

Project “Transformation Processes in Oasis Settlements in Oman”  
Report on the survey campaign spring 2003 in Maqta‘ and Ibrā’

Jutta Häser  
February 2003

Archaeological fieldwork on the third campaign of the second phase in the interdisciplinary cooperation project “Transformation Processes in Oasis Settlements in Oman” started on January 29 and was finished on February 19. Participants were Jürgen Schreiber, M.A. as archaeologist and Dr. Jutta Häser as archaeologist and field director from the German Institute of Archaeology, Berlin, and partly Dr. Birgit Mershen from the Sultan Qaboos University.

The first target of investigations was the small mountain oasis of Maqta‘. With respect to archaeology, the most interesting area is situated above the village in a small valley (Maqta‘ hail). At the northern edge of this valley, different stone structures were recognized (Maq03-Maq14). Most of them were re-used as small huts or stables, therefore their original appearance is difficult to determine. However, about ten large structures with a diameter of c. 6 m are probably remains of Umm an-Nar tombs. Pottery sherds of this period were found in the surroundings of these structures. An Islamic cemetery is situated south of them (Maq02). An oval tomb with a double wall of stones lies between the Islamic tombs. Iron Age pottery sherds scattered on the cemetery give a hint to the dating of the tomb to this period (Maq01). One Hafit tomb is situated on a ridge at the northern edge of the valley (Maq18). Two other Hafit tombs are located on the slope above the modern village (Maq16-Maq17).

From these finds it is clear that the area was used since the early third millennium B.C. A number of springs provide people with good living conditions and the valley above the village of Maqta‘ is a good grazing ground after rain. Pollen profiles, which were taken by the agriculturalists of the project group, will give insight into vegetation and climatic changes over the past millennia.

One special aim of the project is the investigation of paths which connect the coast with the inland. Prof. Dr. Andreas Bürkert, agriculturalist from the University of Kassel, undertook several trekking tours from Maqta‘ to Wādī Tīwī with the help of local guides. During his walk from Jaylah to Mibām he discovered eight large, partly very well preserved tombs. For a correct identification of the tombs, Jürgen Schreiber and myself walked to these tomb on the same track. The tombs are situated on a plateau about two walking hours from Jaylah (Jay01-Jay22). At first glance it was clear that we are dealing with Hafit tombs. Some of them are almost complete, others very delapidated. In all 17 Hafit tombs were discovered. Some other stone structures are located very close to them. These could be tombs of later periods. On one of these structures some pottery sherds were found, which can be dated to the Samad period. Also, a small Islamic cemetery was found.

These tombs show that the graves on the Shir plateau are not a single phenomenon but that they were part of a large system of interconnected tracks and places.

After the investigations in the mountains, archaeological exploration continued at Ibrā’ on February 4. Before going to the field satellite images were examined. This led to the decision

to start the survey on a hilly area between 'Alāyat Ibrā' and Sufālat Ibrā'. After the first inspection it became clear that the decision was right. Here the remains of an Umm an-Nar building were discovered (I0004), which was shown by large boulders and scattered pottery. However, the walls are so dilapidated that the original appearance cannot be determined. Iron Age and Islamic pottery sherds show that the area was re-used in later periods.

About 200 m northeast, a large, round structure was found, which was probably an Umm an-Nar tomb according to its shape and the pottery in its surroundings (I0007). About fifty round and oblong stone structures were found on the same hill. Iron Age pottery and bones were found on two of the round structures. Therefore, we are probably dealing with an Iron Age cemetery. In any case, it is obvious that the stones of the Umm an-Nar tombs were re-used for the younger structures, and it is possible that there was more than one Umm an-Nar tomb.

An area of about 50 m x 50 m was bulldozed between these two small hills (I0005). In the gravel and sand heaps at the edges of this area, Wadi Suq pottery was found. A little south to it the surface was not yet bulldozed and some round underground structures were visible there. Presumably, a Wadi Suq cemetery with underground single graves was bulldozed at this place and only some graves remained. A rectangular stone structure, only one stone layer high, was recognizable on the ground close to the graves. No finds give a hint to function and dating.

On the northeast side of the hills a small smelting site was found (I0008), but it cannot be dated because there are no other finds than slags and hammer stones. Maybe it is possible to date the site by the slags later.

During the survey in the palm gardens and the old towns in the oasis of 'Alāyat Ibrā' and Sufālat Ibrā', it turned out that this area was very disturbed by continuous use. In many cases the old surface is demolished by deepening the ground for the fields. Some small hills can be identified as remains of mud brick houses, which were scattered between the fields. Late Islamic pottery dates these remains. Few Iron Age sherds show that the area was already used during this period.

However, the main Iron Age occupation was located at two different sites. The early Iron Age settlement was situated on a flat hill (I0039), which is now situated in an extended Islamic cemetery. No Islamic graves were built on that hill until today. Some very faint remains of walls are visible on the ground. However, the scattered sherds from early Iron Age settlement pottery made the occupation of the place obvious. At the foot of the hill and slightly apart from the Islamic graves, the remains of some early Iron Age tombs were found. However, it is possible and even probable that the Iron Age cemetery was larger in ancient times and that the tombs disappeared by the later use of that area as burial ground.

This settlement was not inhabited during the later part of the Iron Age. Instead, a new settlement was built on a high hill on the western side of Wādī Gharbī just above the old settlement of al-Qanātir (I0052). The settlement had already been discovered by the urban planners of the project group, when they mapped the architectural remains of al-Qanātir. The settlement consists of about twenty houses built with stone walls. In some cases the walls stand up to a height of 0.8 m. The scattered sherds can clearly be determined as late Iron Age settlement pottery. However, there are also sherds of early Iron Age grave wares. Therefore, it is obvious that the area was occupied by early Iron Age graves before the late Iron Age settlement was established.

Early as well as late Iron Age tombs were also found on the flanks of the hills extending on the southeastern side of Wādī Gharbī.

A settlement of middle and late Islamic date which was probably built already in the early Islamic period is situated on a hill above Wādī Gharbī (I0046). An old mosque is situated at the eastern slope of the hill and a small Islamic cemetery at the southern foot of this hill.

The survey in the modern built-up areas east of 'Alāyat Ibrā' and Sufālat Ibrā' showed that the hills were used for burials during the early Iron Age. However, these tombs are completely demolished. No other sites were recognized, and this makes clear that these areas were not used for habitation until modern times.

The survey was continued along the mountains on the eastern side of Wādī Ibrā' starting at Wādī Nām. At the junction of Wādī Nām with Wādī Ibrā' the hills were crowned by Hafit tombs which mark the passage into the mountains. Further north several groups of different types of tombs were discovered. In all, more than 250 tombs were registered.

One type is similar to the tomb at Tawi Silaim, which was excavated by de Cardi and Doe (Journal of Oman Studies 3/1, 18ff.). It consists of two to three double ringwalls and in many cases a plinth in front of the outer face of the tomb. The diameter of the tombs varies between 6 and 11 m. The chamber is about 1 to 2 m in diameter. Only few sherds of Umm an-Nar pottery were found. Other finds are beads of shell, carnelian and agate.

Another type of tomb is built like the first one but has a larger chamber with one or more division walls (for example 112-4). In this respect they are very similar to Umm an-Nar tombs. In many cases one can find irregularly shaped limestones resembling the Umm an-Nar "sugar lumps". Even if the limestone used for the tombs at Ibrā' was not worked, it had a similar effect. It catches the attention through the sharp contrast against the dark brown stones used for the ring-walls of the tombs.

Only few finds were discovered. Some sherds of Umm an-Nar pottery, a fragment of a softstone vessel with dotted double circles, carnelian, agate and shells beads and frequently flint flakes were found on the tombs. In some cases also Iron Age finds were discovered, which show that the tombs were re-used during this period. For the time being it is difficult to determine if the finds of the Umm an-Nar period belong originally to the grave inventory or if they are the grave inventory of later burials. De Cardi and Doe state that they are not sure, whether the finds of the Umm an-Nar period in the excavated cairn 1 at Tawi Silaim belong to the original grave inventory or to a later burial. In the first case, the tomb would be older than the Umm an-Nar finds.

A third grave type are tombs with an outer double ringwall and two or more chambers inside the walls. In most cases they are situated on top of hills or on ridges, like the Hafit tombs. Since they are demolished in all cases, it is possible that these tombs were originally Hafit tombs. The inner ring-walls could have been removed and two or more chambers could have been built inside this extended chamber. Another possibility is that one or more tombs were built at the outer wall of an original Hafit tomb with the stones of the interior of this original tomb. Since only flint flakes were found inside the tombs, a dating is not possible at this moment.

Besides the paucity of finds, stone robbery is the other big problem which obscures the original appearance of the tombs. In many cases one could see traces of tyres on top of half or completely dilapidated tombs.

However, not only tombs of this early period were found. Remains of walls built of large boulders were recognized on three small hills close to different groups of tombs (I0267). In

some cases rectangular structures of double walls were visible. The walls are only one to three layers high. There were no other finds than flint tools and flakes on these sites. Not a single sherd was found. At the moment it is difficult to date the structures, because the flints need a more detailed examination. However, the use of very large boulders for the walls of the houses, the vicinity of Hafit and Umm an-Nar tombs as well as the complete absence of pottery make it probable that these structures constitute a Hafit or very early Umm an-Nar settlement. However, only excavations could confirm this supposition.

The survey in the oasis of Ibrā' shows that there has been a continuous use of that area over five millennia. The settlement areas are situated close to the wadi but their position shifted with the time. The reasons for this shift will have to be investigated. In all cases the settlements were small. An extension of the oasis was only possible by the intensification of falaj constructions, which enlarged the agricultural basis. This was supported by the Ya'āriba dynasty in the seventeenth century.

UTM-coordinates of main sites

Site	description	N	S
Maq01	Iron Age tomb(?)	2526774	701900
Maq02	Islamic cemetery	2525695	704568
Maq03-Maq14	re-used Umm an-Nar tombs	2525719	704429
Maq15-Maq16	Hafit tombs	2525671	704405
Maq18	Hafit tomb	2525767	704680
Jay1-Jay22	Hafit and later tombs	2520542	720809
I0004	Umm an-Nar building	2510684	658218
I0005	Wadi Suq graves	2510969	658246
I0007	Umm an-Nar and Iron Age tombs	2511154	658103
I0008	melting site	2511062	658103
I0039	early Iron Age settlement	2508956	657285
I0052	late Iron Age settlement	2510794	656896
I0112-4	Umm an-Nar(?)	2515435	658364