

# The Archaeology and Heritage of the Sudanese Red Sea Region: Importance, Findings, and Challenges

AHMED ADAM

Head Department of Archaeology - University of Khartoum  
Director of the Red Sea Project for Archaeological Research

## ABSTRACT

*This paper seeks to shed a high light on the archaeological sites discovered in the area of Suakin, Arkawet, and Sinkat as a part of the project of the department of Archaeology β university of Khartoum, so, the archaeological sites discovered in this region belong to different periods such as Pre-Historic, Medieval, Islamic, and others are unknown, which means that the region used to link the Red Sea Cultures with those on the central Sudan and Egypt far north and Eretria in the east.*

*Through this study I am also seeking to evaluate the field work (Archaeological and Ethnographic) conducted in the area of Arkawet and Sinkat town, and Suakin port, then to put a plan for the managing and protecting the archaeological sites and ethnographic materials. Therefore I will follow or apply a number of approaches in this study such as description, survey analysis of the sites and its contents as well a comparison will be made between the results of the present study with the results of the previous studies in the field of archeology and ethnography conducted on other sites in the Sudanese Red Sea Region. The historical sources will also be compared with the study findings.*

## KEYWORDS

*Red Sea, Archaeology, Heritage, Sudan, Survey, Suakin*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Red Sea lies in an ideal geographical location between eastern and western seas in general, and between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean in particular. It is a bar-shaped rectangular basin, which narrows towards the north and south.

On the western side of the Red Sea extend the Nile River and its tributaries, which constitute the main water bodies of Sudan; that is in addition to many valleys, creeks and seasonal rivers. The extent of the Red Sea coastline and its unique nature led to the creation of many anchorage sites and natural harbors since ancient times, bringing together culture and commerce to the interior of Africa.

Thus, the Red Sea region also formed the link between the civilizations in eastern, southern, northern and western Sudan on the one hand, and the civilizations of the Levant, Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula on the other hand. Hence, the Red Sea has been an important trade route throughout recorded human history, bringing goods of India and the Far East to the markets of Egypt, the Classical World and Europe, and now the Red Sea is one of the most important shipping routes in the world (Zahran. 2010: 104-110).

The geographical location of the Red Sea has a vital role in the history of the countries overlooking the shorelines of the Red Sea in Africa and Asia.

The location of the area of this study is about 400 km from Kassala town in the south and Port Sudan town in the north. It is one of the most important regions in the whole area between the Red Sea and the river Nile, and Atbara River.

The study seeks to shed light on the archaeological sites discovered in the region last season in which were around 83 archaeological sites especially the graves called Roman grave according to the local resources (Adam. 2016: 12).

The archaeological sites discovered in the area extend from Prehistory, to modern times. These will be discussed in detail later.

## 2. THE HISTORY OF THE RED SEA

The Red Sea was among the first regions of the Middle East to be studied and explored by Europeans as early as 1766 by Jean Baptiste Bourguignon Danville, the French geographer and cartographer (d.1782). Shortly thereafter the publication of the Royal Danish expedition to Arabia provided the first detailed account of the Hijaz and Yemen. However, the publication of the work of James Bruce, a Scottish traveler and travel writer (d.1794) was seminal since his account of his travels in Ethiopia and Nubia could be regarded as the beginning of the historical and archaeological study of the Red Sea region. That is in addition to a number of studies that were conducted on

the left and right shores of the Red Sea during different times and until today (Power. 2012: 6).

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 Fadllalalh Al-Umari, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khaldun, Francesco Suriano, Zorzi, Alvarez, Joam de Castro, Almeida, Lobo, Dapper, Danville, Lapanouse, Seetzen, Bruce, Burckhardt and Valentia (Hinkel: 1992: 216). And 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 around.

Many Roman port identified in the Red Sea such as Suakin, Badi, Aydhab, as Evangeline Portus by Ptolemy, which maintained links with the Nile Valley, Ethiopia and Arabia Felix. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, a small gold rush resulted in waves of immigration from the Arabian Peninsula.

The new population 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, Kwatoko: 1993). And it suffered with them from occasional invasions from Egypt. Suakin was a prominent city in the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), when it formed a hub in the Red Sea trade according to Al maqrizi and Ibn Sulaym al-Aswani Suakin as linked to the Nile Valley and also 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, most of its early history, the port was in joint control of both the traders and local Beja tribes.

When John Lewis Burckhardt visited Suakin in 1815 he described a population as emigrated from Hadramout in Yemen. And the Hadareb tribe was in control and Suakin was under the rule of the prince of al-Hadherebe. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE, Suakin was indicated on the map of the many merchants visited the area.

However, one of the most controversial issues with the history of the Red Sea is the uncertainty regarding the location of Punt area in the Red Sea region. From the Old Kingdom onwards, Punt is frequently recorded in Egyptian royal, private, religious and literary texts as a geographical region from which frankincense and other exotic products were imported as well as a mythical place from which marvelous things came to Egypt. According to textual and iconographic evidence, Punt could be reached by land routes or maritime route. Contact with Punt began in Dynasties 5 and 6 (c. 2494-2181 BC) and was frequent in Dynasty 12 (c. 1985-1773 BC), and after. The location of Punt and its routes from Egypt have been debated for more than a century because the Egyptian textual and representational evidence only provides a

general picture of Punt (Fattovich: 1991:257-272). Most scholars agree that the Egyptians were navigating to Punt along the Red Sea as far as the coasts of present-day eastern Sudan.

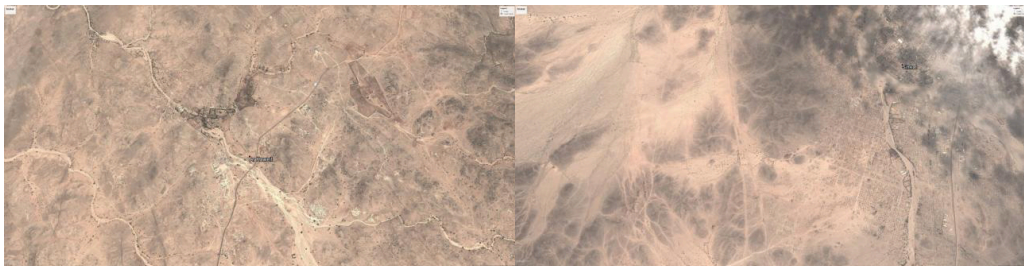
### 3. THE ARCHAEOLOGY AND HERITAGE OF THE RED SEA

The heritage in Sudan exposed to many threats in recent decades caused by the economic, and political changes, such as the construction of dams, mining gold, factories and urban sprawl, agricultural and other. The Red Sea consists of many archaeological sites that suffer from such threats. Other heritage consists of songs and living traditions sepecially in Sinkat and Arkaweet. The later will be recorded too.

The area has not been surveyed in details in the past, and very few reports were published about its archaeological importance. Other studies, including underwater surveys, were focused on Suakin Island which show an evidence of occupation dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. The British Institute of Eastern Africa also investigated many architectural elements In Suakin from 2013-2014.

### 4. THE ARCHAEOLOGY AND HERITAGE OF THE AREA OF THE STUDY

During the first season in September 2015 and January 2016, the survey was conducted in the area between Sinkat and Arkaweet. Special attention was paid to the later area where many archaeological sites were recorded, including cemeteries and buildings remains dated back to colonial era of the region (Figure 1).



**FIGURE 1 – Map of the research area**

## 4.1. SUMMARY OF THE SITES DISCOVERED IN THE AREA

### 4.1.1. Graves

1. The Acratail grave is a form of the well-known graves in eastern Sudan. Nine graves were discovered in the area. The name is locally means the Roman grave and some researchers have called it (Fishtail) (Figure 2).
2. Shrine of the Mahadia commander Osman Digna. His remains were moved from the town of Wadi Halfa in 1964. He has built a dome slatted for him in Arkaweet.
3. Graves with extension room or buildings and walls.  
Several of the graves has sleeve with a varying size. Among them is a site with a stone fence and grave-rooms. The other types consists of graves with fences, consisting of stones stacked vertically on the edge of the grave, similar to the stone monument (Megalithic) deployed in Europe and North Africa (Figure 3).
4. Cemeteries of Muslims. A large number of Muslim graves with multiple forms, some are elliptical and circular, or surrounded by rocks and other in a *Kom* shape (Figure 4).
5. Cemeteries of pilgrimage route. A large number of circular and oval mounds.
6. Dome Ms. Miriam. A mud and red brick tomb lies in Sinkat built during the Turkish are from red and mud bricks.
7. Dome of Sheikh Ibrahim: it is a high dome in Sinkat town, built in red brick and cement. The dome is surrounded by many graves, some dated back to 12<sup>th</sup> century.



FIGURE 2 – The type of fish tail grave



**FIGURE 3 – Circular grave and the stone monument (Megalithic)**



**FIGURE 4 – Circular grave and the stone monument (Megalithic)**



**FIGURE 5 – Khalwa of Majazeeb**

#### 4.1.2. Religious

1. Khalwa of Majazeeb: Retreat for the memorization of the Quran and the teaching of the doctrine, It receives a young children students and the elderly (Figure 5).
2. The impact of the Prophet (tradition): it is the nature of man on a stone locally called the impact of the Prophet, which is protected by a fence made of stone (Figure 6).
3. Khalawi retreats in the mountains: many types of these khalawi are discovered in the mountains but the information is very limited lack.



**FIGURE 6 – The impact of the Prophet (tradition) and ancient Khalwa**



**FIGURE 7 – Types of the colonial building in the area**

#### 4.1.3. *Civilian*

1. The British Rest House. There are many colonial buildings in the area such as:
  - a. the rest houses
  - b. the Stable which consists of a number of units and a large swimming pool built of cement and stones, with a number of bathrooms adjacent with each other, in addition to waiting for the platform (Figure 7).
2. Nimeiri Palace. It's built by the previous president of Sudan during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
3. Ali Mirghani Palace. It's built during the Turkish era. It consists of many rooms and steps. Many graves were dug nearby dated to the early Muslim era.
4. Dams. There are many dams built in the area. Dams generally serve the primary purpose of which retain water due to the lack and bitter water in the region.

#### 4.2. A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE FIELD WORK

1. The fieldwork results in Arkaweet and Sinkat are promising and interesting in many ways such as:
  - First; the discovered sites illustrate the rich of the region in archaeological sites from different periods.
  - Second; the presence of the British colonial sites, which shows the strategic importance of the region during that era.
  - Third: the multiplicity of Islamic sites, which includes cemeteries, shrines, Khalawi and others.
2. Although the current fieldwork was oriented mainly to archaeological data, environmental and topographical elements of the region will present a better scenario of the region in ancient periods. This will be investigated in details in the coming seasons.

#### 5. THE FUTURE PLAN

The project's archaeological investigations have now shown that the Red Sea area is rich with archaeological and cultural remains from different period, extending from prehistory, to modern times. The photographic records from 1888 CE onwards show a constantly evolving architecture in the domestic buildings of Suakin.



Our future research will be based on a number of records from different sources such as archaeology, Local Records, and Ethnographic collections. The personal collections of Jean-Pierre Greenlaw and Greenlaw Archive for example consists of more than 100 drawings of the buildings of Suakin as well as a model of Suakin Island as it was in 1924 CE. Other sources include a series of books and narratives in Arabic, and other different languages, describing the history of Suakin Island and the Red Sea style and the development of European contacts in the region.

It is our duty towards the future generations of this country and global cultural heritage to preserve these crucial landmarks, in Suakin especially the famous towers (Gordon, Kitchener towers), 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, and we still have to consider the great efforts exerted by Turkish government for restoring and preserving the historical building in Suakin.

For the Arkawet area we are trying to make some excavations, and the proportion of the lack of Arkawet area before and which represent great importance in the cultural interpretation and early settlement in the east of Sudan, the study seeks to cover the area around the two cities within a reconnaissance exploratory studies and decided that the project Areas that need deeper studies and those that need to rescue excavations.

Through the study, also, the researchers recommended that the revitalization of tourism in the region to achieve sustainable development, and to achieve that it requires fencing some of the archaeological sites and put up signs showing the importance of archaeological sites in the presence of random mining gold campaigns, which represent a major threat to relics due to the tourist activity estimator in Arkawet, but the visitors are unaware of the importance of archaeological sites because of the lack of information.

## 6. CONCLUSION

According to the archaeological field work conducted in the area, it should be stressed that the processes of interaction between Central Sudan and Eastern Sudan led not only to the exchange of trade as written in the historical sources but also to the local production in Eastern Sudan of objects in a Nubian and Egyptian style. Most likely, this was the case in several of the cemetery types.

Many of these graves can be related to types of interaction different from the simple exchange of cultures but not alternative to it, as may come from abroad such as horn of Africa or even the Middetanean Sea. Involving the exchange of ideas and styles, and possibly the movements of small groups of people. Perhaps they were traders or herders, or both, since a pastoral

nomadic component can be envisaged among the inhabitants of the Red Sea.

It appears that these highly shape of the graves from the area do not have the opposed set of carved fields that characterize this type in upper and Lower Nubia and even the close area in Atbara and are more similar to the variant found in the north around port Sudan, the latter of which has a set of grooves in a single direction. These graves are often associated with type recorded in Aroma and Red Sea hill.

In the same assemblage graves of the type of fish tail are always typical of the eastern Sudan. All of these remarks seem to suggest the occurrence of Roman types in north Port Sudan assemblages in these sectors of the area of study.

Therefore, these recent finds seem to support the traditional view relating the culture to the groups inhabiting at the area or at least some parts of it, perhaps to be equated with the Beja tripe

Other interesting assemblages from the area are characterized by Funj elements. These are some graves and roots of the bottle.

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