

THE PREHISTORIC FISHERMEN SETTLEMENTS OF RH5 AND RH6
AT QURUM, SULTANATE OF OMAN

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Most of the prehistoric sites of Ra's al Hamra, the Red Cape, were discovered during the Seventies. The cape lies a few kilometres west of Muscat, capital of Oman, and consists of a calcareous tertiary terrace stretching towards the sea in one of the more interesting ecological zones, at the end of the flat Batinah beach and the beginning of the rocky coastline which extends southwards as far as Ra's al Hadd.

Four of the sites discovered so far were partly excavated by the Italian and German archaeological expeditions: RH4, RH5, RH10 and RH6 which lies in the mangrove swamp (Durante, Tosi 1977) (fig. 1). The site of RH5 is a mound some 90 metres long and 45 wide. A graveyard and a sequence of settlements were brought to light in the last five excavation campaigns (Biagi, Salvatori 1986; Coppa et Al 1986). The opening of a trench in East West direction led to the discovery of a thick stratigraphy which revealed at least seven main phases of occupation. The deposit is composed of food refuse - mainly marine and mangrove shells and fish bones as well as charcoal and ash levels separated by sterile sandy layers.

Excavations were carried out by trowelling and cleaning the surfaces with a vacuum cleaner. The uppermost layer 0 produced a few pits and three postholes. One of the pits yielded a black burnished carinated pot with traces of bitumen filling (Cleuziou, Tosi n d). The layer has been dated to 2810±100 bc (Bln-3140) and 2990±60 (Bln-3401). The underlying layer 1 produced evidence of a circular structure (fig.2), hearths and pits and was dated to 3080±60 bc (Bln 3141), 2930±60 bc (Bln-3143), 2950±50 bc (Bln-3144) and 2890±60 bc (Bln-3168) (Quitta pers. comm. 1985) (All dates mentioned in this text are uncalibrated). Very similar C14 dates come from layers 3/3d, while layer 5a gave a few large pits and postholes and was very rich in polished stone artefacts. 5b, on the rubified bedrock, was dated to the middle of the IV millennium bc (Biagi, Nisbet nd).

As attested by the large percentage of fish bones and shell valves, the site had an almost absolutely sea oriented economy. This is also documented by the material culture instruments including shell and double pointed bone fish hooks (fig. 3) as well as notched net weights chipped from locally available wadi pebbles (Travers, Biagi 1985). Fishing was in fact one of the most important activities practised at the site. Agriculture was probably a small scale subsistence activity as revealed by a couple of Sorghum grains collected in the shelly layer 4 datable slightly earlier than the beginning of the III millennium bc (Nisbet 1985). Stone tools were made from local outcrops material such as quartzite, rarely flint and red jasper. The most typical instrument

is the so called "wedge" (Uerpmann n d) obtained by percussion technique, documented throughout the whole sequence, while hammerstones from shaped wadi pebbles are also very common (Gebel, Maggi pers comm 1986).

A few hundred metres Southeast of RH5 lies the site of RH6, in the mangrove swamp, on the right bank of Wadi Aday. The site was partly damaged by a bull-dozer trench opened in 1981 (Durante, Tosi 1977). Three dates then obtained from the trench profile range between the end of the V and the first half of the IV millennium bc (Biagi et Al 1984).

The campaign of January 1986 continued this trench. A square metre was accurately excavated and 14 main archaeological layers were recognised. Another trench was opened on top of the mound where a couple of burials were discovered. Here the excavation was stopped when the deposit revealed the existence of man made features, namely a couple of deep postholes. Among the most important finds of RH6 is a large collection of shell implements (Biagi 1985) including different stages of shell hook manufacture: "blanks", "rough outs" and finished implements (Dyall 1983).

Strong differences are observable between the finds of these two shell/fish middens. Net weights are different both in shape and method of manufacture. Those from RH6 are smaller and often incised around their perimeter. The chipped stone assemblage includes flint bilaterally backed points and hyaline quartz blades. Extremely important is also the discovery of a greenstone polished axe, which is the first cutting edged tool so far found along the Northern Oman coast. During the excavations of RH5 and RH6 a flotation machine was in use for five weeks. Abundant Zyziphus stones and fruits were collected from both sites indicating that the area was certainly settled at least during the summers (Biagi, Nisbet n d; Biagi et Al n d).

Charcoal identifications demonstrated that the mangrove swamp was already established when fishermen began to inhabit RH5 in the mid IV millennium bc. Avicennia, Tamarix and Zyziphus charcoal pieces have also been identified from the medium layers of RH6, indicating that the mangrove was already growing at the end of the V millennium bc.

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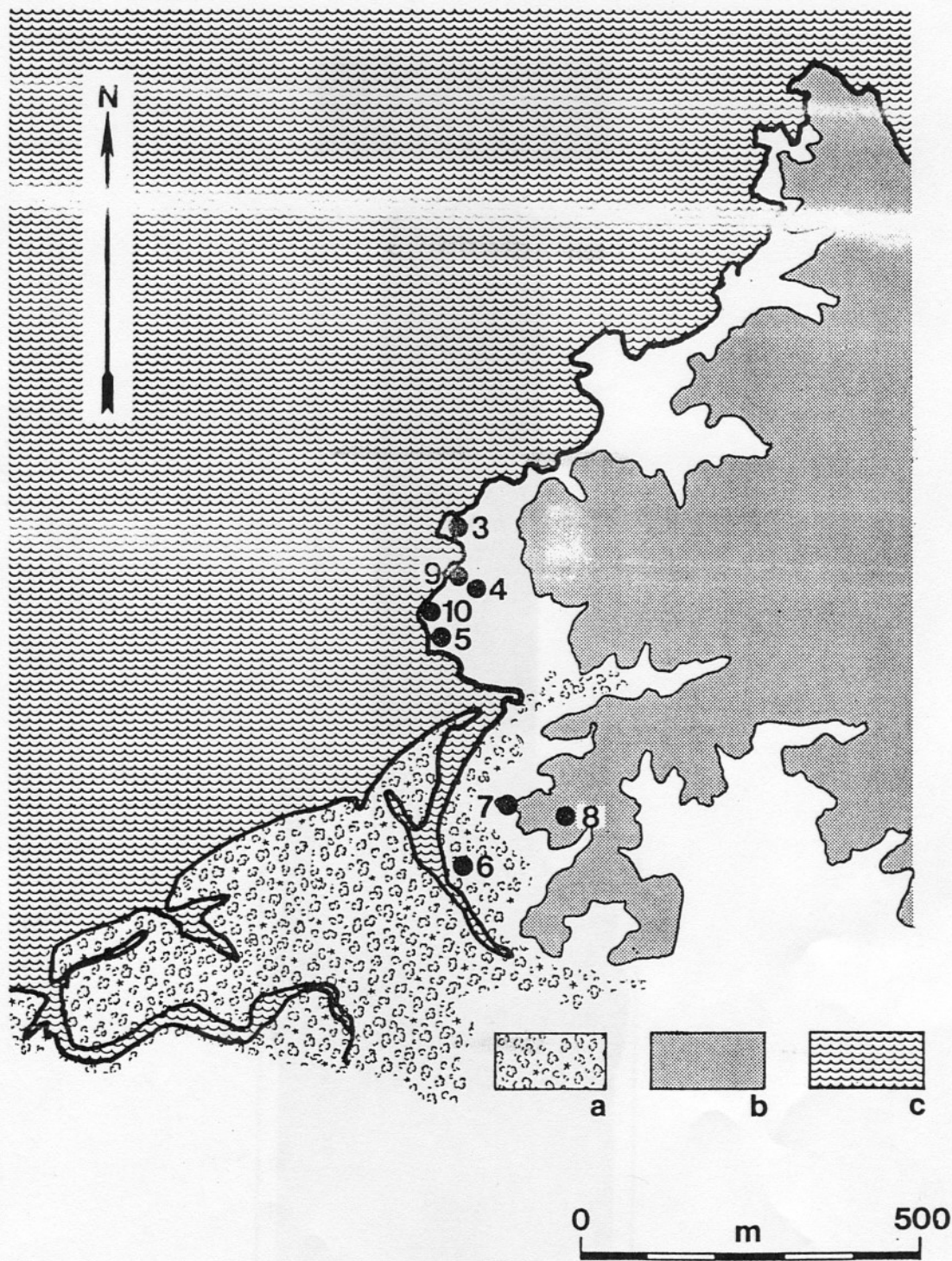


fig. 1 - Distribution map of the shell/fish midden sites on the Ra's al-Hamra cape and the Qurum swamp. a) mangrove area. b) lands above m 10. c) Indian Ocean.

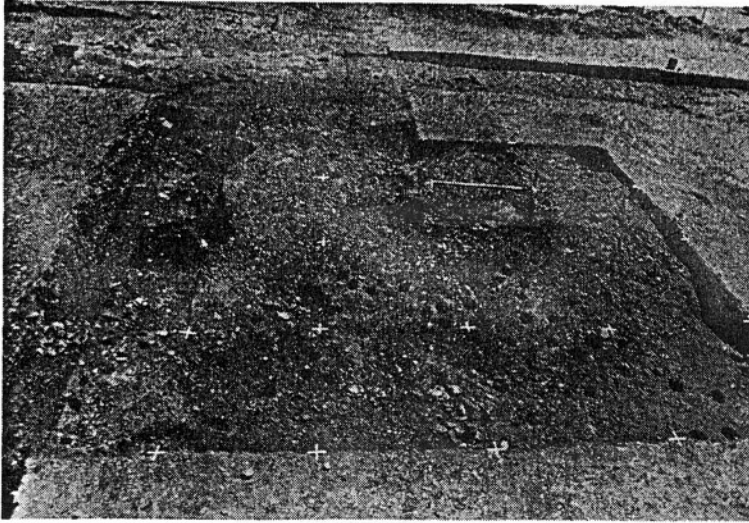


fig. 2 - The probable circular hut foundation in layer 1 at RH5.

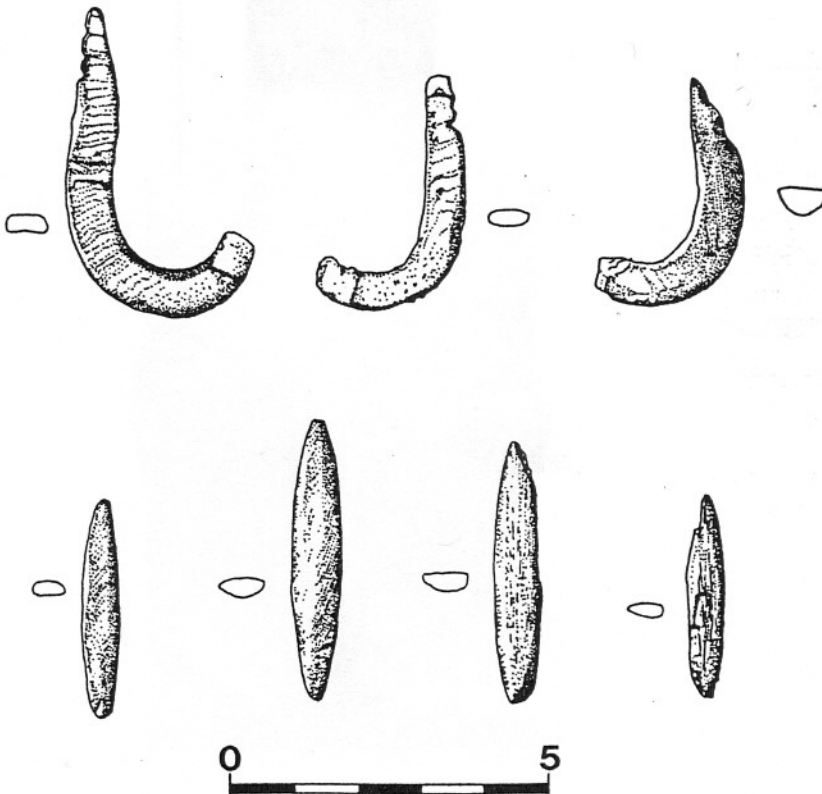


fig. 3 - Shell hooks (top line) and double pointed bone specimens (bottom line) from RH5.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE

SEMINAR

FOR

ARABIAN STUDIES

VOL. 17 - 1987

SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES

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