A PRELIMINARY SURVEY AT AL-SEEB
THE MEDIEVAL TOWN AND HARBOR OF DIMMA

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Introduction

Following a preliminary survey conducted by the author, Prof. Maurizio Tosi (Ministry of National Heritage & Culture of the Sultanate of Oman), Prof. Gösta Hoffmann (German University of Technology, Oman) and Mr Abdel Rahīm al-Maimāni (professional photographer), on June 1st - 5th 2013, a scatter of archaeological sites has been identified at al-Seeb, probably related to the Medieval town of Dimma (or Damā), quoted in the Medieval Portuguese sources dated to the 16th-17th century (al-Salimi and Jansen 2012; Wilkinson 1977, 41; Gallotta 1997).

The sites have been first detected by Prof. Gösta Hoffmann, as a result of survey work for training of GUTech Oman students of Earth Sciences1.

The archaeological remains are scattered along the coastal asphalt road, within the section from wādi Kharīs (South-East), passing through the al-Raudhah Roundabout, till wādi Luwāmī (North-West), for a total extension of 5km (Figs. 1-3).

The location of the archaeological remains seems to confirm the Portuguese sources, according which the ancient Dimma was located at the south/eastern end of the Batina coast, last of the Batina coast’s military forts before Maṭraḥ (modern-day Muscat), while Batina coast’s north-western limit was secluded by Shinās and Ṣoḥār (Wilkinson 1977, 14, 41). Thus, the Dimma’s harbors would have played a key role in the control of the approaching ships to Maṭraḥ.

1 I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. Gösta Hoffmann and Prof. Maurizio Tosi for having invited me, under the patronage of the Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, to take care of the archaeological coté within the GUTech project related to the study of the geology and geomorphology of the al-Seeb coastal area. I wish also to thank Dr. Sultan al-Bakri, (Direction of Excavation and Sites of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Sultanate of Oman) for all the support and help provided during the survey and the sensibility in preserve as much as possible the archaeological evidence in an area where the growth of modern construction is raising up rapidly. A particular thank is also due to Mr. Roman Garba for the help in taking pictures of the collected pottery.
In particular, most of the archaeological materials were collected from al-Raudhah Roundabout and the al-Hayl area where a military structure along the right bank of wāḍī Kharīs has been recognized (Fig. 4).

Archaeological remains were also identified along the Wāḍī Luwāmī, they were exposed till a decade ago, and can be seen in the 2002 Google Earth images, previously to the demolition of the architectonic evidences. This evidence is testified to both by satellite images and local people as mudbrick structures composed by at least one round tower and walls similar to the al-Hayl fort on the right bank of wāḍī Kharīs.

**Detected Archaeological Evidence**

The archaeological area comprises three main spots of interest (Fig. 3):

1. shell middens and a high accumulation of Medieval Islamic pottery dated to between 8th/9th-16th century North of the al-Raudhah Roundabout (Sector B, 23°39′24.23″N 58°13′17.86″E);
2. two mudbrick towers and at least two walls structures, apparently related to defensive or military purposes located 3.5 km South-East of al-Raudhah Roundabout, along wāḍī Kharīs (Sector A, 23°38′5.04″N 58°14′41.19″E);
3. a third area has been pointed out by Mr. Abdel Rahīm al-Maimānī, 2 km North-West of al-Raudhah Roundabout, along wāḍī Luwāmī where a mudbrick building was in place at least until 10 years ago, similar in shape and architecture to the fort along wāḍī Kharīs (Sector C, 23°39′52.06″N 58°12′22.37″E).

**Al-Roudhah Roundabout Pottery collection**

The survey allowed us to collect various potsherds related to different manufacture traditions and periods (Priestman 2008).

The vast majority of the collected materials were located North of the al-Roudhah Roundabout (Fig. 5), where the 2002 Google Earth image show an accumulation of shell middens around a supposed rectangular area

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2 Local people have been interviewed by Mr. Abdel Rahīm al-Maimānī.
of production (Fig. 6). Fortunately the modern building did not entirely cover the archaeological evidence (Fig. 7). Part of the shell middens is still preserved, together with potsherds, although the excavation trench of the closest modern building seems to have mixed the archaeological levels. For this reason the collected materials show a high variety of miscellaneous stock.

**Early Islamic (8th-9th century)**

The most ancient identified potsherds are dated to the Early Islamic period. These materials were imported from Iran; they are also attested at Şoḥār. It is a turquoise-blue alkaline glazed pottery, dated to the 8th-9th century (Fig. 8). It testifies to the manufacture tradition derived from Sasanian times (Priestman 2010).

**Early Islamic Samarra Horizon (8th-9th century)**

A second class of material dated to the Early Islamic is the one imported from Iraq (Samarra) (Priestman 2008). It is a plain white opaque-glazed ware bowls, dated to between the 8th-9th century (Fig. 9).

**Middle Islamic (10th-15th century)**

A third class of materials, the most abundant within our collection, is that of the sgraffiato decoration ware, composed by two types of potsherds: a) clear lead-glazed ware with green, brown and yellow splashes and a white slip incised through with hatched sgraffiato decoration (Fig. 10); b) green lead-glazed ware with crudely incised sgraffiato decoration (Fig. 11) (Morgan 1994a-b; Priestman 2008). Both types can be dated to between 10th-11th century.

**Late Islamic (16th-17th century)**

A collection of Portuguese glasses has been recorded. In particular, long narrow cylindrical neck bottle with globular body dated to the 16th-17th century (Mendes 2002; Brill 1999) (Fig. 12). This type of glass vessels spread out during the Portuguese occupation and disappeared after the Portuguese left (Medici 2005).
Others

Within the collected materials appear a huge number of undefined potsherds (Chinese ware in some cases) which must be studied more deeply (Rougeulle 1991). At least an Indian tradition can be recognized in a reddish paste and red painted potsherd (Fig. 13) (Begley and De Puma 1991).

The al-Hayl Fort

Two km East of al-Raudhah Roundabout, along wādī Kharīs, a tell has been detected in the al-Hayl area (Fig. 14). On the top two mudbrick towers and, at least, two mudbrick walls have been recorded.

The satellite images from Google Earth show part of a quadrangular shape building of a perimeter of $10 \times 8$ m. Two corners are visible, corresponding to the northern and southern towers. The structures are still preserved until 2.5 m in height (Figs. 14-16). According to the preserved walls it seems that the structure was composed by four towers arranged towards the cardinal points (Fig. 17). Although the structures suffered the melting of the external mudbrick, the northern tower can be identified in plan. It is a rounded structure with a 4 m diameter ca. Its northern side (Fig. 16) seems to preserve an entrance.

According to the textual sources it could be considered as a first architectonic evidence of the ancient Dimma or part of a complex system of defense and control along the approaching shore, confirmed by the second fort described below.

The pottery collected shows a concentration of Middle (rare) and Late Islamic (abundant) ware from 12th to 16th century.

The Second fort

Five km North-West of al-Roudhah roundabout a second building was still preserved in 2002, along wādī Luwāmī (Fig. 18).

The satellite image and the local people suggest that this building was a second rectangular structure with corner towers entirely made in mudbricks (Fig. 19). The area has been demolished for the construction, but yet no foundation trenches have been excavated. It could be possible that the ancient building’s foundation walls are still preserved.
First Geomorphological Observations for a Preliminary Reconstruction of the Ancient Landscape

From a geomorphological point of view the site is in an optimal location to be provided of freshwater (Fig. 20). Indeed, the archaeological remains lie down within the alluvial of the wādī Kharīs and wādī Luwāmī at the south-eastern end of the Batina coast, a particularly fertile and dense populated belt close between the sea, to the east, and the mountain (Hajar range), to the West from where a huge number of wādīs come down (Fig. 1).

Moreover, considering that the coastal line has moved forward to the east due to the sediments deposit of the converging wādī streams, we could assume that the ancient coastline would have been closer to the forts and port installation detected so far (Fig. 14)\(^3\). The site would be strategically located in the intermediate stage between Ṣoḥār, to the North-West and Quriyāt, to the South-East marking a coastal route of access and departure from the gulf of Oman southern side before the emergency of the historical Muscat during the 18\(^{th}\) century as port of call between India and East Africa.

Finally, the presence of at least one clear military structure along wādī Kharīs suggests that this very wādī could have been the way in to an ancient harbor of Dimma, providing a security access and a control point for all the incoming ships.

Thus, the general landscape would suggest that this group of archaeological sites could be compounded to be associated with the ancient Dimma, a major medieval town and harbor still attested in Portuguese sources.

However, the ceramic collection gathered so far would indicate a much deeper span of occupation, practically covering all periods from the beginning of Islam, with peaks of the 11\(^{th}\)-13\(^{th}\) century evidently connected to the main trunk route connecting Sirāf and Ṣoḥār (Wilkinson 1979) with the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean (Kennet 2004; Potts 1990; Rougeulle 1996).

So far there is very little evidence of far eastern and Chinese potteries previous to Late Islamic times, although expected in consideration of the role played by Ṣoḥār, the distant port and markets of southern China.

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\(^3\) Further analyses related to the ancient coastal line are under process by Prof. Gösta Hoffmann’s team.
and beyond (Rougeulle 1996). There are also indications of long distance trade with Indian shores that indicate the need for further systematic explorations (Fig. 13).

**Conclusion and Suggestions**

At this very preliminary stage of analysis we are able to define a first picture of the imported wares from the ancient al-Seeb which stretches from southern Iraq (Samarra) to India, passing through Sirāf, in southern Iran and Ṣoḥār. This particular assemblage of materials seems to confirm the nature of the site in which the ancient military forts stand: the ancient harbor of Dimma.

Due to such an archaeological and historical potential and to the high development of modern buildings in the area it has been suggested to protect the architectonic structures of the preserved military fort and start a systematic archaeological campaign on two sides:

1. a regular archaeological excavation campaign of the first military fort close to wādī Kharīs (al-Hayl area) with the primary object to define the extension of the building and, eventually, stratigraphic data on the lower levels on which the fort was built;
2. limited test excavations to sound the consistence of the archaeological remains close to the al-Roudhah Roundabout.

This will allow us to clarify the nature of the evidence and the possible extension of the ancient site before it completely disappears due to the huge modern construction activities.
REFERENCES


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Fig. 4 - al-Seeb. Main archaeological areas
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Fig. 8 - al-Seeb. Turquoise-blue alkaline glazed pottery, 8th - 9th century
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Fig. 9 - al-Seeb. Plain white opaque-glazed ware, 8\textsuperscript{th}-9\textsuperscript{th} century

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