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## **OMAN AN ENTRÉPOT ON THE MARITIME TRADE ROUTES**

The Irish explorer Tim Severin in his book 'THE SINDBAD VOYAGE' claims that Omanis have known seafaring ever since man knew the mast and sail. But the recorded history of their negotiation with sea, however, begins in the 3rd millennium BC when Sumerians had settled in northern Oman and mined Copper in Sohar which they called Magan. They sent this copper to the town of Urr in Mesopotamia where they had their headquarters. Apparently the copper was transported by Omani ships. King Sargon of Akkad is said to have praised the Omani ships anchored in an Iraqi Port bringing copper and diorite stones from Magan.

The early contact of the Omani People with the sea could be attributed to the following factors:-

- a) Its location at crossroads between South East Asia, the Middle East and Africa.
- b) Its long shores extending from Hurmuz Straits on the extreme north down to Yemen - Oman borders.
- c) Its safe and convenient natural sea-havens for ships.

The ports of Muscat, Sohar and Qalhat provided safe shelters plus abundant supplies to ships in all seasons.

By virtue of seafaring, Omanis were excellent ship-builders. The author of "Periplus Round the Erythrean Sea" of the first century AD says that in the second century BC Oman imported timber from India for building ships, some of which were exported to Yemen. There exists evidence that Omani ships carried frankincense from Dhofar to Egypt in the second millennium BC during the reign of the Pharaoh Queen Hatshepsut.



## **FRAKINCENSE TRADE**

Frankincense, this sacred incense gum, still grows in Dhofar. At that time it was used for a variety of purposes like base of perfumes, embalming the Mummies in Egypt, religious sermons by Jews, Christians and others and so on. So we can imagine how precious and pricy it was.

Frankincense was exported from the port of Samhuran south of Salalah, the Capital of Dhofar, now called Khor Rori.

Among gifts carried by the three wise men to the holy child, the Christ, were frankincense and mirr from Dhofar.

Linked with Dhofar is the town of UBAR, which an American archaeologist has recently discovered 150 kilometers north of Salalah. This had raised a great deal of controversy among archaeologists and others as the explorer mistook UBAR for IRAM, the fabulous town mentioned in the Qura'n as the residing place of Aad. This tribe, according to the Qura'n, existed in Al Ahqaf at the south-eastern edge of the Empty Quarter.

Ubar, according to this American explorer named Professor Zarin was the meeting place of merchants who bought frankincense there and proceeded to Samhuran for their onward voyage to India and other countries in South East Asia.

The story of Ubar is a long one, but we shall not discuss it in this paper.

## **TRADE ROUTES**

Goods travelling from South East Asia and the Far East to the Middle East and Africa were transported by road in their final stage. Those bound for the Middle East were unloaded at Ibillah near Basrah. If their destination was Africa, unloading took place at Alexandria. In both cases ships halted at Sohar or Muscat for fresh supplies as well as for suitable winds. Inevitably a great deal of trading took place between the merchants there.

In 563 BC Oman fell under the occupation of the Parthian Emperor Cyrus. Later in the reign of the first Sasanid King Ardeshir in 226AD, Persian merchants used to hire Omani crew for their ships. Persians at that time were in control of the trade along the Persian Gulf as well as the Arab Peninsula.



It appears that the coastal towns of Oman remained under Persian occupation until the arrival of the Azdi Chief Malik Ibn Fahm from Yemen in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Malik migrated from Yemen with around 5000 - 6000 members of his tribe and landed at Qalhat on the east coast where he had to battle with the Persians whom he was able to defeat.

Malik Ibn Fahm and his sons after him ruled Oman until the advent of Islam.

## **OMANI MERCHANT FLEET**

It was in mid-ninth century that the Imam who ruled Oman decided to reinforce the country's sea-power considerably. The aim behind this was to fight off the sea pirates from India and Persia who attacked Omani ships on the high seas. Although, as mentioned earlier, Omani merchants travelled in ships made in their own country before Islam, this Imam ushered the Omani maritime navy into a new era of highly powerful military and merchant fleet.

From that time Omani ships went to South China. They also met Chinese ships at the Indian ports of Kalam Maly & Malabar where goods from China were traded for goods that were brought from Oman, Bahrain and Siraf.

There is a saying that trade is the vehicle that carries civilization, arts and culture from one place to another. Thus, along with trading commodities, these merchants carried the culture of the orient and the religion of Islam to that part of the world.

Islam entered south China as early as 7<sup>th</sup> century. It thrived in places like Quanzhou and other parts of south China in those times. Remains of the mosque (called Al Zikra) built by the pioneer Omani traveller Abu Obaidah Abdullah Ibn al Qasim in the 8th century can still be seen. There are numerous Muslim graves in Quanzhou (Zaitoona) with Arabic inscriptions dating to 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Caliph Uthman Ibn Affan the third Caliph after the death of Prophet Mohammad, sent a delegation to China in 651 AD during the reign of TANG dynasty.

Merchants from Arab Peninsula used to stay in China for long periods. They used to marry Chinese women whom they used to convert into Islam. Thus their children were instrumental in spreading the message of Islam. This can well explain the numerous mosques that were built in South China. The Grand Mosque in Zaitoona is a good example.



Sohar, the historical port town in northern Oman was the centre of Oman's overseas trade and an important entrepôt for ships plying between East and West. Diggings in Sohar have revealed numerous objects imported from China and other countries. Such as silk, ceramics, sandalwood, ivory, textiles, etc. The famous French Archaeologist Dr. Monik Kervran who had done the digging concludes that some of the ceramic wares found in Sohar were imported from China into the Arab Peninsula for the first time, and that they came in Omani ships in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Sohar is amply mentioned as the entrepôt for East-West trade. In his authentic work 'Oman a Renaissance', Sir Donald Hawly claims that in the 10<sup>th</sup> century Sohar was one of the wealthiest cities of the Islamic world. It enjoyed a thriving import export trade. Its harbour had a wharf 6 kilometers long. Its trade with China was so extensive that when a change of regime took place in Quanzhou and the new rulers stopped trading with the Arabs at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, many business houses went bankrupt or closed down. The more significant exports included Omani Pearls, dates, frankincense, horses and copper which was mined in the Sohar region.

As states Dr. Sahar Salim an Egyptian scholar of the University of Alexandria: The sea route to the Far East followed by the Arabs and the Sirafis on their journeys seeking trade provided the link between two different worlds: the world of the East and the world of the West.

As a result of the constant arrival of the Arabs in China, there were more than 10,000 Gulf Arabs in Guangzhou (Zaitoona) alone in late 10<sup>th</sup> century. Al Masoudi in Murooj al Zahab states that around that time a crucial revolutionary conquered the town of Khanfu (Canton) and massacred not less than 200,000 Muslims, Christians, Jews and Pagans.

## **MARITIME TRADE TO AFRICA**

The first Omani presence in East Africa or Bilad al Zinj as it was called, was in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century when the two Omani rulers Said & Sulaiman accepted de feat at the hands of the Omayyad invaders and fled to Kenya. Since then Omani sailors began to travel to Africa taking goods from India and the Far East. Eventually these and other Arab sailors established Commercial settlements on islands such as Zanzibar, Mombasa and further down to the Horn of Africa.



## **WANING OF THE ENTREPOTS**

The discovery of the Cape of Good Hope route in 1498 tended to reduce the importance of the Red Sea as a passway for traders travelling between South East Africa and Africa. This was followed by the introduction of steam power to sailing ships in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Then in 1869 the Suez Canal was opened linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. All these developments helped in reducing the need for the ships to stop enroute as they did in the past. This in turn caused Sohar, Qalhat and Muscat in Oman as well as other Gulf to lose their position and income as stations for maritime trade.

## **OMAN'S MARITIME INFLUENCE**

Notwithstanding the adverse effect of the aforementioned elements upon Oman, her maritime activities survived the impact. For example in 1650 the Omani navy was able to inflict a humiliating defeat upon the Portuguese. They were not simply expelled from the Gulf but the naval power of Oman reached up to their possessions on the East African coast and liberated Zanzibar, Mombasa and other towns from their occupation.

The colonial powers of Europe like Holland, France and Britain were racing to control the sea routes the Arab Sea and the Gulf since early 18<sup>th</sup> century. This competition increased after the British occupied India in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.

Oman, by virtue of her sea power, played a very significant role in striking some sort of a balance in the ambition of these western powers in the region. The British often tried to harass Omani merchant vessels on the high seas under the pretext of carrying slave trade which Britain had banned. So, in order to avoid this interference the Omani government signed an accord with France whereby her ships sailed under the French Flag.

In 1840 New Yorker witnessed the first Arab ship and the first genuine Arabs landing in their city. This was "Sultana", the ship sent by Sultan Sayyid Said of Oman with his envoy on board.

The present regime of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos attaches immense importance to the country's maritime history, as indeed to her part history and heritage in general. In that the Omani Ministry of National Heritage and Culture has recently established a Museum in Sohar depicting the highlights of the City's role in the sea-faring life of Oman.



The said Ministry had also revived Sindbad the Sailor who, as the legends say, had started his voyage from Sohar. The Ministry built a ship in the Omani town of Sur. It was a true replica of the Sindbad's ship. It sailed from Muscat to Canton where it arrived in July 1981.

Oman is no longer a sea power, nor an entrepôt for trade. Nevertheless it does carry a special significance among the community of nations. The Sultanate controls the highly strategic Straits of Hurmuz; the crucial passage for over 50 percent of the world's oil supplies. The Omani government incurs considerable expense and efforts to keep this artery safe, secure and clean for ships travelling to and from the Gulf. This service is, in fact, rendered gratis to the international navigation by Oman.