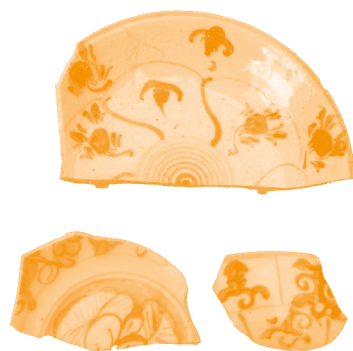


Trade and 'treasure': the role of Suakin in the movement of valuables in the 15th–19th centuries



Abstract: This paper focuses on the historical and archaeological evidence for 'valuables' passing through Suakin, as part of the Red Sea-Indian Ocean trade. The main locations on Suakin Island Town investigated 2002-2013 are briefly described. Interviews show that at Suakin, in the later 19th century/early 20th century, imported valuables included fabrics from Europe, perfume oils, cloths and wooden chests from India; porcelain from China and Turkey; rugs from Persia/Iran and glass from Italy. Interviews and early modern European accounts indicate the range of products from the hinterland, such as cotton, gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, slaves, horses, gum arabic, ebony, musk, tobacco, rubber and coffee. Local fishermen supplied fish, shells, pearls and mother-of-pearl. The archaeological evidence indicates pottery and porcelain from the Arabian Peninsula, south-west Asia, south Asia, China and south-east Asia, while identifications of wood samples indicates teak from south and south-east Asia. A combination of archaeological, historical and ethnographic evidence is needed to build up a picture of the trade in valuables.

Keywords: Suakin, Sudan, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, trade, valuables

*The caravans faring from afar find no rest, but upon
Reaching your shores fall to slumber
Ships likewise sail the seas speeding towards your
Coast, braving storm and thunder**

* Verse from a poem by Yagoub Babikir Omar (recited by a male interviewee in Khartoum, recorded by S. Taha, 2008)

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The following is an account, based on the historical and archaeological evidence, of what is known about 'valuables' passing through Suakin, as part of the Red Sea–Indian Ocean trade, both to and from the coast and into the hinterland. To begin with, the definition of the term 'valuables' needs to be considered. In practice, we have used what may be regarded as a mixed 'emic/etic' definition of what constitutes 'valuables'. This is because there are items we tend to think of as 'valuable' (such as gold), and there are items that may have been considered to be of a similar level of value in a culture/time period being studied. It may be noted that, for example, in the Late Bronze Age, iron was as or of more significance than gold, and in Chinese culture historically, jade was valued similarly to gold. However, during the period considered in this paper, it is the most probable that the major categories of valuable goods would have largely overlapped with what we today would consider 'valuable', that is to say, we would 'expect' the main commodities to be gold, silk, incense, porcelain, ebony, ivory, etc. However, from recent interviews it is apparent that at Suakin specifically, in the later 19th/early 20th century, other items of value included fabrics from Manchester, perfume (*eau de toilette*) from Europe, perfume oils, cloth and wooden chests from India; porcelain tea and dinner sets

from China and Turkey; rugs from Persia/Iran and glass chandeliers from Italy (Taha 2008–2009: Interviewee Sinkat 2009). These can be considered to be valuables because they were imported, and only the most well-off families of Suakin could afford to purchase them.

Suakin is located on the Red Sea coast of Sudan [Fig. 1], the historic Island Town being near the western side of a bay, with a channel leading to and from the Red Sea itself, thus forming a very sheltered anchorage. The reason why we have chosen to concentrate on Suakin is its significance, historically and economically, as the sole major port for Sudan throughout the later medieval and early modern periods, although an earlier Roman port, called Portus Evangelon, may have existed there (Mallinson 2012: 161). Suakin was a major port on the Hajj route, and formed one of the main nodes in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea trade network at least as early as the 13th century. Architecturally, the site is significant, since it comprises the remains of a complete town built of local coral, forming one of the few remaining examples of the 'Red Sea' style of architecture (Matthews 1953). The archaeological work, with field seasons from 2002 to 2013, is part of a larger national project at the site, under the Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

The following is a summary of the major sites investigated archeologically within the historic Island Town: three houses, a governor's residence and the Shafa'i mosque.

BEIT EL BASHA

The house is located near the centre of the Island [Fig. 2]. Excavations were undertaken within the house itself, and in the open ground just to the southwest.

These provided evidence of 3.10 m of stratigraphy, with probable continuous occupation; and evidence for having been an open cooking area over several centuries. Radiocarbon dating indicated occupation for probably about 800 years or so, most of the last millennium, the earliest date being 1027–1212 cal. AD (Breen et al. 2011: 210–217). This is probably one of the most significant discoveries of the project, since this occupation sequence

is likely to be one of the longest discovered so far along this stretch of the Red Sea coast.

SHAFĀ'I MOSQUE

Next to be investigated was the Shafā'i Mosque, also situated toward the centre of the Island Town [see Fig. 2]. Excavation across the centre of the courtyard in 2007 revealed a rectangular pier or base and the top of a round base or pillar, with

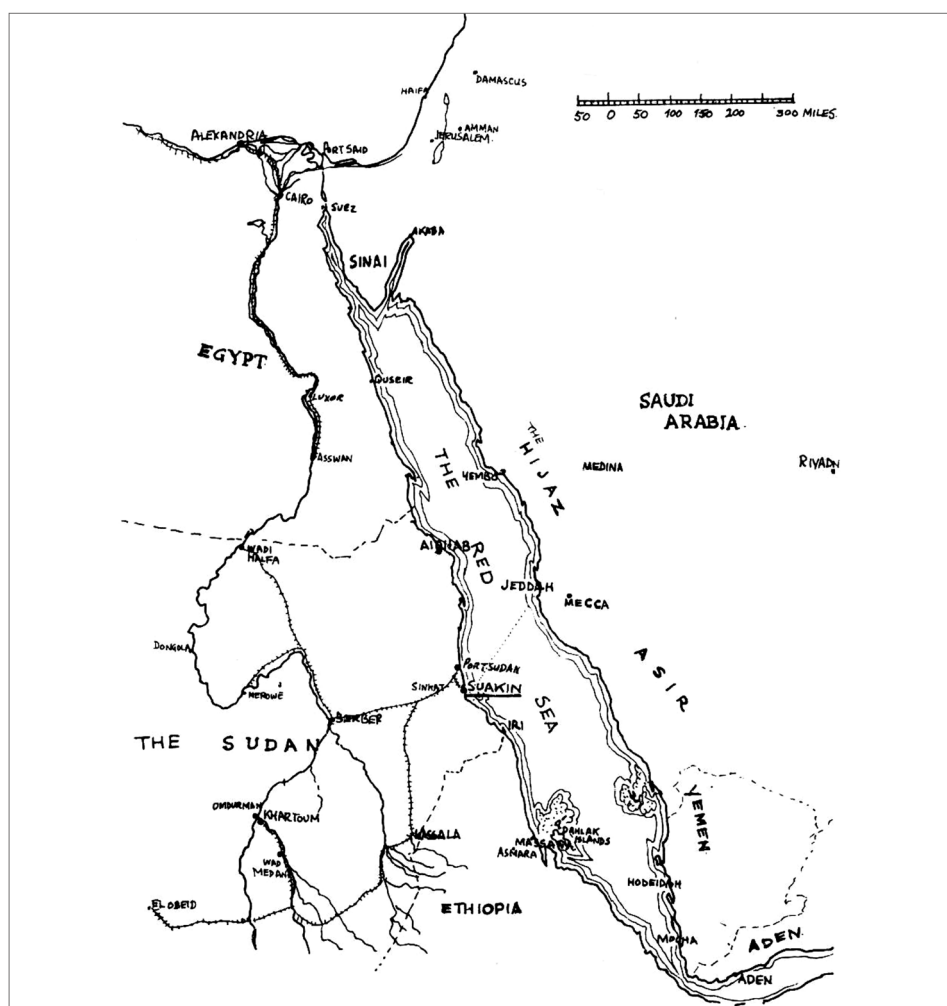


Fig. 1. Location of Suakin in the Red Sea (Courtesy Greenlaw Archive)

a plaster floor appearing at the lowest level excavated. The exact nature of this structure is uncertain, but given its location it could tentatively be an earlier mosque (Smith et al. 2012: 175). Excavations were subsequently undertaken in the south arcade and at the eastern end, with trial pits both inside and outside. Radiocarbon dating indicates a late 13th/early 14th century date for the first building activity, which may be related to the initial mosque construction.

MUHAFAZA (GOVERNOR'S RESIDENCE)

Excavation was undertaken within the courtyard of the Muhafaza, located near the northern edge of the Island Town [see Fig. 2] with the aim of determining whether any earlier occupational levels may have existed before the extension of the building in the 1870s. Excavations reaching a depth of 2 m before encountering the present water table showed four main phases. The earliest occupation in this area comprises several thin layers

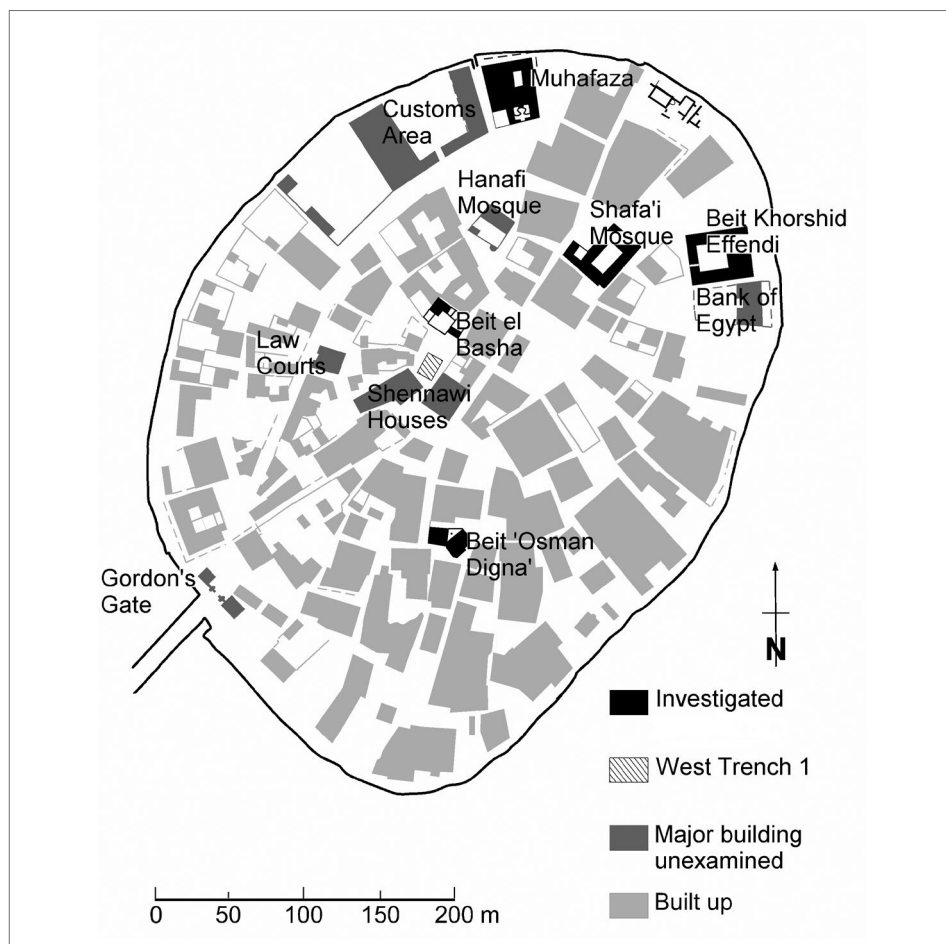


Fig. 2. Main sites investigated in the historic Island Town of Suakin (After Greenlaw 1995: 11 | redrawn L. Smith using 'Professional Draw' program by Gold Disc Inc.)

discovered along the northeast and south sections of the trench, cut by pits. They are considered to be of medieval date. These layers were cut in the next phase by two ditches. There was also a structure (o62) with a wall running east–west and, midway, another running north–south. The associated levels yielded a great deal of potsherds and bone fragments. This structure (o62) is currently thought to be of 17th to 18th century date (Smith et al. 2012: 177–178; Smith, Mallinson, and Phillips 2013: 7). The next phase consists of a layer of compact coralline material, which formed a floor level and infilled the two ditches cut in the earlier phase. The most recent phase represents the modern Muhafaza, comprising floor slabs, mortar foundation and infill over a sandy base.

BEIT 'OSMAN DIGNA'

This house, with a small mosque or prayer room (*zawiya*) attached, in the southwestern quarter of the Island Town [see Fig. 2], appeared 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, subsequently levelled for the construction of the mosque by the 19th century. A trench across the street in front of the house, excavated to a depth of about 2.20 m, exhibited five phases of activity. The first structures, consisting of walls running north–south, were apparently built at the site in the post-medieval period (likely the late 17th or 18th century). They were

levelled to allow for the construction of the mosque by the late 18th or earlier 19th century (Smith et al. 2012: 178–179; University of Ulster 2009: 6–7).

However, some parts of this area were in use early, a date of 676 BP from the earliest phases of the Osman Digna street trench giving further supporting evidence of a 13th-century intensification of activity in the Island Town.

BEIT KHORSHID EFFENDI

This was both the first and the most recent building investigated, being a prime candidate for restoration, since its *diwan* walls survive to roof level on one side, and it is architecturally significant, with elaborately decorated plasterwork in the *diwan*. Restoration of this section of the building is ongoing. Work in 2002–2010 concentrated on the *diwan*, the main block of the house, and the rear courtyard, revealing a plan more detailed than that published in the best-known account of the architecture of the town by Jean-Pierre Greenlaw (1995). This has supplied the grounds for proposing a different developmental history of the structure (Phillips 2012: 189–198). For example, several small rooms, and a *hammam* or bath were discovered. This site is remarkable for the remains of wooden structures, especially timber from the main *roshan* (a form of projecting window feature), which collapsed outwards with the fall of the upper portions of the front wall. These *rawashin* were formerly a significant feature of Suakini architecture, sometimes being quite elaborate (Mallinson et al. 2009: 477–479). In 2012, excavations revealed house foundations in one location, showing that the front

part, at least, was constructed on artificial build-up of the perimeter of the town island. Subsequent excavations outside the façade of Beit Khorshid Efendi revealed two structures preceding the existing house, showing that the forecourt was constructed on earlier,

cleared, buildings. The earlier of the buildings survived only as a short stretch of coral-built wall. The succeeding structure comprised long, relatively narrow, rooms indicating the building may have been a storehouse for off-loaded goods (Smith, Mallinson, and Phillips 2013: 7).

SITE CHRONOLOGY

The site chronology is currently based on radiocarbon dates and a seriation of the handmade wares, supplemented by stylistic dating of mainly Chinese imports. The current phasing extends from the earliest

occupation (A.1) in the 11th to early 13th centuries, on the basis of a radiocarbon date of 1027–1212 cal. CE near the base of the deposits excavated adjacent to the Beit el-Basha (Breen et al. 2011: 214) [Table 1].

Table 1. Main periods recognised at Suakin through pottery phasing and radiocarbon dates from associated deposits (based on Phillips 2013)

Phase	Dating (all CE)	Periods
A.1	Late 11th–early 13th centuries (^{14}C 1027–1212)	Pre-Ottoman
A.2	Late 13th–14th centuries (^{14}C 1276–1387; 1263–1328; stratified above 1281–1331)	
A.3	14th–early 15th centuries	
B.1	Late 15th century–before 1540s (no ^{14}C date; below burnt layer)	Ottoman/Fung
B.2	Not later than mid 16th century (no ^{14}C date; high up below burnt layer)	
B.3	Mid(?)–16th–early 17th centuries (no ^{14}C date; dates probable as no overlying burnt layer; perhaps phase C.1. instead)	
C.1	Second half of 16th–17th centuries (no ^{14}C): possible interruption, if not phase B.3 above	
C.2	Late 17th–18th centuries (no ^{14}C)	Egyptian
C.3	Second half of 18th–early 19th centuries (no ^{14}C)	
D.1	19th century (to 1880s?) (no ^{14}C)	
D.2	Later 19th century, probably after 1880s (no ^{14}C)	Egyptian to British
D.--	19th century, uncertain if subphase 1 or 2 (no ^{14}C)	Anglo-Egyptian

TRADE ROUTES AND TRADERS TO AND FROM SUAKIN

TRADE FROM THE HINTERLAND

The development of Suakin was fostered by its location as a terminus on routes from production areas and intermediate trade entrepôts in the interior. It was also dependent on its location relative to the easier routes through the Red Sea Hills. The latter were not generally impassable, but some routes through the Hills were easier than others, particularly for caravans.

Muslim writers indicate Suakin was involved in trade on behalf of the Sudanese Christian kingdoms in the Nile Valley and the hinterland from the 8th century (Al Shamiy 1961; Dirar 1981; Abu Aisha 2002). Independent merchants organised these extensive, dynamic and functional networks, accomplishing business in major centres such as Berber, Kassala, Soba, Shendy, Sennar, el-Fashir, Al Obyed, Edfu and Gondar, forwarding

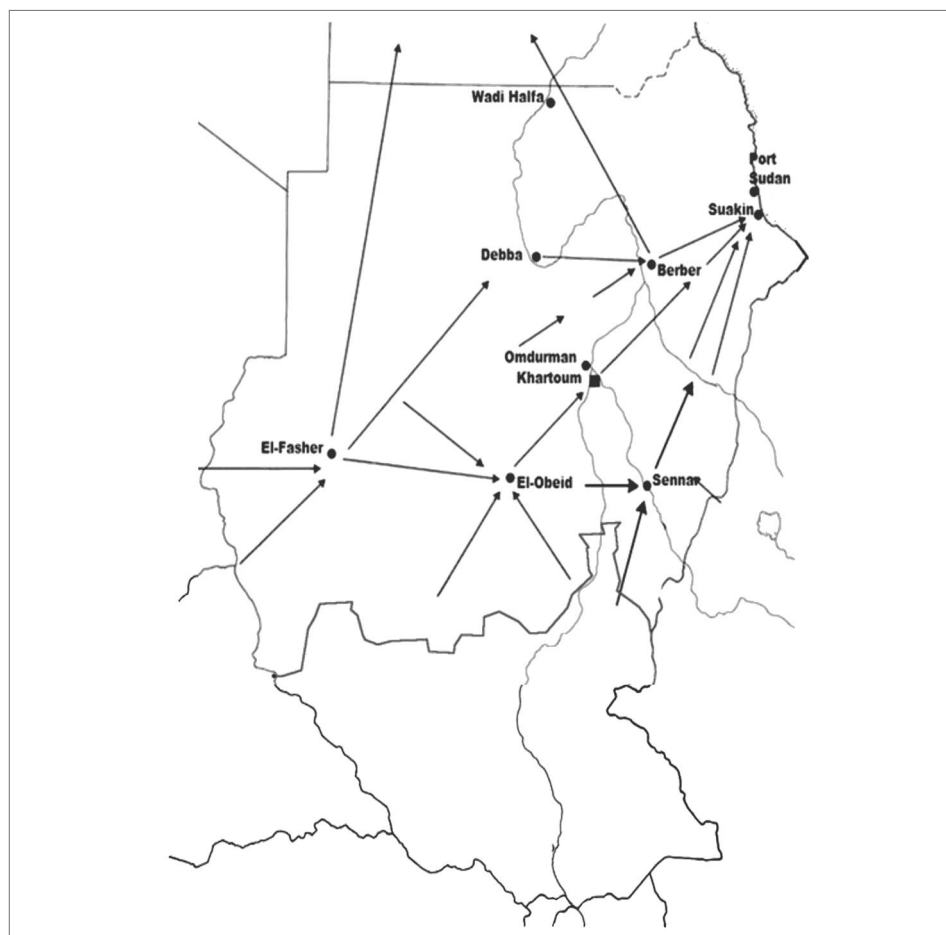


Fig. 3. Movement of goods to regional centres and to Suakin within Sudan (Drawing S. Taha)

caravans further to and from Egypt, Darfur, Kordufan and Ethiopia (for the last see Pankhurst 1968). Suakini interviewees assert their island families had strong links with agents in all established trade centres, with networks for gathering and distributing merchandise in all directions via caravan routes (Taha 2008–2009).

In 1505, the Funj Sultanate came to power, and aimed to protect Suakin and its seaborne trade by controlling both the town and the gold mines in eastern Sudan. Rather than pursue total control or annexation, the Funj concluded treaties and agreements with most tribal sheikhs to protect the caravans along the trade routes and open trade routes to Sennar (Dirar 1981). They appointed an Amir (prince) from within the Artiga family, who still live in Suakin. The title was devalued during the British rule in Sudan to Omda (Taha 2008–2009; interview with Artiga, the present *Omda* of Suakin 2009).

Suakin established good relationships with pastoral nomads, including various Beja tribes (subgroups) involved in the caravan trade, as the main trade routes passed through the heart of Beja land and linked Suakin to the main assembling and distribution centres inland. Beja nomads also served as caravan leaders and transported goods from the port to the interior, as Suakin had trade relationships and networks in most of the major cities in the hinterland.

Hinterland commodities included a vast range of products from all destinations [Fig. 3], including sesame seeds, sorghum, honey, butter and animals from Kassala and Gadaref (Butana) and the

Nile valley. The Beja tribes provided animal products, racing camels, cattle and sheep, the latter of ‘high quality’ being exported to Egypt ‘not for food or breeding but just for show’ according to Al-Umari (about 1300–1350; see Vantini 1975: 513). Local fishermen supplied fish, tortoise shell and seashells, pearls and mother-of-pearl, much of which also could be exported both inland and overseas. From Tokkar came cotton, to be ginned at, then exported from, Suakin. From Sennar and Darfur came gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, slaves, horses, gum arabic, ebony, musk, tobacco and rubber. Ethiopia provided coffee, and other products originated elsewhere. All were then transported abroad by ship (Wylde 1878: 278–279; Bloss 1937: 250; Dirar 1981; Abu Aisha 2002; Badawiy 2005).

Once at Suakin, goods coming from the interior, and the travelling merchants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, stayed at Wakalat Al Shinawi, just on the mainland opposite the Island Town. Goods were stored before being purchased by the merchants operating from Suakin itself, and then stored in their warehouses, usually in the lower floor of their own houses and therefore in close proximity to the port. From Suakin, again in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, foodstuffs, animals and slaves were exported to Hejaz, while gum arabic was exported to Europe (and still is today) and rhinoceros horns went to China, via Yemen or Jeddah. India was also an important trading link for exports, and several families of merchants from India lived at Suakin in this period (Taha 2008–2009).

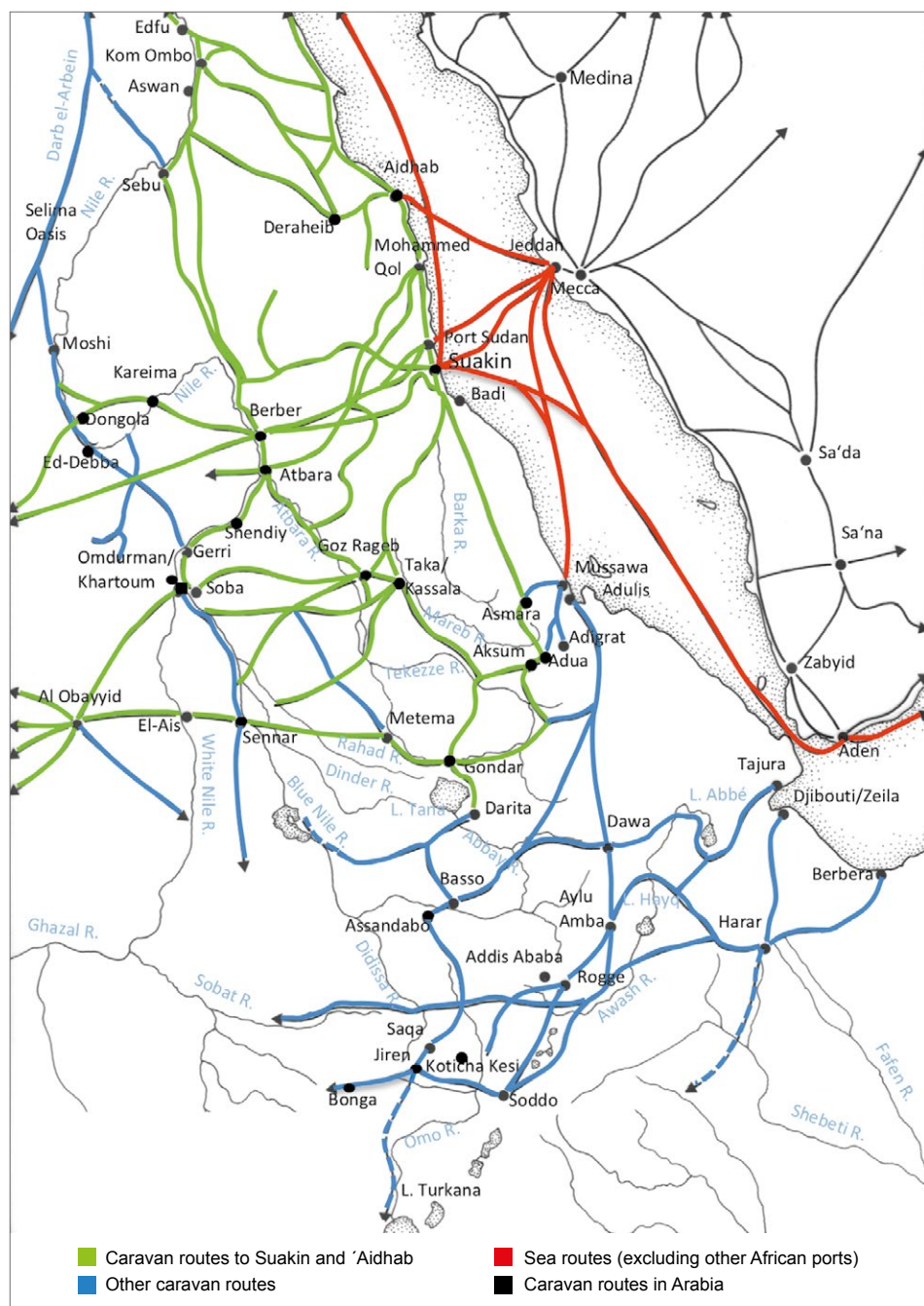


Fig. 4. Main routes for trade and pilgrimage in Eastern Africa and Red Sea region (Compiled and redrawn J. Phillips from Abir 1968: 45, Fig.; Adams 1977: 598, Fig. 84; Bent 2012: 187; Crawford 1958: 29, 31, 35, 47, 70, Figs 5, 6, 8, 14; Insoll 1999: 112, Fig. 4.1; Kinahan 2013: 356, Fig. 1; Power 2012: 138, Fig. 15.1; Sergew 1972: 81, Fig.; Soghayroun 2010: 75, Map 4.3; Walker 2006: 63 fronting the chapter, Fig. 7.1)

PILGRIMAGE AND TRADE

That pilgrimage was a source of external communication and transfer of ideas and goods is, none the less, obvious although dwarfed in emphasis relative to better documented commercial trade and political relationships. Pilgrims journeyed great distances by land to Mecca, mostly travelling for protection with trade caravans or in dedicated pilgrimage caravans. They followed time-honoured regular trade routes with existing facilities such as wells and caravanserais. For example, John L. Burckhardt (1819: 408–410; see also Peters 1994: 390) and his fellow pilgrims, for example, travelled from Shendy to Suakin in 1814 with a caravan of 150 merchants and 300 slaves. In addition to the pilgrims for the *hajj*, Christian pilgrims both from the Nile Valley and from Ethiopia were conveyed by Muslims for safety through to Suakin (Phil-

lips forthcoming). As Tim Power (2008: paras 24–34, *passim*) points out, pilgrimage routes from inland Africa effectively continued existing trade and slave routes to Suakin following the ‘gold rush’ that likely initiated its foundation in the 9th century. Voyages across the Red Sea by boat were separately organised for dedicated pilgrim traffic at individual ports. Trading vessels also accepted passengers to augment their income. Consequently, inland *Hajj* and Christian pilgrims passing through the African coast of the Red Sea travelled both by land and by sea, intersecting at specific ports primarily dedicated to trade [Fig. 4].

Traders, on the other hand, travelled either by caravan or by ship, but not both. Pilgrims are thus unique in bridging the separate trade routes that intersected at Suakin and other ports.

ROUTES AND CONNECTIONS IN THE SEA TRADE

Suakin and the other Red Sea Ports were part of one of two historical competitive trade routes from Europe to East Asia: one passing through Cairo and Egypt’s ports of Quseir and Aydhab, and the other through Baghdad overland to Basra and the Gulf ports on the Persian and Arab coast. Both routes led to India and further to coastal China and the Spice Islands. Ceramics uncovered in Suakin, considered to be from East and Southeast Asia, might well have been brought by sea, having been transhipped through South India, while the ‘Thin grey ware’, for example, from Egypt or southern Iran, could have been traded by the overland routes.

The role of Omani families controlling much of this trade and their evolving ties with Europeans and their interests is of importance, because it stood behind Suakin’s prosperity and subsequent decline (Al-Thani 2015; Sonbol 2015). The early trade from East Asia was based on sailing vessels arriving from Indian and Omani ports on the monsoons, reaching, however, only as far as the winds permitted, which was usually either Suakin or Aydab depending on the season. Jeddah on the opposite shore attained the same importance, sharing the trade as much as the population. The Hijazi Arabs are distinct from the other Saudi tribes, and

share many characteristics with the Sudanese coastal tribes, something recognised already by Ibn Khaldun in *The Muqaddimah: an introduction to history*, where Hadhramaut, Yemen and Abyssinia are depicted as one region. In addition, Arab scholars writing in the 16th century identified loan words in Arabic coming from various languages: Indian, Persian, Byzantine, Ethiopian, Coptic, Hebraic, and Syriac, highlighting the complex trading relations in the region.

Suakin's advantage over the northern Red Sea ports was its access to livestock, incense and slaves, but this wider market also created a dependence on the overland trade routes for supplies: goods brought by the Bedouin and slaves and gold delivered by traders from the mainland kingdoms. The outcome, expectedly, was a mixing of the various population groups living in Suakin and a representation of the trade goods identified in the material culture discovered at Suakin. Much earlier depictions of the Land of Punt in the reliefs decorating the 14th century BCE Temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari in Western Thebes (Egypt) show certain African/Arab characteristics that could relate to the population of the Suakin area in a distant past. The reliefs show huts on stilts which resemble the houses built on wooden posts excavated in Suakin, which were still in use through the 14th century CE. The stilts, which raised Suakini houses above the floods, are an attestation of the higher water levels of the Red Sea in earlier times.

The mix of discrete populations living in the port began to evolve into a distinct Suakini identity related to the Artega

tribe. Through its links by marriage with the people of Hadhramaut and Omani ports, the tribe brought the populations of East Coast Africa in direct contact with the Gulf and Oman states. Even today Jeddah is occupied by people described as Sudanese, who are in reality distant relatives of their Red Sea neighbours. Trade expansion following the opening by the Portuguese of the African circumnavigation route (first described in the 6th century by Phoenician traders), put pressure on this integrated local culture by introducing new commercial goals into the traditional trade and creating a burgeoning need for labour and therefore slaves, primarily of African origin. This resulted in the East African Arab developed families from older times being pushed out from contemporary Gulf populations by distinctive African rivals, this being a side effect of the European demand for slaves in India, and from the trade route from Mozambique being opened up. By the 1870s, 25% of the population in Muscat and Mutrah was African. The new slave populations were part of East Africa's trade in the late 18th-to-early-19th centuries, only a small share of which went through Suakin. Africans were needed to work in agriculture and the pearl trade. In effect, the Gulf states ended up with large slave populations, some of which were not manumitted until the 1970s. Ras al-Khaimah was 50% African in 1816 (Buckingham 1829: 484). Although the numbers differ, the slave trade amounted to an estimated 300,000 people in the course of the 19th century.

Of importance to understand the nature of the Suakin high-value long-distance trade is the small scale on which it operated, which is why it remained high value

despite expanding European influence. In the 16th century, the first Europeans had attempted to replace the local trade networks but the success of their expanding empires and shortage of European émi-

grés made them increasingly dependent on traditional trade vessels, on the one hand, and on traditional crews in their more modern vessels, on the other hand, to carry the bulk of their trade.



Fig. 5. Sailing vessels: top, Suakini *sambuk* trading in the 1920s—this scale of shipping is now banned; bottom, traditional Indian registered vessels plying the traderoutes from Basra to Gujarat today (Photos: top, Durham Archive; bottom, M.Mallinson)

Suakin's importance for this local trade was its particular suitability for small craft as opposed to the larger steam and other ships that were part of the expanding trade in the late 19th century. Early steam vessels were rare; even in the Gulf, the major lines would visit ports such as Dubai five or six times a year, but this did not lessen the ports importance for the trade. Most of the vessels in Suakin's harbour, right up to the last years of its activity, would have been traditional sailing vessels [Fig. 5

top], carrying pilgrims and high value trade goods to the Hadhramauti and Eastern markets.

Today traditional vessels of this kind ply the trade routes from the Gulf into Gujarat [Fig. 5 bottom], continuing along the Indian coast to ship goods to and from ports all the way to Kolkata on the east coast and on to the Malaysian and Chinese mainland. As the records of the first Europeans attest, this kind of trade was practiced uninterrupted well into the late 20th century.

TRADED ITEMS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL RECORD

While Suakin has been one of the primary ports of this part of the Red Sea since at least the 13th century and probably earlier, its role as the sole major port on the Sudanese stretch of the Red Sea coast following the decline of 'Aydhab in the earlier 15th century has only recently been widely accepted.

For the purposes of this paper, trade can be examined as either based on strictly historical sources, largely European accounts published in English which are fullest for the late 18th–19th centuries, or substantiated by finds from the archaeological record, complemented by early historic accounts. The latter generally covers the 17th century and earlier.

Accounts by European visitors to the region can be used to list the main areas with which Suakin traded and the preferred trade goods prior to the opening of the Suez Canal. Interviews with members of families involved in trade from Suakin give information on items traded in the

late 19th century, which were then considered to be 'treasures' [see *Table 2*].

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF TRADE

Commonly traded goods and the areas which were traded with, mentioned in early European accounts in English and in reminiscences of families formerly living at Suakin, have been listed together [*Table 2*].

Gold and ivory were the most commonly-mentioned trade items during the entire 16th-to-19th centuries. Several records mention gold dust. In the case of gold, it is a continuation or revival, from Roman times at the very least, followed by an early medieval 'gold-rush' in the Eastern Desert and Red Sea Hills, indicated by tombstones from the 9th and 10th centuries from Khor Nubt (see discussion in Power 2008: paragraphs 32–34 for the role of gold and precious stone mining in the founding of ports along the coast). Pearls and turtleshell appear

to be important throughout the greater part of the 18th century. Other exported organic products included gum, coffee, senna and ostrich feathers, hides, cotton, sesame oil and cattle.

Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Suakin grew in importance in the context of trade with the Mediterranean. A snapshot of trade vessel activ-

ity in 1872 shows 18 vessels with a total tonnage of 4331 departed from Suakin [Table 3].

The port was also involved in the slave trade throughout its history, although it is not until the later 19th century that there is historical evidence for a large-scale operation. Augustus B. Wyld (1878) reported that in 1874 Suakin merchants

Table 2. Main types of goods and places traded through Suakin, 15th to 19th centuries. Items in color considered to be 'valuables' (Mallinson et al. 2009: 484–495 and references therein; Taha 2008–2009)

	15th century	17th century	18th century	19th century (to 1860s)	Late 19th century
Places in the trade network	Arabia Egypt Ethiopia India Malaka Pegu	India 'East'	China India	Arabia (Jeddah) Egypt	India Persia (Iran) Egypt Saudi Arabia Europe
Goods or products mentioned	Gold Ivory	Gold Ivory Coffee	Gold Ivory Pearls Myrrh Frankincense Tortoise shell Rhinoceros horn Gum arabic Cassia	Gold Ivory Slaves Pearls Ostrich feathers Tobacco Lime Meerschaum Salt Dhurra Beeswax Gum (arabic?) Hides Senna Cotton	Textiles (silk, carpets) Perfumes Glass Horses Sheep Cattle Camels Sesame oil Cattle feed

Table 3. Tonnage of commodities shipped from Suakin in the late 19th century (Bloss 1937: 249) Conversion to modern units based on the Egyptian system prior to 1891, as follows: 1 *kantar* = 44.928 kg (Cardarelli 2003: 387) and 1 *ardeb* = 96 *keddah*; 1 *keddah* = 2.0625 l (Washburn 1926: 6)

Export item	Details	Weight/ form	Modern units
Gum	Sent to Suez	3460 <i>kantars</i>	155,450 kg
Gum	Sent to Jeddah	13,670 <i>kantars</i>	614,165 kg
Ivory	Sent to Jeddah	30,042 kg	30,042 kg
Sesame	Sent to Jeddah	4514 <i>ardebs</i>	893,772 litres

were acting as forwarding agents for the mercantile houses of Jeddah and their only real trade was in slaves, while a year later Junker reported that the town's 'best traffic is in slaves' (Bloss 1937: 251).

The archaeological record from Suakin has yet to yield any examples of high-value goods, like gold. As for macrobotanical remains identified from the site so far (that is, through 2017), they do not represent the organic products historically described as being either exported or redistributed from Suakin. In this situation, ceramics rise to being exclusive evidence

of the 'valuables' imported to Suakin. Five wares have been noted as likely goods 'of value', either because of the fine quality of the ware and its decoration, or because historically it was considered valuable.

THIN GREY WARE (*QULLAS*)

Sherds of this type include bases with a footring, and bodies with either fine incised decoration or patterns raised in relief [Fig. 6]. Finds of this ware are quite widespread in the Island Town, coming from the Beit el Basha, the 'Market Street' trench adjacent to Beit 'Osman Digna', and



Fig. 6. 'Thin Grey Ware' sherds (Photo L. Smith)

the Muhafaza. The temporal span of this ware is also apparently widespread, finds of sherds occurring in contexts ranging from the 'Market Street' Phase 1, radiocarbon dated to the later 13th–14th century, to Phase 2 in the same trench and the Muhafaza, tentatively dated for now between the 15th and 18th centuries. Similar wares

are known from Old Cairo, again dating to the later Ottoman period there, from the 17th century onwards (A. Gascoigne, personal communication, 2005), although there are also similar wares present on sites in southern Iran dated, for instance, to the 13th-to-14th centuries (S. Priestman, personal communication, 2016).

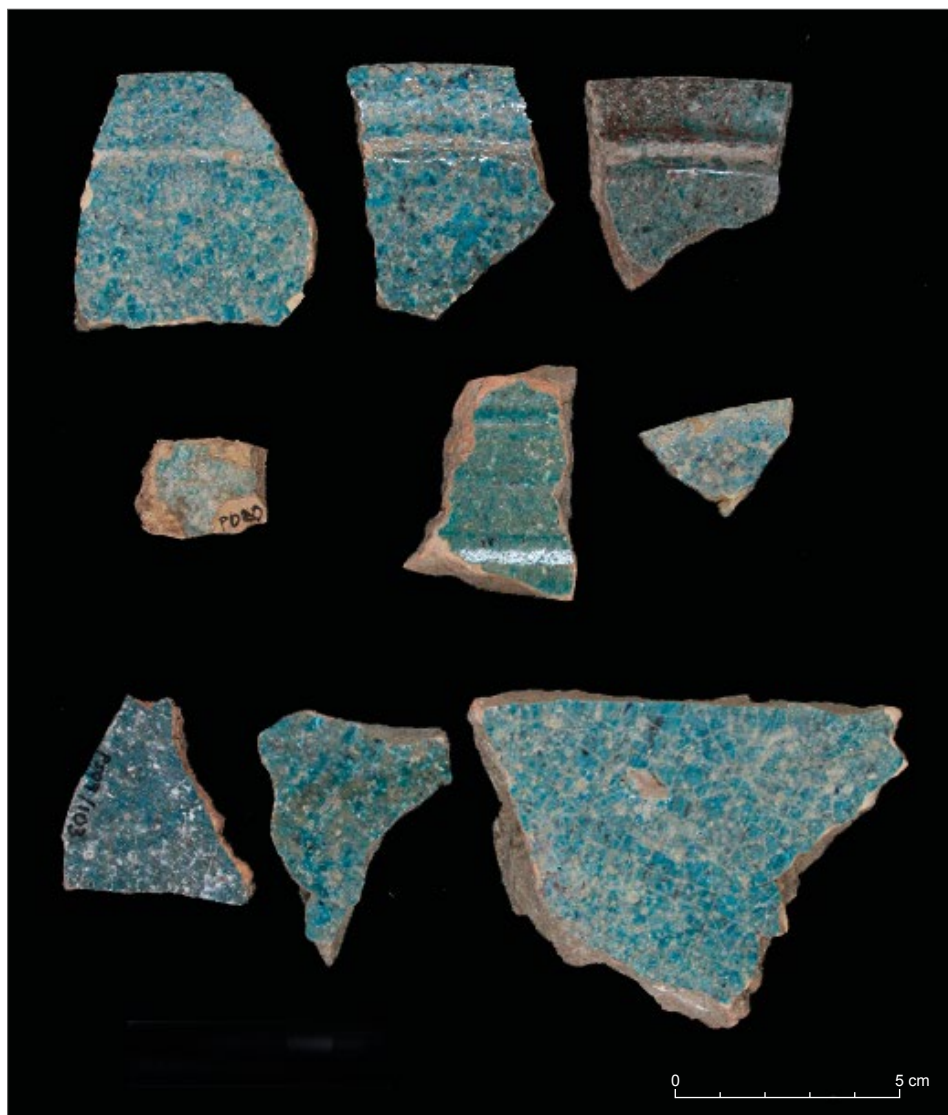


Fig. 7. Turquoise glazed wares (Photo L. Smith)



Fig. 8. Examples of Chinese porcelain from Jingdezhen and Zhangzhou (Photo L. Smith)

ISLAMIC TURQUOISE GLAZED WARES

Sherds of Islamic glazed wares are quite distinctive [Fig. 7], especially in the form of their rims which imitate Chinese Longquan celadons (S. Priestman, personal communication, 2016) and in their turquoise or (in one case) purplish mottled glaze. These sherds at Suakin come mainly from the middle levels of ‘West Trench 1’ [see Fig. 2], and are attributed by radiocarbon and stratigraphic dating to between the 15th and early 16th centuries. This ware at Suakin is comparable to that widespread around the Gulf, on the Iranian and East African coasts, for example, Kilwa, Shanga and Fort Jesus. Generally, they are dated between the 14th and late 17th centuries. This ware was also compared with material from the Old Cairo Groundwater Lowering Project, and it was noted that some sherds were also very similar.

Given the widespread distribution of this ware, it is probable that it may

have had several production sites in the western Indian Ocean region. However, further comparative work needs to be done before a definite provenance can be determined (Smith et al. 2012: 181–182; Phillips and Smith 2016: 9–10).

PORCELAIN

Porcelain (Hard paste)

The majority of sherds are from blue-and-white vessels [Fig. 8], mostly bowls, of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) Dynasties. Most have been identified as products of the long-lasting major production sites at Zhangzhou in Fujian Province and at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province (Phillips and Smith 2016). Such ‘Blue and White’ Chinese porcelain wares continued to be displayed in domestic contexts, along with Ottoman ‘Blue and White’ wares, and were considered a symbol of wealth in recent times (Taha 2008–2009 and personal communication).

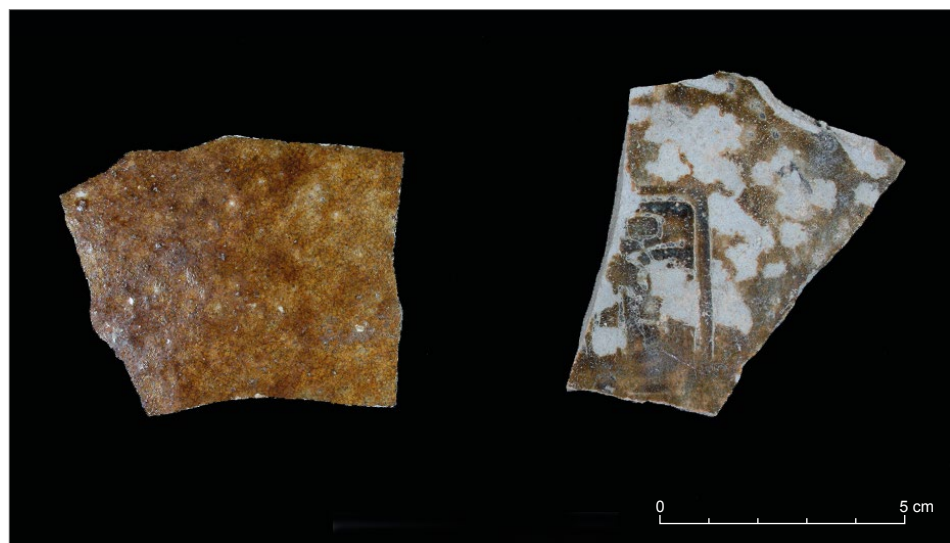


Fig. 9. Sherds of East Asian stoneware: PS10/16, PS10/74 (Photos G.J. Owen)

STONEWARE EAST ASIAN (CHINESE?)

Two sherds are from vessels which are likely to have been imported for the valuable (or desirable) contents shipped in them, rather than as valuable ceramics. These comprise stoneware closed vessel (probably jar) sherds [Fig. 9] of generally East Asian origin: China or Southeast Asia. Both have a slightly streaky mottled honey-brown and dark brown glaze, and may represent the same vessel. One includes a partly preserved stamped, possibly Chinese, motif or text that although not yet definitely identified, may refer to wine (A. Gerritson and L. Liu, personal communication, 2014) within an angular border (Smith et al. 2012: 184, Fig. 18:17). If of Chinese origin, these could date early, between the East and West Jin Dynasty (to 420) and the Song (12th century), though this seems a bit early for the main long-distance trade activity at Suakin. PS10/16 is from an 'intrusive' context, so the two sherds could have been derived from elsewhere. Similar sherds, one including a stamped text (preserved: long, 'dragon') in an angular border, have been recovered at the port

of Julfar (UAE), where they are dated to the 16th and 17th centuries (Hansman 1985: 33–34, Fig. 9.e, g–i, l, m) later than the Suakin contexts.

CELADON WARE AND IMITATIONS

Only a very few sherds of characteristically green-glazed 'celadon' [Fig. 10] ware have been recovered. A few of these give a potential link with East Asia rather than China. Where datable, these are likely to date to the Ming Dynasty. One, PS13/177, from the test excavation to the southwest of the Shafa'i Mosque in 2013, is of Chinese manufacture, but others, PS09/79 and PS09/97 from the trench to the west of the Beit el-Basha, are imitations of Longquan celadons, either from kilns within China, or in Southeast Asia (M. Lin and R. Zhang, personal communication, 2013; A. Gerritsen and Z. Liu, personal communication, 2014).

This material seems to have been valued by the merchants themselves, both for use and temporary display. While they may have been displayed in the cupboards or in niches, that were a feature of some of the rooms of Suakini houses such as the



Fig. 10. Examples of Celadons (Photo L. Smith)

diwan in Beit Khorshid Effendi (Mallinson et al. 2009: 478), there is no early evidence indicating this. However, in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, and even into more recent times, sets of imported 'china' were displayed in cabinets as a symbol of wealth. At Suakin, the use of ceramics does not appear to have formed part of permanent display, as was done in the stone towns of the Swahili Coast, where Chinese ceramics were incorporated in house (and sometimes tomb) decoration. There is no surviving evidence clearly indicating ceramics were plastered on to the walls, as occurred on the Swahili Coast. The very great majority of imported ceramics at Suakin, both from elsewhere in the Islamic world, and from East Asia, were found in contexts, in a fragmented state. As such they had clearly passed beyond being valued, were discarded and formed part of the 'midden' deposits.

WOODEN FINDS

The main evidence other than ceramics for traded 'valuables' so far identified comes from wood found on site. Some wood is present as necessarily being essential to house construction, but some could be seen as valuable in that it relates to construction of the *rawashin*. These were important practically for control of light and ventilation, and as a consequence of the latter, for the provision of cool water, by the placing of water jars where the breeze coming through the *roshan* would cool them by evaporation. They were also important socially, for indicating wealth and status through display on the exterior of the houses, for reception of guests in the *diwan*, and for social interaction within the house, including women being able

to see outside, but not themselves be seen. *Rawashin* were important for the urban space as well, as they provided shade during the hot summers for passers-by walking underneath.

Greenlaw (1995: 103) stated that teak was brought from 'Java', and subsequently used in house-building in the Island Town. Identification of wood species from some window grilles, carried out at the Technical University of Dresden in 1976 (Hinkel 1992: 221), showed that wood of the genus *Shorea* (*Dipterocarpaceae*) had been used. This genus is found only in Asia (Sri Lanka to south China, Moluccas to Lesser Sunda Islands), and so tends to support the idea of wood having been imported from Asia generally.

Recent identifications of 32 wood samples, as part of the current project at Suakin (Clapham 2016), showed that 12 are teak (*Tectona grandis*). These include probable pieces from a *roshan* re-erected during the 1930s in the Muhafaza (at that time a museum and guest-house). Teak is native to India, Myanmar, parts of Thailand, and Laos. Although teak plantations were established in equatorial Africa during the later 19th and early 20th century, the first such plantation in Sudan was in 1919 (Verjee 2013). This is only just before the abandonment of Suakin, so the trees could not have been used for major structural parts. Therefore, these identifications of teak fit with Greenlaw's hypothesis that wood was shipped in bulk from 'Java'. This idea is also supported by ethnographic evidence: descendants of people who lived in the Island Town remembered wood as being known as 'jawi', related to 'Java', meaning that the wood came from or was imported from Java in East Asia (Taha 2008–2009).

CONCLUSIONS

Suakin was important from the 16th to the 19th centuries (and beyond) for the trade in valuables, especially gold, ivory, slaves, incense from the hinterland, pearls from the marine environment, and for import of valuable ceramics, textiles (silk, carpets) perfume glass, spices and wood. The former have little visibility in the archaeological record, whereas the latter are visible to an extent. Hence a combination of archaeological, historical and ethnographic evidence needs to be considered to build up a picture of the trade in valuables, in particular, and the way(s) in which such trade was carried out.

The location of the site was important. The development of Suakin was related to routes from production areas

and intermediate trade entrepôts in the interior. It was also related to the location of the port relative to the easier routes through the Red Sea Hills.

In carrying out the trade, personal contacts were significant. It seems evident that Suakin's rulers, administrators and merchant families were adept at enacting and facilitating, perhaps even manipulating, the economic aims of communities both within Africa and over the wider world. Indeed, by cross-transmitting the respective desired commodities and base products of the interior and exterior communities, the merchants both catalysed and transported the wider aspirations of these vastly differing communities.

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