
Book Review

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF JEBEL AL-BUHAIS, SHARJAH, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, VOLUME ONE: FUNERAL MONUMENTS AND HUMAN REMAINS FROM JEBEL AL-BUHAIS

Hans-Peter Uerpmann, Margarethe Uerpmann, Sabah Abboud Jasim (eds). Department of Culture and Information, Government of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, in collaboration with the Institut für Ur- und Frühgeschichte und Archäologie des Mittelalters Universität Tübingen, Germany, and in cooperation with Kerns Verlag, Tübingen, Germany, 2006. 386 pp. ISBN 3 935751 06 0. €69.95.

This book is the first in a series that will address the prehistory and environs of Jebel al-Buhais. This mountain, located in the Emirate of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, on the Oman peninsula, was used as a graveyard and settlement from c. 5000 to 200 BC. Exploration of the area began here in the late 1980s with a team of French and Spanish researchers. In 1994, an intensive survey was carried out by a local team of scientists and they invited two of the editors of this volume to collaborate when, in 1995, a camel skeleton was discovered in a Late Bronze Age subterranean grave. Soon after, a large Neolithic graveyard, with at least 500 individuals, was discovered. A joint project between the local department of Culture and Information and scientists from the University of Tübingen, Germany, was established, and systematic excavations of the cemetery took place between 1996 and 2005. Excavations of this area demonstrate that it served as a necropolis from the Stone Age through to the Hellenistic period. Thus Jebel al-Buhais provides a wealth of archaeological and skeletal data that provide an important window into the past of southeastern Arabia.

The volume is presented in three parts. The first, by Sabah Abboud Jasim, provides, in chronological order, a thumbnail sketch of each of the sites, tombs, and their contents, including human remains. Plans and sections of each tomb are provided along with artists' drawings and photographs of selected items like bronze and flint tools, pottery, and jewellery. Pottery found in the Bronze Age tombs indicates commercial contact with Mesopotamia, while the tomb types provide evidence of the extent of the spread of Hafit and Umm an-Nar cultures. From the Wadi Suq period, of particular interest is site BH 66, a clover-shaped tomb that is architecturally unique'. Later, during the Iron Age, people apparently re-used older tombs, dug simple pit graves, or used rock-shelters as burial sites. Hellenistic glassware was found in two tombs, suggesting that further exploration of the area may reveal more material from this time period. The chapter provides a brief history of the sites and a valuable introduction to the tombs whose occupants are the subject of the subsequent sections.

The second part of the volume, by Adelina Uerpmann and colleagues, describes the human remains from all post-Neolithic sites in the Jebel al-Buhais area. The authors' task was made difficult by the fact that human bones, from six of the Late Bronze Age to Iron Age tombs, were not systematically collected and most were left *in situ* during the 1994 to 1999 excavations. Luckily, some notes were recorded and a small sample of bones was kept for analysis. The seventh tomb, BHS 85, was systematically excavated from 2001 to 2005 by the authors of the chapter who describe and document this process. What I found particularly interesting was the use of ortho-photographs, in combination with GIS, which allows a succession of skeletons and their associated artefacts to be documented. This technique both allows subsequent measurements

to be taken (distortion is corrected), and allows one to visualise the exact positions of one skeleton to another since semi-transparent photos can be superimposed on each other. Despite the poor preservation and limited information, the authors make a valiant attempt to document aspects of health, diet and activity patterns as revealed by the skeletal material. Dental evidence is consistent with a diet of cereals, fruits, vegetables and some meat. Occupational stress markers and pathologies indicate activities associated with agricultural populations. Of interest to me was their interpretation of the muscle markings of the lower limbs. While some may have resulted from long-distance travel over rough terrain, there is the possibility that habitual riding, perhaps of camels, is the correct interpretation. The discovery of iron arrowheads with burials BHS 12 and 64, and a camel burial at BHS 12, points to two individuals being warriors, who may have taken part in battles associated with the spread of Islam in this region. The skeletal evidence is clearly laid out and each aspect of the analysis well researched. While population-level analysis was not possible, this chapter does provide interesting insights into the lives of the post-Neolithic occupants of this area.

The third and largest section, by Henrike Kiesewetter, involves the description and analysis of human remains from the large Neolithic cemetery at site BHS 18, which dates to the 5th millennium BC. While over 500 individuals are likely buried at this site, the current chapter focuses on the 365 individuals excavated between 1996 and 2000. This is an impressive number of burials and the demographic analysis suggests that the sample reflects the distribution of the population, with the exception of infants. Primary, secondary, as well as group, burials were found. It seems that the Jebel served as a meeting place and burial ground for many generations and that the bones of individuals who died elsewhere

were brought here for interment. A complete bioarchaeological analysis is presented in seven chapters with references, summary and appendices at the end. The format differs from the previous sections, probably because this contribution is the author's doctoral thesis, but this does not detract from the volume. Pathologies, muscle markings, stature, bone robusticity and the level of sexual dimorphism are all consistent with a nomadic, pastoral economy. What is intriguing about this group is the high frequency of cranial injuries which point to repeated, violent inter-group interchanges, possibly due to competition over scarce resources in times of environmental deterioration. Also remarkable was the discovery of the first three cases of trepanation in the UAE and the earliest in the broader region. The results provide a wealth of information on these Neolithic nomads and make an important contribution to the bioarchaeological literature.

I found the whole volume to be informative, well laid out, with beautifully presented graphs and illustrations, particularly the photographs which helped to capture the essentials of excavation, analysis and interpretation. The volume clearly demonstrates the almost continuous use of this Jebel as a necropolis over thousands of years, and provides valuable insights into the prehistory of this relatively understudied area of the UAE. It should also have broader impact, helping to refine interpretations of human prehistory in this region.

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