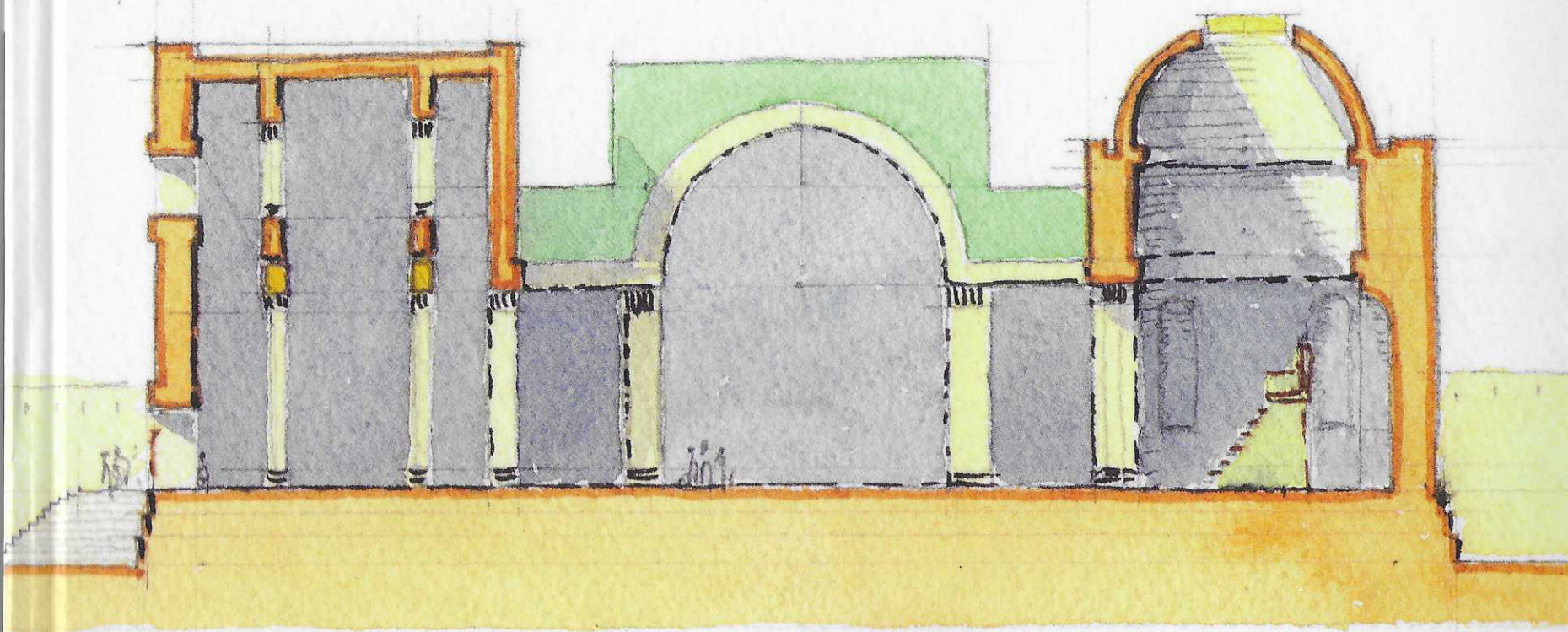


# Contacts between South Arabia and the Horn of Africa, from the Bronze Age to Islam

In Honor of Rémy Audouin



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Cover illustration: Architectural section of the building erected by the Ethiopian king Abraha in Ṣan‘ā’. Christian Darles †.

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## Chapitre 23

### *Husn Al-Baleed, a mediaeval fortified castle along the Omani coast: Preliminary results from the 2016-2017 excavations*

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The ancient port of Al-Baleed, known in Mediaeval times by the name of Zafar (Dhofar <sup>1</sup>), lies in the southern region of Oman, and is now included, together with the Museum of the Frankincense Land, in the homonymous Archaeological Park <sup>2</sup>, located in the modern city of Salalah. The settlement is located at the base of a large drainage system, namely Wadi Garziz, which formed a wide lagoon currently closed by a sand bar in the area of the site. This lagoon was the reason for the existence of an ancient population in the area, dating back to the Bronze Age. Excavations and research developed by J. Zarins and L. Newton in the region of Dhofar <sup>3</sup> have demonstrated that human groups populated the area of Al-Baleed from the 3rd millennium BCE on the basis of seasonal migrations, leaving traces in the stone tools recovered from mixed excavated zones at the site <sup>4</sup>. Thus far, it has been possible to observe occupation continuity from the Iron Age until Late Antiquity. It was however during the Mediaeval period that the site reached its peak as an important hub in the international Indian Ocean trade.

1. The name Zafar/Dhofar is used today to indicate the southernmost region of Oman, and more specifically the Governorate of Dhofar.

2. In 2000, Al-Baleed was listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO together with Sumhuram/Khor Rori, Wubār/Shisr and the natural reserve of Wadi Dawkha, which are all considered part of the Land of Frankincense.

3. Newton and Zarins, 2010.

4. Zarins and Newton, 2017, p. 59.

## The project

In April 2016 a new project involving the excavation and consolidation of one of the landmarks of Al-Baleed, the *Husn*, began at the site (fig. 1). The aims of the project are the comprehension of the architectural structure and its development throughout its long occupation, the study of the materials (pottery, small finds) and, finally, a restoration of the structure encompassing the valorization of the ancient building and its proper visualization. The work at *Husn Al-Baleed* offers, moreover, an extraordinary opportunity to investigate the traditional local construction techniques and their development up to modern times.

## Previous works at *Husn Al-Baleed*

The first archeological operations at *Husn Al-Baleed* were carried out by the American Foundation for the Study of Man in 1952 and they were mainly focused on the south-western corner of the building <sup>5</sup>. Prior to this, in 1932, His Majesty Sa'id bin Taimoor exposed part of the southern wall with its southeast tower <sup>6</sup>. A large room, interpreted as the last private residence of the local ruler, was excavated by the Americans but, despite the exploratory 11-meter-deep sounding, no stratigraphy was identified. A well, which was cleared out during recent excavations, and a series of tanks were brought to light. The excavated materials were barely mentioned in the report, which only had a short reference to “China, glazed and crude ware” and to glass objects <sup>7</sup>. Much more work was done between 1995 and 2003 by the German team of Aachen University, under the direction of Prof. M. Jansen <sup>8</sup>. Excavations were carried out in different sectors of the *Husn*: the north-western corner and its connection with the north city wall or so-called Junction Wall, the southern side with the main gate, and finally some

5. Albright, 1982, p. 60.

6. Phillips, 1972, p. 140.

7. Albright, 1982, p. 60.

8. Jansen, 2015.



Fig. 1 – The northern side of Husn Al-Baleed after the consolidation work (Photo A. Pavan for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

rooms close to the gate complex. Although the main goal of this work was the clearing of the debris in order to prepare the site to be part of an archeological park, the comprehension of the structures and their dating were important achievements. Five main phases were identified and dated, with  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates ranging from the 10th to the 17th century <sup>9</sup>. No  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates are available for the most ancient phases, since the structures were below the actual building. The Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs (Muscat-Salalah, Sultanate of Oman) began investigations inside the *Husn* under the direction of Prof. J. Zarins in 2006. The work was terminated in 2008 and provided important results. The four sides of the building were cleared out to expose their general layout, the south gate and the monumental staircase were completely excavated and some deep soundings were conducted in the interior <sup>10</sup>. Our investigations followed this work.

9. Jansen, 2015, p. 354-357.

10. Zarins and Newton, 2012, p. 40-54.

## *Husn* Al-Baleed, the work in progress

Current work at the site is developing in two directions: 1) a stratigraphic investigation which also includes the archaeology of masonry in order to identify and interpret the different Masonry Stratigraphic Units (USM) and the different phases of construction, and 2) the consolidation of the masonry itself. On the one hand, this is necessary for safely securing the structures and proceeding with the investigations of the lower floors. On the other hand, such consolidation gives added value to the ruins, ensuring a correct visualization. The large amount of pottery discovered at the site has been registered and is undergoing study, but some preliminary information will be provided here with the aim to present the materials in use during the last occupational phases of the *Husn*. The small finds discovered during our work will be briefly presented as well. Worthy of note among them is a large number of wooden objects, discovered in pretty good condition, and which were

concentrated in some deposits in the *Husn* or, more rarely, discovered still *in situ*.

## The architecture of *Husn Al-Baleed*

The *Husn* is located in the northwestern corner of the city in front of the Grand Mosque and of the *maydan*, the largest public square of the city. The *Husn* is roughly square in plan, each side measuring about 60 m, with offsets and abutting semicircular towers on three of the four corners. The building stands on the highest point of the site, and it reaches an elevation of about 13 m, even if at first sight the impression is of a more prominent complex. This was also the feeling of Colonel S. B. Miles who visited the site in 1883, and wrote “the citadel stood on an eminence about 100 feet above the plain”<sup>11</sup>. It is most likely that an open courtyard, surrounded by rooms placed at different stages, was located at the centre of the building, where a large depression is clearly visible even now. According to local stories, not so long ago, a deep well, some staircases going down to the core of the *Husn* and a number of intact rooms were still visible. It is still possible that this image of the *Husn* will be validated, but only time will tell. *Husn Al-Baleed* was a multi-story building and the remains of the beams supporting the ceilings of the rooms are still visible in most of the excavated rooms (fig. 2).

The present construction has a Monumental Gate in the southern side connected to a grand staircase leading to the upper part of the construction, excavated by J. Zarins in 2008. According to Ibn Battuta, it was possible for the ruler to reach the Grand Mosque and the *maydan* directly from this gate<sup>12</sup>. This means that a southern gate was already in existence at the beginning of the 14th century or even before. The original lay-out of the building has been, indeed, substantially modified over the ages.

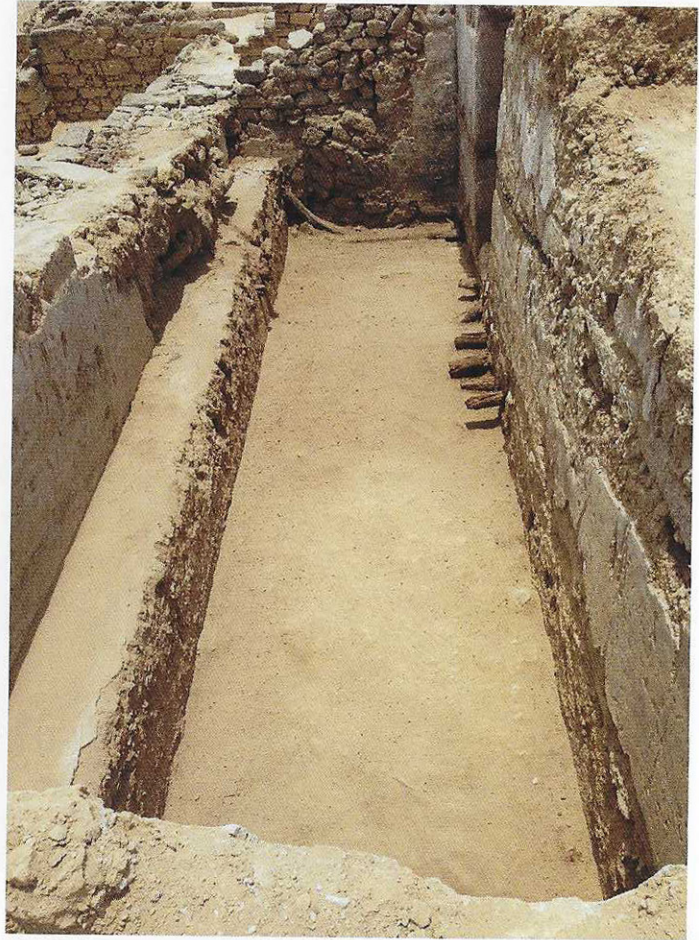


Fig. 2 – Room A2 with evidence of the wooden beams supporting the ceiling (Photo A. Pavan for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

One of the most interesting results yet achieved by our project was the identification of a former formal gate, located on the western side (fig. 3).

This was found obliterated by the construction of an abutting wall which completely closed the entrance and the area around it. Notwithstanding, the premises were filled and used as bases for later structures (an issue we recognized in most

11. Miles, 1919, vol. II, p. 545.

12. Tresso, 2012, p. 293.



Fig. 3 – The formal gate on the western side (Photo A. Pavan for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

of the excavated areas and that was already noticed during the American excavations of the 1950s<sup>13</sup>) and it has been possible to clarify the entryway, 1.60 m wide, that opens onto a large room—possibly without a roof—which leads into an inner courtyard. A double series of ten beams in hard local wood, called *mitan* (*Olea europaea*), have been discovered intact and sampled to obtain <sup>14</sup>C dates. Worthy of note is the masonry and the construction technique used for this former gate, which was made of very large blocks that are also visible in wall 20/M90

in the area of the southern gate (fig. 4). This type of masonry was recognized to be the most ancient in use at the *Husn*<sup>14</sup>.

The western portion of the building was, indeed, the one which offered the most interesting results. Here a series of rooms which underwent several modifications over time have been identified. In all of them, below the top accumulation, a considerable amount of debris interpreted as the collapse which marked the end of the *Husn* has been removed. We interpret

13. Albright, 1982, p. 61.

14. Zarins and Newton, 2012, p. 45.



Fig. 4 – Wall 20/M90. Built with very large masonry blocks, it belongs to the first construction phase (Photo A. Pavan for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

the function of one of the rooms as the armoury, or one of the armouries of the *Husn*. A large block of raw sulphur with a weight of 7.5 kg (fig. 5) was discovered above the last floor of the room together with small quantities of bitumen and charcoal, most likely used for manufacturing gunpowder.

The presence of a complete iron cannonball and the finding of a number of stone projectiles of types hurled with mangonels strengthen the interpretation of the room.

## The pottery

A large amount of pottery was discovered during the excavations. The study of the material is still in progress, but we will briefly describe the general features of the ceramic corpus. Most of the material comes from the layers of collapse of the upper structures and, so far, it belongs to the last occupational phase or has to be interpreted as the debris resulting from the American excavations of the 1950s. At that time, in fact, the rubble from the investigations was not removed but spread on the top of the *Husn*. This is the reason for the apparent high

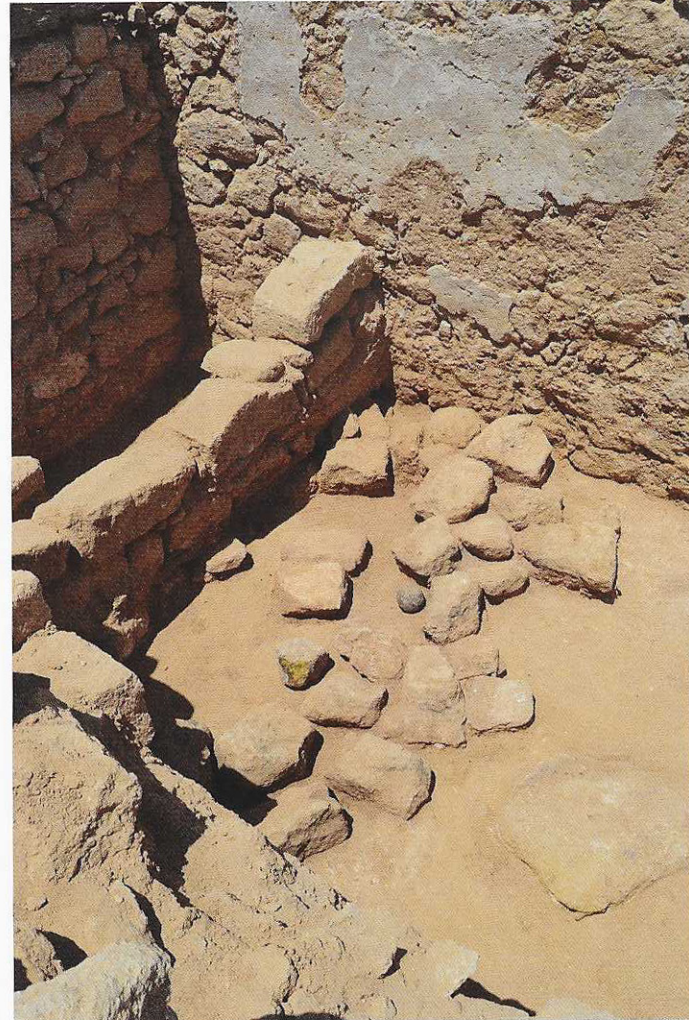


Fig. 5 – The room A33 used as an armoury with the sulphur block and a stone projectile in situ (Photo A. Pavan for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

degree of residue in the pottery assemblage and the discovery of ceramics of the 13th-14th century mixed with materials of the 17th-18th century in the same archaeological contexts. Local pottery from the last excavations has been divided into groups according to the fabric, following the divisions adopted



Fig. 6 – Selection of local pottery (Dhofari pottery) with red painted decorations (Photo A. Pavan for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

by J. Zarins and L. Newton<sup>15</sup> and previously sketched in its general outline by P. Yule and K. K. Mohammed<sup>16</sup>. The pottery from the region of Dhofar (local pottery henceforth) is characterized by very conservative features and it has thus far been very difficult to follow its development in terms of shape, fabric and decoration. It represents the most common material found in all of the archeological contexts, not only in the *Husn* but in the city itself. These ceramics can be mainly divided into Grit Ware, Shell Ware or Red Ware according to the main inclusions visible in the fabric. A distinctive category is represented by Dot and Circle Ware, common in many Dhofari sites (Wubar/Shisr, Ain Humran, Al-Baleed, Hasik, Mughsayl), and whose dating is still debatable<sup>17</sup>. Local pottery is always handmade and includes closed and open shapes. A number of peculiar decorations, made with red paint, could be found along the rim of bowls of different size or along the shoulders or bodies of jars (fig. 6).

Also of note is the presence of a distinctive red dot frequently painted on the interior of the base.

Pottery manufactured in the neighboring regions have been found in consistent quantity. We will mention here some fragmentary sherds of Mustard Ware/Yemen Yellow which, according to J. Zarins and L. Newton<sup>18</sup>, could be considered to be a marker of the Rasulid period (1279-1420) at both the sites of Al-Baleed and Wubar/Shisr. A couple of tiny bowls of Hays Ware, typical of Phase VIII at al-Shihir<sup>19</sup> and thus far dated between 1600 and 1700 which is in line with the last occupational phase of the *Husn*, were also found.

A noticeable amount of Bahla Ware, produced in northern Oman, has been discovered as well. This stoneware, characterized by a transparent glaze ranging from olive green to a



Fig. 7 – Fragment of figural group in Qingbai Ware (Photo A. Pavan for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

brownish hue, has been found at different Southern Arabian sites as early as the 15th century. According to A. Rougeulle it could be found in connection with materials dated from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in many southern Arabian Peninsula site ports<sup>20</sup>.

Indian pottery has been found in great numbers, confirming the strict relations between Dhofar and the Indian subcontinent that date back to pre-Islamic times<sup>21</sup>. Underglaze Painted Ware from Islamic Lands and Fritware were discovered in large amount as well.

Worthy of note is the variety of materials from the Far East. A small number of Martaban Wares and some Swankhalok fragments have been discovered, but a noticeable amount of Chinese material has been found. Ming and Qing Ware are typically found at the *Husn*, together with Longquan celadon which has been collected in great numbers from the debris along the eastern side of the *Husn*. The late occupational

15. Zarins and Newton, 2012, p. 114-115.

16. Yule and Mohammed, 2006.

17. Newton, 2009, p. 64.

18. Zarins and Newton, 2017, I: p. 72.

19. Hardy-Guilbert and Le Meguer, 2010, p. 53.

20. Rougeulle, 1999, p. 134.

21. Pavan, 2015.



Fig. 8 a-b – Fragments of enameled gilded glass (Photo A. Pavan for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

phase is represented by fragments of Overglazed Red Enamel Porcelain, and Batavia Porcelain. Both types can be dated between the 16th and the 18th-19th centuries.

A very recent and unique discovery was the base of a figural group (fig. 7) found among the debris along the eastern side of the *Husn*. It is made in Qingbai Ware and was possibly produced in the area of Dehua. It represents a number of people seated in a landscape with trees and vegetal elements. It could possibly date to between the end of the 17th-beginning of the 18th century<sup>22</sup>.

22. I am very grateful to Dr. Roberto Ciarla, Archaeologist and Conservator at the Museum of Civilizations – ‘G. Tucci’ Oriental Art Collections—Far East Department, for the kind help and indispensable suggestions.

## Small finds

A large number of small finds were discovered during recent work. Glass bangles are the most common category of objects and are prominent in almost all of the excavated layers. More than 350 mainly polychrome bangles have been recovered over the last year of investigations at *Husn Al-Baleed*. The bracelets have not yet been the object of a detailed study. While their provenience is not yet ascertained, we can suppose they mainly came from India and from workshops located in the area of Aden. Fragments of glass containers were also recovered, including finials of sprinklers, conical bases, rims of different shapes and, most interesting, fragments of enameled and gilded glass bearing representations of peonies, a phoenix



and sequences of four-legged animals running along the circumference of the container (fig. 8a-b).

Other small finds include numerous clay objects and more commonly, oil lamps, locally hand-made, with pear-shaped cup and pinched spouts, together with incense burners with



Fig. 9 a-b – Wooden keys and elements of windows (Photo A. Pavan for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

different shapes, and few miniature vessels. Worthy of note is quite a large number of mosaic tiles, made reusing sherds of Glazed Ware, which were supposed to decorate sills or thresholds<sup>23</sup>. In addition we discovered few objects in bone, mainly handles of knives, but also shell pendants and small shell containers with different kinds of residual contents. Worthy of note is a complete thumb or archer's ring, made from bone, a typical element of Arab archery which could have been used by the archers defending the *Husn*.

Other finds include few personal adornments in metal (finger rings) as well as small bronze and iron tools. A complete iron cannonball, weighing more than 17 kg, was found intact, together with a number of stone cannonballs and stone projectiles

23. Albright, 1982, p. 60-61.



Fig. 10 a-b – Ship planks from the last excavations (Photo Alessandro Ghidoni for the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs).

of different sizes. The most interesting discoveries concern the wooden items, which were well conserved as a result of ideal climatic conditions. These have been divided into three main categories: ship planks which have been re-used as architectural components, elements of furniture (parts of beds, window decorations) and items connected with daily life (wooden keys, stoppers, lids, fig. 9).

In particular the timbers (fig. 10a-b) represent an almost unique class of materials of which there are very few comparisons in the mediaeval ports involved in the Indian Ocean trade<sup>24</sup>. With more than 50 pieces the collection of ship timbers from Al-Baleed is exceptional in terms of quantity, quality and conservation of the items. The planks are currently undergoing study and could provide invaluable data on the technology of sewn-boats that sailed in the Indian Ocean during the Mediaeval period<sup>25</sup>.

24. The only other port where boat planks have been discovered in secondary contexts is Quseir Al Qadim, on the Red Sea coast of Egypt. For more detail see Blue, 2006 and Blue, Whitewright and Thomas, 2011.

25. Alessandro Ghidoni, University of Exeter, is currently studying the ship timbers. For a preliminary investigation of the ship timbers from Al-Baleed see Belfioretto and Vosmer, 2010.

## Acknowledgements

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