

Suakin: Tremendous potential for Sudan's open air museum

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Sudan's Suakin Island in the Red Sea has been fought over for centuries. Its residents now hope the island's rich history and fine weather will start drawing in holiday makers to a magnificent open air museum.

El-Gey mosque



Importer/exporter Robert Berg in the lapping of the wavelets at summarises the history and the old sea wall, one can almost splendour of the island: "At dusk, hear the voices of Suakin's past:

the Egyptian of Pharaoh's officers, the classical Greek of Ptolemy's seafarers, the Arabic and Hindi of the Red Sea merchants, the tribal tongues of West African pilgrims bound for Makkah, the Portuguese of European explorers, the To Bedawie of Osman Digna's dervishes, and the English of Kitchener's embattled soldiers." For 3000 years, the port on the island of Suakin was strategically crucial to powerful empires. Today it is a crumbled relic of the wealth

that passed through its coral walls from around the world. But according to UNESCO consultant E Hansen restoration is still possible and desirable, not only for the preservation of the best examples of coral architecture but in order to keep alive a valuable building tradition and to attract attention to a site favoured by a particular beauty and a pleasant climate. He has identified 15 old buildings that could be restored completely; a similar number could

Mosque



Awating restoration



be preserved as ruins and these two elements would form together a unique open-air museum dedicated to the history and culture of this town which once played an important role in Sudan's economy. Ramses III initially developed the port of Suakin during the 10th century B.C.E. At the time, Suakin offered an outlet to the Red Sea for trade and exploration. Suakin may have been the site of the Roman port Evangelon Portus mentioned by Ptolemy

One thousand years later, as Islam gained followers and spread from the Hijaz region of modern day Saudi Arabia, the port took on new importance and became an outlet for Africans on pilgrimage to Mecca. Arab traders, attracted by the promise of gold, settled on the island.

As with so many other situations throughout its history, Suakin's connections with the Hijaz proved a mixed blessing: While assured a prominent role as a departure

point for African pilgrims, as well as a stable trading relationship with the Hijaz, Suakin had to stand by quietly while Jeddah took the lion's share of trade with the Orient. In addition to their Islamic faith and their commercial enterprises, the Jeddah emigrants, called Jiddawis, introduced another benefit that would give Suakin a distinctive face: a new building technique. Unlike the adobe structures of the Sudan, designed to keep the desert heat at bay, the Jeddawis

introduced coastal architecture that strove to catch the cooling breezes of the sea while excluding hot desert winds from the west and the stark glare of the sun above.

The new, Jeddah-style buildings were usually two or three stories high, with walls punctuated by shuttered windows, some of them very large and projecting outward. The interior walls held ventilating grilles that allowed breezes to penetrate the entire home. To

Saveable ruins on Suakin Island



Suakin in 1928



protect against glare, the windows were covered with distinctive mashra-biyyahs, screens with geometric patterns produced by interlocking lathe-turned pieces of wood, or by shish, made from notched or tongued strips of wood joined at right angles. The basic building blocks in Suakin were local white coral, and exteriors were covered with white stucco.

By the fifteenth century, Suakin was flourishing as a trading port of Mamluk Egypt and was inhabited

by Venetian and Indian merchants until the Ottoman invasion of 1517. For the next three centuries, until the arrival of the British, the Ottomans oversaw major construction programs on the island, including distinctive coral buildings decorated with carved stone, elaborately decorated Rojan windows, and intricate plasterwork.

While Suakin constantly evolved, it remained prosperous throughout its existence, bringing great riches

to the shores of Sudan. Local legend tells of a king who operated out of the old city and had 360 wives and lavish quarters in the old city. Stemming from its great wealth, Suakin developed into a rich, gated island port. Every building was made out of stunning coral and the walls were decorated in detailed wood and stone coverings. Suakin was the height of medieval luxury on the Red Sea.

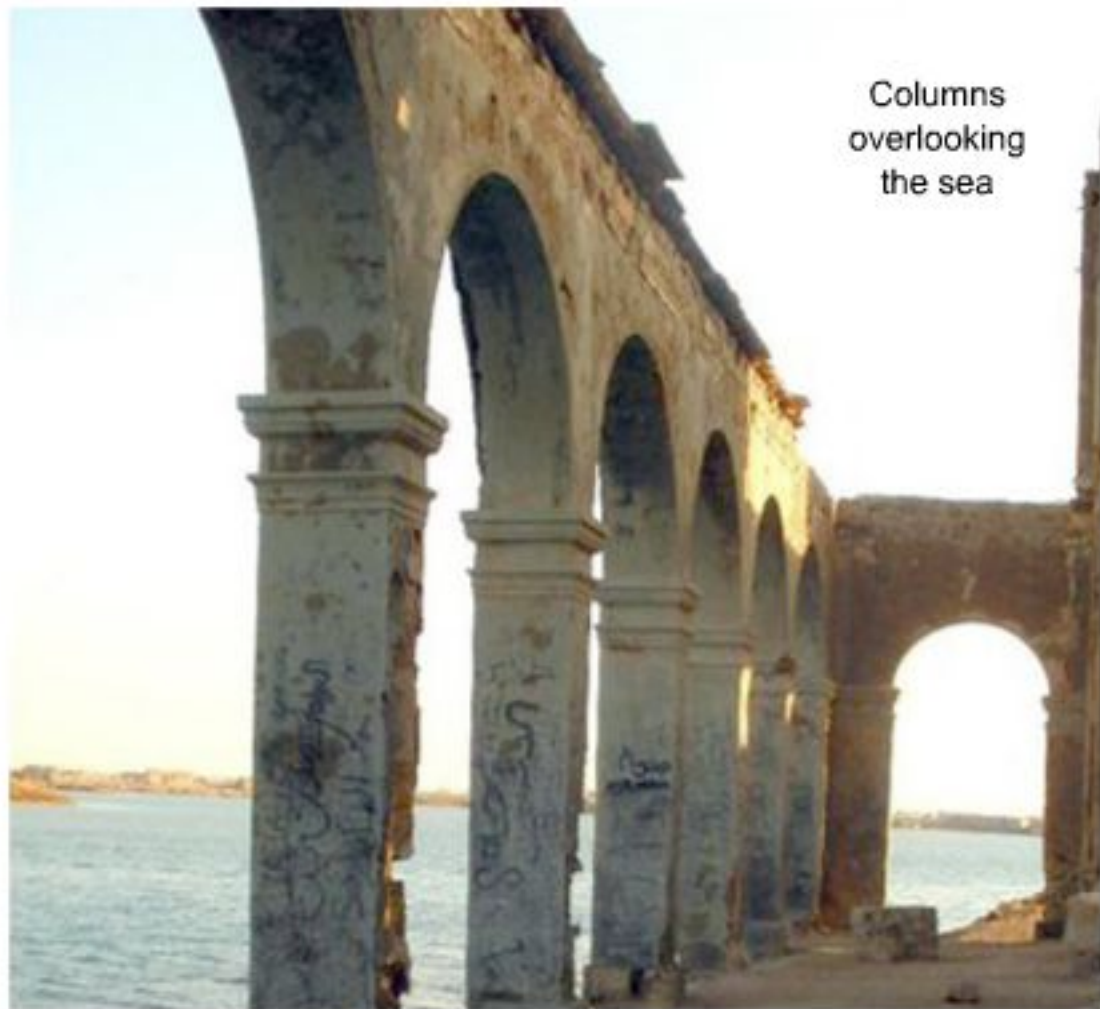
During the 19th century, Suakin evolved for the last time, becoming a hub for the slave trade from

Eastern Africa. As the slave trade diminished, the port became increasingly unnecessary. By the 1920s, Suakin was falling into complete disrepair. Shallow waters and rough coral had pushed most trade North to Port Sudan and the coral buildings that were once the crown jewel of the port were not maintained and are now disintegrating.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 briefly revived trade in and around Suakin and was responsible for a new round of construction of



Suakin's national bank



Columns
overlooking
the sea

public buildings. Defensive walls and forts were built by the British to defend against rebel Sudanese Mahdist forces in 1870–1899. The construction of Port Sudan to the north of Suakin spelled the end of the island's livelihood, and it was largely abandoned by 1922.

Robert Berg reflects on the decline:

"Today, Suakin's piers are empty. Gone are the burly Greek sailor and the Mamluk officer in bright silks. The town's once-fine homes are crumbling, and a few dwellings of grass and matting house the handful of inhabitants. The modest tea shops and market of el-Geyf bear witness to a quiet day-to-day life, and a handful of fishing dhows

plies the waters of the harbor at dawn.

Yet Suakin still holds treasure for the world at large. A unique blend of Africa and Asia, it is the only important relic of its kind on the African Red Sea coast, and few ports can boast a longer or more varied mix of arrivals and departures. What remains of its distinctive architecture, with its stuccoed tracery and grayed teak, could be preserved and restored

to provide future generations with a window through which to look back in time.

E Hansen agrees. In the conclusion to his report he states: "The preservation of Suakin would not be an extravagant gift to culture but a vital contribution to the development of a country deeply preoccupied with obtaining its basic material needs. And the preservation of the traditional cultures is a matter for all humanity."

Suakin

