

## A NEW SEAL FROM THE ANCIENT OASIS OF SALUT (CENTRAL OMAN)

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### Abstract

During the construction works for the new visitors' centre of the archaeological park that will be centred on the main Iron Age site of Salut, in Central Oman, a fortuitous discovery brought to light a new stone stamp seal. The seal adds to the extremely limited corpus of seals known from south East Arabia, and to the four other ones discovered by the Italian Mission To Oman during its work at Salut and ST1, the nearby Early Bronze Age tower site. The seal is shortly presented here, and elements suggesting a date into the Iron Age are discussed.

Since 2004 the team of the Italian Mission To Oman (IMTO) has been carrying on an extensive programme of archaeological investigations in the area to the northeast of the modern town of Bisya, not far from Bahla in Central Oman.

Initially focused on the excavation of the major Iron Age site of Salut, the IMTO project recently extended to include the excavation of the nearby Early Bronze Age site labeled ST1<sup>1</sup>, and a series of surveys of the surrounding plain and hills. The collected data already allowed a diachronic reconstruction of ancient settlement patterns in the area<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, the favorable location of Bisya at the confluence of wadi Bahla and wadi Sayfam suffices to explain why the area was exploited for human occupation<sup>3</sup> at least since the second half of the third millennium, if not earlier<sup>4</sup>. In a period where climate was certainly wetter than today, before the rapid climatic change (RCC) period between 4200-3800 cal. years BC<sup>5</sup>, the plain of Salut was in all likelihood one of the several oases scattered along the western piedmont of the al-Hajjar mountain range where the Bronze Age culture of the Oman Peninsula (so-called Umm an-Nar culture) developed and flourished, up until the end of the third millennium<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Preliminary reports for all the archaeological campaigns are available on-line at <http://arabiantica.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=imto-salut-campaigns>.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent summary see DEGLI ESPOSTI 2015a.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of favorable geographic, climatic and sedimentary aspects of Salut's location see STANGER 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Lithic tools dated to the Neolithic period were collected by M. Cremaschi during one of his surveys in the area (see Cremaschi in 2007 A Preliminary report, cfr. note 1).

<sup>5</sup> MAYEWSKI ET AL. 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See for example CLEUZIQU, TOSI 2007, 137-159.

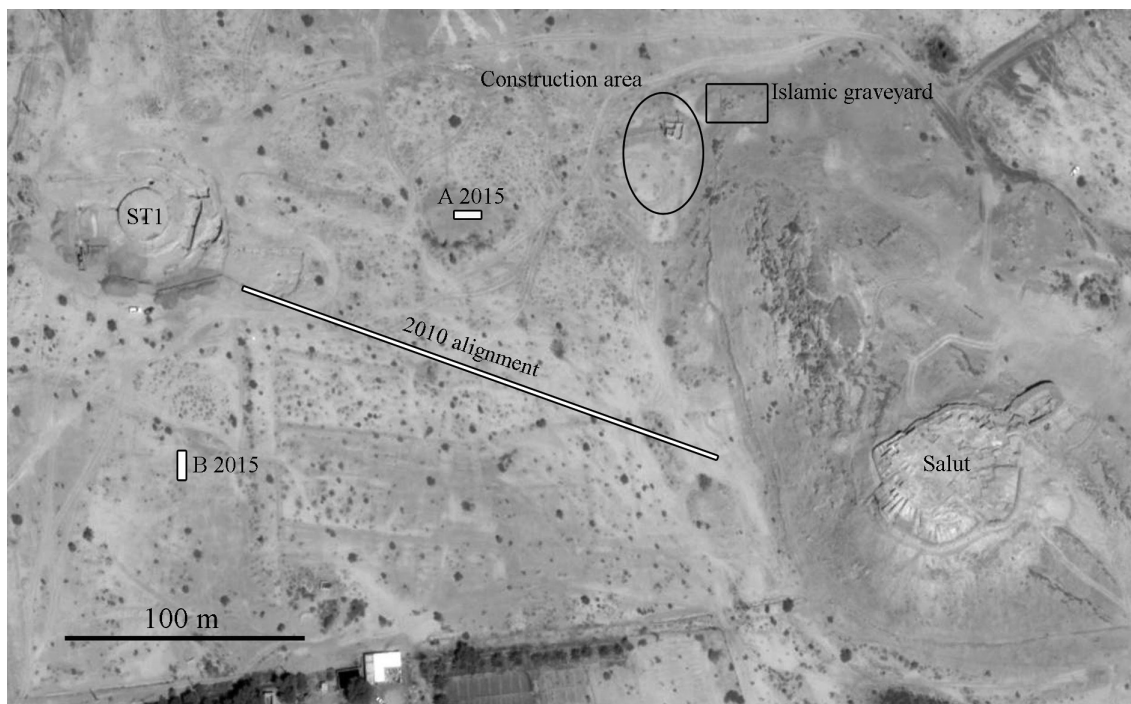


Fig. 1 - The graveyard area where the seal was discovered is located to the north of Salut. The test trenches excavated during February 2015 are shown together with the line along which a series of 12 test trenches was excavated in March 2010.

A more detailed study of the geo-archaeology of the oasis is in course of completion by one of the authors (MDE) in collaboration with M. Cremaschi, based on the richly informative data obtained from the stratigraphic excavation of the huge ditch that surrounds the Early Bronze Age tower at ST1<sup>7</sup>. These will be considered together with the results of old and new surveys of a wider area along the bed of wadi Sayfam and combined with the study of several test pits excavated in the plain more closely surrounding Salut (fig. 1)<sup>8</sup>. One of these trenches (A 2015 in fig. 1) was purposely excavated near the area destined for the erection of a new visitors' centre, in order to evaluate the potential archaeological risk of such a construction.

The excavation of these test pits, specifically those located between Salut and ST1, revealed the presence of shallow buried soils below the recently deposited topsoil. These buried soils can be dated by a few discovered sherds to the Iron Age and to the Bronze Age. However, the Bronze Age soil is much less extensively preserved: often completely washed out or eroded, it is usually replaced by the Iron Age one and only survives in more depressed and protected areas. The same situation was revealed in Trench A 2015, where a single Bronze Age sherd was just a residual occurrence among a handful of Iron Age ones.

Given this general, rough stratigraphic situation, the retrieval of ancient material during the construction works for the abovementioned visitors' centre is not surprising, even in the

<sup>7</sup> DEGLI ESPOSTI 2011; DEGLI ESPOSTI *in press*.

<sup>8</sup> See Preliminary reports for 2007A, 2010A, and 2015A campaigns (cfr. note 1).

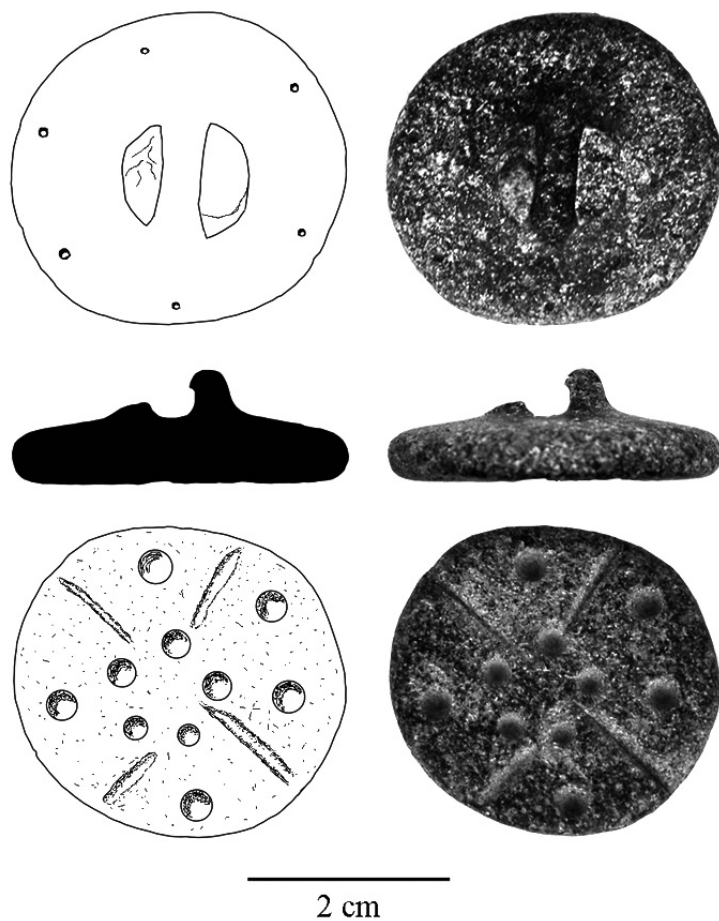


Fig. 2 - Photographs and drawing of the newly discovered seal (M. Degli Esposti).

absence of ancient built structures (fig. 1). The more so to the east of the core area, where buried large stone walls are visible, some of them now englobed in an Islamic graveyard (fig. 1). There, among the material collected from the surface, a fragmented chlorite stamp seal was discovered by one of the authors (WM), and is presented in this short note (fig. 2).

The seal is circular in shape and has a fragmented, pierced boss surviving on its back. The sealing surface and the back side are flattened, the overall section is rectangular with rounded short sides. The seal is made of the grey-greenish chloritite typically used for stone vessels manufacture, a characteristic production of South East Arabia from the third to the first millennium BC<sup>9</sup>. On the sealing surface it shows ten shallow circular drillings roughly arranged on two concentric rows, the innermost of which is more regularly outlined. Besides, four irregular straight incisions define a sort of cross whose limbs start from the seal edge and abut against the inner circular drillings, thus not joining one another in the centre. On

<sup>9</sup> E.g. DAVID 1996.

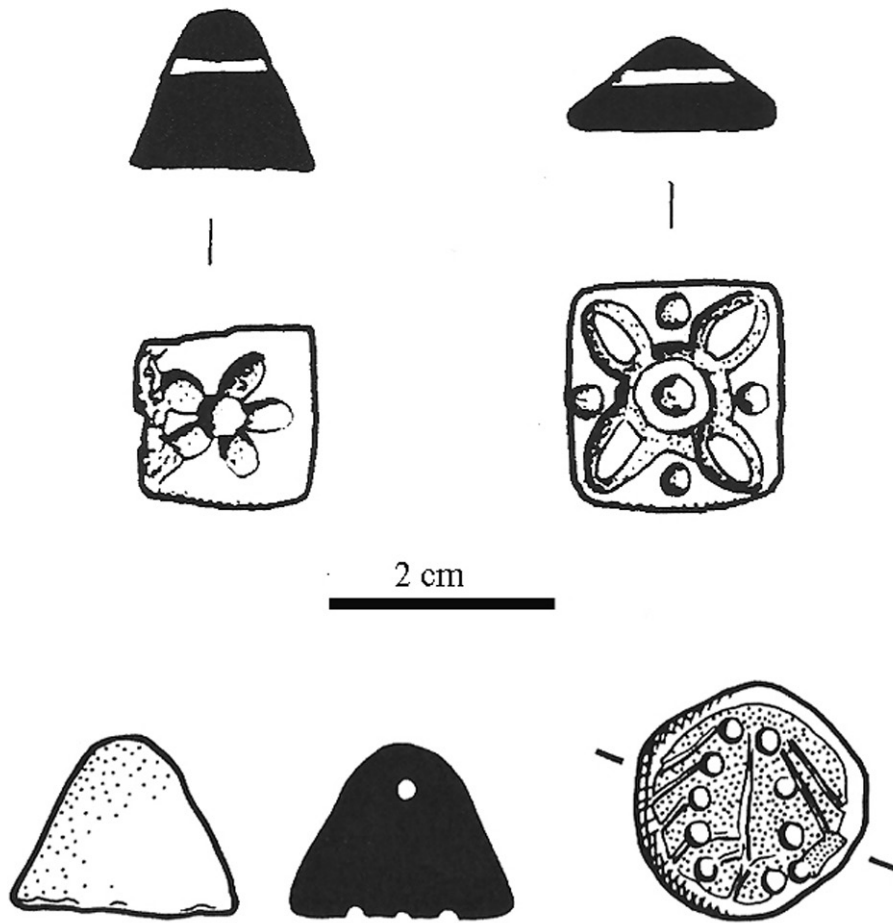


Fig. 3 - Two Iron Age pyramidal stamp seals from Rumeilah (top, after LOMBARD 1985, fig. 2.2,3) and one from the Iron Age levels at Tell Abraq (bottom, after POTTS 1991, fig. 135), show the best parallels for the new Salut seal's motifs.

the back side, six barely visible small incised points are rather equally spaced along the outer circumference.

Prior to this, only four seals were known from the IMTO excavations at Salut and ST1, three being datable to the Iron Age<sup>10</sup> and one to the final centuries of the third millennium and showing a strong Harappan influence, if not the product of an Harappan craftsman<sup>11</sup>.

A date for this new seal clearly cannot be established on stratigraphic bases. However, the area is covered by a dense scatter of Iron Age sherds with almost no intrusive material and this seems to provide a strong clue for a plausible attribution. Comparisons with the limited corpus of stamp seals found in South East Arabia can be used to support this suggestion. The rather crude style of the carvings combined with the use of shallow drillings fit in fact

<sup>10</sup> DEGLI ESPOSTI 2014.

<sup>11</sup> DEGLI ESPOSTI 2015b; DEGLI ESPOSTI ET AL. 2015.

very well with the general schematism of the sealing motifs shared by Iron Age seals from the region<sup>12</sup>.

Moreover, the “decoration” on the sealing surface finds the best parallels in a couple of pyramidal stamp seals discovered at Rumeilah and coming from the Early Iron Age levels of the site (fig. 2 top), and in a single conoid seal coming from the Iron Age levels of Tell Abraq (fig. 2 bottom). The two seals from Rumeilah show a similar use of drillings to compose centrally symmetric motifs (in those case more closely recalling stylized flowers), while on the Tell Abraq seal a comparable combination of rough straight incisions and drillings is used to reproduce what has been interpreted as a stylized bunch of dates<sup>13</sup>. The same carving technique, used to obtain more regularly geometric motifs that also respect a central symmetry, can be seen on at least two pyramidal stamp seals of highly probable South East Arabian production that were discovered in the al-Maqsha necropolis in Bahrain<sup>14</sup>.

Extreme shape variability is one of the most remarkable aspects of South East Arabian seals from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. As such, the fact that the new seal from Salut finds no precise parallel among previously known specimens is not surprising, and clearly of little chronological help. Likewise, both stamp and cylinder seals were used during both chronological periods, although during the Iron Age the production of pyramidal stamp seals seems to become typical of the area<sup>15</sup>.

To sum up, the new seal from the plain of Salut has to be most likely dated to the Iron Age on the basis of both typological parallels and context. The accurate excavation of the area surrounding its find-spot is anyhow scheduled for next season and will hopefully provide safer and more exhaustive data.

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<sup>12</sup> DEGLI ESPOSTI 2014, 135-136. This remains true even if two seals from Samad, regrettably not listed in the cited paper, are considered (see YULE 2014: fig. 18.1,7).

<sup>13</sup> POTTS 1991, 95.

<sup>14</sup> LOMBARD 2000, fig. 183-187.

<sup>15</sup> DEGLI ESPOSTI 2014, 136.

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