The Archaeological Heritage of Oman

LANDMARKS OF IDENTITY

Bronze Age Towers of the Oman Peninsula

STEPHANIE DÖPPER

Sultanate of Oman سلطنة عُمان
وزارة التراث والسياحة
Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG
www.archaeopress.com

Landmarks of Identity: Bronze Age Towers of the Oman Peninsula
(Includes bibliographical references and index).

1. Arabia. 2. Oman 3. Bronze Age. 4. Towers 5. Antiquities.

This edition is published by Archaeopress Publishing Ltd in association with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Sultanate of Oman.

ISBN: 978-1-80327-819-3
ISBN: 978-1-80327-820-9 (e-pdf)

Ministry of Heritage and Tourism
Sultanate of Oman, Muscat
P.O. Box 200, Postal Code 115
Thaqafah Street
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Cover: Al-Rojoom tower, Bat, Sultanate of Oman (photograph courtesy Ministry of Heritage and Tourism of Oman).

Back cover: Photograph of Stephanie Döpper, courtesy Universität Heidelberg, Kommunikation & Marketing.

Contents

List of illustrations and tables

FIGURES

TABLES

Acknowledgments

This book was commissioned and supported by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism of the Sultanate of Oman. I am deeply grateful to the Minister of Heritage and Tourism, His Excellency Salim Mohammed Almahruqi; the Undersecretary for Heritage Affairs, His Excellency Eng. Ibrahim Said Al-Kharusi; Advisor of Research and Studies to the Minister, Mr. Sultan Saif Al-Bakri; the Acting Director General of Archaeology, Dr Amina Al-Balushi; the Director General of Archaeology, Eng. Yousra Al-Subhi; the Director of the Department of Excavations and Archaeological Studies, Mr. Ali Al-Mahrooqi, and all staff members for their valuable and ongoing help.

The German Research Foundation (DFG) has provided me with the necessary financial resources to carry out the research in Oman over the past years that has led to this publication. I am also indebted to my students Katharina Koch and Tamara Schneider, who contributed to the completion of the plates. I would like to thank Dennys Frenez for the professional formatting and typesetting of this book, as well as Azza bint Abdul Aziz Al-Hinai, Translator of the Department of the Journal of Omani Studies, and Sultan bin Saif Al-Bakri, Advisor of Research and Studies, for their thorough review of the manuscript.

This book project began as a collaboration between Charlotte Cable and myself, but Charlotte eventually had to withdraw from the project to concentrate on other endeavours. Nevertheless, the book relies heavily on Charlotte's ideas and input. She laid the foundations for this publication and deserves my heartfelt thanks. Many other colleagues have generously shared their knowledge on published and unpublished towers, and provided unpublished reports, images, and maps. I express my sincere gratitude to all of them. Their willingness to share their data was instrumental in bringing this work to fruition. Without them, this book would have been much shorter.

Heidelberg, June 2024.

Stephanie Döpper

Introduction

Research History

The Oman Peninsula is one of the most visually stunning regions in the world. Bounded by deserts and oceans, divided by mountains and plains, its landscape provides an otherworldly backdrop for the richness of the peoples who once lived within and on it. Bronze Age monumental buildings, so-called towers, were evidence of a time of staggering development and change that nevertheless managed to go virtually unnoticed by modern-day (Western) archaeologists until well into the middle of the 20th century. They were first identified in the 1970s as "circular walled enclosures", generally 20–30 m in diameter, that were usually made of either large stone boulders or square stone blocks (de Cardi *et al.* 1976; Hastings *et al.* 1975). Beatrice de Cardi made the first attempt at a typology of these structures using features such as the presence or absence of an adjoining rectilinear platform as distinguishing characteristics (de Cardi 1975: 109–110; see also de Cardi *et al.* 1976: 149). However, without excavating any of the towers, de Cardi's typology relied upon extant remains and surface finds for both classification and dating.

The first of these "walled enclosures" to be excavated was at the site of Hili near Buraimi in the United Arab Emirates, where a 24 m in diameter circular building made of mudbrick was uncovered (Frifelt 1971: 376; 1975: 368–370). Inside this structure researchers found a stone-lined well amongst a complex of internal mudbrick walls that formed "compartments". These compartments were not rooms *per se*, but were filled with compact rubble and sand. The excavator of this structure, Karen Frifelt, referred to the building as a "circular watchtower" (Frifelt 1971: 376), even though only "half a metre's height of wall remain[s] above the surface" (Frifelt 1975: 369). This is the first known usage of the "tower" moniker to describe these structures. In discussing the second tower she excavated—Tower 1145 at Bat—Karen Frifelt provides clues as to the source of this nomenclature. She writes of Tower 1145: "It is tempting to call it a fortification, a watch tower perhaps. […] The same principle is known from much later towers, still preserved in Oman, most famous perhaps the round tower in Nizwa" (Frifelt 1976: 59). The association of these "walled enclosures" with medieval towers has since stuck—although we would argue that this has become a gloss of convenience rather than a helpful guide to understanding these monuments as individual structures. In fact, we would prefer to return to the term first used by the American survey team—i.e., "raised circular platform" (Humphries 1974: 50)—but it seems likely that the established term "tower" will remain in the literature for many years to come.

As is often the case with monuments, many of the towers were used and reused even up through the recent past. Al-Wardi castle, which sits in the centre of the modern village of Bat, was the community's fortress, and in use as the local jail as recently as the 1980s (Young 2019: 80). While this shows the centrality of these towers throughout time it has complicated their study; as each generation used the tower, they modified it to suit their own needs, often sweeping away evidence of previous generations in the process and leaving archaeologists to the painstaking task of untangling 5000 years of remodelling. The elements of the towers that have endured best—that is, their solid stone and mud foundations—are also the parts of the tower that tell us the least about their uses, their ages, and their makers. Counterintuitively, even finding these monuments has proved difficult. For those towers located in wadi valleys or at the foot of mountains the effects of alluviation have sometimes been significant—so much so that they have been entirely covered (as is the case at Salut). Those

towers located in wadis run the opposite risk—of eroding away against the 5000-year onslaught of flooding (as in the case of Al-Qumayra)—while those located on hilltops and precipices have often fallen victim to gravity. The Oman Peninsula has only recently entered the consciousness of archaeologists of the ancient world, and (as is the case in many countries) much of region has yet to be surveyed systematically. Thus, finding and then identifying these monumental structures is often a combination of skill, persistence, and luck. Towers are still being discovered today. When Charlotte Cable and Christopher Thornton conducted a survey in 2009, they collected evidence of 62 Bronze Age towers; now, a decade later, there are close to 100. In 2009 only a handful of publications were dedicated to research on one or more of the towers. Since that time, several whole volumes have been published (e.g., Thornton *et al*. 2016), as well as a number of theses and dissertations (e.g., Botan 2012; Cable 2012; Barker 2018; Kluge 2021; Abar in prep.). The time is ripe for a comprehensive study on tower research on the Oman Peninsula.

The purpose of this volume is thus three-fold. In the first place and for the first time, *Landmarks of Identity* catalogues all the known towers on the Oman Peninsula to-date, thus creating a record for researchers and visitors alike. Secondly, this volume will update discussions of both the antiquities and purposes of these towers, which have varied considerably based on the data sets available. Here, we bring together those data sets along with evaluations of the proposed functions to provide both chronological and functional depth. The final goal of *Landmarks of Identity* is to highlight these Bronze Age monuments for visitors, community members, government representatives, and archaeologists alike. This book seeks to facilitate a scalar shift in understanding from individual research programs and disparate data sets to a broader knowledge of 3rd millennium BCE cultural traditions.

The Bronze Age on the Oman Peninsula

The Early Bronze Age on the Oman Peninsula is one of the richest periods in its history. It is associated with the beginning of large-scale copper processing (Giardino 2017; Döpper and Schmidt 2019; Schmidt and Döpper 2020), long-distance trade along the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman (Potts 1986; Méry and Schneider 1996; Schmidt and Döpper 2020) and monumental architecture in the region. Scholars working in Oman have divided this period into an earlier and later part—the Hafit (3100–2700 BCE) and Umm an-Nar (2700–2000 BCE)—both named after type-sites in the United Arab Emirates. Here, the typical tombs of these two phases have been described for the first time. Besides the monumental towers, stone-built tombs form the bulk of the archaeological remains of this time. Hafit period tombs are circular or almost circular above ground dry-stone structures with external diameters between 4 and 8 m. Their inner burial chamber is much smaller with a diameter of only 1 to 2.5 m. Inhumation in Hafit period graves were few, normally ranging between one and four individuals. Later Umm an-Nar period tombs differ from their earlier counterparts by their larger diameters, their internal divisions into several chambers and the large number of people buried within them. They can reach up to 400 individuals of both sexes and all ages (Cleuziou and Tosi 2018: 220; Méry 2010: 33). The façade of the tombs is built of carefully dressed stones. Domestic architecture, while extremely rare during the Hafit period, becomes a little more common during the Umm an-Nar. Therefore, it is generally assumed that people in the Hafit period mainly pursued a mobile lifestyle, while a more sedentary, agriculturally based lifestyle, at least for parts of the population, is discussed for the Umm an-Nar (Al-Jahwari 2008: 323–324; Magee 2014: 103–107; Charbonnier 2017). Nevertheless, even in the Umm an-Nar period there are fewer domestic sites known than monumental towers (Döpper 2018b). Thus, monumental towers, the focus of this volume, form one of the largest components of the material heritage of the Early Bronze Age on the Oman Peninsula.