SUAKIN, MEMORY OF A CITY

The island-city of Suakin[1] is located on the western shore of the Red Sea, in the center of the long, thin portion of sea, which separates Africa from Arabia. Oval in form, measuring approximately 400 by 500 meters, the island occupies the end portion of a lagoon, inside a canal formed by a barrier reef, together with two other islands known under the names of Condenser Island and Quarantine Island (fig. 1). Suakin is connected to the mainland by an isthmus built in the nineteenth century under General Gordon at the time of the English domination.

Since ancient times the Red Sea has been one of the great instruments of cultural relations and economic exchanges involving the entire zone of the Mediterranean, Central Africa and the Mid East, as well as the Far East and China. With the rise of Islam in the seventh century, and its rapid spread in the Mediterranean and Asian lands, not to mention the start of the practice of pilgrimages to the holy cities of Arabia, commercial traffic on the Red Sea experienced intense growth. Added to this was the increasingly large influx of those newly converted to the faith in Northern and Central Africa. Suakin became a secure port for merchandise and for pilgrims headed for the Mecca and Medina. From the time of the destruction of Aidhab in 1429 up to the creation of the Port of Sudan in the first years of the twentieth century, it was the most important commercial port of call in Muslim Africa. A well-known geographer[2] of the nineteenth century, Eliseo Reclus, described the island in this way: "in 1882, Suachin or Sawakin was the safest port in the Red Sea. In terms of the layout of the surroundings, it resembled the Port of Massaua. The seaside strip formed of coral reefs is interrupted by a twisting canal, which penetrates four kilometres inland, ending in an oval-shaped basin measuring roughly two kilometres from north to south.... Two round islands, rimmed in part by reefs, stand just a few meters above the water level of the basin: One of them, Sceik-Abdallà, holds no other constructions but sepulchres, while the other, further to the south, is the site of the city of Suakin proper. The main port is found between these two islands... here, in what resembles a lake, seemingly closed off by land on all sides, vessels are offered ideal protection from the winds and the sea. The open port, sitting in the midst of an area whose many shoals and reefs make entry extremely hazardous, well deserves its title "The Port of the Savior Gods", thought by numerous authors to date from the time of the Ptolemies."

Geographically and economically, Suakin became a part of a chain of development involving settlements, which were interrelated in terms of their positions and functions, as well as the firmly entrenched political sub-divisions, which held in the area. One need merely think of the matching pairs of ports at opposite ends of the sea which made it possible to cross the body of water in relatively brief periods of time: Quseyr-El Wejh, Berenice-Yambo, Suakin-Jeddah, Massaua-Hodeida and Asab-Mokha (fig. 2).

In the nineteenth century the opening of the Suez Canal created a direct outlet between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, increasing traffic and trade up through the modern age. But despite this development, the decline of Suakin was not long in coming. In the course of the twentieth century, political and geographical factors led to an inevitable downfall in the fortunes of this economic and mercantile zone of the Red Sea, marking a watershed in the process of economic and cultural modification affecting the entire area. Many population centers, such as Suakin, Aidhab, Massaua and Mokha, just to name but a few, fell into a state of total abandonment, heading towards the inevitable condition of "dead city".

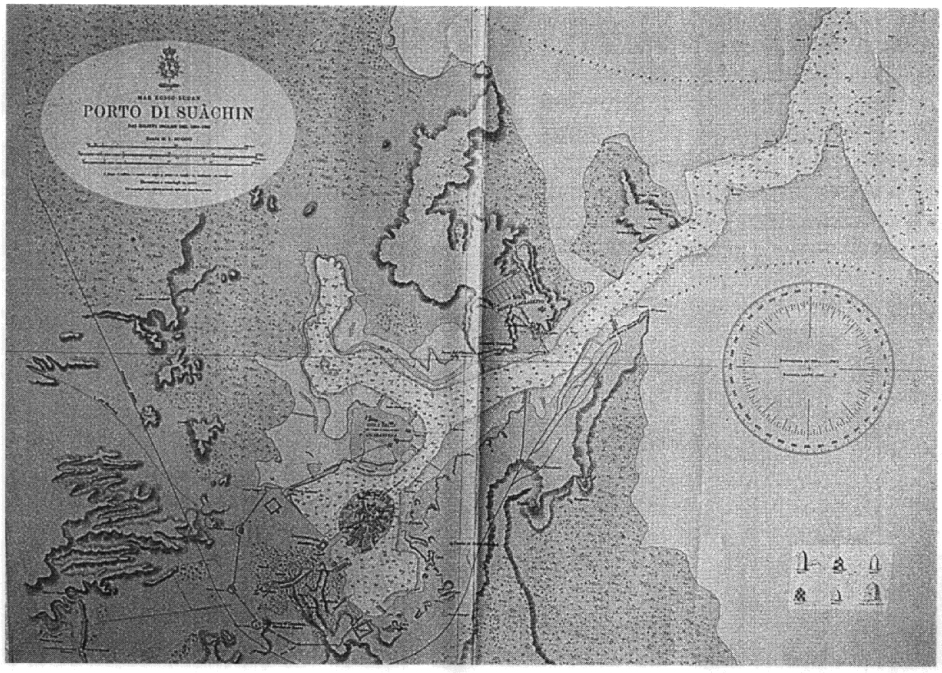
Unfortunately Suakin is now a ghost town. "A drop in the population of the town from 50.000 in 1904 to less than 4000 in 1923 made this unique sea port a mere necropolis" wrote Magdy Tewfik as early as 1981. No one lives on the island itself, as the few remaining locals have taken up residence in the Geyf quarter on the mainland, where shacks have taken the place of the Arabic and Turkish style houses. An observer at the beginning of the twentieth century described what he had seen: 3 "A narrow coral canal 506 meters in length separates the island from the African continent, to which Suakin is tied by a dike approximately 50 meters in length protected by a fortified post. At the entry to the dike is a charming arched gate, which can be closed. From here one reaches the mainland quarter of Keif. The customs and government buildings are the main constructions on the city-island; the most handsome residences are the richly appointed, white, three-story houses reminiscent of those of Jeddah. Contrasting with these structures are the simple, formless baroque constructions of the natives. The bazaar is made up of stand form, which Greeks sell beverages, together with a small street holding stores. There is no European quarter in Suakin. The half dozen Europeans who have taken up residence live in slightly more comfortable homes, located near the shacks of the natives. The city has only one school, which is considered to be among the best in all of the Sudan.

A fortified wall flanked by six forts and further protected by an external wall surrounds the suburb of Keif, located on the mainland. The population is much more numerous than that of the island-city. In the bazaar are the streets where business is carried out, irregularly shaped ways, which hold the establishments of smiths and leather craftsmen. Outside of this suburb, which forms a long oasis in the midst of salty marshes and desert-like steppes, are wells surrounded by gardens and palm groves. These provide the city with the water it needs."[3]

The noble houses, mosques, and zawiyas adorned with

stucco and masharabiyas are no longer to be seen, having been replaced by piles of ruins. This is how the city appeared to me when I first had a chance to visit it in 1982[4] I felt a strong emotion on passing through Gordon's Gate and entering the city, though the striking appearance which the city projects from afar immediately vanishes. Ninety percent of the buildings are in ruins. Here and there one can see pieces of walls, fragments of façades and, standing out above these ruins, almost intact, the two minarets which belonged to the city's most important mosques. The best preserved buildings were the Khorshid House, the site of the Bank of Egypt, plus the Muhafaza - the government headquarters - and only a very few others which had survived the "earthquake" of abandonment that proved to be the principal cause of the "death" of Suakin. The corral stone which had shown forth in all its different shades of pink throughout the centuries could not resist the neglect and abandonment: proving to be too tender without a protective coat of plaster and crumbled away like snow melts under a hot sun.
The enticing appearance created by this material in bygone times, when visitors and merchants made trips to the island, leaving valuable historical evidence, is a thing of the past. The handsome architecture and the numerous emporiums of the city have taken their place in the site's historic memory. Today, through the various historical sources and nostalgic recollections, which remain, it is possible to conjure up, the hustle and bustle of life and commercial activity in the port city. As the sixteenth century Venetian geographer and traveller M. Livio Sanuto stated: "Suachen è luogo sopra il Mar Rosso ed è quello, che è porto alli confini delle terre del Pretegianni[5], e nel principio dell'entrare nell'Egitto, e nella fronte delle signorie de i popoli Nubu havendo come in mezo li popoli Belloi. A questo luogo giungono coloro, che di Egitto partono per andare alla corte del Pretegianni, perciochè voltano quindi le spalle a tramontana, va verso mezogiorno caminando. Partendosi da questa Suachen, ed andando dietro la costa del mar verso l'isola di Mazua, dicono essere tutto il Paese pieno di boschi, che non vi si può passare. E lontano questo luogo del Suachen da Risa, che è posta su il Nilo, lungo nel fine dell'Egitto, per quattordici giornate di caravana de' nostri miglia; è chi esce dal Suachen caminando à settentrione, entra nè più nè meno nei Paesi dell'Egitto"[6].
Here is the memory of the grandeur and decay of Suakin, of the fate of a city which once shone forth with all the riches imaginable, but which also disappeared without creating much of a stir. Its past could not save it from its present-day death. Suakin failed to survive

MAP OF THE RED-SEA AREA



a mortal challenge: technology. Its centuries-old port was left to die in the space of just a few years, to be replaced by the new and modern Port of Sudan, which could usurp its function but not its history.

The oldest historical reference to Suakin comes from Ibn Battuta, who tells of having visited the island-city in 1330 on his return from a pilgrimage to the Mecca. Having left Jiddah for Aidhab, he was forced by a storm to take shelter in the port of Ras Daw'ir, which he claims was located halfway between Suakin and Aidhab. This is how the author describes the island: "Sawakin - Elle est à environ six milles du continent, et n'a point d'eau potable, ni des grains, ni d'arbres. On y apporte l'eau dans des bateaux, et il y a des citernes pour recuillir l'eau de pluie. C'est une île vaste, où l'on trouve la viande d'autruche, de gazelle et d'onagre; elle a beaucoup de chèvres, ainsi que du laitage et du beurre, dont on exporte une partie à la Mecque. ...C'était au temps de mon arrivée dans cette île, le cherif Zeid, fils d'Abu Nemy. Son père a été émir de la Mecque, ainsi que ses deux frères, après ce dernier....."[7]. Nevertheless, this description leaves room for doubt, as many authors, myself included, are inclined to believe that Ibn Battuta never visited Suakin, and that the description he provided applies to the nearby island of Aqiq.

In any event, a number of centuries must go by before we receive a more precise and detailed description of the city, this time as remembered by Don Juan da Castro[8], a Portuguese sea captain who visited it in 1540: "The situation of the city is in this manner. In the midst of a circular nook stands a flat island, almost perfectly round and level with the water, about a mile in compass. In this space there is no foot of ground but what is taken up with houses; so that all the island is a city, and all the city an island: This is Suaken. On the East, southeast and Southwest, its distance from the land is not over a bow-shot. The road for ships lies round about the city to the distance of a great crossbow-shot; having everywhere six or seven fathom of water, so that ships may cast anchor at pleasure, in a mud bottom. This road is encompassed with a great shoal, and that by others, which render it almost inaccessible by sea."[9]

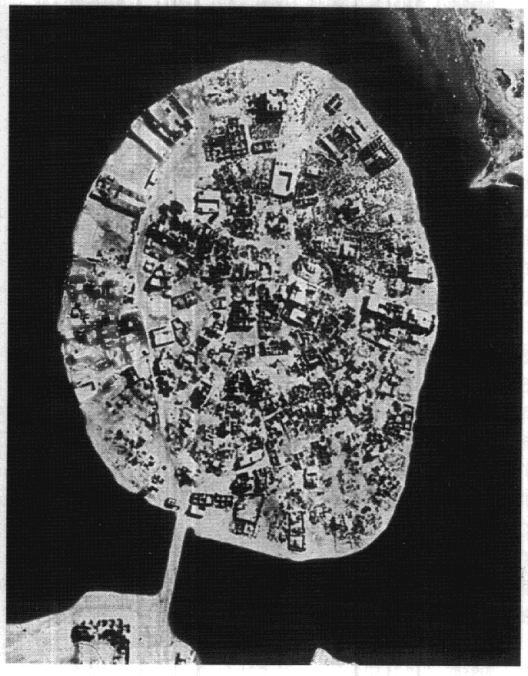
When Lord Valentia visited the island in 1805, he described the city as being "almost in ruins", though this claim should not be taken literally, given that his description continues as follows: "Two minars give it a handsome appearance at a distance and the buildings, being whitewashed and on an elevation, look much better than they really are. It covers the whole of a small island as it did in the days of Da Castro, but the extensive trade, which according to his account rendered it superior to every city he had seen except Lisbon...."[10]

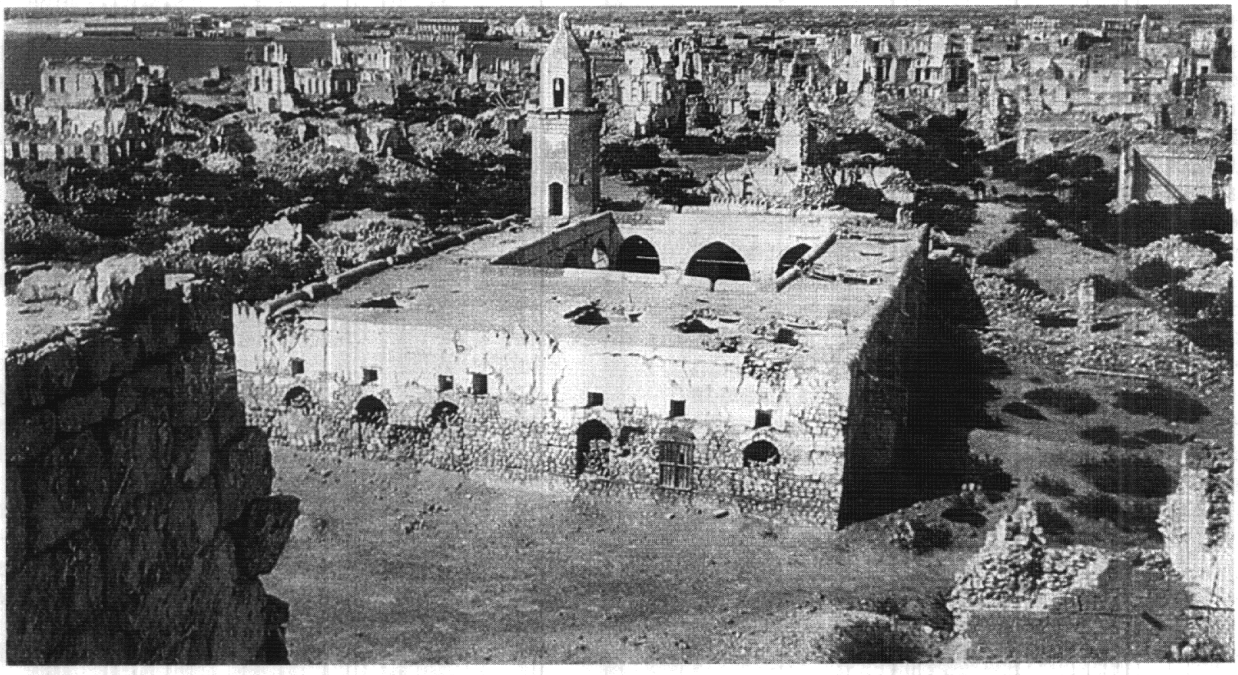
Guillame Lejean visited Suakin in 1860[11] and described it in the following terms: "la petite ville, qui remplit exactement une île presque ronde d'environ cent vingt pas de diamètre, présente à l'arrivant son seul quartier confortable et pittoresque, celui du nord, qui embrasse tous les monuments de la cité. Ces monuments sont: les deux mosquées, dont la principale est un teké de fakirs ou de derviches: le prétoire du mufti, chapelle microscopique, dont le pied baigne dans la mer; quelques fort belles maisons de négociants, ..., derrière la grande mosquée, autour de la place de la Douane, le palais du Gouvernement, la douane, le bureau de l'agence des vapeurs de la mer Rouge, l'agence de la ligne télégraphique du Caire à Singapour."

The History of Suakin

The history of Suakin is naturally tied to that of the Red Sea and to the history of the Sudan. It is likely, though no documentation exists that, as early as the age of ancient Egypt and the ancient Greeks and Romans, the port served as a critical stop for commercial exchanges. Here the pharaohs bought precious merchandise, including gold, ivory and incense. Tradition holds that during the reign of King Solomon (965-926 BC), the Queen of Saba passed through Suakin. At the time of the Ptolemies (332-30 BC), the Port of Suakin was known under the name of the "Port of Good Tidings". It is very likely that the Romans also considered the city a secure port along the routes between the Mediterranean and the Orient. However, no

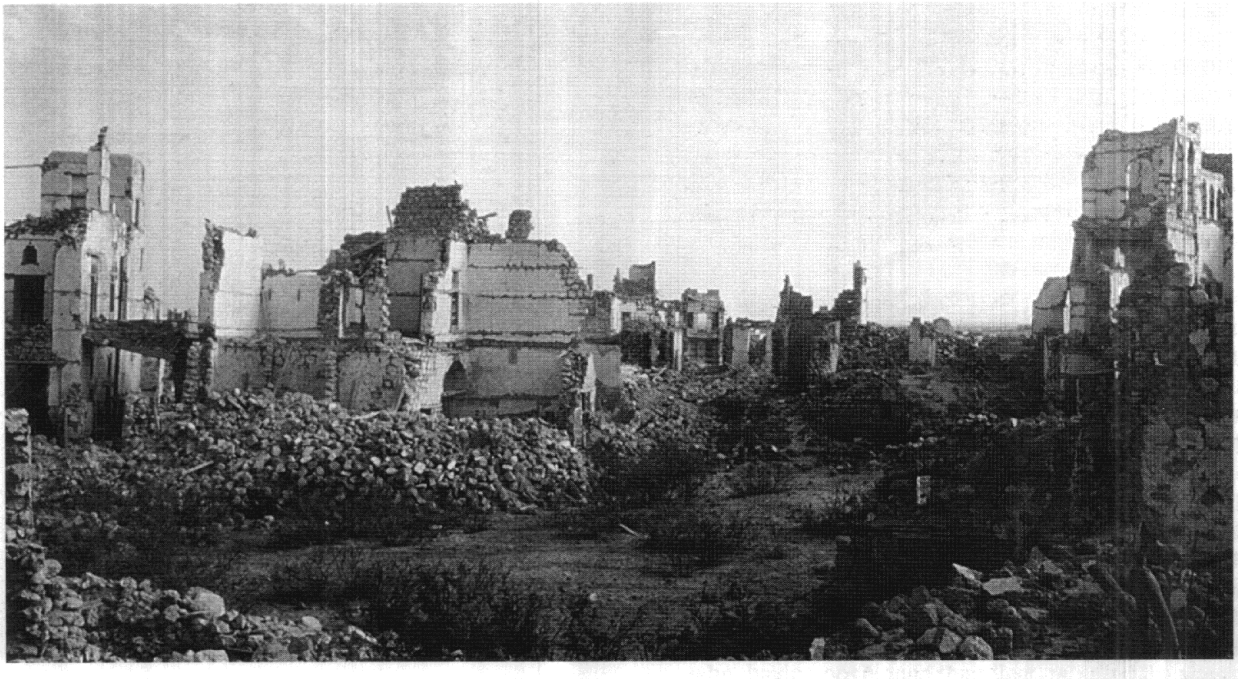
AERIAL VIEW (NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC)





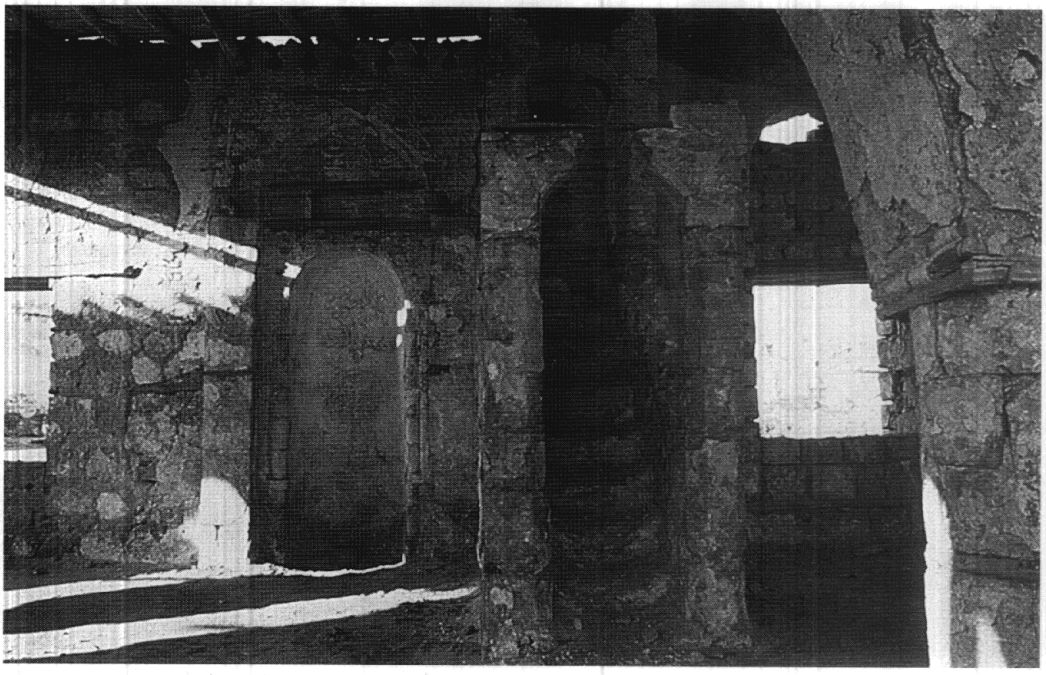
THE SHAFAI'S MOSQUE (CALIA)

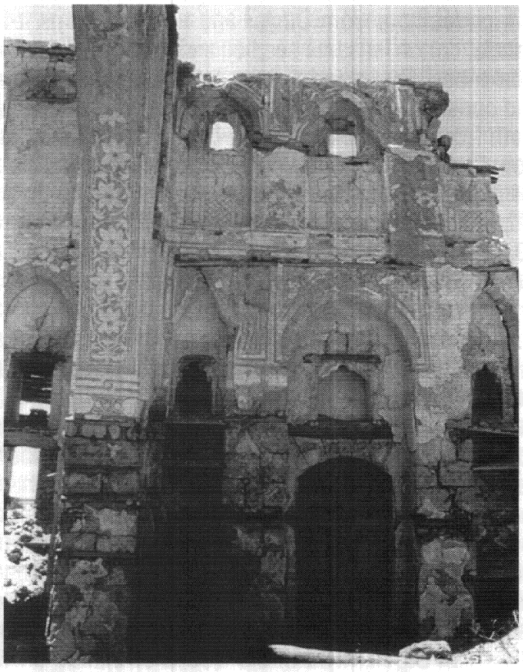
VIEW OF A STREET (CALIA)



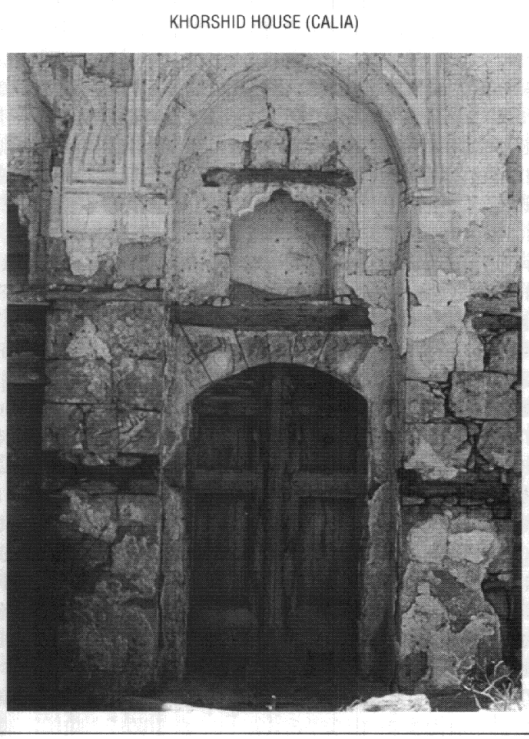
traces remain of its ancient past to prove this.
In fact, the documented history of Suakin does not begin until the rise of Islam and the conquest of Syria and Egypt by the Arabs in 641, though there is some difficulty in determining whether the conquest of Egypt at that time included the southern territories as well. There is no doubt that individual Arabs penetrated into the south, settling along the coasts of the Red Sea, where they came into contact with the local tribes, such as the Beja[12], whose women they married, later converting the tribe as a whole to Islam. And so the Arab settlement in this coastal region was the result not of conquest but of a natural and peaceful process of development[13].
Suakin, and especially Aidhab, which was closer to Egypt and placed under its direct control, became increasingly important port cities. Between 1058 and 1300 Aidhab became the center of trading activity with Egypt and the largest port of the Red Sea, while Suakin became the port of the Beja tribe[14], without having to pay tribute to Egypt. From that point on, the Red Sea witnessed frequent clashes between the tribe of the Bejas and the Egyptians, who sought to gain control of the traffic along the entire coast and had little sympathy for the independence enjoyed by Suakin.
Beginning in 1172, when Salah ad-Din invaded Nubia and forces Islam upon the people there, and on the occasion of the wars with the Crusaders, the ports of the Red Sea were the setting for different attacks by first one side and then the other. The best known episode is tied to the attempt by the Crusader Renaud de Châtillon[15], Prince of Antioch, to conquer the holy cities of Islam, the Mecca and Medina, after which he lingered for a number of months, launching raids and attacks against the ports of the Red Sea and the Arabian coast.
In 1213, as is reported by the Arab historian Yakut, Suakin was still inhabited by black Christians. Two years later, the sultan of Egypt sent an expedition to confiscate the property of the Egyptian merchants, and for the first time the city fell under the direct control of Egypt. This is the period of the first description of the site, given by four officials sent there from the Mecca in 1255, "a small village inhabited by natives of the Hannag tribe".
The Mameluks (1250-1517) aimed to develop central Sudan; they controlled all the traffic and the trading in the area, and levied taxes as well. In 1310 their boundaries were "the Syrian desert, the Euphrates, the Pyramus in the East and North, Sawakin and Aswan in the South and Tripolis in the West".[16] The Mameluks did everything in their power to win the southern routes and control of the traffic. In 1264, Baybars sent a delegation

MINBAR IN THE HANAFI'A MOSQUE (CALIA)





KHORSHID HOUSE (CALIA)



KHORSHID HOUSE (CALIA)

to the princes of Suakin and Dahlak to protest against the practice of confiscating the goods of merchants who died or were murdered in their territory. The order must have fallen on deaf ears, however, since two years later the governor of Qus was sent to establish on the island a military garrison capable of enforcing the authority of the sultan. The intentions of the Mameluks on this occasion remain less than clear, but they may have been following a political strategy of extending their direct influence over these areas as well. What cannot be denied is that, in 1316, Amir Tuqusba, governor of Qus[17], again sent out a mission to collect tribute, using a Marmeluk unit, which travelled from Qus to Aidhab and Suakin.

The rivalry between Suakin and the port of Aidhab[18] - located just a few hundred miles to the north, closer to Jiddah - ended with the fall of Aidhab in the second half of the fifteenth century. From that point on, Suakin became the main Egyptian port on the coast of the Red Sea, retaining this pre-eminence until the construction of Port Sudan, which occurred during the first two decades of this century.

And so, starting in the fifteenth century, Suakin was a prosperous and safe port, a destination for the trade of goods coming from Yemen, Arabia, Ceylon and China. In 1451 a number of members of the Asharaf, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad hailing from the Mecca, settled to the east, near Kassala, living for a portion of the year in Suakin (some of the houses they owned still exist in the island) and in Sinkat.

With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, as well as the rise of the Ottoman Turks and the subsequent disappearance of Egypt as a great power, Suakin and Jiddah enjoyed a brief period of independence and prosperity, providing a safe route for pilgrims to Mecca. In the sixteenth century, two new factors came into play: first the Portuguese discovered India and shifted sea-going traffic to the Red Sea, establishing themselves among the Abyssinians; second, the Amara Dunkas founded their Funj kingdom in eastern Sudan, taking Suakin in the course of their conquests, though without exercising direct power over the port. Indeed, there is no historical record of Funj governors in Suakin.

The Turks conquered Egypt in 1516, sending expeditions south a few years later to occupy Massaua, Suakin and Jiddah, from where they drove out the Funj forces. From then on, Suakin remained, almost without interruption, in the sphere of influence of the Turks, who improved and enlarged the port. In this period the first houses were built with coral.

In 1540, the Portuguese fleet, under the command of Stefano da Gama, anchored in the Bay of Suakin for an attack against the Turks in Suez. Their presence in the port resulted in severe damage to the city, which was sacked, an act that seriously damaged the cause of the Portuguese, as the news served to alert the Turks, who, having positioned their fleet, rebuffed the enemy

and strengthened their hold on the Indian Ocean.
In 1629, Suakin was used as a base for the Turkish invasion of Yemen. During the same period, work was undertaken on the city-island to expand the port and build larger and handsome houses. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Turks continued to exercise their dominion over Suakin. The slave trade was the chief economic resource, and remained so up through the middle of the nineteenth century, when the English banned the practice.
In its last few centuries several factors contributed to the economic and political crisis that affected the entire stretch of seacoast. The threat of pirates coupled a preference for the new route around the Cape as a way of reaching the Far East began a decline for the Red Sea in general and for Suakin in particular.
Buckhardt[19], who visited Suakin at the beginning of the nineteenth century, reported that there were 600 houses, of which two-thirds were in ruins, abandoned by their owners who preferred living in the nearby town of Geyf on the mainland it soon became larger than the island-city.
In 1865 the Ottomans granted a concession to their Egyptian representative the Khedive Islam, and to his children the right of annexation, providing Egypt with the ports of Macaw and Suakin in exchange for an annual tribute. This was a major gain for Egypt, given that Suakin, the only port in the Sudan with a central positioning on the Red Sea, made possible trade with Abyssinia, Arabia and Yemen, in addition to which it continued to be used as the main port for pilgrims from Sudan and eastern Africa headed for Mecca. In 1866, Pasha Muntaz became governor of the island, building new habitations and enlarging and restructuring the old homes, which had begun to decay. The Muhafaza is one of the best known of those he commissioned. During the same period many merchants took up residence in Suakin, building spacious houses which, however, they rarely completed for lack of funds.
In 1869 the resident population of Suakin numbered barely 8,000 inhabitants, a figure significantly lower than that recorded earlier. During the same period the opening of the Suez Canal transformed the Red Sea from a secondary route for sea-going trade to the equivalent of a super highway to the East. Economic well being led to a considerable increases in the population of Suakin, with the bulk of the newcomers being European and Egyptian merchants. Wilde, an Englishman who was in Aden in 1874, remembered the merchants of Suakin and Massaua as being mere agents who sought out merchandise and shipping concerns for the trading companies of Jiddah, but their main activity was the slave trade, which knew no limits. Even the highest-ranking government officials filled their pockets with the ill-gotten gains of a trade, which the Khedive had promised to outlaw.
Others important exports sent out from Suakin were ivory, rubber, abyssinian coffee, gold from Sennar and ostrich feathers from Darfur and Korofan, skins from Kabala, cotton, sesame seed oil and cattle raised by the local tribes. The imports came exclusively from Europe, and consisted of goods such as sugar, wax, rice, soap, cloth from Manchester, silverware and pots and pans from Birmingham. These goods were received in Suakin for distribution to Abyssinia and the Sudan by means of camel caravans. Each caravan consisted of roughly 500-1000 camels, and its departure was always a major event. Between 1874 and 1883 Suakin achieved its greatest splendour, thanks to the increase in trade with Europe: ever-greater amounts of merchandise passed through the port of Suakin rather than being shipped through Egypt.
In 1877 the English General, Gordon, was named governor general of the Sudan. On his way to Khartoum, he passed through Suakin and was taken by its charm that he ordered a causeway built to connect the island to the continent. In 1881 Eastern Sudan was a separate, independent province with a governor general of its own. In 1883, Ali-ed Din was named the new governor general, replacing Gordon, but owing to the activities of Osman Digna, head of the troops of Mahdi, unrest gradually grew in the country. The insurrection of the Mahdis in 1880 quickly spread to Khartoum and beyond the hills of the Red Sea. The resistance at Khartoum, led by General Gordon, and its fall in 1885, is one of the best-known episodes of African history of the nineteenth century. Suakin was the base for the English Second Expedition fleet, which, rather than limiting itself to purely military operations, such as the defeat of Osman, carried out technical and economic improvements as well, such as the construction of the Berber-Suakin railway[20] With the advent of General Gordon's successor, General Kitchner, the city of Suakin almost returned to its peacetime level of prosperity. While he held the position, Kitchner replaced the defensive wall, which was built of earth, with a brick wall, which included the city's present-day entry gate and its small forts.
When the Sudan was placed in Anglo-Egyptian hands in 1898, the option of developing Suakin as the lone functional port was given thorough study, but the problems were many: the entrance to the port was narrow, twisting and difficult for the passage of large vessels; the sources of fresh water were few in number and inadequate; the buildings were in poor condition; significant sums would have to be invested. In 1903 numerous restoration projects were proposed, but in the end in 1904 Colonel Rostai Kennedy of the Anglo-Egyptian Department of Public Works wrote up a report in which he demonstrated how much more appropriate and economical it would be to build a port at Mersa Barghout (today's Port Sudan), located roughly 40 miles to the North of the Red Sea. During the construction of the new port, Suakin enjoyed yet another brief period of prosperity. For a short time trade

continued to pass through it, and many business enterprises, such as the Egyptian National Bank, The Eastern Telephone Company and navigation companies and business firms continued to maintain offices on the island.
The transfer of the port in 1922 marked the beginning of Suakin's rapid decline. By 1936 the wharf's had disappeared from disuse and the docks had collapsed into the shoals on the sides of the port, preventing the larger vessels from entering. Evidence of the difficulty involved in navigating in the internal waters was demonstrated when a cargo ship which ran aground in the southern portion of the island-city of Suakin.
Abandoned by the rich merchants of Arab Turkish and Egyptian origin, Suakin disappeared at an increasingly rapid pace in the course of just a few decades. Today the island has nothing more than a collection of ruins to testify to its historic and artistic past.

Architecture

Suakin and its architecture were unlike any other. No other city on the Red Sea has its form, its site and its allure. The economic growth tied to its function as a port-city favoured the settlement of people from many cultures: Arabs, Turks, Europeans and people from the inland regions: all helped to make Suakin a rich and prosperous population center, a cosmopolitan city with an architectural style all its own. As Paolo Cuneo points out[21]: The origins of its affluent citizens are reflected in both the architectural features of their homes (the oldest were built with internal courtyards, the others in the form of compact, multi-story blocks with internal stairways and shuttered windows) and in the use of decorative elements, some of them essentially "Turkish" (which predominated up through the middle of the nineteenth century and could also be found in Jeddah, Mecca, Medina and Massaua), others were designed in a "modern Egyptian style" (the prevailing choice in the period which followed, and certainly indicative of the modes of expression imported from Cairo and from the Suez). The drive towards emulation shown by the wealthier families in ornately decorating the more visible parts of their homes, in partial contrast to the rules of the simplicity advocated in the Koran, inspired local craftsmen to hone their skills in the complex elaboration of the finishing touches, especially those in stucco and wood (the second quite rare in the region, it must have been imported from Syria or Ethiopia), contributing to the formation of the one of the dominant characteristics of the residential quarter of Suakin".
The architectural structure and the urban layout of Suakin can still be made out despite its ruined state. Its oval shape determined the urban layout of the City (Fig. 3). As Juan da Castro noted in the sixteenth century, "in this space, there is not a foot of land which has not been built on". Suakin appeared as a grouping of housing units arranged along streets that converged in the center like spokes in a wheel. At the center where the market, the main mosques, and the public buildings, such as the customs building, the governor's house, banks, the offices of commercial representatives, and the houses of the most affluent citizens.
It is not easy to date the buildings of Suakin because the types, construction, and style remained almost unaltered throughout the centuries: "Suakin is an example of a smallish Turkish town built between the 16th and 20th centuries like other towns situated around the Red Sea coasts: Massaua, Jeddah, Hodeida, Asat and Mowka. Some have disappeared; others are in advanced state of decay; all are doomed as examples of a vernacular style, which itself has virtually crumbled away. The architecture of Suakin is a type adapted to the requirements of a coastal climate. A coastal climate, however, requires a very different kind of building; one, which will catch every available sea breeze and allow it to circulate freely throughout the house, but the hot land-winds and the harsh glare of the midday sun, must also be excluded. A style to suit these conditions has been evolved around the coasts of the Red Sea. It consists of two or three-storied houses with vertical, not battered, walls pierced by many-shuttered windows and characteristic masharabiyas, large cement windows projecting out into the street in order to catch the breeze. The internal walls also have ventilating grills to allow the air to penetrate right into the center of the house.
The earlier Turkish, as distinct from the later Egyptian houses, were examples of a long-established town-building tradition: tall, whitewashed, three and four-storied buildings of similar plans and elevations, built in blocks or terraces of three or four at a time and separated by narrow streets and small clearings. They were adorned with sculpted door-hoods and denticulate parapets and had windows and doors of Java teak which weathered until they were silver-grey. They were possessed of considerable charm, dignity and refinement.
Suakin Island when surveyed had but three or four really large houses, and nearly two hundred smaller ones. It also had two small mosques and at least six zawias or private praying-places, and there was a street of small shops. Its situation on a flat island in a lagoon provided a setting which gave it a unique beauty"[22]. (figs. 4-5).
All of the houses, whether built with multiple stories or an inner courtyard, had two zones: a public area, which included the *divan* or visiting room reserved for men and business, and the inner area, set aside for women and domestic activities. As a rule, the ground floor was meant to hold a store or a deposit for merchandise. The balconies were used for sleeping on the hottest nights, using the *angareebs,* or wooden beds, that were traditional in the region. The houses were richly adorned

with screens made of Java wood. Lavishly decorated and jutting out from the façade of the house, these *masharabiyas* or *roshans* varied in length up to a maximum of 2.40 meters. This type of house corresponds to a coastal style widely used throughout the entire Red Sea area, the result of a mix of ancient local traditions, weather, family tradition, building practices and the skills of the Egyptian, Turkish and Yemenite artisans. The traditional structure of the Suakin house was made more personal by the ornamentation that enriched each welling with decorative details. A wide variety of stuccoes, especially in the entry gateways, at the arches and in the *diwans* of the wealthier homes and the mosques, follow natural, geometric and stylised motifs, at times with an added touch of calligraphy. Expertly used, these elements generate a refined, well-balanced decor.

The urban structure of Suakin mirrored the society, which inhabited it, giving practical expression to their culture, in accordance with the tradition of Arab Muslim cities. Typically at the center was the mosque with community activities - religious, social, and economic - nearby. The street that leads from the gate of the city, passing by the main public and administrative buildings before reaching the Hanafi mosque, typically served as the suq.

Religious buildings included six *zawias* and five mosques (fig. 6). Of the latter, the two most important are noteworthy less for their architecture than for the rite celebrated inside them: one was Hanafi, the other devoted to the Shafi rite. The floor plan mirrors the layout of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, with a central internal courtyard flanked by the *sahn;* inside is the pulpit or *minbar,* richly decorated and reserved for the spiritual leader, who uses it to give his Friday sermon. Both of the main mosques have a *midana.* Of the *zawias,* the one, which most deserves mention, is the Musai Zawia with its central cupola.

Each of the countries facing the Red Sea put its local resources - stone, unbaked or fired brick, or wood - to use as building materials, with the aid of refined finishing elements, such as glazed pottery, polychrome mosaics and glass, wood inlays, stuccoes, mosaics etc.

In Suakin, all of the buildings were constructed with coral stone extracted from a quarry on the southern side of the bay, together with a purposefully controlled combination of more than one material, such as stone and stucco. Wood was used not only for construction, but also as a structural factor for the distribution loads, and finally as an integral part of the overall design, to which it supplies a series of horizontal alignments. All houses were plastered white, for appearance, for protection against the weather, and for reflecting the sun's rays.

It goes without saying that the loss of the cultural Heritage of Suakin, as well as other historic cities in the same area, points to the shirking of responsibility by people on every level. The UNESCO report[23] was not sufficient to save the city from its inevitable, irreversible fate. Today, there is nothing left of the architecture of Suakin: all that remains are the memories of those who have seen it's ancient splendour and its handsome houses and mosques. I wish to extend particular thanks to all those who, through their studies and their research and documentation efforts, have handed down to us a record of the past culture of the settlements in the area of the Red Sea, and in particular in Suakin.

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1 The origin of the name Suakin or Sawakin is believed by some to be tied to the word suq and to the Arab verb for living, others trace it to a word in the dialect of the local tribe of the Bejas: "Esukib", which means "to the market".
2 Eliseo Reclus 1887, pp. 416-421.
3 Grohamann 1913-24
4 I had the opportunity to visit Suakin in the spring of 1982, when I went to study the city for the first time, having chosen it as the subject for my thesis in architecture. The thesis is entitled: "Analisi storico-critica della città-isola di Suakin in Sudan. Progetto di recupero dell'area del mercato." My faculty advisor was Professor Paolo Cuneo, to whom I owe my interest not only in this area, but also in the entire Arab-Islamic world, towards which he directed my attention with generous, paternal concern.
5 Pretegianni - Prester John - was not a legendary figure, but rather a prince of the Nestorian religion whose dynasty reigned for almost a century in the area roughly referred to as Greater or Upper India. Accounts left by various travellers and ambassadors locate him in Asia, and we later find him in the records of Giovanni da Pian, Rubruk, Marco Polo and, even later, in 1305, Giovanni da Montecorvino, Archbishop of Peking, who tells of having converted to Roman Catholicism a certain King George, a direct descendent of Prester John, whose true name he also supplies: Yank-Khan, which corresponds precisely to the Uneceau or Unecau mentioned by Marco Polo. And so Prester John was not an imaginary creation, but a historic, albeit fairly mysterious one, who entered the realm of legend much later, when a number of ignorant chroniclers placed him in a site in Abissinia, merely because there was a Christian prince or negus in the area". From the book *I precursori di Marco Polo,* edited by A.T. Sersteveus, Italy, 1960.
6 Livio Sanuto 1588: p. 123.
7 Ibn Battuta 1982, 2: 71-72.
8 The account of the voyage of Don Stefano de Gama from Goa to Suez was written by Don Juan de Castro, a captain in the Portuguese fleet; a portion of the text was published by B. Kennedy Cooke 1933, pp. 151-159.
9 Greenlaw 1975, p. 9.
10 Bloss 1936: p. 295.
11 Lejean 1861, pp. 139-140.
12 "Les Beja depuis le IVe millénaire avant J.C., se situent entre le Nil et la Mer Rouge, de la frontière actuelle de l'Egypte à celle de l'Erytrée. Plusieurs fractions débordent sur ces deux pays. Signalons en haute-Egypte: les Ababda; en Eritrée occidentale on trouve les Tigré .... Parmis les fractions résident dans le Sudan, signalons les Ammar'ar dans les montagnes au nord de Port-Sudan et les Bisharin sur les monts de la Cote, au nord de Rawaya, jusqu'à la frontière à l'Atbara. Enfin dernier groupe important: les Hadendawa, qui nomadisent entre l'Atbara et la Mer Rouge, près de l'Erytrée. Détail intéressant concernant cette dernière tribu: les femmes ont constitué des Khalwa (retraites) reservés à leur usage exclusif. Il existe meme à Sawakin des Zawiya pour femme affiliées à la Khatmiyya, qui organisent des chants de la confrérie aprés la prière du Vendredi" in Cuoq 1975; Ibn Sa'id writes in his *Kitah al-Jughrafiyya:* "Les Beja sont des Sudan et il se trouve parmi eux des musulmans, des chrétiens et des idolâtres. Ce sont eux qui conduisent les pèlerins et les marchands à travers ces dèserts sur leur chamaux, la sécurité qu'ils fournissent est bien connue, tandis que le danger sue cette route vient des incursions des Nuba", cited in Quatremère, *Monumenta,* pg. 1084.
13 In 750, the son of the Caliph Marwan II, assassinated in Fayam, fled south along the Nile in the aftermath of his father's death, and travelled towards Axun in Abyssinia, passing through Suakin and Aqiq.
14 In 1529, Leo of Africa (1956: p. 484) wrote of Nubia and the tribe of the Beja, ".... Ce désert s'éntend jusqu'à la mer Rouge, vers les confins de Suachin. Ceux-ci parlent une langue que je crois être mélangée de chaldéen et qui se rapproche beaucoup de celle parlée à Suachin et dans la Haute-Ethipie, où se trouve la résidence du Prete Jan. Cette race est appelée les Bugia. Ce sont des hommes vils, mal habillés et pauvres, vivant du lait e de la viande de leurs chameaux et de gibier sauvage. Ils reçoivent parfois quelques subsides du seigneur de Suachin ou de celui de Dangala".
15 Newbold 1945: p. 272.
16 Lane Poole: p. 272,
17 Garcin, 1976.
18 The Port of Aydhab was of fundamental importance to Egypt; for a certain period it represented the most important stopping-off point for sea-going traffic along this portion of the coast of the Red Sea. The port provided a secure haven for all the traffic between Upper Egypt or Eastern Africa and the ports of Higgaz and Syria. See the chapter "La grande ville du Sud" in Garcin 1976: pp. 216-223.
19 Burckhardt 1819: pp. 431-458.
20 Lejean 1 (1860): pp. 97-103; 2 (1861): pp. 139-144.
21 Cuneo 1977: pp. 31-32.
22 Greenlaw 1977 completes the work, which Derek H. Matthews had undertaken in the 1950's: see Matthews 1953-1955. Greenlaw can be credited with the most important contribution to knowledge of the architecture of Suakin; in light of the state of dilapidation of many of the city's buildings, he decided from the outset to exclude any sort of photographic documentation, instead enriching the pages of his book with a large number of pen drawings which he himself had made. These illustrations are the result of numerous impassioned inspections, followed by elaboration done with the aid of documents, plus ancient and modern images. The essentially graphic documentation has been preferred over other sources, having been judged more suitable for the task of effectively expressing the refined and minutely precise nature of these architectonic details, which, as one catches sight of them here and there between the crumbling walls of the ruined dwellings, still manage to hearken back to the height of the vanished city's thriving commercial and artistic age. In this way the author presents us with the city and its architecture, placing the description against the backdrop of the style found throughout the Red Sea area.
23 Hansen 1973.