

# The Islamic Port of al-Balīd (Oman), between Land and Sea: Place of Trade, Exchange, Diversity, and Coexistence

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## Abstract

The site of al-Balīd (Southern Oman), identified as the ancient *Ẓafār*, was a major port city in the Islamic period. Its strategic position and its history, strongly interdependent with that of neighbouring regions, gave it an important socio-economic role.

The abundant ceramics and the rich and diverse archaeological materials recovered at the site prove that al-Balīd has always maintained relationships with people living inland and, at the same time, that it was intensively involved in the Indian Ocean trade. The pottery also reflects the coexistence of different traditions, various social classes, and several communities at al-Balīd.

## Keywords

al-Balīd – *Ẓafār* – pottery – Islamic period – interregional relationships – Indian Ocean trade – communities' coexistence

## 1 Introduction

This paper<sup>1</sup> presents the results of the recent archaeological project on the site of al-Balīd, with a particular focus on the study of pottery and the insights into the historical, economic and social aspects it offers.<sup>2</sup>

The Islamic site of al-Balīd is located in the Dhofar region, the southern Governorate of present-day Oman (Fig. 1). It is the largest and most visited archaeological site of Southern Oman, especially after being declared UNESCO World Heritage in 2000. Its fame was even greater in the past, as suggested by the dimensions of the walled site and the richness of the materials found.

Al-Balīd was identified as the ancient port city of *Ẓafār* mentioned in the accounts of travellers such as Ibn al-Mujāwir (1204/5–91), Marco Polo (1254–1324), and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304–68/9 or 1304–77), but also in Chinese sources (see below). It was one of the main centres in the so-called Frankincense Land. Moreover, at least since the thirteenth century, *Ẓafār* played a crucial role in the Indian Ocean trade network. The Dhofar region is influenced by monsoons, which makes trade over sea much easier than trade over land. For a long time, trade was the most important activity for the city, as testified by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who wrote that the inhabitants were merchants who lived entirely from trade (Defremery and Sanguinetti, 1969: 198). Many goods were exported, imported, or passed

through *Ẓafār*. During the Islamic period, its involvement in the trade facilitated the development of the city (Staples, 2017: 106; Newton and Zarins, 2014: 269–270).

## 2 Historical Background

*Ẓafār* was under the dominion of different dynasties: the *Manjū/Manjawīyyūn* rulers that some scholars thought to be Persian (Guest, 1935: 403), possibly from *Sīrāf*; the *Habūdī* dynasty (1203–79), probably originally from *Hadramawt* (Guest, 1935: 403), according to several historians, under this dynasty *Ẓafār* was destroyed in 1221, and a new city called *al-Manṣurā* was reconstructed (Smith, 1985: 83); the *Rasūlids* of *Yemen* (1279–1420), which transformed *Ẓafār* into an important port along the trade route to the Persian Gulf and India (Guest, 1935: 407); the *Kathīrī* family of *Hadramawt* (mid-fifteenth–mid-seventeenth centuries, Smith, 2005: 413). When the Portuguese and the Ottomans arrived in the sixteenth century, the city progressively decayed. Nonetheless *al-Balīd* was able to recover, reaching certain prosperity in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries, before it collapsed and was completely abandoned.

During the *Habūdī* period, *Ẓafār* acquired a significant role in the Indian Ocean trade network. This was also the result of the general political situation (that is the fall of the 'Abbasids and the *Būyids*, and the decline of *Ṣuḥār* in the north) that caused the shift of trade from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea, and further south, also involving *Oman* and *Yemen* (Staples, 2017: 83, 98).

Particularly from the thirteenth century onward, the city greatly flourished (Guest, 1935: 407), as it was integrated into a growing and extremely active *Yemeni* trade network developed by the *Rasūlids*, involving *Arabia*, *India*, and *Africa* (Staples, 2017: 106; Guest, 1935: 407). Trade constituted the principal source of income for the *Rasūlids*; consequently, the merchants became a powerful and rich social class, comprising not only *Yemeni* and *Omani* merchants, but also *Indians*, *Egyptians* and *Africans* (Guest, 1935: 407). There must have been a similar social situation in *Ẓafār*, as this city was strongly influenced by the political decisions of the *Rasūlids* (Varisco, 1993: 19).

Different travellers confirmed the splendour and the key role of *Ẓafār* as a port. *Marco Polo* visited the city in 1290 and highlighted its important role in one of the most profitable trades of the period: that of horses. The animals were gathered inland (mountains and inner deserts), but also on the islands, and were collected in several ports, including *Ẓafār*; the merchants sold them in *India*, as the horses were particularly appreciated by the *Indian* rulers between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. Some years later (in 1329), *Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* reported how much this trade had flourished (Defremery and Sanguinetti, 1969: 196). Besides the horses, *Ẓafār* and the region were also known for the export of frankincense and dried sardines, used primarily for the feeding of animals (Defremery and Sanguinetti, 1969: 196–197; Smith, 1985: 85). In Chinese sources of the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, *Ẓafār* and the whole coast of *Dhofar* are mentioned as centres of export for local products, such as frankincense, ambergris, pearls, myrrh, dragon's blood, aloes, benzoin, liquid storax, camels and ostriches, but also as a place of distribution for goods arriving from *Africa*, such as rhino horns and ivory. Most of these items were brought to *China* and exchanged for silk and porcelains (Pavan and Visconti, 2020: 243–245).



FIGURE 1  
Aerial photograph of the site of al-Balid with the indication of the *Husn* (after *Al Baleed Archaeological Park Salalah* 2014: 87); top, left: the Dhofari coast with the site of al-Balid  
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### 3 Archaeological Research

The archaeological site of al-Balid lies in the Ṣalālah plain, 5 km east of the modern city, at the culmination of a major river system, providing abundant fresh water to the area. The site consists of a large fortified city just on the Ocean littoral (Fig. 1); larger suburbs with agricultural fields and artisanal workshops existed to the north, while a marketplace and a large cemetery were located to the west. The western part of the fortified site was the most important one: it hosts the *Husn*, the fortified palace, a large congregational mosque, and a customs house. Mosques, large houses, and a marketplace were located in the central part; in the southern part there were the jetties, the dockyard, and buildings for the arrival and registration of items; the eastern part could have been used for storing and preparing goods.

The *Husn*<sup>3</sup> was built on a higher plane, thus appearing as the most prominent complex of the site (Fig. 2). It is roughly square in plan, covering a surface of almost 5,000 sqm. It has been interpreted as the residence of the local ruler. It was a multi-storey building, with four levels in the last occupation phases. It has massive walls with circular towers. The main point of access was the southern gate, which directly connects the palace with the congregational mosque; a western and an eastern gate have also been identified. Parts of the ceilings with the original wooden beams are still preserved in some areas. An extension along the northern side has been interpreted as the bathroom drains of the *Husn*. Leaning just against the east perimeter wall of the building, a series of rooms have been recently brought to light and identified as horses' stables (Pavan in Pavan et al., 2018: 212).

After the publication of accounts of European travellers that provided information on the site (for an overview, see Tkatsch, 1934: 1256), from 1930 onward, al-Balid started to be archaeologically investigated; several missions conducted surveys, excavations, topographical works, and restoration activities until 2012.<sup>4</sup> The excavations were resumed in 2016, along with the consolidation of the exposed structures and the study of the materials, under the direction of Alexia Pavan (archaeological consultant for the Omani Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs), and they concentrate on the *Husn* (Pavan et al., 2018).<sup>5</sup>

Besides ceramics, which are the most abundant findings, a remarkable quantity of rich and varied materials has been collected and comprises: glass bracelets, glass vessels, incense burners, numerous coins, war devices, such as cannonballs, mangonels, arrowheads, and, particularly worth mentioning, numerous ship timbers reemployed as architectural components. The study of all these materials is carried out by several researchers (Pavan et al., 2018); the final matching of collected data will provide comprehensive overviews of the products traded according to the regions with which al-Balid was in contact, and of the dynamics of supply and demand of specific items.

Between 2016 and 2018, a research project on the study of the pottery from the *Husn* was carried out by the present author, in parallel with the excavations.<sup>6</sup> It has a multidisciplinary approach: the archaeological study is supported by archaeometric analyses and an ethnoarchaeological work on modern Dhofari production.

Especially the study of pottery allows the establishment of solid chronological phases and contributes to shedding new light on several historical and socio-economic issues. Primary purposes of this study are: matching the phases of the *Husn* with relevant historical events, retracing the history of al-Balid, and finally integrating it into the broader history of the Indian Ocean; investigating the relations between al-Balid and other minor sites in Dhofar; recognizing trade patterns and the commercial role of al-Balid, and their changes throughout the centuries; identifying the presence of communities of foreigners that settled in the city.

#### 4 *Husn*: Chronological Phases

As shown in the plan of the *Husn* (Fig. 2), the new archaeological investigations explore a large number of contexts, located in different areas of the fortified palace, both inside and outside the walls. So far, the pottery study has concentrated on the findings from several selected contexts: rooms A31 and A33, and the larger room underneath; room A2 and the room underneath, just behind the southern entrance; room A5, just behind the south-eastern corner tower; the central-eastern area; a trench in the central-southern area; a sequence of rooms (A52–A57) leaning against the eastern perimeter wall of the *Husn*, interpreted as horses' stables; and the eastern gate in the same perimeter wall.<sup>7</sup>

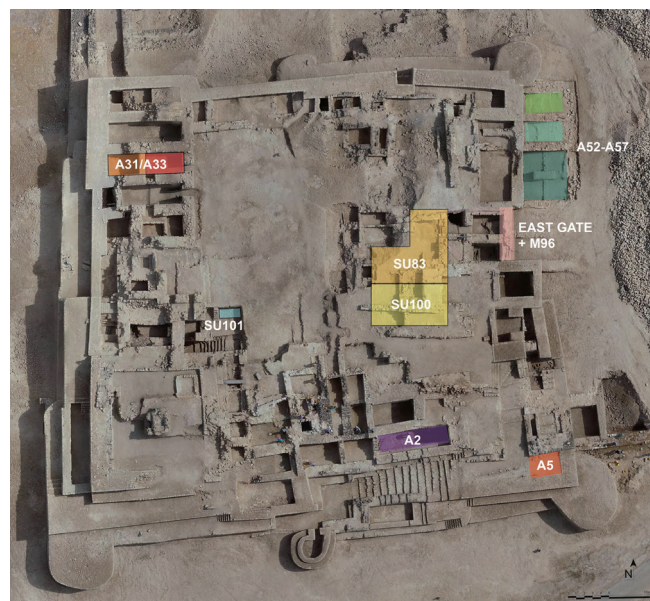


FIGURE 2  
Orthophotograph of the  
*Husn*, with indication of the  
archaeological contexts selected  
for the pottery study  
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The preliminary analysis of the ceramic assemblages allows the establishment of a sequence for the areas investigated, suggesting at least three main phases. They correspond to the last three (IV, V, and VI) of the six constructional phases of the *Husn*,<sup>8</sup> identified on the basis of the results of the excavations conducted so far, including the current ones, the analysis of the masonries, and the study of the archaeological materials (Pavan in Pavan et al., 2018: 213–216).

In the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, the *Husn* reached its largest size. The rooms of the lower floor of the building and the horses' stables were in use. The southern entrance of the palace was the most important section, and the associated monumental staircase was built in the fourteenth century. According to archaeological data, the eastern gate was in use during the Habūdi period. The architecture was exclusively made from large and massive cut stone blocks. This monumental phase (Phase IV, 1279–1500) can be associated with the Rasūlid period: the city's government, nominally under the Yemeni dynasty, was *de facto* independent (Tkatsch, 1934: 1256; Guest, 1935: 404–405; Smith, 1988: 32) and greatly flourished.

Since the fifteenth century, during the constructional Phase V (1500–1650), the stables and possibly parts of the northern area were intentionally obstructed by ramparts built on accumulations of stones and debris; the eastern entrance of the palace was also closed. Some rooms on the lower floors, placed along the curtain wall of the *Husn*, were filled. These changes were part of a more comprehensive transformation that, together with the addition of bastions, towers, buttresses, and casemates along all the four sides, aimed at strengthening the defensive system. Moreover, around the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries, one room on the second floor was probably used for the production of gunpowder and other weapons. This archaeological phase can be related to the rule of the Kathīrī dynasty, that had to face the attacks of both the Portuguese and the Ottomans.

The seventeenth–eighteenth centuries are the latest occupational phase of the *Husn*, corresponding to Phase VI (1650–1800). This phase could be extended to the end of the eighteenth and even the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, thanks to the new data provided by the ongoing archaeological research-work. New, rather poor structures were built on the third and fourth floors of the western part of the palace. They were made of bricks walls covered with plaster. Their presence seems to have been reported by the Portuguese Jesuits, who saw “poor mud buildings which they [the citizens] regarded as a fort” (Beckingham and Serjeant, 1950: 195). The remains of a tank in the south-western corner of the *Husn* also belong to this period, along with a plastered floor that was used as a foundation for a number of plastered basins.

The collapse of many stone walls of the palace suggests its final abandonment.

## 5 The Pottery Corpus

The ceramic corpus, collected at the *Husn* of al-Balīd, and studied between 2016 and 2018, totals about 13,000 items. It mostly consists of local productions; there are also regional manufactures and a striking quantity of imports.

## 6 Local Wares: Conservatism and Continuity of the Tradition

The local wares (Figs. 3–6) share common features that can be considered typical for the local tradition until the modern era. All vessels are unglazed and hand-made, some have probably been shaped with the slabbing or coiling technique, the spherical vessels were possibly produced with the aid of a simple former. The most common surface

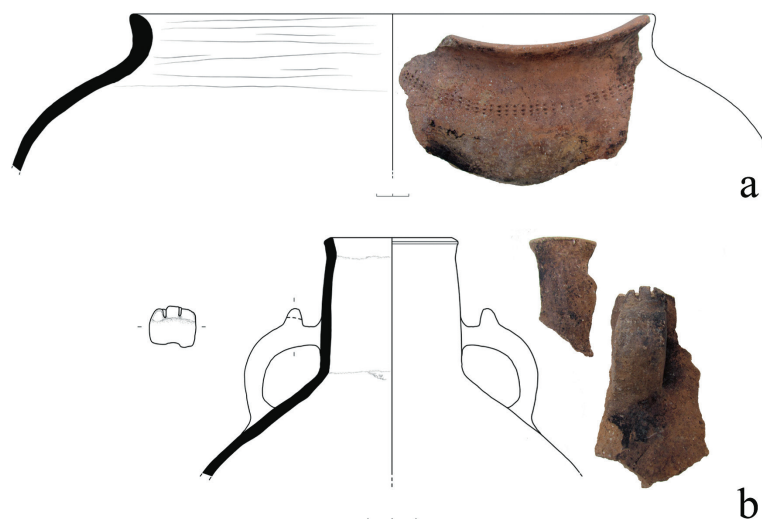


FIGURE 3  
Specimens of the shell temper  
ware collected at the *Husn*: a. large  
pot inv.no. 22,288; b. jug inv.no.  
100,26  
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treatments are smoothing and burnishing. Red paint, simple incisions, and finger impressions are common decorations; incised and impressed motifs were also made with the use of a comb, or, more rarely, with a shell. Almost all vessels were fired using an open-firing technique. The local wares were probably produced in the Şalālah plain or immediately inland;<sup>9</sup> according to the information given by modern women potters, the possible clay sources can be found near Ṭawī Attīr (Ṭāqah) or in the area of Şalālah al-Wuṣṭā, located at a distance from the site of al-Balīd of 11,30 hours and 1,20 hours by foot, respectively.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the simplicity, both of techniques and fashion, the local potters show exceptional skills, and in specific historical periods (especially in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries) they were able to produce high-quality and fine vessels.

Within the local production, four main groups have been identified and outlined, mainly according to the features of the ceramic bodies and the function of the vessels.

The shell temper ware primarily consists of cooking pots and jars, frequently without any surface finishing, sometimes bearing simple or comb-impressed decoration (Fig. 3.a); the finer variant comprises small storage containers, jugs, also spouted (Fig. 3.b), and small bowls probably used as tableware.

The grit temper ware can be considered kitchenware; bowls, basins, pots, jars, large trays that are mostly related to the preparation of food, sometimes in relation to heating (Fig. 4.a), but there are also storage vessels (Figs. 4.e–f); if present, the decoration is painted in red (Figs. 4.c–d). The better-finished vessels could have been used for serving food (Fig. 4.b).

The red ware is the proper tableware, comprising fine bowls, dishes, jugs, jars, and a few pots, usually of small dimensions; some jars could have also been used for storage; the surfaces always show a well-made finish, the most refined are polished and red slipped (Figs. 5.b–c), and frequently bear painted decorations (Fig. 5.a).

The dot-and-circle ware is unique and characteristic for the Dhofar region. The name is derived from the principal motif stamped on the vessels: a dot in a circle (Fig. 6.a). This motif is common in productions of different materials spread through the whole Arabian Peninsula, and the Iranian-Iraqi regions since the Bronze Age. However, only in Dhofar the motif started to be used on pottery, with a beginning proposed between the fourth and the sixth centuries A.D. (Sedov and Benvenuti, 2002: 199; Newton and Zarins, 2010: 254; Newton and Zarins, 2017: 89). The uniqueness of this ceramic production lies in its longevity, as it was in circulation until the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries and bore a very ancient motif until the modern era,<sup>11</sup> in its well-delimited manufacturing area,

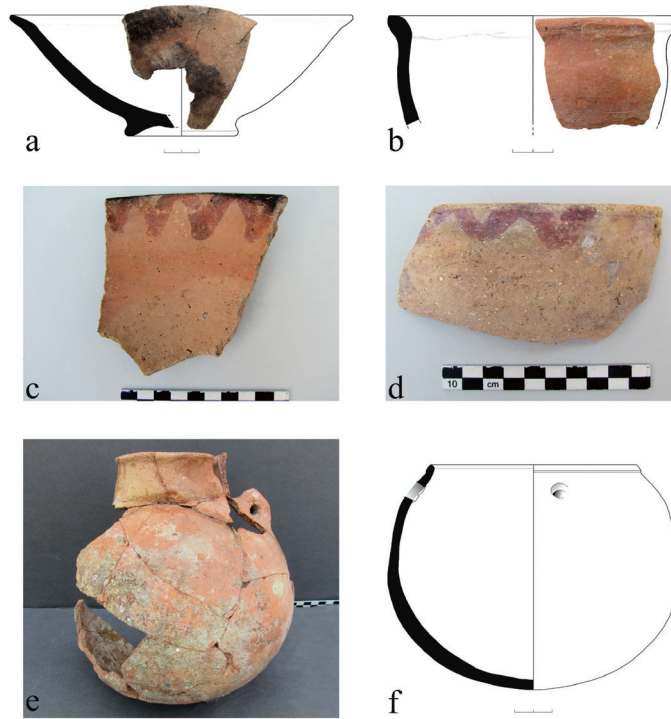


FIGURE 4  
Specimens of the grit temper ware collected at the *Husn*: a. bowl inv. no. 73LW,54; b. small bowl inv.no. 83,2; c–d. painted bowls inv.nos. 61,81 and 61,91; e. handled jar inv. no. 48,1; f. pot inv.no. 73,42  
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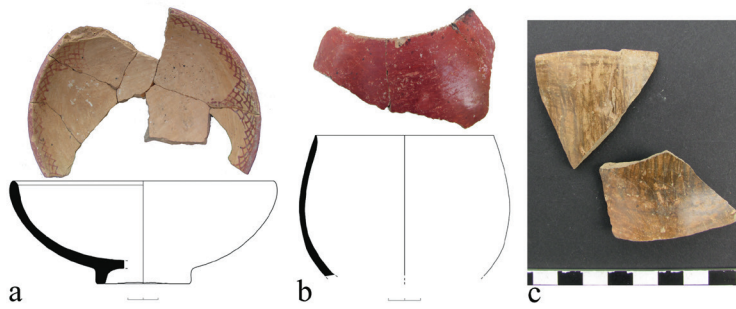


FIGURE 5  
Specimens of the red ware collected at the *Husn*: a. bowl inv.no. 22,39; b. inturned bowl inv.no. 22,54; c. jug inv.no. 22,162  
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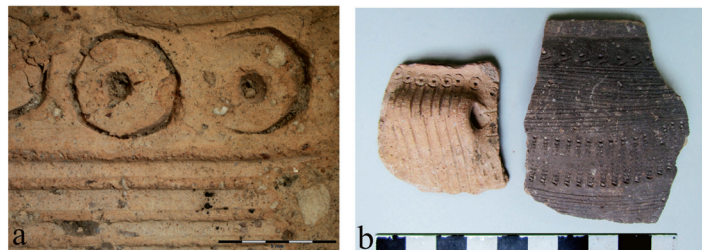


FIGURE 6  
Specimens of the dot-and-circle ware collected at the *Husn*: a. microphotograph of the decoration of sample ASBA29 from the room underneath A31/A33; b. two fragments from room A2; c. handled jar inv.no. 73L,48; d. pot inv.no. 43,59  
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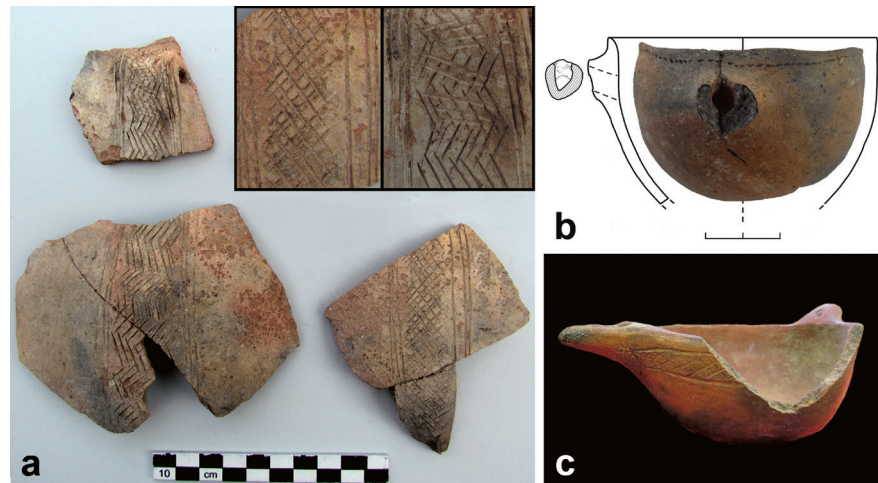


FIGURE 7  
Items belonging to the regional  
grit ware from the *Husn*: a.  
handled jar inv.no. 22,41 that  
details of the decoration; b.  
spouted bowl inv.no. 22,461; c.  
modern item produced at the  
Women Association in Ṭāqah  
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as it is indigenous to Dhofar, and was undoubtedly also produced on the Ṣalālah plain. The specimens found at the *Husn* are inturned bowls, globular pots, and handled jars (Figs. 6.c–d). The dot-and-circle motif is frequently associated with shell- or comb-impresions, incisions, and even red paint (Fig. 6).

One of the most remarkable features of the local production is its conservatism. Although the population of al-Balīd received numerous external stimuli, both in terms of the circulation of imported ceramics and communities of foreigners living alongside local people (see below), the few and simple shaping, finishing, decorative and firing techniques that characterize it since the beginning, were maintained, perpetuated, and transmitted throughout the Islamic period up to the present day.

To examine the longevity of the local tradition, the author conducted a parallel ethnoarchaeological research into modern traditional pottery production in Dhofar. This research consisted of interviews with local women and visits to workshops in Ṣalālah, Ṭāqah, and Mirbāt, documenting and collecting information on the whole manufacturing process. Two women were interviewed extensively in November 2017 and April 2018: Fatima Salima Jebel who made pottery in the past, within a household production context; Amina Fatallah al-Farid who still produces ceramics in the Salalah Handicraft Center. We also visited the Omani Women Association of Mirbāt, and the Women Association in Ṭāqah, and we had a chance to talk to the eldest women, including the president of the Ṭāqah Association, Fatima Obeyd Amri, and the potter Tuful Sayyid Sohil al-Mashani.

Besides giving more information on the past manufacturing process, the ethnoarchaeological work can contribute to the examination of continuity and changes of pottery handicrafts, as well as phenomena of knowledge transfer, throughout the centuries up to the modern era, before the local ceramic tradition completely changes in fashion and technology or even disappears. Indeed, in all the workshops visited so far, only the older ladies still remember the traditional way of making pottery, while the younger women are losing the memory of this tradition. Furthermore, differences among workshops and areas within Dhofar are disappearing, as they are progressively innovating and homogenizing manufacturing techniques.<sup>12</sup> In many cases women use gypsum moulds to produce items in an ‘industrial’ way. At the same time, imported pottery competes with traditional products (Almamari, 2017).



## 7 Regional Wares: the Relationships with Neighbouring Communities

As mentioned above, the trade in horses and frankincense was essential for the richness of Ḥafār. The demand for the best-quality goods led the city to establish relationships with tribes living inland, as well as other coastal settlements. Throughout the Islamic period, the city maintained long-lasting relationships with many different groups in Dhofar and neighbouring lands, from the mountains and the desert to the islands (Zarins and Newton, 2017a: 77–81); these relationships guaranteed people access to resources and safety on the routes (Newton and Zarins, 2010: 248) that sometimes became dangerous and impracticable (Smith, 1985: 84; Zarins and Newton, 2017a: 67–70). The patterns of this inland-coastal network, in the form of both conflicts and interchanges, have often influenced the history of al-Balīd.

The study of the pottery sheds new light onto this still largely unknown topic, giving insights into the neighbouring communities with which al-Balīd had short-range contacts. Indeed, a distinct small group of vessels recovered at the *Husn* has been interpreted as regional manufactures. They resemble the local wares in many ways, thus suggesting a similar tradition, but they are made of different fabrics, produced from raw materials that may originate from other supply areas, and whose recipes changed. The similarities may suggest that they belong to a regional production, possibly localized in Dhofar or adjacent regions, but not on the Ṣalālah plain, as the raw materials are different.

The regional grit ware comprises inturned bowls and jars, which frequently show burnished surfaces; the decoration consists of incisions and impressed notches (Figs. 7.a–b); they closely resemble the local red ware and even modern production (Fig. 7.c). These vessels have been recovered in layers dated to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries.

Another small group of unglazed hand-made globular pots has been found in layers dated to the same period (Figure 8). Some were used as cooking vessels (Figure 8.a). Its well-distinguishable fabric has a soapy feeling and a high amount of shiny flakes, possibly chlorite or steatite. According to the geological nature of these inclusions, this ware could have been produced in Southern Arabia (Pavan, 2017: 30–31), more specifically in Yemen (Porter, 2018), Eastern Oman (David-Cluny, 2001: 319–324), or on Maṣīrah island (Rollinson, 2017). On the latter, Zarins and Newton reported having found items belonging to this ware (Zarins and Newton, 2017b: 103). The same authors also proposed an origin in the area of Mirbāt (Newton and Zarins, 2017: 88).

## 8 Imports: al-Balīd and the Indian Ocean Trade Network

At least from the fourteenth until the eighteenth centuries onward, abundant and diverse ceramic imports circulated continuously at the site, as testified by the findings collected in all the assemblages examined from the *Husn*, in total 8.5% of the whole pottery corpus. They come from different lands, ranging from the Arabian Peninsula to as far China and South-East Asia.<sup>13</sup> Below a selection of them will be presented, especially a few that can be related to historical events, and that raise the most interesting socio-economic issues.

The analysis of the imports within the stratigraphy and the variation of their proportions in the archaeological phases lead to a reconstruction of the trade relations established between al-Balīd and other lands throughout the centuries; it also clarifies



FIGURE 8  
Items belonging to the flakes-temper ware from the *Husn*: a. cooking pot inv.no. 43,66; b. painted pot inv.no. 73L,16  
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FIGURE 9  
 Chinese imports found at the  
*Husn*: celadon jar inv.no. 18,3;  
 blue and white porcelain bowl  
 inv.no. 18,17  
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how trade patterns and the role of *Zafar* changed in different periods, and for which political and economic reasons. The pottery study also gives insights into the wealth of the city and, more specifically, that of its ruling class. In general, the imported items are more abundant in the earlier layers (corresponding to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries); nonetheless, they are also present in the latest layers, even if in lesser amounts. High-quality and expensive items came from far-away regions, such as Egypt, Iran, and China, but local citizens also liked and demanded medium-quality products, such as Yemeni goods. Indian, Chinese, and Far Eastern ceramics are the most abundant imports. The first represent 4.44% of the whole corpus, the latter an overall percentage of 2.56%.<sup>14</sup>

Three different phases have been identified: one related to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries, the second to the sixteenth century, the last to the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries (Fusaro, 2019: fig. 9).

### 8.1 *The Fourteenth–Fifteenth Centuries*

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there was a period of intense trade, both short- and long-distance; a good quantity of Yemeni items arrived, as well as Iranian and Egyptian ceramic artefacts, and the bulk of the Chinese imports. In this period the imports represent about 13% of the assemblages. The variety of imports found and the high quality of many of them may be connected to one of the most flourishing phases of al-Balid, coinciding with the Rasulid period. The ruling class of the city demanded and was able to purchase luxury and expensive items, at least from the fourteenth century onward.

About 60% of the imports from China in circulation at al-Balid during this period consists of celadon dishes, large bowls, and big jars, followed by blue and white porcelain bowls and cups, in total about 19% (Fig. 9). Many stoneware vessels have also been found, some from South-East Asia. According to the preliminary analysis of Chinese ceramics, the port of al-Balid was engaged in long-distance trading activity during two main phases: the first one corresponding to the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries, the second one from the eighteenth century onward (Visconti in Pavan et al., 2018: 228; Pavan and Visconti, 2020: 247, fig. 3).

Until the fifteenth century, several fine unglazed high-quality water vessels arrived at the site, most probably from the Iranian regions (Priestman, 2005: 201–202). They are wheel-thrown handled jugs and a few pilgrim flasks made of buff, light grey or white cream fabrics, and usually bear very fine incised and pierced decorations (Fig. 10).

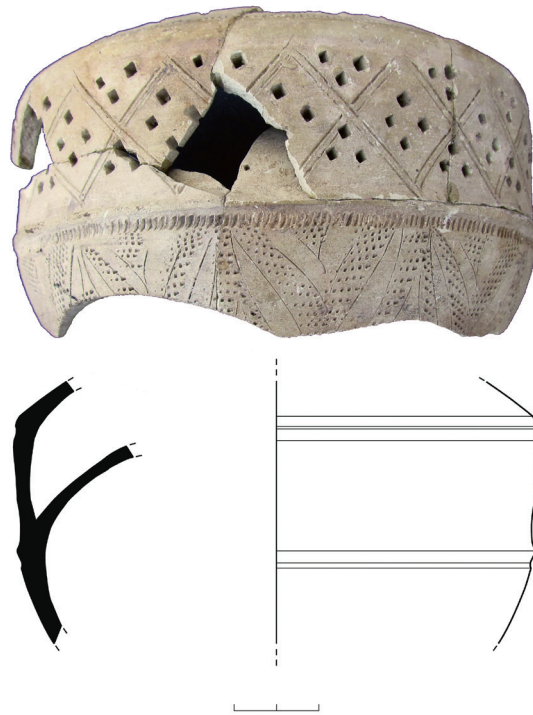


FIGURE 10  
Unglazed flask inv.no. 22,447  
from the Iranian regions found  
at the *Husn*  
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Some specimens characterized by a transparent green-turquoise glaze could also have been imported from the Iranian regions (Hansman, 1985: 52; Kennet, 2004: 56), some have been more specifically identified as belonging to the so-called Persian blue speckled ware (Kennet, 2004: 53–54; Hansman, 1985: 52, fig. 12.a, d, f, g, h). The production does not seem of high quality, as the glaze always appears full of air bubbles and impurities, altering its transparency. Most of the specimens are conical bowls with a straight everted rim and ring base (Fig. 11); a few small jars have been also found. They are widespread in almost all the layers, except the uppermost ones, suggesting circulation at least from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries onward.

Especially from room A2 of the *Husn*, a group of vessels identified as imports from Egypt or Syria has been recovered (Fig. 12). They are all made of stonepaste, which is coarser and not as purified as the body of the Iranian imports (see below); the group comprises medium and small bowls decorated with underglaze blue painted motifs, most of them vegetal and floral, which clearly imitate the then contemporary Chinese blue and white porcelain. They have been attributed to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries (David-Weill, 1960; Peterson, 1980: 66, pl. 4/XIII; Scanlon, 1984: pls 10–11; Jenkins, 1984; Tonghini, 1998: fritware 3, 51–55, fig. 74/g; Watson, 2004: cat.no. S.4, 422–423; Vezzoli, 2011: 132, 136–137, pl. 12).<sup>15</sup>

To date, a unique vessel has been identified as a possible East African product (inv.no. 125,5, Fig. 13). It has been found in the filling of the eastern gate dated to approximately the fifteenth century. It is the high neck of a large jar, characterized by a black/brown fabric and a burnished surface. It shows similarities to African vessels, especially those from Kilwa (Chittick, 1974: 329, type 33, fig. 136 (b); Rougeulle, 2015: fig. 179.8).

The pottery alone could suggest that the link with Eastern Africa was of no importance for al-Balīd,<sup>16</sup> however, on the contrary, historical sources (Staples, 2017: 101), as well as other materials collected at the site confirm more intense relations. Coins from the Sultanate of Kilwa dated to the fifteenth century were, for example, collected at al-Balīd (Annucci in Pavan et al., 2018: 232). Moreover, the presence at several African sites of almost the same ceramic imports found at al-Balīd (see for example the recent

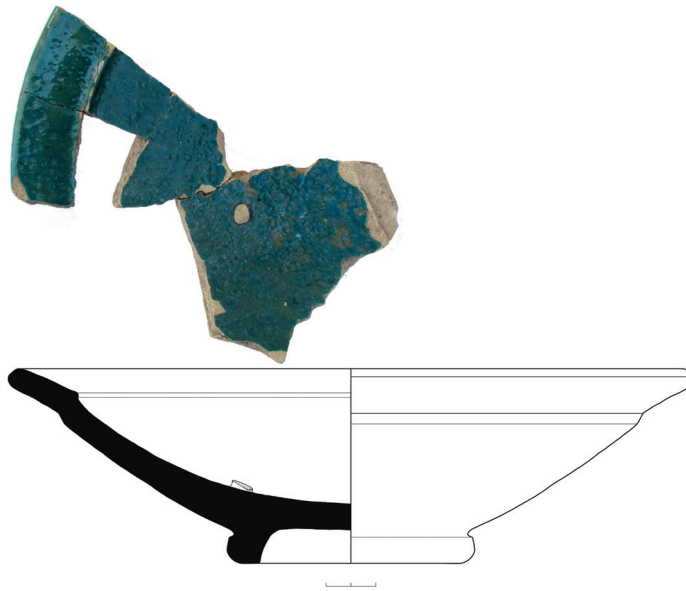


FIGURE 11  
Monochrome turquoise bowl  
inv.no. 18,22 from the Iranian  
regions found at the *Husn*  
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FIGURE 12  
Underglaze painted stonepaste  
bowl inv.no. 22,245 possibly  
from Syria found at the *Husn*  
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FIGURE 13  
Unglazed jar inv.no. 125,5 probably  
from Africa found at the *Husn*  
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research-work in the ports of Somaliland, González-Ruibal et al., 2017) confirmed that al-Balid and the East African centres were in contact with each other and located along the same commercial routes. Therefore, it is possible that African items other than ceramics were traded between Dhofar and East Africa, thus confirming that different products were in demand, corresponding to the regions with which al-Balid was in contact.

### 8.2 *The Sixteenth Century*

During the sixteenth century, there was a drop in imports, which then amount to less than 9% of the assemblages. This may be caused by the arrival and the assaults of the Portuguese and the Ottomans in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, and the resulting political and economic decisions of the Kathīrī rulers, especially the ban on the trade in horses, frankincense and fish-oil around the mid-sixteenth century (Zarins and Newton, 2017a: 81).

### 8.3 *The Seventeenth–Eighteenth Centuries*

Zafār enjoyed an economic recovery and a new impulse in the trade with and through Dhofar in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries: Yemeni ceramics, specimens of Bahla ware from Northern Oman, products from the Gulf area, a good quantity of items from Safavid Iran, a few objects probably from Egypt, but also Chinese vessels reached al-Balid. In this period the imports reach an average of 13% of the assemblages. Especially the finding of high-quality products at the *Husn*, such as blue and white porcelains and Iranian stonepaste artefacts, seems to point to the presence at al-Balid of a rather affluent social class still demanding luxury ceramics.

At al-Balid high-quality imports from Iran were traded at least from the fourteenth century onward; they are among the most beautiful ceramic objects circulating at the site. These bowls and dishes are made of a compact stonepaste, usually bearing a blue painted decoration under a transparent colourless/whitish glaze (Fig. 14<sup>17</sup>); they probably date from the Timurid to the Safavid periods. The decorative patterns are always fine and complex, consisting of floral, vegetal and zoomorphic motifs that usually imitate contemporary Chinese porcelain vessels. Dated to the Safavid period (sixteenth–early eighteenth centuries) there are also several small fragments of underglaze blue and black painted ware, mainly consisting of bowls and cups (Fig. 14<sup>18</sup>). A unique piece, found in the uppermost layer of the south-central area, is a ring base of coarse buff stonepaste (Fig. 15); its ribbed decoration on the outer surface, and the sea-green glaze covering it, clearly testifies to an imitation of Chinese celadon; similar vessels from Iran have been dated to the seventeenth century (Watson, 2004: 465, cat.no. U.17, see also Kennet, 2004: 55–57).

Buff earthenware, large shallow bowls and dishes from Iran have been collected from layers dated to the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries (found in the central-eastern area and room A33; Fig. 16). Their form and colour combinations of glaze and paint suggest that they were imitations of more expensive contemporary stonepaste items circulating in Iran during the Safavid period.

Two unique specimens, found exclusively in the upper layers of the south-central area (seventeenth–eighteenth centuries), belong to a ware whose origin and features are still largely unknown: the so-called Red-Yellow ware. They are characterized by a fine buff clay body, covered with a red/brownish slip which is incised and carved to create a geometric pattern, the glaze is transparent mustard-yellow (Fig. 17). Identical items were found in Ra's al-Khaimah and al-'Ain (Kennet, 2004: 56; Power, 2015: fig. 7). According to the texture and the colour of its fabric, this ware could also originate from Iranian or Iraqi regions.

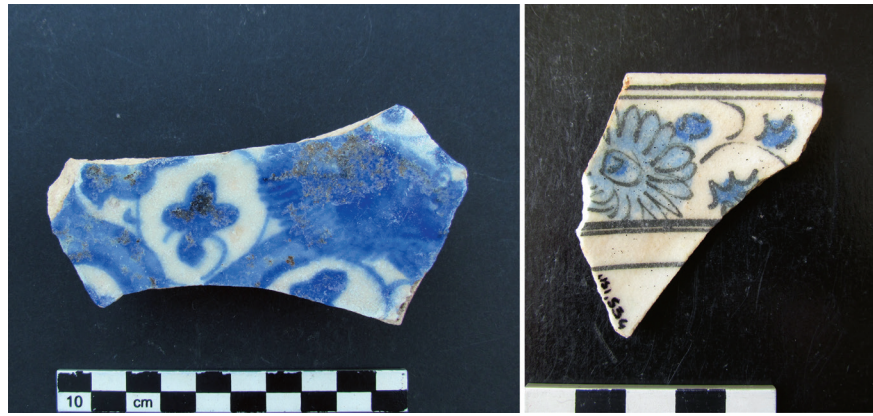


FIGURE 14  
Iranian underglaze painted  
stonepaste items found at  
the *Husn*: ring base of a dish  
inv.no. 48,10; bowl inv.no. 1,534  
PHOTOS © A. FUSARO



FIGURE 15  
Ring base inv.no. 101,1 of Iranian  
sea-green glazed stonepaste  
bowl found at the *Husn*  
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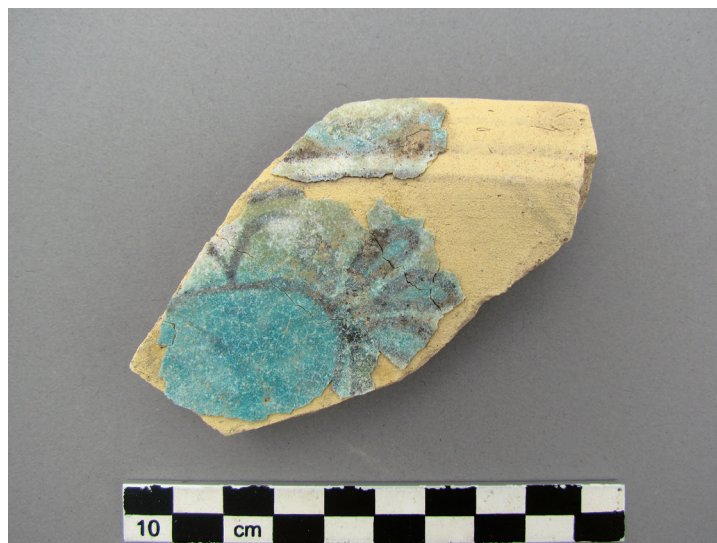


FIGURE 16  
Iranian earthenware underglaze  
painted large dish inv.no. 83,15  
found at the *Husn*  
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FIGURE 17  
Iranian earthenware underglaze  
slipped bowl from SU 101 found  
at the *Husn*  
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FIGURE 18  
Fragments of unglazed grey jugs  
probably from Egypt found at the  
*Husn*: a. inv.nos. 1,251 and 1,411; b.  
sherd with epigraphic band from  
room A2; c. ring base inv.no. 100,5  
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Especially the circulation of several Persian products at the site in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries in particular, was probably an effect of the Iranian political and economic intervention in the Indian Ocean: since the beginning of the seventeenth century, they challenged the Portuguese, i.e. by making treaties with the Ottomans and the English (Floor, 2017: 128).

Far Eastern imports, already mentioned above, even if less present in the uppermost layers, are still quite well-represented within the assemblages. They mainly consist of polychromous porcelain items, such as blue and white bowls, specimens with red enamel paint, and Batavia cups, while the number of celadons sharply decreases.

Fragments of unglazed thin vessels, mainly jugs with high necks and ring bases, made of a fine grey fabric, have been identified as Egyptian imports (Fig. 18; for similar items, see Smith et al., 2012: 180–181). They always bear an incised decoration, which sometimes consists of epigraphic bands in Arabic (Fig. 18.b). As suggested by the analysis of the archaeological contexts, this production is widespread exclusively in the latest

FIGURE 19

Specimens of Bahla ware found at the *Husn*: a. small dish inv.no. 100,19; b. large shallow bowl inv. no. 100,18; c. conical bowl inv. no. 100,17; d. bowl with ribbed surfaces inv.no. 12,16; e: different specimens from the uppermost layer of the central-eastern area

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phase of the occupation of al-Balīd, during the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries, thus proving that contacts with the westernmost lands extended to the very late period.

Within the pottery corpus from the *Husn*, there are some specimens that belong to Bahla/Khunj ware (Fig. 19); Bahlā or other centres of Northern Oman, and Khunj, South-Western Iran, have been suggested as production centres (Hansman, 1985: 52–53; Kennet, 2004: 54–55; Priestman, 2008: 278; Power, 2015: 10–11). The vessels found at al-Balīd are characterized by a transparent olive green-brown glaze, frequently speckled and of low-quality, and usually without slip (Fig. 19.e); the surfaces often appear ribbed (Fig. 19.d). The morphological typology comprises large conical bowls and dishes, there are also small carinated bowls and some jars. This ware is mostly found in the upper layers, thus suggesting a wide circulation during the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries. However, a tiny amount of sherds has been found in one of the lower layers, indicating that it appeared during the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries.<sup>19</sup>

All considered, despite the paucity of architectural evidence pertaining to this last occupational phase, the pottery analysis testifies that al-Balīd was a very active port until the eighteenth century and possibly later. The population living in the city still demanded, and was able to afford high-quality imports. Along with them, other medium-quality objects were still imported from closer regions, such as Yemen (see below) and Northern Oman.

In the same period, a significant refinement and an increase in quality of local ceramic manufacturing have been detected.

Both the remarkable variety of the imports and the revival of the Dhofari pottery tradition during this phase could be explained with the rise of the Ya'rubid (1624–1749) and the Āl Bū Sa'īd (1749–) dynasties, under which there was an intensification of cultural unity in the Western Indian Ocean, and a substantial trade expansion, especially from the seventeenth century onward. Both dynasties are responsible for the creation of the modern nation of Oman (Nicolini, 2017: 141, 143, 155), the Āl Bū Sa'īd included Dhofar in this nation (Peterson, 2004: 257; Nicolini, 2017: 147). The latter could also explain the abundance of the Bahla ware, circulating at al-Balīd in a period when new, stronger relations were started between Northern and Southern Oman.

Finally, the temporary control of the Ya'rubids over Julfār/Ra's al-Khaimah between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries (Power, 2017: 233) could also explain the finding in the latest occupational phase of the *Husn* of two hand-made painted jars (Fig. 20), probably from Julfār (Hansman, 1985: 60–64, figs. 14, 17; Kennet, 2004: 70–1; Mitsuishi and Kennet, 2013: 3, fig. 4 style 5; Saunders, 2013: 300, 'Julfā').<sup>20</sup>





FIGURE 20  
Fragment of unglazed painted jar  
inv.no. 100,1 probably from Julfār  
found at the *Husn*  
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#### 8.4 *The Strong Relation with Yemen*

The continuous circulation at al-Balīd of a large number of Yemeni ceramic imports, both glazed and unglazed, clearly suggests that the city maintained strong, durable relations with this neighbouring country, at least during the whole time span considered so far (fourteenth–eighteenth centuries). From a historical point of view, the abundance of Yemeni products could be explained with the presence of the Habūdī and Rasūlid dynasties of Yemeni origin. It could also possibly suggest the presence of Yemeni people at the site. Indeed, at the time of the Habūdī dynasty, it seems that a good number of Yemenis, probably from Hadramawt, moved to al-Balīd in order to populate the newly reconstructed city of al-Manṣurā (Smith, 1985: 85; Smith, 1988: 28; Smith, 2005: 413). Moreover, at the time of the Rasūlid conquest, Yemeni merchants started their trade in the region.

At least five glazed wares have been recognized as Yemeni productions. The first one is the so-called Yemeni Yellow ware (Kennet, 2004: 53), also known as Mustard ware (Whitcomb and Johnson, 1982: 137–138, pl. 37; Hardy-Guilbert, 2005; Pradines, 2010: 222–224 & 259–261) or Black-on-Yellow (Horton, 1996: 291). It comprises mainly conical bowls painted in dark brown/black under a transparent yellow glaze (Fig. 21.a). The glaze is almost always badly preserved. Within the stratigraphy of the *Husn*, specimens of Yemeni Yellow ware have been found almost exclusively in the earlier layers, thus suggesting that they were spread at least during the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries.

Also coming from Yemen, as suggested by similar fabric and glaze features, there are two unique bowls attributed to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries, whose decoration is obtained by juxtaposing large vertical bands of turquoise and yellow glazes (Fig. 21.c) (Whitcomb and Johnson, 1982: 138, 148, Yellow-Blue Ware, pl.138/v, x, z, aa).

The fabric analysis also suggests that many monochrome turquoise bowls and underglaze blue, black and/or turquoise painted vessels are from the same regions of the aforementioned wares (Fig. 21.b).<sup>21</sup>

Very few fragments, exclusively found in layers attributed to a phase later than the fifteenth century, have been associated with another type of Yemeni pottery production, the so-called Tihamah ware. They are open vessels – one is a hemispherical bowl with



FIGURE 21  
Imported glazed items from  
Yemen found at the *Husn*: a.  
Yemeni Yellow ware (inv.no.  
73LW,62); b. underglaze painted  
ware (inv.no. 1,536); c. bichrome  
ware (inv.no. 105,8); d. Tihama  
ware (inv.no. 1,346); e–f. Haysi  
cups (inv.nos. 83,18; 100,3); g. Haysi  
shisha pipe from the uppermost  
layer of the central-eastern area  
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a thickened rounded rim (Fig. 21.d) – characterized by a white slip-painted decoration directly on the ceramic body, covered by a transparent turquoise glaze. The Tihamah ware is usually dated to the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries (Keall, 1983: 383; Hardy-Guilbert and Rougeulle, 1995: 33–35).

The finding in the later occupational phases of the *Husn* of several coffee cups and a fragmentary shisha pipe<sup>22</sup> (Figure 21.e–g), typical of Hays (Keall, 1983: 383, fig. 4/14; Keall, 1991: 83–84, figs. 10–11; Keall, 1992: 30–32) confirms that in the seventeenth century relations with Yemen were still very intense (Nicolini, 2017: 144–145), also with respect to the coffee trade.

Along with the glazed vessels, unglazed items can be recognized as Yemeni products. The best example is a small pot characterized by white slip and incised geometric decoration (inv.no. 73LW,61; Fig. 22.a), for which a close parallel has been found among the vessels from the Zabīd area (Ciuk and Keall, 1996: pl. 95/41). There are also jars and jugs possibly originating from the same area (Keall, 1983: 383, fig. 5; Ciuk and Keall, 1996: pl. 95/12, 14, 17), with white slipped or light-coloured surfaces and incised decoration (Figs. 22.b–c).

A striking resemblance between a fragment of a jar/jug imported from Yemen (inv.no. 105,7) and a fragment from a vessel locally manufactured (inv.no. 106,7), with a very similar decoration must be pointed out (Fig. 22.d).<sup>23</sup> Other similarities have been detected between the unglazed items produced at al-Balīd – especially large and medium bowls and pots of the grit temper ware – and products from Yadhghat, in Hadramawt.<sup>24</sup> This is evidence once more of the intense relations of al-Balīd with Yemen, even in the shape of imitations or common fashions. Indeed, Dhofar was always culturally much closer to Yemeni regions, especially Hadramawt, than to the rest of Oman (Peterson, 2004: 254–255). Moreover, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa considered Ḍafār as the last (westernmost) city of



FIGURE 22  
Imported unglazed items from  
Yemen found at the *Husn*: a. white  
lipped pot inv.no. 73LW,61;  
–c. jugs inv.nos. 22,155 and 18,42;  
–d. comparison between a local  
product (on the left, inv.no. 106,7)  
and a Yemeni import (on the right,  
inv.no. 105,7)  
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Yemen, while he probably referred to the northern part of the present-day nation when he spoke of Oman (Defremery and Sanguinetti, 1969: 196; for other historical sources, see also Tkatsch, 1934: 1255).

### 8.5 Peculiar Imported Containers

Among the imported items, there are also a few storage jars that preserve a coloured contents inside (Figs. 23–25).

The first is a large jar whose ceramic body contains shell temper, its form recalls Indian products, and it has a red contents (inv.no. 18,96, Fig. 23); it has been dated to approximately the fifteenth century based on its assemblage found in room A2. It could be from the Indian subcontinent, or it could be a local vessel imitating Indian shapes and containing local pigment, such as madder, widely exported to the Indian coast (Newton and Zarins, 2017: 102). The second is a flat base of a wheel-thrown jar with a red residue (inv.no. 101,3, Fig. 24); it arrived from the Gulf area, possibly Iran, as suggested by the fabric of the vessel,<sup>25</sup> during the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries, based on its assemblage from the south-central area.

Two more fragments recovered at the *Husn* preserve a red powder inside; the archaeological analysis carried out at the University of Zaragoza (Spain)<sup>26</sup> allowed us to identify the pigment as cinnabar. This material was also found inside several shells collected at the *Husn*. Cinnabar could come from China, one of the most important sources of this pigment in the world.

A fragment of a large jar with a dark blue contents was also found, possibly indigo (inv.no. 100,13, Fig. 25). It has been attributed to the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries, in accordance with its assemblage found in the central-eastern area. It could have been imported from Yemen, Northern Oman, or even Dhofar (Newton and Zarins, 2017: 101);



FIGURE 23  
Imported unglazed jar inv.no.  
18,96 with red content recovered  
at the *Husn*  
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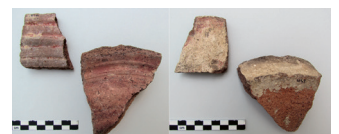


FIGURE 24  
Imported unglazed jar inv.no. 101,3  
with red content recovered at the  
*Husn*  
PHOTO © A. FUSARO



FIGURE 25  
Imported unglazed jar inv.no.  
100,13 with blue content recovered  
at the *Husn*  
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in the latter case, it could belong to a small group of unglazed hand-made large vessels possibly made in the region.<sup>27</sup>

Archaeometric tests are planned to confirm the provenance of these jars. As they are not high-quality vessels, to be sold for their intrinsic or aesthetic value, they must have been imported for the load transported inside them, thus confirming a circulation of specific goods, such as colouring matters.

At the *Husn* a unique incomplete sphero-conical vessel has been found in a layer of the rooms A52–A57 dated to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries (Fig. 26). It is made of a highly overfired, dense and compact grey-violet fabric. The surface is grey, but the outer surface appears darker. This overfired earthenware container has a wheel-thrown spherical body with a pointed base and bears a dense stamped relief decoration, consisting of inverted drops. It belongs to a category of objects found in many Islamic contexts throughout Asia, but it is unusual in the regions of the Indian Ocean.<sup>28</sup> The item collected from the excavations at the *Husn* is until now the only one of this category found at the site of al-Balīd. It shows a strong resemblance to items from Egypt from the Mamluk period (i.e. thirteenth–fifteenth centuries), especially those found at Cairo/Fustat (Monchamp, 2016: 200–202, fig. 3; see also Whitcomb and Johnson, 1982: 119, pl. 49.i; François, 1999: fig.14, pl. 7, 13, 140–142; Stern, 2012: 94). Due to its uniqueness, the vessel could have possibly arrived at al-Balīd with a merchant or a traveller coming from Egypt who brought it as an item for personal use or a gift, rather than a good to be sold.<sup>29</sup>

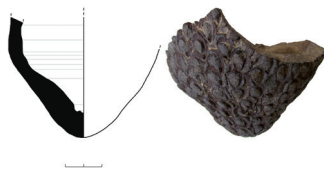


FIGURE 26  
Base of sphero-conical vessel  
found at the *Husn*, inv.no. 73,4  
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## 9 Cultures and Communities of the City

Finally, the ongoing examination of the pottery from the *Husn* provides us with information on the different cultures and communities of al-Balīd.

### 9.1 The Indian Community

From historical sources, we may conclude that at least throughout the Islamic period, Zafār had strong relations with the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, it was one of the most important and convenient stops on the one month journey to these lands, (Guest, 1935: 406; Defremery and Sanguinetti, 1969: 196; Varisco, 1993: 20). Moreover, the city re-exported Indian products to the westernmost lands (Newton and Zarins, 2014: 269), and it also imported rice, the principal food source for local people, and cotton, for local clothing production (Guest, 1935: 406; Defremery and Sanguinetti, 1969: 197–199). This strong link with the Indian subcontinent could have also led Indian people, probably merchants, to settle at the site.

The presence of Indian people at al-Balīd, already suggested by Newton and Zarins,<sup>30</sup> is confirmed by the impressive amount of Indian vessels recovered at the *Husn*. They are among the most abundant imports within the pottery corpus, representing 31.37% of them, and they have been found in all the layers examined. The vessels mainly consist of unglazed coarse red and grey items, comprising pots of many different sizes, and jars in a lesser quantity, shaped by using moulds or the paddle and anvil technique (Fig. 27). The variety of forms and fabrics is remarkable. Only very few bowls and dishes are made of very fine body and are wheel-thrown, thus representing higher-quality unglazed vessels.

Most of the Indian imports are medium- or low-quality products, and many are cooking vessels, as suggested by the soot marks; they do not show any aesthetic value, they are rather simple functional vessels. They seem to have been exported to al-Balīd by Indian people to sustain their specific dietary habits, but they were probably also used as containers for the transportation of items to be sold at the site. Therefore, it can be





FIGURE 27

Unglazed imports from the Indian subcontinent collected at the *Husn*: a. paddle-impressed pot inv. no. 22,131; b. pot with micaceous coating inv.no. 1,728; c. carinated grey pot inv.no. 73L,19; d. grey pot inv.no. 73LW,65; e. large pot inv. no. 10,157; f. small red painted carinated pot inv.no. 73L,27  
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suggested that Indian people migrating to Dhofar brought their traditional vessels for the transportation of goods and foodstuffs; once settled, they probably used them for cooking.

Pots and people came from different regions of the Indian subcontinent that have been identified through a preliminary study of their features and the comparative analysis of coeval ceramic corpora.

Pots with the peculiar paddle impressed decoration on the exterior (Fig. 27.a) could be imported from southern India, as the paddle technique is usually associated with the southern Indian regions, especially the coastal sites (Collinet, 2015: 166). In the Medieval Period this ware seems particularly wide-spread in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, but also in Maharashtra (Selvakumar, 2011: 203). Some of the vessels found at the *Husn* also show parallel fine horizontal lines on the inner surface: they were probably left by bamboo or other wooden sticks used for finishing and smoothing the surface (Reddy, 2016: 69–70); this technique is still common in the pottery manufacturing of Kerala (Pavan, personal communication). Some of the paddle-impressed vessels that were found could also have come from Sri Lanka, as suggested by the strong resemblance to a typical local fabric of the pottery from Tissamaharama (Schenk, 2014: 105, fig. 8,4) and the ceramic body of a few paddle-impressed carinated vessels from al-Balīd (fabric labeled ‘coarse dark red 3’). Other ceramics made of the same ceramic body, such as large pots and small-medium pots coated with red paint/wash (Figs. 27.e–f), and even possibly a small fine grey bowl with a ring base and well-polished silvery surfaces, could have also been imported from Sri Lanka.<sup>31</sup>

Grey/black pots whose bodies show abundant vegetal temper along with a few micaceous inclusions and black or red burnished surfaces (Figs. 27.c–d<sup>32</sup>), could originate from the north-western regions, especially Gujarat<sup>33</sup> (Tomber et al., 2011; Nanji, 2011: black slipped grey ware, 69–70). A few pots with a splayed rim and from coarse red fabric can be safely compared to similar vessels from sites of the coastal area of Sindh (Pakistan).<sup>34</sup> Closed vessels with moulded relief decoration and a micaceous coating (Fig. 27.b) probably come from the same region (Kervran, 1996: 43, fig. 8-A.7).

The quantitative analysis of Indian pottery in the stratigraphy of the *Husn* suggests at least two different periods (Fusaro, 2019: 138–143). First, a considerable quantity of Indian coarse wares was found in layers from the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries (overall average of 6.45%, ranging between 4.6 and 9.8% in the single assemblages), indicating a sizeable Indian community living in the city.

Second, a remarkable drop in Indian items (overall average of 1.4%, ranging between 1 and 2.7% in the single assemblages) seems to prove that the number of Indian people at the site, as well as trade with the Indian subcontinent, strongly decreased. Hypothetically, both aspects could probably be related to the fact that from the sixteenth century onward, the Indian subcontinent and the trade of its items were widely dominated by European powers, thus contributing to a decrease in direct free relations of Indian merchants and communities with the Arabian peninsula.

### 9.2 *The Christian Community*

Following the suggestions by Zarins and Newton (Zarins and Newton, 2017b: 94–95, figs. 4a–4b), but focusing exclusively on al-Balīd, the present research leads to the recognition and a better understanding of the presence of Christians at the Dhofari port city, but also results in the revision of the chronology previously proposed.

This can be deduced from a group of local pottery found in the uppermost layers of the *Husn*, corresponding to the last occupational phase of the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries. Eight high-necked jars and bowls, belonging to the local grit temper ware and red ware, bear a red painted cross-motif, characterized by dotted edges (Fig. 28). This cross seems to be a simplified version of a trefoiled or trilobed cross; preliminary research has so far revealed interesting shared similarities with at least three cross symbols used by different Christian communities. The motif can be associated with the cross characterised by trilobed edges of the Jesuits order; a similar cross is also commonly used by the Nestorians or Persian Christians. There could also be a link with the cross with floral edges of the Saint Thomas Christian community spread throughout South India. The motif of the flowery cross is particularly widespread on religious buildings and monuments in Kerala, Goa, Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lanka.<sup>35</sup>

In the first case, the presence of this motif in the local pottery of al-Balīd could possibly be explained with the Jesuit missions spreading Christianity all over Asia from the sixteenth century onward, but also by the fact that the Kathīrī rulers, especially Badr Bū Tuwayriq (1516–69), had no particular religious hatred for the Portuguese (Beckingham and Serjeant, 1950: 203; Smith, 2007: 522).

In the second case, the cross motif can be linked to the presence of Nestorianism in Oman and Hadramawt since the fourth century. Written sources and archaeological evidence prove that this religious belief managed to survive after the spread of Islam, at least until the ninth century, but probably longer (Carter, 2013: 326–327; Beckingham and Serjeant, 1950: 197, note 3). Indeed, in the thirteenth century, Ibn al-Mujāwir reported that there were still Christians living in Najrān, also known as al-Uḫḫūd (South-Western Saudi Arabia), and they constituted one-third of the population. Moreover, there is evidence that in Tārim (central Yemen) a church still existed in the sixteenth century (Serjeant, 1959). The presence of Nestorians on the island of Socotra until the fifteenth century is confirmed by several sources (Zarins and Newton, 2017b: 94–95). We cannot exclude that Christians from this island, but also possibly from other westernmost sites, such as those mentioned above, visited or settled in al-Balīd. This movement of human groups could also be explained by the continuous migratory flows that occurred in the lands ruled by the Āl Bū Sa'īd dynasty in the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries (Nicolini, 2017: 146).

The cross motif on the local pottery of al-Balīd could also be explained with the arrival at the site of a Christian community from the Indian subcontinent. In fact, from the late sixteenth century onward, the encounters of the Indian Saint Thomas Christians and the Portuguese Jesuits, who began their missionary activities in India, led to a religious dispute and a tragic schism; this could have possibly induced some Indian Christians to migrate to other lands (Moffett, 2005: 12–16; Malekandathil, 2017).



FIGURE 28

Local unglazed items bearing a dotted cross painted in red, recovered at the *Husn*:

a. jug inv.no. 83,8; b. neck of jug from room A2; c. fragments of two bowls from room A2

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## 10 Conclusions

The study of the pottery from al-Balīd provides further information on the ancient port city Zafār, its history, economic development, social texture, and cultural life. Prosperity and times of crisis are strictly related to the history of the Indian Ocean trade. Its strategic position along the Indian Ocean, and the strong interdependence of Zafār and neighbouring regions gave the port city an important socio-economic role, connecting communities and countries, and allowing exchanges between land and sea.

The study proves that al-Balīd/Zafār always maintained relationships with the communities living inland, mainly in the form of interchanges. Moreover, the large amount of imported pottery recovered during the excavations, also comprising luxury and high-quality vessels, proves that it was an important trading centre, intensively involved in the Indian Ocean long-distance commerce networks since the thirteenth century until the late eighteenth, and even possibly the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Numerous unglazed and hand-made wares locally produced, which are much simpler, but lively and varied, were found in identical archaeological contexts. This striking diversity in ceramics circulating at al-Balīd, along with the richness and the remarkable variation of the materials recovered, testifies to the coexistence of different traditions, related to a variety in fashion and technology, and also to various social classes. The pottery also reflects the coexistence of several communities (i.e. Indian people and Christian groups) at the site, thus showing the multicultural and multireligious character of al-Balīd.

### About the Author

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## Notes

- 1 This is a revised version of a paper presented at the International Conference “Muslim Cultures in the Indian Ocean. Diversity and Pluralism, Past & Present” held at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, The Aga Khan University, London, 12–14 September 2018.
- 2 Many thanks to the Omani Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs, that has given me permission to carry out this research work. My sincere gratitude to Alexia Pavan, the staff of the Museum of the Frankincense Land, and the Dhofari women potters who shared with me their experience and knowledge.
- For the years 2017–18, this project has been funded by the Max van Berchem Foundation, established in 1973 in memory of Max van Berchem (1863–1921), the founder of Arabic epigraphy. Based in Geneva, the aim of the Foundation is to promote the study of Islamic and Arabic archaeology, history, geography, art, epigraphy, religion and literature.
- 3 The palace of the ‘sultan of Zafar’ was named ‘Alhisn’ (castle) at the time of Ibn Baṭṭūta (Defremery and Sanguinetti, 1969: 212).
- 4 The expedition of the American Foundation for the Study of Man, led by Wendell Phillips and Frank Albright, since 1952 (Albright, 1982); the work of Paolo Costa, that is particularly worth mentioning (Costa, 1979); the project for the set-up of an archaeological park and the identification of the main landmarks of the site by Michael Jansen (RWTH Aachen University), within the framework of UNESCO, between 1996 and 2003 (Jansen, 2015); the American archaeological mission led by Juris Zarins (Missouri State University) and Lynne Newton (University of Minnesota), from 2005 to 2012 (Zarins and Newton, 2012; Newton and Zarins, 2017).
- 5 In parallel, since 2013, a small archaeological team of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, led by Krista Lewis, investigated a residential compound in the south-western area of the site.
- 6 Fusaro, 2019. Previous research on the pottery from the site was conducted by Paul Yule and K.K. Mohammad (Yule and Mohammad, 2006), Ute Franke-Vogt (Franke-Vogt, 2002), Lynne Newton and Juris Zarins (Zarins and Newton, 2012).
- 7 The excavated layers from which the ceramics were collected and the related chronological phases are presented in Fusaro, 2019: 143–144, fig. 10.
- 8 These phases cover a time ranging from the end of the thirteenth to the end of the eighteenth century.
- 9 See also Newton and Zarins, 2010: 248, 258.
- 10 Very similar characteristics have been noted in Dhofari modern pottery production by the same author and by previous scholars, see Richardson and Dorr, 2003: 503–507.
- 11 Richardson and Dorr reported the use of the motif on the Dhofari pottery until the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century (Richardson and Dorr, 2003: 46–47, 74, 78–81). Nowadays it is lost, as the women potters we interviewed could not recognise the motif on ancient vessels.
- 12 This process seems to have started in recent years; indeed, between 2000 and 2010, researchers working on modern pottery production of Oman still noticed different clay sources, some also in the coastal area, as well as a variety of forms and techniques that almost do not exist anymore (Richardson and Dorr, 2003: 503; Pavan, personal communication).
- 13 The different provenance areas of the imported items have been identified through the examination of their styles and fabrics, together with a comparative analysis of other coeval ceramic *corpora*. The study of the Far Eastern imports is currently conducted by Chiara Visconti (Visconti in Pavan et al., 2018; Pavan and Visconti, 2020).
- 14 The presence of Chinese and Far Eastern ceramics ranges from 0.8% to 4.4% in the single stratigraphic units. This quantity is remarkable if we consider that their percentage in assemblages from other Indian Ocean sites is generally below 1% (Pavan and Visconti, 2020: 247–250).
- 15 For the decorative pattern of the item displayed in Fig. 12, see also cat.no. 29/1988 kept in the David Collection, Copenhagen.
- 16 In general, there is little archaeological evidence of Omani presence in East Africa and at the reverse (Staples, 2017: 101).
- 17 For similar items, see Crowe, 2002: form 139, p. 105, form 148, p. 106; cat.nos. 149 and 155, pp. 117, 119, dated to the mid-seventeenth century.
- 18 For similar items, see Crowe, 2002: cat.nos. 72, 89, 222, pp. 82, 90, 144, dated to the seventeenth century; Watson, 2004: cat.no. U.19, p. 466 dated to the seventeenth century.
- 19 Even if this ware widely circulated in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf area during the late Islamic period, it has received little attention. Along with a few more comprehensive studies recently published on the topic (Priestman, 2008; Rougeulle et al., 2014; Živković et al., 2019; Carvajal López et al.,



- 2019: 59, 63), the ongoing research work could provide useful data to characterise better the Bahla/Khunj production.
- 20 Alternatively they could be also identified as South Iranian products (Hansman, 1985: 54–55).
- 21 Similar items have also been identified from Zabid (Ciuk and Keall, 1996: pl. 95/46, j-m, pl. 95/48, j-l).
- 22 They are covered with transparent green and/or yellow glaze, with a simple carved decoration on the exterior.
- 23 This kind of decoration is not common among those used for local wares.
- 24 Rougeulle, 2007: small bowl of fig. 3/21, large bowls displayed as fig. 9/10–12, pot with piercing holes of the fig. 9/18; for example, they can be compared with the local vessels of the grit temper ware displayed as Fig.4.
- 25 It belongs to a group of a few unglazed vessels made from a peculiar coarse dark red fabric, with black angular and white inclusions. They have been interpreted as items possibly coming from the Gulf area; nonetheless, we cannot not exclude that they may come from the southern Iranian regions, as the author personally classified and analysed vessels with similar fabric features collected in Fars.
- 26 Josefina Pérez Arantegui, Instituto Universitario de Investigación en Ciencias Ambientales de Aragón.
- 27 For similar items, see the third type of so-called micaceous ware identified at al-Hamr al-Sharqiya (Rougeulle, 2008: 653–654).
- 28 An almost identical item was found in the surface layer of Qal'at al-Bahrain (Frifelt, 2001: 102–104, fig. 184).
- 29 With regard to this interpretation, see also Ettinghausen, 1965: 224.
- 30 Their hypothesis was supported both by the presence of Indian vessels found throughout their excavation campaigns at the site (Newton and Zarins, 2014: 267; Zarins and Newton, 2012: 117–120), and by the discovery of a trapezoidal building dated to the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and interpreted as a religious complex possibly related to an Indian community (Newton and Zarins, 2014: 266).
- 31 Some of these items show interesting similarities with pottery from Tissamaharama, see Schenk, 2014.
- 32 For specific comparisons with the displayed items, see Nanji, 2011: cat.nos. T.90, T.92, T.92.2, T.93, T.147; Chittick, 1984: 101, fig. 54.f.
- 33 The main temper added to the clay in modern traditional pottery productions in Gujarat is vegetal material (Sikdar and Chauduri, 2015: 8, in this case it is saw dust).
- 34 Several sites, such as Lahori Bandar and Mullah Kay Kot, were personally visited by the author in 2018–19.
- 35 The motif also resembles the so-called Anuradhapura cross, associated with the presence of a Nestorian community or a group of Saint Thomas Christians in Sri Lanka (Gomis, 2011).