



QUADERNI DI ARABIA ANTICA 4

Alexia Pavan
Michele Degli Esposti

The urban shrine
in Quarter A at Sumhuram
Stratigraphy, Architecture, Material Culture

«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER

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QUADERNI DI ARABIA ANTICA 4
series directed by Alessandra Avanzini

ALEXIA PAVAN, MICHELE DEGLI ESPOSTI
*The urban shrine in Quarter A at Sumhuram.
Stratigraphy, architecture, material culture*

Editing, page layout and cover: Alessandra Lombardi
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1. Introduction

In February 2008 a new urban shrine was discovered in the ancient South Arabian town of Sumhuram (Fig. 1). Its original layout comprised a small main room (A110) linked with a smaller, ancillary room to the north (A152), whose excavation was completed in 2010. Decisive evidence was found to identify a real urban shrine, smaller but in a remarkably central position if compared with the already known temple of Sīn in Area F (Sedov 2008a). The shrine is in fact located in the so-called Area A, south of the massive building named Monumental Building 1 (Fig. 2).

The stratigraphy revealed within the shrine, reaching down to the earliest levels of the city, clearly indicates two main periods of occupation each comprising several sub-phases, finally followed by a late, more ephemeral occupation.

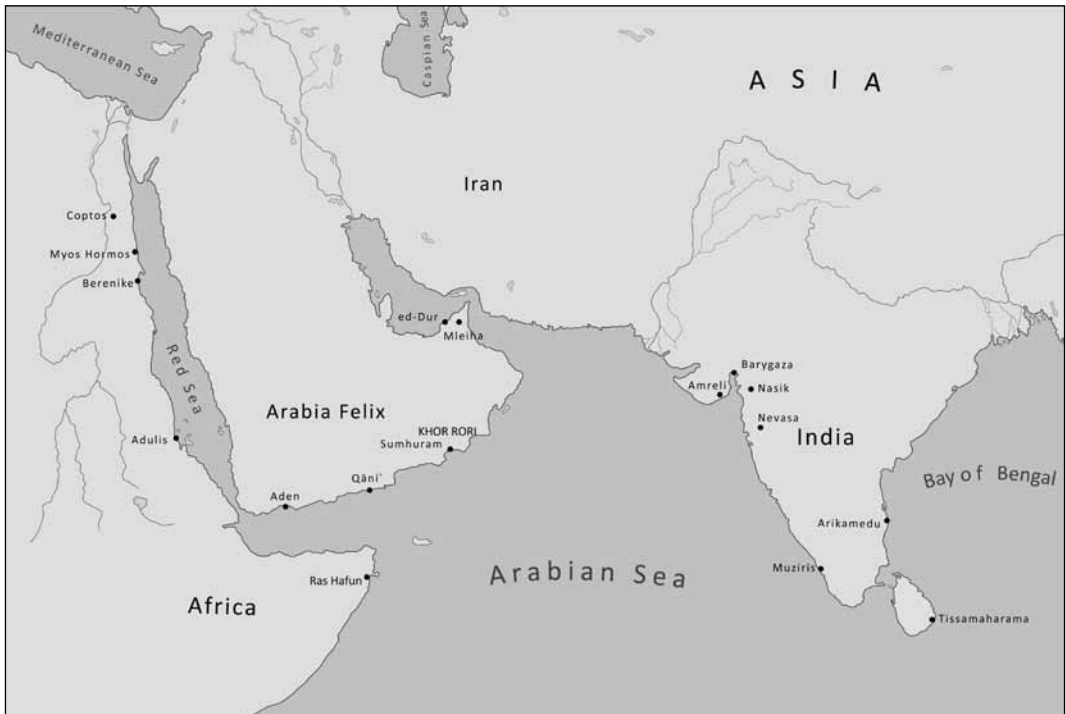


FIGURE 1. *The location of Sumhuram along the coast of South Arabia, and the main sites involved in the Indian Ocean trade (map by A. Lombardi).*



FIGURE 2. General plan of the city showing the different areas of excavation (Area A, B, F). 1: the urban shrine; 2: temple of Sīn; 3: so-called Monumental Building 1 (hosting the well); 4: so-called Monumental Building 2 (plan A. Massa and S. Rossi).

This stratigraphic and chronological sequence can be used as a reference for the general revision work of the other excavated areas still in progress. It also mirrors the broad phasing that has been more recently proposed for the city as a whole and confirms the recent re-assessment of the chronology made by Alessandra Avanzini (2014).

Moreover, its excavation presented an assemblage that, though being quite common in terms of general typologies of the objects, is nevertheless noteworthy due to the stylistic peculiarities of the artefacts. A first discussion of these objects is presented here.

2. The excavation: stratigraphy and architectural evolution

Period 1 (Phases I-IV)

The building originally comprised two adjacent rooms, A110 and A152, with access to the shrine (A110), from a door placed in its eastern wall (Fig. 3).

A110, the actual shrine, was trapezoidal in shape, east-west oriented, and roughly 4.5x4.8 meters wide. Its pavement, US417floor, stood at the average elevation of 27.75 m a.s.l. Perimeter walls, clockwise from north, were M404+M402, M403, M248 and M290. On the northern side a second door, dividing M402 from M404, lead to a little rectangular premise (A152), only 1.2x2.2 m wide. Other walls of its perimeter were, clockwise, M274, M400 and M270 (Fig. 4, Plate 1). The original pavement of room A152 was US431floor, well plastered and standing at an elevation of 27.94 meters a.s.l. This floor was removed in ancient times to leave room to a slightly higher one.¹ In the main room, US417floor was well preserved and randomly scattered with circular reddish spots of hardened plaster that could represent the lighting of small open fires inside the building. This floor was characterized by a remarkable thickness, over 35.0 cm, which accounts for the slight difference in height between it and the adjacent part of the quarter excavated east of the shrine. A few rough stones were visible set within the mortar; a bronze coin (Co643) was retrieved while removing the upper portion of this floor.

The main entrance showed no peculiar feature apart from a low threshold. Conversely, the door linking the two rooms was marked by a low step and still bears traces of plaster on its uprights which indicate the position of the door wing. Plaster also defined a narrow raised ridge across the threshold. While the northern room seems to be nothing but an empty ancillary room, which also presented no significant finds, the main room had a complex internal layout. Immediately left of the entrance a one-flight stair of which only four steps survive (M435) was set against the eastern wall M290, also abutting against wall M404 (western part of the northern wall). This clearly indicates the existence of an upper storey or, at least, an accessible roof, of which no direct trace remains. Low stone benches ran along the northern (bench M445), the eastern (bench M446) and the western (bench M448) walls. Bench M445 must have ended in correspondence with the door leading to room A152, though its later additional portion was not removed during excavation: this reconstruction is confirmed by the limits of the original plastering on its top.

¹ A sounding dug in a small portion of the room showed that floor US431floor was resting directly above a layer of quite compact loam with medium size stones at its base and small stone flecks interspersed within it, something similar to the widespread “foundation filling” defined in many locales throughout the city, laid down as a setting for all the first phase buildings.

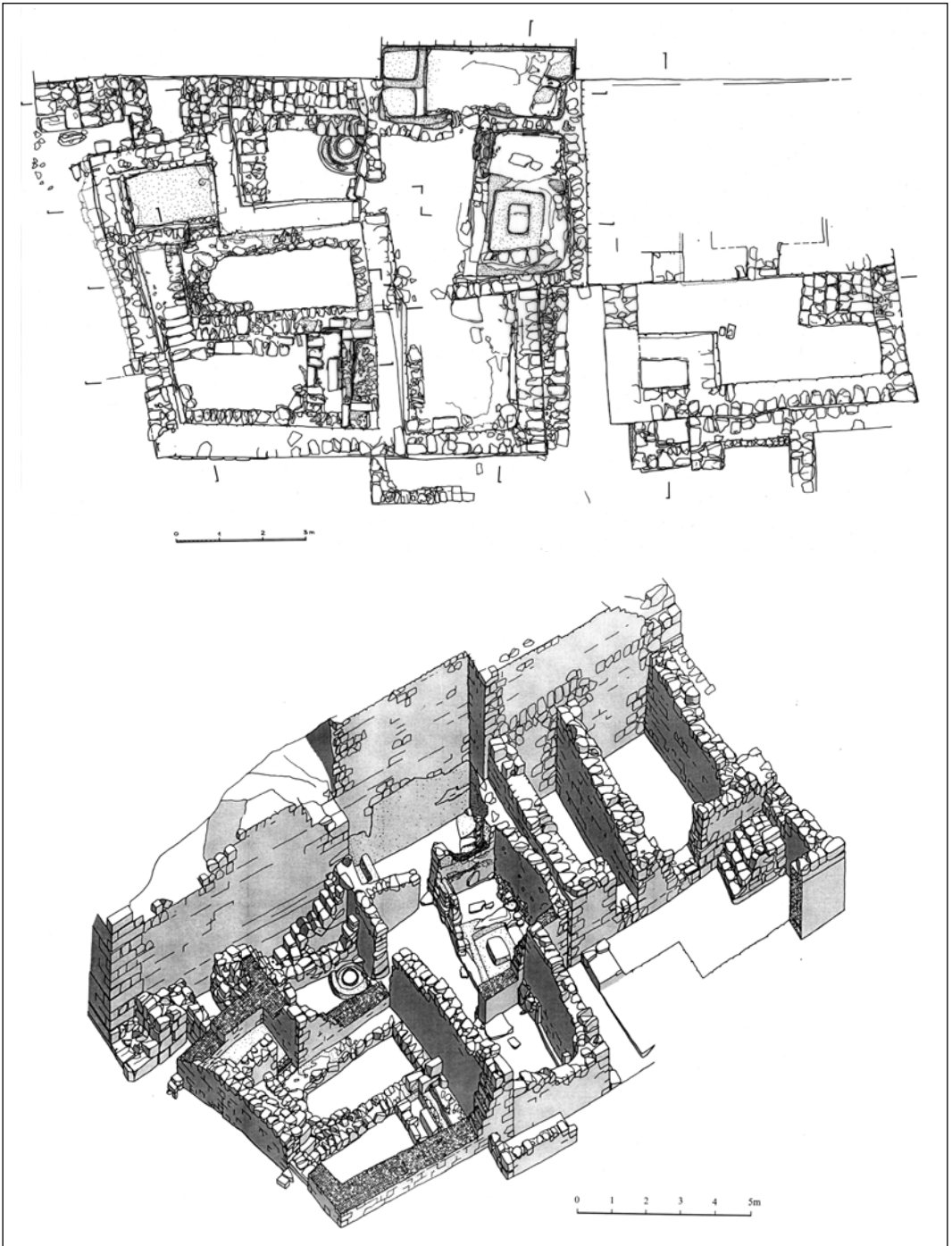


FIGURE 3. Detailed plan and axonometric view of the shrine (Period I) and adjacent area, immediately south of the Monumental Building 1 (drawings by E. Kurkina).