

Paul Yule

Beyond the Pale of Near Eastern Archaeology: Anthropomorphic Figures from al-Aqir near Bahlā', Sultanate of Oman¹

Summary

Metallic anthropomorphic figures, the subject of this essay, derive from Magan/Makkan i.e. from an Umm an-Nar Period context in al-Aqir/Bahlā' in the south-western piedmont of the western Hajjar chain. These artefacts are compared with those from northern India in terms of their origin and/or dating. They are particularly interesting owing to a secure provenance in middle Oman.

Keywords:

Anthropomorphic figures, Makkan, Umm an-Nar, Aqir/Bahlā', Oman.

Zusammenfassung

Aus Magan/Makan sind anthropomorphe Figuren, das Thema dieses Aufsatzes, besonders aus der Umm an-Nar Periode in al-Aqir/Bahlā', am südwestlichen Fuß der westlichen Hajjar-Gebirgskette bekannt. Diese Funde werden mit jenen aus Nordindien in Fragen ihrer Datierung bzw. Herkunft verglichen. Sie sind besonders interessant, wenn man sich mit der Herkunft dieser Stücke im mittleren Oman beschäftigt.

Schlagwörter:

Anthropomorphe Figuren, Makkan, Umm an-Nar, Aqir/Bahlā', Oman.

Résumé

Les figurines anthropomorphes en métal dont traite cet article sont originaires de Magan/Makkan et datent notamment de la période Umm an-Nar à al-Aqir/Bahlā' dans les contreforts du massif sud-ouest de la chaîne du Hajjar. Ces objets sont comparés à ceux du nord de l'Inde en ce qui concerne leur origine et leur datation. Ils sont surtout intéressants en raison de leur provenance du moyen Oman.

Mots-clés:

Figurines anthropomorphes, Makkan, Umm an-Nar, Aqir/Bahlā' Oman.

Anthropomorphic: "a. treating the deity as anthropomorphic, or as having a human form and character; b. Attributing a human personality to anything impersonal or irrational". (Oxford English Dictionary)

Introduction and Find Circumstances

Rare indeed are prehistoric south-eastern Arabian anthropomorphic figures, and these are seldom considered in the context of religious practices². Research in our yet young and subaltern branch of Near Eastern archaeology tends less in the direction of the fascinating but speculative realm of the spiritual life of the inhabitants and more in that of positivistic, much-needed documentation of survey and excavation. The anthropomorphic artefacts dealt with below are all the more interesting as documents of an ever-growing body of information on prehistoric international contact/influence bridging the void between south-eastern Arabia and South Asia.

Gerd Weisgerber recounts that in winter of 1983/4 Sheikh Sa'īd bin 'Alī bin Sultan al-Mānī from al-Aqir near Bahlā' in the al-Zāhirah Wilāya delivered prehistoric planoconvex "bun" ingots and other metallic artefacts from the same find complex to the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture in Muscat (personal communication here and elsewhere). At the same time Sheikh Sa'īd described to Weisgerber that while demolishing a c. 300 m prehistoric wall at al-Aqir to obtain building material, finds came to light imbedded inside the wall at irregular intervals, sometimes in groups. While preparing the publication on the Bawshar oasis in 1997, the writer found ink drawings of copper artefacts from al-Aqir fallen onto the floor of a steel case in the Ministry cellar³. Aside from the copper ingots, these metallic artefacts are a special topic and the subject of this essay. The entire lot of metallic artefacts cannot be claimed to be a hoard *senso stricto*, but rather form a deposit, so to speak, a building deposit, the nature of which is still under

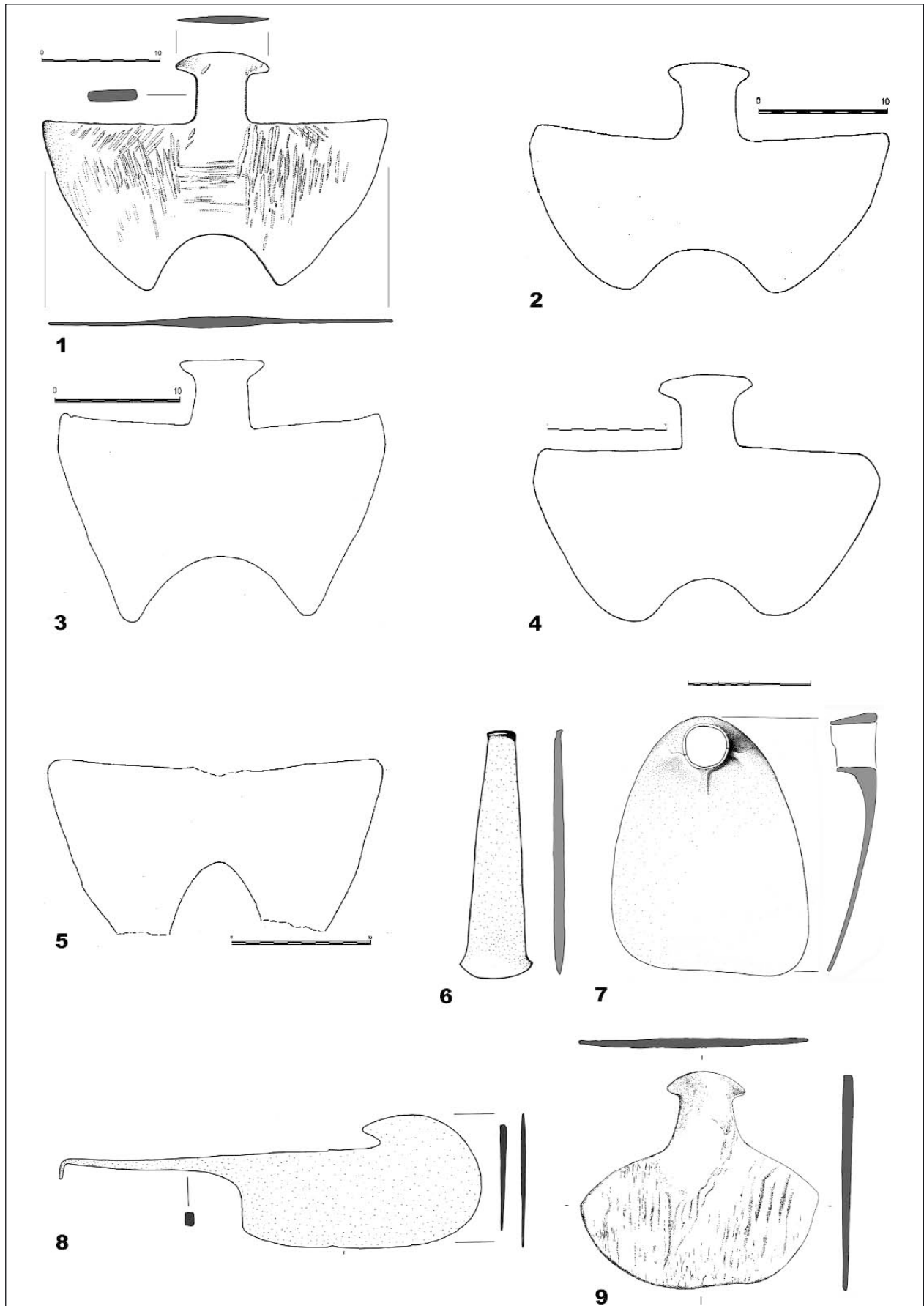


Fig. 1: Prehistoric metallic artefacts from the Sultanate of Oman. 1-8 al-Aqir/Bahlā'; 9 Ra's al-Jins 2, building vii, room 2, period 3 (DA 11961).

Prehistoric metallic artefacts from al-Aqir (excepting ingots)			
No.	cm	Inventory No.	description
1	29.5 x 19.5 x 0,9	DA 15499	anthropomorph
2	29.0 x 20.3	DA 15496	anthropomorph
3	27.7 x 17.4	DA 15497	anthropomorph
4	26.1 x 20.4	DA 15495	anthropomorph
5	30.1 x 15.2 (pres.)	DA 15713	anthropomorph
6	5.4 x 18.7 x 0.9	DA 11783	palstave
7	16.5 x 21.0 x 3.8	DA 11782	hoe
8	40.0 x 12.2 x 0.4	DA 15498	cleaver

Tab. 1: Measurements and inventory numbers of the the anthropomorphic figures from the Sultanate of Oman. 1-8 al-Aqir/Bahlā'.

consideration. Surface sherds, the character of the masonry, and adjacent Umm an-Nar tombs date the artefacts and the wall⁴. The latter served to prevent soil to be washed away and to catch rain water in the ground. The finds are not isolated strays, but occurred in a setting which was settled from the Hafit Period onward.

The Artefacts

Seen en face, the flat figures from al-Aqir are broader than tall and a raised bilobate form suggests an abstract human head. Bilaterally symmetrical broad extremities taper downward, evoking two legs. The metal finds from the al-Aqir wall include ingots, figures, an axe blade, a hoe, and a cleaver (see fig. 1,1-8), all in copper alloy. To judge from the drawings and comparanda, the five figures were cast in copper alloy and subsequently smithed. The extremities elicit from most viewers a spontaneous association with a human head, shoulders, and legs, thus the association with the human form. Aside from their material value, anthropomorphs, such as those dealt with here, have no other intrinsic value or practical primary function, for example as tools. Form follows function. Thus in order to explain how their creators understood them, the archaeologist quite understandably may turn to the realm of ancient cult practices. As the definition cited above indicates, there is no difficulty in using "anthropomorph" for these and/or other artefacts, but particular applications of the term are debatable. In addition, the term suggests that a human-like form was intended by the ancient authors and not simply is considered so by modern viewers.

P. Costa, then archaeology advisor to the Minister of National Heritage and Culture, provided Weisgerber, during his early years in the Sultanate, with a contact sheet of the metallic artefacts. But for some years now the photos have been lost. The first of the anthropomorph series and three other metallic artefacts were properly ink-drafted, but for unknown reasons those remaining survive only as outline sketches.

In addition to the anthropomorphs the narrow palstave (no. 6) is one of several known from contexts of the Umm an-Nar Period⁵.

Hoes such no. 7, in copper alloy, are known from Wādī Sūq and Lizq/Rumaylah Period (Bronze and Early Iron Age) sites in south-eastern Arabia and Iran (Weisgerber 1988, 287-288, fig. 161.1-4; Potts 1994).

The cleaver no. 8 is unparalleled in the prehistory of the entire Near East. Its form resembles an iron coco-nut knife from a reportedly subrecent context in Gudevella (near Kharligarh, Dist. Balangir, Orissa) which the author examined some years ago in India. Aside from the find context and accompanying finds, an ancient dating for the al-Aqir piece is assumed by virtue of the material, copper alloy, which fell out of use prior to the historic period.

Dating the al-Aqir Figures

The dating of the figures, which command our immediate attention, depends on two strands of thought. First, the Umm an-Nar Period/Culture dating mentioned above, encompasses a time-space from 2500 to 1800 BC. In any case, the presence of "bun" ingots among the finds by no means contradicts a dating for the anthropomorphic figures toward the end of the second millennium BC. Since these are a product of a simple form of copper production, they existed with the beginning of smelting in Oman. The earliest dated examples predate this, i.e. the Umm an-Nar Period. Thereafter, copper continues to be produced into the medieval period. Anthropomorphic figures from the Ganges-Yamuna Doab which resemble significantly the al-Aqir artefacts (fig. 2,10-15) form a second line of evidence for the dating. To date, some 21 anthropomorphs from northern India have been published⁶.

But let us turn first to two arguments which might be cited to hinder their use for dating the al-Aqir figures: First, the similarity in terms of form and decoration between the two groups shows some deviation. The "heads", "arms", and "legs" of the Indian anthropomorphs are more clearly differentiated than those from al-Aqir. On the other hand, the surfaces of the only properly drawn anthropomorph from al-Aqir (only one side is drawn and available for comment), and presumably the others as well, are patterned similarly to those from India (cf. fig. 2,10-14). Streaks are

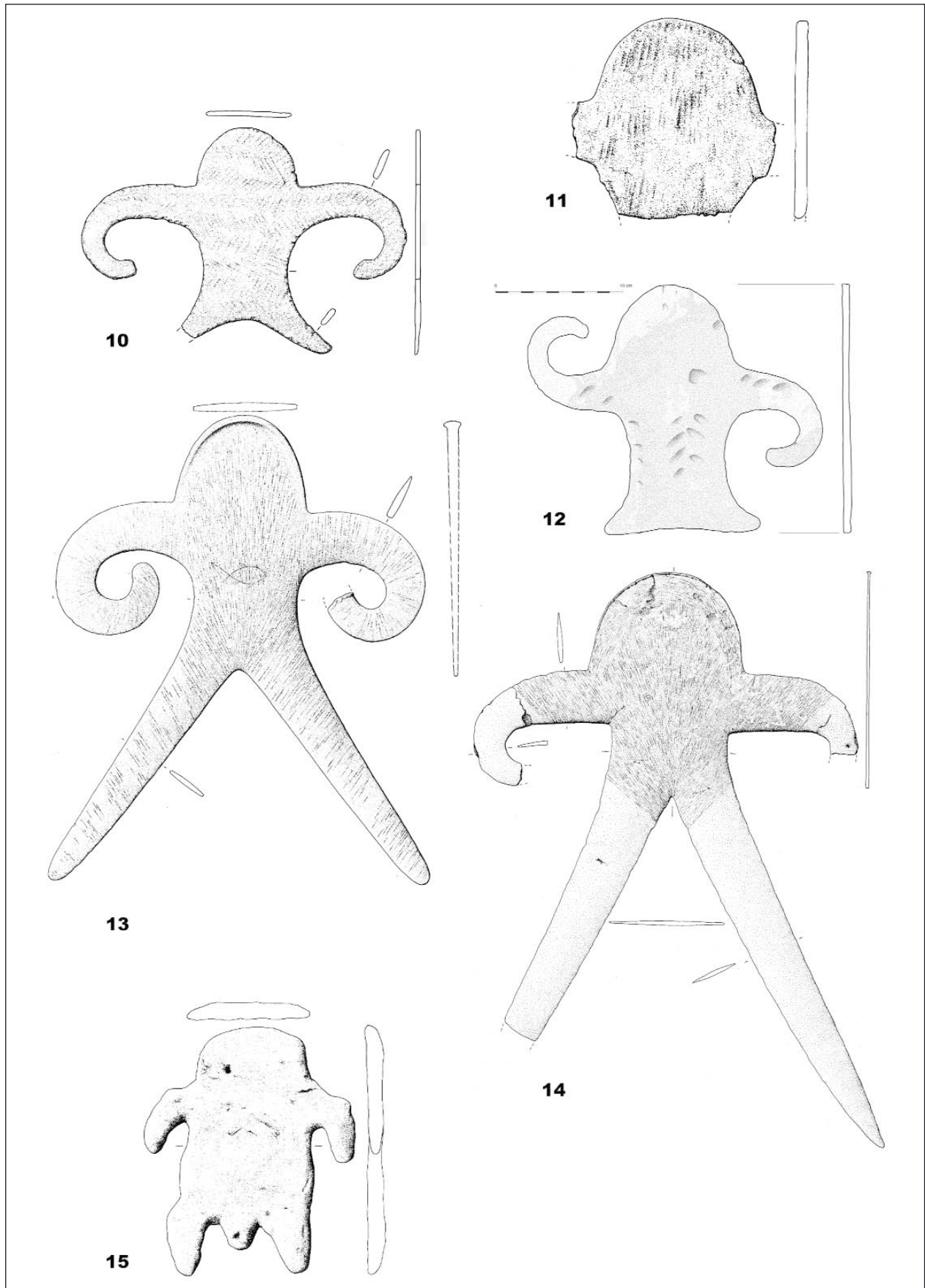


Fig. 2: Anthropomorphic figures from the Indian Subcontinent. 10 type I, Saipai, Dist. Etawah, U.P.; 11 type I, Lothal, Dist. Ahmedabad, Guj.; 12 type I variant, Madarpur, Dist. Moradabad, U.P.; 13 type II, Sheorajpur, Dist. Kanpur, U.P.; 14 miscellaneous type, Fathgarh, Dist. Farrukhabad, U.P.; 15 miscellaneous type, Dist. Manbhum, Bihar.

hammered into the metal in parallel or herringbone fashion. Moreover, the shared form is a stereotype anthropomorphic one. Second, the dating of the Indian anthropomorphs rests on precarious evidence. Few bear a verifiable provenance, but rather are only said to hearken from a given site. On the ground, these sites are sometimes difficult to identify with any certainty (e.g. hoard sites at Hami or Bhagada). And there is virtually no way to know exactly what kinds of pieces (anthropomorphs, swords etc.) constituted a particular hoard, and what the finders kept from a given hoard before it reached the authorities. An interesting exception is a fragment of the "head" of an anthropomorph from Lothal/Gujarat (fig. 2,11), from a layer which its excavator dates to the 19th century BC⁷. Despite certain unfounded doubts as to the integrity of their provenance, it and at least one more appear to derive from a documented accidental find near Saipai Lichchvai village, Dist. Etawah, U.P. (fig. 2,10). The author has articulated the find conditions of this hoard in some detail (Yule et al. 1989 [1992], 203). These anthropomorphs, among other artefact-types, were found stratified together with Ochre-Coloured Pottery, which cannot be dated any more precisely than to the mid second millennium BC. The context of a further hoard of anthropomorphs recovered from Madarpur (e.g. fig. 2,12) remains unpublished. In any case, considering only the contexts of the Lothal and Saipai anthropomorphs together, a dating in the first half of the second millennium seems likely for them and for other artefactually related ones.

Closer to home (that is, in what has become Oman), a parallel for the al-Aqir anthropomorphs was excavated from Ra's al-Jins (Ra's al-Jins 2, fig. 1,9)⁸. The similarities between the Ra's al Jins piece and those from al-Aqir lie in the shape of the "head" and in the manner of the patterning of the surface, shared characteristics which the author takes to be more significant than any differences manifest between the form of the lower parts of the figures. All are about the same size (Ra's al-Jins figure: 18,6 x 20 x 0,9 cm, 862 g). One might well query, as the excavators in fact did, whether the maker of the Ra's al Jins artefact intended a human form. In both publications of this piece, for instance, Cleuziou and Tosi describe it ambivalently as a "*large hoe-shaped tanged flat tool of still undetermined function*". The use as a hoe, however, is most unlikely owing to the shape, unlike that of other hoes, and unnecessary weight. First hand inspection some years ago revealed that part of the lower edge is mechanically somewhat blunted (not visible in the drawing), but the artefact otherwise bears no trace of use-wear, which detracts somewhat from an explanation as a tool. In their publication the discoverers correctly observe that the "edge" bears no evidence of sharpening⁹. The artefact bears vertically oriented patterning on one or both sides, which cannot be clearly seen in the published drawing. The author understands these to be decorative and not just casual traces of production. Even without this, the shape when viewed frontally, particularly that of the "head", one might

venture an interpretation for the Ra's al-Jins piece at variance from that of the excavators – namely that we have here a cult object akin to the anthropomorphs of northern India and more immediately to those from al-Aqir. The Ra's al-Jins artefact is more abstract than the others, but different degrees of abstraction need not be a problem. The find context and accompanying finds, as known from the published reports, shed no light on the identification of the artefact, except from the fact that South Asians travelled to and stayed at Ra's al-Jins.

The excavators date the context from which the Ra's al-Jins copper artefact derived to their period III, i.e. 2300-2200 BC (Cleuziou & Tosi 1997, 57), which falls within the same time as at least some of the copper ingots which are represented at al-Aqir, and for example also in context from al-Maysar site M01. Thus, a dating for the figures under discussion in the late third and early second millennium is suggested here.

Interpretation

At face value, the al-Aqir artefacts appear to have been deposited together in a temporally discrete action in a wall which served to catch rain water and promote cultivation. As opposed to Mesopotamian foundation deposits/figurines, they do not pin anything down, and thus have a different function. Are we to assume that the combination of various artefact types used was purely a matter of chance? Here we have little choice other than pure speculation, which particular god(s) were addressed and how they were spoken to. The copper ingots belonging to the find attained some publicity possibly as the bane of the woeful Ea-nasir, a deceived metals merchant in the Dilmun trade from Ur. But while these "fake ingots" – a slag core mantled with copper (Hauptmann 1987, 210 fig. 2) – awaken a sense of commercial origin and intention, they among the other metallic artefacts in the wall, actually may have been cheaper oblations for the gods. In Islam of the latter day, the offering by overly thrifty or indigent believers of an oryx instead of a goat comes to mind.

Sui generis in the find repertoire of south-eastern Arabia, anthropomorphs such as those from al-Aqir, have hitherto eluded the archaeologist's eye. Their associations with Arabia are less intimate than with South Asia¹⁰. Not only did trade and cultural contacts between here, Iran and south-eastern Arabia take place, at times the area was an entity unto itself (Maka and Ard al-Hind)¹¹. With regard to such early international contacts, the Franco-Italian team has emphasized the presence of a settled Harappan-Period population and lively trade with South Asia at Ra's al-Jins in coastal Arabia¹², where one of the figures under discussion came to light. But why and how might have South Asian (if they really are that) objects reach inland al-Aqir? What is the nature of the connection of these objects or their makers with South Asia? Perhaps aspects of its

culture were common with those in this part of Arabia, or belonged to visitors from there. Is it simply a question of strays which were imported as curios, or were South Asians actually present in the back country? Is it not also conceivable that the anthropomorphs with a particular kind of decoration present simply an intercultural - international style, and did not serve the same exact function in the different areas where they have been found? In the late third-early second millennium, given the presence of a textually documented "Meluhha village" in Lagash (southern Mesopotamia), one cannot be too surprised that such colonies existed "east of Eden" in south-eastern Arabia juxtaposed with South Asia. In any case, here we encounter yet again evidence for contact between the two regions – a contact of greater intimacy and importance than for the other areas of the Gulf.

The anthropomorphs from Oman are interesting on other grounds. There is no reason to question the date of the copper figure from Ra's al-Jins. The thought can be entertained if this example may be taken to raise the uppermost terminus of the South Asian anthropomorphs into the later third millennium BC, instead of being clustered solely during the mid-second millennium, where traditionalists date them.

The foregoing study owes its impetus if not inspiration to Gerd Weisgerber, with whom I had the great fortune to work with during the past 20 years. On meeting him in Cambridge in 1981, little did I know of what this would mean to me for the greater part of my active professional life. I dedicate this article to a rather unlikely looking guru.

Notes

- 1 The author should like to thank the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung for enabling our research in 1997. M. Bemmam is also thanked for going over an early version of the present text.
- 2 Exceptions regarding both: Reade 2000, 133-138; Yule 2001, 200-203. A rare example of a cultic object from the early centuries CE derives from a late Pre-Islamic grave at 'Amlah/al-Zāhirah: Yule 1999, 141, 180 fig. 37.14.
- 3 In Yule (ed.) 1999, 1-81. I thank Dr 'Alī bin Ahmad bin Bakhit al-Shānfarī for permission to publish these drawings. The drawings are numbered 529, 530, and 531 in the drawing file of the Department of Antiquities. While cases are known in and outside of Oman of false provenance information given to mislead competitors, authorities, police, etc., there is no reason whatever to doubt the integrity of that cited here.
- 4 Regarding the find circumstances, the ingots, and the find complex, a study currently is in preparation. The area of the find has been surface-surveyed and mapped with the help of the finder.
- 5 Catalogued in Yule 2001, 48-49 fig. 5.1 class A02; dating: Umm an-Nar; see also Yule & Weisgerber 2001, Plate 52.47-49.
- 6 Yule 1985, 128; Yule et al. 1989 [1992] 274; Yule et al. 2002, for recent bibliography. More are known to exist, particularly from a large hoard deriving from Madarpur. Still others exist in private collections.
- 7 Lothal, phase 4 of period A, type 1.
- 8 Context: phase III, building VII, room 2. First published: Cleuziou & Tosi 1997, 68, 81 fig. 12.
- 9 As published originally, the "edge" and those of other artefacts as well point upwardly, that is, not in the manner that they would be used or carried. Unfortunately, the last named convention of archaeological publication is not adhered to by all.

- 10 The author considers a similarity with certain prehistoric rock images to be a matter of chance: (quadrupeds in "sawbuck" style) as fortuitous: Nayeem 2000, 49 fig. 7 (Kilwa, oryx), 92 fig. 90 (W. Bajdah, steers), 116 fig. 128 (Hanakiyah, steers), 161 (Jubbah, horse), 225 fig. 329 (J. al-Arafah, steers) etc.
- 11 Potts 1986, 285; Yule 2001, 272-273, to name only two examples.
- 12 Cleuziou & Tosi 1997, 63. These authors emphasize the concentration of South Asian imports and settlement remains at Ra's al-Jins.

Bibliography

- CLEUZIQU, S. & TOSI, M.:
1997 Evidence for the Use of Aromatics in the Early Bronze Age of Oman. in: A. Avanzini (ed.), *Profumi d'Arabia*, Rome, 57-81.
- CLEUZIQU, S. & TOSI, M.:
2000 Ra's al-Jinz and the Prehistoric Coastal Cultures of the Ja'alan. *Journal of Oman Studies* 11, 19-74.
- HAUPTMANN, A.:
1987 Kupfer and Bronzen der südostarabischen Halbinsel. *Der Anschnitt* 39, 209-218.
- NAYEEM, M.A.:
2000 *Rock Art of Arabia*, Hyderabad.
- READE, J.:
2000 Sacred Places in Ancient Oman. *Journal of Oman Studies* 11, 133-138.
- POTTS, D.T.:
1986 The Booty of Magan. *Oriens Antiquus* 25, 271-285.
- POTTS, D.T.:
1994 The Hoe and the Ard in Eastern Arabia: Ancient Implements and Agricultural Traditions. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 5, 158-168.
- WEISGERBER, G.:
1988 Oman: A Bronze-Producing Centre during the 1st Half of the 1st Millennium BC. In: J. Curtis (ed.), *Bronze-working Centres of Western Asia c. 1000-539 BC*, London, 285-295.
- YULE, P.:
1985 The Bronze Age Metalwork of India. *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* 20,8, Munich.
1999 'Amla, al-Zāhirah (Sultanat Oman) – späteisenzeitliche Gräberfelder 1997. In: P. Yule (ed.), *Studies in the Archaeology of the Sultanate of Oman*, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Orient-Archäologie 2, Rahden, 121-186.
2001 *Die Gräberfelder in Samad al Shān (Sultanat Oman) Materialien zu einer Kulturgeschichte*, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Orient-Abteilung, Orient-Archäologie 4, Rahden.
2001 Addenda to "The Copper Hoards of the Indian Subcontinent: Preliminaries for an Interpretation". *Man and Environment* 26.2, 117-120.
- YULE, P., HAUPTMANN, A. & HUGHES, M.:
1989 [1992] The Copper Hoards of the Indian Subcontinent: Preliminaries for an Interpretation. *Jahrb. RGZM Mainz* 36, 193-275.
- YULE, P. & WEISGERBER, G.:
2001 *The Metal Hoard from 'Ibrī Selme, Sultanate of Oman*. *Prähistorische Bronzefunde* 20/7, Stuttgart.