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Oliver Grimm (ed.),
in cooperation with Karl-Heinz Gersmann and Anne-Lise Tropato

Raptor on the fist – falconry, its imagery and similar motifs throughout the millennia on a global scale

Wachholtz



**Raptor on the fist –
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Cover picture: the art of falconry

Top row (from left to right): Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, 13th century (drawing after: *Hunting in Northern Europe* [Neumünster 2013] 344, fig. 1; cf. HADJINICOLAOU, this volume, fig. 8); mounted falconer, Syria, early Islamic times (drawing by L. F. Thomsen; cf. DAIBER, fig. 2); Mary of Burgundy, 15th century (KARASKOVA, fig. 1); mounted falconer, Czech Republic, 9th century (drawing by L. F. Thomsen; cf. PROFANTOVÁ, fig. 5.4); Northern goshawk (by courtesy of W. Bednarek).

Centre: Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, United Arab Emirates (by courtesy of IFHC/EFC).

Second row (from left to right): Skilled eagle master, Mongolia (by courtesy of T. Soma); Danish King Knud IV, 11th century (graphically reworked by L. F. Thomsen, cf. BLEILE, fig. 8); falconry mosaic, Greece, late 5th/early 6th century (drawing by L. F. Thomsen; cf. FRADEJAS RUEDA, fig. 3).

Third row (from left to right): mounted falconer, Byzantium, 11th century (drawing by L. F. Thomsen; cf. BLEILE, fig. 2.5); falcon (by courtesy of IAF); falconer figurine, Japan, 5th century (drawing by L. F. Thomsen; cf. MIZUNO, fig. 1).

All names in small caps relate to articles in the present book.

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Late Pre-Islamic raptor imagery from south-east Arabia

By Bruno Overlaet

Keywords: ed-Dur, Mleiha, south-east Arabia, Late Pre-Islamic Period (PIR), pre-Islamic religion, eagle

Abstract: South-east Arabia was a hub on the international trade routes connecting the Hellenistic/Roman world, Mesopotamia and south Arabia with India and Pakistan during the Late Pre-Islamic Period (3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE). The first raptor images occur on 3rd century BCE local coins that copied the image of a seated Zeus with eagle from the Greek Alexander coins. Most probably, however, it was seen as the representation of the Arabian sun god Shamash. Eagles or raptor statues were discovered at the harbour site ed-Dur in a temple and at the entrance of a fort that had been re-used as a burial site. These statues are usually interpreted as representing the god Shamash but eagles can also stand for other Arabian deities or simply refer to royalty. The paper looks at the archaeological context of these discoveries and reviews their interpretations.

Surprisingly few raptor images are known from the Late Pre-Islamic Era in the south-east Arabian Oman Peninsula (3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE) when the region was an important hub on international trade routes (Fig. 1). During the first few centuries, Mleiha was the main settlement and the probable capital of “Oman”, a local kingdom that thrived on the camel caravans between north- and south-east Arabia (OVERLAET et al. 2016).

Like the Arab kingdoms to its north, the Oman kingdom demonstrated its identity and its independence from the Seleucid rulers by issuing coins, probably from about the middle of the 3rd century BCE onwards. These coins were imitations of Alexander coinage and of early Seleucid issues of the Alexander type. Whereas some early issues retain the name of Alexander in Greek, it was soon replaced by the name of the local ruler “Abiel” in Aramaic or in Hasaitic script with south Arabian letters. Abiel is one of the most common names on north-east and south-east Arabian coins and is to be translated as “my father is god” (MACDONALD 2010, 438, 444).

Fig. 2 depicts a silver tetradrachm reportedly from Mleiha (CALLOT 2004, 27–28, 153, n° 5; MACDONALD 2010, pl. 18, Group E, n° Sharjah 05). On the obverse, it shows the head of Hercules (or Alexander) wearing the pelt of the Nemean lion. The reverse of this coin bears the Aramaic inscription “Abiel daughter of Baglan”, which indicates that the ruler who issued this coin was a queen and not a king. Abiel is considered to be a throne name that was adopted upon ascension to the throne by both male and female rulers (MACDONALD 2010, 437–438). The seated figure on the reverse holding a staff and an eagle is inspired by the seated Zeus Aetophorus of the Alexander coins, but it is uncertain how this image was perceived in the Arabian context. It has been suggested that it represented the Semitic sun god Shamash because some of the north-east Arabian coins had the name, sometimes abbreviated to its first letter, written in south Arabian characters. This never occurs on Abiel coins,

however, and since also other south Arabian or Aramaic abbreviations and symbols are found with this seated figure, the association with Shamash remains problematic; it may be correct in some cases but not necessarily in all (MØRKHOLM 1972, 196; HUTH 2010, 110–112; MACDONALD 2010, 404). Furthermore, in the central and southern parts of the Gulf, the iconography of the reverse changed significantly over time, again casting doubt on a single uniform interpretation. One of the changes was the replacement of the bird by a horse or a horse protome (sometimes identifiable as a rhyton); also further symbols such as a trident/anchor, a caliper-like sign or a palm leaf were sometimes added (HUTH 2010, 115). The seated figure may in a number of cases have been seen as the representation of a different deity or even as the (ancestral) ruler (ibid., 112). Furthermore, although the “Alexandrian eagle” is the prototype, the bird on the Arabian issues is not necessarily always an eagle; it could as well be a different raptor or some other kind of bird (MACDONALD 2010, 444).

The “eagle”/Shamash association on south-east Arabian Abiel coins could be supported by the discovery of a bird statue in a temple at ed-Dur, a harbour settlement in the Emirate of Umm al-Qaiwain (HAERINCK 2011; 2012), but also in this case, the identification remains somewhat speculative (Fig. 3). By the end of the 1st century BCE, the overland caravan trade had declined and was largely replaced by sea trade along the Arabian coast of the Gulf. Characene, a small Parthian client kingdom in southern Mesopotamia dominated this route, and it seems the Oman kingdom partook in this new economy through its harbour at ed-Dur. The site flourished from the late 1st century BCE until the early 2nd century CE when it came to a sudden halt, probably as a result of the devastating wars of Trajanus in 116/117 CE that ended the Characene power. After the early 2nd century CE, only some limited occupations and a few strongholds are attested at the site.

An exceptionally well-preserved square temple was discovered at ed-Dur; next to it were a well and several “altars” of which one had a basin with an Aramaic inscription on top (Fig. 3). A word at the centre of the otherwise unfortunately illegible inscription was tentatively read as “Shamash”, hence the temple is commonly referred to as the “Shamash temple” (HAERINCK 2011; 2012). There are also additional arguments to consider it a solar deity’s temple: an east-west axis with its main entrance directed to the rising sun and a stucco decoration around the entrance that included a frieze with swastikas, an image that is often associated with the sun cult. At the same time, however, one should not discard the possibility that a different or more than one deity was venerated at the temple.

Inside the square building stood a black hardstone block with the oval base of a bird statue on top; its body and head were found next to it, the tail a few meters further on (Figs. 3–4). This peculiar slightly curved dark block was originally part of the outer wall of a 3rd millennium BCE monumental Umm an-Nar type tomb¹; the function of the cavity remains an enigma (HAERINCK 2011, 8, pl. 39, 40a, 56). There is only one such tomb recorded closeby, at Tell Abraq, some 8 km to the south-west of ed-Dur, but its local building material is very different (POTTS 2000, 83–89). The dark hardstone is in any case not a locally available stone and it must have been brought to ed-Dur from a considerable distance. The fine white and very soft limestone of the statue was equally imported, the excavator suggested it came from Masafi, some 60 km to the east (HAERINCK 2011, 10). Regretfully, the bird statue is badly preserved and although some details such as the feathering on the tail and wings can still be seen, it is not possible to ascertain the bird’s species. The statue was assembled from separately sculptured parts; neck and head were mounted with a pin on the body. The thin legs are incomplete and possibly the body was also made as a separate piece that was fixed to the base. A small basin in

1 On the Umm an-Nar culture in south-east Arabia, c. 2600–2000 BCE, see MAGEE 2014, 98–125. The name derives from an island on the coast of Abu Dhabi (UAE) where the first monumental tombs of this type were discovered. The outer wall of the circular communal tombs is often constructed in well-shaped hardstone blocks. The block in the ed-Dur temple was originally placed horizontal. The smooth, slightly curved side with the *cupola* faced outwards; its surface follows the circular shape of the tomb.

the same white stone was found in the temple (Fig. 4). Since these are the only two items made of this material and the size of the base fits more or less the opening of the basin, it is probable that the statue decorated the lid of what originally was a stone box. Both are too deteriorated, however, to establish with absolute certainty that they fitted together.

The white limestone box/sculpture and the black stone were found at the original floor level inside the temple, which indicates that they were left when the building was deserted, before it was covered by the dune. It places them both in the late 1st century BCE – early 2nd century CE lifespan of the temple.

The black stone must be a bethyl, a sacred stone idol and may have been one of the principle, if not the main effigy at the temple (on “bethyls”, a designation derived from the Semitic *bet el* [“house of god”], in the Mediterranean, Semitic and Iranian world, see KRONE 1992, 290–299; WENNING 2001; OVERLAET 2009). A tile with traces of burning and a small black wadi stone were placed just in front of it (Fig. 3). This is in agreement with documented Arabian traditions. The *Kitab al-Asnam* (“Book of Idols”), a text on pre-Islamic religion and customs by the Arabian author Hisham ibn al-Khalbi (737–819 CE) mentions the use of relic stones to which sacrifices were made and which were circumambulated (FARIS 1952; HAERINCK 2011, 17–18; 2012). His description of the idol of the goddess al-Lat brings the stone from ed-Dur to mind: “She (al-Lat) was a square rock beside which a certain Jew used to prepare his barley porridge (*sawiq*)” (FARIS 1952, 14). Less clear is the original function and use of the box/bird statue. The discovery of the base on top of the stone with the fragments just next to it suggests that it stood on top of the black stone, at least when the sands covered the temple, but it may have been placed there by plunderers or squatters. It is impossible to know whether it was its original location when the sanctuary was functioning.

However, an eagle statue (box with eagle lid?) topping a bethyl would not be unprecedented. The famous black stone of Emesa (modern Homs) in Syria, said to be a meteorite, and associated with the Syrian/Roman sun god Elagabalus, was often depicted with an eagle perched on top. This could be an eagle statue or sometimes a textile with the image of an eagle (OVERLAET 2009, 436–470, fig. 1–3, pl. 26–28).

An alternative possibility is that the box with its bird-lid was an offering. Unfortunately there were no traces of residue and its original content remains unknown. Since the beak of the animal is not preserved and it cannot be ascertained that it actually was a raptor, it is also possible that it represented e.g. a dove, a bird that could be used as an offering. A small bronze statue, a surface find from Mleiha, shows an offer bearer holding a bird in his right hand that looks like a dove (Fig. 4; cf. MOUTON 2008, fig. 121).

Two undisputable raptor statues (Fig. 5) were excavated in a somewhat later, 3rd/early 4th century CE context at ed-Dur (BOUCHARLAT 1989, 124–125, fig. 7–8; LECOMTE et al. 1989, 38–39, fig. AE–AF, fig. 19–20, 25–28; POTTS 1990, 280–283, fig. 20; LECOMTE 1993, 205, fig. 2; MOUTON 2008, 248–249, fig. 104, pl. 8; LECOMTE 2017). They are made of local “beach rock”, a lagoonal limestone deposit, and flanked the entrance to a fortified building of c. 30 by 30 meter on top of the dune belt that protected the site from the lagoon. This strategically positioned fortress, constructed using the same beach rock, was cleared and used as a burial ground before it was deserted somewhere in the late 3rd or early 4th century CE. Both statues were decapitated and had been toppled, one was found on its side, the other completely inverted (Fig. 5b). The excavators suggested the heads were not simply “broken away” (BOUCHARLAT 1989, 124–125), and the statues are now commonly referred to as headless or “acephalic”. This may be somewhat misleading, however. The top surface is not smoothed and there is no certainty that the heads were intentionally omitted; it seems more likely that they were simply chiselled away in Islamic times.

There has been much speculation about the origin and identity of these two raptors statues. The cavity in the right wing of one of the birds resembles a door pivot and this gave the idea that they had

been taken from elsewhere and re-used at the fort. It was suggested that they originally may have stood at the entrance to the “Shamash temple” (HAERINCK 2011, 6–7, fig. 5; LECOMTE 1993, 196, 202; MOUTON 2008, 248–249). The main entrance to the temple was indeed flanked by large platforms or podiums, partly broken away (see Fig. 3 top). The size and shape of the statues does not seem to correspond to that of the platforms, however, and caution is needed. There is no tangible evidence the statues once belonged to this temple (HAERINCK 2011, 6).

Ascribing the two statues to the ed-Dur temple would also have chronological implications. The top statue in Fig. 5 has some resemblance in its posture to the limestone bird from the temple but the other statue is very different. Its vertical posture, the treatment of the feathers and legs, and the presence of a bull’s head on the base distinguish it and one could very well question whether these statues were ever conceived as a pair and made by the same sculptors. Lecomte noted that the treatment of the second bird’s legs (Fig. 5a below) resembles that of the pillars on stone miniature temple-shaped altars found at Hatra in north Iraq, and he looks to the 2nd/3rd century eagle statues from this site as its inspiration. To bridge the chronological gap, he suggested the temple could have been kept active until the end of the 2nd century, and then the eagles would have been re-used (one possibly as door pivot), before eventually ending up as gatekeepers on the fort/mausoleum (LECOMTE 1993, 202–203). Such a series of events is unlikely, however, since nothing else from the temple area points to a 2nd century date. In view of this chronological gap and accepting the premise of “plundered statues”, Mouton suggested the possibility of a second religious building at ed-Dur, yet to be discovered (MOUTON 2008, 227, note 736).

Raptors or eagles can be associated with various Arabian deities, and without additional data nothing more can be said. Mouton pointed out that raptors are linked to the Aphlad temple at Dura Europos (east Syria) and the temples of the Nabataean god Dushara, venerated in Petra (Jordan) and Madain Saleh (Saudi Arabia) (MOUTON 2008, 248–249), while Potts indicated that the eagle could stand for the god Nasr/Nisra, who is mentioned in the Koran as part of the pre-Islamic pantheon (POTTS 1990, 281–283). The combination of the eagle with the frontal bull’s head on the base could point to a south Arabian connection. Potts suggests the image combines Nasr (eagle) and the south Arabian moon deity Athtar (bucranium) (POTTS 1990, 282, fig. 20c). It is also familiar on coins from Hadhramaut (south Arabia) on which it stands for the moon deity Sayin (HUTH 2010, 116).

Eagles can also be used to express a regal connotation, however, and it is possible that the statues were placed at the fort’s entrance to honour the deceased when the building was turned into a mausoleum. One may have recuperated one or both from elsewhere on the site, or have re-used one and sculpted a second to have a pair (which could explain the stylistic differences). The presence of a cavity on the right wing of one of the statues (the cavity was originally directed to the entrance of the building) is not necessarily proving a past re-use as a door pivot. It could also have had a cultic use. The large Umm an-Nar stone in the temple has a comparable cavity on the front (Fig. 3).

Despite the fact that much archaeological research has been done on the Late Pre-Islamic period in south-east Arabia, there remains a marked scarcity of written documents to complement the archaeological data and provide insight into the ethnicity of the populations, their cultural identity and beliefs. This short excursion on raptor images demonstrates the paucity of our information. The raptor or “eagle” images could stand in the south-east Arabian context for the Arabian deity Shamash, but as well for other local deities or simply for royalty. At present, the interpretation of the ed-Dur and Mleiha finds remains at best speculative.

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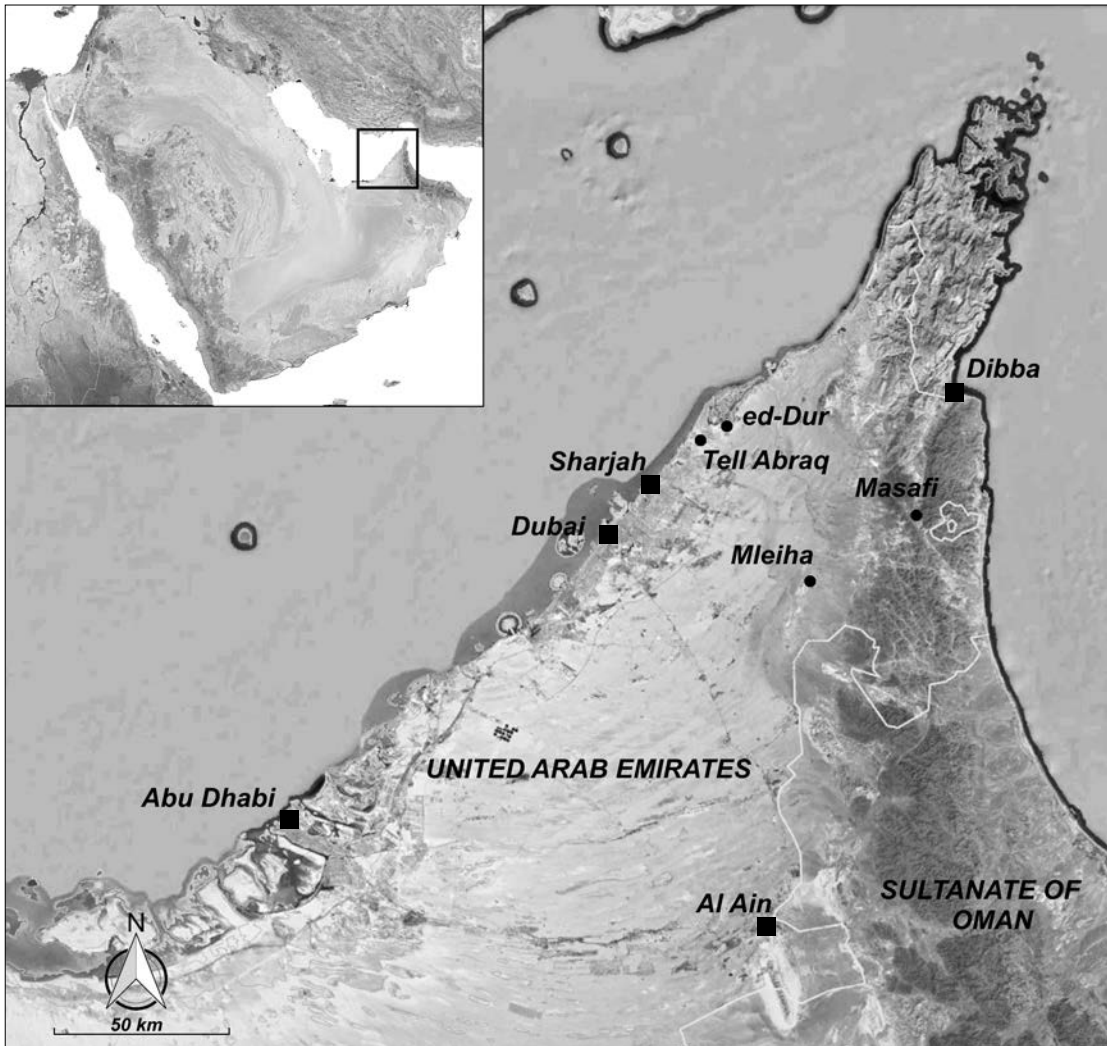


Fig. 1. Map of south-east Arabia. Squares: modern cities; dots: archaeological sites mentioned in the text (map B. Overlaet).



Fig. 2. Silver tetradrachm from Mleiha, UAE, issued by "Abiel daughter of Baglan". Diam. 26 mm, 3rd century BCE. Sharjah Archaeological Museum, inv. no. SM.3085 (after CALLOT 2004, 153, n° 5).

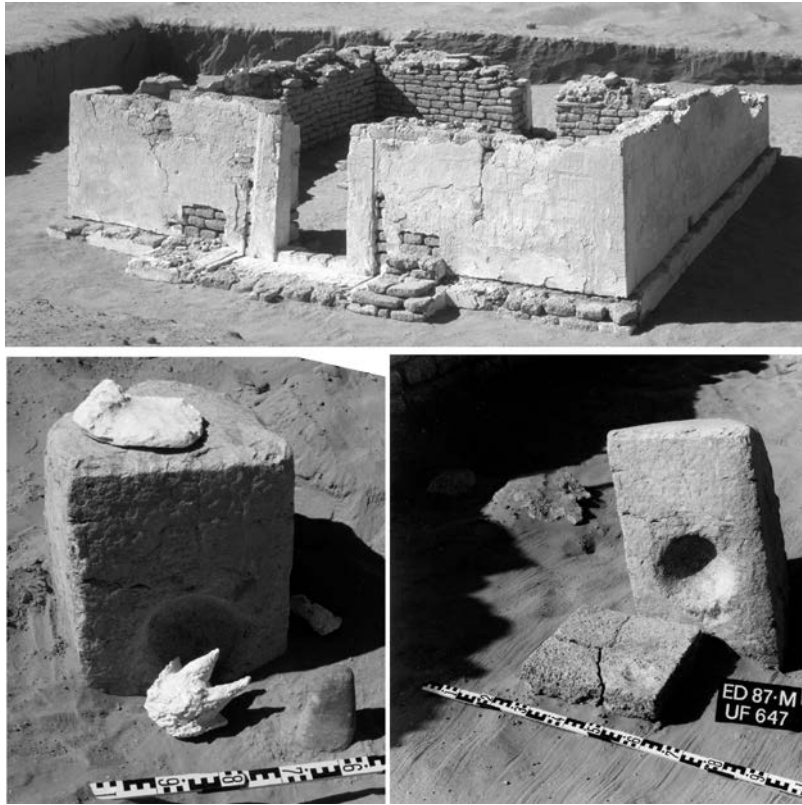


Fig. 3. The temple at ed-Dur, UAE (late 1st cent. BCE – early 2nd cent. CE) and view of a bethyl (?), a re-used 3rd millennium BCE building block (72 x 37 x 40 cm) placed inside the temple. Bottom left: During excavations with fragments of a bird statue in situ; Bottom right: After complete excavation (photos BAMED [Belgian Archaeological Mission at ed-Dur], author's files).

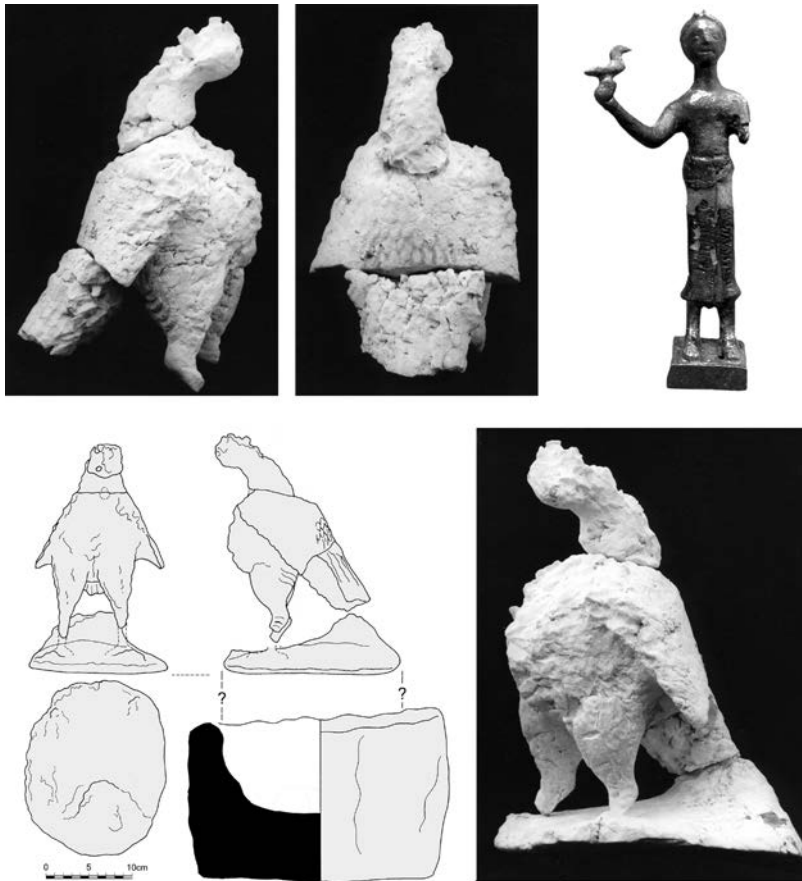


Fig. 4. Top to the left and bottom: White limestone bird statue found inside the temple at ed-Dur, UAE (estimated height: c. 25.5 cm), possibly the lid of a stone box (late 1st cent. BCE – early 2nd cent. CE) (photos BAMED [Belgian Archaeological Mission at ed-Dur], author's files). Top to the right: Bronze statue depicting a man holding a bird (dove?) in his hand; surface find from Mleiha, Sharjah Emirate, UAE (height c. 18 cm; 3rd cent. BCE – 3rd cent. CE) (after MOUTON 2008, fig. 121).

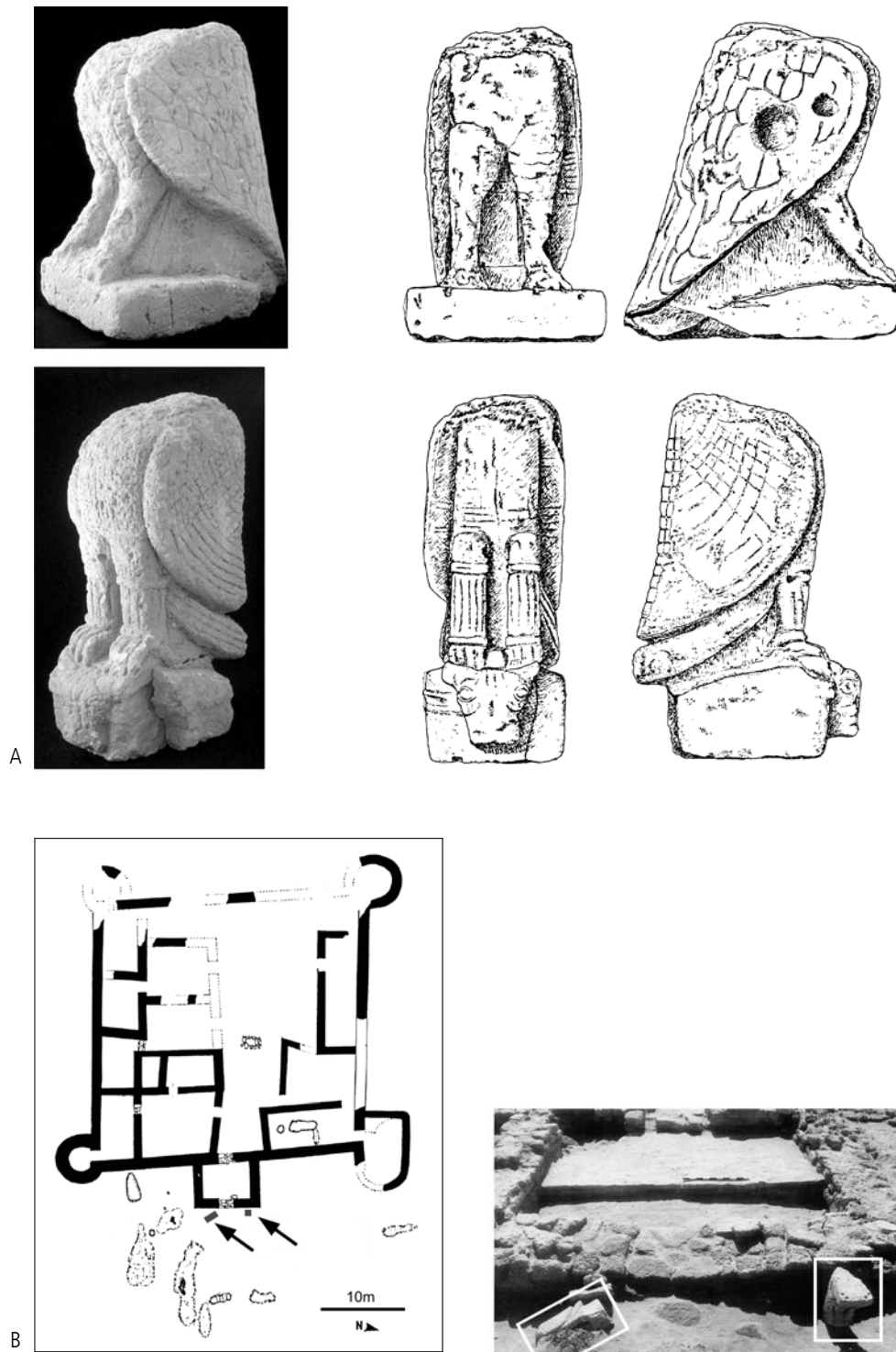


Fig. 5. Fortified building/mausoleum at ed-Dur, UAE (1st–3rd cent. CE); a: Large (decapitated) raptor statues in local beach rock that flanked the entrance, preserved height is 45 cm (top) and 55 cm (bottom) (after MOUTON 2008, fig. 104, pl. 8); b: Plan and in situ photo (after LECOMTE et al. 1989, fig. 19). Position of statues indicated by arrows (plan) and frames (photo).