IMTO – Italian Mission to Oman

University of Pisa

KHOR MUGHSAIL

Preliminary Report

November 2012 (KM12A)
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The first IMTO’campaign of 2012 in Khor Mughsail (KM12A), under the direction of prof. A. Avanzini, started on 10th November and finished on 28th November 2012.

The aims of this first campaign were essentially two. The first one was to point out the ancient stone structures by highlighting all the walls that crop out from the soil or that were covered with old excavation dumps, and cleaning those already excavated but still hidden under their collapsed layers.

The second aim was to draw a new map, through a topographic survey, using a total station.

The work has been conducted by arch. Sergio Martelli with the collaboration of Laura Strolin and Mohammed Al Jafali.

Arch. Simona Rossi has been responsible of the topographic survey.

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Khor Mughsail lies along the coastline, approximately 50 km south-west to Salalah. The site is located on the western side of an extended rocky platform, that rises about 6-8 m above a plateau flanked by two wadi.

To the east lies the principal one, Wadi Ashoq (over 30 km long), while the second one descends directly from the land reliefs north to the site.

Moreover, the site is roughly 400 m far from the shore and around 400-500 m far from the Khor.
The site has been partially excavated by F.P. Albright at the beginning of the fifties. From the documentation recorded in “The American Archaeological Expedition in Dhofar, Oman 1952-1953” Washington, DC 1982 we can derive some useful information. The site develops on a surface of 40 x 30 sm and the different rooms are marked with letters going from A to T. Room A corresponds to a squared well dug into the rock; Rooms B-D indicate an area endowed with basins and spaces related to the use of water; E is a mosque with two contiguous rooms; F is a big room whose function is still unclear; G-O and Q-T are rooms of various shapes and functions; P is a large central square.

The work carried on during this campaign begun with the cleaning up of rooms R, S and T. The external line of the long northern wall and the door thresholds, all covered with a heap of earth and stones, have been cleaned and exposed. An evidently recent wall has been dismantled in room S. The narrow corridor between I and R, and the walls south and east to I, have been cleaned as well.

The works have been carried on clockwise on the whole site.
When facing the eastern area (rooms M, N and O), the situation got more complicated and the map had to be substantially modified (see the sequence of the modifications at the end of the Report). Room O, which has been excavated till reaching the bedrock, shows to its south not a wall but a shapeless row of stones.

In the space between O and M a wall which was not reported on the map shows off to the west. In room M the northern wall was not found. In N, below heaps of big stones, we searched for the south-western side of the wall, but a corner has been found, including a new wall parallel to the southern one.

In the zone east and south to N, two rooms have been found, which were not reported on the map. In the following days we dealt with the walls of rooms H-L, covered too with heaps of dump stones. Room L is devoid of northern and western walls, therefore it is an open space belonging to the square P.

We also realized that the transversal length of the three rooms H, J and K is about 3 m shorter than what indicated in the map. Going on with the works indeed, two more rooms show off. Among these five rooms, two are likely open spaces since no thresholds were found.

Dealing with space F, hidden too by old dumps, we realize that the total length is almost 2 m longer and we find in the eastern part a room (F2) with external access. The southern front certainly presents a double opening almost in the middle of the wall and apparently presents another double opening leaning against the new room. The south-western corner has been lost, but the bedrock is visible. We also searched for the western wall. It is in out of axis by around 2 m with respect to the wall of the mosque with the mihrab. We noticed that on the internal side the wall line was not very clear and neat, but we found a sort of layout of stones, smaller than those usually used for wall construction.
We wondered if it may be the paving of a big court flanking the mosque; its limits have still to be found. This wall, together with the mosque one, forms a sort of long corridor ending with a short right-angled wall, setup on the north-western edge of the mosque. In the northern corner, formed by this short wall and the western wall of room D, a monolithic platform comes out (90 x 60 cm$^2$): two steps come down (?) from this platform towards the open entry of room D. Underneath, a sandstone pavement seems to appear, with a beaten floor of small stones. 2 m to the north of room D, there is a parallel wall, whose occidental limit and closing corner with D cannot be found. Between the two walls, the excavation has shown a beaten floor made of light plaster.

![Fig. 4, Provisional map of the settlement of Khor Mughsail (after Albright 1982: 42)](image)

The cleaning of the site comes to end after the displacement of a huge quantity of stones and earth that had been amassed during the previous excavations on most of the walls and in most of the rooms. The site now appears remarkably modified.
Room L has disappeared, rooms J2, K2 and F2 have been added, and in the south-eastern area the overall aspect has completely changed.
Room O is incorporated in a unique big L-shaped room named M, and to the east two new rooms, U and V, are added.
Also in the area western to the mosque the outline changes with the introduction of new, still poorly defined structures.
Therefore the whole western, north-western area of the site needs to be investigated with attention, together with the extreme northern one, still covered by stone heaps.
Figs. 5-10, Images of the site before and after cleaning the walls
The findings: pottery

Regarding the archaeological finds recovered from the removed earth (US1), we mostly collect ceramic fragments. The potsherds have been simply collected, not numbered nor indexed. A few show a greenish glaze (fig. 11), probably to be linked with the alkaline blue glaze or Sasanian-Islamic jars which represent the most characteristic ceramic types of the Abbasid period -8th/10th cent AD (Rougeulle 2008: 650).

![Fig. 11 Greenish glazed pottery](image)

Many others, in a significant percentage, present an incised decoration of geometric patterns and circular dots, to be connected with the so-called “Dot and circle ware” (fig. 12), which seems indigenous to Dhofar (Zarins 2001: 112). Interesting parallels could be done with the ceramic assemblage from Shisr, dated by Zarins, to the Iron Age B – 325 BC / 650 AD – (Zarins 2001: 110-111, figs. 44, 45, in part. N. 10.2796).
Other typical vessels, to be linked with the supposed Dhofari tradition are the punctate ceramics (fig. 13) which closely remind the Iron Age B assemblage from Shisr (Zarins 2001: 113, fig. 46).

There are also a few fragments with painted red decoration with horizontal strip (fig. 14).
The findings: small finds

Very few small finds have been recovered during the preliminary works presented here. Among them a very well preserved pipe in white stone (fig. 15), a marine shell used as small oil lamp as attested by the burning traces inside (fig. 16). Moreover, a fragment of flint (debitage) and a levigated pebble, probably used as net sinker have been recovered as well (fig. 17).
Fig. 16, Object: oil lamp from a marine shell

Fig. 17, Objects: a fragment of flint (debitage) and stone used as tool (net sinker?)
Preliminary conclusions and perspectives

The preliminary work carried on at the site during the campaign could be considered a first important step in the comprehension of the settlement. Although the dating could not be clarified yet, it’s important to notice the existence of two different phases (pre-Islamic and Islamic? Both Islamic – earlier and later?) attested by two different construction techniques.

The pottery, to be counted and analyzed in the next campaign, presents strong analogies with the assemblages of Shisr and many Dhofari coastal sites (old Taqa, Al Baleed, Alto bay, Hoon’s Bay, Khor Arzat), as well as with the assemblage of ʿAyn Ḫumrān as reported by Zarins after the extensive archaeological survey in the coastal and inland regions of Dhofar.

The author dates these ceramic findings to the Iron Age B (Zarins 2001: 127, figs. 59-60), thus in a chronological frame comprised between the 300 BC and the 650 AD. This dating has been discussed by A. Sedov (2002: 195-199) who highlighted, on one side, the peculiarity of the sites of Shisr and ʿAyn Ḫumrān, distant from the traditional material culture of the Iron Age A phase in Dhofar, and, on the other, focused on the necessity to revise the absolute chronology of the two sites and their related materials.

According to Sedov the two sites should be dated to the post-Sumhuram period, on the base of the lack of comparison with the materials discovered on the port, and the similarities between some forms found in Shisr and ʿAyn Ḫumrān and those discovered in the Sassanide phase of Sohar – phase IV – in the Medieval layers from Arikamedu.

On the other side we have to underline also the noticeable difference between the ceramics of Al Mughsail and the assemblage from Ḥamr al-Sharqiyah (Rougeulle 2008: 645-667) where the “Dot and circle ware” and the punctate ceramics are completely absent, notwithstanding the large number of unglazed ceramics, representing the 90% of the shards discovered at the site.

On the light of all these considerations, it’s very important to proceed with the excavations at the site of Al Mughsail not only to interpret in the proper way the settlement but also to reconsider, in a broader perspective, the chronology of the Dhofari sites and the relations among them.

References