

A Note on the Trident Mark, Stone Worship and Cult Practices in SE-Arabia¹

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Abstract: The worship of baetyls in antiquity is well documented in the Near East and the Mediterranean, archaeologically as well as historically. While such practices were also common in South-East Arabia, the archaeological information on it is still very limited. A boulder carved with a "trident" (a mark familiar from local Abiel coin issues), which came to light at the site of Mleiha, has a circular cavity on the side similar to those visible on stones and on an eagle statue from contemporary ed-Dur. This association suggests a religious context for the Mleiha petroglyph and thus a possible identification as a baetyl. The archaeological evidence for stone worship and associated cult practices from the SE-Arabian Mleiha / PIR A-C period (3rd century BCE - 3rd century CE) is reviewed and compared with ethnographic parallels and information from, among others sources, the Kitāb al-aṣnām (Book of Idols) by Hisham ibn al-Kalbi (737-819 CE).

Keywords: Mleiha, ed-Dur, stone worship, baetyl, petroglyph, pre-Islamic religion, SE-Arabia, Book of Idols

The discovery of a stone with a "trident mark" at Mleiha.

In 1999 Eisa Yousif sighted a limestone rock with a gouged or chiseled three-pronged sign above a horizontal line inside a modern water tank of a disused palm garden at Mleiha. The tank has since been removed, but it is visible on old satellite photographs (e.g., on Google Earth views predating 2013 at coordinates 25°06'51.30"N - 55°52'30.38"E). The irregular boulder measures 39.5 x 26 x 15 cm, bears a geometric "trident" mark of approx. 10 x 6 cm on the more or less flat "front" side, and a shallow circular cavity or depression of approx. 7 cm diameter and 1.6 cm deep on the side (Fig. 1; inv. ML99 - M2361). There appears to be

¹ The Mleiha trident petroglyph was studied during field work at Mleiha supported by a Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) Stay Abroad Grant (nr V477123N). Paul Yule (Heidelberg) kindly provided the photo of the Madha petroglyph, read an early draft of the paper and made some valuable comments. Peter Sheehan (Abu Dhabi) kindly gave us the data on the recently discovered seal with trident from Al Ain and Joanna Rądkowska graciously provided the Fig. 5 illustrations and information on the Berenike temple.

another, more irregular and shallow "depression" above the mark, but it is not an anthropogenic feature, but a natural, irregular shape of the stone. The boulder has appeared in several publications, but was never discussed in detail (Callot, 2004, 95; Abbas, 2009, 94-95, fig. 3; Mouton, 2010, 201, fig. 18, identified as the counterweight of a well lever).

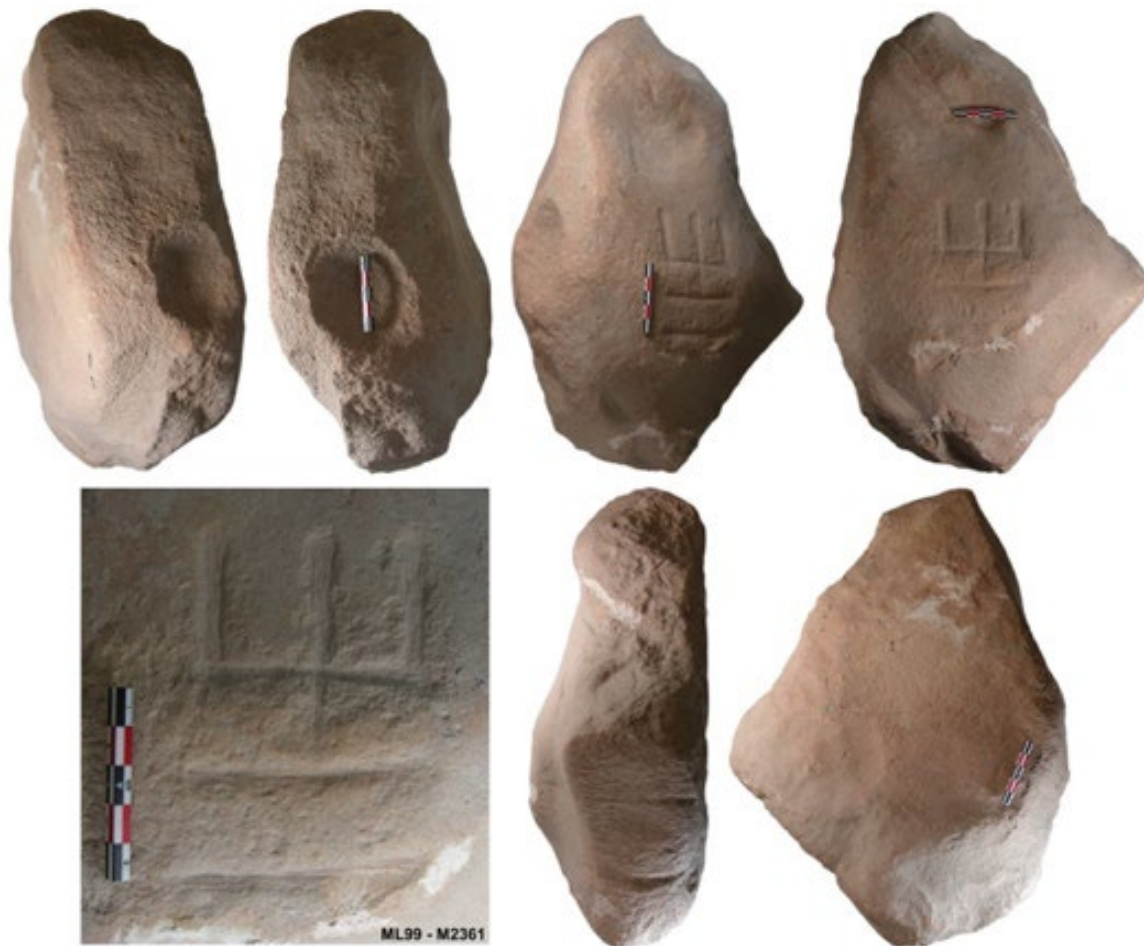


Fig. 1. Boulder from Mleiha with "trident" mark and cavity (Inv. ML99 – M2361; ca. 39.5 x 26 x 15 cm).

The symbol on the Mleiha stone is identical to that on a boulder of similar size from Madha, an Omani enclave 17 km north of Fujairah city, where numerous boulders and rocks with petroglyphs are found (see Haerinck, 1998). Shaikh Mohammed al-Madhani of Madha collected one for his private collection, where Paul Yule recorded it for the then Ministry of Heritage and Culture of the Sultanate of Oman in 2012 (Fig. 2b). Presumably, Shaikh Mohammed picked it up in the immediate area of his home. The mark or symbol, sometimes without its lower baseline, is a familiar element on the reverse of SE-Arabian Abiel coins. There is no standard orientation or position of the trident on the coins, it can be placed sideways, upwards or downwards (Fig. 2c-g). The same symbol but with a U-shaped sign above the trident is present on a seal from a Mleiha period tomb at Al Ain (Fig. 2h; Sheehan, Al Marzooqi, et al., 2024). These occurrences place the symbol firmly in the SE-Arabian Mleiha period. Two scratched markings on pottery at ed-Dur (Fig. 2i-j) and one on a sherd from Akkaz in Kuwait (Fig. 2k) are sometimes cited in the literature as comparisons (Rutten, 2006/2008, nrs 1151 and 1442, Pl. 6; Robin, 2011, 253 nr. 8, fig. 1; Haerinck & Overlaet, et al., 2021, 12, 147, fig. J-

11), but the resemblance is weak and may altogether not be relevant since the marks are incomplete or used in combination with other markings (Fig. 2: i-k).



Fig. 2. "Trident marks" or monograms on stones, coins and ceramics.

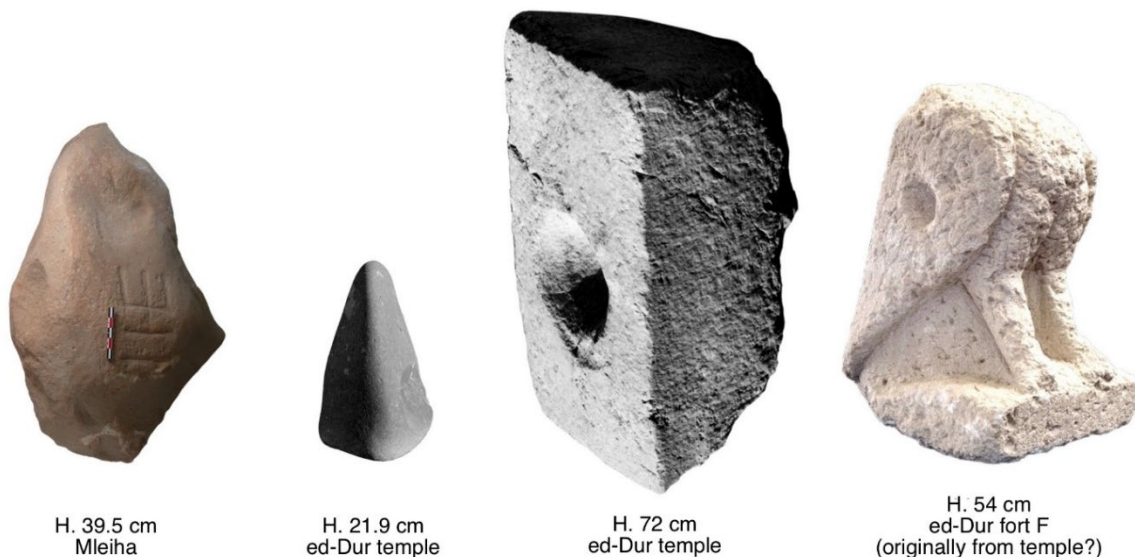
a. boulder from Mleiha (photo B. Overlaet); b. boulder from Madha (photo P. Yule); c -g: Abiel tetradrachms from Mleiha (far left: after Van Alphen, 2010, Pl. 8b; 4 others from a 2021 coin hoard: inv. SAA 246, 017, 001 and 005, photo Kamyar Kamyab, SAA); h. seal from Al Ain (photo DCT Abu Dhabi); i-j scratched markings on ed-Dur pottery (Rutten, 2006/2008, pl. 6); k. sherd from Akkaz, Kuwait (Robin, 2011, fig. 1).

The meaning of the trident symbol remains an enigma. The literature refers to it as either a "monogram" or a "symbol". Dan Potts, in his study of East Arabian coinage, suggested that it derived from the three-pronged anchor, a royal Seleucid symbol found on coins from Seleucia and Elymais. The presence of an anchor on the Abiel coins could be explained by the importance of seafaring to SE Arabia (Potts, 1991, 80). The idea of an anchor was refuted by Callot, since Seleucid anchors have an additional cross-staff. At the same time, Callot did recognize that the image was close to several of the more barbarized depictions of anchors on some coins from Elymais, but he suggested that it could rather be a monogram combining the Greek letters H+E or I+H+E (Callot, 2004, 30, 95; 2011, 270). Di- and trigraphs of Greek letters commonly appear on Hellenistic coins; such monograms indicate mints, rulers, magistrates, moneyers or even die engravers. The size and usually also prominent position of the trident symbol on the Abiel coins, however, suggests that the symbol was more than just administrative information. Callot proposed that it was an emblem representing the kingdom (Callot, 2011, 270). An alternative would be that it represents a deity, or even the concept of (deified?) royalty, as it was introduced on coins along with the Aramaic throne name Abiel, which translates as "my father is god" (Macdonald, 2010, 438, 444).

While the true meaning of the "trident mark" remains unknown, it should not be ruled out that its interpretation or understanding may also have differed or changed over time. It is noteworthy that the mark appears on local coins together with Aramaic, which replaces the Greek (often barbarised) name of Alexander on the "Arabian Alexander" coins. What may have originated as a Greek monogram may have been, to a largely illiterate population unfamiliar with Greek, an abstract mark or symbol representing, for example, the kingdom, the king, a family/clan or a deity. The presence of this trident mark on the Mleiha rock may support this last possibility.

The presence of hollows on stones and stone worship.

Stones with man-made circular cavities or some kind of depressions are common on archaeological sites and are usually labelled as either mortars or pivot stones (e.g. at ed-Dur; Haerinck, Overlaet, et al., 2021, 119-120, 124-126, pl. 103-104). In the case of the Mleiha stone, however, there are no wear marks (pivot stones typically have multiple circular concentric scratches) and the position of the cavity, on the narrow side of the slab, makes both uses seem unlikely. Moreover, the presence of similar depressions on the side of two stones from the ed-Dur temple and on an eagle statue found in a fortress at ed-Dur (but thought to have been taken from the temple) suggests that these depressions may have had some specific, probably cult-related significance (Fig. 3). The 72 x 37 x 40 cm large, more or less rectangular stone block with a 7.6 cm deep cavity occurred inside the temple (Figs 3 & 6). The small, 21.9 cm high pointed grey-green stone was placed near one of the altars next to the temple and is one of many stones of similar size found in and around it (Figs 3 & 6). In this specific case the slight depression visible on the available photograph was neither mentioned by the excavator, nor indicated on the drawings (Haerinck, 2011, pl. 66e; Haerinck, Overlaet, et al., 2021, nr. M 37, 173, Pl. 99 & 102). The now headless eagle statue is one of two such statues that flanked the entrance of the 3rd century CE ed-Dur fort. Most scholars have suggested that these statues may originally have stood on the pedestals flanking the main entrance of the ed-Dur temple (Fig. 6) and that this one was reused as a pivot stone (hence the hollow) before both ended up at the entrance of the fort (Boucharlat, 1989, 124-125, figs. 7-8; Lecomte, Boucharlat, et al., 1989, 38-39, figs. AE-AF, 19-20, 25-28; Mouton, 2008, 121-122, fig. 104, pl. 8; Haerinck, 2011, 6-7, fig. 5; Overlaet, 2020). This seems to be a rather complicated chain of events, and in view of the absence of signs of wear inside the cavity to indicate its use as a pivot stone, the hollow is more likely to be a part of the sculpture's original design. Moreover, both the eagle statues are made of calcareous local beach rock, not hard stone, a rough material which is not a good choice for use as a pivot or mortar.



H. 39.5 cm
Mleiha

H. 21.9 cm
ed-Dur temple

H. 72 cm
ed-Dur temple

H. 54 cm
ed-Dur fort F
(originally from temple?)

Fig. 3. Stone finds with cupola from Mleiha and ed-Dur. Left to right: boulder with trident from Mleiha (inv. M99 – M2361); stone erected in front of altar 3 next to the ed-Dur temple (inv. M37); Umm an-Nar “sugar-lump” stone erected inside the ed-Dur temple (inv. M21); headless eagle sculpture recovered at the entrance of the sector F fort at ed-Dur, possibly originally from the temple (photos not to scale).

The presence of cavities on the sides of two finds from the ed-Dur temple (possibly three, if the sculpture is indeed from its entrance) can hardly be a coincidence. Stones can have a special role or significance in religion or cult ceremonies, and Ernie Haerinck elaborated on some striking parallels between the discovery of specific types of stones in and around the ed-Dur temple and some of the comments on stone worship in the *Kitāb al-aṣnām* (Book of Idols) by Hisham ibn al-Kalbi (737-819 CE) (Haerinck, 2011, 16-19; 2012). The *Book of Idols* goes well beyond the discussion of the black stone of the Ka'bah at Mecca whose integration into the building illustrates the survival of just one of the many pre-Islamic Arabian religious beliefs and traditions related to stones (Rubin, 1986, 118-121; Krone, 1992, 190-191, 295, 480-481). Hisham ibn al-Kalbi lists all the tribal Arabian divinities known to him, discusses rituals, traditions and explains the differences between "aniconic images" or baetyls², "idols" and "altars", distinctions that are not always well defined or evident (Faris, 1952, 24; Krone, 1992, 290-295).

Before discussing these ed-Dur stones, however, a brief excursion to emphasize the vast extent of stone worship in antiquity and the general context behind it is useful. Stones of unusual origin, shape, colour or composition have always attracted the attention of mankind. In particular, meteorites, whose fall was sometimes witnessed, were valued and attributed magical or divine powers. Iron-based meteorites are a special group. In some cultures, the addition of even small amounts of meteoric iron when forging a weapon was believed to provide magical properties. Many terrestrial stones were also claimed or believed to be meteorites, or they were ascribed divine or magical properties based on some mythical background story (Farrington, 1900, 200-202; d'Orazio, 2007; Overlaet, 2008; 2009). Some of the major cults in Roman and East Mediterranean antiquity were centered around stones (d'Orazio, 2007). Among these baetyls, the so-called 'Stone of Emesa', associated with the sun god Elagabal, is one of the best documented and it combines Near Eastern and Roman religious traditions. The Emesa stone appears on coins (Fig. 4) and was brought from Emesa, modern Homs in Syria, to Rome to become the city's chief deity during the reign of the emperor and high priest Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, aka Elagabalus (218 - 222 CE) (Krone, 1972, 391-392; Turcan, 1985; Gradel, 2002, 351-352; Overlaet, 2009, 466-470). The stone was clothed, married to other deities and carried around in procession during sacred festivals. It was eventually returned to Emesa after the assassination of Elagabalus in 222 CE and it is thought to have ended up in Iran as war plunder of the Sasanian emperor Shapur II (Overlaet, 2009). Given the importance of such divine stones, it is not surprising that they, just like divine statues, were taken as plunder, traded or summoned to acquire their power. Another famous example is the "Black Stone of Cybele", taken from her temple in Pessinus to the Temple of Victory in Rome during the Punic Wars in 204 BCE to ensure the safety of Rome. It was later expelled from Rome under Christian influence in 363 CE, but was returned to the city in 392 CE (Lane, 1996, 218-220; d'Orazio, 2007). Most of these sacred stones from Greco-Roman antiquity are now lost, with the rare exception of an Aphrodite stone recovered in 1888 from its sanctuary at Paphos on Cyprus. This 1.30 m high stone - not a meteorite - is exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Kouklia (Fig. 4) and fits the description given by the Roman

² The term 'baetyl' is used here to refer to naturally formed cult stones (extended - as in the case of the ed-Dur temple - to include 'as is' stones taken from ancient monuments). They belong to the broad category of aniconic "standing stones" (Arabic *anṣāb* and Biblical *maṣṣeboth*; see Avner 1999-2000). Although "baityl" / "baetyl" and "betyl" are commonly used as synonyms, in the Nabataean context a distinction is made between "baetyl" and "betyl" (see Wenning, 2001, 79-83).

historian Tacitus “The image of the goddess does not bear the human shape; it is a rounded mass rising like a cone from a broad base to a small circumference” (Tacitus *Historiae*, Book II, 3).



Fig. 4. Left: Sacred stone from the Aphrodite sanctuary at Paphos on Cyprus (photo: Wojciech Biegun, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=70284294>) and its depiction inside the temple on a coin issued at Paphos. Right: the black stone of Emesa on a bronze coin issued by Caracalla with the image of an eagle perched on the stone of Emesa (Turkan, 1985, fig. 7); the Emesa stone on a chariot during a procession in Rome on a gold coin issued by Elagabalus, an eagle is depicted on its textile cover (<http://www.romancoins.info/Gods-On-Coins.html>).

In these examples, the sacred stones appear to have retained their natural shape and were not in any way worked, inscribed or marked. To some extent, this may explain why hardly any baetyls have been retrieved during excavations. It makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify them in an excavation, particularly when they are found outside their original temple settings. Early excavations at best reported on stones or boulders that somehow stood out but rarely documented them in enough detail, let alone kept them as finds. A fitting illustration is the report by Francesco Bianchini on the 1730 excavations by Duke Francis of Parma on the Palatine Hill in Rome. Bianchini states “*I am sorry that no fragment of a statue, or bas-relief, or inscription has been found in the chapel, because this absence of any positive indication prevents us from ascertaining the name of the divinity to whom the place was principally dedicated. The only object which I discovered in it was a stone nearly three feet high, conical in shape, of a deep brown color, looking very much like a piece of lava, and ending in a sharp point. No attention was paid to it, and I know not what became of it.*” (Lanciani, 1888, 127-128). Modern excavators obviously have a different approach. An in-situ baetyl was, for example, documented in a Late Roman era temple at Berenike (Fig. 5). The basalt boulder, believed to be of Yemeni origin, was placed in the central axis of the temple and surrounded by offerings placed in wooden bowls (Radkowska & Zych, 2018, 235-236).



Fig. 5. The Late Roman harbor temple at Berenike. Plan and photos with details of the baetyl with a shell offering at its base (drawing by J. Rądkowska and photographs by S.E. Sidebotham, see also Radkowska & Zych, 2018, figs. 11.1 and 11.6).

Stone worship and the area M temple at ed-Dur.

The many historical references to sacred stones in the Greco-Roman world contrast with the small number of actual archaeological finds, and their importance in society and daily life is still often grossly underestimated. Historical sources on the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula, combined with the evidence from the Area M temple at Ed-Dur³, unequivocally testify to a similarly widespread and deep-rooted stone cult in Arabian society.

The large stone block with a hollow at the center stood inside the temple, with the polished surface and the cavity directed towards the entrance (Fig. 2 & 6). Its slightly curved front side is smoothed or polished, the 4 straight sides are flat while the back is left rough and uneven (Haerinck, 2011, pl. 39-40, 56; Haerinck, Overlaet, et al., 2021, 120-122, pl. 114, 120). It is a characteristic “sugar-lump” type revetment stone from a circular 3rd millennium Umm an-Nar tomb; the back left uneven to bond with the core of the wall that was built with rough stones. This kind of hard stone is not found in the vicinity of ed-Dur, which begs the question whether it was taken from a nearby tomb constructed with such imported stones or whether the

³ The area M temple is commonly known as the “Shamash temple” or the “temple of the sun god” (Haerinck 2011). This identification is based on the tentative reading “for Shamash” at the center of an otherwise illegible inscription on a basin placed on an altar next to the temple (Haerinck 2011, 13, pl. 64, 71-75; Haerinck, Overlaet, et al., 2021, 128-129). However, it is possible that another or multiple deities were housed in the temple, hence the stone finds discussed here should not a priori be associated with Shamash or any other specific deity.

individual stone was taken from a more distant tomb. The only nearby Umm an-Nar tomb known at present is the one at Tell Abraq which is however, built with local, rough beach rock.

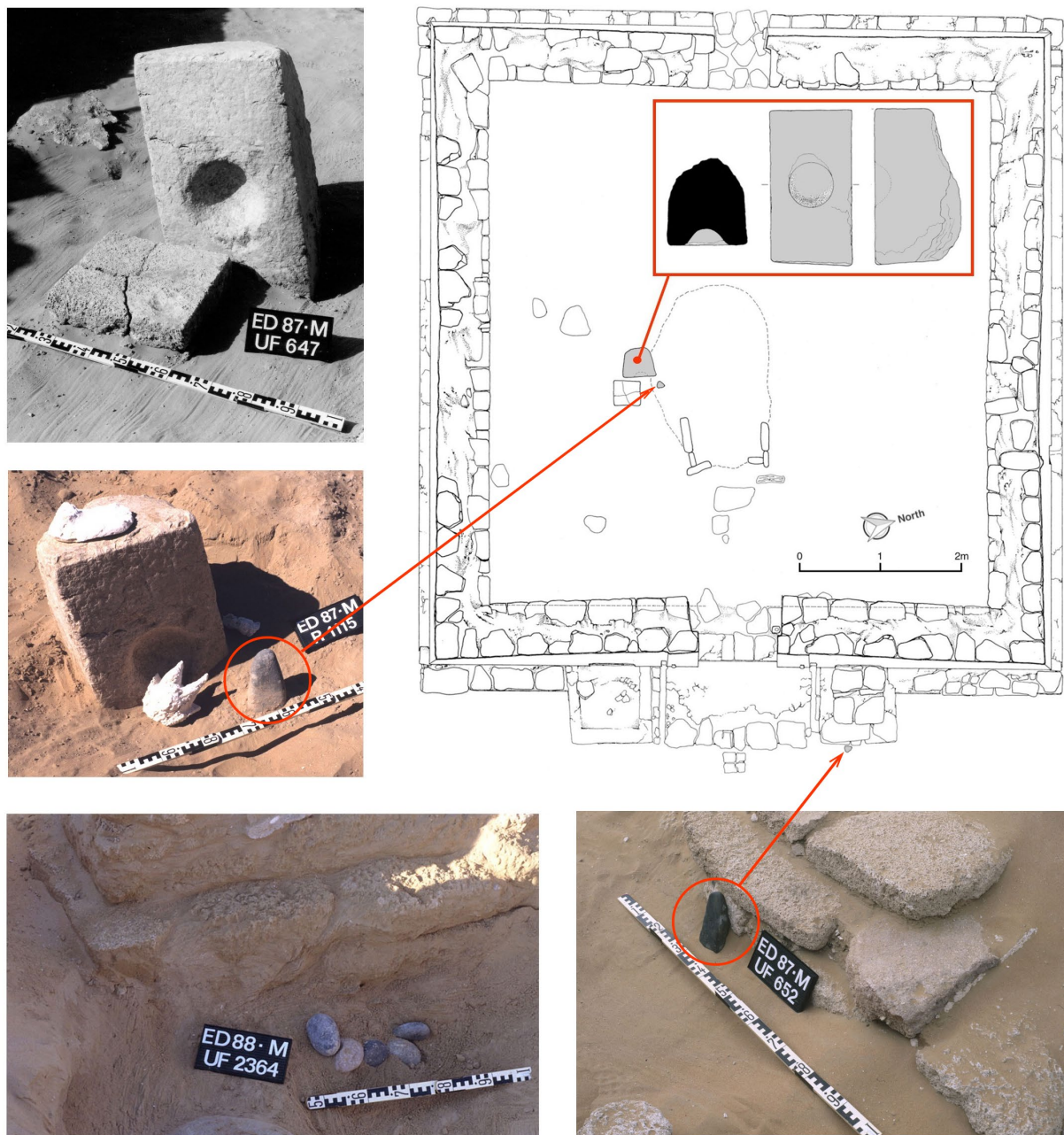


Fig. 6. The area M temple at ed-Dur. Top: plan of the temple and location of the baetyls. Lower left: some of the cobble stones in situ near “altar 3” immediately to the NE of the temple. Lower right: baetyl placed against the platform at the temple’s entrance.

In front of the stone was a cracked tile with traces of burning as well as an elongated pointed stone. On top of the Umm an-Nar stone was the weathered base of a bird sculpture, probably the closure of a stone box that was found along the south wall inside the temple (Fig. 6; Overlaet, 2020, 445, fig. 4; Haerinck, Overlaet, et al., 2021, 113, fig. I-5). The other pieces of the bird sculpture were found next to the Umm an-Nar stone (Haerinck, 2011; Haerinck, Overlaet, et al., 2021, 113-114, pl. 47-48). This stone could be an altar or a podium for the statue (a so-called *motab*, see Wenning, 2001, 88-90) but it is more likely to be a

beatyl that was venerated in its own right since the *Kitāb al-aṣnām* specifically mentions such stones “the Arabs also had relic stones [which they obtained from ancient ruins] and erected. They were wont to circumambulate them and offer sacrifices before them. These stones were called baetyls (ansab)...” (Faris, 1952, 38). Moreover, some Arabian baetyls are specifically described as being “square” in shape (Faris, 1952, 14; Krone, 1992, 290, 294, 372-373).

The small pointed stone in front of the Umm an-Nar “sugar-lump” block must likewise be considered a baetyl (Fig. 6). A similar one was found standing against one of the temple’s entrance platforms (Fig. 6) and a third one was placed near a stone-built altar, a few meters to the SE of the temple (Fig. 3 and 6: “altar 3”, found with 7 other stones). All three have a triangular section, are pointed and were placed upright (Haerinck, Overlaet, et al., 2021, M20, M37 and M24, Pl. 99-102 nrs 16-18). A coral stone with the same shape was placed near the same altar 3 and must have had a similar meaning (Haerinck, 2011, 13, Pl. 66; Haerinck, Overlaet, et al., 2021, 152, pl. 99, 102). “Pillar shaped” hard stones that are comparable to these three that were erected at the temple and the altars have also been found at other locations but were for the most part registered as pestles. In reality, their true function is uncertain but some of them may very well also have been baetyls (Haerinck, Overlaet, et al., 2021, pl. 97-102). The nature of these erected stones fits another comment from the Book of Idols: “The Arabs were passionately fond of worshipping idols. Some of them took unto themselves a temple around which they centered their worship, while others adopted an idol to which they offered their adoration. The person who was unable to build himself a temple or adopt an idol would erect a stone in front of the Sacred House or in front of any other temple which he might prefer, and then circumambulate it in the same manner in which he would circumambulate the Sacred House. The Arabs called these stones baetyls (ansab). Whenever these stones resembled a living form they called them’ idols (asnam) and images (awthan).” This placing of stones near another baetyl or near a temple was a widely occurring cult practice not only mentioned by Ibn al Kalbi (Faris, 1952, 24) but also by other Arabian scholars (Krone, 1992, 292).

The ed-Dur temple’s excavator also mentioned that a large “thick black ware” storage vessel holding more than 200 wadi stones once stood about 2.20 to 2.50 m to the NW of the altar and he explained this with another comment from the *Kitāb al-aṣnām*: “No one left Mecca without carrying away with him a stone from the stones of the Sacred House (al-Haram) as a token of reverence to it, and as a sign of deep affection to Mecca. Wherever he settled he would erect that stone and circumambulate it in the same manner he used to circumambulate the Ka’bah [before his departure from Mecca], seeking thereby its blessing and affirming his deep affection for the Sacred House.” (Faris, 1952, 3; Haerinck, 2011, 17; 2012). However suggestive this description may be, a 'stockpile' for distribution to the faithful is not the only possible explanation for the presence of such a large number of wadi stones in a storage vessel near the temple. Other valid explanations and parallels exist, for example from practices attested at rural shrines in Iran (Fig. 7). The Imamzadeh, a local shrine with the grave of a religious figure, often takes center stage in local communities (Haerinck, & Overlaet, 2008). They are visited for oath-taking in legal cases, for cures, during pilgrimage and religious festivities (Demant Mortensen, 1993, 131). It is quite common to present offerings at such Imamzadehs and objects like combs, bottles of oil, candles, and anything out of the ordinary such as fossils or smooth river cobbles are deposited on the tombs in order to get imbedded with “baraka”, good fortune (Stark, 1934, 100; H. Izadpanah, 1350/1971-72, 527; Demant Mortensen, 1993, 126-127; Krone, 1992, 395). Even archaeological objects like stone bowls, bronze maceheads,

etc. can sometimes be noticed among such deposits (Dales, 1977, 17-27; Potts, 2001, 142, fig. 4.41).

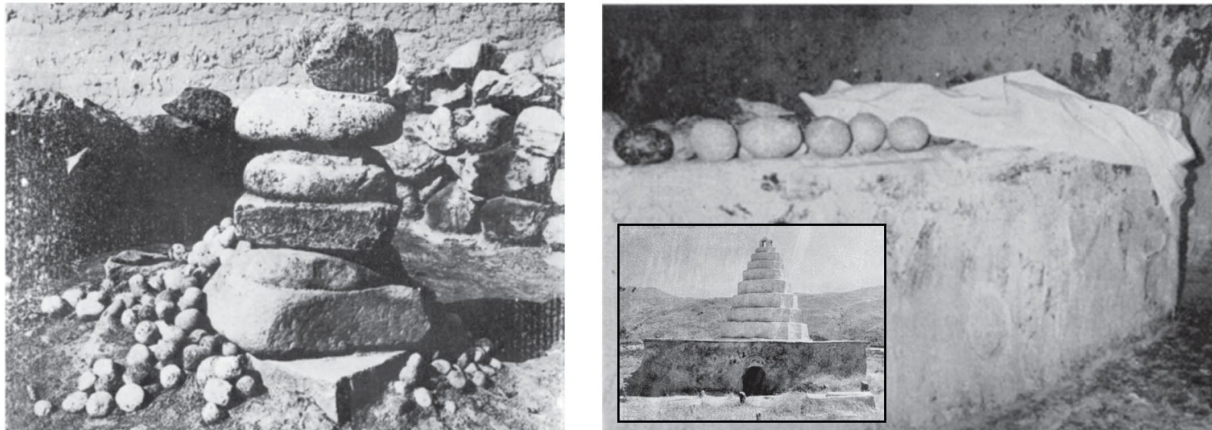


Fig. 7. Depositions of stones at shrines of local imams in the Luristan region of Iran. Left: Imamzadeh Tappe Khanjankani (Deh Pir), stones placed around the open-air memorial built with column bases taken from ancient ruins (photo: Izadpanah, 1350/1971-72, p. 246). Right: Imamzadeh Jabbar Ansar, view of the building (inset) and stones placed on the grave inside the building (photo: Izadpanah, 1350/1971-72, p. 525, 527-8, fig. 2 & 4).

Thus, the black jar containing more than 200 pebbles near altar 3 at the ed-Dur temple site is not necessarily a "source" from which worshippers obtained wadi stones to take with them. It could also be the place where pebbles were collected that had been placed in the sanctuary or at the altars (like the pebbles near altar 3, see Fig. 6). They could also have been stored there for use in certain repetitive rituals. An Arabic example that comes to mind is the way in which the Jamarat at Mina is organised, where pebbles are regularly collected and spread out again (on the origin of the ritual, see Krone, 1992, 394-395). Another ritual involving large numbers of river stones or pebbles is reported from Turkish Central Asia. In times of drought, hundreds or even thousands of pebbles were collected from riverbeds, prayed upon by the community, and then returned as 'rain stones' to summon rain (Baber, 1826, xvii-xviii; Overlaet, 2011, 115).

Hard stones at Mleiha

The discovery of various unworked hard stones in the temple context at ed-Dur, raises the question on the significance of similar stones in other contexts, specifically graveyards but also settlement buildings where small shrines or house shrines may well have existed. The classification and correct identification of such hard stones is not always evident (on this issue, see Squitieri, & Eitam, eds, 2019, 1-4), particularly when there are no visible wear traces. Occasionally, hard stones are e.g., also found in monumental tombs at Mleiha. Fig. 8 shows the hard stones from the fill of a 2nd century BCE tomb at Mleiha area 07 (ML-07 tomb A1; not published). The small pebbles clustered together; the others dispersed in the fill of the looted tomb. It is uncertain whether they were part of the burial goods inside the tomb chamber or are intrusive and were once present in or near its superstructure. Whereas the large slab could have been used as a millstone or even as a polishing slab, the large round cobble stone's function is much more difficult to imagine and a ritual or religious significance is a possibility. Its shape and size are exactly like the stones in Fig. 6 at the base of one of the

ed-Dur altars. It could be a stone brought from a sanctuary, or a baetyl as well as simply a weight or a hammerstone.



Fig. 8. Various hard stone finds from the graveyard area Mleiha ML-07. Left: stones from the fill of a looted underground burial chamber (tomb A1, inv. ML23-24.ML7/F24a-d). Right: a “cuboid-spheroid” stone found in the surface layer (inv. ML23-24.ML7/F01); such shapes are commonly classified as “weights” (see Eitam, 2019).

Final remarks

The trident petroglyph from Mleiha shares the presence of a hollow on the side with stones and also a sculpture associated with the area M temple at ed-Dur. Although caution is advised, this peculiarity suggests that the Mleiha stone is of a religious nature and is most likely a devotional object. The water tank in which the boulder was found was in the same area where another religious surface find was made, that of a silver votive sheet with a zabur dedication to the goddess al-Lat (Stein, 2017), raising the possibility that there once was some sort of shrine in this zone. If the identification of the stone as a baetyl is correct, its “trident” mark could stand for a deity, but also on this, the evidence is inconclusive. It is a sign also present on another boulder from the region but otherwise it is only found in the same configuration on the Abiel coins where it remains equally unexplained.

The identification of the Mleiha trident stone as a baetyl is at the moment the best hypothesis. Literature as well as the evidence from the area M temple at ed-Dur highlight the important role hard stones played in pre-Islamic religious beliefs and practices, specifically during the Mleiha or PIR period in SE-Arabia. Hard stones are commonly found in excavations, e.g., in the graveyard area as well as in and around houses at Mleiha but identifying possible cult stones among the many common tools or objects will always be an archaeological challenge.

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