

Survey and Excavations in Central Oman, 1974-75

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IN NOVEMBER, 1974, a small British Expedition visited Oman to carry out archaeological survey and excavation, a project made possible by a Fellowship from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and grants from the British Academy and the Society of Antiquaries of London. In Oman generous support was given by the Ministry of Information and Culture whose representatives, Mr. Ahmed Saif and Mr. Hamed Rashid, accompanied us in the field, and much assistance was afforded by the Sultan's Armed Forces and Petroleum Development (Oman), Ltd.

Initially, known sites were inspected in an area extending from Izki to Ibri to familiarise the team with field monuments recorded by previous missions, notably the Danish Archaeological Expedition of 1972/73 and the Harvard Survey, 1973. After this introductory briefing the Expedition visited parts of the Sharqiya where a number of 'beehive' tombs of possibly early third millennium date were found with other burials on ridges in the vicinity of al-Mudaibi and Aflaj al-Bedu. These tall, free-standing structures, built of two skins of flat stone masonry with a triangular entrance to the south, were similar to those recorded in a cemetery at Bat some 185 km. to the west. Later, probably first millennium B.C., burials consisting of flat stone structures laid out in long rows were noted in the Wadi Ghurayb and could be traced eastwards as far as Ja'alan. An apparently undisturbed necropolis near Qabil in the Wadi Bu Taymah comprising low profile cairns was chosen for investigation but extensive flooding as work was about to start made it necessary to postpone excavation for a future season. The area was of interest also by reason of a low gravel mound devoid of pottery but scattered with chert chippings and some artifacts including scrapers.

Reconnaissance extending westwards from Izki yielded three other sites where worked chert was plentiful. Two of them were located on ridges overlooking the Wadi Muqniyat and the Wadi al-Kabir, and the third lay on a gravel terrace at the foot of Jabal Kawr near Amlah in the Wadi al-'Ayn. A study of the surface collections from these sites is proceeding.

Oman is particularly rich in burial monuments and the survey yielded a large number of different types of cairns and tombs including examples of the distinctive ashlar-faced structures known in Abu Dhabi on the island of Umm an-Nar and at Hili in Buraimi. Similar tombs have recently been excavated by the Danish team at Bat to the east of Ibri and it was possible as a result of our survey to extend their distribution to al-Banah and Amlah where several were examined (see below).

Other monuments of particular interest were massive circular stone-walled enclosures of a type first noted by the Harvard Survey near Bisyah in the Wadi Bahla. At least ten of these structures were recorded during our survey: four near Bat, two at Firq and Rawdah, one just west of Bahla, and others at al-Banah and Khutm in the Wadi al-Hijr and at Amlah. These circular or oval structures appear to fall into three main categories: (1) circular boulder enclosures on level ground or built around rock outcrop;

(2) perimeter walling with traces of contained rectangular masonry; and (3) peripheral walling enclosing an inner ring-wall around a central mound or natural outcrop. The nature of these monuments has yet to be determined; some probably represent defensive structures while others may have had a religious purpose.

Our survey had shown a concentration of field monuments on the banks of the Wadi al'Ayn between the towering mass of Jabal Kawr and the village of Amlah and we accordingly established a camp in that area. The adjacent sites included funerary monuments, a settlement area, the stone foundations of large rectangular structures and a circular enclosure. Test excavations on the latter (Site 4) showed that the massive boulder wall (diam. 27 m.) enclosed an area which had been filled to a height of about three metres with earth, gravel and stone. No structural or occupational debris was found within the limited area trenched and although surface pottery was plentiful in the locality none was found in a stratigraphical context within the enclosure.

At least six funerary monuments lay between Site 4 and the wadi with some fifteen cairns on the two outcrops to the south. Site 1, a circular tomb (diam. 9.50 m.), proved to have been extensively denuded of stone and virtually all that remained were two courses of its outer wall, 2 m. thick, enclosing a cobbled floor which lay only 20 cm. below the surface. On this floor, however, and in the overlying debris was an assortment of familiar pottery. It included fine black-on-red ware, several bowls with pinched pouring lip, and part of a lattice-painted jar pierced for suspension at four points through both the cordoned shoulder and low foot-ring. Grey wares were of two varieties: incised and painted. The former comprised jars decorated either with chevrons or opposed hatched triangles, and cylindrical pots with slightly everted rims above zones of rather deeper incising combining fine cross-hatching, vertical dividers and the 'sagging lintel' motif. Painted grey ware was represented by fragments of several flat-based canisters with carinated shoulders.

As a whole this assemblage can be closely matched in the funerary wares from both Umm an-Nar and Hili and the grey wares in particular have a distribution extending across the Gulf. At Bampur in Iranian Baluchistan they occurred throughout Periods V and VI; to the north-east of Kerman they were present in the Shah-dad graves (Early Horizon) and at Shahr-i Sokhta in Seistan they are recorded in the destruction level of the Burned Palace in Period IV, a horizon dated to between 2000-1900 B.C.

In addition to pottery, Site 1 yielded part of a chlorite/steatite bowl with incised dot-in-circle motif, a type of decoration which at the south Iranian site of Tepe Yahya was restricted to Period IVa (personal communication from Professor C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky). Other finds included the base of a small white alabaster bowl, some fragments of shell, three small beads and part of a metal object, possibly a buckle or belt fastening.

Another tomb (Site 2), one in a group of four, also proved to have been badly robbed and very little of its structure had survived. Only a few potsherds were recovered but they included fragments comparable to the red ware of Site 1. The spoil thrown out by the robbers, however, contained a small rectangular chlorite box divided into two compartments and, like the Site 1 bowl, decorated with dot-in-circle motif. A box with similar decoration is known from an Umm an-Nar type burial at Hili; further afield compartmented boxes occurred in a late occupation level at Mohenjo-daro and in the cemetery at Mehri in Baluchistan which was probably contemporary with a late phase of the Kulli culture when Harappan influence was strong.

To the east of the tombs, a settlement area could be identified more readily by the extensive strew of potsherds than by the barely perceptible hillocks which possibly represent single homesteads. One of these, Site 3, comprised a low mound about a metre high with a diameter of 50 metres. A cobbled floor

lay just below the existing surface and was enclosed by an outer wall, 50 cm. thick, which had survived as only a single course. The combined effects of stone-robbing and erosion made it impossible to determine whether this wall had supported a stone, mudbrick or *barasti* structure.

The identification of Site 3 as a dwelling rather than a tomb rests largely on the absence of the grey funerary wares and the quantity of domestic pottery in the area. This included some material found also on Site 1, notably the suspension jar with painted lattice and it is of interest that our surface collection from a site (BB6) found by the Harvard Survey north of Bahla included a similar example together with pottery comparable to that of Site 3. The difference in character between the wares of Sites 3 and 1 probably reflects only the distinction between pottery intended for everyday use and that required as grave-goods. Dr. Karen Frifelt, who is currently working on the pottery from the settlement on Umm an-Nar, has kindly confirmed that the suspension vessel was common in both the graves and settlement of that culture and there, too, decorated pottery was less frequent in a domestic context.

A fifth site was examined west of the wadi where several other burials and a rectangular structure were discovered. Site 5 could be readily identified as a tomb of Umm an-Nar type by the distinctive ashlar masonry visible beneath its rubble covering. Clearance of a sector of this tomb showed that it consisted of a circular wall, 8.50 m. in diameter, which stood six courses high (1.50 m.) but lacked the plinth often present beneath Umm an-Nar structures. Robbers had disturbed the interior prizing up part of the flagged floor and it was impossible to determine whether the tomb had contained cross-walling but some evidence for its roofing was provided by several large flat slabs radiating into the tomb. A quantity of human bone was recovered together with part of a shallow chlorite bowl, a small carnelian bead and a couple of sherds. It is hoped that a C14 determination will give precision to the third millennium dating of this and the other sites at Amlah.

