

THE BRONZE AGE OF RA'S AL-JINZ (RA'S AL-JUNAYZ), RJ-2

The tabular headland of Ra's al-Jinz, famous today for the huge green turtles that nest in its sands, occupies the easternmost spot of the Arabian peninsula and thus the nearest point to the Indian sub-continent, in front of which the waters of the Indian Ocean mixes with those of the Gulf of Oman.

Thanks to the long and extensive project conducted over more than thirty years by a joint French-Italian mission, the Ja'alan region of Oman is today among the best archaeologically documented of southeast Arabia. Ra's al-Jinz, with several sites discovered which dates to different periods of the pre-Islamic ages, is probably the most intensively investigated area within the region, together with Ra's al-Hadd, a little more than ten kilometres north of it along the coast.

The most widely investigated site at Ra's al-Jinz is that labelled as RJ-2. It stands in the flat area comprised between the two rocky mesas that makes of Ra's al-Jinz a landmark that can not be overseen and that is clearly visible from the sea as well.





The main phase of occupation at RJ-2 was dated by its excavators between 2600 and 2000 BC, with an internal phasing mainly based on architectural re-arrangements rather than on changes in the material culture, that are actually rather gradual. A more evident change can only be marked around 2300. A more ancient occupation was also discovered in some areas, where postholes and pits could be dated to the end of the fourth millennium.

Occupation at the site was demonstrated to be seasonal, from the fall to the spring, when southern monsoon winds would not limit fishing.

The third millennium site comprises a series of mudbrick buildings, organized into two main compounds; in the area between them only five aligned small walls were discovered, interpreted as a structure meant to place boats in dry conditions or possibly to dry and cure fish.

As it would be easily expected, in fact, the economic bases of ancient settlement at RJ-2 were related to the exploitation of marine resources.

Fishing – in waters extremely rich also today – surely was the main activity, witnessed by hundreds of tools such as net-sinkers and hooks and by tens of thousands of fish-bones, and was presumably used also for exchanges with agricultural products coming from inland sites. Another important craft witnessed at the site was the production of shell ornaments. A shell apex pendants similar to those produced at RJ-2 was also discovered at ST1 near Salut, although obviously nothing indicates from which point of the coast it was imported.

The ability of RJ-2 inhabitants as seamen and boat constructors, as well as the direct connection of each residential unit with fishing activities, is shown by the retrieval of hundreds of bitumen pieces. These can be related to caulking repairs; the study of ancient impressions on their internal face, reproducing boats structure, also lead to the experimental reconstruction of a third millennium “black boat of Magan”.

At RJ-2 the material culture is generally in line with what is known from coeval sites in the region. Peculiar, but actually not so strange given the site’s location, is the abundance of Indus pottery, in some cases bearing incised Harappan signs. Several types of vessels were found which can now find parallels also at ST1: black slipped jars, perforated vessels, all-painted jars.

Another category of finds deserves mention in this brief summary of RJ-2 main features: seals. The majority of them, made of chlorite, can be attributed to local production (often looking like a trial one, indeed), and the signs on some of the were also interpreted as tentative writing. However, this interpretation has to be considered with the greatest caution.

In light of the results from ST1 excavation, it is of great interest the presence, among the seals found at RJ-2, of a square copper stamp seal depicting an animal which is more likely to be an unicorn, standing in front of a stand, with a line of signs above it. These signs were interpreted as being Harappan ones: this rather common iconography had thus been reproduced using a rare material, as metal seals are exceptional within the Indus documentation. Another possible stamp seal made of copper, bearing a geometric motif, was found at the nearby site of RJ-1.

