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Source: *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Vol. 31, Papers from the thirty-fourth meeting of the Seminar for Arabian Studies held in London, 20-22 July 2000 (2001), pp. 15-22

Published by: [Archaeopress](#)

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Al-Fueda near Amla, Sultanate of Oman

Charlotte Bank & Paul Yule

Introduction

The site of al-Fueda is situated 1 km to the east of the village center of Amlah and 2 km to the west of the foot of Jabal Qawr at N23°07'/E56°54' mostly on the ground belonging to one Suleiman b. Aisa b. Amar al-Hinai. Eighteen of the twenty-five graves excavated were situated here, a further five were located 150 m to the northeast on the Qurain ar-Rusa and two more 350 m to the south-east in the Wadi al-Mais. The excavated graves do not represent the entire grave field; it extends further to the south-east (Fig. 1).

At the beginning of the study of the site of al-Fueda stand, as so often, several finds made by a local citizen. In 1990 the Department of Antiquities of the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture received a collection of iron weapons: swords, daggers and arrowheads. An added note defined the finds as gravefinds of the Bat region, near Ibri. In 1996 Paul Yule, who also directed the excavation work the following year, contacted the *wali* in Ibri to learn more about the find circumstances and was led to the finder. Subsequently the site was found interesting enough for further study and thanks to a number of sponsors a season of field work was made possible.¹

The period we call Late Pre-Islamic comprises the centuries from the end of the Early Iron Age until the arrival of Islam in the Sultanate. Not much is known of this period, some scarce notes on the Arabian Peninsula are to be found in classical sources, they remain few and are not very well founded, but rely largely on hearsay. Archaeological

investigation has mostly concentrated on the earlier periods, so material remains scarce. For the later periods the idea was of a 'Hellenistic-Parthian-Sasanian' Oman, but it has long been clear that this has to be revised (Vogt 1984: 278; Yule & Kazenwadel 1987: 252). Politically, pre-Islamic Oman might be described as a state tributary of the Parthian and Sasanian states with an Arabic-speaking population and strong local traditions.

So far two distinct cultural complexes have been defined during the Late Iron Age or Late Pre-Islamic Period: The NLPC (Northern Late Pre-Islamic Culture) or PIR culture, known mainly from the sites of Mleiha and ad-Dur in the modern UAE (Mouton 1992) and the Samad Culture, known from the large cemeteries of Samad ash-Shan and al-Maysar in the Sultanate of Oman. The connection between the two cultures or in what way they were set apart and bordered on each other has so far not been studied, the material being very new.

The graves

The graves of al-Fueda represent a homogeneous unity of form, architecture and finds and can all be assigned to the Late Pre-Islamic Period.

They show oblong, rectangular subterranean grave chambers in some ways similar to those of the Samad culture constructed of large quarry stones in dry masonry (Fig. 2). The walls of the chamber are formed by vertical orthostats. The roof is made up of large, flat stones that rest on support stones and are balanced by cantilever stones. The stones used all seem to have been collected for the purpose in the

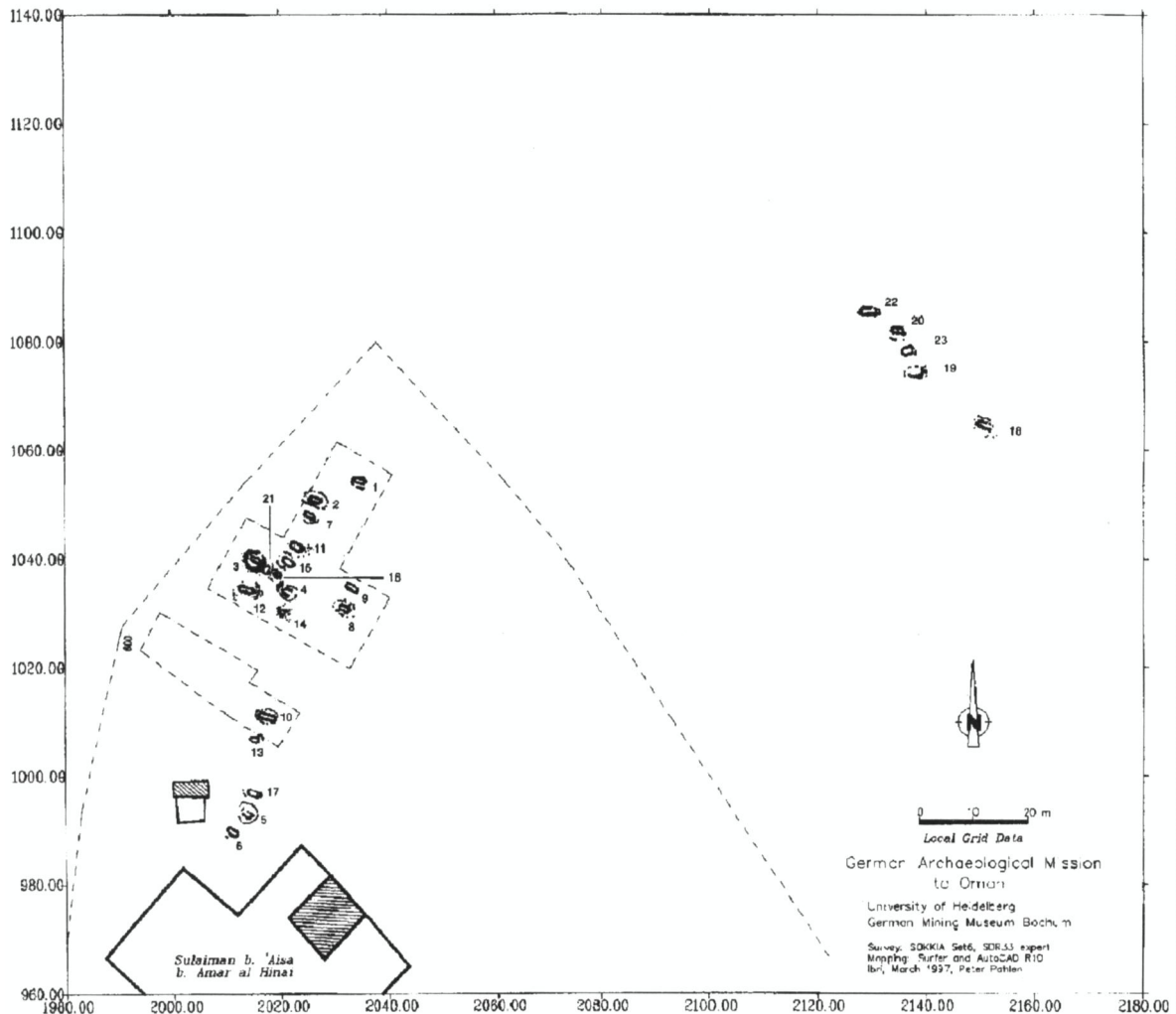


FIGURE 1. Plan of the cemetery.

nearby wadi. Most graves were built for individual use, but in some cases they show several burials. A flat, horizontally placed stone in the chamber wall mostly represents the entrance to the chamber. Usually the entrance was placed at the eastern end of the chamber. In two cases it was placed at the western end and one grave had the entrance at the north. The significant bar wall of the Samad graves was never seen in al-Fueda despite all other similarities. In most cases the graves were surrounded by a stone circle. The orientation of the long axis was mostly south-east–north-west, which represents another similarity with the Samad graves (Vogt 1984: 275), some were oriented east – west.

The length of the chambers varies between 0.80 m and 2.84 m with an average length of 1.79 m. One very long grave showed a double burial. The width varied between 0.44 m and 0.98 m, on average 0.65 m. The floor of the chamber lay about 1 m beneath the surface. Generally the graves at the site of al-Fueda show superficially closer affinities to the Samad graves than to those of other contemporary cultures. Some simple graves at ad-Dur show a superficial resemblance to the al-Fueda graves, but few detailed drawings of these are available (Mouton 1992: 126, fig. 150).

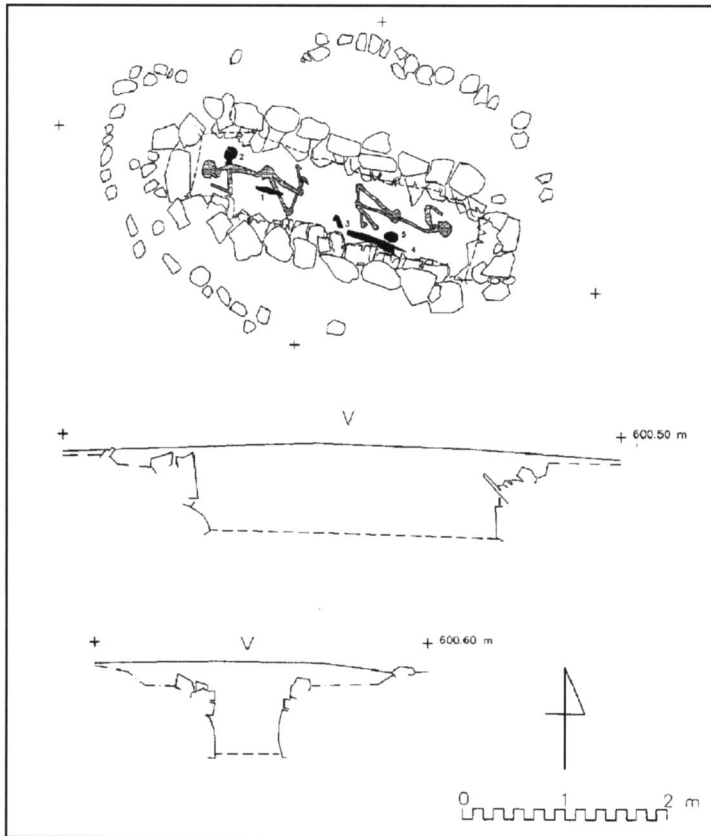


FIGURE 2. Grave Fu10.

Unfortunately little skeletal material was found, due to grave robbing and aggressive soil conditions. Twelve skeletons were recovered, nine were male, one female, the remaining two were too poorly preserved to define the sex. Seven undisturbed skeletons were recovered, they were positioned on the right side in a flexed position with the hands placed in front of the face as is also typical of the Samad culture. At al-Fueda the female skeleton was placed on the right side like the male, in the Samad burials women were placed on the left side (Vogt 1984: 274). The burial gifts show a difference that seems to be linked to the sex of the buried: graves without weapons probably belong to women.

The grave architecture of al-Fueda shows many individual characteristics. To sum it up, the following five statements can be made:

1. Typologically² the graves mostly belong to the type SWO, they show a stone circle (S), cantilever stones (W), orthostats (O) and are narrow.
2. Multiple burials remain the exception.
3. The long axis of the graves was mostly oriented south-east–north-west.
4. The dead were placed on the right side in a flexed position.
5. Deceased females were not provided with weapons (presumption).

Small finds

Contrary to the grave architecture, the small finds all point distinctly to the NLPC (Northern Late Preislamic Culture) located in the present day UAE. The small finds comprise pottery, soft stone vessels, iron weapons, metal objects, and 'other objects'.

Pottery

Fourteen complete or lightly damaged vessels were excavated and some sherds. In most cases pottery was wheel made, this is the same situation as we find on

the sites of the NLPC. The following classes of pottery were found: glazed vessels (eight vessels), painted pottery (two balsamaria), fine pottery (one vessel) and coarse pottery (five vessels). Most vessels were sand-tempered but the wares showed strong differences in all cases.

The glazed pottery represents the largest group of pottery in al-Fueda with eight vessels, two pilgrim flasks, five perfume bottles and one storage jar (Figs 3–4). The clay of these vessels is light coloured, yellowish or brownish, the glazed coating rather thick. The forms resemble those from contemporary sites in Arabia, Mesopotamia and Iran and were probably imported as is the case on the other Arabian sites.³ Pilgrim bottles and perfume bottles find close parallels in the UAE, Oman and Failaka. The storage vessel (Fig. 4) was amphora-like, had two handles and can be compared to a vessel from Mleiha of the period PIR.A. The thick dark green glaze with golden speckles appears to be typical of the early periods of the NLPC in the UAE (Mouton 1992: 40).

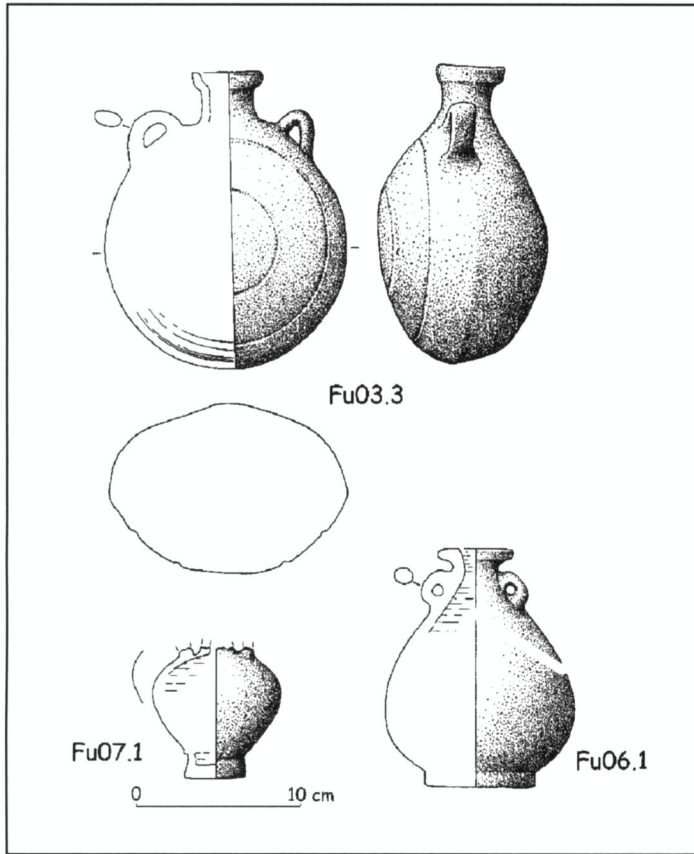
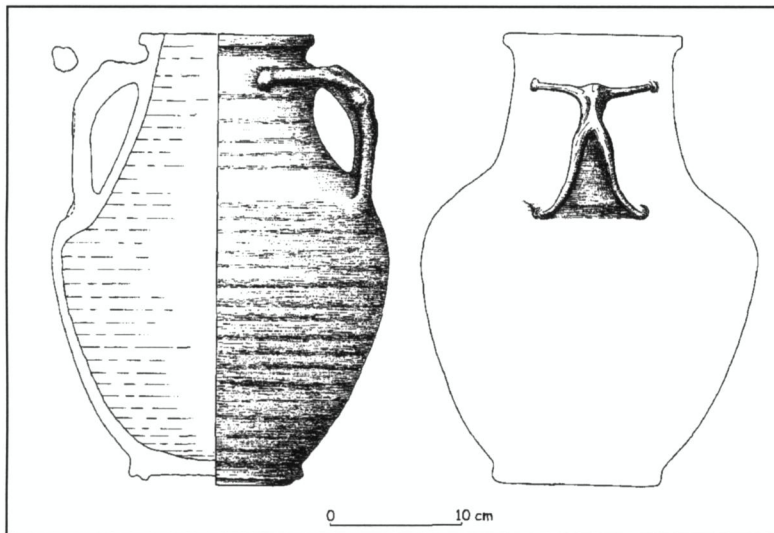


FIGURE 3. Selected examples of glazed vessels: pilgrim flask Fu03.0; perfume bottles Fu06.1 and Fu07.1.

FIGURE 4. Storage jar Fu12.16.



Two balsamaria were found that belong to a type of vessels typical of the Late Pre-Islamic Period in southeast Arabia (Fig. 5). They can be linked to finds from Mleiha, ad-Dur, Asimah, Wa'ab and also Samad (Mouton 1992: 172, fig. 127/4; 167–168, fig.123/1; Yule 1994b i: 109,113,121; ii: 196). The clay is fine and rather soft and dark in colour and seemingly untempered. They were originally painted dark red with a black or very dark gray geometrical decoration of vertical lines, ladders and triangles between horizontal lines; this decoration was preserved in traces. The vessels from the UAE were dated to the early phases of the NLPC (Mouton 1992: 167–168).

The fine pottery comprised only one vessel, a small perfume bottle of a light coloured, quite porous clay that was wheel-made and bore some resemblance to Hellenistic glass bottles with two handles.

The coarse pottery from al-Fueda varies greatly in style and ware and comprises pilgrim flasks, storage vessels and a vase. Two vessels were probably local productions, they were tempered with gravel and organic material and were wheel-turned.

Soft stone vessels

The stone vessels found in al-Fueda were mostly made of soft light-coloured stone, probably calcite, just one flat fragmentary bowl of dark stone was excavated (Fig. 6). We had three examples of a type of vessel presented in a study by J. Hassel as 'beehive-shaped vessels' (Hassel 1997). These vessels are known from a number of Arabian sites and are dated from the last half of the 1st millennium BC to the first centuries AD. They were found in great numbers in south-west Arabia and seem to have been

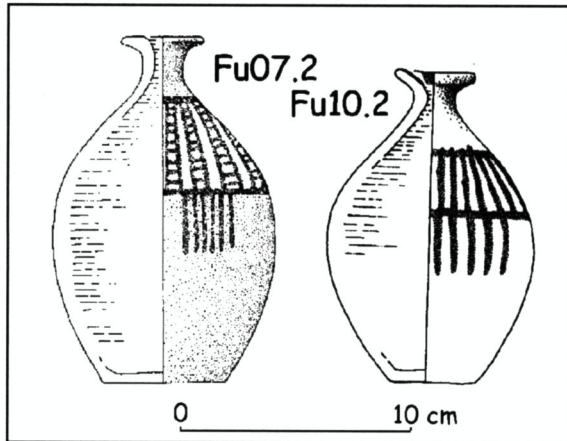


FIGURE 5. *Balsamaria* Fu07.2 and Fu10.2.

linked with cultic practices, many occurred in temples (Hassel 1997: 275). These vessels are important to define the culture of the site of al-Fueda. Beehive shaped vessels are often found on sites connected to commercial stations along the transarabian caravan routes, linking South Arabia with the northwestern centres (Hassel 1997: 276–277).

The sites of Mleiha and ad-Dur yielded some of these vessels, especially in the early periods (i.e. PIR.A and PIR.B) and the vessels of al-Fueda show great resemblance to these (Hassel 1997: 245; Mouton 1992: 57).

The bowl of dark stone, Fu13.1 (Fig. 6), was an example of careful craftsmanship, the stone was of good quality and the cut was clear and exact. Vessels of fine, dark stone have a long tradition on sites in the Gulf region, they seem to have declined during the Iron Age but reappear in the NLPC (Mouton 1992: 209). Bowls of this kind were also excavated in Mleiha and are linked to the early periods of the chronology (Mouton 1992: fig. 25/8). We can date the soft stone material to the early part of the NLPC, the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC.

Iron Weapons

One group of finds dominate at al-Fueda, the iron weapons (Fig. 7). Weapons were deposited in the graves in large numbers, they present an important criterion enabling us to distinguish the graves of males, as women were not given weapons. One

grave, containing the burial of a young man, was particularly rich in weapons, three swords, one fragment of a sword, one dagger, one fragment of a dagger and 41 arrow heads. Such a number of weapons of course leads to the question, was this burial the only one in the grave?

The weapons were in most cases badly preserved and scattered due to grave robbing. The iron was corroded, consequently the interpretation as to exact size and form is difficult since these might have been changed with the condition of the material. Most swords at al-Fueda showed one distinct feature also present in other NLPC weapons from the UAE. They have rim-flanged grips and single-edged blades.

The occurrence of iron as a material for weapons seems to appear relatively late in south-east Arabia, only in the late Iron Age do weapons start being of iron instead of bronze or copper (Yule 1994b, i: 184; Mouton 1992: 149, 203).

By far the most common find were the arrowheads. Most of them were of the kind classified as type C by M. Mouton (1990), that means, they are wider at the base and narrow upwards to the top. We also encountered arrowheads of the A and B types, A being broadest at the top, B showing parallel sides on much of the length. The classification of M. Mouton, based on the material from Mleiha and ad-Dur regards the types of arrowheads as following each other chronologically with a certain overlapping of types, this seems to be very difficult to prove. In al-Fueda we occasionally found the types A, B and C together in one grave, the same situation seems to have occurred in Mleiha. Accordingly the classification cannot represent the last word in the discussion of arrowheads of the NLPC but it can be used as a working basis until more material is known. At this point, though, we can already say that we shall have to dismiss all rigid datings of the Pre-Islamic arrowheads in Oman. The difference in types of arrowheads might be due to the special use of certain types, a study of the 'flight habits' and reach of different arrowheads might be useful in answering these questions.

Hand weapons included four short swords (length between 36.0 and 50.0 cm), ten swords and eight daggers. Further fragments belonging to these types of weapons occurred but were mostly too small and

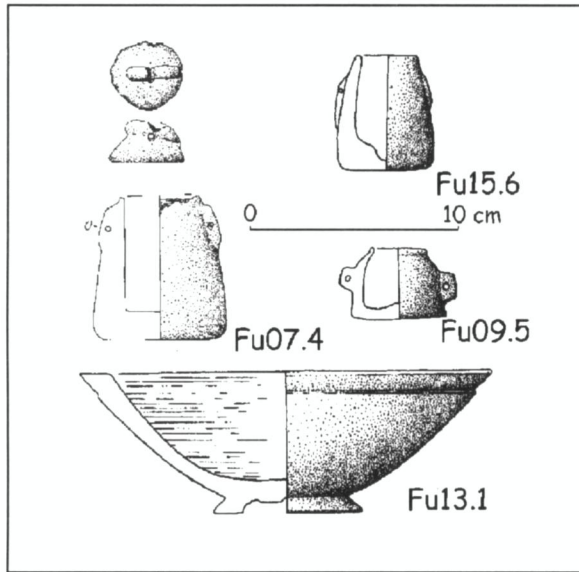
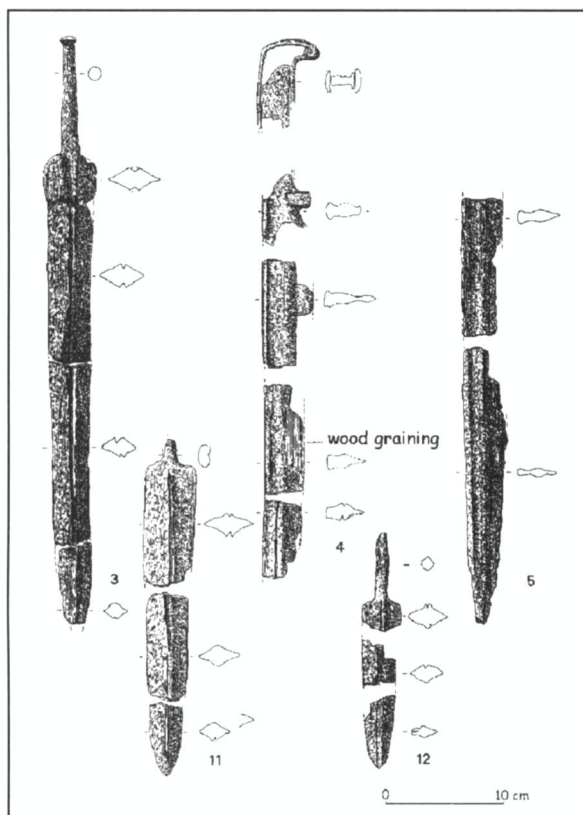


FIGURE 6. Stone vessels Fu07.4, Fu09.5, Fu13.1 and Fu15.6.

FIGURE 7. Iron weapons from grave Fu12.



too badly preserved to allow any interpretation. With two exceptions, one short sword and one sword, the swords of al-Fueda were one-edged and the daggers two-edged. All showed a distinctive blade profile. Similar weapons have been excavated in the UAE and at Samad, but do not seem to appear at sites outside Oman.

A number of swords show a kind of hooked, rim-flanged grip of a kind known from Samad ash-Shan (Yule 1994b, i: 212, 213, 215). The blade and grip were forged in one piece. Origins under discussion for this kind of sword have so far extended from Roman to Sasanian (Potts 1998: 197–198).

Other metal objects

Very little jewellery was found at al-Fueda and practically no beads, which is of course rather surprising, but this circumstance must be due to the heavy robbing of the graves.

The most interesting metal finds include four bronze bowls, two of which showed figurative decoration.⁴ They have thin walls with a thickened rim that turns inward (Fig. 8). This type of metal bowl is known in the Mediterranean region as a 'Phoenician' bowl (Markoe 1985). Fragmentary examples have also been found in, for example, Mleiha, some of these bowls show script (Mouton 1992: 52–55, figs. 24/1, 24/2).

At al-Fueda they date to the early phases of the NLPC. One of the bowls from al-Fueda (Fig. 8) had a very interesting relief decoration in repoussé technique on the inside, showing three registers of animal and human figures around a central motive, the principle of composition is the same as on the so-called 'Phoenician' bowls: bands of decoration arranged around a central round motive, mostly a rosette, in the case of the al-Fueda bowl, the centre being filled up by a wave ornament. The style is vivid and primitive, with details showing some resemblance to the bowls from the UAE.

Conclusions

When we compare the grave architecture of al-Fueda with that of other contemporary sites, parallels to the simple, late Pre-Islamic graves of the NLPC in ad-Dur remain few, the orientation is different and the stone circle is missing there. On the surface the

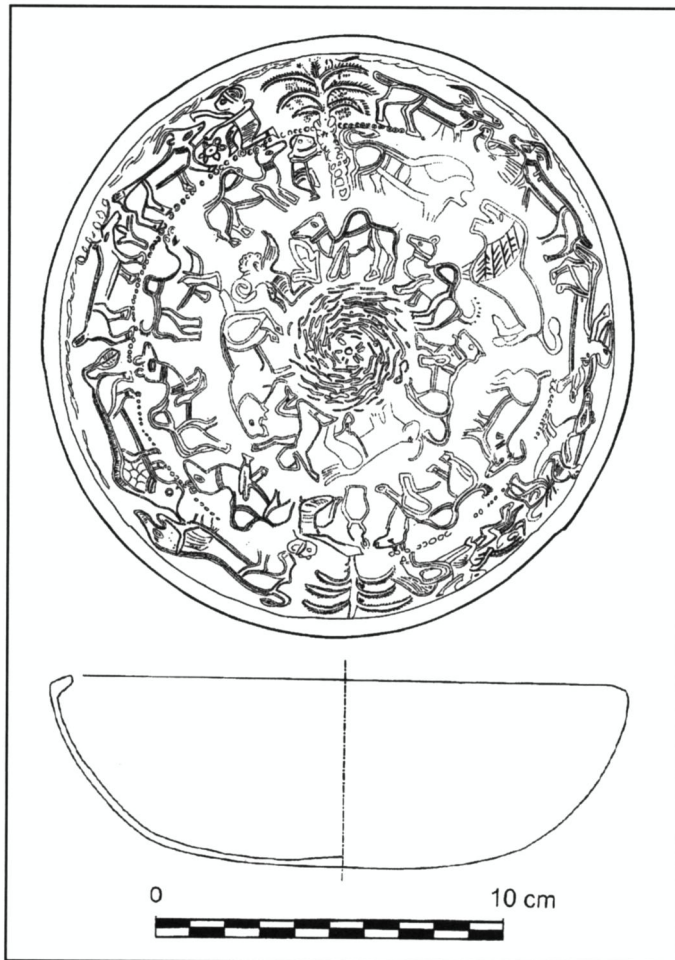


FIGURE 8. *The bowl Full.1.*

graves resemble each other and apparently they show the same type of roof construction.

The graves at al-Fueda show orthostats, cantilever stones, stone circles and roof support stones, the preferred south-east–north-west orientation is a feature shared with the Samad culture. The entrance to the grave chamber was made of a horizontal stone in the wall.

Also in terms of burial customs, parallels to the Samad culture are manifest, the dead were placed on their right side in a flexed position, in Samad this custom was only seen with male skeletons, one grave at al-Fueda showed the case of a young woman being buried in this way. Unfortunately we have no material for comparison with the NLPC

sites in the UAE, where burial customs apparently did not follow the same rules.

The extent of robbing hindered the study of the rules concerning burial gifts, but one point seems to be clear: weapons were regarded as essential in a man's grave. The greatest number of graves, be it the burials of presumed males or presumed females, showed one or two pottery vessels. Pottery seems to have been produced locally when vessels for every day use were needed, the fine wares were imported from pottery centres.

The burial gifts can be dated to the early phases of the NLPC, i.e. the periods PIR.A (end of the 3rd to first half of the 2nd century BC) and PIR.B (mid 2nd to 1st century BC). A slightly longer duration cannot be excluded, some finds seem to point toward this, such as the presence of bluish glaze on pottery, regarded as belonging to PIR.C at the earliest (Mouton 1992: 95).

The site of al-Fueda seems to be situated near a hypothetical border between the two cultural complexes NLPC (centered in today's UAE) and Samad (centered in the Dakhliyah in the Sultanate of Oman). In the mid-1980s the extension of the Samad culture was only known from a few sites in the provinces of Dakhliyah and Sharqiyah (western part). It was already then probable that it was larger than the few sites showed. The NLPC was known from even fewer sites in the territory of the modern UAE. The exact border between the Samad culture and the NLPC still remains unknown. The site of al-Fueda has shown the NLPC to extend further to the south than has been supposed so far.

Notes

- ¹ We would like to thank the Department of Antiquities of Oman, the Thyssen Foundation, the University of Heidelberg, the German Mining Museum in Bochum and Ali Ash-Shanfari of the Department of Antiquities of the Sultanate of Oman for the support they offered to the project that was part of an attempt to define the Late Iron Age or Late Pre-Islamic Period in Oman.

- ² Following the typology of P. Yule (Yule 1994a: 566–567). This typology is based on Samad culture graves.
- ³ Compare Hannested 1983 for intercultural parallels illustrated by the material from Failaka.
- ⁴ The bowls are the subject of a more detailed study that is to be published shortly by P. Yule.

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