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OMAN, SEA OF

OMAN, SEA OF, the sea, or gulf, which divides Iran and the Arabian peninsula and forms the link between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. It is 560 km long and at its widest point is 320 km wide. From a hydrological point of view it is just a northern protuberance on the Indian Ocean. However, the coastal configuration has resulted in a particular system of currents. During wintertime (November-March) the winds are not strong. One or two turbulences occur, with changing directions, but navigation is not seriously encumbered. However, during summertime (May-September) a very strong and continuous southwestern wind blows (speeds above force 7 Beaufort in more than half of the observations) that produces a regular movement of the sea with a one-way turbulence in the sense of the hand of the watch. It is during that season that navigation is very difficult.

Fishing has been next to agriculture the most important economic activity for the coastal inhabitants. The Sea abounds with a great variety of fish that includes sardines, blue fish, mackerel, shark and tuna. The ports on the Omani side include Ṣohār, Muscat [Masqaṭ] and Sur, and on the Iranian side Čāh Bahār and Jāsk. The Sea and its Omani ports derived their importance from their strategic position as the crossroads between India, Africa, and Persia/Turkey. The ports on the Persian side of the Sea were only of local importance.

Since the beginning of recorded history, the Sea of Oman and its ports have been an integral part of what Ṭabari called “the arż al-Hend,” or the realm of the Indian Ocean trading network (Ṭabari, I, pp. 237-8; Balʿami, III, p. 401;

Miles, pp. 366ff). This was due to the fact that the Sea of Oman ports were the last or first place where ships could take in fresh water and supplies on their way into or departing from the Indian Ocean, respectively. “In Muscat they take drinking water from a well that is there. In the mountains of Muscat there are shepherds with flocks from Oman and the boats sail from there to India (Ebn al-Faqih, *Boldān*, p. 11; see also *Aḵbār al-Sin*, p. 7; Masʿudi *Moruj*, I, p. 331). Moreover, given the subsistence nature of the Omani economy, it was vital for the Sea of Oman ports to exchange their dates, fish, dried fruit and pearls for rice from India. Its inhabitants also served as sailors on local and foreign ships.

The Omani coast formed part of the Sasanian province of Mazun, and its inhabitants formed part of its navy (Yāqut, under “al-Mazun”; Masʿudi *Moruj*, VI, p. 143). After the Moslem conquest of the Arab peninsula and Persia, the Sea of Oman hinterland was soon Islamicized. As a result of the economic expansion of the ʿAbbasid empire, trade developed as did the role of Ṣohār in the Sea of Oman. Ṣohār was referred to as Mazun by both the Arabs and the Chinese (Mo-xun) as late as the 12th century (Ebn al-Faqih, pp. 92, 104; Masʿudi, *Moruj* I, p. 331; Zhang Jun-Yan, p. 93). Its merchants became fabulously rich, because much trade was moved in their ships, as did the Buyid officials who administered Oman (*Ḥodud al-ʿālam,* p. 148; Bozorg, *ʿAjayeb al-Hend,* p. 107-11; Margoliouth, H 414; Edrisi, I, p. 173). However, around 1200, the Sea of Oman transit trade suffered a slump due to a change in trading patterns which increasingly bypassed the Omani ports (Edrisi, *Nozha* II, p. 165; Yāqut, *Boldān* III 393). Ṣohār lost its role as the “hallway of China, the treasure house of the East and Iraq, and the mainstay of Yemen” (Moqaddasi, p. 92). There was a shift of trade to Qays and later to Hormoz (q.v.), although Ṣohār continued to play a role in supplying Kerman, for example, in the 13th century (Ebn al-Mojāwer, II, p. 284). Towards the end of the 15th century the Sea of Oman acquired more importance due to increased trade that made use of its strategic position and its ports, but still remained very much in the shadow of Hormoz. “Muscat is a port unequalled in all the world ... there boats take on cargoes of dates—fresh and dried—and horses, and sell cloth, oil, slaves and cereals” writes Aḥmad b. Majid, the famous Omani pilot (Ferrand, I, p. 66).

When the Sea of Oman fell under Portuguese control, at times contested by the Bawārej or Makrāni pirates and the Ottomans, this led to the rise of Muscat (Aubin, Cojetar). In addition to the traditional products, Omani ports also

served as transit points for the very important trade in horses with India (Aubin, Royaume). They would play the same role for coffee later, from the 17th century well into the 19th century (Matthee; Lorimer; Heude ch. 3; Wellsted).

With the advent of the Yaʾāreba dynasty (1629-1747) the Imams tried to attract foreign transit trade by offering better tariffs than in Persian ports. The Dutch also had a trading station for some time in Muscat, while the rulers of this port tried to induce both the Dutch and English to conclude an anti-Portuguese agreement with them on several occasions (Floor, 1982; Idem, 1985).

As a result of the international character of the Sea of Oman many ethnic groups lived in its ports, including Baluchis, who served on ships, Khojas, Hindu Banians and Persians, who traded and were generally free to exercise their own religion, despite the very orthodox Imami religion practiced by its inhabitants. As a result, Persian and Hindi were as frequently spoken as Arabic. For instance, Moqaddasi writes that Persian was the lingua franca in Ṣohār in the 10th century (Moqaddasi, p. 96; Landen, pp. 140-2). In addition to international trade, the local inhabitants mainly earned their living through fishing, pearling and coastal trade (Miles, pp. 401-11, pp. 414-16).

With the growth of Omani Āl-Bu-Saʿid power after 1749 (extending control over the Persian side of the Sea and acquiring Gwadar in 1784) and the upheaval in Persia, the Omani ports such as Muscat became the main entrepot between the Persian Gulf hinterland and the Indian Ocean trading network by 1775 (Lorimer, p. 417; Landen, 62). As a result, strong ties were formed with the Malabar coast, in particular with Tipu Soltan. Also, the expansion of trade and political relations with East Africa and the Red Sea were firmed up at that time (Kelly; Lorimer, p. 435). During the early 19th century, the Sea of Oman trade and pearl fishing was endangered by the persistent maritime warfare between rival Arab groups. Britain was drawn into these disputes as guarantor of maritime peace, that was also important for British trade. This role was reinforced by its interdiction of the slave trade after 1840. Under Imam Sayyed Saʿid, Muscat asserted itself and was able to extend its power over both (Persian and Omani) sides of the Sea. After his death, Oman gradually fell under the control of the British, which led to the reduction of its role as a point of transit with India. Its role in the trade with Africa and the Red Sea, also because of dynastic reasons, remained strong, although it was reduced due to restrictions on the slave trade (Martin, pp. 23-37; Kelly, pp. 411-51, 576-637). Persia also asserted itself after 1856 by gradually ousting

Omani power from Bandar ʿAbbās (1868), other Persian ports and islands as well as Baluchistan. In addition the increased use of steamships, the loss of control of the Persian side of the Sea, the loss of Zanzibar, and British control of Oman, the importance of the Sea of Oman ports declined. Trade with India and East Africa still continued up to modern times, but the Sea of Oman had lost its importance for the bulk of international trade. Muscat and the other Omani ports did not regain their entrepot role due to internal troubles, ineffective rulers, and an anti-modernization policy up to 1970. Currently, the Sea of Oman is an important passageway for much of the world's oil (Martin, Yajima).

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