

Food, Fire, and Ovens: New Archaeological Discoveries at Al Baleed from the Italian Archaeological Mission (2024 Season)

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Abstract

The excavation activities of the Italian Archaeological Mission of the University of Naples L'Orientale at Al Baleed (IAMOB), carried out during the November-December 2024 campaign, focused on mound BA017. This area, which had never previously been subject to archaeological investigation, is located central-western part of the site, near the citadel and the Great Mosque. For the first time at Al Baleed, the ancient city of Zafār, a well-preserved production area dedicated to food preparation and cooking was uncovered. Likely part of a larger complex, the area revealed seven freestanding clay ovens (*tannurs*), hearths, ash pits, and installations for food processing. Associated finds included bread moulds, incense burners, pottery vessels, and personal ornaments. These artefacts suggest that the area was active between the 17th and 19th centuries, corresponding to the final occupational phases of the town.

Keywords: Al Baleed, Islamic Archaeology, *tannur*, Archaeology of Dhofar, Sultanate of Oman

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The fieldwork of the Italian Mission took place from November 28 to December 26 2024, under the coordination of A. Pavan, Deputy Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission of the University of Naples L'Orientale at Al Baleed (hereafter IAMOB), in the southern Governorate of Dhofar.¹ The research carried out during this campaign led to the completion of the excavation of the religious complex discovered at the centre of the site (BA074), which had been initiated during the 2021-2022 campaign, and opened new trenches in the central-western area (BA017), a few meters south of the citadel and the Great Mosque (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 - Aerial view of the site; the red squares indicate the two excavated areas (after Zarins, Newton 2012, fig. 2)

The religious complex

The religious complex, uncovered over three campaigns carried out between December 2021 and January 2024, includes a prayer hall (15.70×16.20 m)² – originally supported by 16 columns holding a flat roof – with a *mihrāb* of semi-elliptical plan (1 m wide and 67 cm deep), and a rectangular minaret

¹ The team, supported by six workers, included A. Antonelli, D. Colagrossi, C. Passaro, R. Valentini, and an external collaborator, M.A. Al Hadri, whose participation was arranged in agreement with representatives of the Archaeological Park. R. Giunta, Director of the Mission, was unable to take part in the excavation campaign.

² The perimeter of the prayer hall of the mosque was firstly identified by Costa (1979/1982, 119, fig. 6).

(4.10×3.30 m), a small burial enclosure with six tombs, and an area for ablutions (Fig. 2). The excavation of the latter was completed during the last 2024 campaign. The mosque-minaret-funerary space complex stands on a platform approximately 1 m above street level and 4 m above sea level, featuring two staircases on the northern side. Elevating mosques on artificial platforms of varying heights is a typical feature in Dhofar and some other regions of Oman (Costa 2001).³

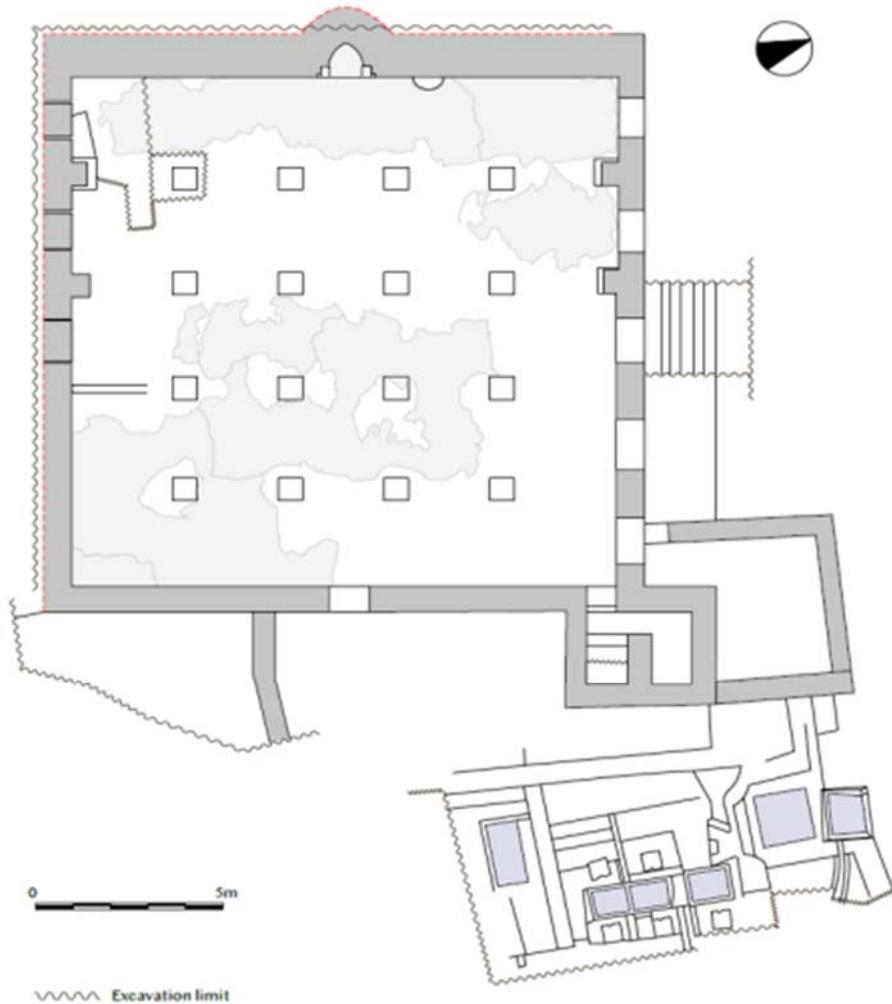


Fig. 2 - Plan of the religious complex (drawing by C. Passaro, ©IAMOB 2024)

In the area set aside for ablutions (50 m²), five carefully built stone basins were identified, their inner surfaces coated by a thick layer of waterproof plaster. Nearby, a well was found alongside the remains of an additional basin that seems to have served for watering animals. The five central basins were ingeniously connected through a series of openings placed at different heights, creating a drainage system that allowed water to circulate from one to another by means of small channels (Fig. 3).

³ For preliminary information, see Giunta, Pavan (2022, 2-3); Giunta (2024, 112-116); Giunta, Pavan (forthcoming *a*). A monograph dedicated to the entire complex is currently in preparation.

Following the discovery of this installation, a wider survey was conducted to document ablution areas in the immediate vicinity of other mosques across the site. This investigation revealed several recurring features and structural patterns, including the arrangement of basins, the use of hydraulic plaster, and the orientation of water channels. These shared characteristics indicate that similar design principles were consistently employed throughout the settlement. Their full significance, however, remains to be determined and will be the focus of dedicated analysis in forthcoming research.

Based on the archaeological and architectural evidence, and particularly on the ceramic finds, the complex has been dated to the period of Rasulid control over the region (13th-15th century).



Fig. 3 - Aerial view of the ablution area (©IAMOB 2024)

The excavation of mound BA017

The new mound selected for investigation was identified during the July 2024 study season, in coordination with representatives from the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) in Salalah. The choice was based on several factors: the substantial size of the mound (approximately 600 sq. m.), its high elevation above sea level (approximately 8.7 m), its previously unexcavated state, and its strategic location - 105.86 m south of the citadel, 40.63 m southwest of the Great Mosque, 75.49 m southeast of the eastern gate, and 103.15 m northeast of the southern gate (Fig. 4). The mound, designated as BA017 following GPS mapping carried out in 2019 by R. Valentini, is located at coordinates 194435.148N, 1882406.235E WGS84/UTM 40N zone.

Consideration was also given to the availability of a large adjacent area suitable for unloading and storing stones and excavation debris (Fig. 5).

The significance of this area had previously been noted by Michael Jansen's team from Aachen University, who proposed it as a potential "Residential Area" and carried out a series of exploratory trenches to the immediate north of the mound in 2000.⁴



Fig. 4 - Mound BA017 and its distance from the main buildings of the western area (Elaboration from Google Earth, ©IAMOB 2025)

⁴ Trenches 1-8; *loci* 700 to 708, see Jansen 2015, 232-233, 235-236. See also Giunta, Pavan (forthcoming *b*).

In the months immediately preceding the campaign, the authorities of the Archaeological Park and the Municipality of Salalah arranged for personnel and equipment to clear the dense vegetation that had grown, especially following the heavy rains recorded between June and August 2024. The superficial stratigraphic unit (SU1) was subsequently removed. This layer consisted of a few masonry blocks and stones of various sizes mixed with sandy material, the result of wind action that had deposited sand from the nearby beach onto the top of the mound.

The removal of this surface deposit allowed for the exposure of the upper portions of two walls (W1 and W2), which had already been partially visible prior to the start of the excavation. No significant structural collapses were recorded, likely due to the systematic reuse of building stones from the site for the construction of buildings in the city of Salalah.⁵ A layer containing a small number of masonry blocks (SU3) was recorded west of wall W2, possibly resulting from the collapse of the wall following the area's abandonment and the subsequent looting of construction materials. Excavation continued with a 2×1.5 m trench (DS1), which was soon expanded to allow for a clearer understanding of the area. Stratigraphic units SU2 and SU4, both sandy in composition and rich in finds, were removed. These units yielded numerous ceramics, animal bones, vertebrae with fish scales, and various objects. The removal of these layers made it possible to define the perimeter walls of rooms A1 and A2 (W1, W20, W3, W25, W24, and W2, listed clockwise from the south), and to identify hearth SU14, located in the corner between W5 and W2. This hearth contained large bones, likely of cattle. During the same phase, two free-standing clay ovens (*tannurs*) were brought to light: SU21 and SU26, along with their respective fills, SU22 and SU27.

Work then focused on the two main rooms, where the small collapse layer SU19 was removed. This deposit had blocked the passage between W5 and W9 and covered both the low wall W12- composed of a single row of blocks-and the ovoid structure W13 (Fig. 6), which had obliterated a third oven (SU29), and belongs to the latest occupational phase. Following detailed photogrammetric documentation, these structures were dismantled. The presence of ash immediately beneath the surface suggests that cooking activities continued during this latest phase, although in a less organized manner compared to the previous one, which was



Fig. 5 - Aerial view of the investigated area at the beginning of the works
(©IAMOB 2024)



Fig. 6 - Ovoid structure W13 obliterating *tannur* SU29
(©IAMOB 2024)

⁵ This practice continued until the 1970s, when the ruins were finally enclosed by a metal fence and designated as a protected archaeological area.

characterized by a high concentration of ovens, hearths, and food-processing installations. Both phases appear to be chronologically close, sharing the same ceramic assemblage.

The removal of the most recent features clarified the layout of the central area, originally rectangular in shape and later subdivided by the construction of walls W10 and W9 (abutting W3) and the pillar W5 (built against W2), which framed the opening between rooms A1 and A2. At this point, all *tannurs* and hearths were identified, along with floor SU38, corresponding to the occupation level associated with the cooking activities.

Excavation was then extended eastward, uncovering rooms A4 and A3, originally one single room, later divided by wall W11 and platform SU55, the latest potentially associated with use as a work surface, as well as A5, defined to the north and west by walls W18 and W3, whose southern and eastern limits are yet to be defined. Floor SU57 was exposed, supporting ovens SU50 and SU31 (with respective fills SU51 and SU32), and an expansion of the oven SU31 (SU42 with fill SU41).

At the eastern edge of the excavation area, installation W19, likely associated with shellfish processing, was discovered beneath SU43 (Fig. 7). The trench was also extended westward, where another minor collapse layer (SU39), similar in composition to SU43 but less rich in material, was removed. The presence of ash lenses in this sector (A6) suggests the possible existence of production installations similar to those identified in A1, A2, and A5, which will require further investigation in the next excavation campaign. In the final week of fieldwork, room A7 was also defined, enclosed by walls W21, W4, W1, W14, and W22 (clockwise from the south). However, due to time constraints, excavation was limited to a superficial level, insufficient to determine the nature of the deposit or the function of the room.

By the end of the excavation, the investigated area covered approximately 200 sq. m., with boundaries measuring roughly 15×12 m (Fig. 8).

The area clearly represents only a portion of a larger complex extending to the north, east, and west of the excavated sector. The size and number of installations suggest that this was a large-scale production



Fig. 7 - Installation W19, associated with shellfish processing
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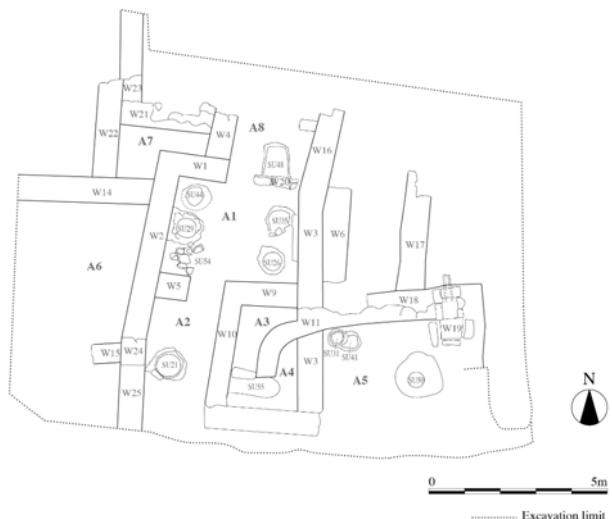


Fig. 8 - Plan of the excavated area (drawing by C. Passaro,
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centre, likely intended to serve a substantial number of people - possibly functioning as an industrial facility or a public kitchen supporting the Great Mosque or the citadel.⁶

The excavation uncovered seven *tannurs* (SU26, SU29, SU35, SU22, SU31, SU44, SU50), slightly conical in shape and with a large opening at the top of the cone (Figs. 9, a-g).

These structures are well attested across the Near East, with documented occurrences spanning all major chronological phases from the Neolithic through the Late Islamic period (Rova 2014). They are still in use today, often built in clay in rural areas and in alternative materials in urban contexts (Mulder-Heymans 2002).

Six *tannurs* are positioned directly on the floor surface; one of them (SU44, Fig. 9, f) was cut into the floor level (SU38floor), with its base lying below the surrounding walking surface. In contrast, *tannur* SU50 (Fig. 9, g) exhibits a double-skin construction, consisting of two concentric walls that may represent a repair technique used to reinforce or restore a previously damaged oven.

The ovens' diameters range from 30 cm (SU31) to 64 cm (SU22), with a maximum preserved height of 50 cm (SU50). These dimensions are consistent with standard measurements for this type of oven, which typically have a height of less than one meter and base diameters between 40 and 60 cm (Rova 2014, 122). Wall thickness varies between 3.5 and 5 cm. No vent hole was identified at the base of the cones, aligning with most archaeological evidence and in contrast to modern *tannurs*, which usually feature an opening to facilitate internal cleaning (Rova 2014). Several of the ovens are surrounded by small stones, likely serving as a foundation and contributing to heat retention. SU31 includes an extension, probably intended for storing and gradually feeding fuel, most likely brushwood, straw, or dung cakes. The ovens were used for both bread and fish preparation, as indicated by the contents of their fills. The exclusive presence of ash is typically associated with bread baking - particularly a type of flat, circular bread that detaches from the oven walls when fully cooked. Conversely, the presence of fish bones and scales points to the use of some ovens for cooking fish.

Inside the fill (SU51) of *tannur* SU50, a fragmentary cooking pot was also found, resting at the bottom of the oven. Notably, the fill (SU30) of *tannur* SU29 is characterized by the absence of ash and the presence of stone fragments within a coarse, brown-yellowish soil matrix.



Fig. 9 - The seven *tannurs* (a-g) discovered during the archaeological campaign (©IAMOB 2024)

⁶ Excavations at the citadel did not reveal any evidence of kitchens or food preparation areas. However, it should be noted that the investigations did not reach the ground floor level, where such spaces were likely located. In addition, the quantity of finds associated with food consumption was very limited (Pavan forthcoming).

At the edge of the main room, small pits dug into the floor were found, likely used to collect ashes from the ovens after cleaning. This is exemplified by pit SU56, located near *tannur* SU44 and SU24 near *tannur* SU26. Generally, after each use, the ashes left inside the oven were pressed down onto its floor until they reached a certain level, at which point they were scraped out and removed - often ending up in the pits dug into the floor for this purpose.

A couple of hearths (SU14 and SU54), consisting of simple, irregular stones arranged in a poorly preserved circular layout, were also discovered.

It is not possible to determine with certainty whether the ovens were located indoors or in an open space. However, considering the number of *tannurs* (which may not have all been in use simultaneously) and the presence of hearths within a relatively small area, it is plausible that the ovens were situated in an open or semi-open space, possibly enclosed by low walls and topped with perishable materials (Fig. 10).⁷

However, the area does not appear to have been intended solely for baking activities, but also for food processing. Specifically, to the east of the trench, a feature was identified consisting of a rectangular basin measuring 52×58 cm, connected to a 40×46 cm work surface built against wall W18. The basin was linked to a 76 cm long limestone channel that passed through wall W18. This channel led to a refuse pit, and within its fill (SU47), numerous object fragments and a large quantity of bivalve shells were found, suggesting that the molluscs were processed in the basin and subsequently discarded through the channel into the pit on the opposite side of the wall.

The absence of burn marks suggests that the molluscs were likely boiled near the basin – possibly in *tannur* SU50 – and that the separated shells were flushed through the channel into the refuse pit (Fig. 11).⁸



Fig. 10 - Virtual reconstruction of a portion of the main room with the freestanding *tannur* SU29, the dug-in oven SU 44, and the hearth SU54 (virtual reconstruction by C. Passaro, ©IAMOB 2024)

⁷ Given the impossibility of providing protective coverings for the investigated area, and in agreement with the authorities of the Archaeological Park, the *tannurs* were secured at the end of the activities with a layer of geotextile, followed by stones and soil, in order to ensure their preservation.

⁸ Four buckets of soil from the fill of pit SU47 were sieved to assess the potential presence of mollusc species and to initiate a malacological study aimed at identifying the taxa and reconstructing their possible uses or processing methods. The study will be conducted over the summer as part of a new collaboration with Dr Gaia Crippa of the University of Milan, Department of Earth Sciences “Ardito Desio”.

Within the fill of the larger basin, just below surface SU1, in layer SU43, an unglazed jug (SU43.1) was found (Fig. 12).



Fig. 11 - View from the north of the drainage channel of feature W19
(©IAMOB 2024)



Fig. 12 - The unglazed jug SU43.1
(©IAMOB 2024)

The vessel appears to be handmade and likely originated in Central-Eastern Africa. Measuring 30cm in height, with a rim diameter of 6.8 cm and a base diameter of 5.6 cm, the jug features a series of grooves of varying depth, created using the combing technique.⁹

Also potentially related to food preparation or serving practices is SU48, which consists of an inclined surface with a packed clay base, bordered on three sides by a thick, high clay edge. To the south, this edge possibly abuts wall W20, although further investigation is needed to confirm this relationship.¹⁰

The hypothesis that the area was used to prepare food that was then served immediately is supported by the types of ceramic material found in large quantities.¹¹ Most of the ceramics are of local manufacture, characterized by distinctive spouts, knobbed handles, and red-painted decorations alternating with incised patterns (Fig. 13).¹² These are accompanied by imported artifacts, including a large olive green glazed bowl with a plain rim, oblique walls, and a ring base (SU8.1), produced in Bahla, northern Oman. Excavations also uncovered a significant number of East Asian imports - mainly Batavia ware cups and small blue-and-white porcelain tea or coffee cups (Fig. 14).

⁹ Two irregularly shaped holes (measuring 2.2 cm and 1.5 cm in diameter) are visible at the base of the vessel. These may have been intentional, although their function remains unknown.

¹⁰ Said Al Amri suggested a possible interpretation of the structure as a surface used for placing freshly baked bread, based on a similar feature he observed in a mountain village north of Salalah.

¹¹ Due to time constraints, not all of the ceramics recovered during the excavation were examined; only those from selected stratigraphic units – specifically SU4, SU8, and SU11 – were taken into consideration.

¹² For further information on this ceramic ware found at Al Baleed, see Fusaro 2021, 82-83.



Fig. 13 - Local pottery from SU8 (©IAMOB 2024)



Fig. 14 - Batavia ware and Blue and White porcelain cups from SU8 (©IAMOB 2024)

Notably, several bowl fragments exhibit a cracked exterior surface, which C. Visconti (2021, 106) suggests may originate from Thai or Vietnamese kilns that produced wares often accompanying Chinese exports. Both the locally produced ceramics and the imported wares collectively date the area's primary use to between the 17th and 19th centuries, aligning with the final occupational phase of the citadel¹³ and, thus far, of the town itself (Pavan 2021).

A total of 70 small finds¹⁴ were collected during the excavation, most of which are related to food processing and preparation. These include a considerable number of pestles, grinding stones and slabs, numerous whetstones, and a couple of iron blades. Particularly noteworthy is the discovery of two fragments from distinct circular bread moulds (Fig. 15) – more accurately described as bread presses – which are emblematic of Dhofari baking traditions that continue to be practiced today.¹⁵ The final product appears to have been a thin, unleavened bread of the *qalib*¹⁶ type, characterized by a crisp texture. The baking technique involved applying the dough directly to the interior wall of a *tannur*.¹⁷

¹³ For the analysis of the East Asian ceramic assemblage related to the final phase of the city's occupation, see Visconti 2021; for the local assemblage, see Fusaro 2021.

¹⁴ A total of 36 objects or fragments in clay, 13 in glass, 12 in worked stone, three in shell, and five in metal (including three in copper alloy and two in iron) were recovered, along with one illegible coin and a dome-shaped plaster element of unknown function.

¹⁵ For a comparison of the bread moulds with recent samples, see Richardson, Dorr 2003, vol. 2, 507, no. 465.

¹⁶ The term *qalib* refers to the act of placing or shaping the dough within a mould.

¹⁷ See also <https://mariellerisse.com/2020/02/15/bread-in-dhofar/> for a description of the bread-making traditions in the region.



Fig. 15 - Decorative bread moulds (©IAMOB 2024)



Fig. 16 - Some personal items in copper alloy (©IAMOB 2024)

Numerous fragments belonging to a well-known type of elongated incense burner – featuring four vertical legs supporting a receptacle – have also been identified. For the first time in this context, one example was found still associated with its base. These pieces are made of Red Ware or Shell Ware and are decorated with red-painted bands and various motifs. This type of incense burner, clearly locally produced, finds numerous parallels in the earthenware assemblage characteristic of the sixth and final occupational phase of the Citadel (17th-19th century; Pavan *et al.* 2020, 170, fig. 4b). Similarly, fragments of oil lamps were recovered, along with one intact specimen, which shows soot traces mainly concentrated near the pinched rim and a surface finish limited to wet smoothing. Some personal items were also found in unusual contexts, such as in the fill (SU22) of *tannur* SU21 – where an earring with a string of chained, hanging rings and a nose earring were discovered – or in the garbage pit containing mollusc shells (SU47), where pendant was found. The latter may have been used to contain perfume, and possibly ambergris in particular (Fig. 16).¹⁸

Frags of glass bangles, the finial of a sprinkler, rims of bottles, and umbonate bases from large containers were also recovered. Despite their extremely fragmentary condition and weathered surfaces, it was possible to reconstruct most of the original shapes of the glass artefacts.¹⁹

For the topographic positioning of the uncovered structures, a new simple survey network with only 4 pegs was established (Fig. 4). The survey was carried out using a Topcon MG50 total station provided by the Al Baleed Park and was based on the previous one. Near the identified area, a benchmark from the previous networks, benchmark 100, was detected. This was used as the origin point for the new network established in 2024. Orientation for the correct roto-translation was carried out using benchmarks 300 and

¹⁸ The hypothesis that it could be some form of pomander was first put forward by D. Colagrossi. Chemical analyses will be conducted in collaboration with the Department of Chemistry at the University of Pisa to determine the material contained inside.

¹⁹ The glass finds, like the other artefacts found during the excavation, are compatible with the assemblage uncovered in the last occupational phase of the citadel and of the town (1600-1800). The study of the glass artifacts from the citadel has been object of the unpublished thesis by A. Antonelli (2024) for the Post-Graduate High School in Archaeology OrSa, (University of Salerno - L'Orientale University of Naples).

600 from the previous network. Additionally, a new benchmark (st5) was established to be used in case the extension of the excavation – including the area of benchmark 100 – requires its removal.

At the end of the archaeological campaign, thanks to the collaboration of Said Al Amri, Site Supervisor at the Al Baleed park for the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, an aerial photogrammetry survey was carried out (Figs. 17-18) to produce a digital twins of the new structures uncovered.

A total of 89 cameras were calibrated using Pix4D software, generating a point cloud of over 17 million points with a sub-centimetric GSD (0.186 cm/pixel; Minucci 2018, 94). The model, aligned with the topographic network, provides real measurements and serves as the basis for the plans and scaled reconstructions presented in this article.



Fig. 17 - The path flight for photogrammetric acquisition (©IAMOB 2024)



Fig. 18 - Point cloud from photogrammetric survey (©IAMOB 2024)

Future activities

The area that the Mission has begun to investigate is gaining significance, particularly as it appears to be the first food processing and cooking production area identified so far within the entire site. The primary objective of the upcoming autumn campaign is therefore to continue the excavation of the mound, which will be extended northward to re-establish continuity with the trench opened by M. Jansen in 2000 (Jansen 2015, 232-233, 235-236),²⁰ and will also be expanded both eastward and westward. The ash lenses uncovered in the western sector (A6) suggest that similar production installations may extend in that direction. Conversely, to the south, the site appears to have been affected by an as-yet-undetermined event that obliterated the ruins, as no trace of the southern wall has been preserved.

Future work will also focus on an in-depth study of the small finds and ceramic assemblage, which will be fully documented and analysed to reconstruct their contextual associations and usage dynamics. In parallel, significant emphasis will be placed on archaeobotanical investigations, particularly through the analysis of sediments collected from the *tannur* fills. The aim is to gain insight into both the types of food prepared and the fuels used to fire the ovens. Concurrently, targeted research will be conducted on the animal bones and shells recovered from the site. These studies are expected to provide key insights into the diet and eating habits of the inhabitants of ancient Ẓafār, thereby contributing an essential element to our broader understanding of their daily life and interaction with the surrounding environment.

²⁰ The perimeter of this trench is still identifiable by its geotextile lining.

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