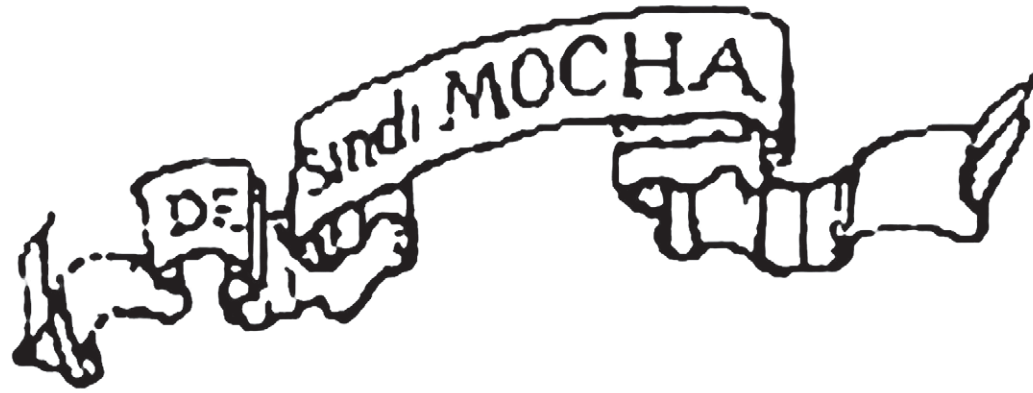


# The melancholy of Mocha



At first glance, this book seems to deal with an unlikely topic. Using architecture as a prime source, it deals with the history of a city, Mocha, which today lies in ruins. Even in 1909 there were only about 20 stone or brick buildings left in this once thriving port city. The reproductions of old photographs of various buildings are often captioned, in melancholy fashion, ‘now destroyed’.

Michael Pearson

Um, Nancy, 2009.

*The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade & Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port.*  
Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.  
270 pages. ISBN 978 0 295 98911 (paperback).

MOCHA HAD A RELATIVELY BRIEF PERIOD of prominence in the trade of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. It rose under the Ottomans, from 1538. In 1635 it was taken by the Qasimi imams, a ruling group of the Zaydi shi'i faith based at various cities in the interior. Professor Um's book covers the period 1650 to 1750, after which the town declined and, finally, was totally eclipsed by the rise of Aden from 1839.

Mocha could have been analysed as an 'Islamic City', or as an 'Indian Ocean port city'. Indeed, Um is fully aware of the literatures on both topics, but she sees Mocha as rather different. The classic Islamic city was usually not a port. Mocha of course is a port and her study could have followed on from the two collections edited by Frank Broeze on Indian Ocean port cities. The difference is that much of the literature on port cities describes the rise of colonial port cities, while Mocha was indigenous, indeed was 'owned' by a distant interior state. Thus, it is analogous to an extent with the great port cities of Gujarat, especially Surat, which owed allegiance to the Mughal state located in the north Indian heartland.

Many urban histories restrict themselves to the bounded city, but Um stresses connections both to the hinterland and the foreland, the former being the Yemeni highlands where the rulers were, and from where some trade goods were derived; the latter being the vast littoral of the Indian Ocean. As she writes in her conclusion, 'For Mocha one must emphasize the relevance of connected sites in a land-based network encompassing an agricultural hinterland, inland market centers, and distant highland capitals. One must consider the city's maritime port counterparts and its surrounding extramural quarters. All these elements contributed to Mocha's social, commercial, and political

structure, its architectural and urban shape, and its historical significance. The city's connections were constitutive of its identity and built shape, rather than external to them'. (p.187)

While Um uses what Arabic sources are available, most of her written information came from the records of the Dutch East India Company. She could have used them to write an economic study, along the lines of Ashin Das Gupta's classic work on Surat. However, Um is innovative in that she uses these written sources, but crucially combines them with what can be discovered of the architecture of the city to depict the layout, the spaces, of this urban area which owed its existence to trade. As she writes, 'I demonstrate that the culture of trade profoundly shaped the underlying structure of the port city, defining the principal orientation of its urban shape, the functional modes of its built elements, and the social hierarchies that dominated community life'. (p.11)

#### Interesting deviation

Following a cogent introduction, which nicely sets out the main themes, the first chapter sketches Mocha's trade networks, both to the interior and around the Indian Ocean, and also summarises its political history. Chapter 2 is something of a deviation from the main theme, albeit an interesting one, for it deals with coffee. Um shows that the notion that the city's trade was dominated by coffee is false, for it traded in many products, and other cities traded in coffee too. In any case, no coffee was grown in Mocha; it came from the highlands.

From now on we get what is the real contribution, that is historical analysis enriched by the use of architecture. Chapter 3 uses the now familiar concept of littoral society to show that Mocha's reach extended far inland, to the ostensibly 'remote' Zaydi shi'i Qasimi rulers. Flows went both ways, for there was a considerable degree of integration despite the inland capitals and Mocha being at least ten days' journey apart. Um shows that Mocha's revenues were crucial for the state, although regrettably she doesn't have precise statistical data to prove this. However, by focussing on architectural matters, such as



the lavish buildings –both houses and mosques –erected in the inland by the governors of Mocha, she demonstrates the richness of the port city and how its maritime profits were taken and used inland. Other governors patronised religious matters, such as lavish versions of the Qur'an. A few did what perhaps one would expect, that is public works in the city from where their wealth came, but this was less important than their 'inland' patronage.

Chapter 4 uses very sparse sources to describe Mocha's merchants, both wholesalers and retail. Um stresses the extensive interchange, not only of goods but also of personnel, with Mocha's twin city, Surat. As one example, a merchant prince of Surat, Muhammad Ali, undertook massive religious patronage in Mocha, as well as in Surat, in the 1720s. There is also good detail on more 'local' merchants, who even so maintained ties with the interior court, and often also with Surat. Qasimi imams also traded to Surat, via their *nakhudas* (ship captains).

Chapter 5 deals with the urban form and orientation of Mocha. Here is a valiant attempt to recreate a plan of the city from very diverse sources. Um shows that Mocha's layout differed from other European and Arab cities where the market is central to the economic function of the city; in Mocha these functions were much more dispersed. There were really two foci: the maritime one on the seashore, and the inland one leading to the interior. As she says, 'The two sets of spatial and built elements facilitated a transition between the realms of the Indian Ocean maritime network and the Zaydi highlands of the Qasimi imamate, mediated by the landmarks of a lowland Sunni village'. (p.123)

The next chapter follows on to show that in Mocha the urban *khan* did not necessarily function as a residence for merchants as well as a place of trade. Indeed, there was no urban *khan* at all in Mocha, that is no public structures where trade took place. Rather it took place in the houses of merchants, including the Europeans, and this is a modification of standard analyses of the Islamic trading city. There is excellent detail on the layout of a merchant's house, with family areas set off

A trading dhow on the Indian Ocean.  
Photo by Charles Roffey.

above the less restricted area where exchange took place and goods were stored. The merchant house also functioned to show the wealth and status of the owner. Not that this house-based focus for exchange was unique to Mocha. While it was not found in the standard 'Islamic' city, it was in other port cities around the shores of the Indian Ocean.

The final substantive chapter describes the banyans, Hindu and Jain merchants originating in Gujarat. These men were sojourners, and did not bring their women with them. Most of Um's data describes their work with the European traders, while we know less about their economic interactions with the dominant Muslim communities in the city. There is much that is familiar here. They played a crucial economic role in exchange, as brokers, yet were often ill treated and used as milch cows. Nevertheless, just as in Gujarat if they were oppressed beyond endurance they could withdraw, thus crippling trade in the city, until redress was promised and they were coaxed back. Despite being Hindu, they were treated like Jews and Christians, as *dhimmis* (non-Muslims), and indeed they were much more economically central than was the Jewish community. This was shown by the way some of the wealthier banyans lived within the city walls, while Jews and other banyans and less important ethnic groups were relegated to suburbs outside the walls.

The Conclusion offers a brief account of Mocha's decline, and recapitulates the main themes. It ends with a very apposite plea for archaeology work, which would be invaluable.

This book deserves to be widely read, and praised. Um demonstrates familiarity with a host of secondary work in urban history, and where necessary challenges and modifies them. Her use of architecture as a key source is extremely innovative. In terms of Indian Ocean studies, we now have a few foundational studies, for example by Bose, the late Ken McPherson, Chaudhuri and Pearson, which sketch broad themes. We need many more micro-studies which can modify received wisdoms. Um's book is an exemplary case study of what we need, and stands alongside Margariti's recent comparable study of Aden in its use of difficult sources, and its successful analysis. Finally, I must praise

the dedication, for Um very touchingly writes of her husband that 'This book would mean nothing to me if he were not there to share in the joy of its completion', p. xii.

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