

In the heart of Oman
the castle of Salut



«L'ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER

ANCIENT OMAN 1

In the heart of Oman

the castle of Salut

edited by
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Foreword

In the beginning, this booklet was simply conceived as a catalogue of the objects published in the virtual museum of Salut (<http://ancientoman.cfs.unipi.it>). This virtual museum represents only a first phase of a wider project, focusing on the major archaeological sites of Oman.

But the contributions from my fellow colleagues and students transformed it into a collection of essays on some of the most interesting aspects of excavations in Salut, and also a preliminary analysis on the history of the interior of Oman before Islam.

This book is not for specialists only.

I used to regard the dissemination of my knowledge for the wider public of little importance. In Oman, instead, I have learned to carry forward the dissemination of research results as an integral part of my profession. Nevertheless, to communicate the results (at times surprising) of archaeological research in pre-Islamic Arabia is not an easy task.

The history of Arabia before Islam is an unexplored topic to the majority of the 'visitors' of our virtual museum, so it is difficult to find the right paths to present it and provide the necessary data to help understand it. The history of Arabia began, for most

of the people, with the period of the Prophet. Before then, it is way too easy to imagine dispersed nomadic groups who lived in tents, bred cattle and camels, and stood waiting to play their role in history, in the phase of the conquest of the world under the green flags of Islam.

But the history of Arabia before Islam does not coincide at all with this picture. It is a long and articulated history, a story of kingdoms, landowners, tradesmen, great builders. It is an integral part of the history of the ancient Near East.

I wish to state, right from the beginning, that it is inaccurate to discuss about a shared history of Arabia before Islam.

At least two large areas can be identified in this phase. A cultural vertical border divides the Arabian Peninsula into East Arabia and West Arabia. One of the main differences between the two areas is undoubtedly linked to the use of writing. In the western part of the Peninsula an alphabetic writing was invented, both monumental and minuscule; the languages in the area are attested by a large epigraphic corpus and by texts of everyday use: letters, and contracts.

In East Arabia, where certainly one or more Semitic languages were spoken, no autonomous writing

was ever used, and the few texts discovered were written in prestigious writings and languages from bordering countries: in Aramaic, in Greek and, before then, in the Cuneiform writing of the Mesopotamian area.

But, at least a factor connects East and West Arabia: the climate change. After a relatively wet period, in the Bronze Age (from the end of the fourth millennium to the end of the second millennium BC) and in the Iron Age (from the end of the second millennium to the half of the first millennium BC), the climate was the same or, at least, very similar to today's climate. All ancient inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula had to perfect some surviving strategies to preserve water, irrigate and cultivate fields. These peoples, despite the difficulties, showed a refined technical ability and at times even some unexpected scientific intuition. East Arabia is the area of the peninsula we are dealing with in our museum, especially the one in the interior of Oman.

As it is known, at the end of the fourth millennium in few areas geographically close to us, the story begins: in Mesopotamia, in Syria, in Egypt. The Oman Peninsula is part of this ancient history.

The wealth of the Arabian Peninsula has always been connected to the presence of unique products that still raise the interest of neighbouring peoples. At the beginning of history, copper, diorite of East Arabia attracted the great Mesopotamian kings for the production of bronze objects, of statues to celebrate their power.

Also the south western part of the Arabian Peninsula had a much sought-after product for Mediterranean peoples: frankincense. Only in this region does the frankincense tree grow and its presence

made that area a happy and heavenly place, the *Arabia Felix*.

The history of trade for these rare products continued with coffee and, in recent times, with gas and oil.

But in order for the inhabitants of these productive regions to become rich and develop, they had to learn how to manage commerce or else become an area to be conquered by more advanced neighbours. In the East Arabia of the period before Islam it seems improbable that vast kingdoms with defined boundaries were created. For sure, there were culturally characterised, articulated and complex societies.

As it happened for many histories that still have to be fully discovered, contemporary scholars must face some chronological and cultural gaps in the period from the end of the fourth millennium up to Islam.

As climate worsened, the hydraulic structures of the Bronze period became useless, and a more advanced irrigation system had to be employed to allow for the development that characterised the Iron period. As archaeological knowledge improved, cultural doubt were solved and historical gaps filled. Excavations in Salut certainly contributed to clarify many aspects of the crucial shift from the Bronze period to the Iron period in this area.

Since 2004 the Italian Mission to Oman, which had already been working in the port of Khor Rori for some years, was invited by HE Abdulaziz Al-Rowas to work in the area of Salut, a place linked to the foundation myth of the Omani identity.

Legends tell that Solomon had the first subterranean canals built in the plain next to the hill of Salut. On

the same plain, centuries later, Malik ibn Fahm was to lead the victorious war against Persians, thus beginning the Arabization of the country.

In the first survey campaign, before the excavations in the hill of Salut began, we had started to collect superficial ceramics, hoping to find ceramic examples of a more ancient Islamic period. In this period can be dated the remains of a small mosque oriented, according to the stories told by the locals, toward Jerusalem and not toward Mecca. This mosque was then built when the Prophet was still alive.

From the first campaigns, the beginning of excavations showed an unexpected chronological depth related to the history of Salut. The Islamic occupation of the site is certainly part of its history, but well before the arrival of Islam – from the end of the fourth millennium BC – Salut and its plain represent an important economic and cultural centre in East Arabia.

The location of Salut is important to understand its history and to define some of the most interesting aspects of the archaeological discoveries by the Italian mission.

The coast on the ocean, the gulf, and the ports were exchange centres and cultural crucial points throughout the long history of Oman, whereas the interior area of the country, the oases at the foot of the mountains, could well be considered a sort of periphery, an area important only to provide food to the inhabitants of the ports along the coast.

Instead, Salut, in the heart of Oman, is an integral part of a long-distance commercial and cultural circuit that was in contact with India and Mesopotamia. Salut did not simply bear witness of the presence of imported goods from distant lands, but also acted as technical and cultural dissemination centre.

Salut today rises in all its might: for millennia it has been indeed surrounded by a unique aura, a place full of energy and spirituality. Many years ago it was a cultic centre, where all inhabitants of the area gathered together. Still, in our days, eagles fly over the city in circles, the offspring of the eagle that talked to King Solomon.

The virtual museum was born from the research and hard work of Alexia Pavan and Alessandra Lombardi. The latter also edited this booklet. The technicians of Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, with whom I have been collaborating for many years, provided the digital support to create this virtual museum. The content of this booklet is the result of the research by Carl Phillips and my former students Michele Degli Esposti, Chiara Condoluci, Enrica Tagliamonte, now all young researchers. To them I give my deeply felt thank you.

Last but not least, I wish to acknowledge the help we received from all the Omanis who work in the Office of HE the Adviser to HM the Sultan for Cultural Affairs, which supported the development of the Italian mission. This might sound banal and, indeed, reductive: none of us would have ever started to work in Salut without the illuminating suggestion from HE Abdulaziz Al-Rowas, nor would it have been possible to carry on with the research without the help of his Office. Once again, thank you, most sincerely.

Alessandra Avanzini



Myth and History



1. Salut in Kitāb al-ansāb

DANIELA AMALDI

Kitāb al-ansāb (The book of genealogies) by al-'Awtabī, of which this paper reports a few pages, is the most ancient Omani historical text that mentions Salut, which survived until today.

The author of this book is Salamah b. Muslim al-'Awtabī al-Ṣuḥarī of the Banū Ṭāḥīya, a branch of the Banū Azd, the powerful tribe that strongly influenced the history of Oman and the Near East since the first centuries of the Hegira. Born in 'Awtab, to the east of Ṣuḥar, in the 10th century the writer spent in this city part of his life as scholar.

It is not by chance that al-'Awtabī chose to narrate the history of Oman in the traditional form of the genealogy, of *ansāb*. He must have pondered this choice carefully, also considering that the historiographical genre had already almost disappeared from the other Arabian countries.

Since the 10th century, with the weakening of the caliphate, the historians of Mashreq – the eastern Arabian countries – had abandoned the overall vision that characterised universal histories typical of the centuries of expansion, and dedicated themselves to the writing of biographies, family and local

stories related to dynasties, communities, famous people, or cities.

Since the 10th century in Oman a lively debate took place among the different positions of the Ibadi erudite scholars, which determined an intense activity of theological studies, the same did not happen for historiography. There is nothing on the genre from this period, except from some individual stories. Naturally, it is not possible to know whether nobody had actually written about history or if these texts, due to an unfortunate turn of events, did not survive up to today.

From such dearth of Omani historiography in those days derives the special importance of *Kitāb al-ansāb* by al-'Awtabī as first historiographic source related to Oman. So important that it was to be literally quoted in following works from the 18th century until today.

Al-'Awtabī presents, according to the indications of the Arabian historiography of the first centuries, the history of Oman from the descendants of Noah to continue with the fall of the Umayyads (750).

The writer puts in the forefront the tribal and individual genealogies emphasising the components of societies intended as tribes and personages, which for centuries marked the history of Oman, and which are still a source of pride today. This is how the research of the origins through genealogy became a speculation on the past, recorded to satisfy the needs and interests of the groups who looked to the past for their own legitimization.

In the pages dedicated by al-'Awtabī to the age that preceded the diffusion of Islam, a relevant section deals with the migration of the Azd, who left Marib and reached Oman.

This movement of Arabian tribes has a long history made of migrations that, according to modern scholars, began in the 1st century AD and ended with the diffusion of Islam. But the events that accompanied this diffusion of tribes throughout the Arabian Peninsula and in the Near East were condensed by tradition in a single narration well known to classic Arabian historiographers, who reported it in their works from the 8th century onwards with some variants.

This story, that starts from the disaster of the Marib dam (fig. 1), is also mentioned in the Koran (Kor. 34: 15-16): *for the people of Saba there was a Sign in their home-land; two gardens, one on the right hand and the other on the left. Allah commanded them: Eat of that which your Lord has provided for you, and be grateful. You have a pleasant land and a Lord Most Forgiving. Yet they turned away from the truth. So We afflicted them with a devastating flood, and converted their two excellent gardens into gardens bearing bitter fruits, tamarisk, and a few lote trees.*

Marib, the historic capital of the Sabaean kingdom of which today it is still possible to see its majestic

remains, went through a crisis that, forced its inhabitants to leave looking for a new home. More specifically, according to Arabian tradition, the Azd seem to have separated in different groups of which one, guided by Mālik b. Fahm, *the first Azd who settled in Oman*, determined the arabization of the region and constituted the originary unit of the 'Azd 'Umān' to which al-'Awtabī himself belonged.

When the Azd and other Arabs reached Oman, their migration came to an end. But before they could settle once and for all, they must deal with the Persians who controlled Eastern Arabia. This is a significant episode for the inhabitants of Oman because it was a crucial step in the history of the origins, but as far as we know it did not leave any trace in the works of other Arabian authors. It is al-'Awtabī the only one who left a narration of this clash of peoples and of the settlement of the Azd in Oman.

Therefore the Azd and the Arabs guided by Mālik b. Fahm and the Persians guided by al-Marzubān fought each other the first time in the desert plain, the *ṣaḥrā'* of Salut. This first victory by the Arabian tribes was followed by another, where the Persians were forced to board a ship toward the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf while the Arabians settled in the Omani interior.

With the narration of the battle of Salut begins a coherent text that differentiates itself on a formal point of view from the rest of the *Anṣāb*. This is a single coherent story that is at the same time much articulated, of which al-'Awtabī does not record any variants nor any reference to previous authors. These two aspects suggest that al-'Awtabī did not



Figure 1 - The Marib dam (Simpson 2000: fig. 16).

feel the need to refer to other well-known authors in order to support the legitimacy of the event, since this was the history of a common Omani heritage that belonged to its inhabitants. At that time, this story still had to be consolidated and accepted by the Omani community who saw here a declaration of their ancient and noble origins.

The first battle described in detail by al-'Awtabī seems to have taken place on the plain of Salut (fig. 2).

In these pages the 'castle' of Salut is not mentioned, since it is the plain the actual scenery where the armies and their knights fought, and where the Persians were defeated by the Arabs for the first

time. This is an episode that marks the origins of the Omani history, and appears even more concrete through the localization of a suggestive place shrouded in mystery.

Indeed, for centuries the settlement that dominates the plain has been considered an ancient and mysterious building, a castle that the Omani people relate to the origins of history by identifying Salut with the fortress visited by Sulaymān (Solomon) on one of his journeys. According to Oriental traditions also recorded in the Koran, Sulaymān was a great builder who was used to amazing journeys transported by the wind, he also knew the language of birds, and



Figure 2 - The plain and the site of Salut.

controlled demons. In the specific case of the *Ansāb*, Salut is a mysterious fortress visited by Sulaymān on one of his mythical journeys; the same Sulaymān who, according to the Omani tradition, built the complex irrigation system of *falağ*, which marked the economic, social, and political life in Oman.

In the text is not a description of historical events,

but a narration full of suggestions and detailed and vivid descriptions.

The story narrated by al-‘Awtabī, following a logical order over time of facts, is mainly a ‘fictional’ reconstruction of the arabization of Oman, of which the main protagonist is Mālik b. Fahm, the brave chief of the Azd. With his words and actions he marks the turn of events that revolve around him.

**The disaster of Marib
(al-ʿAwtabī, Kitāb al-ansāb II, 185-187)**

Then ʿAmr b. ʿĀmir walked into one of his gardens together with two young female slaves, a thing that was reported to his wife Ṭurayfah, who left the house to join him. She then ordered one of her servants called Sinān to follow her, but when she exited the door of her house three moles standing on their hind legs with their fore paws on their eyes blocked her way. [...] When Ṭurayfah saw them she raised her hand telling Sinān: “When these moles are gone, tell me”. And so he did. Then the woman quickly left the house and when she was in front of the canal of the garden where there was ʿAmr, a turtle came out of the water and blocked her way lying on its back; it wanted to turn the right way round but it did not succeed, it started wagging its tail so that a cloud of dust covered its belly and its sides, and urinated. Once she saw this, Ṭurayfah sat down and when the turtle dived into water she walked until she reached the garden where there was ʿAmr ibn ʿĀmir. It was noon, the hottest hour of the day, and suddenly the trees started to sway though there was no wind blowing. The woman walked through the garden until she arrived where ʿAmr ibn ʿĀmir was lying with the two young female slaves on the divan. When he saw Ṭurayfah he was ashamed and told the slaves: “Get down from the divan!” and added: “Ṭurayfah, come and sit on your divan.” The woman said: “For the light and for the shadows, for the earth and for the sky, the plants are lost and water will overflow the banks.”

“Ṭurayfah, who told you this?” “The moles told me that hard times will come when the son and the father must part.” “What are you saying?” “I’m saying that the one who is repentant shall grieve. I saw the

turtle lift dust and urinate abundantly, then I entered the garden and saw the plants sway.”

“What do you see?” “A grave calamity, painful things bearing grave consequences.” “What? Woe to you!” “Yes! Disaster for me / no benefit to you // a disaster for me and for you / here comes the flood.”

ʿAmr suddenly straightened on the divan: “What does this mean, Ṭurayfah?”

“A grave matter, long-lasting pain / few will remain, but a few are better than nothing.”

“What are the signs that prove what you are saying?” “Go to the dam and if you see a rat digging with his fore paws a lot of holes in the dam, and with his hind legs turning stones, you should know that digging is demolishing and that the matter will soon come true.”

“What matter?” “A threat sent by Allāh, a false statement cancelled, an exemplary punishment that will hit us. King, stand up, quick! Go and see the dam.”

ʿAmr ran toward the dam and remained staring at it: the rats suddenly surrounded him and stared at him; so he ordered a few cats and sent them to chase the rats. As he was watching the scene, here comes a large rat that fought a cat to death, a grave omen according to ʿAmr who convinced himself that ruin was to fall over the people and the rest. But the people from Marib did not know anything about the things he hid from them. He walked over another spot on the dam and here he saw a rat digging into the dam with its nails, claws, and iron fangs, demolishing and reducing rocks to crumbles when only fifty men at least would have been able to move those rocks. He went back to Ṭurayfah asking for an explanation for all that he saw.

“I saw an incredible thing that this rat did”. “It is not

a matter of this rat, but of the whole sky. There is no way to defend ourselves. Save yourself! Among the signs that I mentioned to you there is one where you must go and sit in your place between two gardens: order a glass vase and put it in front of you; the wind will fill it with earth from the wadi bank. You know that the two gardens are shaded so that no sun nor wind can penetrate them."

The vase was brought to him upon his order and he put it in front of him. He waited for some time until the vase was full of earth. He informed Ṭurayfah and asked her: "Can you see when the dam will be destroyed?" "In the next seven years." "When exactly?" "Only God knows, and if anyone else should know, this would be me; in the next seven years you will not spend a day or night without thinking that destruction is to come that exact day or night." 'Amr realised that all this was bound to happen and that their country was to be destroyed.

The battle of Salut

(al-'Awtabī, *Kitāb al-ansāb* II, 267-271)

Mālik b. Fahm al-Azdī marched on, together with the tribes of Azd and the groups of Quḍā'ah who were with him, toward the land of Oman where they entered with the army, their tribes and the Quḍā'ah, with numerous knights and foot soldiers. In Oman he found the Persians of the king Dārā b. Dārā b. Bahman b. Isfandiyār who were his people at the time, and the inhabitants, whose chief was al-Marzubān, governor of the king of the Persians. Mālik b. Fahm, his following, his family members, the women and the furnishings stopped by Qalhāt on the bank of Oman. To ensure their protection, he left with them knights and foot soldiers as he contin-

ued his journey with the rest of the army, the nobles with knights and others from the Quḍā'ah. With his son Hunāt b. Mālik at the head of two thousand trustworthy knights from his people, Mālik b. Fahm, commanding the troop and the noble foot soldiers, entered the region of al-Ġawf where he settled on the desert plain and sent a message to the Persians whose commander, at the time, was al-Marzubān, governor of Oman in the name of the king.

He sent a message asking the permission to settle in an area of Oman, therefore he asked them to lend an area where they could have water and pastures, and live together in an area of Oman. When the request by Mālik b. Fahm al-Azdī to settle in Oman and use water and pastures, reached al-Marzubān and his men, they discussed around the matter for long. Finally, with these words they agreed on sending him away because his request could not be satisfied: "We do not want that these Arabs live together with us: our land and our country are too small for us and we do not need neighbours." When their reply reached Mālik, he told them: "I need to settle in a region of Oman and that you share with me water and pastures. If you are willing to give me a part of it, I will settle in an area of the country and I will be grateful to you. If you are not willing to accept, I will stay against your will and if you attack me, I will attack you, and if I win I will kill your troops and capture your sons and will not allow that any of you stays in Oman."

Mālik b. Fahm, on his turn, remained in the area of Ġawf to rest together with his men and prepare for the war against the Persians, and organise everything for the fight by digging in an area of Ġawf the canal that is still known today as "Mālik's canal". His encampment with the cavalry and the troop re-

mained in that area until the Persians were ready to start the war and the fight.

Then al-Marzubān ordered to sound the war horn and to beat the drum, and he marched with the army and the troops out of Şuḥar with a large army which, it is said, was composed of more than forty thousand men, though others say that it was around thirty thousand accompanied by elephants as well. Heading toward Ğawf to meet the Arabs he settled in the desert plain of Salut.

Mālik, who had the army with him, his trustworthy and brave men and the Quḍā'ah who were with him, was informed and they all got on their feet. They were about six thousand, knights and foot soldiers. In the advance guard there was his son Hunāt with two thousand knights and the noblemen of the Azd with their knights. He marched until he reached the desert plain of Salut where he settled in front of the troops of al-Marzubān. They remained in this position for a day until night without fighting.

Mālik spent that night dividing his men on the right, on the left, and in the centre, organising the squadrons and arrange the knights of the Azd in their positions. He deployed two of his sons: on the right side Hunāt b. Mālik and on the left Farāhīd b. Mālik while he positioned himself in the centre with the bravest and strongest of his men.

Also al-Marzubān spent the night arranging his army, dividing the squadrons and sending messages until they were ready to fight and each of the two parts was ready.

On a dappled horse Mālik b. Fahm was splendid in the two armours, splendid between the two coats of mail under which he wore a brownish red tunic and on his head an iron helmet around which he wore, in the shape of a turban, a yellow band. Together

with him rode in formation, the sons and knights of the Azd also wore armours, helmets and coats of mail so that only the eyes were visible.

When they were in line to fight, Mālik b. Fahm started to walk among his men group after group, squadron after squadron saying: "You people of al-Azd full of bravery and tenaciousness, defend the nobility and protect everything you inherited from your fathers, fight and be loyal to your king and lord, because if you will be destroyed and forced to flee, the Persians will come after you with their troops, they will seize you and will turn every stone and clump of earth looking for you and your king. Your determination and your power will decline. Prepare to fight, be tenacious and strong, what happens today will shape the future."

He started to walk among his men ordering them to be strong and careful, walking among them group after group, squadron after squadron, so that the squadrons and the troops would do their best.

al-Marzubān marched forward with his troops, with all the commanders and the elephants to the front, heading toward Mālik b. Fahm and his men. Mālik shouted to his men to charge: "You knights of the Azd come and join me in the assault, may my father and mother be of help to you against these elephants: hit them with the tip of your spears and with your swords." (Fig. 3).

He lunged forward with his men toward the elephants with spears and swords, and hit them with arrows. The elephants retreated and went back to the troops of al-Marzubān treading on many of them. Mālik b. Fahm with his men and knights of the Azd charged al-Marzubān and his men destroying the strategic deployment of troops and



Figure 3 - Mālik b. Fahm and its army (drawing by L. Albergoni).

dominating the field; then the Persians marched on once again confronting the enemies by crossing the swords while al-Marzubān incited his men and shouted to the army ordering to resist the attack of the enemy, and they stood still.

They faced each other, the fight became confusing, the battle intensified, there was nothing to be heard

but the arms clashing and the swords crossing. They fought violently the whole day, but they reciprocally resisted the attacks until the shadow of the night fell upon them. They walked away from each other and parted. The day after they continued the fight and battled with vehemence: on the second day many Persians were killed whereas the Azd resisted until nightfall. They walked away from each other and left many dead bodies and wounded fighters on the field.

On the third day, the two armies battled one against the other and stopped under their own banners. Four noble knights each commanding a thousand men, marched until they were close to Mālik: "Come forward, we will behave honourably and fight you one by one."

Mālik approached the first who charged him with rapid movements, Mālik turned to face him with the courage of a king and the might of the Arabs: he hit the knight so hard that he annihilated him; the knight fell from his horse and Mālik raised his sword and killed him. Then the second knight came forward against Mālik and hit him, but the blow did not shake Mālik who hit the knight back right in the middle of the head and his shining sword got slightly damaged while the brain of the man was crushed, and the man fell dead. Then the third knight came forward toward him wearing an armour and a helmet. Mālik hit him on a shoulder and broke the armour in two so that the sword ended up on the saddle of the horse also breaking it in two. When the fourth knight saw what Mālik did to his three companions he was worried and, to avoid the fight, he walked backwards to turn around and go back to join his other companions. Then Mālik went back to his original position, his success bearing