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Funerary Practices at Ras Al-Hamra RH-5. New Data from 2005/2009 Excavations.

Olivia Munoz

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Window 7

Funerary Practices at Ras Al-Hamra RH-5 New Data from 2005/2009 Excavations

Olivia Munoz

Ras Al-Hamra RH-5 is part of a series of coastal sites discovered in the early 1970s and, dating from 5th to 4th millennia BC, on the rocky headland of Ras Al-Hamra, Muscat (Sultanate of Oman). In the late 1970s, some of these settlements have been subject to excavations or surveys by the Italian team led by M. Tosi (Durante and Tosi 1977), which marked the beginning of research on the Neolithic in Eastern Arabia.

In early 1980s, RH-5 was explored in two main areas. The settlement was investigated by P. Biagi, evidencing at least 7 main occupation phases including structural remains (post-holes, pits, fireplaces), botanic and faunal remains and artifacts (fishing tools, lithic industry and ornaments) (Biagi 1987; Biagi and Nisbet 1989; 1992; 1999; 2006; Biagi and Salvatori 1986; Biagi *et al.* 1984; 1989; Isetti and Biagi 1989). Several radiocarbon dates allow establishing the chronology of the anthropic deposit showing an intense occupation without discontinuity from about 4100 to 3500 cal BC, although a first phase was dated from ca. 4400-4300 cal BC (Biagi 1994; Biagi and Nisbet 2006).

On the other hand, the graveyard was excavated by a team led by S. Salvatori between 1981 and 1985, providing the very first evidences on the funerary practices and biology from Omani Neolithic populations (Bondioli *et al.* 1998; Coppa *et al.* 1986; 1990; Coppa, Cucina and Mack 1993; Danubio and Coppa 1984; Macchiarelli 1989; Mack and Coppa 1992; Palmieri *et al.* 1994; Salvatori 1996; 2007; Santini 2002). More than 120 graves corresponding to 140 individuals and distributed in 3 main stratigraphic layers were excavated and

recorded in the north-eastern part of the headland, altogether with an area (43) where the perturbed remains of at least 80 individuals were identified probably corresponding to a dramatic change in funerary practices (Salvatori 2007; Santini 2002). A number of radiocarbon dates from the graves suggest that the graveyard is used between ca. 3800 and 3300 cal BC (Salvatori 2007: 5; 16).

Few meters north of RH-5, 25 graves containing the remains of 32 individuals were excavated at RH-10, whose characteristics are very similar to those from RH-5 (Santini 1987). Indeed, it seems that the area has been intensively used as a graveyard by Ras Al-Hamra community during the 4th millennium BC. Since 2005, new excavations were conducted at RH-5 and brought to light 21 new graves, containing 40 individuals, in the western part of the site, indicating that the graveyard was more extended westward than supposed before (Figure 7.1). Several graves belonging to the most ancient layers of the deposit were evidenced in a trench (Trench B), while many other were distributed on the surface excavated in extension, pertaining to the last layers of the occupation (Franceschini 2006; Munoz 2008). These new graves confirmed the previous observations about burial modalities and provided more details on actions performed during mortuary ceremonies.

During the salvage excavation in 2005, we noticed the presence of white mineral deposits on several skeletons, suggesting the possibility of textile remains still preserved in the tombs. Next excavation campaigns (2008, 2009) confirmed this observation, with the discovery of manufactured

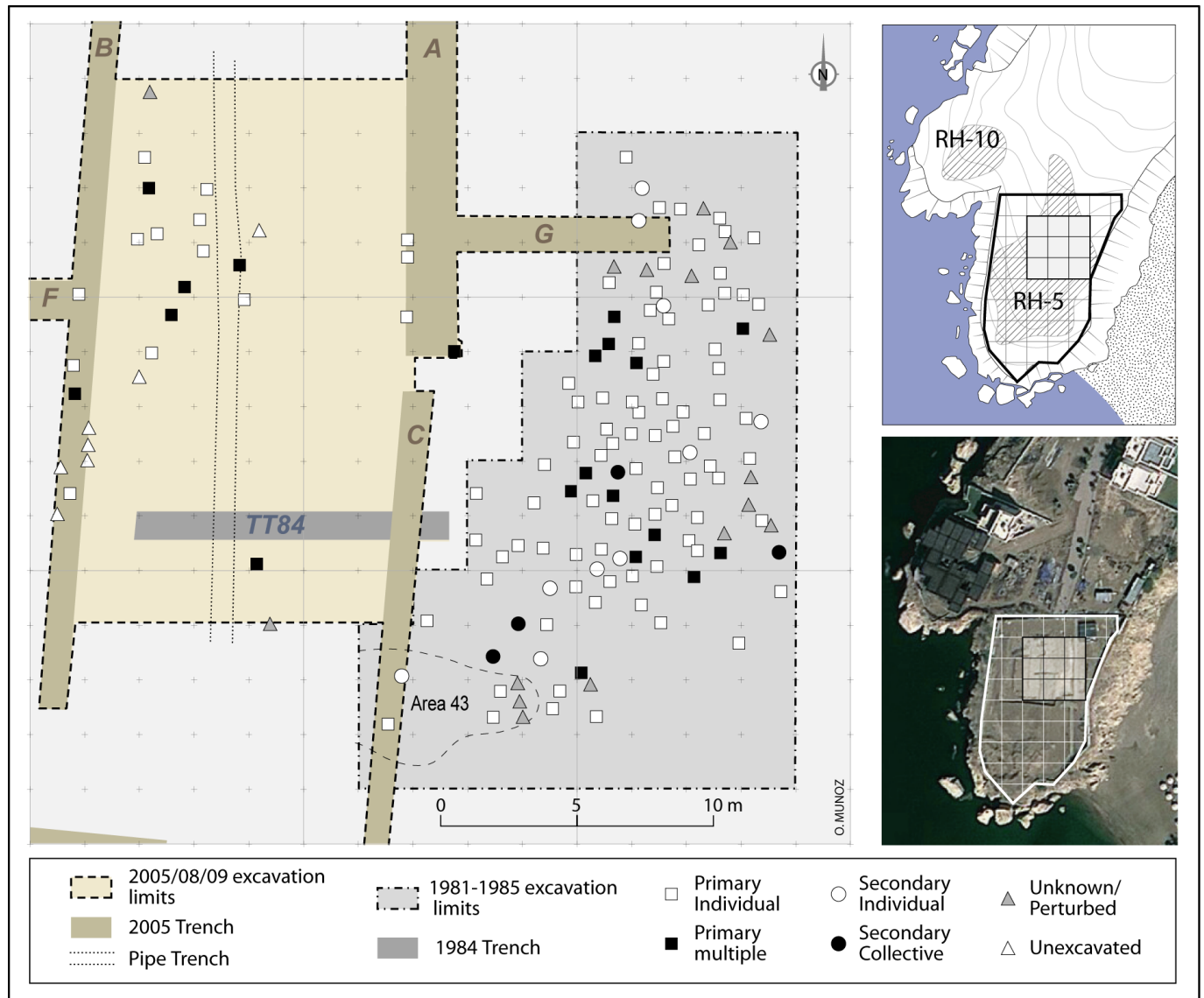


FIGURE 7.1. Distribution plan of RH-5 graves, indicating the main burial types (O. Munoz, with data from Salvatori 2007).

vegetal remains (mats, ropes and strings), whose shape had been preserved by mineralization (Figure 7.2). In fact, several deceased had been wrapped in a kind of woven shroud before being buried. Some were also tied with ropes placed around the body.

The thorough excavation also revealed a repeated sequence of layers filling the pits before their closing by stones. This recurrence, combined with other characteristics of the deposits that show little variability (position and orientation of the dead, typology of the furniture and ornament), suggests that some rules prevailed in the funerals organization, probably guided by common traditions and beliefs supported by a structured

social organization. At RH-5, although the majority of the dead were treated following the same modalities – single primary burial in a crouched position on the right side – some of them had been treated differently: about a quarter were deposited on their left side, without relation to age or sex.

In some cases, several individuals died at the same time were buried together in the same pit (multiple primary burial). Few examples of secondary deposits of dislocated bones were also found by S. Salvatori, reminding those evidenced at Al-Buhais BHS-18 graveyard, about thousand years older (Kieswetter 2006; Kutterer 2010) (Figure 7.1).

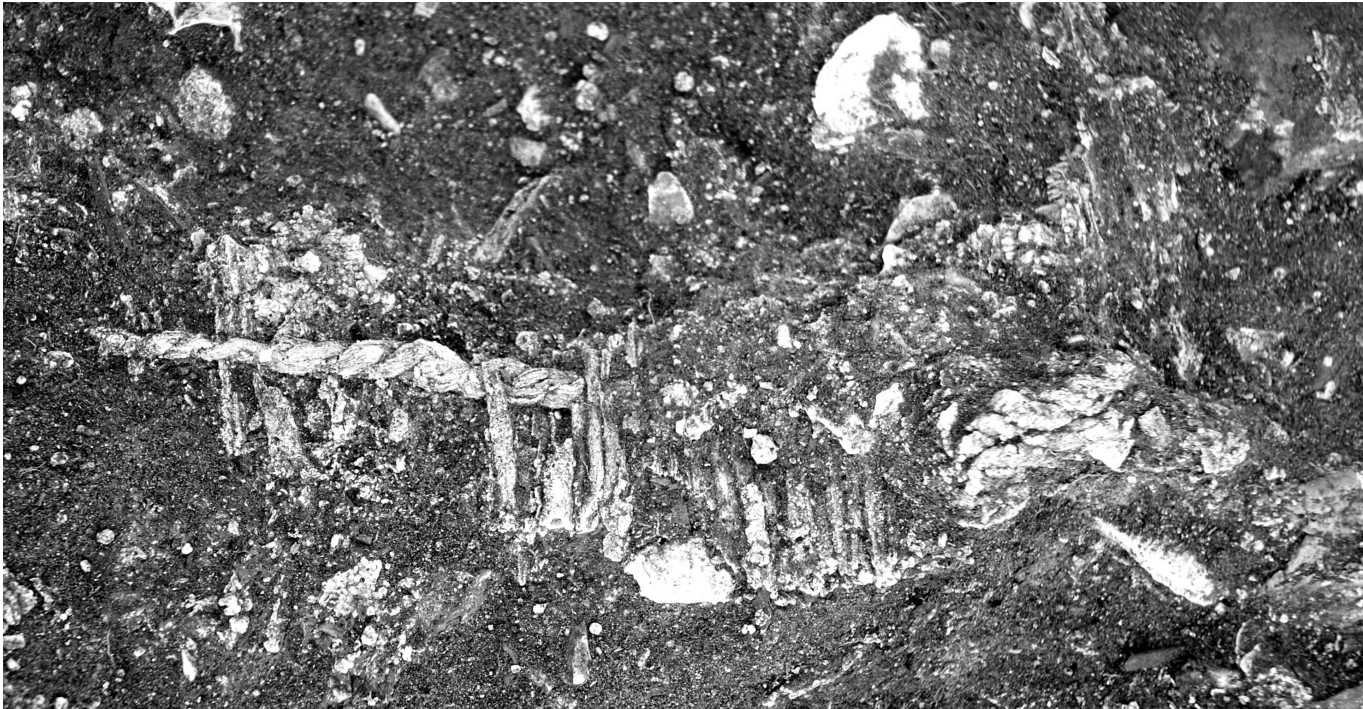


FIGURE 7.2. Example of manufactured vegetal remains preserved by mineralization found in the graves (O. Munoz).



FIGURE 7.3.
Hypothetic reconstruction of grave 411
(O. Munoz).

Furthermore, for some individuals, the ceremony was more expensive in terms of energy/effort expended to gather some items recovered in the tomb (fauna, wadi pebbles), and in terms of furniture (tools, manufactured vegetal, jewellery) deposited with the deceased and therefore lost for the livings. This variability indicates that despite common traditions, the community was open to individual expression in mortuary behavior and may signify a certain degree of social differentiation.

A particularly rich tomb, numbered as 411, was excavated in 2008 and allowed a hypothetical reconstruction (Figure 7.3). An adult man has been buried in an oval pit, lying on his right side, in a

crouched position, with the head toward northeast. He wore a necklace with pendants, a bracelet of shell plates on the left wrist, and a string of stone beads on the right one. Around his head, several shark teeth were recovered not far from *Dentalium* shells, usually used as beads; they could have been part of a headband. Before his disposal, the deceased has been tied with ropes and wrapped in a kind of shroud. The whole has been recovered by wadi pebbles. Then several fishes, shells, and mammal parts have been deposited, as well as stone artifacts, and a big gastropod shell. At the end, several turtle heads have been laid on the grave, before being recovered by mats and polygonal stones ■

Serge Cleuziou & Maurizio Tosi

**IN THE SHADOW OF
THE ANCESTORS**

**THE PREHISTORIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE
EARLY ARABIAN CIVILIZATION IN OMAN**

second expanded edition

Edited by

Dennys Frenez & Roman Garba

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Front cover: Alignment of Hafit type tombs at Al-Ayn © Roman Garba

Back cover: Hafit type tombs at Shihr Jaylah © Roman Garba

Note: The maps in this book are historical and cannot be modified as they are specifically drawn for that period only and they do not reflect political, geographical and administrative boundaries. The Geographical Place Names (GPN) in these maps are not written by the Arabic Standardized Romanization System applied in the National Survey Authority of Oman (NSA).

Table of Contents

Foreword	ix
<i>Cornerstones of Archaeological Research in Oman</i> , by H.H. Haitham bin Tariq Al-Said	
Editorial Note	xi
<i>A Posthumous Expanded Edition</i> , by D. Frenez & R. Garba	
Acknowledgements	xv
In Memoriam of Serge Cleuziou, 1945-2009	xix
<i>An Arabian Explorer in a Cartesian Mind</i> , by M. Tosi †	
In Memoriam of Maurizio Tosi, 1944-2017	xxv
<i>A Scientist of Curiosity</i> , by D. Frenez	
Chapter 1 • A Land of Many Landscapes for Greater Opportunities	1
Chapter 2 • The Search for the Earliest Humans in Oman	17
Window 1	32
<i>On the Trail of the First Humans in Oman</i> , by J. Rose	
Chapter 3 • From Early Hunters to the Last Foragers	37
Window 2	64
<i>Early Herders at A-Buhais 18</i> , by M. Uerpmann & H.-P. Uerpmann	
Window 3	66
<i>Earliest Cultures along the Coastlands of Oman</i> , by V. Charpentier	
Window 4	69
<i>Sea Mammals and Humans in the Oman Peninsula</i> , by V. Charpentier & S. Méry	
Chapter 4 • The Great Transformation	71
Window 5	109
<i>The Middle Holocene Fishermen Settlement of KHB-1</i> , by F. Cavulli & S. Scaruffi	
Window 6	117
<i>The Prehistoric Graveyard at Ras Al-Hamra RH-5</i> , by S. Salvatori	
Window 7	122
<i>Funerary Practices at Ras Al-Hamra RH-5. New Data from 2005/2009</i> , by O. Munoz	
Window 8	126
<i>Shell-Midden Economy in the Fourth millennium BC</i> , by M. Uerpmann & H.-P. Uerpmann	
Window 9	128
<i>Marine Turtles from Ras Al-Hamra RH-5</i> , by M. Delfino & J. Frazier	
Window 10	130
<i>Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Occupations at HD-5</i> , by F. Borgi & E. Maini	

Window 11	135
<i>Bead Production in the Late Neolithic Communities of Coastal Oman</i> , by M. Buta, D. Frenez, E. Bortolini, V. Charpentier & J.M. Kenoyer	
Window 12	142
<i>Jabal Al-Aluya. An Inland Neolithic Settlement</i> , by M. Lemée & G. Gernez	
Window 13	146
<i>The Hafit Settlement HD-6 at Ras Al-Hadd</i> , by V.M. Azzarà & M. Cattani	
Window 14	151
<i>The Early Metallurgy of the Oman Peninsula</i> , by C. Giardino	
Window 15	160
<i>Analysis of Stone and Metal Artifacts from HD-6, HD-10 and HD-1</i> , by R.W. Law	
Window 16	189
<i>The Earliest Camel Remains of Oman from Ras Al-Hadd HD-6</i> , by A. Curci & M. Carletti	
Chapter 5 • A Great Society Emerges under the Eyes of the Ancestors	195
Window 17	225
<i>Tomb 1 at Ras Al-Jinz RJ-1 and Associated Bone Pits</i> , by H. Guy & O. Munoz	
Window 18	229
<i>Zukayt and the Burial Fields of Wadi Halfayin</i> , by E. Bortolini	
Chapter 6 • Taming the Desert with Oases and Herds	233
Window 19	254
<i>Animal Economy in an Early Oasis Settlement</i> , by M. Uerpmann & H.-P. Uerpmann	
Window 20	256
<i>Earliest Potteries in the Oman Peninsula</i> , by S. Méry	
Window 21	259
<i>An Early Third Millennium BC Madbassa?</i> , by S. Cleuziou †	
Window 22	261
<i>The Early Oasis Settlements of the Hajar Region</i> , by J. Orchard & J. Orchard †	
Chapter 7 • Trade and the Beginnings of Seafaring in the Indian Ocean	267
Window 23	301
<i>Copper from Magan for the Mesopotamian Cities</i> , by G. Weisgerber †	
Window 24	303
<i>From Green to Red. Smelting Red Copper from the Green Ore</i> , by G. Weisgerber †	
Window 25	306
<i>Indus Pottery in the Oman Peninsula</i> , by S. Méry	
Window 26	309
<i>Reconstructing an Early Bronze Age Boat</i> , by T. Vosmer	
Window 27	314
<i>Early Bronze Age Navigation and Trade Routes</i> , by T. Vosmer	
Window 28	317
<i>Bitumen from Ras Al-Jinz RJ-2</i> , by E. Badel	
Window 29	323
<i>The Manufacture of Conus sp. Shell Rings at the Site of HD-60</i> , by L.G. Marcucci	
Chapter 8 • The Early Arabian Civilization at its Zenith	329

Window 30	366
<i>Al-Ayn. A Small Settlement and Palm Tree Garden in Eastern Oman</i> , by O. Blin	
Window 31	369
<i>Copper Production as Seen from Al-Moyassar I</i> , by G. Weisgerber †	
Window 32	373
<i>Bat. A Leading Centre of Early Civilization in Oman</i> , by C.M. Cable & C.P. Thornton	
Window 33	377
<i>The Umm an-Nar Burial Pits of the Necropolis of Bat</i> , by S. Döpper & C. Schmidt	
Window 34	381
<i>The Umm an-Nar Settlement of Al-Zebah</i> , by S. Döpper & C. Schmidt	
Window 35	385
<i>The Indus Civilization Trade with the Oman Peninsula</i> , by D. Frenez	
Window 36	397
<i>Carnelian and Agate Beads in the Oman Peninsula during the Third to Second millennia BC</i> , by J.M. Kenoyer & D. Frenez	
Chapter 9 • The Wadi Suq Period. Collapse and Transformation	411
Window 37	434
<i>Copper in the Wadi Suq Period (Second millennium BC)</i> , by G. Weisgerber †	
Window 38	436
<i>Adam North Graveyard in Central Oman</i> , by G. Gernez & J. Giraud	
Chapter 10 • The Iron Age. New Developments on the Eve of History	441
Window 39	463
<i>Long Collective Graves LCG-1 and LCG-2 at Daba, Musandam (Oman)</i> , by F. Genchi	
Window 40	470
<i>Mudhmar East. An Iron Age Ritual Site at the Desert Margin</i> , by G. Gernez & M. Jean	
Window 41	473
<i>Iron Age Buildings with a Pillared Room in the Oman Peninsula</i> , by A. Benoist	
Window 42	475
<i>Iron Age Mining and Smelting in the Lizq Period</i> , by G. Weisgerber †	
Window 43	477
<i>The Early Iron Age in the Sultanate of Oman</i> , by P.A. Yule	
Window 44	480
<i>'Uqdat Al-Bakrah. An Early Iron Age Metal-Working Atelier just inside the Empty Quarter in Oman</i> , by F. Genchi, C. Giardino & P.A. Yule	
Window 45	488
<i>The Fish-Eaters – Ichthyophagoi</i> , by O. Nalesini	
Window 46	490
<i>Ichthyophagoi their Culture and Economy during the Iron Age in Coastal Oman</i> , by R. Loreto	
Window 47	492
<i>Rock Art of Al-Hajar Mountains. A Review and Update</i> , by A.E. Fossati	
Window 48	500
<i>Triliths. Hinterland Monuments of Ancient Nomads</i> , by R. Garba	
Chapter 11 • Dhofar. The Land of Frankincense	511
Bibliography • Journals / Books / Papers	529