

Umm an-Nar pottery assemblages from Bāt and al-Zībā and their functional contexts

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Summary

The sites of Bāt and al-Zībā (Zebah) in the Sultanate of Oman offer a range of different archaeological features dating to the Umm an-Nar period. In this paper we present the pottery assemblages from two burial pits detected just outside a group of Umm an-Nar tombs in the necropolis of Bāt, from the monumental Building II in Area B at Bāt, and from two house complexes in al-Zībā, which were all excavated by the University of Tübingen between 2010 and 2015. By comparing the assemblages with each other, it will be demonstrated that there is a clear distinction in shapes, wares, and decorations between the burial pits, on the one hand, and Building II and al-Zībā, on the other. We argue, therefore, for a functional difference between grave and non-grave pottery in the Umm an-Nar period. Furthermore, we show that the Umm an-Nar pottery is astonishingly homogeneous in the whole of the northern Oman peninsula and discuss its implications for the understanding of the social structure at that time.

Keywords: Bāt, al-Zībā (Zebah), Umm an-Nar period, grave and non-grave pottery, homogeneous material culture

Introduction

Between 2010 and 2015 the University of Tübingen excavated two burial pits, Inst. 0006 and Inst. 0025, outside a group of three well-preserved Umm an-Nar tombs in the necropolis of Bāt, Building II in Area B at Bāt, and two house complexes, House III and House VI, in al-Zībā, 7 km to the north-west of Bāt, Sultanate of Oman (Fig. 1). All these features date to the Umm an-Nar period and yielded considerable amounts of well-stratified pottery.

Burial pits Inst. 0006 and Inst. 0025

The first two pottery assemblages discussed here come from the two burial pits in the centre of the necropolis of Bāt, which features several hundred Hafit and Umm an-Nar tombs. The pits were excavated between 2010 and 2014 (Schmidt & Döpper 2014; Döpper & Schmidt 2014; 2013; 2011). They are comparable to secondary burial pits from other sites such as al-Şufūḥ, Ra's al-Jinz, Bahlā', and Ajman (Benton 1996; Munoz, Ghazal & Guy 2012; al-Tikriti 1989). In 2014 a geophysical prospection survey was conducted in the core area of the necropolis in order to investigate the existence, distribution, and density of burial pits in relation to the stone-built tombs (Döpper & Schmidt 2014: 63–65). Altogether, fourteen new burial

pits were detected in the course of this prospection. They are exclusively located close to Umm an-Nar tombs and never to Hafit tombs. While not all Umm an-Nar tombs have a burial pit, where they do exist, they are mostly single occurrences. Only in two cases were two pits detected beside one Umm an-Nar tomb.

The two excavated pits (Inst. 0006 and Inst. 0025) were dug into the natural gravel, and their filling yielded a multitude of rather badly preserved human bones of more than twenty individuals in each pit. These bones, for the most part, were not in anatomical order. Further finds include several hundred beads of different shapes and materials, among them bleached carnelian beads from the Indus and a flat silver bead with a mid-rib string-hole, as known from the third-millennium Aegean (Schmidt & Döpper 2014: 209, fig. 11/g–h). A rare find is a cylinder seal made of chlorite depicting an agricultural scene with a plough and two draft animals (2014: 210, fig. 12). The two pits were filled in a single action at one time but not simultaneously, as evidenced by joins between pottery sherds from all levels within each of the pits. The findings can be interpreted as the removal of the deceased with their grave-goods from the stone-built tombs into the pits, and thus represent an Umm an-Nar tomb inventory in secondary placement.

The pottery of the first burial pit Inst. 0006 was made up of 4253 sherds in total, among them thirty-

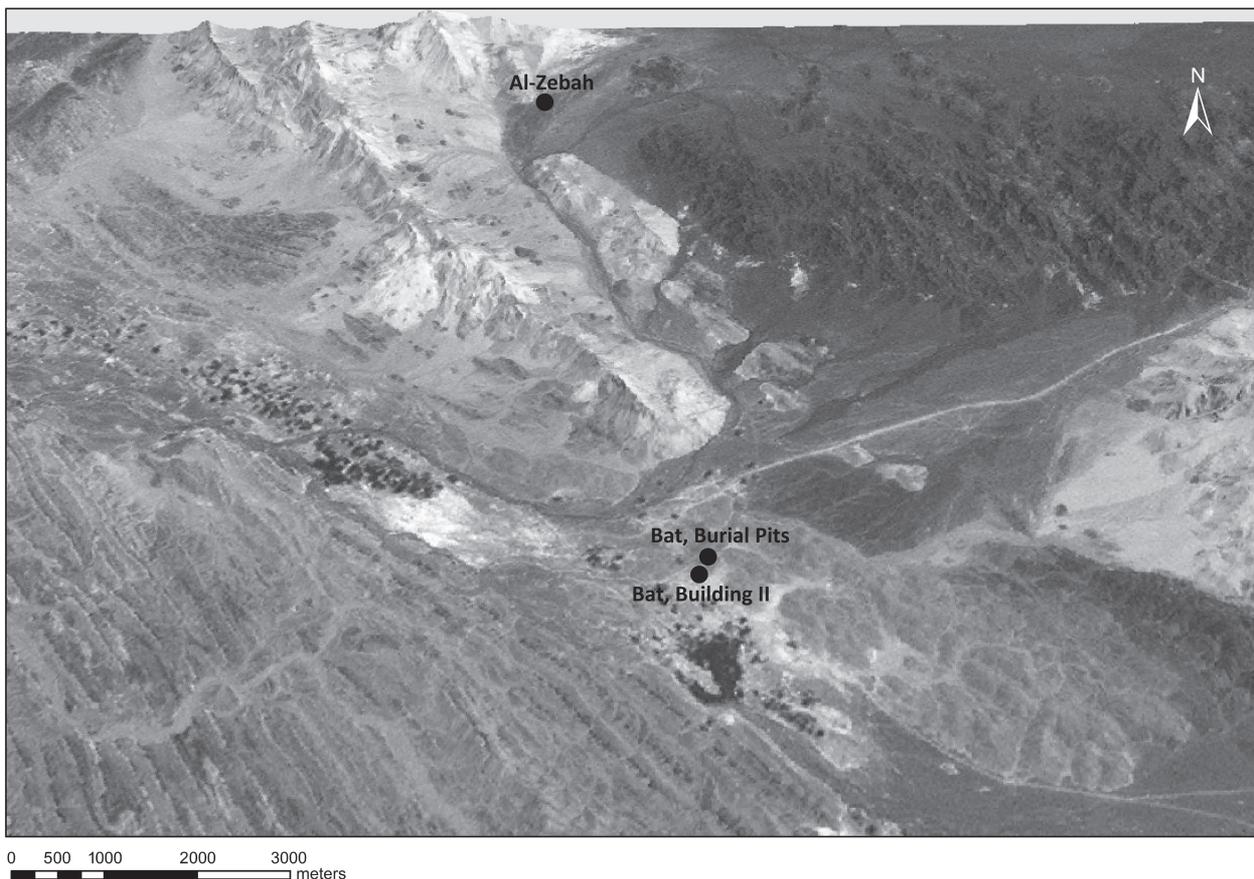


FIGURE 1. The location of burial pits and Building II at Bāt and al-Zībā (aka Zebah).

two complete vessels. Of all diagnostic sherds 87% belong to small jars of different types (Figs 2–3). Other vessel types included shallow bowls (6.5%), deep bowls (3.5%), cups (0.9%), beakers (0.4%), large jars (1.3%), and miniature vessels (0.4%), together totalling only 13%. In burial pit Inst. 0006 Ware 11, a fine, reddish to yellowish, light mineral tempered ware clearly dominates the assemblage with 51.8% (Fig. 8). Black-on-Red Ware 20 accounts for 20.8%; Ware 10, a fine, red ware without temper, 19.3%; Ware 21, a fine mineral-tempered ware with black decoration on a yellowish beige to pale brown background, 3.8%; and Ware 50, a fine, grey ware without temper or decoration, 1.1%. All other wares, including Black-on-Grey Ware 51 and Incised Grey Ware 52, represent less than 1%. There are some imports that deserve special mention: a complete grey ware cup (Fig. 2/f), a fragment of a cordon vessel (Fig. 3/h), and a dark grey cup with two rows of incised triangles (Fig. 2/g) from eastern Iran or Baluchistan (Méry et al. 2012).

Of the 1246 pottery sherds from the second burial pit Inst. 0025, including twelve complete vessels, small jars make up 88.7% of the diagnostic sherds (Fig. 4). Shallow and deep bowls as well as miniature vessels, together account for the remaining 11.3%. This is thus a similar distribution of vessel types as in burial pit Inst. 0006, and this also applies to the types of ware. While Wares 11 and 10 are the most common wares with 36.8% and 36.5% respectively, Ware 20 makes up 20.1%, and Wares 21 and 50 1.3% each (Fig. 8). Other wares account for 4%. One highlight of the assemblage is a complete Incised Grey Ware vessel with a basket pattern (Fig. 4/d).

Building II

The third pottery assemblage discussed in this paper comes from Building II in Area B at Bāt (Schmidt & Döpfer 2014; Döpfer & Schmidt 2014; 2013). Building II is located to the south of the necropolis. It consists of

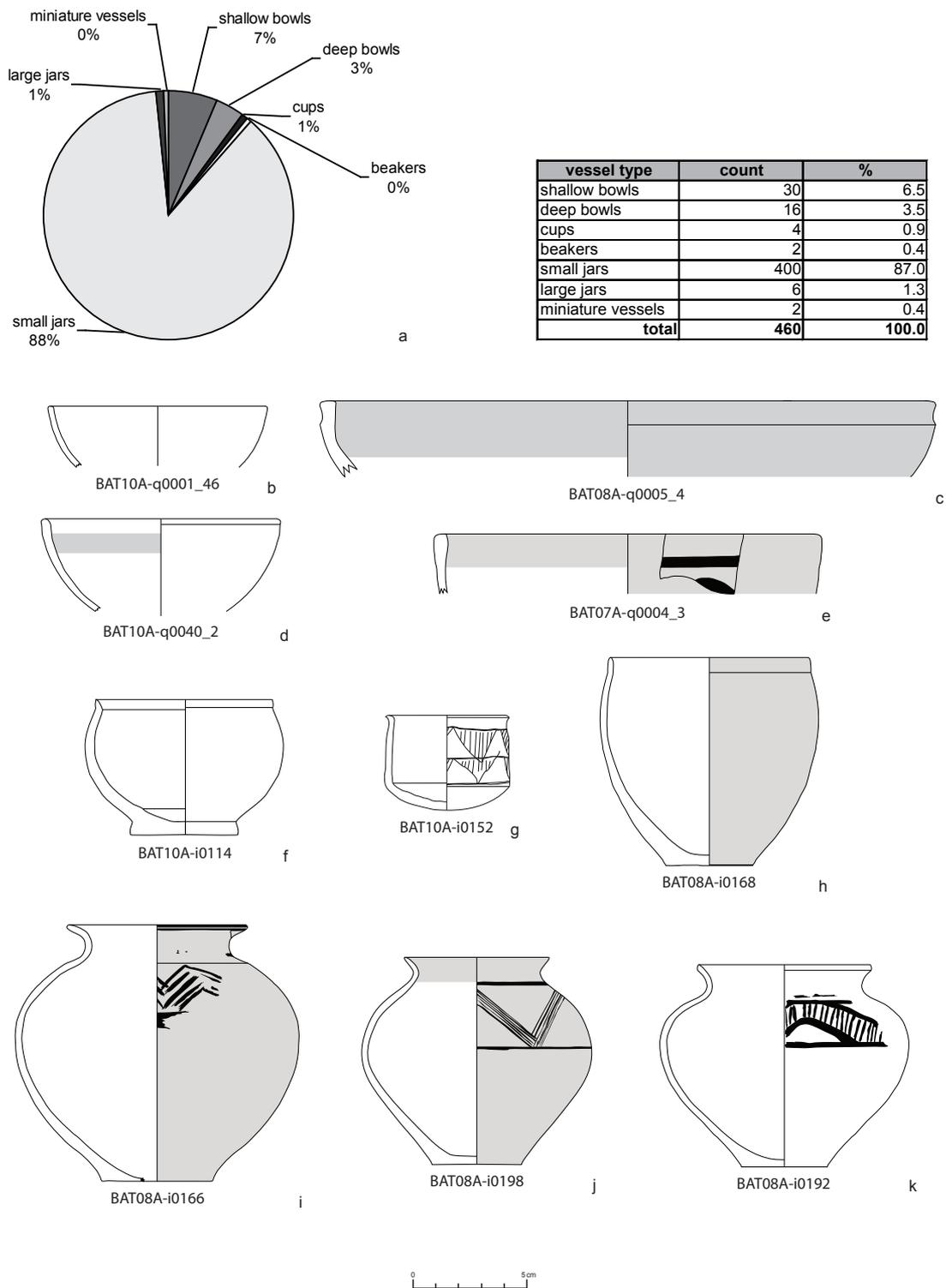


FIGURE 2. Pottery from burial pit Inst. 0006: **a.** distribution of vessel types; **b–d.** shallow bowls; **e.** deep bowl; **f–g.** cups; **h.** beaker; **i–k.** small jars.

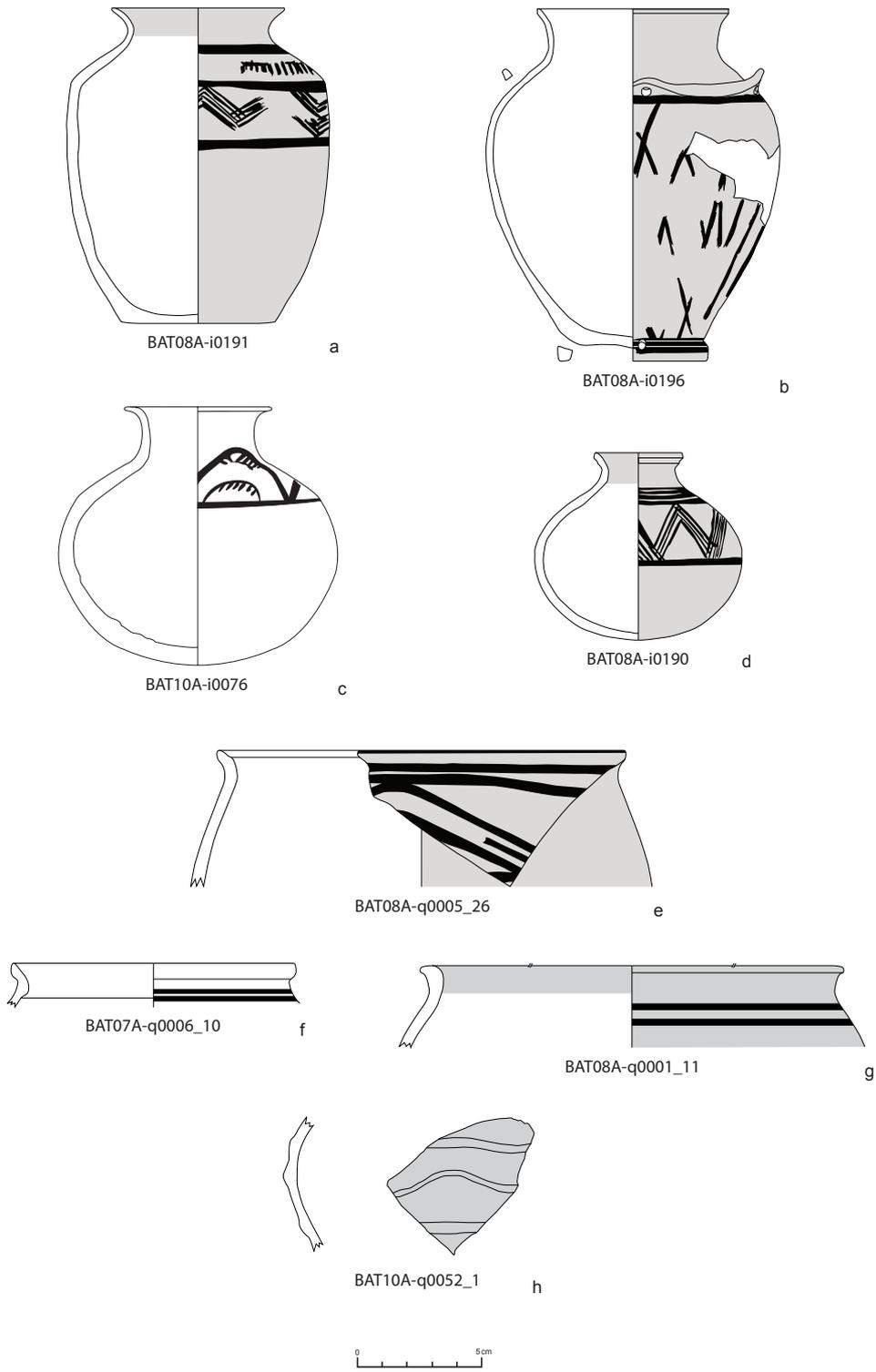


FIGURE 3. Pottery from burial pit Inst. 0006: a–d, small jars; e–g, large jars; h, cordon vessel fragment.

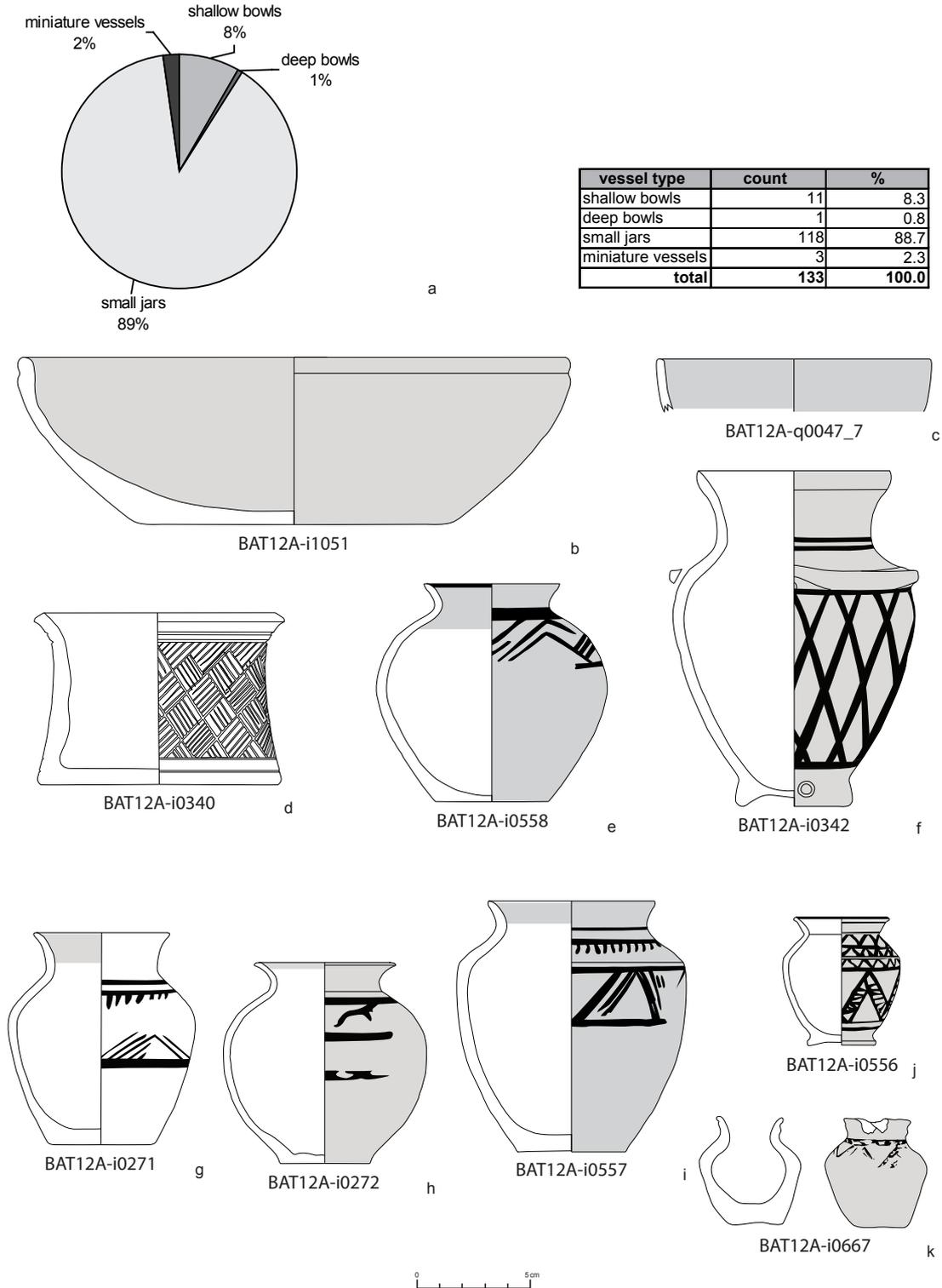


FIGURE 4. Pottery from burial pit Inst. 0025: **a.** distribution of vessel types; **b–c.** shallow bowls; **d.** deep bowl; **e–i.** small jars; **j–k.** miniature vessels.

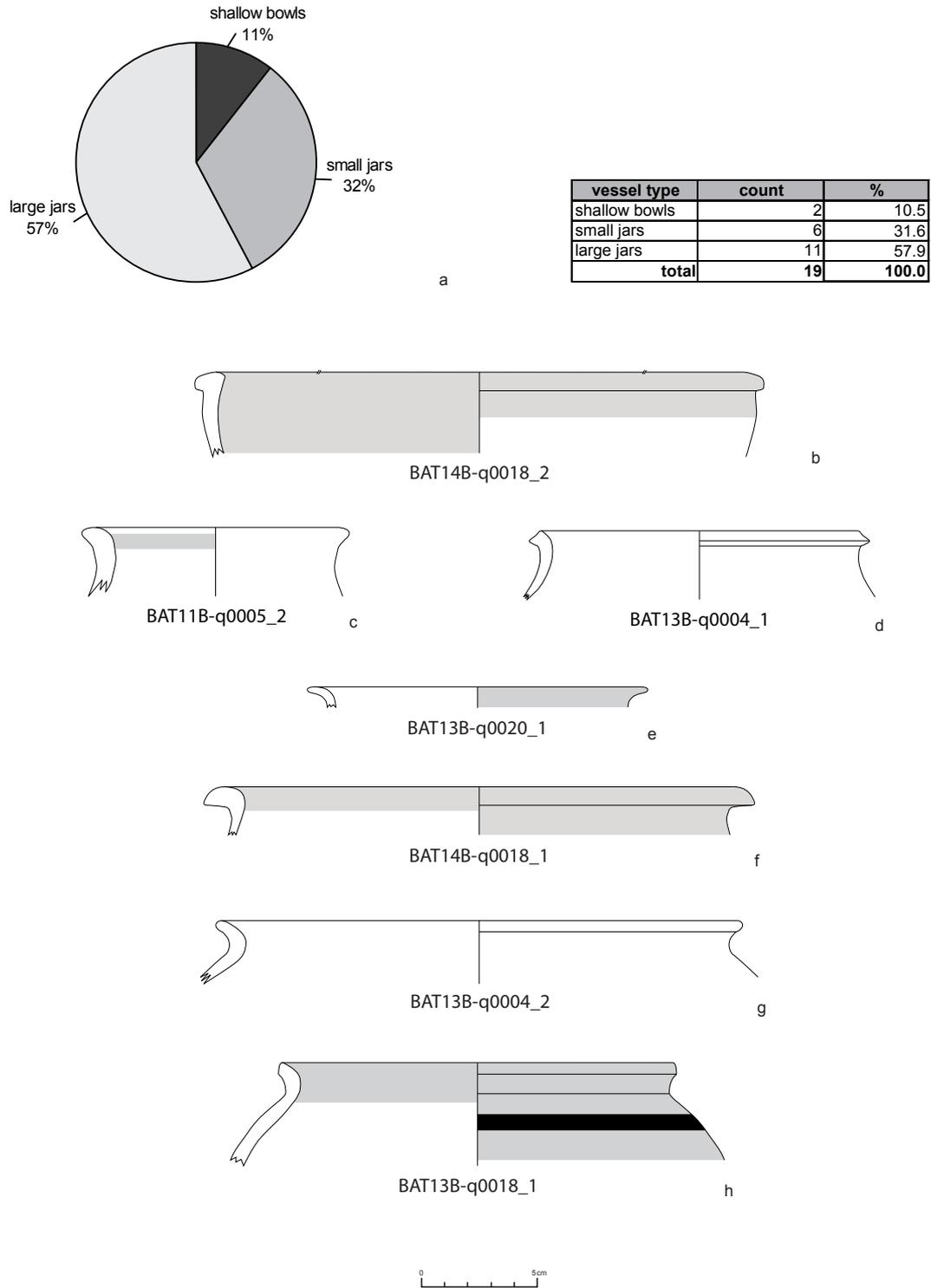


FIGURE 5. Pottery from Building II: a. distribution of vessel types; b. shallow bowl; c–e. small jars; f–h. large jars.

an 84 m-long wall of carefully placed brown limestone, forming an irregular oval 33 by 35 m. Although it is not a typical example of its kind, it might be referred to as a tower. As far as the investigations show, no internal structures, such as walls, were found in the interior of the building, either in the excavations or in the magnetometry. Radiocarbon dates from charcoal from the foundation pit of the stone wall are cal 2 sigma BC 2872–2625¹ and 2887–2677.² On the outside, a series of superimposed deep ditches surround the building. To the south and also inside the structure, additional shallow, stone-filled ditches were detected. Radiocarbon dates from charcoal from those ditches range from cal 2 sigma BC 2921–2780³ to 2859–2506.⁴ Many of the stones within these small ditches show traces of burning. This is especially interesting if they are linked to the copper objects and fragments found here during the excavations, inferring that some kind of copper-processing workshop existed.

Building II yielded a relatively small amount of pottery with only 157 sherds to be analysed. More than half of the diagnostic sherds (57.9%) belong to large jars, while small jars make up 31.6% (Fig. 5). In most cases the shapes of the small jars differ from those from the two burial pits presented above, so that there is little in common between the pottery of Building II and that of the two burial pits. The remaining 10.5% of the diagnostic sherds from Building II are parts of shallow bowls. Concerning the wares the large majority, or 69.4%, belongs to Ware 11, while only 14.6% is Ware 10. Furthermore, Ware 20 accounts for 6.4%, Ware 21 2.5%, and Ware 13, a semi-coarse mineral-tempered ware, and Ware 22, a fine mineral-tempered, beige to reddish ware with black decoration on grey background, 1.9% each (Fig. 8).

Al-Zībā

The fourth and last pottery assemblage presented here comes from al-Zībā, which only has domestic structures, no tombs or towers. Thus, it differs enormously from sites such as Bāt, Bisyā, and Hili (al-Hilī). Al-Zībā consists of loosely arranged house structures, which cover an area 250 by 150 m. Two of these house complexes have been excavated by the University of Tübingen (Schmidt & Döpper 2014; Döpper & Schmidt 2014; 2013; Schmidt 2016). Both feature several large rectangular rooms along with smaller ones surrounding a courtyard.

In these smaller rooms large pottery jars were found *in situ* half buried in the ground. All rooms were built with double-sided stone walls preserved to a height of about 40 cm. They were never higher, at least not the part constructed of limestone, as the stone debris is generally missing. Superstructures made of mud bricks would also have left traces. Instead, the filling of all rooms consists of up to 50 cm of fine layers of wind-blown earth with no mud-brick debris or mud washed out from former walls. These stone walls are therefore interpreted as substructures for tents or *barasti* huts. Together with the loose arrangement of the house complexes in general, this argues for the seasonal use of al-Zībā by mobile pastoralists rather than a place settled year-round. Radiocarbon dates of charcoal found in several fire pits in both excavated house complexes provide dates in the second half of the Umm an-Nar period from cal 2 sigma BC 2465–2295⁵ to 2277–2041.⁶

The pottery from the two house complexes in al-Zībā consists of 1964 sherds. Large jars clearly dominate the diagnostic sherds with 59.8%. Small jars account for 19.6%, shallow bowls 8.9%, deep bowls 8%, beakers 1.8%, and storage vessels and jar stoppers 0.9% each (Figs 6–7). All in all, this distribution of vessel types is very similar to that of Building II at Bāt, although the architectural context could not be more different. As in the other three assemblages, Ware 11 is the most prominent, accounting for 76.3% (Fig. 8). By contrast, the second most common ware in al-Zībā is Ware 21, 7.9%, and the third most common is Ware 20, 7.2%. Ware 10 makes up only 6.4%. All other wares are represented with less than 1% each.

Comparison of the pottery assemblages from Bāt and al-Zībā

The vessel shapes from the four contexts discussed give a very distinct picture. While in the pottery from the two burial pits small jars clearly dominate with close to 90% of the assemblage, the two settlement assemblages feature large jars at between 50% and 60%. As for the wares, more than 70% are Ware 10 and Ware 11 in all assemblages. Differences mainly occur for the Black-on-Red Ware 20, which appears three times more often in the burial pits than in Building II and al-Zībā.

Yet another difference between the four pottery assemblages can be found in the decoration types. The

¹ MAMS, 14C age 4141, INTCAL13, SwissCal 1.0.

² MAMS, 14C age 4188, INTCAL13, SwissCal 1.0.

³ MAMS, 14C age 4268, INTCAL13, SwissCal 1.0.

⁴ MAMS, 14C age 4098, INTCAL13, SwissCal 1.0.

⁵ MAMS, 14C age 3889, INTCAL13, SwissCal 1.0.

⁶ MAMS, 14C age 3750, INTCAL13, SwissCal 1.0.

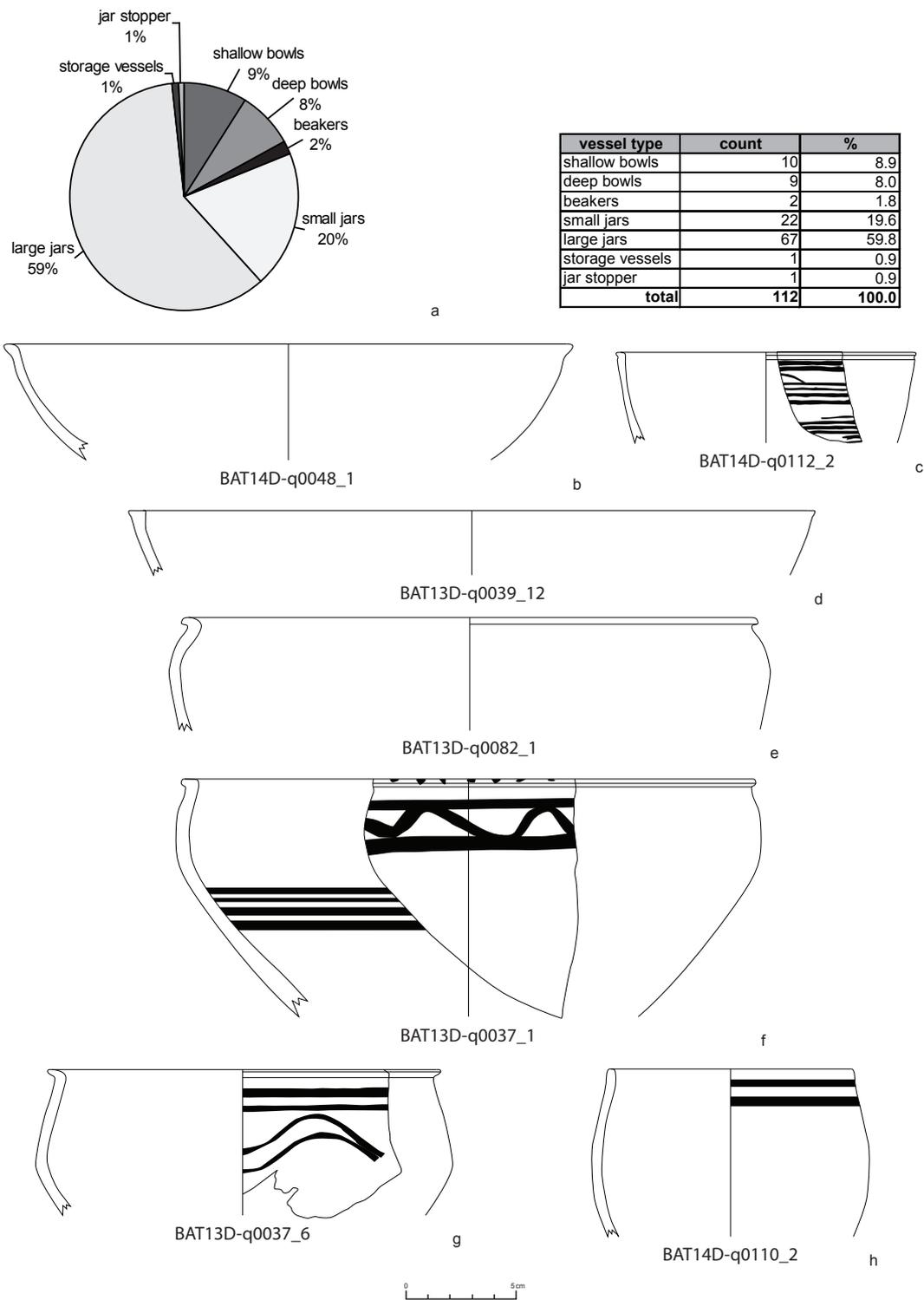


FIGURE 6. Pottery from al-Zibā: a. distribution of vessel types; b–d. shallow bowls; e–g. deep bowls; h. beaker.

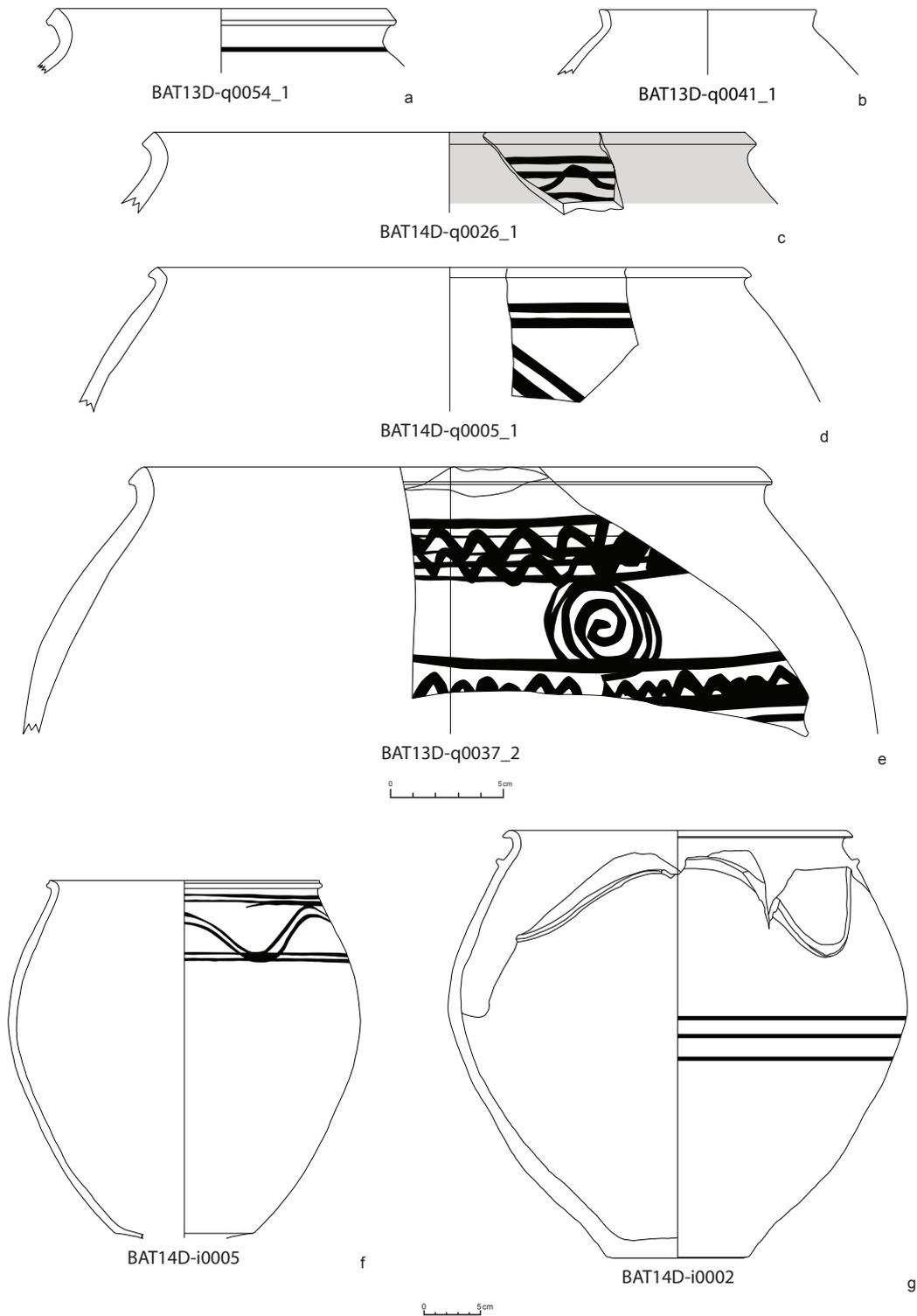


FIGURE 7. Pottery from al-Zibā: a–b. small jars; c–g. large jars.

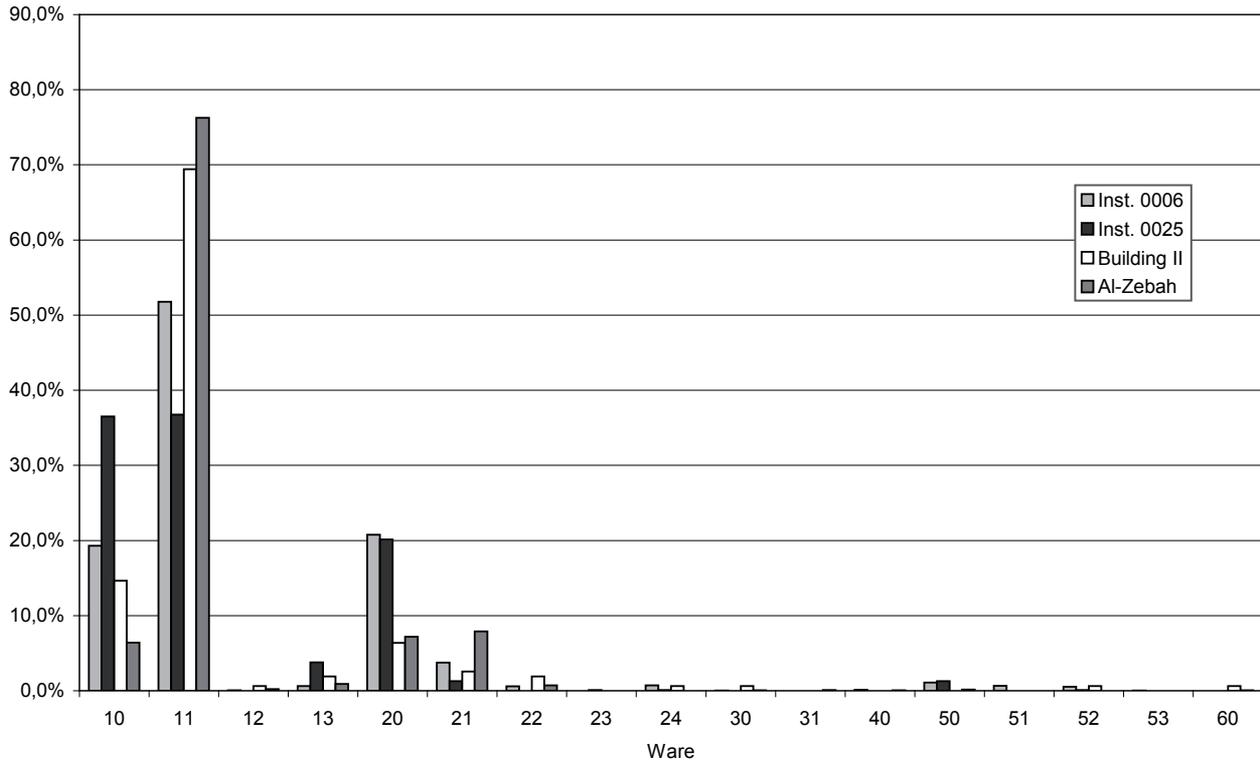


FIGURE 8. *Distribution of wares.*

dominant decoration on the pottery from al-Zībā and Building II is a pattern with horizontal and wavy lines. The most prominent decoration on the pottery from the two burial pits at Bāt is lattice designs and triangles. The same distinction becomes clear when taking the pottery shape types into account. As there is a large overlap in shapes between the two burial pits, there is much less similarity between these pits and the campsite of al-Zībā, and almost none with Building II (Fig. 9). There is, however, a good match in shapes between the assemblages of al-Zībā and Building II. Accordingly, there is a clear distinction between tomb and settlement pottery, represented in this case study by the burial pits of Bāt, on the one hand, and the site of al-Zībā as well as Building II at Bāt, on the other. This confirms the suggestion that larger and more robust pottery is less likely to break than smaller items and therefore more suitable for daily use in settlements, for example, for storing and preparing food. Pottery for funerary contexts can be much finer and more delicate, as it does not have to fit in with everyday life. It can be assumed that grave pottery in the Umm an-Nar period was produced exclusively for use in funerary rites.

The pottery from Bāt and al-Zībā in its regional context

Having presented the pottery from Bāt and al-Zībā, it will now be shown how this fits into the general picture of Umm an-Nar pottery on the Oman peninsula. In order to answer this question, the pottery assemblages from Bāt and al-Zībā are compared with those of other sites, namely Hili, Maysar, al-Şufūh, and Umm al-Nār island. For the pottery from both burial pits in Bāt, good comparisons, including for the decorations, can be found at Tomb A at Hili North, the tombs on Umm al-Nār island, and the tomb and burial pits from al-Şufūh (Fig. 10). For the settlement pottery from Building II and al-Zībā, good comparisons exist in the assemblages from Hili 8 and in the settlement of Maysar-1 (Fig. 11). Unfortunately, little of the pottery from Maysar has been published so far, which limits the possibility of evaluating the data.

This comparison underlines the difference between tomb and settlement pottery, and it further demonstrates that there was a very similar pottery tradition on the Oman peninsula during the Umm an-Nar period. The similarities do not confine themselves to certain types

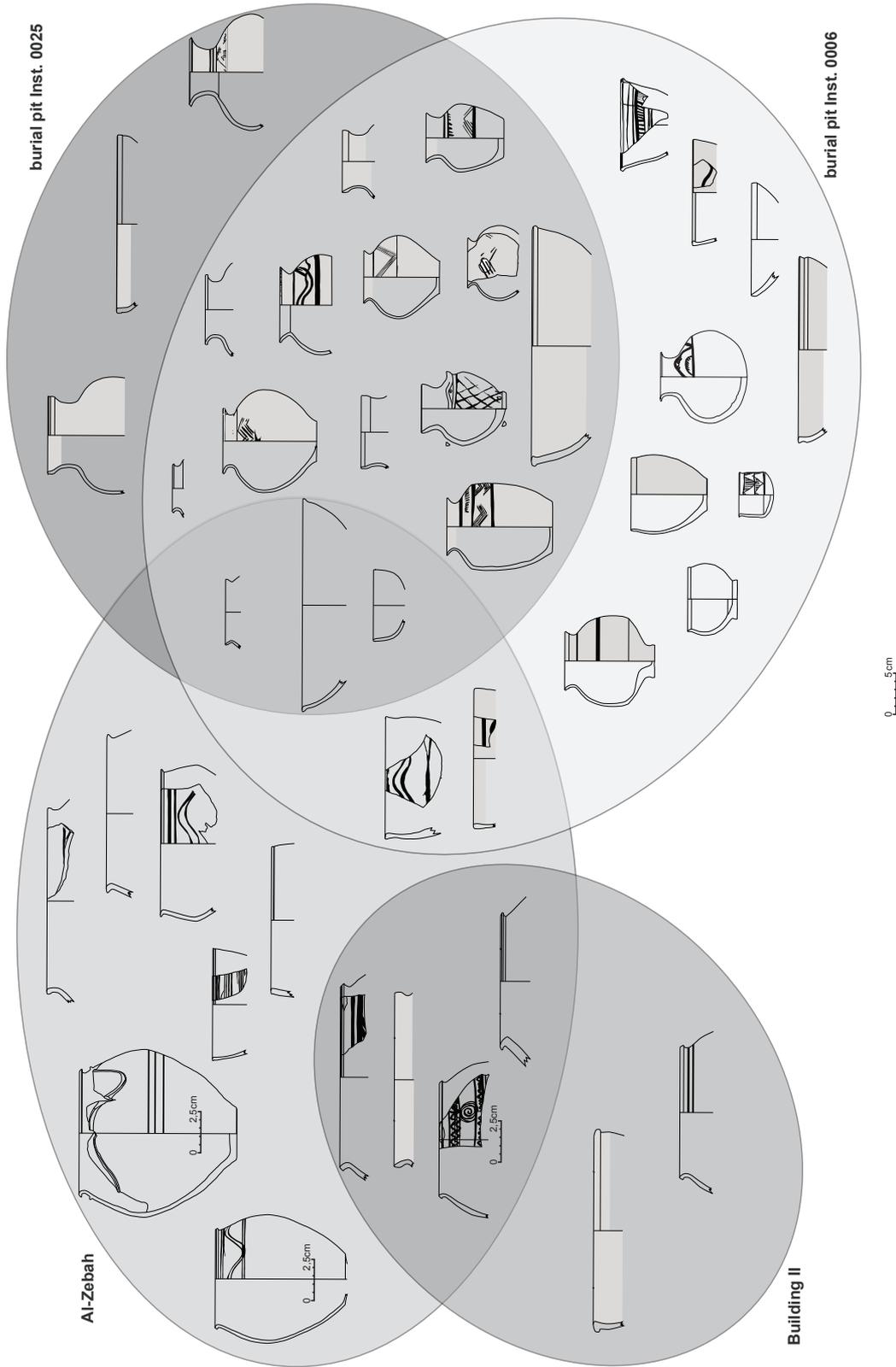


FIGURE 9. A comparison of pottery shapes from Bāt (burial pit Inst. 0006, Building II) and al-Zībā.

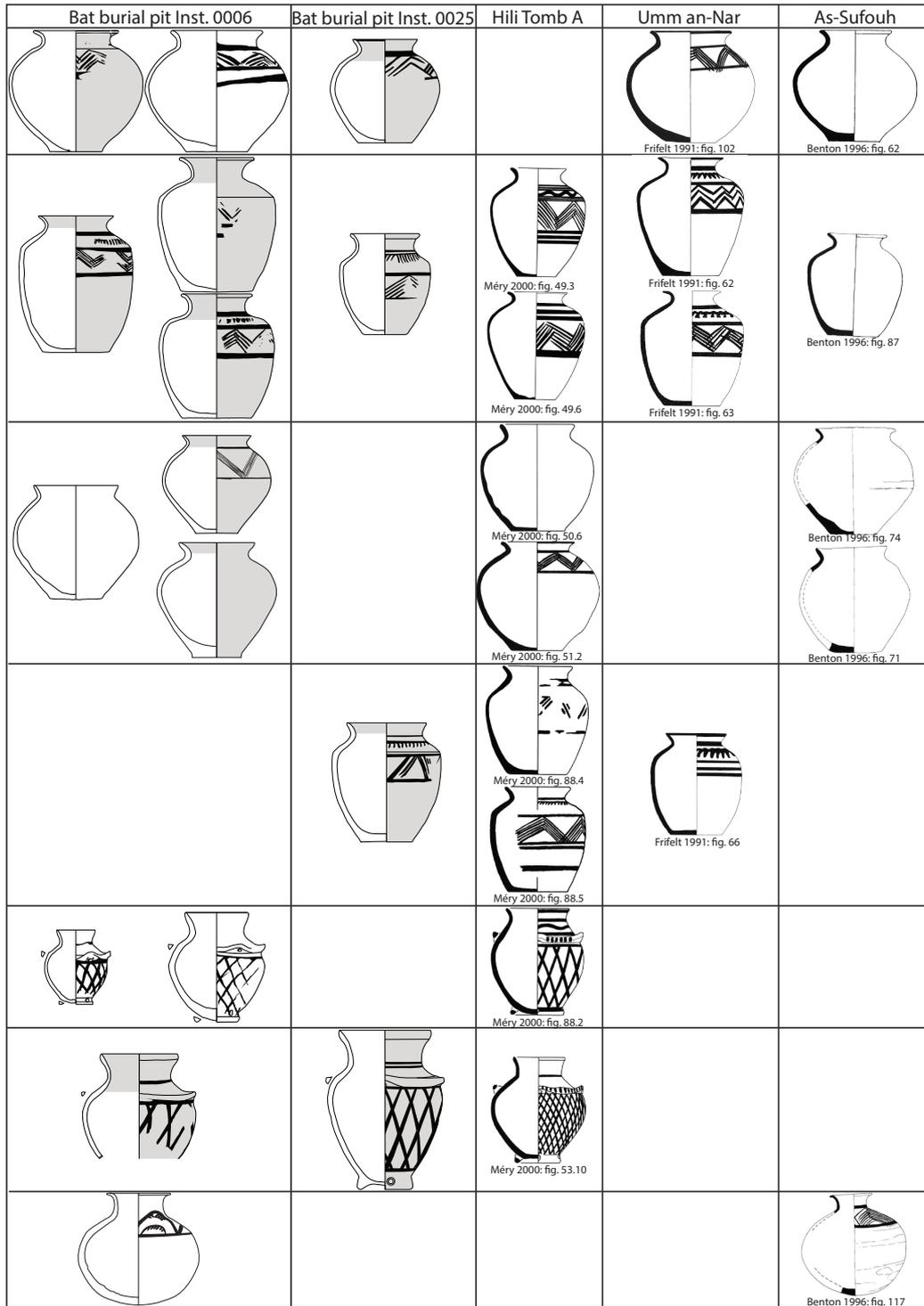


FIGURE 10. A comparison of pottery shapes between burial pit Inst. 0006, burial pit Inst. 0025, Tomb A in Hili North (Abu Dhabi), the tombs on Umm al-Nār island (Abu Dhabi), and the tomb and burial pits from al-Şufūh (Dubai).

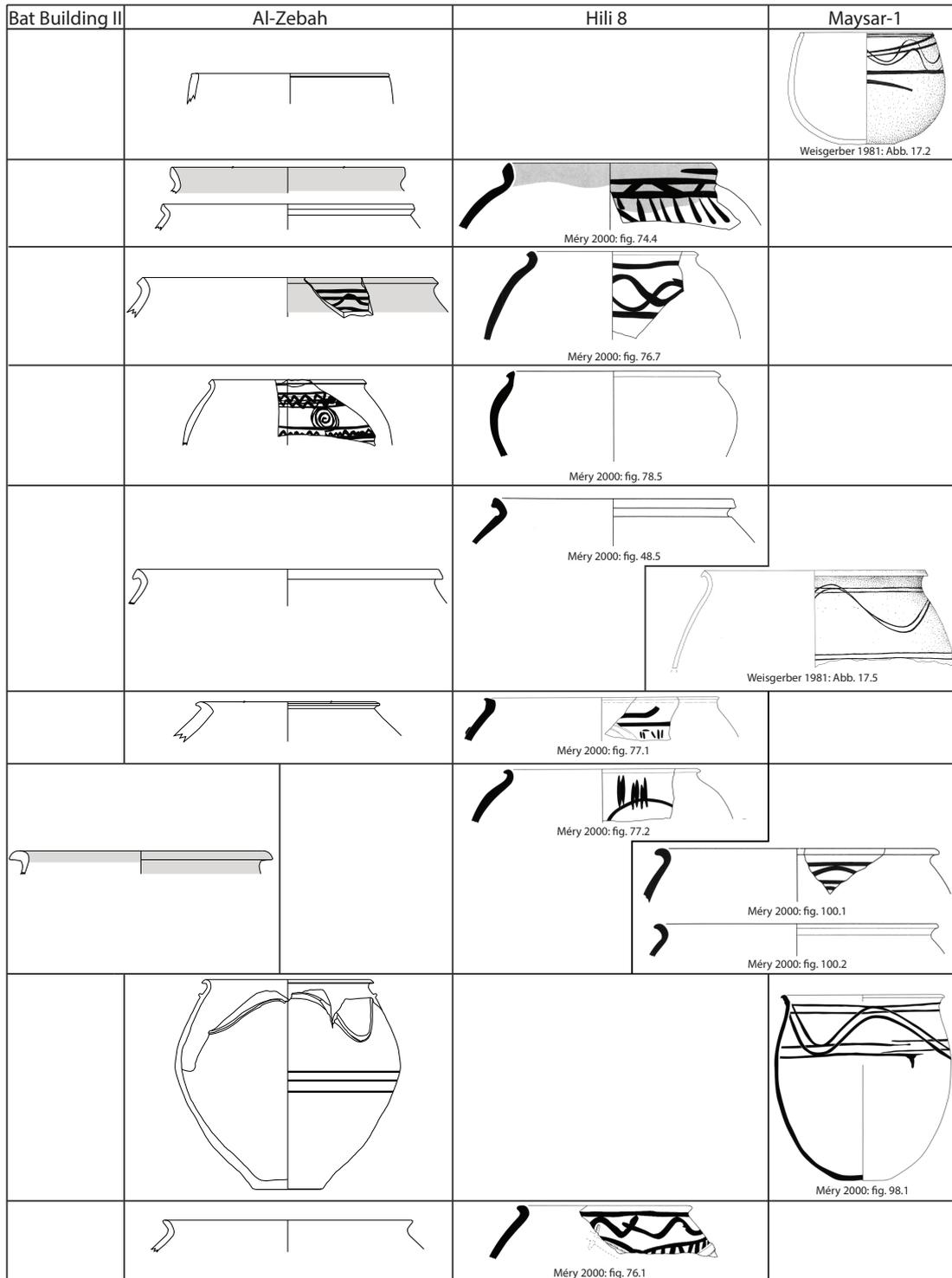


FIGURE 11. *A comparison of pottery shapes between Building II, al-Zībā, Hili 8, and in the settlement of Maysar-1.*

but account for the assemblages as a whole. In addition, there is generally a rather limited range of shapes and decoration patterns present at all sites. The close parallels between the sites that lie several hundred kilometres apart and the limited range of shapes and decoration patterns are rather surprising, as such uniformity is normally not found in prehistoric societies that are not controlled by a strong centralized power (Müller-Karpe 1988: 14; Gates 2001: 141; Pfälzner 1995: 262). This leads to the important question, how can both phenomena occur over a large area without a centralized power — for which there is no evidence in third-millennium eastern Arabia — to control production? The most likely explanation is that pottery was not produced individually by each household or community but rather centrally at one or several sites. From these production centres the pottery was then distributed throughout the region. Such a distribution even over great distances is conceivable in a mobile society that covers great distances in the course of year-round migration. People in the Umm an-Nar

period moved around the region, from summer to winter camps, and to sites with specialized functions, such as necropoleis, pottery and copper workshops, and towers (although their specific function is still elusive).

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