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Naus and galleons in Arabia Felix – Portuguese nautical archaeology in Oman

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Introduction

Scarcely populated, with a society that had Christians, Jews, and Muslims mingling and working side by side, 14th century Portugal turned its back to Europe and started a century of trial-and-error navigations into the unknown Atlantic – and to what lay ahead of it. This empire was, in its nature, maritime, the instruments of its domination and expansion were fundamentally sailing ships and oared vessels.

Naus, caravels galleys and galleons were the tools used by the Crown and Realm to control territories and to brave the world’s great trans-oceanic highways. Projections of royal military, legal and jurisdictional authorities, armed and provisioned platforms, naval microcosms of Portuguese society of the time, these ships faced setbacks and perils: scurvy, corsairs, fires, lack of water and food, beaching and, finally, shipwrecks.

Men and women who, year after year, departed for the Indies, Africa, the Brazil and Arabia, casting out into the unknown, bidding Cape St. Vincent goodbye and heading off in search of fortune or, sometimes, doom and disaster.

Lost between Lisbon and Timor, these shipwrecks are unique and tangible testimonies to man’s artistic and technical capacities and ingenuity. They represent not only a national heritage - the product of an ancient maritime inheritance that has its root on Roman and Islamic shipbuilding traditions - but also Mankind’s heritage, as the perfect evidence of the history of man’s conquering of the oceans.

As these sunken archaeological testimonies lie scattered around the globe, it is not surprising to find them also in the Persian Gulf and in the Arabian Sea. Geography, geopolitics, history, monsoons, piracy and shallow waters, all have conspired to create in those waters another graveyard of wrecks.

How many Portuguese shipwrecks, one will never know; as we will never know how many other wars, from how many other eras, countries and lands have ended their days there, as we can see from the examples of Maurelle, a French military surgeon, and Justaigne, a Fleming by birth, both at the service of Oman’s ruler, Saidi Sultan, and who were both cast by shipwreck upon the coast of Oman, but at different times, in either the late 18th or the early 19th centuries.

Truth is, while some ships were simply lost, leaving behind no written record of the event, some have gone under with all hands, leaving no surviving tell-tale sign of the place of their demise. Some, even, were indeed wrecked - but only to be salvaged later on.

The MASO project

Recognizing the importance of their shared heritage, from which stood out the many fortifications built by the Portuguese in the region – Portugal and Oman have celebrated, in 1982, a MoU regarding the establishment of mutual cultural ties and the protection and study of shared heritage.

Lately, researchers have moved from architectural remains to historical documents. The value of Portuguese sources for the history of most countries of the Indian Ocean littoral has been generally acknowledged, though even the most accessible of these sources have been very inadequately exploited. For Oman’s history they are of exceptional importance because of the scant preservation of the Arabic materials - at least of those that relate to the period when the coast of Oman was to a varying, but considerable extent, under Portuguese control.

For the past decade, the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs of Oman, the University of Aachen and the Portuguese National Archives (Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo – ANTT) have all cooperated in order to search for, and compile, all official documents that have been produced during the Portuguese colonial period in the Oman region.

As such, Portugal in the Sea of Oman - Religion and Politics is truly an editorial achievement, which is unique in the Arab World – it can be compared to the monumental work Records of Oman 1867–1960,

References

1 LORIMER (1915) Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia, p. 432.
2 Decreto n.º 60/82, Acordo Cultural entre o Governo da República Portuguesa e o Governo do Sultanato de Oman, de 26 de Maio de 1982, law decree.
a twelve volume, 7,500 page compilation, but in this case comprehending a much earlier period, from 1500 till 1715. Later yet, underwater cultural heritage has been under the scope in Oman - the Maritime Archaeological Survey of Oman (MASO) being a joint collaborative project with the Ministry of Heritage and Culture of Oman, the Maritime Archaeological Stewardship Trust affiliated to the University of Southampton and the department of Maritime Archaeology of the Western Australian Museum.

The role of the nautical archaeologist is a crucial one – studying the remains of shipwrecked vessels to obtain archaeological data on how these ships were planned, designed, built, operated and used is the only way to supplement, and even complete, Portugal’s maritime history. And that because invasions, accidental fires, arson and earthquakes - mainly the 1755 one, that levelled Lisbon and sent almost all archives tumbling into the Tagus river - have concurred for a dire scarcity of written sources.

More than apprehending techniques, more than understanding the external factors which moulded and constrained Portugal’s trade with its overseas possessions and markets, what really interests nautical archaeologists is to gain an insight into the men and women behind these ships and this trade. That is why what archaeologists excavate is actually people, rather than artefacts. And that is also why it is fully justifiable to bring these sailors, traders, soldiers, passengers and slaves back to life, in order to learn who they were and what moved them to act as they did.

But, how do you prospect for underwater cultural heritage in a faraway place, without getting your feet wet? How do you put a name and a date on an archaeological submerged site, if you have on it only small shreds of ceramic? How can you tell that what is today a pile of ballast stones and some scattered-around bronze guns was once a proud, dangerously armed sailing ship, manned by real people, inserted into a particular historical context?

The answer to all of the above is: you research it in the historical archives. There is but just one problem with this approach: far, very far from those who built them and watched them sail away, many of these ships left behind little more than footnotes at the bottom of manuscripts - the more so when the voyage was uneventful.

So, paradoxically, of the many thousands of voyages undertaken by the Portuguese over the centuries, our attention will necessarily have to focus on those which ended in disaster, with the loss of ship and more often than not of its cargo and those travelling in it. Battles, lost cargoes, deaths, flotsam and jetsam - all created paper work, be it epical narratives or dull judicial proceedings. But yet another hurdle faces the researcher: the paucity of earlier documentation - only small shreds of ceramic? How can you tell that what is today a pile of ballast stones and some scattered-around bronze guns was once a proud, dangerously armed sailing ship, manned by real people, inserted into a particular historical context?

Unlike Spain – which has kept almost the entirety of its Age of Discoveries and Expansion documentation in only two archives, the Archivo General de Simancas (AGS) and the Archivo General de Indias (AGI) – in Portugal, the early 19th century dispersion of archives, of both official and private nature, the lack of indexes and the incredible amount of documentation that is still sitting, unread, in lockers, boxes and cabinets accounts for the fact that much remains to be done regarding the compilation, indexation and transcription of Portuguese documentation of the Modern Age.
Oman: and historical background

Situated between Mesopotamia, the coasts of India and the east of Africa, the region where Oman is actually located has, for more than five thousand years, played a crucial role in the maritime world of the Indian Ocean.

Early antiquity

With coastal settlements in this area generally tending to be sited on creeks and sheltered arms of water from prehistoric times onward, it is on its northernmost part - the al Batinah coast - that we find the first reference to a complex maritime society: Magan, an empire that flourished in Antiquity by exploiting the rich veins of copper found in the mountains around Sohar.

Archaeological studies suggest that, from there, boats would carry the copper to Dilmun - nowadays Bahrain - and would then later carry it to Mesopotamia where the Sumerians, and later, the Babylonians would use it.1 It seems that Magan boats were also used to sail to the Indus Valley, while laden with other valuable goods: jewellery, copper tools, sesame oil, woven fabric, wood and bronze statues.

Around 1800 BC, civil unrest, invasions and political mayhem brought the Indus civilization to a stop, thus sinking the trade ties between Oman, India and Mesopotamia.2

After a brief respite in trade, around 700 BC, commerce did not really pick up until the beginning of Classical Antiquity, with the frankincense extracted in Dhofar becoming the most expensive raw product in the world, even more valuable than gold.3

Back then, the most important ports of this coast were described by Ptolemy: Samharam or Omanum Emporium (identified with the actual Salalah) and Safarra Metropolis (tentatively identified at Ain Humran, at the base of the Qara Mountains).4

Around 563 BC, Cyrus the Great conquered northern Oman, the Persians gradually extending their dominance over the coastal area of the Hajar Mountains during the entire period of the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sassanian dynasties, well into 637 AD.

Late antiquity and medieval times

During the Persian dominion, maritime trade slowly developed between the northern coast of the Indian Ocean and East Africa, the most important ports being Mazun - near today's Sohar, around the 5th century BC - and Daba, in Musandam.5 From these ports, trade was conducted with today's Pakistan, India and China. The opening of new markets further east and south along the east coast of Africa, and the fact that Indonesian traders brought cinnamon from China and Java to Madagascar and the Zanzibar region and thence northwards to Arabia, positively impacted Oman's trade.6

At the beginning of the 6th century, and immediately before the coming of Islam, the eastern coast of Arabia was under the rule of several powers. When, in the north-east of the peninsula, the authority of the Bani Lakhm Arab kings of al-Hira (now in Iraq) began to wane (c. 611),7 an increasing number of Arab settlers from the South, the Azd, and from the East, the Nizari, eventually drove out the Persians. Sassanian rule then become restricted to the region around Sohar. The rest of the country was held by the Al-Azd.8

7 Ancient Arab geographers used the broad geographical term ‘‘Uman to describe the territory encompassed by the UAE and the Sultanate of Oman.


9 This entire coast, with the exception of Abu Dhabi, was held to provide points of good fresh water.

10 From the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages, Oman was the greatest center in the Middle East for the production and exporting of copper. The glory days of copper production came to an abrupt end in the 10th century, the reason for this being probably an acute shortage of fuel wood resulting from over-exploitation of trees.

11 The Persian Gulf entered the geographical consciousness of the West at the end of the fourth century BC, with the Nearchus expedition, undertaken between the mouth of the Indus River and the Euphrates delta.

12 So much so that the region became known as Arabia Felix, a name that would carry well into the 18th century. Frankincense and the wealth it created attracted a lot of unwanted attention from other powers. In 120 BC, the Parthians, who ruled Persia, succeeded in invading Dhofar from the East, taking advantage of the crumbling of the Sabaean empire. One century later, the Himyarite rulers of Yemen made their play. Later still, the Sassanians dominated. The resin of the tree Boswellia sacra – harvested since the beginning of times, and reaching as far as the Roman empire - was traded up right into the 20th century AD.13


14 In the area, Julfar was the most prominent settlement. Julfar - nowadays Ras al-Khaimah, an emirate that borders Oman’s exclave of Musandam – was duly recorded by the Portuguese in the early 16th century, as being a coastal town with a fleet, whose people were “merchants and navigators”. Pedro Teixeira speaks of boats from Bahrain and Julfar going each summer to the pearl fisheries further up the Gulf. He also mentions local pearl fisheries off Julfar.

15 From this profited both the Sassanian and the Byzantine Empires, the two great international powers of the 4th to the 7th centuries AD and which, due to their mutually destructive warfare, formed the background to the rise of Islam - the new faith which was soon to overwhelm the Sassanians and greatly truncate the Byzantine state.

16 The Bani Lakhm Arab kings of al-Hira in south-west Iraq were Nestorian Christians and their role was that of a buffer state for the Sassanians in their conflicts with the Byzantines and their allies in the deserts of Arabia and Syria.

17 The Azd, led by their Al Jaulanda princes, had originated in Yemen. Although they seem to have been the principal tribal group in Oman, there were other non-Azd tribes as well, established in the present territory of the
In 630 AD, the two sons of King Julanda bin Mustakbar, Jaifar and Abd, converted to Islam. When the 4000-odd Sassanians refused to do likewise, they were expelled from the country. Shortly after, Mohammed died and the Islamic movement inexorably overcame the neighboring cultures: the cities of Damascus, Jerusalem (638) and Alexandria (642), all capitulated.

Damascus, now under the rule of the Umayyad dynasty, was the center of Arabic culture and of the Islamic empire up until 750 AD when, under the Abbasids, the capital of Islam shifted to Baghdad - where it remained until the 13th century.

As Oman lies on the edge of the equatorial monsoon zone, Omani sailors - by using the northeast monsoon in November to sail to East Africa or Southern India, from either Sohar or Muscat, which was the last watering place before the crossing to India - took advantage of their unique geographical position to build up a vast network covering the Indian Ocean and its neighboring seas.

As the main ports for the importing of Eastern luxury goods to Iraq were Basra and Siraf, the strategically situated Omans profited heavily from the lucrative intermediate trade, carrying in Chinese porcelain, exotic wood, gemstones, spices, steel and textiles and exporting slaves, copper, myrrh, frankincense and dates.

In 929, the Qarmatians ruled Oman. In the following years, several clashes with the Caliph of Baghdad led to the destruction of Sohar in 965 and to the decadence of trade. The invasions of the Seljuks, in 1064 and the subsequent ones by the Ghuzz Turks, the Persians Muzaffarid and, at the end of the 13th century of troops from the Emirate of Hormuz, led to the displacement of the economic center of Oman from Sohar to Qalhat, which remained a thriving city until it was leveled down by an earthquake in the 15th century.

It was during the Middle Ages, in 1272, that a very special European traveller visited Oman. Marco Polo described the most prominent cities of the country at that time: Hormuz, Dhofar and Qalhat. He found Hormuz very beautiful and eminently commercial. Dhofar had a good port whose most important exports were Arabian horses and frankincense, and Qalhat was distinguished by its harbour, which was a stopping port for many trading ships from India.

Modern Age

In 1498, the Portuguese Admiral Vasco da Gama succeeded in circumnavigating Africa, with the last leg from Malindi to Calicut being done with the invaluable help of Omani pilot Ahmad bin Majid.

Starting in 1503, the Portuguese began to raid Arab settlements and harbors, in order to control both the Malabar Indian coast and the spice route gateways into the Mediterranean: the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

In 1507, Afonso de Albuquerque, led his fleet to conquer the Omani shores, capturing the strategic cities of Muscat, Qalhat, Qurayyat and Hormuz. A vast territory, crisscrossed by innumerable trade and social networks, fell under the influence of the Europeans.

The Portuguese Estado da Índia, as it was later styled, was a Crown sponsored enterprise, displaying a powerful naval and military apparatus. Its basic aim was to try and gain access, by armed force or by peaceful treaty, to a fair share of the overall trade in Asiatic luxury commodities, in order to channel it into Europe by way of the Cape of Good Hope, through the tightly controlled carreira da Índia.

This strategic aim was pursued through the development of a vast network of fortresses and factories, centred in the Indian territory of Goa and stretching all the way from the Island of Mozambique in the East African coast to the Macao peninsula in South China.

In the context of this global strategy, plans were devised to control the two most important routes that before 1500 linked Asia with the Mediterranean and with Europe, that is, the Rea Sea route and the Persian Gulf route.

Portuguese attempts to control Aden during the first half of the 16th century were utterly unsuccessful, for reasons that are still to be fully explained. This strategic port in the Yemeni coast was finally occupied by the Ottomans in 1538, and the Portuguese eventually gave up plans to control the Red Sea, limiting themselves to the regular dispatch of fleets to the Bab-al-Mandab, to try and discourage Asian merchants from following that route, and to the systematic collection of taxes from Red Sea bound ships leaving, or arriving at, the ports they effectively controlled in India or elsewhere.

The Persian Gulf was another matter, altogether. Since the time of Afonso de Albuquerque, who was governor of the Estado da Índia between 1509 and 1515, the Portuguese established a solid protectorate over the kingdom of Hormuz, building a powerful fortress on the island of the same name and maintaining a strong and steady military and naval presence in the region. However, the Portuguese soon found out that it was totally unfeasible to close the Persian Gulf even with the large resources they could muster.

Furthermore, they discovered that huge profits could be gained, by taxing or participating in the same regional trades they were trying to shut down. And they decided to make the best of the situation, that is, to control or participate in the regional trades, instead of blocking them. So, traffic through the Persian Gulf was encouraged, and dully taxed at the island of Hormuz, where the customs house became gradually under Portuguese control.

Soon, the struggle for trade control attracted other powerful players: first, the Ottoman Turks - starting 1538 and proving to be a most feared foe as, up until the middle of the 16th century, they managed to attack Hormuz, Muscat and even Diu, on the Indian shores, capturing the strategic cities of Muscat, Qalhat, Qurayyat and Hormuz. Notwithstanding the harsh geological and climatic conditions prevailing on the island of Djarun, where the city of Hormuz - the capital of a dispersed empire of the same name - stood, this medieval image clearly influenced, in the opening years of the 16th century, Portuguese strategies in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf regions.
coast - and later on, at the turn of the 17th century, the French, the British and then the Dutch.

Although the island was mostly barren, all sorts of people were attracted to Hormuz - a veritable conduit of silver, yielding huge profits to its captains and to the Estado da Índia. Besides an inviable economic relevance, Hormuz had also a major strategic importance, not only because it controlled the Strait of Hormuz, but also because of its role as a vantage point against possible incursions by the Ottomans into the Indian Ocean from their naval base at Basrah.

Among the many Portuguese fortresses scattered across the margins of the Indian Ocean, Hormuz deserved a special attention, as the most celebrated emporium in the world, with the busiest trade of all merchandises, eastern and western.

Anyhow, the 1580’s brought paramount changes to the Estado da Índia. After young King Sebastião disappeared at the battle of Ksar-âl-Kebir, in Morocco in 1578, the vacant Portuguese Crown was claimed, and occupied, by Felippe II, mighty ruler of Spain and its worldwide empire. In 1581, at the Tomar cortes, the Spanish monarch was officially empowered as king of Portugal.

By 1610, Portuguese Asia was beginning to endure some of the direst consequences of the Iberian Union. The United Provinces and England, the powerful North European enemies of Spain, were independently launching their assaults on Asia and trying to wrestle from the Portuguese fair shares of the lucrative Eastern trades.

As a result of Portugal’s integration in the Iberian Union, Portuguese ports had been closed to Spain’s rivals, denying them access to the Oriental wares that for more than a century had been conveyed to Europe solely by Portuguese ships.

The loss of Hormuz and Muscat

The Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC, founded in 1602, was concentrating its operations on Southeast Asia and on the South China Sea, while the English East India Company, or EIC, was trying to establish bases on the shores of the western part of the Indian Ocean, namely at Surat and at Jask. In 1662, both companies, allied with the Persian, managed to capture Hormuz from the Portuguese.

The fall of Hormuz, notwithstanding its psychological impact in the Estado da Índia, did not mean the withering away of Portuguese power in the Persian Gulf. On the contrary, in the years that immediately followed 1622, a powerful fleet under the command of Rui Freire de Andrade was dispatched to the Arabian Sea, where it went about rebuilding Portuguese positions in the Strait of Hormuz.

Muscat became the main operational base for the Portuguese, and several other fortresses were occupied or built along the Arabian coast. But the revenues of trade dropped sharply and the performances of Hormuz were never again equalled by Muscat - but the Portuguese maintained an important position in the regional context up to the 1650s, namely in fortifications, such as Coriate (Quarryat), Matara (Matrah), Sibo (as-Sib), Borca (Barca), Soar (Suwar), Corfaham (Haur Fakkan), Quelba (Kalba), Libedia (al Badi), Mada (Manama) and Doba (Diba).

Elsewhere in maritime Asia, the Dutch and the English kept their pressure on Portuguese positions. The Iberian Crown took harsh measures in the 1630s, continued in the 1640s by the new independent Portuguese dynasty of Bragança, which included the rebuilding of fortresses, the casting of new cannons, the construction of sailing craft, the mobilization of human resources, the launching of naval campaigns. And the Estado da Índia was able to withstand the first European assault on its strategic positions with minor losses.23

Resistance to Portugal also increased in Oman’s interior. In 1624, Imam Nasir ibn Murshid, of the Yarub tribe, united an increasing number of tribes, with the aim of fighting the common oppressor. By applying pressure to the Portuguese, the Imam forced them into a treaty, in which the Portuguese agreed to pay him a yearly tribute, to evacuate Sohar and to guarantee the Omanis free access to Muscat. In spite of the treaty, in 1634 Imamate troops relieved the occupied towns of Sur and Quarıyat.

After the death of Nasir, in 1649, his successor, Sultan bin Saif pushed on through and liberated the rest of Oman of the Portuguese - officially, the last foreign occupiers of the country.

Up until then, the Arabian Sea and its coastline were fairly unknown to the West. The most current maps - for instance, the 1478 Roman edition of Ptolemy’s Geographia, or one of the known versions of Henricus Martellus Germanus’ mappa mundi (c. 1489) - helped to perpetuate a drawing of the Gulf which would only be revised as a result of the successive surveys of the coasts of the area by the Portuguese during the first decades of the 16th century 22

As a matter of fact, it was only after the the main phases of the reconnaissance of the coasts between Hormuz and the Shatt al-Alar took place from 1507 onwards that a concise maps of the region began to be produced at cartographers’ workshops in Lisbon and Seville.

This knowledge would then be transmitted to the professionals who inaugurated the “golden age” of Dutch cartography at the end of the century - Jacob Florisz van Langren, Petrus Plancius, Cornelis Claesz and Jodocus Hondius, for instance, which were decisive in the composition of the most popular models of the Persian Gulf reproduced in the cartographic workshops of the Netherlands until the middle of the 17th century.23

All this come to stop when, in 1650, Muscat fell, at last. But that did not stop the Omanis, as they now ventured into the Indian ocean, either chasing the Portuguese vessels into the western coast of India or bombardimg their settlements on the east coast of Africa, forcing them as far south as Cape Delgado, now Mozambique (south of Zanzibar, actual Pemba). Zanzibar, Kilwa, Mombasa and Patta all came under Omani rule; in 1655 Bombay was taken and looted; in 1670, Diu suffered the same fate.

Mombasa fell at the turn of the century, with the affair of the Portuguese frigate Santo António de Tanna being a case in point.24

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22 The durability of many names along this coast is interesting, and has obvious implications for the historical geography of the region in the Islamic era when, for instance, names like Juffar can be traced back as far as the 7th century. As a matter of fact, one can still identify the vast majority of the Arabic place names which appear on Portuguese navigational charts dating to the second half of the 16th century, ref. POTTS, D. (1996) “The Gulf Coast of the United Arab Emirates in the Homem-Reinels Atlas of 1519”, in Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy, 1996:7, pp. 119-123.

23 From that moment on, this dependence was broken by a series of hydrographic surveys undertaken by the Dutch in the Gulf region, allowing for the gradual replacement of most of the prototypes used until then, of both Portuguese and Italian origin. Dutch surveys of the area would then later be adopted by several French and English cartographers.

24 The Santo António was built in Bassein, India, from good quality teak, between 1678 and 1681. In 1696 the frigate - armed with 30 cannons and
For the mirage of India had gone and on the horizon already lay the immensity of Brazil, from where the intoxicating reflections of gold and diamonds later emanated that would give Portugal the Convent of Mafra and the Basilica of Estrela, amongst other luxuries and ostentation.

At the time, Omani sultans recognized their trading activities mainly in East Africa, bartering for iron, wood, ivory, gold and slaves. This trade was further protected after 1752, year in which the Imam signed a treaty with the Portuguese crown demarcating all territories north of Cape Delgado as being under Omani rule and all others to the south as being under the Portuguese influence.

Sometimes, by defeating the Portuguese in several sea battles, the Imamate captured many of the better equipped European vessels. Thus it was able to lay the foundations of a powerful Omani navy – by 1715, the Omani navy counted in its ranks a 74-gun ship, two 64-gun, one 50-gun, eighteenth of 12 to 32 gun vessels and a large number of galleys, each mounting 4 to 8 guns.

**The Contemporary Age**

Due to internal struggles occurring in mid-18th century (1737-1747), a brief period of Persian domination came up. This ended up with the founding of the actual ruling dynasty, that of Al-bu-Said, who proceed not only to chase away the Persian invaders but also to establish control over maritime trade in the Arabian Gulf and Bandar Abbas and Hormuz. The British, most of all, were wary of the power of the Omani fleet so they made great efforts to win them over as allies in their dispute with France and the Netherlands in the Indian Ocean.

Although in 1798 Imam Sultan ibn Ahmad became the first Arab prince to sign a treaty with the British, Omanis as a rule managed to avoid being drawn into conflicts with the European. They downplayed their interests on trade with India by increasing their activities in both East Africa and Baluchistan.

That changed a couple of years later, when Saudi Wahhabism broke into Oman and clashes ensued, forcing the Omanis into an intensification of their relations with the British, who had been gaining influence in the Indian Ocean. The two countries had interests in common, the most important one being the issue of piracy in the Arabian Gulf, which had greatly increased when fueled by Wahhabism. Piracy was dwelt a severe blow, in 1819, by the combined efforts of the British and the Omanis, both taking advantage of the suppression of Wahhabism by the Ottomans.

In 1828, Sultan Said moved his court from Muscat to Zanzibar, developing this city into an economic empire reaching deep into the interior of East Africa, as far as Lake Victoria - an empire based on the trade of slaves, ivory and cloves, which had been introduced from Indonesia in 1812.

In 1822, and later, in 1839, slave trafficking was gradually banned, a ban forcefully imposed by the British and their Royal Navy. The immediate effect of this was the economical weakening of both Omanis, the sellers, and French, the buyers. In 1840, the Sultan agreed to a general ban on slavery, in return for compensation from the British.

In 1861, following a power struggle between the two sons of Sultan Said led to a division of the Oman Empire. Under the mediation of the British, the vast territory was divided between a wealthy Zansbar sultanate and a modest Muscat sultanate.

Eight years later, the opening of the Suez canal severely impacted Oman’s until then strategically placed position in the world: no longer would goods and people - going from India to Europe and vice-versa - flow via the Persian Gulf. The emergence of steamships accelerated this decline.

As the 19th century progressed, with trade and slavery waning into extinction, both Omani sultanates become increasingly dependent on the British.

From 1868 till 1920, a split between coastal and interior Oman led to several clashes between opposing forces of the Sultanate and the Imamate. The 1920 peace treaty, again mediated by the British, effectively turned the Sultanate into a Protectorate, a situation that would only resolve itself during the 1950s, when the quest for oil and the fight for its rights again pitted Sultanate against Imamate.

In 1955, the Sultan sent his troops into the interior. With the support of British officers they forced to Imam to flee to Saudi Arabia. Three years later, an attack by the British SAS destroyed Tanuf, the center of resistance. The void of power in the interior and in the south periphery led to a Cold War contexted, communist backed insurgency, to appear in Dhofar, heavily supported by China, the USSR and Iraq.

Finally, 1970 saw the accession to power of Sultan Qaboos. This state leader successfully fought and then defused the insurrection and united the country. Peace had come at last.

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25 As all the tribes were armed and the two great tribal confederations of Hinawi and Ghafris were constantly at odds with each other.

26 Until 1947 the Consuls and Political Agents were members of the Indian Political Service and reported through the British Resident in Bushire, and later Bahrain, to the Government of India. In 1947 India became independent and the Foreign Office in London took over diplomatic relations with the Sultanate.
Archival research on documented shipwrecks in Oman

705 – An Umayyad fleet of 300 vessels sailed through the Straits of Hormuz and anchored at Muscat harbour. There, local Jundala leader, Sulayman managed to burn more than 50 of the Umayyad boats.24

965 – The Caliph of Baghdad dispatched a naval force which attacked Sohar and sunk there the entire Omani fleet – all in all, 79 ships.25

1503 – Two Portuguese ships, the Esperança of Vicente Sodré and the São Pedro, of Brás Sodré, wrecked at Kuria Muria islands.26

1509 – Duarte de Lemos, while sailing his fleet from Socotora Island to Ormuz, had several “moorish” ships burnt in Muscat harbour.27

1520 – João Gonçalves was lost at Kuria Muria Island, on a merchant “moorish” ship heading to Cambaia, all hands swammed ashore safely.28

1522 – Nau São Jorge, captain Duarte da Ataíde, coming from Ormuz, sailing to India with two other ships. Due to a sudden storm, the nau, and all the cargo from Ormuz (gold, pearls, silk sent as gifts from the Ommuz Xarif to the King of Portugal) was salvaged by divers sent by the Muscat sheik.29

Also, on the same year, the Governor Diogo Lopes Sequeira, while sailing from Dalak to Ormuz lost 3 ships, two at Masirah island, and one – Jerónimo de Sousa’s galley – that could have been lost either at Kamaran Island, Cape Fartak, (Yemen), or Muscat.30

1525 – Nau Corpo Santo, her captain, Filipe de Castro, an East Indianman sailing from Lisbon to India, via Ormuz, lost during the night at cape Rosalgate (Ras-Al-Hadd), on the 19th November, the fault being both an error of the pilot as well as with the lack of lookouts, that he should have had. The ship was intact. They chartered a ship from Calaliate (Qalhát), in which they sailed with part of the cargo that they salvaged from the nau, and sailed to India.31

1547 – Nao de Jorge Gonçalves, run aground on a rocky reef that projects out of Maceia (Masirah island).32 The local nautíqueus (“pirates” “out of Qalhát) ransacked all the cargo and killed all aboard.33

1554 – Naval battle between the Ottomans led by Pir Reis and the Portuguese, led by Francisco Meneses. Several ships were sunk in front of Muscat, most notably a Portuguese galleon, at the islet of Fak-Al-Asad, at the entrance to Muscat’s harbour.34

There are abundant detail on this battle, mainly at Spanish Turkish and Venetian archives, on documents that still need to be read and transcribed.35

26 References for these two wrecks can be found at: ANTT, CC 1/33/3; QUINTELA (1839) Anuário da Marinha Portuguesa, vol. I, p. 337; REBELO (1903) Livro de marinharia: tratado da agulha de marear do João de Lisboa, p. 1; SOUSA, 1695) Annaes da Marinha Portuguesa, vol. XII, p. 130.
27 Andrê Cortes, laden with numerous and fine wares, ran ashore on a ridge extending from the island of Masirah and was lost there the naotes seized and stole all the wares from the carrack and killed all the Portuguese and they only spared the life of André Cortes and his wife and one of his daughters, whom they later returned in exchange for a ransom, and André Cortes lost all he had and because he fought well he escaped (…) I came [here] sailing aboard a carrack of Jorge Gonçalves, along with my wife and my daughter, with whatever we had in my house. During the midnight watch we reached the northern tip of the Island of Masirah, (and thought) the pilot strove in vain [to prevent it] the carrack was lost with all the goods it was carrying and I was left with just the pants and doublet I was wearing (…) and since the ship had already taken a lot of water on board I went to the sterncastle carrying my daughter on my lap and [taking] my wife, [staying there] until the morning and a lot of water had already entered the castle and I asked them to come back and take us but they did not do so and went away and all three of us moved to the windward side since the shoals were on the leeward side and the sea was very rough and latter all the masts fell and the carrack ripped apart down the middle and broke into pieces, cf. ANTT CJC/0001, Cartas de Ormuz a D. João de Castro, fol 89-97v.
31 (...) Andrê Cortes, laden with numerous and fine wares, ran ashore on a ridge extending from the island of Masirah and was lost there the nautiques seized and stole all the wares from the carrack and killed all the Portuguese and they only spared the life of André Cortes and his wife and one of his daughters, whom they later returned in exchange for a ransom, and André Cortes lost all he had and because he fought well he escaped (…) I came [here] sailing aboard a carrack of Jorge Gonçalves, along with my wife and my daughter, with whatever we had in my house. During the midnight watch we reached the northern tip of the Island of Masirah, (and thought) the pilot strove in vain [to prevent it] the carrack was lost with all the goods it was carrying and I was left with just the pants and doublet I was wearing (…) and since the ship had already taken a lot of water on board I went to the sterncastle carrying my daughter on my lap and [taking] my wife, [staying there] until the morning and a lot of water had already entered the castle and I asked them to come back and take us but they did not do so and went away and all three of us moved to the windward side since the shoals were on the leeward side and the sea was very rough and latter all the masts fell and the carrack ripped apart down the middle and broke into pieces, cf. ANTT CJC/0001, Cartas de Ormuz a D. João de Castro, fol 89-97v.

32 References for these two wrecks can be found at: ANTT, CC 1/33/3; QUINTELA (1839) Anuário da Marinha Portuguesa, vol. I, p. 337; REBELO (1903) Livro de marinharia: tratado da agulha de marear do João de Lisboa, p. 1; SOUSA, 1695) Annaes da Marinha Portuguesa, vol. XII, p. 130.
33 Andrê Cortes, laden with numerous and fine wares, ran ashore on a ridge extending from the island of Masirah and was lost there the nautiques seized and stole all the wares from the carrack and killed all the Portuguese and they only spared the life of André Cortes and his wife and one of his daughters, whom they later returned in exchange for a ransom, and André Cortes lost all he had and because he fought well he escaped (…) I came [here] sailing aboard a carrack of Jorge Gonçalves, along with my wife and my daughter, with whatever we had in my house. During the midnight watch we reached the northern tip of the Island of Masirah, (and thought) the pilot strove in vain [to prevent it] the carrack was lost with all the goods it was carrying and I was left with just the pants and doublet I was wearing (…) and since the ship had already taken a lot of water on board I went to the sterncastle carrying my daughter on my lap and [taking] my wife, [staying there] until the morning and a lot of water had already entered the castle and I asked them to come back and take us but they did not do so and went away and all three of us moved to the windward side since the shoals were on the leeward side and the sea was very rough and latter all the masts fell and the carrack ripped apart down the middle and broke into pieces, cf. ANTT CJC/0001, Cartas de Ormuz a D. João de Castro, fol 89-97v.
1592 – A Portuguese nau, owned by the captain of Barcellor, while sailing from Goa to Hormuz ran aground near cape Ras-al Haad and was lost. The survivors walked all the way to Qalhat.

1594 – The Indianman Madre de Deus, built in India, captain Antonio Teixeira de Macedo, run aground on the desert probably near Masirah island. There were few survivors and all cargo was lost.

1652 – A Portuguese fleet, captained by António de Sousa Coutinho was attacked at Musandam, while tending to the construction of the fortress at Caçapo (Khasab). The Portuguese had the ship of António Lobo da Gama burnt, while the Omanis had a calley sunk. Some sources point that this battle might have occurred at Qishm, Iran.

1667 – Three “terradas” (local oared and sailed vessels, without artillery, that embargoed a party of archers) sunk in front of Muscat by the ship of D. Francisco Manuel.

1763 – The Amstelveen was a large ship, part of the fleet of the Dutch East-India Company (VOC) that sailed from the Dutch East-Indies (Indonesia) towards Muscat and Kharg, in the Persian Gulf. On the 5th of August as it was sailing near Cape Matraca (Ras Ma-Indies) towards Muscat and Kharg, in the Persian Gulf.

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) that sailed from the Dutch East-Indies (Indonesia) towards Muscat and Kharg, in the Persian Gulf.

On the 5th of August as it was sailing near Cape Matraca (Ras Madrakah) on the South East coast of Oman, the ship, hampered by foggy conditions, came too close to the coast and ran aground, in drakah) on the South East coast of Oman, the ship, hampered by foggy conditions, came too close to the coast and ran aground, in the evening, as the darkness was setting in. Due to the very high and powerful waves crashing on and breaking over the ship she capized and broke into pieces and sank. On board there were 105 people – of which 75 were drowning.

1863 – A ship carrying William Gifford Palgrave foundered off Suwadi island, “near Djeyn rock”. There were 6 dead.43

1883 – The SS Knight of the Bath, from Bombay to Have, captain T. Williams, struck a rock near the Cora Muria islands, June, the 17th. In August, information was received that the 17 surviving crew-members were at an Arab village near Ras Sankireh. On the report reaching India the Amberwitch was dispatched to their rescue, and they were then taken to Bombay.44

1904 – Homeward bound to London from Karachi with a cargo of wheat, the SS Pearlmoor ran aground and founded at Kuria Muria, on a site located between Tilly Rock and Jeziat Kabiya Island, on the 17th November.

1914 – The City of Winchester, English steamer with a cargo of tea, Persian carpets, gold and silver bullion, coming from Calcuta. She was the first merchant shipping loss of the First World War, by being sunk on the 7th of August at Cora Muria, Hallaniyah island, Ghubbat Al Rahib bay, by the German cruiser SMS Koenigsberg.

1919 – The cargo ship Boucau - ex-Charles Tellier, built in steel by Wood, Skinner & Co Ltd in 1915, engines by North-Eastern Marine Engineering Co Ltd, Wallsend, operated by the Shipping Controller (Lambert Bros Ltd), London – was wrecked on June, the 28th, at Ras Al-Khabba, on a voyage from Port Said and Aden to Basra with a cargo of frozen meat.

1920 – SS Berwyn was wrecked on the 6th September 1920, at Kuria Muria.

1926 – Tanker SS Volga, ex-Mills, ex-Wellington, ex-Danubio, owned by the Italian Danubio Società Anonima di Navigazione, while en-route from Iran to Italy, with crude oil, lost by fire on January the 12th at 21.02 N 059.28E 52

1937 – Wreck of the sailing ship of Saiyid Mahmud, while enroute to Zanzibar, at Ras al-Hadd, in February. Saiyid Mahmud, who had been unemployed since his dismissal from the post of Wali of Ma-trah in February 1936, had secretly left for Zanzibar while accompanied by his two brothers Khalid and Said.

1942 – Ocean Vintage, torpedoed and sunk on October, the 22nd, by Japanese submarine I-27, commanded by Kitamura, south of Ras al-Hadd near Masirah Island - at position 2310N 6041E, as re-
ported by an aircrew of 244 Squadron out of Sarjah. Built by Per-
manente Metals Corp., Richmond, California, owned by Muir-Young
S.S. Co, London, she was steaming from New York city to Bandar
Shapur, with 9,300 tons of general cargo. Captain John Robinson,
crew of 43 and 6 gunners were towed in the ships' boats by RAF
Crash Launch into Ras el Hadd harbour, Oman. After a couple of
days, HMS Trottott arrived to transport the crew to Aden.54

1943 – Dah Puh, ex-Clara Jebesen, norwegian steamer,55 captain
Adolf Buhre, torpedoed inside Muscat harbour by the Japanese
submarine I-27 Fukumura, on 28th June 1943 while unloading car-
go (asphalt), en route from Basra to Karachi.

Dah Puh broke in two, the stern sinking immediately and the bow
several hours later, position 33º 2 3/4 3/4 cables from Muscat outer
leading light Muscat harbor, the torpedo having been fired through
Duweira Gap. On the morning of the 30th June, the whole length
of the ship had settled on the harbor bed, and only her forecastle,
bridge deck, forecast, and funnel were showing over water.56

1944 – M/V Grena57 was struck by 3 torpedos fired from Japanese
submarine I-26, captain Kusaka Toshio, on March 21, at 20º 48’ N
05º 38’ E, about 30 nautical miles off Masirah Island.58

1960 – On July 14th, 1960, the SS World Sky - flying a Liberian flag
and owned by the Panamanian Oriental Tanker Corporation– colli-
ded in the Persian Gulf with the SS Caltex London, owned and ope-
rated by Overseas Tankship, Ltd. As a result, four seamen aboard
the SS World Sky were killed. After makeshift repairs at Port Sudan, the tanker sailed back to the
UK, refused assistance. A later SOS transmitted was picked up by the
British frigate HMS Landaff.59 Difficulties with the monsoon and loo-
ting plagued the salvage efforts. The vessel eventually broke in two
and was abandoned.60

1965 – SS Noemi, built 1941 by Lithgows Ltd, as Empire Buckler
for the Ministry of War Transport, Lebanese flag, of 7046 grt, run
aground at Masirah Island, on 17th December 1965.61

The Esmeralda affair

As seen previously, Oman is a rich domain for underwater cultural
heritage, its submerged archaeological remains only now begin-
nning to reveal the extent of indigenous nautical technology, re-
gional and international social contacts and far-reaching maritime
trade routes sailed for millennia.

Thanks to the vision of Oman’s Ministry of Heritage and Culture
(MHC), archeological research along Oman’s coastline is now being
organized in such a way as to document, protect and disseminate
what is left, on land and under water, of this considerably unknown
past. Efforts are also geared towards developing national interven-
tion capacities by building capacity alongside research projects
conducted by foreign researchers. One such project is the MASO,
on which the author collaborates, having participated in October
2015 on a remote sensing and surveying campaign at Masirah Is-
land.

Another project is, for instance, the one being developed and co-
managed by Blue Water Recoveries, Ltd. (BWR) and the MHC at Al
Hallaniyah island – of the island group formerly known as Curia
Muria.62

Originally discovered in 1998 by a team led by BWR director, David
Meaurs, who is also today the Al Hallaniyah Project Director, the
vessel ended with her re-grounding and breaking in half, by the
bridge.63

Built in 1924 by Workman, Clark & Co. Ltd., Belfast, tonnage 4919
grt, SS Elettric took part in 126 convoys during WWll. In April 1977
she was used for target practice. Two months later she was smas-
shed flat in a cyclone.

1961 – SS World Jury, in ballast, built by the Japanese Yard Mitsu-
bishi at Nagasaki, launched on 30th September 1954, completed
26th February 1955 and wrecked at Ras Abu ar Rasas, south end
Masirah Island 23rd August, 1961, while enroute from Durban for
Bandar Mashur. All crewmembers were safely rescued by the Brit-

54 USS DECATUR, War Diary, 4/16/42 to 11/19/42, Micro Serial Number:
44943, World War II War Diaries, Other Operational Records and Histories,
compiled ca. 01/01/1942 - ca.06/01/1946, documenting the period ca.
09/01/1939 – ca. 05/30/1946, p. 52: NARA; ABOUL-ENEIN & ABOUL-ENEIN
(2013) The Secret War for the Middle East: The Influence of Axis and Allied Intel-
ligence Operations During World War II, p. 142.
55 Owned by Wallem & Co. A/S, managed by Haakon J. Wallem, of Bergen,
operated by Mackinnon Mackenzie on charter to the Ministry of War Trans-
port, tonnage 1974 grt, 11.46 net, 3200 towt, built in Kiel, Germany in 1922,
World’s Merchant Fleets, 1939: The Particulars and Wartime Fates of 6,000
Ships, p. 330; ROHWER (1999) Axis Submarine Subicides of World War Two:
German, Italian, and Japanese Submarine Successes, 1939-1945, p. 274.
57 Managed by A/S J. Ludwig Mowinkels Rederi, of Bergen, built by A/B
Götaverken, Gothenburg in December, 1934.
58 ROHWER (1999) Axis Submarine Subicides of World War Two: German, Ita-
lian, and Japanese Submarine Successes, 1939-1945, p. 274; HOCKING (1969)
Dictionary of Disasters at Sea During the Age of Steam, including Sailing Ships
and Ships of War Lost in Action, 1824-1962, Volume 1, p. 286.
59 HOCKING (1969) Dictionary of Disasters at Sea During the Age of Steam, in-
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Corporation, No. 8304; AA (1964) 338 F. 2d 649 Giannakouros v. Oriental
Tanker Corporation SS World Sky, No. 9591.

56 Lloyd’s Register of Ships, 1930-1931 Steamers and Motorships; AA
57 AA (1961) ‘Rescue Operation by Frigate’, The Times (London), Friday, 25
58 World Jury’s bell - of typical form, complete with clapper, 33cm high and
incised WORLD JURY SEPT. 30., 1954 – was auctioned in 2011; ref. AA (2011)
Maritime and Scientific Models, Instruments & Art Auction, Wednesday 20th
60 The following statements are the author’s personal and scientific opinion
on the archaeological findings allegedly coming from the Al Hallaniyah site,
Oman. Although the author has requested them from the Project Director,
David L. Meaurs, he was not given any information, be it graphical or writ-
ten material, about the site. He has indirectly come upon some preliminary
reports produced by the Project director, and has discussed them, with the
said Director over the phone and on a face to face meeting in Lisbon, 2014.
As such, any errors and omissions are largely due to the secrecy surroun-
ding the said reports and the lack of peer-reviewed published material.

site consists on dispersed wreckage located in Bandar Archult Bay, off the North East coast of Al Hallaniyat Island.

These remains were identified by Mearns as being the remains of at least one, or two, Portuguese ships, the Esmeralda and the São Pedro, commanded by brothers Vicente and Brás Sodré, who took part in Vasco da Gama’s 1502-1503 voyage to India.

The 1502 fleet to India

The 1502 fleet must be one of the most documented ones, as several first-hand accounts - written by people that sailed with the fleet, mainly Italians and Germans - still survive.

Narrating the wrecks, there is one primary source, that has been analysed, and several chronicles, that seem to be based on the earliest written, the Lendas da Índia.

This account of the Legends of India (which is a 17th century copy out of the 16th century original) must be the most complete and exhaustive account of the shipwrecks – we do believe that Gaspar Correia, who was secretary to Afonso de Albuquerque in India, starting the task 1512, must have met people that were eyewitnesses to the Kura Muria Island 1503 events.

But these events are best told by Góis:

(….) Vicente Sodré (…) reached some islands, that are beyond Cape Guardafui, named Curia, Muria, so that he could repair some of his ships that had sprung a leak, where he arrived on the 20th, April, 1503.

The inhabitants of these islands, although they were all Moors, by being all farmers and fishermen, peaceful men more prone to make their living than to make war, made good company to all of the armada, providing them with victuals in exchange for money; so, Vicente Sodré, having found safety in people so contrary to our way of life and faith, ordered the careening of Pedro de Ataíde’s caravel, and the Moors, seeing that the armada was taking its time, told him that, normally, in those islands, at the beginning of the month of May, a storm would come from the North with a northern wind and that it would strike their anchoring site in such a manner that no ship that would be there at the time would survive, and as such they advised him that he should be anchoring on the other side of the islands, until the storm subsided, because in there he would be safe.

But Vicente Sodré, thinking that they were trying to fool him, paying no heed to what they were telling him (…) In the end, Pêro Rafael, Fernão Rodrigues Baskañas and Diogo Pires, even though they were told not to part company with him, they did not obey him, and sailed to the other side of the islands on the very last day of April, staying Vicente Sodré and his brother Brás Sodré and the people of the caravel that was being careened, of which was captain Pêro de Ataíde.

Anchored these 3 ships behind the islands, the storm of which the Moors spoke about came with such a fury that the two naos were run aground and were made into pieces, on which the majority of the people died, even Vicente Sodré and his brother Brás Sodré, with not a single thing being saved, but what was flatamast cast into the beach, and that were rigging, masts, barrels and things of this quality, with many dead bodies, because neither money, nor cargoes, which were many, and of high value could be recovered, although the salvage efforts were intense.

At least all guns were subsequently salvaged. As for what might have sunk them, we might be looking at the Southwest Monsoon as a culprit. The Nautical Routier for this area says:

On the Arabian coast (…) the winds of the Southwest Monsoon are much stronger than they are in the Gulf of Aden.

They are strongest between Mirbat and Al Misirah and reach their greatest force in Kura Muria Island during the month of July. (…)

In Kura Muria bay, the winds and weather appear more violent and variable than anywhere along this coast.

The N wind is strong. Changes of wind may be sudden and without any warning. In the vicinity of this bay, the Southwest Monsoon is reported to set in with heavy squalls, rain, and thunderstorms.

During this period, many of the local vessels do not sail. The larger craft sail in early June, after the first burst of the monsoon, and at the end of August, when the monsoon is considered to be over.

Ethics, archaeology and salvage

Nowadays, two distinct groups have access to modern technology for the exploration of underwater cultural sites. On one hand, the archaeological community, conscious of the cultural and historic value of this heritage, develops techniques to carry out scientific archaeological surveys, analysis, registration, interpretation and conservation of sites. Underwater archaeologists around the world create programs on the basis of international standards, cooperation, capacity building and research to build a critical mass of experts to help identify the technical means to best protect this unique heritage. Their progress is slow but sustainable, as the purpose of all archaeological work is to contribute to a wider pool of knowledge so that others can have access to the new information.

66 There is in fact a substantial amount of material, probably reflecting the fact that there was an important participation of foreign merchants: there is a report by a Flemish mercenary published in Antwerp in 1504, a German account on a manuscript kept in Vienna, an anonymous Portuguese account, also in Vienna, the letters of the Italian Mateo di Bergamo and a letter from Florentine merchant Buonagrazia, a Tuscan version of the account of Tomé Pires (original now lost).

67 ANTT, CC I-4-57, 20/02/1504, letter from Pedro de Ataíde.

68 All other documents appear to be hearsay, produced years later, sometimes decades later, after the event, cf. Correia, G. (1858) Lendas da Índia / por Gaspar Correia; publicadas de ordem da Classe de Ciencias, da Academia Real das Ciencias de Lisboa; sob a direção de Rodrigão José de Lima Felner, tomo I. Lisboa: Tipografia da Academia Real das Ciências.
As opposed to treasure hunting, archaeology is a scientific discipline concerned with reconstructing past human life and culture from the material remains that survive. In the case of underwater archaeology, the focus of study is the long human relationship with the sea and other water environments. The principal aim of archaeologists in investigating the past is to recover data, and sometimes objects, in a scientific and disciplined manner to help save information about the past for posterity. This is done without any financial or other reward based on the quantity or value of the material raised.

For archaeologists, the priority is to understand the site through interpretation and hypotheses based on the discoveries made. From an archaeological perspective, a place where a ship has sunk is a ‘site’, encompassing the complete area where elements of the structure, rigging or artefacts may have ended up after the wreck. All contain potentially precious information. In short, the structure and content of the ship are interrelated and their systematic, interdisciplinary analysis provides a wealth of information about life and society at the time of navigation.

On the other hand, commercial salvors and treasure hunters search for sites containing commercially exploitable goods. Salvors and treasure hunters recover commercially valuable objects such as jewels, coins, navigation instruments, fragile porcelain and other antique objects, with total disregard for the archaeological, cultural and historical value of the site, which they ignore as an entity.

Although this group has decreased enormously in number over the past twenty years, being pressed by international legislation and Spain’s harsh legal defense of its Underwater Cultural Heritage, salvors and treasure hunters have shifted their activities towards countries where legislation is insufficient or non-existent. There are numerous examples of such ventures in Asia, Africa and Latin America, with deals being cut with governments and statements being tinted with sufficient archaeological jargon to provide a scientific veneer to such enterprises, who lack scientific ethics.

Here, in this case of the Esmeralda such an ethical issue arises as BWR has been involved in underwater treasure hunts. An example is the salvage of the General Abbatucci – a 282-ton cargo ship that was sunk off the northern coast of Corsica and which had its treasure salvaged by BWR in 1996, the artefacts being offered for sale by Christie’s on 7th October 1997. As a matter of fact, BWR has developed an underwater tool, the Grab, that is able to dismantle steel-hulled vessels and penetrate the holds to recover their cargo. This, of course, is a highly destructive tool, fit for salvage and not archaeological work.

Salvage and treasure hunting approaches - often based on personal or corporate reward from the sale of artefacts - results in financial and other pressures which inevitably lead to insufficient archaeological recording of sites as they are destroyed for the objects contained within them. As wrecks of archaeological interest are a valuable but diminishing cultural resource, it is now clear that commercial salvage and looting is not to be condoned. The history of archaeology has repeatedly shown that where exploration and fieldwork were steered by the potential market value of objects, the approach and documentation are so compromised that even the most basic observations become unreliable.

In spite of the fact that Oman is still not a State Party to the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, the Al Hallaniyah project aims to re-locate and locate, assess and in the case of a positive assessment, excavate, recover, conserve, document and scientifically analyze all cultural material from the site in keeping with the said UNESCO Convention. That is not happening, as Rules 22 and 23 of the UNESCO Convention – which address competence and qualifications, both very central concepts in archaeology, conservation and the heritage discipline in general – are not being observed. As per Rule 22 of the UNESCO Convention, activities directed at underwater cultural heritage shall only be undertaken under the direction and control of, and in the regular presence of, a qualified underwater archaeologist with scientific competence appropriate to the project.71

Apparently, the Project Director is neither an archaeologist nor has any background on early Portuguese nautical matters or experience with such archaeological contexts - the Project Director many years’ experience of investigating wrecks does not necessarily constitute useful archaeological experience - particularly if that experience was gained from projects aimed principally at the recovery of artefacts from iron or steel hulled wrecks, with the destruction of sites and the selling of artifacts being seen as collateral damage.

This is an essential tenet, as the Projects Director training and qualifications, - underpinned by a professional commitment to ensure that interventions are carried out to the highest professional and ethical standards – are what sets archaeologists apart from treasure hunters and those with an interest in underwater cultural heritage which is at odds with its proper investigation and conservation. The Project director’s lack of both an archaeological qualification and competence on early 16th century Portuguese navigation and nautical contexts cannot be compensated by the “subcontracting” of “scientific” tasks and papers from other professionals, as it seems that all of the Project “scientific” discourse is being produced by the Project Director.

This leads to the fact that it is now apparent that the early 1998 assumption made by the Project Director – that the site discovered was the site of the 1503 wrecking events – is still being an undisputed issue in his mind and that everything that is being uncovered has to confirm that theory. And that in spite that those island were long before a watering site, an anchoring site and even a wintering site, and that they continued to be so when the Portuguese arrived there - and long after they were gone. As with harbors, an anchorage site will gather on its bottom, not only used and reused ballast stones, but also the odd lost anchor and, sometimes, even the remains of shipwrecks.72

This is a complete, unacceptable inversion of archaeological methodology. After all, in archaeology, data collected during fieldwork has to be organized and transformed into an archive which is readily comprehensible to someone unfamiliar with the site. Following the creation of an archive, basic research is required to compare the gathered information with other sets of data, as well as with material in museum collections. In this way it may be possible 71 As per the UNESCO Convention what constitutes archaeological qualification and competence is likely to include, at least: a degree in archaeology; practical experience in a chosen field/area of specialty; demonstrated research abilities; and knowledge of the specific type of site or archaeological period being investigated – that is, the Project Director has to be scientifically competent to undertake or direct an intervention on an underwater heritage site; before work begins, he must also be an underwater archaeologist fully acquainted with the subject of the investigation.

72 For instance, in 1520, a Portuguese interpreter named João Gonçalves was also wrecked on the Kuria Muria islands while being aboard a “moorish nau” that got lost there.
sible to identify the likely date, function and place of origin of material recovered.

Providing the investigator can make sense of the sometimes fragmentary evidence available from the archaeological investigations, an interpretation should then be possible. Only then comes the production of original ideas. If the evidence is strong enough, and if it is correctly understood by the investigator, the interpretation might stand the test of time.

For the moment, we have serious doubts about several of the evidence produced, from the carvings on the stone shot to the bell engraved with a date not in Roman numerals.

The twisting of original reports - as with the stone shot original one - or the declarations issued regarding some of the artifacts – such as with the ceramics – as well as the lack of credibility of some of the Project specialist and advisers employed by the Project Director raises serious ethical and scientific doubts.

We consider that, before any official statements are produced regarding the identity, chronology and significance of this site, a second or even a third opinion should be sought out by the MCH so as to ensure that the preliminary conclusions reached are as scientifically based as possible.

Although the standards demanded by modern archaeological practice may put off some countries - especially when the obvious alternative, treasure hunting, is less demanding in almost every respect - Oman has correctly assumed the burden of heritage protection and its safekeeping, by investing time, money and human resources on nautical and maritime archaeology. As such, Oman is now in the position of helping Portugal to discover its hidden past, by researching what is truly a shared heritage between the two countries.

With time and drive, it is expected that Oman will gain its place as a regional leader in the maritime archaeological community and become a voice for professional and ethical standards in scientific archaeology and preservation, thus building on the impressive maritime traditions upon which the country was also built.

For that to happen, Oman must continue to make the effort to persevere on capacity building, and then make a positive contribution to the protection of underwater archaeological sites by pressing for improved standards of archaeological work on any project on which the country is involved.

As such, it is vital that Oman regains control of its underwater cultural heritage and seeks advice and counsel from international academic and institutional bodies, like UNESCO, in order to have, at least, a second opinion on how best to produce archaeological science.

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