



BEIT EL MTONI

THE HOUSE AT THE CREEK¹

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MAJOR PEARCE'S REMORSE

'I was at Mtoni Palace yesterday. I see there is a piece of the Persian bath and a wall of the women's quarters still in situ and not absorbed into the oil godown. The ruined portion is however so overgrown with creepers etc that it is inaccessible and the interiors are I expect full of bats and pythons.

Mtoni Palace is of course of great interest as being the first Palace Seyyid Said, the founder of modern Zanzibar and the initiator of the Clove Industry built here in 1828 when he determined to make Zanzibar his African Capital. After generations will I expect put us down as vandals for having turned the palace into an oil godown, just as we wonder nowadays at the vandalism of smashing up the stained glass of our cathedrals and the whitewashing of our churches.

However I think this remnant of the palace might be preserved and in any case cleared of growth, cleaned out and wire doors put up to keep out the vermin. I suppose the D of A has charge, but in any case there is Rs2000 in the estimates some of which could be spared to clean up Mtoni.

Tell him to get the place free of growth, and then I can go and see what other steps can be done.'

'P.S. I write this minute for future generations, to whom Mtoni will be merely a name of a place "where the oil comes from". So please file this for the benefit of our successors.'²

¹ Mtoni in Kiswahili means 'at the creek', 'mto' being creek and the suffix '-ni' standing for 'at'

² Zanzibar Archives, Mtoni folder

This note was signed Major FB Pearce, the British Resident on Zanzibar on 17th February 1919. Pearce, author of a study on the history of Zanzibar³, paid this visit to Mtoni on his free Sunday afternoon. He was able to think about other things than war and politics as the First World War was just over.

The colonial clerks and their successors after Independence in 1963 remained true to Pearce's request, and the note survived up to date. Unfortunately though, it sits rather lonely in the Mtoni Palace file in the archives. Next to a couple of engravings, the odd photograph and schematic Public Works Department conversion plans for the said oil godown, the archives remain silent on the history of Mtoni Palace. It is mainly thanks to Emily Ruete's writings that we have been able to walk through the palace during its heydays, in her footsteps as young Princess Salme, daughter of the illustrious Seyyid Said who had made Mtoni Palace the heart of his newly founded empire.

Thanks to Pearce's feelings about the rich heritage of Zanzibar, the 'Ancient Monuments Preservation Decree' was passed in 1927. Mtoni Palace would be declared in 1957, and has remained listed up to today. Although the Revolution was understandably not positive about the colonial past, none of Zanzibar's built monuments were wantonly destroyed.

In a way, the industrial use of Mtoni Palace preserved the complex from total annihilation. The oil storage in the palace complex ceased by the middle of the twentieth century, probably because of the introduction of bulk storage and filling inlet directly from oil tankers from the seaside⁴. By 1960, the palace complex was converted into a cement storage⁵, and would remain so until the late eighties.

Only at the moment when the buildings were vacated in the nineties decay became threatening. On the joined initiative by the Director of Archives, Monuments and Antiquities and Mtoni Marine Centre further degradation has been called to a halt. ArchiAfrika and the RMIT department of the Faculty of Architecture at Delft University of Technology initiated research work on the ruins in 2006. Simultaneously, archaeological excavations were carried out under guidance of Professor Abdurahman Juma and cleaning and conservations works by Said Hamad and Stephanie Schötz commenced.

THE FRENCH ISLAND AND THE ENGLISH PASS

Zanzibar was a place of secondary importance within the East African world at the wake of the nineteenth century but its star was rising fast. The island would soon come to play a crucial role in the ascendancy of Omani power over a large stretch of East Africa, and Mtoni would become the cradle of the rule of the Al-Busaidi family⁶.



fig. 36 1900 chart Zanzibar harbour approaches

- 1 English pass
- 2 French Pass
- 3 French Island (Chapwani)
- 4 Beit el Mtoni
- 5 Beit el Ras
- 6 Mtoni Creek
- 7 Chem Chem Spring
- 8 Marhubi Palace
- 9 Stone Town

It was however not a member of the Al-Busaidi family who first settled at Mtoni. It would be Saleh bin Haramil from the Al-Abry rivalling family who built himself a house at the strategic location overlooking the main naval approach to the city of Zanzibar. Not only did Saleh build his house at Mtoni, he was also the first to introduce clove cultivation to Zanzibar. He took the seeds from the French plantations in Bourbon to plant them in his gardens at Mtoni and Kizimbani in 1818. His excellent connections with the French would earn him the nickname 'the perfect Frenchman'⁷.

Saleh would not benefit long from his properties. It might have been his pro-French attitude that caused pro-British Seyyid Said bin Sultan to find an alibi to seize Saleh's properties, which happened in 1828 when he was allegedly caught trespassing the Moresby Treaty⁸. Tension between the pro-French and British parties was substantial during the days of the Napoleonic wars. The memories of this period were long kept in the name giving of Chapwani island opposite Mtoni '*l'Île Française*' and the main naval access channel to Zanzibar port between Chapwani and Mtoni called '*the English Pass*'.

- 7 Sheriff 1987: 49 and Studdy Leigh/ Kirkman 1980: 1/298
- 8 Sheriff 1987: 49,50 and Studdy Leigh/ Kirkman 1980: 1/285

3 Pearce 1920
 4 Site layout plan with 'Proposed additional bulk oil depot Mtoni Zanzibar', Geoffrey Mill of the Zanzibar Planning Authority, Nov 1959. Zanzibar archives, Mtoni folder
 5 Juma Abdurahman 1987: 18
 6 The Al-Busaidi family ruled Zanzibar up to 1964 and Al-Busaidi descendant Sultan Qaboos is the current reigning monarch of Oman

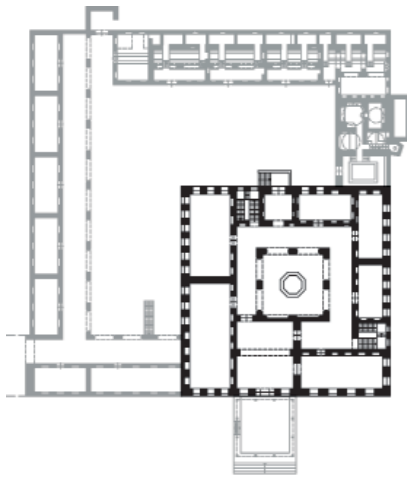


fig. 37 Possible reconstruction of Saleh bin Haramil's house at Mtoni



fig. 38 Entrance to the Sultans' palace on Zanzibar

Seyyid Said thought Mtoni a convenient acquisition. He ordered his son Seyyid Khalid bin Said to move from Muscat to Zanzibar to represent him next to his local vizier Seyyid Suleiman bin Hamed in the rule of the island and to set up court at Mtoni⁹. Seyyid Said chose the house because of its strategic location and its access to abundant drinking water. Mtoni was within direct reach of his fleet; it guarded the naval access to the city and was yet well distanced from the city itself. In case of a local uprising it would be easy to defend the house from an attack from the city. The roads to Mtoni at that time were mere tracks through the wilderness and crossing streams, passable on horseback or donkey only.

It may well have been that Seyyid Khalid carried out construction works on Saleh's house, to reinforce its military and ceremonial position and to prepare the lodging of the full court from Muscat that was envisaged by his father.¹⁰

Mtoni Palace served as Seyyid Said's foothold until he saw fit to move himself in 1833. From the period preceding this step, which was the period of assessment of Al-Busaidi rule on Zanzibar, little remains that refers to the assumed military function of the palace. This is somewhat surprising because Omani architecture is particularly known through its military character.

MTONI AS MILITARY FOOHOLD

The sister-palace of Beit el Mtoni in Oman is Bayt el Falaj at Ruwi, just outside Muscat. The palaces share the same name: House at the Creek. Bayt el Falaj is a typical Omani fortress with tall crenellated¹¹ walls, heavy towers on the diagonally opposed corners and a protected water source. Bayt el Falaj was erected around 1845 by Seyyid Said, but the towers were added only in 1885¹², long after Seyyid Said's death.

Research at Mtoni so far has not unveiled traces or references to towers, unless we have to see the tower and cannon gallery at the mouth of Mtoni creek as remains of the defences of the palace¹³. The remains of this structure leave a lot to be guessed. There was at least one circular tower on the corner at the river and a gallery with cannon ports. The rings to attach the cannon are still in situ. The tower, with its relatively small diameter, would have probably served for musketeers. The typology of this military architecture goes back to the seventeenth century Jabrin castle in Oman¹⁴, which was in turn strongly influenced by the Portuguese invaders. Omani forts were invariably square or rectangular complexes more often than not with a pair of round towers at the diagonally opposite corners. Heavy squad towers with a large diameter would house cannon, whereas slender and tall towers were for watch and manned by musketeers.

It is not known to date when this structure was built, unless we can identify it with the 'Old fort built by Seyyid Majid, 1868', shown on a recently unearthed picture from the Zanzibar Archives. In 1960 a substantial building, referred to as 'hunting lodge'¹⁵ was demolished to make room for the development of a tourist training centre. This could well have been the above mentioned fort.

Historical images of Mtoni Palace from the middle of the nineteenth century do not provide us with information on any military characteristics such as crenellation and defence walls. The only crenellation is the parapet decoration on the northern wing of the palace, certainly added after the arrival of Seyyid Said in 1833. This does not confirm that there had been no crenellation before. A similar discussion can be held on the fenestration of the building. There are fair reasons to believe that there were few or no ground floor windows before 1833, but evidence to support this view can only be obtained after removal of the thick cement plaster on the outside of the building.

The absence of extensive defence works on the palace grounds during this uncertain period can be explained by the protection of war ships that were moored at Mtoni. Protection of the palace and the English Pass might have been more effective from sea than from land. At later times, during Seyyid Said's residency at Mtoni, there was a continuous presence of armed ships guarding the palace and its environment¹⁶. Excavation at Mtoni Palace has unearthed a well in the centre of the court of what is believed as Saleh's original house. This confirms the assumption that drinking water in Mtoni Palace was protected, as is the case in Bayt el Falaj.



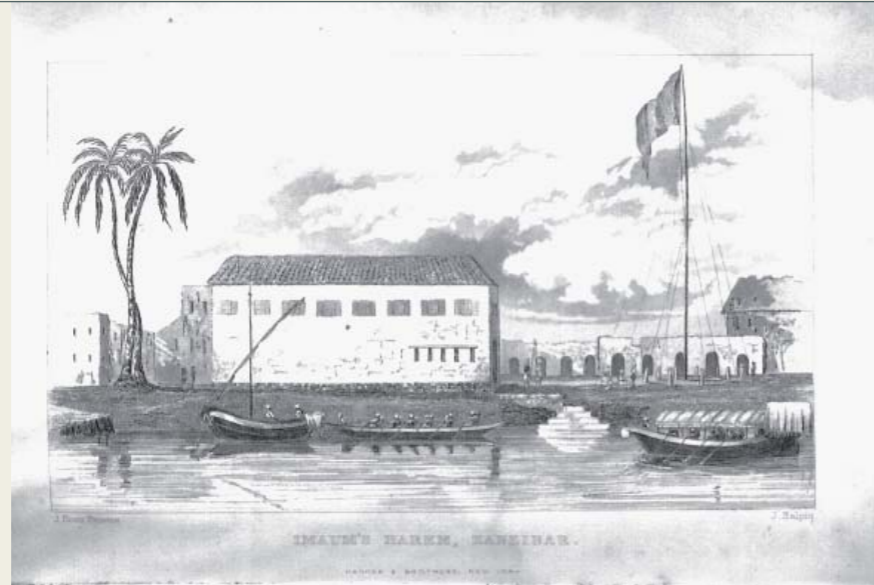
fig. 39 Birkat el Mawz in Oman

fig. 40 Majid's fort assumed at Mtoni creek.

9 Gray 1962:129-130
 10 Guillain 1856: 589
 11 For foreign and scientific names: see glossary
 12 Damluji 1998: 181-183
 13 Abdurahman 1987: 70
 14 Damluji 1998: 252-253

15 Horton 1984: 123
 16 Salme 1993: 156

fig. 41 Beit el Sahel as seen by Browne in the 1840's



PALACE HEYDAYS

1833, the year of Seyyid Said's settlement on Zanzibar, endorsed Al-Busaidi rule and pacification of the island. Seyyid Said could now turn his interest from warfare to economic expansion and relaxation. He converted Mtoni Palace into a comfortable place to live and recreate, a true country manor worthy of the wealthy and powerful prince he had become.

Seyyid Said also erected a palace in Stone Town during the same period, Beit el Sahel¹⁷. Out of convenience, and throughout his further stay on Zanzibar he would divide his wives and households between these two palaces. As the parallel to Beit el Mtoni and Bayt el Falaj near Muscat, there is a clear parentage between Beit el Sahel and Bayt al Jrayzah in the city of Muscat. Bayt al Jrayzah, also called Bayt al Graiza or Greiza¹⁸ was the town house of Seyyid Said's father, Seyyid Sultan bin Ahmed during the last decade of the eighteenth century. It was apparently erected on the location of a church from the time of Portuguese occupation in the 16th century, and its name thus derived from 'igreja'; church in Portuguese.

Mtoni Palace would however remain Seyyid Said's main abode, as it was much larger than Beit el Sahel and was the place to receive official guests. Testimonies by nineteenth century visitors like the Britons Richard Burton and John Studdy Leigh, the French captain Guillain, the German missionary Krapf and the American whaler Browne stand proof of the audiences and lavish receptions given at Mtoni by Seyyid Said.

The extensions and renovations carried out by Seyyid Said were substantial and took a long time to completion. Leigh, on his visit in August 1837 found the palace in unfinished state¹⁹ four years after Seyyid Said settled on Zanzibar.

The conversion from a strategic foothold into a country manor encompassed the extension of the palace with a northern wing for the secondary wives called the 'sarari', addition of a bath complex, gardens and service buildings as well as the renovation of the existing core which included Seyyid Said's apartments and the addition of the belvedere, the *benjile*.

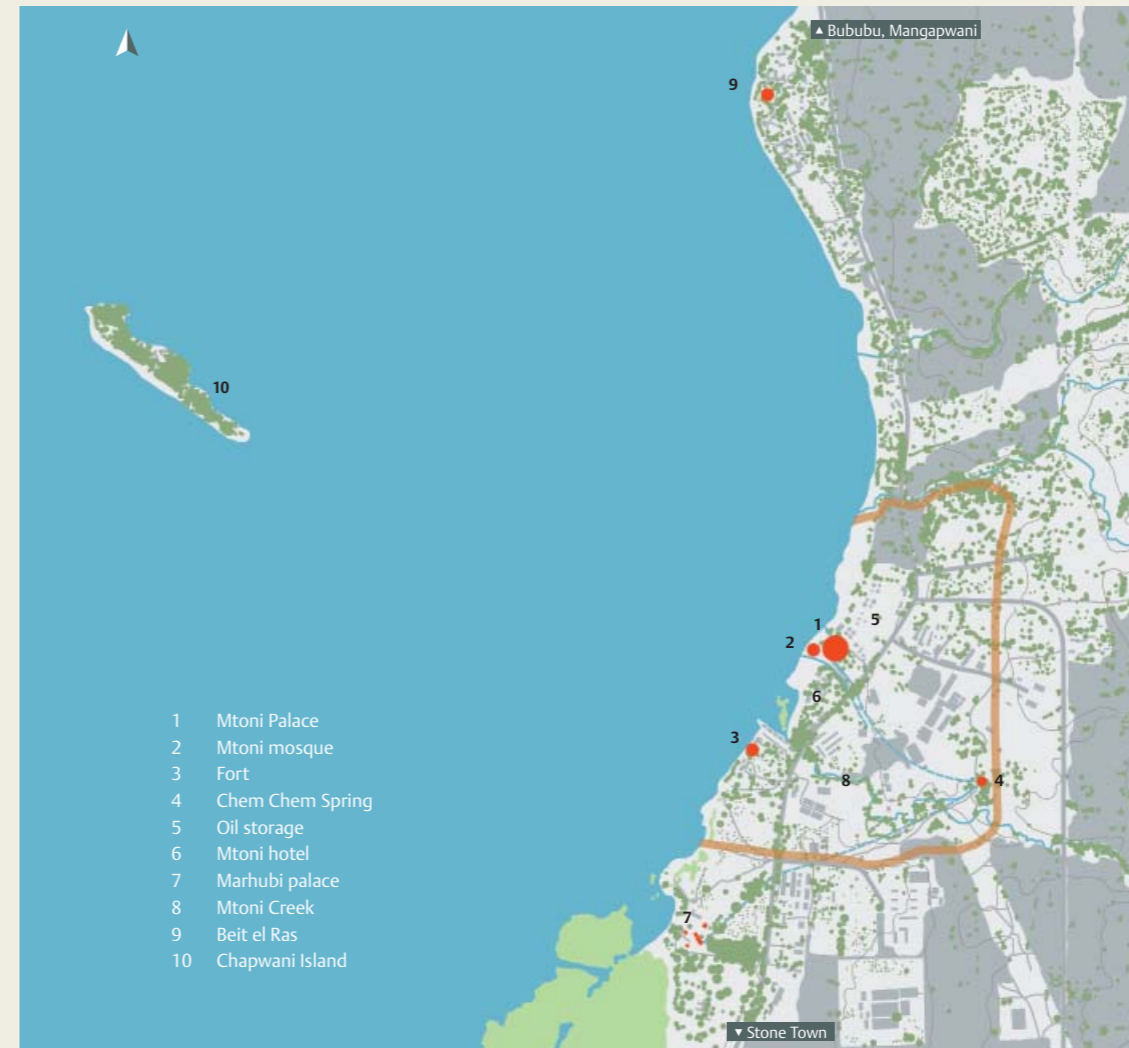


fig. 42 Possible expanse of Mtoni estate in the 1850's see also fig. 36

17 Beit el Sahel - the house on the shore

18 Gereza in Swahili, see glossary

19 Studdy Leigh/Kirkman 1980: 1/285

We may also assume that Seyyid Said ensured large premises around the palace. There is no doubt that the Mtoni Palace grounds were much, much larger than what is left around the buildings today. Princess Salme lived in a palace that was housing a thousand heads, retainers and servants included. She went riding and horse racing took place in the fields within the premises. Wild animals, such as gazelle and ostrich roamed freely through its parks and there is a good chance that there still was some forest found at its fringes. Fruit and spices were grown on Mtoni plantations and we may well believe that livestock animals were kept²⁰.

Close to Mtoni beach, extending much further into the sea than today, there was a shipyard and there is mention of secondary residences of family and retainers elsewhere on the grounds.

All this makes us assume an estate stretching from the creek north of the contemporary bulk oil storage area to somewhere close to the Marhubi palace, and from the sea to the eastern foothills. This latter would mean that the grounds were spreading well beyond the main road to Mangapwani and the former Bububu railroad. The road and railway were only built during Barghash' times, and there was therefore no border on the eastern side of the premises other than the jungle itself. We may well believe that even the complete length of the Chem-Chem aqueduct, measuring 2000 yards²¹, was within the palace confines and maybe the lush Thayef plantations on the slopes as well. The name Thayef comes from the paradisiacal gardens in the hills near to Mecca.

To Mtoni estate also belonged, in a way, the beach and English channel with Chapwani island. We may well believe that Seyyid Said had set a permanent guard on Chapwani, then called French Island and nowadays also Grave Island due to the location of British graves from the First World War. Besides, as stories tell, Seyyid Said brought little dik-dik antelopes to the island for hunting pleasures. Henceforth Mtoni estate at that time can be seen as an autonomous enclave, producing its own food, ships, water and recreation. A 'German or Swiss factory' as Krapf²² or 'Royal Cascine' as Burton²³ described the palace confirms this view of a palace as the centre of a large and autarkic agricultural estate.

20 Salme 1993: 148-149
 21 Noronha 1994: 3
 22 Krapf 1860: 101
 23 Burton 1872: I/31

WATERCOURSES

Emily Ruete stressed the importance of the channelling of the Mtoni stream through the grounds and complex²⁴, water that was not taken from the rivulet, but captured from the Chem-Chem spring in the hills overlooking Mtoni²⁵. With the construction of the aqueduct from Chem-Chem around 1835²⁶ the well in the main court became obsolete and was instead converted into an octagonal basin, with possibly a small fountain. Excavation in 2008 unearthed a broken piece of carved onyx which might well have been part of a basin, similar to the basin at Bayt al Jayzah in Muscat and the fountain in the gardens of the house of Seyyid Humud, nephew of Seyyid Said, where Salme may have spent time later in her youth.



fig. 43 Fountain at Salome's garden

Here we must take into account that the supply of water in arid Oman is a living condition also for the extensive bathing culture and not in the last place for planning the gardens. Even though the water conditions in Zanzibar differ considerably from those in Oman we assume nonetheless that the significance given to water as a living condition here also determined the planning and layout of the water supply.

It is almost certain that the water channel, the 'falay' that was unearthed in 2008 played an important role in the layout and organisation of both the grounds and the palace. From descriptions of landscape, park or garden-like situations in Oman we understand that from a certain point onwards a falay always runs above ground.

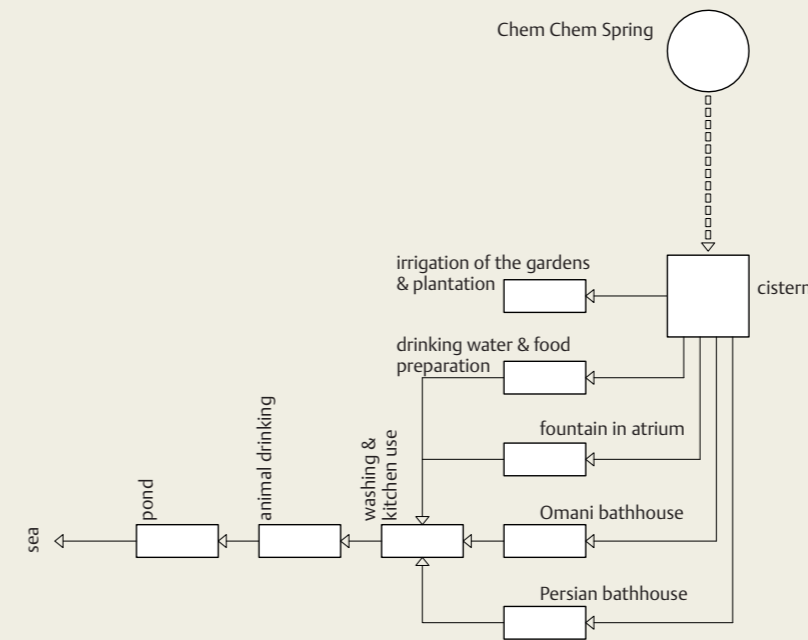


fig. 44 Assumed Afalay system at Mtoni

24 Salme 1993: 145 etc
 25 Chem-chem is the word for spring in Swahili, but being the famousest spring of the island it has retained this name
 26 Gray 1962: 135



fig. 45 Praying room in Jabrin castle, Oman

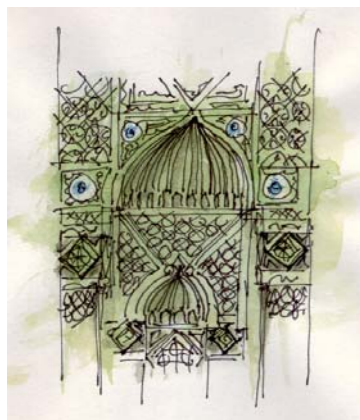


fig. 46 Mirhab at Masjid al Qasr in Oman see also fig. 114

27 Aflay is plural of falay, see glossary

28 Moon/Blanchard 2004

29 Salme 1993: 148

The water has a ceremonial meaning in Omani culture and even though there is no shortage of water in Zanzibar we see that the water supply is formalised likewise in small aflay²⁷ and basins. The water's ceremonial significance has apparently been passed on. The uncovered falay and the supply from the basin to the atrium of Mtoni Palace show that the ceremonial significance of water is maintained.

MTONI MOSQUE

Although sources do mention construction of the mosque at Mtoni by Seyyid Said²⁸ there is no historic evidence to confirm this. Ruete describes multiple locations for praying within the palace, on the *benjile* platform and in the baths, but does not refer to an independent mosque²⁹. It could have been that there was a central praying room somewhere in the main building, as in the Jabrin fort in Oman, but no mention or traces of such use survive.

The mosque is absent on the few surviving drawings and engravings of the palace, which were made during Seyyid Said's time. The fact that the mosque has its own piped water supply to a concrete cistern without trace of an earlier connection to the open water channels from Chem-Chem make us inclined to think that the mosque was not built earlier than at the end of the nineteenth century.

Yet the mosque is of Ibadhi style, and will thus probably have been built by the Al-Busaidi family, who came from northern Oman. The mosque is situated right on the beach, and the ongoing erosion of the beach necessitated protective walls, which were erected in the thirties of the last century. The mosque now almost floats over the ocean, reminding of what is written in the Quran: 'the throne of God rises over the waters'.

The plain external appearance with a flat roof and lacking a minaret or a protruding mihrab is typical for Omani Ibadhi architecture (figs. 62, 112 and 114). The same applies to the interior with its central single circular column and double arch carrying the roof. The original ceiling has disappeared, and the mosque was covered with a simple pitched roof with tin sheets at some point. At a recent restoration a flat concrete slab topped with a low parapet with merlons on the corners has replaced this hipped roof. Decorative wooden beams have been stuck to the soffit of the concrete, as a reference to the traditionally richly painted and decorated timber Omani ceilings.

The interior of the mosque is of total simplicity and balance, with a focus on the mihrab. The mihrab is fully concealed in the heavy coral wall in two superimposed niches with scalloped half domes carried by small round columns with diamond type bases and capitals. The motive of superimposition, scalloped domes and diamond shaped capitals is common in the mosques of northern Oman.

ENTRANCE TO THE PALACE

The main entrance to the palace was from the seaside. It was rare to travel overland as roads were still scarce and not fit for comfortable transport. Instead, Seyyid Said's family, staff and soldiers travelled by ship and would land at Mtoni beach. There is mention of a stone platform or jetty by Studdy Leigh in 1838³⁰ of which no trace survives. Emily Ruete does not refer to a jetty, but instead tells us about how she was carried ashore as child by servants³¹. If a jetty existed, it would probably not have been of sufficient length to ensure mooring at low tide. The tidal difference at Mtoni is considerable, up to four metres, and at low tide the beach extends for several hundreds of metres into the ocean. Instead of a jetty a slipway could have been meant, as at Mtoni premises ships were built close to the beach. Leigh mentions at his first visit the building of a schooner, and a few years later during his second visit, the completion of a brig of Dutch type³².

A tall signalling pole in front of the palace served as communication with the fleet and indicated the presence of the Sultan by waving the red flag. A similar pole was erected at Beit el Sahel, more or less on the same location as the flagpole today (fig. 41). It was a tall mast, braced by stays to poles arranged in a circle.

The approach from the landing to the palace was via a formal, almost ceremonial alley planted with trees as Guillain make us belief. This alley ended next to the entrance porch and main doors. This approach is typical for Mtoni Palace, and indeed a staggered or zigzagged transition is thematic in Islamic building and spatial arrangement in general. This is quite contrary to the Western approach and transition, which is more often than not via straight lines and axes.

THE BENJILE

The entrance porch at Mtoni was part of a most remarkable structure: the *benjile*. This structure consisted of a probably square portico on the ground floor and a belvedere on the first floor with a pitched roof on an octagonal plan. This reconstruction is far from substantial, as sources are contradicting on this enigmatic structure. Ruete writes of a round structure³³, Burton of 'a projecting balcony of dingy planking, with an extinguisher-shaped roof'³⁴. Guillain's engravings are the closest and most detailed proof of the *benjile's* appearance. The *benjile* as understood is not a logical structure, because it is technically far from easy to erect an octagonal roof over a flat square plane, without a sound rainwater run-off and intermediate structural supports such as squinches or the like. The motive of an octagonal spire set in a flat ceiling surface appeared however in contemporary Islamic architecture elsewhere on the continent.

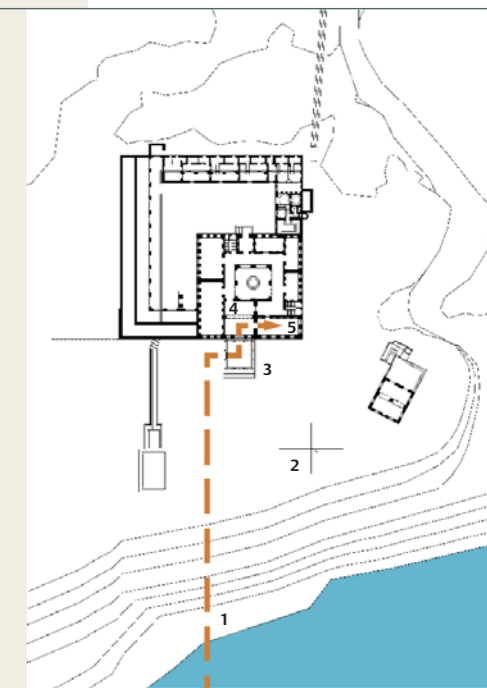


fig. 47 Approach to the Majlis see also figs. 9, 10

- 1 Landing at hightide
- 2 Signalling post
- 3 Porch or baraza
- 4 Hall or debule
- 5 Audience room or majlis or seble

30 Studdy Leigh/Kirkman 1980: I/2

31 Salme 1993: 162

32 Studdy Leigh/Kirkman 1980: I/287 and II/496

33 Salme 1993:156

34 Burton 1872: I/31



fig. 48 Ceiling in Bahia palace, Marrakech, see also figs. 3, 4, 8 and 9

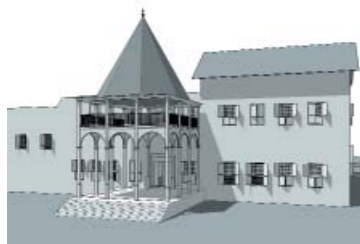


fig. 49 Reconstruction of the benjile

Certainly the *benjile* was erected in wood, and probably completed with carved decoration in the first floor balustrades and fretwork in the arches on the ground floor. According to Ruete, the *benjile* was entirely painted³⁵ and Browne might have meant the *benjile* when he wrote about the ‘richly-coloured cupolas’ at Mtoni Palace³⁶.

The *benjile* is a true riddle, because of its strange structure but also in its exuberance and exposure that contradicts starkly to the Ibadhi sobriety and the overall introvert character of Mtoni Palace. Where does the *benjile* originate? Etymologically, the word *benjile* might be related to the Omani ‘barjil’, ‘badgir’ in Persia and ‘bardiyya’ in the UAE area, meaning wind catcher or wind tower. These barjils were added to Omani houses to cool the building by forcing the breeze through.

The first floor platform in the *benjile* was the ‘prettiest’ and ‘pleasantest’ place to be for Emily Ruete³⁷. It was directly adjoining Seyyid Said’s private rooms and his favourite place to observe his fleet through a telescope, to retire to think and work and finally the place to take coffee with the family.³⁸

There is also mention of the *benjile* ‘facing Meccah’³⁹. This sounds like an enigmatic observation, as the *benjile* was open to three sides, none of them oriented to Mecca. However, there might be reason found for the insertion of the octagon in this remark. The Mecca orientation is added by introduction of the octagon, and thus providing a clear direction for praying, if praying indeed took place on the balcony.

No examples of structures similar to the *benjile* survive, neither in Oman nor in Zanzibar. We are inclined to think that it might have developed out of Indian tent-roofed platforms rather than from Omani or Zanzibari typologies. Indian influence would steadily increase in the course of the nineteenth century, and in Seyyid Said’s days the mercantile contacts with India were already firmly established. In this case, the word *benjile* might even be related to the mixed English-Indian word ‘bungalow’.

At Beit el Sahel a structure similar to the *benjile* was erected, although, judging from surviving images, less independent and less transparent than in Mtoni. Certainly, the *benjile* was a popular part of the palace and out of the *benjile* the loggia’s of Marhubi and Chukwani palaces would develop to eventually become the grandiose gallery around the full perimeter of Beit el Ajaib, the House of Wonders.

INSIDE THE PALACE

The nineteenth century visitors who left us their reports invariably entered the palace through the main door under the porch. The areas in front of and behind the main door were crowded by soldiers and ‘idlers’ as Leigh observed⁴⁰. Together these two areas could be named the *baraza*, the entrance area open to all men. In the hall behind

the main door, the vestibule, or *sebule*, the visitors were asked to leave their shoes or sandals before proceeding into the audience hall, the *majlis*⁴¹.

From the *sebule*, the arch with the largest span to be found in the palace opens to the central court. This is peculiar, as the enormous arch suggests total openness from the *sebule* to the private central court. We found trace of masonry blocking the arches of the courtyard to stop a straight view. Such a direct view would be contradictory to the zigzagged approach to the palace (figs. 10-12).

The audience room, the *majlis*, is the room that has received most attention in the historical reports on Mtoni Palace. No wonder, as visitors would be received and entertained here by Seyyid Said, and not allowed further access into the palace (figs. 13-14 and 79-81).

A lot less is known about the rest of the palace rooms. On the ground floor we could assume servants’ areas, kitchen, treasury and other storerooms arranged around the arcade encompassing the central courtyard or atrium. These rooms were much less attractive for residential use than first floor rooms because of reduced privacy and lack of cross ventilation. The open arcade opened onto the central courtyard of which the water basin or fountain formed the centre (figs. 28-31).

The two surviving staircases gave access to the first floor gallery from where the apartments of Seyyid Said and his first wife Azze bint Sef were located. From their apartments the belvedere in the *benjile* was accessed. The first floor rooms at Beit el Sahel, now the Palace Museum, give an idea of the atmosphere that reigned in Seyyid Said’s and Azze’s apartments, although we may assume a greater austerity.

Of the northern wing of the palace, probably constructed around the arrival of Seyyid Said in Zanzibar, little remains. The ruins were cleared in 1916 to make room for the extension of the oil storage, and only the north-western and north-eastern walls are, in part, original. The south-eastern wall and gables were added in 1916, so were the columns and trusses to carry a vast monopitch roof, which in turn has disappeared since (figs. 84-86).

Next to the excavated foundations and watercourse, which ran parallel to the northern wing through a courtyard, there is little historical material that may help us to make a reconstruction of this part of the palace. The northern wing probably housed the sarari, the secondary wives, with their children, amongst whom Princess Salme with her mother. The only surviving historical picture shows us the northern wing in quite deplorable state. The northern wing was a flat-roofed rather narrow L-shaped double storied building with a decorated parapet. The building comprised seven narrow rooms, along a gallery on the ground floor, probably repeated on the upper floor.



fig. 50 Chukwani palace



fig. 51 Pavilion at Beit el Sahel in the late nineteenth century

35 Salme 1993: 156
 36 Browne 1846: 338
 37 Salme 1993: 156
 38 Krapf 1860: 122-3; Salme 1993: 156
 39 Noronha 1994: 4
 40 Studdy Leigh/Kirkman 1980: I/287

41 Salme 1993: 292-294



fig. 52 Bathing room at Tanuf in Oman

The large L-shaped courtyard between the main building, the northern wing and the baths' complex had a secondary zigzagged entrance to the outside garden (figs. 83, 86, 87, 90 and 122).

The staircase to the first floor was probably freestanding and made of timber. We tend to think that it was located at the north-western end of the courtyard, where a foundation was found. It might well have been these stairs that aroused young Princess Salme's fears due to its steepness and rickety handrails⁴². Emily Ruete is after all not positive about the courtyard and the buildings around it. She felt oppressed by the labyrinth-like layout and thought the overall appearance of the palace 'repellent rather than attractive'⁴³.

The open gallery on the first floor of the northern wing may well have served as the classroom where Princess Salme received her education⁴⁴.

It is doubtful whether the main channel, as we have excavated in 2008, was entirely open to the sky. The find of a tract of channel with a pebble floor might suggest that only this area was open, and that the beautifully polished dark grey pebbles, which originated from Oman, have created a special effect to the water rippling over.

On Guillain's engravings the north-western palace facade extends well beyond the extreme corner of the northern wing (figs. 9 and 83). This is confirmed by the above mentioned photograph showing a ruined tower-like structure and foundations found during the 2008 excavations. There is also mention of two stories in the report on the conversion of the palace into an oil godown in 1914-1916⁴⁵, perhaps, this area was referred to.

It is possible that the kitchen area was situated somewhere around the northern corner of the complex. According to Ruete⁴⁶ most cooking and preparations were done in the open, possibly in the large courtyard, where the water channel might have been used for cooking and washing. Perhaps, the tall structure on the old photograph indicates a smoke stack of a bakery where the pastries were prepared that were served to captain Guillain by Seyyid Said⁴⁷.

THE BATHS

Of all the buildings of the complex the baths have been best preserved. The baths consisted of a row of Omani type cold water bathhouses and a 'Turkish' bathhouse. The latter was for the sole use of Seyyid Said and his first wife Azze.

Although called Turkish baths, it is more adequate to name them Persian baths. The bathing ritual is certainly influenced by central Asian, or Turkish fashion, but distinct

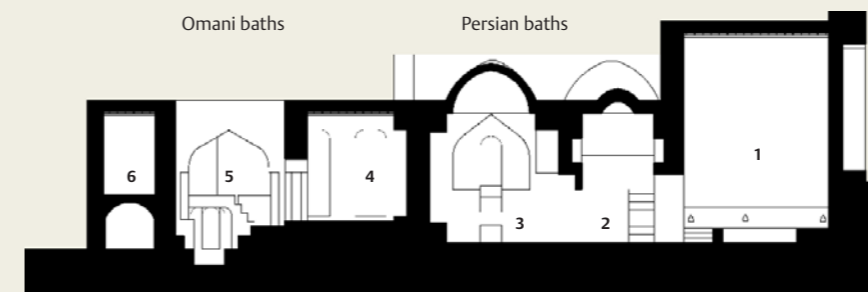


fig. 53 Persian baths

- 1 Praying room, cold baths
- 2 Warm room with steps to latrines
- 3 Ante room with steps to steam tub
- 4 Praying room
- 5 Cold baths
- 6 Latrines

in combining this with classical, Roman systems⁴⁸. Persian influences were evident in the baths' complexes that Seyyid Said had built by a Persian architect for his Persian consorts in Kidichi and Kizimbani (figs. 92 and 97). Possibly, the same architect was consulted on the design and erection of the Persian bathhouse at Mtoni.

Azze and Seyyid Said would enter their bathhouse from a cold room with a sunken basin from where they proceeded to the warm and hot rooms, which were heated by a separate boiler room. The Hamamni baths in Stone Town, built during Barghash' times are of similar layout.

The Persian baths at Mtoni are beautifully preserved (figs. 91 and 93). All domes over the individual rooms are still in situ and stand proof of the excellent workmanship of hundred and eighty years ago. The cupolas were 'richly-coloured' according to the nineteenth century American whaler Browne⁴⁹, but no trace thereof remains, and he might have confused the cupolas with the *benjile* roof.

The transition from the blazing Zanzibar sky to the mysterious darkness inside, subtly lit by the openings in the domes overhead, is a dazzling experience.

The row of cold baths was meant for the households of the sarari, who spent a large part of the day in these rooms to work, relax, pray, sleep and even eat and drink according to Ruete⁵⁰. Each of the four or five bathhouses contained at least two basins, which make up the 'dozen or so' basins mentioned by Ruete. The basins, in fact, are sectioned tracts of the main channel that run continuously underneath the complex. Each bathhouse consists of an entrance room, an atrium open to the air with the baths which are separated by steps leading to the raised back rooms housing ablution rooms and latrines. These latrines were emptied through hatches at the rear of the complex.

We call these bathhouses 'Omani' baths as similar bathhouses are found in the Omani palaces, and this type, apart from Mtoni, is only found at Marhubi palace on Zanzibar.

48 RMIT 2008: 81

49 Browne 1846: 338

50 Salme 1993: 148

42 Salme 1993: 150

43 Salme 1993: 145,174-176

44 Salme 1993: 209

45 Two plans for the extension of the 'Oil Godown at Mtoni' by the Public Work Department, extension PWD from 1916 are kept by the ZNZ Archives

46 Salme 1993: 156

47 Guillain 1856: 33

fig. 54 Salome's garden at Bububu



fig. 55 Mango Carré at Marhubi



fig. 56 Garden at El Badi palace, Marrakech

THE GARDENS

Behind the northern wing and the baths' complex we believe the 'large courtyard' of Princess Salme was situated⁵¹. We assume that it was an enclosed garden that was planted with tall citrus trees with animals roaming freely around. The preserved gardens at Seyyid Humud's house, now commonly referred to as 'Salome's Garden' remind us of the atmosphere that may have reigned here.

Of the original gardens nothing remains. The only fact that can be established with any certainty is that at the prime of Sultan Seyyid Said's reign the surrounding gardens surely must have been a place of exceptional beauty. All the visitors from the nineteenth century are impressed by the lushness of the gardens around Mtoni.

Salome's gardens of Bububu are probably the most reliable reference for the layout and planting of Mtoni's gardens. These gardens are divided into walled areas, which are linked with double porches in a zigzag configuration (fig. 121). Each walled garden is as a small world, a room on its own with a specific atmosphere. There is a geometric garden with a fountain in the centre, a small sugar cane plantation with a juice processing mill, a lawn, and everywhere lush growth of palm trees, creepers, spices and flowers that provide an overwhelming atmosphere of colour and fragrance.

Another reference is the layout of the grounds of the adjacent Marhubi palace. At Marhubi, the mango, coconut and tamarind trees are planted in a sequence of geometric patterns and loosely landscaped scenic groups. Between these groups are

open grassy fields with elevated *aflay*, basins and walkways, all arranged in walled sections.

What did Salme and her contemporaries otherwise remark about the gardens? Not much other than that the gardens were more impressive than the palace building itself⁵². Salme mentions briefly that the garden was a place where people and animals lived together in harmony, and that from windows in the women's quarters she could climb into one of the citrus trees planted in a row 'to escape' from the oppressive palace.

DOWNFALL

The importance of the town palace and its dependencies might have increased at the expense of Mtoni Palace due to the ever growing family, the concentration of power and the boom of Stone Town during the later years of Seyyid Said's reign. Later in his life, Seyyid Said started to build his ideal country palace on a gorgeous location north of Mtoni, Beit el Ras, the House at the Cape (figs. 36 and 42). Judging the monumentality of the remaining entrance porch of Beit el Ras, this palace was to become a far more impressive structure than Beit el Mtoni. However Seyyid Said overstretched himself, as Beit el Ras was never completed and was abandoned after Seyyid Said's death. This story sounds strangely familiar to the fate of the largest sultans' palace ever built in East Africa; al-Hasan bin Sulaiman's Husuni Kubwa complex on Kilwa dating from the early fourteenth century.

At Seyyid Said's death in 1856 Mtoni Palace lost its importance, and fell into ruin quickly as an engraving of this period shows us. The roofs are caving in and the sea reaches almost to the doorstep of the palace, which is blocked by a heap of rubble.

Seyyid Said's successor and son Majid bin Said had set up his throne in Stone Town and would never reside at Mtoni. Seyyid Said's daughter Zuwena inherited the palace and stayed behind with the ageing retainers of the former sultans' court. It is as if the palace would die with the parting of the last retainer, who had kept the fire burning. This is tradition at many African courts, and part cause for the fact that so few of African palaces have survived. At Ruete's visit in 1885, a few old people still lived in the then partly ruined building, but by the last decade of the nineteenth century the palace was completely deserted⁵³.

A rumour survives that the palace was vacated after a fire in 1890⁵⁴ but we have not found any evidence of such an event. Perhaps, confusion has arisen on the gutting of Marhubi palace in the 1890's. Maybe, again, the fire is confused with an assumed fire in the oil godown meanwhile erected on the palace premises during the First World War.



fig. 57 Beit el Ras (presumed)

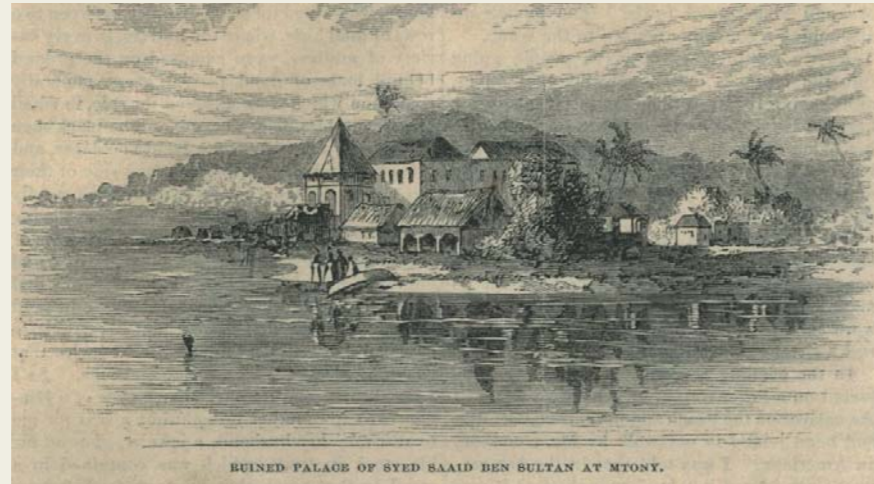
51 Salme 1993: 145

52 Salme 1993: 145,148-149

53 Salme 1993: 394

54 Moon/Blanchard 2004: 3 and Noronha 1994: 2

fig. 58 Mtoni Palace in ruins
(ca. 1860)



Barghash, who succeeded Majid in 1870, was responsible for the construction of a handful of new palaces amongst which Chukwani, Beit el Ajaib and Marhubi. Marhubi was built in the direct vicinity of Mtoni Palace, on the grounds that possibly partly belonged to Mtoni and were already planted in Seyyid Said's time and partly belonged to the rivalling Marhubi family. Marhubi palace water supply was alimeted through a fork off the Chem-Chem aqueduct, which is still standing for a considerable stretch. At a later date, the administration rerouted Chem-Chem aqueduct to feed the town water supply in the course of the sanitation of Stone Town that was initiated by John Kirk and completed by Gerald Portal in the nineties of the nineteenth century.

Of Saleh's clove plantations at Mtoni nothing remains. Probably clove growing was more successful on the fertile higher grounds than on the sandy coastal flats, and the 1860 plunge in the world clove prices could have given the final blow to the plantations at Mtoni. Clove trees were not mentioned in the reports by Burton and Guillain, nor by Ruete. Instead citrus, mango and coconut are quoted, and the oldest surviving trees on both Mtoni and Marhubi grounds are mango and tamarind.

From the later years of the nineteenth century the extensive Mtoni grounds were clipped. First by the establishment of the walled Marhubi premises on the southern side, later by the construction of the main road from Stone Town to Mangapwani on the eastern side and serious erosion by the sea on the western side and finally from 1914 onwards by the establishment of the fuel storage depot on the northern side. The strategic location of Mtoni Palace became once more important in the wake of the First World War. The main building was conveniently converted by the British Administration into an oil-barrel godown by stripping off the first floor, walling up

door and window openings and erecting a tin roof over the full perimeter inclusive of the central court. In addition to this, in 1916, the northern wing was partly pulled down and reroofed as extension to the stores. North of the palace complex a new storage building was erected in the same years. A building that could well have been constructed with recuperated stones from the demolished palace wing. Such was the state in which Major Pearce found the once famous palace on his Sunday afternoon trip in February 1919.

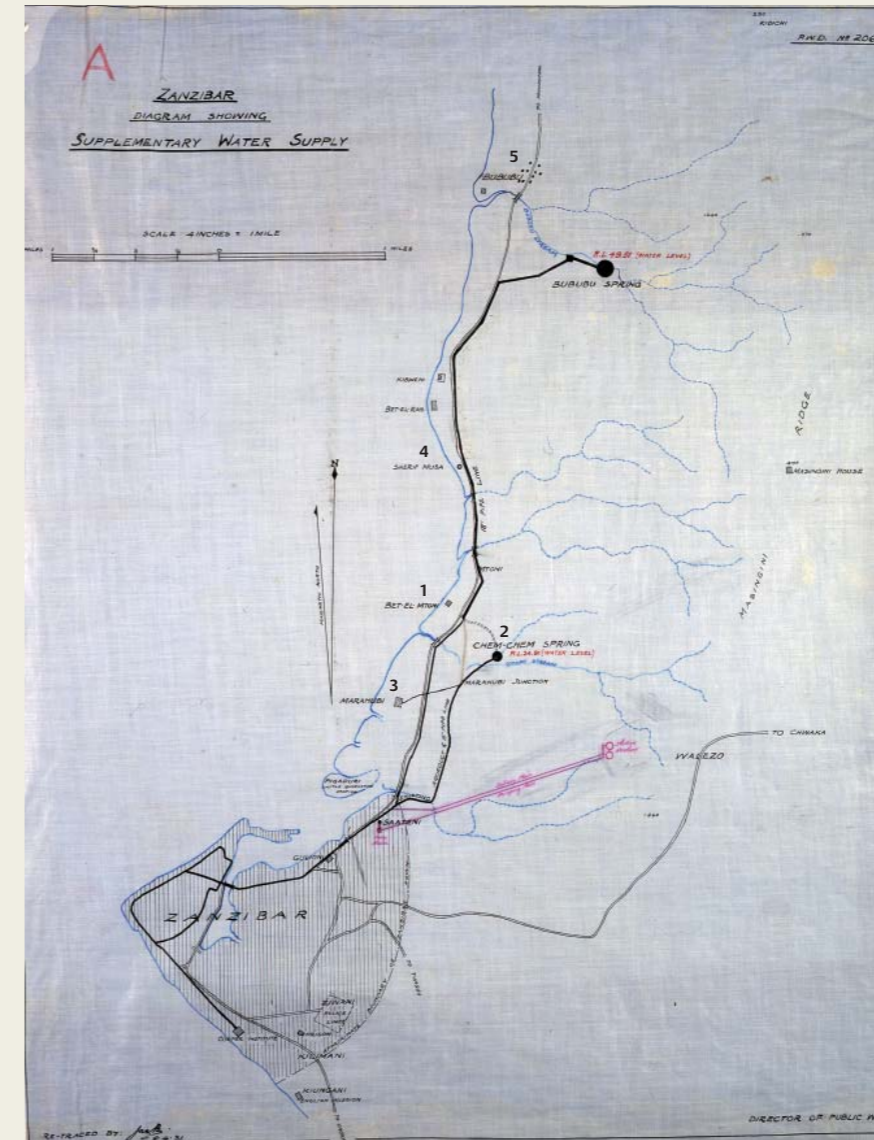


fig. 59 Zanzibar Stone Town water supply scheme (ca. 1900)

- 1 Beit el Mtoni
- 2 Chem Chem Spring
- 3 Marhubi palace
- 4 Beit el Ras
- 5 Salome's Garden