SUHAR PROJECT

DEREK KENNET AND SETH PRIESTMAN

The second season of the ISAC Suhar Project excavations took place during six weeks in January and February 2025. The research questions that lie behind the project were described in last year's annual report; in simple terms, the project is designed to investigate the notable boom in maritime trade that took place across the Indian Ocean during the eighth and ninth centuries CE (and possibly a century earlier, as we are now discovering). At this time, Muslim Arab sailors began sailing regularly to trade destinations around the ocean, from China to the coast of East Africa. Luxury commodities such as textiles, silk, spices, aromatics, and ceramics formed the core of this trade. The high trade volume appears to have had a significant effect on the economy of much of the Indian Ocean, driving new manufacturing in China (along with the settlement of Arab and Persian merchants there) while at the same time beginning the process of "Swahilization" (the spread of elements of the Arabic language, along with Islam and some elements of Middle Eastern culture) in East Africa. This period was, therefore, a hugely important and transformative one across much of Asia, and it arguably began the long march to the fully globalized economy we know today.

Suhar, a celebrated and historic port city located at the southeastern tip of Arabia, is ideally situated to investigate these developments (fig. 1). The aims of the Suhar Project are to gain a better understanding of the origins and development of this trade and to discern the details of its chronology.

Figure 1. The location of Suhar on the southeastern tip of Arabia, looking into the Gulf of Oman.

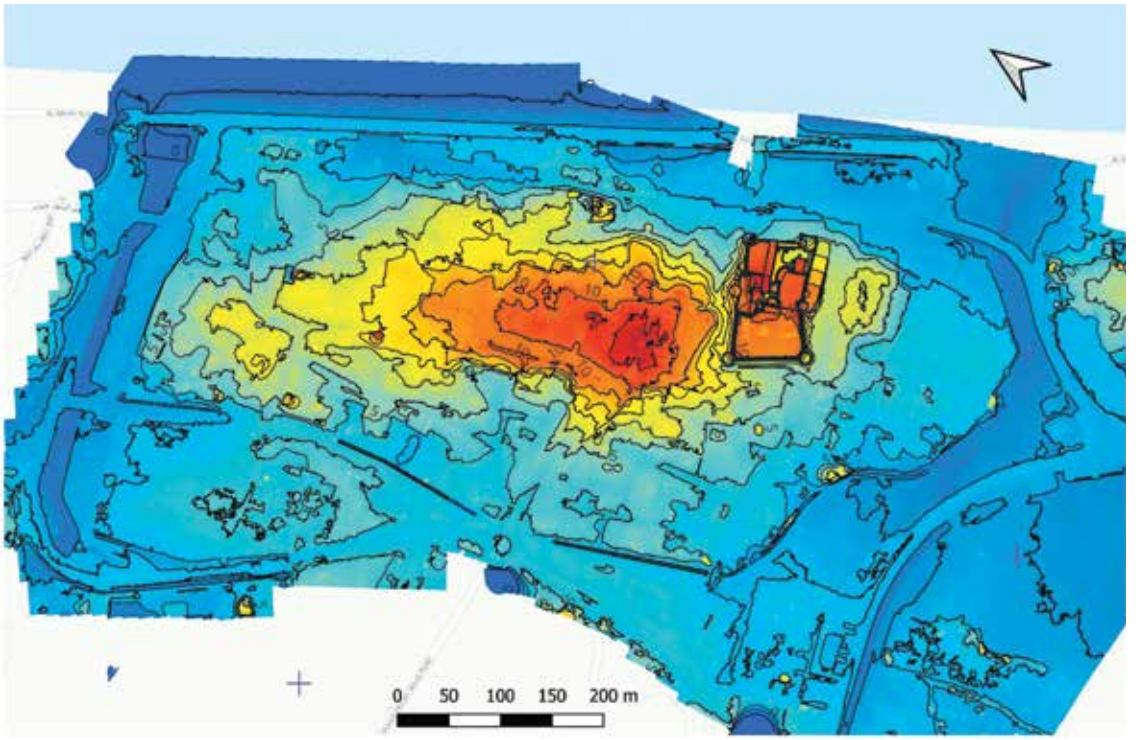

Figure 2. Contour plan of Suhar made by the project.

THE 2024 SEASON

The first season of the Suhar Project had been spent exploring and mapping the site in detail, recording its surface remains, and excavating small soundings to investigate the depth and nature of its stratigraphy. Suhar is a large and complex site: it is a "tell," or settlement mound, measuring about 800 × 200 m and comprising about 8 m of archaeological stratigraphy at its highest point (fig. 2). While this size would be relatively modest by Mesopotamian standards, it is the largest tell in southeastern Arabia and contains a lot of detailed archaeological evidence. It is important to take the time to understand a site properly before committing to its large-scale excavation, so our mapping of Suhar's surface remains—ceramics, bricks, and other evidence—was vital for gaining crucial information about the site's layout and the location of key areas of activity there. We also used ground-penetrating radar to explore much of the tell (fig. 3). This work, combined with soundings, made us confident of our grasp of Suhar's layout and the best strategy for excavating the mound, and thus ready for the start of the 2025 season.

Figure 3. Ground-penetrating radar survey in process.

THE 2025 SEASON

For the 2025 season, we assembled a team of twenty-four leading specialists and students. The project was codirected by Derek Kennet (ISAC), Seth Priestman (ISAC research associate), and Nasser Al-Jahwari (Sultan Qaboos University, Oman). Other team members came from Oman, Chicago, and a number of other countries around the world. Excavation was undertaken in four locations, which had been discussed and agreed on with the Suhar Municipality and the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

Deep Occupation Sequence (Trench SH10)

Taking advantage of an area of open Municipality gardens, a deep excavation was carried out close to the highest part of the mound (fig. 4). Here we aimed to excavate to the base of the sequence to ascertain the depth and nature of the stratigraphy and to establish the earliest date of occupation. We also sought to extract finds and environmental samples spanning the full range of the tell's occupation. Previous excavations in this area had reported a depth of around 8 m.

Excavation at such a depth poses significant logistical and safety issues. It must be undertaken carefully and within a single season so that the trench does not have to be left open for a year between seasons. A mixture of "stepping" and shoring was adopted in a 6 × 6 m trench, within which the central 2 × 2 m area was excavated to the bottom of the sequence (fig. 5). Natural sand was reached 8.4 m below ground surface.

Despite the excavation's limited area, there emerged a clear sequence of occupation, which has been subdivided into nine archaeological phases. A systematic series of samples of shell, animal bone, fish bone, charcoal, pottery, glass, beads, metal, and slag was retrieved. Further study and analysis of the associated finds are required before we can gain a clearer idea of the occupational chronology. But preliminary analysis of accelerator mass spectrometry dates from the bottom of the sequence suggests a foundation date in the late sixth or early seventh century CE, followed, a few meters higher, by ceramics indicating that occupation continued more or less continuously into at least the ninth century. The first historical description of Suhar

Figure 4. The location of trench SH10, the deep sequence excavation, near Suhar Fort on the highest part of the settlement mound.

Figure 5. Stepping and shoring in trench SH10 to safely reach 8.4 m below ground surface.

as a trading port occurs in the early ninth century, so the archaeological evidence will provide a very different, longer, and more realistic picture of Suhar's development.

Multiple Phases of Mudbrick Architecture in Trench SH14 (al-Shizaw)

To the north of the main settlement mound, an area of low archaeological mounding spread over about 4 ha is undeveloped. Called al-Shizaw, this area is covered with a high concentration of archaeological finds, including fired-brick fragments, industrial-waste materials such as glass and metal slag, and quantities of ceramics from the early and late Islamic periods. Chinese ceramics are abundant and include some of the earliest imports so far attested in the region. Being close to Suhar Fort in an area accessible to visitors, al-Shizaw is well suited to the development of Suhar as a tourism site.

A 10 × 10 m trench (SH14) was opened in this area and revealed a number of phases of occupation (fig. 6), the earliest being 3.23 m below ground surface. The stratigraphy shows two major phases of mudbrick architecture interspersed with apparent periods of abandonment. It is possible that the final abandonment of the area was caused by violent overwash from the sea—possibly a tsunami. Suhar would have been susceptible to such events because of its flat, coastal location.

The results from Trench SH14 bode well on two counts. First, there is demonstrably a well-preserved sequence of occupation through the early Islamic period and into the later history of the site, a sequence that will allow us to reconstruct the history of Suhar. Second, the fact that there is mudbrick architecture from the early Islamic period that is in good condition and still standing more than 1 m in height confirms that it will be possible to expose any discoveries of Suhar's ancient monuments, which will testify to the city's important past, provide items of interest to tourists, and, in the future, help support a bid for the site's UNESCO World Heritage status—a status that Suhar's historical fame certainly merits.

Figure 6. Multiple phases of mudbrick architecture in Trench SH14 at al-Shizaw.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Once again, the team worked closely with the Suhar Municipality, whose support was crucial to our work. We also liaised closely with colleagues from the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and the governorate of the Northern Batinah region, mainly through our colleague Sultan Al-Meqbali, director of the Suhar Fort Museum. There is strong local support for the Suhar Project's aims, and we are deeply grateful to all our Omani colleagues in the Ministry and at Suhar for the generous help we received. We were able to offer training and work experience to Omani team members, we delivered public lectures in Suhar and Muscat, and we explained our work to hundreds of visitors, including tourists and especially groups of local schoolchildren, who were always full of questions and excitement (fig. 7). Most importantly, we thank all the ISAC donors whose kindness and generosity have made this work possible.

Figure 7. Schoolchildren visiting the Suhar excavations.