

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES: VOL. 23-1993  
EXCAVATIONS AT SAMAD AL SHĀN 1987-1991, SUMMARY

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**State of Research**

In 1987 the German Mining Museum began the investigation of several cemeteries in Samad and al-Maysar primarily of the Samad Period/Culture as a new project.<sup>1</sup> Survey and excavation previously carried out in the area from 1979 until the early 1980s centred on illuminating the mining and smelting industry which made *Magan* a byword in the study of the entire region especially for the last part of the third millennium BCE. Over the years the German Expedition investigated the mining remains and at the same time has sought archaeological contexts with which to date them, not to mention the cultural assemblages as a whole. Whereas the main archaeological sources for the metals industry belong predominantly from the Umm an Nar through the Lizq/Rumaylah I Period, the time from about 2700 to 1200 CE, and in more recent times (Weisgerber 1981: 179), the periodization and mass of the general archaeology has an entirely different structure and developmental rhythm. For the Samad Period there exist no mining or smelting sites despite to date considerable search efforts. Moreover at the key smelting site at Rakah-Yankul the potsherds found in the slag heaps cannot be dated more accurately than simply "Iron Age". This lacuna in the production of copper is puzzling. Highlights of the latter campaigns devoted to the Samad Period are presented here.

Field research in Oman and in the other Gulf states as well, at first glance seems considerable, but for refining the chronology - an obvious first goal in our work - most of the pieces of the puzzle do not fit well together. Depending on how one counts, some 122 individual field projects of all possible descriptions have taken place in Oman by several foreign and Omani teams since the first one was carried out there by an American expedition in 1952 at al-Balīd and Khor Rori. Prior to 1980 321 sites in Oman had been mentioned as having been sampled (Hastings et al. 1975: 15 note 2; de Cardi et al. 1976; Doe 1977). Paradoxically, these failed to turn up material attributable to the Samad Culture which since 1988 has become Oman's best-documented Pre-Islamic culture, datable largely to the final age prior to the arrival of Islam in 8/630 initially at al-Ṣuḥār. Only a few random pottery sherds from the early surveys compare with those known from the Samad inventory (examples: Humphries 1974: 64 fig. 6b (BB-4); 69 fig. 8i (BB-15); 76 fig. 12l (SH-11); de Cardi 1977: 64 fig. 3.93, .110, .103-.105 (al-Dhurra); idem. 66 fig. 4.118 (al-Niba)).

Since many of the field projects in Oman are surveys, and then only partly published ones, not surprisingly, specialists began by clustering classes of related archaeological finds together into datable groups. Initially the research emphasis was placed by some individuals (W. Phillips, J. Wilkinson, M. Kervran) on the early medieval period, but this shifted to the foreign contacts during the late third and early second millennium (S. Cleuziou, K. Frifelt,

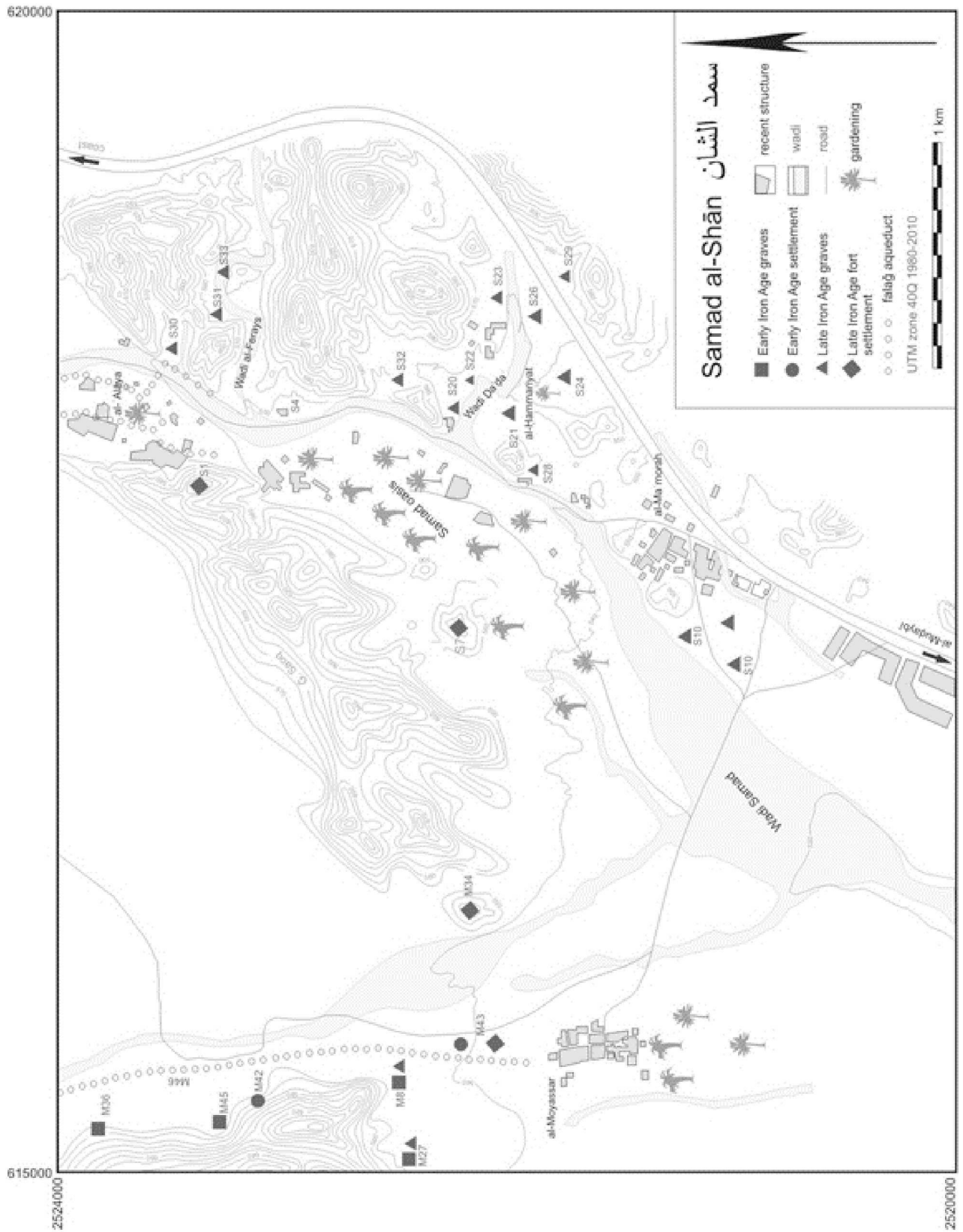


Fig. 1. Site map of Samad and al-Maysar.

J. Reade, M. Tosi). Efforts in Samad, in contrast, certainly moved in the direction of the final Pre-Islamic period because the contexts were in far better condition than those of the preceding periods and offered a better prognosis for data retrieval in the face of a vacuum of information. Our knowledge of the Samad Culture rests principally on grave forms and contents, the positions of the graves to each other as well as to the topography. Several cemeteries of this culture are known scattered from Maysar to the capital area. Three small settlement sites - M34, M43 house 4, S30/house 1 - also shed light on this period. Our source material is rapidly growing, but is still meagre and apt to change with additional research (Samad Culture: Vogt 1981: 239-243; Weisgerber 1982: 81-92; Vogt 1984: 271-284; Yule/Weisgerber 1988; Yule/Weisgerber 1989: 9-13; Yule/Weisgerber 1990: 141-144; Yule 1991: 182-188; Yule/Kazenwadel n.d.; Yule/Kervran n.d.).

### **Work accomplished**

We changed our research strategy continually as unexpected problems arose, questions we were attempting to solve in the field were answered, and when new ones came under consideration. It was clearly a search strategy, and could not have been planned in detail from the beginning. In 1987 we placed the emphasis on burials of the Samad Period in the cemeteries S20, S21-N and S21-S with the intention of obtaining a picture of the find inventory of the graves of the Samad Period (hence "Samad graves"), and we investigated areas as quickly as possible threatened by local building activities. Samad graves and those of the Wādī Sūq Period occurred in the same cemeteries, particularly in S21-N and S21-S. Moreover, at first it was neither possible nor desirable to select the graves of one period over the other for investigation. Thus we excavated all of the graves in a given surface. Where the graves were spread over a large area this was impractical.

During the campaign of 1988 work continued east of the Samad oasis in S21-S, and new work began in S23, which was in the process of being levelled for house building and gardening. S26 seemed destined for the same treatment at any time. A low free-standing grave of the Lizq-Period (M803) and two Samad graves were investigated in M8. Work began on S30 in the valley known locally as Mendessah. Here the graves seemed large and rich, and at first glance different in their find inventories from the others we had been working on. A few graves were investigated in S10 (previously designated Maysar-9).

In 1989 we resumed work in S21-S and as the excavation advanced toward the peak of this hill site, older graves occurred. After three weeks we stopped since nearly all of the graves were datable to the second millennium, which was not in keeping with our brief, namely the illumination of the Late Iron Age. Enough graves had been excavated that one had a fair notion of their character and finds, and those excavated were not well preserved. As work stopped in S21, we took up excavations again in S10. Sites outside of Samad could be visited and as time allowed, were described or even mapped. Such a nearby site lies in a place called al Hind, just south of the oasis al-Khashbah. Here buildings constructed of heavy ashlar masonry are to be found. The best preserved (Fig. 2a, b) is datable by means of the masonry and pottery sherds to the Umm an Nar Period. It is shown here as a computer sketch. Two oval graves inside are secondary.

Owing to the war in 1990 we waited until 1991 for our final season. Work continued in S10 with the purpose of investigating it in as concentrated a way as possible. Nearly 2 km long, S10 could only be excavated partially. Since preservation and the relatively large number of objects in the graves proved favourable, we continued work in the centre of the cemetery. In the same season, as a result of alleged plundering, the Department of Antiquities carried out a test excavation at al-Bustan. A cemetery of the Samad Period came to light and seven well-preserved graves were

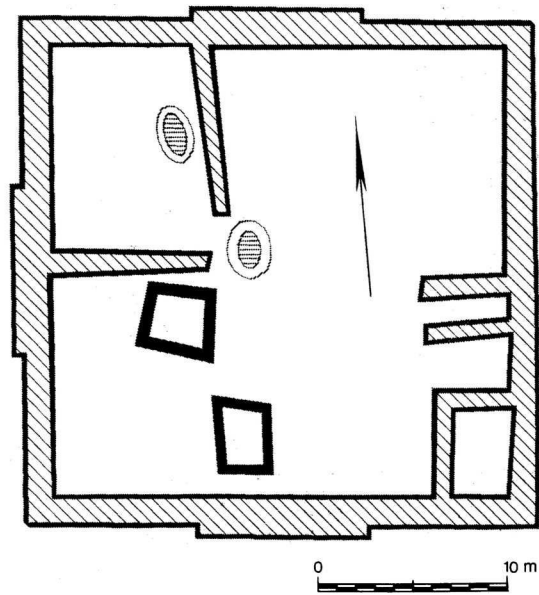


Fig. 2a, b. The square building at al-Hind near al-Khashbah, measured sketch and aerial photo.

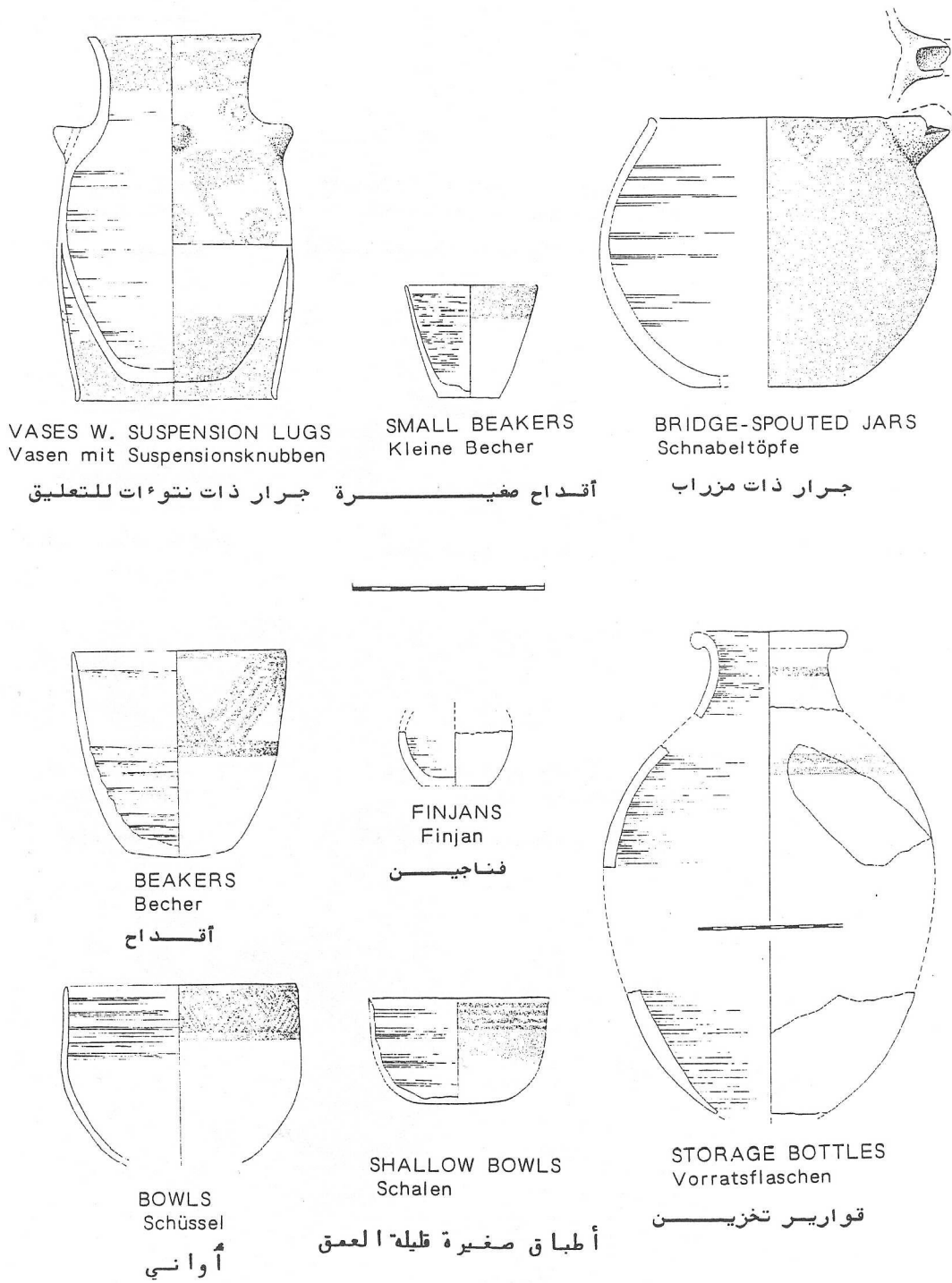
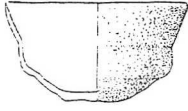
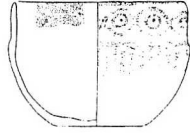


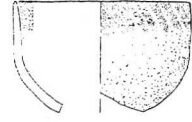
Fig. 3. Main forms of Wādī Sūq funerary pottery.



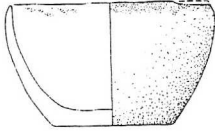
MED. CARINATED BOWL  
Mittl. Knickwandschüssel  
أواني متوسطة متعرجة



MED. BOWL, CONSTRICTED RIM  
Mittl. Schüssel, eingez. Rand  
أواني متوسطة ذات حواف منطبقة من أعلى



MED. BOWL  
Mittl. Schüssel  
أواني متوسطة



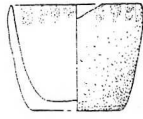
MED. CONVEX BOWL  
Mittl. Konvexschüssel  
أواني محدبة متوسطة



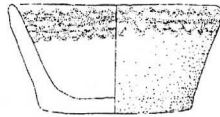
SHALLOW BOWL I  
Flache Schälchen I  
أطباق صغيرة مسطحة نوع أول



SHALLOW BOWL II  
Flache Schälchen II  
أطباق مسطحة نوع ثاني



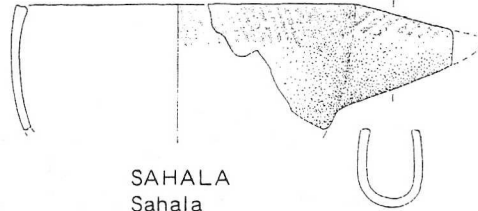
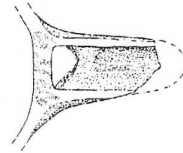
MED. SMALL BEAKER  
Mittl. kl. Becher  
أقداح صغيرة متوسطة



DEPRESSED BEAKER  
Flacher Becher  
أقداح مسطحة مضغوطة من الأعلى



RAISED BOWL  
Hohe Schüssel  
أواني عميقة



SAHALA  
Sahala  
سحلة



Fig. 4. Main forms of Lizq Period funerary pottery.

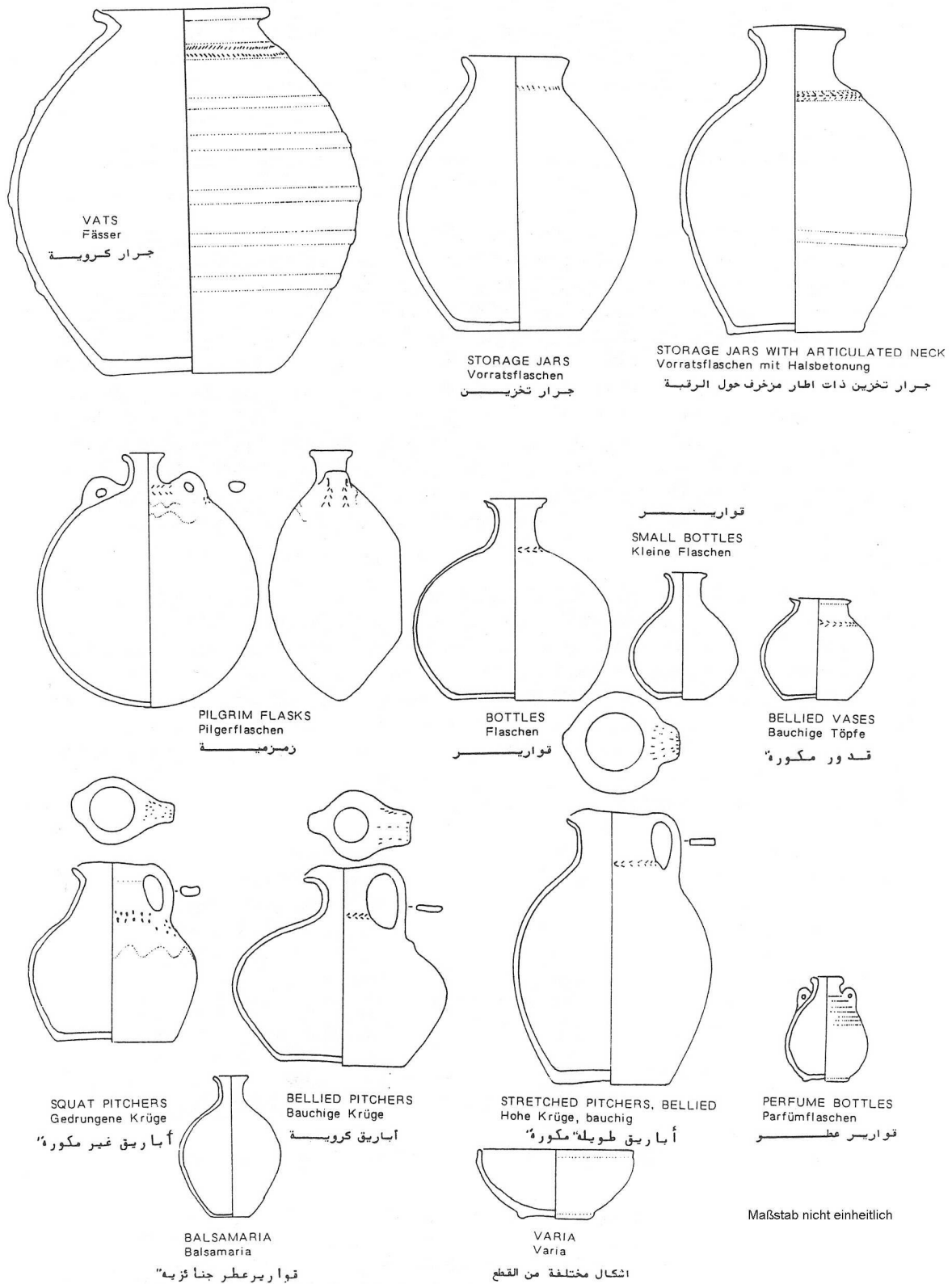


Fig. 5. Main forms of Samad Period funerary pottery.

documented in the 7 x 7 m surface. Our own team was able to test four further Samad graves in al- Amqāt which were discovered during the course of road building from the oasis there to Bidbid.<sup>11</sup>

Preservation was excellent at this site. We were on the lookout for evidence identifying the owners of the graves: family or tribal cemeteries could not be clearly identified, although there is evidence for their existence.

### Chronology

Mixed contexts are less a problem for our efforts than thoroughly robbed ones. A major goal was to define more carefully the assemblages of the successive periods.

We conducted little research on sites predating 2000 BCE. Vogt and Weisgerber observe that a partial overlap exists between the dating of Hafit and Umm an Nar contexts which can be resolved by further study of non-ceramic finds. This overlap manifests itself clearly in the funerary architecture, as witnessed at Shir and at Halban in Oman's East Province (Yule n.d.). Neither transitions nor a fine chronology between the Bronze and Early Iron Age are clearly definable owing to lacunae in the available material. Nonetheless it was possible to further clarify the relative sequence in respect to different kinds of objects, especially pottery (cf. Figs. 3-5). Early and late contexts and artefact classes respectively for the Lizq and Samad Cultures are emerging and shall be articulated in due time. The pottery published here shows the main families and not the far more numerous specific attribute combinations for each of the three main periods which we encountered. Lacking in Samad/Maysar to date is the so-called orange ware of the later Early Iron Age phase in Rumaylah 3, al-Qusays and the Bawshar honeycomb cemetery.

During the early 1980's the Samad Period was believed to lie in the so-called Hellenistic/Parthian age, or alternatively the last three or four centuries BCE (Vogt 1984: 278). At that time the dating rested on the appearance of iron weapons and other implements, a bronze bowl with constricted rim in Gr. S101124 (Yule/Weisgerber 1988: Gr. S101124 fig. 2), an iron sword from Gr. S101125 (Vogt n.d.; Yule/Kazenwadel n.d. fig. 37), as well as the belief that the Samad Period/Culture succeeded the Lizq/Rumaylah Culture at a single point in time, and ended in 8/631 as a result of the country's Islamization. At first the arrowheads seemed to link the dating to that of Persepolis and Failaka (Vogt 1984: 284 fig. 5). The following chronology is suggested:

Āl Bu Sa'id	1749	-	(recent/subrecent)
Ya_āriba Imamate	1624	-	1749 (subrecent)
"Dark Ages"	893	-	1624 (medieval-subrecent)
First Imamate	793	-	893 CE (Early Islamic)
Julanda rule	630/31	-	793 CE (Early Islamic)
Samad	100 BCE	-	893 CE (Late Iron)
Rumaylah 2	800? BCE	-	200 BCE (Early Iron Age)
Lizq/Rumaylah 1	1200	-	200 BCE (Early Iron Age)
Nizwá	1200	-	1000 BCE (Late Bronze Age)
al-Wāsiṭ	1500	-	1200 BCE "
Wādi Sūq	2000	-	1000 BCE (Bronze Age)
Umm an Nar	2700	-	2000 BCE "
Hafit	2900	-	2500 BCE (Chalcolithic)

Since 1982 the dating has changed considerably particularly with the growth of datable material from Samad and other sites in Oman (Yule/Kazenwadel 1993) and as a result of more careful study and cataloguing. Metallic bowls mentioned above with a constricted rim, as depicted on the processional reliefs at Persepolis, in fact need not date to the Achaemenid Period, and have a far wider chronological distribution extending earlier and into the Common Era (Pfrommer 1987). The



development of the Samad Period grave structures is difficult to judge since they and the grave goods develop in an extremely conservative way. Recent calibrated radiocarbon results range decidedly later than expected. In addition, the relative chronology is possible by means of a correspondence analysis of the finds (Yule forthcoming). Most of the datable finds cluster between 100 and 500 CE, thus earlier than the majority of the calibrated and  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  corrected  $^{14}\text{C}$  datings. Most difficult is the transition from the Rumaylah 2 Phase to the Samad Period owing to a lack of a well preserved site documenting both. M42 and M43 respectively contain such finds and help to some extent.

It may be noted here briefly that in terms of shape, decoration, and technique the pottery of the Lizq and Samad Cultures in fact have a distinct character of their own. Some misunderstanding (e.g. "sherds of Persian first millennium type", Wilkinson 1977: 129) has taken place because early workers, without the benefit of  $^{14}\text{C}$  and stratigraphy, had no recourse other than to date their survey finds largely by means of Iranian parallels.

### Distribution of the Samad-Culture

The newly excavated material from the Samad Period does not appear equally distributed spatially or temporally over all of Oman or even in Samad itself. Known graves containing objects linkable to the Samad Culture are distributed in Jawf, to the north at al Maqñiyat, to the northeast in the capital area, and to the southeast to al Baṭīn. Stray finds occur farther away, and the distribution to the southeast is perhaps the least well known. At his most recent season at Ra's al Ḥadd Julian Reade reported Samad ware (oral information). To the north there is little good evidence for dating a variety of grave forms which have been recorded, but not more closely investigated. At first sight they have little to do with the Samad Culture, but there is reason to believe that some are contemporary with it (Yule n.d.).

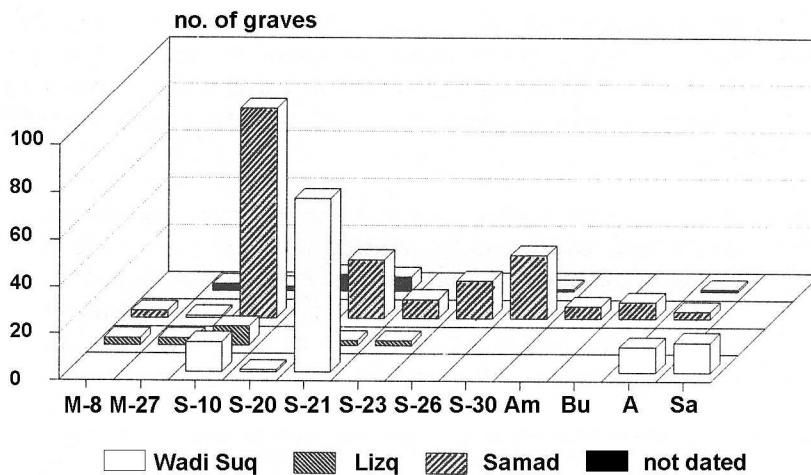


Fig. 6. Datings of the graves investigated from 1980-91. Graves classified chronologically according to the first use of the grave structure. A=al-Akhḍar (Khuḍra), Am=al-Amqāt, Bu=al-Bustan, M=al-Maysar, S=Samad, Sa=Sachrut al-Ḥadri.

Having investigated and/or systematically recorded 361 graves, several gaps in our knowledge are now identifiable (Fig. 6). Impressive at first glance, when in fact this number is divided chronologically, then within each period a relatively small number of well-preserved burials remain for study. This number is then further reduced by the fact that in the case of the Samad graves the burial custom for the women differs, as did the life style, from that of the men. A correspondence analysis of men's burials together with those of women does not measure chronology, but rather in social differences since the women have far fewer belongings and different ones than do the men.

Moreover men's graves are more numerous than those of women. Other problems arise for the representativeness of the material as a result of entire cemeteries which have been carried off as building material, particularly the free-standing hut graves of the Early Iron Age.

The identity of the early medieval local population at Samad is an intriguing question. In Jawf, for chronological and geographic reasons, and on textual grounds the Azd are known to have dominated. Most authors cite the *Kašf al ghumma* in this matter, which in fact is a poor informant for the history of the area. Among the problems at hand is that no Samad graves to my knowledge occur near Salūt or near Qalhāt where the 33rd chapter of the *Kašf* would have their owners (Klein 1938). The distribution of identifiable finds of course may change with further survey. Moreover, long ago Klein pointed out that the *Kašf* is often confused and distant from its sources, with which I would wholeheartedly agree. The names of Persian kings, for example, are cited in such a way that they clearly had no historical meaning for the compiler.

Classical sources, such as Yāqūt and Ibn Khaldūn do not help in this matter<sup>iii</sup>: In the thirteenth century CE Yāqūt describes the Omanis of his time as *Khawārij-Ibādīa*, and presumably the religion had attained its ultimate form and was widespread in Oman. Further information must come from other sources in order to complement this terse information. But these reveal little. In the genealogy of al Hajāj, Oman is the son of the Prophet 'Ibrāhim (Yāqūt 3: 718) presumably from his wife Keturah (Genesis 25:1-6). Al 'Aleppi writes that the name Oman recalls the name 'Umān b. Sebā'b b. Yefthān b. 'Ibrāhim. The Prophet Muḥammad knows that Oman is one of the most distant countries from the Hejaz, but not much more than that. The many unidentifiable place names in Oman mentioned by Yāqūt are disquieting for a reconstruction of the historical geography of the different populations there. It is difficult to use modern place names in order to reconstruct a purely indigenous substrate of the antique population of Oman.

After this article went to the press some citizens in Samad convinced me a large cemetery there, is widely held by local tradition to be occupied by the victims of the battle of Samad in 280/893. The ill-famed Moḥammad b. Nur, vizier of Baḥrayn, vanquished the Ibādī 'Azzan b. Temeem, thus ending the First Imamate. Omanis emphatically pronounce the nickname of the former, "al-Bur", a pun referring to his destruction of the countryside. The graves of the cemetery lie closely together side on side in rows. They popularly are said to contain up to 10 burials each. The position of the *shawāhid* stones at both ends of the men's graves suggests that the usual shapes of these Muslim graves and their orientation already were established at this time. By contrast, the population interred in the Samad graves emphatically is in no way Muslim. Their dead are not positioned toward Mecca and their graves contain numerous grave goods. In accordance with newly corrected and calibrated radiocarbon datings, I have lowered the final date of the Samad Culture to the theoretical terminus 893 CE. The main event at the end of the series of <sup>14</sup>C determinations is the battle of Samad. Can it be that the local non-Islamic and Islamic populations at Samad and Maysar both were decimated in the battle? Excavation of the Samad Period settlement Maysar-43 might yield datable materials to shore up this dating, for example the date of the destruction of the Samad Period *falāj*. The destruction of irrigation systems is an obvious military tactic.

The Muslim legal status of the non-Muslim population in Samad corresponds to *Ahl al Dhimma* (Macdonald 1913: 999) with a right to life, freedom and with certain limitations to owning property. Continuous turmoil between the inhabitants of Oman and foreign rulers from the *Riddah* (Lakit uprising 12/633) to the *Hurūb al-Riddah* characterizes the age. Oman was invaded six times in 260 years. Excesses in the taxation of Oman at this time were alleged by contemporary Christians (Fiey 1970: 33). Thus there are indications that the population by no means was exclusively Muslim, and

was heterogeneous with a large proportion of *Dhimmi*.

To judge from graves observed on the surface there is no reason to believe that in central Oman the Muslim direction for praying or that for the gaze of the deceased was never directed toward Jerusalem (*ūla l-qiblatayn*). If in fact Pre-Islamic burial customs continued in the Muslim graves of the Julandā Period (9/631-177/793) and First Imamate (177/793-280/893), there is no archaeological evidence for a transition to Islamic burial customs. But such conceivably would have been tolerated in view of the *urf* whereby the Islamicized population continued some of their old customs which did not collide frontally with the core of Islamic doctrine. This hypothesis is plausible in view of the fact that even today some abridgements of the law of placing no objects in the graves of deceased Muslims occur. Schimmel reports, for example, that in Islamic graves where death is believed to result from the evil eye, the person, animal and more recently motor vehicle is adorned with blue eye-shaped beads (Schimmel 1990: 250).

To date no graves of Christians or Persians, who on textual grounds existed in number in the *Bayt Mazūn*, have come to light. A vague reminder of the presence of Christians at least in Samad is the place name Jebel Michael just east of the oasis. Local tradition tells of Christians living in Samad long ago, but there is no sign of their presence. The place name Jebel Kanīsa, further evidence of Christians, is said to exist in the Wādī Andām although I have not verified this. The identity of the population buried in the Samad graves remains elusive. Archaeologically speaking these Azd surprisingly are not traceable to a Yemeni homeland.

*Astodāns* or *chahar taqs* are not identifiable in Oman, but the old Persian Zoroastrians conceivably would have needed them. The only Pre-Islamic religious monuments which have survived are the triliths of the bedouins, located mostly to the south of Samad. Calibrated Radiocarbon determinations date two to about the time of Christ (Yule/Kervran 1993). Balādhuri repeats that the Azd were dominant in Oman which means mainly in Jawf (Futūḥ al Buldān part I, 16:76; Yāqūt 3: 717), but in light of the dearth of sources, getting at the real meaning behind such names as *Khaw ārij* for this period (Salem 1956: 7), which hide behind the point of view of the user, is difficult.

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## Notes

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