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The Royal Air Force at Masirah

Stuart Hadaway



The Royal Air Force first investigated Masirah in April 1930, surveying the island for potential use as a staging post for military and civil aircraft flying across the Middle East on their way to and from the UK and the Far East.



An agreement was struck with the Sultan, and the following year the first RAF aircraft arrived, a Short Rangoon flying boat flown by Flight Lieutenant (later Air Vice Marshal) Robert Ragg. After a slightly rocky start, supplies were landed and the beginnings of a staging post established. Over the next few years, the RAF and Imperial Airways developed a landing strip at Umm Masirah and mooring facilities just south of Umm Rasays for flying boats. These provided basic facilities where aircraft were able to stop and refuel on their journeys.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the level of traffic through the region increased drastically. The existing facilities were gradually overwhelmed, and in 1942 the older sites were closed after new ones had been built, with the Airfield Construction Service laying out a 6000ft sand runway at the northern end of the island. In April 1943, the base officially became RAF Masirah. No. 33 Staging Post was established to process the passing aircraft, and later a United States Army Air Force staging unit also arrived. Throughout the war, the station was a crucial link in the transport and communications network connecting the disparate Allied fronts in Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East.

Flights from the RAF Regiment and the RAF Levies were attached to RAF Masirah for defence

duties. RAF Masirah's offensive arm was principally provided by No. 244 Squadron, which operated from January 1942 with Bristol Blenheim Vs (and from early 1944 Vickers Wellingtons) on maritime patrol duties over the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean.

In late 1943, an aircraft from No. 244 Squadron attacked and sank a German U-Boat in the Gulf of Oman. A variety of flying boats also operated from the island, initially with detachments from No. 413 Squadron Royal Canadian Air Force, and later detachments from No. 212 and 321 (Dutch) Squadrons, all of them flying Consolidated Catalinas. In 1944 an RAF Marine Craft Unit was also established on the island, and in 1945 a Vickers Warwick fitted with an air-droppable lifeboat arrived. As well as providing a rescue service for aircrew forced to ditch in the sea, they were also available to pick up the survivors from torpedoed ships.

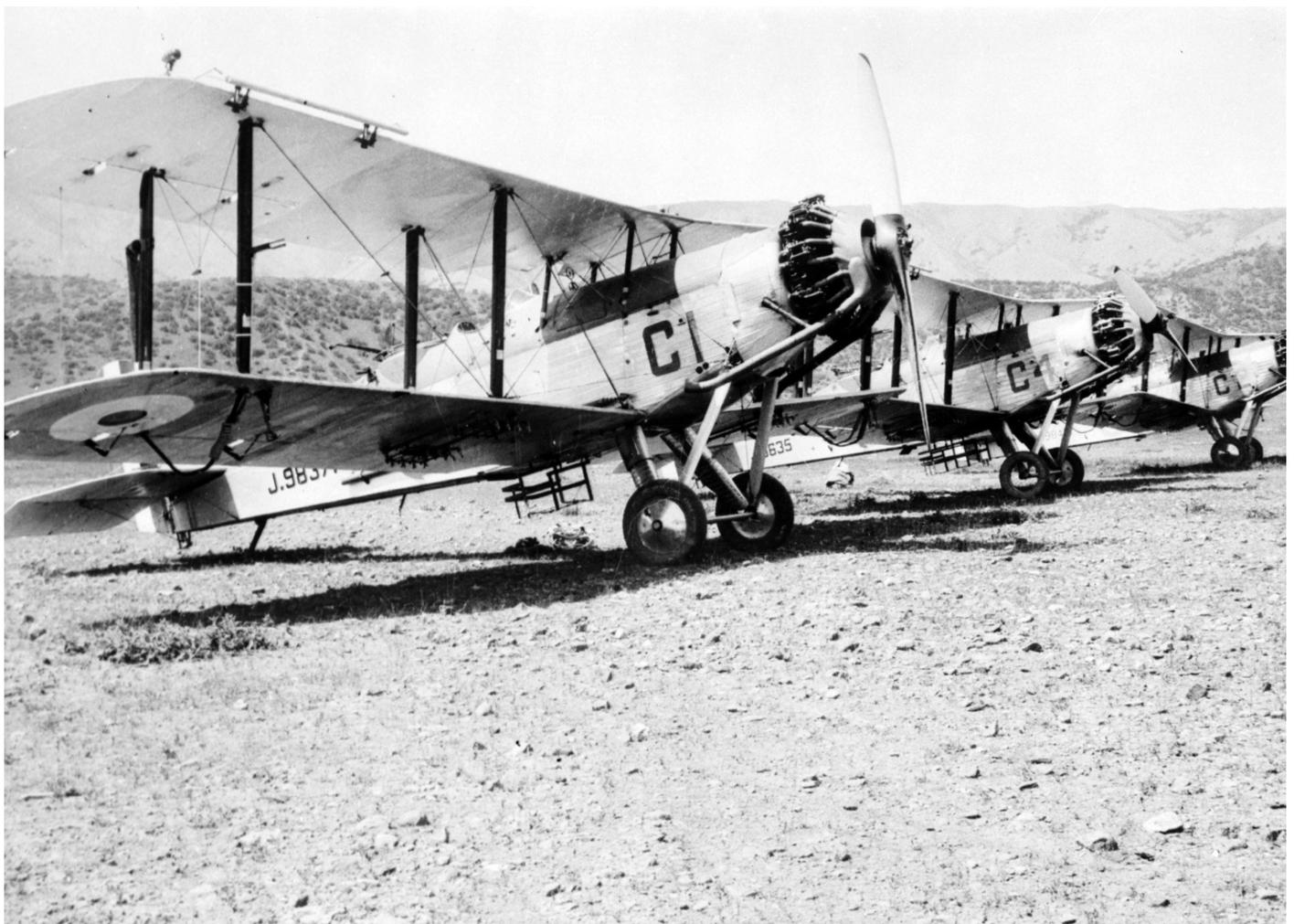
Post-war, the offensive squadron was withdrawn, but the station remained an important transit link. The Staging Post, supplemented by a radio navigation beacon, was kept busy by transport aircraft assisting in the drawn-down of units in the Far East, and also saw a gradual increase in civilian traffic as British Overseas Airways Corporation, Indian Overseas Airlines, Ethiopian Airlines, and other companies established peacetime routes across the region.

From 1956, the RAF presence began to build up again. In that year, the first jet fighters to use the station, de Havilland Venoms of No. 8 Squadron, moved through Masirah, and over the following years, Avro Shackletons based in Aden used Masirah as an advanced landing ground while flying operations over the Jebel Akhdar.

Starting in 1960, the RAF began to modernise and expand RAF Masirah. Over recent years the runway had been made unusable several times through flooding and through 1961-2, the existing sand runway was re-laid (and increased to 7000ft long) and a second, 9000ft asphalt runway laid. The staff on the station was doubled. With the new runway completed, 1962 saw a whole new generation of aircraft pass through RAF Masirah, including de Havilland Comet 4s, Hawker Hunters, and Armstrong Whitworth Argosys. To recognise the station's contributions and new lease of life, it received an official badge in 1963, with its motto – 'The reliance is on oneself' – reflecting the isolated and self-contained nature of the base. Meanwhile, the development of the rest of the station continued, with the opening of new accommodation and messes, a new NAAFI, a cinema, and other recreational and maintenance facilities being constructed.

Through the 1960s increasingly modern traffic continued through Masirah, with the RAF staging English Electric Lightnings, Avro Vulcans, and Handley Page Victors through the island, while various civilian airlines also continued to utilise the facilities. As the British military presence in the Middle and Far East drew down, formalised by the Defence White Paper of 1968, RAF Masirah conversely grew in importance. It became lynchpin for operations across the region, including Operation ALOE (the withdrawal of British forces from Zambia) in 1968, and Operation Hamish (the evacuation of 900 British nationals from West Pakistan) in 1971. By 1970 the station had expanded further, with four times as many RAF personnel based there as there had been in 1960.

However, the contraction of British military forces east of Suez finally caught up with Masirah in 1976, when it was announced that the station would be closed the following year. With the reduction in the need for military connections with the Far East and the increasing ranges of aircraft, the requirement for a staging and communications post in the region had diminished. RAF Masirah formally closed in March 1977, and the facilities were passed to the Sultan of Oman.



About Stuart Hadaway

Stuart Hadaway is Senior Researcher at the Air Historical Branch (RAF) and was previously curator of various regimental museums and at the RAF Museum. He is an expert on the First World War in the Middle East, but has also written and lectured on the history of the RAF. In addition to his many articles for history and family history magazines, he is the author of *Missing Believed Killed*, *The British Airman in the First World War*, *The British Airman in the Second World War*, *Pyramids and Fleshpots* and *From Gaza to Jerusalem*.

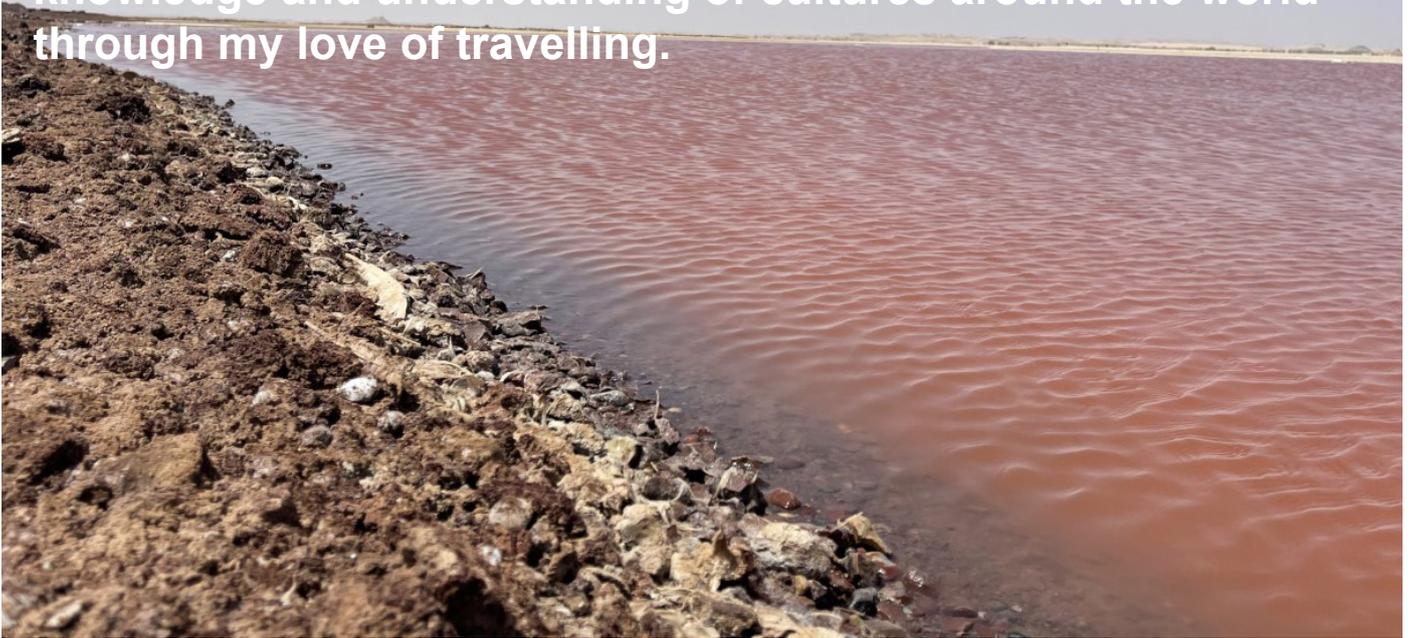


Living & Teaching in Sur

Sara Darr



Seven years ago, I made the decision to leave my teaching job in inner-city London and widen my teaching experiences in the Middle East. I also hoped to develop my knowledge and understanding of cultures around the world through my love of travelling.



I first visited Oman during my half-term break when I was teaching in Kuwait. It was literally love at first sight. I was in awe of how Oman had preserved its culture and how welcoming and generous Omanis were, not to mention the beauty of Oman's landscape, nature, and variety of wildlife.

As a primary school teacher, educating the minds of young children and people is a passion of mine. The first five years of a child's life is vital in embedding the foundations of life around them, which include an understanding of the world, developing social and emotional skills, and acquiring the fundamentals of English and Maths too. One of my aims as an educator is to ensure that I provide a safe, secure, and welcoming learning environment for each child that I teach. I strive to provide a variety of enriching, stimulating and exciting learning experiences that are meaningful for the children.

In Oman, I have been fortunate to teach in Muscat for three years and in Sur for three years. Both teaching experiences have differed hugely in terms of the size of the school, demographics of the children taught, number of students on roll and the facilities and resources available.

Sur is peaceful, quiet, and serene. It is hugely different to the capital, Muscat, as it is still being

developed. Whilst it may take time for people to adjust to living here, it is beautiful and has a special place in my heart. Each time I visit the clifftops or beaches in hidden coves, I am in awe of the mesmerizing hues of blue, turquoise, and green that make up the sea and how it glistens in the sun. Sur is unique because it has preserved its diverse range of wadis, forts and natural wonders.

Wadi Shab is about a 45-minute hike where you reach the first set of turquoise pools. You can wade in and swim to cool off from the heat. But be wary of the slippery rocks underneath the water. If you feel adventurous enough, you can swim through to the cave in the last pool and discover a secret waterfall. This wadi brings back memories of when I first moved to Oman and although it was a challenging hike for me, I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Next up is Wadi Tiwi, which is conveniently hidden at the top of Mibam village in Tiwi. It's a drive up, or trek up the mountains until you reach the last village. That is when the adventure begins, you trek down what looks like the back garden of someone's house until you discover the most gorgeous green pool of water along with a secret waterfall. This is perhaps my favourite wadi because it surpassed my expectations, and it is just stunning! If you are feeling brave, you can venture down to the waterfall, although I would



pre-COVID-19, the children and I explored habitats. We focused on a variety of habitats within Oman such as the mountains, desert, and sea. Being in Sur provided context for the children's learning which they could relate to it and share their experiences. The children could tell me that they had visited the beach and were able to identify a range of sea animals to include jellyfish, sea turtles and dolphins. These raw learning experiences that were easily accessible to them, contributed to helping to secure their knowledge and understanding of what the habitat looks like, the types of animals that live there and how they adjust to live in this climate and habitat in Sur.

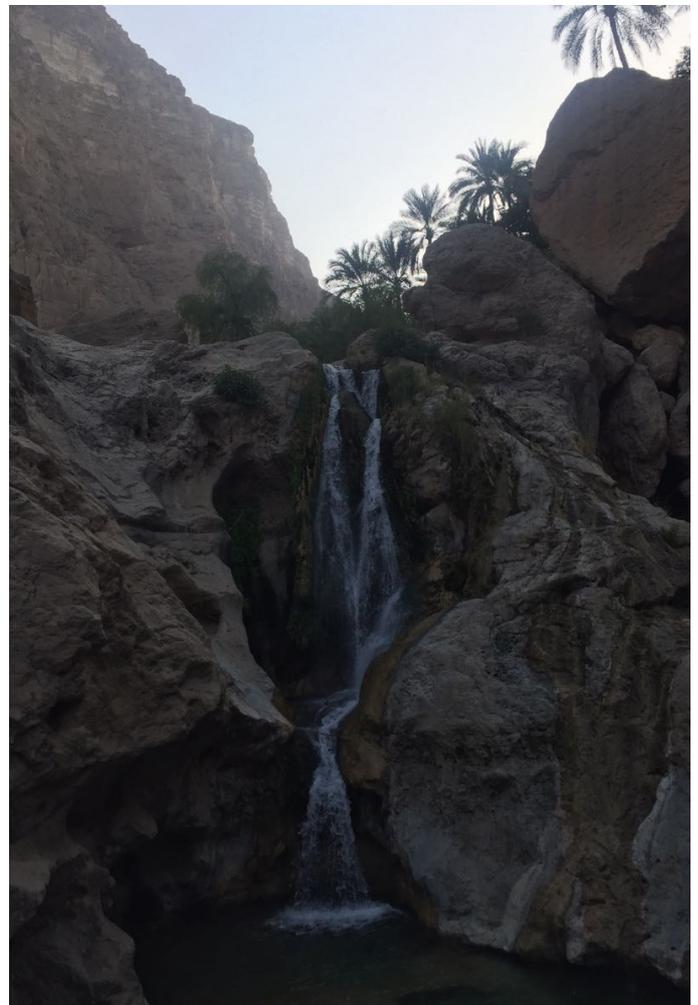
Sur is also incredibly well resourced in terms of providing historical and geographical links to learning. There is a number of forts such as Bilad Sur Castle, Sunaysilah Fort and Al Ayjah Castle. Al Ayjah is famous for the lighthouse landmark which was built by the Portuguese and acted as a watchtower. It was transformed into a lighthouse as a guide to support dhows into the lagoon. It also is home to Sur Maritime Museum, which educates and informs the public about the key role of Oman's rich heritage and maritime history. You can find the famous 'Fatah Al Khair'

recommend a local guide who can support you safely. I am yet to pluck up the courage to do this!

With regards to teaching in Sur, due to limited resources and a lack of extra-curricular activities for students, at times it has been challenging. However, the children and parents have really made my experience here invaluable. The children have a blossoming love of learning, they have an inquisitive nature and enjoy sharing their experiences of their adventures in Sur with me. Whilst the parents have shown a keen interest in supporting and celebrating their child's achievements with me.

Throughout the school year, children are taught a variety of topics that link to learning across the curriculum in subject areas such as Science, Art, History, Geography, Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Physical Education (P.E). By linking the topic to these areas of learning, encourages children to make links, build upon prior knowledge and enhance their knowledge, skills and understanding.

Whilst teaching Kindergarten Two (KG2),



dhow, built seventy years ago and is a testament to Omani boatmanship and craftsmanship alongside Sur Dhow Yard.

When I taught Grade 1, we explored modes of transport from the past and present. We learned that Sur was a focal point for trade in the Middle East as the port was where dhows were loaded and unloaded for trading and business purposes. Sur's rich history has given me the opportunity to make learning fun, relatable and exciting for my students.

Sur is most famous for its sea turtles which nest along the beaches, of Ras Al Hadd and Ras Al Jinz. It is truly an eye-opening and magical experience to see how a female sea turtle crawls onto the beach to dig a deep pit and lay over a hundred eggs. It is equally amazing to witness her hatchlings appear from under the sand and frantically scramble their way to the sea, to begin their journey in life. As part of the children's learning in Grade 2 for Art, we explored the characteristics of sea turtles, colour mixing and textures. We then created water-resistant sea turtles using wax crayons and watercolours. The final pieces were so creative and really encompassed the features of a sea turtle.

Ra's ar' Ru'ays is home to one of Oman's four spots where you can find the pink lakes. Oman's pink lakes are due to a type of algae called Dunaliella Salina and a specific bacteria. It has very high concentrations of salt, B carotene and

is home to a variety of types of harmless bacteria. Ru'ays Pink Lake, which I have visited was a spectacular sight where I viewed the pink lake on one side and on the other the green sea. These lakes also attract a wide variety of birds, I was lucky to spot a flock of flamingoes!

If you carry on driving along the coast, you will reach Al-Ashkharah. It is an excellent get-away from the centre of Sur and its humidity. Al-Ashkharah consists of a long sandy beach, a refreshing sea breeze and cute beach huts for you to relax and enjoy cooler climates.

I have heard so much about Masirah Island and although I have not yet been, it is on my bucket list to visit this year. Masirah Island is much further along the coast and is accessible by a ferry from Shannah Port. It is a small island of golden beaches and shallow turquoise lagoons, perfect for watersports like kite surfing. The wildlife at Masirah is also worth visiting as there are four species of turtles, with the main one being the loggerhead, schools of humpback whales and over three hundred species of birds. It is a keen spot for campers to soak in desert island life and admire another beauty of Oman.

Ultimately, Sur is truly a spectacular place to visit, where you can learn about the history of Oman and its rich maritime heritage, identify a variety of wildlife from the beaches to the mountains and experience the beauty of the coast. It really is a jewel of the Middle East that should be on your list to visit if you have not yet been.

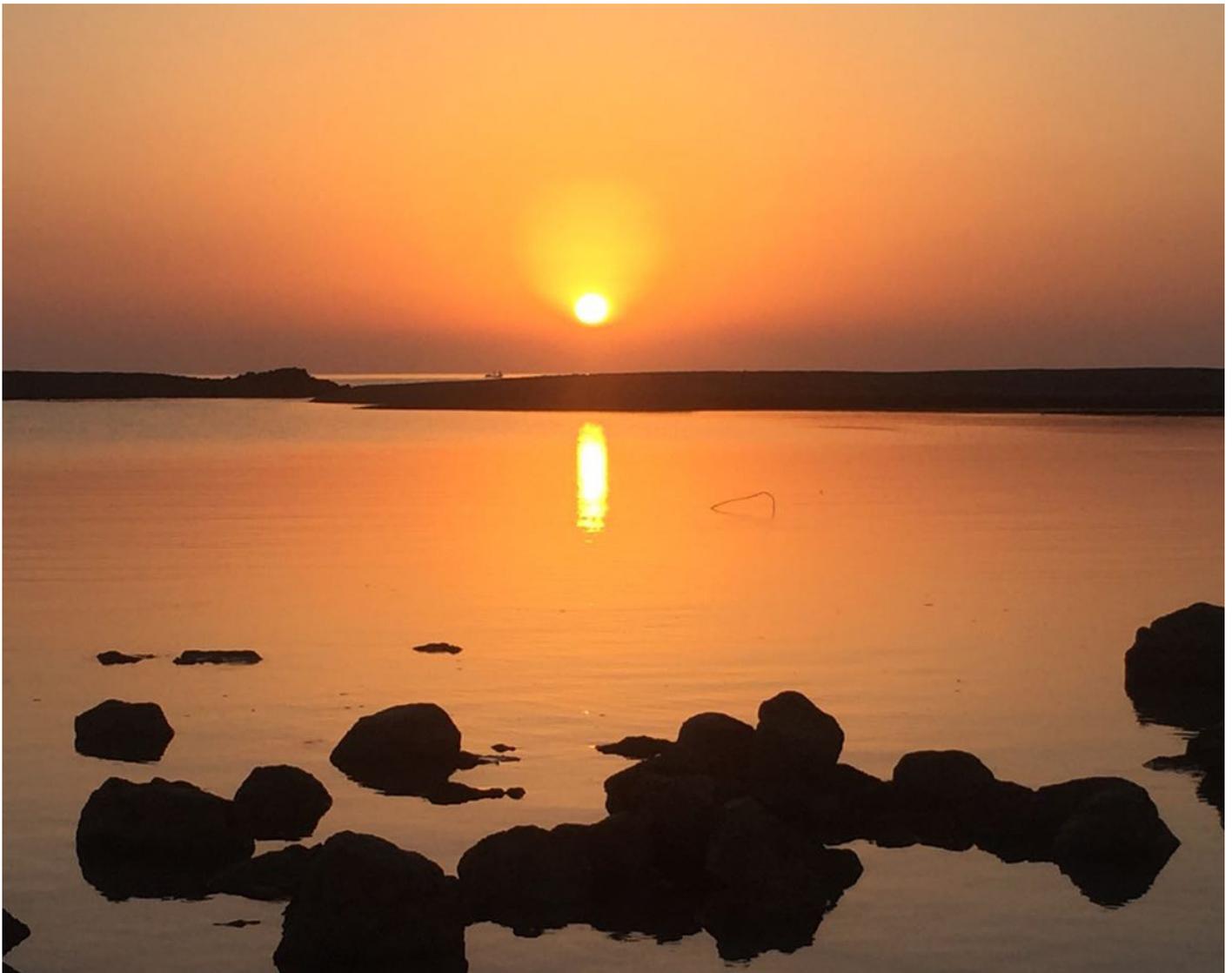


About Sara Darr

Sara studied her BA(Hons) in Mixed Media Fine Art at the University of Westminster in London and then went on to pursue her PGCE in Primary Education at the University of East London. She taught in London for two years until she decided to broaden her teaching experience by travelling abroad to teach in Kuwait. Whilst on holiday in Oman, she fell in love with its beauty, tranquillity and nature. Sara has now been residing in Oman for the past six and a half years.

Sara is currently pursuing her Masters in Special and Additional Learning Needs at the University of East London, to gain a better understanding of how best to support the children and parents in her school community.

In her free time, Sara loves to explore Oman, read about history, paint and cook her favourite dish Kashmiri biryani! You can follow her on Instagram [@sarayasmin87](#)



Tombs & Archaeology in Western Ja'alan

Professor Nasser Said Al-Jahwari



Western Ja'alan, in the governorate of al-Sharqiya South, is home to an important range of archaeological sites including a vast array of tombs.



These funerary sites are unique keys to understanding prehistoric life on the Arabian Peninsula and continue to be sources of invaluable information on Oman's past.

Funerary sites in Western Ja'alan date back to the Hafit period (c.3200–2500 BC), a period which marked a turning point in prehistoric society on the Arabian Peninsula. Evidence suggests that during this time populations adopted sedentary and agricultural lifestyles in place of nomadic patterns, ceramic and copper-working technologies were starting to be developed, and a general population growth occurred alongside the establishment of a strong local exchange network. Because not many Hafit settlements have been discovered and excavated, Hafit tombs help piece together the picture of prehistoric life in Oman.

Hafit tombs, or cairns, are circular above-ground structures constructed with interlocking ring-walls that creates a single chamber in the middle. Inside the chamber is where individuals were interred often alongside ceramics, beads, copper items, and other items that make up the finds of the tombs.

Western Ja'alan is situated on the southern edge of the Oman Mountains, 50 km south of

of Sur along the north-eastern coast. The whole area is made up of a variety of geographies: the mountainous area in the south east including Jabal Ja'alan and Jabal Qahwan, the desert sand dune area in the south-west, and the flat alluvial plains of the north west. On top of this, a network of wadis snake across the area which have historically provided natural resources to the people of Ja'alan. It is in this area that promising archaeological work has been conducted.

During the 1970s and 1980s Danish and British teams carried out surveys to record a number of Hafit tombs in the area. These initial surveys were imprecise and lacking methodology, but they motivated future studies in the early 2000s. Following these surveys two competing theories regarding the Hafit period were developed: the first argues that people living during the period were nomadic or semi-nomadic, while the second argues that there is evidence of a more sedentary lifestyle.

To try and reconcile these opposing views I followed up visits in 2002 and 2004 with a systematic survey funded by Sultan Qaboos University of the area in a series of visits between 2010 and 2012. These surveys began by marking sixteen sub-areas to facilitate the process, and each sub-area was examined carefully.

Archaeological features were entered into four distinct databases according to class with each survey carried out painstakingly on foot. Each site of archaeological remains had their GPS coordinates, elevation, and description recorded along with photographs. A key result of these surveys was the ability to plot the various sites on satellite imagery revealing the tombs were more densely arranged than previously thought. In total the results showed a total of 5,012 tombs were discovered in a total area of 159,326 km².

While the scale of the discoveries was impressive what remained was the unanswered questions regarding the lifestyle of those living in the Hafit period: were they nomadic, semi-nomadic, or sedentary? No definitive answer could be determined from the surveys, however, they did refine our understanding of what are possible theories. Given the evidence of tombs in the area, and the absence of settlements, a credible theory is that the society that constructed these tombs were nomadic pastoralists who lived in temporary and perishable camps. Their distribution across the landscape, their varied elevations, and proximity to wadi watercourses suggest that semi-nomadic pastoral groups moved from location to location in search of grazing for their livestock.

Regardless of the answer, the Hafit tombs in Western Ja'alan provide an exciting area for further archaeological work. Funerary sites in the area continue to provide insights into pre-historical life across the Gulf, particularly in areas where Hafit settlements have been discovered, and enrich our understanding of Oman's place within it. Exciting developments in technology have lent themselves to new methods of surveying and analysing archaeological sites, including detailed topographical and satellite imagery, and will continue to provide new methods of research. It remains to be seen what future paths of inquiry will teach us about Oman's pre-historic past.



About Prof. Nasser Said Al-Jahwari

Professor Nasser Said Al-Jahwari is Professor of Archaeology at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Al-Jahwari earned his PhD from the University of Durham before joining the Archaeology Department at SQU, where he was Department Head between 2010 and 2016. Since 2016 he has been the Editor-in-Chief for The Journal of Oman Studies, on top of which he is a frequent contributor to the journal Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy, and has been published in the Journal of Antiquity, Adumatu, and the Proceedings for the Seminar for Arabian Studies.