

Remembering Maurizio

[*Maurizio Tosi, born 31 May 1944, died 26 February 2017*]

About 1975 I was asked to edit the English of a paper written by Maurizio Tosi. I had already met him occasionally at conferences, and knew that he spoke English well, so it was disconcerting that some of his elaborate sentences did not quite make sense. This was not a commonplace problem of defective syntax or vocabulary, more that I could not quite grasp what exactly he meant. It was years before I began to wonder whether the problem might have lain not with Maurizio but with the language itself, which frustratingly could not accommodate the subtleties of anthropological theory that he wished to explore. Were his standards too high, his imagination too fertile?



Maurizio Tosi at Ra's al-Jinz, December 1986: one of his many landscapes

During a lecture in 2001 to the Society of Antiquaries of London, Maurizio ascribed this interest of his in theory to the months he had spent at the Institute of Archaeology as a postgraduate in his mid-twenties. He began the talk by showing illustrations of books to which he felt indebted: Gordon Childe was one author, some were far less distinguished. He described movingly, for that English-speaking audience, his mother's gratitude for what he had learnt from the English: they had robbed her of her brother, a sailor killed during the Second World War at Taranto, before Maurizio was born, but their teaching had somehow given her back her son. The accuracy of this account is debatable, since he was already a communist and an archaeologist before he came to London, but it is the one time I have seen an academic speaker reaching for a handkerchief and wiping tears from his eyes at the lectern.

In 1980 Maurizio showed me round the excavations at Ra's al-Hamra, the prehistoric site near Muscat. There he talked about the manufacture of shell rings, showing me for the first time his interest in small technical details that could assist the

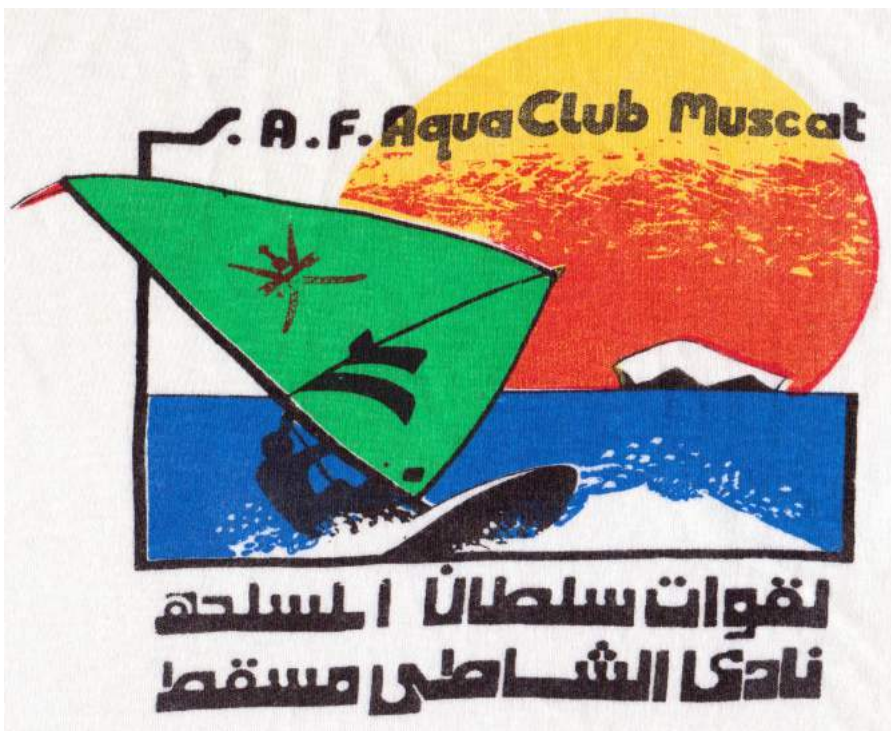
understanding of broad historical processes. Then, one afternoon in 1985, he rolled into the British Museum where I worked, filling the meagre partitioned space behind my desk, and invited me back to Oman for a visit. He and Serge Cleuziou of Paris (CNRS — Centre national de la recherche scientifique) were by now joint directors of a new excavation at Ra's al-Jinz (Junayz), a site isolated far from tarmac roads in the eastern corner of the country. He was looking for someone familiar with Iraq, who might recognise more links between the two regions. Also, he explained later, he had identified me as an outsider like himself—he reckoned we both had "difficulties" with the academic establishment—and he therefore had high expectations. "You will bring your own network", he added, as if we all controlled personal networks as elaborate as his own. I once heard him remark, of someone else, "I brought him to Oman". He did have a diplomatic reason for wanting formal British involvement in the Ra's al-Jinz project, because informally he was already receiving British help. Yet, while it was sometimes said that he used people to promote his own interests, those interests included the advancement of research, and he was using me constructively. He was creating opportunities, just as he did for others, and it was largely up to us what we made of them.



Bill Foxtan in his office at the Beach Club, Muscat, February 1988

In Oman Maurizio the communist had a close friend in Major William (Bill) Foxtan, a brilliant man and war poet, who had lost his left hand fighting the communists in Dhofar. Bill too had a certain piratical quality, and gave as good as he got: Maurizio, no respecter of sensibilities, said ruefully once how he had learnt from Bill that one subject forbidden as laughing matter was the murder of British soldiers in Ireland. Much later, after Bill had left Oman, Maurizio asked me to take him a gift. I naturally agreed. It turned out to be an antique hand-gun. Maurizio pointed out that I was a respectable person and would find it much easier, than he would have done, to carry such a thing through the customs at Heathrow.

Bill was by now in charge of the Sultan's Armed Forces Aqua Club outside Muscat, generally known as the Beach Club, which was overlooked by the cliffs of Ra's al-Hamra. Bill had first spotted Maurizio inspecting the site there, and had gone to check on him. Through this unlikely friendship, Maurizio also met other SAF staff. Their generosity and efficiency provided the Ra's al-Jinz excavations with outstanding logistical support. Military training exercises came to incorporate convoys of trucks carrying archaeological supplies and equipment. Every evening Maurizio, like the commander of a remote outpost, would sign in from the camp at Ra's al-Jinz by shortwave radio to Bill at the Beach Club, reporting progress, resolving problems, exchanging opinions.



The Beach Club, original base of the Ra's al-Jinz excavations: the T-shirt

In 1986, when I first went to Ra's al-Jinz, the camp consisted of caravans, tents, a communal area covered by camouflage netting, and a concrete house (unauthorized because this was inside the turtle nesting reserve) that Maurizio was building in the hope that the government would adopt it as a research centre. A saga described how Bill and Maurizio had acquired the caravans and transferred them by road and track from Muscat. An excellent host, Maurizio enabled me to go wherever I chose, hence the discovery of settlement sites with prehistoric, Harappan and Iron Age material, as well as the known Islamic town, at nearby Ra's al-Hadd where I myself later dug on behalf of the British Museum. Sometimes he drove me, in which case we naturally had to return to the camp for lunch; he explained that like all Italians he could not survive without sitting down for pasta in the middle of the day, a condition from which I and my compatriots were mysteriously immune, which accounted for the British victories in Libya in 1940-41. Nicholas Postgate (pers. comm.), referring to Maurizio in the 1970s, vividly recalls "the way his stomach exceeded the compass of his trousers, but then if you are larger than life such things should be expected."

Maurizio also made me work. One surprise was that he and Serge, who both spoke what I regard as dialects of Latin, communicated with each other in English. Another was that none of the team members seemed to speak Arabic. This contrasted with the situation in Muscat where my wise friend Paolo Costa, for many years Advisor to the Minister of National Heritage and Culture, spoke excellent Arabic while many Omanis spoke excellent English. At Ra's al-Jinz few local people had a second language, so that I, with little enough Arabic myself, found that I was translating for guests. Next I was expected to resolve the confusion created by the employment, as full-time camp guard, of a local fisherman who was accustomed to spending the summer fifty miles away, looking after his date-palms. Finally I was appointed as Arabic interpreter for an Italian doctor studying traditional Omani medicine who knew no English. After half an hour my mind was misfiring, it was mixing three languages, and even Maurizio realised that he had asked too much.



Serge Cleuziou and Sophie Méry in camp at Ra's al-Jinz, December 1986

One morning soon after dawn, when I was up early, there was a ferocious tropical downpour, the tent-pegs were losing their grip, and water began to flood the tents. So I found a spade and set about digging shallow diversion trenches, basic camp maintenance. Meanwhile Maurizio was nowhere to be seen, but as I dug around his matrimonial tent, I gradually gained the impression that he was still in bed, enjoying the storm in another fashion. This was an element of his prodigious appetite for life, well known and deprecated by many people including sometimes himself. He told me once with disapproval, on observing two people in conversation, that former lovers never could or maybe never should be friends.

The Ra's al-Jinz camp was provided with electricity from a generator, which had been bought cheaply by Maurizio and which also powered a computer. In 1986 computers were not yet common in the field, and he was very proud of this innovation, although—he was surrounded as usual by very capable colleagues and assistants—it

always seemed to be someone else who was doing the work. I agreed to join the project, and in 1988 I dug at Ra's al-Hadd when the Ra's al-Jinz season ended (after 1992 I asked Maurizio and Serge to take over Ra's al-Hadd too). Being answerable to the British Museum I could not pool our finances, and anyway I had reason to doubt Maurizio's skills in accountancy, but I shared the camp, and was given elementary computer lessons in order that all the excavation records could be coordinated. It was vital that the electric current should never fail while the computer was running, and I had to rush repeatedly to the back of the house to refill the generator with fuel. Soon a new sparking plug was needed, but I was unable to find one in all the stores in Muscat; when people heard the brand of generator, they laughed.



Excavation camp at Ra's al-Jinz, with RJ-1 outcrop in background, 1989

Maurizio was disappointed by my failure to produce computer records of the dig, and sulked ostentatiously. When I borrowed equipment from Gerd Weisgerber, who was then excavating at Samad for the Bochum Mining Museum, I heard rumours of an "Anglo-German alliance". Were we conspiring against him? Maurizio tended to be forthright in expressing his opinions, but at least he did not erupt in volcanic fury against me, as I have seen him do with no justification at all. I once asked Serge how it was that Maurizio never seemed to have fallen out with him, as he did periodically with so many people. Serge suggested that it was because Maurizio needed him too much. Perhaps another way of expressing this is that Serge was not only Maurizio's equal in theoretical discourse and probably a better archaeologist, but also wonderfully sensible and tolerant. The two of them always seemed to agree easily, when I was at Ra's al-Jinz, about what should be done on the dig.

Maurizio could be self-critical. Postgate recalls him saying how criminal it had been to let someone so young loose on Shahr-i Sokhta, but he built his theories of social development on real familiarity with the material evidence. He took advantage of a

quarrel with Giuseppe Tucci in Pakistan to visit the Italian Institute in Baghdad and study lapis lazuli at the Iraq Museum. I find a 1981 letter from him, expounding with clarity and patience the nature of carnelian sources and workshops (we were not regular correspondents but at one stage he liked to write to me while on transatlantic flights). In Ravenna in 2005, replying to a casual question, he gave me a rapid extempore exposition of the methods of warfare practised in Italy from the time of the Roman republic down to the Hun invasion. In areas where he did not control technical detail—I recollect discussions of early Mongolia and Peru—he could still talk about significant issues. He was indifferent to assumed lines of demarcation between academic specialisms, and was looking forward, when I was in Oman, to government excavations at the great Islamic trading city of Qalhat.

His lighter reminiscences were exhilarating: never let the facts spoil a good story. He spent one long drive with me describing his excursion across the Afghan border, again in search of lapis lazuli, partly disguised under a full-body veil in the back of a car. Another version is that he was acting on behalf of the USSR, looking for weapons smuggled from the USA. And is it really true that he once entertained his companions on a commuter train between Rome and Naples by inventing a far-fetched fantasy about Professor X, and then disarmed Professor X, in case he should hear it through someone else, by going straight from the train-station and repeating the same fantasy to his face?

This was the period when Maurizio, with bewildering rapidity, seemed to be based at IsMEO (Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente), teaching either in Rome or in Naples or in both at once, before becoming full-time cultural attaché at the Italian embassy in Delhi on the way to his professorship at Bologna and Ravenna. He assured me, however, that he would never really leave Rome, because it made the world's finest version of a dish which, on arrival, appeared to be none other than fish and chips. Italian academic politics were also puzzling. In 1991 at the *Arabia Antiqua* conference in Rome I was asked why on earth I was speaking to some particular scholar. It turned out that the scholar was classified as a Christian Democrat whereas Maurizio and other Italian friends of mine were (usually without my knowing it) classified as Communists, and I was not encouraged to fraternise with the opposition. The conference itself, which was intended as the first of a series, had been generously sponsored and supported, presumably thanks in part to Maurizio's persuasive powers, by the Italian government (under a Christian Democratic prime minister) and by two or three large private companies that exported to the Arab world.

While too impatient to publish his own excavations in detail, Maurizio was always eager to publicize what he and his colleagues had been investigating recently, what they had found and what they were thinking, and he considered that others should do the same. Emails remind me of his conversational style. "They had found at Bisya a bronze stamp seal ... When I saw it in May 2011 it was still in the original matchbox packing with a note on paper bearing the date of discovery: January 2, 1982!!!" There is also that massive positive enthusiasm. Writing to me in Sicily, "Bravo, Inglese!!

First International Conference on the Conservation and Enhancement of the Archaeological Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula.....

1. The first meeting of the Organizing Committee took place on July 9, 1988, at the Institute of Archaeology, University of London and began at 10,40 a.m. The Organizing Committee, constituted by a letter of invitation by the President of IsMEO, Prof. Gherardo Gnoli, dated 5.16.88, consisted of the following who were present:

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The meeting began at 10,40 a.m. chaired by M. Tosi. A brief summary of the Conference background was presented. The idea began 3-4 years ago to focus on the research of the Arabian Peninsula and a desire to integrate the existing knowledge with the more existing disciplines in Levantine and Mesopotamian archaeology and history.

This was seen as necessary due to:

- 1) the hitherto unpublicized wide resources found in the Arabian Peninsula and their impact on the Near East as a whole;
- 2) the defensive orientation of the Peninsula's people themselves to Westerners;
- 3) a need to create scientific impact for the archaeology of the region, to be reduced in order to expand regional cooperation and develop an international stratism for the conservation of the Arabian heritage;
- 4) enhance the academic perspectives of the Peninsula by such a conference.

A steering Committee initially approached the Italian Foreign Office and a group of scholars headed by Prof. G. Gnoli, who was supportive of the idea. The development of the Conference idea was seen as potentially beneficial to provide on-going joint collaboration with not only scholars but also with the various Arab states of the Peninsula. Funds were to be provided by the Department for Technical Cooperation of the Italian Foreign Ministry via IsMEO. To make use of the optimal funds provided, the Conference theme would by necessity be focussed on preservation of past cultural materials. The suggested title was: "Conservation and Enhancement of the Archaeological Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula". Dr. Costa's return from Oman was also seen as a good time to accelerate the conference idea.

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It was hoped UNESCO would acknowledge the Conference and possibly provide the opportunity to establish a Permanent International Conference.

After considerable additional debate on the advisory board members both from Western countries and the Arabian countries, the decision was made to include 20 total members - 10 from Arab countries, 10 from non-Arab countries. The list was proposed as follows:

Extracts from minutes of the Arabia Antiqua organizing committee, 9 July 1988

Palermo è una città meravigliosa ... un luogo stupendo che amo molto." A list of places I should visit includes "Mazara del Vallo ora con la splendida statua del satiro", an unusual expression of aesthetic approval. Then "ho amici, colleghi, studenti e parenti dovunque e saranno lieti di conoscerti e accoglierti ... a tutti posso telefonare da Muscat senza problemi e lo faccio volentieri ..." As for the cave at Addauro, "c'è un mio ex studente che si chiama Giorgio Hardouin, diretto discendente della famiglia di cavalieri venuti con gli Altavilla nel XI secolo ed ha fatto la tesi sulla grotta che sta in un terreno di proprietà della famiglia". He is revelling in an intimate link between deep prehistory, the Norman conquest of Sicily, and his personal network of associates. In the same way he was emphatic that Santo Stefano, with its multiple layers of history, was the one unmissable building in Bologna.

In circular emails he lamented the loss of friends. In December 2011 he was planning to dedicate *Journal of Oman Studies* 18 "to the dear memory of Gerd [Weisgerber], Serge [Cleuziou] and Greg [Possehl]" all of whom had died within the previous two years. Then, in November 2014, "The black harvester has called another of us. After Serge, Greg, Roland [Besenval], now Jean-François [Jarrige]. I feel myself surrounded ..."

Friendship was the slightly surprising theme with which Maurizio explicitly began the last lecture I heard him give, in September 2012 at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Eventually it emerged that he was presenting the concept, developed by himself and Serge, of Oman as a land where civilization did not depend on divine kingships like Egypt and Mesopotamia but on varieties of friendship or, as he wrote in the preferred theoretical jargon of his abstract, "egalitarian structures of power legitimization, based on an architecture of family, clan and tribal alliances". He had discovered in ancient Arabia a version of society not unrelated to the communist ideals of his youth.

Julian Edgeworth Reade (23 June - 18 July 2017)