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IN THE SHADOW OF THE ANCESTORS

The Prehistoric Foundations
of The Early Arabian Civilization
in Oman

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ENTRE A L'INVENTAIRE
Le 26.07/2007
N° 11531
Cote D. 340/090 CLEU

Window 6.2 Earliest Potteries in Oman

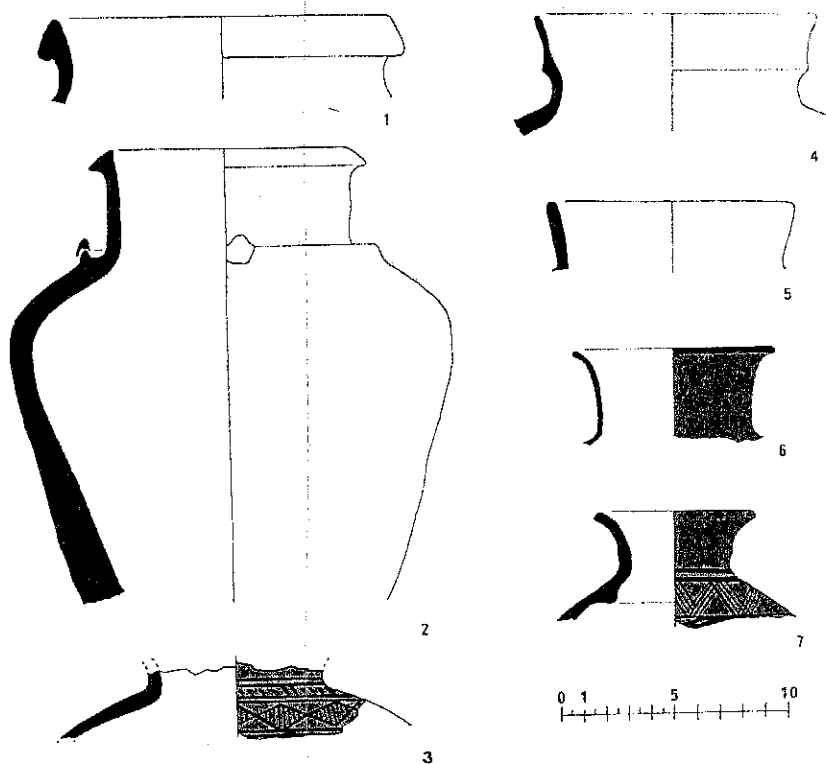
By Sophie Méry

Pottery production appears very late in Oman compared with other regions of the Near East. There is no evidence for it until the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, i.e. at the very end of the 4th millennium BC. The period corresponds to an important change in local technical systems with a probable transfer of certain techniques in pyrotechnology from the Indo-Iranian region. Quantitatively, pottery production in the Bronze Age remained small in the region during the 3rd millennium BC compared to the “mass” production found in Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, south-eastern Iran, and Baluchistan. Thus, pottery retained a real trade value, to the point where foreign production was always associated with local funerary assemblages, often in important amounts.

Painted pottery vessels of Mesopotamian origin occurred at coastal sites from the end of the sixth millennium BC, belonging to a style known as Ubaid in Mesopotamia. However, they were not

responsible for the emergence of autochthonous pottery production. Conditions were not propitious for local pottery production until the last centuries of the 4th millennium, when a new model for exploiting regional resources was to develop: agricultural oases. The earliest pottery of Omani fabrication was discovered on the site of Hili and dates from the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC (fig. 168). It was inspired by models from the Indo-Iranian region, in particular those of Keij-Makran in Pakistan. Not only is the decoration of the vessels inspired by contemporary decorative themes from this region, but the quality of the paste, its fineness and colour are also elements which are similar, together with their shaping technology. Every characteristic of these vessels thus differentiates them clearly from Mesopotamian pottery, even though the latter circulated in Oman, including the interior, during this period. The use of rotation in the fabrication of the earliest native pottery is certainly evident in Oman, but we do not know whether fabrication by

Figure 168 – Hili 8: Mesopotamian imported pottery (1,2,4,5) and locally made fine painted ware in south-eastern Iranian style during periods Ib and Ic, ca. 3000 – 2700 BC (Drawings by Philippe Gouin and Hélène David).



wheel in the strict sense (that is, making a pot from a unique ball of clay which is centred, hollowed, and drawn up by rotary kinetic energy) was mastered by the beginning of the 3rd millennium. The use of this technique, however, is beyond doubt a thousand years later, demonstrated by a current study of the material from tomb N at Hili, dated to 2200-2000 BC. However, this technique appears to have been little employed in the local and regional assemblages and concerns only small or medium-sized vessels; the majority were in fact made from coils finished on the wheel, from coils shaped on the wheel, or from coils thrown on the wheel. The four techniques are manifest at Hili among the local ware (fig. 169).

The Early Bronze Age appears to have been a turning point in the Middle East, when the use and variety of techniques using rotation increased. The study of the material from tomb N shows that quite different traditions of fabrication coexisted at Hili at the very end of the Early Bronze Age, including the fabrication of morphologically simple types, such as beakers. This proliferation of technical options illustrates particularly well the fact that the third millennium BC was a major period of innovation in the Middle East, the integration of rotation techniques being a process which was complex, non-linear, and possibly oscillatory. Analysis of Bronze Age pottery in the Oman Peninsula has explained a development in specialized craft traditions which were in interaction with the Indo-Iranian region. These traditions brought into play a large variety of fabrication tech-



Figure 169 – Fine red painted ware of period Ic at Hili 8 (photo French Archaeological Mission to Abu Dhabi).

niques using the 'wheel' in different degrees up to wheel-thrown production of pottery. Even if they are not comparable to those used in the Indus Valley in the same period, the technical skills involved were generally considerable, and it is highly probable that training in pottery fabrication took place within family traditions of specialized workshops.

In our present state of knowledge, we can assume that pottery production in the Oman Peninsula took shape around two distinct categories of potters. One comprised those producing domestic pottery in the western foothills of the Omani mountains, generally confined to an oasis or a group of neighbouring oases. The other consisted of those potters who made funerary vessels; their products circulated over the whole of the Oman Peninsula, and even beyond, archaeometric analysis having indicated their presence in the tombs on the island of Bahrain at the end of the 3rd millennium. In the case of Hili, the only pottery assemblage in the western foothills which has been studied thoroughly enough, several family workshops functioned at the same time at the end of the 3rd millennium. These workshops produced vessels which only a detailed technological and morphological study could differentiate; the analysis of the ceramic paste indicates a strong homogeneity, showing that clay sources and preparation methods were essentially shared (fig. 168).

Fig. 1. The first local potteries in the Oman Peninsula were inspired by Dasht plain models.

The sherd photographed dates from the first occupation of the settlement of Hili 8, ca 3000 BC.

Fig. 2. Globular medium-sized jars were the best representative domestic types during the Umman-Nar period in the Oman Peninsula. The jar illustrated here was reused in a collective Umman-Nar grave (Hili North Tomb A, ca 2300-2200 BC).

Fig. 3. Experimental work at Hili revealed the large variety of fabrication techniques using the 'wheel' in different degrees up to thrown production of local pottery in the Oman Peninsula. □