

**THE PORT OF 'AQABA AND ITS ROLE IN  
THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE IN  
ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL TIMES**

by  
Yousef Ghawanmeh

Aila ('Aqaba) is an old town which dates back to the Edomites, who were the first people to establish it as a port on the Red Sea<sup>1</sup>. In the 6th century B.C., the Nabataeans gradually replaced the Edomites, and settled in the region, called the "Rocky Arab Lands". From the 4th century B.C. onwards, the Nabataeans took full control of the overland trade roads connecting Egypt and Damascus to the Arabian peninsula<sup>2</sup>.

After the death of Alexander the Great, his empire was partitioned among his generals. Ptolemy I had Egypt as his share. But in 312, he occupied Syria and Palestine with eastern Jordan. Thus Aila ('Aqaba) was incorporated into the realm of the Ptolemaic Kingdom, until 198 B.C., when Syria was conquered by the Seleucid Antiochus III<sup>3</sup>.

The Ptolemies were closely interested in the Red Sea, and the African and South Arabian coasts, and they established commercial relations with these regions. Ptolemy II displayed his interest in the coast of the Arabian peninsula by dispatching Ariston to carry out a scouting mission in the region. The principal aim of this mission was to restore the maritime route between Aila and Aden. Actually, the Ptolemies were able to bring under their control both Aila in the Gulf of 'Aqaba and the route from Aila to South Arabia via the Red Sea<sup>4</sup>.

The policy of the Ptolemies invited the reaction of the Nabataeans, because it undermined their monopoly over commerce

and navigation in the Gulf of 'Aqaba, as well as their port at Leuke Kome, which functioned as a transit station for Eastern trade flowing from south Arabia to Petra and Gaza. Consequently, the Nabataeans tried to stop the Ptolemies' inroad into the Red Sea trade. They began to attack and plunder the Ptolemaic vessels which carried Eastern goods<sup>5</sup>. Despite Ptolemy II's efforts and the arrival of some Greek vessels to south Arabia, both the overland and maritime routes between South Arabia, and Egypt and Syria remained in Arab hands (the Nabataeans in the north, and the Sabaeans and Mineavs in the south), through the 3rd century B.C.<sup>6</sup> In time, however, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids improved their commercial relations with the Red Sea region, South Arabia and the African coast, and even organized regular voyages to India.<sup>7</sup>

During the Roman era of Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines (98-192 A.D.) commercial prospects guided the relations between the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean coastlands. In order to consolidate the Roman supremacy over the Eastern trade, Trajan annexed the Nabataean kingdom in south Jordan to Rome and founded the Province of Arabia (106 A.D.). He also rebuilt and improved the roads which connected the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.

Clearly, Aila ('Aqaba) had a golden age in the period beginning with Trajan and extending into the Byzantine era. Aila acquired a widely-acknowledged significance in the Roman as well as Byzantine world of

1. Robert, *The Holy Land*, Vol. 3, p. 40, Cf., al-Maqrizi, *Khutat*, Cairo, 1324-1326 H., Vol 1/2, p.228.  
2. R. Dussaud, *Pénétration des Arabes en Syrie avant l'Islam*, Paris, 1955. *Al-'Arab fi Suriya* (tr. al-Awakhili), Cairo, n.d., p.15, Robert, *op. cit.*, p.43.  
3. Najib Mikhail, *Miṣr wa al-Sharq al-'Adna al-Qadim*, Cairo, 1959, Vol. 3, p.249.

J.R. Barnett, "The Rise and Fall of the Kingdom of Edom", *PEQ*, (1972), p. 26-37.

N. Glueck, *The Other Side of the Jordan*, Cambridge, 1970, p.106ff and p. 138ff.

4. George Hourani, *Al-'Arab Wal-Melāḥah fil-Muḥit al-Hindi*, (tr. Y. Bakr), Cairo, 1958, p.58.

5. *Ibid.* p.58.

6. *Ibid.* p.59.

7. *Ibid.* p.66.

commerce and seafaring. Two fine roads served Aila: One of these roads connected it to Damascus, running through the major Jordanian towns such as Petra, Amman, Jerash onwards to Bostra, via the Trajan Highway (King's Highway). The other road connected Aila to Gaza on the Mediterranean coast<sup>8</sup>. Aila's prosperity caused the decline of the Nabataean port at Leuke Kome. Nevertheless, the Nabataeans still loomed as winners under the circumstances. They became the masters of trade in the northern Red Sea area and south Syria. In the 2nd century A.D., Petra attained a hitherto unknown level of development.

Trajan's reforms also included the restoration of the canal which connected the Nile with the extreme north-west arms of the Red Sea at the port of Clysma (Suez)<sup>9</sup>. In addition, thanks to the Roman fleet which cruised the Red Sea to protect commercial vessels, navigation in the Gulf of 'Aqaba and Suez became secure<sup>10</sup>. On land, the peace imposed by the Romans (*Pax Romana*) provided Syria with security and trade across its branching roads<sup>11</sup>. Aila became a center of bustling commercial activity. It attracted merchants and itinerants from the adjoining regions, such as the Palmyrenes, who became active in Red Sea navigation, and formed a guild of skippers during Hadrian's reign (117-138 A.D.)<sup>12</sup>.

Aila remained an important commercial center at the head of the Gulf of 'Aqaba during the reign of the Antonines (138-192 A.D.), when Roman activities in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean continued to grow. Roman merchants reached Ceylon and India. Ships kept unloading cargo at Aila and Clysma, whence the merchandise was conveyed to the Mediterranean coast and Europe. By the 3rd century, however, the Roman presence in the Red Sea began to fade away along with the economic decline of the Empire. In 395

A.D. the Empire split into its Eastern and Western parts.

The Byzantines began to rise in the Red Sea. They considered it the artery of their trade with India, China, and Africa, and brought the area under their direct control in view of the Persian attempts to harass Byzantine trade. In order to consolidate their supremacy over navigation in the northern extremities of the Red Sea, the Byzantines established a tollhouse on the island of Jutaba, at the southern entry to the Gulf of 'Aqaba. Here they collected tolls from the vessels sailing in from the south<sup>13</sup>.

Jutaba continued to function as a commercial station and tollgate until the reign of Justin I (518-527 A.D.). The revenue from this tollgate did bear a significance in Byzantine finances. During Justin I's reign, the number of commercial vessels active in the Red Sea, Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean amounted to 60, and were distributed as follows:

- 15 vessels in Aila ('Aqaba)
- 20 vessels in Clysma (Suez)
- 07 vessels in Jutaba
- 07 vessels in the islands of Farsan
- 09 vessels in India
- 02 vessels in Berenice on the Red Sea<sup>14</sup>.

The struggle between the Byzantines and the Persians over the international trade routes instigated both powers to try to establish a foothold in Aden and south Arabia. This struggle adversely affected the Eastern trade. When the two powers finally agreed upon peace in 532 A.D. however, trade between Byzantium and the East resumed as vigorously as before, and the tollhouse on the island of Jutaba continued to perform its function.

In the first quarter of the 6th century, a Byzantine merchant took the trip to the Indian Ocean, passing by Ethiopia and the

8. A. A. Vasiliev, *Justin the First*, Cambridge, 1950, p.363. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p.86.

9. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages*, New York, 1977, p.2.

10. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p.86.

11. R. Fedden, *Syria: an Historical Appreciation*, London, 1946, p.97.

12. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p.87.

Moss, *op. cit.*, p.2. and see also,

J. Innes Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1969.

13. Vasiliev, *op. cit.* p.365.

14. *Ibid.*, p.367.

Arabian Gulf, finally to reach Ceylon. There he met a mixed group of Byzantine ("Roman"), Persian, Ethiopian, and south Arabian merchants. He was most impressed with the Persians, who had a large fleet in Ceylon<sup>15</sup>. In fact, the Byzantine trade with the East was one of imports at Justin I's time. The Empire had an unfavourable balance of trade and tended to lose gold to the Eastern countries. This situation had adverse effects on Byzantine economy<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, the trade continued. In the year 570 A.D., the pilgrim Antonius observed a vessel arriving at Aila from the Indian Ocean and laden with various kinds of commodities<sup>17</sup>.

The same period also witnessed the rise of the Qurayshi power in central Arabia. The Quraysh played an increasingly important role in international commerce across the land routes from south Arabia to Bilad esh-Sham (Greater Syria), and the Mediterranean coast. Aila, however, retained its maritime commercial connections with the South, African coast, India and China. An evidence of Aila's continuing significance is the protection conferred on its residents by the Prophet Muhammad (s). His statement made clear that "the residents of Aila and whoever was with them from among the people of (the) Damascus (area), the Yemen, and the (Red) Sea were granted God's and the Prophet's protection over the security of their ships and caravans at sea and on land"<sup>18</sup>.

The Umayyads also attributed special importance to Eastern trade. The English pilgrim Arculf visited Alexandria in 670 A.D./50 H., at the time of Mu'awiyah ibn-abi-Sufyan. He described Alexandria as a large center of international trade<sup>19</sup>. As for the Red Sea, the ships continued to bring in various Eastern commodities, and unload them in Aila or Clysma to be transported to the Mediterranean coast<sup>20</sup>.

Later, the Abbasids were able to bring the three major international trade routes under their control: the overland route across Asia, the sea route through the Arabian Gulf, and the sea route via the Red Sea. Hence they became the masters of trade from the 7th century onwards (3rd H.)<sup>21</sup>. The port of Aila retained its significance in international trade activities involving Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean during the Fatimid times. The port of 'Aqaba was also connected to Alexandria via Fustat<sup>22</sup>.

From the early 10th century (4th H.) onwards, Jidda (Mecca's coastal port on the Red Sea) began to flourish. Ships arriving from the Indian Ocean anchored here to disembark cargo. The cargo was then carried by local vessels to Clysma or 'Aqaba, because the larger ships were unable to continue northward, given the navigational difficulties in the Red Sea<sup>23</sup>. The Fatimid state collected taxes and tolls on merchandise arriving at Jidda from Egypt, India, and China at the following rates:

A load ("ḥiml") of wheat	1/2 dinar
A scale ("safat") of "Shatawi"	3 dinars
A scale ("safat") of "Daybaqi" cloth	2 dinars
A load ("ḥiml") of Wool	2 dinars
A basket ("salah") of saffron	1 dinar
Per slave head	1 dinar <sup>24</sup>

Early in the 12th century (6th H.), Aila and the Red Sea came under the pressure of an external force. After having occupied Jerusalem, the Franks turned their attention to and seized 'Aqaba to divert some of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade to Jerusalem. They were not content with that alone, however. Their Red Sea fleet became a cause of constant threat to eastern and southern trade, and moreover, to the sanctuaries in Mecca and Medina.

15. *Ibid.*, p.371.

16. *Ibid.*, p.371.

17. *Ibid.*, p.363.

18. M.H. al-Haydari, *Majmu'at al-Watha'iq al-Siyasiyyah*, p.34.

19. J. Thompson, *An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages*, London, 1928, p.196.

20. *Ibid.*, p.197.

21. *Ibid.*, p.338.

22. 'Abu 'Abdallah al-Maqdisi, *Ahsan al-Ta'asim Fil-Ma'rifat al-Aqalim*, 2nd ed., Leiden, 1906, p.178; W. Heyd, *Histoire du commerce du Levant au moyen age*. Leipzig, 1886, Vol. 1, p.8.

23. Hourani, *op. cit.*, p.229.

24. Al-Maqdisi, *op. cit.*, p.104.

Before long, Ṣalāḥuddīn al-Ayyūbi expelled the Crusaders from the Gulf of 'Aqaba, and restored the Arab supremacy in the area (1170/566 H.). He also hastened to add the Yemen to his domain. Hence the southern entrances to the Red Sea, as well as its northern extremities at 'Aqaba and Suez came under his rule. He then devoted the revenue from commerce with China and India through the Red Sea to the struggle against the Franks.

The economic and commercial significance of the Red Sea, and its southern and northern ports became even more manifest during the Mamluk era. The Mamluks patronized commerce and travel, and passed regulations to encourage trade and attract merchants to their lands. Maṣṣūr Qalawun issued a proclamation to encourage merchants from India, China, Sind, the Yemen, Iraq, Anatolia, and the Balkans to come to Bilad esh-Sham and Egypt. He bestowed on them the right to enter his lands, where they would find hospitality and good treatment. He described his lands as being always green and affluent, offering a continuous springtime and prosperity to the travellers. Justice was widespread in these lands, and security and peace reigned in every corner. He added that whoever heard his decree from among the merchants of the Yemen, India, Sind, China and other places, should make their preparations to set out for the Mamluk lands to find upon their arrival that practice was truer than word. Those who were to bring spices or other merchandise which the long-distance merchants were wont to deal with, needed not be apprehensive of dues, for they would not be troubled with any hardships<sup>25</sup>.

Qalawūn's proclamation was dispatched to all the major towns and ports of

India, China and the Indian Ocean islands with which the Mamlūk state had commercial relations. The proclamation was intended as a guarantee for the security and protection of the merchants from these lands.

In order to attend to the vessels sailing from the East, and the merchandise therefrom, across the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, the Mamluks set up a customhouse at al 'Aqaba. Ibn Iyas mentions that al 'Aqaba was the seat of a tollkeeper who collected dues on the merchandise brought there from India, the Yemen, China and other countries<sup>26</sup>. The dues collected in al 'Aqaba amounted to about three thousand dinars annually<sup>27</sup>. As for the overland caravans conveying goods from south Arabia to Egypt, they were tolled at Buwayb al-'Aqaba, to the south of al-'Aqaba<sup>28</sup>. The caravans heading towards Damascus paid tolls at Jisr al-Ḥasa, near Karak, which produced an annual revenue of about 10,000 *Mithqal* (4.68 gr.) gold<sup>29</sup>. In return, the Mamlūks safeguarded the roads, and provided travellers with security and necessary facilities.

Under the Circassian Mamlūks, Aleppo became a prosperous town and attained great significance as a commercial juncture in the trade with the East. By the mid 15th century, the number of camels which came to Aleppo reached 15,000. Towards the end of the same century, however, Aleppo's position was undermined by the obstruction of the overland roads across Asia Minor as a consequence of the ongoing wars between the Ottomans and their neighbors. Only one source remained for Aleppo to acquire Eastern commodities, and that was via 'Aqaba. The cargo bound for Aleppo was disembarked at 'Aqaba, and transported to Aleppo by caravans<sup>30</sup>. Con-

25. Ahmad al-Qalqashandi, *Subh al-A'sha fi Sina'at al-'Insha*, Cairo, 1963, Vol. 13, p. 340-41.

26. Muhammad Ibn Iyas, *Nashq al-Azhar fi 'Ajib al-Aqtar*, manuscript in Dar al-Kutub in Egypt, Folio 87.

27. Na'um Sh'uqair, *Sina Wal-'Arab*, Cairo, 1916, p. 197.

28. Al-Maqrizi, *Al-Suluk Li-ma'rifat Duwal al-Muluk*, Cairo, 1924-1983, Vol. 4, p. 256.

F. Zayadine, Caravan routes between Egypt and

Nabataea and the Voyage of Sultan Baibars to Petra in 1276. *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, II, Amman, Jordan, p. 159-174.

29. Gh. Ibn Shāhīn, *Zubdat Kashf al-Mamālik wa Bayān al-Turūg wal-Masālik*, Paris, 1894, p. 108, and 122; Yusuf Ghawanmah, *al-Tārikh al-Hadhari li-Sharqi al-'Urdun fil-'Aṣr al-Mamlūki*, 2nd ed. Amman, 1982, p. 89.

30. Na'im Zaki, *Turuq al-Tijarah al-Duwaliyya*. Cairo, 1973, p. 150.

sequently, the Mamlūks paid an even closer attention to 'Aqaba. They built a new wharf there to facilitate the unloading of the merchant ships. Sultan Qanṣūh al Ghūri renovated this wharf and undertook other public constructions in 'Aqaba in 1508 A.D. (914 H.). He assigned a team of engineers and masons to the task of completing these works under the direction of the architect-engineer Khayir Bey<sup>31</sup>.

'Aqaba also served the pilgrims travelling from Spain, north and central Africa, and the southern parts of Bilad esh-Sham to the Ḥijāz. The pilgrim caravans remained in 'Aqaba for three or four days. Enormous fairs were set up there to serve them. Traders from many parts of Syria were attracted to these fairs in view of business prospects. Ibn-Faḍlullāh al-'Umari described these fairs as places bustling with activity, unparalleled even in the largest towns<sup>32</sup>. The pilgrimage caravans contributed to commercial activities also in the Ḥijāz. Abu al-Maḥāsin mentions that at pilgrimage time 80,000 camels gathered in Jidda, Mecca's seaport. Here the pilgrims exchanged with Eastern commodities what they brought along with them, and their caravans returned home laden with these commodities<sup>33</sup>. This intensive trade rendered Jidda the principal coastal port on the Red Sea. Walls were built around the town, fortified with towers and cannons<sup>34</sup>.

Eventually, a struggle broke out between the Mamlūks and the Europeans, more specifically the Portuguese, over the control of the Eastern trade. The Mamlūks had dominated this trade for several centuries. However, the Portuguese had discovered an alternative road to the East. In 1486 A.D., the Portuguese navigator Bartholomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope. In 1498, Vasco da Gama completed

his voyage and reached Calcutta<sup>35</sup>.

One notices that the Portuguese activities in the Indian Ocean coincided with Sultan Qaytbay's reign. However, the actual struggle between the Europeans and the Mamlūks was delayed until the reign of Sultan Ashraf Qanṣūh al-Ghūri: I believe that this delay was caused by the grinding pressure of the Mamlūks' struggle against the Ottomans and other European powers in the Mediterranean<sup>36</sup>. Simultaneously a number of natural disasters, such as pestilences, epidemics and drought critically affected the internal conditions in Egypt and Bilad esh-Sham, and wiped out a large part of the Mamlūk army<sup>37</sup>. The economic recession which undermined Mamlūk finances was reflected in the retrogression of their military power. The state was unable to raise the necessary funds to build a fleet, and to bring together a sufficiently strong force to combat the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. The total expenditures of the Mamlūk state in the Ottoman wars had reached 7,650,000 dinars. This huge sum, which astonished the historian Ibn Iyas, had exhausted the state<sup>38</sup>.

Sultan Qanṣūh al-Ghūri was, however, able to undertake several measures to bring the Portuguese advancement in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea to a halt. In 1506 A.D. (911 H.), he built a fleet and dispatched it to India to fight back the Portuguese encroachment<sup>39</sup>. This means that the first Mamlūk reaction against the Portuguese took place seven years after their arrival to the Indian Ocean, and nineteen years after their arrival to the Cape of Good Hope. Other measures taken by Qanṣūh al-Ghūri included the construction of fortresses and fortifications in al-'Aqaba and Sinai. He also garrisoned these forts

31. Ibn Iyas, *Badāi' al-Zuhur fi Waqai' al-Duhūr* (Sha'ab ed.), Cairo, 1960, p.767.

32. Ibn Fadhlallah al-'Umari, *Masālik al-'Abṣār* (manuscript), vol. 2/1, folio 168.

33. Abu al-Maḥāsin, *Hawadith ad-Duhūr fi Mada al-'Ayyām wal-Shuhūr* (W. Boyard ed.), California, 1931, Vol. 1, p.327.

34. Ibn Iyas, *Badāi'*, p.1044.

35. A. Kammerer, *La Mer Rouge*, Cairo, 1929-35,

Vol. 2, p.9.

36. Ibn Iyas, *Badāi'*, pp. 547, 550, 554, and 558-9.

37. *Ibid.*, pp.632-3 and 880. Cf. Y. Ghawanmah, 'al-ta'un wal-jafaf wa atharuhuma 'alal-bi'ah fi janub al-Sham', *Majallat Dirasat Tarikhiyyah* (Damascus University), nos. 13-14 (1983), pp. 77ff.

38. Ibn Iyas, *Badāi'*, p. 593.

39. *Ibid.*, p.734.

with troops dispatched from Egypt and regularly replaced each year. In this way, the northern ports of the Red Sea were protected against the Portuguese inroads. Qanṣūh also built forts at 'Ajrud, Nakhal and al-Alzam, on the road connecting al-'Aqaba to Cairo, and supplied them with troops and military provisions<sup>40</sup>.

There can be little doubt that the Mamlūks tried to the best of their ability to restrict Portuguese activities in the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf and India. They pursued the task despite difficult internal conditions, the financial exhaustion of the state, and the dearth of crucial raw materials such as iron, timber and saltpeter. The Mamlūk effort was not confined to internal precautions. They also resorted to diplomatic measures. They dispatched envoys to almost every state which was concerned with the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea. To give an idea about the extensiveness of the Mamlūk diplomatic activities, one could mention that in one month in the year 1512 A.D. (918 H.), Sultan Qanṣūh al-Ghūri accepted fourteen envoys from different rulers. Among them were the envoys of Isma'il Ṣafawi, the King of Persia, the Turkoman ruler Ibn Ramadhan, the Ottoman Sultan, the Turkoman ruler Yusuf bin Sufi Khalil, the ruler of Tunis and al-Maghrib, the ruler of Kunbaya in India Muzaffar Shah bin Mahmud Shah, the Turkoman ruler Ibn Durghul, Ali Dawlat, and the messengers dispatched by the ruler of Mecca, the viceroy of Aleppo, Husayin al-Kurdi and the viceroy of Jidda. There were also European missions, the envoys of the King of France and the Duke of Venice<sup>41</sup>.

### Conclusion

This study surveyed the significance of the port of 'Aqaba in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade through the Ancient and Medieval ages. It becomes clear that 'Aqaba owed its importance to being the sole opening of Bilad esh-Sham (Greater Syria) into the Red Sea, and, thereby, to the Far East. It attracted steadily growing

attention since the 3rd century B.C. The Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria developed the port of 'Aqaba to link their lands to the maritime routes leading to the Far East. From then on, merchant vessels sailing from the south kept carrying the goods of India, China and the islands of the Indian Ocean to 'Aqaba. These merchandises were thence conveyed overland to Gaza, Petra, and Damascus.

Roman rule initiated a new stage in the history of the port of 'Aqaba. The Trajan Highway and other roads built by the Romans linked the port of 'Aqaba to the network of roads that centered around Rome. The Romans also ensured the peace and security of maritime as well as overland trade. Commercial relations with the Far East across the Red Sea intensified. 'Aqaba's position as Bilad esh-Sham's sole window into the Red Sea, Indian Ocean and East-African trade became underlined.

In view of the significance of the Eastern trade, the Byzantines tried to extend their supremacy from the Gulf of 'Aqaba southward over the Red Sea to Aden. They reached an alliance with the Ethiopians, but Persian counteraction frustrated the Byzantine plans. The struggle between the Persians and Byzantines did not prevent the pouring in of the Eastern merchandises into the port of 'Aqaba. As already mentioned, the observations of a contemporary, the pilgrim Antonious, make clear that vessels sailing from the south continued to disembark various kinds of Eastern commodities at 'Aqaba. At the time of Justin I, 60 vessels operated in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

The significance of 'Aqaba was well-realized also in the Islamic Era, from its very beginnings onward. The Prophet Muhammad (s) provided the residents of 'Aqaba, including the visiting merchants from distant lands, with protection and security. Before long, the Arabs took direct control of the area and reestablished its links with the network of maritime and overland commercial routes which connected Egypt, south Arabia and the east

40. *Ibid.*, p.779.

41. *Ibid.*, p.852 and 864.

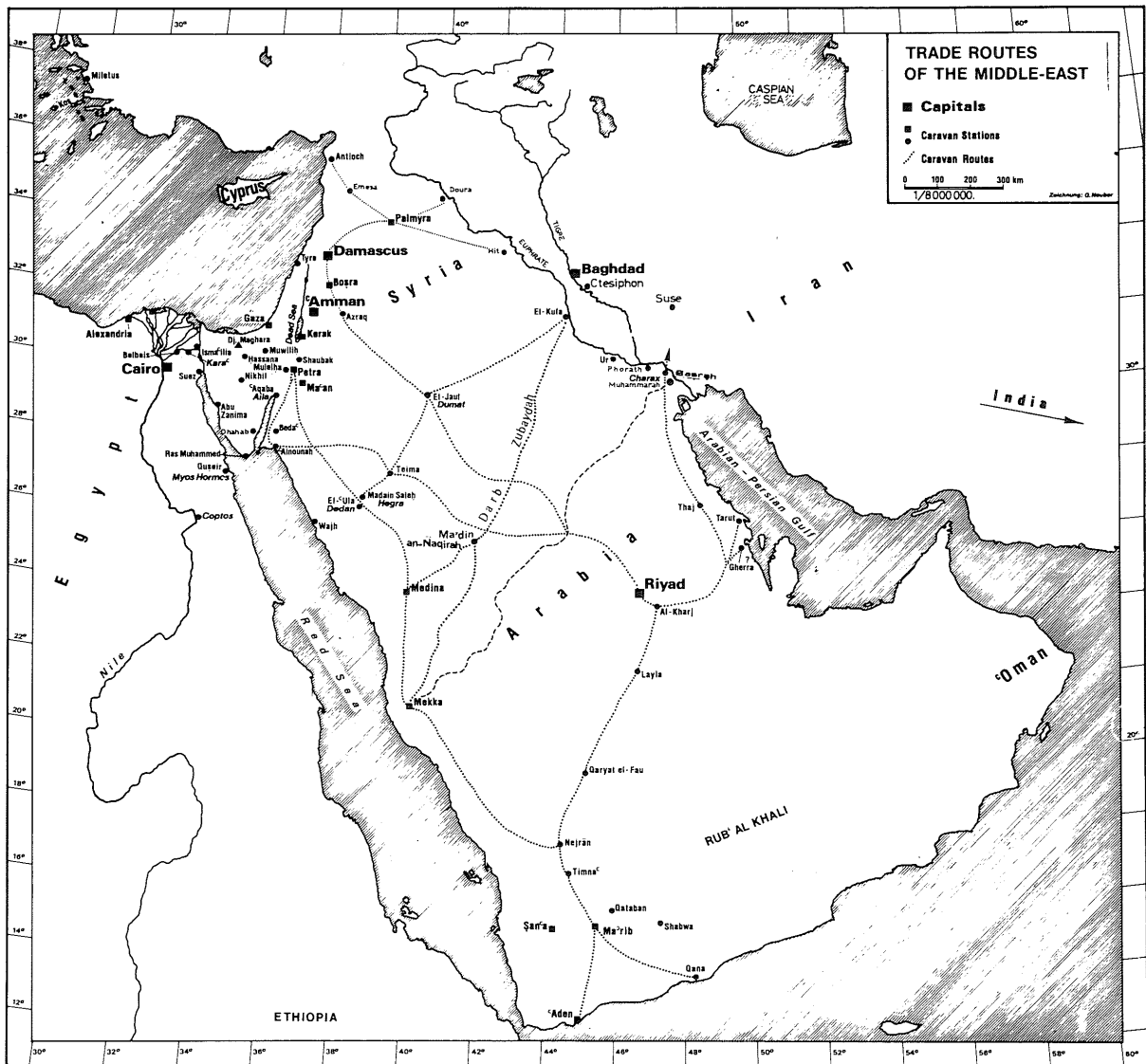


Fig. 1

African coastland. Once more, the port of 'Aqaba resumed its role as a window to maritime trade with the Far East and Africa.

The strategic position of the port of 'Aqaba was dramatically highlighted during the struggle against the Crusaders. Having occupied Jerusalem, the Franks soon turned their attention to 'Aqaba, and invaded it (1116 A.D.) to divert at least part of the Eastern trade to Jerusalem and Jafa, their port on the Mediterranean coast. Şalāhuddīn al-Ayyūbi restored 'Aqaba back to Arab rule in 1171 A.D. Meanwhile, however, the Eastern commodities had begun to flow to the Egyptian port of Aithab on the Red Sea. 'Aqaba could not acquire its

former vitality until after the establishment of the Mamlūk rule.

The Mamlūks attributed a special importance to the port of 'Aqaba. The Mamlūk state was commercially oriented, and its rulers paid their utmost attention to the development of maritime trade with the Far East across the Red Sea. The volume of long distance trade at the major Red Sea ports, such as 'Aden, Jidda, 'Aqaba, Suez and Ṭour greatly increased during the Mamlūk era. At 'Aqaba, the Mamlūks built a new wharf to facilitate the disembarkation of the merchant vessels. They also set up a customhouse to collect dues on merchandise imported from India and China. The revenue of this customhouse exceeded

3000 dinars annually. 'Aqaba also played a significant role in the overland trade flowing from south Arabia toward Damascus and Egypt. The pilgrimage traffic added to 'Aqaba's prosperity. The fairs set up for the transient pilgrims were remarkable for the abundance and diversity of the Syrian, Egyptian, African and Eastern commodities displayed for sale.

The Circassian Mamlūks were particularly concerned with the defence of 'Aqaba, in view of the Portuguese menace against the Red Sea ports and the Eastern trade via the Red Sea. Sultan Qanṣūh al-

Ghūri built fortifications at 'Aqaba and supplied them with troops and provisions to discourage Portuguese attacks. In time, however, the shift of the East-West trade routes away from the Mediterranean and the Arab lands became unmistakable. 'Aqaba's strategic position concerning the Eastern trade, and thereby its prosperity, were seriously undermined.

Yusef Ghawanmeh,  
Department of History  
Yarmouk University  
Irbid - Jordan