

Figure 2: Iron Age spouted bowls from Aqir al-Shamoos, the most common of the four unfinished vessel types found at the site (photographs and drawings by H. David-Cuny).

results that document spatial associations between water resources, ancient human activities and archaeological sites of various periods.

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Khor Kharfot, Dhofar Archaeological Survey

A survey of the extensive human traces at the site was completed in 2014 by the Texas-based Khor Kharfot Foundation (www.khor-kharfot-foundation.com), which has had collaboration with Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and assistance from Dhofar University. Fieldwork will commence in 2016 in collaboration with Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Culture, as Warren Aston reports.

Khor Kharfot is the coastal mouth of Wadi Sayq which provides the principal drainage for the Qamar ranges in the extreme west of Dhofar, abutting the border with Yemen. The inlet, now closed to the ocean by a sandbar as are all Dhofar's inlets, lies roughly equidistant between the fishing towns of Rakhyut and Dhalqut. Accessible only through the 38 km long wadi from the interior or by sea, Kharfot has remained isolated and little-known until recent decades. Although presently uninhabited, the coastal plateaus abound in a variety of structures indicating periodic settlement. The human traces do not extend more than about 1 km inland.

Kharfot is visible at the coast at the extreme bottom of the view (Figure 1) Paolo Costa, former archaeological advisor to the government of Oman, made an initial assessment of the site in 1993, describing its physical setting and anchorage



Figure 1. View of Wadi Sayq looking westward across the Qamar mountains. After Google Earth.

potential as comparable to Khor Rori, albeit on a smaller scale. He presented a paper at the Arabian Seminar of that year, suggesting the "high possibility" that the site may once have served as a tiny port with a well-protected harbour, perhaps in connection with the incense trade. The paper was published in PSAS 24 in 1994.

Based on surface structures, Costa proposed 4 general habitation phases ranging from the Neolithic to the late Islamic, as illustrated in his map (Figure 2):

Due to the annual monsoon run-off from the Qamar ranges, Kharfot is uniquely fertile, containing remnants of the

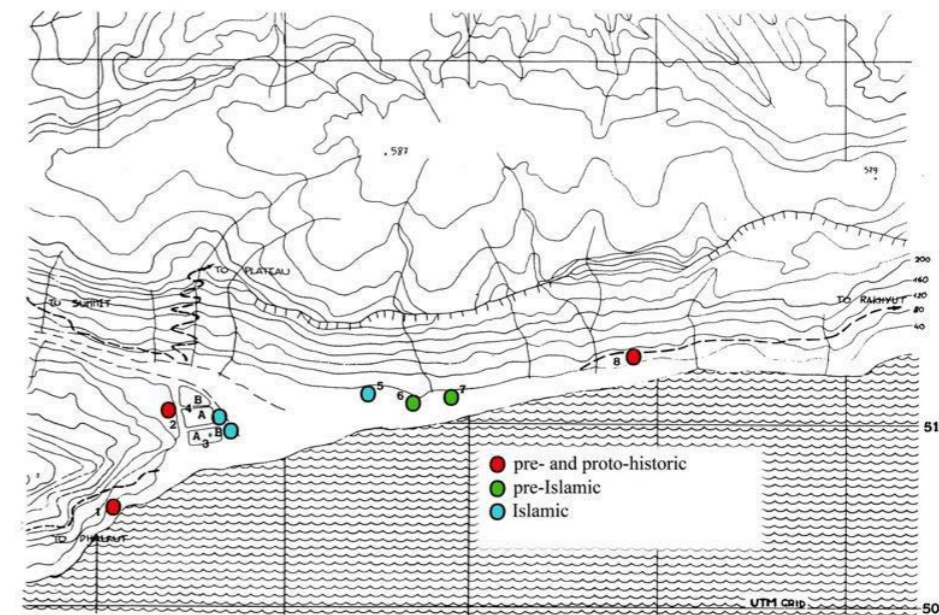


Fig. 2. Khawr Kharfot: sketch map of the main sites mentioned in the text (not to scale).

ancient forests once found in Arabia, a variety of wild fruits, a large lagoon and several permanent springs - all factors that would make it attractive for re-provisioning vessels. It is also home to some of Oman's last surviving Arabian Leopards. This abundance of flora and fauna has attracted several research efforts in recent years, including 3 seasons work by British Exploring Society (BES) teams and a recent team largely consisting of SQU researchers.

However, systematic archaeology at Khor Kharfot did not resume until 2014. In April 2014, Carl Phillips and Michele Degli Esposti completed a more intensive analysis of the site, refining Dr Costa's findings and planning a selection of structures. Their findings will inform future work. A cave burial and an inscription in an unknown script also await further investigation. With its unique geography and resources, Kharfot offers multiple scientific fields a glimpse into Dhofar's past in a setting that remains pristine. While Nigel Groom's suggestion that it could be the long-sought Moscha of the Periplus now seems most unlikely, any site that proves contemporary with Moscha and Cana might qualify as part of the "the spaces in between" the acknowledged ports and thus of immense interest.

Visitors to Kharfot soon recognizes the challenges threatening the place. Water diversion from the wadi to nearby mountain villages is visibly affecting the vegetation, and local plans to construct a road along the coast would impact the integrity of the site. Additionally, the natural environment is highly dynamic, particularly during the 3 months of monsoon rain and wind. One result is erosion by the sea, leaving several ancient structures on the edge of the high cliffs on the western plateau (Figures 3 & 4).

Some of the most intriguing structures are located on this plateau and it is here that forthcoming excavations will initially focus. Researchers plan to use a variety of techniques to date occupation phases more precisely. While

the ongoing effort at the site has not been formally labelled as "rescue archaeology," in many ways it is indeed a race against time to learn more about the past of this potentially significant place.

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Figure 3: Structures on the cliff edges show a large collapsed building of unknown function on the eastern side of the bay. Photo: W. Aston



Figure 4: Structures on the cliff edges Photo: W. Aston