

A Bronze Bowl from the Back Country of the Sultanate of Oman¹

Find Circumstances

In 1997 within the framework of our project "A Structuring of the Iron Age in South-East Arabia", the German Archaeological Mission undertook excavations 1 km east of 'Amlah in the al Fueda plain. The site (N23°07'52"; E56°54'07") is located in the al Ḥāhirah Province of the Sultanate of Oman. Our goals were to shed light on the distribution and chronology of the known regional Iron Age assemblages and more clearly identify chronologically diagnostic classes of artefacts. Included were also the elucidation of the position and date of the interface between the Samad Culture² and its neighbours to the north-west (Fig. 1). We also wanted to investigate or even narrow the temporal gap (250 BC–250 AD) between the so-called Early and Late Iron Ages known in the Sharqīyah and in Dakhlīyah (Central Oman)³. Here the Samad Culture centres, although several sites are known to the north-east, east, and south-east. Sites such as those at Muṭī, al Bustan, and Ra's al Ḥadd HD 21⁴ are clearly attributable to the Samad Culture, but others are known only from strayfinds (Mas-kutah and al Maqniyāt) or atypical grave architecture (Samā'il/al 'Ain and Bidbid/Quthaya) which may or may not be wholly diagnostic. Neither the Bāṭinah plain nor the al Ḥāhirah country of the northern part of the Sultanate contain characteristic finds or graves. Moreover, until now little was known about the Late Pre-Islamic culture and burial customs on the whole outside of Central Oman⁵.

The submission of some antique iron finds by a local inhabitant from the area of al Fueda to the Department of Antiquities brought the clandestine excavations there to the author's attention⁶. Through the good offices of the wālī of 'Ibrī, one of the individuals involved was contacted, and the cemetery was located. Later, time and financial resources allowed the controlled investigation of some 25 of the graves (Fig. 2) in a part of the cemetery which seemed the least disturbed. The cemetery is far larger than this and extends visibly to the south. Part of it was destroyed as a result of landscaping and subsequent cultivation. This presumably took place within the past ten years, at a time when gas and diesel pumps became common in the area. The finds date approximately from the third century BC to the first century AD at the beginning of a cultural assemblage which continues later, known from a few sites in the present-day United Arab Emirates. The occupation at al Fueda corresponds roughly to the phase PIR.A ("Pre-Islamic Recent A", 3rd c. BC – 1st half of the 2nd c. AD) in the UAE⁷. On the strength of characteristic pottery and other small finds, the remains are designated the "Northern Late Pre-Islamic Culture" (NLPC). Al Fueda derives its importance as the first such substantial site known in the Sultanate. The cemetery and its finds document a timespan for which in the neighbouring Samad Period/Culture of Central Oman, little information exists. Other sites such as Ṣuḥār and Ṣaḥām may belong to the NLPC

1 The author first would like to thank H.H. Sayyid Faisal b. 'Alī b. Faisal Āl Sa'īd, Minister, and Dr 'Alī b. Ahmed b. Bakhit al Shanfarī, Director General of the Department of Archaeology, of the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture for their support over the years. Sponsored by the German Mining Museum in Bochum and the Institute for Prehistory of the University of Heidelberg, this year's excavation was made possible by a grant from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation to the writer. Additional funds were granted by W.M. Domke. I would like to thank Chris Edens (University Museum, Univ. of Pennsylvania) for permission to publish the bowl from Ja'lān which he found. Joachim Kunkel was in charge of the restoration of the metal vessels discussed below in the conservation laboratory of the German Mining Museum, Bochum. Kathrin Sachsenberg was the excavator of the bowl DA 13363. She made helpful suggestions in the text. The orthography of the place-names is taken from the Gazetteer of Oman (Washington, D.C. 1983) of the Defense Mapping Agency.

2 B. Vogt 1983; P. Yule/B. Kazenwadel 1993; P. Yule 1999b, 121–146; P. Yule 2001.

3 The Samad Culture dates post 300 BC–1000 AD, although for its beginning there is little evidence.

4 I thank my colleague Julian Reade for his information on Ra's al Ḥadd (Letter 17.09.1998.).

5 Cf. P. Yule/M. Kervran 1993 on the pottery of Ṣuḥār on the Bāṭinah. Written in 1988, this article was already dated when it appeared. It does, however, provide a first glimpse of the Pre-Islamic ceramic repertoire of Ṣuḥār and Khor Rorī. In 1995 test excavations were made 6 km east of al Fueda in a cemetery at Qorin al Ṣaḥḥaimah which was suspected to be of late Pre-Islamic date, but which proved in part at least to date to the Wādī Sūq Period (P. Yule/G. Weisgerber 1996).

6 For the find circumstances of the al Fueda cemetery see Yule in press 1; P. Yule 1999a, 119–121.

and require further study, the main question remaining – whether their finds reflect the occupation of Iranian owners or of local inhabitants.

Furthermore, al Fueda is the only known late Pre-Islamic cemetery in a vast territorial expanse which ranges from Wādī al Qawr⁸ toward the south (NLPC) and to the north-west from al Bustan (Samad Culture)⁹. This area covers some 15,600 km². The discovery made al Fueda a first secure anchoring point in the Sultanate's back country (or for that matter also on the adjacent Bāṭinah plain) for a cemetery of the late period.

During the mission's excavations, four bronze bowls came to light, among them one with particularly richly chased decoration in its inside surface, the subject of this essay. Another of the bowls shows figural decoration on its exterior, and at the time of writing was not yet restored. Two others show ornament on the exterior rim. These three bowls are to be treated in a later study. That bowl under discussion derives from grave Fu11 in the unfortunately plundered and only partially investigated cemetery. Owing to the plundering, resultant exposure, and soil conditions, the grave chamber contained no osteal remains. Ca. 10 cm above the presumed original floor of the grave the bronze bowl lay in secondary position in the debris, slightly tipped. No other finds were extant (Fig. 3). The floor of the grave measured 1.7 m in length – long enough for either a man, or a woman. From what is known of the burial customs of this age, the grave may have belonged to a woman, for it contained neither traces of weapons or tools (iron slivers), and only a single "household" object, the bowl¹⁰.

Iconography

Although during transportation, the bowl was damaged (Fig. 4) and the restoration was complicated by the complete oxidation of the metal, it could be satisfactorily restored. 32 different figures appear inside in registers which are designated a–d, "d" being in the centre (Figs. 6a and 6b). Motifs are most easily recognizable in the upper half of the bowl, as depicted here. Most badly damaged, zones "b" and "c" are comprised partly of small sherds, none of which were missing. The appearance of the innermost registers is complemented by photos which were made just after the bowl was recovered in the field (Fig. 7). A *guilloche* flanked by a row of punched circles is visible on the outside at the rim (Fig. 8).

Seven motifs appear, most frequently camels and goats. The outer two registers are separated by a row of circular punched circles. The central "whirl-

pool" motif provides a register base for the animal figures of register "c". Owing to the steepness of the upper wall, viewed *en face* from a central vantage point above the bowl, the motifs in register "a" appear rather fore-shortened. At two diametrically opposed points in the outer zone a palm tree is rendered. The identification of the animals depicted differs in certainty. Those in registers "a" and "b" are usually clearly preserved. An exception is no. 2. Owing to its hooked beak and bodily proportions, this bird is taken to be a parrot. Other less likely identifications are also possible. In zone "c", the standing man, no. 14, is squeezed into the composition, as is the kneeling man, no. 19 opposite it. Owing to the light and sketchy engraving, both seem a secondary addition. No. 17 revealed itself to be a goat only after repeated study of the photos found traces of lightly engraved horns. Difficult to recognize and to reconstruct graphically is the human figure with upheld hands, no. 28. Also difficult to recognize is the winged figure with a large head in a *knielauf* posture, no. 30, which brings to mind a gorgon. The animals are simply rendered and their naturalistic appearance not closely observed.

The array of figural motifs is the most elaborate known from this part of Pre-Islamic Arabia. The upper and lower halves of the composition are marked by palm trees which straddle the two outer registers. The men appear to wear horizontally patterned garments. Riding scenes, depictions of centaurs, gorgons, and of humans are rare from South-eastern Arabia. Although it seems likely that the figural groups originally may have had a narrative content comprehensible to the artist and/or his contemporaries, this meaning eludes our comprehension. Fairly clear is an offering scene in which a kneeling man (no. 12) stabs a goat (no. 11). Beneath the man's left hand is a six-petalled motif which brings to mind the attribute star of Ishtar. It is tempting to understand the two riders in register "a" as opponents of the centaur (no. 4). Diametrically opposed to them on the other side, the figures suggest individual decorative elements which do not interact with each other. This holds for the single figures in the other zones. Certain details are difficult to explain. For example, while the camel rider (no. 5) seems to have reins, the horse and rider behind them do not (no. 6). Parts of a possible saddle frame (alternative: two sword grips?) are visible behind the camel rider.

Comparanda

A number of metal vessels have come to light in South-eastern Arabia in the past few years which

7 For the dating of the period PIR.A see M. Mouton 1992; *ibid.* 1998. The dating of the al Fueda cemetery is the subject of a thesis at the Institute of Prehistory of the University of Heidelberg.

8 55°45'E; 25°07'N.

9 57°46'E; 23°59'N.

10 For the pattern of grave goods in the graves of males as opposed to females in the neighbouring of the Samad Culture, see Yule 2001.

establish the appearance and development of the local style¹¹. Controlled excavations in the 1980's yielded three fragmentary engraved bowls at Mleiha in the Sharjah Emirate which share features with that from grave Full¹². All three of the bowls show register composition (Figs. 15–17). Common features include zones defined by rows of circular punch marks, scenes of fighting animals, mounted horses, and camels. Also similar are the striated headgear which some of the men wear. The palm trees, which serve as compositional dividers, penetrate the registers in the al Fueda bowl and in one from Mleiha (Fig. 15). The engraving of the al Fueda bowl is deep and enhanced by a *repoussé* relief of the figures. This same technique is present in the three bowls from North-west Oman. The engraving is the most similar to that of Figure 17 from Mleiha, but for one difference. The outlines of the figures in the al Fueda bowl are usually doubly and not singly engraved. The deep chasing pushes up the metal between the cuts especially where they lie close to each other. Bowls related to that from al Fueda derive from sites which are located within some 300 air km of each other. But this proximity does not result in an identical style.

Other metal bowls of the late Pre-Islamic Period have appeared in recent years. A bowl (Fig. 18) reportedly found together with 16 other finds from a grave in the Samā'il oasis contrasts that from al Fueda in its composition¹³. First, the figures are composed around a central rosette in a one-field composition. Second, the motifs are larger and more confidently engraved. Juxtaposed are two lions and two mounted hunters or warriors. They are separated from the lions in the composition by two radially ordered serpents. Owing to a complete lack of comparable dated bowls in the Near East, the dating of the bowl is somewhat uncertain, but seems to fit into the Sasānian tradition. The large tondo composition presents the craftsman with a difficult problem, and contrasts with the simpler multiple register kind of composition known as early as the Early Iron Age in South-eastern Arabia (Fig. 19)¹⁴. The artist's keen observation is evident in details such as the bold curving necks of the horses, a posture characteristic of stallions. The other objects from the burial provide further information about the origin of the bowl. A storage vessel of the G08var class (DA 10624) is

made of the same green ware known from ed Dūr, and rare in Mleiha. This ware occurs most frequently in the third and fourth centuries AD¹⁵. The arrowheads from the grave correspond to M. Mouton's type D¹⁶. Several arrowheads of this kind, which Mouton dates from the first to the fourth centuries AD, were excavated in ed Dūr areas K and F. Another metal bowl from the same grave shows an intricate quadratic band of engraved ornament at the rim (Fig. 20). The same kind of decoration occurs on one of the bowls from Mleiha mentioned above (Fig. 16). This decoration and the use of the lathe to finish the metal bowl from al Fueda provide further evidence for the ultimate provenance. The centre inside bottom of the bowl from al Fueda shows a recession of 3 mm depth and around it a thickening of the material. This same treatment of the metal can be observed in a ladle fragment from the Samā'il grave (Fig. 21). Lathe-turning in the Near East is a topic which requires further attention. Needless to say, it also occurs in the stone working of the Samad Culture¹⁷.

Although the hunt bowl from Samā'il (Fig. 18) came to light in the midst of the Samad cultural area, it is not typical of this culture. Indeed, owing to the small amount of figural art from the Samad Culture, a typical style has yet to be defined. On the basis of the details of manufacture and the accompanying finds, it seems possible that these and/or their owner originated from the area to the north-west. In due time more metal bowls will come to light which will reveal more about the figural art of late Pre-Islamic Central Oman. Those that are known, generally have the same shape (MeOB11 class) with a constricted rim and round foot. Examples derive from Samad al Shān and al Bustan. Possibly ascribable to the Samad Culture or contemporary with it is a stray (Fig. 22) from Ja'fān area of the Sharqiyah. The precisely engraved decoration is radially ornamental. Characteristic of the culture and region is the vessel shape.

Origin of the bowls

Considering certain revealing common iconographic elements, register composition, and the above-mentioned manner of driving and engraving, several bowls (Figs. 5–18, 20–21) form a group which at first glance may well originate in North-western Oman. Particularly the date palms of the bowl from al Fueda

11 As already mentioned, the other three bowls from al Fueda differ from the subject of this study in style and decorative programme.

12 Four other unpublished engraved bowls from the NLPC came to light and are now in the Sharjah Museum. Letter M. Mouton 24.07.99.

13 P. Yule 2001 for the find circumstances and inventory of grave Bar 1.

14 P. Yule/G. Weisgerber 2001, artefact class MeP3, cat. no. 152.

15 Letter (16.07.1989) from R. Boucharlat, who examined a sample of the ware.

16 Class P11. M. Mouton 1990, 98, table 6. His no. No. 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 are not similar to each other. The last two come close to those of my P11 class. The arrowheads must be restudied from a standpoint of chronology.

17 P. Yule, 2001.

18 E. Negahban 1983, cat. no. 20 (male deer or elk), 51, and 52.

and Mleiḥa as well as the camels suggest this region and less so Iran as their place of origin, although some motifs, such as the stag probably derive from Iran¹⁸. But the centaur and possible gorgon bring to mind Mediterranean associations. There is little sense in debating whether a Persian or Greek craftsman was working for Arab customers or if an Arabic speaking individual engraved the designs. The bowl from al Fueda has no clear contemporary comparisons

from Iran. But North-west Oman has an art industry of its own, and one with links there and also with the North. In this it differs from Central Oman, the contemporary art of which is known to us largely only from beads, stone bowls and pottery. Central Oman is different and seems to turn to India and perhaps also Africa for materials and inspiration. The bowl from al Fueda is yet another witness of the art industry of North-west Oman.

Catalogue of vessels mentioned above:¹⁹

Source	l/dm	h	gr	DA no.	vessel class
1 'Amlah/al Fueda gr Fu11	16.2	4.5	362	13363	MeOB12
2 Mleiḥa/necrop. F	17.0	5.3	–	uf137	Me
3 Mleiḥa/necrop. C	18.0	3.5	–	uf201	Me
4 Mleiḥa/necrop. C	18.5	2.5p	–	uf14	Me
5 Samad gr S101124	13.6	6.1	–	5943	MeOB11
6 al Bustan gr Bu5	13.0	8.0	184	11982	MeOB11
7 Samad gr S10815	14.0	9.4	296	12118	MeOB11
8 Samā'il/al Bārūnī Bar1	15.8	4.5	247p	10617	MeOB12
9 'Ibrī/Selme	22.5	3.5	490	5656	MeP3
10 Ja'fān	15.0	6.0	227	11406	MeOB12
11 Samā'il/al Bārūnī Bar1	18.0	6.0p	155	10619	MeGB07
12 Samā'il/al Bārūnī Bar1	7.1	3.5	42	10614	Sc

p=preserved

Sources

- Boucharlat, R. (ed.), 1986. Archaeological Surveys and Excavations in the Sharjah Emirate, 1986 A Third Preliminary Report (Lyon)
- 1989. Archaeological Surveys and Excavations in the Sharjah Emirate, 1988 A Fifth Preliminary Report (Lyon)
- Defense Mapping Agency, Gazetteer of Oman (Washington, D.C. 1983), now available as the Geonet Names Server (www.nima.mil)
- Mouton, M., 1992. La péninsule d'Oman de la fin de l'âge du fer au début de la période sassanide. Unpublished Dissertation Université de Paris I
- Mouton, M., 1998. Mleiḥa (Emirat de Sharjah): la céramique de la période PIR.A (3^e-milieu 2^e s. av. J.-C.) in the CD publication: M. Mouton und F. Carrez (eds.), Assemblages céramique des sites de l'Âge du Fer de la péninsule d'Oman (Lyon) ISBN 2-903264-85-6
- Negahban, E., 1983. The Metal Vessels of Marlik Tepe. PBF II.3 (Munich)
- Vogt, B., 1984. 1st Mill. BC Graves and Burial Customs in the Samad Area (Oman). In: R. Boucharlat and J. F. Salles (eds.), Arabie Orientale, Mésopotamie et Iran méridional de l'âge du fer au début de la période islamique. Mémoire Éditions Recherche sur les civilisations 37 (Lyon) 271–284
- Yule, P., 1999a. 'Amla/al Zaḥīrah (Sultanat Oman) Späteisenzeitliche Gräberfelder 1997: Vorläufiger Bericht, in: Paul Yule (ed.), Studies in the Archaeology of the Sultanate of Oman, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Orientabteilung, Orient-Archäologie v. 2 (Rahden) 119–186
- 1999b. The Samad Period in the Sultanate of Oman, Iraq 61, 121–146
- in press 1. 'Amla/al Fueda: A Cemetery of the Late Pre-Islamic Age in al Zaḥīrah (Sultanate of Oman)
- 2001. Die Gräberfelder in Samad al Shān (Sultanat Oman): Materialien zu einer Kulturgeschichte (Rahden)
- Yule, P./Kazenwadel, B. 1993. Toward a Chronology of the Late Iron Age in the Sultanate of Oman, in: U. Finkbeiner (ed.) Materialien zur Archäologie der Seleukiden- und Partherzeit im südlichen Babylonien und Golfgebiet (Tübingen) 251–277
- Yule, P./Kervran, M., 1993. More than Samad in Oman: Pre-Islamic Pottery from Ṣuḥār and Khor Rori, Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy 4, 69–106
- Yule, P./Weisgerber, G., 1996. Die 14. Deutsche Archäologische Oman-Expedition 1995, MDOG 128, 135–155
- 2001. The Metal Hoard from 'Ibrī/Selme, Sultanate of Oman. PBF XX.10, (Stuttgart)

¹⁹ The artefact classes are defined in Yule 2001.

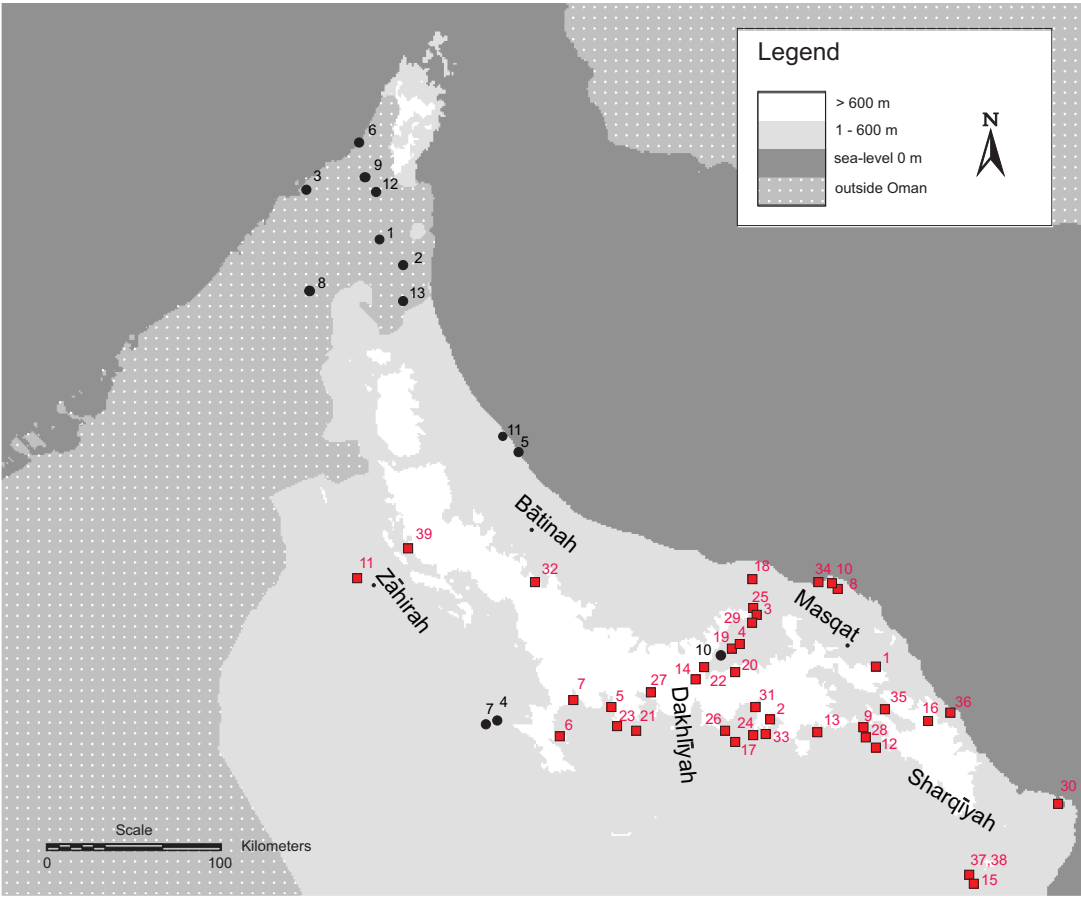


Fig. 1 Map of the Late Preislamic Sites in South-eastern Arabia

Samad Assemblage □:

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1 Abāyah | 16 al-Maskūteh |
| 2 al-Akh ar | 17 al-Maysar |
| 3 al- Amqāt | 18 Multaqā |
| 4 Samā il/al- Ayn | 19 al-Mustagh |
| 5 Ba la BB-04 | 20 Mu ī |
| 6 Ba la BB-15 | 21 al-Nib ā |
| 7 Bandar Jī a | 22 Quthāya |
| 8 al-Ba īn | 23 Ra s āl- add, HD-21 |
| 9 al-Bustan | 24 al-Rawdah/Muqatta |
| 10 al-Dhurra | 25 al-Wāfi/Rubāyrat |
| 11 Ja lān | 26 al-Rustaq |
| 12 Kha r ā Banī Daffā | 27 Samad al-Shān |
| 13 Samā il/al-Khobbar | 28 al-Sarūj |
| 14 Ma al īyah | 29 al-Shāriq |
| 15 Mana | 30 al-Wāfi/W. Muharak |

Late North Pre-Islamic Culture ●:

- 1 Ā imah
- 2 Bithnah
- 3 ed-Dūr
- 4 al-Fuwāydah
- 5 Ghail al-Shabul
- 6 Julfār
- 7 al-Mais
- 8 Mlei a
- 9 Nud Ziba (al-Khatt)
- 10 Samā il/al-Bārūnī
- 11 u ār
- 12 Wa b
- 13 W. al-Qawr

Fig. credits

Fig. 1 Elevation data: National Geophysical Data Center, Boulder, Colorado, version Globe 1998
Digital Cartography, Dr Paul Yule, Bochum 19098
Fig. 4-7.22 P. Yule
Fig. 2.3 P. Pahlen
Fig. 8-14 G. Weisgrber
Fig. 15-17 r. Boucharlat
Fig. 18-21 Deutsches Bergbau-Museum

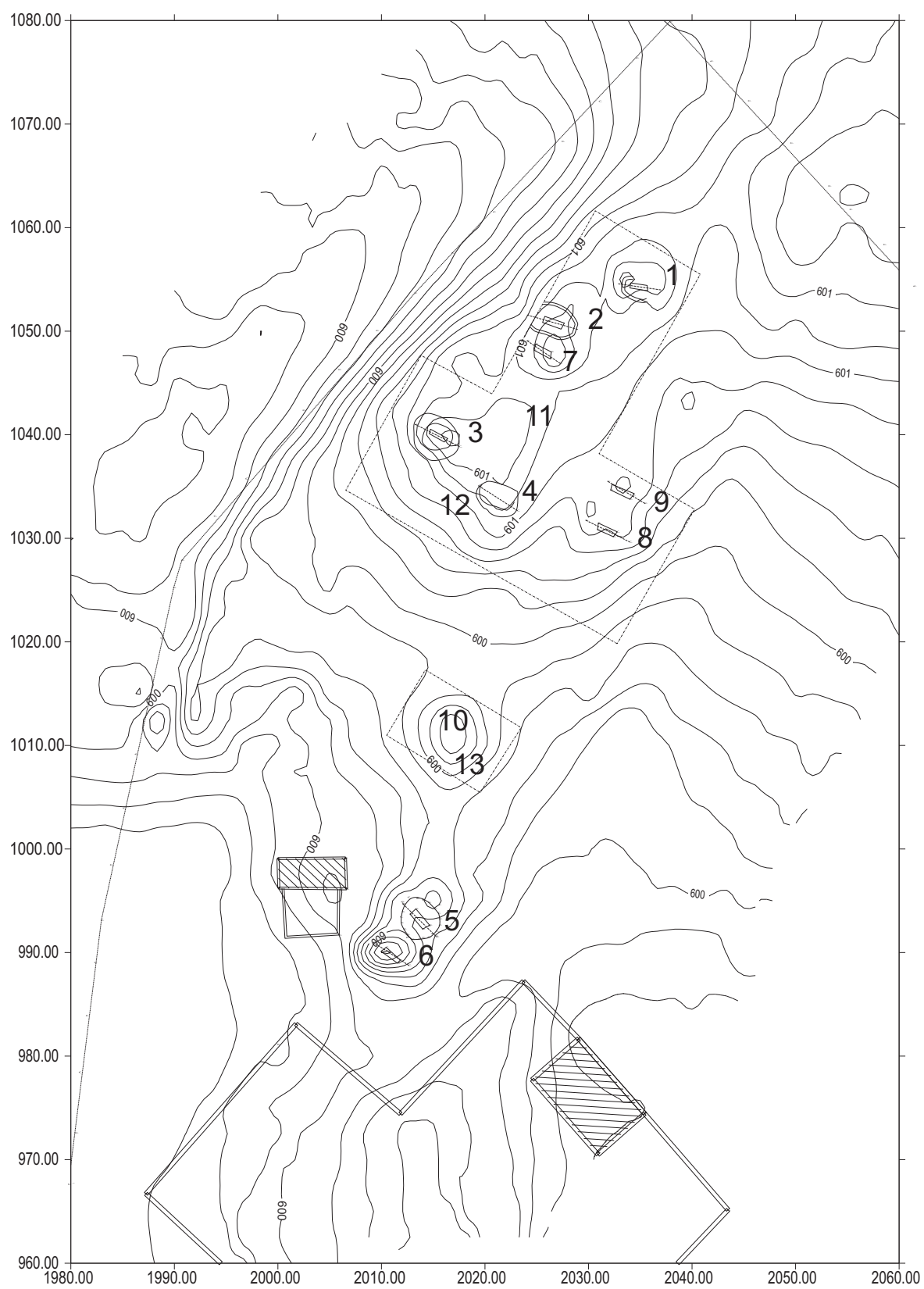


Fig. 2

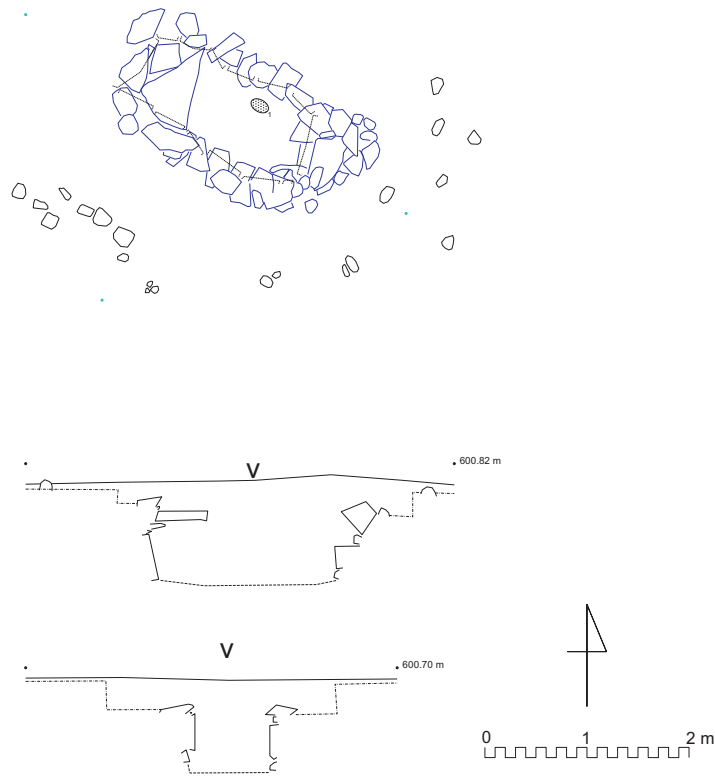


Fig. 3

Grave Fu11 at al Fueda

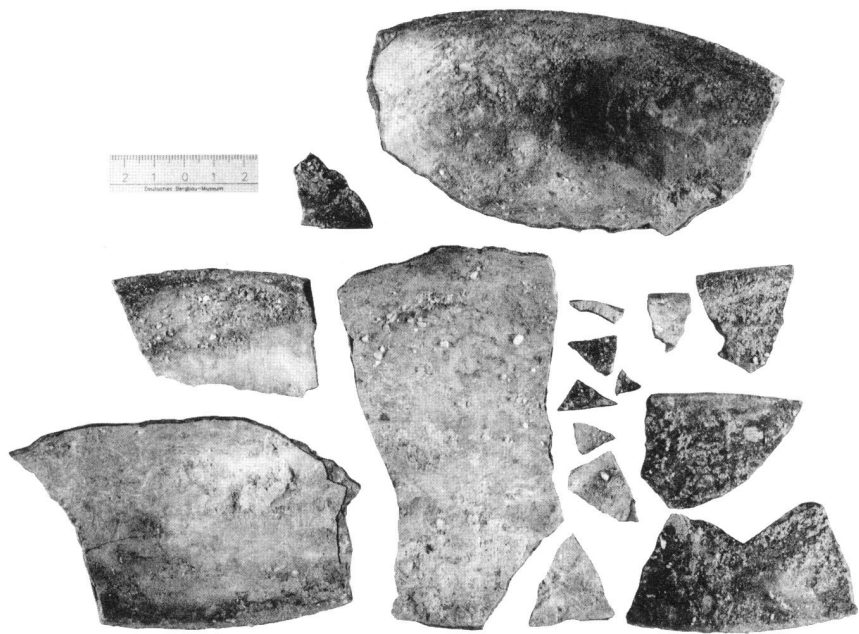


Fig. 4

The damaged bowl DA 13363

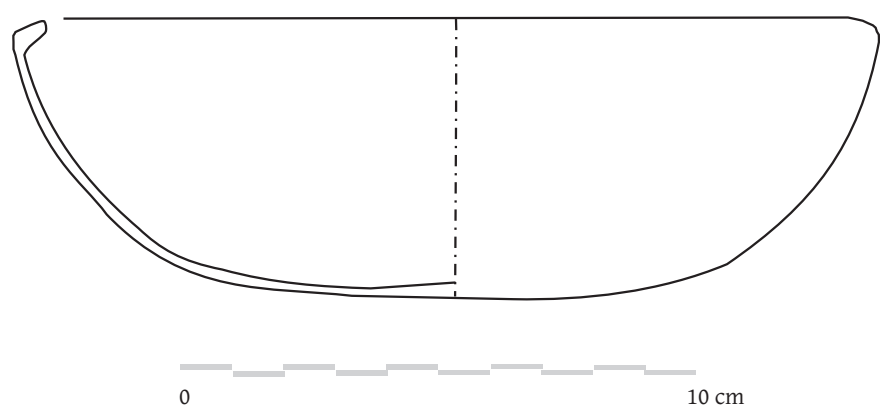
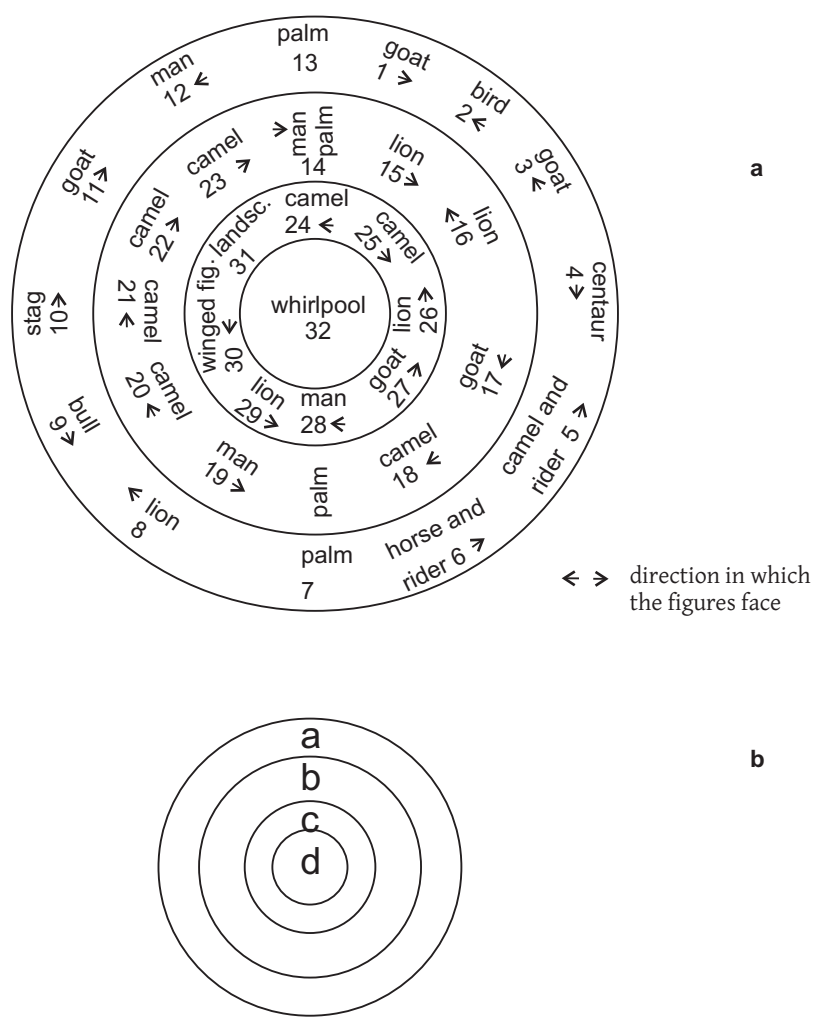


Fig. 5

The bowl DA 13363 [drawing of profile]



The iconography of the motifs. DA 13363 from Fu11

Fig. 6

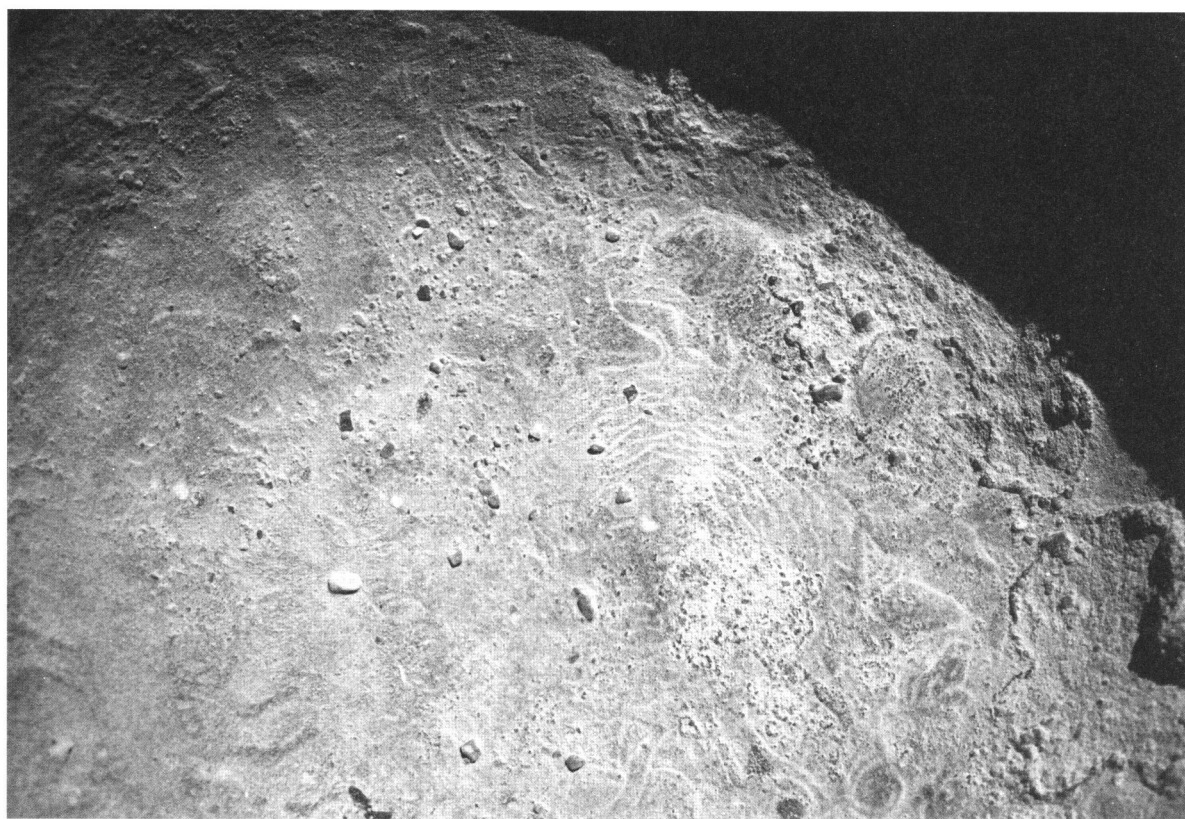


Fig. 7

The centre of the composition (register "d") prior to restoration



Fig. 8

Exterior of the restored bowl



Interior of the bowl with a view of a man offering a goat

Fig. 9

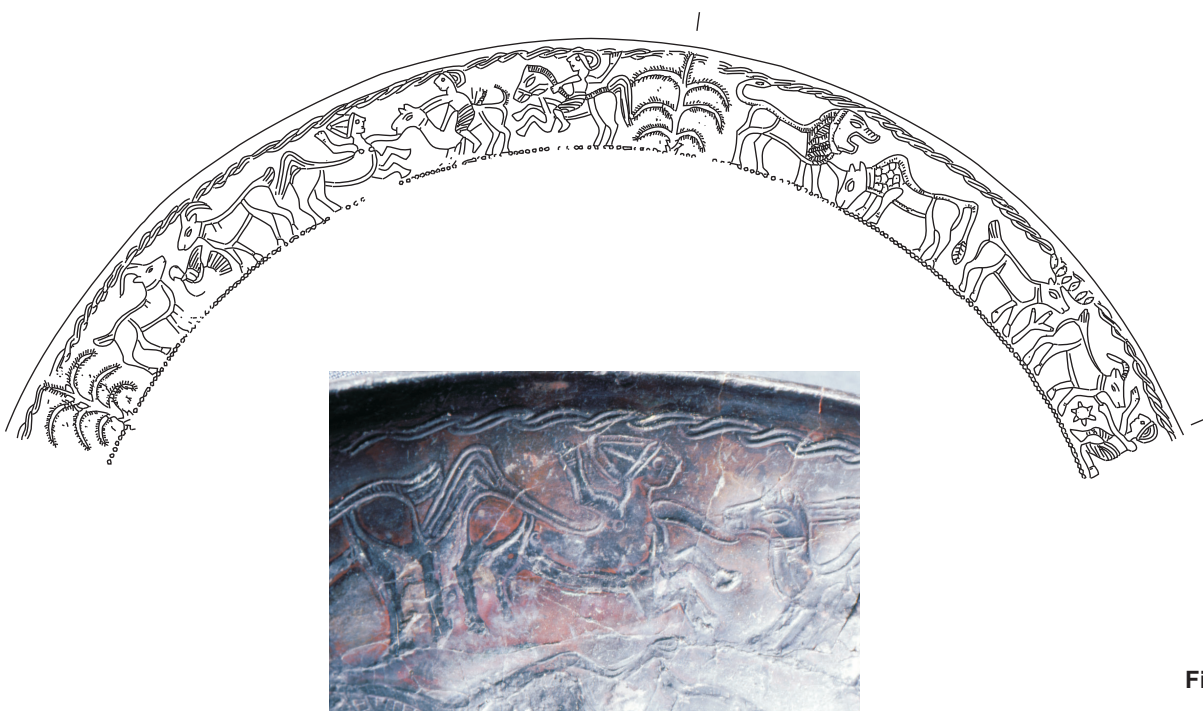


Fig. 10

Interior of the bowl with a view of a man offering a goat



Fig. 11

Interior of the bowl with a view of animal combat

DA 13363



Interior of the bowl with a view mostly of lions and camels

Fig. 12



Fig. 13 Detail including a possible gorgon

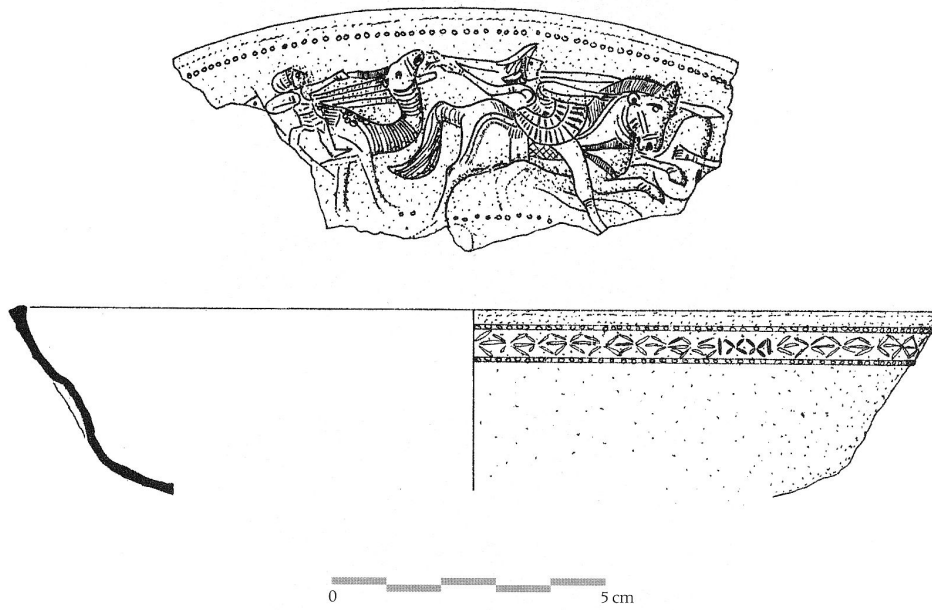


Fig. 14 Interior of the bowl with a riding scene



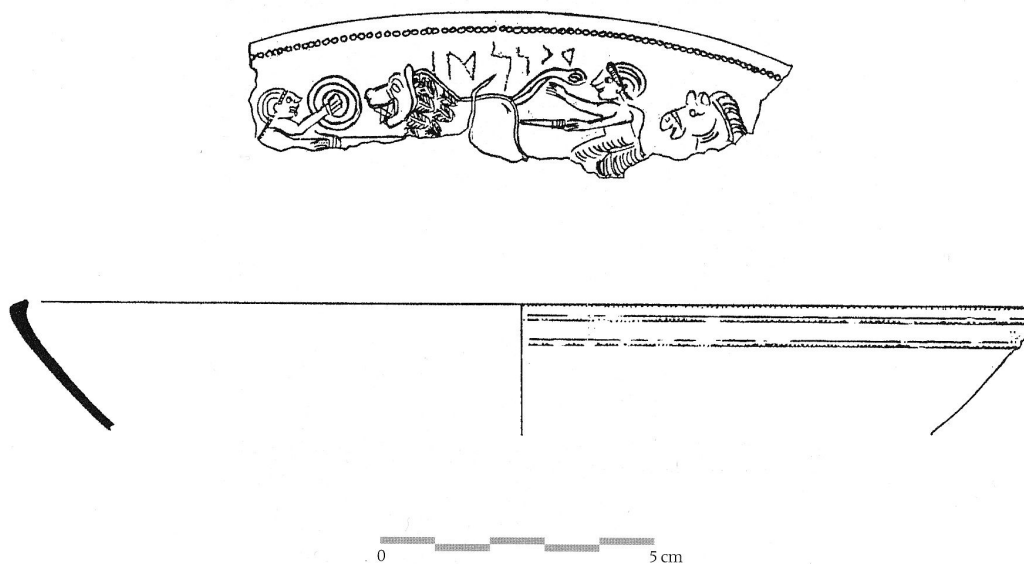
Fig. 15

Relief bowl uf137 from Mleiha necropolis F (after Boucharlat et al. 1987)



Relief bowl uf201 from Mleiha necropolis C (after Boucharlat et al. 1987)

Fig. 16



Relief bowl uf14 from Mleiha necropolis C (after Boucharlat et al. 1986)

Fig. 17



Fig. 18

Hunt bowl (DA 10617) from grave Bar1, Samā'il, al Bārūnī.

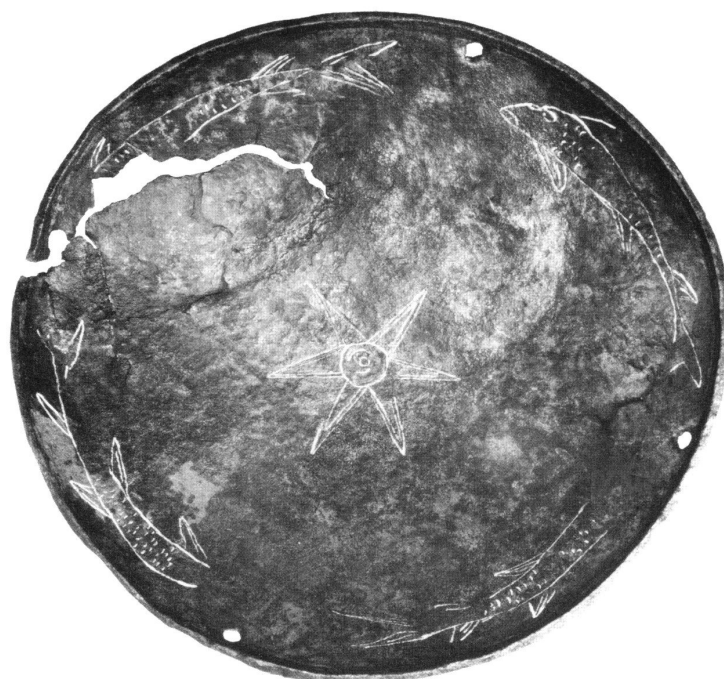


Fig. 19

So-called scale pan from the Early Iron Age hoard at 'Ibrī/Selme (DA 5656).

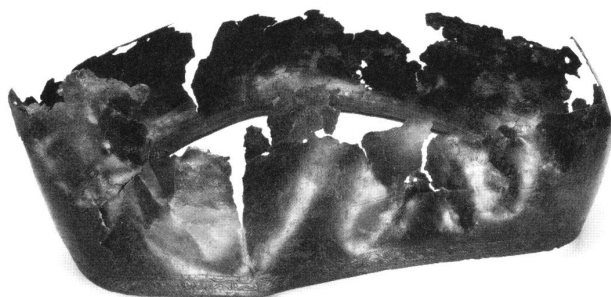
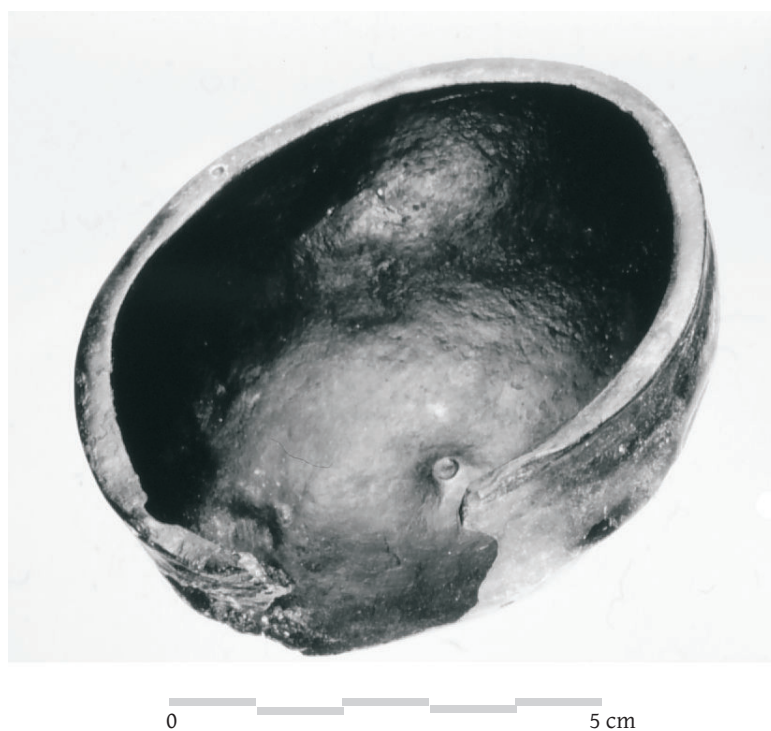


Fig. 20

Bowl with decorated rim (DA 10619) from grave Bar1, Samā'il, al Bārūnī.



Spoon of a ladle (DA 10614) from grave Bar1, Sama il

Fig. 21



Bronze bowl from the Ja lan area of the Sharqiyah (DA 11406).

Fig. 22

