

The History of the Peoples of the Eastern Desert



edited by

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and

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The image on the cover is showing a dromedary race between riders of the Beja Khatmayah tribe as part of a religious festival (photograph by Lucy Skinner, Suakin Project, 2004). Such events are treasured celebrations of Bedouin life.

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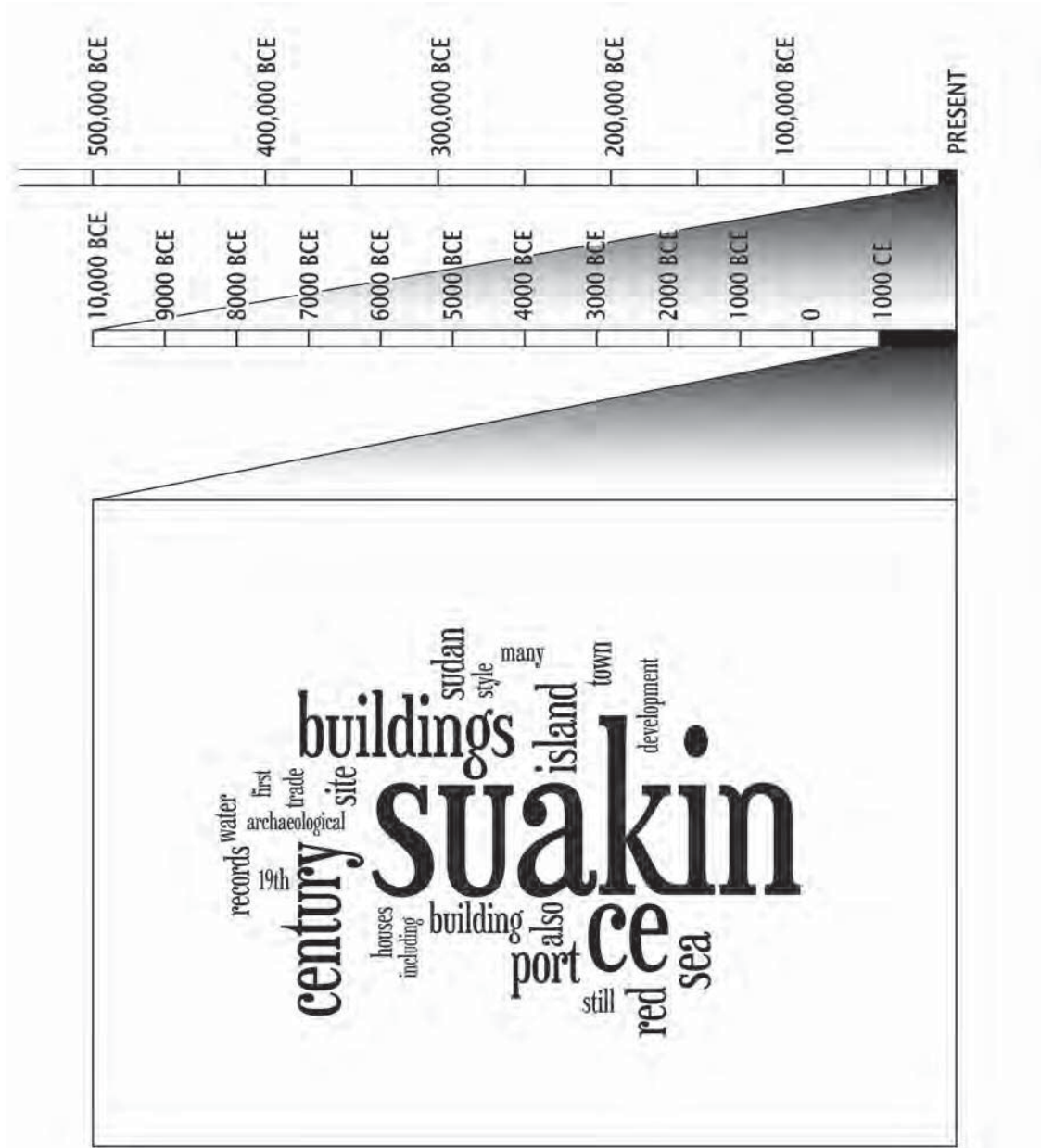
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Time line and word cloud for Michael D.S. Mallinson, *Nominating Suakin a World Heritage Site*. Word cloud by www.wordle.net, written by Jonathan Feinberg (IBM Research); the cloud shows the 25 words that occur most often in the text (typefont Sexsmith, all lower case), giving greater prominence to words that appear more frequently.



Nominating Suakin a World Heritage Site

MICHAEL D.S. MALLINSON¹

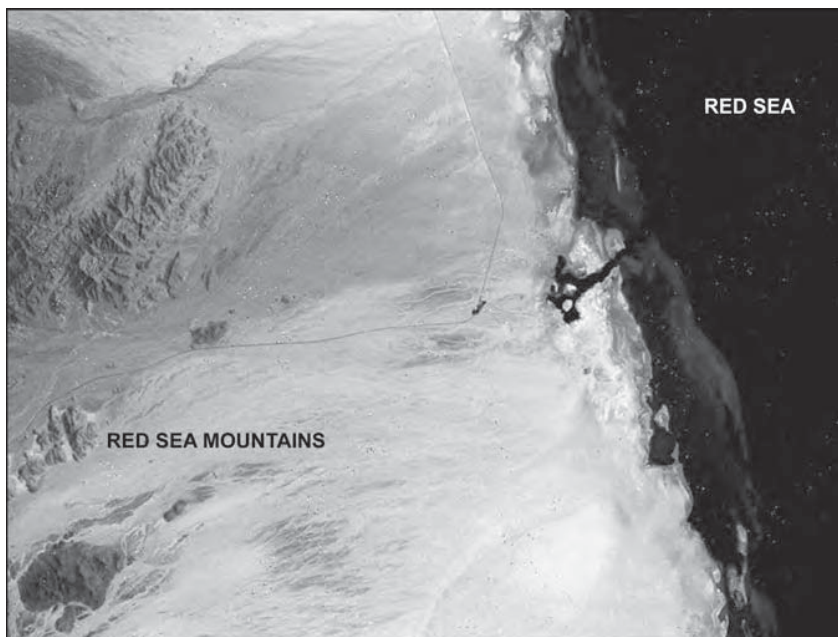
THE SUAKIN PROJECT WAS ESTABLISHED IN 2000 for the purpose of creating a future for the important historical site of Suakin. Its aim was to provide the necessary scientific research and create a suitable institutional infrastructure to help protect and preserve the site, and help the owners of the buildings and the land to restore the site following its destruction by earthquakes and neglect over the last century. As a part of this process Sudan's National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums has been seeking to have Suakin nominated for World Heritage Status since it was placed on the tentative list in 1994. This chapter explains why despite the evident destruction of many of the buildings for which Suakin is famous, the site still has a claim to such a role, and how its story is an integral part of world culture (Schweinfurth 1865; Crowfoot 1911; Robinson 1921; Bloss 1936, 1937; Roper 1939; Newbold 1945; Foster 1955).

Suakin in northeastern Sudan (19°N 06'44.3" / 37°E 20'14.4"; UTM Zone 37Q, 325101 E / 2114083 N) is the last remaining example of a city built in the Red Sea architectural style (Matthews 1953, 1955; Greenlaw 1976,

1995). The Red Sea Architecture of the town that made it famous was constructed of coral blocks between the 15th and 20th centuries CE and its fabric has been untouched since the 1920s when the port was officially abandoned in favor of the newly built Port Sudan. This architecture, however, is not all that Suakin has to offer historically. For a thousand years, Suakin was the gateway for Islamic culture into Sudan and the main African pilgrimage port towards Mecca (Hassan 1963; Insoll 2003; Power 2009). Suakin was also a vital trading port on the route between northeast Africa and Asia, through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, established in Pharaonic Egyptian times and maintained by Graeco-Roman, Byzantine and Arab traders ever since. The project's archaeological investigations have now shown that the entire island is a 2- to 3-m high archaeological mound with cultural remains from the level of the water to the existing ground level. Geographically Suakin is a unique example of a lagoon harbor (Figure 26.1). Over the centuries the town and port developed on a circular island site in the middle of a lagoon that was later connected to the mainland by a short causeway. The beauty of the port, its building and setting, was renowned: Suakin was the Venice of Africa (Greenlaw 1976, 1995). Suakin is at a unique crossroads of Islamic, Sudanese, Ottoman and other cultures. This is expressed in the Red Sea architectural style and the traditions of the island, which ethnographic research reveals remains preserved in the populations surrounding the town. Annual festivals include processions through the town by Beja tribesmen, traditional music festivals and dromedary races along the walls of Suakin. The Suakin Red Sea style has been acknowledged throughout

¹ The National Corporation of Antiquities and Museum's Suakin Project is directed by Hussan Hussein Idris, the head of NCAM, and comprises a team co-directed by Dr Laurence Smith, of the Cambridge Macdonald Institute of Archaeological Research (UK), and Michael Mallinson of Mallinson Architects (UK), with researchers from NCAM (Sudan), Cambridge University (UK), Khartoum University (UK), Ulster University (Northern Ireland) and a team of specialist conservators trained at the British Museum (UK). The project is also grateful for the support of H.E. Taha Eila, governor of the Red Sea State and his office.

Figure 26.1. Satellite image of northeast Sudan, showing Suakin on an island in a bay with a very narrow inlet. The asphalt road between Port Sudan to the north and Khartoum to the west, turning from the coast into the Red Sea Mountains near Suakin, is clearly visible.



the region as the best example of this creative style, comparable only to Massawa, in present-day Eritrea, which was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1921. The ancient written records on the Red Sea are redolent with references to Suakin, including in the works of Ptolemy, Mas'udi, Maqrizi, Ibn Said, Abulfeda, Ibn Fadlallah al-Umari, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khaldun, Francesco Suriano, Zorzi, Alvarez, Joam de Castro, Almeida, Lobo, Dapper, d'Anville, Lapanouse, Seetzen, Bruce, Burchardt and Valentia (Hinkel 1992: 216-218) and it features in many songs and other oral traditions of the Beja people. It was the focus of the historic struggles between the Sudanese people and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century CE, and is considered by most Sudanese, and many other North African people, as a symbol of their link to Islam and their personal pilgrimage to Mecca. The biological diversity of the Suakin reefs and the lagoon wetlands are unique in their own right (Chekchak and the Equipe Cousteau in press).

The History of Suakin

Suakin may have been the site of a Roman port identified as Evangelon Portus by Ptolemy, which maintained links with the Nile Valley, Ethiopia and Arabia Felix. In the 9th century CE, a small gold rush resulted in waves of immigration from the Arabian Peninsula (Burckhardt 1822; Hinkel 1992). The new populations needed a port for access to their homelands. This early role of Suakin was shared with Aydhab farther north and Badi to the south (Crowfoot 1911; Paul 1955; Kwatoko 1993;

Power 2009), and it suffered with them from occasional invasions from Egypt. Suakin was a prominent city during the early Christian Kingdoms of Sudan (10th–12th centuries CE), when Suakin formed a hub in the Red Sea trade. According to al-Maqrizi (*Khitat* III, 257), the Arab writer Ibn Sulaym al-Aswani (975-996 CE) described Suakin as linked to the Nile Valley by a caravan route from Shankir, near Berber. Suakin was first mentioned by name in the 10th century CE by al-Hamdani (*Sifat I*, 40, 133; *Jawaharatayn* 24), who says it was an ancient town. At that time, Suakin must have been a small Beja settlement, but it began to expand after the abandonment of the port of Badi to its south. The Crusades and Mongol invasions drove more trade into the region; there are a number of references to Venetian merchants residing at Suakin and Massawa as early as the 14th century CE. For most of its early history, the port was in joint control of both the traders and local Beja tribes. The writers Masudi and Ibn Said (1208–1286 CE) refer to a tribe called al-Khasa, which comes from near Asmara, in modern Eritrea, as controlling the town. Townspeople were considered good Muslims, although, according to Yakut (III, 182), Christian traders were still present in 1224 CE. When John Lewis Burckhardt visited Suakin in 1815 CE (Burckhardt 1822: 433), he describes the population as emigrated from Hadramaut in Yemen, and that the Hadareb tribe was in control and Suakin was under the rule of Prince (*emir*) al-Hadherebe.

In the 14th century CE, Suakin was indicated on the map of the Genoese merchant Carignano, who spelled

it 'Seueci.' The increased importance of the town in later times can mostly be attributed to the destruction of Aydhab by Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay (1422–1438 CE) around 1426 CE (Leo Africanus III, 837, Pory and Brown 1896). It was at this time that the al-Hadareb tribe took over in Suakin (Paul 1959), who had previously ruled Aydhab. This suggests that despite Leo Africanus's reference to the governor of Suakin massacring the fleeing population of Aydhab, the population more likely moved south to Suakin, which may also be why Aydhab is also referred to as Suakin Gadeem or Old Suakin. In the 15th century CE, trading contacts included Indian and Venetian merchants. The first Hadendowa 'Sherifs of Suakin' traced their origins back to the end of the 15th century CE when, following the visit by al-Ashraf Barsbay in 1451 CE (Crowfoot 1955), they arrived and settled in Suakin. The town was controlled again by Egypt in 1517 CE, after the Portuguese tried to establish themselves in the Red Sea and Selim, the Turkish conqueror of Egypt, built a fleet at Suez to keep them out. By the 16th century CE the port was reported as having well-built houses. In the 17th century CE two small forts are recorded as being built on the mainland, which appear on maps until the 1870s. Only the small tower called Fort Fulla is still visible today (Figure 26.2). At this time the inhabitants are recorded as being under Turkish rule and many of their houses are apparently in a poor state of repair.

Having been under Egyptian Mamluk control in the late 15th century CE, Suakin was surrendered to the Ottoman Turks in 1517 CE and from then on had an Ottoman garrison until the 19th century CE. Used at first as a base for the fleet fighting the Portuguese it became, in 1540 CE, the supply base for the conquest of Abyssinia and a capital of the province (*eyalet*) of Habes. By the 1580s, it was joined with the eyalet of Egypt only to be transferred to the control of Jeddah shortly afterwards. Suakin was the main port for the Funj Sultanate (1504–1821 CE), ruled from Sinnar on the White Nile. In the 19th century CE control passed back to Egypt and the port once again prospered, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 CE. The British general Charles Gordon was based in Suakin in the 1860s when he was governor of the Red Sea littoral and active repressing the slave trade. His residence here was short, but saw the building of most of the larger public buildings in Suakin as well as the short causeway to the mainland. During the Mahdi Revolt (1883–1898

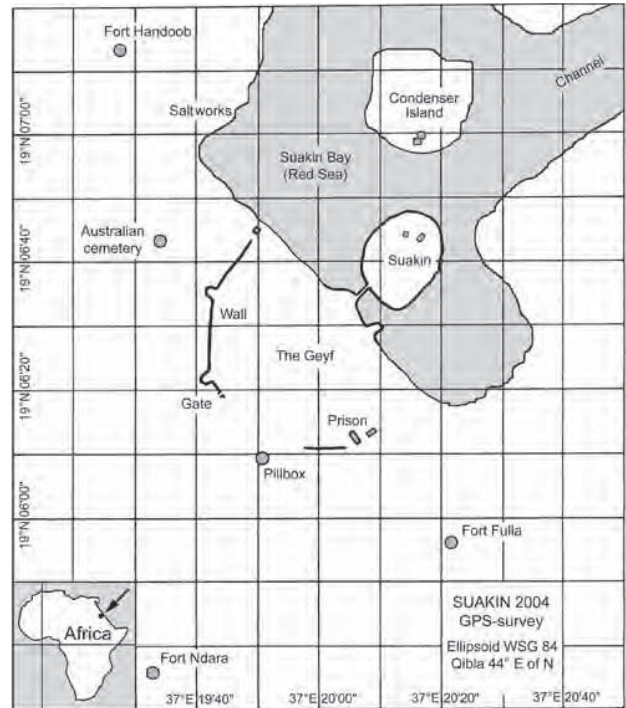


Figure 26.2. Map of the wider environs of Suakin, showing the current coastline and the preserved defensive structures. Surveyed and drawn by H. Barnard.

CE) the town was fortified by Commander (later Lord) Horatio Kitchener and never succumbed to the Mahadist troops under Osman Digne. A revival of the trade with Europe followed, but also led to the abandonment of Suakin as a new port, Port Sudan, was founded 60 km (40 mi) to the north in 1909 to serve as the terminal of the new railroad between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea coast. The majority of the houses of Suakin that were still standing in 1951, when they were surveyed by Jean-Pierre Greenlaw who attested to the rich history of Suakin (Greenlaw 1976, 1995). Their rapid deterioration is a great tragedy for Sudan and the local population.²

The strategic importance of Suakin developed because it offered a protected harbor at the northernmost reach of the trade winds from India. This made it a key location for long-distance trade in the Red Sea. Suakin's history was also influenced by the caravans that passed through Suakin on their journey inland to northern emporiums in the Nile Valley. The Red Sea tribes carried the balance of power in the town; the sea traders had links to the Hadredeb traders in Jeddah but

² Suakin is a protected monument under the 1999 Archaeological Ordinances of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums.

the inland trade, and its dependence on local food and water, ensured that local tribes played a key part of the development of the town. The Beja people owned property in Suakin and many intermarried, resulting in the formation of the separate Artiga tribe whose chief (*omda*) still has great importance, both on the island and in the surrounding area. Alongside this economic development is that of the pilgrimage routes from mainland Africa to Jeddah and Mecca as northern Sudan increasingly converted to Islam. Suakin consequently developed links westwards as far as Darfur and Chad. The pilgrims traveled with the traders, and relied heavily on the same protection as the goods that they traveled with. The Omda of Suakin controlled the north–south route and access to Ethiopia.

Archaeological Research in Suakin

The Suakin Project, under auspices of the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums (NCAM), has undertaken substantial archaeological research on the island of Suakin and its surrounding areas since 2002 (Mallinson *et al.* 2004, 2009).³ Previous to this the only other archaeological work recorded a supposed Roman cistern on Condenser Island, a second island just north of Suakin (Chittick 1982). The recent excavations in several areas of the site, including its center, peripheries and harbor, including underwater surveys, show evidence of occupation dating back to the 11th century CE. Recent radiocarbon analysis of organic samples from the bottom of a pit next to the Beit al-Pasha returned a date of 1066 CE. Most of the pottery, however, dates from times when Islam became the dominant religion in northern Sudan. The findings indicate that the settlement started with the building of simple huts that were later replaced by larger stone structures and a specific enlargement and reshaping of the island in the 19th century CE. Research has also identified a number of lost buildings, including Beit al-Mufti and Beit Osman Digne, as well as previously unrecorded parts of known monuments, including the internal layout of Beit Khorshid Effendi, previously unrecorded diwans in the courtyard of Beit al-Pasha, and an earlier mosque beneath the Shafai Mosque, the main mosque of the city (Figure 26.3).

³ This work was funded by Cambridge University, the University of Ulster, the British Institute for East Africa, and the Sudanese national government through the office of the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport.

In places the island preserves stratigraphic layers of occupation of over 1.5 m deep down into the modern water table. These findings attest to a long period of settlement and development of the central areas around the later Beit al-Pasha and Shafai Mosque. Excavations also suggest that the water table is rising as earlier levels of occupation appear now to be under water. Our research also confirms the continued existence of many of the decorated elements that made the Red Sea houses of Suakin famous, including elements of doors, stone-carved door lentils and decorated *roshan* windows. These have been recovered and stored for future restoration. The richness of their style and the suitability of the architectural elements for living in the hot climate on the Red Sea coast are evident. During the 2004 season all excavation trenches existing at the time and the larger structures surrounding them were surveyed. To aid future survey work in the area, nine station markers were left in situ. The northeast outside corner of the restored Hanafy Mosque, opposite the “lion gate” of the customs building, was chosen as the grid origin for a coordinate system covering the entire site (Figure 26.4). A start was made with the mapping of the wider environs of the city and the Geyf (Figure 26.4), as well as additional survey work on Condenser Island and the recording of the present coast line of Suakin itself (Figures 26.2 and 26.4).



Figure 26.3. The Shafai Mosque in Suakin during restoration work in the spring of 2010. Built in the 17th century CE this mosque is the largest on Suakin Island. It was in a serious state of disrepair and its restoration, implemented by the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums with funding of the British Embassy in Khartoum, is an important step towards the future recognition and rescue of Suakin’s cultural heritage.



Figure 26.4. Map of Suakin showing the current coastline and the position of some of the main structures on the island and the mainland (al-Geyf). Surveyed and drawn by H. Barnard.

The Future of Suakin

Our historical research has resulted in a database of over 1200 photographs of Suakin from sources as diverse as the Sudan National Records, the Durham University Archive, the British National Records Office, the personal collections of Jean-Pierre Greenlaw and Sir Laurence Kirwan, and archived newspapers. The Greenlaw Archive has more than 100 drawings of the buildings as well as a model of the island as it was in 1924 CE. The photographic record is further supported by a series of books and narratives in Arabic, Hebrew, Portuguese, English, German and French, describing the history of Suakin at the end of the Ottoman Empire and the development of European contacts in the region. The information gathered records both the local history and gives accounts of trade and social relations going back to the 16th century CE and beyond. The records of travelers in Sudan particularly bring into focus the old

international links of the site: David Reubeni and Joam de Castro in the 16th century CE (de Castro 1745–1747; Hillelson 1933, 1935), Father Jeronimo Lobo in the 17th century CE (Da Costa *et al.* 1983), James Bruce in the 18th century CE (Bruce 1790), John Lewis Burchardt in the early 19th century CE, coming from Shendi in the Nile Valley spend two weeks here in 1814 (Burckhardt 1822), and numerous late 19th century CE visitors describe the complexities of trading in this area.

The records that accompany these histories and narratives also attest to the development and change of the island, from a collection of simple huts to elaborate stone buildings, large port facilities and impressive defensive structures. The latest examples of the latter, built in the 1880s and 1890s, are detailed by full working drawings by the British War Office, including specifications for the first defenses designed for machine guns and trench warfare. Suakin was at the forefront of the development of colonial technology for much of the 19th century CE, seeing the introduction of water condensers, cotton gins, steam cranes and military ballooning. The first Australian war graves and memorial, dating to the Suakin Campaign of 1884, are to be found here as well (Figure 26.2). Suakin's cultural heritage value is vested in part in its intangible heritage. The songs and traditions of Suakin life are still alive in the oral record of the Beja and Artiga people; they continue to hope that Suakin will again become a center for their culture. The economic activities of the local people, such as fishing, boat building and trading, and the stories of the sea captains of the area, are part of this living tradition and are also being recorded. The hope is that this material can be more fully documented before the oldest surviving inhabitants have died.

The photographic records from 1888 CE onwards show a constantly evolving architecture in the domestic buildings of Suakin. The characteristic decorated wooden windows, called '*roshan*,' and doors, were frequently moved from building to building and remodeled in the process. The historic records of Suakin make frequent reference to the collapse of buildings. The historic record of seismic events shows them to be as frequent as five to ten per year since 1889, with major ones at least every half century (Ambraseys *et al.* 1994). The 1938 earthquake, 5.8 on the Richter Scale with its epicenter 90 km (60 mi) away, was stronger and closer than the one that destroyed Massawa in 1921, which was 5.7 on the Richter Scale and 140 km (90 mi) away. It did not cause

many casualties, as by then the port was closed and the buildings mostly empty. The references to collapse are supported by the archaeological work carried out by the Suakin Project. A number of building foundations from the 18th century CE were found under the later 19th century CE buildings among deposits of fallen blocks. Moreover, the edge of the island is constructed with layers of rubble from collapsed buildings.

Detailed examination of the process of building collapse, gleaned from photographs before and after the 1938 earthquake, and the state of *in situ* building materials, reveal four significant factors that have made the buildings vulnerable to seismic disturbance. First, the buildings were built close to the water table in friable porous materials such as coral limestone and mud mortar. Consequently, the buildup of moisture and the accumulation of salts within the lower walls of the buildings from damp within the ground eventually resulted in a fatal weakening that eventually caused slumping. Second, the decay of the timbers inserted in the walls to provide lateral strength compounded the problems of instability, as the timbers decay due to the moist and salty atmosphere. Third, the roofs of the buildings collapsed due to the decay of roof timbers and occasional heavy rains. Fourth, recent trials in reconstructing the coral walls of the Beit Khorshid Effendi using local conservation techniques has shown that the addition of salt water to make the lime mortar weakens its binding properties. This would have been common practice, as fresh water was in short supply and therefore expensive. All these factors contributed to an intrinsically unstable outer wall. Cracks in the walls that were not maintained or repaired led to collapse, either spontaneously or following an earthquake like the one in 1938, or the series of tremors between 1958 and 1962. The potential for destabilization was also compounded by adding storeys to existing buildings, encouraged by economic prosperity or family expansion. The architecture of the Red Sea style has built-in weaknesses that the earthquakes expose, particularly if left without suitable repair or reinforcement. This structural vulnerability needs to be overcome in any building restoration or conservation.

In 1972, UNESCO commissioned a report that fully endorsed Suakin as an Outstanding World Heritage Site, and made a plan for its conservation (Hansen 1973). At this time only 15 of the 140 major buildings were still standing. A further proposal for the protection of the site was prepared by Friedrich Hinkle, which maintained the hope of restoring several buildings (Hinkel 1992).

Shortly before the site was placed on the tentative list in 1994, UNESCO commissioned a report that recommended a Master Plan in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program. The optimism of the reports of 1968, 1972 and 1979 was based on the assumption that the remaining buildings and ruins could be restored and conserved. Although this may be true for a few of the key buildings, the majority of the houses need a more rigorous approach. Comparable historical cities like Lamu (in Kenya) and Zanzibar (in the autonomous region of Tanzania with the same name) were able to continue as living ports because although many fine houses have been conserved,⁴ others have been rebuilt using stronger materials. Even if the families who owned the houses would have had the resources, the restoration and conservation of all the houses would have been expensive, difficult and dangerous. Reconstruction with stronger structural materials, using the coral blocks and carved decorative elements from the original buildings as facings, presents a more practical and cost-effective solution, while the distinctive cultural style of the buildings and monuments can be preserved by using the historic records as guides.⁵ The rebuilding of the fallen buildings follows in the traditions and necessities of building on the island as established by historical and archaeological records. Most of the buildings are still owned by families and some can be encouraged to rebuild their homes as viable living units and also to develop new economic activities, such as tourism and diving. Modern structural techniques and infrastructure can be integrated to make the buildings safer and more suitable for the present, while still displaying an authentic Suakin, Red Sea style. In the words of Nasr al-Hagg Ali (first minister of culture of Sudan):

It is our duty towards the future generations of this country and global cultural heritage to preserve this crucial landmark, the gateway through which the life-line from the East steadily trickled in and accumulated the pool of our present-day culture and national makeup. These relics cannot be measured in terms of money, and they are invaluable in the development of this young nation.

⁴ Jeddah, Massaua, Qusier and Yanbu once had a Red Sea architectural style comparable to Suakin; these are all now either completely lost or built over.

⁵ This approach has been sponsored by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums in the restoration of the Hanafi Mosque and Gordon's Gate.

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