OMANI SILVER

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Introduction

Work in gold and silver goes back thousands of years and is steeped in mysticism. To the ancients gold was associated with the sun and silver with the moon. As early as the Fourth Millennium B.C. silver was being worked in Asia Minor and by the early part of the Third Millennium silver was being brought to Sumer in Mesopotamia from Elam and the Anatolian silver mines at Keban on the Euphrates, and it is expected that excavations of the ancient mines in the Binalad mountains west of Meshed and near Isphahan may yield evidence of the early production of silver in Iran.

Of all the crafts now practised in Oman work in silver is perhaps the most varied and beautiful and has been going on for as long as anyone can remember. An interesting example of how well-known Omani silver work was abroad is the fact that in the early 1920's the rich in Kuwait sent their Dimple Haig whisky bottles for silver covering in Nizwa - long the centre of the silver trade. Apart from Niswa, silver is worked in a variety of places all over the country including Bahla, Rostaq, Ibri, Sur, Salalah, Muscat and Matrah. Each place produces a distinctive design of its own. For example, from Nizwa come appliquéd geometric designs, from Rostaq the rose and the stem pattern, and from Ibri the lozenge-shaped pattern, but, with the movement of people from one area to another and particularly across the mountain range from Nizwa to Rostaq, patterns have become inter-changeable in more recent times.

Although there have been recent reports of traces of silver being found in the mountains of northern Oman, the chief source of silver for working has been the Maria Theresa Dollar, with its high and constant silver content. The quality of the metal is important as ornamental pieces are bought as an investment as well as for adornment and possession of good pieces is a mark of prestige for the owner and a form of security in time of war. In many bedu

families jewellery constitutes the bank account with the man attaching his wealth to the wrists and ankles of his wife: it is also for her the sign of an appreciative husband. Until recently old battered pieces were melted down to make new as the modern Omani likes modern silver in good condition. However, to the eye of the outside collector old pieces often seem finer and of better craftsmanship and now with the advent of Europeans in Oman in search of old silver it is being preserved at high prices in the souqs.

Apart from its mystical associations with the moon, silver has long been believed to possess qualities of protection against the 'evil eye'. For this reason - and although representation of the human in all forms is forbidden by Islam - one finds a variety of little men, either dangling on chains or etched on the back of medallions, possibly as a representation of djinns, worn to ward off evil. This use of similar anthropomorphic objects is not new: they were found in the Ganges civilization somewhere between 1700 and 1000 B.C. Mercury too is supposed, on account of its appearance, to have similar properties and it is not unknown for it to be taken orally as a protection against witches, as in Bahla, and for it to be rubbed into the gums of new-born babies: it is said to be readily available in some of the souqs in the Interior. Old glass bottle stoppers, pieces of wood and stone are sometimes set in silver and worn on complicated necklaces, and look as though they serve as teething objects for babies, though in fact they too are probably to ward off illness and to protect from evil, as was done by the Assyrians as early as the Ninth Century B.C.

Designs are on the whole borrowed from simple commonplace motifs,developed into artistic, exquisite and stylised patterns. Few stones are used in Omani jewellery, but imitation coral is sometimes strung between silver and gold beads, as is done widely by the bedu of Palestine and Jordan, and cheap plastic and glass is sometimes worked into jewellery. It is difficult to trace the origins of Omani jewellery. It is similar in so many ways to the styles and motifs found all over the Middle East and India. That it is similar to the Indian folk jewellery is hardly surprising as Oman has long had trading links with the Subcontinent. Many of the ideas commonly seen in jewellery all round the Middle East may have come from Somalia and Ethiopia, from Iraq and Turkistan and, of course, there are great similarities between the work done in Oman and that of Persia and Afghanistan. Silver work has traditionally always been done by ethnic minorities and has been the subject of patronage by the rich. The wealthy or royal traveller in the Middle East may well have taken his jeweller round with

him and it would seem that good ideas were quickly copied, making it difficult to say now which designs started where or when, particularly as good jewellers moved about freely, following fortune.

By the Third Millennium B.C. chasing, engraving, piercing and filigree work were all being done. Many of the designs current in Oman today are of great antiquity and universality. For example, the filigrain work of Cattack in India is identical in character with that of Arabia, Malta, Genoa, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and with the work of ancient Greece, Byzantium and Etruria, and was probably carried into the West by the Phoenicians and Arabs in the course of medieval trade between Turkistan and Russia. Some of the bracelets worn today in Oman are reminiscent of jewellery from northern Europe, Greece and Byzantium and may have come in with the Sabaean merchants and Phoenicians; and the Indian jewellery from Guzerat, Marwar, Kattiawar, Katch, Sind and Baluchistan all seem to be of the same family as that of Oman. The motifs found in Indian folk jewellery are often Moslem or Persian with leaves and the tree of life prominent; Parsee jewellery of the early 1880's was still in the traditional style of the Sassanid period in Persia though the work was done by Hindu jewellers. Many of the chains and links found in Oman are similar to those worn by the mountain woman of North Africa and many of the headpieces and motifs on the clips holding these and earrings are like work in the Taza collection in Morocco. Some of the pendants and bracelets are like those worn by the Turkomans and the wrought silver anklets like those of the Bakhtiyari and other tribes in Iran; the souqs today in southern Iran are full of silver such as one finds in Oman - not surprising perhaps in view of the long connections between the two countries.

Techniques used for the production of Omani jewellery are similar to those used all over the world. Gold is often used to ornament the silver work and now, more and more, the bedu are turning to gold jewellery when they can afford it.

The Maria Theresa Dollar or Thaler

This handsome coin used to be the valid currency in Oman until recently and though it is no longer, it continues to be sold widely in the souqs and to be used as a weight for assessing the value of the silver in a particular item.

It is named after Maria Theresa, the Empress of Austria who died in 1780, hence the date stamped on most of the thalers available today. The word thaler refers to the Jachimsthaler, a large silver coin of Count Stephan von Schlick of Jachimstal in Bohemia, which appeared in 1525. The letters S.F. beneath the portrait of the Empress stand

for Scholbe and Fabi, mint-master and warden respectively at Gunzburg where the coins were minted in the 1760's. The thaler was first minted in Vienna in 1751, with the growing demand for a large silver coin for commercial and trading purposes. The thaler was ideal, for it was difficult to counterfeit or clip and its standards of weight and fineness were strictly maintained. As silver had long formed the general standard and measure of value in the Far East, particularly in India and China, the thaler was in great demand in the Middle East for trading activities with Eastern neighbours, and by the first half of the Nineteenth Century it was circulating in a wide area bordered by the north-western coast of Africa, Nigeria, Madagascar, Muscat and the Turkish coast of the Black Sea. Subsequently it became a trade dollar with no fixed face value but merely a commodity value determined by the current value of the silver content and the vagaries of supply and demand.

Khanjars, knives and swords

Omani khanjars, distinctive in shape, vary in design according to where they originate and many have fine silver thread work on them as well as highly ornate handles and tops. The handle and blade are the most important part; bone is considered the best material for the handle though wood, and latterly plastic, are used. A good khanjar has seven silver rings on it, two to hold the belt and five through which decorative strands of thread are woven. Traditionally the top of the handle is flat, but the *Saidi*, or Royal Family one, has a cross-shaped top. Sayyid Said bin Sultan's Persian wife is said to have been bored with the straight top of her husband's khanjar and so designed the more ornate one.

Khanjars are worn on belts which range from fairly simple webbing, sometimes interwoven with silver thread, to beautifully ornate leather finely embroidered with silver wire and with handsome buckles. A simple leather pouch is often stitched to the back to hold a knife which may also have a finely worked silver handle. While the khanjar is defensive in origin, but now purely ornamental, the knife is used for practical purposes.

The Omani crest is made up of crossed swords and a khanjar and there are some fine examples of old swords, which were used for fighting and are still used in some of the *'id* dances. As swords are so much less common than khanjars or rifles it is probable that they are regarded as a treasured possession of the wealthy and powerful and largely confined to the nobility.

Utilities

Apart from engraved and embossed sets of coffee pot, incense burner and rosewater sprinkler, with the traditional Nizwa coffee pot having a definite 'waist', many items in common use are made of silver or richly decorated with it.

Old rifles and Martini Henris often have silver decoration on the butt and barrel, and powder horns - though some are of wood - can be beautifully worked silver with gold decoration. Pipes, tweezers and picks for removing thorns, ear cleaning spoons and tooth picks and the pins used for making holes in the ubiquitous embroidered cap are all made of silver. The kohl containers - both the little pot and stick used by women and the fancy holder on a fine chain worn on the belts of the men - are usually of silver.

There is a variety of chain work, with the double silver wire loop the most common, but a thicker chain, six or so strands of knitted silver wire, is often used to hold earrings in place.

Necklaces

Necklaces are widely worn, the most common being the *ḥirz* - a square or oblong box often highly decorated with appliquéd and embossed work, and occasionally with a stone in the middle - which contains a piece of the Koran. Sometimes the chain supporting the *ḥirz* is festooned with smaller silver boxes - or phylacteries - silver mounted bottle stoppers, horn or bone set in silver and occasionally an animal's claw, a lion's being deemed the best for protection against evil. Small silver shapes and tinkling bells often hang on chains along the base of the *ḥirz*. This use of danglers is an ancient design, being found in the Achaemenid Treasury jewellery at Persepolis and possibly dating to the Eighth Century B.C., on Cretan pendants and on the jewellery of Rhodes and classical Greece.

Large silver medallions on chains which may also bear a mumber of Maria Teresa thalers are common. The barrel-shaped loop which attaches these to the chain is identical to that found on a Fourth Century B.C. pendant from an Etruscan tomb in Umbria, to jewellery of the Early Kassite period in Mesopotamia and to necklaces from "Amalsh" in Iran from the Second Millennium B.C. Large and small silver bead necklaces are popular in the Interior of Oman, as are flat silver bands with embossed work and chains with little bells on them.

More elaborate necklaces, often with silver beads interspersed with coral beads and gold leaf soldered on to flat pieces of silver, with heavy ornate chains seem to come from

the desert areas of Oman and though distinctively Omani seem to use styles of work culled from varied and distant parts of the Middle East.

Anklets and Bracelets

There is an enormous variety of both anklets and bracelets and both are widely worn in Oman as elsewhere in the Middle East. They often contain little stones which jingle, indicating to the husband which wife is approaching. Heavy hinged anklets traditionally come from Nizwa but are also made in Rostaq. Many of the children wear little flat anklets; some, called ḫawājil, have bells hanging from them and look Indian in design but are also found in Iran. A twist of silver fastened by a loop and pin, similar to Eighteenth Century B.C. work found at Tel al Ajjul in Palestine, is also common.

Bracelets, called banāgiri, are worn all over Oman. The simple embossed bracelet about ¾ inch wide is probably Baluchi in origin and is made and worn in Muscat, Matrah and along the Batinah coast. It may originally have been Turkoman as bracelets of this design were found in Anatolia as far back as 2500 to 2000 B.C. and it is still widespread in Iran today. Another common form of bracelet is about 1½ inches wide with a single row of bosses all round. If it has a double row of bosses it comes from Sur in the Sharqiyah. Sometimes there are up to three single bossed bracelets joined together, going right up the forearm.

Earrings and hairpieces

The most common form of earring in Northern Oman is the almost circular hoop, part of which is usually smooth and the rest ridged; it usually has one or more silver blobs hanging from it and a set of danglers, perhaps representing the hand of Fatima. It is worn either direct into the ear - it is not uncommon for quite young girls to have four or five of these in holes going right up the ear - or suspended on chains hanging over the head. The blob, looking rather like a mulberry, is identical in design to earrings found in the Marlik tombs in the Elburz Mountains dating to the Ninth and Tenth Centuries B.C. and comparable to earrings from Patnos in Turkey of about the same date. They are also very similar to earrings worn by the mountain women of Morocco.

A more unusual earring is the large intricate pendant - a barrel with bosses round it, terminating in a triangle of separate silver beads and an inverted pyramid of smaller beads, on a hook which hangs on a chain, or may go into the ear lobe. Blobs of beads of this shape were found at Ur in the Third Millennium B.C. and similar designs were found in Cyprus,

probably Mycenaean in origin, to be dated to about 1550 - 1500 B.C.; at Ajjul and Megiddo in Palestine in the Middle Bronze Age; and in Urartian jewellery from Anatolia and Transcaucasus in the Ninth to Seventh Centuries B.C. Two fine examples of this type of work from Susa, which can be dated to the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C. Neo-Elamite graves, can be seen in the Louvre. Not surprisingly these blobs are common in other parts of the Arab world and the diamond-shaped pieces applied to the chain are typical of jewellery from the Hejaz. The chain holds the earrings firmly in place by being tucked into the hair or headdress.

Also tucked into the hair may be elaborate hairpieces, usually bedecked with danglers which jingle as the girl walks, which are worn particularly in Rostaq, Bahla and Jabrin where girls often have ornately plaited hair styles. Dinars or silver coins hanging down on the forehead are common on little girls, particularly around Rostaq, and it is probable, as in other parts of the Arab world, that these are worn round the neck after marriage. The very ornate headpieces which hang down below the headdress over the forehead are normally worn for weddings.

Rings

Rings are worn on both hands and feet. While toe rings are normally simple round rings with the familiar bosses, rings for the finger are often ornate and of varying design according to the finger on which they are worn. They are made in pairs, one for each hand, with a different one for each finger and the thumb.

Rings for the first finger are round at the base going up to a point over the first joint and are called shawāhib; for the second finger the ring is usually round and called khātim abū fauz - perhaps meaning the ring of attainment or success; for the third finger the ring is normally square and called khātim abū saṭḥ mrabbaʿ ; for the fourth finger it may have a coloured stone, or glass, and the mulberry-shaped design made up of beads soldered into a pyramid often appears. The ring for this finger is called haisa, perhaps meaning sensuous. Thumb rings are made up of solid silver bands, sometimes with a small stone in the middle and called marāmi, hais masbūkāt or butham.

Rings with bone or horn set in silver are probably 'djinn' rings, worn to protect against evil. 'Djinn' rings are usually gold with a carnelian set in them but it seems that for the poorer bedu silver and horn may have had to suffice. Magic or talisman rings, have, of course, been common throughout the ages, with the Ring of Solomon or Solomon's Seal the most famous. Nose rings are almost always made of gold and are widely worn.

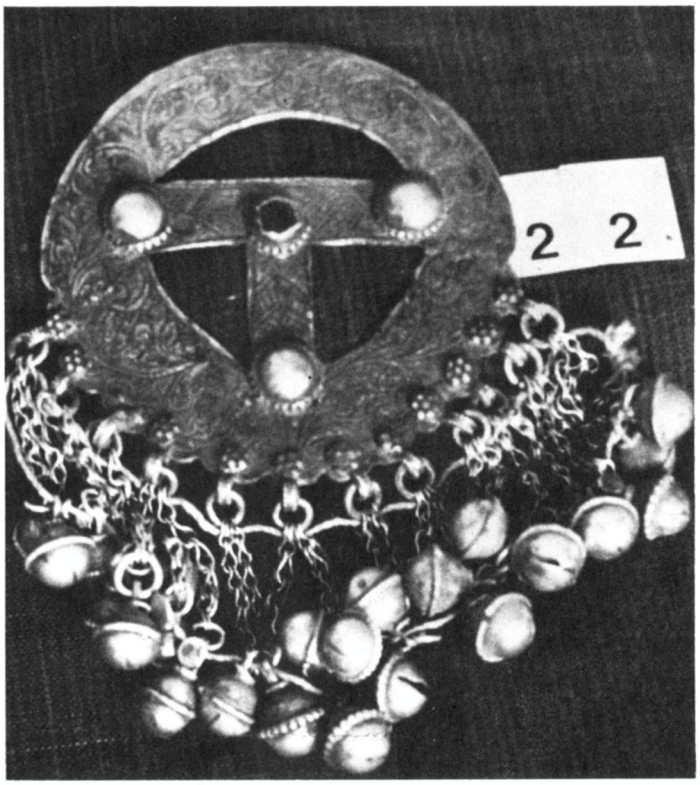
Dhofari silver

Silver jewellery from Dhofar, the southern province of Oman, tends to be more solid, with thick chunky beads often interspersed with coral, or imitation coral, and other, sometimes plastic, beads.

Typical examples of jewellery from Dhofar are the heavy chain or silsila with intricate and distinctive links which the women wear garter fashion, over one shoulder and under the other arm, called a manjad. Another typical piece is the sils, a heavy little triangle of fine silver decoration hung with chains and tinkling bells which is worn on the headscarf. Bracelets too are distinctive: there is the mhaḍabit, the Jibāli name for a D-shaped bracelet, the curved part of which is heavy twisted silver; and one made up of chunky silver beads alternating with little cog-shaped beads and coral called malnaut. Dhofari hair pieces include a set of ten little pendants each with small bells on them, hung on wool interwoven in the hair, called atngeel. Long conical earrings are also a feature of Dhofar and finger rings tend to be more solid than their Northern counterparts.

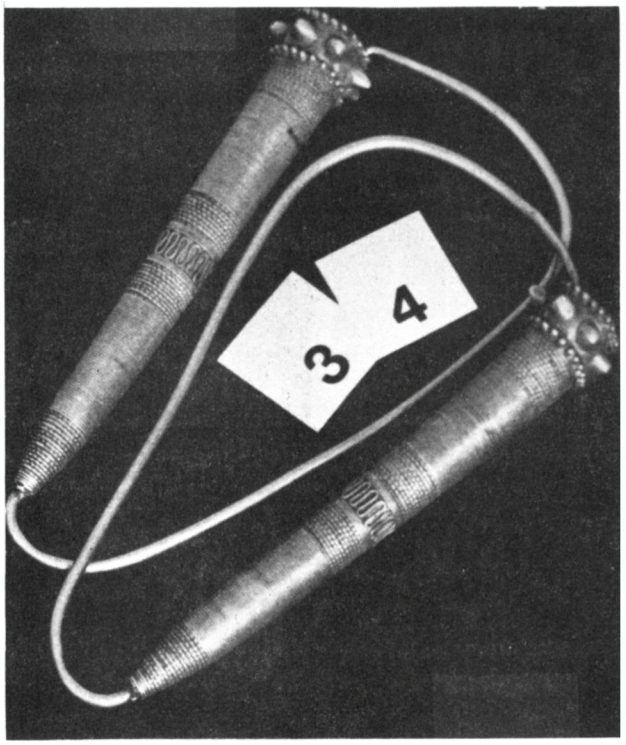
With the exception of the atngeel silver does not seem to be made up into jewellery any more, as gold has almost entirely replaced it.

Plate 1



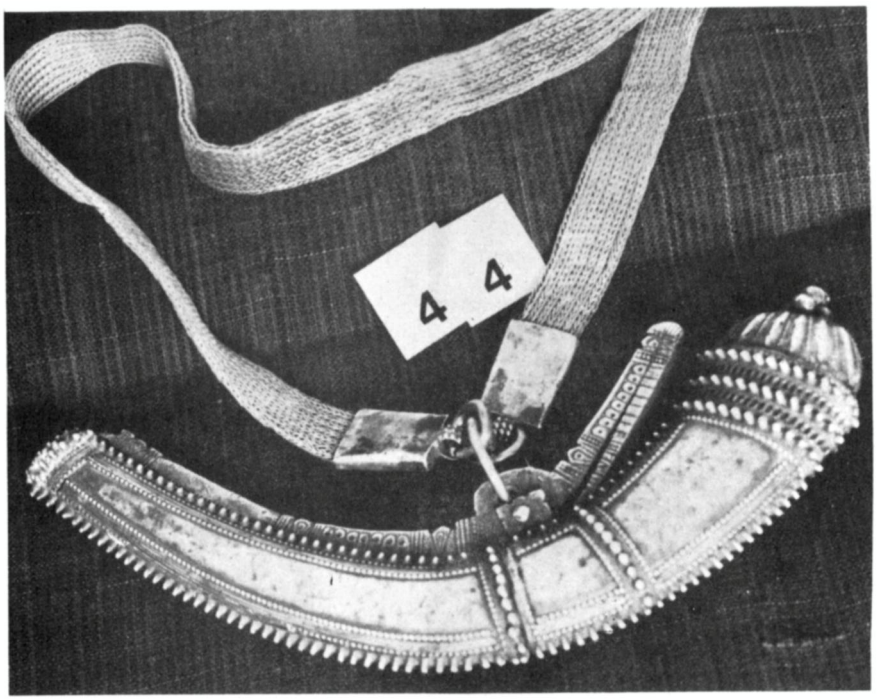
A.Hairpiece from the interior.

B.Long conical earrings from Dhofar

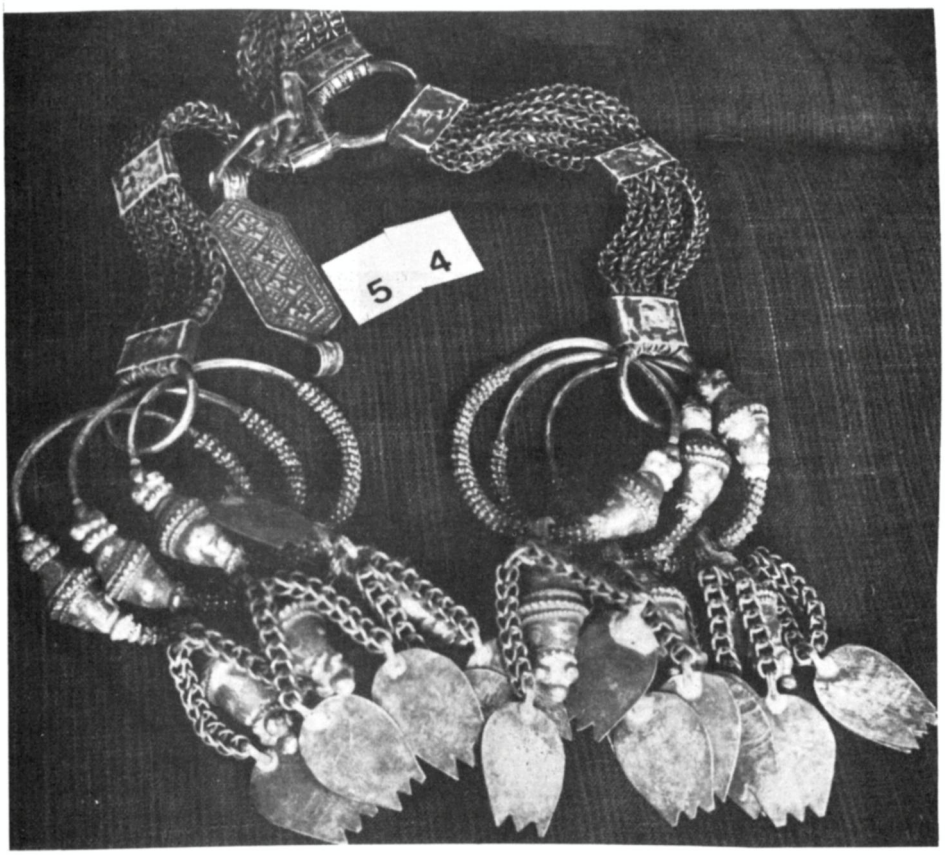


C.Heavy anklets from Rostaq

Plate 2



A. Silver powder horn



B. Earrings with supporting chain from northern Oman