

"L'Orientale"
Università degli Studi di Napoli

Centro Interdipartimentale di Servizi di Archeologia

Newsletter di Archeologia

CISA



Ricerche e studi

Direttore
Andrea D'Andrea

Rivista on-line
ISSN 2036-6353

2021
volume 12



The site of Ẓafār/al-Balīd (Sultanate of Oman)

Archaeological investigations between past and present

Proceedings of the round table held at Naples, Università L'Orientale, on June 18th 2021

Edited by A. D'Andrea, R. Giunta, A. Pavan, R. Valentini



Pubblicazione elettronica del

Centro Interdipartimentale di Servizi di Archeologia (CISA)

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Newsletter Archeologia CISA. Ricerche e Studi

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Pagine 178 + covers; Dimensioni 21 × 29,7 cm

ISSN: 2036-6353

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FOREWORD

I welcome with great pleasure this volume on the Italian researches over al-Balīd site published by the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. This is a further sign of how actual, dynamic and tangible is the collaboration between Italy and Oman in the archaeological field. Since the 1970s, the contribution of the Italian archaeological missions to the development of the relationship between the two countries has been essential. Thanks to the enthusiasm of the Omani authorities in promoting studies and research on the history of the Sultanate, Italian universities have always found responsive and supporting stakeholders, willing to facilitate excavations, analysis and in-depth activities by the archaeologists. Italian universities have always shared and agreed the goals and the features of their research with the Omani authorities, thus helping build a solid relationship of collaboration and trust, which has turned into a constant dialogue, joint activities and publications. These collaborations have also paved the way to a cooperation in the cultural and restoration sectors which allowed to share Italian conservation techniques with the Sultanate.

As part of the Vision 2040, the economic diversification strategy, the Omani authorities are focusing on the development of the tourism sector thanks to the appeal of the great historical heritage of Oman. The collaboration with Italy also supported the inclusion of several Omani sites studies by Italian scholars in the UNESCO World Heritage List. This is a great recognition of Italy and its scholars.

In this framework, the activity of “L’Orientale” in Dhofar is extremely important. This part of Oman is a key area for studies on the development of coastal civilizations in Southern Arabia. The research allows us to understand the relations that the Dhofar had with the rest of the region, from the African coasts the shores of Asia. This highlights the roots of the openness of the Sultanate to the world, which still today makes the maritime dimension a pillar of Oman’s development. The interest of the Omani Authorities for Dhofar – the birthplace of late Sultan Qaboos bin Said – and its potential for cultural tourism thanks to the presence of important UNESCO sites, makes the continuation of the studies on al-Balīd as promising as ever.

Since 2021, the Mission led by Prof. Roberta Giunta has received funds from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy. Italy has been supporting the work of Italian archaeologists in the Sultanate for over 40 years, thus gaining the appreciation of the Omani authorities at the highest level. Whilst recalling with great pleasure my participation to the roundtable of June 2021, I wish the mission full success in its research, which will be able to clarify still unknown aspects of the long history of Omani civilization.

A special thanks goes to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism of the Sultanate of Oman, a strong partner of Italy and which has been supporting this new project. With the same spirit, I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Roberta Giunta and the co-director Dr. Andrea D’Andrea, as well as their working group, and Dr. Alexia Pavan in particular, for their dedication and constant collaboration with the Embassy of Italy in Muscat.

Alessandro Garbellini
Deputy Head of Mission Embassy of Italy in Muscat

INTRODUCTION

This volume collects the contributions presented at the remote round table “The site of *Zafār/al-Balīd* (Sultanate of Oman). Archaeological investigations between past and present”, held at the University of Naples L’Orientale on 18th June 2021. The choice to organise a workshop and not a traditional conference arose from the need to create an opportunity for exchange and comparison among the scholars and experts who have worked in different fields at al-Balīd during recent years. This opportunity for discussion was also necessary given the peculiar historical moment: in 2020 the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs, under whose aegis the work of J. Zarins and L.S. Newton (2015-2012) and subsequently of A. Pavan (2016-2020) had been carried out, was closed and the activities passed under the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism of the Sultanate of Oman. Moreover, the pandemic crisis of 2020 had caused a forced and prolonged interruption of fieldwork, requiring a change in the strategy of the archaeological activities conducted since 2021 by the mission of the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, co-directed by Roberta Giunta and Andrea D’Andrea.

It was therefore a priority to organise a meeting from which, on the one hand, the state of the art about the current knowledge of the site could emerge and, on the other hand, new research trajectories could be outlined. The last few years of work at al-Balīd have been characterised by a multidisciplinary approach, which, alongside the more traditional methods of archaeological investigation, first and foremost the stratigraphic excavation, has included the collaboration of experts from various sectors, from geo-archaeological investigations aimed at the reconstruction of the palaeo-environment, to the study of ceramics from both the Islamic Lands and East Asia, numismatics and wooden elements reused in architecture and, finally, the 3D survey of the citadel.

Despite the work that has been carried out, there is still much to be understood about the foundation of the city, its urban layout with its transformations, its relationship with the surrounding area and the ethnic components that are presumed to have inhabited it.

Only a holistic and interdisciplinary approach will allow us to try to understand many of the still unclear issues of the settlement’s development and therefore archaeological field research must necessarily be accompanied by a recovery and a re-reading of the available written tradition that may record different sources, Chinese, Arabic and also European.

The geographic location of the site represents a privileged perspective to outline a model of an Islamic city in southern Arabia at least for the middle and late Islamic period. In fact, al-Balīd is the only medieval city along the Indian Ocean coast where excavations can be carried out, given the political instability in Yemen and the lack of evidence along the eastern part of the coast, with the exception of Qalhāt, which was however abandoned in the 16th century.

The proceedings of this conference represent a starting point for a new season of investigations in al-Balīd including the contribution that scholars from different research perspectives can make to the understanding of life of this important crossroad in the East-West trade routes. The main purpose was to produce a “handbook” that could be used by those working on-field, also to guide necessary subsequent studies on the ancient landscape and on the materials. However, we are committed to continuing our investigations through activities aimed at understanding the urban development of the site, but also delineating the cultural and natural environment in which the site was able to develop and prosper for many centuries.

Our heartfelt thanks go to the authors who contributed with their articles and research to this volume. The resumption of investigations in al-Balīd can only be achieved by bringing together a young and old group of scholars who are experts in different fields and moved by a spirit of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Works at al-Balīd have been possible thanks to the cooperation with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and we would like to thank the Minister, HE Salim bin Mohammed Al Mahrouqi, Dr Sultan Al Bakri, Director General for Archaeology and Dr Ali Al Mahrouqi, Director of Surveys and Archaeological

Excavations in Muscat for their support to the resumption of activities at the site.

In Ṣalālah Mr Khaled Abdullah Al Abri, Director General of Heritage and Tourism in the Governorate of Dhofar, Mr Ali Al Kathiri, Director of the Land of Frankincense Sites Department, and Mr Said al Amri, Supervisor of the site of al-Balīd, are heartfelt thanked for the strict and fruitful collaboration on the field, in the logistic and for their continuous support.

Warda Al Shahri, Salem Ghassani and Salem Tabook did a great job in the organization of the store and the conservation of the findings.

Warm and due thanks must also be directed to HE Abdulaziz bin Mohammed Al Rowas, former Adviser to the former HM the Sultan for Cultural Affairs who first believed in the potential of the site and initiated the development of the works at al-Balīd.

The efforts of surveyors, restorers, technicians and geologists have to be mentioned as well, in particular we are grateful to M. Cremaschi, S. Laurenza, A. Massa, A. Tilia, A. Zerboni for their contribution to the round table.

Finally, we really would address a heartfelt thanks to the Italian Embassy in Muscat in the person of HE Federica Favi, Italian Ambassador in the Sultanate and Dr Alessandro Garbellini, Deputy Head of Mission, whose constant support has been essential for an easier resumption of the activities at the site and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for the economic and political support provided to the mission.

The editors

DHOFAR CEMETERY AREAS: THE STATE OF RESEARCH AND NEW INVESTIGATION TASKS

Amanda Antonelli, Graduate student at OrSa – Scuola Interateneo di Specializzazione in Beni Archeologici (UniSa, Unior)

The aim of this article is to sum up all the information known to date on the Islamic funerary context and epigraphy within the archaeological site of al-Balīd and the related Ṣalālah area, and to set the starting points for further research that should be hopefully carried out in the near future. The possibility to resume this study originates from our involvement in the Italian Mission at al-Balīd of the University of Naples L'Orientale, co-directed by Roberta Giunta and Andrea D'Andrea, and financed by Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) and the International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies (ISMEO).¹

Until today only few studies have been conducted regarding the funerary context during the Islamic period in the Dhofar region. The first article on this matter was published in the first half of the 20th century by Rhuvon Guest (1935) who studied three marble *stelae* from the cemetery of al-Ribāt offering a brief description and a translation of the texts inscribed upon them. His work was then resumed by Venetia Porter (1988) and by Elizabeth Lambourn (2004), both of them studying the connection between these *stelae* and the production of marble slabs in Cambay in Gujarat. In 1975 John Carter wrote a very small note on three graves from the cemetery of Bā 'Alawī (Ṣalālah Gharbiyya) where three descendants of Badr Bū Ṭuwayriq² were buried. In 1980 Giovanni Oman carried out a general epigraphic survey of the Ṣalālah area,³ that will be discussed in detail, which resulted in only three publications (Oman 1982, 1983, 1989) concerning funerary evidence. Further studies were then conducted within the Archaeological Park of al-Balīd during the 1996-1997 campaigns of the funerary mosque by the Sultan Qaboos University, though no documentation of the results was ever published. Another gravestone was also found on the ground of a quarter mosque situated almost in the centre of the city; its epitaph was studied by Eros Baldissera and published as a contribution to the volume by Paolo Costa (2001, 127). In 2003, the University of Aachen created a database containing almost 1500 of the burials of the western cemetery of al-Balīd. Unfortunately, we have no access to official records of this database and our only source of information is the unpublished report by Juris Zarins and Lynne Newton (2012). Further studies have been conducted by Paolo Costa (2001) and by Lynne Newton (2010) on the shrines of Dhofar.

THE SURVEY OF GIOVANNI OMAN

The most important work concerning the Islamic funerary context and epigraphy in Dhofar is that conducted by Giovanni Oman in the 1980s, result of the survey carried out in the area of Ṣalālah. In fact, Oman was called by Paolo Costa to take part in the research he was conducting in the site of al-Balīd (Costa 1982) and to carry out an epigraphic survey that aimed to locate burial grounds, monuments and mosques where Arabic inscriptions could be found (Oman 1983, 277). The survey took place from the 14th to the 23rd of March 1980. The burial grounds located by Oman were those of al-Balīd, al-Ḥaddād, al-Ribāt, al-Qūf, Bin 'Afīf, Bā 'Alawī and 'Awqad, and the shrine of Bin 'Alī near Mirbāt (Fig. 1). Oman managed to visit all of the burial grounds except for the one located in al-Qūf.

The results of this survey were presented within the three abovementioned articles that, as also Oman often pointed out, were only preliminary and would have required further investigations that have never occurred. Because of their preliminary nature they indeed have some limitations: only the evidence from the "Section A" of the western cemetery of al-Balīd has been thoroughly documented and the burials photographed, numbered and partially studied, while of the other cemeteries we only have partial information both on the burial grounds and on the graves and gravestones. An additional problem concerns the study of the epitaphs: the Arabic texts are completely absent and only partial translations have been given even when more

¹ Some of the topics that will be briefly presented in this paper were also treated in detail in the author's unpublished Master's degree thesis discussed at the University of Naples L'Orientale (Antonelli 2021).

² Kathīrī chief (Carter 1975, 211), Muccadam of Seiyun that became Lord of Hadramawt and Dhofar (Miles 1919, 510). Miles records that the Kathīrī became one of the leading tribes in Hadramawt by the end of the 14th century and invaded Dhofar at the beginning of the 15th century, establishing the Kathīrī dynasty, founded by 'Alī b. 'Umar al-Kathīrī (Miles 1919, 506-508).

³ Former Professor of Arabic dialectology, Arabic linguistics, Arabic literature, Muslim history and institutions, Islamic studies and Arab studies in several Italian Universities including the then Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples.

complete readings were possible.⁴ Regarding the photographs attached to the 1983 and 1989 articles, not all of them allow a clear view of the burials and the record of the single graves is often incomplete. This was both due to the limited time available and to the difficulties that the team had to face taking the photographs:

“[...] to photograph the inscriptions was particularly difficult for at least three reasons: the front of the gravestones faces north; [...] the lower part [...] is still buried in the ground; many of the inscriptions are covered by a dark coating [...]” (Oman 1983, 280).

Even in the light of these weaknesses, the information provided by Oman is still very rich and it has represented an invaluable starting point to resume the study.

THE BURIAL GROUNDS

Thanks to the plan of the Ṣalālāh area (Fig. 1) and to the sketches included within Oman's report (1983, 281, 284-285) it has been possible to locate all of the burial grounds except al-Qūf and some of the shrines identified by Lynne Newton (2010, figs. 1, 2, tab. 1) on Google Earth (Fig. 2). To these locations we also added the burial ground of the funerary mosque within the archaeological site of al-Balīd.

Through the analysis of the satellite images, it has also been possible to partially verify their state of preservation: none of them seems to have undergone any changes in their extension, although, by comparing the historical imagery present on Google Earth, some modifications were observed inside some of the cemeteries, in particular those of Bin 'Afif, al-Ḥaddād, Bā 'Alawī and 'Awqad.⁵ Between 2004 and May 2021, within some of the burial grounds, buildings and rectangular structures of roughly 2×1 m that could resemble *mausolea* and tombs were built, suggesting these areas may still be in use in these days.

Some first remarks can be made on the structure of the burial grounds: in fact, they all share common features that Oman had highlighted and that the photographs and the satellite images have partially confirmed. All of them are surrounded by an enclosure, a fence, as in the case of al-Balīd, or a wall and access was possible through gates. In the maps attached to the 1983 article (Oman 1983, figs. 2-8) it is possible to see that some areas inside of the burial grounds are signalled as “ruins”. Some of these ruins have turned out to be remains of old mosques, as in the case of al-Ribāt (Costa 1982; 2001, 128), and shrines, as that of Ṣāḥib al-Ḥadra in “Section A” of the cemetery of al-Balīd (Newton 2010, 337). Oman reported the presence of mosques inside of the enclosures of the cemeteries of 'Awqad, Bā 'Alawī, Bin 'Afif and al-Ḥaddād. The majority of the burial grounds also contains a shrine of a saint or of a *shaykh*, traditionally consisting of a plain open-air tomb and less often of a *mausolea*. On the other hand, none of them holds the tomb of a prophet, usually situated in isolated locations far from the city centres. This could be the reason why most of the names given to the burial grounds can be traced back to illustrious people that were part of important families of saints and prophets of Dhofar and Hadramawt, though more studies will be necessary to determine the link between burial grounds and shrines.

TYPES OF BURIALS

From a first examination of the photographic evidence of the tombs, it was possible to define some features common to all the burials. All the graves are excavated in the earth and north-south oriented, allowing to lie the deceased on the right side, with the face towards Mecca (Oman 1983, 278). The graves are all covered with earth, levelled to the ground or in some cases creating a very low mound. They can be marked by one, two or three gravestones and in some cases delimited by an enclosure. In many cases, the tombs were signalled by only one gravestone, usually photographed *ex situ* or far from the original burial location. For this reason, it was impossible to define if this is in fact a type of burial or just a bad state of preservation of the original tomb. For the remaining tombs, as Oman (1983, 278) had already pointed out, the number of *stelae* varies depending on the sex of the deceased: if male the burial was delimited by two uprights, one in the position of the head and one above the feet, while if female a further slab was added at the centre of the mound. Some female burials also show extra stone slabs of smaller dimensions which Oman (1983, 278; 1989, 197) supposed – though without discussing his theory – that were used for graves of women who died during childbirth.

⁴ During the analysis of the photographic evidence collected from the several studies, it was often possible to suggest reading hypothesis of the texts, despite the quality of the pictures.

⁵ A more detailed analysis of both the satellite images and the cemeterial areas was made within the unpublished thesis by the author (Antonelli 2021). However, because of the preliminary nature of our hypotheses, that will also need to be verified on the field, we have decided to present here only a brief summary.

Some of the burials were also delimited by a border. It was possible to observe three different types of enclosures:

- border made of earth, slightly higher than the level of the mound;
- border made of uncut, rough stones;
- border made of hewn stones, that in some cases was plastered. A subtype of the latter enclosure was found in the cemetery of al-Ribāt, the border made of hewn stones with a line of Koranic verses engraved along the whole perimeter.

In the light of this data, it was possible to define four different types of burials (Fig. 3):

- (A) burial covered with earth, in some cases creating a low mound, signalled by one (A1), two (A2) or three (A3) gravestones;
- (B) burial covered with a low mound enclosed by a border made of earth signalled by one (B1), two (B2) or three (B3) gravestones;
- (C) burial covered with a low mound enclosed by a border made of uncut stones signalled by one (C1), two (C2) or three (C3) gravestones;
- (D) burial covered with a low mound enclosed by a border made of hewn stones signalled by one (D1), two (D2) or three (D3) gravestones with the exception of its “Koranic subtype”, only signalled by two gravestones.

TYPES OF GRAVESTONES

The gravestones from the burial grounds of Dhofar are usually made of stone, with the exception of two wooden *stelae* from Mirbāt. The majority were made of local stone while the three *stelae* from the Victoria and Albert Museum of London were made of marble from Cambay, therefore imported from Gujarat.

The shapes of the gravestones are very simple: usually plain, squared stone slabs with no inscriptions. Some gravestones with more complex shapes, however, stand out because of the profile of their upper part or “head”. A preliminary subdivision has led to identify four types of slabs named with the Greek letters α - δ (Fig. 4).⁶ Within each of the four groups a varied number of subtypes were identified, each of them indicated with sequential numbers and displayed from the simplest shape (1) to the more complex. We don’t rule out the possibility that the simplest shapes also correspond to the oldest types.

Type α with a semi-circular top:

- $\alpha 1$ regular;
- $\alpha 2$ slightly recessed from the body;
- $\alpha 3$ ogee shaped.

Type β with a squared shape top:

- $\beta 1$ regular;
- $\beta 2$ with a sequence of small teeth;
- $\beta 3$ with three merlons.

Type γ with a trapezoidal shape top:

- $\gamma 1$ smoothed angled top;
- $\gamma 2$ regular;
- $\gamma 3$ with a small squared tooth.

Type δ with a head:

- $\delta 1$ semi-elliptical;
- $\delta 2$ three foiled;
- $\delta 3$ rhomboidal;
- $\delta 4$ with a varied number (generally odd) of teeth.

Some gravestones of the type δ , regardless of the subtypes, show a peculiar shape of the body, with a varied number of projections (or dentils) along the lateral sides. Other characteristics of some type δ gravestones that should be further deepened are the resemblance of subtypes $\delta 1$ -3 to the anthropomorphic form (lateral projections as arms and a “neck” connecting the head to the body) and the shape of subtypes $\delta 4$ that recall that of a hand with an open palm and fingers pointing upwards.

To link the types of gravestones to their burial grounds of origin, we have added to the map published by Oman (1983, fig. 1) coloured marks indicating each type (Fig. 5). The only burial ground where all the

⁶ The two wooden *stelae* from Mirbāt have been considered separately and will not be discussed within this article.

types were present was in the site of al-Balīd, followed by al-Ribāt where all types are present except for type δ; Bā ‘Alawī where only types α and β were present; ‘Awqad where only type γ was present. No epigraphic evidence was documented from the cemeteries of Bin ‘Afif and al-Ḥaddād. However, it has been possible to identify *stelae* of the α and β types in Bin ‘Afif and of the β type in al-Ḥaddād thanks to two panoramic photographs of the areas (Oman 1983, pls. 5, 58). Finally, a photograph provided by Oman (1989, pl. 2.3) shows a view of the burial ground of al-Qūf where only anepigraphic slabs with no decoration and anepigraphic stone blocks of varied dimensions are visible.

THE CORPUS

To organise the *corpus* of the funerary evidence from Dhofar we have created a catalogue (Antonelli 2021, 58-172) containing information sheets of 17 tombs and 67 *stelae* of which 36 were part of a tomb and the remaining ones were photographed isolated. Because of the limited space available we have decided not to include the catalogue within this article. However, in Tab. 1 we have provided a brief index of the catalogue. The tombs and gravestones have been arranged by burial ground, though the original location of some gravestones is still unknown, and the order depends on the quantity of gravestones from each cemetery (from the most to the least numerous). In the catalogue were not included: the gravestone seen by Miles in 1919 in the cemetery of al-Ribāt, of which only the name of the deceased is reported;⁷ the three burials recorded by Carter (1975, 211) from the cemetery of Bā ‘Alawī (Ṣalālah Gharbiyya), of which we have no detailed photographs nor information other than the names of the three deceased – two women and a man –⁸ and a possible date of the death of the male individual.⁹ In the last two columns the epigraphic or anepigraphic character of the *stelae* is indicated.

The epitaphs are usually carved in a slightly accentuated bas-relief, though some of them show a deeper incision. Only the lamps on the upper parts of the gravestones from the Victoria and Albert Museum are carved in high relief, almost sculpted in the round. The decorative elements (frames and geometric or vegetal motifs) of the gravestones are usually made using the same technique employed for the epitaphs.

The texts are usually arranged on the four faces of the gravestones. This is a peculiarity of this epigraphic material that also G. Oman (1983, 281) had highlighted, because usually slabs are only inscribed on the front face. Texts are organised in one or more horizontal lines, more or less regular, often enclosed within squared frames (Fig. 6). Only few of the epitaphs are arranged freely on the surface. Another peculiarity concerns the way the words and characters are organised within the lines: they are often arranged in an irregular way and they are in some cases split on different lines with words following a boustrophedon style, though from bottom to top and then from top to bottom. This tendency has made reading and deciphering the texts quite hard.

The formulary of the epitaphs is extremely plain and often it doesn’t even include the name of the deceased nor the date of the death. A table with the recurring expressions, formulas and Koranic verses is presented in Tab. 2.

Also, some recurring titles and epithets were found within the epitaphs, presented as follows in order of their frequency within the corpus. The only feminine epithets, found at the moment on five of the 23 female gravestones, is *al-ḥurra al-tāhira*, “the freeborn, the pure”. A greater variety of religious and political titles were uncovered on male gravestones, though many of these have not been deciphered yet. The first one is *sayyid*,¹⁰ often followed by *sharīf*, both of them indicating descendants of the family of Prophet Muḥammad. Another title frequently found is *shaykh*, sometimes used instead of *mashayikh*, usually indicating the head of a family, of a school, a community leader or a religious authority (Newton 2010, 333; Bosworth 1986e). Other titles are *ṣadr*, used to define illustrious people with both religious or political authority (Bosworth 1986b), and *faḍl al-kāmil*, which is frequently used but further studies will be necessary to find out its meaning.

Another matter concerns dating systems, summarised in Fig. 7. At the moment only five gravestones (nos. 8a, 36, 35a, 37b, 43a)¹¹ show a readable date, but we must consider that our documentation is only partial and that many of the epitaphs are unreadable in the lower part of the slabs, where dates are usually inscribed.

⁷ Malik al-Fattāḥ ‘Abd al-Kādir b. ‘Abd al-Wahīd b. Wāthik Ibrāhīm b. al-Muzaffar ‘Amr b. ‘Alī (Miles 1919, 510).

⁸ The names of the two women are: Badrīyat bint Ja‘far b. Badr Bū Ṭuwayriq and Ruqaiyat bint ‘Amr b. Ja‘far b. ‘Amr b. Badr Bū Ṭuwayriq, that of the man: ‘Amr b. Ja‘far (Carter 1975, 211).

⁹ “[...] carries a date which corresponds to about 1728” (Carter 1975, 211).

¹⁰ For both the titles *sayyid* and *sharīf* see Bosworth 1986c; 1986d.

¹¹ The numbers are to be referred to the catalogue of the *corpus* included in Antonelli (2021, 58-172).

Nonetheless four different ways to write dates have been identified so far:

- dates written in letters;
- dates written in figures;
- dates written in figures with the hundreds in letters: units, tens and hundreds inscribed in figures; thousands *alf* written in letters preceded by the conjunction *wa*;
- dates written with *abjad* system:¹² Oman (1983, 281) signalled it on slabs nos. 30 and 33, still undeciphered. On no. 33 the chronogram is followed by *wa alf*.

On gravestones nos. 8b and 43a we signal the presence of number five in its Persian figure. This has led us to suppose that also the chronogram on slab no. 33 could be a date in Persian figures, though this hypothesis needs further studies to be verified.

Concentrating now on the writing styles, as also Oman (1983, 287) had pointed out, no Kufic inscription has been found so far and all the slabs are inscribed in cursive script, but no distinction of the different types of cursive characters was made. Anyhow, a great variety of styles of cursive script was identified during the study of the *corpus* (Fig. 6), making their classification very hard. Sometimes, more than one style was employed on a same gravestone or on the gravestones of a same tomb. Firstly, there is a clear distinction between incised and sculpted epitaphs. Two different styles of incised cursive script have been identified: the first one, could be defined as a Kufic-like style because of its angular letterforms and features common to the Kufic script, especially in the way the *lām-alif* is realised, while the second one could be defined as a rough cursive, for its unrefined execution. Three different styles of cursive scripts have been identified on the engraved slabs: a first Kufic-like style similar to the one observed on the incised gravestones, a fluid script with a regular execution and arrangement of the letters and a fluid script with an irregular execution of the letters.

DATING THE *CORPUS*

As already pointed out only five gravestones bear a readable date so it is still impossible to define a chronology of the *corpus* and therefore of the burial grounds. These gravestones have been displayed on a timeline in Fig. 8.

The oldest date was read on the *stelae* of Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, from the shrine located in Mirbāt, no. 43. This gravestone is a slab with a semi-circular top slightly recessed from the body (type α2) bearing the date of ٥٥٦, 556/1160-1161, though Oman (1983, 287) was not convinced this gravestone could be this old, assuming that “[...] dating this inscription will not be an easy task [...]”. Following this gravestone in chronological order are two of the three marble gravestones from al-Ribāt,¹³ part of the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, both slabs with an ogee shaped top (type α3). The first one, no. 35a (A13-1933)¹⁴, is slightly older, bearing the year

إحدى عشر وسبعمائة
711/1311

while the second one, no. 36 (A5-1932), bears the date of

أربع ع(ش)ر وسبعمائة
714/1315 (Guest 1935, 408-410).

Despite the large number of gravestones from al-Balīd, only one of them shows a readable date inscribed. It is no. 8a, a gravestone with a head with five teeth (type δ4) and it bears the date of ٩٥٥ والف (1095/1683), even though Oman (1983, 284) read that of 1011/1602. The last dated gravestone, no. 37b, comes from the graveyard of Bā ‘Alawī and it is a plain rectangular slab (type β1) bearing the date of سبع وميه والف (1107/1695; Oman 1983, 285).

¹² *Abjad*, or chronogram, consists in assigning a numerical value to the letters of the Arabic alphabet. In our case, the sum of the values provides the date of death.

¹³ The third gravestone, no. 35b (A12-1933), only has religious inscriptions (Guest 1935).

¹⁴ In brackets are the Victoria and Albert Museum catalogue numbers also used by Guest 1925, Porter 1988 and Lambourn 2004.

In the light of this first information, it is evident that the dates cover a very wide time frame, from a pre-Rasūlid period,¹⁵ if we consider the gravestone of Muḥammad b. ‘Alī as contemporary to his death, to a Rasūlid time with the two slabs from al-Ribāt, up to the 17th century with the two slabs from al-Balīd and Bā ‘Alawī. All of the gravestones that have been dated until now are rather late and none of them is older than the 6th century/12th century.

Considering the lack of dates inscribed on the gravestones, other methods should be employed in the future to try to define an internal chronology of the *corpus* and, subsequently a chronology of the occupation of the burial grounds.

CONCLUSION

From these preliminary data it appears clearly that further studies need to be conducted on the subject. This first study was aimed to gather all the information known until now on this topic together into one paper but is in fact entirely based on partial data and the impossibility to visit the burial grounds and verify their state of preservation has represented the main limit in order to achieve new results. It will be necessary to further study the position of the burial grounds within the region of Dhofar, to resume the study of their structure and internal organisation and to verify whether they are still in use nowadays. It will also be necessary to deepen the study of the graves, in particular, their disposition within the burial grounds, where possible, the types of burials, and to verify whether there is a match between certain burial types and the use of different types of gravestones. The study of the gravestones also needs to be resumed and in particular the palaeographic aspect has to be studied in depth as it can contribute to establish a first chronology of the slabs.

To define some comparisons will also be useful to shed more light on the history of both the burial grounds and the gravestones. Concerning the area of Dhofar, many photos of epigraphic evidence have been shared on Twitter where a great number of accounts debate about the history and culture of Dhofar. In particular a contact was made with the manager of one account named البارقي الشرقي, @salalah2019,¹⁶ settled in the town of Ṣalālah, that has offered to help as further research is done.

Hopefully the activities of the Italian Mission at al-Balīd will start again in the near future allowing new surveys of the burial grounds to gain new information.

¹⁵ The Rasūlid dynasty conquered Dhofar in 1279 and ruled until the 14th century when power shifted to the Kathīrī dynasty. Before the Rasūlid conquest, the ruling family were the Habūḍids (Bosworth 1986a; see also Giunta in this volume).

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/salalah2019>.

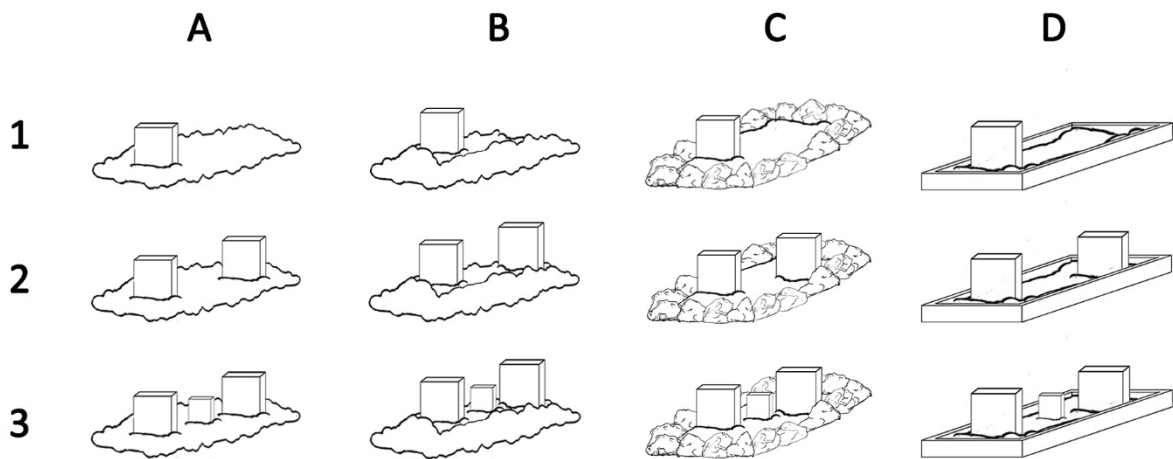


Fig. 3 - Types of burials (Drawings by the author).

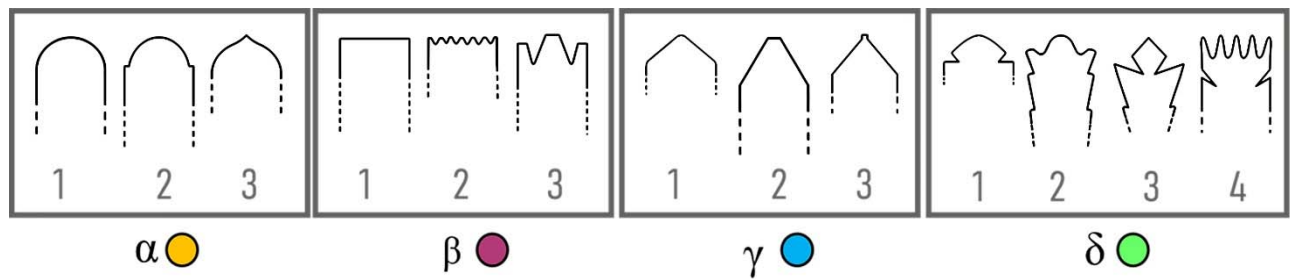


Fig. 4 - Types of gravestones (Drawings by the author).

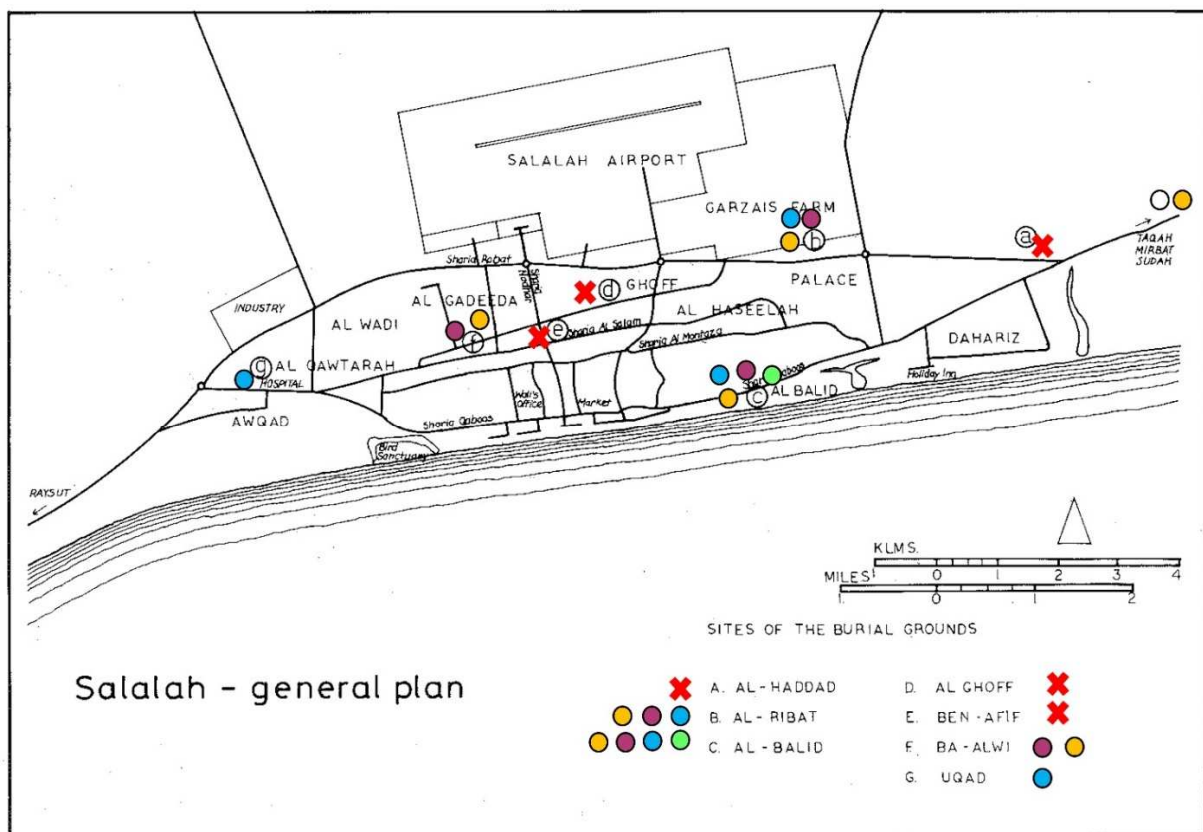


Fig. 5 - Distribution of the types of gravestones.

Tomb	Stelae from a same tomb	Isolated stelae	Epigraphic stelae	Anepigraphic stelae
al-Balīd				
n. 1	Tomb with 3 stelae (nos. 1a, 1b, 1c)		1a, 1b, 1c	
n. 2	Tomb with 3 stelae (nos. nn. 2a, 2b, 2c)		2	1
n. 3	Tomb with 3 stelae (nos. 3a, 3b, 3c)			3a, 3b, 3c
n. 4	Tomb with 3 stelae (nos. 4a, 4b, 4c)		2	1
n. 5	Tomb with 2 stelae (nos. 5a, 5b)		5a, 5b	
n. 6	Tomb with 3 stelae (nos. 6a, 6b, 6c)		2	1
n. 7	Tomb with 2 stelae (nos. 7a, 7b)		7a, 7b	
n. 8	Tomb with 3 stelae (nos. 8a, 8b, 8c)		8a, 8b, 8c	
n. 9	Tomb with 2 stelae (nos. 9a, 9b)		9a, 9b	
		n. 10	10	
		n. 11	11	
		n. 12	12	
		n. 13	13	
		n. 14		14
		n. 15	15	
		n. 16	16	
		n. 17	17	
		n. 18	18	
		n. 19	19	
		n. 20	20	
		n. 21		21
		n. 22	22	
		n. 23	23	
		n. 24	24	
		n. 25	25	
		n. 26	26	
		n. 27	27	
		n. 28	28	
		n. 29	29	
al-Ribāṭ				
n. 30	(1)		1	
		n. 31	1	
		n. 32	1	
		n. 33	1	
		n. 34		1
n. 35	(2) nn. 35a, 35b		2	
		n. 36	1	
Bā ‘Alawī				
n. 37	(2) nn. 37a, 37b		2	
n. 38	(1)		1	
n. 39	(1)		1	
		n. 40	1	
		n. 41	1	
‘Awqad				
n. 42	(1)		1	
Mirbāṭ				
n. 43	(2) nn. 43a, 43b		2	
Unknown burial ground				
n. 44	Epigraphic enclosure			
		n. 45		1
		n. 46		1
		n. 47	1	
		n. 48	1	

Tab. 1 - Index of the catalogue of the *corpus*.

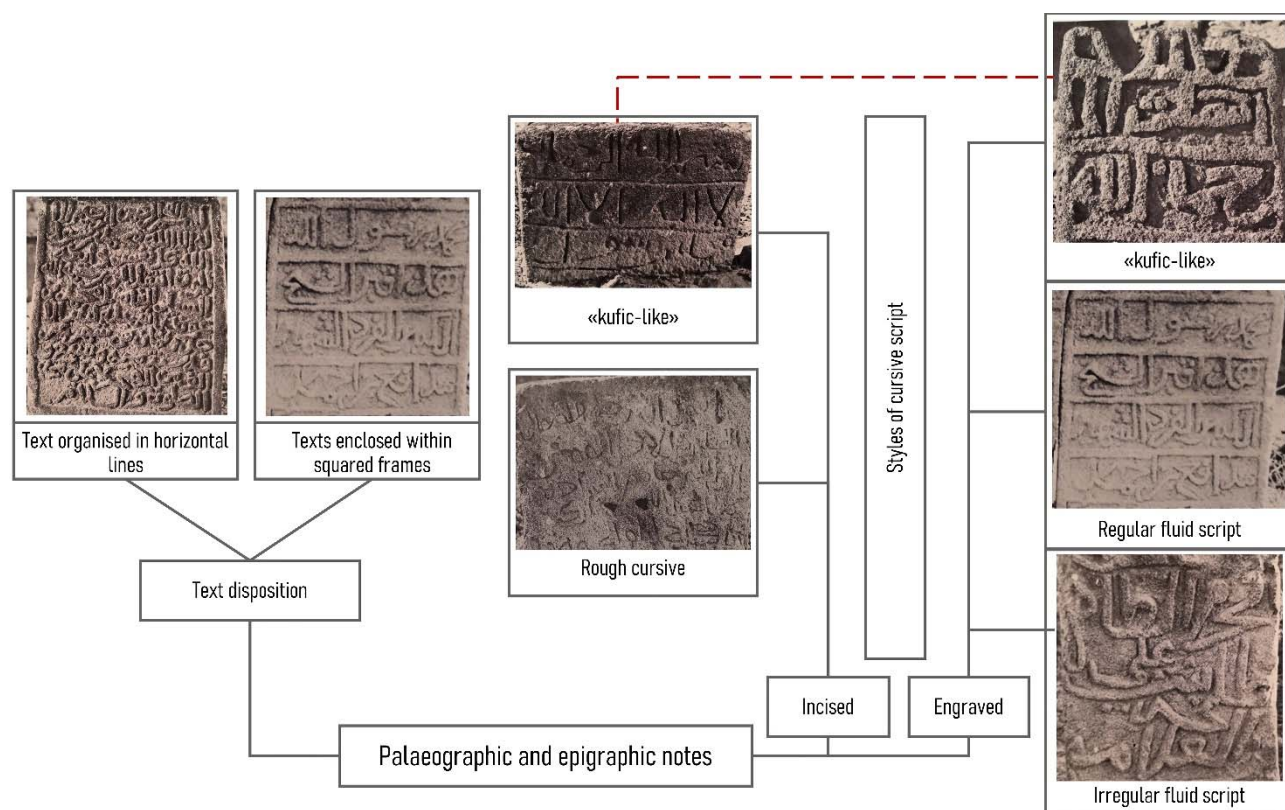


Fig. 6 - Text disposition and styles of cursive scripts (Scheme by the author; Oman 1983, pls. 8, 9, 15, 33, 40, 48, 52, 60, 71).

<i>Taṣliyya</i>	صلى الله عليه وسلم	May God bless him and peace be upon him
<i>Shahāda</i>	لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله	There is no God but Allah, Muḥammad is the Prophet of Allah
<i>Basmala</i>	بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم	In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Mercifull
<i>Ḥamdala</i>	الحمد لله	Praise be to God
Kor. 3:185	كل نفس ذائقة الموت وانما توفون اجوركم يوم القيامة فمن زحزح عن النار وادخل الجنة فقد فاد وما الحياة الدنيا الا متاع الغرور	Every soul will taste death. And you will only receive your full reward on the Day of Judgment. Whoever is spared from the Fire and is admitted into Paradise will 'indeed' triumph, whereas the life of this world is no more than the delusion of enjoyment.
Kor. 55:26	كل من عليها فان	Every being on earth is bound to perish.
Kor. 55:27	ويبقى وجه ربك ذو الجلال والاكرام	And there will remain the Face of your Lord, Owner of Majesty and Honor.
Definition of the tomb	هذا قبر	This is the grave of...
Introduction of the name of the deceased	انتقل الى رحمت الله	Passed away into God's mercy

Tab. 2 - Formulary.

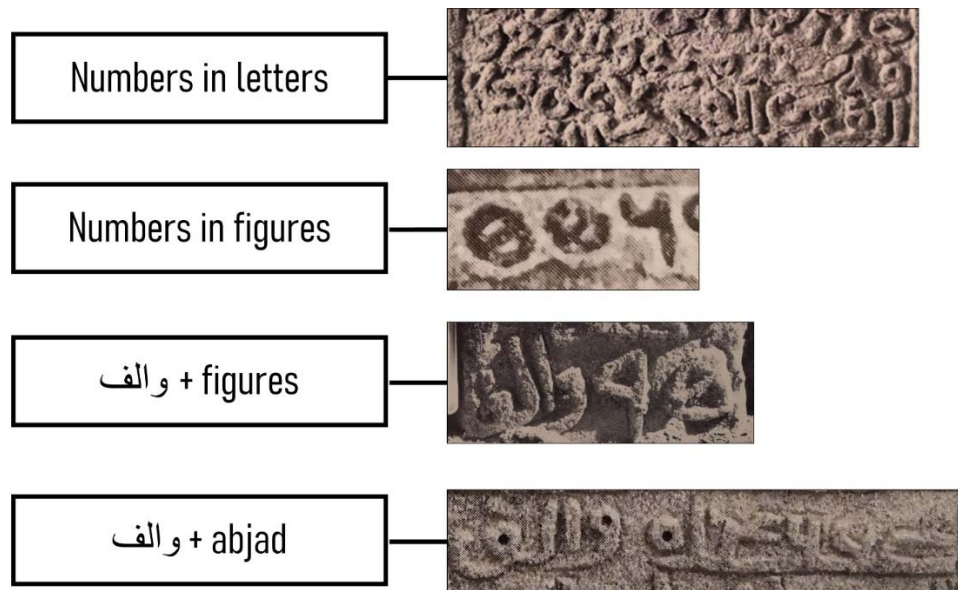


Fig. 7 - Dating systems.



Fig. 8 - Timeline of the dated gravestones.

ANNEX

Visits, archaeological surveys and excavations in Zafār/al-Balīd (1834-2019)

Andrea D'Andrea, Roberta Giunta, Alexia Pavan

<i>Years</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>References</i>
1834-36	First visit by Stafford Bettesworth Haines to 'Awqad (lit. Audád), Salalah (lit. Ṣallálah), Ḥāfa (lit. Haffer) and the "extensive ruins located two miles and a half E.N.E. of Haffer, near a fresh-water lake".	Haines 1845, 118
1836	Charles John Cruttenden visits Salalah (lit. Solahlah), Dahrīz (lit. Dyreez), Ḥāfa (lit. El Hafah), and the remains of an old town called El Bellut (i.e. al-Balīd) located between Ḥāfa and Dahrīz.	Cruttenden 1836, 187
1839	Henry John Carter draws the first schematic plan and provides a detailed description of the site, which was located between the towns of Salalah (lit. Silalah) and Ḥāfa (lit. El Hafa) on the west, and that of Dahrīz (lit. Dareez) on the east. He visits the citadel ruins (pp. 229-30) and the ruins of the great mosque (lit. Temple or Mosque), which originally contained one hundred and eighty-three pillars (p. 230). He points out that the site was divided into two parts, of which only the eastern one was fortified (p. 225).	Carter 1844-46 (The same information can be found in Carter 1846)
1883 and 1884	Samuel Barrett Miles draws a historical picture of the region (pp. 498-514), and gives a description of the site, which he locates between Ḥāfa (lit. Al-Hafa) and Dahrīz (lit. Dareez). He clearly identifies the city walls, the towers, the ditch, the citadel, the great mosque and the custom house (p. 544). He also provides information on the burial grounds at al-Ribāt (lit. Robot; p. 547).	Miles 1919; Marshall 1989, 74
1894	The Bents (James Theodore and his wife, Mabel) visit al-Balīd (lit. Al Balad) and al-Ribāt (lit. Robot), which were the ancient capital of Dhofar (p. 115). Based on Sprenger's work (1864), Bent points out that the ancient name of al-Balīd was Zafār (lit. Zafar), which was destroyed in 618/1221-22, when al-Manṣūra (lit. Mansura) was built, "under which name the capital was known in early Mohammedan times" (p. 116).	Bent 1895
1895	The Bents visit Dhofar region for the second time. With regard to al-Balīd and al-Ribāt, they provide very similar information to that of the 1894 publication.	Bent Th. and M. 1900
1918	Charles Craufurd visits al-Balīd (lit. Al Bilad), which is in a state of complete ruin, and the graveyard located in the western area. He also takes the first photographs of the Great Mosque.	Craufurd 1919

<i>Years</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>References</i>
1930	Visit to the ruined city of al-Balīd (lit. Balid) by Bertram Thomas (p. 38), “the most extensive ruins of the Dhofar (lit. Dhufar) plain” (p. 8). He takes some photos on the site (see also Peyton 1983, p. 75).	Thomas 1932
1930 ca.	Sultan Said bin Taimur carries out some excavation works along the east end of the south side of the citadel.	(Quoted in Albright 1982, p. 59)
1945	Wilfred Thesiger arrives for the first time in Ṣalālah, “the capital of Dhaufar”, and visits the site and the numerous ruins scattered around the city and the plain (pp. 43-44).	Thesiger 1959 (ed. 2008)
1952-1960	First archaeological excavations (started in spring 1952) under the auspices of the American Foundation for the Study of Man (AFSM). Wendell Phillips was the sponsor of the expedition; Frank P. Albright the main archaeologist and responsible of the whole work. The AFSM works involved the city wall, the towers, the two city gates, the citadel (“Area A”), the great mosque, the western bridge, four habitations in the western side of the walled city (“Area H”), and a number of buildings and mosques scattered around the site which are shown on a map drawn by Phillips (fig. 21; see also Zarins 2007, fig. 2). However, a full account of the excavation work and a complete list of the finds are lacking. Albright (p. 106) provides only a list of 90 artefacts, summarily described and without graphic or photographic documentation. Unpublished materials are held by the AFSM in various locales in Virginia.	Phillips 1971; 1972; Albright 1955; 1982
1977-1981	Paolo Costa leads three seasons of work (started in spring 1978, following a first survey in winter 1977) on behalf of the Omani Ministry of National Heritage and Culture and in cooperation of the local authorities. Costa employs a large team of experts, analyses the site for the first time with a scientific approach, and provides a detailed site plan with a 50 m interval grid system. The main excavation activities concerned the great mosque, the western bridge and city gates (called “Area A”), and an area located in the centre of the walled city (called “Area B”). However, once again, a final analysis of the materials and a study of the ceramic fragments are lacking.	Costa 1979
1980	Giovanni Oman, upon invitation of Costa, carries out a preliminary study of the epigraphic material from the western cemetery of the site (1983), as well as from Ṣalālah and Mirbāt (1982).	Oman 1982; 1983; 1989
1994	At UNESCO’s request, Michael Jansen draws up an executive project for the development of cultural tourism in the Governorate of Dhofar.	Jansen 2015, p. VII
1995-2003	The German archaeological mission from Aachen University, directed by M. Jansen, in cooperation with the National Committee for the supervision of Archaeological Survey in the Sultanate, carries out numerous campaigns. The main activities carried out by the mission were: the first topographic surveying of the site (1995-1996; Jansen 2015, p. 31); the application of digital prospection and three-dimensional documentation in conservation of architectural remains (1997-2000; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 32-37); the documentation methodology for the archaeological activities (2001; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 37-40). The excavation activities involved the Great Mosque (Sept. 1995; Sept. 1996; March 1997; Aug.-Nov. 1997; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 49-92); the citadel (March 1997; Aug. 1998; March 1998; Febr.-April 1999; Oct.-Dec. 1999; spring 2000; Nov.-Dec. 2000; March-April 2001; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 161-208); the northern and western city wall (Sept. 1996; Sept. 1997; March-April 1998; Oct.-Dec. 1999; March	Powell, al-Salmi 1997; 1998; Jamme 1998; Koschick 1998; Powell 1998a; 1998b; Yule 1998b; 1999a; 1999b; Hermann 1999; Jansen 1999; Al Shamsi 1999, White 1999; 2000a; 2000b; White, Unterlechner 1999; 2000; Peshkov 2001; Peshkov, Voyakin 2001;

<i>Years</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>References</i>
	2000; Nov.-Dec. 2000; March-April 2001; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 93-160); the small mosques 655 and 940 (spring 2000; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 219-226); the House 803 (May-June 2000; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 231-232, 258-263); the courtyard 720 (May-June 2000; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 228-231, 237-257); the residential area south of the citadel (March 2000; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 232-233, 235-236). Seven soundings (1998; <i>Id.</i> , pp. 270-284) were moreover carried out with the aim of finding pre-Islamic evidences which, however, did not emerge. A number of conservation actions, such as the restoration of a number of columns, were performed as well.	Stevens 2001; Urban 2001; Franke-Vogt <i>et alii</i> 2003; Jansen 2001; 2002; 2003; 2015
1996-1997	Two excavation campaigns lead by an archaeological team of the Sultan Qaboos University focused on the so-called “funerary mosque” with its facilities and burial area.	Ibrahim, Al Tigani 1997; see also Jansen 2015, pp. 209-217.
1996-1998	Mauro Cremaschi conducted a number of geomorphological surveys within the works carried out by the Italian Mission to Oman (IMTO) in the coastal area of Dhofar and in the interior of the region. In 1997 a palynological study was carried out as well with the samples processed by the University of Amsterdam (Carina Hoorn). At al-Balīd tests were conducted on three different spots in order to collect palynological samples. The results confirm the idea of Costa that the settlement was a kind of virtual island and that the lagoon was connected to the sea until recent time.	Hoorn, Cremaschi 2004
1997-2004	First studies on ceramic material with proposals for typologies	Yule 1998a; Franke Vogt 2002; Yule <i>et alii</i> 2005; Yule, Muhammed 2006
1998	Within the frame of the Oman Maritime Heritage Project, Jana Owen made a short reconnaissance campaign in the lagoon of al-Balīd. https://museum.wa.gov.au/maritime-archaeology-db/maritime-reports/oman-maritime-heritage-project	Owen 1998
2000	A first sedimentological study is conducted by the Canadian Edward Reinhardt who prepared a PhD thesis discussing the development of the site from a palinological, sedimentological and micropalaeontological perspective.	Reinhardt 2000
2005-2012	Archaeological works are carried out by Juris Zarins and Lynne Newton under the auspices of the Office of the Adviser to H.M. the Sultan for Cultural Affairs, directed by Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed Al Rowas. Their work focused on the citadel, the western and south-eastern areas of the walled city, jetties, breakwaters, southern towers and gates, “Custom House”, a small mosque located to the east of the citadel and the building complex in the southwestern corner, outside the city wall. Most of the excavated material were cleaned, classified and placed in boxes.	Zarins 2007; Belfioretti, Vosmer 2010; Newton, Zarins 2010; 2014; 2017; Zarins, al-Jahfali 2012; Zarins, Newton 2006; 2012
2012-2018	Krista Lewis of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock directs new excavation works that lead to the discovery of a large multi-storey building, located in the south-western part of the site.	Lewis 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2014; 2015

<i>Years</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>References</i>
2015-2016	Excavation campaign by the Italian Mission to Oman (IMTO), University of Pisa, headed by A. Avanzini and directed by A. Pavan (October-December) and S. Lischi (February-March 2016). Works were carried out exclusively on the citadel following the request of HE Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed Al Rowas.	Pavan 2015; Lischi 2016; Pavan, Lischi 2016
2016-2019	The most recent archaeological work carried out at the site focused on the citadel and was conducted by Alexia Pavan under the auspices of the Office of the Adviser to H.M. the Sultan for Cultural Affairs, directed by Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed Al Rowas. New and important results have also been achieved through the study of ceramic and porcelain material, as well as ship timbers and coins.	Pavan 2017-18; 2019; 2021; Fusaro 2018; Pavan <i>et alii</i> 2018; 2020; Fusaro 2019; Pavan <i>et alii</i> 2019; Annucci 2020; Fusaro 2020a; 2020b; Ghidoni 2020; Pavan, Visconti 2020

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