TRANSFORMING MUSCAT: THE CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

This essay is not primarily a treatise on urban development, even though it does attempt to provide some enlightenment on the urban development of the Muscat capital area since 1970. Nor is it intended to provide a detailed chronological narrative of Muscat’s history. Such a task would not be very original, as it would consist principally of reliance on and summarization from secondary sources. Even more importantly, much of Muscat’s history is lost to present knowledge, and a chronological narrative would be extremely sparse until the arrival of the Europeans. Even then, great gaps would remain for much of the following centuries.

Instead, two primary purposes lay at the heart of this essay. The first is to define and explain the historical environment that determined the significance and design of Muscat, Matrah, and environs prior to 1970. The second intention is to explain: (a) how the development of the conurbation since 1970 has transcended the historical boundaries and considerations of the existing settlements, (b) how the process of development has proceeded largely without any consideration of the impact on Muscat’s tangible or remembered history, and (c) how much of the tangible historical legacy of Muscat has been gratuitously destroyed and much of the remainder trivialized and bowdlerized. This said, undoubtedly it would be useful to provide at the outset a brief historical overview of the history of Muscat and its surrounding region.

**Historical Muscat**

*Pre-Portuguese Period*

The origins of Muscat are lost in the mists of time. It seems reasonable to conclude that the site was settled at a very early date because of the twin advantages of a natural harbor and the natural defenses provided by the rugged surrounding terrain. Moreover, water was to be found in some abundance and there is plentiful evidence
that nearby sites, such as Bandar Jissah on the sea or Bawshar inland a few kilometers, were settled in prehistoric times. There is no reason to think that Muscat should be any different. Paradoxically, the fact of its long habitation and constant rebuilding, especially in the three decades since 1970, has obscured or buried all traces of the distant past. Although preliminary archaeological investigations in the general Muscat region have provided some glimmers, extremely little historical evidence exists regarding settlement in the Muscat area, including the principal towns of Muscat and Matrah, before the 16th century A.D.

Most likely the existence of Muscat was well known to ancient geographers, even if they noted it only briefly in passing. It may well have been Ptolemy’s Kryptos Limen, or “Hidden Port,” and so may have been mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea.* There is also an unsubstantiated local tradition that Muscat was founded by Himyari colonizers. One historical source claims that the Sassanid Shah Khausraw Anushirvan (r. 531–578) built Muscat, but this does not seem credible. Two 9th century works detailing the sailing routes from the Gulf to China cite Muscat’s importance as the last watering place for ships heading out of the Gulf for destinations in India, East Africa, and beyond long before the coming of Islam.

Other medieval Arabic sources refer to Muscat as a port where ships took on drinking water before setting off for India or Yemen.

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1 In support of the ancient origins of Muscat, M. Redha Bhacker al-Murad, in his “Guide to Mirani and Jalali Forts in Muscat” (unpublished manuscript, August 1993), p. 3, states that recent archaeological evidence points to maritime trading links between Oman, the Red Sea, and the Gulf as early as the 6th millennium B.C.


3 Smith, “Masqat,” p. 146.


6 Smith, “Masqat,” p. 147; citing Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani in the early 10th century and Muhammad al-Muqaddasi in A.D. 985, respectively. Other sources mentioning Muscat include Muhammad al-Idrisi (d. 1166), Ibn al-Mujawir (d. 1291), and al-Dimashqi (13th century).