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Mudhmar East. An Early Iron Age Ritual Site at the Desert Margins

Guillaume Gernez & Mathilde Jean

The site of Mudhmar East is located in central Oman, 20 km from the oasis of Adam in the al-Dakhiliyah Governorate. It precisely lies at the very eastern tip of Jabal Mudhmar, opening on Wadi Halfayn, thus being in a strategic place on an important nomadic passageway. It was discovered in the 2009 surveys, then excavated since 2015. Several buildings and areas compose the site (Figure 38.1).

Building 1 encompasses seven spaces or rooms delimited by stones and mudbrick walls. In the

main room, several stone pillar bases were found inserted into the floor, revealing the installation of structures supporting the roof in the largest covered room of the building. In the north-eastern corner of this room, a 'cistern' was found under the floor, about one meter deep and with an opening at the bottom of the western wall. Although its exact functioning is still under study, it seems very likely that this structure was somehow related to water management. Besides the main room, a small square room revealed an exceptional set of

FIGURE 38.1.

Mudhmar East, aerial view of the site from the east (Photograph by Hautefort).





FIGURE 38.1.

Mudhmar East, Building 1. Two copper quivers in the “room of the bows” (Photograph by G. Gernez).

FIGURE 38.3.

Mudhmar East, Building 1. Main deposit, including copper/bronze bows, arrowheads, daggers and shaft-hole axes (Photograph by G. Gernez).

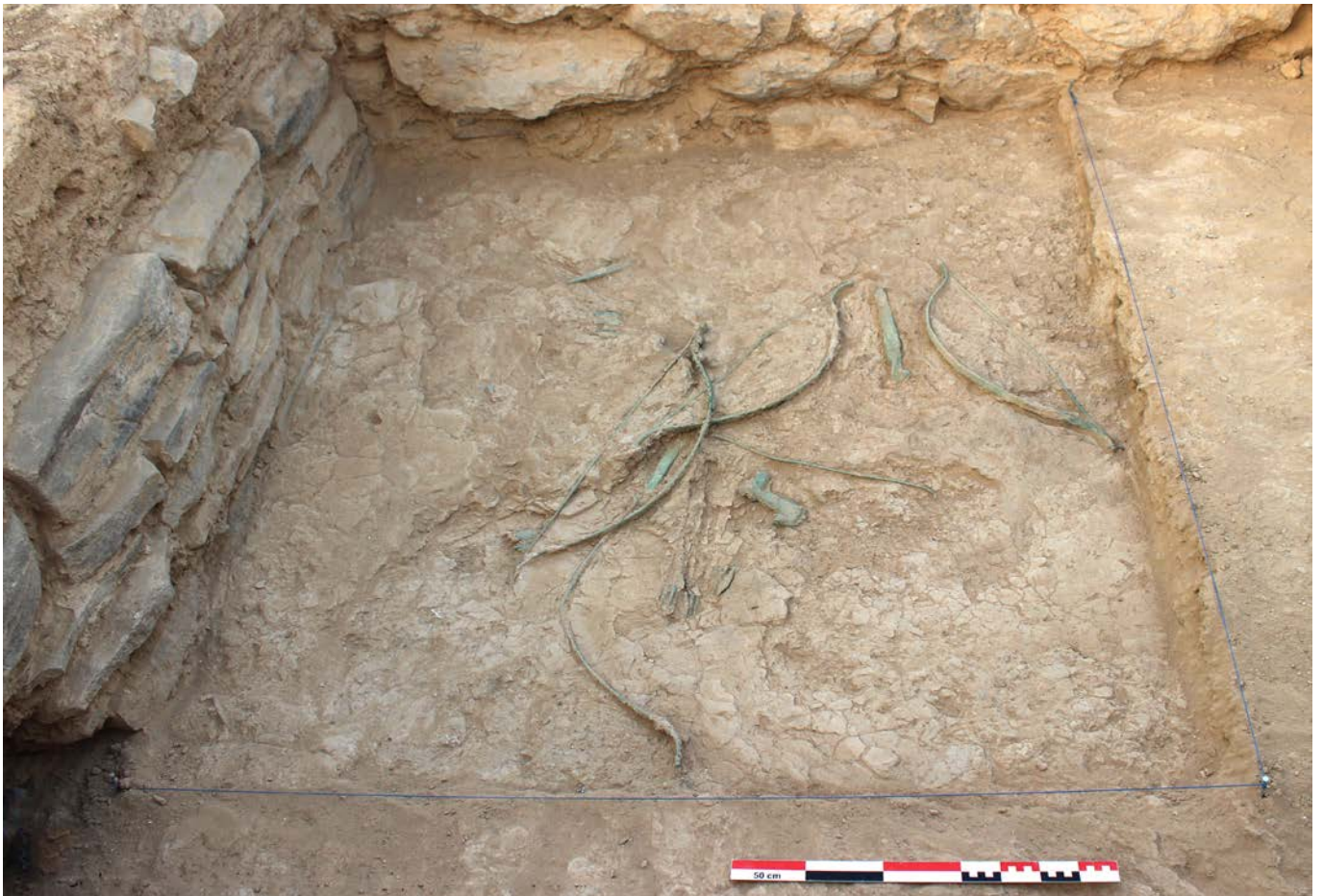


FIGURE 38.4. Copper snake figurines from Area 3 (slope)
(Photograph by G. Gernez).



copper/bronze weapons, including quivers, bows, arrowheads, axes and daggers, but also miniature weapons, being all probably very valuable but unusable, which have been interpreted as votive and/or symbolic offerings (Figures 38.2 and 38.3).

It therefore appears that Building 1 presents a number of characteristics identified on other meeting or cultic sites in Eastern Arabia during the Early Iron Age including a pillared room, copper/bronze weapons deposits and a link to water management.

The Building 2, located just south of the first one, is less preserved. It consists of a small rectangular stone building (about 7×5 m) very original in Oman due to the presence of numerous postholes in a small space, linked with successive layer of use.

At the end, this building was destroyed and intentionally filled with big stones. The materials found inside include copper snake figurines and faunal remains strictly selected (cow, goat and mutton, mainly legs) and frequently burnt: this assemblage is incompatible with any domestic installation and probably reveals a ritual purpose.

The area of Mudhmar East 3 revealed an unusual installation on the jabal slope/gully associated with very rich and diversified materials: some structures were built on the slope including a large wall for a terrace and a series of postholes. A large amount of pottery was found mixed with stones, and was intentionally brought from another place that would be linked to ritual activities, according to the large amount of decorated (incisions or snakes in relief) handles for censers. A lot of copper/bronze weapons were also discovered in the slope, including 250 arrowheads, several complete reduced-model arrows and bow strings, and two daggers. These discoveries confirm the importance of weapons in the ritual activities. Finally, one very rare copper flying peacock and 27 copper snakes were discovered in this area (Figure 38.4), what is typical of ritual sites during the Iron Age, but very rare in Oman: until now, only Salut yielded such material.

On the top of the slope lays a possible destroyed stone platform made of large brown sandstone, but their original use is not known.

Even if the precise kind of activities remains unclear, the function of this site located in a crossroad along Wadi Halfayn is definitely linked to ritual activities, maybe during the meeting of nomadic people and/or travellers moving from Adam to Sinaw for trade or a kind of pilgrimage. A lot of offering were made during these meetings, and they are most of based on weaponry, snake, copper and water. This site is connected to northern Early Iron Age sites, either for copper metallurgy (as 'Uqdat al-Bakrah / As-Safah) and rituals (Masafi and Saruq al-Hadid in the U.A.E). Inhabitants of both regions seem to share the same culture and beliefs. ■