Since Antiquity the prime export of southern Arabia has been the resin of the Frankincense tree, a practice which was continued with great success by the Rashidun rulers of Yemen. Their extension to the Dhofar region of Modern Oman saw the growth of the port of Al-Balid (Salalah).

The Hormuz Kingdom’s proximity to the Mughal state of Iran allowed it to act as the middleman towards the Indian Ocean and Arabian trade networks. The Hormuz-controlled port of Gachet was renowned in particular for trading in the famed Arabian horses.

With the establishment of permanent trading posts in China and India in the 16th, Muscat became an important entrepôt for Portuguese merchant vessels. In particular the influx of Chinese porcelain left its trace on in the architecture, acting as decor of high-status homes and mosques.

The Omani conquest of the Portuguese domain in East Africa after 1650 permitted the Ya’Arab to connect to the African economy, trading in carved tropical hardwoods, slaves and ivory. Successful merchants often built themselves large palatial mansions, decorated lavishly with stuccoed walls and wooden carvings.

The Indian and Lusatiyyah communities which eventually settled in Muscat and Muscat were known primarily as traders in staple foodstuffs. Rice, spices and dry fish not only supplied the market, but Indian cuisine also became widespread throughout Oman.
**ADAM**

Typical of oasis settlements on the desert fringes, Adam specialized in exchange between settled (hostil) and nomadic (bozal) peoples. However, such oasis towns were also responsive to influences of maritime trade extending inland, as its decorated miharab of the mid-15th century would attest.

**BAHLA**

The walled oasis centre of Bahlal lies on the trade route that extended along the southern edges of the Oman Mountains, connecting Sur on the Indian Ocean with Juwayiyya on the Persian Gulf. Ideas, pottery, artefacts and peoples flowed through imparting a cosmopolitan character.

**NIZWA**

Focus of Baridim since early-Islam, Bahlal travelled to the coast to sell its spices. Around 1350 CE, al-Bakri, 1096 CE frequently picked up glowing descriptions of Nizwa and its gardens fed by springs. Its markets catered for meat and fresh produce, diverse metal crafts and agricultural implements.

**QALHAT**

This 13th century port town of the Hormuz Empire rose to prominence following Sohar’s demise as the main entrepôt. Qalhat developed formidable links with Iran and India, trading amongst other things in horses. The latest artefacts of Bahlal Mihara’s Tomb show Indian Ocean architectural influences.

**MUSCAT**

The Portuguese converted Muscat into a formidable town by building extensive defensive systems to guard the natural harbour that had supported human habitation since pre-history. The Jalan and Misfat forts flanked this cosmopolitan port town and influenced later Oman’s military architecture.

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**GEO-ECONOMIC BOUNDARIES**

Omani markets as points of exchange made convenient use of the ecological interfaces that shaped the landscapes. Since the 15th century Muscat grew in importance as a port, supported by contiguous Muharib, first under Portuguese, and later under Yalah and Ali Al Khodr ruler. A series of smaller ports helped move the goods along the coast, which then accessed interior markets through the transhumance tracks. The Oman interior markets operated through the larger towns of Nizwa and Bahlal, and made use of foothill and desert frontier interfaces to transit with mountains, plains and nomadic tribes. 12th century Al Janbad developed as a foothill market town, which attracted inhabitants from the Jabal Al Akhdar and was connected to other foothill markets, such as Al-Tawakh along the Shariyyat desert edge, providing points of exchange with nomads. The continuous settlement fabric along the uninterrupted Batinah coastal also exhibits the numerous points of exchange that existed between water and land.

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**TRADE PATTERNS**

The Indian Ocean trade links that brought in goods and wealth also introduced external influences through peoples, ideas and at times, more tangibly, through architectural expressions. Oman was always part of the And Al-Minh, as the Sassanian formed this maritime world, which had since introduced Harapan pottery from western India. The interaction with the Indian sub-continent is reflected in the arcade of foliated arches at Mirbat’s Al-Balad, also evident between walled and land. Another persistent ancient influence has been from Iran, which is the likely candidate for the mid-12th century introduction of the decorated miharab, a feature unique to Oman within the Arabian Peninsula. Expansion of Omani maritime interests along the East African littoral, imported cultural habits and architectural motifs through Zanzibar – decorated doors made by African and Indian craftsmen – as well as Chinese porcelain artifacts, were draped across to Oman and adorn many merchant houses of the Oman interior.
MIHRAB

The decorated mihrab (prophet’s niche) is a unique feature of some mosques in central Oman. The earliest known example is from Taif (Al-Aitha), 8th CE. An excellent product of cultural exchanges between Southwestern Arabia, Iran and East Africa, reflected through the Indian Ocean trade, the reception of the mihrab in Oman was shaped by the moderate and mystical strands present within Islam, that repeatedly strove towards resolving the iranomorphic.

DESIGN

The focus of the decorated mihrab is a low-arched, heavily scalloped shallow alcove. Its arches supported by receding sets of half columns. Unlike in Sunna mosques, this inaccessible niche conforms to the fossil requirement that the imam should always remain part of the congregation.

DECORATIVE MOTIFS

A key motif employed in the decorated mihrab is a wide band of impressed alternating small and large roundels, encircled in a closed void-knot pattern, set within intricate九龙. Rounded square representations and the arabesque have denoted endless repose of time/space across the Middle East.

PORCELAIN INSERTS

The early 17th-century revival of the mihrab tradition incorporated Chinese porcelain ware as decorative features. A small number of these were already in circulation before the Portuguese expansion of the trade. The earliest example from Marash (16th CE) is identical to a sample found from the 17th Luna Snail.

INSCRIPTIONS

In addition to the shahada la ilaha illallah (Muhammad), no inscriptions exist on the mihrab. The artisan, Abdullah b. Qasim al-Husayni, and his descendents from Marash contributed significantly to the revival.
The traditional markets of Oman, the souqs, were the mainstays for household shoppers as well as large-scale trade in high value goods from overseas. For the most part it is possible to distinguish between the weekly marquets, usually held on either Fridays or Thursdays in the vicinity of the souq, and the more permanent daily markets, which were open in the afternoons. The weekly markets are open structures, usually providing only shade and space for livestock and other wares. Auctions take place here, where entire herds of cattle, goats or camels can be bought or sold. The weekly markets of towns such as Surr, Adam and fan were also the main point of interaction between the settled peoples of the towns and the nomadic Bedouins of the Rub al-Khali desert. The daily markets, normally held in the mid-morning and mid-afternoon, are built enclosures with up to several dozen stalls. Each stall of a shopkeeper is allocated space to present wares or produce crafts, with the remainder normally used only for overnight storage.

INFORMAL MARKET

The last three decades or so have seen the growth of large expatriate communities settling in Oman, consisting mostly of people from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The predominantly low economic- and often illegal immigration status of many expatriate workers do not permit them to rent modern housing leading them to live in the ancient abandoned houses of villages and towns. The increasing size of these informal communities has lead to the creation of entire quarters inhabited almost exclusively by migrant labourers, many of whom have established businesses and practice informal trade.

To meet their commercial needs and also to engage in business the inhabitants of Oman’s informal settlement quarters have established open-market areas for foodstuffs and household items and clothes. In towns such as Sahibat (shown here) these markets are held in the open spaces, streets and lanes of the old quarters. Creating a culturally distinct layer of commercial and social activities, the ubiquitous re-use of the traditional Omani urban environment, originally geared towards maximal domestic privacy, is creating instead a vibrant public community.

PORTS

Despite being one of the Indian Ocean’s most important sea-faring nations, Oman’s naval infrastructure was traditionally quite basic. Ancient ports such as Sur, Salalah, and Bahla relied primarily on sheltered coves and beaches to promote maritime business, and tended not to have elaborate portary constructions. Still today smaller vessels tend to be beached for loading and unloading, while larger ships for long-distance trade such as dhows, were usually loaded with tenders. The beaches and coves adjacent to sea-side towns functioned not only as harbours, but also as ship-building sites, markets, and for the preparation of dried fish.

While some ports, such as Mutrah acted as large markets for produce that was intended specifically for the Omani markets, other sites such as Muscat (located only 2km from Mutrah) functioned more as trans-shipment points for long-distance trade, in particular between East Asia and Europe. This was complemented with the establishment of warehouses, funduq and the provision of a steady water supply for the ships.