman - of appropriating the goods of merchants who died at sea near the port. The charge appears to have been a pretext for a punitive expedition: The Mamluks apparently feared that an increase in Suakin's wealth would pose a competitive threat to 'Aydhab, whose position they were bent on maintaining. The attack was led by the governor of Qus in Egypt and his general, Ikhmin 'Ala' al-Din, and was supported by 50 ships from 'Aydhab. Al-Asba'ani fled in defeat.

A Mamluk agent was installed to oversee the port and a garrison was left behind. Shortly after 'Ala' al-Din's departure, however, al-Asba'ani returned to attack the town, but was again soundly defeated. Baybars eventually decided that a local chief would be better suited to look after Egyptian interests in such a remote location, and he accepted al-Asba'ani's request to rule the port in Baybars's name. For the first time, Suakin came under direct Egyptian control.

Al-Asba'ani was descended from a long line of merchants who had migrated to Suakin from the Hijaz in Arabia. This ongoing migration insured the development of strong commercial ties linking Suakin with Jiddah and Makkah. Many of those whose businesses flourished settled in the port and married local Beja women, and the Beja tradition of matrilineal inheritance allowed some of the immigrant Arabs to attain prominent tribal positions. In 1332, the renowned traveler Ibn Battuta visited Suakin, and found the port ruled by al-Sharif Zaid ibn Abi Numayy ibn 'Ajlun, son of the *amir* or prince of Makkah: He had inherited the post by way of his Bejawi maternal uncles.

As with so many other situations throughout its history, Suakin's connections with the Hijaz proved a mixed blessing: While assured a prominent role as a departure point for African pilgrims, as well as a stable trading relationship with the Hijaz, Suakin had to stand by quietly while Jiddah took the lion's share of trade with the Orient.

In addition to their Islamic faith and their commercial enterprises, the Jiddah emigrants, called Jiddawis, introduced another benefit that would give Suakin a distinctive face: a new building technique. Unlike the adobe structures of the Sudan, designed to keep the desert heat at bay, the Jiddawis introduced coastal architecture that strove to catch the cooling breezes of the sea while

excluding hot desert winds from the west and the stark glare of the sun above (See *Aramco World*, September-October 1987).

The new, Jiddah-style buildings were usually two or three stories high, with walls punctuated by shuttered windows, some of them very large and projecting outward. The interior walls held ventilating grilles that allowed breezes to penetrate the entire home. To protect against glare, the windows were covered with distinctive *mashra-biyyahs*, screens with geometric patterns produced by interlocking lathe-turned pieces of wood, or by *shish*, made from notched or tongued strips of wood joined at right angles. The basic building blocks in Suakin were local white coral, and exteriors were covered with white stucco.

The early 16th century saw another major power shift in the Red Sea region: In 1517, the Ottoman Turks conquered Mamluk Egypt, and for a time Suakin fell under the sway of the Funj, a Muslim people based at Sennar on the Blue Nile, who took advantage of the disruption to annex the port. But the Funj grasp was fleeting. Soon their role became one of making whatever commercial arrangements they could with the emergent Turks, who rapidly extended their authority down the Red Sea coast. From this time until the rise of the Mahdi in the late 19th century, Suakin was almost continuously under Turkish rule.

In 1540, a Portuguese fleet bound for an attack on Suez anchored at Suakin. A drawing of the port made by a member of this expedition has survived: It shows an island port in which "there is not a foot of ground but what is taken up with houses; so that all the island is a city, and all the city an island." The Portuguese commander, Stefano da Gama, provoked a dispute with the governor of Suakin and sacked the town. This act alerted the Turks to the Portuguese presence and, forewarned, they defeated the invaders at Suez. Portugal never seriously threatened the Red Sea again.

Early on, the Turkish presence signaled a time of prosperity, and some of the larger Suakini homes date from this period. But increasingly harsh rule, and the discovery of the sea route around Africa to the Orient, soon led to a sharp decline in the town's fortunes. From the mid-17th century onward, local merchants emigrated, abandoning lavish homes that fell slowly into ruin. Nonetheless, Suakin continued to provide a vital outlet for its hinterland, although the scope of its trade was narrowed considerably.

At the close of the 17th century, the French pharmacist-traveler Charles-Jacques Poncet reported that the Funj capital of Sennar did a great volume of trade with the East through Suakin. With the onset of the monsoon, Sennari merchants embarked upon their trading journeys from Suakin with stocks of gold and ivory, returning with silks and spices. Poncet also mentioned that "fishing for pearls" was one of Suakin's industries.

The town's low ebb was perhaps reached in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The great Swiss traveler Jean Louis Burckhardt visited Suakin in 1814 on his way to Jiddah. He found two-thirds of the homes in ruin; el-Geyf on the mainland was populated mainly by Beja, while Suakin's population was principally descended from Egyptians, Hijazis, Hadramawtis and Turks.

With the Funj empire on its deathbed, Suakin's international trade had virtually ceased. Gone were the days when luxury goods from the African interior and exotica from the Orient crowded the Suakini piers. Most of the trade, with Jiddah and to some extent with Yemen, was in stock, cloth, hides and butter. Turkish authority was represented by a customs officer who, along with his five or six bodyguards, feared the Beja too much ever to venture onto the mainland.

One last attempt was made to revive Suakin's commercial role. In 1865, the Khedive Isma'il of Egypt was granted title to Suakin by the Ottomans. Suakin, along with Massawa, was to play an important role in Egypt's bid for an African empire. Egyptian authorities made a serious effort to revitalize the

port and equip it for modern commerce. Housing was repaired and new dwellings were built. Mills were imported for grinding local grain. A new mosque, secondary school, hospital and *wakalah*, or inn, were all erected. When the upswing in commerce attracted Coptic Christian merchants from Ethiopia, orders were given for construction of a church so the Copts would have a place to worship.

The Egyptians introduced participatory government modeled on their own system at home. Schemes for agricultural development were launched; Manchester cloth and Birmingham cutlery changed hands for gum, sesame oil, ostrich feathers and coffee. A brighter day seemed to be dawning. But then came defeat in the 1876 Egyptian-Ethiopian War and looming financial disaster at home; the curtain came down on Egypt's dreams of empire. Only a few years remained before the call to *jihad* was pronounced by Muhammad Ahmad ibn al-Sayyid Abd Allah, the Sudanese tribal leader who proclaimed himself the Mahdi. The Mahdist revolt reached Suakin when the famous Turkish-Sudanese trader Osman Digna donned the dervishes' patched *jubbah*, or coat, and rallied the Hadendowa for the Mahdi.

Suakin was the only point to weather the storm. Lord Kitchener, commanding Anglo-Egyptian forces, set up headquarters in the town and used it as a base of operations for sorties into the Red Sea hills. The Beja forces of Osman Digna threatened Suakin and in 1888 invested the port, and in one of his ballads, Rudyard Kipling related how Digna's dervishes "cut up our sentries" there. Egyptian troops were shipped in to relieve the port. In December of that year, the Mahdist forces were defeated in a bitter clash at Gemmeiza, just outside the city walls.

With the final military defeat of the Mahdists 10 years later, Britain moved forward rapidly with plans for economic development of the region from Kordofan to the Red Sea. A coastal emporium would be required to handle the expected increase in trade. But Suakin, which had played that role in the past, was handicapped by the need for extensive rebuilding, the tightness of its harbor and its limited - and barely drinkable - water supply.

In 1904, the site for a new port, to be called Port Sudan, was chosen at the harbor of Mersa Barghout, some 64 kilometers (40 miles) to the north. A railway connecting Port Sudan to Atbara, on the Nile, was completed in 1905. In 1910, provincial headquarters were transferred from Suakin to Port Sudan. The greater volume of trade continued to flow through Suakin for a number of years but, by 1922, the last of the big companies had departed.

Today, Suakin's piers are empty. Gone are the burly Greek sailor and the Mamluk officer in bright silks. The town's once-fine homes are crumbling, and a few dwellings of grass and matting house the handful of inhabitants. The modest tea shops and market of el-Geyf bear witness to a quiet day-to-day life, and a handful of fishing dhows plies the waters of the harbor at dawn.

Yet Suakin still holds treasure for the world at large. A unique blend of Africa and Asia, it is the only important relic of its kind on the African Red Sea coast, and few ports can boast a longer or more varied mix of arrivals and departures. What remains of its distinctive architecture, with its stuccoed tracery and grayed teak, could be preserved and restored to provide future generations with a window through which to look back in time. *Inshallah* - God willing - there is still one more chapter of Suakin's history to write.

**Robert Berg** imports goods from Egypt and Sudan, and has studied and taught about the Middle East. He and **Lorraine Berg** live outside La Luz, New Mexico.

This article appeared on pages 32-39 of the July/August 1993 print edition of *Saudi Aramco World*.

Copyright © 2004-2015 Aramco Services Company. All rights reserved.