

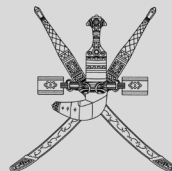
Athar آثار

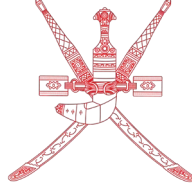
Bulletin of Archaeological Research in the Sultanate of Oman

Issue 2 Field Season 2023-2024



وزارة التراث والسياحة
Ministry of Heritage and Tourism





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Sultanate of Oman سلطنة عُمان

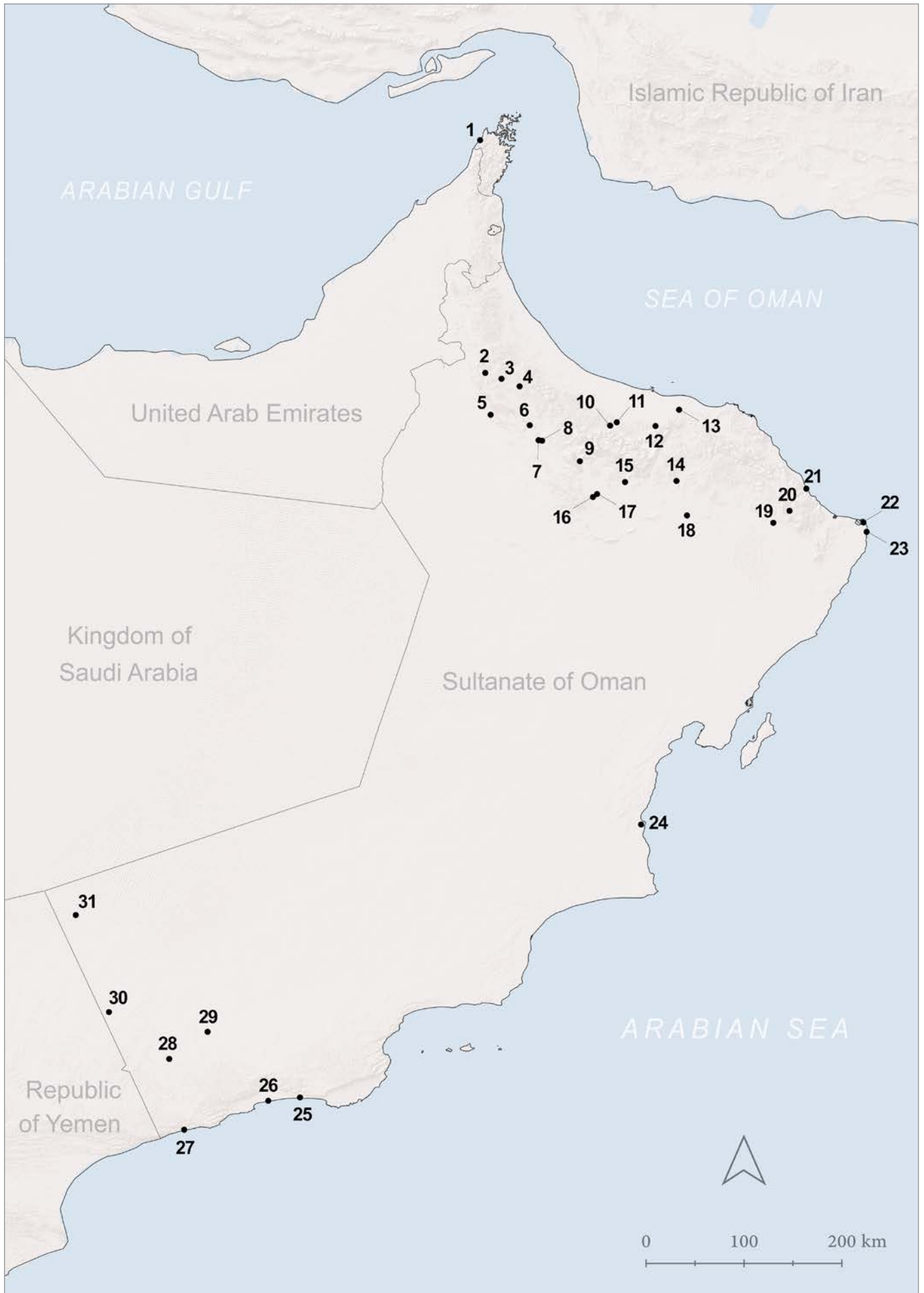




Artha



1. Bukha
2. Qumayra
3. Aqir Al Shamoos
Waby Al Zady
Tawi Zaba
4. Hayy Ukur
Shwaghy
5. Ash Shukur
6. Al Arid
7. Al Khatum
8. Bat
9. Hayl Ajah
10. Hayy Al Sarh
11. Al Tikha
12. Wadi Al Ma'awil
13. Halban
14. Mihlya
15. Tanuf
16. Sallut
17. Bisya
18. Al Mudhaybi
19. Romail
20. Wadi Bani Khalid
21. Wadi Tiwi
22. Ras Al Had
23. Ras Al Jinz
24. Ad Duqm
25. Khawr Rawri
26. Al Balid
27. Khawr Kharfut
28. Wadi Stum
29. Lahem
30. Tosnat
31. Mitan



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A Rasulid Mosque at Al-Balid: New Excavations and Interpretative Perspectives

Giunta R.¹ & A. Pavan¹

During the 2023–2024 field seasons, the Italian Archaeological Mission at Al-Balid (IAMOB) resumed investigations at mosque BA074, located in the centre of the ancient settlement. The mosque was part of a larger religious complex that the excavations have now brought to light, including a rectangular-plan minaret, a spacious area for ablutions, and a small funerary enclosure containing six burials. Full exposure of the structure confirmed a construction date in the 13th century, corresponding to the period of Rasulid domination in the Dhofar region. However, a trench excavated in the south-west corner of the prayer hall revealed that the mosque had been built over an earlier structure. The recovered assemblage includes locally produced and imported ceramics, glassware, coins, and fragments of gypsum plaster decorated with geometric and epigraphic motifs. Aerial photogrammetry and 3D modeling were employed to support documentation and to inform a virtual reconstruction of the complex.

خلال موسمي الحفريات 2023–2024، استأنفت البعثة الأثرية الإيطالية في البليد (IAMOB) الحفريات في المسجد الواقع (BA074) في وسط المستوطنة القديمة. كان المسجد جزءاً من مجمع ديني أكبر أظهرت الحفريات مكوناته الآن، بما في ذلك مننذة ذات مخطط مستطيل، ومنطقة واسعة للوضوء، وسور جنازي صغير يحتوي على ست قبور. أكد الكشف الكامل عن البناء تاريخ إنشائه في القرن الثالث عشر، وهو ما يتوافق مع فترة سيطرة الرسولية على منطقة ظفار. ومع ذلك، كشف خندق حفري في الركن الجنوب غربي من قاعة الصلاة أن المسجد بُني فوق بناء أقدم. تشمل المجموعة المستردة فخاراً محلي الصنع ومستورداً، وزجاجيات، وعملات معدنية، وقطعاً من الجص مزينة بزخارف هندسية ونقوش كتابية. تم استخدام التصوير الجوي الفوتوغرافي والنمذجة ثلاثية الأبعاد لدعم التوثيق والمساهمة في إعادة بناء افتراضية للمجمع.

The field activities carried out by the Italian Mission of the University of Naples L’Orientale at Al-Balid (hereafter IAMOB) during the 2023–2024 field seasons focused on continuing the archaeological investigations initiated in 2021. The team, comprising R. Giunta, A. D’Andrea, A. Pavan, R. Valentini, C. Passaro, and A. Antonelli, with the support of three local workers, fully exposed the remains of a mosque that had been almost entirely concealed beneath mound BA074. The mound is located at the centre of the ancient settlement (Fig. 1), near both the intersection of the town’s two main axes, aligned

north–south and east–west, and the so-called “Area B,” where a complex of structures of unknown function was uncovered during excavations conducted by P.M. Costa in the late 1970s.

Based on the analysis of its structural features and a preliminary assessment of the associated material assemblage, the building can be confidently dated to the 13th century, specifically to the period of Rasulid control over the Dhofar region (Giunta 2024).

During the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 field seasons, excavations uncovered the mosque’s prayer hall (14.5 × 14.5 m), a hypostyle structure with nine



Figure 1. Aerial photograph of the site, with the location of Mosque BA074 marked in red (© IAMOB 2024).

Director: Roberta Giunta ✉ rgiunta@unior.it

¹ Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies, University of Naples L’Orientale, Italy

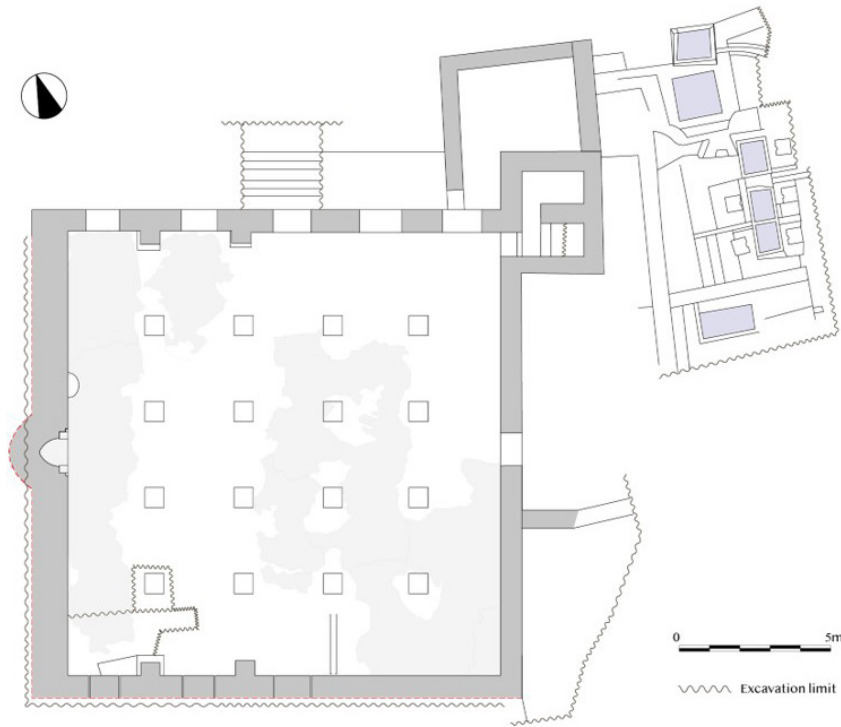


Figure 2. Plan of the religious complex BA074 (Drawing by C. Passaro; © IAMOB 2024).



Figure 3. Deep Sounding 1, showing the foundations of a wall oriented differently from the southern wall of the mosque (© IAMOB 2024).

doorways: one in the wall opposite the *qibli*, three in the south wall, and five in the north wall. Sixteen monolithic columns, arranged in four rows, were originally set into square sockets measuring 65 × 65 cm. The structure notably lacks a courtyard. All columns have disappeared, leaving only the roughly square foundations in place.

The primary evidence for the original appearance of these elements consists of four fragmentary examples, now on display at the Museum of the Frankincense Land in Salalah, and the tentative reconstruction published by Costa in 1982 (120, fig. 7). The *mihṛāb* (1 m wide) was located at the centre of the western wall and was flanked by two granite semi-columns, of which only a few fragments survive. The roof of the prayer hall was supported by wooden beams. The minaret, built against the northern end of the eastern wall, was accessed through a doorway in the prayer hall's eastern wall. Of the minaret tower, which has a rectangular plan (4.10 × 3.30 m), only the sill remains, from which a few steps ascend to a height of about 1 m.

Both the prayer hall and the minaret were built of local stone bonded with mortar, with the interstices packed with small stone fragments and chips. The structures stand on a raised platform about 1 m above street level and 4 m above sea level, reflecting a tradition typical of mosque architecture in Dhofar and parts of Oman (Costa 2001; Giunta 2024).

Excavation activities conducted during the most recent campaign brought to light the external face of the eastern wall of the prayer hall (to the left of the main entrance), the entire lower section of the minaret—flanked to the east by a staircase—and, further east, a large area used for ritual ablutions (Fig. 2).

The ablution area comprises five stone basins coated with a thick layer of hydraulic plaster, a well, and part of a basin that was likely used for watering animals. The five central basins were interconnected through multiple openings at various heights, allowing for the inflow and outflow of water via a complex system of channels. A funerary enclosure was also discovered to the north of the minaret, containing six stone-built graves, perfectly aligned and correctly oriented towards Mecca.

Two deep soundings were also carried out in the south-western part of the prayer hall. The first trench DS1 (2.60 m E–W × 1.90 m N–S) made it possible to assess the depth of the foundations of

the southern wall of the prayer hall and of one of the column bases of the first row (SU4). The second trench DS2 (1 m E–W × 2.50 m N–S) aimed to investigate the consistency and nature of a short N–S alignment (W9) found in front of one of the three southern doorways of the hall. Trench DS1 also led to the discovery (at a depth of 2.50 m) of a small portion of the foundations of a wall upon which part of the southern wall of the prayer hall is built (Fig. 3). This earlier wall, also running E–W but with a slightly different orientation compared to the southern foundation wall of the mosque, is associated with a compacted earthen floor.

The presence of structures beneath a couple of the site's mosques had already been noted during the investigations conducted by Paolo Costa and Juris Zarins. Contrary to Zarins' interpretation (2007), and in agreement with the hypothesis put forward by Costa (1982), the wall structure to which the earlier building belonged appears to be chronologically very close to that of the mosque.

Trench DS2 revealed that the alignment rests directly on the floor of the hall, indicating that it was added at a later stage—possibly intended to mark a separation within the space, possibly a prayer area for women.

The excavation activities yielded numerous ceramic fragments—mainly locally produced, as well as Yemen Yellow ware, diagnostic of the Rasulid period, and some sherds from East Asia. A number of small glass fragments were recovered, including a few pieces of enameled and gilded glassware, as well as fragments of glass bangles. Several stone slabs with central cavities—likely functioning as sockets for door pivots—were also found, along with perforated stone objects of uncertain purpose, fragments of stone basins, and a single bead.

Additional finds include five coins, a bone bead, small metal fragments probably related to nails or pins, and a piece of worked wood, possibly part of a piece of furniture. A substantial quantity of animal bone fragments was also recovered, likely associated with a later phase of occupation within the building.

Fragments of architectural decoration carved in gypsum plaster were found within the collapse layer of the minaret. Some bear incised geometric patterns, while others preserve short inscriptions that can be dated to a phase of use of the mosque following the Rasulid period.



Figure 4. Virtual reconstruction of the exterior (a) and the interior (b) of the mosque (Drawing by C. Passaro; ©IAMOB 2024).

During and after the excavation activities, both graphic and photographic documentation of the area was collected. The photographic record also includes drone imagery—kindly provided by Said Al Amri, Supervisor of the Archaeological Park—which enabled the production of detailed and overall photogrammetric models of the entire excavated

area. The drone was also employed to document the south-western sector of the site, where the Mission plans to continue archaeological investigations in the forthcoming campaigns.

In order to support the interpretation and communication of the site's original appearance, mission architect Carlotta Passaro developed a virtual re-

construction of the entire complex (Figs. 4a,b). The 3D model integrates archaeological data with comparative analysis of similar structures and elements of traditional architecture from the Dhofar region. It

includes both external and internal reconstructions, providing a spatially accurate and visually informed representation of the building.

Acknowledgements

The Mission was carried out in close collaboration with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism of the Sultanate of Oman. Its activities were made possible through funding from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the University of Naples L'Orientale (UniOr), and the International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies of Rome (ISMEO). The team would like to extend special thanks to Ali Al Kathiri, Director of the Land of Frankincense Sites Department, and Said Al Amri, Director of the Al-Balid Archaeological Park, for their invaluable logistical support and assistance during the fieldwork in Salalah.

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