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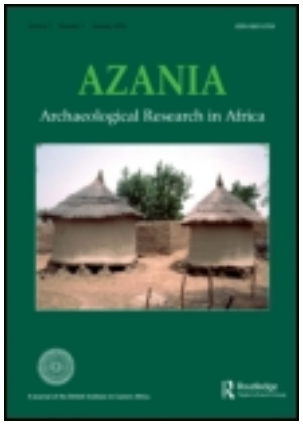

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The port of Suakin on the western shores of the Red Sea served as one of the most important trading centres of the region throughout the second millennium AD. In 2002 an integrated conservation research project was initiated at the site following decades of neglect. This paper reports on one section of this project, the excavations centred on the building known as the Beit el Basha. This section of the archaeological investigations has provided important information relating to the earliest occupation of the island and key insights into medieval settlement and activity in the area.

Keywords: Suakin; medieval; Beja; Ottoman; trade; port

Le port de Souakin sur la côte ouest de la mer Rouge a été l'un des centres commerciaux les plus importants de la région tout au long du deuxième millénaire de notre ère. En 2002, un projet de conservation intégrée de recherche a été lancé sur le site après des décennies de négligence. Cet article présente une section de ce projet, les fouilles autour de l'édifice connu sous le nom de Beit el Basha. Cette section des enquêtes archéologiques a fourni des informations importantes relatives à la plus ancienne occupation de l'île et des renseignements clés sur le peuplement et l'activité médiéval dans la région.

Introduction

Suakin on Sudan's Red Sea coast has historically been the most important port town in this region throughout the second millennium AD. It is also one of the most enigmatic and iconic sites in eastern Sudan with many traditions and folktales associated with it, embedding the place into the region's psyche (Calia 1997–99; Salim 1997). Following the establishment of a deepwater port further north at Port Sudan in the 1930s the town was largely abandoned and many of its buildings rapidly fell into ruin. The site continues to deteriorate today and few upstanding buildings remain. Following years of conservation assessments and indecision (Hansen 1972; Hinkel 1976; Salim 1997), the Suakin Project was established in 2002 to carry out research and conservation on the site. A large team of archaeologists and architects was drawn together from the Universities of Ulster, Cambridge, London (School of Oriental and African Studies) and Khartoum under the auspices of the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) of Sudan to undertake this programme of work. To date, test excavations have been conducted across the island of Suakin to assess the nature and potential of buried archaeological material and various conservation interventions have been initiated, including the rebuilding of a mosque and portions of a residence on the eastern shores of the island. This paper

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reports on one section of this project, the excavations centred on the building known as the Beit el Basha. In a pioneering study of the island's buildings conducted between 1940 and 1975 Jean-Pierre Greenlaw, a Khartoum-based teacher and illustrator, provisionally identified this building as one of the earliest in the town dating to the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries AD (Greenlaw 1995). Privately published, in 1976 Greenlaw's study was reissued by Kegan Paul International publishers in 1995. While well illustrated and an invaluable aid to researchers, it is not, however, without its problems. It remains unclear as to what extent the drawings were conjectural and much of the research is fragmentary and lacks referencing. Our archaeological investigations were thus targeted at this particular building in an attempt to elucidate information relating to the earliest occupation of the island and provide key insights into medieval settlement and activity in the area.

Suakin is located on Sudan's narrow coastal plain wedged between the Red Sea Hills and the Red Sea (Figure 1). These plains consist of marine and continental deposits of Pleistocene and more recent age and are subject to a complex system of tectonic movement, as well as changing sea-levels (Elzien *et al.* 2005). A number of embayments, lagoons and breaks in the plain are evident with Suakin constituting an unusual feature referred to locally as a *marsa* consisting of a natural break in the reef leading to a narrow channel and a small enclosed bay 2 km in from the sea. It was

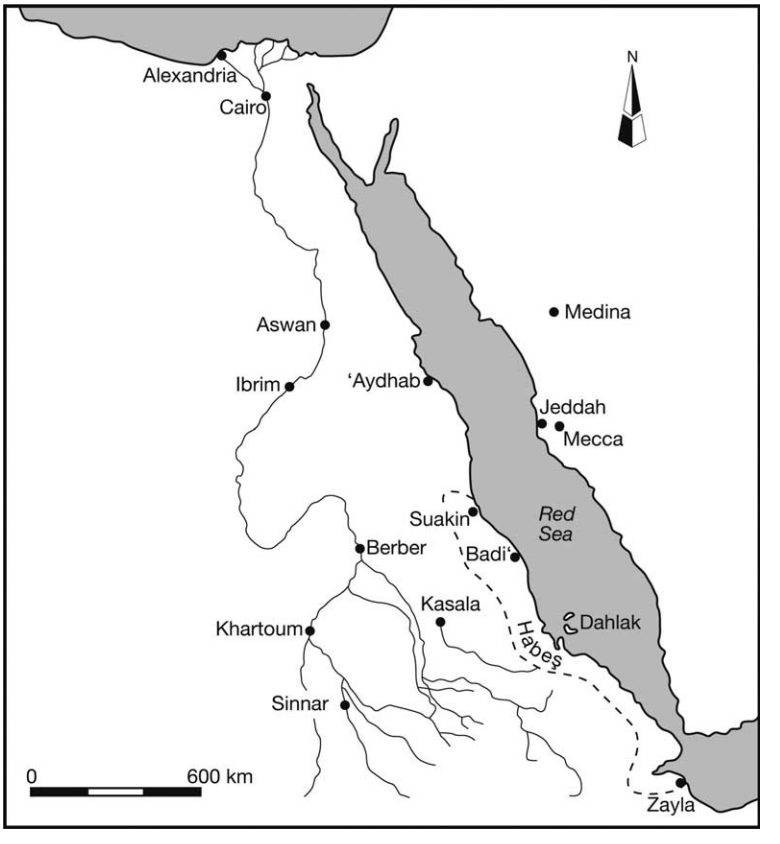

Figure 1. Map of the Red Sea showing the location of Suakin.

once thought that the *marsas* formed as a result of faulting, but they have been viewed more recently as erosive features formed as a consequence of a rapid drop in sea level associated with wadi formation (Rabaa 1980, 63). The focus of this project's work has been on the island of Suakin located 30–50 m offshore from the western shoreline (Figure 2). The island itself would originally have consisted of a low-lying natural coralline outcrop that became the central focus of early settlement. In 1541 de Castro described the town as lying 'in the midst of a circular nook stands a flat island, almost perfectly round and level with the water, about a mile in compass. In this space there is not a foot of ground but what is taken up with houses; as that all the island is a city, and all the city an island' (Bloss 1937, 290).

Suakin provides a sheltered anchorage on an otherwise largely inhospitable coastline. Its approaches are safe and relatively easily navigable for shallow draught wooden sailing vessels ranging from small local fishing vessels to larger European ocean-going ships. Its bathymetry and bottom type allow for good holding ground given that the internal natural basin acts as a depositional environment for sediment coming in from the surrounding lands. Vessels can then lie safely at anchor for extended periods of time while being easily observed from both the military and economic strategic points on both the island and the mainland. Although no deepwater berths existed prior to the twentieth century they were hardly required given the diversity of other mechanisms visiting vessels used to both load and offload goods and passengers, including the use of small tenders and beaching. The

Figure 2. Aerial photograph of Suakin in 1930 (Durham University, Sudan Archive). Since this photograph was taken the condition of the buildings on the island has deteriorated considerably and most have now collapsed.

island itself has no freshwater source, but at least two wells and a reservoir lay close by on the mainland (Parry 1886). It was here that caravans, travelling centuries old routes through the Red Sea Hills from the interior stopped before undertaking dealings with the town's merchants and administrative bodies (Burckhardt 1822). A number of primary overland routes appear to have been utilised, including a central route to Khartoum and the Nile and a southern route to Ethiopia. A third northern route diverting to Wadi Halfa bypassed several of the Nile's cataracts.

History

For the Roman period five major ports have been identified along the western shore of the Red Sea, including three in Egypt: Clysma (Suez), Myos Hormos (Quseir al-Qadim) and Berenike (Peacock and Peacock 2008). A fourth port, Adulis, has been investigated in Eritrea, while Ptolemais Theron is believed to have been positioned on the coast of Sudan (Peacock and Blue 2007). With the abandonment of both Berenike and Adulis in the fifth and eighth centuries respectively, both 'Aydhâb and Badi on the Sudanese coast rise to prominence. Power (2008) associates their rise with a general expansion of mercantile activity in the region at this time and political manoeuvrings to contest the naval power of Aksumite Ethiopia. Limited archaeological research has been undertaken at these Islamic period ports and significant work remains to be done on the general medieval character of Sudan's Red Sea coast. Peacock and Peacock (2008) have identified possible port features and associated settlement evidence from satellite imagery at 'Aydhâb, while Badi has been subject to a number of short reconnaissance visits that have identified medieval material, including cisterns, a number of burials and artefact scatters (Crowfoot 1911; Kawatoko 1993; Seeger *et al.* 2006).

A number of commentators have equated the site of Suakin with that of the Roman port of *Evangelon portus* mentioned by Ptolemy (Hinkel 1992). However, it is becoming increasingly evident after nearly a decade of archaeological work at the site that there is no evidence to support this assignation. Chittick (1981) recorded a brick-built cistern on Condenser Island, which he believed to be of a Roman date, but a re-evaluation of this structure has shown that it dates instead to the Islamic period. In the ninth century the area saw an intensification of external activity with the emergence of the Sudanese gold trade in the Red Sea Hills (Power 2008). Significant quantities of gold deposits existed across the upland regions of the hills and the arrival of prospector groups led directly to conflict with the Beja who had inhabited this region for millennia (Dahl and Hjort-Af-Ornas 2006). In a treaty signed in 831, however, the Beja agreed not to damage mosques at a number of named locations, in return for which their unhindered passage into Egypt was allowed (Shinnie 1954).

One of the first reliable sources for the settlement at Suakin comes from the tenth-century geographer al-Mas'udi who referred to its population as belonging to the *el Hassa* Beja tribe and recorded that they were Muslim. He also made reference to the routes from the mines at Shenkir near the Nile to the ports of Suakin, Badi, and the Dahlak archipelago (Hinkel 1992, 216). By the twelfth century the port at Suakin was well established and in 1132 the merchant Abu al-Barakat recorded that he had bought textiles in India on behalf of Jewish merchants in Cairo and travelled onto Aden where he bought brazilwood, cinnamon and rhubarb, sending them back

to Egypt via Suakin and other Red Sea ports (Margariti 2007, 136). At Suakin he sold 20 robes at the port for 10 Egyptian dinars to pay the customs (Goitein and Friedman 2007, 262). In 1213 Yaqut described the 'famous' town of Suakin as a port to which came ships from Jeddah and described its inhabitants as Christian *Buga* (Yaqut 1957; Hinkel 1992, 216). As its role in Red Sea trade expanded the larger economic powers of the region began to engage politically with the port. In 1264 the Governor of Qus moved against the town following complaints to Cairo that merchants were being harassed by its occupants. Suakin now came under the formal control of Egypt for the first time (Hinkel 1992, 216). Ibn Fadlallah el Umari recorded *c.* 1320 that all its occupants were Muslim and that its governor was Sherif Zaid ibn Abu Nami el Hasani, a son of the former emir of Mecca. Zaid was also mentioned by Ibn Battuta, who visited the town in 1330 and recorded that his ship 'emerged at a roadstead called Ra's Dawa'ir between Aydhab and Sawakin. . .After two days' travelling we reached the island of Sawakin [Suakin]. It is a large island lying about six miles off the coast and has neither water nor cereal crops nor trees. Water is brought to it in boats, and it has large reservoirs for collecting rainwater. The flesh of ostriches, gazelles and wild asses is to be had in it, and it has many goats together with milk and butter, which is exported to Mecca. Their cereal is *jurjur*, a kind of coarse-grained millet, which is also exported to Mecca. The sultan of Sawakin when I was there was the Sharif Zayd, the son of the Emir of Mecca. We took ship at Sawakin for Yemen' (Battuta 1958: II: 362–3). This account was written down a number of years after his visit and Battuta may have forgotten elements of his visit, including the description of the site as lying six miles (approximately 10 km) off the coast.

In the fifteenth century Suakin was the primary embarkation point for North African Muslims travelling to Mecca via the port of Jeddah, ruled by a Muslim sultan subject to the king of Hamasen (near Asmara); simultaneously, it served as a departure point to Jerusalem for Christian Abyssinian pilgrims (Crawford 1958, 55–63). By the century's end the town was again under Egyptian Mamluk control, but became subsumed into the broader economic and cultural sphere of the Sennar-based Funj sultanate following its establishment in the opening decade of the sixteenth century (Welsby 2002). Suakin's exact relationship with the Funj is unclear, but while control of the port fluctuated and changed over the following two centuries the sultanate appears to have had a constant influence on the town's politics and often had a share of the port's customs and economic dealings (O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974). After the Portuguese failed to establish themselves in the Red Sea, the town was surrendered to the Ottoman Turks in 1517 (Bloss 1937), but it appears to have retained a degree of autonomy. The tenuous nature of the Ottoman hold in this region is illustrated by a unsuccessful campaign down the Nile probably directed against the Funj (Ménage 1988, 143), who by then had exerted control over the Hadásiba shayks controlling the Beja country between the Nile and the Red Sea and a share of Suakin's customs revenues (O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974, 26). In 1555, however, a second Ottoman expedition established Özdemir Pasha as the first governor of an Ottoman province of which Suakin was the capital, although the presence of the Ottoman administration did not stop others from attempting to gain control of the port. Periodic Portuguese intrusions were largely unsuccessful, but both the Funj and the surrounding Beja continued to hold a vested interest in the town's economy and operation (Crawford 1951). Utman Pasha, Özdemir's son,

reported in May 1564 that rebellious Bedouin were effectively controlling water supply to the island and charging excessive prices for it. He requested military support to negate this threat. Seven years later he was congratulated for beating off an attack on Suakin by the Beja and the Beylerbey of Egypt was ordered to send guns and ammunition to the Ottoman fortress at Suakin (Ménage 1988, 145). A period of tense military and political manoeuvrings continued into the seventeenth century before Ottoman control became more firmly established. A significant expansion of the port's role developed over the following centuries (Greenlaw 1995; Hinkel 1992; Rhodes 2011), but findings from this element of our overall work at Suakin will be described elsewhere.

Beit el Basha excavations

The building referred to by Greenlaw (1995) as the Beit el Basha is now in a very ruinous state (Figure 3). All of the structure's walls have collapsed and the site is essentially represented by a pile of rubble. The house was targeted for excavation because tradition names this as the earliest building on the island (Greenlaw 1995; Hinkel 1992) and because it was clearly constructed in a different manner to the nineteenth/twentieth-century structures identified on the island. It was also positioned centrally on the island close to the two standing mosques and was clearly a building of importance. An accurate description of the house's structure and plan was ascertained following limited clearance of this rubble combined with excavation and the use of Greenlaw's original survey of the site (Figure 4). Its main entrance was located to the extreme east of its northern wall and access was gained from a narrow

Figure 3. Suakin: photograph looking southwestward across the rear yard of the Beit el Basha towards the area of Trench 1 marked by the central vegetation.

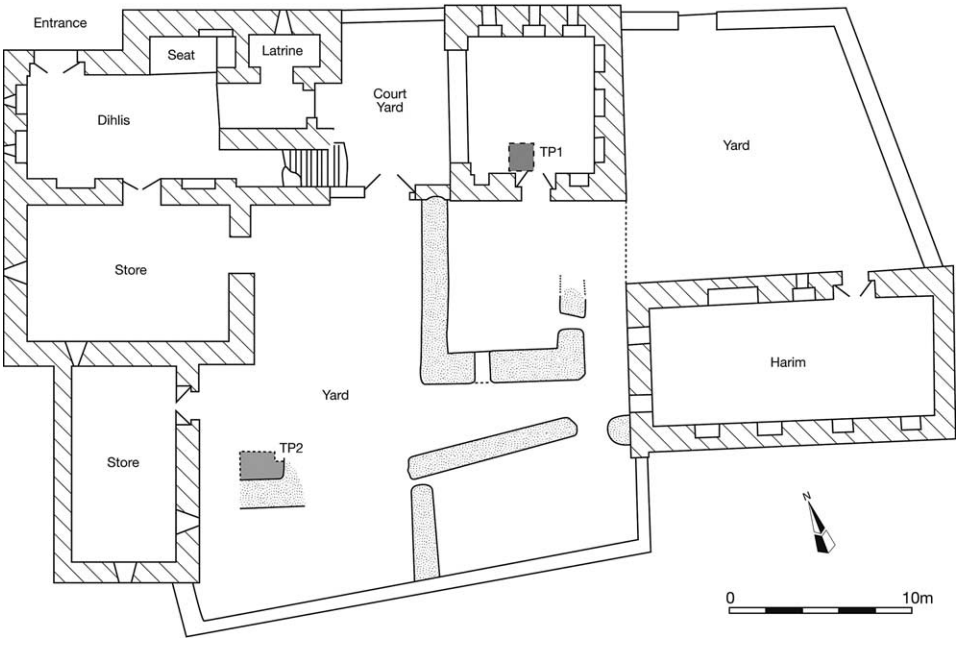

Figure 4. Suakin: ground floor plan of the building known as the Beit el Basha.

laneway. This doorway led directly into the *dihlis*, or entrance hall. Two windows on the eastern side lit this entrance area and a *maga'ad*, or seated alcove, was located immediately west of the door on the internal wall. One doorway led from the *dihlis* into a large room, possibly used for storage, while a second passageway led past a latrine and stairwell, providing access to the first floor, into a small courtyard. Greenlaw (1976, 26) referred to a store-cupboard under the stairwell that was closed by a mahogany door carved with a geometric design. Across the courtyard lay the *diwan*, or reception room, which was entered under a carved stone archway with two floral motif plaques on either side of the pointed arch. This was a roughly square building in plan with an internal measurement of 3.5 m. Two open yards were positioned to both the immediate west and rear of the house. A large single storied rectangular building with an internal measurement of 8 m abutted the western wall of the rear yard and was accessed through a narrow doorway on its northern wall from the smaller corner yard. A final ground floor building was located in the southeastern corner of the main yard. The entrance stairwell led to a small first storey space above the *dihlis* containing the *majlis*, or living room, as well as a further latrine, kitchen and bathing space. Greenlaw (1976, 26) provisionally interpreted this as the building of the original sixteenth-century Turkish governor's residence and dated it to that period on the basis of the decorative motif over the *diwan* arch, which is comparable to motifs found on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mosques and palaces in Cairo (Pauty 1932).

Excavations took place within the interior of the house, in its rear yard and in the large open space to the south of the building over three short seasons from 2004 to 2007, totalling seven weeks of work (Figure 5). Internally a 1.5×1 m test pit was excavated in the *Diwan* against the inside face of the doorway (Figure 6). The original

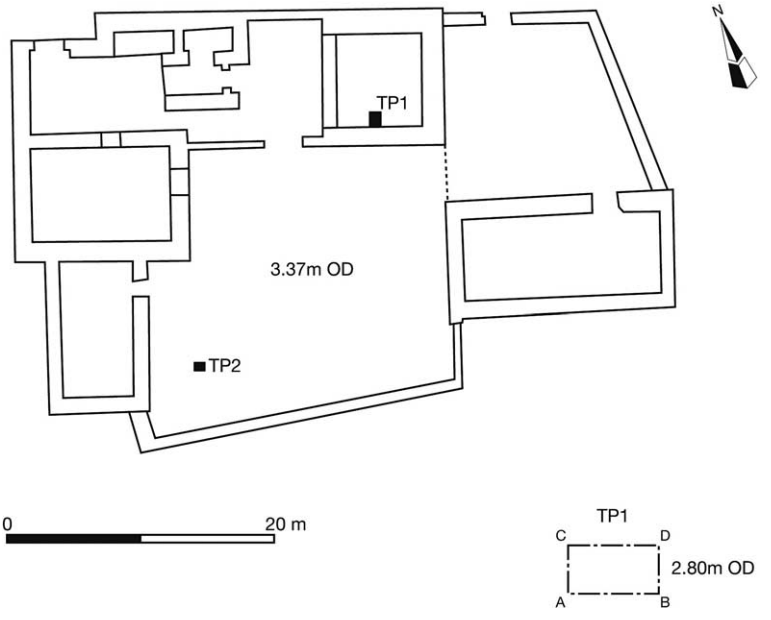

Figure 5. Suakin: location of the two test pits and main trench excavated (SE of House, in bottom right of figure) over three seasons from 2004 to 2007.

ground or floor surface was missing and the upper stratigraphic sequence consisted of a depth of overburden sitting on a compacted sediment surface that in turn overlay a thin 0.05 m mixed and compressed charcoal layer deliberately laid to protect against rising damp. This deposit is a common feature across the site and was a preventive strategy used throughout the post-medieval period. The foundations of the house consisted of a mortared coral stone wall sitting on a 0.25 m thick basal plinth. A substantial preconstruction deposit lay under the plinth that could not be bottomed out due to the unstable nature and depth of the trench sides. These deposits, consisting of rubble and soil, represent an accumulation of medieval occupation material and it seems apparent that pre-existing masonry structures had been present at this location prior to the building of the Beit el Basha as a large amount of stone and plaster from an earlier structure had been packed against the foundation plinth to effectively create a compacted platform on which the house was built. A date range of 1430–1630 cal. AD (Table 1) was obtained from *in situ* charcoal immediately under the plinth, associated with what appeared to have been activity during the building of the house. This date ties in broadly with the arrival of Özdemir Pasha as governor in 1555 and the establishment of Suakin as the capital of an Ottoman province. It would seem, then, that this house was indeed the residence of the Pasha, or at least of another leading administrative figure, and that local tradition and the naming of the building are rooted in historical fact. The historical importance of the structure would also account for its survival into the twentieth century.

Excavations in the vicinity of the house were expanded in 2007 to the open area to its south 20 m south west of the *harim* and 10 m north from the rear wall of the more recent Shennai Bey house. Here an area of 6x4 m was investigated over two seasons.

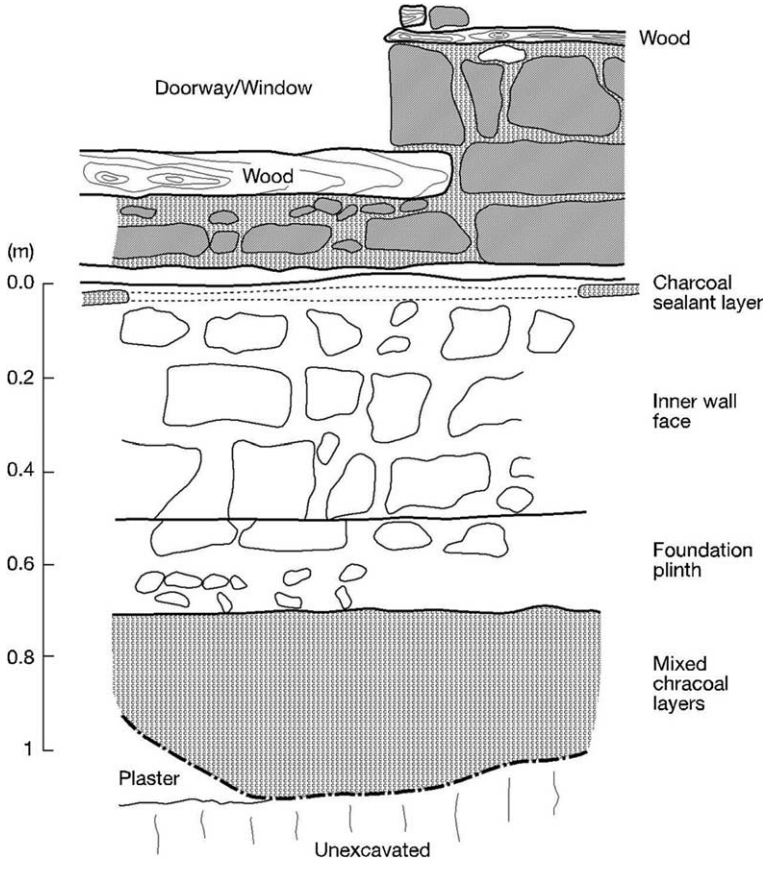

Figure 6. Suakin: section of Test Pit 1 located inside the *diwan* of the Beit el Basha.

It quickly became apparent that much of the area had been disturbed by a series of mid to late nineteenth-century refuse pits that were up to 1.5 m deep in places. A stone-lined nineteenth-century cistern, 1.5 m wide at its base and over 3 m deep, was also exposed in the southeastern corner of the trench. Fortunately, intact stratigraphy survived in the limited spaces between the pits and in the medieval levels that remained beneath them (Figure 7). From these levels it was possible to ascertain the chronological sequence of cultural activity at the site and to acquire a degree of information about the nature of social and economic activity undertaken in this area of the town.

Given the depth of deposits, the extent of disturbance in the upper levels and time scale limitations the trench was partially excavated. Deposits of 3.1 m in depth were found to be contained in this area that is the highest point on the island (Figure 7). The water table was reached at the base of the trench, but a number of physical processes at play here make the identification of this level difficult. First is the fact that sea level is constantly changing and may have been lower during the medieval period. Secondly, given the geological structure of the area subsidence is also an issue, so ascertaining true sea level at any one phase during the medieval period is difficult. Radiocarbon dates from charcoal associated with earthenware ceramics and

Table 1. Radiocarbon results from Suakin (calibrated using Intcal 98 (no. 1) and Intcal09.14c (2&3) Reimer *et al.* 2009).

No.	Site Context and material	Laboratory number	Fractionation AMS $\partial^{13}C$	Uncalibrated radiocarbon age BP	2-sigma range of calibrated date
1	Foundation deposit; charcoal	Beta-202654	−24.9	390 ± 40	1430–1630 cal. AD
2	Settlement deposit; charcoal	UBA-13509	−24.6	956 ± 20	1027–1154 cal. AD
3	Settlement deposit; charcoal	UBA-13508	−28.7	895 ± 19	1050–1212 cal. AD

occupation deposits at depths of 2.8 m and 2.3 m respectively at the base of the trench produced dates within the range of 1027–1212 cal. AD (Table 1). No readily identifiable structural evidence was found, but the ceramics and burnt deposits would suggest a domestic area. While the excavation trench narrowed to a small test pit at this level, the stratigraphy is not indicative of a dense urban space, but points instead to the existence of a small eleventh-century coastal settlement. The geomorphology is also suggestive of possible periodic inundation or flooding given the low-lying nature of the settlement. There is a notable intensification of cultural activity in the thirteenth century, quantified by an increase in the density of ceramics and the increasing complexity of the stratigraphy (Figure 7). Locally produced earthenwares dominated the assemblage with imported glazed ceramics, mostly Sassanian wares, accounting for just under 12% of the total sherd count. This increase in the quantity of ceramics from these levels is stark where sherd recovery averaged at 12.5 sherds per square metre compared to three sherds per square metre in the lower tenth-century levels. This reflects the increasing importance of the port as illustrated in the contemporary historical sources. A detailed analysis of the ceramics is currently being undertaken and will be published separately (Smith in prep.).

By the fifteenth century this area of the settlement was marked by dense human activity, mostly concerned with food preparation. Very large quantities of bone, dominated by goat as well as fish, were recovered from these contexts, as well as

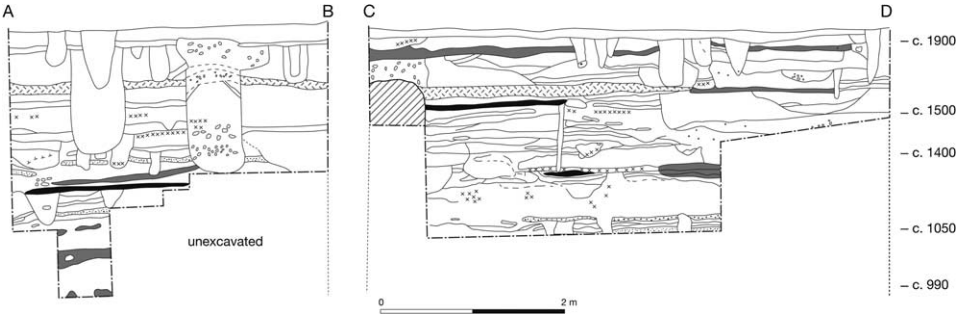

Figure 7. Suakin, Beit el Basha: two sections of Trench 1, with the north-facing section to the left and south-facing section to the right.

mollusc shell. In the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century levels 10 kg of animal bone were recovered, but this decreased to just over 4 kg in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century levels. This notable decrease was also evident in the earliest levels, where recovery rates dropped significantly further. Additionally, a very high density of cooking wares, a large number of which had been subject to burning, were recovered from the fourteenth- to sixteenth-century deposits. These ceramics were associated with a number of pits used for cooking, a series of hearths and a wide assortment of artefacts associated with food preparation, including fragments of eight separate querns or grinding stones, each with a concave surface: a possible ninth example showed evidence of use in pounding at one end (Figure 8). Five of these grinding stones were of granite. Seventeen rubbing stones of varying sizes and stone type were also recovered; three showed clear indications of burning and may have been used as pot boilers or in other forms of cooking. Four polished sharpening or hone stones were also found in association with this range of stone domestic material. A succession of structural features, including post and stake holes, was present in each of the pre-sixteenth century medieval layers (Figure 9). No definitive patterning could be ascertained for any of these *in situ* groups of posts because of the limited

Figure 8. Suakin: fragment of a quern stone recovered from a fifteenth-century context in Trench 1 of the Beit el Basha excavation.

Figure 9. Suakin: plan of the late fifteenth-century level in Trench 1 of the Beit el Basha excavation.

nature of the trench and the stratigraphic disturbance caused by the intrusion of the later refuse pits that penetrated the fifteenth-century levels but did not impact on the earlier deposits. They appear, however, to have been associated with wooden or post-and-wattle structures of either a domestic or temporary structural nature. Given the extent of material culture found at these levels, it is unlikely that they were associated with a single house or home, but instead they probably formed part of a large community food preparation or food sale area. One interpretation is that this area was positioned within a *souk* or similar market place.

In the early part of the sixteenth century activity becomes less intensive in the area and a masonry structure appears for the first time in the stratigraphy. While this trench cannot be taken as the definitive statement on cultural activity across the town, it is representative of the general sequencing of a settlement and building presence on the island. It is interesting to note, then, that both this trench and the test pit in the interior of the house clearly show the introduction of masonry construction in the opening decades of the sixteenth century. One could make the connection between the formal arrival of the Ottoman presence in the area in the second decade of the century as the stimulus for masonry construction following decades of independence and Funj presence in the port. Little can be said about this masonry feature, other than it currently stands three courses high, was of coral stone

construction and was bonded with a sandy mortar. It may be the basal level of a rear wall of a building or boundary feature. Either way, it was subsequently levelled, probably in the eighteenth century, when a hard compacted 'yard' surface was laid over this section of the trench. The sixteenth century levels also contained a notable increase in imported glazed ceramics accounting for 31% of the total assemblage (Figure 10).

Discussion

These excavations, while limited in scale, provide important information on the chronological development of settlement on the island town of Suakin. To date, no evidence of Roman-period activity has been identified and the earliest occupation of the island appears to have taken place in the early part of the eleventh century. There have, however, been considerable changes in the surrounding environment throughout the last two millennia and earlier or more intensive settlement evidence may yet be found in the coastal area around the current island. The archaeological deposits over the following centuries indicate intensifying activity on the island, and by the fourteenth century a central food preparation area had been established at this location. This was the central part of the island and also its central place. It is unsurprising, then, that it was occupied by large-scale production of foodstuffs and processing of grains as the needs of an expanding port would have been extensive. In particular, the constant stream of visiting ship's crews, merchants and pilgrims would have necessitated widespread demand for foodstuffs.

With the arrival of the Ottomans in the early part of the sixteenth century the type of activity conducted in this area shifted from being a communal accessible area to a more exclusive and elitist one. Masonry construction is noted early in the century, while the Beit el Basha itself was constructed in the middle part of the sixteenth century leading to the widespread shift to the use of stone in house building. This was likely to have been the central administrative building of the Ottoman élite erected in the central part of the island. Suakin's urban plan now developed along typical Islamic lines with a central area built around mosques and buildings of the mercantile and administrative elite. Suakin was then subject to a multitude of cultural influences. The main focus of its activities was on the island, where an exclusive mercantile space emerged with occupants and visitors drawn from across the Red Sea region and further afield (Mallinson *et al.* 2009). This also became the centre for external colonial and administrative activity, with the Funj, the Ottomans and the British all in turn developing the island to conform to their own notions of urban development (Rhodes 2011). A series of administrative buildings was established across the island, while a number of forts and other military structures were built on the mainland for protection. The island was thus almost always a separate place, removed in both a physical and metaphorical sense from the mainland, an élite space primarily involved in the facilitation of economic flows and subject to the introduction of a myriad of commodities and identities. From here Suakin served as a connector between inland caravan routes and ports on the eastern shore of the Red Sea, as well as further afield in the Indian Ocean. It facilitated both the *Hajj* routes to Jeddah and Christian pilgrimage routes northwards towards Jerusalem, as well as allowing the continual movement of trade items throughout the broader region. We anticipate that further archaeological

Figure 10. Suakin: ceramics from the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century horizons in Trench 1 of the Beit el Basha excavation.

fieldwork and analysis will provide still more detailed insights into Suakin's role in these processes.

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