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Théo Mespoulet, Ludivine Audebert, Josselin Pinot, Ayoub Al-Oufi, Mathilde
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"The largest tower in Oman"

Recent excavations in the Al Dhabi 2 monumental site (Bisya)



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Théo Mespoulet^{1,4}, Ludivine Audebert¹, Josselin Pinot¹, Ayoub al-Oufi², Mathilde Jean³

1 : Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne & UMR 7041 ArScAn ; 2 : Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Sultanate of Oman ; 3 : Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, British Museum, 4 : EUR ArChal

Al Dhabi 2: objectives of archaeological investigation

Al Dhabi 2 is an Early Bronze Age site located within a cluster of so-called 'towers' in the vicinity of Bisya/Sallut (Oman), in the southern foothills of the Hajar mountains. Since 2022, the French Archaeological Mission in Central Oman (FAMCO) and the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) have led excavations at the site. The main monumental building was erected on top of a hill; the settlement area (ca. 1 ha) lies on the southern slope and several tombs surround the site. While the majority of such 'towers' measure from 15 to 30 m in diameter, the Al Dhabi 2 tower reaches 45 m, making it the largest one known to date.

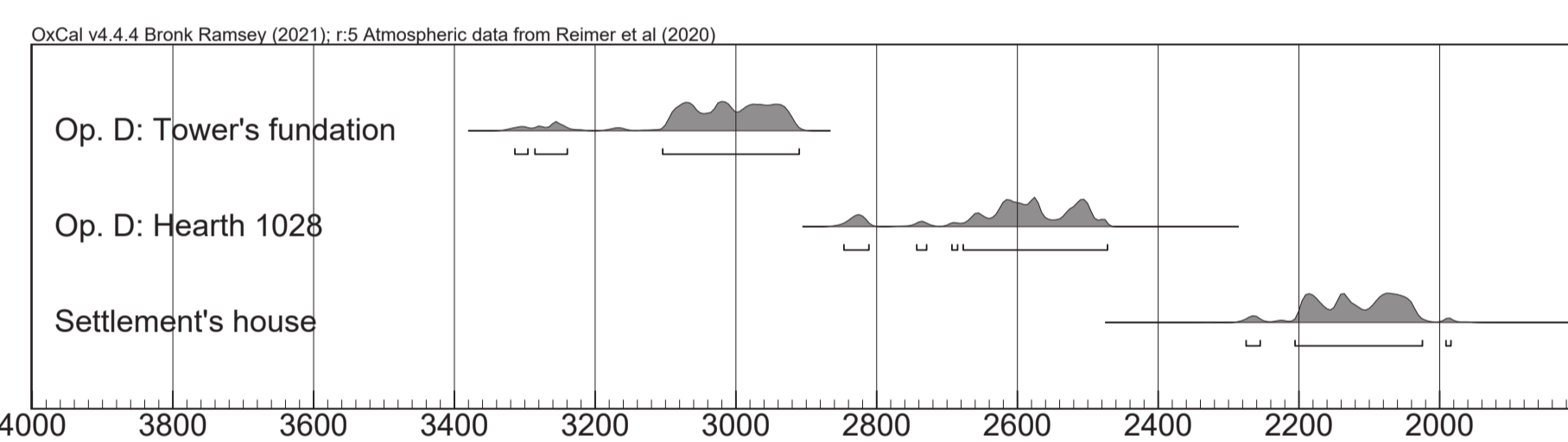
Excavations focus on three main objectives: (1) dating of the tower foundation and occupation; (2) architecture and relation with the surrounding buildings; (3) function of the monument.

Chronology

Occupation at Al Dhabi 2 spans the entire 3rd millennium BCE. Radiocarbon dating of a bark fragment from the tower's foundation trench provides the earliest dating at the site, ca. 3000 calBCE, making the tower the oldest building, and the only one C-14 dated to the Hafit period so far.

Inside the tower, a hearth revealed charred cereals, one of the seeds dating to ca. 2600 calBCE, in the Early Umm an-Nar period. Similar datings were recorded in the structures lying beneath the houses in the settlement area, whereas all the stone-based houses belong to the Late Umm an-Nar period.

Further investigations will allow to precise the duration of the use of the tower, its function, and its relation with the settlement.



Architecture and access

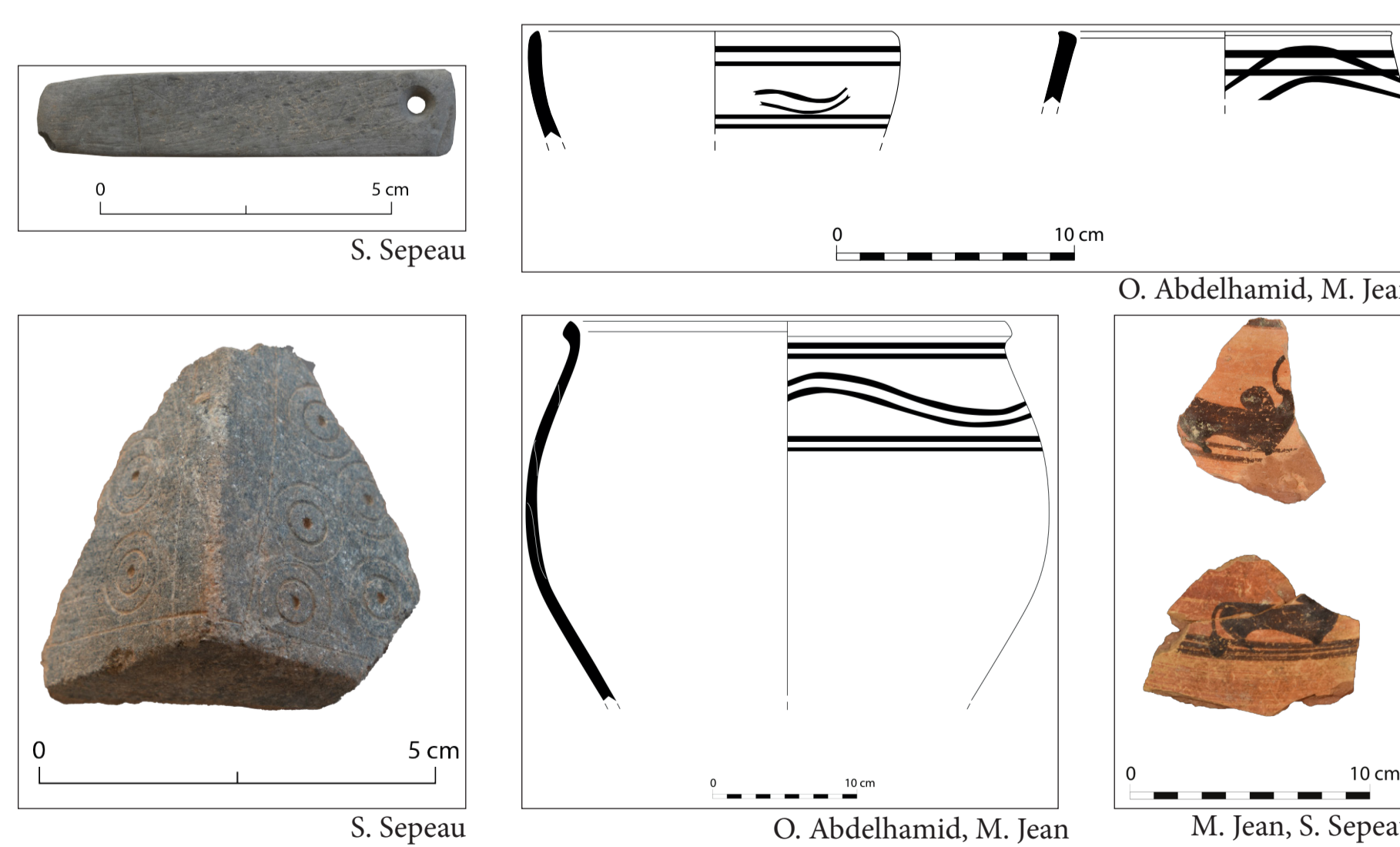
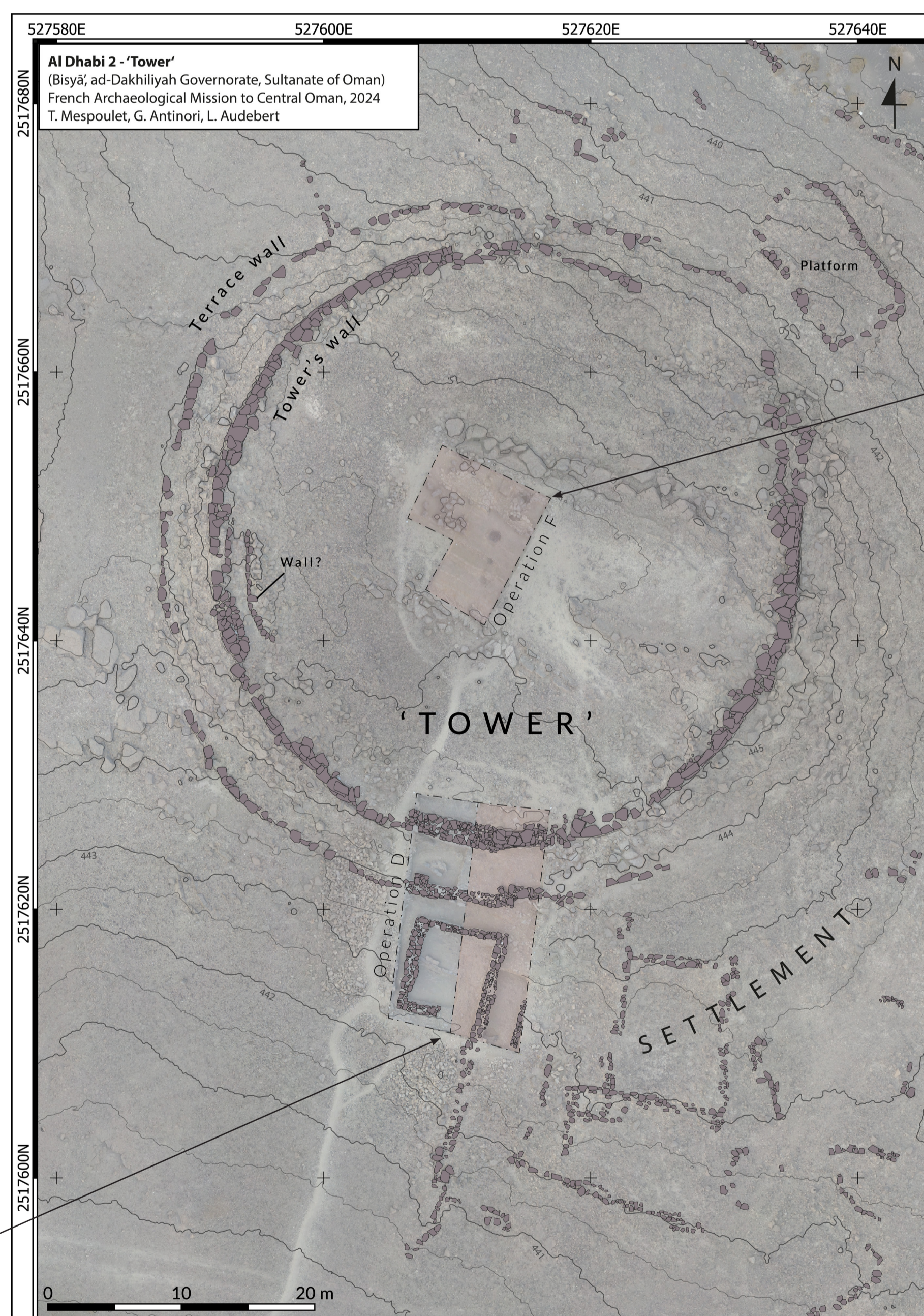
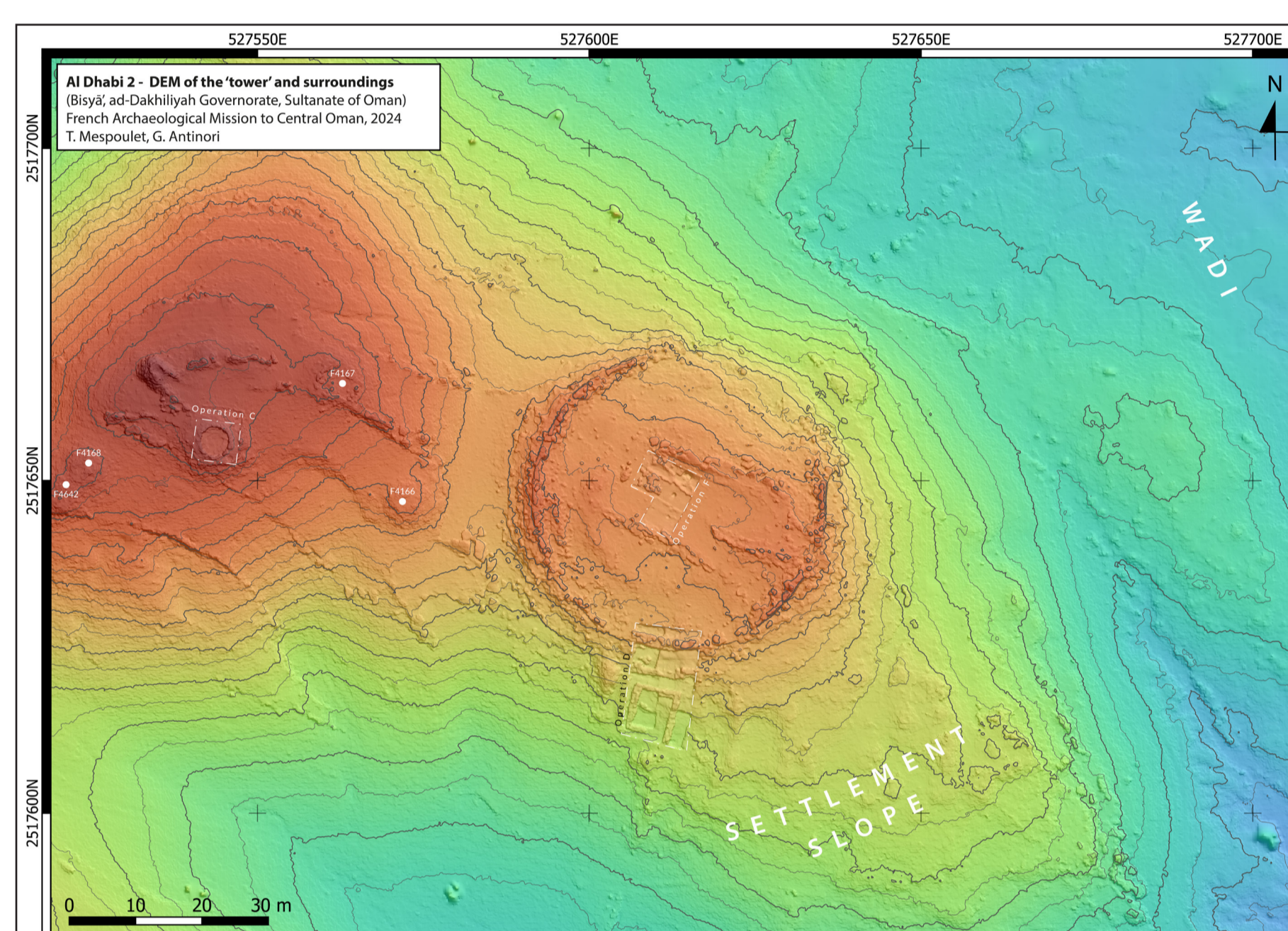
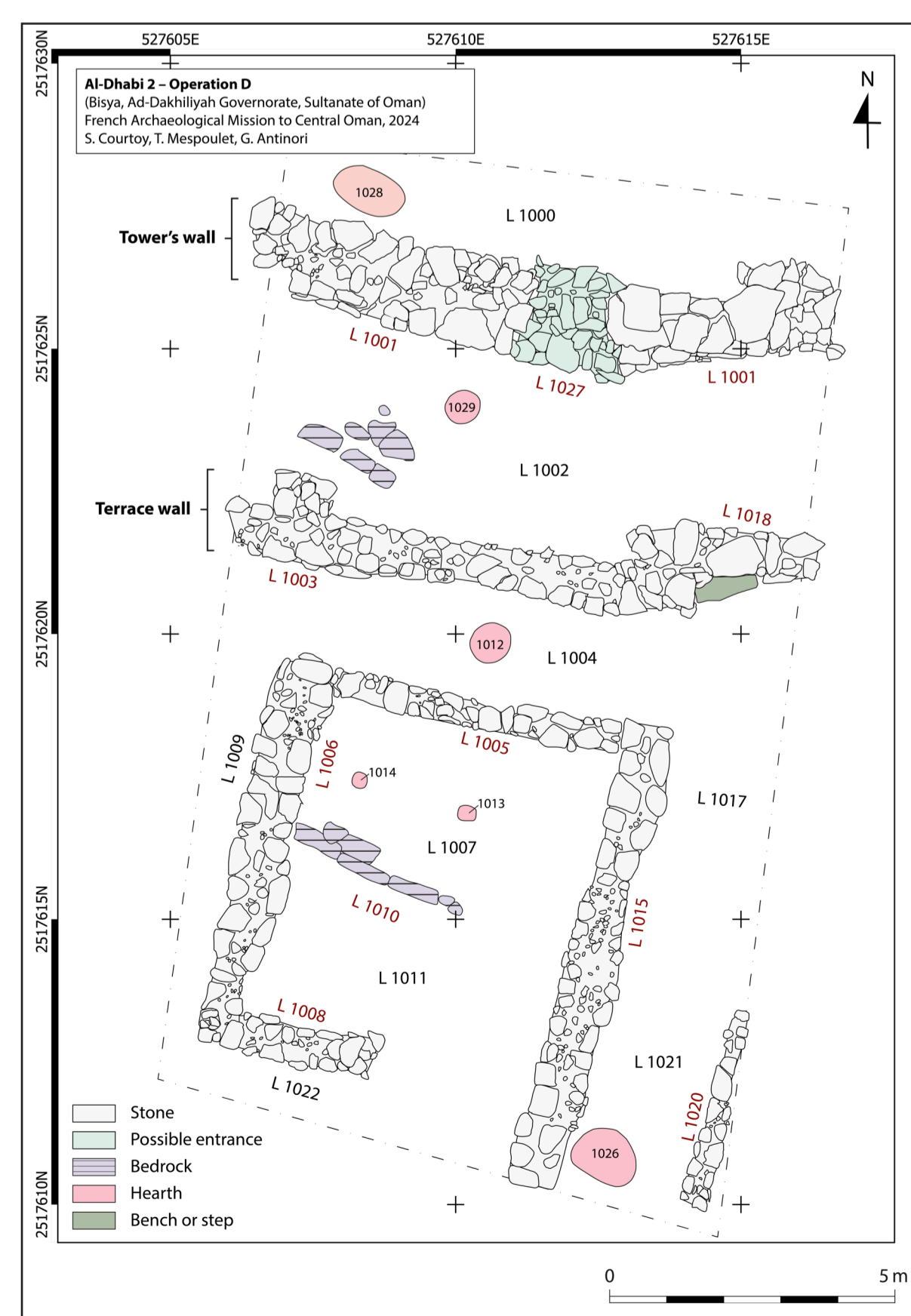
The tower has an almost perfect circular plan. It measures 44-46 m in diameter and is constructed with several courses of large squared blocks of local stone. The tower wall is massive, with an average thickness of 1.5 m, and is preserved up to 2 m high on the external side.

The tower seems associated with a second circular wall (53 m in diameter), not visible on the eastern side, and filled in with pebbles and Umm an-Nar potsherds. Its contemporaneity with the tower should still be demonstrated and, if so, this wall could be interpreted as a terrace supporting the tower. A rectangular platform (12 x 7 m) is built to the northeast of the tower, as known at other sites.

A gate was identified on the southern side of the tower's wall that was later blocked by disorganised stone blocks (including one with a door socket). Circulation around the tower was possible through a peripheral pathway that probably led from the tower to the settlement.

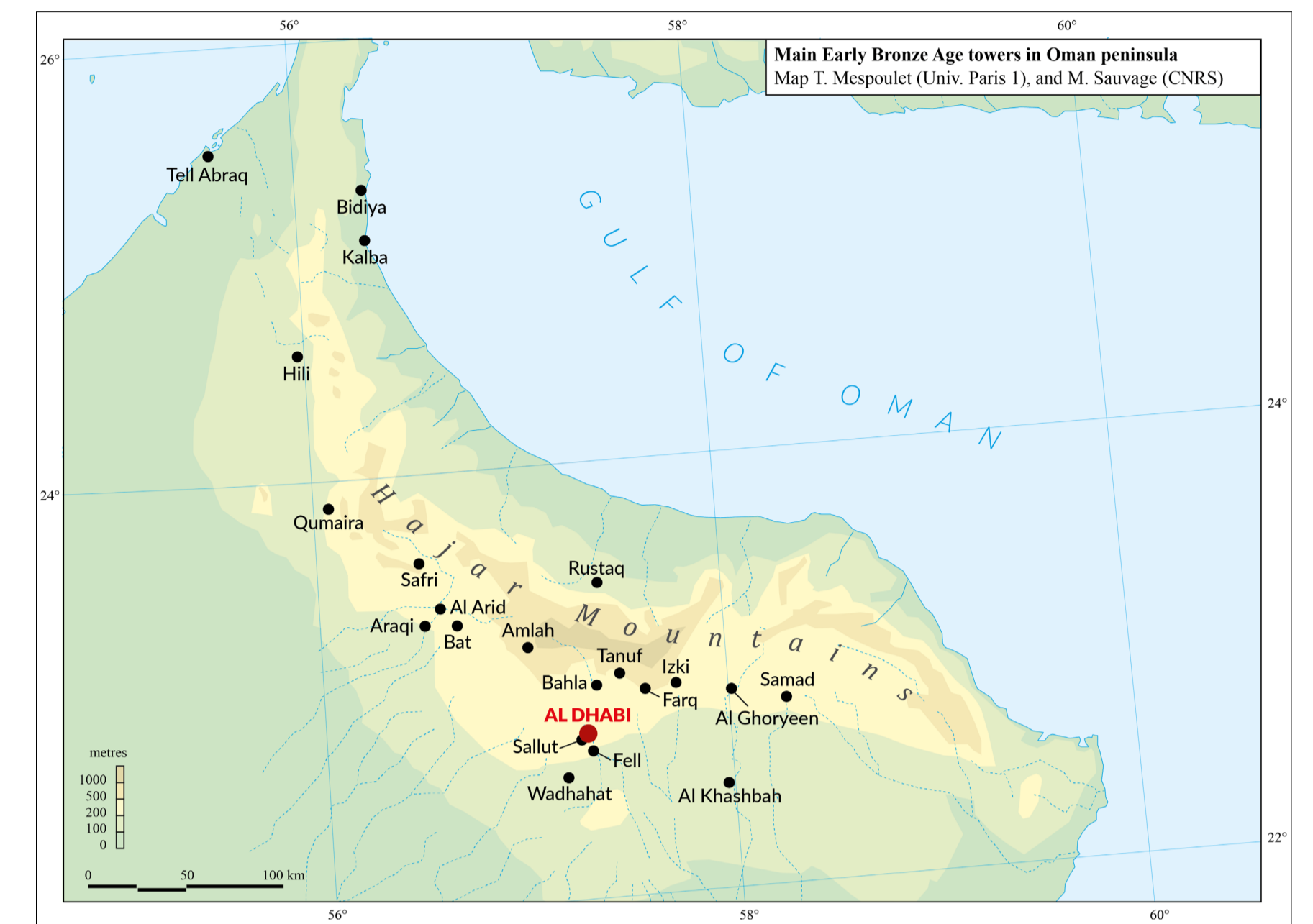


FAMCO: M. Jean, S. Sepeau, L. Audebert



Conclusion

Al Dhabi 2 is a major example of the iconic Early Bronze Age monumental sites in central Oman. The circular tower is built on a hill crest, taking advantage of a favourable location for defence, surveillance and water supply along a wadi, although its precise function is still unclear. Founded ca. 3000 calBCE, it appears to be the earliest building at the site that has been settled through the entire 3rd millennium BCE.



FAMCO: T. Mespoulet, S. Sepeau

Internal layout and structures

Excavations inside the tower did not reveal any clear evidence of internal subdivision. Instead, two enigmatic oval, basin-shaped structures were uncovered in the centre of the building (4.3 x 1.9 x 0.5 m, and 3.6 x 1.4 x 0.3 m). Due to their shape and location, it is still unclear if these structures are anthropogenic or natural; they are probably both as their surface is smoothed, and the stone blocks seem connected to the bedrock layers.

Other structures are hearths and pits dug into the natural layers. In the central trench (Op. F), the main structure is a stone-and-clay-lined firepit (ca. 0.5 m deep). To the south, a large hearth installed along the tower wall yielded remains of charred wheat and barley. Except a few Umm an-Nar potsherds on the surface, almost no artefacts were found in the tower, questioning its chronology and occupation.

Relation with the settlement

The settlement area is built on the southern side of the tower, on the hill flank. Orientation and implementation of the buildings indicate a direct relation to the tower's architecture. Excavations revealed a squared building, associated with the long north-south wall which delimitates the settlement. Several hearths were found on the natural bedrock, and the buildings seem directly built upon it. An elusive floor was evidenced in the building.

The finds include typical Middle-Late Umm an-Nar pottery and imported Indus wares such as fragments of black-slipped jars, and a few grinding stones. One stone pendant/sharpener and a fragment of softstone vessel were discovered in the collapsed layers.

