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## **An Archaeological Survey of the Farasan Islands, Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

*An archaeological survey of Saudi Arabia's Farasan Islands in May 2010 recorded a broad range of sites that have not previously been documented. The survey concentrated on Greater Farasan and Segid islands, and comprised a rapid recording of sites shown to the authors by representatives of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities. The sites were photographed, their positions logged, sketch drawings made of the principal features, and surface pottery drawn and photographed. Detailed drawings were made of a stone anchor and of a well with Ancient South Arabian carved decoration. The sites visited included settlements, wells, cemeteries and a cave. Several sites included the remains of buildings made of massive ashlar blocks, as well as others of rubble-stone construction. Datable material at the sites points to several periods of occupation, from the early first millennium B.C. to early modern. Some locations were characterised by long periods of settlement. Apart from the findings of this survey, most of the sites remain largely uninvestigated, and suggest significant potential for future research into settlement on the archipelago, and also into past maritime activity and technology in the southern Red Sea region and beyond.*

## **Introduction**

A rapid archaeological survey of the main islands of the Farasan archipelago (جزر فرسان) was carried out by the authors over a three-week period in May 2010 at the invitation of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA).<sup>2</sup> The survey aimed primarily to create for the first time an inventory and brief characterisation of a number of sites on the islands of Greater Farasan (فرسان الكبرى) and Segid (سقيد), most of which were known locally but had not been formally recorded or published: the survey logged and characterised some 27 sites, including settlements, cemeteries, wells and a cave (Fig. 1). It further aimed to establish a chronology of settlement in the survey area; to understand the ecological and economic context of habitation; and to identify

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<sup>2</sup> The survey comprised part of a wider programme of research into the maritime past and traditions of the islands led by Professor Dionisius Agius, Principal Investigator of the University of Exeter's MARES Project.

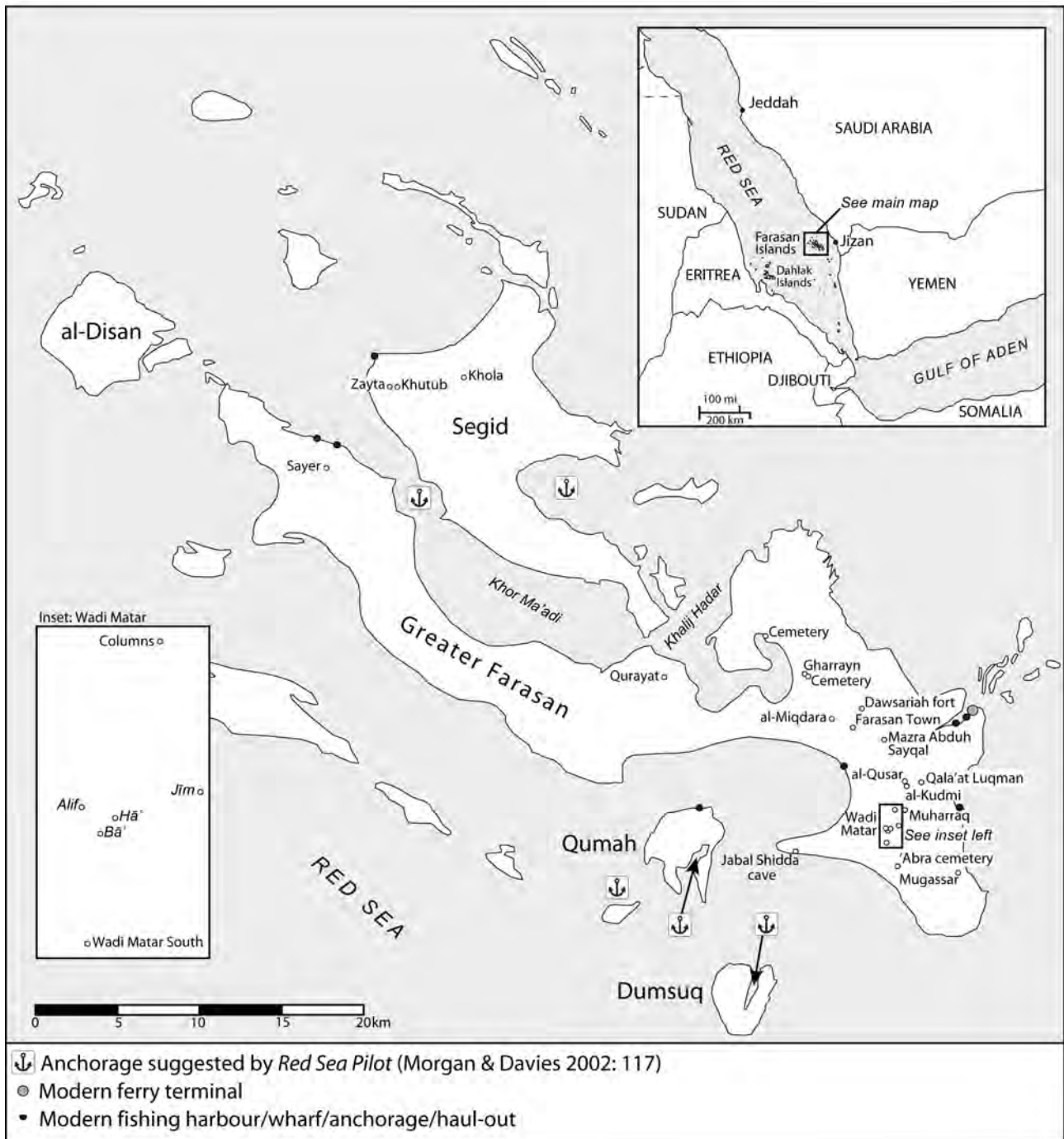


Figure 1: Map of the Farasan Islands, showing the sites discussed in the text (Image: Authors).

indicators of overseas contact.

The Farasan archipelago consists of over 140 islands and coral islets spread over a sea area of 1050 km<sup>2</sup>. The islands are some 45 km from the Arabian shore of the southern Red Sea. Most of the archipelago falls within modern Saudi Arabia, although its southern extension is Yemeni. Three of the Farasan Islands – Greater Farasan, Segid and Qumah (قماح) – are inhabited today. The two islands surveyed by the authors are the largest in the archipelago: Greater Farasan is 57 km long and

over 20 km wide at its widest point; Segid is 24 km long and 12 km wide. A modern bridge connects the two.

The archipelago is low lying, reaching a maximum height (on Greater Farasan) of 70 m above sea level. It consists of fossil-coral plateaux, coral-sand dunes and plains, low-lying wadis, and deposits of mostly shallow aeolian and alluvial soil (El-Demerdash 1996: 82). The climate is arid: today the highest rainfall occurs in December, but even then averages less than 70 mm/yr (El-Demerdash 1996: 82). Underground water sources occur at several sites on the main islands, and must have been a key attraction for past settlers and seafarers: the fifteenth century navigator Ibn Majid cites a well on the archipelago called Shalil which “will water 1,000 ships” as well as islands “having cattle and camels, palms and fruits” (Tibbetts 1971: 259). From a maritime perspective, the islands were also strategically located, with east access to and from the open sea, close connections to the Arabian coast, and an easy crossing to the African side via the Dahlak Islands.

The archipelago sits within the Farasan Bank, a rich fishing area of shoals running for some 600 km between the island of Kamaran in Yemen and al-Lith in Saudi Arabia; these are typically 40 m deep, but can reach 100 m (Bjurström 2000: 18–27; McKinnon 1990: 144–5).

Sailing conditions along the Arabian coast of the southern Red Sea are generally good: the numerous channels, islands, reefs and coastal inlets offer shelter, while the monsoon cycle generates favourable winds for northbound craft during the northeast monsoon, and southbound vessels during the southwest monsoon. Historically, it was the eastern side of the Red Sea – outside the reef zone – that was the recommended route for those heading further north, since sailing vessels could take advantage of sheltered waters and southerly winds that last longer than on the opposite shore (Davies and Morgan 2002: 121). Water levels are usually highest in winter, when southerly winds drive water northward into the Red Sea. Convenient anchorages are to be found in the south-eastern bay of Segid island; in Khor Ma‘adi (خور معادي) between Greater Farasan and Segid; and at Qumah island (Fig. 1; Davies and Morgan 2002: 116-117).

## Historical sources

Although limited, written sources on the Farasan Islands suggest that they played an important role in Red Sea maritime trade and naval activity at least from the early Roman period.

The islands are not mentioned in the first-century AD *Periplus Maris Erythrei*, which concentrates on the African shore of the Red Sea, or in the second-century AD work of Agatharchides, *On the Erythraean Sea*. However, a Latin military inscription found on the island and dating to the AD 144 shows that in the early Roman period the archipelago was host to a detachment of the Second Legion Traiana Fortis, otherwise based in Egypt (Villeneuve, Phillips and Facey 2004: 153).

The name appears later in the *Martyrdom of St. Arethas*, written no later than the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, which mentions that ships based in the islands were sent to Adulis, on the Eritrean coast, to join an expedition of the Christian Abyssinian fleet against the Jewish Himyarite king Dhu Nuwas in AD 525 (Van Hecke *et al* 1861: 747; Bowersock 2013: 92–105). The one-time Christian nature of the islands' inhabitants is reported by the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD historian Hamdani, who says that there were at his time ruined Christian churches there (Beckingham 1965: 788).

Ibn Majid calls the islands “the most important” in the southern Red Sea region, and notes that there is a creek (Ar. *khawr*) there where 1,000 ships could anchor, and which could “be used in the Kharif [‘autumn’] in all winds”, taking advantage of plentiful water and food supplies. He describes northbound routes past the archipelago, and around its northern fringe and into the channel between it and the mainland (Tibbets 258–261).

The island's strategic importance continued into later centuries. Egyptian Mamluks occupied them briefly in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the Ottomans at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> (Beckingham 1965: 787–788). The latter permitted the establishment of a German coaling station on Qumah, the remains of which survive, prompting two brief British occupations of the islands during the First World War (Peterson 1985: 23–24). Following their absorption into Saudi Arabia in the 1920s, the islands suffered economically from the collapse of the pearling industry in the 1930s and 1940s, but

revived with the development of the country's oil economy in later decades.

It is not clear when pearling began in the islands. A recent re-examination of two Latin inscriptions found in Egypt's Eastern Desert suggests that pearl diving was already under way in parts of the Red Sea, in the Roman period, and not just in the Gulf as previously thought (Schörle, *in press*). The more recent pearling boom of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries has left its legacy in oral history and the architectural heritage of the islands (*see below*).

### **Archaeological context**

The only in-depth archaeological investigation on the Farasan Islands to date has been into the extensive prehistoric shell middens scattered along the shorelines of Greater Farasan, Segid and Qumah: since 2007, these have been the object of study by a team led by Geoff Bailey and Abdullah Al-Sharekh that has also investigated submerged paleo-shorelines (Bailey *et al.* 2007a; Bailey *et al.* 2007b; Bailey *et al.* 2013). The middens accumulated over several hundred years between 5000-5500 BP, and so predate the sites discussed in this paper (Bailey *et al.* 2013: 244–245)

Archaeological research beyond the middens has, to date, been limited in quantity and scope, and also in published outcomes. Juris Zarins *et al.* (1981: 27) refer to a visit to the Farasan Islands by Basim Rihani and William Facey in 1978 during which they first identified the archaeological site of Gharrain (غرّين), but the results of this brief visit were not published. Two year later, Zarins, Abd al-Jawad Murad and Khalid Al-Yish (1981: 26–27, Pl. 4) included southern Greater Farasan and Qumah island within a broader ten-week archaeological survey of the southwest region of Saudi Arabia. Their brief account reports “extensive foundation remains” at Wadi Matar (وادي ماطر), and notes the characteristic door jambs, large ashlar blocks, and South Arabian inscriptions there; they also make cursory observations about surface pottery and obsidian, and include a sketch plan of the buildings that the SCTA was later to designate Wadi Matar Jīm (جيم) (Zarins *et al.* 1981: 27, Pl. 10b, 43c-d). The survey briefly noted similar architecture and pottery at Gharrain, plus two Nabatean sherds (Zarins *et al.* 1981: 27). It also notes the “minor” sites of Qala‘at Lukman (قلعة لقمان), al-Qusar

(القصار) and Kudmi (كدمي), and observed an Ancient South Arabian inscription in the modern village beside Kudmi. Excavations were limited to a single test excavation of a shell midden, and published information on the pottery assemblages, visible structures, and their interpretation is brief. It is from this basis that the present authors build.

Paleographic studies comprise a significant portion of the archaeological research published on the islands to date. Most follow the discovery at al-Qusar of the AD 144 Latin military inscription already mentioned (Villeneuve, Phillips and Facey 2004). Inspired by that find, François Villeneuve and Laïla Nehmé conducted a short survey of the islands in 2005 and 2006 that remains unpublished. It focuses mainly on epigraphy, with a few observations on surface pottery from Wadi Matar and other sites shown to them by resident historian Ibrahim Muftah (Marion de Procé 2008). Mr. Muftah helped in locating sites during those surveys, as he kindly did during the present research. Villeneuve and Nehmé's surveys identified a second Latin military inscription and eleven Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, plus eight or nine cut into the bedrock (Marion de Procé 2008, unpublished). The Latin inscription is dated to *ca.* AD 120, and suggests that the archipelago was considered part of the Roman province of Arabia (Villeneuve 2007a: 13; 2007b and 2008). The South Arabian inscriptions offer some important chronological information on the settlement of the island, meanwhile. The inscriptions found at Wadi Matar indicate a period of occupation dating to the second half of the fifth or to the fourth century BC, while inscriptions found at al-Qusar and Khutub (ختب) are perhaps contemporary to the two Latin inscriptions (Marion de Procé and Phillips 2010: 280).

Marion de Procé has resumed investigations at Wadi Matar subsequent to the present authors' survey; her results have not yet been published.

## **Methodology**

The survey reported here was conducted rapidly and with limited resources during a three-week research visit to the Farasan Islands in May 2010, the main focus of which was ethnographic questions not addressed in this article. The authors took the opportunity of the visit to verify the

evidence of previous surveys and to better understand the potential for further archaeological research in the archipelago. Colleagues from the SCTA showed the authors some 27 archaeological sites on the islands, taking them there by vehicle. These included the Greater Farasan sites mentioned by Zarins, Murad and Al-Yish (1981), which by the time of our visit had been enclosed within protective SCTA fences, and others known to local people that have not been published prior to this article. Survey at the individual sites comprised field walking during morning and evening hours. Remote sensing imagery from Google Earth, a small-scale local tourist map, and published archaeological maps and plans (Zarins *et al.* 1981: Pl. 4, Pl. 10B and C) were used to support the survey. The geographical location of each site was recorded using a hand-held global positioning system (GPS) unit.

Given the time constraints and rolling nature of the survey, the survey time at each site was limited to no more than an hour in most cases. The location was recorded using the GPS unit; photographs were taken; and notes of key features made. In most cases, the authors sketched maps of the settlement area and drawings of architectural remains, as well as more detailed drawing of a decorated well and a stone anchor. The basic dimensions of selected structures and architectural elements were also recorded. A number of ceramic surface finds were drawn and photographed. Archaeological maps were produced afterwards using remote sensing imagery from Google Earth and the GPS positions obtained in the field; these were integrated with measurements and sketch maps drafted on the field to produce indicative and gerefenced site plans.

## **The survey**

### ***Settlements on Greater Farasan***

#### **The Wadi Matar sites**

Five archaeological sites were visited on an arid low-lying stony plain of some 2,500 Ha to the west



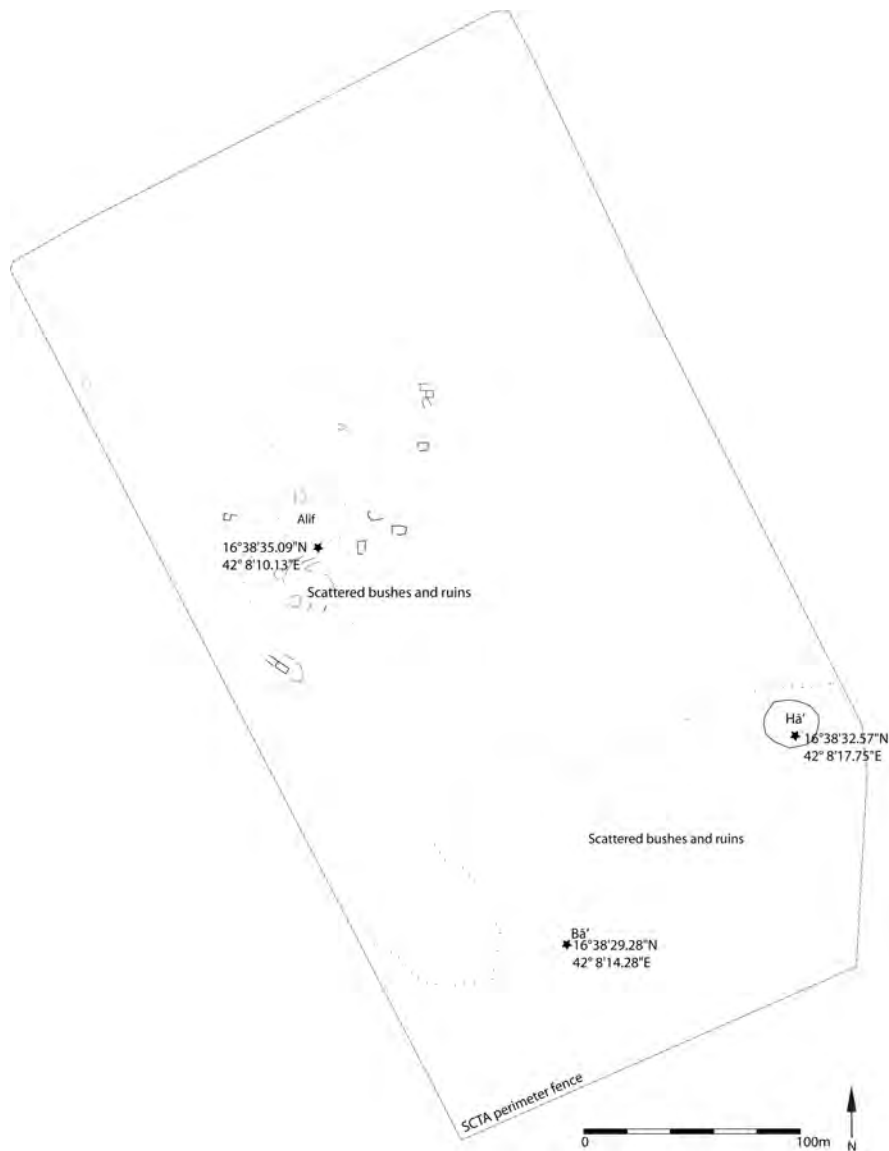


*Figure 2: Fragments of columns from Wadi Matar.*



*Figure 3: Ashlar blocks re-used at al-Buq'a.*

of Wadi Matar, a shallow wadi running north-south in the main southern lobe of Greater Farasan island (Fig. 1). The sites are some 2–3 km from the coast, which lies to the south and east. Vegetation on the plain is limited mostly to a thin scatter of acacia; in one area this forms a relatively dense woodland covering some 30 Ha; it is on the northern and southern edges of this wooded area that the main sites are found, between 500 m and 1300 m west of the wadi bed; water from the wadi today supports date-palm groves around Muharraq village (محرَّق), and may have supplied the ancient settlements. Four of the sites are labelled by the SCTA with the Arabic letters Alif (أ), Bā' (ب), Hā' (ح) and Jīm (ج). The authors were also shown a further site, which we call Wadi Matar South. To the north of the main cluster of sites, scattered mounds of dislocated architectural remains suggest the existence of more numerous settlements in the past than those



*Figure 4: Sketch map of Wadi Matar sites Alif, Bā' and Ḥā'.*

identified today. Local informants said that dressed stone from these mounds had been removed and incorporated into buildings in nearby Muharraq and al-Qusar. Among these scattered remains, the authors encountered two fragments of monolithic columns measuring 48–53 cm and 53–56 cm in diameter respectively. The larger fragment incorporates a square capital measuring 70 cm along its only complete edge (Fig. 2). Elsewhere, a scatter of ashlar blocks at al-Buq'a (البقعة), on the northwest edge of al-Qusar, was all that was visible of sites that had been otherwise robbed out (Fig. 3).

Wadi Matar sites Alif, Bā', and Ḥā' are enclosed within a single SCTA fence, measuring *ca.* 460 x 250 m (Fig. 4). The westernmost settlement, Wadi Matar Alif, extends over an area measuring some



*Figure 5: A wall of one of the buildings at Wadi Matar Alif, showing large block-work.*



*Figure 6: Doorways at Wadi Matar Alif were either east-west or north-south oriented, and comprised two monolithic standing doorposts and monolithic threshold.*

250 x 300 m. The survey encountered three principal compounds of buildings with rooms built on a rectangular plan, and at least six small isolated buildings, often of only one room. The stone was local fossil coral (Zarins *et al.* 1981: 27), and highly eroded. Standing walls were rarely more than three courses high. Tumble was extensive. Three distinct construction methods were apparent. One wall comprised large blocks up to 2.5 m long, 1.25 m deep and 0.8 m high (Fig. 5). Other buildings were made of smaller, though still roughly ashlar blocks. One of these had a massive stone in its lower course, *ca.* 3.5 m long. Another type of construction was distinct from both of these. Its main characteristic was its doorways, which comprised two broad, slab-like doorjambs rising to 70 cm above a monolithic threshold. These entrances were oriented in the cardinal directions (Fig. 6). The visible wall remains rose no more than one metre above ground, and in some cases comprised broad, flat irregular stones standing on their edges. A large surface scatter of seashells of the *Strombidae* superfamily was also present.

Pottery collected on the surface mainly comprised fragments of red or brown mineral-tempered fabric, with a dark-grey core and burnished surfaces. It included the everted rims, some of a triangular cross-section, of jars and bowls, large rims of bowls or basins, fragments of horizontal and vertical handles and ring-shaped bases (Fig. 7(A)). These were observed on the surface of all Wadi Matar sites except Wadi Matar South. They may be locally produced wares of the Ancient South Arabian period (8<sup>th</sup> century BC – 5<sup>th</sup> century AD). Zarins *et al.* draw parallels between these and finds at sites on the Arabian mainland (Zarins *et al.* 1981: 27). One or possibly two everted-rimmed fragments of an orange fabric with a dark-grey core were comparable to Aksumite types dating to the Aksumite 3 phase (AD 350–550) (Fig. 7(B)). Other imports included pink-fabric sherds with horizontal ribs and external yellow slip and one rim fragment with an external green-yellow slip. Both these fragments belong to a type of amphora that is widespread in the Red Sea, dating from the late 4<sup>th</sup> – early 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, and commonly referred to as Ayla-Aksum or Ayla/Aqaba amphorae (University of Southampton 2014). The only production centre found for these so far is Ayla, ancient Aqaba, although large quantities of sherds are found at Adulis and



Figure 7: Pottery: A. Mineral-tempered red-ware sherds with polished outer surface, Wadi Matar Alif; B. Body sherd of orange ware with dark grey core comparable to Aksumite cooking pots from the Aksumite 3 phase (350-550 AD), Wadi Matar Alif; C. Body sherd of pink ware with horizontal ribs and external yellow slip. Rim fragment of pink ware with external green-yellow slip. Both sherds probably belong to Byzantine amphorae, Wadi Matar Bā'; D. Mineral-tempered red-ware sherds with polished external surface, Wadi Matar Bā'; E. Mineral-tempered red-ware sherds with polished external surface, Wadi Matar Bā'; F. Pink ware sherds with exterior yellow slip and horizontal ribs, probably belonging to Byzantine amphorae, Wadi Matar Bā'; G. Unknown red-ware sherd with horizontal ribbed incisions, Wadi Matar Bā'; H. Sherd of a Byzantine amphora with external ribbing (1). Handle and body-fragment of a Dressel 2/4 amphora (2 and 3), Wadi Matar Ḥā'; I. Sherd of a Byzantine amphora with external ribbing (1). Mineral-tempered red-ware sherds with polished external surface (2). Wadi Matar Jīm; J. Red-ware sherd with horizontal ribbing (above). Sherds of turquoise-glazed wares (below), Wadi Matar South.



Figure 8: Pottery: A. Handle of a Dressel 2/4 amphora (1) and some Chinese Blue-and-White porcelain fragments (2), Gharrain; B. Pink-ware sherds with external yellow slip and ribbing, most likely belonging to Byzantine amphorae, Gharrain; C. Body sherd of a Burmese monochrome white ware or a similar Far Eastern white-glazed trade ware, Gharrain; D. Sherd of blue-glazed ware similar to Persian Blue Speckled pottery (Kennet 2004: 53-54), but with a different fabric – probably suggesting a local production, Gharrain; E. Sherds of South Asian celadon, Gharrain; F. Sherd of red-bodied underglaze painted ware common at Julfar in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and perhaps Iranian, Gharrain; G. Body fragment of a red-ware pot bearing a sequence of incised triangles below the original placement of the rim, Gharrain; H. Sherd of turquoise-glazed ware, broadly 8<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> c. in date, al-Miqdara; I. White-ware bowl fragments with painted and sponge-painted floral and leaf motifs, al-Miqdara. Usually defined as Refined White Ware, dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and from the Netherlands; J. Fragments of green-glazed cups still produced locally, al-Miqdara; K. Red-brown potsherds of mineral-tempered ware, including bottle rims, large jar-rims and flat bases, Qurayat; L. Various pottery fragments including red-ware sherds with external diagonal ribs, Byzantine amphorae, pink-ware with incised lines, red-ware mineral tempered rim basins. Also a flake of obsidian (above, right), Zayta; M. Body fragments and the base of a Byzantine amphora made of a pink ware with external horizontal ribs and yellow slip, Zayta.



*Figure 9: A doorway at Wadi Matar Bā'.*

Aksum. A rim fragment found at Wadi Matar seems to belong to the type 10.d variant of this amphora, identified by Melkawy, 'Amr and Whitcomb at Ayla (1994), that is also widespread in Adulis (Mandelli in Zazzaro *et al*, 2014: 537)(Fig. 7(C)) . This type of amphora was employed for carrying products from the southern Levant: the options proposed so far for the contents are *garum*, dates and wine (Peacock and Blue 2007: 103).

Wadi Matar Bā' is some 150 m south east of site Alif, and covers an area of some 110 x 200m (Fig. 4). The authors noted a large compound of interconnected buildings and rooms built using coral stone, and similar in construction to the 'doorjamb' buildings at Wadi Matar Alif. Fifteen doorways of this type were found, each with two monolithic standing slab doorjambs and a monolithic



*Figure 10: Two large doorposts at Wadi Matar Bā' bearing Ancient South Arabian inscriptions on their inner face.*



*Figure 11: Ancient South Arabian inscription on the inner face of one of the large doorposts at Wadi Matar Bā' (see Fig. 10).*

threshold, oriented in the cardinal directions (Fig. 9). The doorjambs ranged from *ca.* 50–190 cm in height, 56–92 cm in width and 15–44 cm in depth. The thresholds were *ca.* 90–102 cm in width and 30–73 cm deep. The doorjambs of one building comprised two large facing monoliths (respectively 183 x 56 x 40 cm and 170 x 74 x 37cm); these bore short and highly eroded South Arabian inscriptions (Figs 10 and 11).

A large stone anchor was found lying on the surface in the southern part of Wadi Matar Bā' (Fig. 12). It was made of the same local coral rock used in the surrounding masonry, and was comparable in its overall form to the slab-like standing doorjambs characteristic of these buildings. The anchor was in the shape of an isosceles triangle, and measured 153 x 85 cm, with a thickness of *ca.* 20 cm. It had three holes with diameters of 11–15 cm pierced through it. Two were near the shortest edge





*Figure 12: Stone anchor on the ground at Wadi Matar Bā’.*

of the anchor, and most likely held wooden grappnels. The third was near the apex, and would have secured the hauling rope. The anchor had been chiselled into shape, the holes having been cut continuously from one side to the other (Cooper & Zazzaro 2012). Its remoteness from the nearest shoreline, 2.7 km away, is striking, although it is not unprecedented to find stone anchors in inland contexts in the wider Bronze Age Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean (Wachsmann 1998: 258–273; Zazzaro and Abdel Maguid 2012: 144–151).

Surface pottery at Wadi Matar Bā’ was consistent with the Ancient South Arabian material found at Wadi Matar Alif (Fig. 7 (D and E)). Imported materials include sherds in a pink fabric with exterior yellow slip, and fragments of Ayla-Aksum amphorae (Fig. 7 (F)).

Among the unidentified sherds was a thin body fragment of a red-ware pot with irregular rib incisions (Fig. 7 (G)); the authors also observed this type at Gharrain and Zayta (زينة), as well as at Khor al-Ghureira in Yemen (خور الغريرة) and Raheita in Eritrea (Zazzaro 2014: 23, fig. 9). All incidences of these sherds on the Farasan Islands were in undated contexts.

Wadi Matar Hā’ lies some 60m to the north of Bā’ (Fig. 4). At the time of survey, the site comprised a roughly ovoid precinct measuring 32 x 28 m. The periphery was fringed intermittently by large coral-stone blocks, most of which were collapsed, but some of which, particularly around the southern edge, were standing up to 1.5 m in height – suggesting an original perimeter barrier. Within the enclosed space stood a roughly rectangular inner platform of collapsed blocks oriented east-west and measuring some 8m along its longest side (Fig. 13). Potsherds collected on the



*Figure 13: Ovoid stone enclosure around a rectangular inner platform oriented east-west, at Wadi Matar Ḥā'.*



*Figure 14: General view of the buildings at Wadi Matar Jīm.*

surface were generally consistent with the pottery assemblage observed in the other Wadi Matar sites. A concentration of potsherds on the northern side of the structure included body sherds and the handle of a Dressel 2/4 amphora (Fig. 7 (H; 2 and 3)) and a ribbed sherd of a Ayla-Aksum amphora (Fig. 7 (H; 1)) suggesting occupation ranging from the first to the early seventh century AD.

Wadi Matar Jīm is some 750 m east of Alif, towards Muharraq. The site was visited and sketched by Zarins, Murad and Al-Yish (1981: 27, Pl. 10B), and at the time of the present survey was enclosed within a rectangular SCTA fence measuring some 110 x 90 m. The site included a compound of buildings built of large coral blocks up to 2 m in length. The main rectangular structure measured some 30 x 15 m, with surviving walls standing up to 2 m high (Fig. 14). Pottery



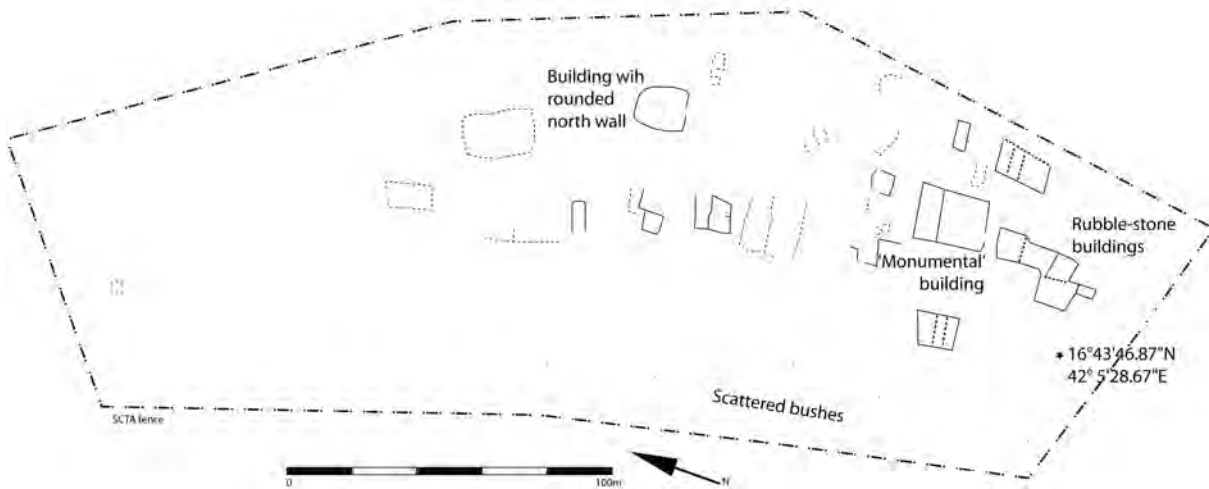
*Figure 15: Panoramic view of the settlement at Wadi Matar South.*

found on the surface resembled the locally produced South Arabian pottery encountered at sites Alif, Bā' and Ḥā' (Fig. 7 (I; 2)), but also included sherds of Ayla-Aksum and perhaps Egyptian amphorae of the amphore égyptienne 3 (AE 3) type (Tomber 2007) (Fig. 7 (I; 1)). The AE 3 has been found at several Red Sea ports sites; it was used to export wine (Tomber 2007: 97) and also, according to Peacock and Blue, to carry water on board ship (in Tomber 2012: 206). The structures possibly date to the last phase of occupation of the site, which the Ayla-Aksum amphorae suggest is the late fourth–early seventh century AD.

Wadi Matar South lies some 900 m south of Wadi Matar Alif. The survey encountered three main groups of coral-stone buildings extending over an area 240 x 30 m wide. One building comprised ashlar blocks measuring *ca.* 100 x 30 x 40 cm, surviving to five courses, and oriented in the cardinal directions. Another had stone doorjambs rising to over 150 cm (Fig. 15). Surface ceramics differed from the other Wadi Matar sites, in that turquoise-glazed wares and Ayla (?) red-ware sherds with horizontal ribs were found, tentatively dating the latest occupation phase to the late fourth–seven century AD (Fig. 8 (J)), alongside a more recent *qulla* type of water vessel similar to those found in the Sadana Island shipwreck in Egypt (Ward 2001: 3), therefore possibly dating to the eighteenth century, and suggesting a *terminus post quem* for the occupation of this area.

### **Gharrain**

The site of Gharrain lies 4.5km to the north-west of Farasan town on an elevated plateau flanked to the east and west by two small areas of cultivated land, extending over an area of 380 x 130 m. The



*Figure 16: Sketch map of the settlement at Gharrain.*



*Figure 17: Panoramic view of the settlement at Gharrain.*

surveyed encountered a relatively large group of some 16 multi-roomed buildings orientated in a roughly northeast-southwest direction along the axis of the plateau (Fig. 16). Two distinct construction types were apparent. A number of structures comprised courses of very large ashlar blocks; others were built of rubble stone, and rose to as much as 2 m in height (Fig. 17). While most building foundations were clearly rectangular, one structure appeared to have a curved wall at its northern-most edge. In one structure, the floor plan and construction suggested a monumental building with internal rooms. It was built with large coral-stone blocks, the largest of which was 260 cm long, 93 cm high and 61cm deep. At the northern end of the settlement were smaller buildings with doorways comprising two standing slab-like doorjambs and monolithic thresholds, similar to those recorded in Wadi Matar.

Two rectangular coral-stone basins were recorded on the site.

The limited pottery observed on the surface indicates Ancient South Arabian occupation. Surface material collected in the south-western sector also indicated Nabataean, Roman and Byzantine contact. The finds included a sherd of Nabataean fine-ware: Nabataean sherds were previously collected on the surface in 1978, and reported by Zarins *et al* (1981: 27, Pl. 28). Also found was the probable handle of a Dressel 2/4 amphora (Fig. 8 (A; 1)) and pink fabric sherds with external yellow slip and ribs belonging to Ayla-Aksum amphorae (Fig. 8 (B)).

Surface finds indicating a 15–16<sup>th</sup> century reoccupation of the site were identified by Robert Carter. This included Far Eastern white-glazed traded ware, probably Burmese monochrome white ware (Fig. 8 (C)); blue-glazed ware similar to Persian blue-speckled pottery (Kennet 2004: 53–54), but with a different fabric (Fig. 8 (D)); two sherds of South Asian celadon (Fig. 8 (E)); red-bodied underglaze painted ware that was common at Julfar<sup>3</sup> in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and is perhaps Iranian (Fig. 8 (F)); and some Chinese blue-and-white porcelain fragments (Fig. 8 (A; 2)).

A body fragment from a red, mineral-tempered fabric pot bearing patterns of incised triangles below the original placement of the rim was also found (Fig. 8 (G)). This resembles Aksumite 1 (150 BC– AD 150) bowl fragments recorded at Maṭarā in Ethiopia (Anfray 1967: Pl. XXXIX n. 3282 and n. 3283), as well as at Adulis, on the Eritrean coast (Zazzaro 2009: 51, Fig. 6:3a).

The pottery assemblage suggests that the site was inhabited over several periods from the first century BC-AD to the sixteen-seventeen century, and by resident and/or non-resident people involved in the Red Sea-Indian Ocean trade.

### **Qala‘at Lukman**

Qala‘at Lukman (Ar. ‘the fort of Lukman’) lies on a small isolated hill rising to *ca.* 36m above sea level some 850 m east of al-Qusar and 5.5 km south-east of Farasan Town (Fig. 1; Fig. 18). The hill itself appears to be a natural feature rising to *ca.* 8 m above the surrounding plain, and measuring some 20 m across its base. At the time of the survey, a structure visible on its summit comprised a single substantial building on a rectangular plan measuring 10.35 x 11.60 m. A double wall was

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<sup>3</sup> Today in Ras al-Khaima, United Arab Emirates.

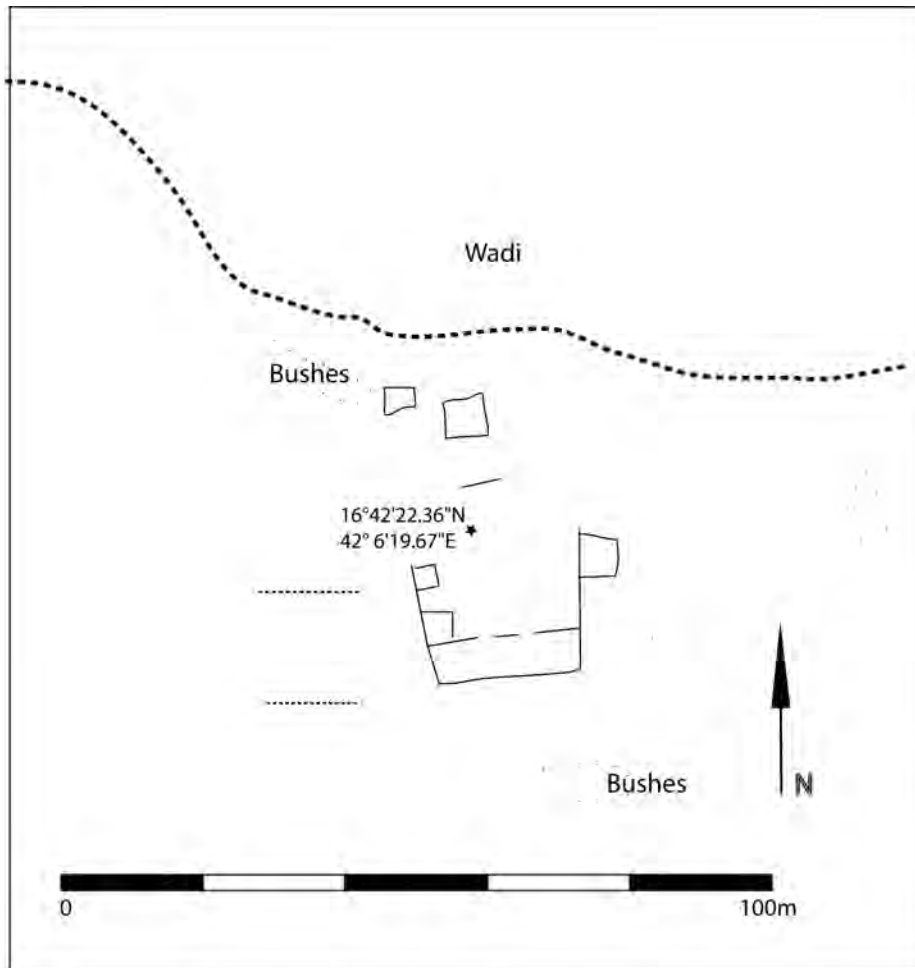


*Figure 18: Qala'at Luqman consists of a rectangular building with double wall built on the summit of a small isolated hill.*

discernible; each wall comprised large ashlar coral-stone blocks up to 2m in length. Much of the hillside was strewn with tumble comprising blocks similar to those *in situ*. Very few surface ceramics were encountered, and no material enabling a dating of the site. The site had extensive views in all directions, including east to the sea and west and south towards the Wadi Matar sites. The architectural form of the building, its strategic position in the middle of the southern portion of Greater Farasan, and its contemporary name all suggest a defensive purpose.

#### **Al-Miqdara (المقدرة)**

Al-Miqdara lies some 1.5 km to the north-west of central Farasan town, on the fringes of the modern settlement. The site is 200 m north of two modern industrial compounds on a fossil coral plain scattered thinly with thorn bushes, and has been encroached upon to some extent by modern dumps of building rubble (Fig. 19). The survey encountered a number of coral-stone structures within an area measuring *ca.* 100 x 65 m. The main cluster of buildings included a monumental building in the north sector of the site measuring 25 x 17 m, consisting of a rectangular room with one circular annex on the east side and one square annex on the west. North and east of the main compound were three isolated rectangular buildings. The surviving walls were preserved to around



*Figure 19: Sketch map of the settlement at al-Miqdara.*

1 m in height, and comprised large coral-stone blocks measuring up to *ca.* 100 x 40 cm – a style similar to buildings seen at the Wadi Matar sites and at Gharrain (Fig. 20). Buildings with large standing slab doorjambs such as those seen in Wadi Matar were not noted, however. Among the ruins was a stone slab with a hemispherical cavity, and a stone basin. Surface ceramics were plentiful relative to other sites and represented a broad chronological range. Preliminary identifications by Robert Carter included turquoise-glazed fragments that might be from a broad 8<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century date range (Fig. 9 (H)) and some white-fabric bowl fragments with painted and sponge-painted floral and leaf motifs – usually defined as Refined White Earthenware – dating to the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and coming from the Netherlands: probably the Sphinx company or Société Céramique, both of Maastricht (Fig. 9 (I)).

Surface materials also included fragments of green-glazed cups, apparently still produced locally (Fig. 9 (J)) (SCTA, undated).

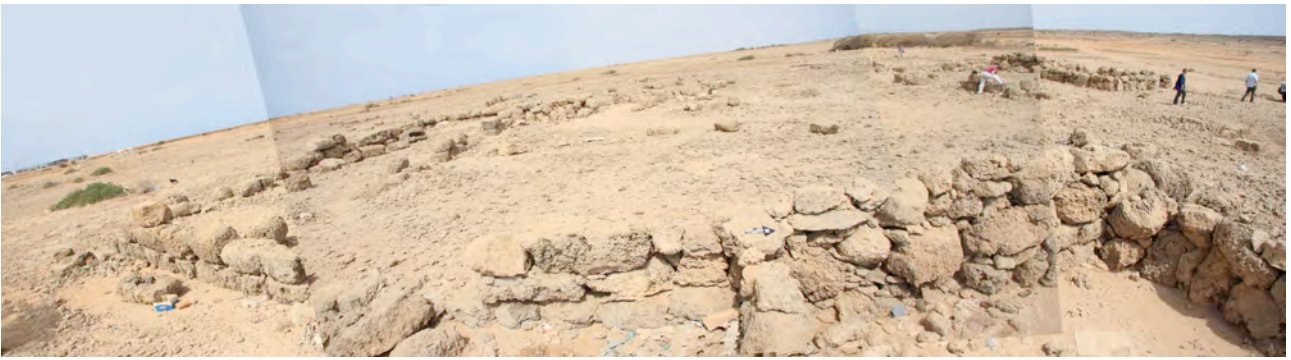


Figure 20: General view of the buildings at al-Miqdara.

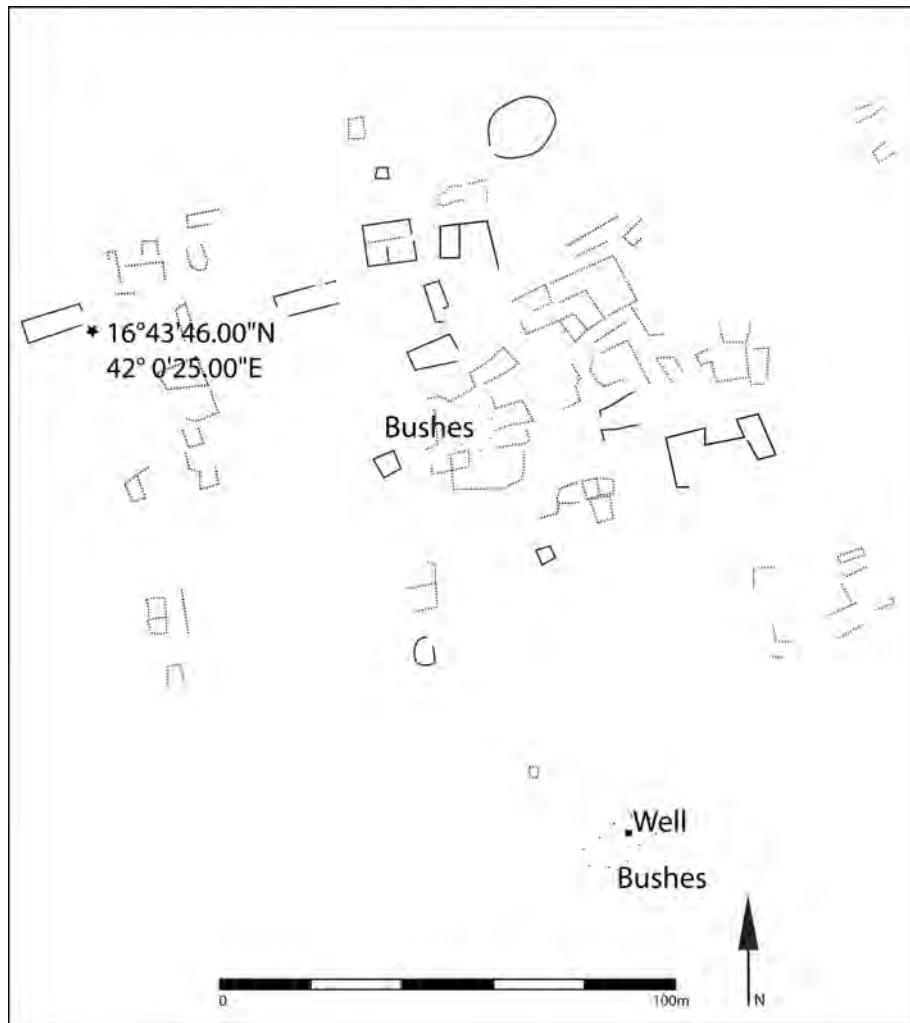


Figure 21: Sketch map of the settlement at Qurayat.

### Qurayat (قريات)

The site of Qurayat is in the central sector of Greater Farasan: it is 1.2 km inland from Hadar bay (خليج هدار), which lies to its north and east, and 2.2 km from the 400-m-wide strait that separates Greater Farasan from the island of Segid. It extends for *ca.* 270 by 200 m in an open plain with scattered acacia bushes (Fig. 21). On the southern fringe of the site, some 400 m from the central





*Figure 22: One of two monumental buildings with large ashlar blocks at Qurayat.*

nucleus of buildings, a large low-lying area of scrub suggested relatively high groundwater in the area. To the east of the settlement, linear stands of acacia grow in the alluvium gathered in fissures in the coral-stone plain. A well, excavated some 80 m to the south of the main concentration of buildings, had taken advantage of just such a fissure; its opening was edged with coral-stone blocks. The site comprises a relatively dense nucleus of small coral-stone buildings measuring some 80 m across, with satellite buildings some 90 m to the east, south and west. Several buildings had standing coral-stone doorjambs, and up to six courses ashlar masonry survived. Two monumental buildings were built with large ashlar blocks measuring typically 160 cm long x 50 cm high. One of these buildings measured 9.90 x 9.52 m and was distinctive in that some of its large blocks were scarf-joined (Fig. 22).

In one of the small buildings, the team observed a large dressed coral-stone slab with a semi-circular end, measuring 178 cm long x 86 cm wide on its face, and 22cm thick. Surface ceramics were eroded and difficult to identify: most of the potsherds were of a red-brown, mineral-tempered fabric, and included bottle rims, large jar-rims and flat bases, most probably local Ancient South Arabian wares (Fig. 9 (K)).

### **Al-Qusar and Kudmi**

The abandoned early-modern village of al-Qusar lies some 5 km southeast of Farasan town in the



*Figure 23: Abandoned mosque with barrel-vaulted roof at al-Qusar.*

Wadi Matar, and *ca.* 3 km north of the main sites of the wadi. The village covers an area of some 300 x 300 m, and stands within a relatively fertile area of partly abandoned date groves and a small number of cultivated orchards. The village is overrun by an invasive variety of acacia.

Al-Qusar was abandoned in the 1950s as new housing and social services in Farasan town attracted residents. Previously, it had been a place of seasonal occupation: fishing communities from across the islands came to work on the date harvest in late summer. At the time of survey, the village comprised single-story rubble-built coral-stone buildings built on a rectangular plan, often with a single room, and with palm roofs. The houses are associated with high-walled enclosures, which normally attach to only one (long) face of the building. A small number of the houses had stucco decoration on the courtyard face, similar to houses seen at Khutub on Segid Island (see below) and in Farasan town. Some also had elaborate stucco interiors. Three mosques were also noted: these were of similar construction to the other buildings of the village, although one had a barrel-vaulted roof (Fig. 23).

The village's location within the Wadi Matar allowed it relatively easy access to groundwater, and a number of wells were noted in the village. One of these had four edging stones typical of others on the island, but unusually two of these stones, facing each other, had post-holes, measuring *ca.* 15 x 13 cm, cut into their upper surface, and a small channel extending away from it.



*Figure 24: Drainage basin at al-Kudmi.*

While the surviving fabric of the village largely reflects the occupation of recent centuries, extensive evidence for the re-use of ancient materials from the vicinity has been found (see also Phillips, Villeneuve, Facey 2004: 244–245, figs 4, 5 and 6). The mostly rubble-stone walls of the village often incorporate larger ashlar blocks similar to those observed in the Wadi Matar sites. These blocks were often incorporated as corner stones, and in doorframes, foundations, and perimeter walls. It was at Kudmi, adjacent to al-Qusar, that the second Latin inscription (Villeneuve 2007a), the South Arabian inscription published by Zarins *et al.* (1981: 27, Pl. 43C) and inscriptions studied by Marion de Procé and Phillips (2010) were found. These are now in the care of local scholars Ibrahim Sayyadi and Ibrahim Muftah (see below). At Kudmi a basin, circular in shape, *ca.* 90cm in diameter, and carved in the bedrock was found adjacent to the external wall of a building to which it was connected by a water pipe (Fig. 24).

Mounds of glazed potsherds and red-brick fragments were noted on the outskirts of the village.

### **Farasan Town**

The main town of the islands lies in the east of Greater Farasan, some 2.8 km inland. It is here that the main administration and government services of the island are located, as well as its main religious and commercial establishments. The historic core of the town covers an area of some 750



*Figure 25: Interior of the restored house of pearl merchant Ahmad Munawwir al-Rifa‘i, Farasan town, built in 1341 AH (1922/23 AD).*



*Figure 26: The entrance arch and exterior of the house of ‘Uthman al-Rifa‘i, Farasan town.*

x 300 m, and contains numerous coral-stone buildings with wooden roofs and exterior courtyards, some with stucco decoration. The finest survivals of this decorated architecture are in Harat al-Salb (حارة الصلب) quarter. The SCTA has restored one of these, built by Ahmad Munawwir al-Rifa‘i, a pearl merchant, in AH 1341 (AD 1922/23) during the heyday of the pearling industry (Fig. 25). The building is richly decorated inside and out with white-painted stucco, and its ceiling is wood, decorated with elaborate painted designs. Qur’anic verses are carved in a wooden frieze within the main *majlis*, or sitting room, and stained-glass clerestory windows are found on three of its walls. Embedded in two of the walls are wooden picture frames in the form of small painted lifebelts



*Figure 27: Interior of the al-Najdi mosque, Farasan town, built in 1347 AH (1928/29 AD), showing the minbar (pulpit) and surroundings.*

bearing the legend “Duchessa d’Aosta”, the Lloyds Triestino steamer built in 1921 above, and “Shanghai” below. Within each frame is a photograph of a man in local dress, presumably a member of the al-Rifa‘i family.

Some 40 m to the northeast of the house of ‘Ali al-Rifa‘i is a similar building, this one not restored, that is known as the house of ‘Uthman al-Rifa‘i; it is constructed and decorated in a similar manner (Fig. 26). Other, less elaborate buildings of similar construction survive in the quarter in a state of dereliction. The architectural style of these buildings recalls buildings elsewhere in the southern Red Sea, not least Zabid (زبيد) in Yemen.

Another historic building in the historic quarter of Farasan Town is the mosque of Ibrahim al-Najdi, built in AH 1347 (AD 1928/29) (Fig. 27). Al-Najdi was a pearl merchant from al-Najd who settled



*Figure 28: The Ottoman fort, standing on an elevated ridge of coral-stone bedrock northwest of Farasan town.*

in Farasan, and the mosque is indicative of the impact of pearling on the local economy. The mosque comprises a vaulted prayer hall on a triangular plan comprising three aisles and twelve painted domes. The elaborate *mihrab* and *minbar* are imported from India. Outside, the bases of two minarets survive.

### **The Ottoman Fort**

Farasan's small Ottoman fort stands on an elevated ridge of coral-stone bedrock some 1.3 km to the north-west of central Farasan Town, and enclosed within a protective wire fence (Fig. 28). Its whitewashed stucco construction had been maintained recently by the authorities. The fort is on rectangular plan. Access is through a single door in the centre of the southern (long) wall, which leads into a courtyard. The building itself runs along the north side of the yard, and has a veranda, while a small room stands at the yard's eastern end. The main building comprises one large room with shooting positions, with an adjacent room at its west end allowing access to the roof. The fort was served by a nearby well. Although small, the building testifies to the Ottoman military presence on the islands in the early of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***Settlements on the island of Segid***

#### **Khutub**

The village of Khutub lies some 1.8 km inland in the north-western lobe of the island of Segid. It is one of the island's three main settlements, and stands to the north of a small area of agricultural



*Figure 29: A well at Khutub.*

land. The authors noted three wells on the western edge of the village, but the village shaykh, Muhammad ‘Abd Allah Al-Rajhi, reported that there were 39 in the village in total, and that some were up to 300 years old. This clearly attests to the historical availability of groundwater in the area. The wells resembled others on Greater Farasan: vertical, round-shafted wells, sometimes exploiting fissures in the fossil-coral bedrock, and edged at the head with four slightly overhanging stone slabs (Fig. 29). One well on the western edge of the village had two narrow channels running away from it: one extended 12 m to the west, and the other 10 m east. Residents said that a group of *ca.* 16 cm-diameter holes drilled into the bedrock some 50 m northeast of the wells had in the past been used by hunters who put water in them to lure birds.

Interspersed among Khutub’s modern dwellings were decaying older (probably early-modern) buildings, usually rectangular in floor plan, with rubble-stone walls, partially stuccoed walls and flat roofs supported by palm trunks. The houses were usually enclosed on one or more sides within walled compounds, with windows, carved wooden doors, and stucco or carved stone decoration concentrated on the wall or walls facing the enclosure. The interior rooms, often only one, were decorated with carved stucco on the walls, and painted on the walls and ceiling beams. The former shaykh’s compound contained several buildings, and was reached through a single decorated stone arch. There was a well in an open area in the west of the village.



*Figure 30: General view of the building at Zayta.*

### **Zayta**

This site lies some 400 m west of the western fringe of Khutub, on a low ridge within an area of small and relatively fertile and alluvium-rich wadis. The area is scattered with dūm-palm trees and acacia. The authors were shown a rectangular building measuring *ca.* 10 x 8 m on a small raise. The building comprised three rooms and an apparent courtyard on its north side (Fig. 30).

Surface ceramics included mineral-tempered red-fabric sherds with external diagonal ribs (Fig. 9 (L)), and the body fragments and base of an Ayla-Aksum amphora with a pink fabric, external ribs and yellow slip (Pl. 9 (M)). A flake of obsidian was also found on the surface: given the lack of island sources, this probably came from the southern Arabian mainland or northern Horn-of-Africa coast, both major regional sources.

In the wadi to the southeast of the site, local informants showed the authors a large, up-ended flat stone measuring 125 x 155 cm, with a thickness of 42 cm, known locally as “the Pharaoh’s stone” (Fig. 31). It had several 16 cm-diameter holes carved into it, much like those at Khutub.

### **Khola (خولة)**

Like al-Qusar on Greater Farasan, Khola is an abandoned village of early modern date comprising single-story buildings of rubble-stone construction and palm roofs (Fig. 32). It is 4 km east of





*Figure 31: Flat stone with carved holes near Khutub, locally know as “Pharaoh’s stone”, perhaps originally used in bird trapping.*



*Figure 32: General view of the buildings at the abandoned village of Khola.*

Khutub, and less than 2 km from the northern shore of the island. A still-used mosque, in whitewashed render, stood on the fringe of the site, while another ruined mosque within the site had two prayer niches. Elsewhere a *muṣallā*, or prayer area, was marked out on the ground with loose stones. Three wells were also identified, cut into a natural fissure in the ground, with edging blocks around each. There was also a large coral-stone trough. A large pink-granite bowl and a fragment of a basalt grinding stone were also found – both materials suggest an overseas origin. The plentiful surface pottery included blue-glazed wares, painted Dutch cups with multi-coloured floral designs similar to that identified at al-Miqdara, and blue-and-white porcelain, probably Chinese.

## *Cemeteries*

The survey visited three cemeteries on Greater Farasan, and a possible fourth.

One of these, located 200 m to the southeast of the main Gharrain site is presently protected by an SCTA fence measuring some 70 x 50 m (Fig. 33). It consists of some 40 graves oriented in an east-west direction. Each grave comprises a small oval mound fringed with coral-stone slabs, often with a larger stone at the supposed head of the grave, and sometimes with incised symbols ascribable to the Byzantine period (Fig. 34).

Another cemetery was at 'Abra (عبرة), some 9 km south of Farasan Town, at a point where the Wadi Matar opens onto a sandy plain. The site comprised 120–150 graves lying within a slightly elevated 'dome' of ground some 45 m in diameter (Fig. 35). The site was encircled by a raised dyke, some 60 m in diameter, probably of recent construction. As at Gharrain, the graves were east-west oriented, and comprised small oval mounds encircled with dressed coral slabs. Larger standing slabs typically mark the head and foot of the mound, with the eastern stone significantly larger. From their dimensions, three broad categories of grave could be discerned: large graves are roughly 230 x 130 cm with the main stone c. 80 cm high by 55 cm wide; medium size graves are *ca.* 180 x 80 cm with the main slab *ca.* 70 x 45 cm; and small graves are *ca.* 110 cm x 60 cm with the main slab c. 35 x 40 cm. One grave, measuring 230 x 130 cm, differed from the others in the sandstone (rather than coral) slabs that covered it, and in the absence of dressed slabs encircling it (Fig. 36).

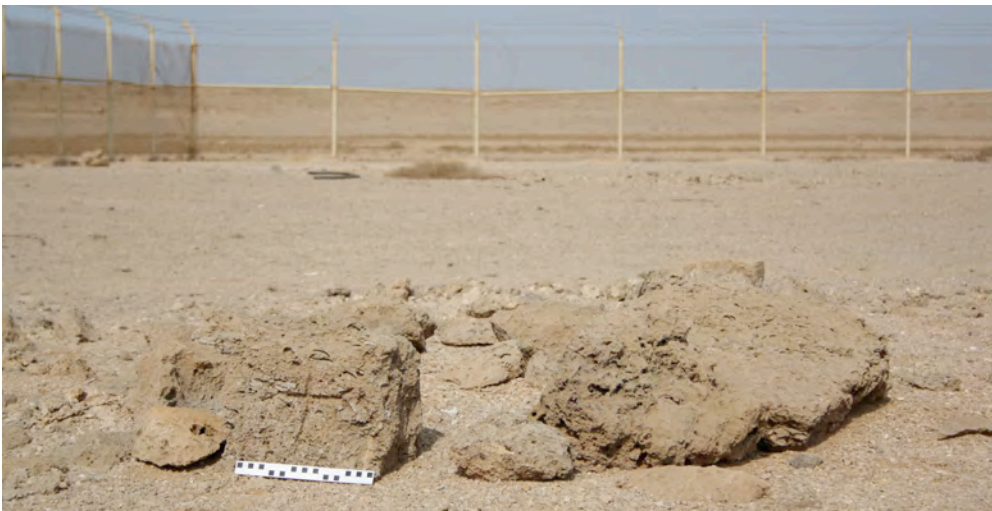
Another cemetery was visited *ca.* 8 km north west of Farasan Town near the head of Hadar Bay. It included some 40 burials, consisting of small oval graves, roughly east-west oriented, each encircled by dressed slabs (Fig. 37).

The site of Mugassar (مقصر) is a further possible cemetery. It lies some 5 km south-east of the main Wadi Matar sites, and just 400 m from eastern coast of the island in an area of open scrub with a shallow wadi to its north. It consisted of a cluster of large, flat coral-stone megaliths up to 2m in height, three of which were standing (Fig. 38).

Another cemetery with rock-cut tombs covered by large stone slabs was recorded at Kudmi by Phillips and Facey, but was not visited by the authors (Phillips, Villeneuve and Facey 2004: 244).



*Figure 33: The cemetery at Gharrain.*



*Figure 34: Headstone of a burial with cruciform motifs incised on both of its main faces, Gharrain.*



*Figure 35: General view of the 'Abra cemetery.*



*Figure 36: An unusual grave in the 'Abra cemetery, characterised by sandstones slabs covering the mound.*



*Figure 37: Cemetery near Hadar bay.*



*Figure 38: Megalithic (cemetery?) site at Mugassar.*

### ***Wells***

The widespread distribution of wells on the islands points to historically important supplies of near-surface ground water. The wells at Qurayat, al-Qusar, Khola, the Ottoman fort and Khutub have already been noted: others were seen at Sayer (صير). Most of those inspected had circular shafts cut

through the bedrock, often taking advantage of natural fissures. Their heads were usually edged with four-or-so stone slabs. Often these had deep rope-cuts: their function was probably to keep the water receptacle clear of the well walls during hauling, and to provide a safe footing.

Most of the wells were in use until recent times – the islands today are served by a desalination plant – and are difficult to date. However one well shaft, of a group of four in a date-palm grove 200 m west of Muharraq, was carved internally. These wells lie on a low ridge, roughly midway between the area of the main Wadi Matar sites, Qala‘at Lukman and al-Qusar. All four wells were typical of others on the islands in that their heads were edged by four coral-stone slabs (Fig. 39). However, the carved one was unique in that the four edging stones were scarf jointed at their corners, and the bedrock of the shaft had been decoratively carved for the first 2 m below ground level (Fig. 40). The well shaft was square in section from the wellhead down to 1.5 m, below which it was circular. The four faces of the square-sectioned portion were carved with a crenelated relief, in which each shaft’s face has one down-step, in the central section of each face. The two upper-level steps of the crenelation on either side run horizontally to the corners of the well, where they meet the line of the crenelation on the neighbouring face. Carved within the down-step on the western face of the well was the symbol of the disc and the crescent, common in ancient South Arabia, but also in other pre-Islamic and Islamic-era regional cultures (Ettinghausen 1965: 381; Breton 1999: 125)(Figs 40 and 41). In the corners of the square-sectioned portion were carved four foreshortened columns, each 15–20 cm in diameter and rising some 50–60 cm from the point where the well shaft became circular. Directly below each of these columns, niches with flat bottoms and cusped arches, *ca.* 40 cm high and 25 cm wide, were carved into the circular shaft. Below this level, two vertical sets of footholds were carved into opposite sides of the shaft, enabling descent to the bottom of the well.

The three other wells at the site were without interior decoration. Alongside one of the wells was an ovoid stone basin. A modern diesel pump continued to extract groundwater at the site for irrigation.

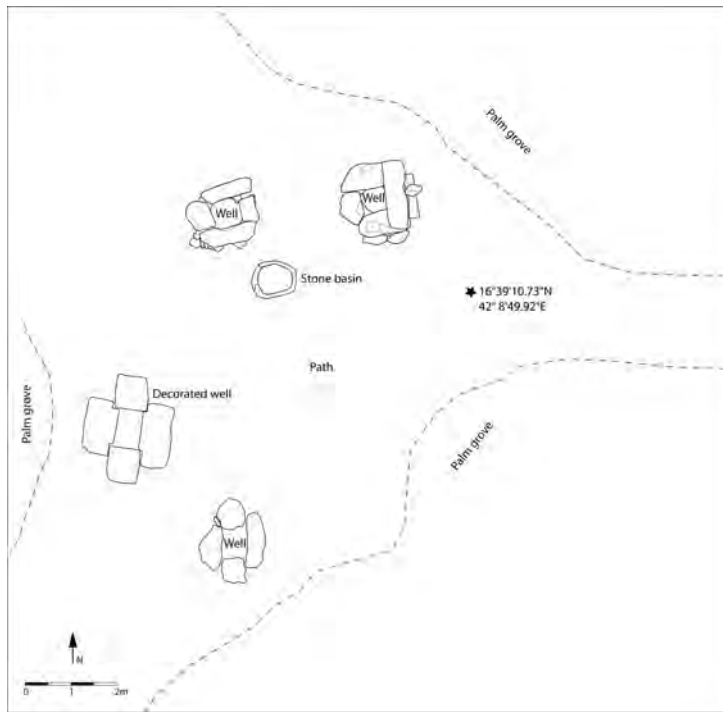


Figure 39: Plan view of the wells at Muharraq.

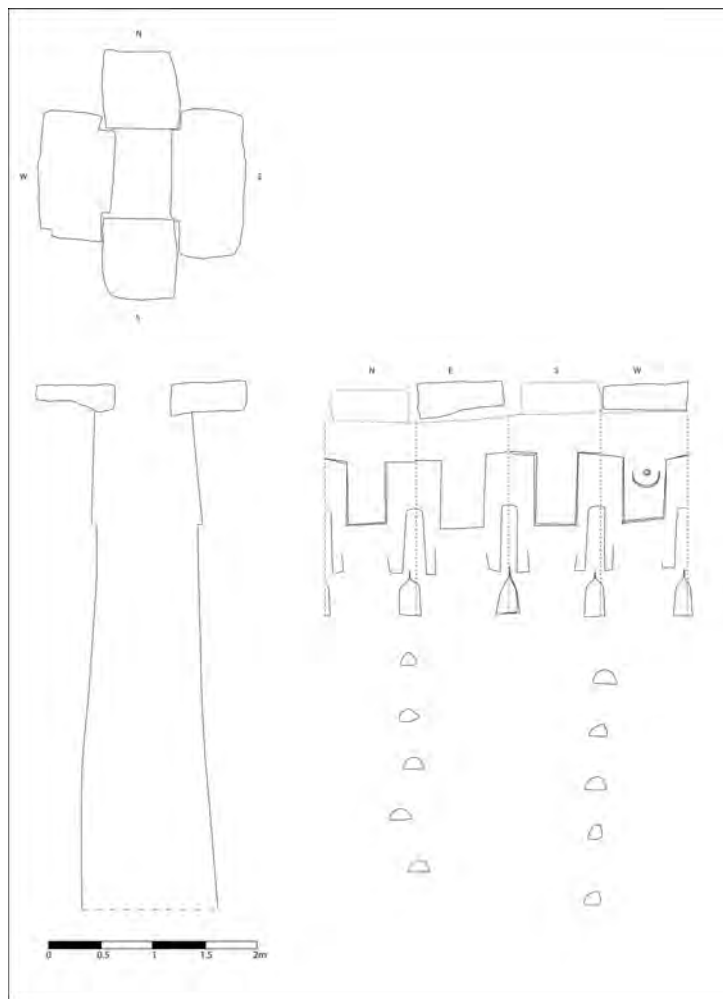


Figure 40: Plan, section and detail of the decoration carved inside of one of the wells at Muharraq.



*Figure 41: The inside of the decorated well at Muharraq.*

### ***Cave sites***

#### **Jabal Shidda (جبل شدة)**

This elevated coral-stone ridge runs broadly east-west for a distance of 350 m on a westward-pointing peninsula in the south of Greater Farasan island, some 7 km west of the main Wadi Matar sites. The survey logged a human-made cave on the northern face of the ridge at a level of *ca.* 16 m above sea level, still several metres below the top of the ridge (Fig. 42). The presence of a spoil mound in front of the cave, apparently cleared away from the entrance, suggests that it had been dug out relatively recently. Copper or copper-alloy fragments and possible pre-Islamic pottery were found on the spoil's surface.

The entrance comprised a rectangular doorway, 1.24 m wide, formed by a monolithic threshold and



*Figure 42: The entrance of the Jabal Shidda rock-cut cave.*

two upright dressed monolithic stone slabs, each 1.54 m in height: the easternmost of these had a 10 cm square hole in its upper portion. There was also a stone slab step leading down to the doorway from the outside. A dislodged slab outside the entrance may once have formed part of the entrance structure. Inside, the roughly rectangular cross section of the entrance passage, all excavated, widened out over a distance of 2 m before meeting the main rectangular chamber. The earth floor of this chamber stood some 1.2 m below the entrance passage, following a vertical drop down. The chamber was 3.25 m wide at the front, and ca. 3.7 m wide at the rear. The excavation was 5.7m long from entrance to rear wall, of which 3.6 m was the chamber. The ceiling height was 2.6–2.7 m. The form of this cave makes it unique on the Farasan Islands and in the southern Red Sea. Caves close to the sea and carved into the coral bedrock wall with a similar shape have recently been investigated at the Pharaonic harbours of Mersa Gawasis, Ayn Sukhna and Wadi al-Jarf on the



Egyptian Red Sea coast (Bard and Fattovich 2007; Tallet 2012). Those at Mersa Gawasis and Ayn Sukhna date to the Middle Kingdom, while the Wadi al-Jarf caves are Old Kingdom in date. All were temporary places to stay and store ship-related equipment. The Jabal Shidda cave might similarly have been connected with maritime activity. It might equally have been a dwelling: “cave dwellers” (Troglodytes) are also frequently mentioned by classical authors describing the coastal populations of the Red Sea (Pliny VI, 32, 149–154; Strabo XVII, 1, 1; Diodorus I, 30, 3; Burstein 2008: 250–263; Tomber 2005: 41–49).

Some 120 m to the northwest of the cave, a fissure in the fossil coral terrace opened up into what local informants reported was a series of three natural underground caverns leading ultimately to the sea. A lack of appropriate equipment prevented investigation of these caves beyond the first cavern.

### ***Portable artefacts***

A number of archaeological artefacts, including fragmentary Latin and South Arabian inscriptions as well as amphorae and architectural elements have in recent years been deposited on an *ad hoc* basis by local people in the gardens of the homes of Ibrahim Muftah and Ibrahim Sayyadi, with the knowledge of the SCTA. Most of these finds had been found in re-used contexts within the masonry of houses in abandoned villages, especially at al-Qusar and Kudmi.

Artefacts collected in the courtyard of Ibrahim Sayyadi included:

- A rounded coral-stone mortar c. 30 cm in diameter (Fig. 43 (1)).
- Two unidentified architectural elements, both dressed coral-stone slabs. One measured 40 x 28 x 10.5 cm, with a square unfinished hole. The other, rectangular in shape, measured 52 x 45 x 7.5 cm (Fig. 43 (2)).
- Two pillars with flat rectangular ends and four convex vertical faces. The first one was 52 cm high, 25 x 18 cm wide at its ends, in its widest extremities and 14–17.5 cm in its narrowest central part, where it also had a groove 1.5 cm wide. The second (Fig. 43 (2)) measures 76 cm in height, 28 cm wide at its narrowest central part, and 31 cm in its widest extremities.



*Figure 43: Artefacts collected in the courtyard of Ibrahim Sayyadi's house.*



*Figure 44: Ancient South Arabian inscription recorded in the courtyard of Ibrahim Sayyadi's house.*



*Figure 45: Artefacts in the courtyard of Ibrahim Muftah's house.*

- Three South Arabian inscriptions. The first was carved onto the face of a block that had subsequently been cut into an arch shape (Fig. 43 (5)). The block was originally recorded as a window lintel in al-Qusar (Marion de Procé and Phillips 2010: 278–279, fig. 2/a). The second inscription, reported by Marion de Procé and Phillips (2010: 279–280, fig. 2/d), was originally found in Wadi Matar before being moved to its current location. The third was carved into a coral-stone block measuring *ca.* 30 x 25 cm that was broken at one end. Though not yet published, this inscription had previously been inspected by Villeneuve in Wadi Matar Bā': it was subsequently classified by Marion de Procé as WM2B1. The inscription comprises two pairs of two letters approximately 5 cm high, separated by a vertical word-separator symbol. From left to right can be read *bn / (?)*, "son of...", probably the beginning of a truncated name (Marion de Procé 2008: 52) (Fig. 44).
- Three columns: one 38–52 cm in diameter, retaining part of a badly preserved capital; another of the same diameter (Fig. 43 (3 and 4)); and the third 23–45 cm in diameter with leaf motifs on the capital.

Artefacts kept in the garden of Ibrahim Muftah included:

- Three fragmentary coral-stone columns measuring 34–36 cm in diameter (Fig. 45 (2, 3, 4)).
- A rectangular coral-stone masonry element with an incised cross, found at Gharrain (Fig. 45).
- Two Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, one found at al-Khutub (Marion de Procé and Phillips 2010: 279, fig. 2/c) and the other at Kudmi (Fig. 45 (6 and 7)). The latter was carved into a coral-stone block measuring *ca.* 62 x 50 x 6 cm (Marion de Procé 2008: 54–55 fig. 24) (Figs 45 (7) and 46).
- A Latin inscription studied by Villeneuve (2007a, 2007b and 2008).
- A fragmentary coral-stone cornice originally found at Kudmi, where it had been reused as a door frame (see also Phillips *et al.* 2004: 244–245, fig. 6) (Fig. 45 (1))



*Figure 46: Ancient South Arabian inscription in the courtyard of Ibrahim Muftah's house.*



*Figure 47: Rectangular stone object with a decorated face reused as basin, found near a well at Kudmi and now at Ibrahim Muftah's house.*



*Figure 48: Large millstone in volcanic stone (basalt?) of unknown provenance, now at Ibrahim Muftah's house.*

- A cuboidal coral-stone object with a decorated face found near a well at Kudmi (Fig. 45 (9) and 47). The object has been modified from its original shape: with exception of the original decorated face, the other faces have been chiselled off and the upper part, as seen in the picture, had a rectangular cavity cut into it. The present form shows that it has almost certainly been reused as small basin. The authors showed photographs of the object to Professor François Villeneuve, on whose kind advice the following description and interpretation as an *aedicula* is based. On the decorated face a "niche" is depicted, flanked on both sides by pilasters or half-columns bearing a triangular pediment. In the middle of the pediment is a disc motif. Within the niche is an incised motif perhaps suggesting a vertically elongated altar with broad base and a cornice running along the top. The object is almost certainly the product of a Hellenised or Romanised culture in the Red Sea region: it might be a small religious feature, or an architectural decoration within a larger religious monument<sup>4</sup>.
- A large basalt millstone, *ca.* 45cm in diameter, of unknown provenance (Fig. 48). The form is comparable to larger Roman volcanic millstones found in Rome (Wilson 2003: 85–109) and also on the Eritrean shore at Raheita (Anfray 1970: 41 Pls. X–XI). Similar millstones might have been transported on ships as ballast.
- Two amphorae: local people referred to the larger type as *mā'ūn*, used until recently for water storage on larger sailing vessels in the Red Sea region. One, larger and ovoid in shape, has a pink fabric, and had external yellow-green slip, with handles that attach at both ends to the shoulder, and lateral incisions running around the body at the shoulder (Fig. 45 (10)). This amphora is similar to one found under water near the Sawâbia archipelago in Djibouti (Desanges and Reddé 1994: 190–192, fig. 17) and to amphorae displayed in the Northern Red Sea Regional Museum of Massawa in Eritrea and in the Suez Museum in Egypt.

Other stone artefacts had been taken to the outdoor *dīwān* known as Mazra' Abdo Sayqal, some 2

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<sup>4</sup> A detailed description of the *aedicula* will be presented by Solène Marion de Procé in the forthcoming proceedings of the Red Sea VI conference, held in Tabuk in March 2013.



*Figure 49: Artefacts in the Farasan Elementary School museum.*

km southeast of central Farasan town, and to the small museum of the Farasan Elementary School in Farasan town itself. At Mazra' Abdo Sayqal, the authors noted:

- A coral-stone column, *ca.* 200 cm in length and 38 cm in diameter, with a quarter-segment cut away along its length. One of the inner faces of the segment had four square holes cut into it, perhaps as original mortises to allow it to be attached to the corner of a wall, or otherwise made subsequently in order to adapt the piece to serve a new purpose: local informants said the column had been re-used as a door lintel.
- A cylindrical piece of coral stone, roughly 35 cm in diameter and 30 cm high, with a hole in it around 15 cm suggesting its use as a vessel or mortar.

In the Farasan Elementary School the survey noted:

- A stone basin with drainage hole, oval in shape, *ca.* 1 m in length, and similar to those seen next to the wells at al-Qusar and Khola (Fig. 49 (1)).
- The probable edging stone of a well with incised rope-grooves (Fig. 49 (2)).
- An Ancient South Arabian inscription incised on a coral-stone monolith measuring over 100 cm and *ca.* 40 cm in diameter (Fig. 49 (3)). The inscription has not been translated: it was roughly carved, and appears archaic (Marion de Procé, *pers. comm.*, based on inspection of

photographs).

- A large amphora of pink fabric and an external green slip, resembling the *mā'ūn* observed in the courtyard of Ibrahim Muftah. The vessel was over 100 cm high and *ca.* 13 cm in diameter at the neck. There are parallel circular incisions on the shoulder and on the body. The amphora had vertical handles attaching to the shoulders. (Fig. 49 (4)).

## **Discussion**

The Farasan Islands have for millennia constituted a strategic location for maritime activity in the southern Red Sea region. Supplies of fresh groundwater dotted across the island offer the fundamental resource for habitation in an otherwise hyper-arid environment. Given the archipelago's separation from the monsoon-based rainfall run-off that supported life on the south Arabian mainland, wells accessing this groundwater were essential to human subsistence, and are found at sites across the main islands. Evidence of recent date-farming and localised field systems attests to at least a limited potential for agriculture, and echo Ibn Majid's 15<sup>th</sup> century observation that some of the islands had "cattle and camels, palms and fruits" (Tibbetts 1971: 259). Meanwhile the rich seas of the surrounding Farasan banks offer abundant marine resources for local exploitation. Shell middens throughout the islands underline the importance of the sea to the island's inhabitants for nutrition from the earliest of times (Bailey, Meredith-Williams & Alsharekh 2013).

The Farasan Islands were not only a place of localised habitation, however. Their position on the eastern flank of the Red Sea corridor – with a ready supply of fresh water – made them a stopping-off point for mariners and, at times, a base for naval forces. On the one hand, the islands represented a convenient halt for Red Sea crossings between Africa and Arabia, especially for smaller craft: by sailing between the Farasan Islands and the Dahlak archipelago, mariners reduced their open-sea leg by about one-third. On the other, the islands also represented a key reference point on long-distance maritime routes following the axis of the Red Sea. So far, however, the only direct evidence we

have for maritime technology during antiquity on the islands is the stone anchor recorded during this research at Wadi Matar Bā'. Other evidence, particularly in the form of epigraphy and ceramics, is nevertheless implicit of settlement and overseas contact.

Ibn Majid provides some insight into the place of the Farasan archipelago in the navigational landscape of the southern Red Sea in the medieval period, setting out as he does the water, food and anchorages available to mariners, as well as the routes past and around the archipelago. While the information provides food-for-thought as to how the islands were used by navigators in other eras, it is striking that the archaeology of Greater Farasan and Segid islands lacks data reflective of the period that Ibn Majid describes.

Nevertheless, results from the present survey can be used to infer the broad maritime connections the archipelago experienced with the outside world in various periods, pointing as they do towards links with northern Arabia and the Mediterranean, possibly since the first centuries BC-AD; with the opposite African coast, northern Arabia and the Arabian/Persian Gulf (?) in the fourth/fifth to the early seventh century AD; with the Gulf in the thirteen- sixteen century and with the Far East and western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteen century. It underlines the potential of the islands to deepen our understanding not only of past settlement, but also of long-distance trade and contact. We do not exclude for example, the involvement of Farasan in the Afro-Arabian circuit of exchange (Fattovich 1996) – which includes Egypt – given the archaeological evidence of shell middens dating back to that period and before (Bailey, Meredith-Williams & Alsharekh 2013).

On a more functional level, the research logs the extent of archaeological remains to be found on the islands, and hints at the scope for future work.

A preliminary evaluation of the typology, dating and distribution of the main settlements of the islands can be made on the basis of this survey, although further work, including test excavations, would be necessary in order to corroborate the present assessment.

The main ancient settlement areas recorded on Greater Farasan are in the eastern part of the island:



these include the concentration of sites near Wadi Matar, as well as al-Miqdara, Gharrain, and Qurayat. None are on the coast, but all are less than 3 kilometres from it. All are in the vicinity of underground water sources and, by Farasan standards, fertile plains, which presumably influenced the choice of site: some are associated with cemeteries. The earliest observed occupation of the Wadi Matar settlements is Ancient South Arabian. The palaeography of the South Arabian inscriptions reported at al-Qusar and Wadi Matar Bā' by Marion de Procé, Phillips and Villeneuve indicates a period of occupation starting at least from the first half of the first millennium BC: associated pottery seems to confirm this date (Marion de Procé & Phillips 2010: 280). The 'Abra cemetery, ca. 2 km south of Wadi Matar, and the wells recorded at the nearby village of Muharraq might also be associated with the Wadi Matar settlements, although this assumption is based at this stage on little other than proximity. The earliest occupation at Gharrain also appears to be Ancient South Arabian, based on limited surface pottery, while ashlar building techniques employed there, the size of the blocks and of some structures are shared with Wadi Matar South, Buq'a, al-Miqdara and Qurayat. Surface ceramics at Qurayat suggest occupation limited to this Ancient South Arabian period: further investigations here might provide new insights into pre-Roman maritime trade connections in the Red Sea. The discovery of Nabataean wares at Gharrain by Zarins *et al* and during the present survey points also to direct or indirect contact with the north of Arabia in the late centuries BC and early centuries AD. Nabataean involvement in the maritime trade with the southern Red Sea is little known (Tomber 2008: 68–71), although recent finds of so-called Nabataean “painted fine ware” at Adulis are opening new perspectives on this subject (C. Durand and R. Loreto in Zazzaro *et al* 2014: 544–546).

A subsequent Roman and Byzantine presence in the east of Greater Farasan is confirmed by scattered column fragments and amphora sherds at a number of the Wadi Matar sites and Gharrain. The second-century Latin inscription mentioning *Portus Ferrasan*, found at nearby al-Qusar, points to a Roman naval presence in the area in the decades following the opening of Trajan's canal, which connected the Nile at Babylon to the Red Sea at Clysma, modern Suez (Cooper 2009), and during

the prosperity of the Roman ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike, when Roman interest in trade with South Arabia and India centred around exotic products such as frankincense and pepper (Tomber 2008: 57-87). The fact that another second-century Latin inscription has been found in the present-day cemetery serving nearby Farasan Town (Fig. 45 (8)) further indicates an ancient Roman military presence in the area (Villeneuve 2008).

Contact between the archipelago and the northern end of the Red Sea continued into the Late Roman and Byzantine period, with so-called Ayla-Aksum amphorae and other late-Roman sherds found at most Wadi Matar sites and at Gharrain, underlining historical mention of a naval fleet on the islands in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD (Van Hecke *et al* 1861: 747; Bowersock 2013: 92–105). The cemetery adjacent to Gharrain, with its east-west oriented graves, is likely to be late-antique in date.

Occupation of most of the main in Wadi Matar sites appears to have ceased by the onset of the Islamic era, with only Wadi Matar South indicating subsequent occupation. Evidence of medieval occupation of the islands is, in fact, sparse, despite Ibn Majid's indications of maritime activity in the late medieval period. Only Wadi Matar South and al-Miqdara yielded surface sherds from the Islamic era in its broadest sense. The reasons for this lack of medieval evidence may be as much taphonomic as actual, however.

There is greater evidence of activity on the islands during the Ottoman era. The fort near Farasan Town is clear evidence of this, as are early-modern surface ceramics at Wadi Matar South and al-Miqdara. But it is in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that a significant increase in settlement activity is detected, due in large part to the boom in the pearling industry that took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Carter, 2012: 141—181). The decorated stucco buildings of Farasan Town, Khutub and al-Qusar, not to mention the highly decorated al-Najdi mosque are testament to this more recent surge in activity on the islands. The evidence of re-use of ancient stones in the buildings of this era suggests that it had a detrimental effect on the archaeological sites of earlier periods. While that particular boom is over, oil-era development of the islands is continuing apace, and the archipelago is becoming a popular destination for internal Saudi tourism.

It may be that, as in other areas of the Red Sea, the greatest present threat to archaeological sites on the islands now comes from this quarter.

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