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## CHAPTER 6

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# Muscat as a Port City

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Muscat, boasting one of the best natural harbors in the region, flourished as an important port for a comparatively short time, from approximately the fifteenth until the early nineteenth century. Its historical role rested only in small measure on serving the Omani hinterland. Instead, its importance rested on such strategic criteria as its position controlling access to the Strait of Hormuz, its location as one of the few protected harbors between the Gulf and Aden, and its utility as the last place for ships to take on water and vegetables before venturing into the Indian Ocean.

Why it took so long to rise to prominence remains a mystery but its era of prosperity seems to have depended on control by a strong political authority with international connections, whether that be Portuguese or Omani. Some Gulf ports were sustained essentially by an economic hinterland. Muscat's success was due to political factors as much or more than a hinterland. This was a significant contributing factor in its truly cosmopolitan nature. As an example of that cosmopolitanism, it was said at the beginning of the twentieth century that 14 languages were spoken regularly in the *sugs* of Muscat and Matrah.<sup>1</sup> It may be surmised that just as many were spoken for centuries before that and indeed are spoken today.

### *Geography and Competition*

#### **The Topography of Muscat Port**

The harbor of Muscat is shaped like a horseshoe with its opening to the northwest. Entrance is difficult, not so much because of navigation (although

it requires a precise orientation) but because sight of the entryway is easily lost among the crags of ophiolite that extend along that particular rugged section of the Oman coastline, stretching from Bandar Jissah on the east to Ra's al-Hamra' to the west (which marks the beginning of the sandy beaches of al-Batinah coast). Indeed, ancient geographers have noted the "hidden" nature of the port and it may well have been Ptolemy's *Kryptos Limen*, or "Hidden Port," although it does not seem to be mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* as sometimes alleged.<sup>2</sup>

The harbor is nearly completely enclosed and the only reliable navigable entrance opens to the north.<sup>3</sup> Two small promontories extending northward guard the immediate entrance to the harbor and add to the illusion of a continuing wall of rock unless the anchorage is viewed straight on from the north. Both promontories are surmounted and protected by small forts on the east and west constructed by the Portuguese, which are now known as al-Sirah al-Sharqiyyah and al-Sirah al-Gharbiyyah, respectively.

Protecting the harbor from the open sea on the east side is Muscat Island. From the seaward side, the island appears as part of the craggy coastline; the waters separating the southern tip of the island from the mainland can be traversed only by small boats at high tide. The island and the nearly adjoining mainland cradle the small bay and anchorage of Mughub inside the harbor.

The southern shore of the harbor is flat and originally sandy and it is here that the settlement of Muscat was established. Imposing Portuguese forts sit on hills on either side of the beach. A small beach lies south of and under the western fort (al-Mirani) and was used until recently for beaching small craft and previously contained a cistern for loading water onto visiting ships. Nearby, a jetty for medium-sized vessels was constructed in the mid-twentieth century under the east side of the fort. Muscat's inland perimeters are marked by other ophiolite peaks, which provide protection from the interior (enhanced by watchtowers at regular intervals). These are breached only by several narrow passes. One valley, al-Wadi al-Kabir, extends several kilometers south into the hills and is the source of Muscat's water and, prior to 1970, its farms.

Craggy ophiolite similar to that of Muscat Island is mirrored on the west side of the harbor. Mukalla bay, with a depth of three fathoms or less, is cradled in the shelter of the western peaks. Its shallowness restricted its utility as an anchorage to smaller local craft, although coal sheds were maintained on its shore in the nineteenth century with a pier extending to deeper water for loading and unloading coal.

Muscat's natural advantages as a harbor are its protection from both sea and land, the presence of supplies of sweet water, and the depth of its anchorage. The harbor is about one mile wide with depths of nine to 13 fathoms at

the entrance, becoming progressively more shallow until the depth is only two fathoms about 200 yards from the southern beach on which the town was built.

But the harbor also exhibits some drawbacks. The opening to the north (more accurately, north-by-northwest) leaves it vulnerable to the *shamal*, the northerly wind that blows most of the year except in winter, which drives the sea directly into the harbor. Mughub Bay provided some protection from the *shamal* although anchorage was complicated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the existence of a telegraph cable along the bottom, while protective anchorage could also be obtained on the east side in the lee of Muscat Island. The harbor is also unprotected from the heavy seas generated by the *nashi*, the winter northeasterlies from off the Iranian and Makran coasts. Another disadvantage is that the same rocky ridges that provide its protection from overland attack also serve to cut it off from easy access to the Omani hinterland.

As one moves slowly along the coast from Muscat harbor to the west, there are several small coves before a larger bay is reached at Matrah. This location provided easier access to the interior and settlement at Matrah was long established as a sister town to Muscat. Anchorage at Matrah provided protection from the *shamal*, although not from the *nashi*. Its utility as a harbor, however, was hampered by the shallow, sandy beach abutting the town.

### Muscat's Location

As will be shown later, the natural setting of Muscat's harbor was not the reason for its development as a port, since Muscat only came into prominence in about the fifteenth century. Instead, its strategic location seems to have played the defining role. The location mattered in two senses. For the first, Muscat was the last stopping point for ships from the Gulf headed into the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, bound for India or East Africa. This did not matter so much for trade since Muscat produced only a few goods and constituted a small market. Rather, it was the last source at which to top up with sweet water, vegetables, fruit, and cattle, before heading across the open seas. This was cited as early as the ninth century AD in two works detailing the sailing routes from the Gulf to China, as well as by other classical geographers.<sup>4</sup> Al-Muqaddasi, writing slightly later, remarked that "Al-Masqat [sic] is the first place ships from al-Yaman encounter; I have seen it myself, a delightful place, with abundance of fruits."<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-Mujawir, writing in the thirteenth century, described it simply, writing that it "used to be an anchorage of the town of Sohar and it was here where ships coming from the ends . . . used to anchor."<sup>6</sup>

The importance of Muscat's location in the second sense is more geopolitical and came to the fore only with the European entry into the region. Major ports such as Siraf and Hormuz on the Iranian coast and Basra at the far end all faced the problem of being located inside the Strait of Hormuz. The strait was a chokepoint through which navigation could be controlled or harassed. Muscat lay well outside the strait but close enough that it could serve as a naval and maritime base for the Portuguese and the succeeding Omani dynasties. From this time, its uniqueness as the only significant port on the Gulf of Oman aided in its role as a transshipment port between the Gulf and India and Africa. Its closest natural competitor was Aden, which, however, was far too distant to serve the same functions (as were al-Mukalla and Salalah).

The great mystery of Muscat, however, is why did it not become a significant port until approximately one century before the arrival of the Portuguese. There were two major ports along the Omani coast prior to Muscat, although they belonged to different eras. Suhar, to the west of Muscat, lacked any natural harbor whatsoever. Copper and diorite stone (particularly olivine gabbro<sup>7</sup>) were mined from the interior near Suhar from the end of the third millennium BC, for export to the kingdoms of Dilmun and Mesopotamia. However, the lack of harbor facilities at Suhar is probably the reason why they seemed to be exported overland via al-Wadi al-Jizzi and then through a Gulf harbor rather than directly from Suhar. Suhar first gained attention as a port in the first and second centuries AD when it began to prosper as a trading port with south Persia and India. This initial rationale for the town's emergence as a port kept Suhar prominent until well into the Islamic era.

The rationale for the later emergence of Qalhat, to the east of Muscat, is more difficult to explain. The settlement had only a small *khawr* (inlet) that may or may not have been suitable as a harbor and Qalhat was located at an extremely isolated position on a rugged coast. However, its isolation, together with the high hills immediately behind it, may have afforded some protection from landward attack and the adjacent *wadi* provided adequate water supplies. Furthermore, there was good anchorage just offshore, although completely unprotected.<sup>8</sup> Qalhat was established by the kings of Hormuz as a branch from their main base at Hormuz and it later served as their principal port along the Arabian coast. But its decline began well before the arrival of the Portuguese and thus the choice of location for its founding remains a mystery.

The only other natural port on Oman's Gulf of Oman coast is Sur at the far eastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Although the *khawr* at Sur is extensive, it was reported in the early twentieth century to have a bar at the entrance covered by only three feet of water and the narrow channel leading

into the *khawr* proper was only 1–2 fathoms deep. As a consequence, Sur was only served by dhows, although this made it an important port for connections between interior Oman, especially al-Sharqiyyah, and East Africa. Al-Sib, a few miles to the west of Muscat, is the closest landing place to Wadi Sama'il and thus to the interior of Oman. However, it does not give much more advantage in terms of distance than Matrah and its suitability as a port is severely hampered by its extremely shallow beach.

Certainly, Muscat traded with and served as a port for the Omani hinterland. Wadi Sama'il leads to the heart of the country, which was the principal center of Ibadi learning and the imamate, especially at Nizwa, and a source of Oman's dried fruits and famed dates. Al-Batinah coast to the west of Muscat was important for producing horses and dried fish for export. Still, the population in and the amount of trade generated by Oman's hinterland would not justify Muscat's emergence as a major port.

### *Muscat's Emergence as a Significant Port City*

#### **The Portuguese Period**

Muscat's emergence some 600 years ago then can be postulated as the result of two specific factors. The first is the decline of Qalhat in the fifteenth century. Why Qalhat declined is not clearly understood but presumably it was because of political instability associated with weakening Hormuzi power. Muscat, relatively nearby, was well-placed to take up Qalhat's port role and the settlement prospered and took over the principal role for the Indian trade even though Hormuzi political control remained in Qalhat.<sup>9</sup> Ahmad b. Majid, the famous Arab navigator, sometimes erroneously reputed to have piloted Vasco da Gama on his Indian Ocean crossing, wrote (with perhaps a bit of exaggeration regarding his home port) that "Maskat is a port the like of which cannot be found in the whole world. There can be found business and good things which cannot be found elsewhere. Maskat is the port of Oman where year by year the ships load up with men, fruit, and horses and they sell in it cloth, vegetable oils, new slaves and grain and all ships aim for it. It is a cape between two different routes, safe in every wind and possesses fresh water and a hospitable and sociable people who love strangers."<sup>10</sup>

The Portuguese admiral Afonso de Albuquerque, who conquered the city, noted that Muscat was "a large and very populous city . . . it is the principal entrepôt of the Kingdom of Ormuz, into which all the ships which navigate these parts must of necessity enter. . . . It is of old a market for carriage of horses and dates; is a very elegant town, with very fine houses, and supplied from the interior with much wheat, maize, barley, and dates, for lading as

many as vessels come for them.”<sup>11</sup> The Portuguese traveller Duarte Barbosa, believed to have visited Muscat in the early years of the sixteenth century just after the Portuguese conquest, described it as “a large place, wherein dwell many persons of standing. It has great trade and an exceeding great fishery, where are taken fish many and great, which they salt and dry. They have dealings in this fish with many countries.”<sup>12</sup> Other Portuguese observers described it as “Entourée de jardins, de vergers et de palmeraias, arrosés grâce à des puits dont les trueils étaient mus par des bœufs.”<sup>13</sup>

The second factor, changes in ship design, specifically the appearance of larger and deeper European vessels that required more draft in harbors, followed on the heels of the decline of Qalhat.<sup>14</sup> When the Portuguese seized Muscat in 1507, it seemed only sensible to make sustained use of it as a port. Not only did it have a history as a long-distance port but it boasted deep and mostly well-sheltered anchorage for their larger craft. The strategic regional location—particularly important after the loss of Hormuz in 1622 and the resultant relocation of Portugal’s regional headquarters to Muscat until 1650—simply added to these advantages.<sup>15</sup>

Muscat served the Portuguese well as a center for trade, essentially trans-shipment with the Gulf, India, the Red Sea, and Africa, particularly since the Portuguese had established factories (i.e., trading stations) in all these regions. But it also served as a center for political and commercial control. In this sense, it anticipated the British establishment of ports and control points at Singapore, Hong Kong, Malacca, Penang, and Aden. The difference was that Muscat had existed already as a port whereas most of the others were created from nothing.<sup>16</sup>

### The Ya’aribah, the Al Bu Sa’id, and European Trade

The Portuguese occupation of Muscat lasted for more than a century until the garrison was finally forced to surrender to the Ya’rubi (pl. al-Ya’aribah) dynasty of Oman. This transfer did not diminish Muscat’s importance, however. While the Ya’aribah continued to keep their capital in the interior of Oman, where their power base was located, considerable use was made of Muscat as their principal port for the maintenance of a regional maritime empire. Furthermore, the port was not closed to European traders, as Dutch and English merchants in particular made regular visits and undertook negotiations for factories.

The Ya’aribah launched their first assault on Muscat in 1640 but without success. Imam Nasir b. Murshid al-Ya’rubi’s attack in 1648 succeeded in dislodging the Portuguese from Matrah and a third attack in 1650 eliminated the defending garrison with the survivors escaping to India. Muscat subsequently served as the controlling port for the Ya’rubi maritime

empire, although this seemed to have little impact on the physical structure of the town. The maritime orientation of the Ya'aribah created consternation among European competitors: "The strength of the Arabs at Muscat, in shipping and forces, was, at this time (1694–1695), so great, as to excite an alarm that they would obtain the command of the Persian Gulf."<sup>17</sup> The Ya'aribah were so powerful that they ousted the Portuguese from Mombasa, pillaged Diu on the Malabar coast of India, and took possession of Zanzibar.<sup>18</sup>

More significant changes were made after the descent of the Ya'rubi dynasty into civil war and the country's occupation by the Persian ruler, Nadir Shah. While there was some decline in Muscat's role with the deterioration of Ya'rubi power, it continued as the major import/export port for Oman under the Al Bu Sa'id dynasty. The dynasty's progenitor, Ahmad b. Sa'id, drove the Persians out of Muscat and out of Oman in the early 1740s. Little use was made of the port initially. But about 1789, the third ruler, Hamad b. Sa'id, assumed political leadership from his father and moved the family's seat from al-Rustaq to Muscat so that he might better conduct his maritime interests.<sup>19</sup> Shortly after that, Sa'id b. Sultan, the fifth ruler in the dynasty, revived Oman's maritime expansion with Muscat as the center of operations for forays along the Persian coast and into the Gulf. Eventually, however, his attention turned to East Africa.

This development marked a new stage of growth in maritime trade with Muscat at its center. A native broker of the (British) East India Company was stationed periodically in Muscat during the years 1773 to 1779. Tipu Sultan, ruler of Mysore (1782–1799), established a permanent trading mission and factory at Muscat, where he anchored part of his commercial fleet during the off-season. Muscat traded silkworms, sheep, saffron seed, rock salt, horses, pearls, raisins, pearl fishers, and artificers for Tipu Sultan's navy for sandalwood, pepper, ivory, cloth, and rice.<sup>20</sup> Al Bu Sa'id trading activities during this period were widespread, stretching from the Makran Coast immediately opposite, down the coast of India and up the other side, into the islands of Southeast Asia and along the East African littoral.<sup>21</sup>

But the relationship between Tipu Sultan and the Al Bu Sa'id also had its disadvantages. The anti-British attitude of the former aroused British suspicion of the Al Bu Sa'id, already blamed for Muscati slave trading in British territories, which was not helped when a letter from Napoleon Bonaparte to Tipu Sultan via Muscat was intercepted.<sup>22</sup> A commercial treaty was signed with the British in 1798 and ratified in 1800, although it did not include any right to establish a factory in Al Bu Sa'id territory.<sup>23</sup> A British Agent was represented at Muscat during the period 1800–1809 and then again in 1840.<sup>24</sup>

### Zanzibar and the Decline of Muscat's Importance

Zanzibar eventually became the preeminent port in Sa'id b. Sultan's empire, handling the more important part of Omani trade while Muscat was reduced to a subsidiary status. The centrality of Zanzibar's position was the result of the island's increasingly important production of cloves, a crop introduced by Sa'id b. Sultan, and the slave trade. Not only did this change of orientation result in Sa'id b. Sultan's nearly permanent residence in Zanzibar, it strengthened the Omani connection with East Africa and deeper penetration into that continent's interior.

With Sa'id b. Sultan's death in 1856 and the subsequent division of the Al Bu Sa'id realm into independent Zanzibari and Omani states, Muscat declined as an entrepot and was reduced to the status of a relatively minor port principally serving the limited Omani hinterland. In addition, strife within the family and between Muscat on the one hand and the tribes and religious leaders of the interior on the other was endemic throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

### *The Historical City of Muscat*

#### Under the Portuguese

The earliest descriptions extant of Muscat are of the port at the time of the Portuguese conquest in AD 1507. The Portuguese incorporated many of the existing features of the settlement into their town, and many of their additions or improvements could still be discerned into the 1970s. When the Portuguese first appeared along the Omani coast, the alarmed residents of Muscat erected an earthen sea wall, known as Sikkat al-Madfa'. This did not prevent the Portuguese from overrunning the town's defenses but they retained and strengthened the sea wall, as well as the existing wall around the town's inland perimeter.<sup>25</sup> They burned the large wooden *jami'* mosque in the center of the town and replaced it with a church. Although Albuquerque departed soon after his victory, Muscat was maintained as a garrison and factory.

To protect their investment, especially from Ottoman threats, work was eventually carried out on fortifications. The first structure was located on a hill on the east side of the harbor, between the town and Muscat Island. Fort São João, later known as Fort al-Jalali, was built perhaps on existing fortifications, probably Hormuzi, as mentioned by Braz de Albuquerque in his description of Muscat, and constructed during 1582–1587.<sup>26</sup> Work on a fort on the western side of the harbor began in 1552 and, although still in early stages of construction, served as a refuge for the Portuguese garrison when Ottoman forces attacked that same year.<sup>27</sup> It took a later Ottoman force,

attacking by both land and sea, to shock the Portuguese into completing the fort. Fort Capitão, later known as Fort al-Mirani, was finished sometime between 1584 and 1587.

The Portuguese also constructed the small fortlets on the promontories marking the entrance to the harbor, as well as a small fort in al-Wadi al-Kabir to protect the town's water supplies. With the emergence of a landward threat from the Ya'aribah in the early seventeenth century, the earthen wall encircling the town was strengthened and a moat added along its exterior. Watchtowers were added along the surrounding ridgelines.

An Augustinian monastery was built in the town in 1597 as part of a large complex including the governor's residence, the factory, and the garison. This came to be known as the *gharayzah*, *gareza*, or *greiza*, a term undoubtedly derived from corruption of the Portuguese word for church, *igreja*. During the same period, a new customs house was erected with a gate bearing the date 1625, and a boat dock was extended under Fort al-Mirani.<sup>28</sup> Improvements were also made to the canal bringing water from al-Wadi al-Kabir and to a basin to hold it under the shadow of Fort al-Mirani.

### After the Portuguese to the Mid-20th Century

Unfortunately, the historical record of Muscat during the Ya'rubi period is little better known than that before the Portuguese, although there are some descriptive accounts by European visitors. The Omanis expanded fortifications, particularly Fort al-Jalali, and the Imams made use of the original church as their residence when they visited Muscat and of the *gharayzah* as a warehouse.<sup>29</sup> Various powers sent representatives to negotiate trade pacts with the al-Ya'aribah in Muscat and some representatives even resided in the town. Although the Ya'aribah made good use of the Portuguese improvements to the town—including the original church, the *gharayzah*, the town walls, and the two forts overlooking the harbor—there is no evidence of any truly Ya'rubi structures in the town.

Perhaps two decades after the Al Bu Sa'id made Muscat their capital, a robust program of construction seemed to ensue. The Sultan's palace, Bayt al-'Alam, appears to have been constructed in the early nineteenth century, built partially on the old sea wall. In addition, a number of fine, large houses seem to have been constructed during the same period, some of which survived until the 1970s.

### Muscat in 1960

Even though the Al Bu Sa'id made certain improvements to the city, its outline and organization remained remarkably similar to what it had been

at the time of the ouster of the Portuguese. An aerial survey photograph of Muscat town in 1960 revealed the extent of the similarities, and this photograph was used as the basis for several maps.<sup>30</sup> The two Portuguese forts continued to tower above the town and harbor. The original Portuguese church seemed to have survived until at least 1835 or 1843 while the ruins of the *gharayzah*, still visible in a photograph of 1905, were finally demolished sometime around 1920.<sup>31</sup> The town wall with its three gates still separated the more substantial residential quarters inside from the rough *barasti* (reed) dwellings on the exterior. The wall's upkeep was logical since it had defended the town from tribal attacks on various occasions in the nineteenth century. The main gate, al-Bab al-Kabir, had been widened slightly for vehicles to pass through.

Fort al-Mirani was occupied by a small police unit while Fort al-Jalali served as the country's principal prison. The waterfront was occupied by the sultan's palace, already decaying, the adjacent *harim* (the women's quarters of the palace), and the compound of the British consulate-general. Various members of the sultan's family occupied the Al Bu Sa'id residences, and al-Waljat quarter within the walls contained substantial houses owned largely by Indian Hindu families. A major landmark of the town was the British Consulate compound, with its imposing chancery building dating from 1890.

The Al Bu Sa'id houses were still intact, even though Bayt al-'Alam Palace was no longer occupied by the sultan. The most notable of these were Bayt Gharayzah, built in the shadows of Fort al-Mirani not far from the site of the old *gharayzah*, and Bayt al-Faransi, which took its name from its occupation by a French consulate at the end of the nineteenth/beginning of the twentieth centuries. Several other notable houses were constructed in the late nineteenth century, including Bayt Mughub (near the British consulate and built into the natural rock) and Bayt al-Kharajiyah (which took its more recent name from the residence there in the 1950s and 1960s of a British "minister of foreign affairs" for the sultan).

In keeping with Ibadi traditions, there was no imposing Ibadi mosque. The small mosque frequented by the ruling Al Bu Sa'id was known as Masjid al-Khawr and was adjacent to Bayt Gharayzah. The three most prominent mosques of Muscat, however, were all Sunni and also seemed to have been constructed around the turn of the twentieth century. The impetus for this may have been the prosperity of local merchants from the arms trade that centered on Muscat at this time. This was also true of the residence of Ratansi Purshotam (one of Muscat's most prominent merchants of the time), a red-roofed building that was second in prominence on the skyline only to Bayt al-'Alam. The *suq* (market) was still in the same place it had been centuries earlier and it remained a jumble of small, ramshackle buildings.

Outside the walls, a few newish buildings had been erected, including a post office, a bank, and a school. Down the *wadi* from the main gate, a road led to the wells and gardens that had occasioned Muscat as a port of call for many centuries and continued to sustain the local population. The oil era had yet to hit the country and Muscat was a sleepy and well-preserved capital.

### Matrah and Environs

Muscat more accurately might be thought of historically as a small metropolis with two nodes: Muscat town itself and the neighboring settlement of Matrah. Throughout recorded history, Matrah generally has been considered only in passing as a suburb of Muscat. It has been almost totally neglected in descriptions of the town, consideration of its historical role, and the preservation of its significant structures.

Matrah's history before the arrival of the Portuguese is even less known than that of Muscat. As pointed out earlier, Muscat was mentioned, albeit in passing, by various classical travelers and geographers. Matrah, however, was not. Therefore, its pre-Portuguese past is totally unknown. It can be assumed that human settlement in Matrah is as ancient as Muscat but no tangible evidence of early settlement has come to light. The more than a century of Portuguese occupation produced two prominent watchtowers on a rocky crag perched above the town and overlooking the beach. Curtain walls between them were presumably added by the Ya'aribah afterward to create Matrah fort, which still remains as the visual highlight of the town.

There exists also a central rectangular agglomeration of houses arranged so as to prevent access to the quarter except through two gates. This quarter has been occupied by the Lawatiyyah community for at least several centuries. It is possible that the area was originally a fortified Portuguese garrison that was handed over to the Lawatiyyah by the Ya'rubi imam. There is, however, no real proof for this supposition. It must be admitted, however, that most of Matrah's buildings were of poor construction and so did not survive. Furthermore, Matrah's existence in the shadow of Muscat was also in part due to its unsuitability as a port. Matrah depended on Muscat as its port, even though it was the immediate point of departure for goods destined for the Omani interior. Communications between the two towns depended on transfer by boat or via a steep and winding trail until a rudimentary road was constructed along the coastline in the 1920s.

Muscat's other suburbs, such as Sidab, Qantab, Bandar Jissah, al-Bustan, Kalbuh, Ruwi, al-Wutayyah, and Bawshar, served simply as fishing villages or irrigated gardens. An eighteenth-century fortified country palace at Bayt

al-Falaj (inland behind Matrah) was transformed in the early twentieth century as the headquarters of the country's nascent armed forces.

### *Population and Communities*

Traditionally, the Bani Wuhayb tribe were regarded as the indigenous inhabitants of Muscat while the Bani Hasan predominated in Matrah. But as a port city, Muscat's population exhibited a complex mix of peoples from a very early date. The Omani Arabs may have been only a minority of the population even during the Portuguese occupation.<sup>32</sup> It should not be surprising that large numbers of Baluch and Persians have resided in Muscat from an undetermined early date, since Baluchistan lies just across the Gulf of Oman and Persia straddles the northern side of the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>33</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, the Baluch of Muscat were considered to constitute more than half of the population and served as soldiers, sailors, porters, servants, and petty traders.<sup>34</sup> Several prominent merchants of the early twentieth century were Baluch. Another small community, the Zadjalis, have long been intermingled with the Baluch.

Because of ancient trading ties with India, it can be surmised that Indian merchants have resided in Muscat through the centuries but their presence was first documented during the Portuguese period. Banians, Hindu merchants from Sind and Gujarat, were involved in trade with Muscat during the Portuguese period and established warehouses in Muscat.<sup>35</sup> Various travelers in succeeding centuries remarked on the numbers and role of Hindus in Muscat and they were described at the beginning of the twentieth century as being bankers and importers of rice, piece-goods, sugar, and coffee from India. In addition, they exported dates, were silversmiths, and owned some of the best gardens in Muscat's suburbs.<sup>36</sup> While a number of Hindu families left Oman after 1970, a sizeable number still remain. These trace their origins to Kutch in Gujarat and maintain close relations with family in India.

While Hindus tended to reside in Muscat, the Lawatiyyah community clustered in Matrah, specifically in the Sur al-Lawatiyyah community on the shore. Their origins are not clearly known but it is conclusive that they have been in Oman at least since the 1740s. They are presumed to be of Indian origin and were quite possibly originally Hindu, although the community is entirely Ja'fari or Twelver Shi'a now. In the past, a smaller community of Agha Khani Isma'ilis coexisted uneasily with the Lawatiyyah. While the main Ja'fari body of al-Lawatiyyah are thought to have arrived during the period of the Ya'rubi dynasty (1650–1740s), the Agha Khanis probably arrived during the Al Bu Sa'id era (from the 1740s). A number of the Agha Khanis were excommunicated by the Agha Khan in the 1860s, whereupon

they converted to Ja'fariyah. Of the remainder, some heeded the the call of the Agha Khan in the 1960s to gather in Pakistan and the rest converted to Ja'fariyah and merged into the Lawatiyyah community.<sup>37</sup>

Two other Shi'i communities in Oman are the 'Ajam (or Persians) and al-Baharinah. The origins of the 'Ajami community in Oman are undoubtedly ancient. They were described in the 1830s as being mostly merchants dealing in Indian piece-goods, coffee, hookahs, and rosewater.<sup>38</sup> British observers early in the twentieth century divided the community into Persian traders and long-established families of Persian extraction who were occupied as shopkeepers, fishmongers, and makers of quilts and bedding.<sup>39</sup> The term al-Baharinah, unlike in Bahrain and elsewhere in the Gulf, is used in Muscat to simply mean Shi'a of Arab descent. The Bahraini community is quite small, consisting of perhaps a dozen families but they are well represented in commerce and, in the post-1970 period, in politics.

In addition, Oman's long connection with East Africa resulted in a community of Swahili speakers, either pure Arab or of mixed race, as well as many Muscatis of African descent. A small Jewish community existed until well into the twentieth century but there have been few if any indigenous Christians since the Portuguese era.<sup>40</sup>

### *The Modern City*

#### **The Creation of an Urban Metropolis**

The sleepy, unchanged nature of Muscat changed drastically in the years following the coup d'état of 1970 and the accession of the modernizing sultan, Qabus b. Sa'id Al Sa'id, the 14th ruler in the long line of the Al Bu Sa'id dynasty. Muscat's role as the preeminent port of Oman continued and in addition was enhanced as socioeconomic development produced increasing demand for imports. But Muscat town itself was bypassed in this renewed port emphasis. Oil exports were unloaded from the terminal at Mina' al-Fahl, a few miles to the west of Muscat in a secluded bay that had been selected for its isolation. General maritime facilities shifted to Matrah where a modern port was dredged and protected by a breakwater. Construction on the port was begun by the previous sultan but the present ruler took credit by naming it Mina' Qabus.

The new wealth accruing to the country as the result of oil exports and the expansion of the government's role in the post-1970 period combined to enhance Muscat's unprecedented role as the true capital of Oman and as the economic and political nucleus of the country. As a result, the Muscat urban area exploded in size to accommodate the steady influx of population, both indigenous and expatriate, to create a sizeable metropolis.

One area of the capital region experiencing changes before the developments of 1970 was Mina' al-Fahl and Ra's al-Hamra'. Mina' al-Fahl was chosen in the 1960s as the headquarters of Petroleum Development (Oman) (PDO) and the terminus of the oil pipeline from the interior. Houses for PDO's expatriate staff were built along the adjoining promontory of Ra's al-Hamra'. The choice of the location of Ra's al-Hamra' was meant to isolate large numbers of expatriates from Omanis, thus satisfying a requirement of the sultan of the time.

Among the first areas to feel the effects of post-1970 expansion were Greater Matrah and Ruwi. Greater Matrah was built up along one of the two roads leading from Matrah toward Ruwi and the interior and development gradually expanded into the adjoining Wadi Bayt al-Falaj and near the army headquarters and Muscat's airfield. As the press for business premises, industrial sites, and residential accommodation continued, the *wadi* gradually filled in and the village of Ruwi, at the inland end of the valley, was transformed into a commercial center with small shops and warehouses.

While some growth occurred to the east of Muscat in the villages of Sidab and Qantab, this mostly consisted of improvements for the existing population and not transformation because of cramped quarters due to the surrounding hills. The greater path of expansion was therefore westward, first enveloping the small garden village of al-Wutayyah. The country's first "modern" housing development, Madinat Qabus, was established on low hills overlooking the sea at the beginning of al-Batinah Coast. This was gradually followed by development into al-Qurm (anchored by the Muscat Intercontinental Hotel on the beach) and al-Qurm Heights (around the Gulf Hotel on a hill overlooking the beach). At the same time, some growth followed the contours of Wadi 'Adayy near Ruwi and into the Sayh al-Harat basin behind the hills but this remained also limited.

Creeping growth tended to follow the coastal axis to beyond al-Qurm to al-Khuwayr, where most of the country's ministries were eventually located. 'Udhaybah had been colonized even earlier, first by industrial plants and then by housing. Shati' al-Qurm along the shore gradually filled in with prosperous houses anchored by the Hyatt Regency Hotel. As the narrow coastal plain widened, expansion was experienced in the formerly country villages of Bawshar and Ghallah. While al-Sib had been an important village in the past, the relocation of the country's principal airport there and later the construction of a new armed forces headquarters nearby spurred extensive development. Al-Sib eventually became the largest residential area of the capital region. Urban growth continued along al-Batinah beyond al-Sib and inland to al-Khawd, site of Sultan Qabus University.

The residents of this new metropolis were extremely diversified. About half were Omanis drawn from all over the country to fill government

positions, establish small businesses, and seek employment of any sort. The other half of the population explosion came from a complex mix of expatriates. While northern Arabs and Westerners predominated in skilled positions, such as government officials, business managers, and teachers, the majority of expatriates came from Asia, especially India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. The expatriates of these countries also filled some skilled and semiskilled positions, with each country and sometimes regions of each country providing specialized occupations (Sikhs excelled as engineers, Keralites as clerks, and Filipinas and Sri Lankans as maids and governesses, for example).

### The Transformation of Muscat and Matrah

The greatest changes took place in the old precincts of Muscat and Matrah. While some initial physical development had taken place in Muscat, the town was clearly too small to accommodate larger government requirements or population growth. Early on, a decision was made to locate emerging ministries in Wadi Bayt al-Falaj along the route to Ruwi (from whence most were later transferred to al-Khuwayr).

In the mid-1970s, a considerable extent of Muscat inside the walls (including the old palace) was demolished to make way for the new Qasr al-'Alam ceremonial palace (Sultan Qabus never lived there). Over the next several decades, the *sug* was demolished. The town walls and gates were rebuilt with imported materials to provide more aesthetic appeal. The British embassy was moved out to the beach at al-Khuwayr, presumably in part to put an end to the symbolic presence of the imposing chancery next to the palace. The US embassy, occupying the same premises as the American consulate had at the beginning of the twentieth century in Bayt Mughub, had been relocated already.

The old Al Bu Sa'id house of Bayt Gharayzah and the nearby Khawr mosque were destroyed and rebuilt from scratch. While a few other Al Bu Sa'id houses were preserved (most notably Bayt Faransi, which became a Franco-Omani museum), others were demolished to make room for new buildings of the Diwan of Royal Court. In the early 2000s, the remaining old quarter of Muscat was swept away to provide massive new buildings associated with the palace and an overblown ceremonial entryway to the palace was blasted through the town walls. Thus, the old port settlement of Muscat succumbed to being transformed into nothing more than palace precincts and an area for tourists to wander about while gazing up at the old Portuguese forts, which were preserved albeit with significant changes.

The precincts outside the walls had been transformed even earlier. In part, modest new houses replaced *barasti* structures. The way from al-Bab

al-Kabir up the *wadi* was blocked by more Diwan structures, and housing and the gardens that had sustained Muscat for centuries were unceremoniously bulldozed for more housing.

The changes to Matrah were less dramatic although still overwhelming. The beach was transformed into a corniche that wound its way around to Muscat town and the seaside houses now looked out on the modern port. The through traffic between Muscat and the rest of the capital, as well as the heavy traffic of cargo offloaded in the port and trucked to destinations throughout the country, forced the cutting of a broad boulevard through a central part of the town. Matrah's old *sug*, already picturesque, was tarted up to appeal to tourists. Nevertheless, the town retained much of its pre-1970 character with older *barasti* structures giving way to modest new residences, leaving much of Matrah's population intact. Sur al-Lawatiyyah retained its closed nature and exhibits something of a mysterious compound to passersby.

In a few decades, the role of Muscat had changed far more radically than it had in the previous four and a half centuries. Instead of a thriving port catering to trade from the Gulf to India and Africa, Muscat turned its attention to the business of business, politics, and international affairs. Continued port activities were left to Matrah to handle and these were reduced to the simple importing of construction materials and consumer goods.

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, two developments spelled a final end to Muscat's role as a storied port city of the Indian Ocean. First, a gigantic new port was dredged out of the sandy beach at Suhar, part of the ambitious project to transform the town into Oman's industrial hub. Second, Mina' Qabus had become a popular port of call for cruise ships. In July 2011, the government decreed that Mina' Qabus would be converted from a commercial port to a tourist port. All commercial operations, including import, export, general cargo, and container activities, were to be transferred to the Suhar Industrial Port. As a consequence, Muscat's five-century existence as Oman's predominant port was consigned to history. At the same time, Suhar, eclipsed as a major port for nearly 1,000 years, regained its status.

## Notes

1. W. G. Grey, "Trades and Races of Oman," *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society*, vol. 2, no. 2 (January 1911): 4.
2. S. B. Miles, *The Countries and Tribes of the Persian Gulf* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1919; 2nd ed., London: Frank Cass, 1966), 462; G. Rex Smith, "Masqat in the Arab Lexicographers and Geographers," *Journal of Oman Studies*, vol. 6, pt. 1 (1983), 146–47. The Arab navigator Ahmad b. Majid noted that "There is a rock at the head of the port, which the traveller to and from any place sees, whether

he aims for India and Sind or Hormuz or the West, and Northwest by West of it is a high red island called al-Fahl and these are landmarks sufficient for even the ignorant man when he comes across them, night and day.” G. R. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean before the Coming of the Portuguese Being a Translation of Kitab al-Fawa'id fi usul al-bahr wa'l-qawa'id of Ahmad b. Majid al-Najdi* (London: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1971), 213. But Muscat served as Ahmad's home port and he wrote in the 15th century, well after Muscat's port use had become established.

3. Description of harbor details is drawn from the US Hydrographic Office, *Persian Gulf Pilot, Comprising the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Makran Coast*, 1st ed. (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1923; H.O. 158), 68–76. See also the description in Arthur W. Stiffe, “Ancient Trading Centres of the Persian Gulf, IV: Maskat,” *Geographical Journal*, vol. 10, no. 6 (1897): 608–9.
4. *Ahbar as-sin wal-Hind / Relation de la Chine et de l'Inde, Rédigée en 237/851: Texte établi, traduit et commenté par J. Sauvaget* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1948), 7. M. Redha Bhacker al-Murad, “Guide to Mirani and Jalali Forts in Muscat” (unpublished manuscript, August 1993), 3, also cites the *Kitab al-Masalik wa'l-mamalik (Book of Routes and Kingdoms)* compiled by the ninth-century geographer Ibn Khurradadbih. Smith, “Masqat,” 147, cites Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani in the early tenth century and Muhammad al-Muqaddasi in AD 985, respectively. Other sources briefly mentioning Muscat include Muhammad al-Idrisi (d. 1166), Ibn al-Mujawir (d. 1291), Ibn Battutah (d. 1368/1369), al-Dimashqi (thirteenth century), and Afanasij Nikitin (fifteenth century).
5. *Al-Muqaddasi, The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*, trans. Basil Collins (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2001), 80.
6. *A Traveller in Thirteenth-Century Arabia: Ibn al-Mujawir's Tarikh al-Mustabsir*, trans. G. Rex Smith (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate for the Hakluyt Society, 2008), 280. Lacuna in the original.
7. “This diorite or ‘black stone’ which has been referred to many times in the Sumerian texts, is in fact the ‘gabbro olivine’ of the mountains of Oman, a part of the ophiolite complex. Its exploitation is easy because it crops up on the slopes of Jabal Hajar, sometimes breaking away from it in blocks which roll into the wadi beds.” Monik Kervran, “Sohar Fort Museum” (Muscat: Sultanate of Oman, Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, 1996), 14.
8. The waters just off Qalhat appear to have been shallower than elsewhere along the coast, thus allowing safe anchorage in bad weather for ships that otherwise would be dragged along the coast. At the same time, the anchorage just offshore was deep enough to permit the loading and unloading of cargo, especially horses exported elsewhere in the region. Mohammed Redha Bhacker and Bernadette Bhacker, “Qalhat in Arabian History: Context and Chronicles,” *Journal of Oman Studies*, vol. 13 (2004): 19–20.
9. J.C. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition of Oman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 44.
10. Tibbetts, *Arab Navigation in the Indian Ocean*, 214–15.
11. Arnold T. Wilson, *The Persian Gulf: An Historical Sketch from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928, repr. 1959), 114–15; citing Albuquerque's *Commentaries*. Albuquerque's description is also mentioned in J. Theodore Bent and Mabel V.A. Bent, *Southern Arabia*

- (London: Smith, Elder, 1900; repr. Reading: Garnet, 1994), 51. For a fuller account of the Portuguese capture of Muscat, see Frederick Charles Danvers, *The Portuguese in India: Being a History of the Rise and Decline of their Eastern Empire*, 2 vols. (London, 1894; repr. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1992), vol. 1, 159–61. On the later period of Portuguese occupation (1622–1650), see Willem Floor, *The Persian Gulf: A Political and Economic History of Five Port Cities, 1500–1730* (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 2006), 323–427.
12. Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa; An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants, Written by Duarte Barbosa, and Completed about the Year 1518 A.D.*, 2 vols., trans. from the Portuguese by Mansel Longworth Dames (London: Hakluyt Society, 1918; repr. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1989), vol. I, 71.
  13. Jean Aubin, “Le royaume d’Ormuz au début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Mare Luso-Indicum*, vol. 2 (Geneva: Droz, 1973 for Centre de Recherches d’Histoire et de Philologie, Hautes Études Islamiques et orientales d’histoire comparée), 115, citing Brás de Albuquerque, vol. 1/24, 82.
  14. Aubin, “Le royaume d’Ormuz,” 112. Aubin also speculates that Qalhat’s decline may have been the result of earthquake damage.
  15. Muscat was also well suited to carry out Portuguese strategy in the Indian Ocean. As has been pointed out, “Europeans brought to the balance of trade at world level the skills of the arms dealer and the military expert.” C. A. Bayly and Leila Tarazi Fawaz, “Introduction: The Connected World of Empires,” in Fawaz and Bayly, eds., *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 18, citing André G. Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Frank, *Asian Age: ReOrient Historiography and Social Theory* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies, 1998).
  16. It has been postulated that the weakness of the Portuguese commercial enterprise in the Indian Ocean was that they did not control the hinterlands of the areas in which they established maritime mastery. When that maritime supremacy was challenged and bested, the Portuguese position collapsed. Kenneth McPherson, “Port Cities as Nodal Points of Change: The Indian Ocean, 1890s–1920s,” in Fawaz and Bayly, *Modernity and Culture*, 78–79.
  17. Wilson, *Persian Gulf*, 194; citing John Bruce, *Annals of the Hon’ble East India Company* (London, 1810), vol. 3.
  18. Wilson, *Persian Gulf*, 194.
  19. Hamad died of smallpox at Muscat in 1792 and was interred in one of the *wadis* behind the town. J. G. Lorimer, comp., *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, ‘Oman, and Central Arabia* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, vol. I: 1915; vol. II: 1908; reprinted by various publishers in 1970, 1989, and 1998), here vol. I, 418. The tombstone (or more likely its replacement) can still be seen in the large cemetery next to the Hillat al-Shaykh suburb in Muscat’s al-Wadi al-Wusta.
  20. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition*, 50–51.
  21. M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: The Roots of British Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992), 33.
  22. Wilkinson, *The Imamate Tradition*, 50–51.
  23. Bhacker, *Trade and Empire*, 32–33; Wilson, *Persian Gulf*, 189.

24. Robert G. Landen, *Oman since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 195.
25. Miles, *Countries and Tribes*, 464. Floor, relying on Portuguese sources, states that the Portuguese had started to build the earth wall only in 1625 (*The Persian Gulf*, 336).
26. Paolo M. Costa, "Historical Interpretation of the Territory of Muscat," in *Oman Studies* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1989; Serie Orientale Roma, vol. 63), 101. Costa speculates that the Portuguese may have used the existing fort on the site initially and then utilized the site on the western side of the harbor (Fort al-Mirani) for an entirely new fort later. In his view, it is likely that the Portuguese continued to use and improve the existing structures on the site of al-Jalali, with the only new element possibly being the gun-gallery overlooking the harbor. Costa does not consider who built the existing fort. Ibid. Braz de Albuquerque, Afonso's son, also mentioned an existing fortress. (Al-Murad, "Guide," 56.)
27. The Bents state that work on the forts began in 1527 but the impetus for their completion came by the order of Madrid after the union of Portugal with Spain in 1580. (*Southern Arabia*, 53). Donald Hawley, in *Oman and Its Renaissance* (London: Stacey International, 1977), 110–11, says that work began in 1522 but was destroyed in the same year by the Ottoman fleet of Piri Reis; but he gives no source for his information. Miles, *Countries and Tribes*, 169, gives the date as 1552. Floor, *The Persian Gulf*, 336, gives the original names of al-Mirani as Fort Boqueirão or Quelbúque while that of al-Jalali was Fort Santo António.
28. Miles, *Countries and Tribes*, 163–64 and 464.
29. G. Weisgerber, "Muscat in 1688: Engelbert Kaempfer's Report and Engravings," *Journal of Oman Studies* vol. 5 (1979): 97; and Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia, and Other Countries in the East* (n.p., 1792; reprinted Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), 115. See also Robin Bidwell, "Bibliographical Notes on European Accounts of Muscat 1500–1900," *Arabian Studies*, vol. 4 (1978): 123–59.
30. One map was issued by a bank in the 1960s and reproduced in several publications subsequently, including W. D. Peyton, *Old Oman* (London: Stacey International, 1983). A newer map based on the same photograph was published in J. E. Peterson, *Historical Muscat: An Illustrated Guide and Gazetteer* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).
31. The photograph by Percy Cox is reproduced in Peterson, *Historical Muscat*, figure 71.
32. See, for example, the comment about Muscat by a British naval captain who surveyed the Omani coastline in 1824: "Hindoostany appears to be the lingua franca, Arabic being only spoken by the native Arabs, who form by far the smallest portion of the inhabitants." W. F. W. Owen, *Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia, and Madagascar*, 2 vols., ed. H.B. Robinson (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833), vol. 1, 205.
33. See J. E. Peterson, "The Baluch Presence in the Persian Gulf," in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (London: Hurst, 2013), 229–44. For more details on the population mix of Oman, including Muscat, see J. E. Peterson, "Oman's Diverse Society: Northern Oman," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 32–51.
34. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, vol. 2B, 1185 and 1200.

35. Calvin H. Allen, Jr., "The Indian Merchant Community of Masqat," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 44, pt. 1 (1981): 40; citing William Foster, *The English Factories in India, 1634–1636* (Oxford, 1911), 127–34.
36. Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, vol.2B, 1185.
37. Allen, "Indian Merchant Community of Masqat," 49; interviews in Oman.
38. J.R. Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1838; reprinted Graz: Akademische Druke, 1978), vol. 1, 17. He also remarked that other Persians from Bandar Abbas, Lar, and Menon [sic], manufactured swords and matchlocks, for which there was a great demand in the interior. *Ibid.*
39. Grey, "Trade and Races of Oman," 4; Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, vol.2B, 1185.
40. Grey, "Trade and Races of Oman," 4, mentions that Portuguese or Goanese was spoken in Muscat by a Goanese population of about a dozen, consisting of merchants, domestic servants, etc. Another hint of the existence of this community is the documentation in British archives of the sultan's grant of land for a Christian cemetery near the American Mission in Muscat. The list of subscribers to the cemetery, in addition to the British Political Agent, the French consul, a Scottish merchant, the staff of the American Mission and other Europeans in Muscat, included the handwritten names of J. S. de Hallo (?), P. C. Cordeiro, C. M. de Souza, P. A. de Rocha, P. S. Pereira, J. A. dos Remeoris (?), (illegible), Pinto & J. Francisco, L. A. Honterio (?), Benjamin de Souza, and A. C. Di Grastos (?). British Library, Oriental and India Collection, Records of the Political Agency, Muscat, R/15/6/67 (1900).