

Oman and Eastern Africa An ancient relationship

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The distinguished location of the Sultanate of Oman has played an important role in its political and economic life, the Omanis realized the importance of their country's geographical and historical position, therefore they set out in their commercial and maritime activities, and that was the gateway to openness to the different peoples of the world. The nature of the Omani coasts helped them to establish a series of active ports, which were the reason for the establishment of an international navigation network throughout the ancient and medieval eras, the occupation of the Arabian Gulf took the lead in carrying the Indian Ocean trade to the cities of the Mediterranean, and due to the proximity of the Omani coasts to the Gulf, Oman was also at the fore in monopolizing most of the Indian Ocean trade.¹

The Omanis by virtue of their experience, have become in this way of ability and fame to ride the sea. It is not surprising if some researchers pointed out that the sea route to the Far East was almost the preserve of the Omani seamen without anyone else. And that commercial activities became in their hands, and that Oman's navigators and merchants were the influential elements in the prosperity of Arab navigational activity in the Indian Ocean. From Sohar, Muscat, and other Omani ports, a large number of competent Omani navigators emerged, some of

¹ Salem, Sahar Abdel Aziz. Oman and its trade with the Far East and East Africa in the Islamic era. Research in the Oman symposium through history. Muscat. (in Arabic)1994. pp. 31-32.

whom we have listed, who controlled the maritime trade with the Far East and East Africa².

The large coastlines that characterize Oman played a major role in the presence of many of them like:

1-Muscat Port (Cryplos Portus): Its name means the hidden port, and it is one of the important ports at the entrance to the Gulf of Oman, it is the only port that was mentioned by Ptolemy the geographer in the Gulf of Oman due to its great importance.

2- Port of Qalhat (Eorum Acila): It is the departure point for ships heading to India.

3- Omana port: scholars know it as Sohar port. It is a port that has a wide commercial activity with neighboring countries such as India and the East African coast.

Due to the prosperity of the land routes on the one hand and the external competition on the other hand, the sea routes between the coasts of southern Arabia, East Asia, East and Africa have always flourished, unlike the trade of the Gulf and the Red Sea³.

It is worth noting that the Arabs were in the past the link between the countries of the ancient world, east and west, and they carried to the east the products of the west of ostrich feathers, ivory, gold and silver and they carried to the west the products of the East, such as spices, spices, and tin. They also carried to both the

² Al-Mashhadani, Muhammad Jassim Hammadi. The history of Dhofar from 798 AH / 1396 AD. Dhofar through history. Salalah (in Arabic),1997. pp. 78-79.

³ Al-Naeem, Noura Abdullah Al-Ali. The economic situation in the Arabian Peninsula in the period from the third century BC to the third century AD. Riyadh. Al Shawaf House. Riyadh. First, Ed., (in Arabic)1992, p. 249.

eastern and western countries their precious Arab products, foremost among them incense, pearls, precious stones, inked clothes, and robes that were woven.⁴

Therefore, the Arab countries reached a great place of economic growth due to these various activities, and trade also enabled them to control the most important international trade routes at the time. Which caused it to be coveted, but its peaceful policy towards the various political forces contributed greatly to maintaining its position. Despite this, several attempts were made to invade and occupy it, and indeed some of these attempts sometimes succeeded, as the political forces at the time did not aspire to anything more than securing their trade routes, obtaining tribute and some spoils⁵.

The Arab lands attracted a lot of historians, as many of them wrote about them, for example: Strabo, who spoke about the achievements of the Arabs of this region in the field of trade, the gold mines and water for irrigation in their country, and what they produce of honey and wax in abundance, as they distinguish them in the field of urbanization, and mention their luxurious homes. The writings of the famous Greek historian Herodotus also had a share in talking about the excellence of the Arab countries without competition in the production of incense, frankincense, and types of perfumes, which they were famous for among the ancient nations. They also had a hand in extracting the minerals for which the Arabian Peninsula was famous, and which was rich in gold, silver and precious stones, which the famous historian "Al-Hamdani" talked about in his book "The Characteristic of the Arabian Peninsula," as mentioned by the historian Yaqut Al-Hamawi in his

4 Abdel Mawla, Osama Mahmoud. Incense trade in southern Arabia from the tenth century until the end of the first century BC (Master thesis). Zagazig. Higher Institute of Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations, (in Arabic) 2013. p 12.

⁵ Jassim, Abdel Rafea. Abyssinian invasion of Yemen. educational studies. Fifth Issue, (in Arabic) (2009). pp. 121-122.

“Mu’jam Al-Buldan” Others talked about the gold mines in southern Arabia countries. As Al-Masoudi mentioned in describing the Safala region, he said: “It is the ends of the country of Zinj, and to it you mean the boats of the Omanis.”

Considering that southern Arabia countries were not only a producer of the commodity of incense, but it was a trade medium, between the Indian subcontinent and Northeast Africa and between the regions of the Mediterranean basin, which was called the Near East, a network of settlements has been established, both inside and outside the Arabian Peninsula. In addition, the trade of the ancient southern Arabs extended to the areas of the Aegean basin, that is, to the countries of the Greco-Roman world.⁶

The importance of Oman's location

Omani-African Relations

Due to the large sea coasts overlooking the Sultanate of Oman, the Omanis were among the most skilled navigators and took advantage of this skill in trade.

Oman was an important center for goods exchanged between East and West only for the Arabian Peninsula, as it was the connecting link for transportation for ships that must pass between East and West through its multiple ports. The Omanis enjoyed a long history of maritime trade with the continents of Asia and Africa, and it remained so, but with the intervention of many influences such as stability and the climate of global economic movement.⁷

⁶ Clip, Mahyoub Ghaleb Ahmed. Trade links between southern Arabia, the Fertile Crescent, and Egypt during the first millennium BC. Damascus University Journal - Volume 27 - Issue 1 + 2 (in Arabic), (2011), p. 331.

⁷ Abdel Halim, Rajab Mohammed. The Omanis, navigation, trade and the spread of Islam. Muscat. Al-Nahda Press, (in Arabic), 1989. pp. 57-58.

We start with Africa, the rich continent in which trade played an important role in political and social relations. Because of the active Omani trade with East Africa, there has become a special interest on the part of the Omanis in East Africa, where many Omanis settled in some cities there, where some historical sources mention the exodus of many Omanis in migrations to Africa at the beginning of the seventh century AD, these immigrants have maintained their relationship with their mother country (Oman), and then it becomes clear to us how trade relations were a major reason for the transfer of culture and civilization between Oman and the eastern part of Africa. Therefore, researchers have always linked trade links with the civilizational influence of the Omanis in the African East, and the Omanis' experience in commercial transactions throughout their extended history has contributed to this, and this experience was the result of frictions with neighboring and distant civilizations.

It is not excluded that the Arabs - and the Omanis in particular - had imported timber suitable for the manufacture of ships, especially since they controlled a large part of its production areas in the African Coast It is also not excluded that they made ships in the areas of timber production, which is what the Omanis did, and they used to go to the islands that produce coconuts, They have carpentry machines and others, they cut wood and dry it, then they make boats, and weave them from wicker and make sails, and when they are done with that, the boats are loaded with hookahs and they go to Oman to sell them.⁸

It is worth noting that these trade relations preceded the emergence of Islam. The Omanis did not penetrate much before the advent of Islam inside Africa.

⁸ Al-Naeem, Noura Abdullah Al-Ali. Op., Cit. p. 248.

They were content with settling on its eastern coasts, establishing trade centers there, and working on bartering Africans, bringing to them the products of India and China in exchange for ivory and gold. This relationship has been steadily strengthened by virtue of the commercial exchange, which resulted in the establishment of coastal centers established by the Omanis to serve commercial purposes In this early period in the history of Omani-African relations, the frequency of Arab ships coming from the countries of the Arabian Gulf increased, Among them is Oman on the eastern coast of Africa, as well as the Arabs intermingled and intermarried with African tribes. Over the long history, the people of that region from East Africa viewed Oman as the mother country, of course The prevailing climatic conditions in the Indian Ocean have helped the navigation activity between East Africa and Oman. The northern monsoon winds often pushed the Omani ships from the coast of Oman to the eastern coast of Africa during their winter periods on the Gulf region. Likewise, the southwestern monsoon pushed the same ships on their way back across the waters of the Indian Ocean to Oman in the summer.⁹

Oman-Asian Relations

If we come to the relationship between Oman and India, many researchers believe that the Omanis arrived in India and they had active trade relations. Omanis were importing many products from India, and they also bought timber from which they made ships in Oman and some of them were made in India. Oman used to export many products to India, including frankincense, gum, leather, and spices. At one time, some of these products were used in mummification, fumigation, and the manufacture of drugs. In the later ages, frankincense, horses and leather were

⁹ Salem, Sahar Abdel Aziz. Op., Cit., (in Arabic), p. 33.

exported to India from Thofar in the Sultanate of Oman, and the Omanis' activity extended to Serendib, Ceylon and many Asian cities.¹⁰

The Arabic culture in Eastern Africa

The influence of the southern Arab influence reached that some southern inscriptions spoke of Abyssinia as if it were part of the Arabian Peninsula and not from Africa. On the country of Nubia and the Somali coast, declaring the establishment of an African Arab state whose capital is Aksum, as if the power had moved from the south of the peninsula to East Africa, and from the Arab ancestors to the descendants of the Arabs¹¹

There were also Arab religious influences that moved to East Africa. The crescent and the disc were religious symbols that are associated with the deity of the moon. In Abyssinia, incense burners were found with the symbols of the deity of the moon, namely, the disc and the crescent. It was also found at the site of Yaha, northeast of Adua in the country of Abyssinia. On some monuments, the Arab influences are clearly visible, dating back to about the middle of the first millennium BC. In the same site, a temple dedicated to the god “Sin” was also found.¹²

Incense and its role in the Arab control of East Africa

At the beginning of the first millennium B.C, there was a clear development in irrigation technology in southern Arabia, which led to a rise in the production of

10Gargash, Muhammad. Dhofar and its place in world trade, a historical study between the third and eighth centuries AD. Dhofar through history. Salalah. (in Arabic), 1997. p. 151.

11Abdel Mawla, Osama Mahmoud. Ibid. (in Arabic) p. 133.

¹² Abdel Mawla, Osama Mahmoud. Ibid. pp. 133-134.

agricultural crops Then some crops were turned into commercial commodities. The trade of ladden, myrrh, kandar, frankincense and other spices became famous and it became very popular in all the countries of the Near East and the Mediterranean Basin Those perfumes were used in temples during religious rituals, and in embalming the dead, and were used in the preparation of medicinal drugs, as well as adornment for members of the community, in addition to some of them giving good smells. Thus, its value was very high. Incense production constituted an important source of wealth for the ancient Yemeni state. Some classical sources even indicate that it constituted a superstitious source of income for it.¹³

In the Sabean lexicon, the word frankincense came in the sense of frankincense (incense), and that ancient word was transferred to the Greek language and became libanos. As for the word Al-Kander, it is a Hadrami word that has a Persian origin, and it has moved to the Arabic language. In Yemen, the name Al-Kander was always called frankincense, and various attributes were added to it, such as (Duker frankincense, Shahri frankincense, mastiha frankincense, and other names)¹⁴.

The growth of frankincense trees was not limited to the regions of southern Arabia - especially Dhofar - but some types of frankincense also grew in Somalia. It was reported from Herodotus that the south of the peninsula is the only region that produces frankincense, myrrh, acacia, cinnamon, mastic, or laden.¹⁵

The Dhofar region is the main home for the production of frankincense in the Arabian Peninsula, although it is not limited to it, but it has grown in some Yemeni sites. Some of its species still grow in the hills of Hadramawt and the coast of Somalia Dhofar relied on frankincense as a solid pillar in building its economic

13Clip, Mahyoub Ghaleb Ahmed. Ibid. p. 333.

14 Abdel Mawla, Osama Mahmoud. Ibid. p. 18.

15 Abdel Mawla, Osama Mahmoud. Ibid. p. 20.

entity, and its people monopolized its production and trade. Several ports in the south of the Arabian Peninsula have flourished due to that trade, and studies have proven that “Khoury” is the port of “Sumhuram” mentioned in the southern Arab inscriptions, which is the port of Dhofar dedicated to the export of Dhofar frankincense¹⁶

The frankincense trade has prompted the inhabitants of southern Arabia to try to control its production areas in Somalia so that it would not be the subject of competition for the frankincense produced by their lands. And they called the incense of Somalia "the incense of the distant shore", It was shipped with other African goods by ships bound for southern Arabia It is clear that the purpose of this is to re-export these goods from the ports of Yemen, and thus they tighten their grip on African goods, especially incense, so that it is not a way to compete with Arab incense.¹⁷

16 Abdel Mawla, Osama Mahmoud. *Ibide*. p. 21.

17 Syed, Abdel Moneim Abdel Halim. *The Red Sea and its back in antiquity*, Alexandria. University Knowledge House, (in Arabic), 1993.pg. 576.

Conclusion

- It can be said that the Arabian Peninsula invaded Africa civilly, while the East African region invaded the Arabian Peninsula militarily.
- Incense and frankincense were the main motive to draw the attention of the Arabs to the countries of the East African and the necessity of controlling it so as not to compete with its products at a time when incense was the backbone of the economy of the whole East.
- It is noted that the names of the process of extracting kander from trees and the names of the tools used in this area of Arabic origin, which indicates the connection between the population of the two areas of growth of kander in northern Somalia, in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, for example, the Somalis call the process of cutting trees “zara” and they call the container in which they collect the frozen juice “Zanbeel.” Rather, the tool for splitting trees, which is similar to a knife, has one name in both Somalia and Dhofar, which is “Manjif”, which is a Hadrami word of origin.
- There were other motives for Arab stability in Africa, which was the control of wood production areas The Omanis needed a permanent resource to manufacture their ships, so they preferred to settle there, and they could have built their ships there and then sent to their country, which is what they followed with some islands.
- Finally, the migration of Arabs to Africa was a reason for laying the foundations of civilization and culture that emanated from the core of Arab civilization to the heart of Africa and when the Arab civilization was inactive, an African country of Arab origin took the role of leadership temporarily, and its name began to be repeated in the inscriptions in the 3rd

century BC. But over time, this civilization dissolved in the Abyssinian midst, leaving only the writing or the Musnad script.

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