

Project “Transformation processes in oasis settlement of Oman”  
**Archaeological reconnaissance at Izki and the Jebel Akhdar.**

A preliminary report.

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Introduction:

A interdisciplinary German-Omani cooperation project “Transformation processes in oasis settlement in Oman” started in 1999. It was conducted by members of the Sultan Qaboos University (Department of Archaeology and Department of Agriculture), the University of Tübingen (Oriental Institute), the University of Stuttgart (Institute for Urban Planning), the University of Kassel (Institute of Crop Sciences) and the German Institute of Archaeology in Berlin (Orient Department); head of the cooperation project is Prof. Dr. Heinz Gaube from the University of Tübingen.

After three survey campaigns in Wādī Banī ‘Awf and in the al-Ḥamrā’ region in the years 1999 and 2000 and one campaign for studying the finds in 2001, a second phase of the project started in 2002. The German Research Foundation, the Sultan Qaboos University and the German Institute of Archaeology financed this second project phase, which lasted two years and saw archaeological surveys at Ṭīwī at the coast via the Eastern al-Hajar mountains to Ibrā’ in the interior, at the edge of the Wahiba sands.

In December 2003 this project was extended for another two years by generously financial grants of the institutions mentioned above. Archaeological research will concentrate on surveys in Izki, the Jebel Akhdar, Nizwa and Bahla. The first campaign of the third stage of the project took place from March 7<sup>th</sup> – March 29<sup>th</sup> 2004. Participants were Juergen Schreiber M.A., director (archaeologist) and Frank Voigt (student assistant). All in all we spent eight days in the field in Izki, three days at the Jebel Akhdar and another seven days were used to study the finds and work on the documentation.

Work at Izki:

The town of Izki is located in the upper part of Wadi Halfayn, directly at the southern end of the Sumail-gap, since prehistoric times one of the most important ways through the al-Hajar mountains, connecting the interior of Central-Oman with the coastal areas of the Batinah.

The vast oasis of Izki is divided into several quarters or settlement areas. The oldest and most important centres of the oasis are the quarters of al-Yaman and al-Nizar, separated by a fort (c. 200 years old), located between the two quarters. Situated to the north are the settlements of Seddi, Maghiuth, and Harat ar-Raha, and situated to the west are the small villages of Wuddai and Harat Bani Husain. To the south small parts of the oasis spread in the direction of Zukait.<sup>1</sup>

In every respect, Izki is an important place in Omani history. So is Izki the only place in Oman, which is mentioned in sources of the neo-assyrian period. According to an inscription of the so-called „Ishtar-slab“ in Ninive (c. 640 BC), a king named Padê came from a land called Qadê after a half a years journey to the royal court of Ninive, to pay tribute to Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria. The name of Padê's town can be transcribed as *Is /š/ z – ki / qi-e*, which fits very well with the modern name Izki.

Furthermore, according to local tradition Izki is the oldest town of Oman and one of the places, where the Azd-tribes under Mahlik bin Fahm settled after their arrival from Yemen. Another oral tradition tells about Izki as an important place in prehistoric times, where an idol named Jurnan was worshipped in a cave.

We started our fieldwork on March 9<sup>th</sup> in Izki at an area locally known as “Saruj”. This area is formed by some low plateaus, which border the southern part of the main oasis at the west for some kilometers. Paolo Costa already shortly described this part of the Izki oasis in the late 1980ies.

The main feature at Saruj is a large circular structure (Iz0005) (diam. 20 m), built of large un-worked boulders, which probably formed the foundation of a platform, incorporating a natural rocky outcrop. While the northern part of the structure is founded on top of the plateau, its walls run down the eastern slope towards the wadi. This means, that the eastern side of the structure must have been of enormous height to achieve an even level for the platform. There is no doubt that this structure dates to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. This date is confirmed by comparisons to similar buildings (cf. `Amlah, Firq, Wihi al-Murr etc.) and Umm an-Nar potsherds, which were found in and around the structure. Generally these structures occur never alone, but are always accompanied by at least a second one, if not more (cf. Bat, Firq, Hili etc.). Unfortunately no second circular structure was found until now, but it may have

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<sup>1</sup> At Zukait is a vast necropolis of beehive-tombs, which was mentioned already by B. de Cardi. A short visit showed not only beehive- and Hafit-tombs sitting on the ridges of the mountains, but also tombs sitting in the plain. All in all there must have been hundreds of them, but no traces of settlement were found during our short visit.

been located on the opposite Wadi-bank, where the old and new quarter of al-Nizar are situated and may have been vanished today.<sup>2</sup>

South of Iz0005, down the slope several structures (a retaining wall, terraces, house-foundations), also build of large boulders were visible, which probably belonged to a 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC settlement. These were re-used during the Early Iron Age (Iz0118). This is shown by the remains of structures build of smaller stones set between the larger Umm an-Nar structures, as well as by a dense scatter of domestic Iron Age pottery. The actual size of this settlement site is around 1 ha, but may have originally been larger, as the eastern part of the site towards the wadi is heavily eroded today. In our days, this area is also used partly as a cemetery and around two-dozen Islamic graves is located there.

Situated immediately to the west of the circular building Iz0005, are some large rectangular structures, possibly tombs. They consist of a double-faced foundation wall of large undressed rocks. They all appear to be heavily disturbed and normally just the lowest stone layer is preserved. Generally they are oriented NE-SW, but some few examples are oriented N-S also. They do not differ much in size and their average dimensions are 5.00 x 3.00 m. These structures are loosely distributed all over the oasis, as they are also found at the afore mentioned settlement area (Iz0118), on top of the plateau above the settlement, where they stand alone or in small clusters as well as on the Islamic cemetery west of Iz0005, at the large main Islamic cemetery east of al-Nizar and a smaller Islamic cemetery (Iz0406) at the western wadi-edge at Harat ar-Raha. A group of 27 of these tombs at an area of the large cemetery opposite of al-Nizar, have been recorded by a team of the German Mining-Museum at Bochum in 1988, but were not excavated. These tombs cannot be dated for sure, as this type of tomb is unknown on other sites of the Sultanate – therefore the term “Izki-tomb” shall be introduced here. Because of their NE-SW orientation, they were tentatively dated to the Late Iron Age by P. Yule. Pottery of this period was at least found at the surface of the main cemetery between these tombs as well as at the surface of Iz0406 (among the potsherds were also two fragmented clay figurines). It seems striking, that some of the older Islamic cemeteries were founded at sites, where Izki-tombs have already been built – this speaks for a long continuity in use of burial places.

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<sup>2</sup> In November 2002, Dr. Jutta Haeser and the author thought to have found a large circular-structure at the foot of the western mountains and labelled the site Iz0004. A closer examination this time showed, that it probably was not man-made, but was a natural feature, which arose from large boulders rolling down the mountain-slopes.

On the southern part of the plateau at Saruj an Islamic tower, a house-ruin, a wall running along its eastern edge and a Hafit-tomb seemed to be the only visible structures. But a closer look showed, that the whole area was full of archaeological remains, but nearly all of them were in a very bad condition. Because of that, just the better-preserved monuments were mapped. An interpretation of this area is very complicated, but according to the archaeological record it can be roughly outlined as follows:

The earliest use of this area is attested by several Hafit-tombs sitting on the edges of the plateau. One near the Islamic tower is preserved up to 1,5 meters, but most of them were totally destroyed, so that just faint stone-circles remained. Some Umm an-Nar potsherds were found also at the plateau, namely around the wall. They must have been connected to Iz0005 and the settlement on the eastern slope, as they cannot be attributed to this structure for sure. The existence of Early Iron Age is proofed at least by re-use of older Hafit-tombs, as well as some circular crater-like structures with some Early Iron Age-pottery, which may be remains of a campsite of this period. It is also possible, that some of the badly disturbed tombs may have been of Early Iron Age origin. A handful of Late Iron Age potsherds as well as some tombs with a stone-set underground chamber, which were partly excavated by grave robbers, can be seen as a hint of Late Iron Age occupation. While no traces of the Early Islamic period were found, Middle and especially Late Islamic is well represented by the watchtower, the house-ruin and probably the wall. Scatters of modern Islamic pottery shows, that the plateau was occupied until recently.

When we went onward to examine the chain of low hills spreading to the north along the old highway, ending at the western edge of Harat ar-Raha, the picture did not really change. The three low hillocks are all covered with remains of ancient tombs, which are all so demolished, that it is generally not possible to say which type of tomb they might have been. Some of them may have been Hafit-tombs (then with Early Iron Age re-burials) but the majority of them may be some kind of Early Iron Age tombs. An interesting feature is a wall, which runs at least across the two northern most hills toward a Late Islamic/recent mudbrick tower, overlooking the now deserted old quarter of Harat ar-Raha. As this wall was built over a row of prehistoric tombs, it may be of Islamic date.

After finishing these hills east of the old main road, we changed to the other side of this road. This is a flat area at the foot of the mountains, which was nearly complete bulldozed for building new houses there. So we just found a few traces of old remains to the north of this

area where the new sewage plant is located. There are some prehistoric tombs (Hafit?) situated in the plain as well as some deserted falaj shaft-holes.

When we looked at the slopes above the modern houses we saw some tombs there and when we climbed up, we found a large number of them. The two upper most were 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC beehive-tombs, while on the ridges below them large (Iron Age) tombs were build of un-worked stones. They consist of one or two concentric ring-walls around an oval chamber, which was covered by large flat stones and were partially preserved to a height up to 1 m. A closer look showed, that the slopes in this area were full of several hundred tombs. The situation is similar to that, we found at the vast Late Iron Age cemetery at the coastal site of Tiwi. As in Tiwi, tombs were built here using natural features, especially large freestanding rocks. A semi-circular wall was build in front of these rocks, incorporating them into the structure. Other tombs were totally built between large natural rocks, which rolled once down the mountains. They form clusters of different size, depending on the number of demolished graves. All in all we recorded about 350 tombs there, but as we just mapped the better preserved ones their number must have been much higher. Unfortunately, finds were very scarce at this site. We just found a handful of potsherds, which should be of Late Iron Age date – this also fits with the archaeological record at Tiwi.

Another vast cemetery is located on a plateau south of the canyon where the small village of Wuddai is situated inside. This relatively large plateau ends near the Sinaw-junction. Around 60 large tombs were recorded on this plateau. Their average diameter is 7 m, but some reach 9 m and the better preserved of them are still standing up to 1,5 m high. The foundations of these tombs were built of large boulders and form a plinth and concentric ring-walls around what seems to be a rectangular chamber. According to their location on a plateau, their size and elements of construction they should be Hafit-tombs. Some smaller round or oval tombs with a diameter of 2 – 3 m intermingled between the larger ones, should be of a later (Iron Age) date. Finds were also scarce here. Just a few potsherds of Iron Age date were found and may derive from re-use of the tombs in this period as well.

The only non-funerary feature is a wall (Iz0712) running from the slope of the western mountains through a small valley up onto the plateau and across the middle of this plateau towards the wall Iz0106, which is located on a hill at the east side of the main road. As the position of the wall in the middle of the plateau does not make any sense as fortification, the wall may represent a kind of tribal boundary.

To conclude the results of this campaign, we can say that the Oasis of Izki was at least used with the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, what is attested by beehive-tombs and the vast Hafit-necropolis described above. As usual no settlement remains of this period were found. A settlement area with a large circular structure represents the following late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, but no tombs of this period were discovered so far. While the Wadi Suq period is totally lacking, the Early Iron Age period sees the re-use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC settlement-area and an extensive re-use of older tombs, but also the construction of new ones. The Late Iron Age is best represented by the vast cemetery at the slopes of the western hills as well as by a settlement area, located directly between the two quarters of al-Yaman and al-Nizar.<sup>3</sup>

Islamic sites are somehow under-represented until now. Most Islamic remains we recorded during this campaign were some cemeteries, watchtowers and some ruins in the deserted fields east of Harat ar-Raha – most of these features (except of some of the cemeteries) are of a relatively young date, but this will change, when we turn to the centre of the oasis during the next campaign.

All in all we mapped 744 archaeological sites/features, mostly tombs. At least 1500 potsherds (mainly of Early Iron Age date) were collected. Among the small finds (shells, fragments of soft-stone bowls, some flint-flakes) the most interesting are a bronze arrow-head (Early Iron Age), an iron bracelet (probably Late Iron Age) and the fragments of three clay figurines (one is a painted camel like the examples from Rumeilah and is therefore of Early Iron Age date, while the second camel is unpainted; the third one is not a camel, but very similar to the figurine we found at the Late Iron Age settlement at Ibra in 2003).

Taking in account the above results, aims for the autumn campaign will be to examine the core of the oasis and the Islamic periods more carefully; to have a look what is preserved at the east side of the oasis after pipelines and new highway were built there; search for another circular structure(s); extending the survey area further to the south and closer examination of the Izki-tombs, maybe including excavation of one or two of them to clarify their date. If there were enough time, it would be very interesting to check if there is a connection between the areas of Zukait and Izki.

#### Work at the Jebel Akhdar:

As the enormous area of the Jebel Akhdar massive was until recently military prohibited area, almost no scientific research was made there until now. This and the special climatic

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<sup>3</sup> This site was also discovered by Jutta Haeser and the author in November 2002, but was not visited again this time.

conditions, which have led to a completely different cultivation compared to most other areas of Oman, caused the agriculturists of our team to establish a project there. We accompanied them from 22. – 25. March for a short visit to get a first impression of archaeological monuments in this area.

The question was: Did the good climatic conditions (annual rainfall 200 mm and above, so no artificial irrigation was necessary) encourage early settlement or was the area so remote, that settlements developed relatively late?

We concentrated our short survey mainly on the Saiq-plateau (2000 m), where today the main settlements of Jebel Akhdar are located. Even in this short time, we were able to map around 70 archaeological remains, mainly tombs. The densest occupation of tombs we found at Saiq itself, where the southern edge above the valley Saiq is located in, was full of remains of Hafit-tombs. Generally we noticed, that these Hafit-tombs were sitting on flat mountain ridges, flanking small wadis. It was very obvious, that they were always located in such a way, that they were visible for those people, coming up the mountains. So they mark perfectly occupied territory. This also holds for areas away from the Saiq-plateau, as we noticed some Hafit-tombs in similar positions, when we made a short trip to Hail, some 15 km northwest of Saiq. We also found three probable hut-graves of the Early Iron Age, which were built with stones of older Hafit-tombs nearby.

To find prehistoric settlements was much more difficult. Above Saiq we found remains of what once was probably a camp. There were a few foundations of houses as well as some circular structures (probably stables), which were built of stones of nearby ancient tombs. As we found no single potsherd in this area, we are not able to date this site. But as there is also an adjacent small Islamic cemetery, the site should at least be Islamic and of relatively late date. The same picture occurred, when we visited some of the villages there. The paths inside these villages were so clean, that generally no potsherds were found there too, with one exception of an Early Iron Age rim-sherd from the village of al-Ain. When we looked at the waste dumps of these villages we generally found potsherds, dating back no more than 50 years. But as the prehistoric settlements may have occupied the same locations than the modern villages, potsherds from these periods may be found deep down the canyons and gorges, where they were washed down in the course of time.

Coming back to our initial question, the answer is still a preliminary one, but may be as follows:

Taking in account the natural, climatic and topographic conditions with its wells and caves, the Jebel Akhdar area could already have been occupied in Neolithic times, but this would need further exploration. For sure, the area was used as herding-grounds at the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, as it is attested by a relatively large number of Hafit-tombs. The next period we can prove is the Early Iron Age, as we have a single potsherd and maybe also some hut-graves. The Late Iron Age is attested by a re-burial inside of one of the disturbed Hafit-tombs above Saiq, where we found a soft-stone spindle-whorl of this period.

The other prehistoric but also older Islamic periods should be found during a more thorough exploration

This shows, that the Jebel Akhdar was not a remote area, but was occupied early in prehistory. This also fits with the information given by local people there, that within the range of a four to five hours walk, it is possible to reach all surrounding areas (Birkat al-Mawz, Nizwa, Tanuf, Rostaq, Wadi Bani Kalid etc.).