

# A Study on the Trading Routes Connecting the Red Sea and Ethiopia as Serial Heritages

Riichi Miyake Rumi Okazaki

## Abstract

The Red Sea Area in north-east Africa, characterized by its specific geographical condition represented by deserts and highlands, has been the stage of interrelation among different political powers and cultural groups. The presence of imperial Ethiopia was decisive in the highland area while other powers such as Egypt and Turkey tried to dominate coastal area by way of navigation. Port cities like Suakin, Massawa, Zeila were thus established under the authority of Ottoman Empire or Egyptian rulers. These ports were connected to inland cities by caravan route. Inland post cities like Sennar, Adowa, and Harar flourished as relaying post and market. This paper aims at the analysis and the re-evaluation of the once-existed network of such caravan routes by clarifying the urban formation of port and post cities, the identification of the routes, their transformation in the modern period and resulting decaying process. The rapid changes of transportation system in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have made them out of fashion. Some of these cities have been menaced by severe deterioration, both in natural and social senses.

**Key Words:** Red Sea, Ethiopian Highlands, Port Cities, Caravan Route, Inland Post, Market, Slave Trade, Caravanserai, Deterioration of Heritage, Serial Heritage

## 1. Introduction

### <Background>

Since ancient times the Red Sea coastal area has been mentioned as an active trading zone supported by the navigation from Egypt to north-eastern Africa and Arabian Peninsula. While pilgrimage to Mecca accelerated the immigration of people, passage between Egypt and southern coastal areas became frequent by trade of precious materials such as ivory, gold, myrrh, animal hides and even slaves. This resulted in the formation of several important port cities, like Suakin (Sudan) and Massawa (Eritrea), which strengthened their port facil-

ities during the Turkish reign between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These port cities were starting points for the caravan to inland posts like Sennar along the Blue Nile on the Sudanese side or highlands posts like Adowa and Harar, both in Ethiopia actually.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Egyptians took over the control of these cities in parallel with European powers which were eager to explore their business chance there as well as the Ethiopian Empire which expanded toward the southern highlands. This transformation of territorial division made this are all the more interconnected. The wealth accumulated in this period enriched the cities

---

三宅 理一 Department of Human Life Studies, Faculty of Human Life Sciences, Fuji Women's University  
Division of Human Life Studies, Graduate School of Human Life Sciences, Fuji Women's University  
岡崎 瑠美 Faculty of Environmental Information, Keio University

despite harsh political and military tensions and resulted in unique architecture for the governors, traders and residents, which is still regarded as unforgettable cultural heritage of that splendid period.

However, the actual states of these cities are far from the images of the past. Many of them suffer from decay and deterioration due to the radical change of economic system in the modern period. This paper aims at the re-consideration of the old trading routes and cities in African Red Sea Area from the viewpoint of urban history and heritage management<sup>1</sup>.

#### <Target Area>

The target area of this paper is the Red Sea Coastal Area of eastern Africa and its hinterland, including Ethiopian highlands. Actual Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia are comprised in this area. Old port cities, such as Suakin (Sudan), Massawa (Eritrea) and Zeila (Somalia), which rebuilt their port facilities during the Turkish period, strengthened their role of connecting points between the sea and the land routes while inland trading posts such as Sennar (Sudan) and Harar (Ethiopia), which once dominated caravan routes from the Red Sea to inner Africa, convey the images of old capital cities although the former has been abandoned since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. New trading cities like Kassala (Sudan) and Mekelle (Ethiopia), founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are also included in the research area.

#### <Research Purpose>

The purpose of this paper could be summarized in the following way.

- (1) Re-evaluation of pre-colonial trading routes from the port cities to inner Africa before

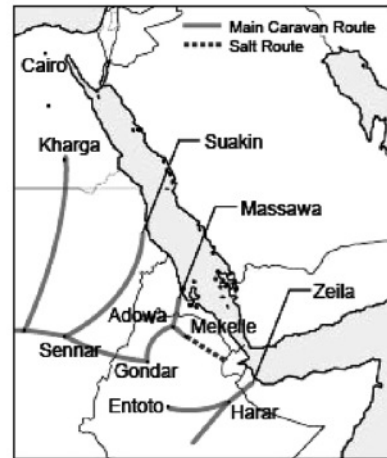


Fig.1 Map of Trading Routes

- the construction of railways and highways
- (2) Comparative analysis of urban formation of respective cities in relation with the navigation and the caravan transportation
- (3) Appraisal of their architectural heritages which were once conceived as fundamental facilities for trading ports and posts
- (4) Analysis of the transformation of the trading routes and resulting deterioration process of these heritages
- (5) Definition of these cities as serial heritages connecting the Red Sea and the Ethiopian Highland

#### <Method to be Applied>

The authors have applied the following methodology to accomplish this research program.

- (1) Mapping:  
Necessary information on the targeted cities has been plotted and layered on GIS map. In certain countries among the targeted area in which difficult procedure for mapping is required, Google Earth was very practical to get over all information.
- (2) Finding of old documents:  
Consultation to the local archives as well as European and even Japanese archives has enabled finding of old documents related to the urban and architectural issues of the targeted countries. Old pictures found

<sup>1</sup> The authors have presented the initial idea of serial heritages in the IUSAM annual conference in Beijing, September 2011. This paper is a revised version of the report presented on that occasion.

through internet were very helpful for the reconstructive approach of the old urban environment.

(3) Field survey on the target area:

The authors have visited repeatedly to the targeted cities in order to measure the existing buildings, to make interviews with the residents and those who concern, and to discuss with local authorities.

## 2. Red Sea Trading Routes and Trading Cities

So long as the Red Sea coastal area, which extends to more than 2000 km southward, has been considered hot and futile land with vast deserts behind, a limited number of human settlements have been recognized since ancient times. Still the Egyptians kept strong concern on it and explored navigation routes for pursuit of precious materials from Yemen and Abyssinia. Ruins of ancient port cities such as Berenice of Ancient Egypt or Adulis of Aksumite Kingdom, are now exposed to the eyes of archaeologists and convey the importance of ancient Red Sea trading routes from/to Egypt. The Red Sea trade was enhanced by Turks when Ottoman Empire gained the dominance over this region from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Suakin, Massawa and, later, Zaila, became the major ports of Habesh, Turkish Province of Red Sea Africa. The *pasha*, governor, resided in Suakin and controlled other cities by nominating *naib*, deputy, among native Belaw clans in Massawa. Some of the actual heritages in these cities date back the beginning of Ottoman reign of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The primary and nominal role of these port cities was to assure the navigation for the pilgrims for Mecca as the sultan of Ottoman Empire recognized himself as the patron of all Islamic people. Transportation of merchandise to the hinterland by caravan was another but practical purpose of this port. Suakin was related to the city of Sennar, the capital of

Sennar Sultanate, 1200 km westward, while Massawa was the starting point toward Ethiopian highlands, where cities like Adowa, Aksum, and Gondar, capital of Ethiopian Empire, were goals of caravans. On the other hand, Zeila, another capital of Adal Sultanate, was directly connected with Harar Sultanate.

The vessel used in this area was *dhow*, traditional Arab sailing boat, suitable for the transportation of heavy merchandise and operated by 10–30 crew members on board depending on the size of the vessel. These port cities flourished until the introduction of steam ships which required deep-water port and modernized facilities. Only Massawa has survived and become one of the most important trading ports in actual Red Sea Area.

## 3. General View of Trading Ports

### 3-1. Suakin

Ottoman Suakin was newly planned city over the old fabric of a small Christian town of Beja people who converted into Islam in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The city, formed by an island part and a mainland part, enjoyed the ideal position for receiving *dhow*s and even European caravels as it is situated in the depth of an inner bay. The mainland built-up zone came to be surrounded by fortification conceived by a British military engineer toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

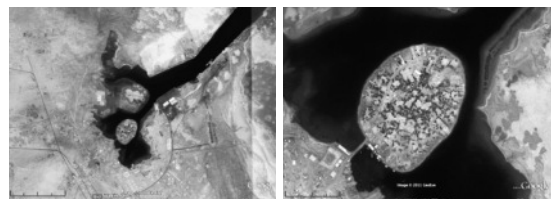


Fig.2 Images of Suakin, *Google Earth*, 2011

Within the surface of 40 ha, approximately 600 houses were concentrated in the most flourishing period. The most outstanding building in the early age used to be *Pasha's* residence

occupying the centre of the island. However, the fame was replaced by a mosque deriving from a mausoleum of a Sufi saint belonging to Marghani Order, whose widow Sharifa Miryam, inheriting the status of its representative, constructed a wonderful mansion in front of the mosque.

Contrary to the mainland part, the island city is characterized by radial street layout. The houses, trading and residential, were occupied by traders and merchants from Turkey, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia and even Italy. Shops are allocated on the ground floor of these houses. Besides the residences, buildings of caravanse-*wakana* and custom office, both completed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, stood out as special facilities for trading purpose while praying rooms (*zawia*) and other smaller popular facilities were scattered within the urban fabrics. The city is connected with two main caravan routes: one to Berber and even to Dongloa westward, another to Sennar through south-west regions. One caravan consisted of 500-1000 camels at the same time, carrying cotton, spices, perfumes, silk, rice, sugar, and flour for outbound, and coffee, ostrich feathers, senna, sesame, gum, hides, animal flat and ivory for inbound.

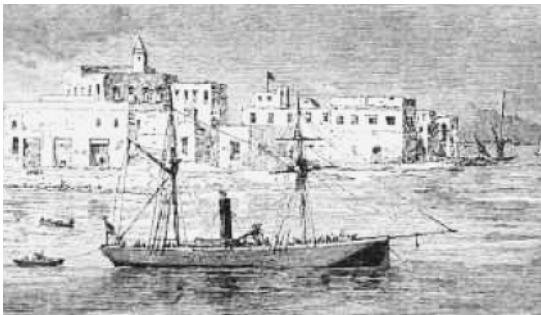


Fig.3 Suakin 1886

UNESCO report of 1972 suggested that the prosperity of Suakin was paradoxically supported by exports of slaves and ivory to explain

the rapid decline of this port city<sup>2</sup>. However, recent research on the complicated political and economic issues in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sudan revealed that the internal political turmoil represented by Mahdist movement and epidemics in the following period weakened the trade and commerce of these regions to a great extent and did not allow them to sustain external trade with foreign countries<sup>3</sup>. Religious rivalry between Marghaniyya, based in Suakin, and Mahdi sects affected seriously Suakin's situation. Although slave trade of Suakin occupied comparatively bigger portion of its economy, it was not such a big deal as in Zanzibar which was considered the main centre of slave trade until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3-2. Massawa

Massawa started its history after the decline of the ancient port of Adulis in its vicinity. Before the arrival of Ottoman troop, this coastal city made the most of its unique position as the port for the Eritrean local kingdoms. Situated on an archipelago off Mokullu, Massawa consisted of a few islands and the mainland. The old town is situated on Batse (Massawa) Island like in the case of Suakin. Henry Salt, British traveller, artist and collector of antiquities, visited Massawa in 1810 and reported that Massawa was a peaceful city with the population of 2500 people and that import consists of mainly cotton from Muscat and Bombay while exports consists of gold, ivory, slaves and corn from Ethiopia<sup>4</sup>. In addition he

<sup>2</sup> E.K. Hansen "Preservation of Suakin", UNESCO, Paris, October-November 1972, p.2, Slave Market of Suakin was closed in 1870 definitively and caused the rapid decline of this port.

<sup>3</sup> Gundrun Dahl + Anders Hjort-Af-Ornas "Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroad", in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 15(4), 2006, pp.473-498

<sup>4</sup> Henry Salt "Voyage to Abyssinia and Travels into the Interior of the Country, executed under the Orders of British Government, in the Years 1809 and 1810", Carey, Philadelphia, and Wells & Lilly, Boston, 1819, pp.449-450

identified 4 mosques, constructed in a plain style, and a few stone houses, most of which were then ruined. Majority of people lived in huts with thatched roof.

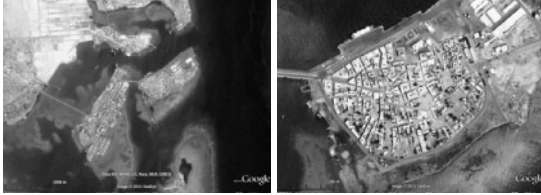


Fig.4 Images of Massawa, *Google Earth*, 2011

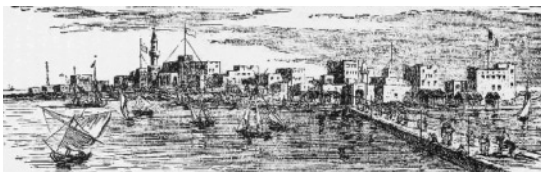


Fig.5 Massawa at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century

Ottoman Empire appointed *naib*, deputy of *pash*, to local Balaw family<sup>5</sup>, but Egyptians who took over this place in 1865 dispatched governor (*Pasha*) whose residence used to occupy the centre of the old town in parallel to the mosque before Werner Muntzinger, Swiss business man but appointed as *Pasha*, constructed a new palace on Taulud Island. Muntzinger conceived a series of construction projects with innovative mind, including causeways which connect the mainland and the two islands. An engraving of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is very helpful to understand the situation that period. Contrary to the description by Henry Salt, the old city was built-up by masonry buildings with several storeys.

The Egyptians, who took over this city in 1864–65, reported that there were approximately 100 stone houses, 200 wood huts, and 20 mosques and *zawiya*, 200 shops and warehouse, one church with the population of about 2000 in

Massawa Island. In Hetumbo, on the mainland, they found 507 stone and wood constructions, 4 water wells and so on<sup>6</sup>. As a gated town, the city comprised a number of trading and residential houses for Turks, Egyptians, Arabs, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Beja, Greeks, Italians and so on. The urban structure of that period is still well maintained although other part of the city on different islands and the mainland were considerably transformed by rapid development or seriously damaged by war.

### 3-3. Zeila

Zeila, situated near actual Djibouti, is a very old port city since ancient times. Its geographical condition with sand bank off shore formed a natural sea port between the bank and the beach. Once a stronghold of Ethiopia, it became the capital of Adal Sultanate, flourishing thanks to the trade of incense, myrrh, gold and, above all, slaves. This port was closely related to Arabian Peninsula and once ruled by Mocha, a port city on Yemenite side. It was at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Ottoman Empire gained the domination of this region and expanded its force toward the south.

Zeila used to be the port of Harar because of its vicinity. When Arthur Rimbaud, French poet who became a trader after he had abandoned his poet career, visited this port in 1880, he described that the city is an agglomeration of sailors, merchants and nomads, counting approximately 140 masonry houses and 450 thatched roof houses<sup>7</sup>. 15 days were necessary to travel to Harar by caravan. Two decades before, the ruling power of this city had been replaced to Egyptians.

A view of this city of this period is left although the date is unknown. This explains

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Miran “Red Sea Citizen: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa”, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2009, p.38

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.146

<sup>7</sup> “Lettre, Harare, 12 novembre, 1880” in *Arthur Rimbaud ‘Lettres du Harare’*, Mille et une nuits, Paris, 2001

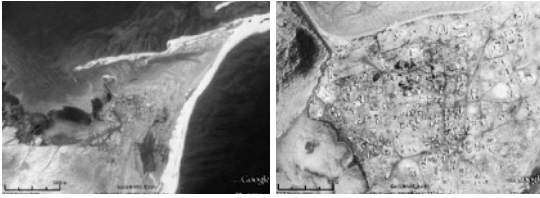


Fig.6 Images of Zeila, *Google Earth*, 2011



Fig.7 Zeila in late 19<sup>th</sup> century

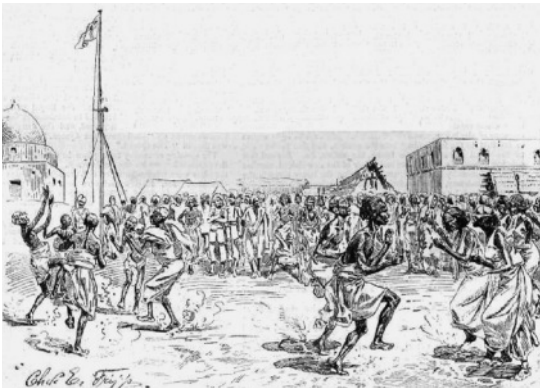


Fig.8 Zeila in 1887, *The Graphic*

the juxtaposition of permanent coral block buildings and nomad's tents. A few sketches on the life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Zeila, published in a British weekly newspaper, provide concrete images of its townscape<sup>8</sup>. Currently a certain number of old structures such as mosques, governor's house, and market could be recognized as the remains of that period although the city has suffered from fierce economic decline

<sup>8</sup> A few sketches of the people in Zeila drawn by a British officer, lieutenant Pritchard, were published in *The Graphics*, May 7, 1887. The buildings drawn (mausoleum) is still existing, but seriously damaged by the civil war.

as well as damages by civil war.

#### 4. Inland Trading Posts

##### 4-1. Route to the Highlands

Above-mentioned port cities were departing points for inland trade posts connected by caravan. In Red Sea Africa, various kingdoms and sultanates repeated birth and decline. Among them, Ethiopia has been the most stabilized and powerful nation situated on the highlands of 1500-2500 meters above sea level. Gondar, its capital from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was constructed by Emperor Fasilidas as a new and permanent capital in the vicinity of the source of the Blue Nile, which is Lake Tana, in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the participation of Portuguese and Indian craftsmen besides Ethiopians. This means that the connection with Europeans had been already established before Fasilidas reign. It is known that the Portuguese mission of that period used generally the route from Massawa via Debarwa, capital of Ethiopian northern provinces, to Lake Tana area where emperors set up their temporary capitals in the form of moving court. Although Jesuits were driven out during Fasilidas reign due to the internal conflict of the court, Gondar continued attracting a lot of foreign people and items. Merchandises were transported through the mountainous routes mainly from Massawa calling upon Debarwa, Adowa and Aksum. If not, by the desert route from Suakin through Sennar. Ethiopian Orthodox Church which dispatched regularly missions to visit Coptic Egypt and Jerusalem made use of this route down to Sennar, and then followed the way to Cairo along the Nile River.

The route via Harar is different. Harar flourished by the trade between the coastal area represented by Zeila and highlands of southern Ethiopia where provinces of Oromo (called Galla) stretched out. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopians started the campaign of conquering Oromo territories, which

resulted in the establishment of new ruling power in Shoa. The court of the new emperor was set up in Entoto, actual Addis Ababa. Harar, which had been annexed to Ethiopia in 1884, played an important role to connect the Red Sea trade and this new capital.

#### 4-2. Sennar

Sennar was a capital of Sennar Sultanate established alongside the Blue Nile from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This period corresponds to the Ottoman reign in the coastal area and Gondarite Dynasty in Ethiopia. Its prosperity was supported by the existence of such stabilized powers which enabled active trade activity by using caravan routes from/to Sennar and assured free passage over them. Although this capital was completely ruined after the arrival of Egyptian authority by Mohammad Ali in 1821, the townscape could be reconstructed by way of the report and pictures by European travellers. Charles-James Poncet, French physician, travelled across Sennar on the way to Gondar, in 1699 and made a precise report on various aspects of the city<sup>9</sup>. He arrived at Sennar with the caravan passing along the Nile from Egypt. Although he might have been shocked by the improper and insanitary conditions of the city, the French doctor was all but satisfied with the palace of Sultan, which consisted of buildings made of sun-baked bricks and with apartments “richly adorned with large carpets after the manner of the Levant.” The commerce of the city was very active. Variety of merchandises was available in the main market place: ivory, gold, tobacco, brass, spices, Venetian glass, silk, cotton, papers and so on. Another market for slaves was open in front of the palace, selling men,

women, boys and girls. Egyptians were the big buyers of slaves. Sennar was well connected with Suakin from which merchants sailed even to India via Mocha on the opposite coast of the Red Sea, taking two years for round trip.

Joseph von Russegger, Austrian mine engineer dispatched there for the survey of mineral resource in 1830's, visited Sennar in 1837 provided its visual images although the sultanate had collapsed already in front of the interference of Egyptians. The city stretched along the Blue Nile, comprising several important buildings such as Sultan's residence, big and small mosques, a few market places as well as cemetery<sup>10</sup>. The drawings of Sultan's residence and other buildings done by an Italian traveller on the same period clarify the architectural detail and building techniques<sup>11</sup>. The five storey residence, partly ruined, comprises a vaulted banqueting room with mud brick masonry techniques while another masonry building, most probably a market place, shows the layout of rectangular and open courtyard type facility. These sultan's facilities were not in use any more. Actually, due to the construction of a canal along the Blue Nile, the site of this old capital has completely disappeared



Fig.9 Sennar in 1826, drawn by Guiseppe Ferraro

<sup>9</sup> J. Poncet “A Journey to Abyssinia” in John Pinkerton “Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in all Parts of the World”, printed for Fongman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Partner-Row and Cadell and Davies, in the Strand, London, 1814, pp.68-72

<sup>10</sup> Josef von Russegger “Reisen in Europa, Asien und Afrika, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung auf die naturwissenschaftlichen Verhältnisse der betreffenden Länder, unternommen in den Jahren 1835 bis 1841”, Schweizerbart, Stuttgart, 1841-1849, 7 vol.

<sup>11</sup> Guiseppe Ferraro “*Veduta del Sennar della antica residenza del Re*”, Firenze, 1826

within the route of the canal.

#### 4-3. Adowa

Adowa is also known as a big market place in Northern Tigray. Its location was important as the junction of two different routes: one to Gondar another to Tembien and Enderta districts in eastern Tigray. Henry Salt, passing by Adowa in 1810 stated its appearance as follows.

“The town of Adowa is situated partly on the side, and partly on the bottom of a hill, a circumstance very unusual in Abyssinia; and the houses, which are all of a conical form, are pretty regularly disposed into streets or allies interspersed with wanzey trees and small gardens, some of which are cultivated with considerable care; the town itself being plentifully supplied with water from three streams, which take their course through the valley below. The number of residents in this place, may, on a general calculation, being supposed to contain ten inmates, would altogether amount to a sum probably falling short of the actual population. Adowa may be regarded as the chief mart for commerce on the eastern side of Tecazze”<sup>12</sup>.

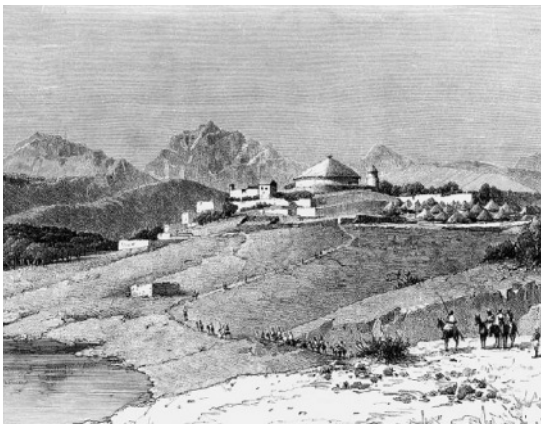


Fig.10 Adowa in 1886

Salt added to say about the presence of “biggest population of Muslim for trading and com-

merce, manufactory for coarse and firre clothe, already export and import through Massawa” in this market city. His description is important because he referred even to the numbers of the houses, then provided a clue for counting the population more than 8,000. The housing typology is *tukul* (round house), resembling that of Aksum and other towns. The engraving in this publication explains that houses were dispersed on the slopes and the terraces of a hill although it is very difficult to grasp the general layout of the urban fabric<sup>13</sup>. The question is when this type of very dispersed system became “urbanized”. So far it is difficult to reconstruct the commercial zone of this city despite its fame as trading city. Market and other dependent facilities must have been open air like in many rural communities of contemporary Ethiopia.

#### 4-4. Mekelle

Mekelle is comparatively a new city because its foundation dates back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Emperor Yohannes IV, who had originated from Tembien, took the initiative of its foundation by constructing a new palace. Although the decision of the construction was very political, the situation of new Mekelle was very convenient to gather the attention of traders and merchants as it is on the route towards Chelekot and Antal, residential places of local warlords, as well as to Shoa region where future emperor Menelik would enlarge the political hegemony. Before the construction of Yohannes Palace Mekelle had been only an agglomeration of nine villages with market.

The urban formation of Mekelle was so quick. In accordance with the establishment of Emperor’s residence, subject of the court

<sup>12</sup> Henry Salt, op. cit. p.328

<sup>13</sup> “The Town of Adowa” engraved by J. Greig after a picture by Henry Salt, published in George Viscount Valentia’s *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, The Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt*, 1811.



gathered around the palace. They formed *hidmo*-type residences mainly on the western and the southern sides of the palace. Loosely connected *hidmos* gradually developed to form block-and-street type urban fabric due to the densification by immigration and the spontaneous land adjustment process. This urban formation process was the first in Ethiopia where the notion of urbanity was limited to smaller size local cities represented by the terminology of *keteme*, or *kukuma* in Tigrinian except the capital city of Gondar, which was the first permanent capital for the imperial family. Local masonry techniques accumulated in Tigray contributed a lot for formulating this type of European like stone city.



Fig.11 Picture of Mekelle, *L'Illustration*, 1896

Salt trade was one of the most important businesses in Mekelle. Salt has been mined around Lake Abbé and Lake Asal (actually in Djibouti) in Danakil Depression, the lowest part of which is 100 m below sea level. Afar camel caravan carry salt periodically crossing the desert up to Mekelle where salt market has been well established. This enabled Mekelle to accumulate wealth despite its short history. The extremely hard condition of this salt trade road, managed only by local Afar pastoral tribesmen, did not allow other merchandise to pass this short cut between the Red Sea (Tajoura, for instance) and Tigray.

#### 4-5. Harar

Harar has been regarded as the fourth holiest city in the Islamic world, numbering 82 mosques and 102 shrines actually. Some monuments date back even to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The location of this city in the eastern highland on the way to Somalia gave it high opportunity to dominate the main routes from the Red Sea towards the inland of Ethiopian highlands and, thus, to become a prosperous trading centre. This is the departing point of the route to Galla (Oromo) and Shoa regions, which would become the parts of Ethiopia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This route is another way to reach inland Ethiopia by avoiding harsh Danakil Depression Desert.

Harar miraculously survived different stages of hardship and even the modernization process as it maintains old structures of medieval period within the city wall. The urban fabric is not at all traditional Ethiopian (Amharic and Tigrayan) urban formation. It is typically Muslim. Each urban block consists of several different typologies such as indigenous Harari style, Indian one, and eclectic one according to the construction period. Indigenous Harari house is a kind of a courtyard house surrounded by main corps and depending buildings. The concentrated layout of such traditional houses made the townscape irreplaceable. A series of surveys by French Architectural University, prior to that by the authors, contributed a lot for understanding the urban structure and architectural design of this city<sup>14</sup>. The house of Arthur Rimbaud is well preserved by French initiatives. His detailed documents on his journey Zeila-Harar and Harar-Entoto (actual Addis Ababa) in 1880's provide concrete information of the situation of respective cities and settlements as well as the way how people prepared for such difficult trips over mountains

<sup>14</sup> Philippe Revault, Serge Santelli ed. "Harar—une cité musulmane d'Ethiopie", Maisonneuve & Larose, Paris, 2004

and deserts.

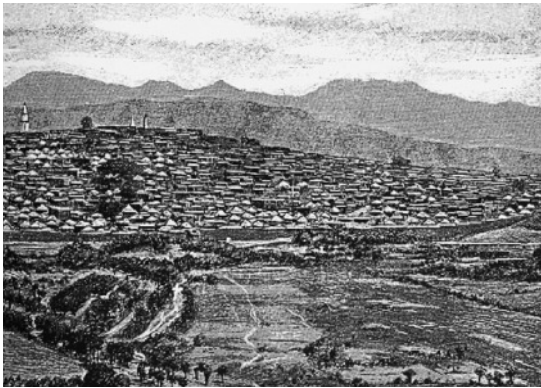


Fig.12 Picture of Harar in 1930's

## 5. Specific Facilities for Red Sea Trading Route Cities

To understand the groups of cities in the targeted area as trading route cities, recognition of common features as well as reciprocal relation among them is very important. So long as merchandise and people moved from one place to another, transportation and communication were naturally fundamental issues. Facilities to meet such objectives are spatial and architectural solution vis-à-vis the requirements of trading route network. Here several facility types are to be analysed in order to define the idea of trading route cities in the Red Sea Area.

### 5-1. Port Facilities

Port cities are the connecting points between the sea and the land. A limited number of port cities such as Suakin, Massawa and Zeila played a decisive role along the Red Sea coast for completing the international and inter-regional transportation network. Two phases should be distinguished to know its flourishing period: one from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, another second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the completion of Suez Canal of 1869. The former corresponds to the establishment of the hegemony by Ottoman

Empire on the Red Sea. The latter reflects upon the change of power to Egyptians and the start of frequent navigation by Europeans. The Turkish period means the set-up of the administrative power under the governor (*Pasha*) who made his stronghold in Suakin<sup>15</sup>. A medieval type of island port was transformed into dignified *Pash*'s port, which was competent with Portuguese ones. Thus, the port attracted various types of merchants and traders from every corner of Red Sea Area. Presence of Turks and Europeans (Italians and Greeks) enlarged the realm of trading world. Traded items were spice, myrrh, ivory, hide, coffee and slaves for export, and food, crafts, mirror and fabrics for import. African hinterland was seeking the valuable products from Turkey and Europe. Merchandise was stocked in each trading house, except slaves who were imprisoned in a special camp.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Red Sea trade jumped up suddenly after the gradual decline for nearly two centuries. Markets in Europe and India required quantity of exotic materials while African monarchs were in need for weapons and new industrial materials in return. Stockyards for such items were to be constructed in parallel to new facilities to meet the mass transportation of steam ships.

However, the old port cities, except Massawa, were not able to answer the requirement

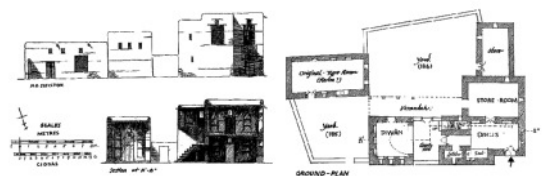


Fig.13 Beit el Beshha (Governor's Residence), Suakin, 16<sup>th</sup> century, drawn by Jean-Pierre Greenlaw

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Pierre Greenlaw "The Coral Buildings of Suakin: Islamic Architecture Planning, Design and Domestic Arrangements in a Red Sea Port" Kegan Paul International, 1995

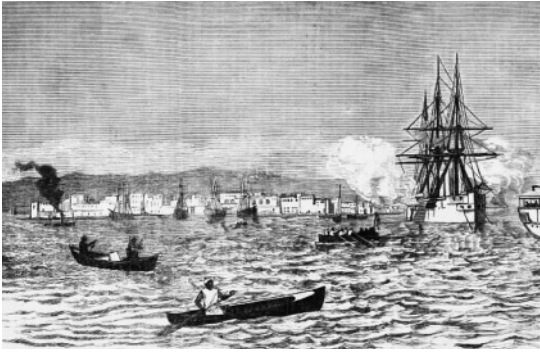


Fig.14 Suakin at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

of deep-water port assigned by bigger steam ships. Construction of Port Sudan and Djibouti ended up the role of the old ports. Abolition of slave trade by Egyptians in 1870 was controversial within the local business communities, which were still dependent on this type of human trafficking.

### 5-2. Facility for Caravan

Contrary to navigation, land transport could afford smaller volume of merchandise. Besides, the routes from the port to the targeted inland posts was very harsh, if not, steep. Attacks by hostile tribes were not exceptional. Therefore special consideration was required to form caravan in the Red Sea area. Caravan must be formed by big number of camels: several hundreds to a thousand. From the major port cities such caravan departed every few days to inland posts. Caravanserai was one of the major facilities, in this respect. In Suakin, the biggest building used to be this. Sennar was able to house such a big number in the market. However, unlike Muslims in the desert, highlanders were not equipped with this type of facility. Caravans were expected to camp tent in a vast field reserved for caravan. Therefore in Ethiopia neither caravanserai nor accommodation for caravan was specially conceived. In Mekelle, the camp field was prepared for next to the market place. Such was the case in Gondar. Even the merchants' city of Harar did not possess caravanserai.

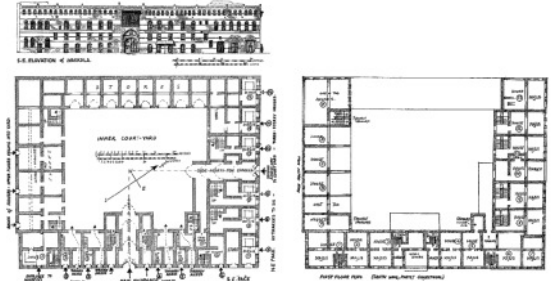


Fig.15 Caravanserai in Suakin, drawn by Jean-Pierre Greenlaw

In any big city markets were basic for the daily life, but for trading cities, markets were the place where traders from other regions and cities gathered, sell their merchandise and buy new items. Besides normal type of markets, slave market was very common in the targeted area.



Fig.16 Caravanserai in 1950's

### 5-3. Slave Market

The most negative aspect of the Red Sea Trade was slave trade. A recent report of human trafficking says that almost 500,000 people were sold as slaves from this area to Egypt and Arabic countries. Unlike Western Africa, Europeans did not touch this business.

Suakin was a very important port for the export of slaves who were captured from the Upper Nile regions or southern highlands of Ethiopia and taken there by slave traders. Ethiopian female slaves were preferred as "selected items" with higher price in Egyptian and Turkish slave market. Some of them were dispatched to European courts as gift. The grand grand-father of Pushkin, Russian great novelist, was an Abyssinian (Eritrean),



Fig.17 Enslaved Abyssinians Caravan resting at Korti, Nubia, David Roberts “*Egypt and Nubia*” 1846-49

captured by Turks and sent to Istanbul from Massawa as a slave, then sent to St. Petersburg as a gift for the court of Peter the Great, in fact<sup>16</sup>.

Slave market in Sudan was permanent facility as was in Zanzibar. No building is left now, but as image of slave market in Khartoum was printed in British weekly newspaper. A decorated entrance was set in order to attract buyers while the auction was held in the courtyard. Its location was in general in the very centre of the city, neighbouring to the Friday mosque (Khartoum) or monarch’s palace (Sennar).

Egyptians ordered abolition of slavery in 1870

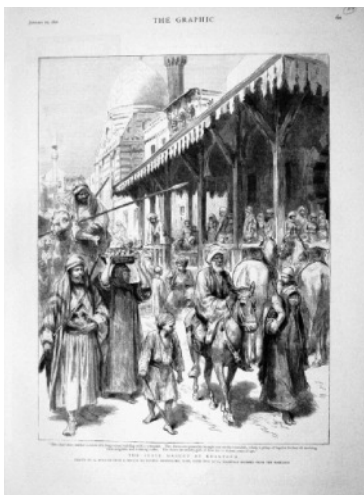


Fig.18 Slave Market in Khartoum, *The Graphics*, 1892



Fig.19 Slave Market in Cairo, date unknown

due to the pressure by European countries, but local traders in Suakin and other parts of Sudan protested and clandestine slave trade continued until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was only 1930 when the slavery was abolished in Ethiopia.

#### 5-4. Traders’ House

Traders were the subjects of the en route transportation. They organized the caravan according to the type of the merchandise as well as the demand from monarchs or foreign traders in partnership. Port cities provided building sites for their mansions and residences. Suakin and Massawa are the good examples to show how they furbish and decorate exterior and interior of such buildings. The building material is coral blocks or porous conglomerate as is the case in other cities on Red Sea coast. This material is light, easily cut and manipulated, resisting earthquake and, above all, available all over there. Early buildings of this area date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century while recent ones derived between the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Massawa, Italians who occupied the land from 1885 added new constructions until the end of the Second World War.

The characteristics of the Suakin style houses are either three-storey buildings with *mashrabiyyah* window and elevated terrace for Turkish period or much higher buildings with

<sup>16</sup> Eleine Feinstein “Pushkin: A Biography”, Ecco (Harper Collins), 2000, pp.36-38

half-bow window and projecting balconies for Egyptian period. Vast reception rooms, wooden staircases and intimate rooms for females represent the delicate design ability of local masons and carpenters. Warehouses and shops were incorporated on the ground floor so that the house was at once residence of the trader's family, business office, and stockyard. All the goods transported from the desert or from abroad were stocked temporarily, waiting for the negotiation with the clients and caravan/shipping schedule.

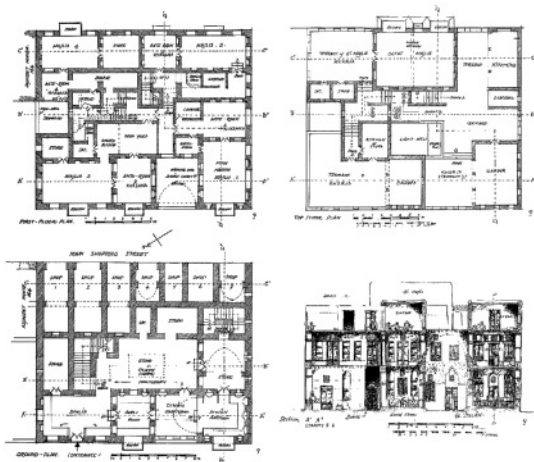


Fig.20 House of Shennawi Bey, Suakin, drawn by Jean-Pierre Greenlaw

Harar style is completely another one. They resemble more Arabic houses because houses are closed by high walls without window. The principal building, called *ge gar*, represents highly Harari characteristics of building design. A spacy salon called *gidir gar* (entrance hall and seating spaces), meaning literally “large room”, provides the most spectacular scene within the *ge gar*. Communal life of the residents is well reflected upon in the spatial composition. Parallel to Suakin, architectural design changed in the second half of the 19th century. In fact, the house of Arthur Rimbaud has different feature called Indian and showing the details of Egyptian-Indian style.

Mekelle has also masonry tradition, but with

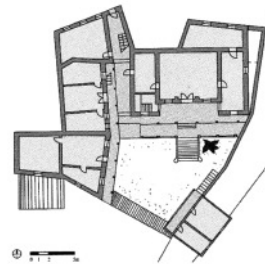


Fig.21 House of Arthur Rimbaud, Harar

much higher skill for stereotomy. After the construction of Yohannes Palace, nobles and warriors set up their mansions and residences around it, but in Ethiopian tradition they are more military than commercial. A few cases among high nobles show good examples of housing complex. *Dejazmach* Abraha Araya, brother of Yohannes IV, who had successfully accumulated wealth by salt trade from Danakil Depression, constructed his own castle in 1910. Its position toward the south of the city marked another focal point of Mekelle, parallel to Yoahannes Palace in the north.

Sennar, on the other hand, depends on the building technique of mud bricks. That is the reason why the sultan's place disappeared after the city was sacked by Egyptians.

## 6. Problematic for Trading Route Cities

### 6-1. Notion of Route as Serial Heritage

The buildings and urban spaces of above-mentioned cities are doubtlessly worth preserving despite the fact what happened inside these. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the

Red Sea area faced colonization by European powers with the exception of Ethiopia which defeated the Italian attack of 1895-1896. Italy had already succeeded in enlarging its colony in Eritrea from 1885. Sudan became subject to British-Egyptian rule. France obtained Djibouti. Somalia was divided by British and Italian. The newly generated borders dissolved the network of caravan routes once stretching all over this area. Moreover, appearance of heavy steam ships in Red Sea did not allow the merchandise to be landed at the old ports except Massawa equipped with deep-water facility. Railways from Port Sudan and from Djibouti created rapid and assured connection between the new sea ports and the inland capitals. Thus new railway post cities were founded: Atbara and Dire Dawa. Old Sennar was abandoned and collapsed. Suakin and Zeila were forgotten. Harar fortunately maintained its position thanks to the strong tie of Harari merchants who dispersed all over Ethiopia.

Still, the notion of the caravan network is important to understand the history and culture of this area. To set up the idea of heritage as route, comparative study on the targeted cities and spaces is fundamental. ICOMOS has already proposed the idea of serial heritage like cultural route. The Aboriginal “dreaming tracks” in Australia and the slave road that brought indentured labour from the Pacific islands to Australia are good examples among them<sup>17</sup>. The trading route of the Red Sea area, directly related to caravan posts and ports, is worth attracting world attention.

## 6-2. Physical Deterioration

Suakin is now facing the crisis of disappearance. The pictures of this city taken in 1930's inform that it was still habitable despite the existence of a number of damaged buildings

within it. However, lack of maintenance without the residents has caused serious problems for masonry structure since then. The deterioration process is as follows. Coral blocks are used as major materials for construction. Lime mortar made of the same material, which should have been used as joint of blocks, was used only for surface painting. Clay was used for joints and also for infill within the walls, which may have been the building technique of mud brick buildings. The water penetration caused by spalling of surface mortar or by underground water made the clay swell and deteriorate coral blocks<sup>18</sup>. This phenomenon has been accelerated in recent years. Most of the building have collapsed and become ruined. The architectural monuments which conveyed the splendour of its flourishing period, including the *Pasha's* residence and the caravanserai, have disappeared.

Suakin's case has been caused by natural process once the population had gone away. Such a phenomenon happened so many times in the case of mud brick city. Sennar was typical of this. It has returned to earth at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the fall of the capital in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reason why Zeila came to be considerably deteriorated is, on the contrary, the civil war. Not only the buildings were hit and damaged by fire, but the inhabitants have refuged outside of



Fig.22 Suakin today

<sup>17</sup> Australia ICOMOS “Working Paper, WHC-95/ CONNE203/INE9”, 1995

<sup>18</sup> E.K. Hansen, op. cit. p.6



Fig.23 Collapsed building in Suakin

the country. The population has become one fourth finally. Coral building without maintenance followed the same way as Suakin.

### 6-3. Inner City and Gay Trade

Contrary to the depopulation of Suakin, Massawa has faced different type of deterioration of the central zone. It survived the Ethiopian civil war although it was bombed several times by *Derg* force. The activation of post-war port activities in recent years has made the old town benefitted by its economic development. In comparison with the new area on the mainland side, the old town of the island suffers from the deterioration of aged buildings. Bars and hotels there formulate a kind of a gay trade zone. It may be the feature of a port city in general, but the difference between this red-light zone and sane residential quarters on the mainland is apparent. Prostitution is common there like other port cities<sup>19</sup>. It should be noted, then, that prostitution, whether it is commercial or amateur, takes place in the old historical houses in the centre. Architectural heritage was taken by such occupation.

<sup>19</sup> Eritrea Social Marketing Group “Staying Safe on the Streets—A Situational Analysis of Commercial Sex Work in Eritrea”, The National AIDS Control Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and UNAID in Asmara, Asmara, 2003, p.4

The authors have analysed the cases of Mekelle and Gondar in Ethiopia, focusing the specific aspect how these occupants prefer the central part of a city so as to establish drinking places and prostitution spaces<sup>20</sup>. Unlike Eritrea, prostitution is legal in Ethiopia. The owners of old buildings do not hesitate to lease them for such purposes. Provided that prostitution is one of the informal sector businesses, those who are engaged in such occupation prefer staying in the city centre for the sake of business chance or job opportunity. The author has categorized this phenomenon as “prostitute-in-heritage” as the new occupants of old heritage benefitted by the accumulation of spacy buildings in the city centre, staying in an old deteriorated architectural heritage. Even the World Heritage city of Gondar is seized by such a phenomenon<sup>21</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

The notion of the Red Sea Trading Ports and Posts is very crucial because of its specific historical value. One aspect is to grasp the network of cities from their interdependence, while another is to re-evaluate these cities from the view-point of their communication with exterior world. Contrary to the closed idea of each national group like Ethiopian, Sudanese, or Somali, cities in this area have been supporting each other beyond ethnicity and locality since ancient times. Still, the geographical and even the political conditions of this area decisively caused the separation of highlands and coastal regions. To cross the huge vacuum

<sup>20</sup> Rumi Okazaki “Deterioration of Heritage by Informal Urbanization in Mekelle, Ethiopia”, *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*, Vol.10, No.2, 2011

<sup>21</sup> Riichi Miyake, Rumi Okazaki, Moe Hirohara “A Study on the Living Condition and the Housing Problems in Central Gondar, Ethiopia”, *Bulletin of Fuji Women’s University*, No.48, Ser. II, 2011, pp.23-33

stretching between the seat of the powerful Ethiopian emperor on the highland and the port cities on the coastal area, people were obliged to depend on limited means of transportation, that is, by caravan. Rapid change of transportation system since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has eradicated the old-fashioned urban network and exposed their facilities to the menace of demolition, if not, natural deteriora-

tion. It is urgent to re-evaluate the value of this once-existed network and to reconstruct the images of the past. Further analysis on the deterioration mechanism as well as the social factor of such old heritage is also needed. The notion of serial heritages is crucial for the appraisal and the re-evaluation of the inter-city communication inherited since ancient times.