

Encyclopedia of Islam
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Muscat since 1500

Muscat (Masqaṭ) has been a principal port of Oman for five centuries and the country's capital for the last two centuries. The town resembles a horseshoe, with a natural harbour on the north and a small bowl surrounded by barren peaks on the

south. A stone wall encloses the landward half of the town.

Muscat was settled very early, although little archaeological evidence and only scattered historical references exist regarding settlement in Muscat town itself before the tenth-eleventh/sixteenth centuries. By local tradition, Muscat was originally occupied by the Arab Banū Wuhayb tribe, but, being a port, it early developed a distinctly cosmopolitan population. The two natural advantages that should have made Muscat an important port, a protected harbour and steep mountain defences, also presented serious limitations: the harbour's opening to the north left it vulnerable to winter winds, and the mountainous surroundings restricted expansion of the port and cultivation and cut Muscat off from any hinterland. Consequently, Muscat remained on the margins of history, eclipsed by other Omani ports such as Ṣuḥār and Qalhāt, until its emergence in the seventh/thirteenth century as a transshipment port for Iran and India under the kings of Hormuz.

At the beginning of the tenth/sixteenth century, a Portuguese fleet under the command of Afonso d'Albuquerque (c.1453–1515) pillaged the eastern coast of Africa and then crossed over to the Arabian Peninsula. Albuquerque's forces sacked and burned Muscat in 913/1507. A permanent factory (the premises of colonial traders) and garrison were subsequently established there. As Muscat grew in importance, work was begun on its defences. By 933/1527, construction had begun on the forts of Capitão (al-Mīrānī) and São João (al-Jalālī), but the forts had not been completed when Ottoman fleets attacked Muscat in 953/1546, 957–9/1550–1, and 988–9/1581.

The ouster of the Portuguese from their base in Hormuz in 1031/1622 forced them to retrench in Muscat and improve its fortifications. Nevertheless, the Omani Ya'ariba *imāms* attacked Muscat in 1049–50/1640 and 1058/1648. In Muḥarram 1060/January 1650, the town and forts surrendered, and Muscat remained under Omani sovereignty thereafter. Under Imām Sulṭān b. Sayf al-Ya'rūbī (r. 1059–90/1649–80), the Ya'ariba unified the country and built a naval fleet that not only prevented the Portuguese from reacquiring their Omani possessions but chased the Europeans down the coast of East Africa. The Ya'ariba imāmate eventually descended into civil war, and one of the candidates as *imām* sought help from the Iranian ruler Nādir Shāh (r. 1148–60/1736–47). Nādir Shāh's army was ousted only in about 1154–5/1741 by the Ya'rūbī governor of Ṣuḥār, Aḥmad b. Sa'īd Āl Bū Sa'īd (r. 1167–98/1754–83). In recognition of his services, Aḥmad was elected *imām*, and his descendants continued to rule Oman.

Muscat remained important in trade, but Ḥamad b. Sa'īd (r. 1203–6/1789–92), Aḥmad's grandson, was the first ruler to make it his capital. It prospered when Sa'īd b. Sulṭān (r. 1807–56) used it as his base for overseas expansion, but Sa'īd grew to pay more attention to Zanzibar; on his death, the Arabian and African realms were divided between two sons. The ruler of Muscat, Thuwaynī b. Sa'īd (r. 1856–66), was assassinated by his son Sālīm (r. 1866–8) in 1866, but two years later a coalition of Ibāḍī religious leaders and tribesmen captured Muscat and installed 'Azzān b. Qays (r. 1868–71), from a cadet Āl Bū Sa'īd branch, as a weak (that is, not religiously qualified) *imām*. In 1871, a counter-attack by Turkī b. Sa'īd b. Sulṭān

(r. 1871–88) regained control of Muscat and killed 'Azzān. Another Ibāḍī tribal offensive took place in 1883, while one in 1895 succeeded temporarily in gaining control of the town but not the forts.

British support for the Āl Bū Sa'īd sultans, as they came to be styled, secured the capital, even as control over the interior was lost to Ibāḍī tribal forces by 1913. Indian Army troops protected the capital against another attack by Ibāḍī tribal forces in 1915. Thereafter, Muscat changed little until 1970. The two Portuguese forts still commanded the harbour, while the early nineteenth-century Bayt al-'Alam Palace dominated the waterfront. A half-dozen imposing houses of the same period and a small souk were also situated inside the walls. Late nineteenth-century construction included the British consulate on the waterfront, several prominent houses, and the three principal Sunnī mosques. A few more buildings were added outside the walls in the 1950s and 1960s.

Dramatic changes took place after the 1970 coup d'état, which put Qābūs b. Sa'īd (r. 1970–2020) on the throne. The decaying palace was demolished, and an imposing new one constructed in its place. Much of the original population of less than ten thousand gradually moved out of Muscat town to elsewhere in the rapidly expanding metropolitan region. Most of Muscat's substantial older houses were demolished and replaced by buildings for the royal *dīwān* (palace).

Muscat and the small town of Maṭraḥ were gradually absorbed into a major urban area with a population of more than 500,000 by 2020 and stretching more than seventy kilometres along the coast. The small village of al-Khuwayr was transformed into a government quarter, with embassies along the beach

and government ministries lining the main road. The introduction of tourism resulted in a profusion of luxurious hotels and resorts. Eventually, the main thoroughfare, the Sultan Qābūs Highway, was overwhelmed by traffic, forcing the construction of the parallel Muscat Expressway. The name of Sulṭān Qābūs (Sultan Qaboos) was attached to housing complexes, the main highway, the sports complex, the grand mosque, the university, and many other facilities.

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J. E. PETERSON