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*Geographical Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4. (Oct., 1990), pp. 431-433.

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*Geographical Review* is currently published by American Geographical Society.

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## **GEOGRAPHICAL RECORD**

### **BATINAH COAST OF OMAN\***

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Unlike other sections of Oman, the Batinah coast has been little affected by modern oil production (Melamid 1984, 1986; Dutton and Winsler 1987). The region thus provides a case study for analyzing why development sometimes fails to ensue after heavy expenditure of capital. Although a paved highway follows the approximately 200-mile length of the coast from Muscat, the capital of Oman, to the boundary with the United Arab Emirates, development along the road has been limited, and important economic activities have actually declined along the coast. The coastal plain has a maximum width of twenty miles and is mostly sand covered, with a few short tidal inlets that, in English, are usually called creeks, although a riverine origin is unproved. Inland the boundary of the region lies in the Jebel Akhdar, whose rugged outliers and foothills gradually merge with the coastal plain. Rainfall is very low, though systematic records are absent, and except for the wadis and near the creeks, there is little natural vegetation. Where the small amounts of percolated rainwater in the sands meet the heavier oceanic saltwater, sweet water can be extracted from shallow wells that are usually fewer than twenty feet deep (Lorimer 1915). The best wells are found near the mouths of creeks where settlements were established long ago. Some evidence indicates human occupation dating to the third millennium B.C. (Costa 1985). This source of water also sustained date cultivation in orchards, usually on loamy soils derived from coral or shells, that were as many as three miles wide and that almost continuously paralleled the coastline.

Before construction of the modern highway, most settlements were small, consisting of twenty to thirty palm-frond or mud-brick houses defended by mud-brick walls and towers that in some instances rose sixty feet (Costa 1985). An exception was Sohar, a regional capital and reportedly the home of Sindbad the Sailor of medieval fairy-tale fame. Sohar contained approximately 800 houses, half of them serving as residences for immigrants from Iran. Otherwise, the regional population was primarily of Arab origin. No immigrants from India were present, and there were only a few descendants of African slaves. Each household owned several donkeys, which not only were the main beast of burden but also supplied the power to pull the ropes and buckets that lifted the water from the wells. Camels were used for transportation over long distances; they and a driver were usually rented

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\* For information about the region before and after road construction, I acknowledge the help of Paolo M. Costa, Dale and Christine Eickelman, Jörg Janzen, and Fred Scholz.

from nomadic tribes that lived farther inland from the coast. These tribes also supplied animals for meat and wool to the coastal inhabitants. A few small settlements with date orchards located among foothills of Jebel Akhdar relied on water percolating from wadis or on qanats on talus slopes.

With date production, some fishing, and shallow-draft vessels, dhows, that could cross the sandbars of the creek mouths at high tide, the coastal region was probably very prosperous until the eighteenth century from commerce with India based on dried dates and fish as well as rough cotton cloth crafted in the interior. Efforts to document the prosperous past by excavating ruins have not been satisfactory, because the latter have been demolished by workers faster than archaeologists can examine them. A large, pre-nineteenth-century Jewish cemetery in Sohar has been identified and photographed (Costa 1985).

Regional economic decline can be attributed to the effects of recurrent warfare, especially attacks from what is now Saudi Arabia, and to one main geographical factor: the dhows could enter the creeks, but the deep-draft European vessels could not. When the Portuguese arrived with their caravels, they did not stop along the Batinah coast for any length of time but used Muscat with its deep inlets and defensible hills, where forts and warehouses were erected. After capture by local forces, Muscat became the capital of Oman. The advent of still larger ships accelerated the growth of Muscat and the decline along the Batinah coast. Omani merchants were purchasing such large ships secondhand in Bombay. By 1750 fifty of them were recorded as being used in trade between India and East Africa. Shipping today is centered on the inlet at Matrah, some ten miles west of Muscat, where the Omani oil-export terminal is located. With its deep inlet and surrounding hills, the area of Muscat and Matrah, now referred to as the capital region, differs starkly from the Batinah coast, where well water is insufficient to maintain date orchards and drinking water is supplied from a seawater-distillation plant at Matrah.

In the 1960s it was decided to develop the area by constructing a modern highway along the coast. The road was to follow an earlier rough track that bypassed most of the date orchards on the landward side, a route that also avoided bridging the creeks. After construction of the highway, many inhabitants relocated from sites near the creek-mouth wells to the road. Overall, the number of houses in the region seems to have increased, a consequence of significant population growth and higher incomes resulting from distribution of oil revenues to the local population. However, the effect of employment in the oil industry, either in the interior oil fields or at Muscat-Matrah, is limited at Batinah. Some nomadic tribesmen work in the oil fields, but most of them have moved to the capital region. The population, now estimated at 300,000, accounts for one-third of the inhabitants of Oman and is of local Arab origin. The few immigrants are concentrated mainly in Sohar (Barth 1983).

Economic changes have been profound. Export of dried dates and fish has ceased, and fruits are chiefly for local sustenance. Pumps and improved irrigation channels make agricultural changes feasible, but recreation is now the chief use of the gardens, which serve as green areas for residents and visitors from the oil fields and the capital region. Food, including meat, fruits, and vegetables, is imported from overseas, via either Matrah or Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Imports are encouraged by the absence of tariffs or quotas and have helped raise the local standard of living. The significant increase in intra- and interregional traffic was confirmed by the number of gasoline stations along the highway (Sultanate of Oman 1971): formerly there were none, and travelers had to carry their supplies. Local crafts and fishing have virtually disappeared, and a large percentage of the settled population moved to the capital region, mainly during the 1970s. Other than some retailing, no new services such as medical offices were introduced. With this lack of development, including extension of urbanization, local cultural and religious life (Ibadi and Sunni Muslim) has remained unchanged. Extensive date orchards and vernacular structures of the Batinah coast represent life in eastern Arabia before recent modernization and are expected to be one focus of tourism to the region.

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