

Window 46

Ichthyophagoi their Culture and Economy during the Iron Age in Coastal Oman

Romolo Loreto

From 2013 to 2017 the project «*Ichthyophagoi* their culture and economy. Landscape and people during the Iron Age in coastal Oman» went on with archaeological excavations and field surveys related to the study of the coastal area between Bimah and Tiwi under the patronage of the Ministry of Heritage and Culture (Sultanate of Oman), the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and the University of Naples «L'Orientale». The activities focused on the Early Iron Age coastal settlement of Bimah (named BMH2 after the 1985-88 campaigns of the Italian Archaeological Expedition led by Maurizio Tosi), by the definition of the socio-economic

strategies of coastal people that later on were labelled as *Ichthyophagoi* in the Greek-Roman classical sources. Despite the negative perspective concerning the barbarians fish eater that emerged from the written sources, Bimah and its natural environment are going to take the shape of a complex portrait. From an inner perspective, the ancient village subsistence economy takes form by a deep coastal landscape exploitation involving different strategies as well as from an outer perspective, so that Bimah appears to be mostly connected with the Early Iron Age II (900-600 BC) cultures of northern Oman, linked to them by the fine painted ware trade.

FIGURE 46.1.

BMH2 Early Iron Age II settlement as seen from the north.





FIGURE 46.2. The industrial southern area after the excavation of the hut H5.

If one sees at the prehistoric evidence, such as the so-called «Bronze Age Tower», it is clear that the area should have been an attractive point probably due to the natural springs that gave life to Wadi Bimah, nowadays dry.

No clear levels of abandonment were identified between the lower levels in which Bronze Age lithic came to light and the first Early Iron Age II levels in which diagnostic stone vessels and pottery assemblages were collected. Moreover, it seems that there is not an Early Iron Age I phase, a phenomenon already attested elsewhere, such as in Kalba and northeastern Oman.

Thus, the construction of the Early Iron Age II village should have followed a natural process: the local community was attracted by an area already exploited during the Bronze Age where fresh water was available. The related tower could have been a focal element for the new community. Thus, the first evidence of an Early Iron Age II phase is that of

a seasonal occupation followed by the construction of the huts and, perhaps, the shift to a permanent occupation based not only on fishing but also on agriculture and breeding. By all means, the main resource is the sea: the impressive amount of sea products, above all the shell beads, must have been a major issue in the village, some sort of currency of exchange in the commercial trade.

BMH2 emerged in a period during which a settlement intensification took place along the Gulf regions in southeastern Arabia Early Iron Age II period, in particular from the Musandam peninsula to the Hajar mountain piedmont and alluvial plains.

This impressive spread of settlements was mainly allowed by the new irrigation system of the *falaj*, the main responsible for intensive cultivations. In fact, palaeoclimatic proxies suggest that at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC a radical decrease in rainfall occurred.



FIGURE 46.3. A cultic element from the hut H1: a clay snake inside a *Lambis truncata*.

FIGURE 46.4. Some fine painted ware small carinated cups.



The underwater channels were the natural solution to the problem, even though in this model BMH2 stands as a particular case. Although in Wadi Bimah agricultural areas and terraces have been identified, no *falaj* irrigation structures were detected up to now. The only water resources must have been the Wadi Bimah spring or, when this latter expired, the wells that still today are used inside the *wadi* or, eventually, the seasonal water coming from the mountain through Wadi Bimah and the secondary *wadi* flows.

Although the village does not have huge proportion (150 x 100 m) and no more than 20 structures, it appears that there was some kind of differentiation in the spatial arrangement of the huts reflecting a variegated and stratified social scenario.

At least two main architectural and functional distinct areas were recognized. The southern huts, displayed along the lower part of the village, were strictly devoted to an industrial purpose: basins to dry fish, shell beads production, and food processing (cooking and grinding) are the most common activities performed. The faunal remains from the huts also prove that the practice of

breeding was part of the complex economy of the village, which could have been a further resource during the year. The northern huts, on the contrary, revealed some interesting features related to a more sophisticated and quite less barbarian sphere. The huts were composed by more differentiated rooms, in which one can recognize fireplaces for communal banquets and store room, in both cases the carinated fine painted ware was the typical pottery artifact put in light.

Moreover, cultic elements were part of the daily life: *Lambis truncata* shell, above all, used in the construction of the walls of the huts, painted shells and pottery snakes most probably all of them devoted to the celebration of sea and land fertility.

One can imagine what was the rude atmosphere in this village made of simple structures more similar to a shelter than to a house during the fishing season: massive dry fish process (sure the smell was bad), frantic activities of fishing, catching clams, beads assembly line, food processing, etc. No matter what, they were not isolated in their own barbarian world, either they were seasonal fishers or permanent settlers trade linked them to the inner oases in a broader landscape ■

Serge Cleuziou & Maurizio Tosi

**IN THE SHADOW OF
THE ANCESTORS**

**THE PREHISTORIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE
EARLY ARABIAN CIVILIZATION IN OMAN**

second expanded edition

Edited by

Dennys Frenez & Roman Garba

Published by the

Ministry of Heritage and Culture

Sultanate of Oman

2018



www.mhc.gov.om

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Sultanate of Oman

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In the Shadow of the Ancestors. The Prehistoric Foundations of the Early Arabian Civilization in Oman
(second expanded edition).

1. Arabia. 2. Oman 3. Archaeology. 4. Prehistory 5. Antiquities.

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First published 2018

Printed in the Sultanate of Oman

ISBN: 978-99969-3-201-4 (hardback)

Front cover: Alignment of Hafit type tombs at Al-Ayn © Roman Garba

Back cover: Hafit type tombs at Shihr Jaylah © Roman Garba

Note: The maps in this book are historical and cannot be modified as they are specifically drawn for that period only and they do not reflect political, geographical and administrative boundaries. The Geographical Place Names (GPN) in these maps are not written by the Arabic Standardized Romanization System applied in the National Survey Authority of Oman (NSA).

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