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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

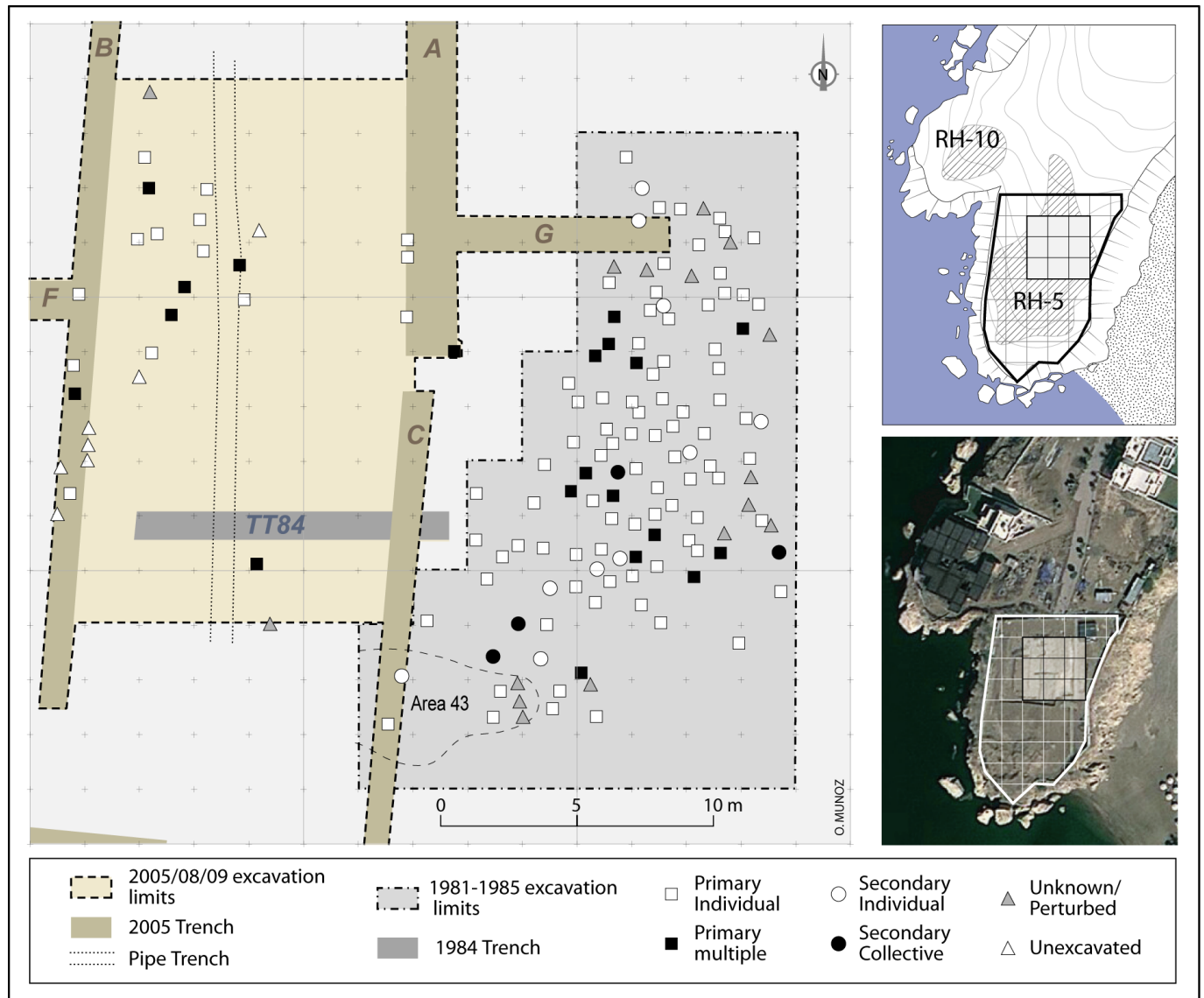


FIGURE 7.1. Distribution plan of RH-5 graves, indicating the main burial types (O. Munoz, with data from Salvatori 2007).

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).

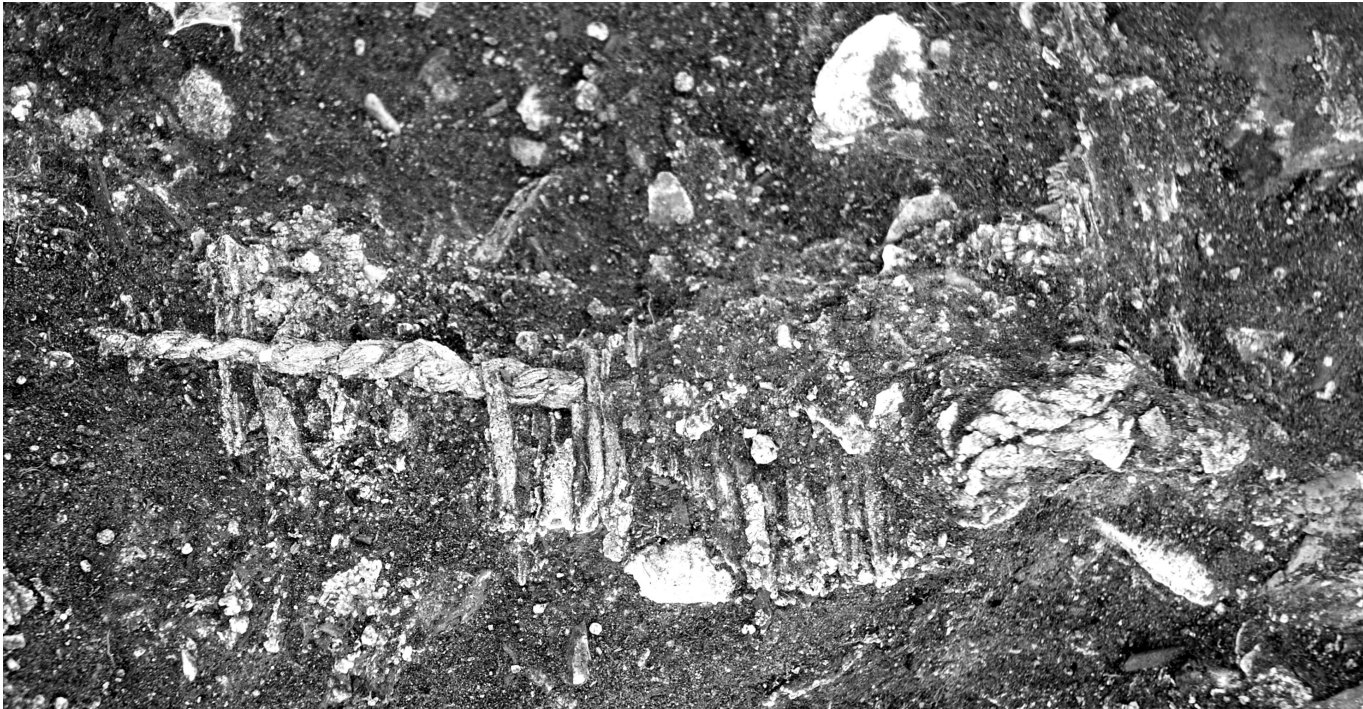


FIGURE 7.2. Example of manufactured vegetal remains preserved by mineralization found in the graves (O. Munoz).



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 north-east. 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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Ministry of Heritage and Culture
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P.O. Box 668 P.C. 113
Khuwair, Muscat
Phone: +968 24 64 13 00
Fax: +968 24 64 13 31
Email: info@mhc.gov.om
Web Site: www.mhc.gov.om

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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).

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