

# The multi-period cemetery in Maḥālya, Wādī ‘Andām, Sultanate of Oman, revisited

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## Foreword

This text is dedicated to one of Russia’s foremost archaeologists, whom I had a great fortune of meeting at the World Public Forum, Dialogue of Civilizations on Rhodes in 2012. His leadership has sustained and developed the Hermitage in a turbulent age to be on a par with such institutions as the Louvre and Metropolitan Museum of Art.

## Introduction

Comparing the pre-Islamic cemeteries at Maḥālya and Samad al-Šān articulates their relations better than previously considered. The graves which he “had excavated for himself”, as he used to say, he dated intuitively to the Late Iron Age – roughly parallel in years to that time nomenclature in Europe. They contained iron weapons as well as hand- and wheel-turned pottery (Yule 2001a I, p. 62–78; Mauro 2019, p. 133–146). After spending some years as a museum volunteer, in 1987, full-time, I systematized the previous excavation documentation and carried out four further campaigns. In all, there were seven excavation campaigns at Samad al-Šān. As it was my duty to find comparable cemeteries, on 22.02.1995, for the first time, I described the Maḥālya burial grounds per se (translated from German): “The telephone company first reported the cemetery which it encountered while trenching. It extended on both sides of a road, to the north c. 500 m and to the south c. 400 m, c. 150 m in width. It contains at least 2,000 graves... Unfortunately no time to investigate” (Yule & Weisgerber 1996, p. 141; Yule 2001b, p. 258).

Preparing the building of a road, in 2004, a team from the Sultan Qabus University and Ministry for National Heritage and Culture excavated 74 graves which they described as “...primary, in the sense that they were not used twice

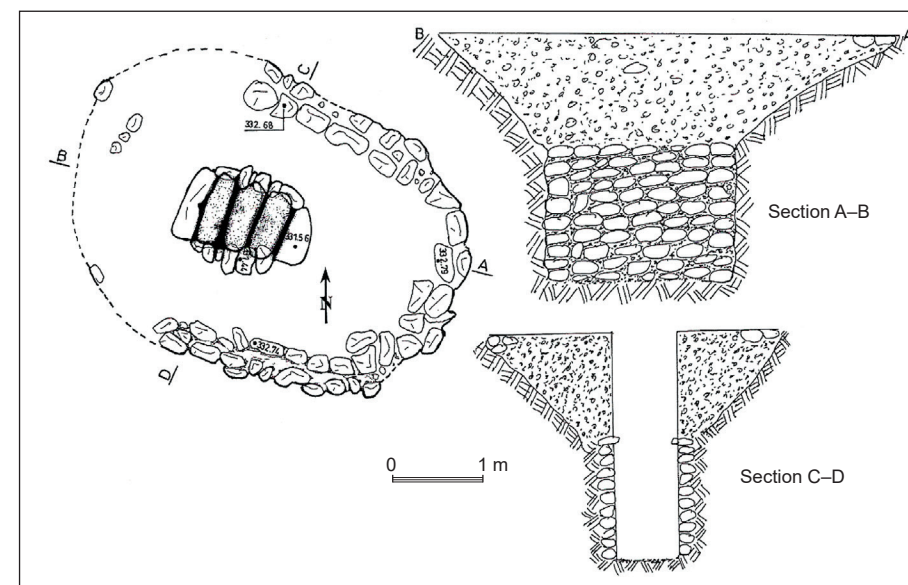


Fig. 1. *Mahleya* tomb dated to the Late Iron Age – Samad period drawing shows few datable characteristics (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 60, fig. 4; al-Jahwari 2013, p. 87, fig. 99)

for burial. The condition of the graves and their contents allowed fifty-three of them to be documented” (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 59). Although they romanize the name as Mahleya; in fact, it is spoken as Maḥālya with a long vowel in the middle. Unfortunately, the cemetery plan is of such a small scale that neither the graves with their registration numbers nor their orientation are recognisable individually (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 58, fig. 1). The main obstacle in comparing the cemeteries is that there is only a single published grave drawing (fig. 1) and no published grave good inventories. Despite the title of the preliminary excavation report, some of the graves appear to have been re-used from the Bronze Age Wadi Suq period (1900–1500 BCE). From the beginning, an attempt to summarize different attributes of the two burial areas has been flawed. While a preliminary report appeared in 2005 and in 2013 N. al-Jahwari’s dissertation was written, they did not present full documentation. The first question is if the Samad Late Iron Age population at Maḥālya was earlier, later or contemporary with that at Samad?

## Skeletal remains

Unfortunately, the preservation of the skeletons was poorer at Maḥālya than at Samad and only two individuals could be recorded. Some of the teeth showed severe caries, the main pathology best known from Samad. The lack of oral hygiene and the daily diet are shared by both the Samad Late Iron Age pop-

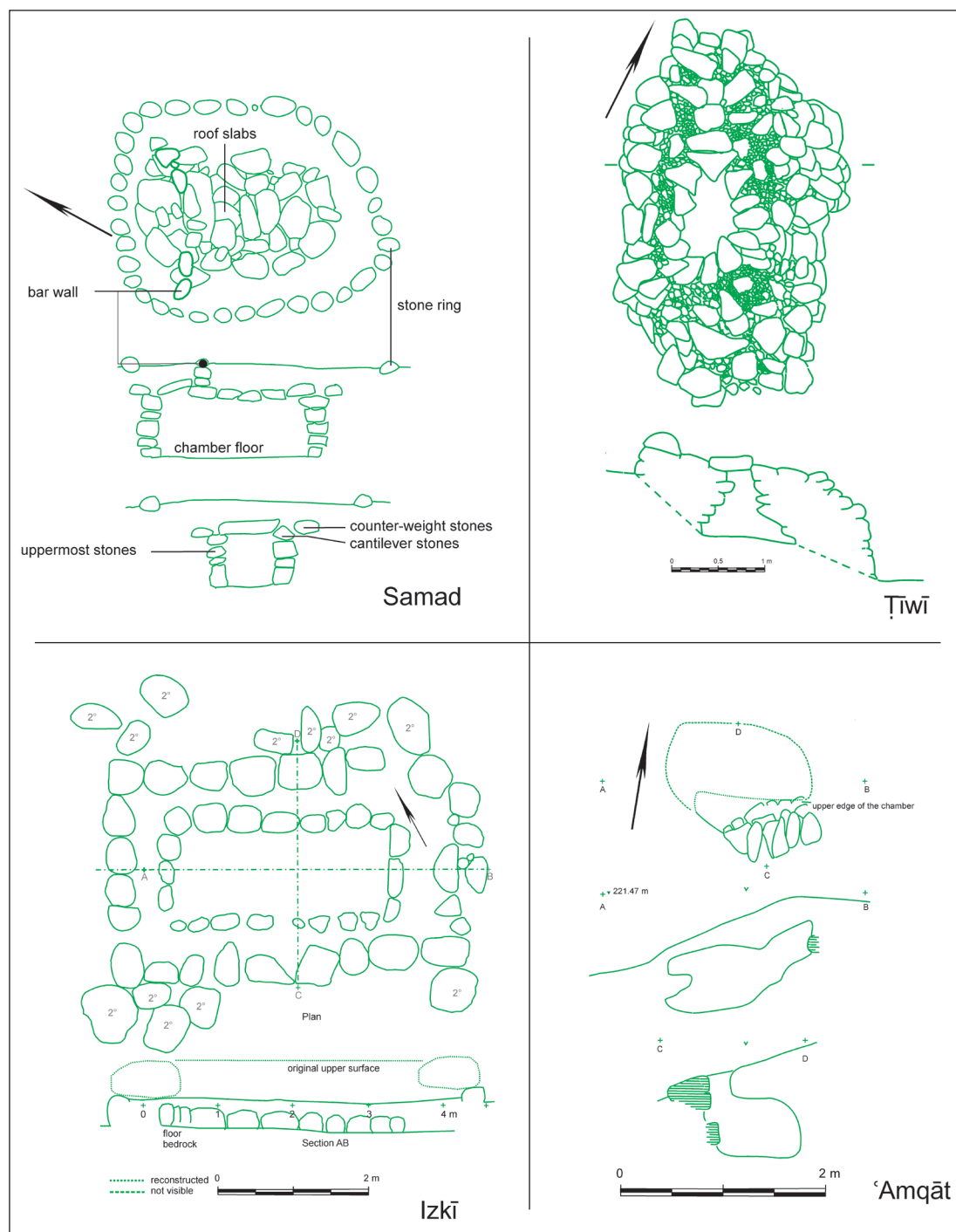


Fig. 2. Typical graves which contain Samad Late Iron Age finds at Samad, Tīwī, Izkī and al-ʿAmqāt (heidICON)

ulations and the present-day population as well (statistics summarized in Yule 2018, p. 457). Lacking skeletal data the excavators attempted to estimate the sex and age of the interred by virtue of the grave size and its offerings. Incorrectly, they report (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 61, 67), that I used this same method for the Samad publication, which others repeated (e.g. Magee 2016, p. 254). Few of the specialists took the trouble to read our reports, most of which were written in the German language, in which our team articulated the procedure in determining sex, age and pathology of the individuals (Yule 2018, p. 446, 447). We correlated the skeletal diagnoses with the grave offerings and other characteristics. This correspondence enabled us to estimate the social standing of Late Iron Age men versus women. Suffice it to say, that our team physical anthropologist, Manfred Kunter, never assigned biological sex on the basis of burial goods. Later, however, at Samad in the case of some “regular” burials without skeletons I estimated sex and roughly age. With aplomb, one colleague suggests that physical anthropology was introduced to Oman only recently (Caine 2016, p. 134: “The limited information presently available for populations from the Bronze and Iron Age in this region emphasizes the importance of this study and analysis”), cavalierly dismissing decades of relevant research. Reportedly 33.8% of the graves belonged to infants, to judge from the length and width of the burial cists, which were not cited (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 59).

### Grave structures

The excavators describe the Maḥālya cist graves in terms of size and as having, “the end walls, the roof with capstones and the roof support stones. In three cases we found a bar wall... a small wall two stones wide and two courses high, which is placed widthways across the middle of the grave” (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 61). The bar wall is typical of Samad Late Iron Age graves. Clearly, its function is as part of the entrance, usually at the north-west end of the grave. As opposed to the description in the Maḥālya preliminary report, the deceased rather is placed at the bar wall end of the grave and then the entrance is sealed (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 61). This makes much more sense than placing the deceased in the grave and then placing roof stones and bar wall onto the structure. Reportedly the grave cists were oriented east/west, although the one existing drawing shows a south-east/north-west orientation of the long axis of the grave cist (fig. 2).

### Grave goods

#### Pottery

Since grave inventories are unpublished, the pottery descriptions seem to describe together Early and Late Iron Age pottery (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 61). On one page the graves show clear examples of Samad Late Iron Age pottery (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 62 figs 6, 7), but none of the Wadi Suq period.

### *Soft stone vessels*

On the next page the stone vessels appear to date to the Bronze Age Wadi Suq period (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 63, fig. 8), but not to the Samad Late Iron Age (ElMahi & al-Jahwari 2005, p. 64).

### *Metal objects*

#### *Arrow-heads*

The Maḥālya excavation yielded 74 iron arrow-heads (p. 64, fig. 9). Nine “spear-heads” (p. 64, fig. 10) also came to light, but the means of distinguishing projectile points is difficult, especially given their lengths of 6.8 cm, 7.5 cm and c. 8.6 cm (the third image is cut off). The authors point out that without cleaning it is impossible to determine adequately the artefact shape in a secure way. Nonetheless, the arrow-heads compare best with those excavated from Samad al-Šān (Weisgerber 1981, p. 226, Abb. 63 (restored iron examples); Yule 2001a I, p. 102; Yule in press) which number 602 incomplete examples from a total of 1,462 in iron. Even in a given Late Iron Age quiver, one finds considerable morphological variation in the arrow-heads. As the excavators write, several parallels can be noted in the iron arrow-heads excavated from the United Arab Emirates from the Période préislamique récente (PIR, Mouton 1992).

#### *Beads*

The Maḥālya graves yielded some 900 beads of different shapes, sizes, materials and colours. Surprisingly, glass is not mentioned as a material, just the opposite of the Samad period cemeteries at Samad and al-Maysar (3,313 of 4,707 beads). This raises chronological and other questions.

### *Conclusion*

Unfortunately, despite best intentions even of assiduous scholars it is easy to miss ever-increasing numbers of new publications. On the one hand, the authors of the Maḥālya report of 2005 missed the main reports for the al-Fuwaydah Late Iron Age cemetery of 1999 and for the Samad cemeteries of 2001 and subsequent updates which compromises their comparisons. On the other hand, until June of 2019 I did not notice the dissertation of Nasr al-Jahwari of 2013 in which he ambitiously evaluates the entire archaeology of Oman down to the eighteenth century CE. In order to disambiguate the Samad Late Iron Age, in 2001 I focussed first on this same period. Al-Jahwari surveys the entire spectrum of finds, of which the Samad Late Iron Age is only a small part. His approach resembles that of the author in one way: Similar between the two studies is the extensive use of computer sorting for find-classes and sites.

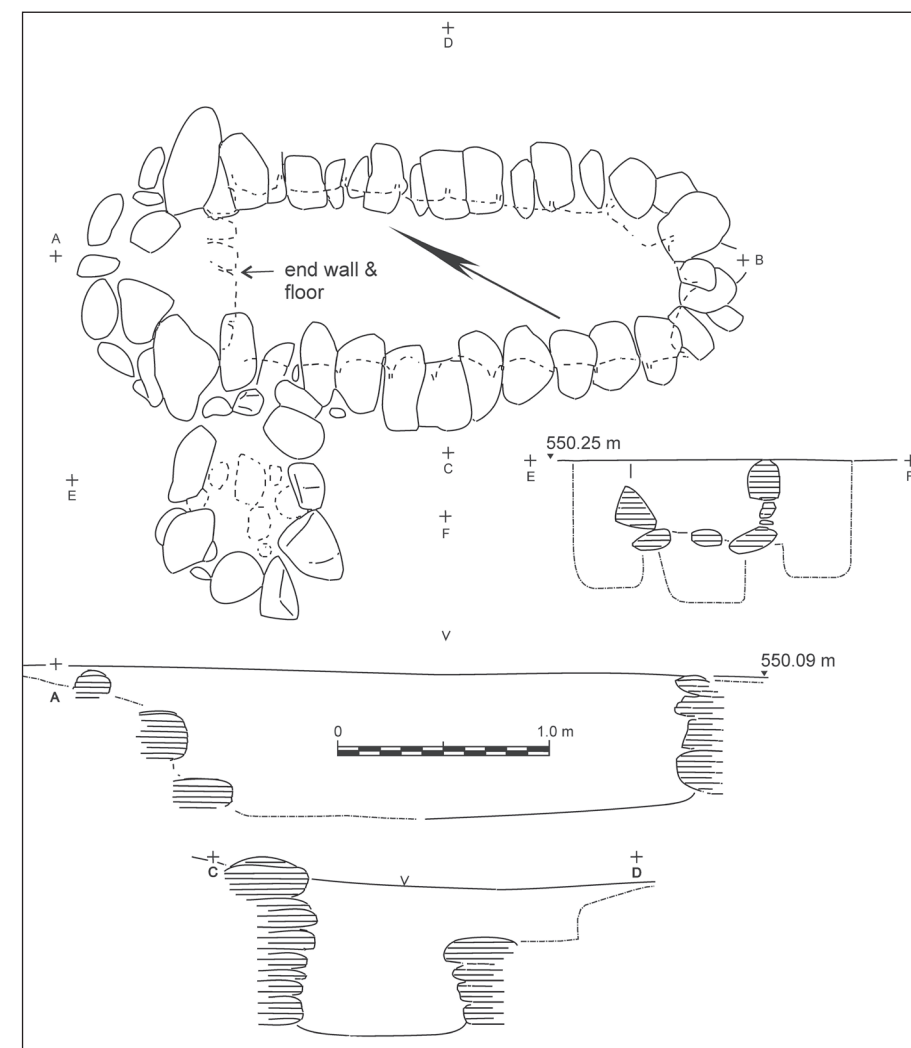


Fig. 3. Typical grave (No. S2148) which contained Wadi Suq objects. Probably the deceased was placed into the grave at its walled up north-west end. Such graves may exist at Maḥālya, to judge from the published Wadi Suq finds (heidICON)

On the down side, first, the authors of the Maḥālya excavation had the handicap of not using the main excavation reports for Samad, instead of two preliminary reports, those of 1988 and 1993, written prior to the main excavation campaigns of 1988–1991 and more importantly the evaluation thereof. Second, al-Jahwari uses the nomenclature “Parthian, Hellenistic”, in place of the archaeological neutral PIR and Samad Late Iron Age, which requires a definition in terms of pottery and grave types. Third, terms such as Mahleya tomb “...include end walls...oriented east-west” (al-Jahwari 2013, p. 219) collide with a well-defined



Fig. 4. The multi-period cemetery S21 north shows grave axes for the Wadi Suq and Samad periods which often are influenced by the topography (heidICON)

Recently the definition of the Samad artefactual assemblage had to be made more consequent. Therefore I distinguished “near to Samad”, “non-Samad Late Iron Age”, “post Late Iron Age/Sasanian” and PIR. Moreover, the role of the Sasanian period assemblage had been underestimated. A redefining of the Samad assemblage, based on Samad and al-Maysar graves in terms of pottery, weapons and grave architecture resulted in a reduction of the core area from 80,000 km<sup>2</sup> to 17,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Yule in preparation). While I have tallied some 80 sites of the Samad Late Iron Age in Oman, in his dissertation, al-Jahwari cites more sites than this alone in the Wadi ‘Andām survey area (al-Jahwari 2013, p. 85, fig. 97). This reflects different methods and standards that must be reconciled with each other.

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## Abstract (The text will be translated into Russian)

The multi-period pre-Islamic cemetery excavated in 2004 at Maḥālya shows strong similarities to that at Samad al-Šān, located 24 air km to the south-east, and excavated from 1980–91. The Maḥālya excavator's describe the grave structures, grave goods and scarce skeletal remains. A comparison of the two excavation projects shows closer relations than originally presumed.