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Pre-Islamic Pottery from the Oasis of Khaybar – Saudi Arabia
First Technological and Morphological Considerations

Shadi SHABO[1] and **Guillaume CHARLOUX**[1]

[1]CNRS - UMR 8167 – Orient & Méditerranée. Paris

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique

Orient & Méditerranée CNRS-UMR 8167 Ivry-sur-Seine. Paris

Khaybar *Longue Durée* Archaeological Project

AFALULA AGENCE FRANÇAISE POUR LE DÉVELOPPEMENT D'AL-ULA

الهيئة الملكية لمحافظة العلا Royal Commission for AlUla

The 55th Seminar for Arabian Studies. Berlin, 5th – 7th August 2022

Introduction

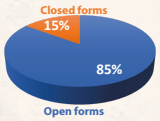
Ceramic studies started in 2020 in the oasis of Khaybar, in northwestern Saudi Arabia, in the framework of the Khaybar Longue Durée Archaeological Project (KLDAP-AFALULA/R-CU/CNRS, 2020-2024). This poster aims to present a first characterization of the pottery assemblage of the pre-Islamic period (from the fourth millennium BCE to the first century CE) collected during three first seasons of the project. We introduce here the macrofabric groups, the methodology and techniques employed, and attempt to provide a first preliminary range of human activities in the Khaybar survey area during this timeframe.

Methodology



So far, 928 sherds have been collected during survey and have been attributed to the pre-Islamic period (late pre-Islamic pottery excluded). They come from 80 archaeological locations within the oasis: settlements, surfaced scatters, tombs and isolated structures. Only a limited part of the Royal commission for AlUla jurisdiction of Khaybar has been surveyed up to now, and the activities are still in progress.

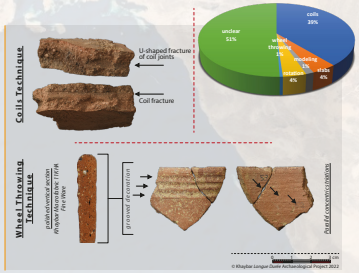
Morphology



The majority of the pottery consists of body fragments and is very poorly preserved. The diagnostic sherds are small and provide only limited information on the vessel shape. Generally speaking, open forms (mostly bowls, large bowls and platters) are predominant (65%), while closed forms (necked and hole-mouth jars and few large jars/basins) are less present (only 9%). Unclassified sherds, due to their insufficient size, represent 20% of the assemblage, and the bases (mostly flat and rarely slightly rounded) 6%.

Technique

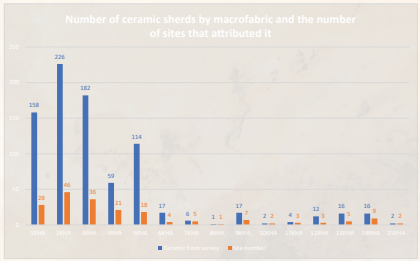
After a simple and preliminary macro-observation, it appears that the most frequent fashioning techniques is the use of a **coil technique**. **Slab technique**, **modelling** (**hand-made**) and **wheel-throwing** were also identified but in less quantity. Most vessels show minimal surface finishing. **Smoothing** is the predominant technique; **burnishing** and the use of a **red slip** are less common.





Macrofabric groups

So far, 15 macrofabrics have been identified in the pre-Islamic ceramic assemblage. The identification of the macrofabric groups was carried out by macro-observation of the paste (matrix, inclusions, voids), then confirmed by stereomicroscope examination of fresh breaks and polished sections. The macrofabric identification is based on the size, the shape, the colour of the different inclusions and their distribution in the paste. Only a brief description of the macrofabrics have been included here.

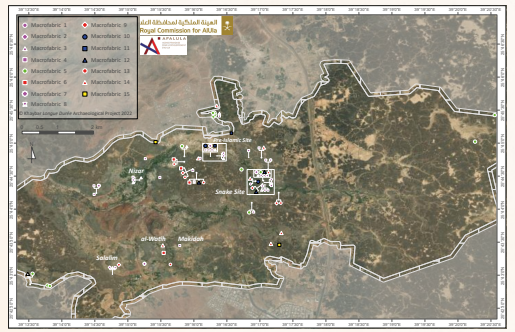


Periods of human activity at Khaybar during the pre-Islamic era

Although the pottery assemblage derives mainly from surface deposits, the identification of 15 macrofabrics provides a first chronological anchor for the oasis. At this stage, we have identified four broad phases according to the macrofabrics, albeit reliant on a small number of diagnostic sherds. This preliminary categorization is based on regional comparisons. At the present stage of research, we are not able to attribute smaller Macrofabric groups 10, 11 and 12, to a specific period.

Chalcolithic period

Macrofabric 5 is widely distributed in the oasis, but it is also the only group recorded in the eastern part of the oasis, where a significant number of prehistoric structures have been recorded.



Bronze Age

Macrofabrics 1, 2, 3, and 4 represent around 87% of the assemblage. They are characterized by a friable red to brown paste indicating a low firing temperature, and by smoothened or burnished surface treatments. The most relevant comparisons are the Red Burnished and Gritty Ware (Grey Burnished Ware) from Taymāʾ and Madāʾin Sālih (Tourtet et al. 2021, Hausleiter 2014, Hausleiter and Zur 2016, Abu-Azizeh 2015), dated between the second half of the third millennium and the first half of the second millennium BCE. Macrofabrics 7 and 8 (only five sherds) evoke Qurayyah Ware (Hausleiter 2014). They testify to strong dynamics of activity in Khaybar.

Iron Age

Macrofabric 6 seems to correspond to Group 3 at Taymāʾ (Hausleiter 2014; Abu Duruk 1989 (Sanaʾiyah cemetery); Abu Duruk and Murad 1985 (Qasr al-Hamra)), where one sherd bears an imperial Aramaic inscription from the mid- or second half of the first millennium BCE (Macdonald 2020). Parallels are also found at Dadan (al-Shehry 2014) and at Tall al-Kathīb (al-Zahrani 2007). The same period is attested by Macrofabric 13, which is only used in the pilgrim flask: the closest parallels come from AlUla and Taymāʾ (al-Zahrani 2007, Abu Duruk and Murad 1986). Macrofabric 9 is represented by only a few sherds and finds parallel in the AlUla region, especially at Dadan (al-Shehry 2014). Macrofrabric 14, of hypothetical date, is the only vegetal-tempered group in the assemblage of Khaybar so far.

Nabataean-Roman period

Only two sherds of Eastern Terra Sigillata from the first cent. BCE to second century CE have been identified in the oasis.

This preliminary study of the Khaybar ceramic assemblage seems to show a continuous occupation throughout the oasis during the pre-Islamic period, with variations of intensity, and a possible decrease of activity over time. This hypothesis needs to be confirmed by excavations and archaeometric analyses.

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Contact details: Shadi SHABO: shadi.shabo@cnrs.fr ; **Guillaume CHARLOUX**: guillaume.charloux@cnrs.fr