

# After the Fall of the Caravan Kingdoms Notes about the Occupation of Sumhuram and the Area of Khor Rori (Oman) from the Fifth Century AD to the Islamic Period

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**Abstract:** Since the beginning of the investigations in the area of Khor Rori and at the site of Sumhuram, the easternmost outpost of the caravan kingdoms along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, cultural material and architectural evidence seemed to exclude frequentation, both permanent and seasonal, during the Islamic period. Indeed, it was assumed that any form of occupation, which had begun in the second century BC, ceased in the fifth century AD, consistent with the historical, economic and cultural scenario that marked the end of the caravan kingdoms. However, discoveries made during more recent fieldwork, along with a critical reinterpretation of previously collected data, have clearly demonstrated the existence of a late occupation of the area, which can be tentatively dated to the Late Antique period in the case of the burials located nearby and to the Islamic period in the case of the reoccupation of the site. This paper will discuss the preliminary results of the re-analysis of the late evidence, focusing on the last architectural structures, the small finds and some of the pottery.

**Keywords:** Sumhuram, Khor Rori, Dhofar, Late Antiquity, early Islamic period

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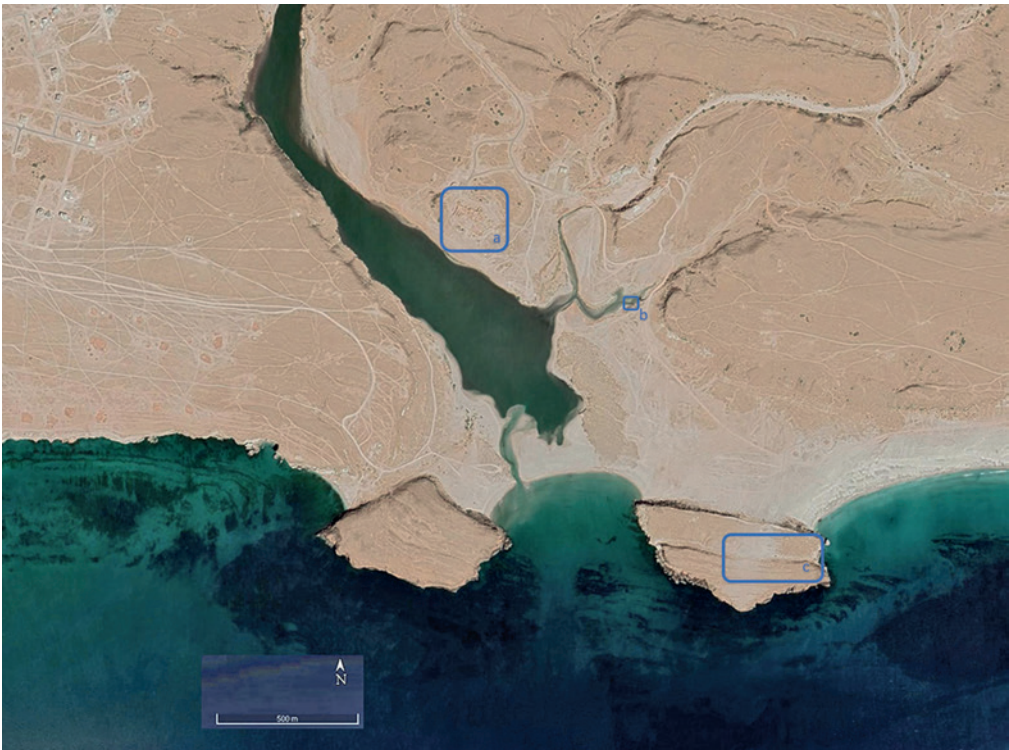
From the end of the 1990s to 2019, the Italian Mission to Oman (IMTO), headed by Alessandra Avanzini (University of Pisa), and the Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs – merged since 2020 into the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism of the Sultanate of Oman – carried out an extensive programme of archaeological investigations focused on the ancient town of Sumhuram (second century BC – fifth century AD) and on the surrounding territory of Khor Rori (**Figs 1–3**).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the discussion of the chronology, see: Avanzini 2008; 2014; Pavan, Degli Esposti 2016; Buffa 2019. The whole area is today included in the Archaeological Park of Khor Rori, listed since 2000 among the UNESCO World Heritage sites.



1. Location of the main sites mentioned in the paper along the south Arabian coast (Retrieved from Google Earth; processing: A. Pavan).



2. Aerial view of the site of Sumhuram (a), with indication of Ḥamr al-Sharqiya (c), and the location of the mosque (b) along the lagoon formed by wadi Darbat. The boat-shaped graves east of the town are located just outside (a) the city walls of Sumhuram (Retrieved from Google Earth; processing: A. Pavan).



3. Panoramic picture of Sumhuram (Phot. S. Bizzarri).

Over the years, fieldwork *extra moenia* included the excavations of a number of structures coeval to the settlement, such as a temple located along the lagoon,<sup>2</sup> a few cave tombs excavated in some rocky outcrops placed north of the town,<sup>3</sup> and a number of partially preserved rectangular premises, standing east of Sumhuram,<sup>4</sup> possibly connected with the agricultural exploitation of the area, also mirrored in channels and small dams recognised in the territory nearby. With the aim of broadly studying the occupational patterns in the area from a diachronic perspective, a mosque, erected on a platform according to the typical arrangement of the Islamic religious buildings in the southernmost region of the Sultanate of Oman,<sup>5</sup> was excavated in 2006. Two occupation phases, close in time and reflected in two different architectural arrangements, were identified during the archaeological

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<sup>2</sup> The archaeological evidence related to the temple, not attributed to a precise deity, has been discussed in Pavan, Sedov 2008.

<sup>3</sup> For the preliminary results of the excavation of the cave tombs see the reports SUM05A and SUM05B, available at the website: *Arabiantica*.

<sup>4</sup> For the preliminary results of the excavation of these structures see the report SUM04A available at the website: *Arabiantica*.

<sup>5</sup> Costa 2001.

investigation of the mosque, although it was not possible to date them due to the absence of diagnostic materials.<sup>6</sup>

Two intensive geo-archaeological surveys were carried out, respectively conducted at the end of the 1990s by Mauro Cremaschi and Francesco Negrino, and in 2006 by Cremaschi and Alessandro Perego, University of Milan La Statale. The latter activities led to the identification of more than 1,000 sites in the area of Khor Rori including cairns, megalithic monuments, hut bases, scattered flints, portions of buildings – considered coeval to Sumhuram – scattered pottery, stone alignments, and stone circles overall mirroring a long occupation of the area from the Bronze Age to the Islamic period.<sup>7</sup>

Recently, the archaeological works on the top of the Inqitat, also known as Ḥamr al-Sharqiya or Inqitat Mirbat, the eastern of the two rocky promontories which naturally close the harbour (see **Figs 2–3**), have been resumed after some previous investigations carried on by IMTO at the beginning of 2000s.<sup>8</sup> At that time, the study of the pottery unearthed in the small and fortified *entrepôt* located on the top of the cliff, led to the identification of two main occupation phases, respectively dated to the tenth century and to very end of the tenth century/beginning of the eleventh century AD.<sup>9</sup>

The excavations carried out on the Inqitat in the most recent years, which are still continuing within the scope of the Dhomiap Project directed by Silvia Lischi, provide fresh and new data, confirming a continuity in the occupation of the territory over a long time-span, ranging from the Bronze Age to the Islamic period, and opening new interesting perspectives of research about the newly defined Dhofar Coastal Culture.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, a broader and more complex archaeological landscape has been emerging, driving us to critically re-analyse and re-discuss the occupational patterns in the area of Khor Rori and at the town of Sumhuram itself after the fifth century AD, during the so-called Late Antiquity (AD 400–750) and the following early (750–1050) and middle (1050–1650) Islamic period.<sup>11</sup>

The whole pottery assemblage related to the latest occupational period of the town, including the fragments unearthed during the *extra moenia* investigations, is currently under study by the author. This contribution, therefore, will be focused on the discussion of the latest ephemeral architectural structures unearthed in the town, of the most significant pottery already published and of some small finds dated to the Islamic period.

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<sup>6</sup> The building is currently under study by the author and will not be discussed in detail in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> Cremaschi, Negrino 2002; Cremaschi, Perego 2008. For recent survey in Dhofar and the discussion of occupational patterns in the region, see Garba 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Avanzini *et al.* 2001: 49–59.

<sup>9</sup> See Rougeulle 2008: 654 for the definition of *entrepôt* and the discussion of the chronology.

<sup>10</sup> Lischi 2019a; 2019b; 2023.

<sup>11</sup> For the periodisation see Power 2015.

## THE DEMISE OF SUMHURAM

The fifth century AD has been generally considered as the period when the fortified settlement of Sumhuram was definitely abandoned.<sup>12</sup> This dating has been univocally considered reliable since the beginning of the excavations, supported by a number of cultural, historical, and paleo-environmental data and by a <sup>14</sup>C sample which provided an estimated calibrated date of about AD 425 for the last occupational phase of the town.<sup>13</sup> Recent studies on the pottery assemblage unearthed in Sumhuram<sup>14</sup> revealed that, from the second half of the third century AD, the city recorded a dramatic drop in imported materials from the western regions gravitating around the Mediterranean Sea. Until this period, the import of ceramic material was abundant and easily recognisable, mainly consisting of amphorae, with a predominance of Dressel 2–4 from the Tyrrhenian coast, Vesuvius, Nile alluvium and Mareotis,<sup>15</sup> and a number of fragments of *terra sigillata* – mainly Eastern Sigillata B, Italian Sigillata and, in smaller numbers, Eastern Sigillata A.<sup>16</sup>

As for the following centuries, a single fragment of San Lorenzo amphora, manufactured between the third and the fifth century AD, together with five fragments of Aqaba amphorae, usually dated from the middle of the fourth/fifth century AD until the early Islamic period,<sup>17</sup> have to be considered indicative of the connections with the Mediterranean/Red Sea regions during the last occupational phase of Sumhuram.

Regarding ceramics from the African coast, some Aksumite pottery was unearthed during the excavations, and it includes an almost complete globular jar with the base interior decorated with a stamped medallion, an amphora-like jar with double handle and ring base,<sup>18</sup> together with some handles and body sherds belonging to fragmentary containers of an unidentified shape in Brown and Red Aksumite Ware.<sup>19</sup> This *corpus*, albeit not abundant, finds interesting comparisons in the pottery assemblage discovered in Aksum and dated from the fourth/fifth century AD onwards.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the scarcity of pottery from the Mediterranean and the Red Sea regions, the archaeological contexts dated from the third to the fifth century AD reveal a quite remarkable amount of pottery manufactured in the Gulf area, consisting of a large number of glazed vessels,<sup>21</sup> as well as Indian storage vessels and cooking pots, mirroring the shift in

<sup>12</sup> Morandi Bonacossi 2002: 38; Avanzini 2008: 625–629; Buffa 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Morandi Bonacossi 2002: 37.

<sup>14</sup> Pavan 2017 with some further considerations in Buffa 2019: 266–273.

<sup>15</sup> Sedov, Benvenuti 2002: 180–181, 200–203, 237, 244; Tomber 2017: 322–325, 350–390.

<sup>16</sup> Comfort 1960; Sedov, Benvenuti 2002: 185, 192, 246–248; Tomber 2017: 325, 333–340.

<sup>17</sup> Tomber 2017: 324, 375, 384.

<sup>18</sup> Pavan 2017: 216, Pl. 65/1.

<sup>19</sup> The author presented these materials during the poster session of the 23 Rencontres Sabéennes. Out of Arabia: South Arabian long-distance trade in antiquity, held in Vienna, University of Vienna, on 13–15 June 2019. For the description of the Aksumite wares attested in Sumhuram, see Pavan 2017: 20, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Wilding 1989: 275, Fig. 16/257, 259; 284, Fig. 16/307.

<sup>21</sup> Most of the glazed vessels consist of bowls with flared or rounded walls, an angular profile, carinated bowls with different types of rim and plates with overhanging rim (the so-called fish plates). The glazed pottery

commercial routes from the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions to the Gulf area and the Indian subcontinent.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the pottery materials from Sumhuram seem to perfectly match the political, economical and historical dynamics developed in south Arabia and along the western Indian Ocean after the third century AD.

The town of Sumhuram, which was founded by the Ḥaḍrami in the second century BC, managed to survive the defeat of the kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt by the Ḥimyarites at the end of the third century AD. However, it faced a prolonged decline, aggravated by the progressive siltation of its natural port. The widening of the sand barrier placed between the two rocky outcrops which naturally protected the harbour gradually isolated the lagoon from the ocean,<sup>23</sup> marking the end of the city port. Moreover, the Aksumite and Sasanian empires started to become strong and powerful competitors in international trade, fostering the progressive weakening of the caravan kingdoms, culminating with the end of Ḥimyar in AD 525. The demise of Sumhuram in the fifth century perfectly fitted this general scenario.

Further work at the site, however, seemed to call into question this historical reconstruction, taken for granted after the first decade of investigations at the site.

This first intuition about a late (i.e. Islamic) phase of occupation came from Alexander Sedov who, during the IMTO's 2011 autumn campaign, wrote: 'It seems quite probable that the ruins [of the building] were re-occupied in mediaeval times, when several small houses and shelters were built on the remains of the ancient town'.<sup>24</sup> This idea was later confirmed, as we will see in this preliminary note, by further field work and the discovery of a number of artefacts and pottery definitely dated to the Islamic period.

## DATING THE LAST OCCUPATIONAL PHASE OF THE TOWN

The intensive excavations of the walled city of Sumhuram enabled the recognition of a number of quarters with specific functions (**Fig. 4**). The structures related to the latest occupation of the town will be discussed according to each area with particular reference to the portions of the city named as B, F and A.

### AREA B

The south-eastern portion of the town, conventionally named Area B, has been the object of investigations by the American Foundation for the Study of Man (AFSM), under the direction of Frank P. Albright, since the 1950s, when a quarter devoted to storage and metal production was identified upon the discovery of some rooms, interpreted as bins,

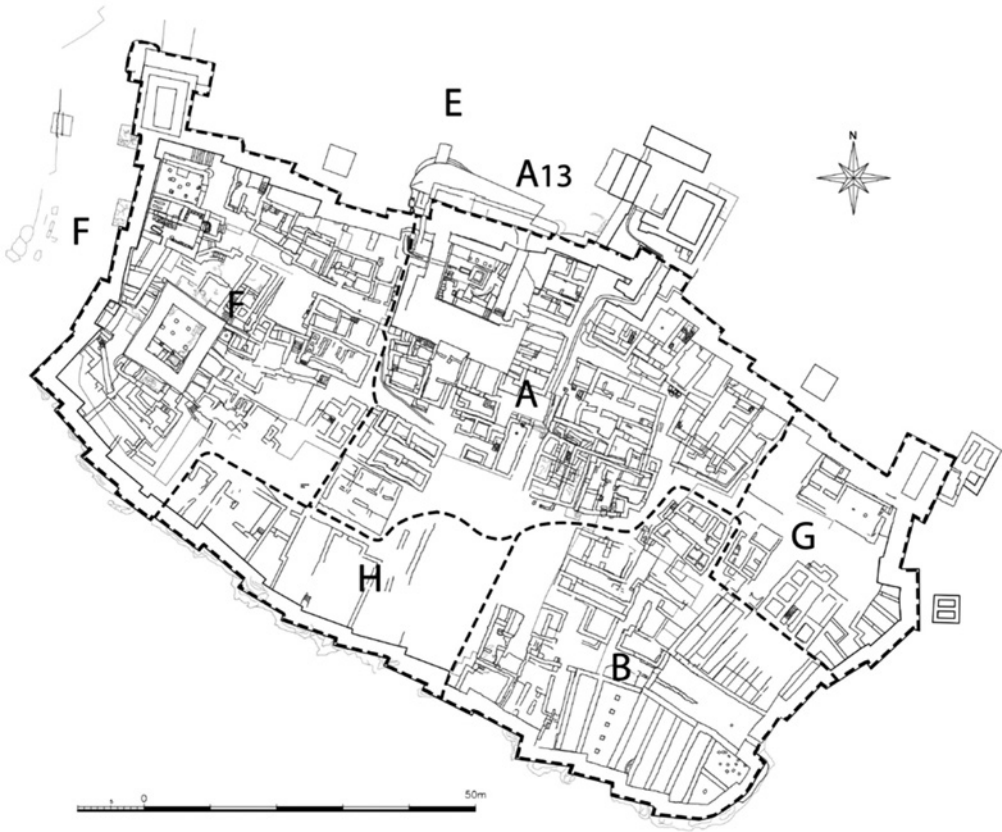
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from Sumhuram finds significant comparisons in the assemblages from ed-Dur, Mleiha, Qala'at al-Barhrein and Failaka; see Pavan 2017: 120–126.

<sup>22</sup> Buffa 2019: 266–273.

<sup>23</sup> Horn, Cremaschi 2004.

<sup>24</sup> For the preliminary results of the excavation carried on between October and December 2011 (SUM11C), see the website *Arabiantica*.



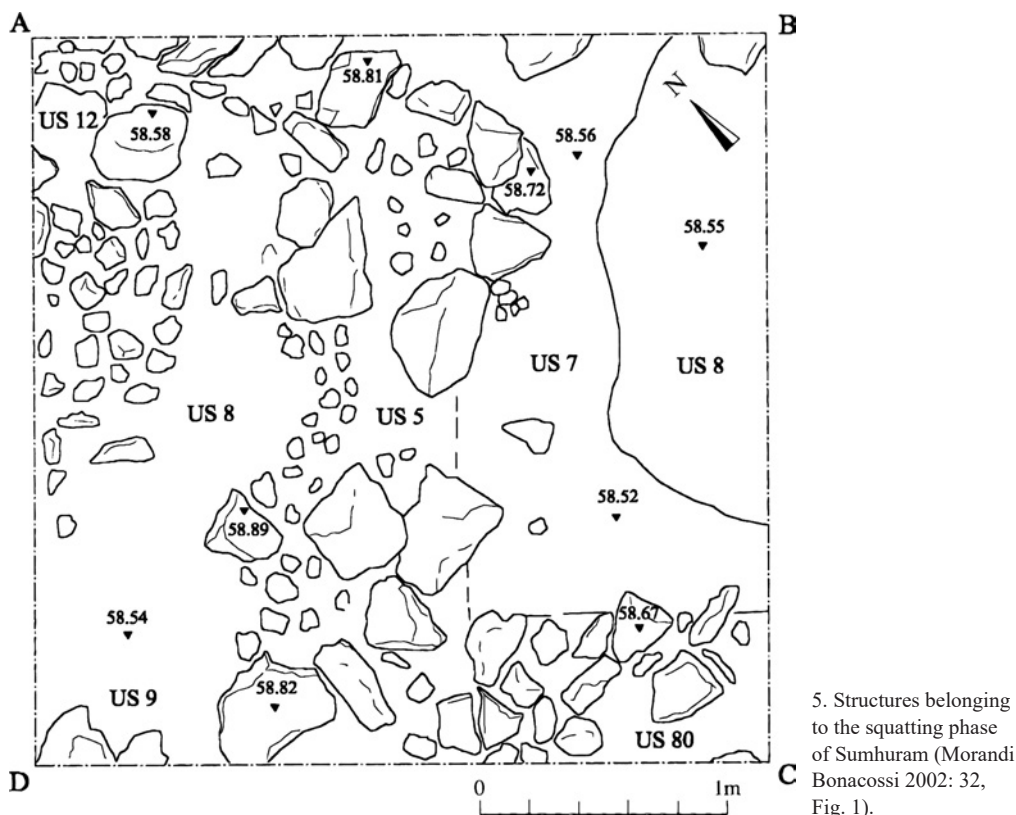
4. General plan of Sumhuram with the excavation areas (Buffa (Ed.) 2019: 10).

and of a space which could be the possible mint of the town.<sup>25</sup> In the same area, during the first excavations conducted by the IMTO at the end of the 1990s, a number of post-holes related to huts and the reuse of some building materials (masonry blocks) were noticed.

The 1997 and 1998 field seasons allowed the identification of four main occupational phases with the uppermost two (levels 1–2) characterised by ‘squatting’ features. Daniele Morandi Bonacossi, director of the first field operations of the IMTO, recorded the evidence of very simple structures, unearthed about 10–30cm below the topsoil, built above the ruins of previous buildings (Fig. 5).<sup>26</sup> Some of these structures have a circular shape and can be compared with the traditional dwellings built by local communities (*Jibbali*) living on the mountains. They comprise a stone foundation and are covered by a dome structure made with wooden poles and branches radiating from a central pillar made from a large

<sup>25</sup> Albright 1982: 32–34.

<sup>26</sup> Morandi Bonacossi 2002: 31.



trunk.<sup>27</sup> Such constructions were in use in the region of Dhofar from the Iron Age, or even before, both in the Salalah plain and in the interior, as witnessed by the site of Taqah 60, investigated in 1992 by the Transarabia Expedition directed by Juris Zarins,<sup>28</sup> and by the geo-archaeological surveys conducted by Cremaschi, who noticed the occurrence of circular structures in the area of wadi Darbat, just north of Sumhuram, and in the pre-desertic Nejd region.<sup>29</sup> Recent discoveries on the promontory of Inqitat (see **Figs 2–3**) brought to light a settlement extending over two hectares with a number of circular, sub-oval and sub-rectangular structures, the distribution of which indicate a certain social complexity and a continuous occupation from the fourth century BC to the first/second century AD.<sup>30</sup> Today, similar structures are still used in the region as animal pens linked with seasonal pastoral activities.

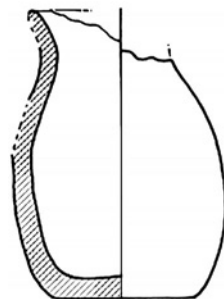
<sup>27</sup> For an architectural and anthropological study of these structures, see Sale 1980: 43–48, Pls A-B. A re-analysis of these evidence has been recently discussed by Lischi and the author at the conference Primo Congresso di Archeologia del Paesaggio e Geografia Storica del Vicino Oriente, held in Rome, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Zarins 2001: 72–73; Newton, Zarins 2017: 22–24.

<sup>29</sup> Cremaschi, Negrino 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Lischi 2019a; 2019b.





6. Juglet inv. no. US236,4; h. 11.5cm, diam. 6cm, th. 0.5cm (Pavan 2017: 161, Pl. 34/3).

At Sumhuram, Morandi Bonacossi dated these dwellings to the late occupation of the town in the early fifth century AD, on the basis of the general historical context and of a  $^{14}\text{C}$  sample dating back to AD 425 – calibrated date – obtained from charcoal collected from an ashy layer covering a trodden floor in a hut with stone wall bases.<sup>31</sup>

Evidence of productive activities such as smelting and smiting in Area B,<sup>32</sup> confirmed a double vocation (commercial and productive) of this quarter and evidenced a long continuity in the occupation of this portion of the town.

In 2007, a garbage heap located north of the storage bins, where rows of aligned stones were clearly visible just underneath the surface, was excavated.<sup>33</sup> This accumulation, named SU236, mainly consisted of a large amount of organic matter, such as fish bones and mammal bones, with abundant ashy lenses and charcoal flakes. Interesting was the fact that the pottery material discovered during the investigations included many sherds with mending holes or other traces of re-use, suggesting the prolonged use of several vessels. The finding of an almost complete juglet (**Fig. 6**), lacking only the handle and large part of the plain rim and flat base, was particularly interesting.<sup>34</sup> The juglet was hand-made in a poor quality fabric, rich in grit temper including calcium carbonate grits clearly visible to the naked eye. At the moment of the discovery, it was tentatively attributed to local production.<sup>35</sup> The juglet finds no comparison in the ceramic assemblage unearthed at Sumhuram and, more generally, in pre-Islamic south Arabia where jugs and juglets are very rare. The fabric and the surface treatment – limited to a simple wet smoothing – presents striking comparisons with the so-called Grit Ware (GW), featuring a large number of locally manufactured vessels, discovered at the Islamic site of al-Balīd (ancient Zafar), 50km west of Sumhuram.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Morandi Bonacossi 2002: 31–33, 37, n. 15.

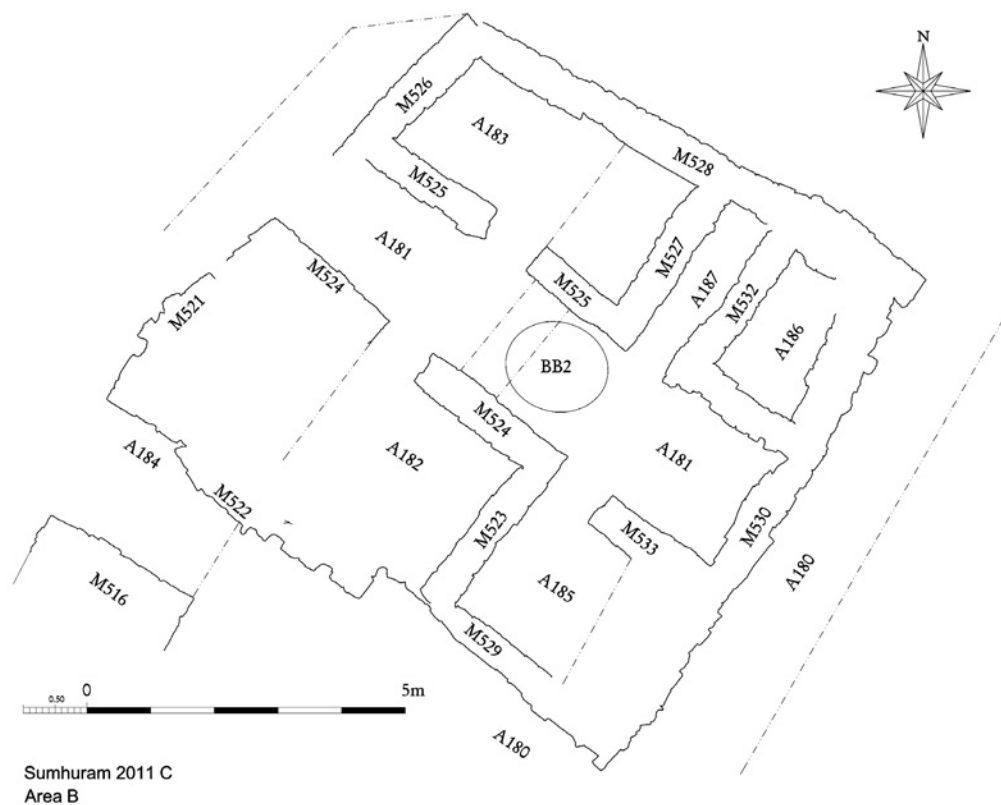
<sup>32</sup> Chiarantini, Benvenuti 2011.

<sup>33</sup> For the preliminary results of the excavation of 2007, see website *Arabiantica*.

<sup>34</sup> Pavan 2017: 110, Pl. 34, inv. no. US236,4.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of local pottery in pre-Islamic Dhofar, see: Sedov, Benvenuti 2002: 195–199; Pallecchi, Pavan 2011, and, more recently, Lischi, Pavan Fusaro 2022 where the conservatism of the pottery production in south Oman over time is highlighted.

<sup>36</sup> Fusaro 2019: 132–133; 2020: 72; for a general overview of the recent works at al-Balīd, see Pavan *et al.* 2020.



7. Plan of Area B, with a detail of Building BB2 after the investigations of Fall 2011 (Drawing: Esplorativa Architetti).

Late occupation of a few rooms of buildings BB1 and BB2, located in Area B at Sumhuram, was noticed by Sedov during the Fall campaign of 2011, allowing the first formulation of the hypothesis of an Islamic occupation of the city (see above). The architectural evidence related to this re-occupation consists of irregular premises built with dressed or roughly-dressed masonry blocks (Fig. 7), re-used from the buildings belonging to the earlier phase of the town (second century BC – fifth century AD).

The cultural deposits were quite poor, made of greyish, rather compact loam with ashy lenses, charcoal flakes and a large number of limestone and sandstone masonry blocks collapsed from the surrounding walls.<sup>37</sup> These contained mainly marine shells and animal bones, together with a consistent number of stone tools such as very simple hand-stones and multifunctional utensils. The pottery assemblage is definitely scarce and consists of a few worn body sherds that cannot be easily fitted into a chronological framework. Surprisingly, in such a modest archaeological context, just beneath the surface layer, an almost

<sup>37</sup> For a detailed discussion of the stratigraphy and the findings, see the report SUM11C available at the website *Arabiantica*.



8. Glass bottle inv. no. G167; h. 11cm, max. diam. 10.5cm (Phot. A. Pavan).



complete glass globular bottle was discovered (**Fig. 8**).<sup>38</sup> Lacking the rim, the bottle is decorated in the lower half of the body with the so-called ring-and-dot or *omphalos* motif, made of a raised ring with a small disk in relief in its centre. The upper part of the vessel is plain. This pattern, which originally belonged to the Sasanian iconographic *milieu*, was later adopted by Islamic glassmakers<sup>39</sup> and became quite popular in the Iranian regions between the ninth and twelfth century AD.<sup>40</sup> The bottle is the first clear evidence of Islamic imports to the town and it seems contemporary to the occupation of the Islamic settlement on the Inqitat (see above). Thus, it is possible to put forward the cautious hypothesis of an occupation of the city between the tenth and twelfth centuries AD.

#### AREA F

Occupational patterns similar to those described for Area B, were brought to light in Area F, the western portion of the city (**Fig. 4**) where the main temple of the town, dedicated to the god Sīn, was erected.<sup>41</sup> In a couple of rooms abutting one of the recesses of the city wall,

<sup>38</sup> The bottle was discovered in room A185, Building BB2, US531,1.

<sup>39</sup> Carboni 2001: 208.

<sup>40</sup> Carboni 2001: 232, 248, 254; Lukens 1965: 207.

<sup>41</sup> Sedov 2008a.



9. Boat-shaped grave in Sumhuram (Avanzini *et al.* 2001: 48, Fig. 42).

excavated at the time by the AFSM, some very poorly made walls belonging to ephemeral structures with undefined shapes, were excavated and later removed by the IMTO in 2008.

The late activity and a different use of this portion of the town was moreover evidenced by the discovery of a small empty boat-shaped grave, dug through the layers belonging to the last occupational phase of square A20, in front of the main temple of Sumhuram, in 2000 (Fig. 9).<sup>42</sup> The grave, which constitutes a typical marker (see below) for the occupation of the territory of Khor Rori during the so-called Late Antiquity (AD 400–750), was dated, at the moment of the discovery, to the period between AD 300 and 350, during the third occupational phase of the town.<sup>43</sup>

In 2010, Zarins, in an article about the boat-shaped graves,<sup>44</sup> discussed the dating of the Sumhuram burial, finding indirect confirmation for a late and partial reoccupation of the settlement in a whole series of <sup>14</sup>C dates obtained from samples collected in different areas of the city.<sup>45</sup> Some of these dates, referable to archaeological contexts in Area F, could

<sup>42</sup> Avanzini *et al.* 2001: 47–48.

<sup>43</sup> Avanzini *et al.* 2001: 49.

<sup>44</sup> Zarins 2010.

<sup>45</sup> See Avanzini (Ed.) 2008: 727–736, Appendix I. Radiocarbon dates and chronological sequence of Sumhuram.

therefore corroborate a reoccupation of the area between the seventh and the first half of the twelfth century, thus in line with the generally accepted dating for boat-shaped graves and coeval with the two occupational phases of the *entrepôt* on the Inqitat.

In area F and specifically from the open square A20, facing the main temple of the city, an Islamic coin (**Fig. 10a**) was discovered in 2016. Minted in bronze, the coin's obverse is totally obliterated. Although not clearly readable in the reverse, the coin has been recognised as an African issue, possibly linked with one of the Sultans of Mogadishu, and it is dated between the ninth and the thirteenth century AD.<sup>46</sup> The presence of such coins, minted in East Africa, appears as a common feature along the coast of Dhofar during the medieval time, as shown by the findings from al-Balīd where a good number of issues of the dynasties ruling over Kilwa were discovered.<sup>47</sup>

## AREA A

Area A, the residential quarter of Sumhuram (**Fig. 4**), also showed evidence of late frequentation and/or occupation, consisting not of architectural remains, but of pits and fireplaces, dug in floors related to the last period of occupation of the monumental town.<sup>48</sup>

Pottery fragments discovered in the filling of a pit (US111) associated with a very late floor brought to light in Building BA4 are, for example, well representative of Islamic productions.<sup>49</sup> The Indian cooking pot (**Fig. 10b**)<sup>50</sup> is characterised by an externally projecting rim and multiple grooves on the upper part of the shoulder, which appears typical of the late (i.e. Islamic) assemblage from Arikamedu, in South India,<sup>51</sup> and finds additional comparisons in numerous Indian cooking pots unearthed at al-Balīd during the excavations of Zarins and Lynne Newton and the more recent investigations of the citadel.<sup>52</sup> Another fragment of a base (**Fig. 10c**)<sup>53</sup> is typical of a number of Indian large hole-mouth vessels lacking the handles and with the base decorated with the paddle-and-anvil technique, a method of manufacture in use from the early centuries AD and still adopted in southern India for shaping the bases of cooking vessels or large water jars similar to the discussed sample.<sup>54</sup> This combination of shape and decoration occurs in several places along the southern coast of Oman, with some very close comparisons in vessels from al-Balīd, where it is dated to the middle Islamic period.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The coin was identified by Arturo Annucci and Roberta Giunta whom I thank for their helpful cooperation.

<sup>47</sup> Pavan *et al.* 2020: 194–197.

<sup>48</sup> Buffa, Sedov 2008: 35.

<sup>49</sup> Buffa, Sedov 2008: 45.

<sup>50</sup> Sedov 2008b: 102–103, Pl. 21/4; Pavan 2017: 44.

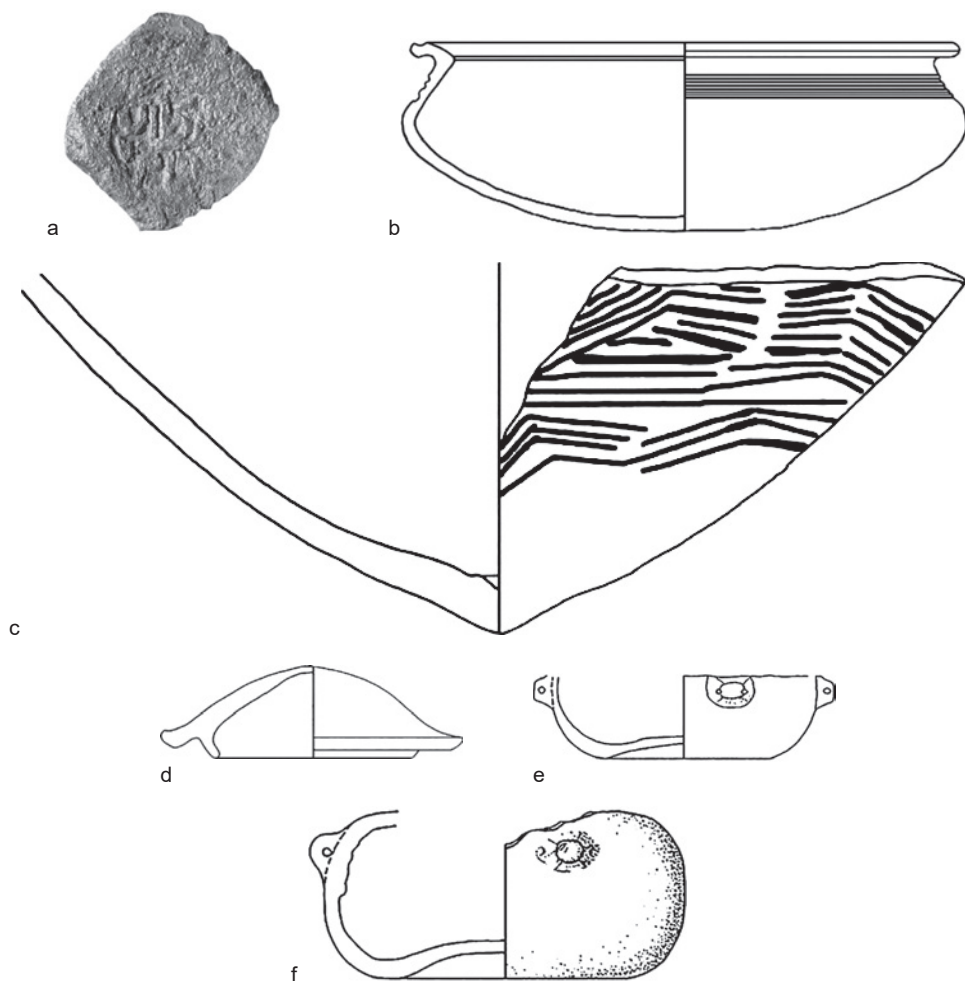
<sup>51</sup> Begley 2004: 240–241, nos 3.243, 3.244, 3.245, 3.246 etc.

<sup>52</sup> Newton, Zarins 2014: 264, Fig. 7, 1-5-16-18; Fusaro 2020: 86–88, Fig. 27.

<sup>53</sup> Sedov 2008b: 104–105, Pl. 22/4; Pavan 2017: 211, n. 57.

<sup>54</sup> Pavan 2017: 26–27.

<sup>55</sup> Newton, Zarins 2014: 262–263, Fig. 6/12. Several body sherds and a jar with out-turned rim have been moreover discovered in Sumhuram but they are dated to the pre-Islamic period.



10. Coin and pottery from Sumhuram, not to scale: a. inv. no. Co1010, 1.45 x 1.5cm, 2.7g; b. cooking pot, inv. no. US111,3, diam. 23cm, th. 0.6cm; c. large jar, inv. no. US111,10, diam. 38cm, th. 1.2cm; d. lid-cum-bowl, inv. no. US111,11, diam. 13cm, th. 1.3cm; e. bowl with perforated handle, inv. no. US111,2, diam. 13cm, th. 0.8cm; f. bowl with perforated handle, inv. no. US111,1, diam. 16cm, th. 1.1cm (a. Phot. G. Buonomini; b-f. Sedov 2008b: Pls 21/6, 22/1–4).

Also, the complete lid-cum-bowl (**Fig. 10d**)<sup>56</sup> was manufactured in India and belongs to a long tradition of lid/containers which started to be produced in the first century BC and remained in use until the Middle Ages.<sup>57</sup> However, despite the conservatism of the type, it is possible to appreciate over time a gradual disappearance of the rim which, in the medieval samples, is almost absent, as in the discussed example.

<sup>56</sup> Sedov 2008b: 104–105, Pl. 21/4; Pavan 2017: 90–91, Pl. 17/8.

<sup>57</sup> For a diachronic discussion of the type, see Pavan 2017: 56.



11. Board game,  
inv. no. S3137  
(Phot. S. Al-Tabook).

0 10cm

Finally, a couple of very rare bowls (**Fig. 10e-f**)<sup>58</sup> with dimpled concave bases and pierced lugs were also found in the pit. The vessels are handmade, with incurving walls and vertically perforated lugs, and they are manufactured with highly micaceous ware. The only comparison known at the moment to the author comes from a pot found in Ḥamr al-Sharqiya which presents also a similar fabric and it is dated between the tenth and the very beginning of eleventh century AD.<sup>59</sup>

## SURFACE FINDINGS

A couple of board games should be added to the evidence dated to the Islamic period (**Fig. 11**).<sup>60</sup> These objects were collected from the surface during the excavations at Sumhuram, and have been interpreted as evidence of the recreational activities that took place in the city, likely in its later phase of occupation. These board games find good comparisons in a number of similar objects discovered in archaeological contexts dated to the mediaeval period in different areas of the city of al-Balīd,<sup>61</sup> where in one case the board was re-employed within the masonry of the citadel, in Wubar,<sup>62</sup> and close to the ruins of the mosque along the lagoon in the area of Khor Rori.<sup>63</sup> Recently discussed within the frame of the discoveries made along the seashore of Salalah, these board games, also known by

<sup>58</sup> Sedov 2008b: 102–103, Pl. 22/2–3; Pavan 2017: 118, 172–174, Pl. 40/8–9.

<sup>59</sup> Rougeulle 2008: 660–661, Pl. 2/7.

<sup>60</sup> Inv. nos S3136 and S3137. I wish to thank Ali Al-Kathiri and Salim Al-Tabook for the kind help in finding the pieces, currently in the store of the Museum of the Frankincense Land in Salalah.

<sup>61</sup> The pieces ID0668 and BA16A.0176.W14 are currently included in the museum collection of the Museum of the Frankincense Land in Salalah.

<sup>62</sup> See ID0264 and ID0263, currently exhibited at the Museum of the Frankincense Land.

<sup>63</sup> See footnote 6, above.



12. Cluster of boat-shaped graves located at the foothill of Sumhuram (Phot. A. Pavan).

the name of *mancala*, are generally associated with the middle and late Islamic periods,<sup>64</sup> thus indirectly confirming a late occupation of the site of Sumhuram.

### THE BOAT-SHAPED GRAVES

Boat-shaped graves, elliptical in shape and made of stones of different sizes, constitute a type of funerary monuments which can be considered a peculiarity of the region of Dhofar (south-western Oman) and of the Mahra Governorate (eastern Yemen), with some sporadic occurrences on the island of Socotra.<sup>65</sup> Recently discussed in detail by Zarins,<sup>66</sup> these funerary monuments are still not fully understood. Who built these graves and what was the religion of the people buried inside them is still a matter of debate. Their date is also uncertain: they are generally placed within a long time span between AD 400 and 1000 on the basis of stratigraphy and associated pottery,<sup>67</sup> but a single <sup>14</sup>C uncalibrated date

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<sup>64</sup> Charpentier *et al.* 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Zarins 1997: 652; Morandi Bonacossi 2002: 43, n. 31.

<sup>66</sup> Zarins 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Zarins 2010.



(AD 880 ± 50) is currently available, obtained from a body buried in the graveyard located about 2km northwest of Khor Rori (see below).<sup>68</sup> No grave goods were found associated with the boat-shaped graves.

Boat-shaped graves are frequent in the area around the town of Sumhuram. About 200–250 graves belonging to this type were noted by Albright during his excavations at Sumhuram,<sup>69</sup> but only about 50, grouped in clusters, have been possible to count to date (see **Figs. 12**).

According to Albright, these structures were built during the last occupational phases of the city, as evidenced by the fact that, for their construction, materials originally employed in the masonry of Sumhuran were reused. They are generally considered not Islamic. This would be confirmed also by the position of the inhumed body in the only grave excavated by Albright, which is ‘lying on his back with the pelvis and legs bent at the elbows with the forearms folded across the stomach’.<sup>70</sup>

A large cemetery (KR55 and KR56) consisting of more than 400 tombs (including tumuli and boat-shaped graves) was surveyed about 2km north-west of the city of Sumhuram, at the base of a natural terrace overlooking the lagoon fed by wadi Darbat.<sup>71</sup>

In reconsidering the occupation and different use of the area of Khor Rori from a diachronic perspective, therefore, a consideration of this funerary evidence cannot be overlooked, as it has the potential to provide a record of the area in what is the most critical and least evidenced period in the history of southern Arabia, namely Late Antiquity.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the beginning of the investigations at Sumhuram, cultural material and architectural pieces of evidence have seemed to exclude frequentation, either permanent or seasonal and with squatting features, during the Islamic period: any form of occupation was thought to have ceased in the fifth century AD, consistent with the historical, economic and cultural scenario that characterised the end of the caravan kingdoms. However, discoveries made during more recent fieldwork, along with a critical reinterpretation of previously collected data, have clearly demonstrated the existence of a late occupation at Sumhuram, which can be dated with certainty to Late Antiquity for burials and to the Islamic period for re-occupation of the site. Ephemeral structures consisting of huts or circular dwellings have been recognised, together with buildings comprising irregular premises that re-used more ancient construction materials.

The occurrence of evidence dated to the Islamic period in the area of Khor Rori adds a small but significant piece to the set of evidence of the period in coastal Dhofar, not yet investigated from a broader perspective. Several sites, datable to the Islamic period,

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<sup>68</sup> Morandi Bonacossi 2002: 43–45, n. 38.

<sup>69</sup> Albright 1982: 40.

<sup>70</sup> Albright 1982: 40.

<sup>71</sup> Morandi Bonacossi 2002: 43–45, 60–61.

were identified by the surveys conducted by Zarins<sup>72</sup> and subsequently by Zarins with Newton,<sup>73</sup> but very few have been archaeologically excavated.<sup>74</sup> For this reason, the dating of many settlements is doubtful and it is, therefore, still quite difficult to outline the sites distribution and occupation patterns of Dhofar starting from the end of the caravan kingdoms throughout the whole Islamic period. The foundation date of the site of al-Balīd itself, the largest in the region and one of the most important in the whole of south Arabia in Islamic times, is still uncertain despite the numerous excavations, albeit not continuous, conducted over the past 70 years.

The data relating to the latest occupation of Sumhuram are still difficult to frame within a more specific range of time and, hopefully, the forthcoming study of the pottery assemblage will provide helpful new data. It is however highly probable that this late occupation was contemporary to the *entrepôt* investigated on the nearby Inqitat and even later, considering the discussed comparison between the excavated pottery and the assemblage dated to the middle Islamic period unearthed at al-Balīd.

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<sup>72</sup> Transarabia Survey 1990–1995; see Zarins 2001.

<sup>73</sup> Dhofar Survey, see: Zarins 2007; *Atlas of Dhofar 2013*; Newton, Zarins 2017: 42–52.

<sup>74</sup> Albright 1982; Avanzini *et al.* 2001; Rougeulle 2008.

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