

A virtual colloquium on

# OMAN STUDIES IN GERMANY

## New research in archaeology, history and social anthropology

Convenor: Prof Johann Buessow

Ruhr University Bochum

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Bahla, Sultanate of Oman. April 2018. Photo: Johann Buessow.

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	2
New collaborative research projects	2
Key research topics	3
Objectives of the meeting	4
Papers presented	4
<b>How to participate?</b>	5
Connecting with Zoom	5
The “Side-by-side Mode”	6
<b>Programme</b>	7
<b>Speakers and contact information</b>	7

## Introduction

In recent years, Oman has attracted a growing number of researchers in the humanities and social sciences worldwide. This colloquium brings together nine researchers that are part of a new, **“third generation” of Oman studies**. Academic research on Oman's history, society and cultural heritage began with several **British studies**, in the context of British suzerainty over the Indian Ocean region. German-language scholarship made contributions to this first generation of Oman studies mainly in the fields of philology and Islamic studies, focusing on Arabic dialect and questions of Islamic doctrine. A **second generation of research** began only during the 1970s, in the era of Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id, after the country had been hardly accessible to researchers for about half a century. Now, academic studies on the country received consistent support by the Sultan's government and they became markedly interdisciplinary. This included **innovative research cooperation** across the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. German-language scholars, increasingly publishing in English, were at the forefront of this second wave of Oman Studies. Most of them were brought together by several seminal **collaborative endeavours**. Most noteworthy in this respect are

- The South-East Arabian Research Project at the University of Göttingen (1976-1982), which was headed by the geographer Fred Scholz and focused on Oman's nomadic population,
- German archaeological expeditions between 1977 and 1990 (headed by the Bochum-based archaeologist Gerd Weisgerber),
- the interdisciplinary German-Omani research project “Transformation processes in oasis settlements of Oman” (1999-2007) and
- the annual conferences on Ibadism and Oman organised by Heinz Gaube, Abdulrahman Al Salimi and others.

### New collaborative research projects

The virtual colloquium held at Ruhr University Bochum (RUB) cannot claim to give an overview of the entire landscape of research in the German humanities and social sciences devoted to Oman. However, the six presentations capture a sizable portion of this research landscape. Next to discussing cutting-edge research approaches and new findings, the colloquium is also to celebrate the start of two collaborative research projects:

- **The Abandoned Mud-brick Settlements of Central Oman:** This project is led by researchers from three disciplines: Archaeology (S. Döpfer), Cultural Studies (Th. Schmidt-Lux) and Middle Eastern Studies (B. Mershen). The project started in the

spring of 2020. It is funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation within the framework of a special research programme on “Lost Cities”.

- **Letters to the Sheikh:** The project, led by M. Hoffman-Ruf and J. Buessow, investigates political and economic transformations in the Indian Ocean World as reflected in the letters to the ‘Abriyin of al-Hamra’ (Oman) during the long 19th century. It is funded by the German Research Foundation and due to start in early 2021.

## Key research topics

The presentations deal with collaborative research projects as well individual research pursued by students and postdoctoral researchers. These diverse studies share a number of research interests that relate to specific features of Oman’s history and culture. In addition, many of them investigate **the relationship between material structures and the social and cultural worlds of the inhabitants of the region** through the ages.

The geographical area the studies deal with is **Central Oman** (also Inner Oman), a historical region that covers the northern part of today’s Sultanate of Oman (see Figure 1). Social, economic, political and cultural life in this region, from Antiquity until today, cannot be understood without consideration of the particular environment of the **oasis settlements**, commonly referred to as *harat* in Arabic. These villages and small towns, next to maritime trade, were the cornerstones of Omani traditional economy and culture. The specific features of Omani oasis settlements are their adaptation to the environmental conditions, marked by the scarcity of the vital resources of water and land, and an intricate social organisation based on tribal structures.

In Oman – in contrast to other areas of the Middle East – dry farming is not possible. Agriculture always depends on irrigation. Since Late Antiquity, the core of the oasis economy is highly complex **water management systems**, known in Arabic as *aflaj* (sg. *falaj*). The *aflaj* were also the main determining factor with regard to the physical layout of settlements. These systems require well-organised cooperation between the members of the community of the oasis concerned for their functioning and maintenance. **Tribal structures** were a major organising principle of these communities. An individual’s position in society was defined to a large extent by family and tribal affiliation and the political landscape was shaped by alliances between families and tribal groups.

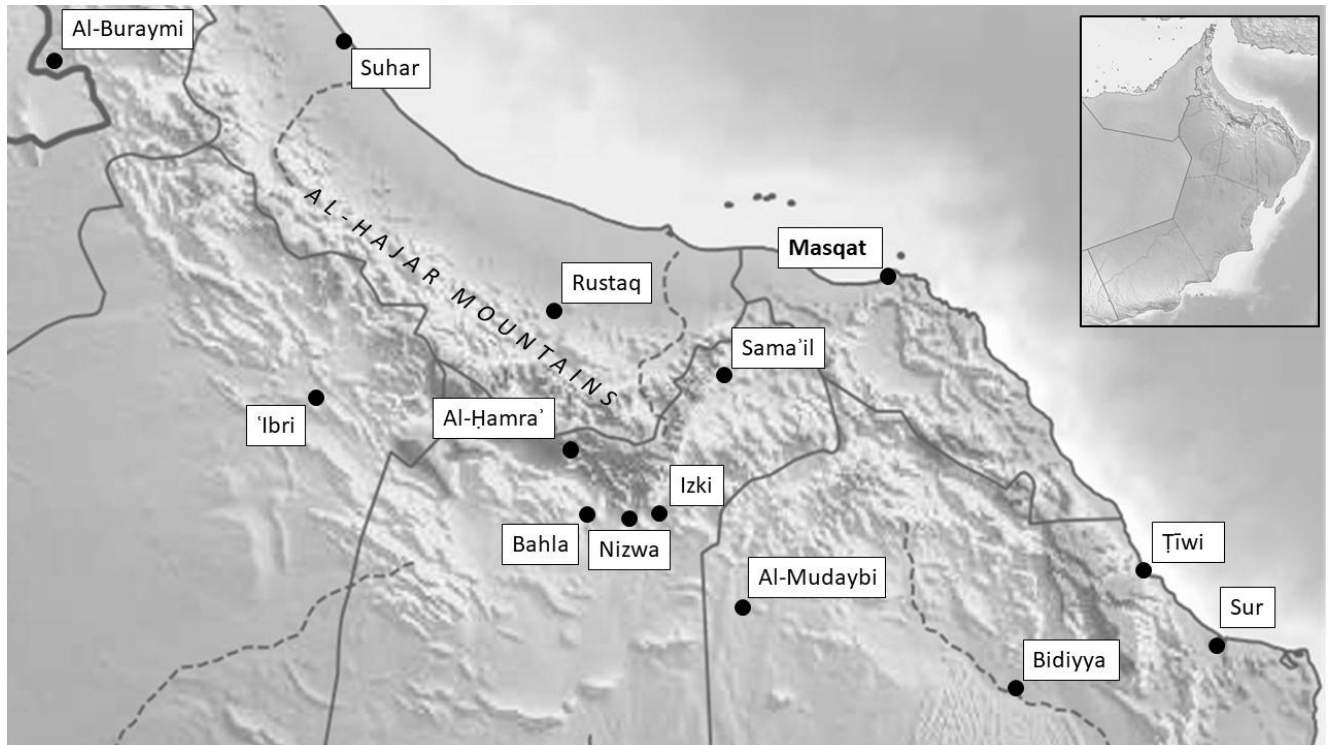


Figure 1: Central Oman with key historical settlements and today's provincial boundaries (Wikipedia).

Since the Islamic conquest in the 7th century CE, Omani society is also distinct with regard to religious and legal matters, due to the predominance of **Ibadism**. Ibadi doctrine includes a strong emphasis on the equality of all believers and the doctrine that an elected leader (*imam*) should guide the community in both political and religious matters.

### Objectives of the meeting

The six short presentations are directed not only to specialists in the field, but also aim at **explaining key concepts in Oman Studies** to a wider public. Each speaker is invited to discuss the following four points:

1. the questions that sparked the individual research project,
2. key concepts of the particular study, such as mud-brick architecture, communal organisation or *mawlid*,
3. new findings, and
4. the most promising avenues for future research.

## Papers presented

The talk by **Dr Birgit Mershen** (Ruhr University Bochum) will introduce us to Oman's traditional oasis settlements and their mud-brick architecture as they evolved until the mid-20th century. In particular, she will ask how local institutions of communal organisation are related to specific spatial and architectural structures.

Next, **Dr Stephanie Döpfer** and **Irini Biezeveld** (Goethe University Frankfurt) will zoom in on pottery as a source for understanding the evolution of Omani oasis settlements.

Finally, **Dr Thomas Schmidt-Lux** and **Josephine Kanditt** (University of Leipzig) will close this first section of the meeting with observations on current discourses on these now largely abandoned settlements.

In the second part of the afternoon, **Dr Michaela Hoffmann-Ruf** and **Prof Johann Buessow** (Ruhr University Bochum) will present a case study of communal institutions in an oasis settlement on the eve of Omani state centralisation around 1970. They will also discuss the relevance of the findings for the wider field of Middle Eastern history.

**Maren Jordan** (University of Hamburg) will then present findings from social anthropological fieldwork on family planning and kinship practices as major arenas of social change in contemporary Oman.

Towards the end of the meeting, the talk by **David Jordan** (Ruhr University Bochum) will provide unusual insight into Oman's religious field and will discuss the controversial legacy of an Ibadi-Sufi text dealing with the Mawlid al-Nabi (Prophet's birthday) celebrations.

## How to participate?

All speakers will meet at RUB's convention centre – provided the current Covid-19 restrictions will allow to do so –, while the interested public is invited to follow the event and join the discussion via Zoom.

The presentations will be limited to 15 minutes. Q & A periods after each presentation and the final discussion will provide space for exchange.

## Connecting with Zoom

In order to establish a connection to the meeting - provided that you have Zoom already installed - either [click here](#) or use the ID and password below to log in manually.

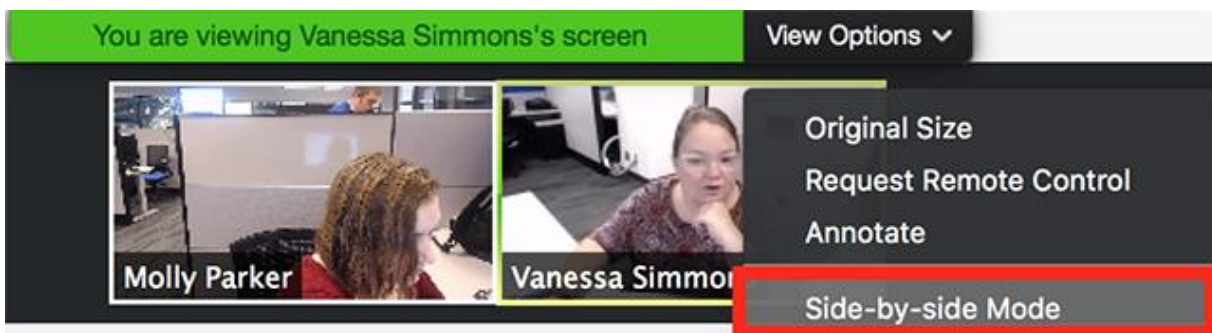
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## The “Side-by-side Mode”

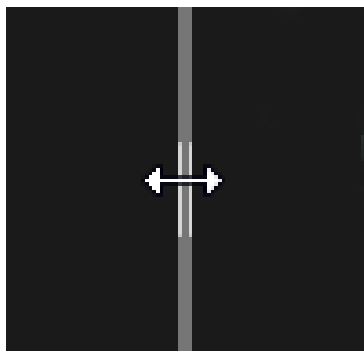
In order to see both the slide as well as the speaker during a presentation it is advised to activate the “Side-by-side Mode” (not available on mobile devices). This will activate the shared screen and therefore display the presentation on the left side of the screen while the speaker will be displayed on the right hand side. Therefore one needs to

1. click on “View Options” on top of the application window,
2. then choose “Side-by-side Mode”.



To deactivate “Side-by-side Mode” one simply needs to repeat steps 1 to 2.

In order to adjust the size of the windows one needs to



1. hover over the boundary of the screens until a grey line appears in the middle and the mouse pointer turns into a double sided arrow.
2. Clicking and dragging you can adjust the windows until you'll have reached a favourable ratio.

## Programme

13.00-13.15 **Welcome**

Prof Johann Buessow (Ruhr University Bochum)

13.15-13.45 **Presentation by Dr Birgit Mershen (Ruhr University Bochum)**

*"An Architecture of shura: Communal organisation and institutions and their spatio-material correlates in harat of Inner Oman"*

13.45-14.15 **Presentation by Dr Stephanie Döpper and Irini Biezeveld (Goethe University Frankfurt)**

*"Investigating the Late Islamic (1500-1950) Pottery of Central Oman: Case studies from Safrat al-Khashbah and Al-Washhi"*

14.15-14.45 **Presentation by Dr Thomas Schmidt-Lux and Josephine Kanditt (University of Leipzig)**

*"Talking about Mud: Current discourses on harat architecture in Oman"*

14.45-15.15 Break

15.15-15.45 **Presentation by Dr Michaela Hoffmann-Ruf and Prof Johann Buessow (Ruhr University Bochum)**

*"Al-Sur al-Muhiṭ: The city wall of Bahla as a case study for the organisation of communal tasks in Central Oman on the eve of modern state administration, 1967-1976"*

15.45-16.15 **Presentation by Maren Jordan (University of Hamburg)**

*"Socio-Demographic Change and New Kinship Practices in Central Oman after 1970: Anthropological findings from al-Hamra"*

16.15-16.45 **Presentation by Dr David Jordan (Ruhr University Bochum)**

*"The Reading of an Ibadi-Sufi Mawlid Text and Its Controversial Legacy in Oman: Abu Muslim al-Bahlani's (1860–1920) al-Nash`a al-muhammadiyya"*

16.45-17.15 Break

17.15-17.45 **Final discussion**



## Speakers and contact information

### **Irini Biezeveld ([irinibiezeveld@gmail.com](mailto:irinibiezeveld@gmail.com))**

Irini Biezeveld is a Ph.D. student at the Institute of Archaeology, Goethe University Frankfurt. She completed her research master at the Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University in 2020 on Late Islamic (c. 1500-1950) ceramics and settlements of the Şuḥār Region (Sultanate of Oman). Her current research focuses on abandoned 18th to 20th century settlements in Central Oman, with an emphasis on the ceramics that are found within this context.

### **Prof Johann Buessow ([johann.buessow@rub.de](mailto:johann.buessow@rub.de))**

Johann Buessow is a historian of the modern Middle East with a focus on the social and cultural history of the modern Middle East. Since 2018, he has been Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Ruhr University Bochum. He is the author of *Hamidian Palestine* (Brill, Leiden 2011), a study of politics and society in the Ottoman district of Jerusalem during the era of Sultan Abdülhamid II. For the past four years, he has been working on the history of Gaza during the late Ottoman period, together with Yuval Ben-Bassat and an international group of scholars, In cooperation with Michaela Hoffmann-Ruf, he will soon start another research project dedicated to the political and economic transformations in the Indian Ocean World as reflected in the letters to the ‘Abriyin of al-Hamra’ (Oman) during the 19th century.

### **Dr Stephanie Döpfer ([doepper@em.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:doepper@em.uni-frankfurt.de))**

Stephanie Döpfer (PhD 2015, Tübingen University) is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Archaeological Sciences, Goethe University Frankfurt. She was co-director of the excavations at the Early Bronze Age site of Al-Khashbah in 2015–2018 and continues to direct the Al-Mudhaybi Regional Survey in the Sultanate of Oman since 2019. Dr Döpfer is part of an ongoing interdisciplinary research project on the abandoned mud-brick settlements of Central Oman within the framework of the Gerda Henkel Foundation’s “Lost Cities” programme. Her current research interests include the role of mobile societies in the Bronze Age of Eastern Arabia, reuse of tombs in a diachronic perspective and pottery studies.

**PD Dr Michaela Hoffmann-Ruf ([michaela.hoffmann-ruf@rub.de](mailto:michaela.hoffmann-ruf@rub.de))**

Michaela Hoffmann-Ruf is currently employed by the Berlin State Library as coordinator of the project "Orient Digital". Before she has been working in the project "Settlement and Society in Pre-Modern Oman" at Tübingen University. From 2010 until 2014 she has been responsible for a DFG-sponsored project to edit and analyse the correspondence of the 19th-century German Orientalist Johann Gildemeister (1812–1890) at the University of Bonn. Her main research interest lies in the history of modern Oman, manuscript culture and the history of Oriental Studies in Germany. She is the author of the document-based study "Scheich Muhsin bin Zahran al-Abri: Tribale Macht im Oman des 19. Jahrhunderts" (Berlin 2008). In cooperation with Johann Büssow, she will continue her research on Oman with a project dedicated to the political and economic transformations in the Indian Ocean World as reflected in the letters to the 'Abriyin of al-Hamra' (Oman) during the 19th century.

**Dr David Jordan ([david.jordan@rub.de](mailto:david.jordan@rub.de))**

David Jordan is assistant lecturer for Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Ruhr University Bochum and coordinator of the German side of the French-German ANR/DFG project "The Presence of the Prophet: Muhammad in the Mirror of His Community in Early Modern and Modern Islam". He completed his PhD thesis *A History of Ba' thist Politics and the Revival of Sufism in Iraq* in spring 2019. His research focuses on the entanglement of religion and politics in the Middle East during the early modern and modern eras, particularly in Iraq, Iran, and the larger Gulf region. Recently, he began to work on the mystical tradition among *Ibadi* scholars in Oman and Zanzibar. His publications include "Jaysh rijal al-tariqa al-naqshbandiyya: The Sufi Resistance of the Former Ba' th Party in Iraq." in *Jihadism Revisited: Rethinking a Well-Known Phenomenon*. Vol. 2, edited by R. Lohlker and T. Abu-Hamdeh, Berlin, Logos.

**Maren Jordan ([maren.jordan@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:maren.jordan@uni-hamburg.de))**

Maren Jordan is a PhD student in social anthropology at the University of Hamburg, specialising in the Arabian Gulf Region. She has conducted altogether 14 months of fieldwork in northern Oman within the DFG-funded project "Fertility Transition in the Sultanate of Oman (2016-2019)". Her research investigates Oman's rapid demographic transition since 1970 through an ethnographic case study of the Central Omani town al-'Hamra' and is grounded in the interdisciplinary field of anthropological demography. Her research interests include population politics, kinship, gender and reproduction as well as theories of social change.

**Josephine Kanditt ([josephine.kanditt@posteo.de](mailto:josephine.kanditt@posteo.de))**

Josephine Kanditt is a PhD student in the joint research project on abandoned mud-brick settlements in Central Oman, sponsored by the Gerda-Henkel-Foundation as part of its special research programme, "Lost Cities". In February 2020 she finished her M.A. studies in Cultural Studies with a focus on Cultural Sociology at Leipzig University with a thesis on: "Castorf in a matchbox: Archiving processes of the Volksbuehne-am- Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin". Josephine Kanditt completed a double Bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies and Social and Cultural Anthropology at WWU Münster.

**Dr Birgit Mershen ([birgitmershen@yahoo.com](mailto:birgitmershen@yahoo.com))**

Birgit Mershen-Lohrer is a scholar of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, specialising in the social and cultural history of the modern Middle East. She has taught at Yarmouk University in Jordan and Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, and has been an advisor to Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Culture. She has worked extensively in the field of cultural heritage and material culture in Oman, with a particular focus on the vernacular built environment. Currently affiliated with Ruhr University Bochum's Institute of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies as a research fellow, she is undertaking a joint research project on abandoned mud-brick settlements in Central Oman, sponsored by the Gerda-Henkel-Foundation as part of its special research programme, "Lost Cities".

**PD Dr Thomas Schmidt-Lux ([schmidt.lux@uni-leipzig.de](mailto:schmidt.lux@uni-leipzig.de))**

Thomas Schmidt-Lux is a scholar of Cultural Sociology and currently works at Leipzig University. He has worked extensively in the field of sociology of vigilantism, sociology of law, sociology of religion and sociology of architecture with a particular focus on processes of digitisation in the field of architecture. Together with Dr Birgit Mershen-Lohrer and Dr Stephanie Döpfer he is conducting the project on abandoned mud-brick settlements in Central Oman, sponsored by the Gerda-Henkel-Foundation. His second current project deals with imprints and effects of built materiality.