

## A NEW PREHISTORIC ANTHROPOMORPHIC FIGURE FROM THE SHARQIYAH, OMAN

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The following lines muse about a curious kind of artefact, which may have shared a common origin from prehistoric South-eastern Arabia and South Asia, are dedicated to a master of this interregional dialogue. He has devoted many productive years to illuminating the age from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC in Oman.

Weighing up to 6 kg, so-called anthropomorphic figures are one of the most striking artefacts of prehistoric northern India. Flat figures fashioned of copper alloy, which bear a superficial resemblance to a frontally depicted human, suggest an abbreviated head, arms and legs. They often are pattern-hammered. Several examples have been catalogued on the Subcontinent and belong to the so-called Indian Copper Hoards (Yule 1985; Yule *et al.* 1989; Wikipedia "Copper Hoard Culture"), which occur mostly in the Ganges-Yamuna plain. Geographically, the writer has assigned most of these anthropomorphs to his 'Doab group' of hoard artefacts. They frequently occur together with other kinds of metallic artefacts in hoards. Organic remains have not survived, just the metal-finds.

In the 1980s, Shaikh Sa'īd bin 'Alī bin Sultan bin Mā'nī from al-Aqr near Baḥlā' in Oman's al-Zāhirah province submitted eight metallic artefacts and 16 'bun ingots' to the Department of Archaeology in al-Khuwayr, which the writer interprets to be a foundation deposit from beneath an ancient runoff dam (Yule 2003: 541). Shaikh Sa'īd described to Gerd Weisgerber† the exact find conditions of the metal-finds underneath an ancient diversion dam/wall which he demolished (Yule 2003: 537).

First, the term "anthropomorphic figure" requires explanation. Mostly from the Ganges-Yamuna, all are simple and aniconic. If in fact, humans are represented, missing, for example, are ears, eyes, feet and hands. Nonetheless, this basic name sticks for lack of a better one. The name anthropomorphs is a convenient convention which facilitates discussion.

Controversial theories explain the use of anthropomorphs. Based on European behavioural models, the writer sees them as ritual deposits and denies a functional use such as casters' hoards (Yule *et al.* 1989: 229). One reason is because they evince no clear traces of use-wear. In addition, if form follows function, they are too big or heavy to be used as tools, or are simply ergo logically incomprehensible. Some hoards cannot be retrieved after deposition and thus can have had no economic value - perhaps only a cultic one. A craftsman develops simple

and practical means to accomplish his work. At present, we cannot convincingly explain the anthropomorphs as tools. Colleagues have suggested that they represent the *vajra* weapons of Sanskrit religious lore, which were fastened to a string or clasped in wood in order to throw them (Das Gupta 2009: 51-53, fig. 3).

One may legitimately question whether the makers of the anthropomorphs from India and Oman really considered them to be similar in function. After all, the latter anthropomorphs show even less resemblance to human form than those from India. Completely schematised are the "legs" and "arms". While the provenance of anthropomorphs from al-Aqr is known in detail, that for the one being introduced here is not. It is not a solution to condemn these artefacts as forgeries as a result of their not optimal provenance.

The author associates the five al-Aqr anthropomorphs (cf. Fig. 1b) with a copper artefact which came to light in Ra's al-Jins 2, building 7, room 2, period III (Fig. 1c; Yule 2003: 538 fig 1.9; 541). The eight room house plan offers few clues for the use of the artifact (personal communication, letter by V. Azzara 22.02.2012). Together with the DA 11861, a necklace made of one round and twenty-three oval copper beads occurred in Room 2. First in a later stage, the room contained grinding stones, hammer stones as well as a millstone related to processing activities.

The point of comparison between this piece and the others lies in two main attributes: the aniconic 'head' and the thrashed patterning on both sides of the artefact. The rub is that Maurizio Tosi and Serge Cleuziou† understand its use as a, "large hoe-shaped tanged flat tool of still undetermined function" or a chopper (Cleuziou and Tosi 1997: 68, 81 fig. 12). Although for the use identification there is no absolute right or wrong, the writer points out the unusual shared surface patterning, a lack of clear use-wear and general morphological attributes, such as the cross section. But if the artefact was hafted with a handle, this might resolve the question.

The dating of most South Asian anthropomorphs is debated, because few derive from known archaeological contexts (Yule *et al.* 1989: 222, 230 tab. 2; Yule 2003: 539-541 fig 1). One example from Lothal in Gujarat (phase 4 period A) occurred in a context which the excavator S.R. Rao dates by means of radiocarbon to the 19<sup>th</sup> century BC. Typologically, the finds from Oman can be attributed to the Umm an-Nar period (2500-1900 BC).

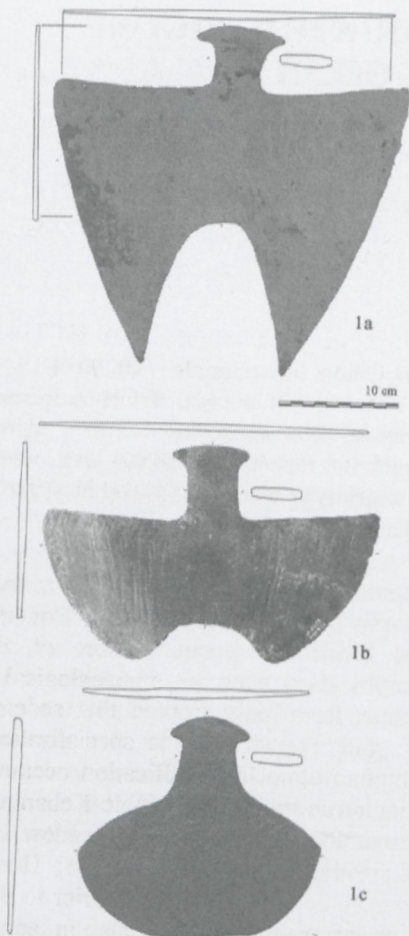


Fig. 1. a) Anthropomorphic figure said to have been found in Sinaw/Sharqīyah (DA 24964);<sup>1</sup> b) Anthropomorphic figure from Baḥlā'/al-Aqr (DA 15496); c) Suspected anthropomorphic figure from Ra's al-Jins (DA 11961).

The context of the piece from Ra's al-Jins dates to 2300-2100, two to four centuries earlier than that from Lothal, but consonant with that from al-Aqr.

Like its relatives, the new (unrestored) anthropomorphism (Fig. 1a; 29.7 x 29.5 x 0.8 cm, ca. 1500 g) is fashioned of copper alloy. It has a thin, dull khaki patina on one face, the other unpatinated one is oxidised dark grey. Unfortunately this artefact is only a stray which

Aḥmed Ḥamūd Sa'īd al-Farsi from Wilāyat Maḥouṭ/al-Juba reported to be from Sinaw/Sharqīyah, some 200 km south of al-Aqr. Like those from al-Aqr, its surface is patterned with groups of parallel thrash-marks, but only on one face. The al-Aqr anthropomorphs have them on one (DA 15713) or both (DA 15496, 15497, 15499) faces. Given the similar dull patina only on one face and the general similarity in type, one might ask if it in fact also derives from the al-Aqr deposit. At any rate, it probably also originated in the Umm an-Nar period owing to its similarity with the others. To the field archaeologist it seems a shame not to have found any (aside from the Ra's al-Jins piece) in context. Anthropomorphs fuel musing regarding artefactual or even spiritual contact between the two regions.

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<sup>1</sup> The writer thanks the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture for permission to publish the images used. Images by the author.