

The reuse of tombs in the necropolis of Bat, Sultanate of Oman

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Summary

The reuse of Umm an-Nar tombs in later periods on the Oman peninsula is an often neglected phenomenon. Within the scope of this paper, the results from the excavation conducted by the University of Tübingen of two Umm an-Nar tombs in the necropolis of Bat, Sultanate of Oman — Tomb 155 and Tomb 156 — will be presented. In these two tombs, we find clear evidence for their reuse in the Iron Age. In addition, indications for the reuse of other tombs within the necropolis, excavated by the German Mining Museum Bochum and by the Danish expedition in the 1970s — Tombs 154, 401, 402, 403, 1142, and 1143 — will also be discussed. Together they give a broad picture of the different kinds of Iron Age reuse in the necropolis of Bat, consisting of individual inhumations within the Umm an-Nar tombs, the creation of new Iron Age tombs in the direct vicinity of the Umm an-Nar tombs and the reuse of their building materials, and scattered stray finds dating to later periods in the debris of the Umm an-Nar tombs. Finally, I will attempt to link the reuse of Umm an-Nar tombs to practices connected to collective memory.

Keywords: collective memory, reuse of Umm an-Nar tombs, Late Iron Age, Bat, Oman peninsula

Location

Bat (Bāt) is situated at the south-western fringe of the Jabal al-Akhdar, the main mountain range in the north of the Sultanate of Oman, about 25 km to the east of the modern town of Ibri. The site comprises a large necropolis with several hundred Hafit and Umm an-Nar tombs, at least seven Umm an-Nar towers to the south-west of the necropolis in the area of the modern oasis of Bat, and some scarce settlement remains along the so-called settlement slope. Better-preserved domestic architecture can be found at the site of al-Zebah (al-Zībā) 7 km to the north-west of Bat at Wadi Shwoi'ai (Wādī Shuwā'ī).

Research history

The first archaeological research conducted at Bat was undertaken by a Danish team under the direction of Karen Frifelt in 1972. Besides her investigations into some of the Umm an-Nar towers and the so-called settlement slope, Frifelt excavated four tombs in the necropolis in the following years (1975). These are the Hafit tombs 1137 and 1138 and the Umm an-Nar tombs 1142 and 1143.¹ Between 2004 and 2008, a team from the German Mining Museum, led by the late Gerd Weisgerber, investigated and partly reconstructed nine other tombs

in the necropolis in various states of preservation. Among them were Tombs 154 and 401–403 (Böhme & Ali Al-Sabri 2011; Böhme, Heckes & Weisgerber 2008; Weisgerber 2006; Weisgerber, Böhme & Heckes 2007). Since 2007 an American team under the direction of the late Gregory Possehl of the University of Pennsylvania, has investigated several of the towers at Bat and its immediate vicinity (Cable & Thornton 2012; Thornton, Cable & Possehl 2012). This project continues as an American-Japanese cooperation directed by Christopher Thornton, Yasuhisa Kondo, and Charlotte Cable since 2012.

In the spring of 2010 Conrad Schmidt of the University of Tübingen initiated a new archaeological research project. It has so far focused on the investigation of Umm an-Nar tombs and burial pits in the necropolis of Bat, of a double round structure to the south of it, and of the Umm an-Nar settlement of al-Zebah (Döpper & Schmidt 2014).

The burial pits Inst. 0006 and Inst. 0025

Between 2010 and 2013, the team from the University of Tübingen excavated two Umm an-Nar tombs, Tombs 155 and 156, from an ensemble of three such tombs in the centre of the necropolis of Bat along with two burial pits, Inst. 0006 and Inst. 0025 (Fig. 1). The two shallow pits are oval in shape and lie close to the entrances of Tombs 155 and 154 respectively and are dug into the natural gravel. Pit Inst. 0006 measures 4.00 x 3.60 m and is up to

¹ They correspond to tombs 601, 602, 132, and 112 according to the numbering in Weisgerber's surveys.

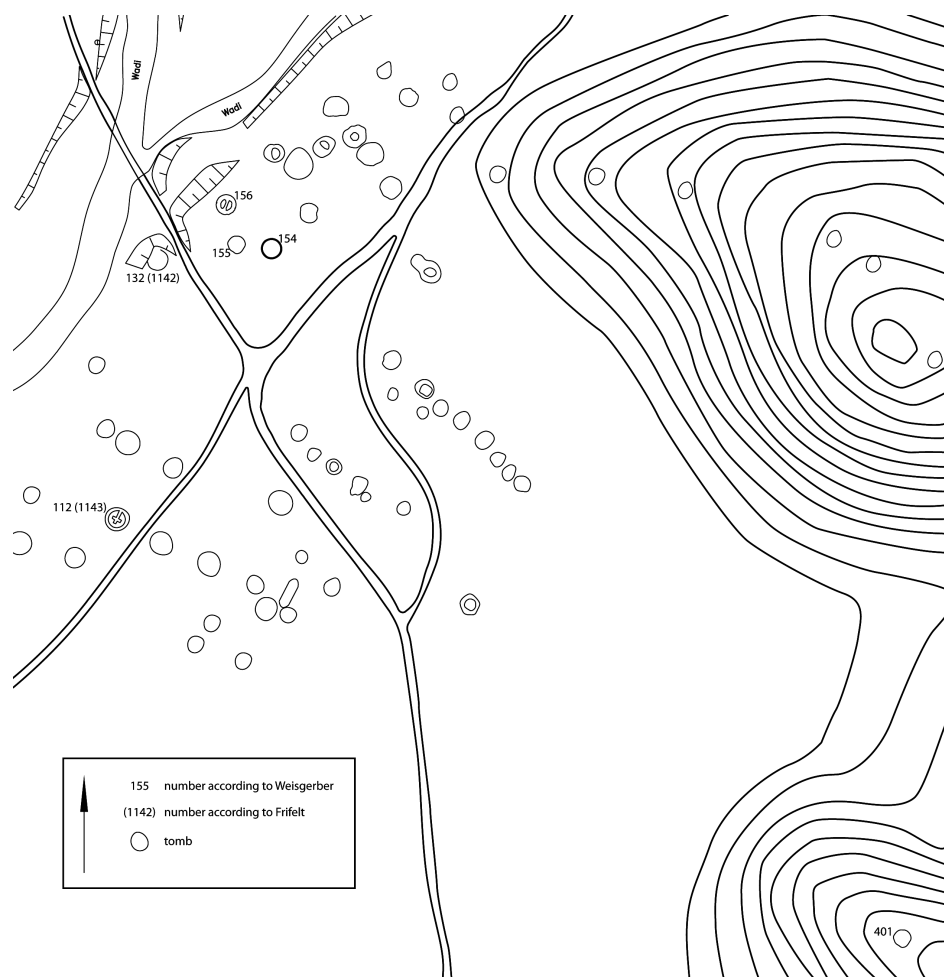


FIGURE 1. *A map of the core area of the necropolis of Bat with the tombs mentioned in the text. Numbers are according to Weisgerber, numbers in brackets according to Frifelt.*

0.74 m deep. Pit Inst. 0025 measures 3.70 x 3.20 m and has a depth of up to 0.60 m. Fragmented human bones of a large number of individuals provide the majority of the finds from both pits. They were, for the most part, not in anatomical order, indicating that they were placed here as secondary burials. As their primary burial places were most likely the large stone-built tombs close by, their relocation into the burial pits is probably the result of a need to create space for new burials within the tombs.

Among the other objects from the two burial pits are many small, complete, typical local Umm an-Nar pottery jars with geometric black on red decoration as well as incised grey ware pottery imported from what is now

Iran. Special finds include bleached carnelian beads, a flat silver bead with midrib string-hole, which is a very distinct third-millennium BC type, which stretches from the Mediterranean to the Indus, a fragment of an ivory comb with dot-in-circle decoration, and a unique cylinder seal most likely depicting an agricultural scene with two animals in front of a plough (Schmidt & Döpper 2014: 210, fig. 12). All finds date exclusively to the Umm an-Nar period. They most probably represent the grave inventory, which at a certain point had been moved together with the human remains from the tombs close to the pits.

Tomb 155

The excavation of Tomb 155 began in 2012 and was completed in 2013 (Fig. 2). It is one of an ensemble of three Umm an-Nar tombs in the core area of the necropolis, which are Tombs 154, 155, and 156. Tomb 155 is a round burial structure with an outer diameter of 6.5 m. It is separated into two roughly equal large chambers by a central wall. This wall spans about half the diameter of the tomb leaving the inside space, where the entrance is located, free and giving it a very typical layout for an Umm an-Nar tomb. The only entrance to the tomb is opposite the small end of this inner wall and faces west. Originally, the tomb had a facade of white limestones, so-called ‘sugar lumps’, of which only a few have survived. The tomb is paved with large, flat undressed stones, and among them are some white stones that are normally used for the facade. They were obviously reused here as spoil, probably taken from one of the other tombs such as the nearby Tomb 154.

At the beginning of the excavation in 2012, the tomb was filled with fine, wind-blown earth and stone debris from the surrounding walls. The fill yielded many finds,

among them a few very fragmented human bones in a bad state of preservation, especially in the lower part of the southern chamber, pottery sherds, chlorite vessels, and more than 500 beads, including a long biconical carnelian bead from the Indus (Schmidt & Döpper 2014: 199, fig. 6).

In the southern chamber several stones are missing from the paving along the inner wall, leaving a gap of 1.60 x 1.00 m. Inside this gap, a complete skeleton in flexed position was found. The anthropologist Steve Zäuner determined its age to be 16 to 25 years and although the bones were in bad condition, there are some clues indicating that it might be a female individual. The skeleton is associated with metal objects including at least five iron arrowheads² and two bronze and iron plates connected by two pins,³ which might originally have belonged to the hilt plate of a dagger or similar (Fig. 3). Two of the arrowheads were found close to the feet of the skeleton, two more were positioned at its lower back, and the last one was lying in the area of the forearms. The hilt plate was discovered on the shoulder of the skeleton.

² BAT13A-i0436, BAT13A-i0437, BAT13A-i0549, BAT13A-i0561, and BAT13A-i0575.

³ BAT13A-i0566.

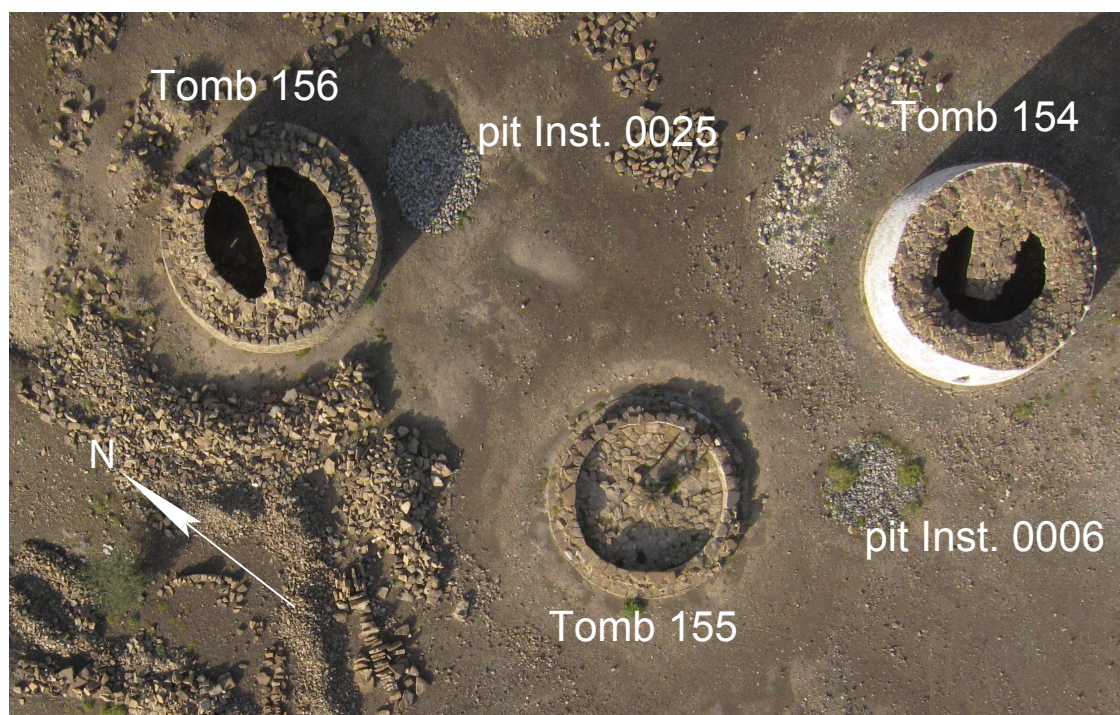


FIGURE 2. Ensemble of the three Umm an-Nar tombs 154, 155, and 156 and the two burial pits Inst. 0006 and Inst. 0025 (photograph GGH Solutions in Geosciences).

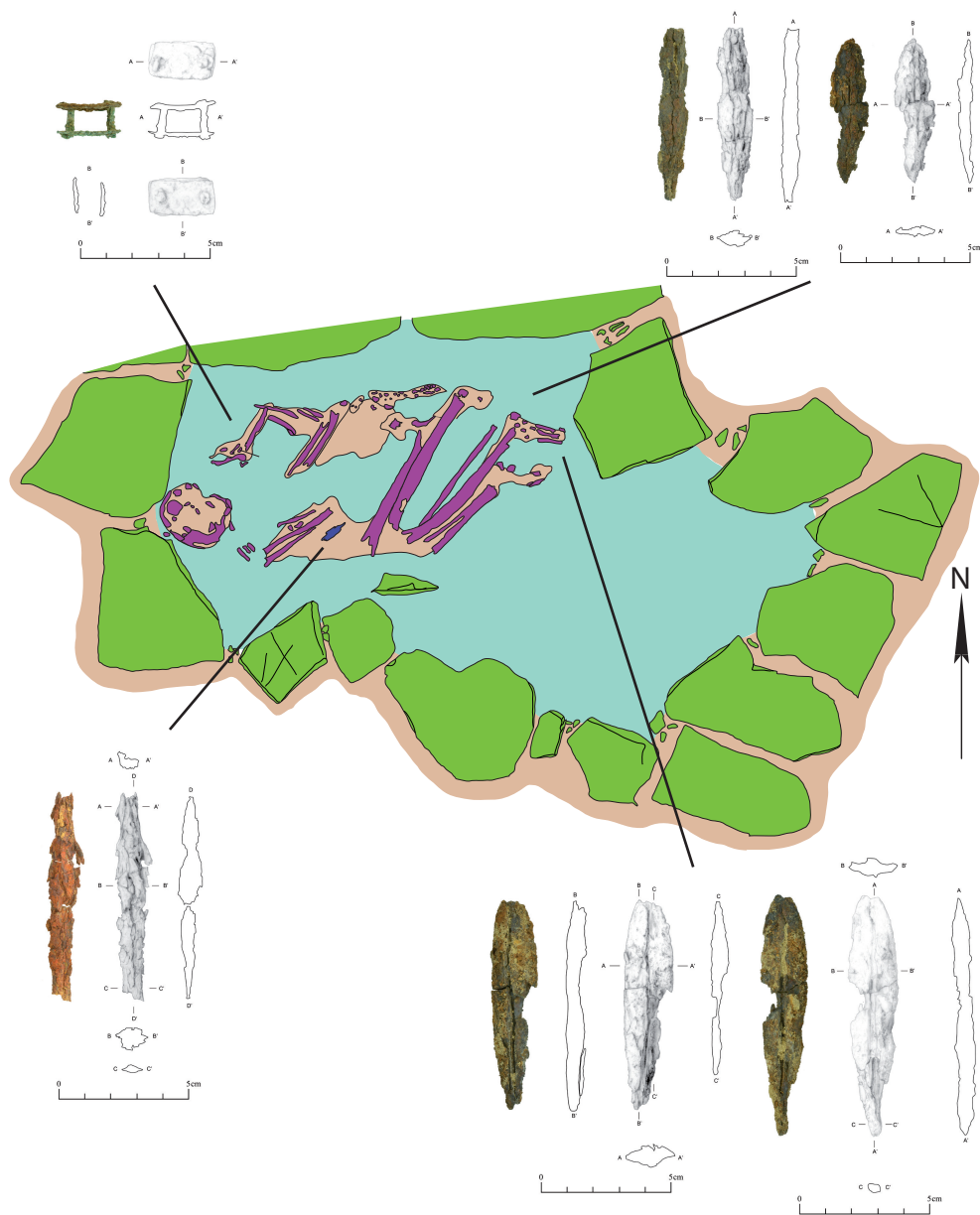


FIGURE 3. *The Late Iron Age burial in Tomb 155 with associated finds.*

The arrowheads resemble in their shape those from the beginning of the Samad period in central Oman (Yule 2014: 61 fig. 33/4). Thus, these grave-goods demonstrate that this burial does not belong to the original Umm an-Nār inventory of the tombs but to a later reuse of Tomb 155 during the Late Iron Age.

In the north-western part of the fill of the tomb, c.40 cm above floor level and therefore not in the direct vicinity of the skeleton, a handmade pottery jar, BAT12A-i0674, was found with an incised wavy line decoration (Fig. 4). The jar has a maximum diameter of 8 cm and is 7 cm high. It might be connected with the Late Iron Age burial

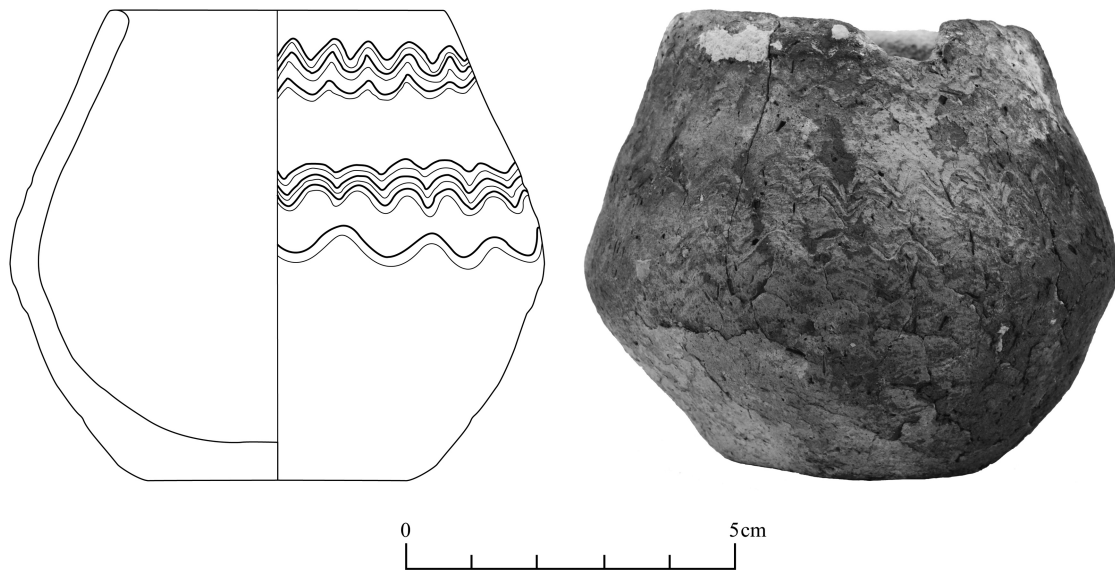


FIGURE 4. *The pottery jar BAT12A-i0674 from the fill of Tomb 155.*

in the southern chamber, as it certainly does not belong to the original use of the tomb in the Umm an-Nar period. Some other Iron Age finds were scattered in the fill as well as outside the tomb. Among them were fragments of steatite vessels and additional fragments of metal hilt plates, giving more evidence of reuse.

Tomb 156

In 2008, the German Mining Museum Bochum undertook restoration work on the Umm an-Nar Tomb 156 close to Tomb 155. The debris cone, which surrounded the tomb, was removed and the outer wall was refaced, but this restoration work did not affect the interior of the tomb. From 2010 to 2011 the new German mission of the University of Tübingen excavated the interior of Tomb 156 and removed the debris filling it (Döpper & Schmidt 2011: 305–311; Schmidt & Döpper 2014: 189–196). Tomb 156 has an outer diameter of 8.10 m and consists of two semi-circular chambers, Room A and Room B, which are separated from each other by an interior wall. Each chamber has its own entrance, one facing east, the other facing west. Unlike Tomb 155, Tomb 156 has a facade of brownish stones. Its floor, which is only partly preserved, is paved with large stone slabs, comparable to that of Tomb 155.

During the restoration work by the German Mining Museum Bochum, a skeleton was found on top of a

collapsed part of the exterior wall of Tomb 156 (Böhme, Heckes & Weisgerber 2008: 69) (Fig. 5). It was assigned the number 156W. Several metal objects were placed next to the skeleton as grave-goods including fragments of at least three — but most likely more — iron arrowheads and several bronze plates connected to each other with pins. They might again be interpreted as the hilt plates of weapons. According to the excavators, the badly preserved skeleton belongs to a male individual and is dated by its grave-goods to the Samad period in the Late Iron Age, similar to the one in Tomb 155. The photographs of the skeleton in the report of the German Mining Museum suggest that it was lying in a flexed position comparable to that of the Iron Age burial in Tomb 155. The similar grave-goods of both burials further underline the similarities between the two burials and suggest that they were both interred in the older tomb structures for similar reasons.

In front of the eastern entrance of Tomb 156, above the level of the Umm an-Nar burial pit Inst. 0025, a small assemblage of Iron Age pottery and burned animal bones from sheep or goat was found (Böhme, Heckes & Weisgerber 2008: 69).

In the interior of the tomb, which was excavated by the team from the University of Tübingen, only a few finds were recovered from the debris in chamber A, but with many more found in chamber B. The finds were scattered throughout the fill and included five copper and eight iron arrowheads, as well as many more iron fragments



FIGURE 5. *The Iron Age burial in Tomb 156 (photograph Manfred Böhme, German Mining Museum, Bochum).*

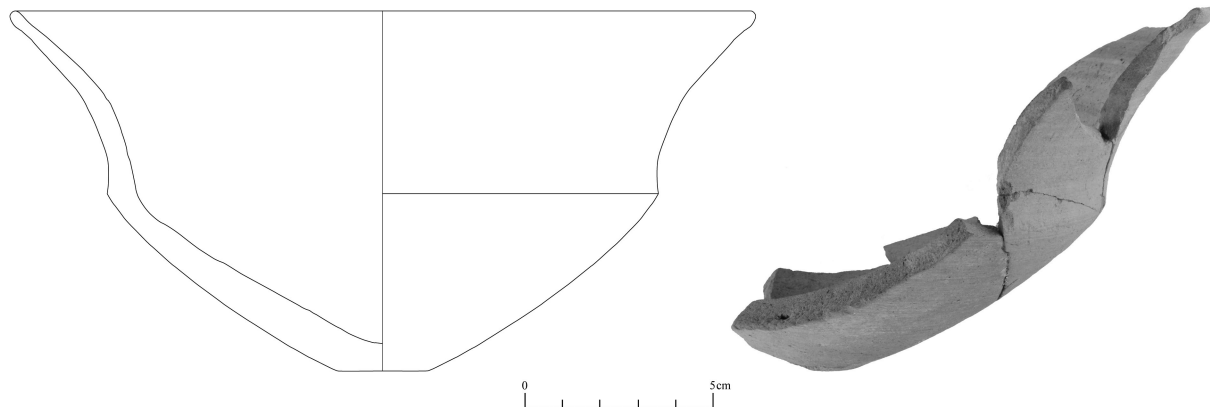


FIGURE 6. *The Achaemenid cream bowl BAT11A-i0744 from the fill of Tomb 156.*

that might belong to arrowheads as well, but they were too corroded to determine their original shape. The iron arrowheads are generally comparable to those from the two Late Iron Age burial discussed previously, while the copper arrowheads are akin to those from the Late Iron Age from Samad (Yule 2014: 41 fig. 17/29). The fill also contained bronze and iron hilt plate fragments, which bear a resemblance to those from the two burials. The pottery from chamber B of Tomb 156 is predominantly

very coarsely minerally tempered, thick walled, and often handmade. A more elaborate pottery type found within the tomb is a carinated bowl of a beige-coloured, sand tempered ware, which is a so-called Achaemenid cream bowl or a local imitation of it (cf. e.g. Lamberg-Karlovsky 1970: 26, fig. 8E; Potts et al. 2009: 271, pl. 13, QKC 1172; Stronach 1978: 242, fig. 106/13) (Fig. 6).⁴ Similar

⁴ BAT11A-i0744.

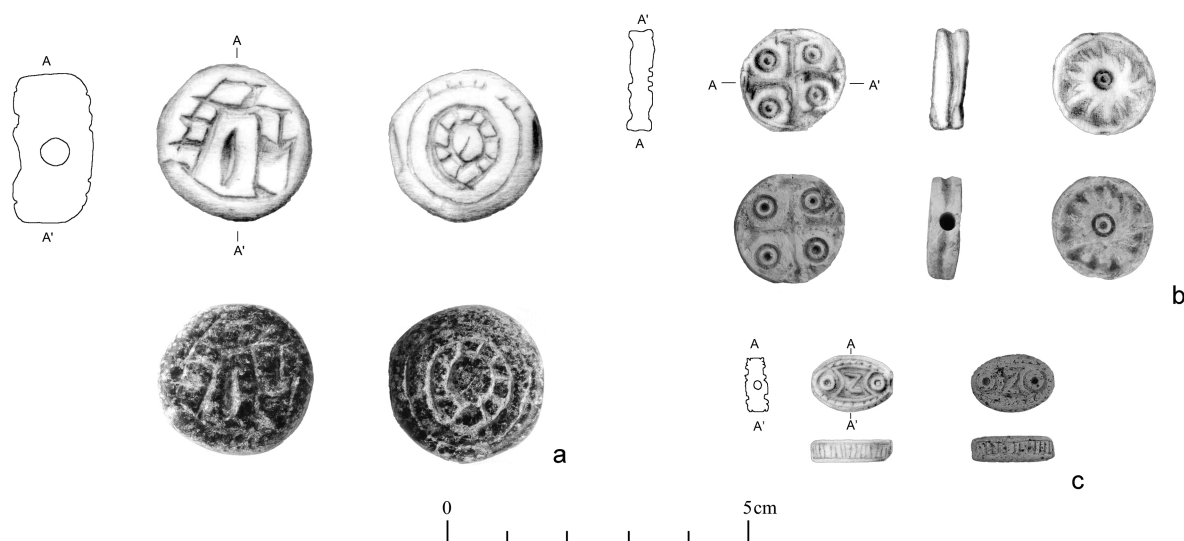


FIGURE 7. Beads: a. BAT11A-i0633; b. BAT11A-i0486; c. BAT10A-i0178 from the fill of Tomb 156.

bowls have been found at other Iron Ages sites on the Oman peninsula, such as Rumaylah (Iamoni 2009: 224, fig. 1/1; Tosi & Cleuziou 2007: 297, fig. 320/9–10) and date to the Early Iron Age III or the beginning of the Late Iron Age. Several chlorite bowls with rather carelessly applied decoration of vertical lines between horizontal ones also originate from Tomb 156 (Döpper & Schmidt 2014). As sketchy incisions are taken to be diagnostic of Early Iron Age III (Yule 2014: 39), most of the chlorite vessels from Tomb 156 should date within this period. In addition, many beads were also found in the fill. While the beads from chamber A mostly belong to the Umm an-Nar period, chamber B yielded some elaborate versions from earlier periods. These are an ellipsoid bead with incised decoration⁵ (Fig. 7/c), a round stone bead with incised dot-in-circles⁶ (Fig. 7/b), which is comparable to a Wadi Suq period bead from Shimal and Failaka (Vogt & Franke-Vogt 1987: fig. 48/15–16), and another round bead of black stone⁷ (Fig. 7/a). The latter bears a pattern of concentric circles on one side and a figurative design on the other, which might be interpreted as an architectural element. It has close parallels to a pendant from an Iron Age context in Tell Abraq (Potts 1991: 98 figs 142–143). Although the finds were found loose in the fill, some of them might be associated with the Late

Iron Age burial found by the German Mining Museum Bochum, as they mostly seem to be of a comparable time range. They certainly do not belong to the original use of the tomb in the Umm an-Nar period and thus clearly indicate its reuse.

Tomb 154

Besides the two clear examples for Iron Age reuse of Umm an-Nar tombs in the necropolis of Bat in Tombs 155 and 156, more clues of reuse can be found in the other excavations by the team from the German Mining Museum Bochum. The Umm an-Nar Tomb 154, which is located close to Tombs 155 and 156 (see Fig. 2), has a very similar layout to that of Tomb 155 with a diameter of 8.8 m, an inner dividing wall, and a facade of white limestones (Böhme 2012). The fill of the tomb produced a wealth of Umm an-Nar period finds including typical black-on-red pottery and numerous beads. Manfred Böhme also writes that there were finds from the Wadi Suq period inside the tomb and that Iron Age burials were interred when the monument was already a ruin (2012: 116–117), but no further details of these burials were given. Böhme believes that hearths found beside and in front of the tomb's entrance can be connected with later activities such as the Iron Age burials (2012: 118). The latter gives an interesting comparison with Tomb 156. Generally, the filling had for the most part a mix of Umm an-Nar and Iron Age finds (Weisgerber 2007:

⁵ BAT10A-i0178.

⁶ BAT11A-i0486.

⁷ BAT11A-i0633.

6). Among the Iron Age objects from the fill inside and surrounding the tomb are iron arrowheads, coarsely minerally tempered pottery, and chlorite vessels with incised vertical lines comparable to those from Tombs 155 and 156 (Böhme, Heckes & Weisgerber 2008: 30).

Tombs 401, 402, and 403

Another tomb excavated by the team from the German Mining Museum Bochum between 2004 and 2006 is the Umm an-Nar Tomb 401. This tomb lies to the east of the centre of the necropolis of Bat, on the slope of a hill about 18 m above the surrounding landscape (Böhme & Ali Al-Sabri 2011: 113) (see Fig. 1). The tomb has an outer diameter of 7.45 m, a facade of white limestone, a floor paved with stone slabs, and an inner dividing wall (2011: 114–115), giving it overall a very similar layout to that of Tombs 154 and 155. According to its excavator, Manfred Böhme, this tomb did not show any signs of reuse after a longer break, as the pottery assemblage is exclusively of Umm an-Nar date, but some parts of the stone floor are missing as in Tomb 155. Böhme interprets this as a later removal, which could have been connected with later burials (2011: 119).

In addition, two Iron Age hut-graves, Tomb 402 and 403, were found immediately to the west and to the south of the tomb (2011: 114, 136 and fig. 9). In their orientation, they clearly relate to the Umm an-Nar Tomb 401. Tomb 402 consists of two agglutinated chambers and Tomb 403 of four such chambers. The stones used for their construction come from the Umm an-Nar Tomb 401 and possibly also from the Hafit tombs in the surrounding area (2011: 152). Unfortunately, no finds could be made within the Iron Age tombs and only a few pottery sherds and chlorite vessel fragments which might belong to the original inventory of these tombs were found on the surface of the slope of the hill (2011: 152, fig. 21/148). This reuse obviously differs from that of Tombs 155 and 156, where the burials were interred directly in the Umm an-Nar tomb. Here, the stones from the Umm an-Nar Tomb 401 were used to create new Iron Age burial structures, which were placed very close to the Umm an-Nar tomb and thus stand in a clear relationship to it.

Excavations by Karen Frifelt

When the Danish expedition, under the direction of Karen Frifelt, excavated two Umm an-Nar tombs south of the core area of the necropolis of Bat — Tombs 1142 and 1143 in her numbering — it found, besides the

typical third-millennium inventory consisting primarily of black-on-red pottery, incised grey ware, and painted grey ware (1975: 386–387), some objects of a later date that Frifelt calls intrusive. They consist of a chlorite vessel fragment belonging to the Wadi Suq period and a rim-spouted bowl made of a coarsely minerally tempered — probably Iron Age — ware (1975: 389). Although these are only stray finds, they might also be connected with some form of reuse of these tombs after the Umm an-Nar period.

Reuse of tombs and collective memory

As we have seen, Iron Age reuse of Umm an-Nar tombs in the necropolis of Bat is by no means rare. On the contrary, most of the third-millennium BC excavated tombs demonstrate some form of reuse. Either Late Iron Age burials were directly interred in the Umm an-Nar structures as in the case of Tombs 154, 155, and 156, or the stones from the Umm an-Nar tombs were used to build Iron Age tombs in the immediate vicinity of a third-millennium tomb as seen at Tombs 401, 402, and 403. Stray finds from the Iron Age and other periods indicate further activities at the tombs after their original use as burial places in the Umm an-Nar period. This leads to the question, why did the Iron Age people decide to bury their deceased in or close to the Umm an-Nar tombs?

In the 1920s, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs suggested that all memories are influenced by social processes and that not only do individuals have individual memories, but social groups have collective memories (Halbwachs 1966; 1967). He further emphasized that collective memories always interact with spaces and that social groups, which dominate such a space, are at the same time influenced by it (Halbwachs 1967: 142). Jan Assmann, a German Egyptologist, similarly argued that aspects of collective memory are reflected in material remains such as pictures, buildings, monuments, settlements, and also in rituals and landscapes (Assmann 1988: 11). Thus, places can become sites of memories and in interacting with them, they can evoke memories in people (Wickholm 2008: 89). Halbwachs explains further that continuity is a key aspect in the practice of actions connected to collective memory (Halbwachs 1967: 157). Emphasizing continuity helps to maintain legitimation and underlines the fact that a group has kept its identity over time. The reuse of the Early Bronze Age tombs in Bat during the Iron Age can be interpreted as equivalent to, for example, Wickholm's analyses of the reuse of Finnish cremation cemeteries

(Wickholm 2008) or Artelius's work on reuse in Swedish prehistoric cemeteries, as these are places where present and past are bound together in a continuum (Thäte 2007: 82). Through rituals and other actions the collective memory of a group is jointly recalled by its members. The third-millennium BC Omani tombs would then have

functioned as a physical space, which helped to evoke such memories. As collective memories are a key aspect in shaping group identities, those reused tombs in the necropolis of Bat would have become the location where the group identity was stored and kept for the future (Wickholm 2008: 95).

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