

SUHAR PROJECT

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OMAN ON THE FRONT LINES AT A TURNING POINT IN GLOBAL HISTORY

The early centuries of Islam (seventh to ninth centuries CE) witnessed a huge increase in maritime trade across the Indian Ocean. For the first time in history, ships regularly sailed directly from Iraq to China and back. Commodities such as textiles, silk, spices, aromatics, ceramics, and many others, which had previously been traded in small quantities along the Silk Road, began to be moved by ship in large quantities. The economy of Asia was completely transformed. These developments represent the early roots of the modern “global economy.” The main protagonists in the trade were Muslim Arab sailors, many of whom were Omani—the Arabs best known for their seafaring experience.

This period was therefore an important turning point in human history. The Indian Ocean economy began to coalesce—Muslim merchants settled on the coast of China; the coast of East Africa underwent an economic transformation along with the first phase of “Swahilization” (the adoption of Islam and some Arabic); Arabic became the commercial *lingua franca* of the entire ocean; and commodities such as high-quality Chinese ceramics began to find their way to the Middle East as fashionable tablewares (broken sherds of which are still found today at coastal archaeological sites from Kenya to the Philippines).

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUHAR

In the western Indian Ocean, three key ports handled this trade: Basra (Iraq), Siraf (Iran), and Suhar on the Batinah coast of Oman. Suhar is mentioned in many historical sources of the ninth century (e.g., al-Tabari, al-Baladhuri, al-Muqaddasi) as the “gateway to China.” Suhar’s location gave it access to trade moving from China and India to Iraq, Iran, and Egypt—the three key areas of the early Islamic empire. That Suhar played a pivotal role in this trade marks it as an archaeological site of truly global significance. It certainly has the stature to become a sixth Omani UNESCO World Heritage site—a development that would chime perfectly with current Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism policy and would help develop both tourism and local education in the Northern Batinah Governorate.

But there is a problem: to be listed by UNESCO, Suhar would need to contain tangible archaeological monuments *related to the early Islamic period*. At present there is nothing. The fort, which is the main tourist attraction in the town today, dates to the sixteenth century and is 800 years too young. There are no archaeological remains of the early Islamic period presently exposed in the town that could be used to support a UNESCO listing (although many lie buried in the ground).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Investigating the archaeological history of Suhar and its engagement in maritime trade therefore presents us with a chance to answer many of the most difficult questions about this trade.

Previous excavations at the site, most importantly those of Monique Kervran in the early 1980s, succeeded in demonstrating that Suhar has a long and well-preserved archaeological record of trade, but there are some serious problems with this work. First, Kervran’s proposed dating is now known to have an error of more than 200 years; second, her excavations did not incorporate modern archaeological techniques such as environmental sampling and quantified analysis; and third, Kervran succeeded in opening only three or four very small “keyhole” trenches. As a result, the story we can glean from this work is very limited indeed.

Further excavation is therefore needed. Here are some of the key questions we wish to answer:

1. When was Suhar founded, and when did it first begin to grow as a trading port? We hope to gain a precise chronology for these events based on C14 accelerator mass spectrometry dating.
2. What changes took place at Suhar and in its hinterland as the maritime trade economy began to affect the town? For example, can we see environmental, agricultural, and economic changes taking place? What effect did the presence of Suhar have on the inhabitants of the Northern Batinah area?
3. What actual evidence is there for maritime trade—in particular, ceramic evidence of trade with China—and how did the volume of that trade change through the main years of Suhar’s activity?
4. When did maritime trade begin to decline, and when did the town begin to decline? Is there a link between the two?
5. What did the town of Suhar look like in the eighth to tenth centuries? Can we find buildings, streets, a mosque, shops, and/or workshops that can tell us something about life at Suhar during this time?

THE ISAC SUHAR PROJECT

The excavations of the current ISAC/University of Chicago Suhar Project aim to answer these questions. The project is a collaboration of ISAC/University of Chicago, the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, and the Department of Archaeology at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. Staff from other universities (Durham and Cardiff in the United Kingdom) are also involved. The excavations began in January 2024 and are slated to continue for at least seven more years. ISAC is funding the work. Further funding will be sought in the future (e.g., from the National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, and other organizations) to expand the scope of the work.

The project has four aims: (1) to investigate, using the latest archaeological methods, the history of early Islamic Indian Ocean trade and Suhar’s role in that trade; (2) to work with the municipal administration of Suhar and with the North Batinah Governorate to expose buildings datable to the period of Suhar’s greatest importance—the ultimate goal being to support a UNESCO bid; (3) to engage and educate the public on the history of Suhar; and (4) to train local Omani staff in archaeological and heritage skills.

During the first season (January–February 2024), excellent progress was made in all these areas. Archaeological investigation began by surveying surface finds (fig. 1) and starting to tackle the difficult technical challenge of excavating the largest archaeological mound of this type anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula. A series of deep archaeological probes has begun to draw out the pattern of the buried town. A strategy involving a combination of deep shafts requiring temporary protective shoring and more extensive exposure in shallower areas within the outer town offers a certain way forward for future investigation (figs. 2 and 3). The work is combined with cutting-edge strategies for paleoenvironmental recording, finds recovery, and scientific dating.

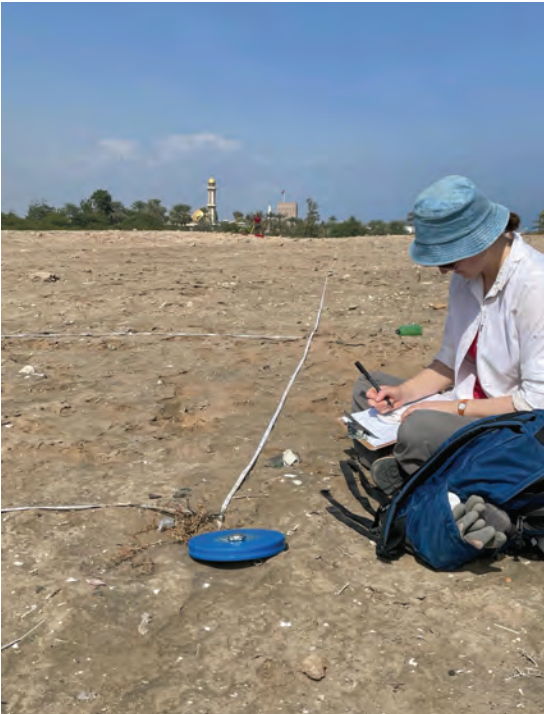


Figure 1. Field survey in an open area to the south of the town.



Figure 2. Test excavations next to the main mosque at Suhar.



Figure 3. Deep sounding to reach the lower buried levels. To make the sounding safe, metal shoring was required.

The aim of this project is to continue to expose both the scientific and historical significance of the site, its importance to the heritage of Oman, and its clear potential as a destination for international tourism. The excavations are expected to continue for at least seven seasons, during which further important discoveries will certainly come to light.

The team met with the wali (equivalent to a mayor), the director of the North Batinah municipality, as well as with governors of North Batinah, Musandam, and Dhofar. We offered training to Omani team members, delivered public lectures, and explained our work to hundreds of visitors, including groups from local schools. Meetings with His Excellency Eng. Ibrahim Said Al Kharusi, Undersecretary of Heritage Affairs at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, confirmed that there is strong ministry support for the Suhar Project's aims. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our Omani colleagues for their support and collaboration.

We also, of course, take this chance to thank all ISAC donors whose generous support has made this work possible.

THE SUHAR PROJECT TEAM

The Suhar Project team this year comprised Prof. Derek Kennet, ISAC/University of Chicago; Prof. Nasser Al-Jahwari, Department of Archaeology, Sultan Qaboos University; Dr. Seth Priestman, Durham University, United Kingdom; and Dr. Eve MacDonald, Cardiff University, United Kingdom.
