

A fortress before the city walls in Sumhuram: the Monumental Building 2

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Introduction

In 2004 the excavations of the so-called Monumental Building 2 started. They have been conducted and recently resumed (2014) by the Italian Mission to Oman, under the supervision of Prof. Alessandra Avanzini.

The Monumental Building 2 is one of the two biggest structures of the city and it is located south of the sacred area with the temple of S'yn, the main god of the kingdom of Hadramawt.

The building has a regular squared plan and covers an area of approximately 136,52 m². Its perimeter consists of four adjacent massive sandwich-walls (M110, M92, M93, M109) with a hypothetical original height of 7 m, where no entrance has been detected. This is an exceptional feature that gives to the complex the appearance of a fortress. The main walls are splayed. This construction technique, a singular case in Sumhuram, gives to the structure a better weight balance and an elevated height. The external surface of the walls could be coated with plaster, like the majority of the buildings of the city. Observing the general plan of Sumhuram, it can be noted that the oldest buildings of the town lean on the city walls. The absence of a structural binding between MB2 and the city walls and the isolated position of this structure, leads to suppose that it was built before the enclosure walls. According to the data emerged from the excavations (stratigraphic sequence, pottery shards...), it could be one of the oldest buildings of the city.



Fig. 1 Monumental Building 2 plan

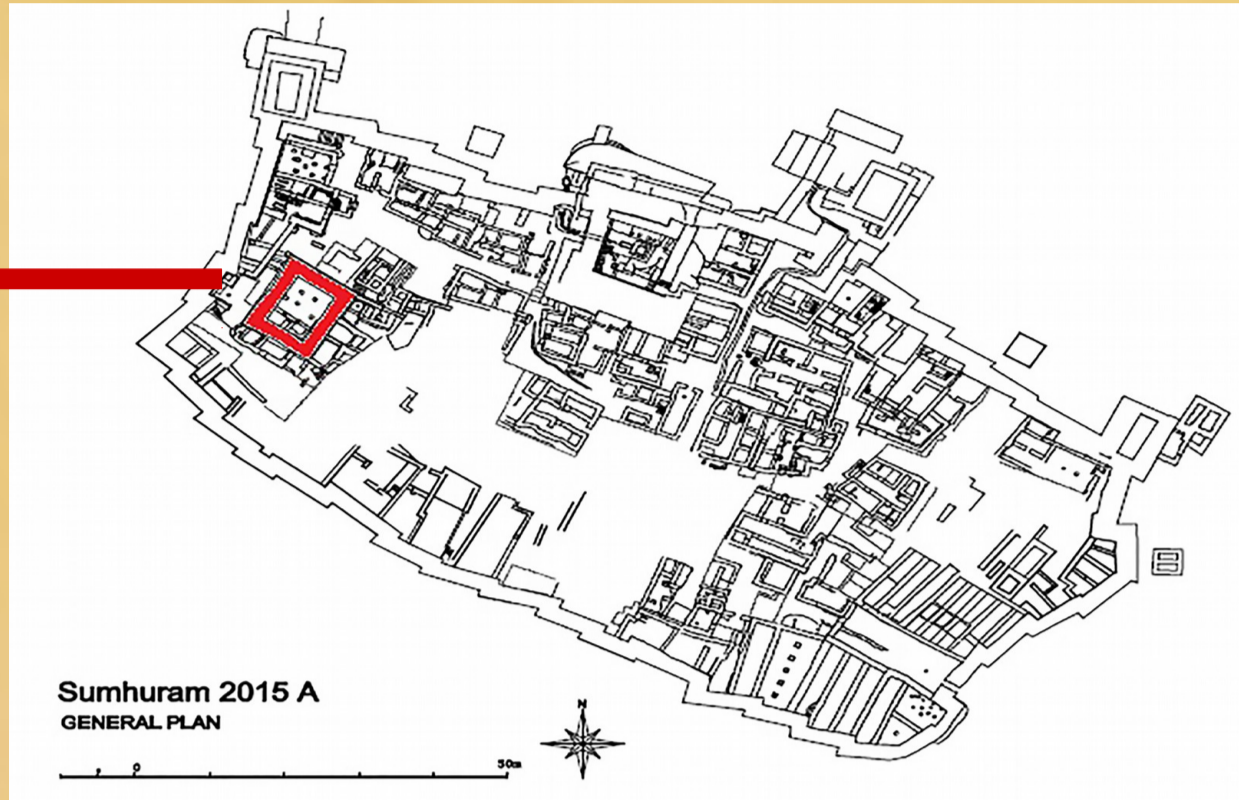


Fig. 2 General plan of the city, Monumental building 2 in red



Fig. 3 Monumental Building 2 by drone

Constructional phases

It is possible to sum up three of the five constructional phases of the building (See Report 14C):

- I phase, three rooms were brought to light:
 - A244, a big room characterized by a floor with bases of six of columns (still *in situ*).
 - A241, a plastered room
 - A242, a small cistern/basin in the southern-east corner of the building.
- II phase, one big room:
 - During this phase an accumulation layer covers the entire inner surface of the structure, including the walls of the rooms A242 and A241. Thus the room called A52 was formed . Inside this big room it is still possible to see the column bases.
- III phase, abandonment:
 - After a gradual and continuous accumulation of layers, the structure was abandoned.



Fig. 4 First phase of MB2



Fig. 5 First hypothetical reconstruction of MB2 by Sergio Martelli

The carved blocks

Contemporary to the first phase of MB2 are the most impressive findings related to this structure: the carved masonry blocks in the north-eastern wall (M93), still *in situ*. These represent typical animals of the South Arabian iconography, such as ibexes, camels and one bull carved in very low relief and have parallels with similar rupestrian vestiges from other regions of ancient South Arabia. The blocks are the expression of a popular art, very rough and schematic but quite realistic. We can argue that the largest block identified in the wall could represent a hunting scene.



Fig. 8 Ibex in M93



Fig. 9 Camel in M93

This practice recurs in the South Arabian culture, and was perhaps linked to the religious and political power. It involved several animals, but the most chased was the ibex (symbol of the power of Nature; in the kingdom of Saba' generally associated to Almaqah, "the lord of the ibexes"). The ritual hunt had been practised in the Southern Arabia Peninsula by kings and high dignitaries since the most archaic times, but later lost its ritual significance to become a kind of sport entertainment or a proof of individual courage.



Fig. 7 Mansory block with a ritual hunt representation in M93

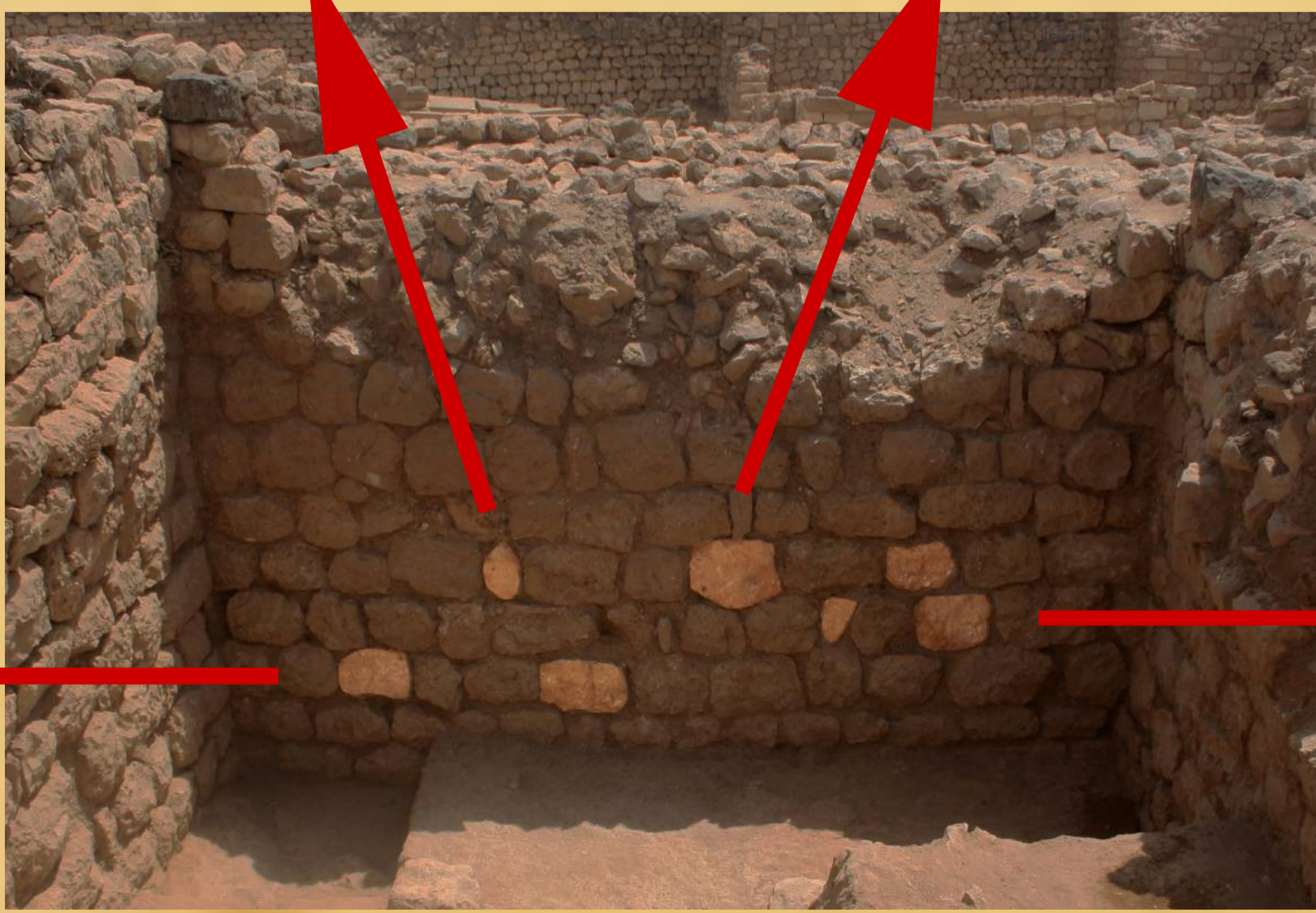


Fig. 6 The north-eastern wall (M93) with the carved stones highlighted



Fig. 10 Ibexes in M93

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