The Archaeological Heritage of Oman

AT THE DAWN OF HISTORY

The Late Pre-Islamic Age in South-Eastern Arabia

PAUL A. YULE AND FAUSTO MAURO

Sultanate of Oman سلطنة عُمان
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Nomenclature, transcriptions and abbreviations

Artefact class nomenclature

The term 'artefact group' refers to the major artefact forms (arrowheads, bangles, swords *etc*.) which consist of the different artefact-classes (*e.g.* Swords S1) for the metals periods of south-eastern Arabia. Artefact-class abbreviations, conceived for computer storage first appeared in Yule and Weisgerber 2001 and Yule 2001. They are updated and anglicized from Yule and Weisgerber 2015a, again in Yule 2018b and yet again in Al-Jahwari *et al.* 2021: tab. 2, 257–71. At present, the find classes amount to 609 in number, and including 67 for beads total at 676. Only the late pre-Islamic artefact classes appear here. The contexts also are cited according to alpha-numeric codes (*e.g.* Al Fuwayda grave 15=Fu15). Those cited repetitively are described in Yule 1999a and 2001.

Place-name abbreviations

Abbreviated place-names according to the International Association for the Study of Arabia and the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft* (DIN norm 31635):

A	Al Akhdhar/al-Akhḍar
Ad	Adam/Ādam
Am	Al Amqat/al-ʿAmqāt
As	Asima/ʿAsīma
B	Bawshar/Bawshar
BJ	Bandar Jissa/Bandar Jiṣṣa
Bar1	Samail, Al Baruni/Samāʾil, Al-Bārūnī grave Bar1
Bi	Bilad Al Muaydin/Bilād al-Muʿaydin
Bid	Bidya/Bidya
Bis	Bisya/Bisya
Bit	Bithna/Bithna
Bhs	Al Buhais/al-Buḥayṣ
Bu	Al Bustan/al-Bustān
Di	Dibba/Dibbā
Du	Ed Dur/al-Dūr
Em	Jabal Emala/Jabal ʿEmāla
Fe	Al Feg/al-Feg
Fsh	Fashgha/Fashgha
Fu	Amla, Al Fuwayda/ʿAmlāʾ, al-Fuwayda
Ful	Al Fulayj/al-Fulayj
G	Ghalila/Ghalīla

Ghal	Jazirat Al Ghalla/Jazirat al-Ghalla
Ghan	Jazirat Umm Al Ghanam/Jazirat al-Ġanam
H	Hili/Hilī
Ha	Hafit/Ḥafīt
HDh	Hor Al Dhabʿ/ Ḥūr al-Ḍabʿ
Ib	Ibra/Ibrāʾ
Iz	Izki/Izkī
Ja	Jalaan/Jalān
KBD	Khadra Bani Dhafaa/Khaḍra Bani Daffāʿ
Kho	Khor Rori/Khawr Rūrī
Khob	Al Khobbar/al-Khobbar
M	Al Moyassar/al-Muyassar (previously al-Maysar)
Mai	Amla, Al Mais/ʿAmlāʾ, al-Mayṣ
Mah	Al Mahaliya/al-Maḥālīya
Mahu	Mahut/Maḥut
Maq	Al Maqniyat/al-Maqniyat
Mask	Al Muskute/al-Maskūta
Ml	Mleiha/al-Milayḥa
Mo	Mowayhat/Mowayhat
Mu	Muqatta/Al Muqatta
Mud	Mudhmar/Muḍmar
Mul	Al Multaqa/al-Multaqa
Mut	Muti/Mutī
N	Nizwa/Nizwā
Nej	Al Nejd/al-Nejd
NM	Negda Madira/Negdā Madira
QAN	Qasr Abu Nasr/Qasr-i ʿAbū Nasr
QS	Qaryat Al Saih/Qaryat al-Sayḥ
Ru	Rumeila/Rumayla
Rus	Al Rustaq/al-Rustāq
S	Samad Al Shan/Samad al-Shaʾn
Sa	Masira, Sachrut Al Hadri/Maṣīra, Sakhrut al-Ḥadrī
Saf	Yanqul, Al Safri/Yanqul, al-Safrī
Sah	Saham/al-Saḥam
Sal	Salut/Salūt
Se	Ibri, Selme/ʿIbrī, Selme
Sh	Shimal/Shimal
Shd	Saruq Al Hadid/Sārūq al-Ḥadīd
Sho	Dhank, Al Shokur/Ḍank, al-Shokur
Su	Suhar/Ṣuḥar
Sun	Jabal Al Sunsuna/Jabal al-Ṣunṣuna
Tw	Tiwi/Ṭīwī
UB	Uqdat Al Bakra/ʿUqdat al-Bakra

UR	Umq Al Rabakh/ʻUmq al-Rabakh
Wa	Wadi Suq/Wādī Sūq
Wab	Wab/Wa'b
Wad	Wadi Dura/Wādī Ḍura'
WBK	Wadi Bani Khalid/Wādī Banī Khālid

Other abbreviations

Ach	Achaemenid
alt	altitude
a.s.l.	above mean sea level
BA	Bronze Age
BMSW	Burnished Maroon Slip Ware
CA	correspondence analysis
cm	centimetre
CS	Wadi Andam survey (Al-Jahwari 2013)
DA	Department of Antiquities inventory number, Ministry of Heritage and Tourism
DAAA	Digital atlas of ancient Arabia https://ancientarabia.huma-num.fr/maps/index.html
DAI	Deutsches Archäologisches Institut
DBM	Deutsches Bergbau-Museum, Bochum
Diam	diameter
DOI	Digital Object Identifier
EIA	Early Iron Age
ETS	Eastern terra sigillata
g	gramme
h	height
ha	hectare
IA	Iron Age
IAB	Dhofar Iron Age B
IOM	Indian Ocean Monsoon
km	kilometre
l	length
LBA	Late Bronze Age
LIA	Late Iron Age
m	metre
MHT	Ministry of Heritage and Tourism
NSA	National Survey Authority (Oman)
nSLIA	non-Samad Late Iron Age
PIR	*Pré-islamique récent*
pr	preserved
SAA	Sharjah Archaeology Authority
Sas	Sasanian
SLIA	Samad Late Iron Age

SLIAn	Samad Late Iron Age, near
SQU	Sultan Qabus University
U	Umm an-Nar
UAE	United Arab Emirates
URL	uniform resource locator
Var	varia
Wa	Wadi Suq

Governorate nomenclature

The Sultanate's governorates can be referred to cardinally in reference to their Arabic names (Figure i). When below the authors refer *e.g.* to 'eastern Oman', this means the north and south Ash Sharqiyyah governorate, but the 'central Oman provinces' or 'core-Oman' refer alternatively to the central, north-western, north-eastern and eastern governorates. Corresponding to Arabic usage, this alternative nomenclature is readily understandable. The term 'Oman Peninsula' has two meanings: 1) all of south-eastern Arabia, 2) the northern tip of south-eastern Arabia into the Hormuz straits, as below.

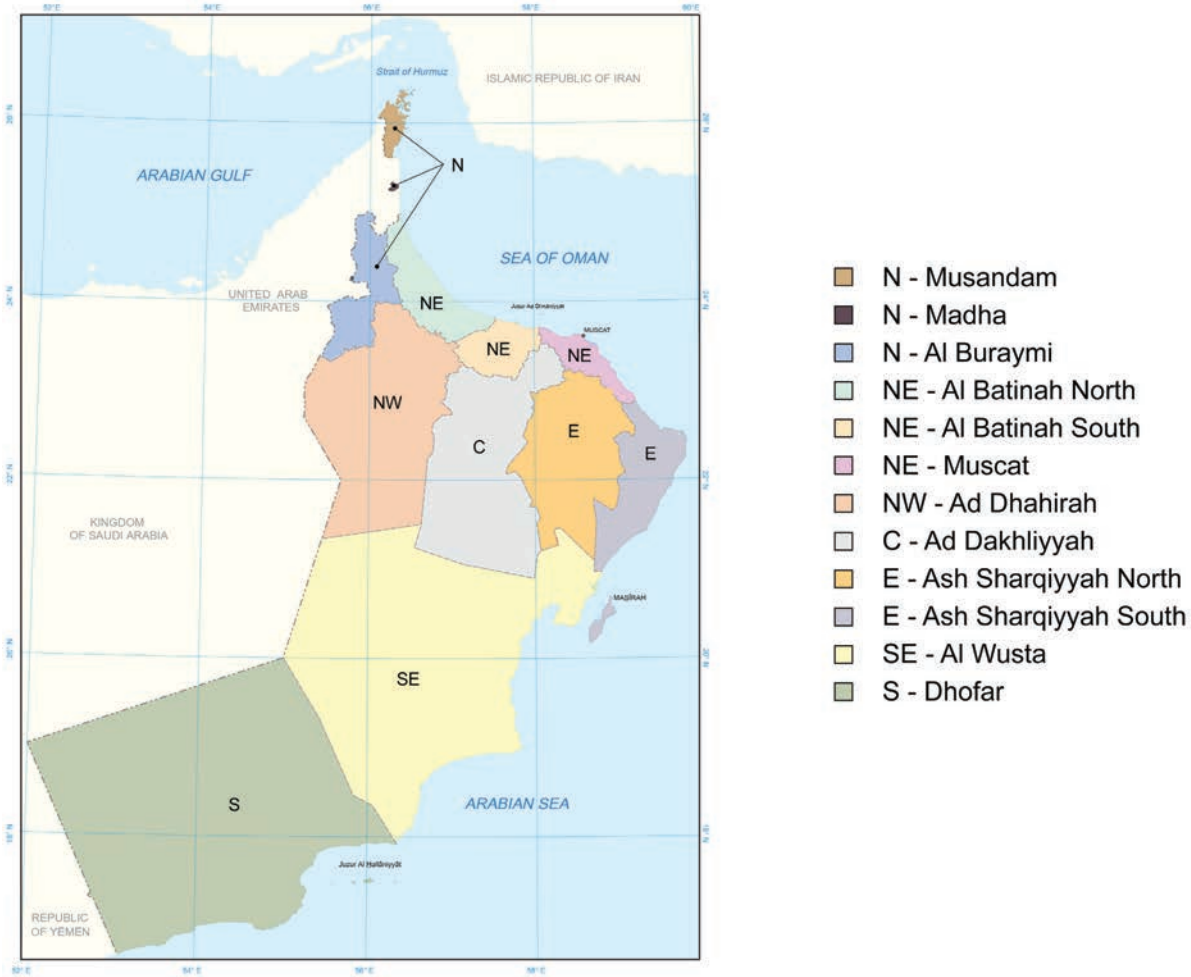

Figure i. The names of the governorates of the Sultanate equate to the cardinal points.

Introduction

By the 4th century BCE in south-eastern Arabia the wide distribution of Early Iron Age (EIA) sites had declined drastically. Whether or not during prolonged erratic dry spells, at this time two interrelated causes impact the ancient world from Macedonia to the Indus plain: the worldwide conquests of Alexander III – the Great – and the collapse of the Achaemenid empire. The following survey focusses on the Samad Late Iron Age (SLIA) *i.e.* on the archaeology during the centuries flanking the year 0, mostly in the eastern, marginally in the neighbouring governorates of the Sultanate ‑ whose sandy and rocky expanses have inspired European-written travelogues and even films. While colleagues may conflate the term 'Iron Age' for the late 2nd millennium BCE to the 3th century CE, the following distinguishes Early and Late Iron Ages for Oman. SLIA sites lie between 22°30' and 23°30' latitude; those of the Mleiha or *Pré-islamique récent* (PIR) lie further north, mostly between 24° and 26°30'.

Archaeologists of south-eastern Arabia prefer Bronze Age sites and ancient trade for their research, after which in terms of the number of publications the late period trails in popularity. This preference results from lying thematically outside Ancient Near Eastern and Classical Archaeology, having few if any indigenous written sources. The popular image of Arabia as dreary deserts populated by stray nomads also serves to marginalise its study (Magee 2014: 1, 14 quoting Sayce 1889: 406). Often, the SLIA is relegated in passing to casual mentions of secondary burials salvaged from non-descript, 'cairns'. This relativizes the importance of this period/assemblage by encapsulating it in what amounts to discussions of purported 'main' periods. In this double helix value system, a lack of data potentiates a lack of interest.

At the outset, what does the designation 'late pre-Islamic' entail? In terms of the number of contexts and finds, the SLIA *per se*, which in Oman is the most conspicuous assemblage of this period, shows no clear indication for the use of writing, as opposed to the PIR which evidences coin inscriptions and even monumental 'Omani *musnad*' inscriptions in stone. This makes the first assemblage prehistoric, but the second historic. Paradoxical is that while the SLIA is represented by several sites and finds, even basic features such as population and economy remain obscure, owing to the spotty nature of the research. The sites at Al Fuwayda, Al Safri, Salut SLP and Al Shokur are related archaeologically speaking with the SLIA as known at its type-site, but also differ from it significantly. They form a third assemblage. The roughly contemporary triliths comprise the fourth regional assemblage. Our emphasis lies on the late pre-Islamic period, to a lesser extent that of the UAE and far less to Oman's southern governorate, Dhofar – the latter with its own archaeological sequence. The topic of triliths, which since 2020 received innovative and thorough treatment in the dissertation of R. Garba, also lies outside of our emphasis.

Typically, SLIA graves contain iron weapons, and mostly a handmade pottery with a limited repertory of shapes, impressed decoration and fabrics, which coincide to some degree with those of the Mleiha facies. However, given their intimate closeness, we need to discuss both together to get the full picture. In recent years, field study at Mleiha and Dibba has illuminated their phases and the term "Mleiha period" has come about to more clearly express Mleiha's representative role and a partial re-definition of the relative and absolute chronologies (Haerinck *et al.* 2021: table on p. 2).

The terms 'Arsacid', 'Hellenistic', 'Parthian', 'Roman' and 'Sasanian' appear below where in south-eastern Arabia they plausibly reflect the presence of these periods/assemblages in a closer sense. These are not just the result of stray export articles. 'Roman' is a term used in a narrow sense (respectively 100 BCE–200 CE), as opposed to early and late Roman (respectively 700 BCE–476 CE), which excludes a 'Hellenistic/Parthian' period for south-eastern Arabia. Further regarding nomenclature, whereas 72 years ago in the first edition of his classic, *Arab seafaring*, Hourani held that, 'In the pre-Islamic period all Arabs were Arabians…and all Arabians were Arabs' (1995: 3n1), today this no longer rings true. The Arabs are late-comers to south-eastern Arabia and indigenous groups such as the Mahra spoke and speak their own language. Since the 1980s, emirates sites Al Khatt and Kush have been the main regional sources for the Sasanian period. Ongoing research also has made this period in Oman more tangible than previously with the new excavation of the Sasanian fortlet in Fulayj. But this later segment of the pre-Islamic period also postdates our main topic.

The following book emerges from a vetted *Habilitationsschrift* and a MA dissertation with different intentions and ranges. The latter of F. Mauro lends our study a measure of reliability and thoroughness it might otherwise not have, owing to its detailed involvement with the PIR. As new archaeological sites accumulate, our understanding of the late pre-Islamic period continues to evolve, requiring time to overcome the inertia of cumbersome archaeological publication and discussion.

Just prior to his death in 2016, Haerinck referred to Ed Dur as, '…a "single period" site since there is little stratigraphy and its occupation dates from a culturally uniform period…' (2021: 1). The assumed homogeneity of the combined late pre-Islamic assemblages will be questioned below. Interfacing closely with the PIR, our book-architecture contrasts previous iterations on this topic, the last major one being Yule 2016. Newly reported finds show that late pre-Islamic archaeological facies in this region are more complex than just lapidarily Mleiha and the SLIA, as previously represented.

Because it is written in German, few have read the report of 2001 of the multi-period cemeteries at Samad, which requires updating: Below, a clearer depiction of the SLIA pottery updates the relation between vessel shape, decoration and fabric. Attributes of the SLIA pottery need to be immediately understandable without paging back and forth in order to combine disparate basic data, as in the original site report. The depiction of the seriation of the SLIA contexts and find classes is also re-focussed. In the archaeological literature obsolete research results persist shoulder to shoulder beside new findings as if still equally valid – the discussion culture for this period being meagre and focussed on other periods. The present study compensates by citing disparate writers and is aided by diligent networking.

In different ways our new book is a risky undertaking. We strive for a well-founded, illustrated account which will appeal to the public, be reader-friendly and include the necessary data. For some it will be too academic, for others too superficial. A balance between readability and comprehensiveness requires all manner of compromises as not to lapse into extraneous topics, especially the archaeology of preceding periods.

The general lack of understanding of basic aspects of the SLIA has resulted in the uncritical acceptance of and generalization from the available information and island-solution nomenclature for south-eastern Arabia - the newest addition to ancient Near Eastern archaeology. Readers hoping for information on this period may find a few choice nuggets buried in a welter of redundant and unfocussed background information. At this formative stage, upper and mid-Gulf-based archaeologists may still apply their chronologies, conclusions and nomenclature to all of south-eastern Arabia (Schreiber 2007: 64). In a relatively young, little-researched field like ours, nomenclature coins basic comprehension and suggests ranking importance as well as interpretation nuances. The terms 'PIR' and 'Samad' originated to avoid

Figure ii. Aerial view of the SLIA fortlet Al Muyassar M34.

ethnic associations implicit in period designations for Oman such as 'Parthian' and 'Hellenistic', hallowed by decades for Mesopotamian centres which overshadow emerging Arabian ones (Weisgerber 1982: 82). Applied to south-eastern Arabia, as research developed the latter became anachronistic misnomers analogous to 'lead' pencils, 'tin' foil, 'blackboards', which today exist in different colours, the 'dialling' of telephone numbers, although rotary dialling is out of use (Wikipedia 'misnomer'). While at first, such distinctions may seem contentious, in fact, they distract from an understanding of real Seleucid-Parthian contexts and finds. Countering centripetal tendencies resulting from individual scholars fixed on their own sites, the present authors strive for a generally accepted nomenclature and definitions for aspects including the chronology.

The SLIA deserves to be treated in greater depth than in Yule 2001 (Potts 2002: 645), conceived to distinguish the different assemblages. The emphasis below on the SLIA is a natural development alternative to the multi-period approach common to most field reports on south-eastern Arabia. It should be obvious that the extant artefact classes and sites need not be wholly representative.

Arabic speakers themselves, including archaeologists, even with a good knowledge of a European language, can only understand romanised Arabic with difficulty (Serjeant 1951: xii–xiii). This tends to remove dialectical studies from their notice. Place-names and personal names appear in the text Anglicised in the simplified form they appear in the archaeological literature.