

Kohlan

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Driving down from the high plateau of al-Ashmur to Wadi Seres, the major regional wadi, one can see the *husn* of Kohlan perched on an oddly striped black and pink cliff called Kata'at 'Izzan; the town looks like a piece which has fallen from the major plateau of al-Ashmur.

Until one drives around Kata'at 'Izzan, the town appears to be small; then one suddenly discovers the astonishing sight of tall buildings tightly huddled together, covering the northern slope of the mountain and overlooking from a thousand metres above the wadi system and the midlands of the al-Sawd district.

The town of Kohlan surprises the visitor with its apparent quietness. Only on the day of the market, which is mainly an agricultural market, the lower part of the town is filled with the sounds of horns and motors which symbolise for Yemenis the new life-style. What used to make Kohlan an important centre — the coffee trade, an administrative status as *qada* centre, and being a station along the old Hajjah-Amran road — have more or less disappeared. Coffee cultivation has declined; Kohlan is only a *nahiya* centre (district), and the new asphalt road bypasses the town through the southern slope of Kata'at 'Izzan. It has, however, become one of Yemen's most important tourist attractions with its spectacular

location and its well-preserved historical buildings.

In 1216, the Imam Abdullah ibn-Hamza, whose capital was Dhofar/Dhibin (north-east of Amran), put his brother Amir Yahya ibn-Hamza in charge of setting up a new administrative centre in the highlands west of Amran in order to control the area and collect the taxes. It is not known whether the strategic site of Kohlan, which the Amir chose, had some construction on it already or not. One can only say that the *husns* and the *hukuma* buildings which are standing today are dated from the period of Amir Yahya ibn-Hamza. The Qadi of Kohlan mentioned that some stones with Himyaritic inscriptions had been found at the location of al-Husn and below the *suq* but there is no historical mention of the town of Kohlan before the thirteenth century. There is only mention of Husn al-'Affar, a Himyarite site south of Kohlan and part of the district. The Amir made the town the centre of the *qada* which then extended to include the Hajjah area. During his rule of about forty years, he had the walls of the town built and when he died he was buried in his mosque, al-Amir mosque, next to the *hukuma* buildings. His tomb, with its carved inscription on wood, is a significant example of Dhofar/Dhibin tombs dating from the same period.

With the arrival of Zaydi Sayyads, Kohlan town became the *hijra* of the Kohlan tribe, the tribe of Bani Shawar ibn-Gudam (whose tomb lies on the top of Jabal Din also called Jabal Gudam) in the Hamdan region. It belongs to the Hashid Confederation but due to its peripheral position, it has not been intensely involved in the Hashid tribal conflicts.

The town is still the *hijra* of this small tribe (today it can only rally 4,000 men in cases of conflict). There are no records of significant historical tribal actions and one wonders if it has been simply overshadowed by the regional Zaydi history or whether they had such a prosperous

agricultural income that they kept busy through centuries with hoes rather than with arms.

The *suq* developed steadily by attracting the agricultural produce of the surrounding mountains and wadis; it also attracted merchants from the Sana'a and Hajjah region who were marketing coffee throughout Yemen and exporting it from the ports of Aden and Hodeidah. Taxes on coffee reached twelve tonnes of coffee per annum in an average year which meant that a hundred and twenty tonnes of coffee came through the Kohlan *suq* annually. In addition, the traditional trade of wheat and sorghum flourished. The majority of the inhabitants of the town, who were tribal men and therefore would not get involved directly in trading activities, were prosperous landowners whose coffee crops were being farmed by the lower-class inhabitants of the wadis under a share-cropping system. The wealth thus generated allowed the inhabitants to take care of their town and its defence without depending on the Imam's army. Even during the two Turkish occupations, they managed to confine the Turks to the village of Beit al-Wali, south of the town.

Of the Zaydi rulers of the town, few left traces of their stay besides Yahya ibn-Hamza. The Imam Hadi ibn-Sherafeddin lived in the town and built al-Hadi Mosque where he was buried in the seventeenth century. In 1924, the ruler of the town, Yahya Shayban refused to move the Hajjah as ordered by the Imam Yahya. Consequently, an army was sent to fight the rebel, and after his defeat, the centre of the *qada* was transferred to Hajjah.

Despite its change in status, the town retained its importance because of the taxes it generated. Thirty years ago, Imam Ahmed built the Ahmed Mosque and a *samsarah* (shelter for travellers) which is currently used as a health centre.

After the revolution, the town lost its political as well as its economic importance. The government no longer allo-



Kohlan.

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cates a budget for the repair and maintenance of al-Husn; as a consequence it is rapidly deteriorating. About a quarter of the town's population has migrated to towns such as Hajjah, Amran and Sana'a.

The inhabitants have made efforts to improve the condition of the town by constructing a sewerage network and roof rainfall catchment systems in each house to increase the domestic water supply of the town. However, because of its limited economic prospects and the costly restraints posed by its existing physical plant and its unusual geographical location, the town is doomed to lose more and more of its population in the future.

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Kohlan. His Highness The Aga Khan on the site visit in Kohlan.

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