

East of Ibrā': A Jāhil in the Sharqīyah with two Graves<sup>1</sup>

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In Islam, a *jāhil* is an unbeliever without law or religion; the word *jāhiliyya* refers to the time of darkness before the coming of Islam.

Paul Yule first heard the story of the demonic *jāhil*, Kebir Keb, in 1993 while conducting an initial study of some recently discovered stone towers located in an area called Shir, in the Sharqīyah province of the Sultanate (Fig. 1). The mysterious ancient structures fire the imagination of the local inhabitants, who attribute their construction to this legendary figure. Unaware of their original function, the villagers refer to the monuments simply as "towers" (*būrīj* in the local dialect). But archaeologists have recognised the group of some 60 stone towers as tombs comparable to others in the Sultanate. They owe their good state of preservation to what was until recently a relatively inaccessible location, on a remote mountain top. Looming above the desert below, the tallest are preserved to a height of as much as 8 metres (Pl. 1). The bevelling of the facade stones and the regular courses suggest that most date to the Umm an Nar Period (2500-2000 BC), but more irregularly built ones may have been built during the preceding Hafit period (3000-2500 BC)<sup>1</sup>.

One morning as the archaeological investigation in Shir began, Bakhit b. Muḥammad al Mukhainī, of the nearby village of Jaylah, passed by and stopped for a chat. He related a tale about the origin of the towers which was previously unknown outside the immediate area of the Sharqīyah, but is equal to any of the classical stories of Arabia<sup>1</sup>: It concerned Kebir Keb and the heroic goatherd who killed him. According to Bakhit's first account, the events of the legend took place "before history". But later, when pressed on how long ago the demon might have lived, he said "perhaps a thousand years ago", thus contradicting his initial statement about the *jāhil*'s antiquity.

One day, Bakhit related, as the goatherd was looking for some stray goats, he spied a waterfall and a pond in a distant valley. The goatherd hastened to he awoke, he inadvertently noticed a beautiful jinn bathing in the water, and so offended her modesty.

She was enraged and wanted to kill the goatherd, but then she relented because, as she told him, she that pleasant spot and, after quenching his thirst with the cool water, promptly fell asleep. Alas! When believed in Allah and, moreover, the young man reminded her of her son. Instead of killing him, she told him a valuable secret.

If he went to the place of the towers, she said, he would encounter a (demon) *shayṭan*, Kebir Keb, who lived in one of them. The demon, she continued, guarded the towers with his mighty "*katārah*" (sword), the sharp thunderbolt with which he had quarried and dressed the stones for all of the towers. This remarkable weapon hung in the tower in which the *shayṭan* slept. But beware! When his eyes were closed he was wide awake, and only when they were open, did he sleep. Knowing this secret, the goatherd crept into the tower, making sure that the eyes of the demon were open. Stealthily, he removed the sword. But while departing, the blade accidentally struck against the door jamb, awakening the demon. The *shayṭan* jumped up and chased the goatherd down the mountain until he reached a creek. He could not leap over water. The goatherd hid himself in a cave, only emerging after the danger seemed to have passed. Then he returned and beheaded Kebir Keb with the sword. But the demon still did not die. The goatherd, unsure whether a second blow would kill him or revive him to full strength, left well enough alone.

In a version of this story told in Jaylah, it was said that cutting the demon would make him become double. The bisecting of the demon is a key element in the legend, but this did not become clear until years later when the authors visited his two grave sites.

During the 1995 excavations of the towers at Shir, 'Ubad b. Silaim b. Hadaib al Nahedī, a resident of

<sup>1</sup> We gladly acknowledge the help of Khalifa b. Khamis b. Ḥamed al Rassibī, of the Department, who has accompanied us over the years. R.G. Khoury of Heidelberg translated a transcript of the legend. David Insall discussed the orthography of the personal and place names. We also would like to thank Wolf Martin Domke, Berlin, Kamal Abdurredha Sultan, Muscat, and the German Mining Museum, Bochum for supporting this project.

<sup>1</sup> A. al Shanfari 1993, 12-16; P. Yule 1992, 274-279; P. Yule-G. Weisgerber 1998..

<sup>2</sup> P. Yule 1996, 336. David Insall and Kamal Sultan were among the first outside visitors to the "*būrīj Kibaikib*" in February 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication 12 May 1997.

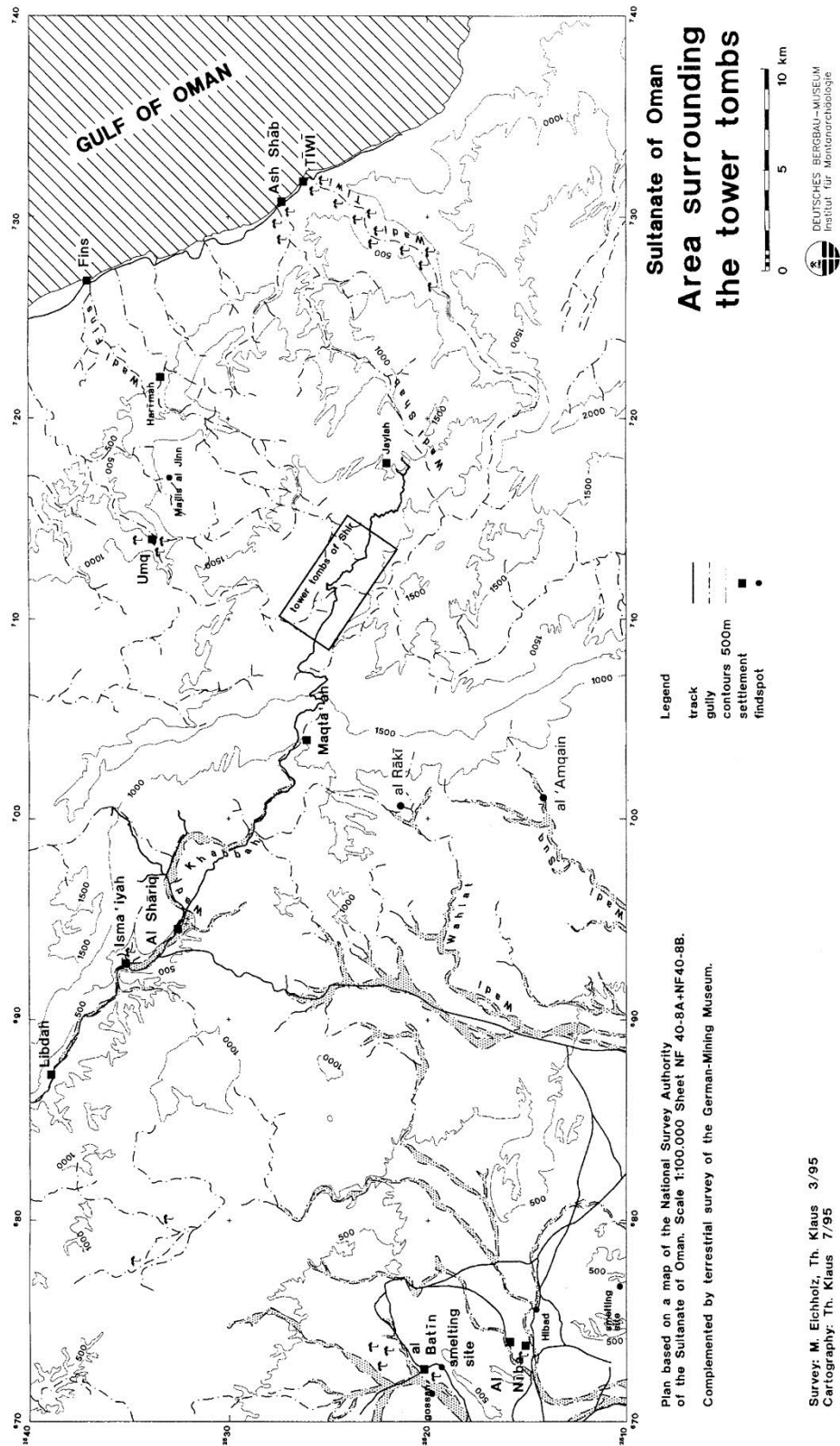


Fig. 1 Map with sites mentioned.

شكل ١. خريطة تبين المواقع المذكورة.



Pl. 1 Tower tomb at Shir

لوحة ١. برج قبر في شير.

It was not until December 1997 that we had the opportunity to further investigate the story of the demon. The authors looked up 'Ubaid b. Silaim, and proceeded, in the company of his son and a guide, to the grave site. The isolated tomb, locally referred to as "the grave of the *jāhil*", is situated near the small village of al Rākī in the eponymous *wādī*. The grave is marked by an elongated oval of large cobbles and measures 4.2 x 1.3 metres (Pl. 2, Fig. 2). Most are round *wādī* stones; some are broken. The oval did not enclose a fill of smaller stones and dirt, as is usually the case for this type of burial. Moreover, as one of the villagers, Nasir b. Muḥammad b. Sa'īd al Sa'dī observed, the grave is far too long for a normal Islamic burial. It is also very unusual for either Pre-Islamic or Islamic graves to be isolated.

The burial is situated on flat ground, some 100 metres from a fork in the road to the village of al Rākī, that curves into two clefts flanking a low, conical hill. At the base of this bare outcropping is a small cave just large enough to accommodate a crouching man (Pl. 3). Here we were told, the *jāhil*

once lived.

Other local informants, mostly from al Rākī, recounted further conflicting details about the *jāhil* which indicated that there is more than one version to the story. According to Naṣir b. Muḥammad, the *jāhil* was a highway man, and lived only 175 to 200 years ago (a reason perhaps for the tomb's isolation and the occupant's infamy). He was of gigantic stature and extraordinary appearance. "The arms of the *jāhil* reached all the way to Ibrā', and his legs all the way to the Wādī Bānī Khalid so that he could fulfil his needs," said another villager. He possessed two swords, had a grave demeanor, and his eyes gleamed. With superhuman strength, he plunged his magic sword into the "ash" that connected the conical hill to the adjoining ridge and so created a path for the road. And he carved the cave with his sword as well. There was also further information about the heroic goatherd, whom the al Rākīs said came from Shir. The jinn gave him milk from her breast, they explained, and that is how he became strong enough to overwhelm the demon. Most importantly, the *jāhil*'s legs are said to be buried in



Pl. 2 Grave of the *jāhil*, al Rākī  
 لوحة ٢. قبر الجاهل في الراكي.

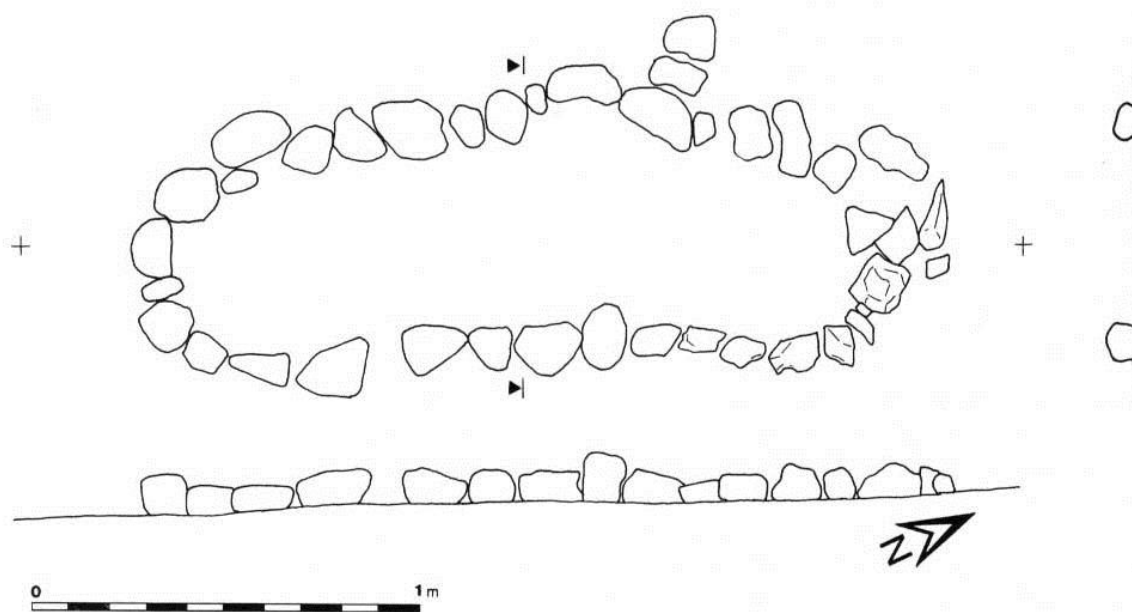


Fig. 2 Grave of the *jāhil*, al Rākī  
 شكل ٢. قبر الجاهل، الراكي.





Pl. 3 Cave of the *jāhil*, al Rākī

### لوحة ٣. كهف الجاهل في الراكي.

al Rākī, while the rest of him is buried some five kilometres away near the village of al 'Amqain. However, the villagers from al Rākī claimed that the demon had "no bones", which raises some interesting questions vis à vis the possible contents of his graves.

At al 'Amqain, two elderly al Sa'di villagers led us to the second grave, located two kilometres north of their village, and we heard the end of the *jāhil*'s story. This grave is also isolated, lying approximately 140 metres south of an Islamic cemetery. The flat strip of barren land in which the cemetery and the *jāhil*'s grave are located is flanked by two sharp outcroppings of fractured ophiolite whose green and red chips cover the ground like a carpet. It is probably no accident that the Islamic graves lie on a bed of green, Allah's favourite colour, while the *jāhil*'s grave is located on a tract strewn with red. Measuring 2.7 x 1.7 metres, the *jāhil*'s grave at al 'Amqain is much shorter than the one at al Rākī (Pl. 4, Fig. 3). It is marked by large white stones, approximately 20 cm in diameter, enclosing a fill of pebbles and soil.

Taking up the story where the villagers in

al Rākī left off, our guides told us that after the goatherd sliced the *jāhil* through the middle, the legs fell down and were brought to burial in al Rākī, but the demon's upper body continued to pursue his assailant. The two ran all the way to al 'Amqain where the goatherd "took another way" and escaped. Here then the *jāhil*'s torso stopped dead in its tracks and was buried. Unfortunately, the old men did not have any further details to relate. Their grandfathers knew more, they said, but they were of course long gone.

Paradoxically, both of the *jāhil*'s graves are oriented towards the *qiblā*, the long axes lying north northeast by south southwest. Thus, the interred person lies on his right side and his eyes are directed toward Mekka. There were two piles of stones on top of the grave at al 'Amqain which may be the *šawāhid*-stones typical of Muslim burials. Who is the historical person buried in these graves, around whom this fantastic legend has grown up? Although neither the villagers at al Rākī nor those at al 'Amqain claimed to know the name of Kebir Keb, it is likely that he and the *jāhil* are one in the same. David Insall, a local expert on Oman who also



Pl 4 Grave of the *jāhil*, al 'Amqain

لوحة ٤. قبر الجاهل في العمقين.

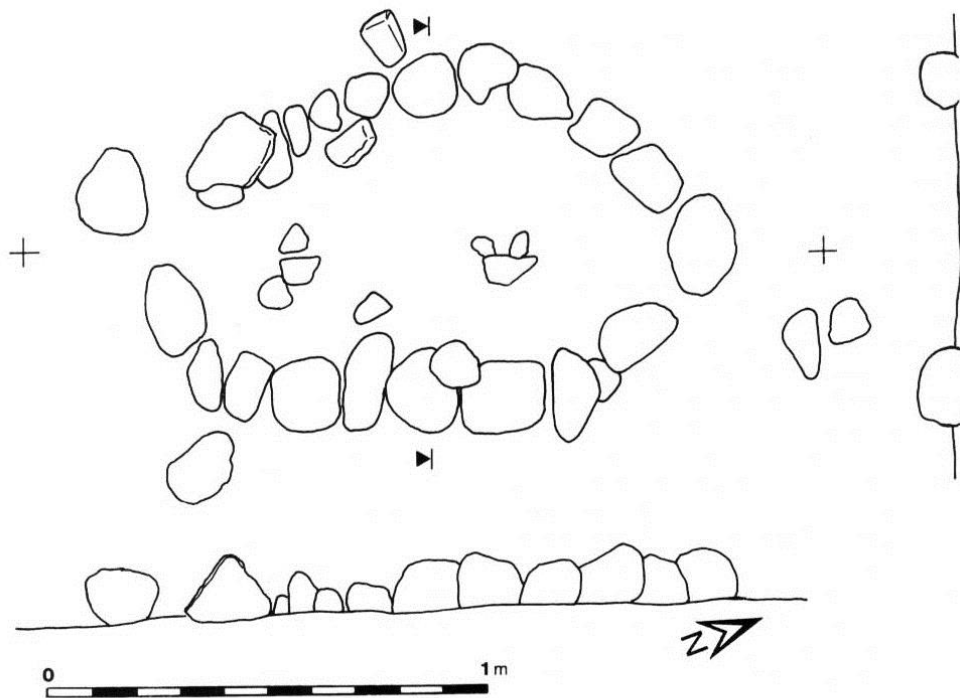


Fig. 3 Grave of the *jāhil*, al 'Amqain

شكل ٣. قبر الجاهل، العمقين.



studied the legend, notes that in the neighbouring village of Maqṭa'ah, the *jāhil* is similarly called "Kibaikib"<sup>1</sup>.

It seems likely that the villagers at al Rākī and al 'Amqain do not want to call the devil by his name, *shayṭan*, while the villagers at Jaylah are more forthcoming about Kebir Keb because they live at a safe distance

from the scenes of violence and the demon's burial places. When we asked the al Rākīs whether they had heard of Kebir Keb, but they dodged the question. Although they did not believe that the grave was Islamic, they did not want us to investigate it. Still the encounter gave us an excellent opportunity to gather more information about the legend, and the accounts we heard at al Rākī were more specific than those from Shir. This suggests that the *jāhil* probably lived and died where the locals claim, that is, in the vicinity of his grave in al Rākī. Older inhabitants in particular claimed to know who was in the grave.

What is the significance of this legend, historically? On the strength of the initial descriptions, it seemed that the person in question may have lived during the early medieval period, when Oman was ruled by Persian colonists. Yet after the coming of Islam - first to Ṣuḥār in 631 A.D. - many indigenous people in the region did not convert even up to fairly recent times<sup>2</sup>. At first we suspected that Kebir Keb would be one of the few persons from Oman known by name from that early period. It now appears possible that the *jāhil* lived as late as the 18th century A.D. or later. Whichever the case, the legend of Kebir Keb is very much alive, even among the younger local inhabitants, and his story is told as far away as the town of Ibrā'.

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## Abstract

In 1993 during fieldwork on some recently discovered prehistoric stone towers at Shir (al Shajar), P. Yule first learned a story about a legendary demonic *jāhil*, a unbeliever called Kebir Keb. Although locals attribute the building of the towers to this mythical figure, architectural features date most of the structures to the third millennium BC. According to legend which

manifestly is more recent, the demon was cut in two by a goatherd and both halves of his body were buried near the villages of al Rākī and al 'Amqain respectively. This contribution raises the question as to the historical background of the legend and its relationship in the context of the archaeology of the area.

## شرقي إبراهيم: جاهلي في الشرقية مع قبرين

في عام ١٩٩٣ وخلال عمل ميداني في بعض الأبراج الحجرية العائدة لعصر ما قبل التاريخ والمكتشفة حديثاً في منطقة شير في إقليم الشرقية في السلطنة سمع ب.يول بادئ الأمر قصة شيطان جاهلي، وهو كافر خرافي يدعى كبير كيب. ورغم أن السكان المحليون ينسبون بناءها لهذا المخلوق، فإن المعايير المعمارية تقود لتأريخ معظم لأبنية في فترة الألف الثالث ق.م. الدراسة.

تروي الأسطورة، التي لا شك بحداثتها عهداً، بأن راعياً للماعز قطع هذا الشيطان إلى نصفين وأن هذان القسمان دُفنا على التوالي بالقرب من قريتي الراكي والعمقاني. هذه القصة تثير التساؤل عن الخلفية التاريخية للأسطورة وكذلك عن علاقتها بعدد من السمات الأثرية في المنطقة التي تجري فيها

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