

Sohar Project: The Archaeology of an Indian Ocean Port in Arabia

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The Sohar Project is an international collaboration that aims to look at the history and archaeology of the port of Sohar, Oman. We wish to examine the once famous early Islamic port city in the broader context of its foundation, development as a vibrant entrepôt on the Indian Ocean (Fig. 1), and subsequent transitions through mid to late Islamic phases.

Sohar is a site of outstanding international significance. At a time when a large portion of western Eurasia had been united under the newly established Islamic Caliphate, Sohar rose to prominence as a leading centre of trade in the Indian Ocean and the primary point of maritime exchange in Arabia. During these early centuries the urban landscape, constructed largely of fired brick, stretched over 2km along the shore. The remains of the city form the archaeological settlement mound – perhaps the largest tell in Arabia. The story of Sohar and its material culture are of crucial significance to understanding the early development of economic pathways that connected the Middle East directly with China, India, and East Africa for the first time in history. These routes were primarily developed by Omani sailors via Sohar, as has been recognised in the historical record dating from as early as the 9th century.

In 2023, a targeted survey took place in and around Sohar Fort yielding excellent results including areas where large quantities of early Chinese ceramic imports are easily accessed on the surface. In January/February of 2024 a full seven-week fieldwork season took place. Our work is generously supported by the University of Chicago – Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC) - and represents an international partnership and collaboration also involving Sultan Qaboos University, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, and Durham and Cardiff Universities in the UK.

This is a multi-faceted project involving a range of experts in the field who are focused on the phasing, topographical, environmental, and broader social impacts of the city in its heyday. The first season involved the work of 14 specialists from seven countries (USA, UK, Canada, France, Italy, Georgia and Japan) working together with local participants from the Sohar Fort Museum, the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism Office in the North Batinah Governate and a recent Omani graduate from Sheffield University. Our work is authorised by the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

The aims of the 2024 excavation season were centered on accessing the material remains of the archaeological mound, where the earliest contexts can lie up to eight metres below the current ground surface. A series of deep archaeological probes has begun to draw out the pattern of the buried town. The strategy involved a combination of deep shafts requiring temporary shoring (Fig. 2) and more extensive exposure in shallower areas of the outer town (Fig. 3). The success of this season offers a certain way forward for future investigation.

Excavations targeted the fort itself, where two trenches were opened, and two other areas sitting outside of the existing fort walls to the south and east. The existing fort, sitting near the highest point of the tell has only recently been renovated and encompasses a still visible earlier structure that had been the subject of excavations in the early 1980s by Monique Kervran. One goal of the season was a full assessment of the function and phasing of this visible structure and its relationship to the existing fort. What became clear is that the original fired brick fort has been intensively reconstructed and reworked from what is possibly the mid-Islamic period through Number 32, 2024 Spring Edition 17 the Portuguese occupation and well into the late Islamic period (Fig. 4). There is clear evidence for the successive construction of massive supporting walls added to the exterior of existing structures, most likely because of the increasing force of contemporary weaponry.

An intensive archaeobotanical assessment of the excavated contexts was aimed at adding to the limited bioarchaeological information available for the early historic period in the Arabian Peninsula (Fig. 5). Intensive sampling was conducted that included sieving, hand picking and floatation collection across stratified contexts both inside and outside of the fort. Analysis of the environmental remains, animal and fish bones and shell will enhance the broader understanding of the city of Sohar within its agricultural hinterland and marine environment including the possible importation of foreign species of plants and animals.

A detailed ceramic analysis has begun to quantify the links and connections in the network of Sohar over the whole phase of its existence (Fig. 6). From Mesopotamia to Iran, India, China, East Africa, Europe and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula – Sohar was globally connected from its very beginnings and remains a key port and conduit for trade into the Gulf and the Middle East.

The team of GIS experts involved in the project have worked on the topographical mapping of the existing old town of Sohar and its relationship to the archaeological mound (Fig. 7). This has been essential for understanding the archaeological potential across landscape of the earliest contexts. There is a great deal of current urban development in the city of Sohar whose beachfront location and old town makes it an attractive tourist destination. We hope

that our work in identifying areas of key archaeological potential will help to foreground the heritage of Sohar in future plans of urban development and renewal.

Another key aim of the Sohar Archaeological project is to develop a comprehensive community engagement programme (Fig. 8). We hope to work together with key stakeholders to widen the local participation and knowledge of the outstanding heritage of the city of Sohar. A focal point for our activity is the Sohar Fort Museum, which acts as one of the main visitor attractions in the region. This season we welcomed school groups, visiting dignitaries and tourists across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Encouraging further community participation in and expanding the local appreciation of the unique heritage of Sohar is a key ambition of the project and all its participants.

These promising initial results have begun to open up an understanding of the earliest development of the city of Sohar and its thriving trade across the Indian Ocean. The impact of the city and its contacts on the local environment and agricultural hinterland will continue to be investigated. The specific details of the excavated results from the 2024 season await full scientific analysis. For regular updates and to support our research please join us on IG @soharancientport