

# ANCIENT HISTORY

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## THE WORLD OF WOMEN

A FEMALE VIEW OF ANTIQUITY

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### SHOW TRIAL

After Germanicus' apparent murder, the Roman populace was out for blood.





The National Museum of the Sultanate of Oman is located in the nation's capital of Muscat. Located in a purpose-made building, it first opened its doors in 2016.

## TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

By James Blake Wiener

# TREASURES OF THE PAST

Archaeological artefacts and historical texts show that Oman's civilisation stretches back over 5,000 years. Referred to as 'Magan' by the Mesopotamians as early as the third millennium BC, it was fêted for its copper, frankincense, sea-borne vessels, and fortresses. As Oman occupied a prime location between trade routes to Egypt, Greece, Rome, Persia, India, and China, its history is marked by a diverse array of cultural influences and exchanges. Here we speak to His Excellency Jamal al-Moosawi, the Secretary-General of the National Museum of the Sultanate of Oman in Muscat, about his museum.

lection of over 6,000 artefacts, your museum is arguably the most 'encyclopaedic' national museum in the region. It may surprise readers that the museum additionally contains a substantial collection of prehistoric metallic artefacts. Could you tell us why these artefacts, in particular, are so important in gaining a better understanding of prehistoric Oman?

Although the Museum is encyclopaedic in its scope of collections attesting to Oman's rich and diverse cultural heritage all the way to the present day, covering craft industries, manuscripts, maps, prints, arms and armour, numismatics, architecture, and interior design, nonetheless, the archaeological findings constitute the backbone of our collections spanning the Prehistory and Ancient History galleries which cover the following sections: (1) Bat, al-Khutm and al-Ayn; (2) The Land of Frankincense; (3)

**Y**our Excellency, thanks for speaking with me on behalf of *Ancient History Magazine*. The National Museum of the Sultanate of Oman (the Museum) opened in 2016, and it covers Omani history from the earliest human settlement some two million years ago through to the present day. With fifteen galleries and a permanent col-

Discovered at the Ra's al-Hamra archaeological site, this musical instrument known as a 'jam' or 'yam', is the oldest ever found in Oman – it is between 4,000 and 5,000 years old.

© The National Museum of Oman







← The oldest coin ever found in Oman dates from to between 200–100 BC. The obverse is decorated with a highly-stylized portrait of Alexander the Great.  
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Prehistory; (4) The Civilisation of Magan; (5) Ancient History.

Metals represented a new, durable kind of wealth accumulation because they are not perishable products; they supported and promoted the concentration of wealth and, therefore, social stratification. The earliest copper objects started to appear in Omani settlements and graves around the beginning of the fourth millennium BC. At this time, ancient Oman witnessed a substantial increase in the population density of the local groups of gatherers, fishermen, and nomadic or semi-sedentary farmers. These communities progressively occupied the most productive areas of the region, creating highly specialised environments.

In the Prehistory and Ancient History galleries, visitors can come across a feature wall with a timeline dedicated to copper; here, on display is the earliest known copper object uncovered at the Ra's al-Hamra archaeological site, dated to 3,400 BC. It is a multi-purpose blade tool, used as a cutter, scraper, shell opener or chisel. The timeline also features such displays as ceremonial and long daggers, anthropomorphic figures, swords, arrowheads, fishhooks, chisels, and ornamental objects, spanning all the way to the early days of the adoption of Islam.

On display is the Selme/Ibri Hoard, a large hoard of metal artefacts from the Iron Age (1,300 BC–AD 400) with more than 500 metal weapons, bangles, and vessels, and a further 82 stone and ceramic vessels, making it the single largest such hoard ever found in the Middle East. Tests have confirmed that the metal and artefacts were mined, smelted, and manufactured in ancient Oman.

**The name 'Oman' is believed to mean 'the abode' or 'the land', but it is undeniable that Oman's past is inextricably connected to the sea. For thousands of years, Omani sailors and merchants traversed the high seas, trading exotic luxuries and manufactured metals. What can you tell**

**us about those items in your museum that demonstrate Oman's timeless maritime traditions and technologies?**

Oman has a long-lasting relationship with the sea. Omani merchants traded goods across the seas as early as the third millennium BC, and by the Islamic period they were part of a vast trading network that extended from China in the Far East to East Africa, the single longest maritime trade route at the time.

The Museum has a dedicated gallery to Oman's maritime history; highlights include a pot shard made of earthenware uncovered in Ra's al-Jinz archaeological site. The pot dates to approximately 2,500–2,000 BC, is of Mesopotamian origin, and contains traces of bitumen, suggesting trading activity between Magan and Mesopotamia.

Approximately 200 well-preserved bitumen slabs and 100 smaller fragments dating from 2,300–2,100 BC have been found in the ruins of ancient fishermen's houses at Ra's al-Jinz. Barnacle growth on one side of the bitumen attests to its use as a coating for ocean-going vessels. Impressions of reeds, wood, mats, and ropes left on the bitumen surface, still apparent after more than 4,000 years, represent two different types of vessels. One type was made from sewn wooden planks, and the other of bundled reeds and mats. These fragments, along with rock art and stamp seal iconography, illustrate what Bronze Age vessels may have looked like.

Also on display are sewn and nailed planks. Sewn construction was the dominant form of building wooden vessels in Oman from the third millennium BC. Coconut rope was often used to sew the planks to one another and lash the frame in place.

**One of the more unusual pieces held by your museum is a musical instrument, which is about 8,000 years old. It is believed that this is Oman's oldest musical instrument. Where was this object discovered, and how would you characterize its importance?**



An exhibit on how Oman's traditional system of irrigation channels, which are known as *aflaj*.



The Civilization in the Making Gallery looks at how Omani architecture has evolved over the centuries.



An exhibition showcasing the protohistoric sites of Bat, al-Khutm, and Al-Ayn, which date from the third millennium BC.



The gallery has sections devoted to traditional music and traditional dance genres. On display in this gallery is the earliest discovered musical object in Oman. It is a musical shell instrument, known locally as 'Jam' or 'Yam', and it dates to approximately 5,000–4,000 BC. It was uncovered over the grave coverings in Ra's al-Hamra archaeological site in the Governorate of Muscat. This 'Jam' is still being used today in traditional music genres.

**The Museum is also home to a fascinating ancient box, which depicts the world's oldest "Omani" story and dates to the Arabian Iron Age (1300–300 BC). What was this ancient box used for?**

Unique in its figurative iconography is an intricately decorated rectangular-shaped vessel carved of soft stone, dated between 1,200 and 800 BC. This object was found in an Early Iron Age collective burial at Diba in the Governorate of Musandam. Such vessels were used to store valuable commodities such as wild honey. The imagery represents a goat and a wolf, carved on the opposite long sides, with foliage carved on the opposite short sides. The four sides form a continuous scene with two animals in a thicket of short bushes, turning the vessel into a vignette telling a parable known to the two conversing animals.

**Even though they form one of the largest protohistoric necropoleis in the world and date from c.3000–2000 BC, the 100 beehive-shaped tombs that dot the hilltops of northern Oman in Bat, al-Ayn, and al-Khutm remain an enduring mystery. Little is known about the tombs or the culture that constructed them. How does the Museum contextualize these intriguing burial sites and bring them to life for public audiences?**

Together, the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Bat, al-Khutm and al-Ayn form the most complete collection of third millennium BC settlements and necropolises in the world. Located in Ibri, in the Governorate of ad-Dhahirah, in north-western Oman, the beehive tombs are monumental structures that attest to the grandeur of the civilisation of Magan and to the networks that bound them together with Mesopotamia, Ancient Iran, and the Indus Valley Civilisation. From around 3,000–2,000 BC, the Ibri area was likely a populous centre of productivity and political authority, where caravan routes converged and multiple families and tribal groups came together to exchange goods from across the ancient world.

The necropolis at Bat has around 350 stone-built tombs and a large settlement area. Al-Ayn comprises 21 spectacularly sited 'beehive' tombs, and al-Khutm is notable for its complex third millennium BC tower. Archaeologists believe that more than 50,000 Bronze Age tombs once dotted Oman. The effort involved in building such enduring monuments was a way of



© The National Museum of Oman



This vessel carved from soft stone and decorated with the image of a wolf dates from between 1,200 – 800 BC.

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(Clockwise from top left) The prehistory and ancient history gallery; the museum has an impressive collection of armour and weapons from the early modern era; the Splendours of Islam gallery explains the country's relationship with religion; and in the maritime gallery, Oman's long history with the sea is explored in detail.

bestowing honour upon the deceased. An exact replica of one of Bat's distinctive stone tombs has been expertly reconstructed in a gallery that is named after the UNESCO WHS. The tomb is made of over seventeen tonnes of naturally uniform brick-like local stone.

**Oman was the wealthy land of Magan, attested in Mesopotamian cuneiform. Is it true that Alexander the Great and the Macedonians were the first to introduce coinage to Omanis? What does Oman's oldest coin reveal about Oman's position between various civilizations?**

The cross-civilisational contacts between Oman and Europe can be traced to the fifth century BC, to Greco-Roman times. Androstenes of Thasos and Nearchus of Crete, under

the command of Alexander the Great, had circumnavigated the shores of Oman in the fourth century BC.

According to current archaeological evidence, the earliest known coins to have been minted in historical Oman were struck in both Mlayha and ad-Dur. The earliest known coin on display at the Museum is a tetradrachm of Abi'el type. The coin is made of copper or copper-alloy and is dated to approximately 200–100 BC, which corresponds to the late Iron Age. The coin's obverse side has a portrait of Alexander III of Macedonia, with the 'Amun horns' formed by a plain crescent and the 'lion mane hair' as a simple fishbone pattern. On the reverse of the coin, one can observe a seated

deity and an Aramaic legend, which translates to *my father is God*. **AH**

**Your Excellency, thanks for your time!**

**James Blake Wiener interviews experts for AH. Learn more at [jameswiener.com](http://jameswiener.com) or via [@herrlichman](https://twitter.com/herrlichman).**



#### ► ABOUT THE EXPERT

In 2017, Jamal al-Moosawi was appointed director-general of the National Museum — Sultanate of Oman in Muscat. Moosawi's previous posts include being a curator at the Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha, in 2007–08, and regional arts project manager for the GCC, Iraq and Yemen at the British Council.