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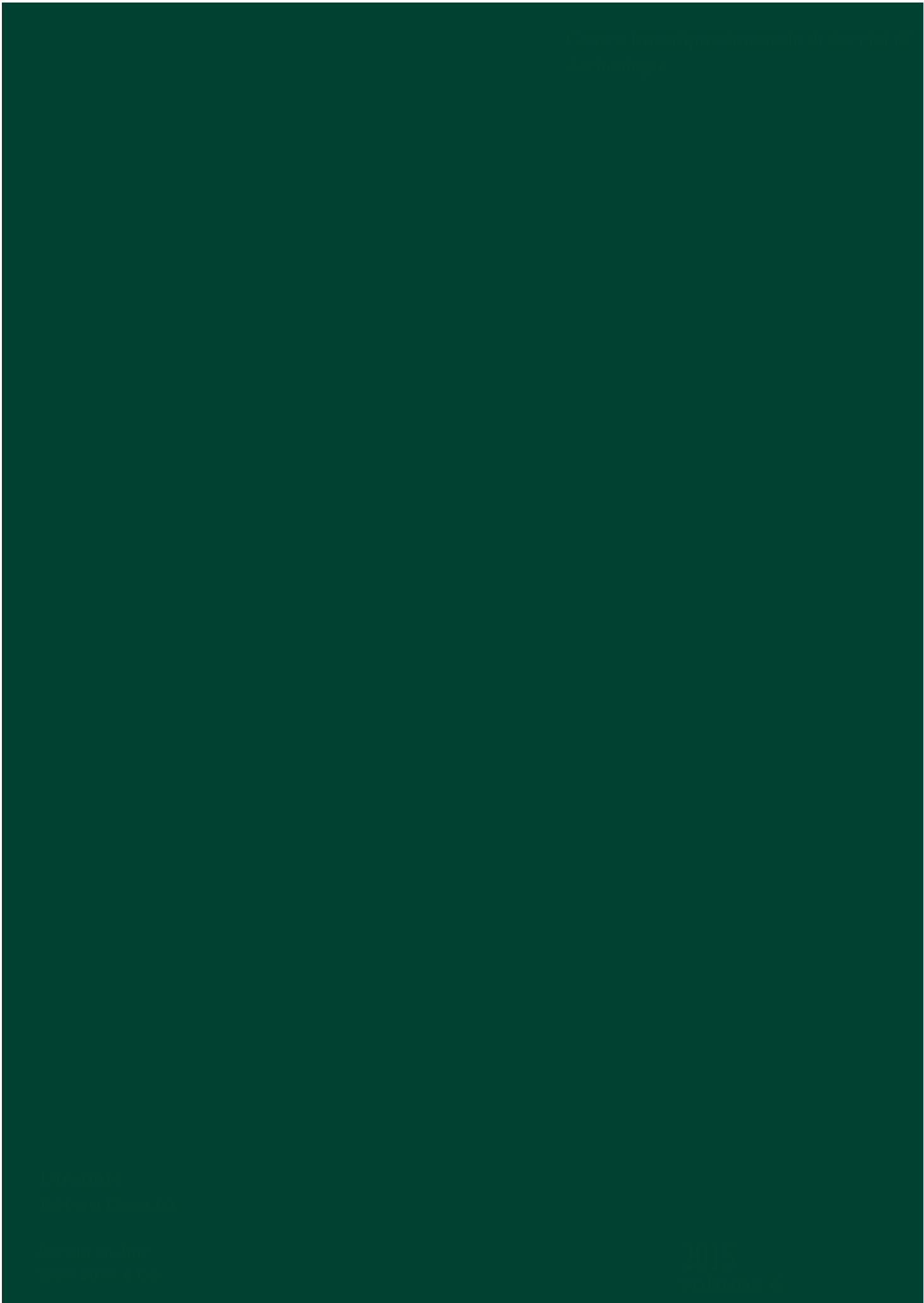


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# The site of Zafār/al-Balīd (Sultanate of Oman)

## Archaeological investigations between past and present

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

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## CHINESE-STYLE CERAMICS UNEARTHED AT ZAFĀR/AL-BALĪD: A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE *CORPUS* AND A FOCUS ON THE LATEST PERIOD

Chiara Visconti, Università di Napoli L'Orientale

Work on Chinese-style ceramics<sup>1</sup> from the site of Zafār (present-day al-Balīd) began in 2018, following the resumption of excavations in the citadel and in connection with the study of the other finds and, in particular, of local pottery and wares imported from short and medium distances conducted by Agnese Fusaro (2019, 2020a). From the very outset, priority went to the fragments collected during the ongoing excavations of the citadel, for which certain stratigraphic and quantitative data were available, but at the same time surface finds and ceramics included in the reference collection assembled by previous archaeological missions to the site were not neglected. Some of these latter fragments are reconsidered and presented in this paper.

The first step in the examination of the *corpus* was identification and cataloguing of the individual vessels, a task made difficult by the extremely fragmentary condition of most of the material and the somewhat homogeneous nature of fabrics and glazes. During 2018 and 2019 campaigns, approximately 300 fragments were inventoried, to which must be added at least another hundred sherds unearthed in late 2019 and early 2020 in the area north of the citadel (Visconti, Pavan 2021), cataloguing of which was interrupted due to the pandemic emergency. Overall, less than half of the sherds are diagnostic. Nonetheless, the first fact that emerges clearly is the surprisingly high proportion of Chinese and/or East Asian pottery within the overall *corpus*: in 2019 the percentage stood at 2.56%, fluctuating between 0.8 and 4.4% in individual stratigraphic units (Pavan, Visconti 2020, 247), and this would appear to be confirmed by data from the latest excavations. This figure is rather high, the percentage of Chinese ceramics in assemblages from other sites on the Arabian Peninsula being generally below 1%, attesting to the importance and volume of Chinese imports at the site.<sup>2</sup>

The study of Chinese-style ceramics was primarily instrumental in defining the chronological phases of the citadel.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Chinese imported wares are, as a rule, excellent chronological markers, often contributing considerably to determining the chronology of the archaeological deposit in which they are found. At this stage of the research, we can say that the chronological span of the *corpus* ranges from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; during this long time-span, periods showing relative abundance alternate with periods of pause. The results of these first investigations were published in a number of articles that appeared between 2018 and 2020, where the ongoing research, with redefinition of the periodisation, and the materials unearthed are illustrated (Pavan *et alii* 2018; 2020; Pavan, Visconti 2020). However, the research on the imported ceramics found at the site is intended to go beyond the mere chronological dimension and aims to understand their trade and circulation patterns in different chronological phases, analysing at the same time how pottery from different geographical contexts was perceived and used. The first studies in this regard were devoted to ceramics datable from the late 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (corresponding to phase IV of the citadel), the most flourishing period for relations between China and the site and for the port of Zafār in general (Pavan, Visconti 2020). However, study of the imported ceramics also proved crucial to postdating the later occupation of the site and demonstrating how the latter, despite the scarcity of architectural remains (Pavan *et alii* 2018, 214) attributable to this period (phase VI), was still a dynamic and active port along the Indian Ocean trade routes. It is to this last occupation period that this paper is dedicated.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Chinese-style ceramics” was coined by Dupoizat and Harkantiningasih (2007) for the Majapahit findings and also used by Zhao Bing (2015a; Carter *et alii* 2020) for ceramics found in East Africa and at the Julfār site. The term includes both Chinese and Southeast Asian wares inspired by the former in terms of decorative motifs, styles and forms. Although most of the sherds found at Zafār are certainly of Chinese manufacture, I have chosen to borrow the term here because it also includes ceramics that, especially during the last period of occupation of the site, are still of dubious origin.

<sup>2</sup> This is certainly among the highest data in the Arab world, comparable perhaps only to that of Qal‘at al-Bahrayn (Zhao Bing, Lombard 2005).

<sup>3</sup> On the basis of the excavations conducted so far, a sequence of three constructional phases (IV, V and VI) has been established. See Pavan *et alii* 2018. See also Pavan in this volume.

## THE *CORPUS*

The ceramic classes that make up the *corpus* of Chinese-style imports have been distinguished and grouped mainly on the basis of fabrics, glazes and type of decoration. This choice, which partly adopts the six main complexes proposed by Zhang Ran (2016, 151), was imposed at the current stage of research for several reasons: firstly, the state of the sherds which, in most cases, only makes it possible to distinguish between closed and open forms (the latter being clearly predominant), but not the morphological reconstruction of the vessels. In addition, no archaeometric analysis of artefacts from China or East Asia has been carried out so far, and attributing the manufacture of an object to a specific production centre – and even more so to a specific kiln in a kiln complex – is in many cases premature.

The main categories identified to date are:

### Green-glazed ware / *qingyouci* 青釉瓷 from the kilns of Longquan

This type, often referred to as *celadon* in the Western literature, comprises a wide range of ceramics fired at high temperatures in a reducing atmosphere, with glazes varying from light blue to light green and olive green. The decoration, when present, may be impressed underneath the glaze or moulded in relief. Sometimes the glaze has a *craquelé* effect obtained by exploiting the different coefficient of thermal expansion of the glaze compared to the body. The latter is compact and light grey in colour. In the Western literature, Longquan celadons are always described as fine stonewares,<sup>4</sup> but Nigel Wood's (2007, 75-76) analysis of glazes and ceramic bodies showed them to be almost identical to Jingdezhen white porcelain (see below), except for a slightly higher content of iron and titanium oxides and a predominance of potassium over soda. Even more recent analyses have highlighted differences and variations over time in the composition of bodies and glazes of sherd unearthed from eight kiln sites in the Longquan complex (Palace Museum 2019). Future studies may better define the provenance of celadon wares destined for export.

In Zafār, this category is the most represented among the Chinese imports, especially for the period between the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (citadel phase IV),<sup>5</sup> and includes both open forms – bowls, plates – and closed forms – jars, baluster vases, pourers (Figs. 1-2).<sup>6</sup>

### Green-glazed ware/ *qingyouci* 青釉瓷 not from Longquan kilns

Zhang Ran (2016, 154-187) distinguishes 13 classes, and several sub-classes, of Chinese green-glazed wares in Western Indian Ocean assemblages. Notably, in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the export of Longquan celadons reached its peak, ceramics imitating their forms and decoration began to be produced also in southern China, in kilns in Jiangxi, Fujian and Guangdong. To these ceramics must be added the imitations produced in Southeast Asia and, in particular, in North Vietnam and Thailand, which also enjoyed a considerable market in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

To date, no archaeometric analysis has been carried out on the Chinese-style ceramic sherds found at Zafār. This makes it effectively impossible to identify from which kiln site of the huge Longquan complex the celadon sherds came and, in many cases, even to distinguish the low-quality Longquan green-glazed sherds from those of southern production. Although from superficial observation of the fragments, some of them can be attributed to the latter manufacture, firm conclusions can only be drawn after the archaeometric investigations planned for the next excavation campaigns.

### Glazed storage jars (*Martaban*)

The Martaban jars are storage jars of glazed coarse stoneware with an ovoidal body, flat base and short neck. Four or six small handles are applied to the shoulder, serving for cords to be passed through them to keep the lid in place. The height varies from 10 to over 100 cm. The lead glaze may cover the outer surface completely or only partially and ranges in colour from olive-green through brown to black. Decorations, moulded or carved, are rarely found. These jars take the name used for them in literature from the Arabic pronunciation of the eponymous port in present-day Myanmar, and were already called “Martaban” in the writings of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (2008, 693). Used to transport provisions, liquids, spices or porcelain itself, the Martaban jars were produced in the southern Chinese kilns of Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong, as well as various centres in Southeast Asia. Situated in the vicinity of the ports, these kilns produced utilitarian pottery for export, thus allowing to save on the transport costs necessary for the more highly prized wares from hinterland kiln complexes. Martaban jars circulated widely throughout the

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese literature does not differentiate between porcelain and stoneware, both of which are referred to as *ci* 瓷.

<sup>5</sup> See also Fusaro and Pavan in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the figures, photographs, and drawings have been made by the author.



Indian Ocean over a length of time spanning from the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, they are a constant presence in the archaeological assemblages of the ports involved in the inter-Asian trade network. However, although recent years have seen some major publications on these jars (Ströber 2016; Zhao Bing 2017; Qin Dashu *et alii* 2017), there is still no reliable typology and considerable difficulties persist in dating and, very often, also in attributing them to a specific production centre. In the case of the sherds found at Zafār, these difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that only a few of them are diagnostic and no significant quantitative or qualitative variations are observable in the archaeological levels investigated so far (Fig. 3).

#### Bluish white porcelain / *qingbaici* 青白瓷

*Qingbai* porcelain, literally “blue white”, also known as *yingqingci* 影青瓷 is characterised by a watery-blue lime glaze, the colour of which derives from the iron in the raw materials of the glaze, fired under reducing conditions (Medley 2006, 165; Wood 2007, 50-53). The firing temperature is, by porcelain standards, rather low, and typically ranges between 1220° and 1260°C. The decoration may be engraved or moulded. The production of *qingbai* porcelain, the centre of origin of which is still debated, began in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and continued to flourish until the 14<sup>th</sup>, extending to several kiln complexes in central-southern China, including Jingdezhen (see below), Fachang in Anhui, Nanfeng in Jiangxi, Dehua in Fujian (see below), and Husi in Hubei (Li Zihan *et alii* 2021). *Qingbai* porcelains, which were probably the most important ceramics exported to the Arabian Peninsula between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, as shown by the assemblages of Sharma (Zhao Bing 2105*b*, 279-282) and Şuhār (Kervran 2004, 323), appear in the Zafār *corpus* only in the form of a few fragments.

#### Blue and white porcelain / *qinghuaci* 青花瓷

Blue and white porcelain is the second most represented category in the Zafār *corpus* of Chinese-style ceramics. This category, certainly one of the most significant Chinese porcelain productions and one of the best known in the West, is characterised by the decoration in cobalt ores applied under the lime-alkali glaze, and the fine high-fired white body. The origin of the blue and white porcelain is still widely debated, but it is certainly considered to be the most characteristic production of the Jingdezhen kiln complex from at least the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and, as it were, symbolic of the effects that commercial interactions could have on artistic production. This is true of the composition of the cobalt used in China – which very often involved a mixture of local ores and imported cobalt, especially from the Persian world –, but it is also true of the adaptation of the decorative motifs to the taste of the countries for which the production was intended, and of the attempts at imitation that were made almost everywhere there was any possibility, from East Asia to Western Europe (see below and Fusaro 2020*a*, figs. 12 and 14).

The earliest fragments of Jingdezhen blue and white porcelain found at Zafār date from the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) and more specifically from the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of blue and white porcelain increased in percentage terms over the centuries, taking over from green-glazed ceramics as the most represented Chinese-style pottery at the site after the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

From a qualitative point of view, the sherds vary considerably: while for phase IV of the citadel all the sherds come from the kilns of the Jingdezhen complex, and some can even be attributed to the production of imperial kilns (Fig. 4), the sherds from the archaeological levels belonging to phases V and VI are, as we shall see, of poorer overall quality, deriving not only from Jingdezhen, but also from kilns in southern China and possibly Southeast Asia.

#### Dehua ware / *Dehuaci* 德華瓷

The kilns of Dehua, in the coastal province of Fujian, constitute the third largest kiln complex in China along with Jingdezhen and Longquan. They began operating in the Northern Song period (960-1127), expanding production considerably from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and became famous in the West in the Ming era (1368-1644) for producing a distinctive ivory-white porcelain known as *Blanc de Chine*.

The *corpus* of Chinese ceramics from Zafār certainly includes some fragments of small, white-glazed proto-porcelain bowls with light moulded lotus panel patterns on the outer surface, dating from the late 13<sup>th</sup> to early 14<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 5). This type of production, distinctive of Dehua’s manufacture in the Yuan period, is characterised by the matte white colour of the surface, derived from the low percentage of calcium oxide in the glaze. It is probable, although yet to be established with certainty that some fragments of white porcelain attributable to later phases also came from this kiln complex.

#### Polychrome ware

This category groups all ceramic classes with polychrome decoration with the exception of the blue and white porcelains, which have been treated separately because of their importance in the *corpus* and their

specificity. Almost all the classes of polychrome ceramics date to the later occupation phases of the site and are represented by only a few sherds. Among them, there are a few fragments of porcelain decorated with polychrome enamels over glaze, some cups showing a coffee-brown glaze of the type known as Batavia, some sherds with red and green decoration, probably belonging to Zhangzhou export production.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE ROLE OF CHINESE-STYLE CERAMICS IN DEFINING THE CHRONOLOGY OF ZAFĀR

As mentioned above, Chinese-style sherds contributed to the definition of the constructional phases of the citadel: indeed, the fragments found in the filling levels of the investigated rooms provided a useful chronological term for the use of these rooms as well as for the architectural transformations that occurred over time. The identified phases are: phase IV (1279-1420/1500), phase V (1500-1650) and phase VI (1650-1800).

At the same time, the Chinese-style ceramics – whether from the citadel, the surface collection or the reference collection assembled by previous archaeological missions to the site, and now partly housed at the National Museum of Oman in Muscat –, also provided evidence that Zafār still played an active, though perhaps no longer so important, role in the Indian Ocean trading network<sup>8</sup> during the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that the abandonment of the site must have occurred at a later period than previously imagined (Newton, Zarins 2017, 67).

In terms of absolute chronology, on the evidence available at the current state of research the *corpus* of East Asian ceramics covers a chronological span from the late 13<sup>th</sup> to the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout this time span, periods of major and minor import activity as well as changes in the forms and decorations of the ceramics which can only partly be ascribed to changes in taste, are clearly distinguishable.

The most flourishing period for the import of Chinese ceramics, and also the period of greatest splendour for the port of Zafār in general, corresponds to Phase IV of the citadel and is evidenced by the volume as well as the quality of the imported materials (Pavan, Visconti 2020). The coincidence of certain favourable conditions meant that the site enjoyed a special position in diplomatic and commercial relations between China and southern Arabia. Indeed, in 1279 China became part of the Mongol Empire with the founding of the Yuan dynasty: ceramics became one of the main export products and the axis of trade rapidly shifted from land to sea, reaching an unprecedented volume. In the same year, the Rasūlid dynasty (1228-1454) conquered Zafār and included the port in its network of commercial and diplomatic relations with East Asia. The intensity of relations between China and southern Arabia between the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century is also attested, albeit in a rather summary manner, by the Chinese textual sources of the period and, in particular, by those which, at the beginning of the Ming period, recounted the expeditions of Zheng He (1371-1435), testifying to direct contacts between China and the port of Zafār.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, analysis and comparison of the material culture and, in particular, the imported Chinese-style ceramics, seems to confirm the existence of a commercial circuit for this period that directly linked the ports of southern India to those of the southern Arabian peninsula, and then on to the Swahili coast of Africa, as far as Kenya and Tanzania. This network seems to have been largely distinct from the one that had previously linked East Asia to the centres of the Persian Gulf, as attested to by the definitive decline of Sīrāf and Ṣuḥār (Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 1988, 87),

<sup>7</sup> Zhangzhou ware was made for export at various kilns, mostly located in Fujian. It is also known as “Swatow” after the Dutch transliteration of Shantou, as it was mistakenly believed to be exported from that port, in Guangdong province.

<sup>8</sup> See Fusaro in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> From the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Zafār begins to appear in various Chinese sources under different transliterations. It probably made its first appearance in the *Zhufan zhi* 諸蕃志 by Zhao Rugua 趙汝适, superintendent of maritime trade at Quanzhou, which was completed in 1225. In the text, Zafār is transliterated as Nufa 奴發 and related to other cities in Hadramawt and the trade of frankincense. In the Ming era, Zafār is transliterated as Zufa'er 祖法兒 or Zuofa'er 佐法兒. The main textual sources in which it appears are those left by chroniclers following Zheng He's expeditions, such as Ma Huan's 馬歡 *Yingya shenglan* 瀛涯勝覽 (1433), Gong Zhen's 琯珍 *Xiyang fanguo zhi* 西洋番國志 (1434), and Fei Xin's 費信 *Xingcha shenglan* 星槎勝覽. On the evidence of these texts, the port was visited by Chinese fleets in the course of the sixth and the seventh expeditions, i.e. between 1421 and 1422 and between 1431 and 1433. The circumstances under which this last expedition took place are also recorded in the *Ming Xuanzong shilu* 明宣宗實錄, compiled in 1435. Zafār appears once again in the official *History of Ming* or *Mingshi* 明史, the compilation of which was completed in 1739. In Ming times, the name of the Arabian port is also recorded in some nautical texts: the *Shunfeng Xiangsong* 順風相送, a collection of sailing directions, which dates in its extant form from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the nautical charts of Zheng He or Mao Kun map, included in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century *Wubei zhi* 武備志. During the Qing epoch, Zafār appears in an encyclopaedic text, the *Yuanjian leihan* 淵鑒類函 (1701-1710), which essentially refers to contacts during the Ming dynasty and is based on chronicles from that period.

as well as being the network over which the European powers exercised their hegemony from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

During this period, Longquan celadon is the most frequently recorded ceramic class in Zafār, followed by Jingdezhen blue and white (Pavan *et alii* 2018, 220-226; Pavan, Visconti 2020, 247-250). What is striking is not only the quantity of sherds found (Chinese pottery in the archaeological levels investigated from this phase is never less than 1.8% of the total pottery found), but also the truly remarkable quality of some objects and the variety of forms represented. Open forms predominate, including medium and large bowls, dishes with lobed rims and small basins. To these are added some closed forms, such as small jars or baluster vases (Figs. 1-2). We might also reasonably assume that some of the blue and white porcelain fragments brought to light are attributable to the production of the imperial kilns in Jingdezhen and should be contextualised in the system of gift exchange between Chinese and Arab delegates, thus providing material evidence of direct contacts as described in the textual sources (Fig. 4).

Just as this profitable diplomatic and commercial activity had begun thanks to the coincidence of certain dates which had favoured its development, so a series of circumstances which occurred more or less at the same time brought about its decline. The death of the Emperor Xuanzong (r. 1425-1435) marked the end of the great Chinese expeditions, and the issuing of new restrictive measures both on the production of blue and white porcelain and on maritime trade. Other factors may certainly have contributed to this decline: the nature of the port of Zafār, for instance, which like other ports in the region was sandy and shallow and did not provide stable anchorage over time (Hardy-Guilbert *et alii* 2005); or even the competition between the various centres involved in the inter-Asian trade, which led to some hubs coming to prevail over others from time to time; or, again, the emergence and eventual dominance of European powers in trade along the Indian Ocean routes. From this period onwards, there was a dramatic decline in Chinese imported ceramics, which lasted for at least a century.

In the current state of research, no fragments of Chinese ceramics seem to be attributable with certainty to the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, whereas imports certainly resumed with some regularity from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the percentage of Chinese ceramics during phases V and VI is lower both quantitatively and qualitatively than observed for the 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and is indicative of a profound change in the dynamics of trade relations and, probably, also in the patterns of perception and use of Chinese ceramics at the site.

#### THE LATEST PERIOD

Chinese ceramics attributable to phases V and VI come from different contexts: the archaeological layers marking the last occupation period of the citadel, from which come some of the polychrome porcelains (Pavan *et alii* 2018), the surface collection and the reference collection, which includes sherds from different areas of the site and is now in part in the Muscat Museum.

The majority of the fragments belong to the category of blue and white porcelain which became the most exported in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. SU124,6 is a fragment of a bowl with everted rim with decoration divided into panels showing lotus sprays below Buddhist emblems (Fig. 6). Produced in the kilns of Jingdezhen, it is a *kraak* porcelain, whose name probably derives from the Dutch form of the Portuguese name carrack, a type of galleon that was used to transport porcelain from China. *Kraak* porcelain is typically an export porcelain, which arrived in Europe in large quantities in the 17<sup>th</sup> century through the various East India companies, and is characterised by its thin walls and patterned decoration, generally arranged in radial panels. Characteristic of the Wanli period (1573-1620), *kraak* porcelain continued to be produced in large quantities until the end of the third quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Fragment SU124,6 is dated to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup>

The small cup for serving tea or coffee SU9,1, decorated on the outer wall with a flower scroll and low petal border above the foot, and on the inner base with a flower within a circular medallion, is datable to the mid/late 17<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 7). A smaller fragment of a similar cup was collected earlier in the area of the settlement walls and is preserved in the reference collection. The cup is very similar, except for some details, to a piece in the collection of Topkapı Saray (TKS 15/10394; Ayers, Krahl 1986, III, 977), which bears the *shenghuang tangzhi* 聖皇堂製 mark in use in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Attributable to the early Qing dynasty (1644-1911), and once again both found in the citadel excavations and conserved in the reference collection, are the fragments of a type of large bowl with floral decoration consisting of chrysanthemums and scroll motifs, distinguished by the broad brushstrokes and the variations in the intensity of the colour used (SU1,463; Fig. 8). Coming from private kilns in southern China (Fujian or

<sup>10</sup> For comparison, see the decoration of the *kendi* TKS 15/7809 in the Topkapı Saray collection (Ayers, Krahl 1986, II, 728, no. 1291).

Guangdong), this type of bowl is an example of a rather inexpensive production destined for export, whose decoration was probably inspired by models from Jingdezhen: it is, in fact, no coincidence that similar fragments have been found in several sites, such as Khashm Nādir, south of Julfār, on the Arabian side of the Gulf (Hansman 1985, 30, fig. 8f and pl. IIIh). The cup from the reference collection is now on display at the National Museum of Oman in Muscat (Fig. 9).

The sherd described above was found in SU1, one of the uppermost archaeological layers of the citadel, which was very rich in ceramics and yielded quite a number of blue and white porcelains fragments, datable from the late Ming dynasty to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 8). All these fragments belong to bowls or small cups for the consumption of tea or coffee. Particularly interesting are some small bowls (SU1,201; SU1,421), of different sizes but with the same decoration, consisting of panels alternating cross-hatched patterns and stylised flowers along the rim. Sherds of identical bowls were also found in other layers, such as SU26 (the accumulation layer in room A12; see Fig. 10), and some others are preserved in the reference collection. These bowls are part of a mass production destined for export from the Fujian kiln complexes, and more particularly from the kilns in Dehua or Anxi, dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With a few variations, similar bowls were exported practically everywhere: to Southeast Asia, to the Arabian Peninsula (see the small fragment from the latest occupation of Sharma in Rougeulle, Zhao 2015, 442, fig. 280.7), to the Ottoman Empire (Ayers, Krahl 1986, III, 1121, no. 2647), but also, in the context of what is known as the Manila Galleon Trade, to Nagasaki (Miyata 2019, 167, fig. 9.9), the Philippines and the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Kuwayama 1997). Very often, and also at Zafār (see SU1,211; Fig. 8), in the archaeological assemblages these bowls are associated with other small bowls of similar provenance and date, decorated along the rim with circular motifs alternating with dots (Rougeulle, Zhao 2015, 442, fig. 280.5; Miyata 2019, 167, fig. 9.9).

In the reference collection of Zafār there are also two other bowls, one of which is now on display at the National Museum in Muscat, which are slightly larger and have the same decoration as SU1,201, SU1,421 etc. The body of these is badly damaged: the colour is opaque, yellowish white, while the surface is covered with cracks (Figs. 9-10). Whether the poor condition of these small bowls is attributable to an error that occurred during the firing of the pieces or damage that occurred later, I have never seen Chinese porcelain deteriorate in this way. This leads me to speculate that they may have been produced by Thai or Vietnamese kilns, inspired by and exported with Chinese production. In particular, the Thai kilns at Sawankhalok produced a proto-porcelain with underglaze blue decoration, which shows a pattern of alternating cross-hatched panels and similarly inspired floral decoration.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the arrival of fragments of blue and white porcelain in Zafār is attested at least until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: a small jarlet, only a few centimetres high, preserved in the reference collection (Fig. 11), is identical to the examples found in a wreck, which has been dated to 1796, excavated between 2019 and mid-2021 off the island of Pedra Branca, Singapore (Fig. 12).<sup>12</sup>

During the last occupation period of the site, most of the sherds found at Zafār belong to the blue and white category, produced both in Jingdezhen and in kilns in southern China. Nonetheless, ceramic classes in which underglaze blue is associated with other colours, and others whose decoration consists of overglaze enamels, are also represented. Among the latter, we note the fragment of a ring foot SU138,16 with floral decoration in red and green enamels (*honglücai ci* 紅綠彩瓷), probably from the kilns of Zhangzhou, Fujian, and datable to the end of the Ming dynasty, i.e. the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 13).<sup>13</sup> From the same period, or slightly later, is also the fragment SU1,116 (Fig. 14) with red and blue underglaze decoration (*qinghua youlihong* 青花釉裡紅).

Finally, a number of small cups with lobed panels reserved on a coffee-brown glaze, of the type generally known as Batavia, were brought to light (Fig. 15). This ceramic class developed only as from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The examples from Zafār have a floral decoration in underglaze blue within the reserved panels that is essentially identical to that of the cups found in the Sadana Island shipwreck, on Egypt's Red Sea coast, dated to after 1764 (Ward 2001, figs.1, 2).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the small jar with lid illustrated in Hansman (1985, 121, pl. 7b).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/centuries-old-shipwrecks-discovered-in-spore-waters-artefacts-to-be-displayed-in-museums>.

<sup>13</sup> For comparison, see the plate in the Palace Museum collection (<https://en.dpm.org.cn/collections/collections/2020-08-17/5880.html>).



## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The textual and material evidence concur in defining the period of Zafār's greatest splendour as that of the Rasūlid reign. The quantity of finds and, above all, the quality of some of them suggest that the arrival of Chinese-style ceramics took place along two channels: on the one hand in the segmented maritime trade along the routes of the Indian Ocean, through the intermediary of guilds of merchants of various nationalities, and on the other hand through the system of gift exchange and direct contacts between Chinese and Arab delegates.

In the successive periods (phases V and VI of the citadel), the proportion of Chinese-style ceramics in the assemblage tends to decrease quantitatively and, above all, qualitatively. The 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century *corpus* is, in fact, attributable to mass production for export, showing little morphological variety. Indeed, almost all the fragments can be traced back to bowls and cups for the consumption of tea or coffee. From the point of view of decoration, the blue and white category is the most represented and the motifs, mainly floral, are standardised. Direct relations with China probably ceased completely, as did the arrival of porcelain expressly intended for the Islamic market.

At the same time, we can observe a partial shifting of the production sites. While, in fact, the overwhelming majority of the sherds attributable to Phase IV are from Jingdezhen and Longquan (except for the Martaban jars), in phases V and VI a substantial part of the finds can certainly be attributed to the southern kilns of Fujian and Guangdong. In the next excavation campaigns, it is planned to carry out archaeometric analyses, which should allow us to specify the origin of the objects in more detail.

While these data confirm the general crisis of the site, due to both political and natural factors after the fall of the Rasūlids (Newton, Zarins 2017, 115), they also shift the final abandonment of the site to the very late 18<sup>th</sup> century, if not the early 19<sup>th</sup> (Pavan *et alii* 2018, 214; see also Fusaro in this volume).

Over and above the merely chronological aspect, the aim behind the analysis of Chinese-style ceramics in the broader context of the ceramic *corpus* and, in general, of the finds and structures unearthed at the site, is to understand their trade and circulation patterns, as well as to investigate how these wares were perceived and used simultaneously with imports from different geographical contexts, how their function could possibly have evolved over time, and how they interacted with or affected the local productions.

As from the late Ming dynasty, the arrival of ceramics from East Asia has to be contextualised within increasingly globalised trade dynamics. The presence of bowls like SU1,201 – found in several sites in the Indian Ocean, as well as Nagasaki, or Mexico City, in the context of the Trans-Pacific trade –, or bowls like SU1,463 – occurring in an area extending from Southeast Asia to the coasts of Africa (Carswell 2000, 91, fig. 91a,b) –, tell us of a mass production of standard quality, saleable in different and distant markets, its diffusion taking place in a global framework (Fig. 8). In the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century, Zafār was part of this framework, possibly retaining a role as commercial hub for the region, as evidenced by the imported items from the short and medium distance (Fusaro 2020a, 79-82). Still to be investigated further, but certainly fundamental, is the role played by ports and merchants from the Indian subcontinent in the arrival of Chinese-style porcelain in Zafār. The recently excavated wreck at Pedra Branca, in which a cargo of jarlets equal to the one in Fig. 11 was found, has been identified as that of the Indian ship “Shah Munshah”, sunk in 1796 during the voyage from China to India.<sup>14</sup> The presence of Indian utilitarian wares in the corpus of Zafār leads us to go on to hypothesise the presence of Indian communities living in town (Fusaro 2020a, 86-88). Certainly, one of the future aims of the research is to look more deeply into the role played by Indian merchants, in particular those from Gujarat, in the arrival of imported items at the site.

While Chinese porcelain was exported almost everywhere, the reception, use and value attributed to it must have varied considerably depending on the context. Imports of Chinese porcelain certainly had a strong impact on the cultural traditions of the port of Zafār, and perhaps also on the local ceramic industry. It is worth noting that during the period of diminishing imports, the production of more refined local ceramics expanded, perhaps partially replacing Oriental ceramics as a significant commodity when the latter was no longer available in such large quantities. However, even at the height of their production, the local workshops had neither the raw materials nor the technology to produce ceramics that could imitate Chinese ones – as was the case, by contrast, in Egypt or Iran, to name but two not too distant contexts – or enjoy the prestige attributed to the latter. We might even speculate that the perception of Chinese porcelain as a luxury good had not changed so much over time, even though in these last phases of occupation of the site the assemblage appears to be limited to mass-produced vessels, among which the valuable objects that stood out in the previous period no longer appear. This idea seems to be confirmed by a number of standard quality pieces from the bulk export

<sup>14</sup> <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-07-23/VHJhbnNjcmldDU2NzU3/index.html>.

production of the late Ming/early Qing period, which bear traces of restorations made with metal clamps (Fig. 16). Furthermore, it is worth noting that at Zafār this practice was largely limited to Chinese porcelain.

These considerations, moreover, concern not only the perception of Chinese porcelain, but also the use that was made of it: the restorations must, in fact, necessarily have changed the intended use of the small cups in the figure which, certainly, could no longer be used as containers for liquids.

In conclusion, the broad chronological span of the Chinese ceramic *corpus*, which, at the current state of research, is to be dated from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the variety of ceramic categories represented and the possibility of studying them within a carefully documented archaeological context, make Zafār an excellent case study for diachronic analysis of the dynamics of circulation, use and perception of imported pottery in southern Arabia. This is true not only of the period that saw the site's most flourishing activity, but also of the later and less textually documented periods. While we have excellent publications in which Chinese ceramics from sites on the Arabian Peninsula are accurately dated, the same cannot yet be said of the study of these finds in a wider context. In particular, future research aims to place imported Chinese ceramics in a broader framework that includes the social and economic development of the site, the maritime trade system in the Indian Ocean, and the cultural, economic and social relations between the various entities involved in this network of commercial and diplomatic relations.



Fig. 1 - Neck of a Longquan green-glazed baluster vase from the excavation of the citadel, mid-14<sup>th</sup> century (SU18,3).



Fig. 2 - Longquan green-glazed *guan* jar from the excavation of the citadel, 14<sup>th</sup> century (SU61,31).





Fig. 3 - Fragments of Martaban jars from the excavation of the citadel (SU301, walls not numbered) (Photo by A. Pavan).

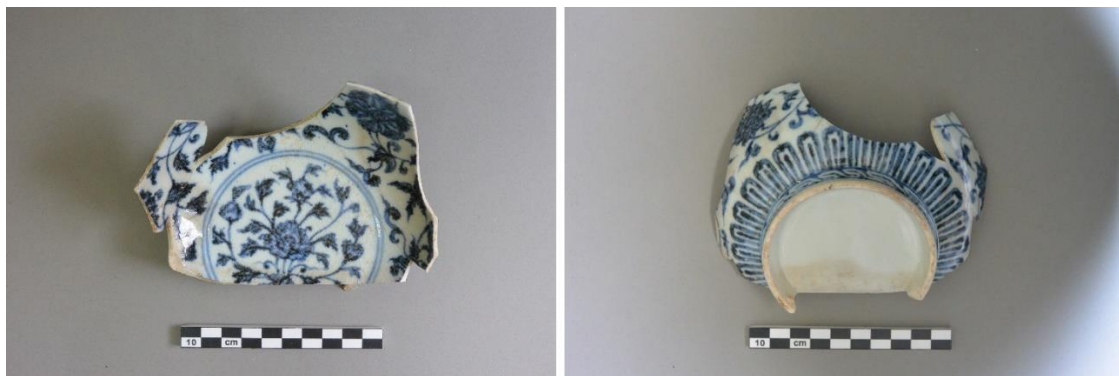


Fig. 4 - Blue and white porcelain bowl from the excavation of the citadel, early 15<sup>th</sup> century (SU202,1).





Fig. 5 - Sherds of Dehua lotus bowl from the excavation of the citadel, first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (SU301,16-19) (Photo by A. Pavan).

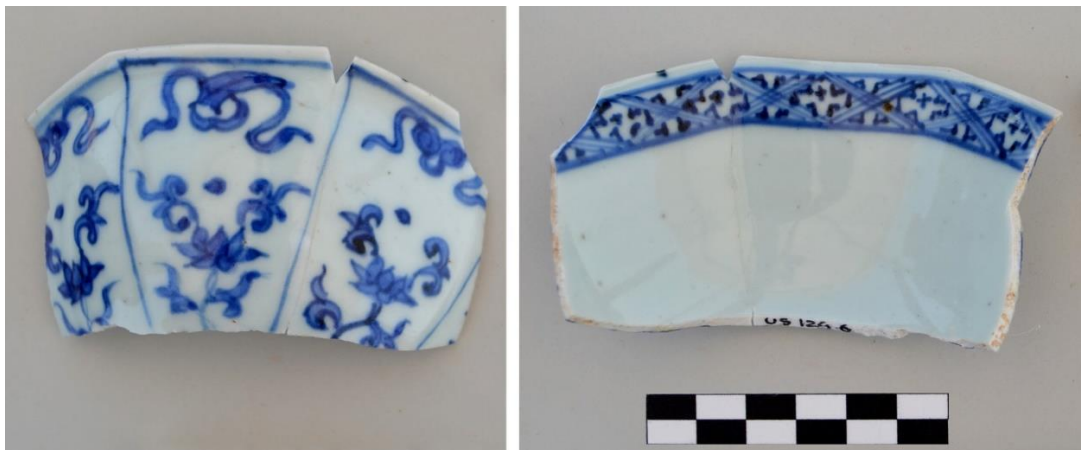


Fig. 6 - Blue and white *kraak* porcelain bowl, end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (SU124,6).

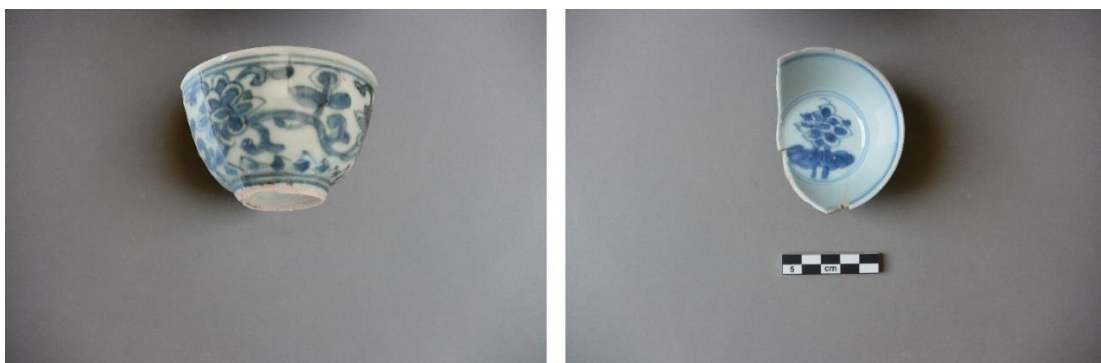


Fig. 7 - Blue and white porcelain cup, mid/late 17<sup>th</sup> century (SU9,1).



Fig. 8 - Sherds of blue and white porcelain bowls from SU1.



Fig. 9 - Chinese-style ceramics from Zafār on exhibit in the National Museum of Oman, Muscat.



Fig. 10 - Fragments of blue and white bowls from the reference collection and citadel excavation, 18<sup>th</sup> century (from left to right: BA1205.1020; SU26,26; SU1,201).



Fig. 11 - Blue and white porcelain jarlet from the reference collection, end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (BA1202.1005) (Photo by A. Pavan).





Fig. 12 - Chinese porcelain jarlets and bowls found in a wreck dated to 1796 off the island of Pedra Branca, Singapore (Photo from web, see n. 12).



Fig. 13 - Red and green painted porcelain fragment of a ring foot, first half of 17<sup>th</sup> century (SU138,16) (Photo by A. Pavan).



Fig. 14 - Small porcelain cup with red and blue underglaze decoration, first half of 17<sup>th</sup> century (SU1,116).



Fig. 15 - Sherds of Batavia ware cups from the reference collection and citadel excavation, late 18<sup>th</sup> century (from top left: BA14A.0233.P1; SU1,139; SU1,1010; SU1,1913; SU152,2: SU1,466) (Photo by A. Pavan).





Fig. 16 - Small cup with metal repairs (SU114,2, Photos by A. Pavan).

## 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. Şallálah), Hāfa (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), Hāfa (lit. El Hafah), and the remains of an old town called El Bellut (i.e. al-Balīd) located between Hāfa 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 Hāfa (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 Hāfa (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-Manşūra (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 Mirbāṭ (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-Balid 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-Balid. <a href="https://museum.wa.gov.au/maritime-archaeology-db/maritime-reports/oman-maritime-heritage-project">https://museum.wa.gov.au/maritime-archaeology-db/maritime-reports/oman-maritime-heritage-project</a>	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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