

## Wine for the Afterlife – Tombs and Burial Practices at Mleiha in SE-Arabia\*

by

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KEYWORDS. — Mleiha; Arabia; Wine; Rhodian Amphorae; Bronze Bowl.

SUMMARY. — SE-Arabia is strategically located near the Strait of Hormuz and developed in the 3rd century BCE into a major player on the international trade routes. The “kingdom of Oman” with its own currency inspired by that of the Hellenistic empires controlled much of the caravan and sea trade. Since 2009, the Royal Museums of Art and History, in close collaboration with SAA (Sharjah Archaeology Authority), have conducted excavations at Mleiha (United Arab Emirates), the alleged capital of the kingdom. Excavations in the city’s necropolis show the importance of wine in pre-Islamic burial traditions and the presence of international imports.

TREFWOORDEN. — Mleiha; Arabië; Wijn; Rhodische amfora; Bronzen schotel.

SAMENVATTING. — *Wijn voor het hiernamaals – graven en grafgebruiken te Mleiha in ZO-Arabië.* — In de 3de eeuw v. Chr. ontwikkelde ZO-Arabië zich dankzij de strategische ligging aan de Straat van Hormuz tot een draaischijf in de internationale handel. Er ontstond een koninkrijk met de naam „Oman” dat een eigen munt had, geïnspireerd door de Hellenistische rijken, en een groot deel van de karavaan- en zeehandel beheerste. Sinds 2009 wordt door de Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis, in samenwerking met de *Sharjah Archaeology Authority* opgegraven te Mleiha (Verenigde Arabische Emiraten), de vermoedelijke hoofdstad van het koninkrijk. Opgravingen in de necropool van de stad tonen het belang van wijn in de pre-Islamitische cultuur en de invloed van de internationale contacten op de Arabische tradities.

MOTS-CLÉS. — Mleiha; Arabie; Vin; Amphores de Rhodes; Coupe en bronze.

RÉSUMÉ. — *Du vin pour l’au-delà – tombes et pratiques funéraires à Mleiha en Arabie du sud-est.* — Grâce à son emplacement stratégique sur le détroit d’Ormuz, l’Arabie du sud-est est devenue au 3<sup>e</sup> siècle avant notre ère une plaque tournante du commerce international. Le royaume appelé «Oman» avait sa propre monnaie, inspirée de celle des empires hellénistiques, et contrôlait l’essentiel du commerce caravanier et maritime. Depuis 2009, les Musées royaux d’Art et d’Histoire, en collaboration avec la SAA (*Sharjah Archaeology Authority*), mènent des fouilles à Mleiha (Émirats arabes unis), la supposée capitale du royaume. Les fouilles dans la nécropole de la ville démontrent

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l'importance du vin dans la culture préislamique et l'influence des contacts internationaux sur les traditions arabes.

### **The Mleiha Period in the Oman Peninsula**

After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, the Diadochi, Alexander's former generals, divided his realm and founded the first Hellenistic empires. Most of the Arabian peninsula had never been part of Alexander's territory, but many Arab cities and communities still took advantage of the surge in international trade that these Hellenistic empires brought about. One of these was a kingdom in the Oman peninsula, the present-day territory of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the northern parts of the Sultanate of Oman.

Its principal site is Mleiha, an oasis in Sharjah Emirate, at the centre of the peninsula. It is thought to be the authority behind the SE-Arabian coins that bear the name *Abiel*, "my father is god", apparently the ruler's hereditary throne name (MACDONALD 2010, pp. 438, 444). Its iconography resembles closely the coin issues of contemporary Hellenistic rulers. The reverse shows an imitation of Alexander's head with the pelt of the Nemean lion; the obverse a seated figure holding a staff and an eagle, horse or rhyton, a reminiscence of the Greek Zeus and his eagle (VAN ALFEN 2010, HAERINCK *et al.* 2021).

In the 3rd century BCE, Mleiha became a major trading hub for caravans from North and South Arabia but geopolitical events would strongly affect its fate. From the mid-1st century BCE sea trade overtook traditional caravan transport in importance and harbours, such as ed-Dur on the western and Dibba and Sohar on the eastern coast, had to accommodate more of its trade activities. Ed-Dur was the main harbour between Qatar and the Strait of Hormuz from ca. 50-25 BCE to ca. 125-150 CE and channelled a massive flow of goods. It was a large site, covering several km<sup>2</sup> with fortified buildings, ephemeral habitations, a graveyard and a temple. The fate of ed-Dur was closely linked to that of South-Mesopotamian Characene, a Parthian client kingdom that largely controlled the Gulf's sea trade (HAERINCK 1998; CALLOT 2010, p. 393). When Characene lost its dominant position as a result of the Roman emperor Trajan's wars (116-117 CE), ed-Dur rapidly lost its importance; it was almost completely abandoned and would never recover.

The Mleiha kingdom continued to thrive for another two hundred years, however, until the rise of the Sasanian dynasty in Iran and the Near East in the early 3rd century CE. By 262 CE, the Sasanian king Shapur I (c. 241-272 CE) listed the SE-Arabian territories as part of his dominions in his trilingual *Res gestae divi Saporis* inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam in Southern Iran. Whether his authority ever extended much beyond the coastal areas remains debatable (MOUTON & CUNY 2012). It is clear, however, that the Sasanians had monopolized the long-

distance trade routes between the Far East and the Mediterranean, thus effectively stripping away Mleiha's core business and the base of its prosperity.

The site was apparently deserted on short notice, presumably during a crisis, given the unusually large amount of luxurious and valuable goods left behind. The siege and burning of the so-called "palace", a fortified manor at Mleiha (fig. 1), seems to confirm this. Whom these assailants at Mleiha actually were still remains uncertain. The timing of the event is, however, significant.

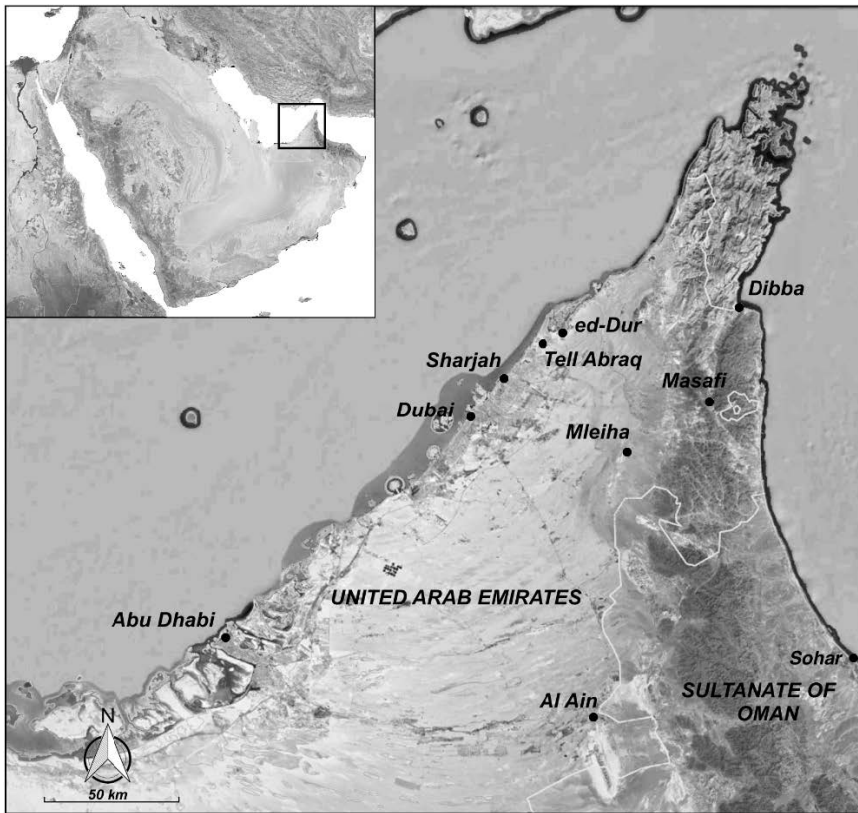


Fig. 1. — Map of SE-Arabia with location of the main Mleiha period archaeological sites.

### Belgian Archaeological Research in SE-Arabia

Archaeological research in SE-Arabia was comparatively limited until the early 1980s and few had realized the region's importance during the so-called Hellenistic and Partho-Sasanian periods; a telling but now outdated label for the

region since it refers to political authorities in other parts of the Near East. With the expulsion of international research teams from Iran in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, archaeologists focused their attention more on the Arabian coast of the Gulf. This included a Belgian team headed by Ernie Haerinck from Ghent University who excavated from 1987 until 1995 at ed-Dur in the context of an international consortium with French, British and Danish universities (BOUCHARLAT *et al.* 1988, 1989; HAERINCK *et al.* 2021). These excavations brought about major new insights into the region’s history, particularly for the “ed-Dur phase” (mid-1st century BCE to early 2nd century CE). To better understand the formative phase of what would prove to be an Arabian kingdom, an excavation project started in 2009 at Mleiha (Sharjah Emirate, UAE), the main site of the so-called “late pre-Islamic period” (tab. 1) in the Oman Peninsula (OVERLAET 2015, 2018).

**Table 1**

Chronology of the late pre-Islamic period or PIR (*pré-islamique récent*) in the Oman peninsula

Period	Phase	Time span	PIR phases (MOUTON & CUNY 2012)
Mleiha period	Early Mleiha phase	Early/mid-3rd century – mid-/late 1st century BCE	A B
	Ed-Dur phase	Mid-/late 1st century BCE – early 2nd century CE	C
	Late Mleiha phase	Early/mid-2nd century CE – mid-3rd century CE	D
Sasanid period	Post-Mleiha phase	Mid-/late 3rd century – early 7th century CE	E

### Rhodian Amphorae at Mleiha

The Belgian excavations at Mleiha mainly targeted the necropolis and specifically its early Mleiha phase monumental tombs (fig. 2). The 2009 to 2015 excavations in area AV had revealed several clusters of monumental tombs and although all of them had been thoroughly plundered, many still contained fragments of Rhodian wine amphorae (tab. 2) (HAERINCK & OVERLAET 2018, pp. 52-53, pl. 12; OVERLAET 2015, 2018).

Wine played an important role in pre-Islamic Arabia, although it would be more correct to speak of “fermented drinks” rather than simply “wine”, since it was not only produced from grapes, but also from dates, honey and cereals. These Arabian wines were usually transported in simple wineskins. They were stored in wine casks, in vessels or even in palm-leaf baskets that were coated with bitumen to make them watertight. The Arabs distinguished four wine colours and drank their “wines” either pure or thinned with water, sometimes mixing them with aromatics such as frankincense and myrrh or adding spices like pepper and sweet basil to create a range of different flavours (MARAQTEN 1993).

The island of Tylos in the Gulf and South Arabia were among the renowned wine producers and Southern Arabia (Yemen counted eighteen different wine grape varieties) exported wine to places like Barygaza in India (Periplus; CASSON 1989, pp. 65, 81). At the same time, Arabia was a wine importer with a strong interest in wines from the Mediterranean, Syria, Palestine and Iraq (MARAQTEN 1993, pp. 105, 107).



Fig. 2. — Satellite view of Mleiha with the main excavation areas. The graveyard to the south and east of the settlement is shown with a grey overlay. Rhodian amphorae were discovered in the red-circled graveyard areas.

The Greek island of Rhodes in the Mediterranean Sea was in Hellenistic times one of the major producers and exporters of wine. For over three hundred years, it shipped wine in locally-produced and very recognizable types of amphorae. Most of these were identified with stamps on the handles: one handle had the name of a yearly-elected official with the Greek preposition *epi*, “under the term of”; the other displayed the manufacturer’s stamp. With the exception of the early period, the officials’ stamps always bear the name of a month of the Rhodian calendar. Symbols are often included in the stamp, mostly in connection with the manufacturer’s name (head of Helios, an animal, a divine attribute,...). Rhodian amphorae were systematically stamped for about two hundred and seventy years, from about 304 BCE until the sack of Rhodes by Cassius in 43 BCE. When production later resumed in the Augustan era, however, the tradition of stamping was discontinued (FINKIELSZTEJN 2001, BADOUD 2015).

Mleiha is at present the only site in Arabia where a significant number of Rhodian amphorae are documented and their importance for the site's chronology cannot be overrated (tab. 2, fig. 7). Specialists of Rhodian amphorae have studied the combinations and sequences of eponyms with style features and fabricants to determine the approximate years in which officials were in office. These lists now help to determine the production date of individual amphorae. They provide the Mleiha finds a *datum post quem* for the deposition of amphorae in tombs or their occurrence in some of the settlement areas. The analysis of the Rhodian amphora corpus from Mleiha in table 2 demonstrates that there must have been a fairly regular import from the early 3rd century BCE to the end of the early Mleiha phase (MONSIEUR *et al.* 2013, OVERLAET *et al.* 2019).

The use of imported (and very recognizable) wine containers such as those from Rhodes at inland sites may often have been a status symbol. This would explain the presence of Mediterranean wine amphorae amongst grave goods of important burials in *e.g.* Babylon and Uruk in Mesopotamia (amphorae from Rhodes and Thasos: PEDDE 1993; BOIY 2004, p. 41) and Susa in Iran (Rhodes: MONSIEUR *et al.* 2011). At Mleiha, Rhodian amphorae should even be regarded as a type artefact amongst the burial goods in the early Mleiha monumental tombs. It is doubtful, however, that they always contained the original Rhodian wine. Some may have been refilled with other wines or maybe even have contained other commodities since a number of amphorae show ancient repairs or were glazed on their way to Mleiha (see fig. 7).

Mediterranean amphorae, at first merely modest containers for various liquids like wine, oil or *garum*, were apparently valued at Mleiha. The difficulties and the associated cost of transporting them to this SE-Arabian inland destination may have been part of their local appeal. Since the shape of Rhodian (and other) amphorae was adapted to mass transport and storage in a ship's hull, it was much less suited for land transport. When amphorae had to be loaded on camel's back to be transported to inland sites, it was cumbersome. They needed to be placed in protective casings or ropes to avoid breakage, a practice occasionally depicted on Hellenistic camel-shaped ceramic vessels (GUBEL 2007-2008, pp. 9-11, fig. 8).

**Table 2**  
Survey of the identified Rhodian amphorae and amphora stamps from Mleiha with reference to their findspot  
(red = graveyard; black = settlement or surface find) (updated table from OVERLAET *et al.* 2019).

Phase: Finkielstein's <i>chronologie basse</i>	Date	Eponym <i>Graveyard</i>	Fabricant <i>Graveyard</i>	Mleiha sector <i>Graveyard area</i> Settlement/surface
I	c. 304-235			AI (c. 270-250) F (early 3rd cent. BCE)
II	c. 234-199	Aristeus (c. 233-220) Eukles II (c. 233-220)	Kreon	E
III	c. 198-161	Sodamos (c. 195) Timasagoras (c. 184) Agemachos (c. 181-179) Ainesidamos II (c. 179/177) Ariston II (c. 167-165)	Antigonos Apollonios Iason I Aristogeitos Damocrates Diskos II (c. 189) ----- IIIb-IVb: Antimachos Aisopos/Nysios	F (2nd cent. BCE) C AV-Z, Q & P E W
IV	c. 160-146	Timourrodos (c. 159/8-154/3) Eudamos (c. 150/147)		AV-Q Surface
V	c. 145-108	Andromikos (c. 132)		7 Surface
VI	c. 107-88/86		Vc-VI: Philostephanos (?) (c. 118-88/86+)	7 (c. 107-43) Surface
VIIa	c. 87/85-43			



### Wine Sets in SE-Arabia

Fermented drinks usually had to be mixed, spiced and/or sieved before they could be enjoyed and this gave rise to special utensils or attributes. Many of these have a long history in the Near East. When Xenophon described the use of straws with strainers at the tip to drink barley wine, he was referring to a tradition that was already depicted on Near-Eastern reliefs as early as the 3rd millennium BCE: “[...] barley wine in large bowls. Floating on the top of this drink were the barley grains and in it were straws, some larger and others smaller, without joints; and when one was thirsty, he had to take these straws into his mouth and suck. It was an extremely strong drink unless one diluted it with water, and extremely good when one was used to it” (Anabasis 4.5.26-28) (on straws, see OVERLAET 2003, p. 193, fig. 160). By Hellenistic times the use of other utensils to filter fermented drinks was widespread. MOOREY (1980) discussed “wine sets” with sieves, drinking bowls and ladles to scoop the wine from the Iron Age to the Hellenistic period in burial contexts around the Mediterranean, in Egypt, the Near East and Iran. Since his discussion of this phenomenon, the excavations in SE-Arabia have revealed many more examples, including some with a local type of strainer.

Several complete and fragmentary wine sets were discovered by Haerinck in tombs at ed-Dur (fig. 3) (HAERINCK 1994; HAERINCK *et al.* 2021, fig. B2, pl. 20-21, G). They include ladles and three different types of sieves. Figure 3b-f illustrates the bronze wine attributes found in the undisturbed communal ed-Dur tomb G.5156. The strainers 3b and c have a rim and/or horizontal handles that could rest on the mouth of a vessel to filter the liquid while decanting the wine. Figure 3b fits neatly on top of the green glazed table amphora from the same tomb, a pottery vessel imported from South Mesopotamia (fig. 3a).

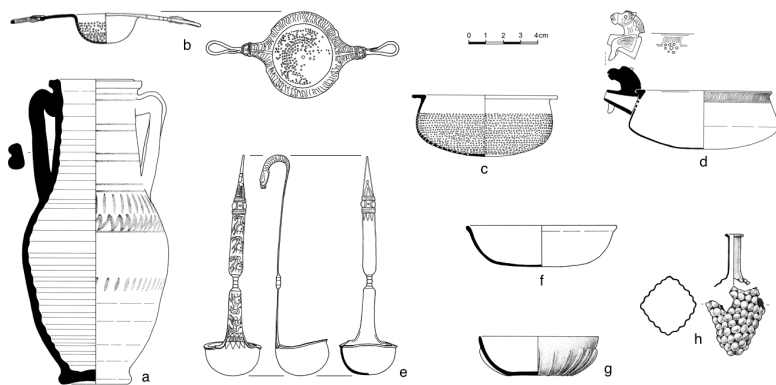


Fig. 3. — Selection of wine-related items discovered in the communal tomb G.5156 at ed-Dur (UAE): a. Green-glazed South Mesopotamian table amphora; b-c. Bronze sieves; d. Bronze pouring bowl with sieve and spout; e. Bronze ladle; f. Bronze drinking bowl; g. Roman glass bowl; h. Roman glass bottle in the shape of a bunch of grapes (after HAERINCK 2001, pl. 90-95).



The two-handled strainer type was known throughout the Hellenistic world (QUERTINMONT 2013-2015). Its animal-shaped extremities and its engraved decoration, more specifically the incised wavy lines pattern on the flat rim, are identical to the pattern on the pouring bowl with horse protome from the same wine set (fig. 3d) and that on many other pouring and drinking bowls from SE-Arabia. It suggests a local production imitating a Hellenistic model. Pouring bowls like those on figure 3d seem to duplicate the function of the larger sieves since the spouts with their sculptural decoration in the shape of a horse or a bull protome (at Salūt also a sphinx; DEGLI ESPOSTI *et al.* 2019) are placed over a group of small perforations. One could imagine the wine being transferred with the ladle (fig. 3e) from the (table) amphora to the pouring bowl and then being poured into drinking bowls like figures 3f and g.

The horse- and bull-shaped spouts are characteristic of the Mleiha period and have been found in significant numbers in tombs at ed-Dur, Mleiha and Dibba in the UAE (BENOIST *et al.* 1994, fig. 11; MOUTON *et al.* 1997, p. 47, fig. 25; JASIM 1999, p. 83, fig. 33; JASIM 2006, fig. 55; OVERLAET 2018, pp. 22-26, fig. 17) and at al-Rustaq, Samad, Sama'il/al-Baruni and Salūt in the Sultanate of Oman (YULE 2001, taf. 240, 447, 533-534; AVANZINI 2007, fig. 5). Outside SE-Arabia, only two specimens have up to now been excavated. One was discovered at Jebel Kenzan in Eastern Arabia (POTTS 1989, p. 74, figs. 118-119); the other at Sumhuram in the southernmost part of the Sultanate of Oman (AVANZINI 2007, fig. 5; PAVAN 2011, pp. 106, 109, fig. 10). The ed-Dur communal tomb G.5156 also contained some plain bronze and a Roman glass drinking bowl (fig. 3f-g). The presence of bronze bowls at ed-Dur is rather rare since Mediterranean glass bowls, which were massively imported into the region during the ed-Dur phase, seem to have largely replaced metal drinking bowls. Bronze (and occasionally silver) drinking bowls, sometimes lavishly decorated, are on the contrary common in the preceding early Mleiha phase. Up to now, only one decorated example has been found at ed-Dur but as its iconography closely follows 8th-7th century BCE Levantine examples, it may have been an heirloom (fig. 8; OVERLAET & YULE 2018). About a dozen decorated bowls or fragments are on the contrary reported from Mleiha alone; one of these was found in association with a Rhodian amphora in the “tomb of Amud”.

### The “Tomb of Amud” at Mleiha

Tomb FA-5, the so-called “tomb of Amud”, was excavated by the Belgian team from 2015 to 2017. It is located in area F at the western part of the graveyard (see fig. 2) where four monumental tombs were explored in the 1980s by a French expedition (tombs FA-1 to 4; MOUTON 2008, figs. 32-33). Like all monumental tombs at Mleiha, these were robbed in antiquity but among the findings were fragments of Rhodian amphorae, of decorated bronze bowls, some glass,

jewellery and pottery from both the early Mleiha and the ed-Dur phase. This suggested the area could contribute to a better understanding of the chronology of the two phases and it was decided in 2015 to excavate a fifth adjoining monumental tomb that was left unexplored in the 1980s. Area F proved to be a cluster of five monumental tombs with a series of medium- and small-sized tombs to its south (see fig. 2). This is a characteristic pattern throughout the Mleiha graveyard and such clusters, ranging from just a few monumental tombs to more than a dozen ones in combination with larger numbers of more modest graves, may represent family or tribal groups.

The monumental tombs of the early Mleiha phase were apparently all intended for individual burials but the size of their underground burial chambers could vary considerably and probably depended primarily on the amount of burial goods they needed to accommodate. The burial pits varied from a simple rectangular pit of about one by two metres to large square rooms of up to 4 by 4 m that could need additional transversal walls to support the heavy roof and the superstructure (figs. 4-5). The burial chambers were closed by a massive layer of mud brick, which represented an impressive weight, supported by wooden beams of 10 to 12 cm in diameter. Many tombs had no separate access and were permanently sealed once the burial chamber's roof of beams and mud brick was put in place. The larger tombs, however, often had a separate entrance from the side, usually a dug-out stairway, sometimes in combination with a long corridor. Once the burial had taken place, these entrances were blocked with a mud-brick or stone wall and filled up with sand (fig. 4).

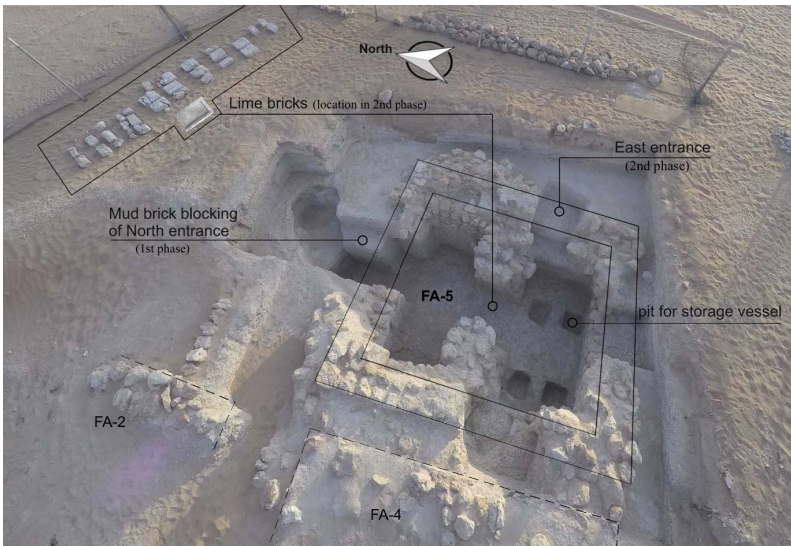


Fig. 4. — The underground chambers of tomb FA-5 (“tomb of Amud”) after the excavation in 2017 with an indication of the outline of the square superstructure.

Figure 4 gives an overview of the subterranean burial chamber of the tomb of Amud, one of the largest tombs at Mleiha. The corridor-shaped access from the north was closed by a 1-m thick mud-brick wall across the passage, half of which is left *in situ* and can be seen on the photograph. The two short walls in the centre of the burial room were necessary to support the heavy mud-brick “roof” that doubled the floor of the building above (fig. 5). This indeed created a H-shaped plan with two elongated parallel rooms. Rectangular cavities were dug out in the back-room floor to position storage vessels or amphorae with their rounded or pointed base. A Rhodian amphora was found *in situ*, set in a similar floor pit in another tomb at Mleiha (OVERLAET *et al.* 2019, p. 244, fig. 3). The lower part of the burial chamber was dug out in a compact marl layer but the upper half, just above the thin gravel layer in figure 5, was dug through softer soil. This part of the walls was raised with boulders from the nearby mountains set in mortar. The chamber was then covered with the beams resting on the stone walls, topped with five mud-brick layers. The floor was still preserved in the SW part of the building when the excavations started, documenting its precise composition and the bond of the mud bricks (fig. 5).

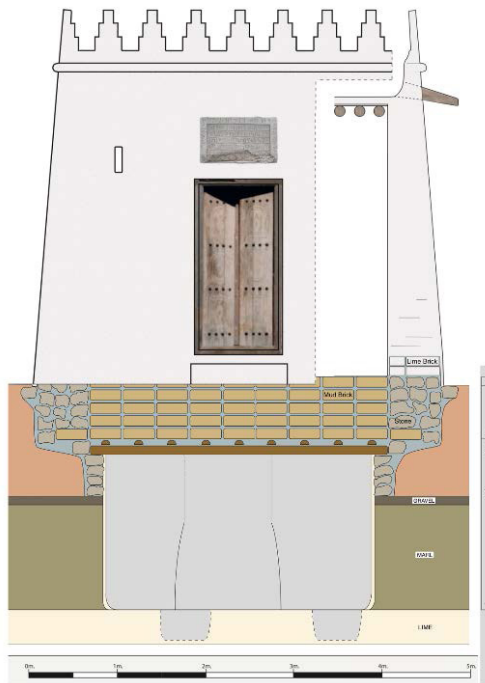


Fig. 5. — Tentative reconstruction of the superstructure and section of the underground burial pit of tomb FA-5, the “tomb of Amud” (drawing, B. De Prez & B. Overlaet).

Little was preserved of the superstructure because the area was bulldozed in the 1960s and used for agriculture. Nevertheless, parts of the original lime brick crenelations of the building were found next to the foundations of the walls and some of the lime bricks of the walls were still *in situ* on the stone foundations. Originally, it was an almost square building that stood an estimated three to four metres high with slightly leaning walls, which is typical of traditional Arabian architecture. A small platform or step at the north side led to the door of the superstructure. It was placed above the bricked-up and filled entrance corridor to the burial chamber.

Tomb FA-5 was looted and re-used during the Mleiha period. The stratigraphy allows some understanding of the chain of events. When the original burial was first disturbed, the looters almost completely emptied the tomb, leaving merely a broken amphora, some sherds, a bronze bowl and some small metal fragments. When the underground burial chamber opened up, sand infiltrated and piled up until it filled about half of the chambers' depth. At that time, the southernmost tomb chamber was renovated to receive another burial. A new stair-shaped entrance was dug at the eastern side to the depth of what was the floor level of the now partially filled room and what remained of the passage between the two burial chambers was bricked up. It created a new but much smaller burial chamber, about one fourth of the volume of the original tomb. Eventually, also this second grave would be robbed.

The superstructure of tomb FA-5 and those of the neighbouring tombs had in all probability fallen in disrepair by the time the tomb was re-used since the bricks that closed the passage between the two underground chambers were lime bricks, otherwise only used in superstructures of funerary monuments. Lime bricks were produced in the same way as traditional mud bricks but the use of lime, which could be found at the site, made them much stronger and weatherproof. When they closed the passage, they used wall bricks, fragments of crenelations and a large block with an inscription, measuring 87 by 52 cm (see fig. 4 top left and fig. 6). The inscription was not visible; it faced the other lime bricks and it is thus not related to the later burial. It must have been taken from the superstructure of tomb FA-5, or perhaps even from one of the four neighbouring tombs. Given this uncertainty, the label "tomb of Amud", which refers to the name of the deceased mentioned in the inscription, remains to some extent a speculative attribution. The block's original place in the building is uncertain but it is tentatively placed above the entrance in the reconstruction in figure 5 since fragments of a similarly inscribed lime brick were discovered in front of the entrance to another monumental tomb at Mleiha.

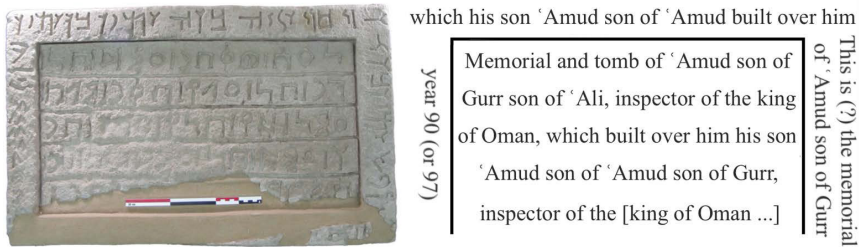


Fig. 6. — Bilingual funerary inscription in monumental South-Arabian (central panel) and Aramaic (rim) script on a lime brick block of 87 by 52 cm, re-used in Mleiha tomb FA-5. The lower part was damaged by water infiltration (translation: MULTHOFF & STEIN 2018).

The funerary inscription in monumental South-Arabian and Aramaic script is of exceptional historical importance (fig. 6, OVERLAET *et al.* 2016, MULTHOFF & STEIN 2018). It reveals that the deceased was named Amud and that his son constructed the tomb for his father in the year 90 or 97 (the text is damaged at this point), which translates from the Seleucid era to the year 222-221 or 215-214 BCE. It confirms that these early Mleiha tombs were not family tombs but the resting place of single individuals. Moreover, both men appear to have been “inspectors of the king of Oman”; it is the first reference to the name “Oman” and to a king in 3rd century BCE south-eastern Arabia. The use of Aramaic for the shortened version of the text and its use of the Seleucid era emphasize the importance of trade for Mleiha. At that time, Aramaic was the *lingua franca* used in commerce throughout the Near East.

Since the tomb of Amud was looted, only a few finds can be associated with the original late 3rd century burial; among these are a highly-decorated bronze drinking bowl (fig. 7c & fig. 9) and a Rhodian black-glazed amphora (fig. 7b). The bronze bowl was found on the original floor in the passage between the rooms. The amphora was broken but all fragments were found in the lower part of the fill that predated the tomb’s re-use. Its shape indicates an early to mid-3rd century BCE production date, which agrees well with the burial date provided by the inscription, accounting for the time needed for transport, glazing, use and tomb deposition. The uncertainty that remains about the association of the inscription with this specific tomb, is of minor importance. The five monumental tombs share close characteristics, also in the finds, and represent the same chronological phase. Their construction as a group must be placed in the 3rd century, possibly extending into the early 2nd century BCE.

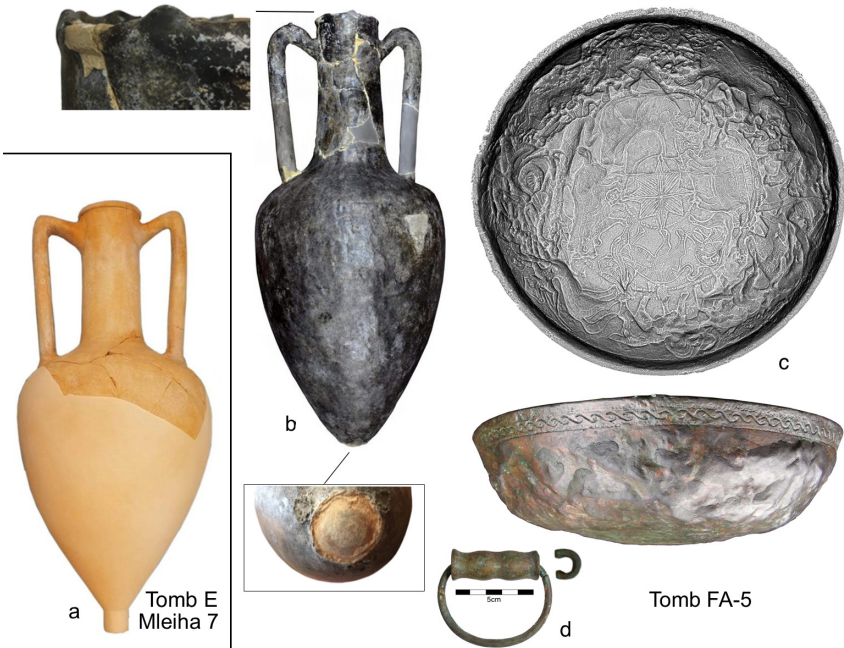


Fig. 7. — Pottery and bronze finds from Mleiha tombs 7E (a) and FA-5, the “tomb of Amud” (b-d): a. Rhodian amphora from the monumental tomb E in graveyard area 7 (see fig. 2) stamped by the official Ainesidamos (c. 179-177 BCE) and the fabricant Damokrates (preserved H. 48 cm; lower part reconstructed); b. Rhodian amphora with black glaze, the spike has been deliberately removed (H. 76 cm); c. Bronze bowl with embossed and chased decoration (see fig. 9) (diam. 21 cm); d. Bronze loop handle (max. width 7.5 cm).

The Rhodian wine amphora is exceptional because of its thick black glaze. Large drops of glaze are visible on the rim and on the top of the handles; they illustrate how the vessel was dipped in the liquid glaze and was then placed upside down to let the excess glaze drip off. This glazing was a later adaptation since these amphorae were never glazed in Rhodes. Apparently, it was done somewhere on the route from the Mediterranean coast over Mesopotamia and Northern Arabia, probably somewhere in southern Mesopotamia since the glazed pottery of SE-Arabia (like the table amphorae of figures 3 and 10) was generally produced there. The black colour is rather unique; the repertoire was normally limited to a whitish/yellow to green/turquoise spectrum. This “upgrading” of plain Rhodian amphorae may have been specifically targeting SE-Arabian clients since none have been reported from elsewhere. Apart from this complete vessel, sherds of two others were found at Mleiha: a black-glazed shoulder sherd in area FK and a green-glazed handle in area 7 (see fig. 2).

To be able to glaze an amphora, it obviously had to be emptied, leaving it an open question what the precise content was when it arrived at Mleiha. More



Rhodian amphorae from the tombs must have been (re)filled with wines or liquids other than Rhodian wine since several show traces of repairs (OVERLAET *et al.* 2019, fig. 3). Another adaptation to local taste or use was the removal of the typical amphora spike, something that was also noted on plain amphorae from Mleiha. The exposed clay surface on the amphora's bottom (see fig. 7b) shows where the spike was removed after the vessel had been glazed. The three rough oval spots in the glaze around it are spur marks, left by the support on which the amphora was placed in the pottery kiln during glaze refiring.

The metal bowl (figs. 7c and 9) is an unusual example of the SE-Arabian decorated bronze and silver drinking bowls. The common decorative pattern of these bowls are concentric rings with diverse images of animals, palm trees, fighting or hunting scenes around a central rosette or star. This is a decorative pattern that stands in a long tradition, originating from an 8th-7th century BCE Levantine production. Heirlooms must have directly inspired some of the craftsmen as is shown by a bowl from ed-Dur, decorated in a local style but displaying the mirror image of a familiar scene on much older Levantine bowls (fig. 8).

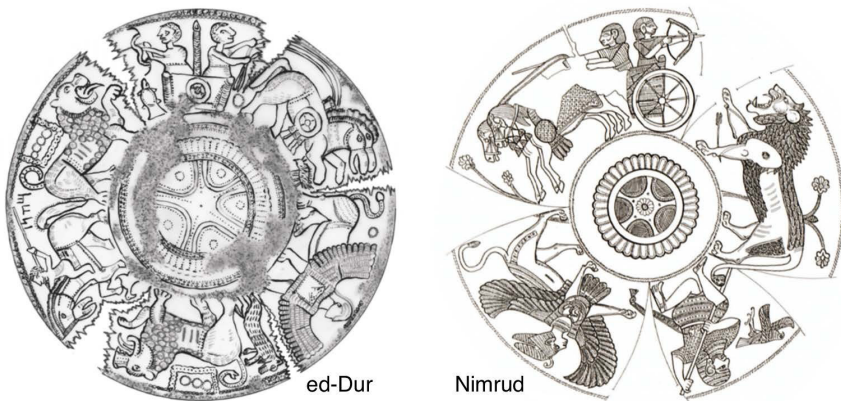


Fig. 8. — Bronze bowl from ed-Dur with a local interpretation of a sphinx and a lion hunt from a horse-drawn chariot around a five-petalled flower, an Iron Age iconographic theme, depicted on the right on a Levantine bowl excavated at the Assyrian capital Nimrud in Iraq (ed-Dur: drawing by P. Hudson, after OVERLAET & YULE 2018 / Nimrud: British Museum, inv. BM.118780, after CURTIS & TALLIS 2012, p. 116).

The bowl from the tomb of Amud is exceptional, however. Most SE-Arabian bowls display scenes taken from Arabian life (hunting scenes, warfare, wildlife, palm trees,...) combined with Hellenistic elements such as centaurs, ichthyocentaurs, gryphons and sphinxes. The bowl from the tomb of Amud falls into this second category but its decoration was drastically altered in antiquity. Some of the iconography was kept, some parts were reworked and new figures were added on top of existing ones. Since corrosion has damaged parts of its surface, it is no longer



possible to perceive all the details of the decorations but differences in style and workmanship can help distinguish between original and later imagery. The decoration is set in two circular bands around a central rosette. The original decoration in the outer band is hammered in relief and is finished with deeply engraved lines. The lion hunting scene with an Arab and his camel holding a lasso and the fighting centaur belong to these initial decorations (fig. 9a,b). The centaur was fighting against an ichthyocentaur in the original design but this creature was reshaped in what now seems to be a pair of pelicans, their wings spread onto the rim of the vessel. Several SE-Arabian bowls display ichthyocentaurs with an elongated curled body and forked tail. This Hellenistic theme is known from temples in southern Mesopotamia and was apparently also popular in SE-Arabia (KOSE 1998, pp. 321-322, 647, pl. 114-115, 123; OVERLAET *et al.* 2017, pp. 43-45, figs. 22-23). Several other animals, including a goat or gazelle with curved horns and an African elephant (fig. 9d), can be recognized in the outer band.

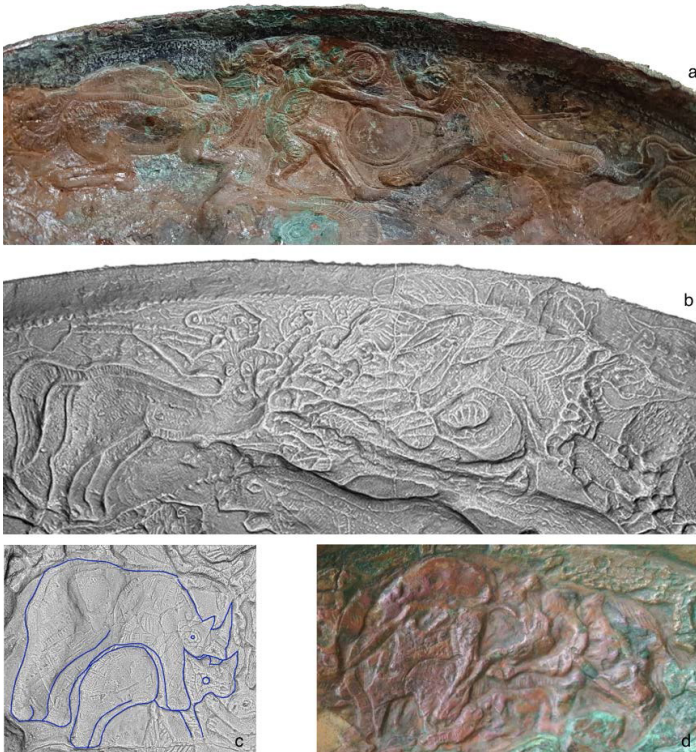


Fig. 9. — Details of the bronze bowl from tomb FA-5 at Mleiha (compare fig. 7c): a. A hunter in front of his camel holds a lasso and stabs a lion; b. Centaur fighting a pelican (?), originally the fight between a centaur and an ichthyocentaur; c. Mating rhinoceros; d. African elephant (b & c: screenshot of the 3D model with Meshlab radiance scaling filter).

The different styles are easier to distinguish on the inner band (figs. 7c and 9c). A walking sphinx engraved with clear and deep lines is part of the original design; animals drawn with superficial lines on top of others are additions. The image of a hyena was scratched over a lion figure (fig. 7c) and the image of a pair of mating rhinoceros covers a bovid (outlined in blue lines on fig. 9c). The mating rhinoceros are drawn in a somewhat naive style; the male is simply drawn in front and above (with four legs visible) rather than actually mounting the female. Nevertheless, details such as the uneven horns, the wrinkles around the eyes and the mouth demonstrate that the artist did know what the animals looked like. These are white rhinoceros, indigenous animals to East Africa but alien to Arabia (on the occasional trade and transport of rhinoceros in antiquity, see GOWERS 1950). The addition of exotic animals like the rhinoceros, the African elephant, a hyena and a crocodile to the bowl's iconography is a token of the connections between SE-Arabia and the South-Arabian/East-African territories. This was a trade partner from where, for instance, calcite vessels with aromatics and ointments (HASSELL 1997) and possibly also wine (MARAQTEN 1993) were imported.

The presence of an “upgraded” Rhodian wine amphora and a decorated drinking bowl in the initial burial context of tomb FA-5 points to the deposition of wine and wine sets as early as the 3rd century BCE in the SE-Arabian elite tombs. Metal fragments found in the tomb reveal more wine-related burial goods must have been present. A rim fragment of another bronze bowl with a decorative pattern was found as well as a swivelling ring or loop handle (see fig. 7d). This is a shape familiar from Hellenistic bronze “lebes” or (wine) cauldrons (compare AMANDRY 1971, pp. 602-610, figs. 9-11).

The second burial in the tomb of Amud was thoroughly plundered but dates in all probability to the ed-Dur phase. A medium-sized tomb with a burial pit of c. 2.5 by 1.5 m from the same period was excavated just a few metres to the south of FA-5 (OVERLAET *et al.* 2021, pp. 23-31). Although it was plundered and no skeletal remains were found, the remaining burial goods strongly suggest that it was used for at least two burials; a not uncommon phenomenon for this size of ed-Dur phase tombs. At least two wine sets and two glazed table amphorae were present (fig. 10). The sheet metal parts of the bronze vessels were very fragmentary but bits of sieves and of decorated drinking bowl(s) were among them. The cast spouts were much better preserved; one in the shape of a bull's head and another with a horse protome (fig. 10a,b) imply the presence of two pouring bowls, similar to the one discussed above from the ed-Dur tomb (see fig. 3).

Rhodian wine amphorae no longer reached Mleiha in the ed-Dur phase but another type of Mediterranean amphora was found in the tomb. Patrick Monsieur, the amphora specialist of Ghent University, identified it as originating from South Spain, probably from the coastal region of ancient Baetica in the late 1st century BCE or the early 1st century CE. It is an amphora type that was likely

used for garum, a fermented fish sauce (fig. 10d). This Roman delicatessen was widely traded and can be compared to today's *mehyawa*, which is still a valued produce in the Gulf region. The amphora was unfortunately found upside down in the corner of the tomb chamber, probably left in this position by the tomb looters, so without any residue that could be analysed. As such, it remains unknown whether it actually contained fish sauce when it was placed in the tomb or whether it was re-used, possibly for wine.



Fig. 10. — Pottery and bronze finds from Mleiha tomb FG-2: a. Bull-shaped spout from a pouring bowl (H. 4.6 cm); b. Tubular spout with a horse protome (H. 4 cm); c. One of two identical south-Mesopotamian table amphorae, the original green glaze being faded to a golden hue (H. c. 41 cm); d. Imported Mediterranean (south-Spanish?) amphora (H. 77.5 cm).

## Conclusion

The excavations of Mleiha period tombs at all the major sites demonstrate that wine amphorae and wine sets were a recurring and characteristic part of burial goods in SE-Arabia. It stands in a tradition that has been reported elsewhere in the Near East since the 8th-7th century BCE. Tombs at Mleiha, ed-Dur and Dibba, which were re-used, often also contain multiple wine sets, suggesting that the consecutive burials had received their wine and wine utensils as a funeral donation. These wine sets traditionally consisted of sieves, ladles and drinking bowls. A pouring bowl with a small sieve and a cast spout in the shape of a bull's head or a horse or sphinx protome, is a typical SE-Arabian addition.

The wine-related burial goods at Mleiha clearly reflect the SE-Arabian trade network. From the 3rd to the 1st century BCE, the early Mleiha phase, Rhodian wine amphorae were a common burial good, which arrived at the site along the Mesopotamian trade routes. The fact that some of them were embellished by glazing shows the intrinsic value such amphorae had in SE-Arabia, considered in their region of

origin, the Mediterranean, to be merely simple transport containers. The absence of wine vessels in some graves is probably due to the fact that wine was commonly transported in much cheaper but perishable wineskins. The interest in Greek/Hellenistic traditions and iconography is not only apparent from the amphorae or from e.g. the imagery on local coinage but also from the iconography on highly-decorated drinking bowls. Centaurs and ichthyocentaurs are among the typical representations on SE-Arabian drinking bowls. They are combined with local Arabian elements like camels, palm trees, war and hunting scenes. The unique addition of South-Arabian/East African imagery like rhinoceros and elephants on such a late 3rd century drinking bowl from the tomb of Amud can be seen as an illustration of the (trade) connections with this region. Green-glazed table amphorae with ornamental handles, which were produced in southern Mesopotamia (the origin of nearly 43 % of pottery at ed-Dur), are another type of vessel associated with the SE-Arabian wine sets.

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