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## Dépendance of Hadrami and Jeddawi Traders in the 19 th Century of the Ottoman Port Suakin (Sudan)

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# Dépendance of Hadrami and Jeddawi Traders in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century of the Ottoman Port Suakin (Sudan)

by Mohamed Elfath Ahmed

## Introduction

The article considers the role of Hadrami and Jeddawi trading families in the urban and architectural developments of Port Suakin during the late Ottoman era. The port is a favorable access point to the holy cities via Port Jeddah in present-day Saudi Arabia. This has made Port Suakin a stop-off point for African pilgrims on their way to the holy cities in Saudi Arabia for decades<sup>1</sup>. The proximity of the port to Jeddah also attracted traders from Jeddah to open branches in Suakin. The appearance of the port city was formed mainly between 1865 and 1905, when many of the extensions and architectural changes recorded in the buildings owned by the new settlers who had a mainly commercial background were carried out. Some trading families, especially from Hadramout and Jeddah, settled there after they had established themselves in Jeddah, Suakin and other Red Sea ports<sup>2</sup>. In fact, these families might have found their way to Suakin during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the situation in Jeddah and other Hejaz cities was not secure<sup>3</sup>. The position of the Jeddah traders would have affected the economy, and thus the shape of the buildings<sup>4</sup>. After a brief description of Suakin during the Ottoman era, the paper will discuss the major contributions of these trading families to the urban and architectural developments in the port city.

## Historical background

Port Suakin is located in the eastern region of present-day Sudan. Suakin served as an important trade centre among the ports of the Red Sea, as many historians have stated<sup>5</sup>. The port was an outpost of the Ottoman Empire from 1555 to 1864 after the Ottomans had taken control of Suakin and other Red Sea ports<sup>6</sup>. After a short period, the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul promoted this *sancâk*<sup>7</sup> to *eyalet* (of Abyssinia, or Habeş Eyaleti), which included the ports of Sevakin (or Suakin) and Masavva (Massawa) in present-day Eritrea. The appointment of the *beylerbey*<sup>8</sup> as *eyalet* governor came directly from Istanbul, the centre of the Ottoman Empire<sup>9</sup>. This shows the importance of the *eyalet* in early Ottoman times. Suakin's present-day situation is a stark reminder of how this kind of Ottoman architecture is slowly disappearing throughout the Red Sea region, e. g. at Port Mocha in Yemen and Port Massawa in Eritrea. Due to the relocation of the city's port to the new Port Sudan in 1905, the city fell into ruin and life there, e. g., shipping activities, almost ceased after 1930<sup>10</sup>. Today, the island city has almost collapsed, with nobody living there except for only three families.

1 Hasan 1967, 88.

2 For more information about Suakin under Egyptian control, see the studies of Talhami 1979, Derrar 1988 and Greenlaw 1976.

3 Al-Hejaz, Hejaz, also Hijaz, Arabic, literally means the barrier, i. e., a region in the west of modern-day Saudi Arabia.

4 Ottoman Archive in Istanbul (BOA): I. DH. 00243\_014790\_001\_002 dated 1268/1851.

5 Hasan 1967, 87–89.

6 BOA, KK. Ruus, no. 211, sh. 78, dated 962/1555.

7 *Sancâk* means Ottoman frontier which is a subdivision of the *eyalet*.

8 *Beylerbey* means lords of lords, or commander of commanders.

9 BOA, Ruus, no. 213, sh. 212; IRCICA 2007, 78.

10 Perkins 1993, 33.

## Urban and architectural developments

The Island of Suakin is oval in form, measuring approximately 400 by 500 meters. It is connected to the mainland through a causeway (fig. 1). The urban layout reveals a radial plan with shops, market and an open space at the center, with irregular lanes leading to the shore on all sides. The houses on Suakin Island were occupied mainly by elite traders from abroad, while the locals settled outside the island on the al-Geyf which is a suburb on the mainland<sup>11</sup>. Between 2010 and 2013, around 127 houses from 270 plots were architecturally investigated with the support of natural science methods, in particular dendrochronology<sup>12</sup>. The historical buildings at the core of the island consisted of three- to four-storeyed building complexes. These complexes were occupied by large merchants' families. The buildings included a domestic area and a commercial one. The commercial part was located on the ground-floor while the domestic one was located on the upper floors.

The main construction materials used in Suakin architecture are coral stone and wood. Generally, the houses share certain characteristics. The *majlis* (parlor or hallway) is the women's and family reception room, usually situated in the first and upper floors of the house. The *dihliz* (entrance room) is the sub-entrance lobby which functioned as a distribution area for incoming guests. Service rooms include baths, latrines and store rooms. *Roshan* refers to the projecting window looking onto the street. The *kharja* level is the terrace level of the house where the family could sleep and cook. Common architectural features in the indoor and outdoor spaces are the wooden *roshan* in the façade, the wooden board system within the construction walls in order to add strength, the ornamental door hood on the entrance doors, the cupboard system inside the interior room walls, the simplified furniture and in some large houses the cistern on the ground-floor level, as well as the characteristic furniture found in the *dihliz*, *majlis*, and *kharja* interior furniture<sup>13</sup>.

The wood samples extracted from selected buildings in Suakin and from some comparative examples in old Jeddah enabled us to investigate the origin and type of the wood, and to arrive at new construction dates in Suakin. During the survey, we were able to identify the historical market street among the ruins, and to date selected ruins. Around 57 traders' buildings in Suakin were successfully dated with their origin information. The results were confirmed by means of the large construction beams used in the construction of the earlier buildings of Suakin, which date to between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and stem from Gotland, Finland, South Germany, Italy, Greece, Spain, Poland, Albania and Turkey. Previous studies on the Red Sea cities presupposed that most of the building materials, such as wood, were originally from the Indian Ocean before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1861. The oldest samples, dating to 1519 AD, were identified in building B. no. 196, which is situated nearly in the heart of the island town at the market area. Other buildings near the bazaar could be dated back to the same period<sup>14</sup>. The plan (fig. 1) shows the location of the investigated historical buildings in Suakin. At present, almost 80% of the buildings are damaged and/or in a state of ruin. The first identified area was the market street which led to the commercial core of the island town in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only the ground levels of the shops and residential buildings could be identified as the rest has been completely destroyed. According to archive documents, the shops were owned by Arab traders with Hadrami and Jeddawi background like the Siam, Bagneid, Bazars and other families<sup>15</sup>. These merchants were present in the shopping street of Suakin from probably after the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ruined shops were situated on the ground level of the following residential buildings: B. no. 163, B. no. 273, B. no. 273/1, B. no. 274, and B. no. 243<sup>16</sup>. Building B. no. 163 was a large mixed-use complex located at the core of the island (fig. 1). The prominent merchant Mohamed Abdel Karim Shinawi Bey owned it in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century as NRO archive documents dating to 1933 report<sup>17</sup>.

11 Prokosch 1994, 250.

12 Elfath Ahmed 2016, Appendices 1–3. In cooperation with Karl-Uwe Heußner, Department of Natural Sciences at the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) in Berlin, Dendrochronology results of fieldwork in Suakin and Jeddah-al-Balad, 2013.

13 Greenlaw 1976, 40.

14 Elfath Ahmed 2016, 102.

15 NRO, document no. 36/772, Houses belong to the Heirs of Bagneid family in Suakin, in 14.01.1937.

16 Elfath Ahmed 2016, 152 f.

17 NRO: National Records Office, Khartoum – Sudan. NRO, document no. 210–211, Mortgage Deed, in 10.2.1933.



1 Suakin Island, Cataster plan with all streets and plots numbers after the Port Sudan Survey Office Plan and many references in the late of 19<sup>th</sup> century

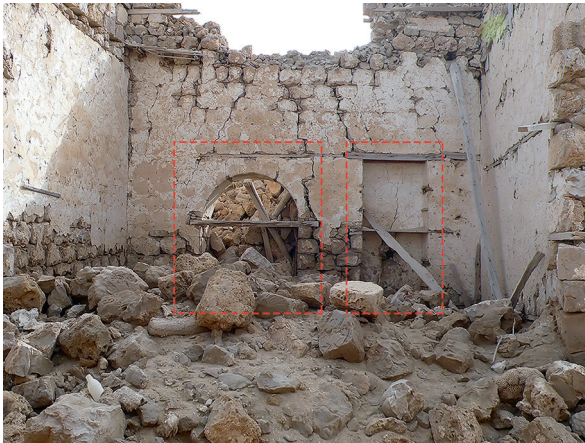
Shinawi Bey appears to have been a prominent figure in Suakin. His family owned around 14 buildings in Suakin, besides the large Wakkalat (Caravanserai) building on the adjacent main-

land<sup>18</sup>. The trader's family owned most of the vessels used in the export and import trade between Suakin, Jeddah and Massawa, as well as all the other coastal towns, due mostly to him being

18 Derrar 1988, 70 f.

the government's favourite contractor probably after 1885. The family originally emigrated as merchants from Egypt and is considered to be hand in glove with the Ottoman-Egyptian in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later with the Angelo-Egyptian government in the late of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>19</sup>.

The commercial space comprised a group of seven shops located on the ground level of this residential building, while the domestic part was on the upper floors. The shops could be accessed from the main street via a small entrance and varied in size between 15–40 m<sup>2</sup>. What can be seen today are the remains of the walls on the ground floor at the entrance to the shops on the southeast façade, and an arched door which gave access to a small storeroom of one of the shops (fig. 2).



2 Suakin Island, Bayt Siam B. no. 274, North façade

The second shop area is located in the area of buildings B. no. 273, 274 and 275 (fig. 2). This is part of a large complex owned by the merchant Said Siam from Jeddah, who was a prominent merchant in Suakin and Jeddah in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. According to David Rodon »Siam's closest external ties were with Arabia and especially with Jeddah where his father was apparently in business. But he also traded directly with Calcutta, Suez and Massawa.«<sup>20</sup> Said Siam owned five buildings in Suakin (nos. 230, 273–275) and left business documents and a diary, which cover this period in the port city<sup>21</sup>. The building complex of Said Siam is located in the southern zone of the island. Today the two upper floors are in

ruins, but some parts of the building on the ground floor still exist. On the north side of B. no. 274 a room with an area of around 38 m<sup>2</sup> has been identified. There is a rear area attached, which can be reached via an open arch constructed in the back wall. The rest of the rooms on the northeastern façade have been identified as a row of shops located on the ground-floor level. They, contained back rooms for storage or offices, which could be reached through a narrow passage on the ground floor.

Fig. 2 shows about one third of the shopping area which was located along the south façade of B. no. 243 in the southern zone of the island and on the northern side of Bayt<sup>22</sup> Siam B. no. 274, 275 (fig. 2). Today, only the ground-floor level consisting of two indoor rooms remains. Parts of the walls of the rooms located west and north still exist. However, these rooms are identical in area and it has been determined that they had a closed back room which could be reached through an open arch in the back wall. The back room area and design can be compared with the ground floor rooms of Bayt Siam no. 274 and 275. What can also be identified is the rest of a closed room attached to the back room. This could have been a storage room attached to the main room. Inside the commercial space a shelf on the back wall has been identified.

## Type 1

Two types of shop that were characteristic for Suakin were identified on the ground level of B. no. 243 (fig. 3). The first type of commercial space could be entered by two doors, both of which opened onto the market street. The first door led to a room with an area of 44 m<sup>2</sup> which probably served as the main area for trader / merchant and direct contact with clients. The second door gave access to a smaller room with an area of 22 m<sup>2</sup> which was connected to the main room via a small door with an arched opening. It probably served as a store room or *majlis* for the use of the merchants, who were probably also the owners of the building. This type of commercial space had direct connection to the domestic spaces of the building where the merchant and his family lived.

19 Sartorius 1885, 44–46. Derrar 1988, 70 f.

20 Roden 1970, 4.

21 Roden 1970, 4.

22 »Bayt« means house.



3 Suakin Island, Building B. no. 243, North façade

## Type 2

The second type of shop identified on the ground floor of B. no. 243 (fig. 4) occupied an area of 42 m<sup>2</sup>. It had only one main entrance which opened directly from the south main façade onto the market street. The main difference between the two types is that type 2 had an independent character and was not connected to any part of the domestic space. It might have been profitable for the house owner to rent out the ground-floor spaces either short term or long term. It is important to note that the commercial spaces identified during the field survey in Suakin did not change during the Ottoman I, II and III periods in contrast to the residential parts.

A letter from the Sultan in Istanbul provides us with information about the construction of residential buildings belonging to traders from Hadramout in 1267/1851 in Massawa in present-day Eritrea. Similar constructions took place in Suakin during the same period<sup>23</sup>. The letter is addressed to Beylerbey (commander of commanders) Esmat Bey in Massawa and the Hadramout traders in the port. The document proves the existence of these traders who also resided in Suakin and Jeddah in the same period. Apparently they were important for the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul, where they had been summoned in order to give evidence regarding a pe-

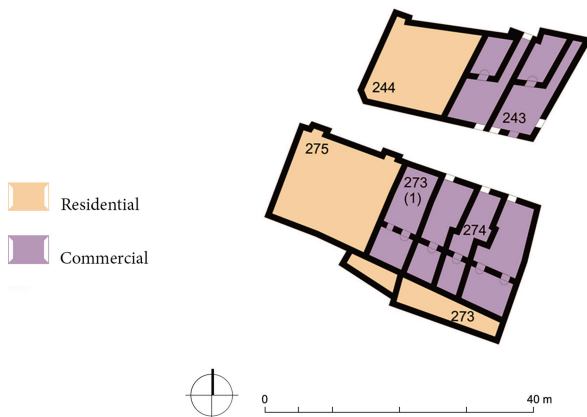
tition filed by a group of local people in Massawa against the Ottoman governor Mohamed Paşa.

The Hadramout traders are: O. Ab. A. Bagnied, S. A. El Safi, O. A. Bazarra (appears in the reply letter from the Hadramout traders in Massawa. A. Salmien. A document in the Ottoman archive from 1844 concerns the income custom house in Suakin (*Bender-I Sevakin Gümrüğüünün iradatının hesabını mübeyyin defter*). A BOA document dating from 1851 on this issue have been assigned by the prominent leaders of the port city claiming a Jeddawi (person from Jeddah) in Massawa to Ottoman authorities in Istanbul and Jeddah<sup>24</sup>. The Jeddawi contractor appears in the archival document as one of the main contractors responsible for many constructions in the port city during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The influence of Jeddah (politically and economically), however, leads to the assumption that contractors and association of merchants existed both in the port of Massawa and the port of Suakin in this time of prosperity. Salem Omer Bagnied, a Hadrami trader who was resident in Cairo wrote a letter in 1937 to the Anglo-Egyptian colonial authorities in present-day Sudan regarding the property of his family in Suakin, in which he explains: »Respectfully I have received your letter dated 8<sup>th</sup> January 1937 regarding the house of the family of Bagnaeid in Suakin. The heirs of this family some of them are found in Hadramout and some in Jeddah. I have no Tawkeel (power of attorney) from them enabling me to dispose of their property especially as .....of the legal heirs in this house. Know the heirs are very poor. I sent this notification my release from this case.«

The second main group was from Jeddah, namely Hadrami and Arabs whose shops mostly occupied the core of the island, e. g., Bayt M. Abdel Karim El Kabli (without number), Bayt Osman Ali Obied 196, 379, 64, Bayt Shawish Shams 233, 232, 231, Bayt Abdel Rahman Y. El Daroubi 257, Bayt Bagnieid 389, 388 and Bayt Bawrass (without number) (fig. 2). The existence of quite a number of properties belonging to Hadrami and Arab families in Suakin and Jeddah asserts that a closed trader's network existed in the Red Sea ports during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

23 BOA, I. DH. 00243\_014790\_001\_002 dated 1268/1851.

24 BOA, I. DH. 00243\_014790\_001\_002 dated 1268/1851.



4 Suakin Island, Building B. no. 234, 273/1 and B. no. 274, Shopping area

## Conclusion

The architectural investigation with the support of new dendro dates reveals three different phases in the island of Suakin which can be categorised as the ›Ottoman I‹ period (1519–1592), ›Ottoman II‹ period (1723–1808) and ›Ottoman III‹ period (1836–1899) according to the different political and economic shifts in the port city. The multifunctional building type (domestic in the upper floors and commercial on the ground floor) was common in the port city and other parts of the island. It covered the needs of the merchants who settled in the city with their families, and can be described as a one-unit building with many functions. The trading families had their own shops and their commercial transactions might have been completed within their own houses. Such building types, where living took place on the upper levels, while working was restricted to the downstairs levels, were common also in other Ottoman ports in the Red Sea area. The existence of a politically powerful ›network of trading families‹ in the Red Sea ports in the late Ottoman eras well attested in the Ottoman archive<sup>25</sup>. The elite traders maintained branches in Jeddah and the Red Sea region, e. g. the Hadramout Bagneid family, who in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century owned houses in Jeddah al-Balad, perhaps even before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in the port cities of Suakin and Massawa. They were even consulted as trusted persons by the Ot-

toman Sultan in Istanbul. During the Ottoman I and II periods, the architecture of Suakin Island was mainly influenced by Arab traders from Hadramout and Jeddah. The extensive construction works during this period show that the port attracted Arabian traders who settled there with their families. The families lived in buildings in which the warehouses were located on the ground levels, while the domestic parts were on the upper level. The new constructions of the smaller houses in this period were mainly vertical extensions in order to fulfil the needs of large family groups. The *roshan* façade is a good witness to this conservative phase brought about by the householders from Arabia as the Swiss traveler Lewis Burckhardt reports in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>26</sup>. The position of the Hadrami and Jeddawi traders is likely to have affected the economy, and thus the shape of the buildings as can be seen in the bipartite division of the house into a commercial and domestic sphere. The ground-floor level could contain a separate room functioning as an office for the householder who was often a merchant, e. g. CHBS Catalogue of historical buildings in Suakin, B. no. 243, 273/1, and B. no. 274. It also contained a store for his merchandise. He could use the space to meet traders in private and to conduct business without interruptions from other parts of the house. The political situation due to the Wahhabi movements in Hejaz during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century would have increased the numbers of immigrant traders from Jeddah settling in Suakin. This led to a, in many respects, similar architecture in Jeddah and the port city, which the British artist Jean-Pierre Greenlaw in the late 1970ies called an ›architectural colony of Jeddah‹ in Suakin. These similarities can be clearly seen in the common use of coral stones and special techniques with wooden panels in the construction of walls. Similarities are also to be seen in the organization of the interior space, the gender segregation in floor level spaces, the existence of the *majlis*, *diwan* and *kharja* as well as in the *roshan* as a façade feature. The properties of Arab, Hadrami and Jeddawi traders in Suakin show a cosmopolitan culture of trade in this port which might be one of the main sources of wealth, peace and a flourishing urbanism and architecture.

25 BOA, I. DH. 00243\_014790\_001\_002 dated 1268/1851.

26 Burckhardt 1819, 342.

## Summary

The urban structure of the Ottoman Port Suakin is a particular expression of a long established regional building tradition in the Red Sea area. The coming of Islam greatly increased the urban importance of Suakin as the entry point for the African pilgrimage to the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. Be it the Ottoman imperial sphere, Egypt, or international influences, the shape of the port city was mainly formed between 1865 and 1905, when many extensions and architectural changes can be clearly recorded in the new buildings owned by the new settlers, e. g. from Hadrami and Jeddah. The article considers the urban and architectural developments of the port city its urban complex, narrow, and congested street system, the changing styles and typology of its architecture and its significance within a political and social transition process. This considerable change can be observed in the new buildings which can be attributed to the »post-Ottoman« period after 1865, when Suakin came under Ottoman-Egyptian control. The aim of the present study is a development of a historical typology for the historical buildings depending on political and economic changes. Also, the new dendrochronological investigations in technical cooperation with the German Archaeological Institute (Berlin) support the reliability of the established buildings catalogue for the port city. On this basis it is possible to understand the developments and changes in the city during different colonial eras. The architecture of the post-Ottoman houses in Port Suakin combines influences from the individual buildings culture of each householder group residing in the city after 1865, and it retains essentially an Ottoman spatial program.

## Zusammenfassung

Die urbane Struktur der ottomanischen Hafencity Port Suakin ist Ausdruck einer tief verwurzelten regionalen Bautradition am Roten Meer. Das Aufkommen des Islam steigerte die urbane Bedeutung von Suakin als Eintrittspunkt der afrikanischen Pilgerfahrt zu den zwei Heiligen Städten Mekka und Medina in Saudi-Arabien. An der Schnittstelle von kaiserlich Ottomanischen, ägyptischen und internationalen Einflüssen gelegen, wurde die Gestalt der Hafencity vor allem zwischen 1865 und 1905 geprägt, als die

Neubauten der neuen Siedler, etwa aus Hadrami und Jeddah, zahlreiche und gut dokumentierbare An- und Umbauten erfuhren. Der Beitrag untersucht die urbane and architektonische Entwicklung der Hafencity: ihr urbanes Gefüge, das enge Straßensystem, die stilistischen und typologischen Veränderungen in ihrer Architektur sowie ihre Bedeutung innerhalb eines politischen und gesellschaftlichen Übergangsprozesses. Der tiefgreifende Wandel kann in den neuen Gebäuden der »post-ottomanischen« Periode nach 1865 beobachtet werden, als Suakin unter ottomanisch-ägyptische Kontrolle geriet. Das Ziel der vorliegenden Studie ist der Entwurf einer historischen Typologie für die historischen Gebäude, die den politischen und wirtschaftlichen Wandel miteinbezieht. Darüber hinaus scheinen die in technischer Zusammenarbeit mit dem DAI (Berlin) durchgeführten dendrochronologischen Untersuchungen die Zuverlässigkeit des etablierten Bautenverzeichnisses für die Hafencity weitgehend zu bestätigen. Auf dieser Grundlage ist es möglich, die Entwicklungen und Veränderungen in der Hafencity über verschiedene koloniale Zeiten hinweg zu verstehen. Die Architektur der post-ottomanischen Häuser in Port Suakin nimmt Einflüsse der verschiedener Baukulturen der nach 1865 in der Stadt ansässigen Hausbesitzer auf und bewahrt zugleich ein grundlegend ottomanisches Raumprogramm.

*Übersetzung: Jenny Wilde*

## CAPTIONS

- Fig. 1** Plan: M. Elfath Ahmed  
**Fig. 2** Foto: M. Elfath Ahmed  
**Fig. 3** Foto: M. Elfath Ahmed  
**Fig. 4** Plan: M. Elfath Ahmed

## Abreviations

- BOA** Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, Istanbul-Turkey  
**IRCI CA** Research Centre for Islamic History, Istanbul-Turkey



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