

Oman
the land of Sindbad the sailor

Pisa – Museo di San Matteo
6 June – 7 July 2012



OFFICE OF THE ADVISER TO HIS MAJESTY
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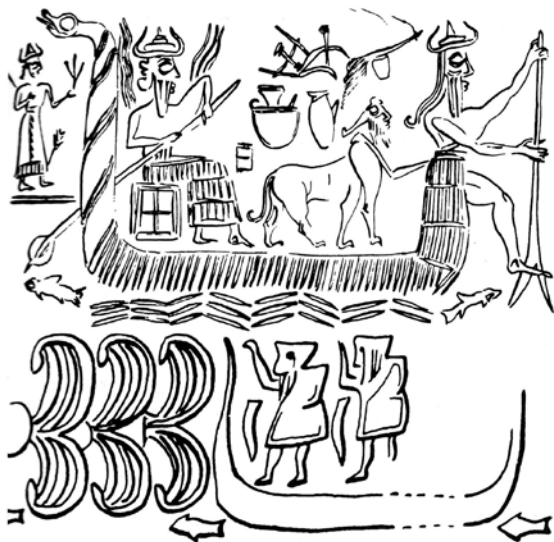
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Introduction

Oman is still a relatively unknown country to most people in the West. The exhibition *Oman, the Land of Sindbad the Sailor*, which will be on display to the public from June 6th to July 7th 2012 at the Museo Nazionale di San Matteo (Pisa, Italy) will shed light on aspects of the history and culture of Oman that will strike the imagination and stimulate the interest of visitors.

For the exhibition we have sought to draw connections between this distant, exotic land and more familiar things. It is well known, for example, that copper was an important raw material used in the fusion of bronze beginning in the 4th and 3rd millennia BC, but few are aware

that the land of Oman, referred to in Mesopotamian sources as Magan, was the principle source of copper in this long-ago period.

Most of us are familiar with the perfume of incense and some will no doubt be aware that in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome incense had a mythic connotation and was regarded as "the food of the gods." But very few know of the tree that produces this precious resin, and the fact that the highest quality of incense has always and still does come from the southern region of Oman.

While we all know that the young Marco Polo travelled to China, few realize that his ship passed along the coast of Dhofar and that he described the port and the city of Al Baleed in *Il Milione*.

We have chosen, as the title of the exhibition suggests, to concentrate on one important aspect of the history of Oman: how closely the fortunes and the destiny of the country were linked to the sea and to the courage of its sailors (among whom the restless Sindbad from *A Thousand and One Nights* is the best known imaginary representative). For this people going to sea had many consequences. In the first place, they had to perfect their sailing and navigational techniques. Crossing the Indian Ocean by night with only the stars to guide one required the use of instruments that were at first quite rudimentary (beginning with the hand, and then a cord with knots tied at fixed intervals), but which eventually developed into sophisticated and accurate instruments such as the sextant and the astrolabe.

The ships crossing these seas brought back not only goods, but also new ideas from different cultures. The sea offered a bridge to the rest of the world. Opening up to the unknown signified a genuine tolerance toward peoples and cultures different from one's own. The Omanis have been seafarers since the dawn of history. They had already established ties with India during the Magan period; they were the first to take advantage of the monsoon winds to navigate the open sea from the coast of Arabia to the southern extremity of India; they eventually arrived as far as China; and Oman was the first Arab country to send an ambassador to the United States.

But Oman is not only the sea. The heart of the country, as the Omanis like to say, is the desert.

To live in the desert or to cross its vast expanses, the nomad – like the mariner at sea – had to combine courage with highly developed skills and a profound knowledge of his environment.

The technique of constructing subterranean canals or *falaj*, which spread from Oman to Iran and then the Mediterranean, provides proof of the engineering skills of the ancient inhabitants of Oman. However, like all of mankind's most important discoveries, this one was not based on immediately obvious, common sense notions. The construction of the *falaj* did not begin at the source, but at the other end and, excavating underground following the water-bearing stratum, made its way back to the fountainhead – the “mother of the *falaj*” as it was so

suggestively termed. This allowed engineers to take advantage of the force of the water to fill deep wells from which the skilfully laid-out system of canals could carry water to the fields from the highlands to the coast.

We also believe that visitors will be interested to see what the ancient land of Sindbad looks like today.

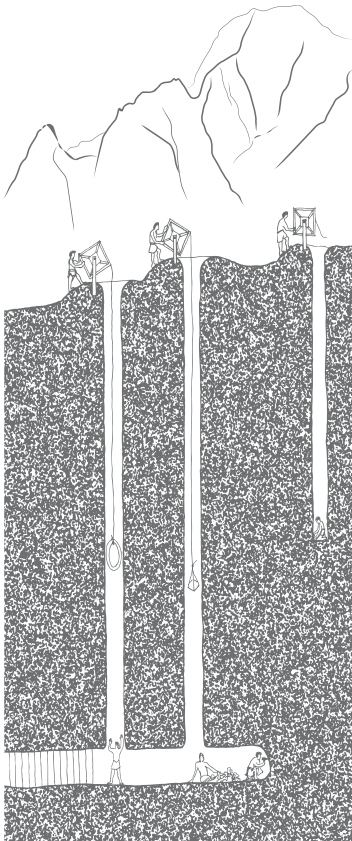
In the space of just four decades, Sultan Qabus Bin Said has transformed the backward kingdom which he inherited when he acceded to the throne into a modern country with roads, hospitals and a productive sector that are in the avant-garde. The history of Oman, its open attitude to the outside world together with its pride in its ancient traditions, has certainly helped the Sultan in his arduous task.

The exhibition, which was realized by the architect Antonio Giammarusti, represents just one of the many initiatives stemming from the on-going, fruitful collaboration between the University of Pisa and Oman. Credit for the idea for the exhibition and its sequence of displays must go first and foremost to Abdulaziz Al-Rowas, Adviser of the Sultan for Cultural Affairs. Without his generous support, both conceptual and financial, this exhibition could never have been realized.

In addition, I would like to express my profound appreciation to all of the young scholars who have for years collaborated with me in Pisa in my research on ancient Oman. Without them, none of this would have been possible.

Alessandra Avanzini

The beginning of history



King Solomon and the invention of the *aflaaj*

Legend has it that King Solomon, while on one of his journeys on his flying carpet, landed on the Salut plain in the interior of Oman. There he found the castle of Salut had no inhabitants apart from an eagle. According to the legend, the Jinn then dug *aflaaj* (water channels) from the mountains on Solomon's orders.

The truth is that these *aflaaj* were dug out by Omanis. They are an amazing piece of engineering.

These *aflaaj* were dug beneath the ground to take advantage of the water-bearing stratum, and they demonstrate the ability of the ancient inhabitants of Oman to plan and execute complex engineering projects.

The *aflaaj* enabled fresh water to be brought from the mountains to the villages. It was then distributed among the inhabitants by means of a complicated system of channels controlled by sluice gates and barriers, which were regulated according to the time of day (sunrise and sunset) and the position of the stars.

The *falaj*

The construction of every *falaj* began with the *basir* who decided, based on his own intuition combined with an intimate knowledge of the territory, where to dig the first well. Once the necessary depth had been ascertained, generally between 10 and 20 meters, work continued with the digging of a series of vertical shafts at varying distances depending on the topography of the land. These shafts served to supply air to the men working underground and to allow the removal of debris produced by the excavation. Once the problem of the air supply was resolved, the project of digging horizontal tunnels from the points of delivery back to the wellspring could begin.

Two important engineering considerations had to be kept in mind during this process; the slope of the tunnels required to ensure the unimpeded flow of water and

the cementing of their walls to make them watertight and resistant to landslides. Once the fountainhead—the *umm falaj* (mother of the *falaj*)—had been reached, water could be channelled from it into the subterranean canal. In this way the process of bringing water to inhabited areas and distributing it in accordance with precisely defined rules began. The purest water, which was drawn off at points close to the source, flowed into basins and cisterns in the villages for use as drinking water. The system of *falaj* sometimes also supplied the local fortresses and often passed alongside the mosques. Only after these points of human habitation and congregation were supplied was water then brought to the fields, where it was distributed under the strict control of a ‘guardian of the waters’ in order to ensure that each farmer received his fair share. During the day the guardian measured the passage of time based on the meridian, while at night he used the movement of the stars.





The land of Magan

In Sumerian and Akkadian sources from the 3rd millennium BC, Oman is referred to as the land of Magan (present-day Oman and United Arab Emirates). It owed its strategic importance and economic prosperity to the copper mines located in the northern part of the country.

From there the copper, transformed into ingots, was exported to Mesopotamia, Dilmun (present-day Bahrain), as well as the Indus Valley.

The images on carved seals and evidence from excavations of the site of Ras al-Jinz show us how merchant ships were built during the 3rd millennium BC.



The hull was made of tightly bound bundles of marsh cane and reed mats were affixed to it. Only a few parts, such as the mast and sections of the rudder, were made of wood. The hull was waterproofed inside and out with bitumen; hence these craft were known as “the black ships of Magan”.

Ras al-Jinz

In the 3rd millennium BC Ras al-Jinz, situated on the north-eastern coast of Oman, was little more than a village built of stone and mud-bricks. Its inhabitants seem to have been for the most part fishermen, although excavations have brought to light evidence of a wide range of activities – from fish processing to rope-making, boat building and the fashioning of modest ornaments from seashells – all of which suggest a certain level of social and economic development.

The discovery of objects produced in Mesopotamia, the coast of Iran, the Indus Valley, and southern Arabia confirm that Ras al-Jinz was involved in international trade during that period.



The Bat site

Located in the northern part of Oman, Bat was one of the first sites in the Sultanate of Oman to be systematically excavated; this was carried out in the 1970s by a Danish archaeological expedition. The settlement includes a large necropolis and several imposing circular towers that were built in the Bronze Age.

The necropolis dates from at least the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. It was added to in successive periods, and the changing typology of the tombs allows to follow the evolution of local burial practices, which began with individual tombs of modest dimensions and culminated in large structures, some comprising several chambers, with an external facing of squared blocks of white calcareous stone.

The 'beehive tomb', an example of which is shown here, marked an intermediate point in the development of

this culture's funeral architecture. Such tombs typically assumed the form of truncated cones, sometimes built up from a series of concentric walls. The entrance was generally trapezoidal in form, and might be completely blocked off after the burial ceremony by the completion of an outermost encircling wall.



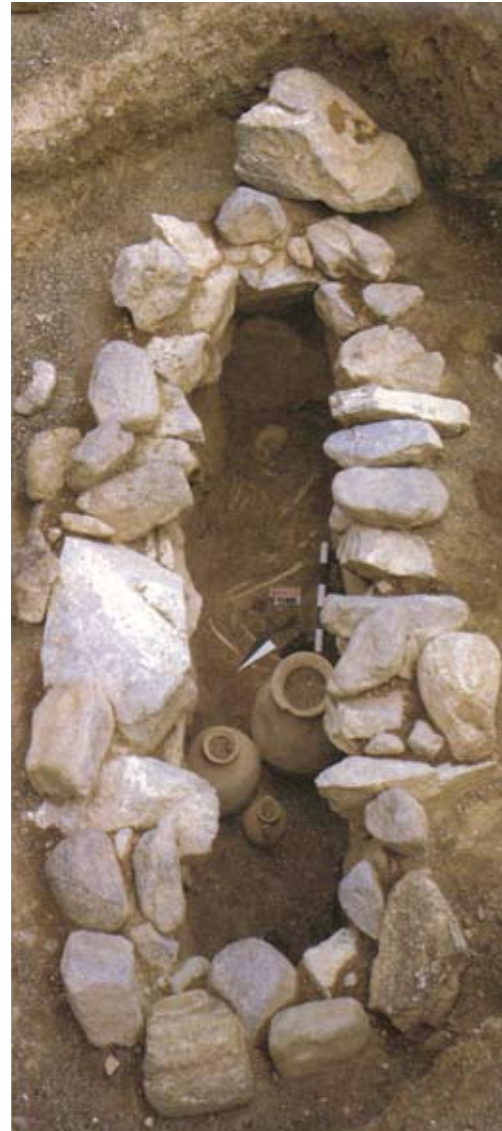
Samad al-Shan

Situated not far from al-Maysar, in the eastern region of Oman – in an area where important mines have been discovered dating from the 3rd millennium BC –, the site of Samad al-Shan lends its name to a specific civilization which flourished from about 300 BC to 1000 AD, and thereafter the arrival of Islam in Oman.

The Samad al-Shan culture was characterized by a type of pottery that was quite new in terms of its decoration and its shape, and by the widespread use of iron for weapons such as swords, daggers and arrowheads.

Another peculiarity of this civilization was the way in which the dead were buried. A grave lined with pebbles or roughly hewn stones was prepared into which the body was laid arranged in a fetal position.

It is interesting to note the differences in the way men and women were buried; they were often positioned on their opposite sides (right and left), with different grave goods.



Salut. Two millennia of history, as seen through the work of the Italian Mission To Oman

The excavations at the site of Salut were launched in 2004 with the intention of investigating various Iron Age remains already identified in the 1970s by a team of archaeologists from the University of Harvard. Initial analyses of the pottery that had been brought to light in fact suggested that the hill of Salut had been occupied in two successive periods, the first during the course of the Iron Age (circa 1st millennium BC) and the second in the Islamic period (9th to 10th centuries AD).

Up until 2010 research focused on defining the planimetry of the site, its evolution, and the material associated with it in the Iron Age. Indeed, Salut represents a site of exceptional importance with regard to the history of ancient southeast Arabia due to its noteworthy architectural remains and the wealth of stratigraphic evidence that it offers. Significant results have been obtained, in particular from a comparison of the pottery found at different archaeological levels in stratigraphic positions that have been identified with certainty through radiocarbon dating. During the course of various excavations these have consistently indicated the great antiquity of the site, which can be placed as early as the 14th century BC, thus opening up a debate on the chronology of the area and a reassessment of the hitherto accepted sequence, especially with regard to central Oman.

With a view to broadening the study and understanding of the territory around Salut, including its diachronic evolution, in recent years IMTO has launched several projects that are being conducted in parallel with the excavation of the site.

Great attention is being focused on the Early and Middle Bronze Ages. Regarding the former (end of the 3rd millennium), much has emerged from the excavation of an impressive circular tower (about 22 metres in diameter) constructed out of large blocks of rough-hewn stone, rising from the plain to the west of the site. Perhaps even more significant than the edifice itself is the broad moat (at least 9 metres wide) surrounding it, which presumably formed part of the settlement's irrigation system. Other auxiliary structures around the tower are gradually being uncovered and await in-depth study in future excavations.

Furthermore, evidence of human settlement in the 3rd millennium has been found on the summit of the hill of Salut, in the form of two circular tombs that were eventually razed to the ground (although they were probably already in a ruined state) in order to make way for the building of other structures during the Iron Age.

Similar tombs can be found on the crests of the hills surrounding the site and the archaeological mission decided to explore various locations on the mountain



directly facing Salut. These excavations have yielded an unexpected wealth of data pertaining to the Middle Bronze Age (first half of the 2nd millennium BC). For example, most of these tombs had already been pillaged by robbers in antiquity. The uncovered tombs belong to various periods extending from the Early Bronze Age to the middle Bronze Age, and many of them remained in use until the Iron Age.

Our decision regarding which sites to explore has been rewarded with the discovery of what is to date an *unicum* in archaeological studies of southeast Arabia – a small temple consisting of a platform made out of a conglomerate of mortar on which stood six columns arranged in two rows. The scanty remains found with the structure allow us to date it to the Iron Age, a hypothesis that is supported by the site on which it was constructed, directly above the ruins of a handful of dismantled tombs from the 2nd millennium BC.

Other excavations have uncovered an abundance of material, consisting in large part, not surprisingly, of pottery. Metal objects have also been unearthed, albeit not in large quantities, and for the time being none have been found that date to as early as the Bronze Age. In contrast, in every stratum vessels made of stone have been unearthed, whose form and decoration vary with the period in which they were produced.

Among the artifacts that have been brought to light, some seals found during the excavation of the Bronze

Age tower deserve particular mention. In addition to two cylinder seals datable to the Iron Age (when the tower was re-occupied), there is a rare seal that appears to be of Indian origin, which we in fact hypothesize was directly imported from India based on its workmanship and iconography, as well as the presence of an inscription written in the Harappa language. This seal confirms the existence, as early as the end of the 3rd millennium BC, of commercial ties linking the coast of Oman with the Indian valley and extending as far as the central regions of Arabia via trade routes over land.

Serpents

A distinct class of objects found in Salut consists of serpents fashioned out of copper or bronze, either in the round or from flattened strips of metal.

The serpent motif can also be found on the pottery of Salut; for example, a cord might be used to make an impression representing the body of the reptile in the wet clay. In addition, incense burners with handles in the shape of serpents have been excavated.

Objects decorated with serpent motifs have been found at other Iron Age sites in the Emirates, suggesting that the snake represented a religious motif that was common to the entire region.

Catalogue



1.

Serpent made from a flattened strip of bronze with a small triangular head and tapering tail.
(l. 16.9 cm; w. 1.3 cm, th. 0.5 cm)



2.

Bronze serpent with a trilobate head and round, slightly protuberant eyes. The sinuous body is decorated along its length with a motif of circular elements realized in relief.
(l. 23 cm; w. 5.5 cm, th. 1.5 cm)



3.

Serpent with a raised, triangular head and tapering tail made from a thin folded sheet of bronze.
(l. 19.8 cm; w. 1.0 cm, th. 0.3 cm)



4.

Fragment of pottery decorated with a serpent in appliqué, its body ornamented with a motif of circles impressed into the clay.
(l. 18 cm; w. 9 cm)



5.

Fragment of pottery with a serpent in appliqué. Its body is decorated with a series of transverse lines pressed into the clay.
(l. 13.5 cm; w. 8 cm)



Seals

During the excavation of the Bronze Age tower located outside the city walls of Salut three carved seals were unearthed, a highly significant find because this category of artifact is known but certainly not abundant in the area.

The oldest of the three is a quadrangular stamp seal dating to the end of the third millennium BC and recognizable based on its typology as having been imported from the Indus Valley. The second and third are instead cylinder seals dating to the Iron Age. Their form and style are quite similar and were clearly derived from Mesopotamian or Near Eastern models, but the figurative motifs and quality of execution suggest that they were produced by local artisans.

The three other objects on display are seal pendants that can also be dated to the Iron Age.



Catalogue



1. Quadrangular stamp seal with the image of a standing bull facing to the right and a rectangular element behind it that may represent an altar or a manger. Next to the image are signs traceable to the scripts of the Indus Valley. The quality of the intaglio work and a comparison with similar seals suggest that this exemplar was imported from the Indus Valley.
(Tower; l. 2.5 cm; w. 2.5 cm; th. 0.5 cm)



2.

Cylinder seal in dark gray stone, perforated. The carved decoration consists of a row of five men holding hands that, when rolled, create a continual motif punctuated at intervals with astral symbols, including a solar disc.

(Tower; diam. 1.3 cm; h. 2.3 cm)



3.

Cylinder seal in dark green stone with a perforation, depicting a horned animal standing between two stylized trees, with a symbol of the sun at its feet and three circles in the upper part of the scene.

(Tower; diam. 1.2 cm; h. 2.3 cm)



4.

Seal pendant carved out of dark gray stone in the shape of an irregular pyramid. The principal face is incised with an astral motif composed of eight triangles and a circle.

(l. 3 cm; w. 2.2 cm; th. 0.7 cm)



5.

Seal pendant of dark gray stone carved in the shape of a flattened teardrop and incised on both sides with lines in a radial pattern with a scattering of dots.

(l. 3 cm; w. 2.2 cm; th. 0.7 cm)



6.

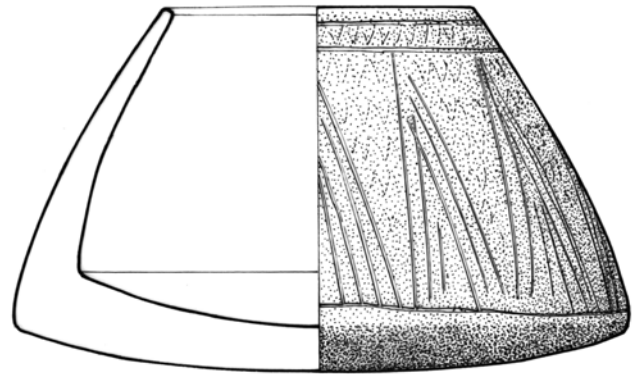
Rectangular seal pendant in dark gray stone with rounded corners and a perforation along one of its longer sides. One face has been decorated with a pattern of incised lines, while the other has a line running down its center with a series of V-shaped elements on either side.

(l. 1.9 cm; w. 1.6 cm; th. 0.7 cm)

Metal or stone objects

Not only household utensils, but also vessels and ritual objects (such as the serpents) were realized in bronze. Cups, small bowls, and vases, the latter often with handles, were being produced during the Bronze Age all over the peninsula of Oman, albeit not in large numbers. A more unusual object is the ladle, which appears to have been used for ceremonial purposes.

Another popular material was soft stone (steatite, chlorite or calcite) from which bowls in the shape of 'beehives' or truncated cones, and compartmented boxes with lids were made. Detailed study has revealed a specific local typology whose form and decoration evolved over a period of many centuries, beginning in the early Bronze Age and continuing until the end of the 1st millennium BC.



Catalogue



1.
Bronze ladle unearthed together with another smaller exemplar and a serpent (see no. 3). The spoons clearly formed a pair that were used during ritual banquets. The handle bears some graffiti scratched on its surface.
(l. 17.5 cm; cup diam. 6 cm)



2.
Beaked bronze bowl with a flat base.
(diam. 7.4 cm; th. 0.3 cm)



3.
Bowl made of light gray stone. Its rim is decorated with a motif of oblique lines incised into the stone.
(diam. 10.5 cm; h. 6 cm)



4.
Globe-shaped container made of light gray stone with a flat base, four small vertical handles that allowed it to be suspended, and a decorative band consisting of a simple circle-dot motif.
(diam. 6.1 cm; th. 0.4 cm)



5.
Small vase made of light gray stone in the form of a truncated cone with a convex base. Its decoration consists of a narrow band incised with a saw-tooth pattern running beneath the rim, and a broader band around the body of the vase consisting of a saw-toothed motif alternating with triangles.
(diam. 5.9 cm; h. 7.2 cm; th. 0.5 cm)



6.
Lid made of light gray stone with cylindrical handles, decorated with an incised circle-dot motif.
(Graves at the Jebel Sebekhi; diam. 9.3 cm; h. 6 cm)



7.
Lid made of a soft stone that is light gray in colour, with a cylindrical handle. Both the lid and handle are decorated with a motif consisting of two concentric circles and a dot.
(Graves at the Jebel Sebekhi; diam. 9.3 cm; h. 6 cm)

The land of frankincense



Tree and resin

Oman has been the most important centre for the production and export of frankincense since ancient time. Dhofar, in the southernmost part of Oman, offers the climatic and soil conditions best suited to the cultivation of the *Boswellia sacra* tree.

Frankincense is an aromatic gum resin that is extracted from the *Boswellia sacra* tree. An incision is made through the bark, which exudes a white, milky fluid that then dries and hardens in the form of translucent droplets. The tree may grow to a height of seven meters, but only begins producing resin eight or ten years after it has been planted. The branches spring densely from the base of the tree; its leaves are small and fleshy, and the flowers are white.

In the past every part of the tree was used – the wood, cut into chips, as a dye; the leaves as forage for animals; and the buds, flowers and fruit to prepare remedies for stomach ailments.





Frankincense in ancient times

Considered the perfume of kings and a symbol of power and wealth and used in places of worship, frankincense has ensured the fortune of southern Arabia since the earliest times.

It is mentioned in clay tablets found in Mesopotamia as one of the precious goods originating from the land of Magan. The frankincense tree is even portrayed in wall paintings in the temple of Queen Hatshepsut (15th century BC). The queen organized an expedition to the land

of frankincense and attempted to introduce the cultivation of the tree in Egypt, but it failed to thrive due to the unsuitable climate.

The Greeks first, and then the Romans, used frankincense in large quantities for a variety of purposes. Its fragrance was celebrated in the odes of the classical poets. Sometimes in Rome there was an immoderate use of frankincense; Pliny mentions, for example, that during the funeral of Poppaea, the emperor Nero had an entire year's imports of the frankincense burned.

In ancient times frankincense was burned on official occasions and during religious rites, but it was also used in cosmetics, balms, perfumes, medical remedies, and to preserve food.

Four different qualities of frankincense are produced in Oman: the intensely fragrant *Al-Hojari* harvested in the zone furthest inland during the hottest period of the year; *Annajdi*, which is produced during the months following the monsoon; *Ashazri*, which is gathered at the beginning of the rainy season; and the least prized variety, *Asha'bi*, harvested during the coldest months of the year from trees growing along the coast.





Sumhuram between legend and history

That Sumhuram is a magical place has been known by the inhabitants of Oman since ancient times. According to the local folklore this area has forever been frequented by benign spirits. The anonymous mariner and author of the navigational guide *Periplus of Erythraean Sea* – dating to the 1st century AD – mentioned Sumhuram, and noted that the source of its wealth – incense – was protected by a special god. In fact this place, isolated and protected by a deep lagoon, is permeated by a sense of magic that cannot leave the visitor indifferent. However, Sumhuram is not only a place of rare beauty; it is also a site of enormous historical interest because it formed a key node in the international trade of antiquity.

Located halfway down the coast on the southern side of the Arabian peninsula, Sumhuram was an important stopping point on the route that connected India with the Mediterranean, and as a port has always been a crossroads for different peoples and cultures. This fact is reflected in the material discovered during our excavations. Amphorae from the Mediterranean testify to the brisk commerce that was conducted, as does the presence of imported objects intended for daily use, such as fine glazed ware from the East which graced the tables of many households. There is even evidence – ranging from objects of daily use to images of deities – to show that a community of Indians resided in the city.

Sumhuram can be considered a model of the South Arabian city in antiquity. Fifteen years of excavations by the Italian Mission to Oman have revealed a large



part of the city's layout. The residential quarter, the area dedicated to commerce and warehouses, and the temple and the sanctuary where the gods were venerated have all been uncovered. The site of what appears to have been a mint, where the city would have produced its own coinage, has also been identified.

In addition, Italian archaeologists have explored the surrounding territory and discovered remains dating to the 3rd millennium BC, together with traces of occupation during the medieval period. Noteworthy is an important find dating to the same period as the city: built in the 3rd century BC and abandoned in the 5th century AD is a splendid small temple on the edge of the lagoon, which was probably used by travelers wishing to stop and pay homage to the gods in the form of prayers and sacrifices during the course of their long journeys.

At the same time, the landscape around Sumhuram must have been quite different to what it is today. Traces of pollen, as well as the remains of irrigation dykes and canals, have been uncovered that testify to the widespread practice of farming in ancient times.

Above all, Sumhuram served as a port for the incense trade. The city is located in fact close to the Nejd, the pre-desert area where the source of the most prized incense in the Middle East – the *Boswellia sacra* tree – grows. The precious resin was stored in the city's warehouses before being transported to far-away markets in the West and the East on camel-back or in ships. It should thus come as no surprise that the largest and



most varied collection of incense burners in all of southern Arabia has been found in Sumhuram. These range from the simplest of perfume-burners intended for daily use in modest households to more unusual models that testify to the skill of the local artisans and their ability to assimilate and incorporate models belonging to different cultural traditions.





Incense burners

The collection of incense burners from Sumhura, comprising some seventy exemplars, represents the richest and most varied array of these objects to be excavated in South Arabia.

Most have been unearthed in the vicinity of religious sites and were clearly intended for ritual purposes, but some have been found on the sites of private residences, or just outside the city walls or in the area surrounding the city.

Beginning in antiquity and up to the present day, in South Arabia incense has been used not only during religious ceremonies, but also daily in the home to ward off the evil eye, to protect clothing against insects, and to scent the air during social gatherings.

The incense burners found at Sumhura range in typology from simple geometric forms such as cylinders or cubes standing on small feet, sometimes coloured with red paint or decorated with geometric, astral or naturalistic motifs, to more elaborate composite forms standing on bases often in the form of truncated pyramids. Many fine examples have been found, intact and perfectly conserved, during the course of recent excavations. They are of interest because they reflect a strong local artistic tradition with its own motifs and autochthonous traits. The fact that these objects were carved out of the same limestone that was used as a building material in the city of Sumhura confirms that they were of local manufacture.

Catalogue



1.

This splendid incense burner was discovered together with many other religious objects in a small sanctuary at Sumhura that was excavated between 2008 and 2010. It is composite in form, consisting of bowl resting on a parallelepiped with a truncated pyramid base. The most interesting aspect of this object is its carved decoration, which consists of a lion flanked by a pair of ibexes depicted in profile, facing outward with their heads turned back to look behind them. All three animals have been portrayed with striking realism, the artist capturing such details as the texture of the goats' rough fleece and craggy horns, and the luxuriant mane, clawed paws, and sharp teeth of the lion.

(Small sanctuary; h. 33 cm; base: 23x19 cm; dp. cup 2.8 cm)



2.

This incense burner was found in the same sanctuary as the one described above. Poised on a base in the form of an upside-down, truncated step pyramid is a cube-shaped receptacle that has been decorated on two sides with a checkerboard motif carved in bas-relief, reflecting the love of geometric forms that is one of the most characteristic features of South Arabian art. The object was found entirely intact, apart from three of the four small rectangular corner elements which are missing. The front side is decorated with one of the most common symbols in South Arabian art – a crescent moon and a disc standing on a trapezoid base.

A pilaster decorated with the image of a serpent that was excavated nearby probably stood next to the altar with the incense burner placed on it. Indeed, similar traces of plaster have been found at the top of the pilaster and on the base of the incense burner.

(Small sanctuary; h. 31 cm; base: 14x13 cm)



3.

This fine incense burner was found in 2004 during the excavation of the temple that stood outside the walls of Sumhuram on the edge of the lagoon. Once again, its form consists of a cube-shaped receptacle standing on a truncated pyramid base. The piece is nearly intact; only three of the four cube-shaped elements decorating its top are missing. The principal side is decorated with a stylized motif consisting of three rows of slightly projecting rectangular elements. The lower border has been embellished with lace-like trimming consisting of a row of elongated elements, each terminating in a circle, another typical South Arabian motif.

(External temple; h. 26 cm; base: 20x17 cm)



Bronze objects from the temple of Sin

Among the most interesting finds at Sumhuram are the objects in metal that have come to light during the excavation of the temple of Sin.

In addition to the splendid inscribed basin on display here – a genuine unicum in the panorama of South Arabian art – numerous other ritual objects made of metal have been found: incense burners, different sized bells, spouts in the form of animals, small dishes, spoons, and candle holders.

Many of these objects were imported from regions that had close commercial ties with Sumhuram (Egypt, the countries of the Arabian Gulf, the Mediterranean, and India). Small pieces of jewelry (rings, bracelets, pendants, and hair ornaments) that probably represented temple offerings, as well as fragments of plaquettes that were hung on the walls as *ex-votos* and requests for favours from the gods, have also been found.

Extensive excavations have uncovered evidence of bronze workshops scattered throughout the city of Sumhuram, such as small furnaces and crucibles containing traces of metal.



Bronze basin

This bronze basin, made using the lost wax process, was excavated from the site of the city's main temple dedicated to the god Sin, and represents one of the most interesting finds brought to light thus far. Its rim is decorated with an inscription cast in relief, which cites the name of the king who donated the basin to the temple, a detail that is of great importance as it allows us to date the piece to the 2nd or 1st century BC.

It was evidently greatly prized and used for centuries; the bottom bears signs of repair in the form of metal pins at points where the basin was damaged or worn.

(diam. 34 cm; h. 10.5 cm; h. of letters 2.3 cm)

THE INSCRIPTION

The rim of the basin is decorated with a long inscription that extends for two lines, written using a South Arabian alphabet in a beautifully stylized, geometric script.

Inscriptions dating to as early as the beginning of the first millennium BC and as late as the 6th century AD have been found in South Arabia, in the region corresponding to Dhofar and the modern-day Republic of Yemen.

At least fifteen thousand inscriptions have been discovered thus far, carved into mountain sides, on city walls and steles, and on smaller objects such as stone statuettes and objects made of bronze.



Restoration

In addition to archaeological excavations, the Italian Mission to Oman (IMTO) has been conducting extensive restoration work that is still on-going in both Salut and Sumhuram.

The consolidation of the city walls and buildings that have been brought to light thus far is absolutely essential in order to ensure their conservation for posterity.



Sumhuram



Salut



The city of Al Baleed

The city of Al Baleed is located about midway along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. While there are numerous traces of occupation as far back as the Iron Age, the city enjoyed its moment of greatest glory during the Medieval Period. Marco Polo, who stopped there in 1290 on his way to China, described it as one of the largest ports in the Indian Ocean and a commercial centre that conducted a profitable trade in incense and the celebrated breed of Arabian stallions.

The settlement was rectangular in layout and extended for 64 hectares. Recent excavations have brought to light the foundations of the city wall running along the southern perimeter of the city, which was punctuated by 18 semicircular towers. The area within the walls was divided into three sections: a market on the eastern side, a residential quarter in the center and to the west the mosque and the palace. The city was surrounded by a lagoon and goods were transported into the city by boat after they had been unloaded from trading ships moored along the coast or from several southern gates on the city wall.

During the last archaeological season, which was brought to a successful conclusion at the end of April 2012, an intriguing discovery was made. While the remains of a building were being excavated in an area outside the city wall near the southwest corner of the city, a large number of heads sculpted in the local sandstone were found, whose purpose remains for now an enigma. These heads represent a unique discovery in terms of their number and the characteristics of the faces, which await study and interpretation.







Objects from Al Baleed

1.

This elegant glass bowl was found close to the city wall on the southern side of the city of Al Baleed. Most probably the work of skilled artisans in Damascus, it can be dated to between the 12th and 13th centuries AD. It is intact and in an excellent state of conservation, its beautiful painted motifs and gold decoration still visible.

(diam. 12 cm; h. 6.1 cm)

2.

This small celadon bowl was also found near the southern wall of the city of Al Baleed. On its base two characters can be seen: *fu* (good fortune) and *lu* (good fortune or official salary), traditional formulas of benevolent wishes addressed to the owner of this piece. It was probably produced and imported from Longqun in the Chinese province of Zhejiang between the 14th and 15th centuries AD.

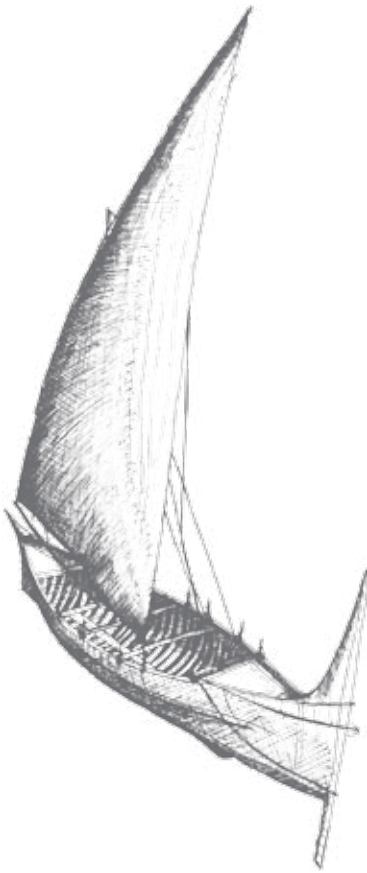
(diam. 6.2 cm; h. 7.3 cm)

3.

This dainty, blown glass unguent container can be dated to the 11th- 12th centuries AD and was probably imported from Aden.

(Southern city wall; diam. base 5.3 cm; h. 8.8 cm)

Sindbad the sailor



Navigation

Oman was a land of great navigators, and the legendary sailor Sinbad believed he was born there. The stories of his exploits recounted by Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights* are replete with magical places, fabulous creatures, and terrifying natural phenomena that the restless sailor, who set off from Oman to conquer the Seven Seas, faced during the course of seven long and perilous journeys.

Omanis were not only expert seafarers, but also skilled ship builders. This panel shows the principal types of boats in use by the Omanis at the time, which ranged from fishing ships to vessels for military and commercial purposes.

The vessels built by the Omanis had certain features that distinguished them from the other boats which plied the waters of the Indian Ocean. For example, the planks were not held in place by nails, but were 'sewn' with ropes made from palm trees fibres. The wood most commonly used for the hull and mast was either teak imported from India or the trunk of the coconut palm. The sails could be woven from coconut fibres, palm leaves or cotton.

The Sultanah

This is a model of the Sultanah, the vessel which carried Ahmed bin Na'aman, the Ambassador of the Sultan Sayyid Said bin Sultan, to America in 1840 on the first diplomatic mission sent by an Arabian potentate to the United States. Embarking from Zanzibar, the voyage to New York took three months.

The ambassador was charged with ratifying a diplomatic treaty and strengthening trade relations between the two countries. Among the gifts sent by the Sultan were fine Arabian horses, exquisite gold jewelry, precious stones, a gold-plated sword, embroidered cloth, Persian carpets, samples of the finest dates, and raw materials such as gum arabic, ivory, spices and, of course, incense.



Baghla

The most elegant of the sea-going vessels used for commercial trade by the merchants of Oman was the baghla. The first exemplars were constructed in the nineteenth century and the last embarked from the shipyard of Sur in 1952.

Some of these ships were forty metres long and could carry from one hundred and fifty to four hundred tons of cargo. The largest baghlas had three masts, and as many as five windows along the stern sculpted in teak by artisans from Oman or India.







Navigational instruments

Sailing the seas in ancient times required an exact and close knowledge of the sky's features. The stars and planets were the sole reference points that sailors could rely on to navigate in the open ocean.

At first, mariners used their hands to measure the height of the stars above the horizon, but as time passed increasingly sophisticated instruments were developed, from the *kamal* to the astrolabe, the sextant, and the octant, culminating in instruments that are still in use today.





The *kamal*

The *kamal* was a simple, but effective device that was widely used by navigators in the Indian Ocean. It served to measure the height of the Polar Star at latitudes close to the equator (and was therefore of no use to Europeans sailing at more northern latitudes). Consisting of a thin rectangular piece of wood sized to fit the distance between the horizon and Polar Star, and attached to a string that was knotted at specific intervals, it allowed navigators to measure the height of the Polar Star and therefore to determine the latitude of their port of destination.

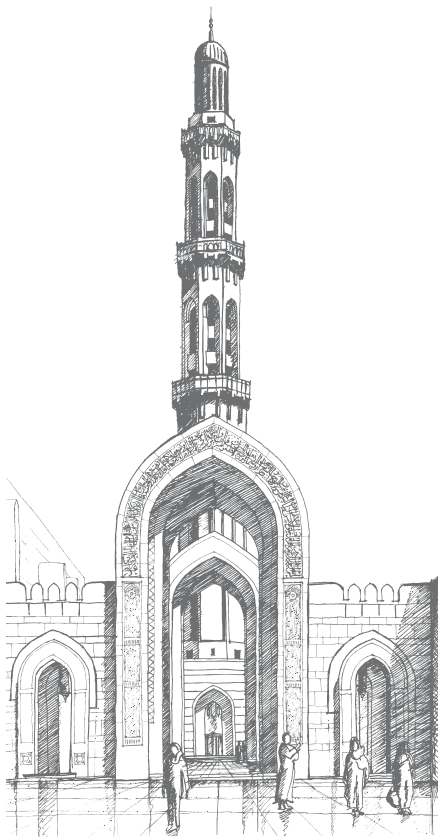


The astrolabe

The astrolabe is an instrument that allows the sailors to verify their route, identify their position or predict their destination.

The disposition of the sun and the principal stars – about twenty stars on most simple instruments, although larger and more sophisticated models might show up to fifty – was marked on a flat disc that could be rotated in accordance with the date and time, in this way providing a picture of the heavens at any given moment. The astrolabe remained in use until the 18th century.

The land of Sindbad today



The Omani Renaissance

On the 23rd of July 1970 H.M. Sultan Qaboos bin Said succeeded to the throne of Oman and inaugurated a new era that brought back Oman from the ashes of history.

H.M. Sultan Qaboos managed to restore confidence, dignity and self-respect for all Omanis. His government began 5 years development plans providing services for all the people all over Oman and built a civil service that can manage the task.

Extensive infrastructures were built, such as roads, hospitals, schools, universities, ports and airports, as well as a telecommunications system connecting Oman's cities, towns and villages with the rest of the world.

The Omani monarch is set to continue leading his nation to ever broader horizons.



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