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Jonathan Miran

Massawa

OTTOMANS, NA'IBS AND EGYPTIANS IN MASSAWA AND ITS REGION, TO 1885

The ports of Massawa and Hirgigo were conquered by Özdemiş Pasha in 1557 and made one of the *sandjaks* of the Ottoman province of Habesh (Habesh eyaleti). Following unsuccessful attempts to occupy more territories on the Abyssinian plateau the Ottomans abandoned their expansionist ambitions in the region and left but a small garrison of soldiers in Massawa. Consequently, some time around the middle of the seventeenth century, they delegated power to a locally powerful chief from the Hirgigo based Belew family whom they appointed as *na'ib*. The *na'ib's* duty was to maintain order in Massawa's close hinterlands (the Semhar), provide security on the trading routes connecting the inland with the coast, and thus secure the commercial vitality of the ports of Massawa and Hirgigo. Ottoman indirect rule enabled the *na'ibs* to control, in practice, the region between the northern plateau and the sea. However, since the first third of the nineteenth century political and economic change in the Red Sea area led to heightened imperialist struggles between Ottomans, Egyptians and Abyssinians over the control of Massawa and the coast. Rivalries and conflicts culminated in violent clashes between all parties in mid century leading to the removal of formal power from the *na'ibs* and a transition to a more involved and direct mode of Ottoman control. In 1865 Massawa and Sawakin were ceded by the Ottoman Porte to Khedive Ismail Pasha of Egypt (see Smidt, Erythraea, fig. 8). Two decades of Egyptian government were characterised by major urban constructions and developments, public works, the promotion of agricultural schemes and a reorganisation of Massawa's local urban institutions. Since the 1850s, relative economic growth also led to a phenomenon of inward – urban – migration by

entrepreneurs and labourers from both the Arabian Peninsula and Massawa's hinterlands. It was under the governorship of Werner Munzinger (see Smidt, Erythraea, fig. 2) in the 1870s, that the causeways linking the island of Massawa to Tawlud and the mainland were built. Massawa thus found itself more closely linked to its growing suburbs and satellite villages of Hotumlo and Moncullo on the mainland. But political developments in Egypt and the Sudan cut short Egyptian ambitions and the port was taken over by Italy in 1885.

THE FRENCH AND BRITISH PRESENCE IN THE RED SEA AREA (AND MASSAWA)

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, French and British imperialist rivalry over waterway access to India and the Indian Ocean placed the Red Sea area as a strategic area of diplomatic competition between the two powers. But it was only in the beginning of the 1830s, as a result of the commercial revival and the introduction of steamship navigation, that these struggles translated into effective contestations in Red Sea waters. The East India Company grasped quickly the importance of rapid communications with England. Officers of the Indian Navy conducted systematic explorations in the Red Sea and published detailed hydrographic charts of its coasts by 1836. Coal supplying stations for British vessels were established in Suez and Aden and in 1839 the latter was formally occupied by the British. Weakened by the Napoleonic wars, the French navy intervened only in the beginning of the 1840s largely under the influence of Saint Simoniens officers who promoted the piercing of the Suez isthmus. Throughout the decade, the French navy conducted multiple reconnaissance expeditions collecting information on Red Sea naviga-

tion and explored ways by which to establish their own coal stations for future steamship lines between Bourbon and Suez. But French-British rivalry was not limited to the sea, it increasingly involved political and commercial aspirations regarding the lands along and behind the Red Sea coasts. Since the 1830s, a growing number of European explorers, missionaries, commercial entrepreneurs and semi official and official envoys began entering Abyssinia via the port of Massawa. Competing for political influence over the northern Ethiopian provinces, French and British envoys and entrepreneurs courted Ethiopian rulers and chiefs. In 1841 a French consulate was opened in Massawa. The British followed suit and opened their own consulate in 1847. But Egyptian expansionism, European limited interest and their broader international considerations vis à vis the Ottoman empire opened the way for increased Egyptian regional dominance. Under the ambitious Khedive Ismail (r.1863-1879), Egypt took control over the entire African shores of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Only following the deposition of Khedive Ismail in 1879, and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, was the 'Scramble for the Red Sea' and its coasts relaunched.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES IN THE RED SEA, TO CA. 1885

At the opening of the nineteenth century commerce in the Red Sea area was relatively stagnant. However, beginning in the 1820s and 1830s, a combination of economic, political and technological developments led to the revival of commerce and trade and signaled the transformation of the Red Sea basin's geo-strategic position. The general growth of agricultural and industrial production prompted the expansion of world trade and an increased commercialisation of primary materials and commodities. The rise of Muhammad Ali in Egypt, the suppression of the Wahhabi revolt in 1818 in the Hejaz, and the conquest of the Sudan in 1820-21 established Egypt as a major regional power in Northeast Africa and the Red Sea area. Throughout the nineteenth century, Egyptian modernisation schemes and economic development enhanced commercial activities. In technological terms, the introduction of steam navigation to the Red Sea starting in the 1840s enabled to transport commodities in greater quantities and more rapidly. The combination of these factors resulted in competition and rivalry between European, Arab, and Indian trading and maritime networks, even

though Arab and Indian merchants and financiers still dominated most of the commercial arena. From the 1840s, the ports of Jidda and Aden replaced Mokha in economic prominence, serving as regional emporia and international entrepôts. Mokha, which was until the end of the eighteenth century the most active and important port exporting coffee and linking the Red Sea with the wider Indian Ocean and world trade systems, declined as a result of growing competition on the world market. Jidda served the pilgrims on their route to Mecca and in 1850, under the British, Aden became a free port. On the African shores, Sawakin, Massawa, Zayla' and Berbera occupied important positions as outlets for the long distance caravan trade bringing rich African commodities and slaves to the coasts for shipping across the Red Sea and beyond. Exported commodities from African ports consisted mainly of ivory, gold, civet, wax, ostrich feathers, hides and skins, gum, butter, pearls, and honey. Imports to the Red Sea ports from India and Egypt included principally manufactured products such as textiles, silk, copper, glassware, carpets, beads but also wheat and a variety of spices and wheat. Slavery was a principal component and a driving force behind the economy centred on the Red Sea. An estimated 500,000 Sudanese and Ethiopian slaves were exported from Sawakin, Massawa, and the Gulf of Aden ports towards Yemen and Arabia throughout the nineteenth century.

THE SUEZ CANAL, 1869

A concession to build a canal linking the Mediterranean and Red Seas was granted to Ferdinand de Lesseps by the Viceroy of Egypt, Sa'id Pasha, in November 1854. The following year the *Compagnie universelle du canal maritime de Suez*, initially dominated by Frenchmen, was formed. Work began on the canal at the end of April 1859. The total cost of the project, 287 million gold francs, proved to be far higher than the original estimate and ten years were necessary to complete the work instead of six. In the course of the project thousands of Egyptians who were mobilised to the digging as *corvée* labour lost their lives. The Canal is 163 kilometres long and was built with bottom width of 22 meters, a surface width of 58 meters and a depth of 8 meters. On November 17, 1869 the Suez Canal was inaugurated with maximum pomp by Khedive Ismail Pasha with the presence of Empress Eugénie, the Crown Prince of

Abb. 1. Massawa, ehemaliger ägyptischer Regimentspalast mit Umgebung (Foto: MBA 2214.1).



Abb. 2. Massawa, ehemaliger ägyptischer Regimentspalast, über-eck von nahe (Foto: MBA 2214.2.).



Prussia and other European royal members. Four days of lavish ceremonies and festivities in Cairo and in the Canal followed the official opening. Palaces were built in the new cities of Isma'ilia and Port Sa'id, an opera house was opened in Cairo and Verdi was commissioned to write an opera on an ancient Egyptian theme

supplied by Auguste Mariette. But the opening of the Canal had heightened the already strong Anglo French rivalry over the control of vital waterways connecting metropolises with overseas colonies. Seizing the opportunity provided by an Egyptian financial crisis in 1875, Benjamin Disraeli bought for the British government 40



Abb. 3. Massawa, Teilansicht mit Mole und Palast; Blick auf die Insel Taulud (Foto: MBA 212.03).

per cent of the Khedive's shares in the Company, and thus made Britain the largest single shareholder. In 1888 the Suez Canal Convention was signed at Constantinople by all the Great Powers; it provided for 'free and open' navigation 'in time of war as in time of peace' for all vessels. In regards to the Red Sea, it should be noted that contrary to past common held perceptions, the opening of the Suez Canal was not a decisive event in the region but the culmination of economic and navigational developments that already began in the 1840s.

MASSAWA: POPULATION, COMMERCE, RELIGION, AND ARCHITECTURE

Population

As an urban settlement situated on the African coasts of the Red Sea, Massawa has been in close contact with the Eritrean/Ethiopian highlands and the Red Sea and Indian Ocean worlds throughout its history. Since the sixteenth century, it has been occupied by Ottomans, Egyptians, Italians, British and Ethiopians. The town's

past and its relationships with multiple worlds are reflected in the unique commercial, social, cultural, religious and architectural features of the town and its inhabitants. Traditionally, the people of Massawa have been a community of merchants, mediating between commercial partners in Africa and beyond the sea who have traded through them. The Massawans form a plural society composed of elements of disparate origins whose members have intermingled, intermarried and interbred throughout the town's history. Some families trace their origins to various Saho, Afar and Tigre speaking groups of Eritrea. Other inhabitants of Massawa claim origins from abroad, namely the Arabian peninsula, Yemen, Egypt, as well as other countries in the Middle East and South Asia. However, due to their distinct role as a community of intermediaries and cross cultural brokers, the inhabitants of Massawa have formed a closely knit group with a high sense of urban communal identity. In the second half of the twentieth century, Massawa's population has suffered multiple demographic and social shocks and upheavals resulting in the breakdown of communal structures and forced outward migration.



Abb. 4. Massawa, Teilansicht von der Mole her (Foto: MBA 212.04).

Many Massawans left their town and settled in the diaspora, mostly in the Middle East, while many newcomers from the highlands and from Massawa's vicinities came to settle in the port town¹.

Commerce/Economy

Historically, Massawa has been the most important outlet of the long distance trade caravan routes connecting the inland Ethiopian and Sudanese regions with the Red Sea. As a coastal emporium, a wide variety of commodities such as ivory, gold, wax, hides and slaves were exported through Massawa to other Red Sea and Indian Ocean ports. On the other hand, Massawa imported manufactured products such as a variety of textiles, glassware, copper, and beads that were sold and exchanged in inland markets. But Massawa has also been at the centre of a regional economic system, bringing together around the port the Afar, Tigre, Saho and Arabic speaking peoples of the eastern Eritrean lowlands and the Dahlak archipelago. Breeding livestock and cattle, fishing, pearl fishing and some agriculture was practised around Massawa.

Certain products were designed to feed the urban and nomadic populations of the area, others were exported abroad – all found their way to the town's colourful shops and markets. In the town, a long tradition of artisans and craftsmen – mainly goldsmiths and carpenters – has also existed.

Religion

Since its foundation, Massawa has maintained intimate links with the Islamic world and the holy centres of Islam in Arabia. Adherence to Islam has always been a primary ingredient in the identity of the region's inhabitants. Some of the town's most prominent families attach themselves to lineages of *seyyids* and *sharifs* claiming direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Local legendary traditions identify Ras Midr, on the island of Massawa, as the landing place of the Prophet's companions following their flight

¹ Today, Massawa is Eritrea's largest port and the home of approximately 40,000 people.

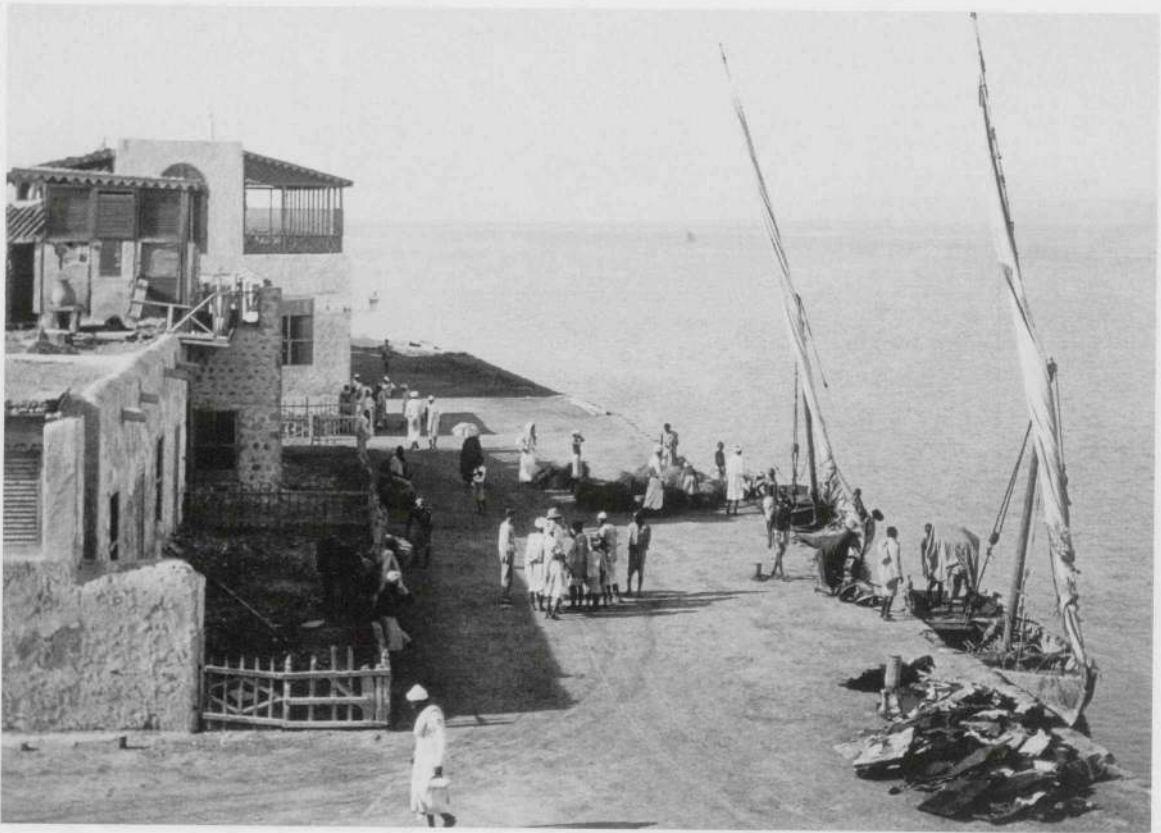


Abb. 5. Massawa, Kaiabschnitt mit Booten (Foto: MBA 212.05).



Abb. 6. Massawa, die Ruine der 'Banca d'Italia' (Foto: St. Wenig 1999).

from Mecca in the seventh century. In the beginning of the twentieth century there were nearly twenty public and private mosques in Massawa's old town and some sixty more in the greater urban area. According to local traditions, the Shafi'i mosque is the oldest in the town. The Hanafi mosque and the Shekh Hammal religious

complex most probably date to the sixteenth century, closely associated with early Ottoman presence. The town and its region have also been at the centre of several local and regional pilgrimage (*ziyara*) sites performed around the shrines of saints and holy men who have lived and died in the region. Since the nineteenth



Abb. 7. Massawa, hölzerner Balkon (*mushrabiyya*) des Hauses Ba Hamdun (Foto: St. Wenig 1999).



Abb. 8. Massawa, Eingang eines Hauses im islamischen Stil (Foto: St. Wenig 1999).

century, an important *ziyara* to Shekh Muhammad b. Ali b. al Amin's (m.1877) shrine in Embereme is performed. Similar *ziyaras* are performed around the Mirghani Sufi order's religious center in Hotumlo. Both pilgrimages attract thousands of followers from the wider region. From the time of its establishment under the Ottomans, Massawa's Islamic court (*shari'a*) has been a central institution preserving and regulating all aspects of Islamic life in Massawa. Nevertheless, despite Massawa's predominantly Islamic past, Christian, Jewish and Hindu communities have also dwelled in and around it.

Architecture

Massawa is a town of mixed architectural styles largely owing to its Turkish, Egyptian and Italian colonial heritage. The rich diversity of style of its private and public buildings are a living testimony to its long history of foreign

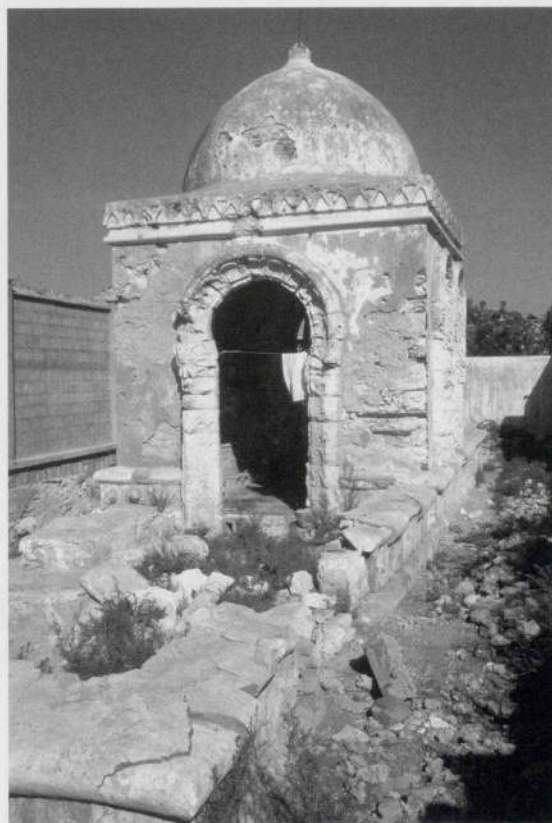


Abb. 9. Massawa, das im Zerfall begriffene Grab von Scheich Durbush, dem ein Alter von etwa 500 Jahren zugeschrieben wird (Foto: St. Wenig 1999).



Abb. 10. Massawa, die ehemals berühmten holzüberdachten Laubengänge des Basars (Foto: St. Wenig 1999).

occupations, external cultural influences, periods of prosperity and the domestic and social arrangements of its mercantile urban dwellers in the past. Even if largely influenced from abroad, Massawa's architectural features and building techniques and materials are deeply grounded in local conditions, especially the harsh climatic environment of the Red Sea coast. Massawa has thus shared some common architectural features with other Red Sea ports with which it shares particular geographical and historical traits. Massawa's buildings have been built with coral stone extracted in its environment but mainly in the Dahlak. A great amount of public works and building construction took place in the 1870s during the period of Egyptian rule. The distinctive features of the period included beautifully carved wooden lintels and window frames, doorways with trilobate arches and trellised balconies known as *musharabiyyas*. Following the destructive results of major fires and earth-

quakes in the late 1880s and in 1921/2, Italian colonial architects and construction engineers repaired and rebuilt damaged houses by maintaining and improvising on features of the traditional Turkish and Egyptian styles. In the 1930s building continued in the *moderne* style. Hotels, open air cinemas, bathing pools, officers' clubs, administrative buildings and villas were constructed during a period of considerable urban development².

[During his stay at Massawa Theodor von Lüpke, architect and photographer of the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition, took some photographs of Munzinger's palace (Figs. 1 and 2) and of the port of Massawa (Figs. 3–5). Some more photographs taken in 1999 show, although heavily damaged during the civil war between 1961 and 1991, the former beauty of this city, an architectural mixture of Islamic and Italian elements (Figs. 6–10). The editor]

² Unfortunately, the town of Massawa was heavily bombed by the Ethiopian air force in 1990, as a result of which many of the town's buildings and edifices have been destroyed or heavily damaged. Since the independence of Eritrea there have been various projects aiming at repairing and preserving Massawa's rich and unique architectural heritage.

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