

„Transformation processes in oasis settlements in Oman“

The 2005 campaigns.

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This year two campaigns of archaeological work were conducted in Nizwa. The spring campaign (22.03. – 22.03.2005; participants J. Schreiber (archaeologist, field director) and F. Voigt (assistant)) concentrated on fieldwork at Nizwa oasis. The results may shortly be summarized as follows:

According to historical sources, Nizwa is, together with Izki said to be one of the oldest towns in Oman. So was Nizwa capital under the Julanda-Dynasty in the 6th and 7th cent. AD, when Islam was introduced to Oman. Since this time Nizwa played an important part in the country's history as capital and seat of the Imam.

Despite of its importance, hardly any archaeological work was done at Nizwa - like in most of the other large oases of inner Oman, which were, probably because of their size, always excluded from systematic research.

B. de Cardi and B. Doe recorded a few sites in the early 1970ies. Two of these, circular structures of the 3rd millennium BC are located at Firq, a small village which today forms the southern edge of the Nizwa oasis. Another site of late Islamic/recent date was found at the northern edge of the oasis at al-Jinah, but the core of the oasis was not examined.

In 1985 Nizwa was again target of archaeological research, when a rich ensemble of metal-artefacts was delivered to the Department of Antiquities in Muscat. Examination of the find spot, located at the Jebel al-Hawrah east of Nizwa-centre, showed, that the artefacts derived from a “worrier-tomb”, which was dated to the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. This tomb was not far away from an Early Iron Age/middle Islamic hill-fort called Sharjah al-Hadirah, whose surrounding wall is still visible on a plateau above the quarter of So'al.

M. Ibrahim, who recorded inscriptions of tombstones at Nizwa's main cemetery, conducted the latest work.

Today Nizwa has a north-south extension of nearly 20 km and is with its 60.000 inhabitants the largest oasis of central Oman. As the process of urbanisation is in fast progress at Nizwa, large areas are already sealed by modern building activities, which had to be excluded from survey activities. Therefore the survey was concentrated on the edges of the oasis as well as some undisturbed areas in the palm-gardens and the oasis itself.

C. 300 find-spots were recorded, what seems to be not very much for an oasis of this size. Southernmost point of the area of research was the outskirts of Firq, while Wadi Sumit was the northern most point of investigation.

The late 4th and early 3rd millennium BC is represented by c. 50 – 60 Hafit-/Beehive tombs, while it was again not possible to locate a settlement site of this period.

Monuments of the second half of the 3rd millennium BC are located at Firq and are known since the 1970ies. These are remains of two circular structures (diam. 20 m) and a small “tell”, c. 3 – 4 m high and also with a diameter of 20 m, which is encircled by a wall consisting of large un-worked rocks. In the surrounding several remains of walls are visible on the ground, which seem to be connected to this structure.

Further remains of the late 3rd millennium BC were found in the north of the oasis, especially at a valley, which forms the border of the oasis to the northeast. In this valley rise some low rocks (among them so called “Oman-Exotics”), where remains of walls as well as Umm an-Nar-sherds can be found. The most impressive of these rocks is a c. 20 – 30 m high rocky peak, which is nearly completely fortified by massive walls.

Large areas of this valley, in which these sites are located at, was recently completely bulldozed to use this area for agriculture. Numerous fields were laid out there for cultivation, but most of these were already deserted again. The bulldozing of this area probably caused the destruction of most archaeological monuments. This is shown by a small Islamic cemetery, which was not bulldozed of course, where we clearly found the remains of a very disturbed Umm an-Nar-tomb together with remains of some foundations. North of this field-area several “structures” were hardly visible in the ground, so that this area may be covered by sediments. We can conclude, that in the 3rd millennium BC the whole valley was used as a settlement area.

As in many other oases the following Wadi Suq-period is missing. But at least the famous Nizwa “warrior-tomb”, which was already examined in 1985 proves the end of this period or rather the transition from Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age.

In the Iron Age II (1100 – 600 BC) settlement activity increases considerably, especially at the eastern side of Wadi Kalbu. There, south of the quarter of So´al lies a vast area of deserted

fields, which stretches into the modern village. Located between these fields are some low mounds, scattered with Early Iron Age pottery. On the surface of some of these mounds were foundations visible, remains of Iron Age houses or farmsteads. This settlement area stretches for some kilometres from the mountains, bordering the oasis to the east, to the edge of Wadi Kalbu to the west and is today cut by the modern Nizwa main road.

Another Early Iron Age settlement area is located some hundred meters up the wadi in a small valley near the modern village of Siba´a, Today this area is used as a cemetery, but between the Islamic graves are still some foundations visible and the surface is densely scattered with Iron Age pottery.

These two settlement areas are separated by a mountain (Jebel al-Hawrah). Built on its flat plateau is a hill-fort, surrounded by an 200 m long enclosure with the remains of at least one tower. Situated inside the enclosure are several ruins of buildings as well as a cistern. According to the pottery this site was already used during the Early Iron Age and later rebuilt during the middle Islamic period.

The question, if this increase in settlement activity during the Iron II-period is connected to the introduction of the falaj-system at Nizwa, has still to be answered.

Remains of the following Late Iron Age or Samad-period are scarce. On the western side of Wadi Kalbu a handful of Late Iron Age sherds were collected on an Islamic cemetery, but no structures or tombs seem to belong to this period.

More interesting is the ruined middle Islamic Friday-mosque of Samad al-Kindi. This mosque was built between the fields and palm-gardens and is nearly completely overgrown. Almost nothing of this building is left, just the wall with the mihrab and the remains of a few pillars were preserved. As far as it is possible to say without excavations, this mosque was built on a flat mound, which was, according to the pottery a Late Iron Age house- or settlement site.

The Islamic periods, except the Early Islamic period are well attested – and at least with the beginning of the middle Islamic period most of the oasis was used for agriculture and settlement. At So´al we found the remains of a middle Islamic potter-workshop. The surface of a low mound there was scattered with thousands of potsherds, many of them burned, melted or distorted as well as many fragments of nozzles. Fragments of three glazed horseman-figurines were found also at Nizwa (a fourth was found at the Jebel Akhdar) and may be dated to the Late Islamic period.

To conclude, we can say so far, that main prehistoric and Islamic settlement was located at the eastern side of Wadi Kalbu, while on the western side of the wadi just very few archaeological monuments can be found

The autumn campaign lasted from 16.10. – 27.11.2005. Members of the team were J. Schreiber (archaeologist, field-director), B. Muhle (archaeologist, draughtswoman) and from 26.10. – 45.11.2005 J. Haeser (archaeologist, director). The work of this campaign concentrated on the pottery, the small-finds and the documentation of the previous campaign. 2000 potsherds were registered in a database and most of them were drawn.

Around 500 potsherds of different periods and different areas of our survey were sent to Germany. There at the FU Berlin, a chemical analysis will be conducted to verify the definition of our pottery-wares.