

PROCEEDINGS
of the
SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES

VOLUME 30 2000

Papers from the thirty-third meeting of the
Seminar for Arabian Studies
held in London, 15–17 July 1999

SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES

BREPOLS

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Formation and transformation processes of oasis settlements in the Sultanate of Oman: preliminary report on a new field project

Jutta Häser

The project

In the spring of 1999 a new interdisciplinary project, entitled 'Transformation Processes in Oasis Settlements in the Sultanate of Oman' was undertaken.

With a broad historical background, the project's aim is to record the material culture, agriculture and the architecture of pre-modern times as well as their environmental setting and to point out possible tendencies in development. The aim of the archaeological investigations is to document the settlement history — especially the development of oasis settlements — in the area under study from their beginnings until modern times.

Participants in the projects include orientalists, ethnographers, architects, urban planners, plant physiologists, computer specialists and archaeologists from the universities in Tübingen, Hohenheim, Stuttgart and Muscat, as well as from the Orient Department of the German Institute of Archaeology in Berlin.

With the financial support of the state of Baden-Württemberg, the Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat and the German Institute of Archaeology, the planned length of this pilot project is two years.

The area under study lies in the al-Hajar massif and can be characterized as a c. 35 km long transection, that extends from al-Hamra over the Jebel Akhdar and through Wadi Bani 'Awf to the road al-Rustaq — Awabi (Fig. 1). It was chosen for

investigation for two main reasons: on the one hand, its delimited nature as a settlement area, which would allow the reconnaissance to be completed within two years; on the other hand, the inhabitants have maintained traditional customs and economy, which enables the documentation of traditional forms of living and production.

In respect to archaeology, this area has not been examined until now, with the exception of the environs of al-Hamra (de Cardi, Collier & Doe 1976: 144, 161; Costa 1983: 255). At the moment the question of ancient oasis settlements in the Sultanate of Oman is intensively discussed¹ and this project is intended to contribute to the solution of the origin and development of such settlements, especially on the northern side of the al-Hajar mountains.

First results

Field surveys commenced with a three-day reconnaissance of the study area, for which points of major interest for all project participants had been selected. These included seven oases, where inhabited dwellings, abandoned structures as well as larger cultivated areas were present. The oases are — from the northeast to the southwest — Far'a, al-Wasit, Tikha, Zamma, Balad Seet, Misfah and al-Hamra (Fig. 2). Aerial photographs were made from heights of 300 m to 1000 m with the aid of a helium balloon, and the films were developed and scanned

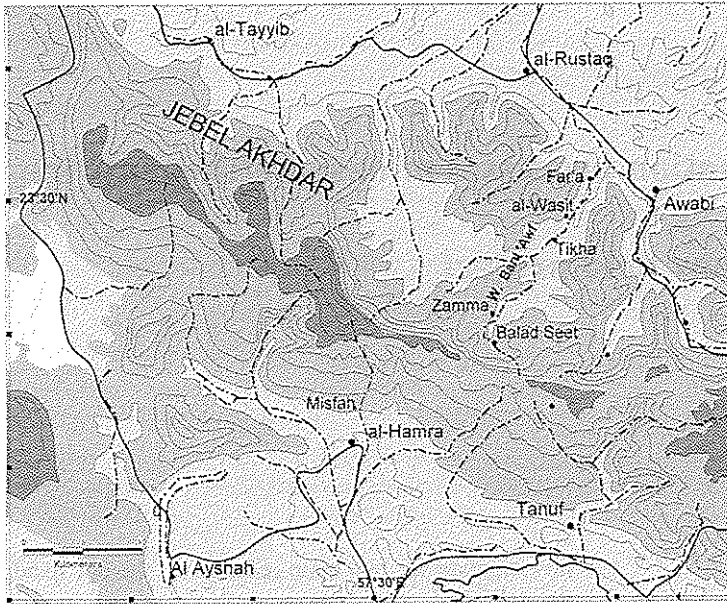


FIGURE 1. Study Area in Central Oman.

in Muscat. The enlargements aided in mapping ground plans of structures and in collecting surface pottery, according to its appearance in areas of dwellings, compounds and streets.

The initial reconnaissance was followed by a more intensive survey, which concentrated on Wadi Bani 'Awf, and in which all sites were recorded with a Global Positioning System, photographed and described.

Forty-six abandoned settlements and fortifications as well as 16 cemeteries of Islamic date were registered. The settlements are situated primarily on slopes or hill tops above the arable land, which represent the few places where soil formation could occur.

However, it was possible to see that, for example at Balad Seet, high terrace walls had been erected to retain artificially accumulated cultivatable soil (Fig. 2). This process of artificial soil accumulation is practised frequently in Oman, especially where access to water is easier than to arable soils. The sparseness of agricultural resources in Wadi Bani 'Awf during the past centuries is illustrated by numerous

fortifications, such as in Far'a, near al-Wasit, Tikha, Balad Seet, Misfah and al-Hamra, which were built as defence not only against enemies from the outside but also against neighbouring tribes.

A detailed study of the pottery collected from the settlements will be undertaken in future. However, it is already clear that the pottery constitutes mainly local wares. Dating the pottery is difficult due to the lack of typology and comparisons. At present the oldest determinable pottery are sgraffiato sherds, found in a demolished settlement on a small gravel bank in the wadi and indicating a date in the 12th or 13th century.

The sparseness of arable land and hence the continual use of the same spots for settling make it very difficult to find pre-Islamic settlement remains. For this reason such settlements have not been discovered with certainty until now. Yet near Tikha and Balad Seet stone structures were found, which could be interpreted as remains of earlier dwellings.

FIGURE 2. The modern oasis settlement of Balad Seet and the surrounding terrace fields.

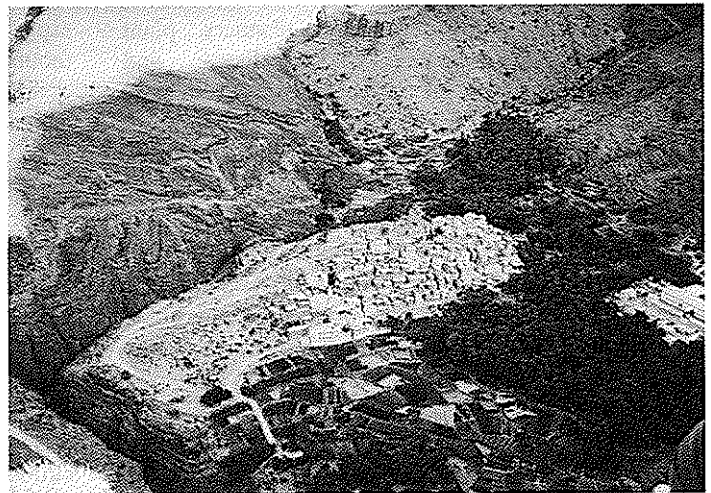




FIGURE 3. Round building structure with threshold and one upright doorpost, the second one is fallen down.

The structures near Tikha are located on the edge of a hill near graves dated to the third millennium BC. They consist of rows of large, unworked rocks, forming four polygonal enclosures with a diameter of 7 m to 12 m. The largest enclosure has an entrance in the northeastern corner, and approximately in its centre there is a large boulder, surrounded by smaller stones. Whereas the enclosure is certainly man-made, the origin of the boulder and smaller stones is unknown. For the moment the purpose of this particular place is still in question. Possibly it represents an enclosure for tents or huts made of organic matter.

The structures at Balad Seet consists of several circular walls, some of which are three rows in height. An entrance was discovered, with a threshold of one large stone and door jambs of two large upright stones in one of these walls (Fig. 3). Unlike the simple enclosures in Tikha, the enclosures in Balad Seet appear to have been structures for living or storage purposes.

No archaeological finds were made in either site, making their dating impossible at the moment. However, the buildings are based on a completely different concept of house planning from those in the Islamic settlements of the Wadi Bani 'Awf, making a pre-Islamic date probable. Further detailed

investigations will be carried out at both sites in the future.

Undoubted remains from pre-Islamic times are found in the form of graves in Wadi Bani 'Awf. Ninety-eight Hafit/bee-hive tombs² as well as Umm an-Nar tombs of the third millennium BC appeared in small groups of two to ten graves. Most of them were destroyed and/or robbed and none contained grave goods.

In three cases tombs of the third millennium show secondary use, but the date of re-use cannot be determined due to the absence of finds.

A very interesting findspot is a small hilltop just above the oasis settlement of Zammah with three or four Hafit/bee-hive tombs. This hilltop has been levelled and encircled by two low double walls in order to construct a flat area and to reinforce the slope against erosion before the erection of the tombs.

Six subterranean graves were discovered in the vicinity of Zamma, that are oval in shape and c. 2.5 m in length. They are marked on the surface by one or two rows of stones from the grave chamber and the cover stones. Since the cover stones were found moved aside, presumably the graves had been robbed. Here also no archaeological material was found which would allow their dating. Based on the grave structure they are possibly Wadi Suq single graves of the early second millennium BC.³

Further surveys will be carried out in Wadi Bani 'Awf in the fall of 1999, in order to complete the mapping of archaeological sites and to investigate in greater detail the most interesting places mentioned above. In addition, the initial reconnaissance of the region around al-Hamra will be undertaken. This will be followed by two campaigns in the spring and fall of the year 2000. In the meantime, results from other participant disciplines will be collected into a geo-information system, thus enabling a complete evaluation with special consideration of the topographical and ecological conditions of the oasis settlements.

Notes

- ¹ For recent discussion see: Orchard & Stanger (1994: 63-100), Orchard (1995: 145-158) and Potts (1997: 63-71).
- ² The problem of the definition and distinction of Hafit tombs and beehive tombs has been clearly pointed out by Vogt (1985).
- ³ For a detailed study of second and first millennium tomb-types see Yule (1994: 519-577).

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