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Prehistoric cemetery in al-Šuwayʿi (الشويعى), Sultanate of Oman – a find note

Paul A. Yule, Annika Wilkening, Nasser Bovoleti Ayash[1]

1. Archaeology in Oman

Bronze Age Oman is widely known for its important copper production in Mesopotamian cuneiform texts, in which the region is referred to as 'Magan'[2]. Centuries later, during the Roman period neither Pliny nor the anonymous *Periplus Maris Erythraei* seem to mention eastern Oman (§32), but rather southern Oman and trade routes most important to India (HN 6.32.2-3; Casson 1989, 162, 170–2, 176). To obtain a chronology for the different periods, archaeologists expanded their research, including later understudied ones, such as the so-called Iron Age. Due to the large amount of funerary remains with a bewildering number of local traditions of south-eastern Arabia, archaeologists focus on burial architecture to expand knowledge regarding indigenous prehistoric populations who resided in the area. This find note presents documentation for a site in a place called al-Šuwayʿi,[3] noted for its multi-period copper production (Weisgerber 1981, 177 Abb. 'Ad Shewei'). Stone structures are interpreted as tombs in Oman's eastern governorate (140 km south-west of the capital, Muscat). Two kinds of tombs spread irregularly over an area of 400 x 400 m (80.000 m^2) covering two small mountains which deserves more public discussion.

2. History of research on tombs

Since 1980 archaeologists have visited al-Šuwayʿi and noted these stone structures which invoke prehistoric tombs. Among the early visitors, G. Weisgerber differentiated so-called hut tombs from the Early Bronze Age circular 'beehive' tomb architecture[4], as their plan is rectangular, with rounded corners. Moreover, the architecture of the presumed tombs is defined by a roof made out of long, flat stones with a gravel filling (Weisgerber 1980, 101). A. Hauptmann and G. Weisgerber describe the copper production site Bilād al-Muʿaydin (32 km to Šuwayʿi), where similar tomb architecture was designated as '*Kastengräber*' (English: hut tombs and pill boxes). Accordingly, hut tombs are attributed to the smelting site which they dated to the Early Iron Age, 1200-300 BCE (Weisgerber 1981, 183, 190).

A second type of stone structure is seen in al-Šuwayʿi, cylindrical in form. Weisgerber also briefly described similar tombs at Bilād al-Muʿaydin as *'turmartige Gräber unbekannten Alters'* (English: tower-like tombs of unknown age) (1981, 259). These cylindrical tombs have no entrance and relatively thin stone walls (40–50 cm).

Subsequently, archaeologists excavated numerous standing tombs in northern and north-eastern Oman belonging to different periods during the course of the Batina Expressway rescue project (During & Olijdam 2015; Saunders 2016; Laurenza 2019; Genchi & Larosa 2021).

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[2] Such as Bibby 1972, 206–8, 210, 235–7, 255, 324–5, 358–9, 400.

[3] 'In my opinion, one must use the root š-y-ʿ to explain the placed-name'. It seems to be a diminutive form. The basic form for this is grammatically "fuʿayl", thus "šuwayʿ". Here, an "-ī" is added, which is interpreted as a *nisbe*-ending: šuwayʿī'. https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%8A_(%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A) (pers. com. Volkan Bozkurt, Heidelberg).

[4] In 'ad Shewi (al-Shuwayi) Weisgerber noted, '*...eine Gruppe von Gräbern, die sich von den sonst üblichen Bienenkorbgräbern In der Konstruktion unterscheidet. Vom Grundriß her sind sie nicht rund, sondern rechteckig mit leicht gerundeten Ecken. Obwohl die Mauern sich oben nach Innen neigen, sind sie nicht in einer Kuppel geschlossen, sondern tragen eine Abdeckung aus starken, langen Decksteinen. Darauf befindet sich eine Schüttung aus kleinsteinigem kiesigem Material* (Weisgerber 1980, 101).

With the aim of collecting material for a tomb typology, a Heidelberg project starting 2015 annually to study the so-called hut tombs of eastern Oman. This departed from well-preserved tombs at sites such as al-Salayli (Gaudiello & Yule 2018; Yule & Mauro 2019, 8-14; Yule & Gaudiello 2021). Old identifications of 'Iron Age' tombs in some cases could not be verified (Yule et al. in press).

3. Documentation of cemetery in al-Šuwayʿi in 2024

P. Yule argues that for preservation reasons the numerous excavated graves in the Batina plain just mentioned generally are too poorly preserved to shed much light on the kind of architecture of hut tombs, best known in eastern Oman at al-Salayli. There, he assigns burial structures to local shape classes. The dating is summarised in the *Thematic dictionary of ancient Arabia* and the database '*ent*' (respectively, Schiettecatte et al. 2023; Yule 2024) which give the positions of the sites and basic information, such as bibliography. Here, the presumed cemetery in al-Šuwayʿi is provisionally assigned to the Early Iron Age. With its different kinds of stone structures, it presents an opportunity to document tomb architecture systematically, building on the first sightings of Weisgerber and Hauptmann.

In 2024 Yule and his colleagues visited al-Šuwayʿi again to catalogue, map and verify the structures (see Figure 1).[5] The assigning of each structure to the categories of either hut or cylindrical tomb has been done when possible to enable a tomb typology (Table 1). Some of the structures are damaged to the point that their purpose or tomb type are moot.

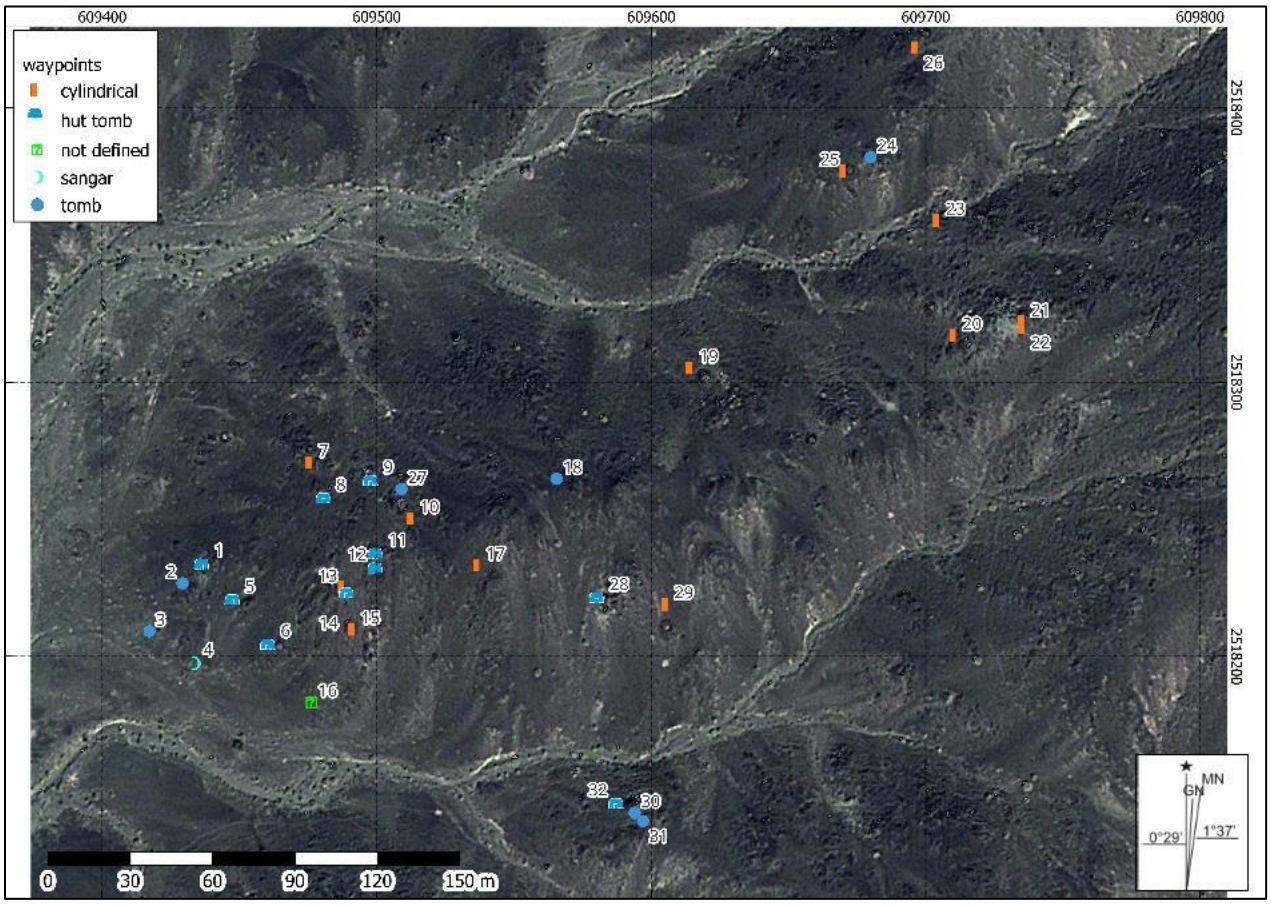

Fig. 1. Plan of the features at al- Šuwayʿi (Google Earth, 12.05.2011, mapping November 2024).

[5] We measured the positions of the structures by means of a GNSS/GPS. Resolution was 3m radius.

3.1. Typology

feat. no.	description	40Q UTM e	UTM n	Alti.	entrance dir.	next nearest tomb	L Br H	preservation
1	hut tomb	609.437	2.518.231	527	W	2	3 x 2.6 x 1.3	roof & west end destroyed
2	tomb	609.429	2.518.226	527	W	1	4 x 1.6 x 0.7	destroyed
3	tomb	609.417	2.518.209	527	?	4	-	destroyed
4	*sangar*	609.433	2.518.197	527	-	3	1.6 x 1.3 x 0.4	one stone course, on northern half partly non
5	hut tomb	609.448	2.518.218	527	W	4	4 x 3 x 1.7	west end destroyed, roof covered by hill slope, entrance framed by big stones
6	hut tomb	609.461	2.518.201	527	W	5	3 x 3 x 0.9	two preserved stone layers, oblong plan
7	cylinder tomb	609.476	2.518.270	541	-	8	3.5 x 3.5 x 0.8	about 4-5 stone layers preserved
8	hut tomb	609.481	2.518.255	541	NW	7	4 x 3 x 1.65	roof collapsed; several stone layers preserved
9	hut tomb	609.498	2.518.261	547	N	8	3.1 x 3.5 x 1.6	northern end destroyed, going southwards max 6 layers of stone preserved
10	cylinder tomb	609.513	2.518.250	552	-	9	3.5 x 3.5 x 1.6	south-east side damaged, rest of cylindrical wall ca. 12 layers preserved
11	hut tomb	609.500	2.518.235	553	SW	12	4 x 3 x 1.8	collapsed, about 4 layers preserved
12	hut tomb	609.500	2.518.229	552	-	11	2 x 2 x 0.6	collapsed
13	cylinder tomb	609.488	2.518.225	552	-	14	3.5 x 3.7 x 1.6	south-east side damaged, northern wall part up to 12 layers preserved
14	hut tomb	609.489	2.518.220	549	E	13	3 x 4 x 1.7	collapsed, entrance still visible and framed by big stones
15	cylinder tomb	609.491	2.518.209	548	-	14	3.1 x 3.1 x 1.4	west side demolished, east wall ca. 10 irregular layers preserved
16	n.d.	609.476	2.518.183	547	-	6	3 x 3 x 0.3	recognisable as a tomb, sparse big stones in a round, one layer
17	cylinder tomb	609.537	2.518.233	566	-	10	3.2 x 3.2 x 0.9	walls damaged, around 3-5 layers preserved in cylindrical form
18	tomb	609.565	2.518.264	573	-	17	3.1 x 1.6 x 0.5	wall badly damaged to very low height, oval form
19	cylinder tomb	609.615	2.518.305	559	-	18	3.7 x 3.8 x 1.6	max. 6 courses high, northern side stone rows collapsed
20	cylinder tomb	609.711	2.518.317	535	-	22	3.2 x 3.2 x 1.7	west side collapsed; 6 courses high
21	cylinder tomb	609.736	2.518.322	542	-	22	3.4 x 3.3 x 1.2	south side collapsed, max. height 6 courses

22	cylinder tomb	609.736	2.518.320	542	-	21	3.2 x 3.2 x 1.1	west side badly damaged, eastern walls max 4 courses preserved
23	cylinder tomb	609.705	2.518.359	534	-	24	3.1 x 3 x 1.2	max 6 courses high
24	tomb	609.680	2.518.382	536	-	25	2.3 x 2 x 1.3	badly damaged, on the western end about 5 stone rows visible
25	cylinder tomb	609.671	2.518.377	536	-	24	3.8 x 3.8 x 1.3	max. 5 courses preserved, relatively neatly placed
26	cylinder tomb	609.697	2.518.422	546	-	24	4.5 x 3 x 0.7	chamber floor smooth, 4 courses preserved
27	tomb	609.509	2.518.261	538	-	9	3 x 2.9 x 1.6	built against boulder, tomb structure due to damage not clearly visible
28	hut tomb	609.581	2.518.219	543	Perpen-dicular to slope	29	4 x 2.8 x 1.8	collapsed down the slope, low height
29	cylinder tomb	609.606	2.518.219	540	-	28	3.8 x 4.1 x 1.3	collapsed
30	tomb	609.594	2.518.143	541	-	31	2 x 1.6 x 0.55	circular plan, but not cylindrical, small
31	tomb	609.597	2.518.140	541	-	30	1.4 x 1.4 x 0.6	circular plan, but not cylindrical, small
32	hut tomb	609.588	2.518.144	541	W-SW	30	4 x 1.5 x 1.7	wall and roof collapsed; long flat stones used around entrance area

3.2. Image catalogue

3.2.1. Hut tombs

Feature no. 1

Feature no. 5

Feature no. 6

Feature no. 8

Feature no. 9

Feature no. 11

Feature no. 12

Feature no. 14

Feature no. 28

Feature no. 32

3.2.2. Cylinder tombs

Feature no. 7

Feature no. 10

Feature no. 13

Feature no. 15

Feature no. 17

Feature no. 19

Feature no. 20

Feature no. 21

Feature no. 22

Feature no. 23

Feature no. 25

Feature no. 26

Feature no. 29

3.2.3. Sangar

Feature no. 4

3.2.4. Undefined structure

Feature no. 16

3.2.5. Unclassified structures

Feature no. 2

Feature no. 3

Feature no. 18

Feature no. 24

Feature no. 27

Feature no. 30

Feature no. 31

Conclusion

Beyond citing opinions regarding the dating of hut and cylinder tombs in our field recording we cannot establish the dating, but at least can make the illustrated catalogue available in terms of shape and spatial distribution.[6] Catalogued sites such as this are rare in Oman. Another reason for our catalogue is that these features have not been discussed since their first sighting 40 years ago. Although without excavation one cannot prove it, there is no reason to doubt the use of the features as tombs. Spatial distribution of the two kinds of structures gives no hint of the nature of the sites. For example, there is no evidence for paths between the tombs for visitors. Nor do the two kinds tombs relate to each other in an explicable way. These particular hut and cylinder tombs are indigenous to eastern Oman, but not other places. The closest parallels for the hut tombs in al-Šuwayʿi are those in nearby Bilād al-Muʿadin, and al-Ṣalaylī. Those for the cylinders are at Bilād al-Muʿadin and al-Multaqa.

[6] Vielleicht zeigen sich in der Kombination beider Bautypen ungewöhnliche Bestattungssitten an, vorausgesetzt, sie sind tatsachlich gleich alt. Aber gerade die Datierung dieser Anlagen ist nicht sicher. Vielleicht zeigen sich in der Kombination beider Bautypen ungewöhnliche Bestattungssitten an, vorausgesetzt, sie sind tatsachlich gleich alt. Aber gerade die Datierung dieser Anlagen ist nicht sicher (Weisgerber 1981, 260).

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