

Assessment 1

Abstract

My investigation for Assessment 1 comes amid a wider interest in the region of what is the modern United Arab Emirates. My studies thus far have allowed me to investigate the range of archaeology that exists and remains to be discovered along with considerations of the role of the region within the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean trading networks. The site of Muweilah has drawn my attention at various points throughout my MA studies and my residence in the local area certainly has had a role in heightening my desire for further understanding of how the site fits into the historical picture. The artefact that will be the focus of this investigation can be viewed at [Sharjah Archaeological Museum](#) and is somewhat of a standard-bearer for local archaeology and ancient culture in the emirate of Sharjah alongside having wider regional significance.

Archaeological Context

The UAE provides an example of a very modern yet ancient region, with much of the past being rediscovered alongside its relatively recent growth spurred on by the discovery of oil and now diversifying in the 21st century. The site at Muweilah provides somewhat of a welcome conundrum of ancient history amidst the modern developments in Sharjah. The site holds its origin in the Iron Age II period within the overall Iron Age era beginning in 1300 BCE and ending in 300 BCE. One of the lead excavators of the site was Peter Magee and illuminates the importance of the era: “the middle phase...sees a massive increase in the number of settlements in this region”¹ Magee furthers his arguments following his seasons of excavation by highlighting how the massive intensification of settlement at Muweilah is the “defining feature of the Iron Age II period (1000-600 BC) in southeastern Arabia”.² The discovery of a rich material culture at Muweilah has prompted the dismissal of the site as a campsite for travel further inland by nomads and raises the requirement for further examination of the use of the south-eastern Arabian desert environment by the peoples that inhabited the area throughout the 1st millennium BCE³. Indeed the extensivity of the site is backed up by geophysical results that indicate a large and fairly extensive site of around 1 hectare with a wall fortifying the compound confirming a society of social, political and economic complexity⁴.

Muweilah exists within a regional trade network, encompassing other contemporary sites at Tell Abraq and Malieha. The significance of Muweilah within this network is perhaps emphasised by the artefact under investigation here as shown in Figure 1. The existence of the Muweilah camel figurine is insinuated of a shift in traditional patterns of settlement that were hallmarked in the third and second millennium by coastal/oasis occupation. According to the

¹ Magee et Al, 2002, 133.

² Magee, 2004, 24.

³ Blau et al, 2000, 119.

⁴ Blau et al, 2000, 126-127.

arguments of Magee this shift is as a result of the introduction of domesticated camels with the archaeozoological evidence, alongside the ceramic, providing the proof of such a new settlement focus.⁵ Beyond this regional shift, the use of domesticated camel can perhaps be considered in the reconfiguration of the wider trading network with evidence emerging from Yemen at the sites of Barāqish, Yalā, Hajar ar-Rayhānī, Hajar at-Tamra, and Hajar Ibn Humayd.⁶ The factor that stands out when considering the site of Muweilah is that of its location away from the shoreline and “in an environmental zone which does not appear to present obvious environmental resources that would promote and sustain sedentary human occupation.”⁷ It is with this in mind that we can strive to garner some thoughts about the nature and function of the figurine.

Artefact Analysis

Initial observation of the Muweilah camel suggests a ceramic material (however this is not identified in the initial excavation report of Magee) that has been crafted by advanced artistry that is clearly part of an established cultural tradition. The figurine is identified as being painted “red and black geometric patterns” perhaps most visible towards the stern in Figure 1⁸. The shape of the camel itself could almost be described as wavy as if some motion exists, the front legs being positioned at angles suggests that the camel is in the process of kneeling down in order to be relieved of whatever load was situated on its back. The position of the legs of the figurine provide a sense of stability for this object that wherever it was placed, sand or stone, it would remain stable. The figurine holds much aesthetic to the observer and the key in my opinion to this is the flowing form of the body, legs and neck. The geometric decorative paint that remains provides a further sense of the aesthetic that this camel held in the Iron Age II period and onwards to this day.

The part of the figurine that perks the most interest is perhaps the flat saddle load on its back that indicates to the viewer that something should be placed upon it, what that something should be is a very intriguing thought. The flat saddle load would fit in with the overall stability of the figurine and indicates that an additional item should be placed atop the saddle. Magee makes reference to this in his initial excavation report and opens the interpretative debate of “Whether or not the object is the *sadad*, or North Arabian saddle...no other known camel figurines from southeastern Arabia are represented in this fashion”.⁹ This initial observation and interpretation by Magee opens the window for further considerations about whether the figurine can be considered as an import or representative of a significant shift in local culture, as would perhaps fit the introduction of domesticated camels. Certainly the uniqueness of this figurine to the region makes it one of the most significant objects either for the interpretation

⁵ Magee, 2004, 25.

⁶ Fedele, 2017, 287.

⁷ Magee, 2001, 115.

⁸ Magee, 1996, 207.

⁹ Magee, 1996, 207.

of wider trading networks or for the layered cultural and artistic complexity of the society in the Iron Age II era at Muweilah.

There has been some reconstruction of the item as its front left leg was missing upon excavation along with the left ear, as identified by Magee in his report on the 1995/6 season. The figurine is identified as being paralleled by similar figurines at Tell Abraq and Rumeilah yet the Muweilah figurine is “one of the best-preserved examples from south-eastern Arabia.”¹⁰ Upon comparison of the neck of the 95/96 camel to a similar figurine excavated in Magee’s later seasons then it is suggested that the fragmentary figurine has an elongated neck that imbues a running motion.¹¹ The range of figurines from Muweilah and the wider local area is a clear indicator of an advanced culture in the south-eastern Arabian region that is thriving on the establishment of caravan trading via domesticated camels and according to the 2001 excavators “highly suggestive of not only familiarity with the camel but also of their regular use”¹². This assertion is complemented by a note made by Magee with reference to a personal communication from Iris Gerlach (Field director at Awam) about similar figurines being found at Awam in Yemen dating from 8-7th centuries BCE¹³.

Functional Analysis

In order to identify the functionality of the Muweilah camel it is apt to consider theories through which a lens might be established with which to view the figurine. Upon considering the agency of the Muweilah camel the lens is convoluted by whether the figurine had function for decorative, play or religious purposes. The wider consideration of these functions perhaps relies on the pre-Islamic society that existed in southeastern Arabia centred around cultic worship of the sun, a scope beyond this analysis here. Upon applying the lens of Gell and his establishment that the agency of artistic objects having the power to influence others then one is drawn to the important role of the domestic camel in the Iron Age II era. It is the very ‘style’ of the Muweilah camel that is of significance to the viewer, shaped to function in the desert environment and at home with the wavy forms of the dunes from which it came, illuminating the “psychological saliency” of the craftsman.¹⁴

There is an undeniable level of symbolic communication embodied in the Muweilah camel, reflective of the environment in which the culture existed, and for a period, settled and flourished. The ability to traverse the desert environment is symbolic of the figurines’ very existence, therefore humans seeking to represent their most prized possession seems intrinsic. This perhaps can be linked with a question of Gell in his musing on technology and enchantment with the consideration that the significance of the Muweilah camel is derivative of “certain stimulus arrays” leading to the production of a ceramic figurine that holds a possible

¹⁰ Magee, 1996, 206-207.

¹¹ Magee et al, 2002, 152-153.

¹² Magee et al, 2002, 153.

¹³ Magee et al, 2002, 156.

¹⁴ Gell, 1998, 157.

enchantment element to the local populace. Beyond this, Gell suggests the link between art production and the production of social relations and uses the example of humans (reproduction). In the Iron Age II site at Muweilah this can be considered as applying to the central role of the camel and the nurture required to rear them, encourage reproduction and utilise them in societal advancement. This goes even further when we consider the connection that Gell places on the uncertainty of the surrounding world and a magical attitude as a by-product of such a latent or emerging knowledge.¹⁵ In a changeable desert environment it is quite possible that the Iron Age II settlement at Muweilah and across the region would have been subject to seasonal change (High summer temperatures/possible flash flooding in winter) thus a magical nature to figurines to ensure the safety, security and longevity of the caravan has some considerable weight.

Upon consideration of the miniaturisation of the domestic camel for the Muweilah figurine one could make some use of Bailey's arguments of miniature vs. model.¹⁶ The figurine under discussion here has some features that are unnatural in form, the soft wavy pose and the flat top to its hump displays a fluidity of form that would not be found in a real-life dromedary. This suggests some function here that is beyond the use of the camel in everyday life, providing a 'manipulation of reality' as suggested by Bailey via Foxhall that we can see here in this figurine, it has been somewhat compressed and abstracted. Further to this, we are compelled to use our knowledge and imagination to provide the missing details to this figurine, the missing details to us are due to our lack of succinct knowledge on the function of this figurine.¹⁷ However, for the Iron Age II culture, for the peoples that initially utilised the figurine their intent and thus this missing functional form was not a consideration. Bailey's cheirotic approach to minaturised objects provides a possible insight towards functionality with a camel figurine enabling subtle empowerment at a physical level through the touch of a three-dimensional representation, thus a possible portal for strengthening the bond between human and dromedary.¹⁸

Conclusion

When we consider a key question of Magee's excavations in linking the settlement at Muweilah with the difficulties of the environment in which it existed then the use of domesticated dromedary becomes vital, not only for travel but beyond that for the sustenance that can be provided as a source of milk and meat in combination with the cultivation of date palms. The domesticated camel is the central figure in Magee's conclusion on why the site at Muweilah emerged and was sustained in the Iron Age II period.¹⁹ The site offers a glimpse into the pan-Arabian habitation linked with wider trade networks that existed prior to the 3rd century BCE when the important (Hellenistic?) site at ed-Dur perhaps comes into existence. Indeed the site at ed-Dur provides some later parallels with the continuation of the use of camel figurines,

¹⁵ Gell, 1998, 44-57.

¹⁶ Bailey, 2005, 32.

¹⁷ Foxhall, 2015, 3.

¹⁸ Bailey, 2014, 29-32.

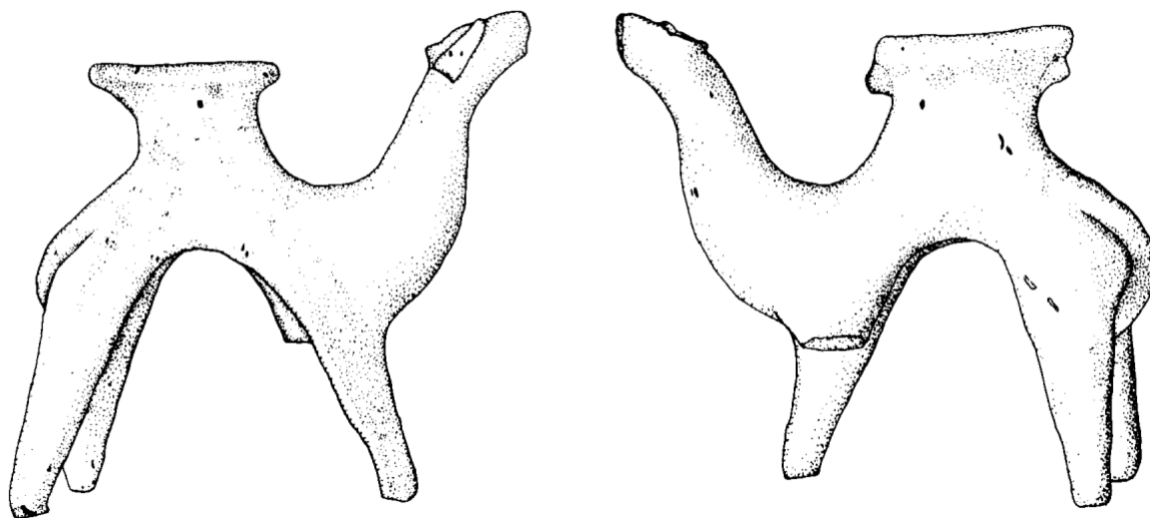
¹⁹ Magee, 2001, 128-129.

other contemporary examples have been discovered at Thaj in Saudi Arabia and Ain Jawan, west of Tarat island.²⁰ An array of wider regional examples is indeed an intriguing consideration for further thought in the accompaniment assignment. It is with this in mind that we can connect the existence of the camel figurine to life at the Muweilah site. The form, state of preservation and functional possibilities indicate a use that is symbolic and significant within the everyday life of the peoples of this era with a potential 'cult of camel' being coincident with the domestication of *Camelus dromedarius*.

²⁰ Daems, (2004), 232.

Figure 1

Sharjah Archaeological Museum²¹

Figure 2

Camel Figurine from Area C, Scale 1:2²²

²¹ Sharjah Archaeological Museum

²² Magee, 1996, 210

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