

Pierre Corboud, Anne-Catherine Castella, Roman Hapka, Peter im Obersteg, *Les tombes protohistoriques de Bithnah Fujairah, Emirats Arabes Unis. Terra archaeologica 1* (Mainz 1996), 171 pages incl. 29 plates, 120.- DM

In December of 1987 archaeologists of the Fondation Suisse-Liechtenstein began work in the U.A.E. Selected for investigation was a Pre-Islamic cemetery of little known type. The work was well-financed, the publication handsome and expensive. Every aspect of the documentation is dealt with therein in detail, with the exception of the osteal finds. The text, photos and drawings are excellently rendered. This leanly edited work is organised into 10 chapters (an eleventh is an English language translation of the French résumé). Following a description of the funerary architecture, the cataloguing of the pottery and small finds is detailed and of a high standard. Chapter 8 synthesizes the arguments for the dating of the tombs and their finds.

Excavation centred on the large tomb no. 4 which is T-shaped in plan and which seems to have had a corbelled roof. The excavators venture an origin in the late Wadi Suq Period, late in the second third of the 2nd millennium BC. For this two arguments can be cited: First the form and decoration of certain arrowheads (pl. 24.10-12) give some indication of date. Second, several large collective tombs date in principle to the mid second millennium (93 fig. 67). But in fact the relative dating is not yet settled, and an origin in the initial Lizq/Rumaylah equally is possible. The latter generally is referred to as the Iron Age, and by some who work in central Oman (Dakhiliyah and Sharqiyah) as the Early Iron Age. The major point of reference for the relative dating of the pottery and stone vessels is the assemblage at Iron Age Rumaylah, the publication of which is readily accessible. This site also has a relatively clear stratigraphy.

The stratification of the finds in Gr. 4 verifies to some extent their relative typological sequence. The accompanying single graves are compared to those of the Samad Culture (post 300 BC-1000 AD). But characteristic Samad graves differ from them in several respects, particularly the roof construction and size. Single graves may occur in different Pre-Islamic periods in East Arabia, as the authors mention. Late Pre-Islamic finds also occurred in Gr. 4 (pl. 13).

On typological/stylistic grounds the bulk of the pottery from Gr. 4 derives from the end of the Iron Age (especially pl. 3.9). The closest comparisons are found in Rumaylah and Bawshar (report in preparation). Zigzag (pl. 6.12) and wavy line decoration (pl. 6.11) bring to mind those of the subsequent neighbouring Samad Culture/Period. A dating at the end of the Early Iron Age seems appropriate for the decoration of the pottery "imitations pierre tendres" (pl. 9) and that of the majority of the stone vessels (pl. 14-19 [except the heirloom 19.5], 20-23). Many of the latter are virtually indistinguishable in their form and decoration from those excavated from the "honeycomb" cemetery at Bawshar, from the end of the Early Iron Age.

In the Late Pre-Islamic Period the culture of this part of Oman differs clearly from that to the southeast in central Oman, the heart of the Samad Culture. The form of certain arrowheads (81 fig. 61, especially the third from the right) belongs not unexpectedly to the repertoire known from nearby Mlayha and ed-Dur.

One might cavil whether an excavation procedure as elaborate as this one was necessary for the badly disturbed Gr. 4. But this post hoc scepticism can only derive from having first viewed the published results. Prior to excavation, short of precognition, no one could have known the condition of this context. The disturbance itself of the finds and of the elaborate architecture further justify such detailed investigation. But at the heart of cultural resource management in Arabia and elsewhere lies the sobering axiom that for every grave investigated, many nowadays are intentionally or unintentionally destroyed and elude archaeologists.

A contentious reviewer might insist on many more comparanda in the catalogue, but this need neither deepen our understanding of the finds nor their historical context. Most of the parallels are themselves from mixed find contexts and of limited usefulness. Nevertheless, I might point out that the curious, circular, relieved, stone boss reproduced in pl. 27.3 is comparable to one from Gr. S2202 at Samad al-Shan (Wadi Suq and Lizq/Rumaylah finds) published by the reviewer in 1988. Moreover, three more unpublished examples from a largely Early Iron Age collective tomb at Naslah are on exhibit in the Ra's al-Khaymah Museum.

The authors are to be congratulated for their resoluteness to publish in a discipline undergoing continual change.

Paul Yule 29.11.1996