



Food for eternity? The analysis of a date offering from a 3rd millennium BC grave at Hili N, Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates)

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the early 3rd millennium BC the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) has played an important role in eastern Arabia where its remains, in the form of seeds, fruits and stem fragments, are preserved on numerous archaeological sites. The recent discovery of a carbonised mass of pitted dates in a collective burial pit from the end of the Umm an-Nar period (ca. 2200–2000 BC) at Hili (United Arab Emirates) constitutes the earliest example of a food preparation involving this species. The present paper describes the discovery and identification of this unique offering before addressing the question of its significance in a funeral context in Bronze Age Arabia.

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1. Introduction

The Early Bronze Age in eastern Arabia is marked by major changes in the economic and social organisation of local populations. The first examples of agricultural production appear in the form of irrigated date palm gardens of oasis type, first installed in the foothill zone and in the wadis of the Oman mountain range (Cleuziou and Costantini, 1980; Tengberg, 2003). Metallurgical activities and pottery production develop parallel to the intensification of long-distance trade involving the regions located on the northern shores of the Persian Gulf (Mesopotamia, Indo-Iranian borderland) (Méry, 2000; Weeks, 2003).

During this period villages were organised around large circular mud brick towers, built on a massive base and reaching a height of several metres (Potts, 1990, 78–80, 101–102). A well in the centre of the tower provided an independent supply of water to its inhabitants. Archaeological excavations have shown that surrounding dwellings consisted of either small mud brick houses or ephemeral hut-like structures.

Another typical feature of the Bronze Age cultures in the Oman peninsula are the graves associated with particular funerary practices. During the second part of the Early Bronze age (Umm an-Nar period, 2700–2100 BC) graves are characteristically monumental, circular and constructed of carefully picked and fitted stone masonry. They are

divided into several chambers and contain collective burials, sometimes involving several hundred individuals. Around 2200 BC, another kind of collective burial, consisting of large sepulchral pits, appears in eastern Arabia (Al Hadouh, 1989; Al Tikriti, 1989). One of the two examples known so far is located in the northern part of the Hili oasis (Hili N), 150 km east of the modern city of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (Fig. 1). The pit was first excavated by an Emirati team (seasons 1984–1989) then by a French team (seasons 1998–2006) (Al Tikriti and Méry, 2000; Al Hadouh, 1989; Gatto et al., 2003; McSweeney et al., 2008; Méry et al., 2001, 2004, 2008).

The recent discovery in this pit of a loaf-shaped food preparation, identified as made of date fruits, constitutes a unique example of a plant food offering in the Arabian peninsula. Previous finds of offerings probably intended as food in funerary contexts from the Neolithic and later consist exclusively of faunal remains, such as bones from mammals and fish (Salvatori, 2007, 22). The presence of an alimentary preparation involving dates, the first of its kind in the Middle East, echoes the importance of the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) in this region, both from an economic and a symbolic point of view.

The present article describes the discovery and identification of the Hili date find before a more general discussion on the role played by the date palm as well as the practice of offering foodstuffs in burial contexts in Bronze Age Arabia and surrounding regions.

2. Excavation of the burial place at Hili N

The sepulchral pit at Hili N is part of a larger burial ground called Hili Garden that includes a dozen characteristic, circular Umm

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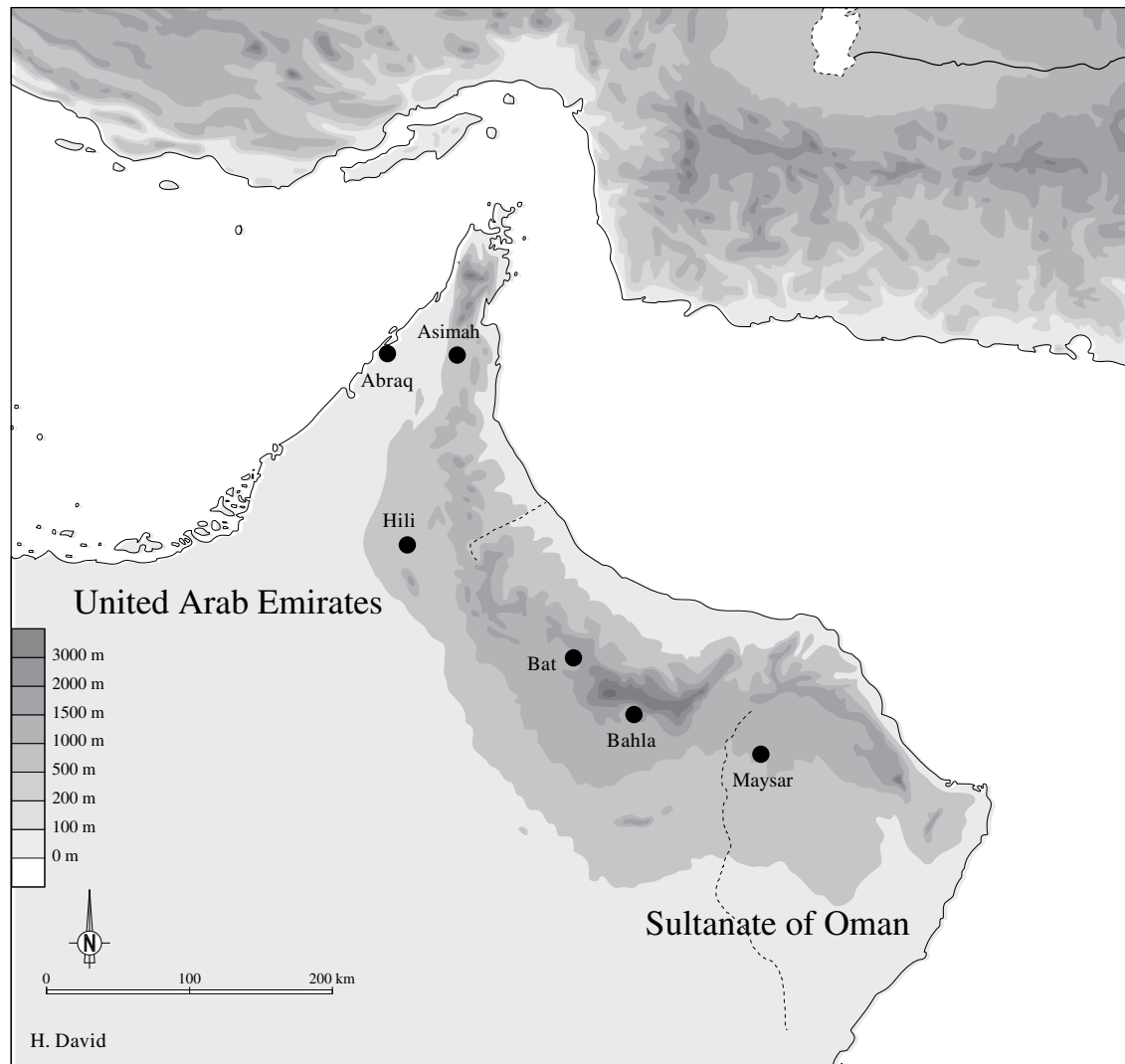


Fig. 1. Location of Hili and other 3rd millennium BC oasis sites in the Oman peninsula.

an-Nar graves. The Hili N pit constitutes the last collective burial in the area dated to the Umm an-Nar Period and is situated around 100 m from the most recent of the earlier monumental stone graves (no. 1059), that is also one of the most famous ancient monuments of the United Arab Emirates. An older monumental grave called Hili E is immediately adjacent to the pit (Fig. 2).

The excavation of the burial pit has revealed the presence of exceptionally thick (up to 1.7 m) and intact burial deposits (Fig. 3a and b). These offered a unique possibility to reconstruct the precise chronology and nature of the burial practices that lasted for at least two centuries according to C14 dating and the artefacts from the deposits (Méry et al., 2004). Four different burial phases have been distinguished containing a majority (if not all) of primary burials (Gatto et al., 2003). The study of over 850 ceramic vessels and rims, dozens of stone vessels and metal objects as well as several thousand ornaments found during the excavation of the pit has even led to a reconsideration of the chronology of the end of the Early Bronze age in this region (McSweeney et al., 2008).

The 8 m long and 2.5 m deep pit seems to have been covered originally by a light structure, possibly made of the midribs of palm leaves. Later, it was closed by limestone slabs that preserved the tomb from discovery after its abandon. The skeletons found in the pit seem to have resulted from natural death followed by a rapid burial. Some of the corpses were placed against the wall of the pit,

but in most cases they were laid down in a flexed position either on their left or on their right side, sometimes in a decubitus dorsal position. The position of the deceased was variable, depending on the space that was left or could be freed in the tomb. Sometimes sand was added in order to create an artificial level on which the



Fig. 2. General view of the burial pit at Hili N and the adjacent circular Hili E tomb (© S. Méry).

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