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Sharma, Un entrepôt de commerce médiéval sur la côte du Hadramawt (Yémen, ca 980-1180).

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Sharma, Un Entrepôt de Commerce Médiéval sur la Côte du Hadramawt (Yémen, ca *980-1180)*, published in 2015 as the 17th British Foundation for the Study of Arabia Monograph by Archaeopress is an extensive (559 pages), clearly presented and lavishly illustrated archaeological monograph edited by the director of the fieldwork project, Axelle Rougeulle, with multiple contributors to the specialist reports. The publication presents the final results of five seasons of investigation completed between 2001-2005 of the relatively recently discovered small coastal entrepôt of Sharma situated on an isolated stretch of the Hadramawt in Yemen, facing onto the Indian Ocean on the shoreline of South Arabia. The site, which consists of a fortified citadel that makes use of the natural defences of a steep sided rocky promontory and a lower town dominated by warehouse structures, has a relatively short lived occupation history spanning the late 10th to mid-12th centuries. Thus unlike many other contemporary coastal Indian Ocean port cities such as Sohar, Siraf, Shanga or al-Shihr, Sharma offers a clear insight into a neatly constrained period within the history of the region free from many of the problems associated with long lived multi-phase settlements, especially the effects of secondary redeposition and residuality.

The monograph is presented in five main sections with large portions of the text provided by the project director, Axelle Rougeulle, with further authors contributing mostly towards the specialised finds studies and the discussion of the site within its wider context. The text is in French throughout. Following a general introduction to the site of Sharma within its regional and historical setting, Section I presents the limited evidence for earlier pre-Islamic occupation encountered during the archaeological investigation of the site. Section II discusses the main archaeological findings of the stratigraphic excavations completed across various sectors of the settlement together with detailed plans, sections and good quality supporting black and white and colour photographs. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the relatively short lived nature of the occupation, the sequences revealed generally do not reach any great depth or complexity. This is compounded by the deflationary conditions, which are typical for this type of arid environment with denuded vegetation cover. Only in a few selected locations are there well-preserved deposits associated with the initial occupation dated to the late 10th century.

Section III presents the finds from the excavation including separate chapters on unglazed ceramics, glazed ceramics, Chinese imports, glass, soft stone vessels, ground stone implements, coins and other small finds including metalwork and beads as well as analysis of resins and the archaeobotanical remains. Section IV discusses the evidence for later limited reoccupation at the site in the 13th – 14th and 18th – 19th centuries. Finally, five authors contribute to the discussion of the site within its broader regional context in Section V, including information on the local coarse ware ceramic industry identified during the course of the project nearby at Yadghat, and information on the significant port city of al-Shihr situated c. 50km to the west of Sharma, which recent excavations have shown to contain a long occupation sequence spanning the 8th to 19th centuries. The second half of the section provides a broader historical analysis of the potential role and interpretation of the site within its western Indian Ocean context written by Eric Vallet.

One of the important features to note about the finds study from Sharma, and especially the three chapters dealing with the different elements of the ceramic assemblage, is that this work represents a shift towards a system of quantitative finds recording, which has not been evident in many publications of near contemporary coastal settlements within the Indian Ocean area in recent decades, for example Tissamaharama,(1) Sohar,(2) or Mantai.(3) This is in itself hugely significant and while the ceramic finds study makes up only one part of the much wider remit of the monograph publication, this review will focus largely on this specific aspect of the work and especially the quantitative treatment of the assemblage. Finds quantification opens up the possibility to compare finds assemblages systematically through time and space and to provide an absolute measure of the changing volume and composition of

(1) Schenk, H. 2001: 'The development of pottery at Tissamaharama'. In Weisshaar, H.-J., Roth, H. & Wijeyapala, W. (eds.) *Ancient Ruhuna*: Sri Lankan-German Archaeological Project in the Southern Province 1. Materialien zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie Band 58: Mainz/Rhein, 59-195.
(2) Kervran, M. 2004: 'Archaeological research at Suhār 1980-1986', *Journal of Oman Studies*, 13: 263-381.
(3) Carswell, J. Deraniyagala, S., Graham, A. 2013: *Mantai - City by the Sea*. Linden Soft Verlag: Aichwald.

material exchange. The recent widespread adoption of quantitative finds recording and publication within the field of western Indian Ocean archaeology,(4) provides a vital source of data that is likely to revolutionise our understanding of the long-term economic history of the region. The methodology of quantification has therefore become a crucial consideration to the development of a broader subject area.

Because of the sporadic and relatively slow adoption of finds quantification in the Indian Ocean area, we are starting from a low point in terms of the range of data potentially available. In 2004 there were still only two quantified sequences that had been published in a comprehensive manner anywhere within the western Indian Ocean, from Shanga in Kenya,(5) and Kush in the United Arab Emirates.(6) Based on a more recent review,(7) the total has now jumped up to thirteen, and we can anticipate the publication of further datasets or the improvement of published information on some of the existing material in the near future, especially from East Africa from sites such as Tumbe, Fucuchani and Unguja Ukuu. What is really needed now more than anything else is the provision of accurate information from a greater number of sites covering different periods, geographic areas and site types.

The publication of the sequence from Sharma makes an especially important contribution in a number of respects. It represents the first quantified sequence from South Arabia and in this sense offers a geographic bridge between contemporary sequences from East Africa and the Persian Gulf. Functionally the site appears to be unusual and may, as the authors suggest have acted more as a dedicated commercial entrepôt rather than the more typical pattern of an entrepôt-come-urban-centre. This certainly seems to be reflected in the predominance of warehouse structures and the high proportions of imported ceramics from a wide variety of sources. Historically Sharma occupies an important transition period following the political and economic decline of the Abbasid caliphate along with a number of prominent port sites within the Persian Gulf, mostly notably Basra and Siraf and a western reorientation of power within the Islamic word with the rise of the Fatimids in Egypt, which benefited the Red Sea ports and South Arabia. In terms of the sequence itself, the site's constrained chronology and the unusually high degree of dating precision offered by the large quantity of Chinese ceramic imports mean that Sharma offers a range of important insights that help to inform our understanding of broader ceramic chronologies across the region, upon which the interpretation of the whole ceramic dataset rests.

Given the clear significance of the Sharma sequence, and the high quality of the presentation in general, it should be noted that there are a number of omissions from the finds data presentation that mean our knowledge of the site still remains somewhat incomplete. This will make it difficult to fully integrate the results of the Sharma finds study into the emerging picture of ceramic exchange patterns within the wider western Indian Ocean. While these issues may not be of central concern to those wishing to seek a general overview of the archaeology of Sharma, they may be worth raising here as the work does highlight issues that have a significant bearing on the presentation of similar finds data from other sites moving forwards.

The most significant limitation of the Sharma publication appears to be the omission of data on the total quantities of finds for each category described within the report across the individual excavation sequences or phases. Instead what we are presented with is a high level synthesis, but little of the background information that would be required to interrogate the dataset further. The high level synthesis is itself based on several assumptions, which may be valid in themselves, but which are buried from the reader behind the data analysis process. First of all, an overarching periodization has been applied across the excavation sub-divided into approximately fifty-year time periods into which individual contexts from each excavation must have been assigned (Table 2, page 155). The absence of an additional table showing how individual sequences have been assigned within this scheme means that

(4) See for example Kennet, D. 2004: *Sasanian and Islamic Pottery from Ras al-Khaimah: Classification Chronology and Analysis of Trade in the Western Indian Ocean*. British Archaeological Reports (International Series), 1248/Society for Arabian Studies Monographs, 1. Archaeopress: Oxford; Carter, R.A. 2005: 'The pottery'. In T. Insoll (ed.) *The Land of Enki in the Islamic Era. Pearls, Palms and Religious Identity in Bahrain*. Kegan Paul: London, 108-192, 401-51; Nanji, R. 2011: *Mariners and Merchants: A study of the ceramics from Sanjan (Gujarat)*. British Archaeological Reports, S2231/Sanjan Reports Volume 1. Archaeopress: Oxford; Fleisher, J. & LaViolette, A. 2013: 'The early Swahili trade village of Tumbe, Pemba Island, Tanzania, AD 600 – 950', *Antiquity*, 87: 1151-68; Power, T. 2015: 'A first ceramic chronology for Late Islamic Arabian Gulf', *Journal of Islamic Archaeology*, 2(1): 1-33.

(5) Horton, M. 1996: *Shanga, the Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa*. Memoirs of the British Institute in Eastern Africa 14: Nairobi.

(6) Kennet, D. 2004: *Sasanian and Islamic Pottery from Ras al-Khaimah*.

(7) Priestman, S.M.N. 2013: *A Quantitative Archaeological Analysis of Ceramic Exchange in the Persian Gulf and Western Indian Ocean, AD c.400 – 1275*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Centre for Maritime Archaeology, University of Southampton: Southampton.

the results cannot be further unpacked if required. The periods themselves are dated on the basis of the occurrence of certain categories of closely datable ceramics. Confusingly the periodization itself has not been arranged as a continuous chronology. The main periods follow consecutively to one another, but sub-periods have also been included with date ranges that bridge more than one period. While it is understandable that the dating precision for different contexts is likely to vary, the presence of multiple partially synchronous periods within the same scheme makes it difficult to place all of the finds data into a linear chronology for analysis purposes.

Later within the report, a unified chronology is deployed but this adopts a different system to the periodization. It is based on chunking up the find totals into twenty-five year time periods. Again there is a crucial stage missing from the presentation showing how the periodization and this latter scheme interrelate. This means that the information contained within the main ceramic finds data summary table (Table 2, page 155) cannot be related to the graphs that appear later within the report. This is particularly problematic as Table 2 is the only place in which the sherd counts per phase are provided rather than percentage figures. This leads us on to a further range of problems associated with presentation of the finds quantification.

Firstly, the quantification is selective. For certain categories we are provided with the changing relative proportion of material by period and for other categories, such as Indian imports, this information is omitted. The chapter dedicated to Chinese ceramics written by Bing Zhao takes an altogether different approach and only includes the total number of sherds for each class across the site rather than by period. The analysis of whole assemblage composition cannot be completed on the basis of the information provided. Secondly, where figures are included broken down by period, they are presented only as percentages on a bar chart. While this is visually effective and provides what is likely to be the most informative and meaningful mode of presentation, the original totals from which the percentages have been calculated remain unknown, as do the precise percentage figures themselves, which can only be roughly estimated from the position of the bar on a scale. Finally, the percentages that are included have not been calculated from the period total, but are instead derived from sub-sections of the assemblage in which they occur. For example, the values given for sgraffiatos are calculated as a proportion of all glazed ceramics, not as a proportion of the whole assemblage. For coarse wares the calculation is even more problematic because it only includes diagnostic sherds. Without knowing the total number of glazed sherds or the total number of diagnostic non-glazed sherds per period, the size of the sample cannot be determined and thus different elements of the assemblage cannot be compared.

Admittedly there may be specific challenges associated with the presentation of ceramic finds data derived from the particular type of archaeological investigation undertaken at Sharma, which involved the excavation of 110 test pits and 8 small soundings with shallow stratigraphy across different parts of the site. Unlike Shanga and Kush, which contain large contiguous blocks of archaeological deposits and long occupation sequences, Sharma offers a different sort of excavation model that the authors have adapted to accordingly. The ceramic finds study from Sharma is also underpinned by accurate work on the classification, description and illustration of the material. The format adopted for the presentation of the assemblage data and the omission of certain aspects of the associated information do in the opinion of this reviewer present obstacles to a full integrated analysis of the assemblage data, but these are relatively minor considerations when set against the substantial achievements of the wide ranging and comprehensive archaeological investigation and publication of the site.

In summary, the publication of Sharma provides a full and attractive archaeological monograph that presents the results of a large-scale archaeological investigation of an important site on the south coast of Arabia that was highly engaged in a wider trans-Indian Ocean exchange during a narrow window between the late 10th to mid-12th century. The site offers huge potential for understanding this transition period when a number of large well-established hubs of long-distance exchange in the Indian Ocean were in decline and new order was emerging connected with the rise of Fatimid power in Egypt and the growing importance of Red Sea trade. (8) What Sharma also clearly demonstrates is that the interaction between the Red Sea and Persian Gulf trade routes was not one of straightforward oscillation between one and the other as it has sometimes been presented. The post-Siraf era was characterised by the continued active flow of glazed ceramics from southern Iran into East Africa and at Shanga, for example, a significant rise in the proportion of imported ceramics as a whole (Horton, 1996: table 3). Sharma provides a further additional component to this picture: the exchange in the opposite direction

(8) Power, T. 2010: *The Red Sea Region During the 'Long' Late Antiquity (AD 500-1000)*. Unpublished D.Phil. Dissertation: Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, p. 340.

of substantial quantities of low-fired East African cooking pots into South Arabia, which account for around 15-20% of the non-glazed diagnostic sherds. This speaks volumes of the complex interactions and multi-ethnic constitution of the trading community at this time. The archaeological fieldwork completed at Sharma provides a mine of new information that will force many old ideas to be reinterpreted.

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