A burial mound at Shakhoura (Bahrain)

Article in Arabian archaeology and epigraphy · July 2001
DOI: 10.1034/j.1600-0471.2001.d01-4.x

CITATIONS
2

READS
28

3 authors, including:

Aurelie Daems
Ghent University
7 PUBLICATIONS 17 CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Ernie Haerinck
Ghent University
101 PUBLICATIONS 170 CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Available from: Ernie Haerinck
Retrieved on: 01 October 2016
A burial mound at Shakhoura (Bahrain)

A. DAEMS, E. HAERINCK AND K. RUTTEN
Ghent University, Belgium

After preliminary visits to Bahrain in 1998, it was decided to excavate burial mound no 3 in Area A at Shakhoura. The team from Ghent University was in the field from 21 October to 14 December 1999 (1) and worked in close collaboration with the Ministry of Information and the National Museum of Bahrain (2).

The village of Shakhoura, located in the northwestern part of Bahrain c.1 km south of Budaiya Road, is rapidly expanding and the numerous new houses are built very close to the different mounds. Some mounds are already almost enclosed by buildings, which will make it difficult to excavate them in the future. However, when excavated, some of these mounds will provide major information on burial practices of the early Dilmun period and certainly of the locally called Tylos (i.e. Seleuco/Parthian) period.

In 1996/97 the Ministry of Housing completed a plan of the area on which the remaining mounds are indicated (Fig. 1). The site was divided into two areas, although these are only separated by a few buildings. Prior to 1996 about seven mounds had been excavated, leaving some thirty mounds in area A and four in area B (3). Apart from our team’s two seasons, activities by Bahraini teams were resumed after completion of the map, and an additional seven mounds were excavated in area A, while no new research was undertaken in area B. The Bahraini teams excavated Mounds 1, 2, 4, 25 and 30, while our team excavated Mounds 3 and 5. Mound 1 was particularly large, measuring 80×50 m and standing between 4 and 12.70 m high (4). Its excavation lasted about six months. This is of course too long a timespan and we would need to investigate such a mound over three, if not four or even five seasons of two months each. In any case, the continuous efforts of the Ministry of Information and the Bahrain National Museum are to be commended and their research has shown clearly that not all burial mounds and graves on Bahrain were plundered completely. The insights gained from Mound 1 are certainly important and the excavation has provided not only a wealth of information but also a number of important objects for the museum. In total some ninety individual tombs were cleared. Among the objects of note are examples of glazed pottery, calcite vessels, blown-glass vessels, bone cosmetic containers, a bone doll in the shape of a nude female, numerous spindles made of bone or softstone, frit, glass paste, stone and gold beads and finger-rings with inset bezel, as well as wooden coffins for the deceased and statues which seem to represent funerary stelae.

There are however, many more mounds
Fig. 1.
Plan of Shakhoura showing the location of the burial mounds.
still to be excavated at Shakhoura. Mound 7 in area A is certainly the most impressive, measuring $c.120\times70$ m and standing several metres high. Mounds 1 and 2 in area B are each some 70–80 m in diameter. Such mounds would require more than six months of excavation, although the full exposure of Mound 7 might take a whole year. Because of time constraints we decided, therefore, to excavate two smaller mounds in area A, namely Mounds 3 (in 1999) and 5 (in 2000) (5).

Mound 3 was more or less oval, measuring $27\times17$ m and standing 4 m high (Fig. 2). The whole mound consisted of different uneven layers of sand, mixed with smaller stones, and quite large pieces of burnt palmwood fragments. The material used for the mound was probably comprised of cleaned-out sediments particularly from the irrigation channels in the surrounding northern palm gardens (6). In this way an impressive memorial, made up of unwanted sand and rubbish, was erected above the graves. It should also be stressed that on most burial sites, including Shakhoura, bed-rock lies just below the surface. Thus, areas with burial mounds were not ‘wasted’ space because these zones were in fact of no use for gardening.

Fourteen graves were discovered below Mound 3, twelve of which belong to the late third/early second mill. BC and two of which date most likely to the first c.BC/first c.AD.

**The Early Dilmun period graves**
The Early Dilmun graves are between 0.75 and 2.20 m long, 0.65 cm to 1.40 m wide

---

**Fig. 2.**
Mound 3 at Shakhoura, before excavation.

**Fig. 3.**
Grave 10 (Early Dilmun period).
Fig. 4.
Pottery from Mound 3. 1. Painted black-on-red late Umm an-Nar jar from grave 5; 2. Red ridged ware jar from grave 1; 3. Plain red ware, scored jar neck from square 4; 4. Plain red miniature vessel from grave 1; 5. Plain red jar from grave 3; 6. Plain red jar from grave 10.
and 10 to 35 cm deep. All twelve graves were cut directly into the bedrock. Ten graves had only two or three courses of rather small, irregular stones preserved as an upper part. The tops of these graves were most likely flattened by the levelling of the area and subsequent construction of the Tylos graves. The two others were simple, shallow pits in the rock without any delineation. The tombs are either rectangular, oval or circular in shape. All capstones were missing. Four graves have a NW-SE and five a NE-SW orientation. Two others have an almost exact E-W orientation. As was common during the Early Dilmun period, the deceased were interred directly on top of the irregular and sometimes crumbly bedrock or on a thin layer of sand above it. Eight burials contained human bone, albeit completely disarticulated and badly decayed. Only the few remaining bones recovered in tomb 10 (Fig. 3) indicated that the deceased had been buried in a flexed position, with the knees pointing to the south. It is interesting to note the discovery of what could perhaps be the remains of a stone circle constructed around one of the graves.

Some of the graves contain objects (Fig. 4.1–2, 4–6, Fig. 5). In grave 5 we recovered a painted late Umm an-Nar period jar (Fig.
4.1) and several beads, while grave 10 yielded two shell rings, a plain red-ware jar (Fig. 4.6), fragments of a small bitumen-coated basket and fragments of a chain-ridged jar (Fig. 5) with an applied, circular knob on the shoulder bearing the impression of a stamp seal (7), shown upside-down, with two seated men drinking from a vessel through reeds (8).

In the fill of the mound were found several other sherds which can be dated to the late third/early second millennium BC (Fig. 4.3). Some of them might have come from plundered graves and/or from the clearance of the area before the construction of the Tylos graves. Amongst the sherds were several examples of plain red-ridged ware (Fig. 4.2) while painted sherds were rare.

The Tylos-period graves
Two Tylos-period graves were found. One, located at the southeast edge of the mound, had only its floor and very lower part cut into the bedrock, while the upper part, which had almost completely disappeared, was made of stones. The complete tomb must have been plastered over. The burial was approximately 2.80 m long and 1.40 m wide, with a NE-SW orientation.

The second Tylos-period grave (Grave 8), the so-called ‘main grave’ for which the large mound was erected, had an E-W orientation. It had been dug into the bedrock and was completely plastered over (Figs. 6–10). On the bedrock surface a U-shaped construction had been built with its opening to the west (Figs. 6–7). This construction was plastered over and measured 3.60 m in length, 2.40 m in width and 15 cm in height. Two large (2.75 m long) cap-

---

Fig. 7.
Grave 8 (Tylos period) and nefesh.

Fig. 8.
Grave 8 bone plaques.
Fig. 9.
Nefesh at grave 8.
stones, joined with plaster, were found in situ. The grave had been entered by plunderers in the past through holes dug in the plaster in the northeast and northwest corners. The burial-chamber itself was 2.15 m long, 70 cm wide and 1.40 m deep. The plaster on the exterior of the grave showed clear finger streaks and footprints. Textile impressions were visible on the underside of the plaster sealing the capstones, suggesting that a large piece of cloth was used to cover the burial-chamber before the capstones were put in place and the tomb sealed with plaster. This was done perhaps to prevent sand and small stones from falling on the corpse. Large iron nails were hammered into the plaster at regular intervals to keep the cloth in place.

The central tomb was completely empty, but the robbers had nonetheless left large parts of the skeleton and some objects outside the grave. Amongst these finds were two small glazed jars (Fig. 11.3); a fragment of an ivory kohl container; two small stone beads; several iron nails from the destroyed plastered corners; and some flat squarish or rectangular bone plaques, some with a circular perforation (Fig. 8). The function of these bone plaques remains unknown, but similar pieces were found in a relatively rich, unplundered tomb in Mound 1 at Shakhoura (9).

Six metres to the east of the mound, parallel to the grave, a stepped, truncated pyramid (Fig. 7.9–10) was found. Made of small stones and plastered over on all sides, it was c.85 cm high. On top of the pyramid was found a stone with two sculpted, oval bosses, the meaning of which eludes us. This small structure, clearly associated with the central grave, has to be interpreted as a nefesh or ‘the house of the soul of the deceased’. Different types of nefesh were typical for the Arabian tribes who settled on the fringes of the Arabian desert, i.e. from Petra to Qaryat al-Fau to Mleiha, from the third century BC onwards (10). Characteristic for Bahrain are the different slab stelae or idols.
ranging from those with a simple, schematic shape, a rectangular body and a rounded head, to more elaborate reliefs of standing men or women (11). Similar, schematic stelae have been found on Tarut (12), and they occur also in Jordan (13). A stone slab with a schematic idol in relief carved on it from a third-millennium grave on the island of Umm an-Nar, Emirate of Abu Dhabi, has thus far defied explanation (14). It may be a late addition, but such stelae are otherwise unknown in the United Arab Emirates, and no late pre-Islamic occupation is attested on the island.

It seems probable that this pyramidal structure originally stood outside, at the foot of the mound, but was later covered by the sand when the mound started to cave in, erode and lose its steep appearance. This funerary monument, which faces west, has the same orientation as the central grave which most likely belongs to the Middle Tylos period (first c.BC–second c.AD). On Bahrain, an E-W orientation, obviously linked to the movements of the sun, is common in the early Tylos-period (300–100 BC) tombs, but from the Middle Tylos period onwards there is much more variation, imposed by both practical and spatial considerations (15). In any case the orientation of the main grave was almost certainly dictated by a belief in the sun god Shamash, a belief also evidenced by coins (16). This shared belief in Shamash by the Arab population of the Arabian coast of the Gulf was confirmed by the discovery of the first-century AD temple at ed-Dur (UAE), where an Aramaic inscription found on an altar next to the temple mentions the sun god, and also by the locally-minted coins of southeastern Arabia (17).

Conclusion
Although the excavations at Shakhoura Area A, Mound 3 did not provide us with much material for dating purposes or for contributing to the chronological and typological framework of the area, we are nonetheless happy to have contributed in a small way to a better understanding of this important region where so much basic material remains unpublished. At best this may be shown in a museum display case, but at worst much remains hidden in museum basements. The study of all periods on the Arabian shores of the Gulf has made incredible progress in the last two decades and this region, having been neglected for so long, is finally taking a well-merited place in Near Eastern archaeology and history. Although much research remains to be done, this region can no longer be ignored by archaeologists and historians.

References
1. The Ghent University team consisted of Ernie Haerinck, director; Miss Katrien Rutten, field-director; Miss Aurelie Daems and Miss Susie Delbeke, archaeologists. Miss Sine Toft Jensen, from Aarhus University, Denmark, joined the team for almost the complete season. As usual Mr. Erik Smekens acted as photographer-draftsman and also took care of several other tasks. The research was made possible by a grant from the Foundation for Scientific Research–Flanders. The team would also like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Dom Herman, consular agent of Belgium in Bahrain, for their help and kindness.
2. In Bahrain the research was kindly made possible by Sheikha Nayla al-Khalifa, Director of Archaeology and Heritage, and by Dr. Abdullah A. Yateem, Assistant Under-secretary for Culture & National Heritage and Mr. Khaled M. Alsendi, Superintendent of Archaeology at the Bahrain National Museum. Mr. Abbas Ahmad Salman took care of all practical matters on the site and we greatly appreciated his kindness and friendship. Mr. Marzuq Al-Afoo was in charge of the topography. The team was assisted by fifteen Bahraini, Bangladeshi and Indian labourers.


7. Cf. Højlund F & Andersen HH. Qala’at al Bahrain. vol. 1. The Northern City Wall and the Islamic Fortress. Aarhus: JASP, 30/1: 1994: 98, Figs. 228 and 335, Fig. 1747.


9. Al-Sindi & Ibrahim, Une nécropole représentative: 158, illustration of Tomb 2; bone plaques with perforation below the right hand and close to the right femur, together with beads, calcite bell-shaped vessels and an ivory cosmetic container; Ibrahim M. Hafriyat as-shakhura tell A1, Dilmun 18: 1999–2000: 25: detail of the same grave no. 2 (Arabic section).


Addresses:
Aurie Daems
Dept. Near Eastern Art & Archaeology
Ghent University
St. Pietersplein 6
B-9000 Ghent
Belgium
aurie.daems@rug.ac.be

Ernie Haerinck
Dept. Near Eastern Art & Archaeology
Ghent University
St. Pietersplein 6
B-9000 Ghent
Belgium
ernie.haerinck@rug.ac.be

Katrien Rutten
De Damhouderestraat 18/4
B-2018 Antwerpen
Belgium
katrien.rutten@eudoramail.com