

# From Gujarat to the Red Sea

## The connectivity of the port of Suakin, Sudan, within the western Indian Ocean

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This paper focuses on historical, ethnographic and archaeological evidence for the links between the Sudanese port of Suakin and South Asia, as part of the Red Sea/Indian Ocean trade, during the overall period later 13th to early 20th century AD. The main locations on Suakin island town yielding relevant material are briefly described. The archaeological evidence indicates pottery comparable with examples of glazed and unglazed burnished wares from India. Consideration is given to the means of trade, particularly the relation between pilgrimage and trade. Interviews indicate the origins of the community of Indian traders at Suakin, in the later 19th century/early 20th century, and show the range of items traded, many of which are invisible archaeologically under the preservation conditions at the site. Continuities in the sea trade until the present day are noted. It is concluded that a combination of archaeological, historical and ethnographic evidence enables hypotheses as to the main routes and methods of trade to be put forward.

*Cet article présente les témoignages historiques, ethnographiques et archéologiques attestant les liens entre le port soudanais de Suakin et l'Asie du Sud, dans le cadre du commerce entre la mer Rouge et l'océan Indien, pour la période allant de la fin du XIII<sup>e</sup> au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle ap. J.-C. Les principaux secteurs de la ville insulaire de Suakin ayant fourni des informations pertinentes sont brièvement décrits. Les traces archéologiques comprennent de la céramique comparable à des productions glaçurées et non glaçurées provenant d'Inde. Une attention particulière est accordée aux modalités du commerce, notamment à la relation entre pèlerinage et commerce. Les entretiens révèlent les origines indiennes de la communauté de commerçants à Suakin vers la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et le début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, ainsi que la diversité des objets échangés, dont beaucoup sont périssables et archéologiquement invisibles dans les conditions de préservation du site. On note la continuité du commerce maritime jusqu'à nos jours. En conclusion, la combinaison des témoignages archéologiques, historiques et ethnographiques permet d'avancer des hypothèses quant aux principales routes et aux modalités du commerce.*

## Introduction

The current study will concentrate on historical, ethnographic and archaeological evidence for contacts between the port of Suakin, in Sudan, with South Asia, during the period from the later 13th to early 20th century. The evidence for this link can be divided, chronologically, into two main periods: 13th to early 19th century, and then 19th to early 20th century. In the former period, the evidence is mainly historical and archaeological, whereas in the latter period it is mainly historical and ethnographic.

The reason for focusing on Suakin is that it was significant, historically and economically, as the sole major port for Sudan throughout the later medieval and early modern periods. It was important for connections with trade from the African hinterland through to the Indian Ocean and East Asia. Since the beginning of the 15th century, Suakin became the predominant port on the African Red Sea coast. In addition, after the spread of Islam in Central and West Africa, Suakin became a principal port for pilgrims travelling to Mecca. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Suakin was used as a port for the first time then. Oral mythology takes Suakin back to the time of King Solomon. The documented history of Suakin goes back to 8th century AD, but scholars state that Suakin's locale is one of the oldest to serve as a port on the Red Sea.<sup>1</sup> As early as the second millennium BC, there was a mention of Suakin being used as a port, and the Red Sea has since been one of the main trading routes between the Mediterranean Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Moreover, Suakin has been a historical bridge between Africa, Arabia, Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe.<sup>2</sup> Suakin was one of the longest-serving ports, and made a substantial contribution in the world of international trade and commercial exchange.

Suakin's rich intangible heritage is expressed through religious festivals, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, practices, and a way of life, traditional knowledge, skills, crafts, and so forth that is inseparable from its tangible heritage. The site has been on the UNESCO tentative list since 1994. The architecture and planning were characteristic of Islamic towns. Suakin endured intact, occupied by multigenerational families and operating as a fully functioning port up until the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium administration opted to move the port to present-day Port Sudan at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Suakin Project is an undertaking of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of Sudan (NCAM) that began in 2002. The major objectives of the Project have been as follows:

1. historical study, mainly through secondary or tertiary sources in English and Arabic;
2. architectural study of significant structures and their building history;
3. archaeological investigation, particularly of pre-Ottoman periods;
4. underwater archaeological investigation of the island town perimeter and the bay;
5. collection of ethnographic histories relating to Suakin;
6. restoration of historically and architecturally significant buildings.

This paper is derived from work on the first, third and fifth of these objectives. It is based mainly on fieldwork undertaken between 2006 and 2010, with historical research undertaken to the present.

## Trade links according to historical and ethnographic evidence

### Historical accounts of trade links between Suakin and South Asia

This brief account will be confined to historical accounts in English (or English translation) between the mid 16th century and the mid 19th century, before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 altered the conditions of shipping and trade through the Red Sea. Among the accounts most readily available from

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1. Al Shamiy 1961; Dirar 1981.

2. Dirar 1981; Abu Aisha 2002.

this period, there are only three that specifically mention India or “the Indies”. The Portuguese admiral, de Castro, ca 1541 mentions trade with “both peninsulas of the Indies”, primarily in gold and ivory.<sup>3</sup> Ovington, in the 1690s, says trade with India was carried on also in gold and ivory, with the addition of coffee.<sup>4</sup> Poncet, at the beginning of the 18th century, is not so specific, only stating trade was with “the East”, and included pearls and tortoises, possibly for tortoiseshell.<sup>5</sup> The next mention of India comes with Bruce in the late 1760s to 1770s, who mentions trade with India and China, and a wider range of goods, including gold, ivory, gum arabic, cassia, myrrh, frankincense, pearls, tortoise shell and rhinoceros’ horn.<sup>6</sup> The subsequent accounts, of Valentia in 1805, Seetzen in 1808, Burckhardt from 1814, Parkyns in 1851 and Baker from 1861, either are unspecific about the areas with which trade was carried out, only mentioning the main goods involved or mention other areas, such as Arabia or Egypt, but not India.<sup>7</sup>

Other accounts, such as that by the Portuguese Jesuit Lobo, show the international nature of the trade route whilst indicating that it was vulnerable to being dependent on the mainland for basic sustenance, and access to the African trade routes.<sup>8</sup> The Ottoman control of the port, during the period from the early 16th to mid 19th century was also dependent as much on local support as Egyptian/Turkish power, the garrison on more than one occasion being starved out following local disagreements.

In this context the trade fleets provided the only alternative sustenance and the Indian control of this fleet explains the significance of the evidence of trade found archaeologically at Suakin. After 1814, the Indian Administration was nominally in control of the Gulf trade routes after the suppression of piracy along the sea routes. This explains the increased significance of Indian traders after this time as this also ensured their protection as traders in these ports.

## Indian merchants at Suakin in the 19th/early 20th centuries

One difficulty in the present study is that, so far, it has not been possible to identify archaeologically the material traded to and from South Asia that is mentioned in the historical sources, as most items are organic in nature, and the environment at Suakin is not conducive to good organic preservation because of climatic and soil conditions. It is because of this deficiency in the archaeological record that ethnographic information has been included in the present study.

Ethnographic research complements archaeological, historical and archival data. Ethnographic investigation conducted in Suakin and other towns supports the findings of the archaeological and historical research described below. All the stories recounted are still within the living memory and are passed on from one generation to the next.

In the past, research focused primarily on Eurasian, Indian, Chinese, the Gulf region, and Southeast Asian trade and contacts with the Indian Ocean,<sup>9</sup> whereas trade relations between Africa and India were overlooked or given less attention. It is only recently that there has been more research on the African connections with India.<sup>10</sup>

It is relevant to this research to show the continuity of trade between the Sudanese Red Sea coast and the Indian Ocean from ancient times to the present. Trade with the Indian Ocean started as early as the

3. Bloss 1936, p. 290; Kennedy Cooke 1933, pp. 152-153.

4. Foster 1949, p. 176.

5. Foster 1949, pp. 107, 154.

6. Bloss 1936, pp. 292-293.

7. Bloss 1936, pp. 295-299; Hinkel 1992, p. 218.

8. Costa, Beckingham 1984.

9. Haaland 2014.

10. For example, Ahmed 1967; Dirar 1981; Frank et al. 1993; Abu Aisha 2002; Haaland 2014.

Meroitic Kingdom. It has been well established that the Kingdom of Meroë traded with India through ports on the Red Sea.<sup>11</sup> However, it is not known which port on the Red Sea Meroë used (*fig. 1*).<sup>12</sup> Muslim geographers and historians were the first to report the enormous impact of the Crusaders' presence on the Red Sea and the closure of the *hajj* route through Sinai. Similarly, Newbold states that, during the Crusades, the *hajj* route via Sinai was impassable for pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land. He suggests that Muslim pilgrims moved to Aydab and then Suakin, emphasising that Indian traders diverted to Suakin before the destruction of Aydab by the Mamluks in 1429.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Suakin was involved in trade to all Christian kingdoms along the river Nile, and as a route to Jerusalem by riverine Christians as well as Aksumite Christians. Also, it was favoured by tax evaders. Merchants paid high taxes at the port of Aydab; Suakin was a small harbour and no tax was levied.<sup>14</sup> Trade flourished and increased with India during the Funj sultanate.<sup>15</sup>

Ahmed's research on caravan and trade routes found that Indians traded with Sudanese Red Sea ports from earlier times, but only a few resided in Suakin.<sup>16</sup> They were agents for Indian firms who lived in Suakin to manage trade in Sudan. From the 1880s, a large number of Indian merchants, mainly Banyans, settled in Suakin, and trade with India increased. One of Taha's interviewees narrated to her that "Most of the Indian community in Suakin were from Gujarat. My family were from (Vanih) Bonian in Arabic". Taha's Suakini interviewees related to her that Indians in Suakin are referred to as "Banyan" or "Bonian", which confirms Ahmed's findings above. The India-Sudan relations and embassies of Sudan and India (trade relation office based at the India embassy in Khartoum) state that the first Indian

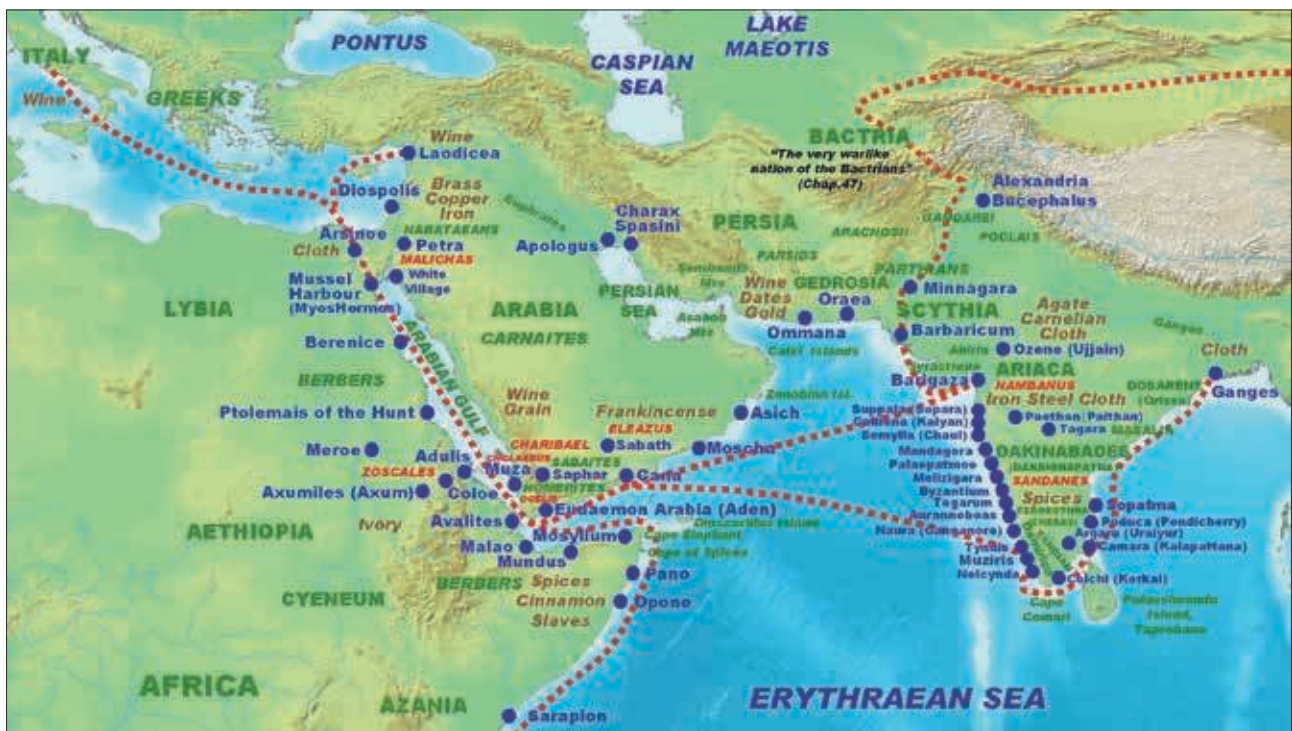


Fig. 1 – Map of Indo-Roman trade, showing main sea routes from South Asia into the Red Sea (Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Roman\\_trade.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Roman_trade.jpg)).

11. Arkell 1951; Haaland 2014.
12. Haaland 2014; Manzo 2017; Taha, this volume.
13. Newbold 1945; Shaggier 2007; Paul 2012; Taha 2013.
14. Dirar 1981; Shaggier 2007; Taha 2013.
15. Taha, this volume.
16. Ahmed 1967.

Gujarati trader “Luvchand Amarchand Shah” who imported goods from India, was believed to have moved to Sudan from Aden in the early 1860s according to the Indian community accounts. Further, they confirm that Mahatma Gandhi visited Port Sudan on his route to England by boat in 1935; he was given a warm reception by the Indian community. Another Indian statesman who was cordially received by the Indian community in Port Sudan was Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who stopped in Port Sudan on his way to Britain in 1938. Chhotalal Samji Virani hosted an event in honour of Mahatma Gandhi at his home (MEA 2017; Embassy of India 2018; Embassy of the Republic of Sudan 2019).

Europe, and in particular England, preferred to send their cargo directly to Suakin rather than thorough Alexandria. Therefore, by 1883, Suakin totally replaced Egypt, Aden and Jeddah as the main markets for gum arabic, ivory and senna. Imports included silk, sandalwood, perfumes, fabric, cloth, rice and spices. Exports included gum arabic, ivory, senna and sea salt from Ras Rawiyha. The salt produced was sent to India and Jeddah, not to the interior (*tab. 1*).<sup>17</sup>

Countries	1883	1886	1887	1888
	£ Sterling	£ Sterling	£ Sterling	£ Sterling
England	84,855	2,300	1,423	–
Egypt and Turkey	28,587	1,400	2,193	570
India via Aden	521	600	2,156	875
Other countries	13,300	1,000	5,932	3,313
Raftieh	–	4,000	–	–

Tab. 1 – Table of exports 1883-1888 (Ahmed 1967).

Interviewees related that the Indian community started to settle in Suakin in 1821.<sup>18</sup> They opened perfume shops and were trading in silk, sandalwood, and perfume oil. When the port was moved to present day Port Sudan at the beginning of the 20th century, the Indian community was one of those who fought hard to keep Suakin as an operational port. Their ships continued to use Suakin until 1924.<sup>19</sup> They said that they loved living in Suakin and resisted moving to Port Sudan despite British encouragement. They were the last merchants to move from Suakin and only after the closure of the bank, telegraph and school in Suakin. They moved to Port Sudan, Kassala, Khartoum and other big cities in Sudan. They still trade in the same family business and the same products:

My grandfather moved to Port Sudan after the closure of the bank. The British asked the Indian community in Suakin to move, they gave all possible assistance and promised to give them a neighbourhood only for their community. The community refused; they were happy in Suakin. Then the British closed the telegraph, all communication depended on the telegraph company, then they closed the bank. I believe the motive behind this was to force the merchants to move to Port Sudan (male interviewee, in Port Sudan, in his 80s).

All merchants in Suakin, including Indians did not want to move. They have their families, extended families, their business, they know the place, they do not want to move to a new place they are not familiar with, they do not know the weather, the business conditions, the market, if the trade will succeed if they move... people were worried, insecure... (male interviewee, in Khartoum, in his 80s).

Merchants left their families, their properties, children at first. It was so difficult to travel, the road was not paved, transport by lorries only, it used to take 2-3 hours and was very hard and uncomfortable. The road was rough, you need to be tough to be able to travel (male interviewee, in Khartoum, in his 70s).

There was a large community in Suakin. Harksiras Khosal was the last Indian to leave Suakin (male interviewee, in Khartoum, in his 70s).

17. Ahmed 1967; Taha unpublished interviews with the Indian community 2007, 2008-2009.

18. Taha unpublished interviews with the Indian community 2007, 2008-2009.

19. Taha interviews 2008-2009 with the Indian community in Suakin and other cities in Sudan.

Moving from Suakin; my parents moved in 1918, my cousins moved in 1928. My family worked in trade, they used to sell fabrics. The Indian community are some of the last merchants to move from Suakin (male interviewee, in Khartoum, in his 80s).

The Indian shops were at the entrance of the island, next to the gate in Suakin on the left and the right-hand side, there were shops. Some Indians had shops in al Gyef, but lived on the island (male interviewee, in Port Sudan, in his 80s).

Another interviewee related that:

My grandfather came from India in 1870 to Suakin when he was only 14 years old. I know the family's history from my father. The community was around 400 Indians. My grandfather moved to Port Sudan in 1915 (male interviewee, in Khartoum, in his 80s).

Interviewees also recounted that:

The Indian community in Suakin did not send their children to study at the Amiriy school in Suakin. Mainly, because of religion and language, although, they can speak Arabic, but they did not read or write it, that is why they cannot join the school. The children were sent to India for their education. They used to travel by Sambooks, the journey used to take between 25-30 days (male interviewee, in Port Sudan, in his 80s).

The perfume shops at the entrance of the island (*fig. 2*) and the fragrance people used to smell when entering the island are still within the living memory and were recalled by a number of interviewees, some from personal experience, the young from stories told to them by families as revealed in the extracts below:

My father used to tell us about the perfume shops. He said at the entrance of the island there used to be perfume shops, you can smell the scent of the perfumes when you are entering the gate... (male interviewee, in Suakin, in his 40s).

Suakin was at its zenith of civilisation, it was a gem, and we had sandalwood and perfume from India, we were the first to wear silk in Sudan (female interviewee, in Port Sudan, in her 80s).

Suakin was at the pinnacle of civilisation, we had sandalwood, perfumes and silk from India, the rest of Sudan was nothing to compare with Suakin. We had Persian rugs and real china; we had all types of fruits you cannot find even now... Such a lavishness (female interviewee, in Port Sudan, in her 80s).



Fig. 2 – View of houses inside Gate of Suakin, prior to the 1920s (reproduced by permission of Durham University Library and Collections, SAD 744/1/5).

All of the above extracts confirm, complement and validate the existing archaeological and historical data regarding the links between Suakin and South Asia in terms of trade. In addition to trade, historical records show the importance of Suakin in another major institution linking the port with the western Indian Ocean, that of pilgrimage, also interlinked with trade.

## Pilgrimage and trade

Suakin quickly developed a collateral role directly associated with its inherent far-flung commercial and political relations, the physical act of pilgrimage (*fig. 3*). It is ideally situated as a central “hub” for pilgrims of the three major faiths – Islam, Christianity and (presumably) Judaism – who came from both farther west and south in Africa, and the Indian Ocean world. Pilgrimage traffic from as far as China and southern Africa came almost entirely by ship, often aboard trading ships, and from inland sub-Saharan Africa by land. The main destinations, of course, would be Mecca and Jerusalem, but pilgrims would also visit other sites holy to their faith along the way. Although the *hujjāj*<sup>20</sup> destined for Mecca are better recorded, the numbers and experiences of “eastern Christian” pilgrims who journeyed to Jerusalem and other holy places both local and international are little known; Jewish pilgrims from these regions are virtually unrecorded.



Fig. 3 – *Hujjāj* at Suakin, early 20th century (reproduced by permission of Durham University Library and Collections, SAD 12/6/1).

Sailing conditions and commercial itineraries both contributed to Indian Ocean ships docking at the African as well as Arabian coastal ports of the Red Sea. Contemporary sources such as Ibn Saïd al-Andalusi indicate that the very large Kārimī ships from India frequented Suakin by the 13th century and “some, but not many” travelled as far east as Cathay.<sup>21</sup> Indian *hujjāj* may have performed the *hajj* as early as the mid 7th century,<sup>22</sup> and would have travelled aboard trading ships that stopped at various ports along the way. Pilgrim passage from India varied according to the seasons and centuries, in the autumn and winter months transferring from the Indian Ocean ships to smaller vessels at Aden, some then following the “Eastern Boundary Current” on the African coast to about Suakin, from where the pilgrims would continue their journey.<sup>23</sup> During the spring and summer months, the larger ships could continue farther up the African coast to Egypt or, alternatively, the pilgrims could travel by land, eventually reaching Jerusalem. At Suakin and Aydab, eastern pilgrims would have also encountered overland African pilgrims from west and south, before continuing to Cairo and Jerusalem;<sup>24</sup> Suakin was the obvious point of departure for *hujjāj* crossing to Jeddah for Mecca.

20. *Hujjāj*: pilgrims who undertake the main pilgrimage to Mecca.

21. Yūsuf 1967, p. 84; Abu-Lughod 1989, p. 229.

22. Sayeed 2017, p. 1.

23. Menezes 2018; Irwin 2012, pp. 167-169; Facey 2013, pp. 103 (map), 106, 107, 110; Abu-Lughod 1989, pp. 241-242.

24. Phillips 2020, p. 9.

Other trader ships would travel along the Arabian coast or down the middle of the Red Sea, also carrying pilgrims. The situation changed with the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, and political and technological developments from then on. Peacock suggests “eastern Christian” pilgrimage traffic, by sea through the Gulf of Aden from China, Southeast Asia, India, the Persian Gulf, Socotra and eastern Africa, and from Ethiopia, may have been more important for Suakin than Muslim pilgrimage, at least in the 15th through early 16th centuries.<sup>25</sup> These eastern pilgrims, like African pilgrims travelling overland, are virtually unique in bridging the zonal borders of the commercial trading network that linked Suakin with India and the Indian Ocean world, as well as West Africa, Ethiopia, Egypt and the Swahili coast.

Blunt records, amongst others, some 6,000 Persians, 15,000 Indians, 12,000 Malays and 100 Chinese *hujjāj* travelling by sea to Mecca for the most holy day of Arafat in 1880,<sup>26</sup> whilst Hornaday travelled with 111 deck-class *hujjāj* returning to Bombay in 1877.<sup>27</sup> Whether these ships anchored at Suakin is not indicated, but other nationalities certainly travelled via the port. Suakin remains a major *hajj* port today, with its port facilities recently expanded to accommodate the steadily growing traffic. Hence, Suakin was a point of departure for pilgrims from as recently as the early 20th century to as early as the medieval period, thus bridging between the two periods distinguished above, in terms of the main sources of data available. The archaeological evidence will be considered next.

## Archaeological evidence for trade links with South Asia

During the excavations and surface survey on the island town of Suakin, several locations have been excavated, covering examples of commercial, domestic and religious buildings (*fig. 4*). Evidence has been recovered for contacts with areas ranging from the countries also bordering the Red Sea, including the Arabian Peninsula, through to South Asia and East and Southeast Asia.<sup>28</sup>

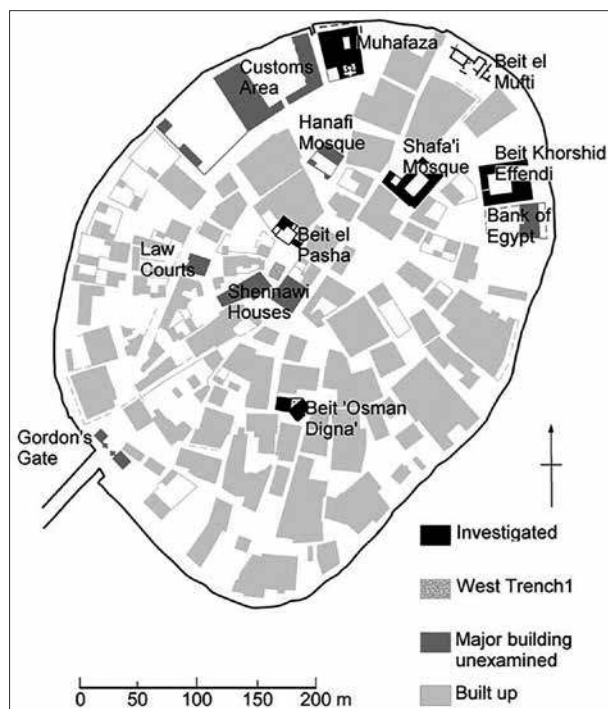


Fig. 4 – Suakin town island; sites investigated, 2006-2013 (redrawn from Greenlaw 1995).

25. Peacock 2012, pp. 31-32.

26. Blunt 1882, p. 206, fig. 160.

27. Hornaday 1901, pp. 18-19.

28. Smith et al. 2012; Smith et al. 2018.



## The relevant excavated sites within the town

### Beit el Basha and West Trench 1

The Beit el Basha<sup>29</sup> is located near the centre of the island. It was initially investigated in 2004 and provided the first evidence of a significant depth of stratigraphy under the Ottoman-period buildings.<sup>30</sup> The house has two courtyards, and rooms including *dihlis*<sup>31</sup> and *diwan*.<sup>32</sup> Trenches and soundings, in courtyards and in some rooms, provided the first evidence found for the existence of stone-built structures predating those until recently standing, and showed the existence of a depth of stratigraphy in the centre of the island. Subsequent area excavations to the southwest of the Beit el Basha, in 2006 and 2007 (designated West Trench 1), revealed 3.1 m depth of stratigraphy. This included a 19th century cistern and much 18th-19th century pitting (*fig. 5*), together with earlier postholes from timber, probably round, structures. Stratigraphy indicated that this building tradition was not simply replaced by that of stone building, but that the two types of structures were both present for a period in the 16th century, at least. Overall, occupation here extended to the early 11th or late 10th century AD, as indicated by radiocarbon dating. This forms one of most significant discoveries of the archaeological work, since this is likely to be currently the longest largely continuous sequence so far discovered along the Sudanese Red Sea coast.<sup>33</sup> Below the early 16th century levels, there was a sequence of layers with cooking pits, grindstones and cooking vessel sherds, including “Black Burnished Wares” (BBW) which indicated that this area had been an open-cooking area throughout the medieval era, possibly related to the adjacent souk.



Fig. 5 – West Trench 1, near Beit el Basha, showing cistern and pitting (C. Breen).

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- 29. “Beit el Basha”: the house of the pasha.
  - 30. Breen et al. 2011, p. 211.
  - 31. *Dihlis*: entrance hall.
  - 32. *Diwan*: main reception room.
  - 33. Breen et al. 2011, pp. 205-220.

## Beit Osman Digna and environs

This is situated in the southwest quadrant of the island town. It appears to be sited on a boundary between the original coral atoll, and the later artificial build-up around the perimeter. The site comprised a house, associated with the local Mahdist leader Osman Digna, a small triangular courtyard, and a small mosque. In the post-medieval period, two structures were built, and subsequently levelled for the construction of the mosque by the 19th century. A trench across the street in front of the house, excavated to ca 2.2 m depth (fig. 6) exhibited five phases of activity.<sup>34</sup>



Fig. 6 – Trench across northern end of “Market Street”, adjacent to Beit Osman Digna (L. Smith).

## Beit Khorshid Effendi

This was the first building investigated in the project, being a prime candidate for restoration due to its historical significance and since its *diwan* walls survived to roof level on one side, with elaborately decorated plasterwork in the *diwan*. Work in 2002-2010 concentrated on the *diwan*, the main block of the house and the rear courtyard, revealing a more detailed plan than that published in the best-known account of the architecture of the town by Greenlaw,<sup>35</sup> and a developmental history of the structure can now be proposed.<sup>36</sup> For example, several small rooms, and a *hamam*<sup>37</sup> were discovered, differing from Greenlaw’s published plan. This site is remarkable for the remains of wooden structures surviving, especially timber from the main *roshan*,<sup>38</sup> which collapsed outwards with the fall of the upper portions of the front wall. *Rawashin* were formerly a significant feature of Suakini architecture, sometimes being quite elaborate.<sup>39</sup> Test trenches in the Beit Khorshid Effendi forecourt were opened in 2012 and 2013 revealing two structures preceding the Beit Khorshid Effendi.<sup>40</sup> The earlier survived only as a

34. Smith et al. 2012, pp. 178-179.

35. Greenlaw 1995.

36. Phillips 2012, pp. 189-198.

37. *Hamam*: bathroom.

38. *Roshan* (plural *rawashin*): projecting window or balcony closed by decorative wooden grilles (Hinkel 1992, p. 73).

39. Mallinson et al. 2009, pp. 477-479.

40. Porter 2013.

short stretch of coral-built wall. The long, relatively narrow, rooms of the second structure indicate it may have been a magazine for storing goods offloaded from ships anchored at the perimeter of the island (*fig. 7*); Neither produced any dating criteria but, probably, when building or extending the Beit Khorshid Effendi, the structure was demolished to its lowest course, the rooms infilled and the blocks used to raise the area near the shoreline to a similar level. Later activity comprised digging small pits and a slightly irregular ditch, and possibly burning fires.



Fig. 7 – Forecourt area of Beit Khorshid Effendi, showing narrow rooms of preexisting structure and blocks reused for leveling foreshore (L. Smith).

## Ceramic wares indicating links with South Asia and western Indian Ocean

This section will concentrate, in terms of the material culture obtained archaeologically, on pottery currently considered to have originated in South Asia. Two types of wares form the major categories of pottery so far identified as likely to be from this region. One type is a black burnished ware in a distinctive fabric and forms; the other is a mottled turquoise to blue glazed ware, usually in the form of bowls with heavy foot-ring bases, and everted rims. These are briefly described below.

### Black Burnished Ware (BBW)

Sherds of probably domestic black burnished wares were recovered from two locations on the island town.<sup>41</sup> Most sherds found to date have degraded surfaces, but enough remains to indicate that they were probably originally black burnished. They comprise mostly rim sherds, characterised by a

41. See Mehta 1979, pp. 42-46; Sankalia, Subbarao, Deo 1958, pp. 153-155.

strongly everted rim, together with some body sherds, with a band of fine ribbing below the rim and often a slight carination at the transition between the upper and lower parts of the body. They comprise mainly closed vessels but also large more open containers (*fig. 8*). These sherds have been recovered from the West Trench 1 near the Beit el Basha, from several contexts where they were associated with charcoal and other ceramics likely to be domestic wares, and from three contexts in the “Market Area” trench adjacent to the Beit Osman Digna.

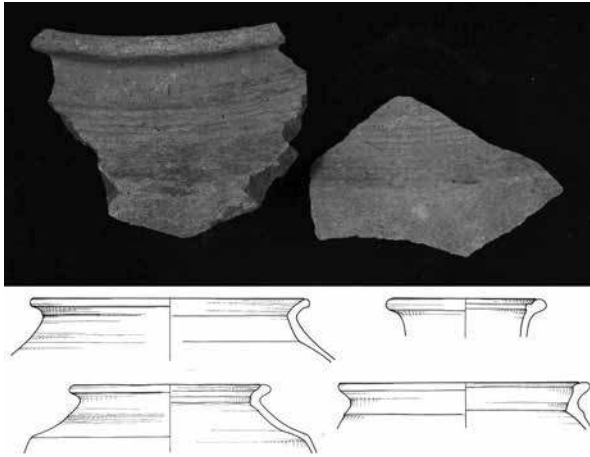


Fig. 8 – “Black Burnished Ware” (BBW) jar sherds, PS07/404 and PS403, similar to wares from India (photo: L. Smith; drawings: W. Schenck).

According to current dating, based on radiocarbon dates and a seriation of handmade pottery by Phillips, the BBW occurs in largely 14th through mid 16th century contexts at Suakin, corresponding to her later Phase A and Phase B.<sup>42</sup> Unlike almost all other imported vessels, these are closed forms and therefore may have been used to transport their contents rather than be imported for their own sake. The most likely origin of these vessels is the Gujarat region of northwest India and dated there within the late early historic/early medieval (4th-13th century) periods.<sup>43</sup>

Such wares also have been recovered around the Strait of Hormuz at Sohar (Oman) and at Ras el-Khaimah, where Kennet labels them “Shiny Black Burnished Ware” (SBBW).<sup>44</sup> They were a long-lived ware at Sohar, but disappeared from the stratigraphy there by the 16th century, somewhat earlier than at Suakin.<sup>45</sup> However, wares with grey fabric and black-burnished exteriors occur at many sites in India of the early historic and medieval periods. Similar vessel and rim forms (although differing in detail) are present, for example, at Sanjan,<sup>46</sup> and in layers of Period IV at Nagara, and Period VI at Nevasa, both dated 14th-18th century AD,<sup>47</sup> hence covering most dated contexts at Suakin from which BBW was recovered. This comparative material supports the idea of a South Asian origin for the BBW at Suakin. Further fabric analysis is required to resolve this question.

### Mottled Turquoise/Blue Glazed Ware (TQW)

Sherds of this ware, including some “overfired” examples, come mainly from the middle levels of West Trench 1 (*fig. 9*) where they are dated by radiocarbon and stratigraphy between the 15th and

42. Phillips 2013.

43. R. Harding (University of Cambridge), pers. comm. 2014, from examination of the sherds.

44. Kennet 2004, p. 66, fig. 40.

45. Kennet 2004, p. 66; Kervran 1996, p. 38.

46. Nanji 2011.

47. Mehta, Shah 1968; Sankalia, Deo, Ansari 1960.

early 16th century,<sup>48</sup> together with further examples from the Beit el Basha House, the Beit Osman Digna and the forecourt of the Beit Khorshid Effendi. They comprise mainly ring-footed bowls with everted rims. These forms are imitations of the prestigious Chinese “Longquan” celadons.<sup>49</sup> They could, therefore, either have been brought as items of trade in themselves, or have been gifts to Suakini merchants.

These very distinctive sherds correlate to Kennet’s “Persian Blue Speckled Ware” which is widespread around the Persian Gulf, South Arabian coast and East African coast.<sup>50</sup> The turquoise/blue glazed sherds at Suakin are also comparable to blue or turquoise glazed sherds found widespread around the Gulf, as at Ras al-Khaimah, on the Iranian coast and on the East African coast, such as Kilwa, Shanga and Fort Jesus, dated 14th to late 17th century.<sup>51</sup> Others have been recovered at Old Cairo (Fustat), all generally dated within the 14th-17th century.<sup>52</sup>

They likely had multiple production centres<sup>53</sup> including the Persian Gulf region, where their distribution is wide and scattered. However, visually similar wares (*fig. 10*), including kiln wasters, have been found in surface collections from a site near Khambhat (Cambay), Lashkarshah, indicating India as one potential source.<sup>54</sup>



Fig. 9 – “Mottled Turquoise/Blue Glazed Ware” (TQW) bowl sherds, PS07/355, /643, /359, /644, /642 and /352, similar visually to sherds from a site near Khambhat (L. Smith).



Fig. 10 – Examples of mottled glazed sherds from Lashkarshah site, Gujarat, India (photo courtesy of E. Lambourn with thanks to R. Nanji).

This extended distribution and possibly multiple production centres make it difficult to ascertain how they arrived at Suakin. Both land and sea routes are possible, even if the vessels at Suakin originated in Persia. The route with the shortest land component moves the wares to the Gulf coast, then possibly via Hormuz along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula past, or via, Aden to Suakin and Jeddah. If the similarities between sherds at Suakin and from Lashkarshah indicate that the vessels came from this area of Gujarat, the main shipment ports during the period to which the contexts of most sherds in these wares date (15th-17th century) could have been Cambay (Khambhat)

48. Breen et al. 2011, p. 218, fig. 10; Phillips 2013.

49. S. Priestman, pers. comm. 2017.

50. Kennet 2004, pp. 42-43; pers. comm. 2014.

51. Chittick 1974; Horton 1996; Kirkman 1974.

52. A. Gascoigne (University of Southampton), pers. comm. 2004.

53. R. Carter (UCL-Qatar), pers. comm. 2012.

54. Bhan 2006; E. Lambourn (De Montfort University), pers. comm. 2019.

initially, probably via its successive outer ports of Gandhar and Gogha. It appears that Cambay had a relatively long decline during the 16th century, with Surat increasing in importance from 1530s onwards, and being important as a transshipment port by 1540s.<sup>55</sup> Surat had become dominant in the trade overall by the first half of the 17th century.<sup>56</sup>

It must be said that the number of sherds indicating connections with South Asia is small in relation to the overall number of diagnostic sherds excavated so far. BBW sherds occur in two contexts at Beit Osman Digna, where they amount to ca 11% and 33% of the sherds in each context; however, diagnostic BBW sherds in these contexts total only nine and three respectively. The largest number of BBW sherds comes from the West Trench 1 excavations, recovered from five contexts. The earliest two, contexts C45 and C46, date to the 15th century; the BBW amounts to 7.8% of the diagnostic sherds in the former (n = 51), and 20% in the latter (but n = 5). In the next most closely dated context (C37), which dates 15th-16th century, the BBW occurs at 3.12% of the diagnostics (n = 32). In context C3 they are present at 2.04%, within a total of 49 diagnostics in the context. This context is broadly dated to 16th to early 19th century, being a relatively recent context susceptible to disturbance (19th century pitting is present); it is likely the BBW sherds were mixed in to this context.

As noted, the TQW have been recovered from all four locations described above. Only one or two sherds of the ware were found in the Beit Osman Digna and the forecourt of Beit Khorshid Effendi. Deposits in the Beit Khorshid Effendi forecourt included material placed to level the ground surface (probably for building at least one phase of the house itself), and so the TQW sherds may have come from elsewhere on the site. The majority of TQW sherds came from the Beit el Basha house and West Trench 1. The sherds of this ware only accounted for 11.1% and 20% of sherds in the contexts from which they came, likely to date from 15th to 17th century, but only 9 and 5 diagnostic sherds came from these contexts in all. TQW from West Trench 1 occurs in small numbers in two early contexts, C48 dating from 15th century and C4 dated to ca 1540s (2.22% and 3.03% respectively). Most sherds come from C37, dating 15th to 16th century, where they amount to 17.2% (n = 87). One other context contained TQW, a pit dug into C4; it is possible these TQW sherds were mixed in from the earlier context C4 while digging the pit. Although they occur in small numbers in the locations excavated so far, these wares are very distinctive, and clearly differentiated from the other types of ceramics recovered. It should also be considered that only a small proportion of the total area of the site has been excavated to date.

## Historical continuity and modern trade in the wider context

Although Suakin itself is now mainly a port for *hajj* and trade with the Arabian Peninsula, commerce with South Asia continues from the same region, as there is Gujarat trade from Badi port to Sharjah and Dubai. The name Badi also has a local connotation, as this was the name given to the Roman port south of Suakin, near to Adobana where Roman remains were recorded in 1930s, and rediscovered by a survey of the Suakin project in 2006.

The names of the modern ships recall those of Roman ships used by the traders who made the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. Casson's list of ancient ships names runs to 300,<sup>57</sup> and in the Roman period they were named after the planets and constellations as standard, like the name of the Badi ship "Beautiful Moon" (*fig. 11*). Suakin is possibly named as "Evangelon Portus" in the *Periplus*, and so the ships and the traders who brought their goods to the Red Sea still maintain the trade along the sea routes described in the mid 1st century AD.

55. Subrahmanyam 2000, pp. 31-32.

56. Fatima 2009-2010, pp. 355-359; R. Harding, pers. comm. 2020.

57. Casson 2014.



Fig. 11 – Badi registered vessels in Sharjah; *Noore Shabir* means “Beautiful Moon” (M. Mallinson).

The populations living on these boats never leave them and move with them on their trade routes with their families. That these populations have never stopped plying this trade route over this long period is not surprising given the long-term stability of the trading locations along the coast that, despite British claims of piracy in the 19th century by the coastal ports, actually provides evidence for the level of protection that this trade route attracted from the coastal ports when Europeans started trying to control it.

The modern lists of port destinations for these small ships of Badi continue around India to Myanmar just as did the original trade of the *Periplus*. The ceramics recovered at Suakin coming from South and even Southeast Asia<sup>58</sup> are evidence for this continuous ancient trade, possibly even carried out by descendants of the same sailors, as the families on these ships never leave the water, a floating archaeological city, rebuilt by each generation following the ancient trade routes.

## Conclusions

The proportion of sherds that can, on present evidence, be provenanced on stylistic grounds to South Asia is insufficiently large within the overall pottery corpus at Suakin to indicate trade in the vessels themselves. The BBW sherds are from vessel forms most likely to have been utilitarian, probably related to food preparation. Their excavation in West Trench 1, interpreted as an open communal cooking area during the later 15th century,<sup>59</sup> supports this and indicates these are unlikely to have been traded items in themselves, although this cannot be entirely excluded. It is possible they were brought either with pilgrims and/or traders from South Asia. The former would have been transitory at Suakin. It remains uncertain whether the latter were seasonal or permanent residents at that time, the historical and ethnographic evidence indicating they only became a fully settled community from the early 19th century onwards. In contrast, the TQW sherds, being imitative of the “Lonquan” celadons, and being open forms, are most likely to have been either bought by merchants as display wares, or given to them as gifts.

58. Smith et al. 2018, p. 641.

59. Breen et al. 2011, pp. 214-216.

For both pilgrimage and trade, the route with the shortest land component moved the wares to the Gulf coast, then possibly via Hormuz along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula to the Red Sea. If the TQW and the BBW are both from the Gujarat region of India, the main shipment ports, especially for the former, could have been Cambay (Khambhat) or its outer ports in the late 15th and early 16th century, followed by Surat from the earlier 17th century. The sea routes most likely to have been followed are those heading firstly towards Hormuz and the Gulf, but then turning southwest along the Arabian coast and in through the Bab al-Mandeb past, or via, Aden to Suakin and Jeddah (fig. 12). An alternative route could have been southwards along the west coast of India, and then across to Raysut and thence along the South Arabian coast to the Red Sea.

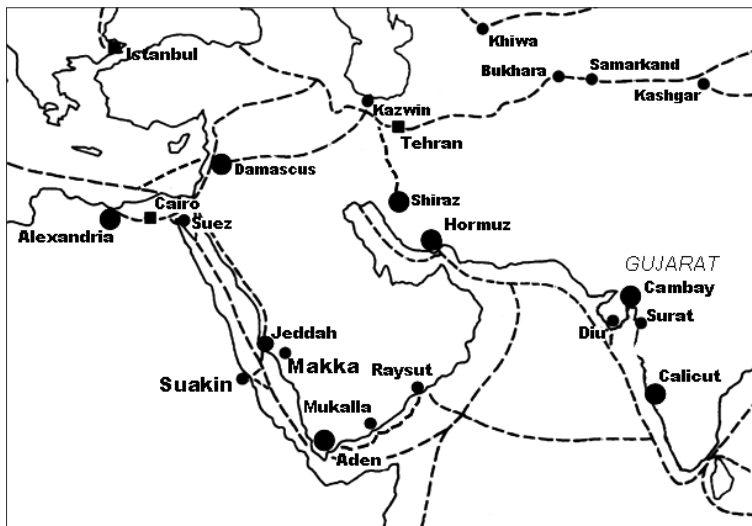


Fig. 12 – Land and sea routes linking South Asia and the Red Sea region (Smith et al. 2018, and references therein).

This study indicates the importance of “attachment”, both to “place” and to a “way of life”. The Indian merchants settled in Suakin, although their ancestors came from India itself, were strongly attached to Suakin and did not wish to leave to transfer their businesses to Port Sudan. The families engaged in the Indian Ocean trade from East Asia who lived for many generations largely on board their vessels also evince a strong attachment to this way of life. In both cases, this attachment forms a social complement to the practical aspects of the trade (including political conditions influencing sources of goods, and safe routes, and climatic influences on sailing conditions). Hence, despite any changes in the latter aspects over time, the social aspects have had a large influence on maintaining the continuity from the past through to the present in the Indian Ocean to Red Sea trade.

The multidisciplinary approach adopted in this paper enables us to gain a better understanding of the people, the land, trade, contacts and connections with the outside world. Likewise, it helps us to appreciate and comprehend the expertise, and aptitude of the people. We argue that Suakin communities were excellent entrepreneurs who skillfully managed both to trade internationally within the Indian Ocean/Red Sea trade network, and to form a major node in related network of pilgrimage from South and extending to East Asia.

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### Abbreviations

*AAR*: *African Archaeological Review* (Cambridge).

*BSOAS*: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (London).

*JESHO*: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (Leiden).

*SNRec*: *Sudan Notes and Records* (Khartoum).

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