

Shisr etc (Oman)

No 1010

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Shisr, Khor Rori, and al-Balid Archaeological Sites and the Frankincense Park of Wadi Dawkah in the Dhofar Region
<i>Location</i>	Dhofar Province
<i>State Party</i>	Sultanate of Oman
<i>Date</i>	28 July 1999

Justification by State Party

The archaeological sites of Shisr Khor Rori/Sumhuram and al-Balid, in conjunction with the frankincense park of Wadi Dawkah, constitute outstanding testimony to the civilization that from the Neolithic period to the late Islamic period flourished in southern Arabia and established economic, social, and cultural links, reaching from the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions to Mesopotamia, India, and China, through the development of the frankincense trade network.

Criteria iii, iv, and v

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of sites*. It is also a *cultural landscape*, as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

History and Description

History

- General

While Shisr was already playing a major role in the Iron Age as an important outpost providing traders with water before they entered the desert of the Rub al-Khali, the foundation of the fortified port of Khor Rori/Sumhuram by LL'ad Yalut, king of the Hadhramawt, took place at the end of the 1st century BCE in the context of growing sea trade between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. After the decline of Khor Rori during the first half of the 3rd century CE, the site of al-Balid can be considered to be that of the port which took over the main role in sea trade up to the Late Islamic period

In the region of Dhofar the natural setting of Wadi Andoor, Wadi Hogar, and Wadi Dawkah represents the most significant area where frankincense trees grow. The Wadi Dawkah Park has been chosen for nomination as a natural/cultural site, representative of the harvesting of the incense gum from very early times and still intact in its natural setting.

Early hominids (*Homo erectus*) arrived in Dhofar around 1 million years ago from East Africa. Evidence of their crossing is preserved in archaeological sites, principally in Yemen and western Saudi Arabia. Recent studies point to modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) reaching Dhofar around 1000,000 BP¹, as shown by finds from the Nejd, and especially around the Shisr area.

An extremely arid phase between 20,000 and 8000 years BP in southern Arabia led to the abandonment of most of the peninsula. In the Neolithic period, around 6000 BCE, pastoral nomads arrived in southern Arabia. These Semitic speakers came from the Levant and gradually occupied most of the peninsula. Traces of their herding of cattle, sheep, and goats, recognizable from their distinctive flint tools, are to be found throughout the Nejd on ancient river courses and lakes. It was these people who established the ancient long-distance trading routes.

They first began trading frankincense from Dhofar in response to a demand from southern Mesopotamia. By 3200 BCE, with the introduction of writing, there is evidence that trade in frankincense increased in volume and frequency. The specific ethnic identity of the traders is unknown, but distinctive flint types link the trade specifically to Dhofar.

The Bronze Age in Dhofar (2200-1300 BCE) was a period of retrenchment. The population retreated to the edges of the hills and the Salalah plain near permanent springs. They had close ties with the Bronze Age villages of Yemen. It was at this time that domestication of camels began. Maritime trade, most likely of copper, linked Masirah with Dhofar. The palaeo-lagoons and upland terraces were exploited intensively for the first time. Frankincense continued to be traded widely.

The Iron Age (1300-300 BCE) saw the emergence of local populations again, herding cattle, goats, and now camels, as well as growing plants specific to Dhofar such as sorghum and millets following a lifestyle similar to that of the contemporary Mahra peoples. The rise of the southern Arabic states created a formal network for incense that reached to the west, along with a continuing demand from northern Yemen and eastern Arabia.

By 300 BCE the site of Shisr had become part of this network. The *Periplus* of Ptolemy's *Geographia* (2nd century CE) provides a clearer picture of the region and its peoples. Excavations at Shisr and the Salalah plain show that both the Hadrami state of Shabwa (Khor Rori/Sumhuram) and the indigenous people participated in the incense trade. The Omani Arabs, moving north-eastwards from Yemen, enter the picture at this time as part of the complex interaction in social relations and economic life. The Parthian Persians also influenced Dhofar, as instanced by material remains at Shisr and the Salalah coast. Combining

¹ BP (Before Present) is used to denote dates obtained by physical techniques, notably radiocarbon dating. The "present" is conventionally set at 1950.

the historical and archaeological evidence, it has been suggested that Shisr could be either Ubar or the *Omanum Emporium* of Ptolemy, whilst Khor Rori has been associated with the *Moscha limen* of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (1st century CE).

During the Islamic period internal trade continued to prosper, perhaps fuelled by the demand for incense and horses. Links to India that had been developed millennia earlier continued to be strong. Coastal Dhofar participated in long-distance international trade, especially in the Abbasid Period. Both fortified inlets and harbours and small settlements testify to these ties between the Red Sea and East Africa to the west and India and China to the east. Al-Balid and Mirbat continued to prosper, reaching their peak in the Middle Islamic Period. By 1450 the Turkish and Portuguese invasions brought the network created in Iron Age and Islamic times to a standstill.

- Shisr

There is a number of Neolithic sites in the immediate vicinity of Shisr. This agricultural oasis and caravan site on the route along which frankincense was brought from the Nejd to the port of Sumhuram was dominated by an Iron Age fortress of the 2nd century BCE. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the site continued in use in the Early and Middle Islamic periods. However, it declined steadily from the late 1st century CE and had lost its importance by the 3rd century. There was very limited occupation along the southern wall which lasted into the Late Islamic period.

- Khor Rori/Sumhuram

The port of Sumhuram (*Smhrm* – “His Name is Great”) was founded at the end of the 1st century BCE. Inscriptions record that it was established by LL’ad Yalut to control the trade in Dhofar incense. It is identified as the *Moscha* of classical geographical texts, where Indian seamen who had brought cotton cloth, corn, and oil in exchange for incense overwintered, waiting for the favourable monsoon winds to take them home.

The port was the hub of the trading settlement on this coast during the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Its close links with the powerful Shabwa state made it a very rich town. At this time it was a small, strongly fortified town covering some 1ha. However, the process of disintegration began in the first half of the 3rd century, a process that was completed by the end of the century, when the site was reclaimed by the sea and by natural vegetation.

- Al-Balid

Al-Balid is the historically late name for a medieval town in the Mahra area, the name of which is transcribed variously as “Dhofar,” “Dhufar,” “Zafar,” etc. However, archaeological excavations have shown that there was an Iron Age settlement here. It most probably survived for a long period afterwards, despite the lack of a specific mention in Ptolemy’s *Geographia*.

There is no doubt of its importance in the Islamic period. However, it began to decline in the 12th century, and it was attached and partially destroyed on several occasions in the 13th century, both by Arab rulers and by Persian raiders. By the late 15th century radical changes to trading patterns imposed by Portuguese and other European trading nations sealed the fate of the town.

- The Frankincense Park of Wadi Dawkah

The Neolithic inhabitants of southern Arabia were, on the basis of archaeological evidence, engaged in long-distance trade with the Arabian coastal littoral and from there into Mesopotamia. Excavations have revealed that shells and obsidian were being traded, and there are documentary and epigraphic sources relating to trade in frankincense by the later 3rd millennium BCE, when it was certainly flourishing, not only with Mesopotamia but also with Egypt.

The sources of frankincense are clearly described by Ptolemy, and can be identified with the three areas in the Dhofar region in which the frankincense tree (*Boswellia sacra*) is still to be found. This trade continued throughout the Iron Age and into the Islamic Period. The other main export from southern Arabia at this time was that of horses.

Description

- Shisr

Shisr lies about 180km north of Salalah in the desert, located on a geological fold. The archaeological remains occur near a large collapsed limestone dome in which there is a cave from which a perpetual spring flows. The total area of the site is 0.36ha.

A fortress wall 90cm thick, constructed of limestone blocks and in the form of an irregular pentagon in plan, surrounds a central complex on a rocky outcrop. It is braced at intervals by short buttresses of similar dimensions. The remains of two towers can be seen on the north-eastern and south-western corners, part of the original construction, and two horseshoe-shaped towers were inserted at a later date. Part of the west wall has disappeared as a result of a collapse of the underlying limestone.

Stubs of walls indicate that the enceinte was divided into two enclosures, the smaller of which is in the north-western corner. This was dominated by a substantial building oriented on the cardinal points of the compass in what may be a southern Arabic tradition. This building underwent a number of alterations and extensions during the medieval period. The larger enclosure has not been the subject of archaeological study, but traces of a number of structures can be discerned.

- Khor Rori

The archaeological site of Khor Rori lies 40km to the east of Salalah on a hilltop on the eastern bank of a sweet-water outlet (*khorr*). The site covers an area of 3.128ha.

The remains of the fortress, covering an area of 130m by 70m, are located on a rocky spur running east-west. It forms part of a wider defensive system, details of which still can be made out. The walls are built of dressed stone facings with rubble cores.

The most heavily fortified part is on the north, where the entrance is located. The gate itself is a massive structure with three successive gates on the steep entry path. It is flanked by the remains of towers. A small rectangular structure by the gate has been tentatively identified as a temple. There is a deep well in the interior, lined with smooth slabs. Much of the defences on the south side, where the land drops away steeply, have collapsed.

A series of archaeological campaigns have identified a considerable number of sites, most of them Neolithic.

- Al-Balid

Al-Balid is on an elevated site extending along the coast with a *khôr* providing sweet water from the mountains. The main settlement measures c 1600m by 400m; there are also the remains of other buildings and a large cemetery outside the moat. The nominated site covers an area of 50ha.

Most of the site now consists of a barren landscape covered with stone blocks, the result of robbing for the construction of more recent buildings. The only site to have been fully excavated is that of the Great Mosque. This measured 40m by 48.5m and was surrounded by an outer platform on all sides except the east, where there was an ablution platform. There was an inner courtyard and the 4m square minaret was originally in the north-east corner. The main prayer hall was lined with several rows of octagonal columns, 144 in all, which supported the roof, the construction of which is unknown. The structure underwent many changes, occasioned in some cases by collapses due to poor construction and in others to ground instability.

The citadel mound is in the north-west corner of the enceinte, with the *maydan* (public open space) to the south.

- Wadi Dawkah

The Wadi Dawkah Frankincense Park covers an area of 7.964km². The central feature is a north-draining *wadi* on the edge of the desert. The frankincense trees are to be found in the flat bed of the *wadi*. The higher areas within the park are largely acacias and similar species that can tolerate the more extreme conditions.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The three archaeological sites are registered on the national cultural inventory and the Wadi Dawkah site is on the national natural inventory.

The archaeological sites are protected under the terms of Royal Decree No 6/80 on the Protection of the National Heritage. This imposes strict controls over all activities that may threaten the integrity of protected sites, archaeological excavations, and the transfer of ownership of portable antiquities. There are severe penalties for transgression of these provisions.

Management

All four properties belong to the Sultanate.

At the time of preparation of this evaluation, only the al-Balid site was the subject of a management plan – the Urban Development Plan of Salalah, which identifies the archaeological site as a nature conservation area. The nomination dossier asserts that “The Oman Government will adopt the relevant conservation plans and tourism development plans [for all the sites] in the near future.

At the present time management of the sites is the responsibility of the National Committee for the Archaeological Survey in the Sultanate of Oman. This is comprised of the Ministers of Education (Chair), High Education, Foreign Affairs, National Economy, and Palace Affairs, the Under Secretary for Cultural Affairs in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, the Governor of Dhofar Province, and the Archaeological Advisory Board (with

representatives from UNESCO and the Universities of Aachen, Oxford, and Pisa). It is reported in the nomination dossier that a regional director for the archaeological sites of the Dhofar region is to be appointed. The Governor of Dhofar Province also has a role in management of the properties, but this is not specified.

All four properties are surrounded by buffer zones which may be deemed to be adequate, given that two are in the desert.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Conservation as such has hardly taken place at any of these sites. There has, however, been a number of excavation campaigns by universities from several countries. The most recent have been from the Technical University of Aachen, which surveyed the three archaeological sites and excavated the Great Mosque at al-Balid, and the Institute for the Application of Technology to Cultural Properties of the University of Pisa, which has prepared a commendable *Project to restore the monumental complex of Khôr Rori*.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the sites is not open to question. Three are archaeological sites that have had no inhabitants for centuries and the fourth is a natural site in a desert area.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Oman in January 2000.

Qualities

The four sites that make up this nomination provide a comprehensive picture of one of the most important trading activities of the ancient and medieval world. Wadi Dawkah represents the natural forests of frankincense trees, now much depleted, Shisr is an oasis on one of the caravan routes along which the frankincense was moved, and Khôr Rori and al-Balid were the ports from which it was shipped to destinations in Asia, North Africa, and Europe.

Comparative analysis

There are other countries with sites comparable to these (except, perhaps, for the substantial frankincense forests), but none can offer the same group that so admirably illustrates this trade.

ICOMOS comments

In its earlier evaluation, ICOMOS made the comment that, although the properties were protected under Royal decree, they were so far lacking in management plans. This is a matter of concern, given that it was clear from the dossier that tourism plays an important role in their nomination.

The Bureau was informed at its meeting in June 2000 that a management plan was being drawn up and would be ready for study before 1 October. The Bureau therefore referred this nomination back to the State Party, requesting the provision of the management plan. This had not been

received by ICOMOS when this evaluation was prepared for printing.

Brief description

The frankincense trees of Wadi Dawkah and the remains of the caravan oasis of Shisr and the ports of Khor Rori and al-Balid dramatically illustrate the trade in frankincense that flourished in this region for many centuries.

Recommendation

That, subject to the management plan being available by 1 October and found to be in conformity with the requirements of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of ***criteria iii and iv***:

Criterion iii The group of archaeological sites in Oman represent the production and distribution of frankincense, one of the most important luxury items of trade in the Old World in antiquity.

Criterion iv The Oasis of Shisr and the entrepôts of Khor Rori and Al-Balid are outstanding examples of medieval fortified settlements in the Persian Gulf region.

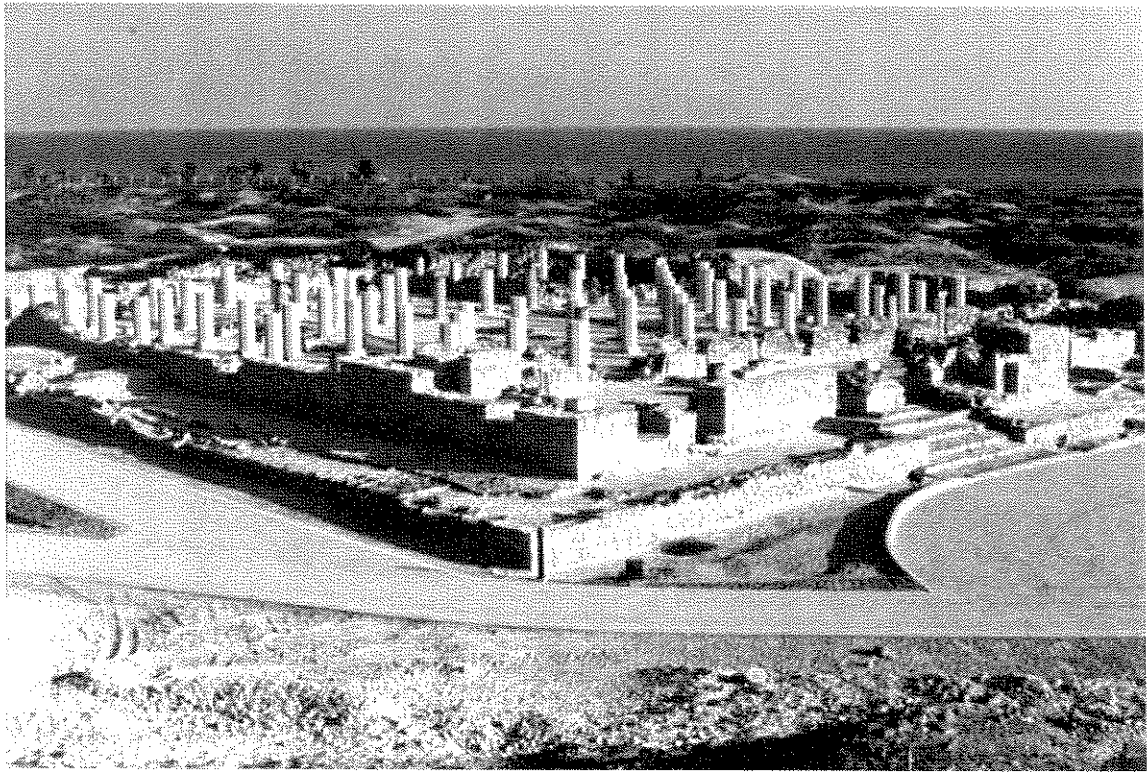
ICOMOS, September 2000



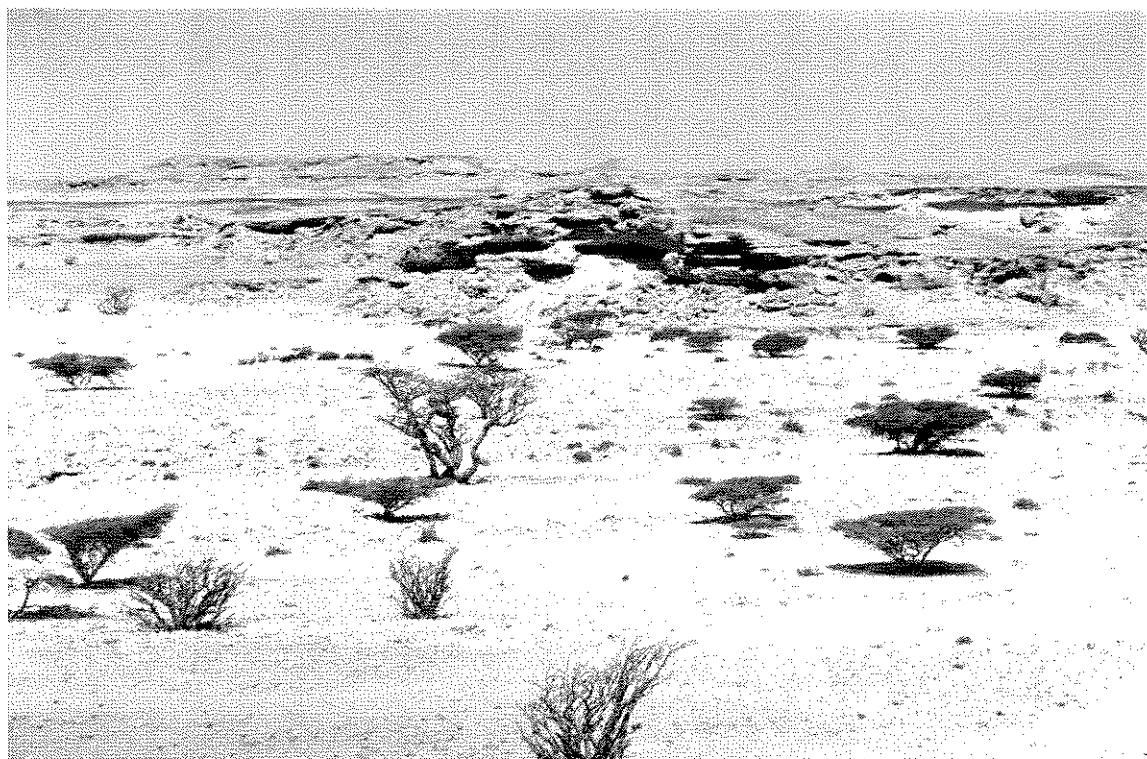
Vue aérienne de Shisr / Aerial view of Shisr



Khor Rori : vue de la forteresse vers Khor /
Khor Rori : view from the fortress towards the Khor



Al-Balid : la Grande Mosquée / Al-Balid : The Great Mosque



Arbres à encens dans le Wadi Dawkah / Frankincense trees in the Wadi Dawkah