

THE FUNERAL RITES AT MLEIHA (SHARJA-U.A.E.); THE CAMELID GRAVES

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Summary

During the 1994 campaign of excavation in the interior site of Mleiha (Sharja, U.A.E.), a necropole contemporaneous of the Greco-Roman period has been exposed, turning our attention to the privileged statute of some animals. Several human graves were indeed associated with camelids graves. In one case, one of the graves housed both a Camelid and an Equid. Anthropological studies will throw light on the specific Man /Animal relationships, still little known in this part of the world.

Résumé

Rites funéraires à Mleiha (Sharja, Émirats Arabes Unis) : les tombes à camélidés.

À l'occasion des fouilles archéologiques effectuées pendant l'hiver et le printemps 1994 sur le site intérieur de Mleiha (Sharja, E.A.U.), une nécropole contemporaine de la période gréco-romaine a été mise au jour, attirant l'attention sur le statut privilégié de quelques animaux. En effet, des inhumations humaines étaient associées à des tombes à Camélidés. Dans un cas, une tombe abritait simultanément un Camélidés et un Équidé. Les recherches archéozoologiques ainsi qu'anthropologiques jetteront la lumière sur les liens particuliers entre l'Homme et l'Animal, encore peu connus dans cette partie de l'Orient.

Zusammenfassung

Bestattungssitten in Mleiha (Vereinigte Arabische Emirate): Die Kamelgräber.

Die vom Winter bis ins Frühjahr 1994 in der Siedlung von Mleiha (Sharja, Vereinigte Arabische Emirate) durchgeführten Ausgrabungen haben eine griechisch-römische Nekropole ans Licht gebracht, in der sich auch die besondere Bedeutung mancher Tierarten zeigt. Die menschlichen Bestattungen sind mit solchen von Kamelen vergesellschaftet. In einem Fall enthielt ein Grab ein Kamel und einen Equiden. Die archäozoologischen und anthropologischen Untersuchungen werden dazu beitragen, das Verhältnis zwischen Mensch und Tier - in diesem Teil des Orients bisher kaum bekannt - zu beleuchten.

Key Words

United Arab Emirate, Mleiha, Graves, Camelid, Equid, Funerary rites.

Mots clés

Émirats Arabes Unis, Mleiha, Tombes, Camélidés, Equidés, Rites funéraires.

Schlüsselworte

Vereinigte Arabische Emirate, Mleiha, Gräber, Camelidae, Equidae, Grabsitten.

During March and April 1994, the French Archaeological Expedition in Sharja and the Department of Heritage of this Emirat conducted two parallel excavations in Mleiha, one of the most interesting sites of the United Arab Emirates (Mouton, 1992; Callot *et al.*, in press). The site is located in the south of the modern city of Dhayd, on the western Piedmont of the Oman Mountains, in the well-watered inland plain of Al-Madam, which is drained by seasonal streams and protected from the sand winds by the

outcrops of Djebel Faya on its west side (Boucharlat and Mouton, 1990, 1994; Potts, 1992) (fig. 1).

The site extends 3 km² on each side of the present north-south road. Many natural mountain passes facilitate accessibility to the sea of Oman. Besides, the wide north west valley opens on the Persian Gulf littoral, only 80 km away from the other contemporary and important site of Ed-Dur in the Emirat of Umm al Qaiwain (Boucharlat *et al.*, 1988, 1989) (fig. 1). The geographical situation of Mleiha

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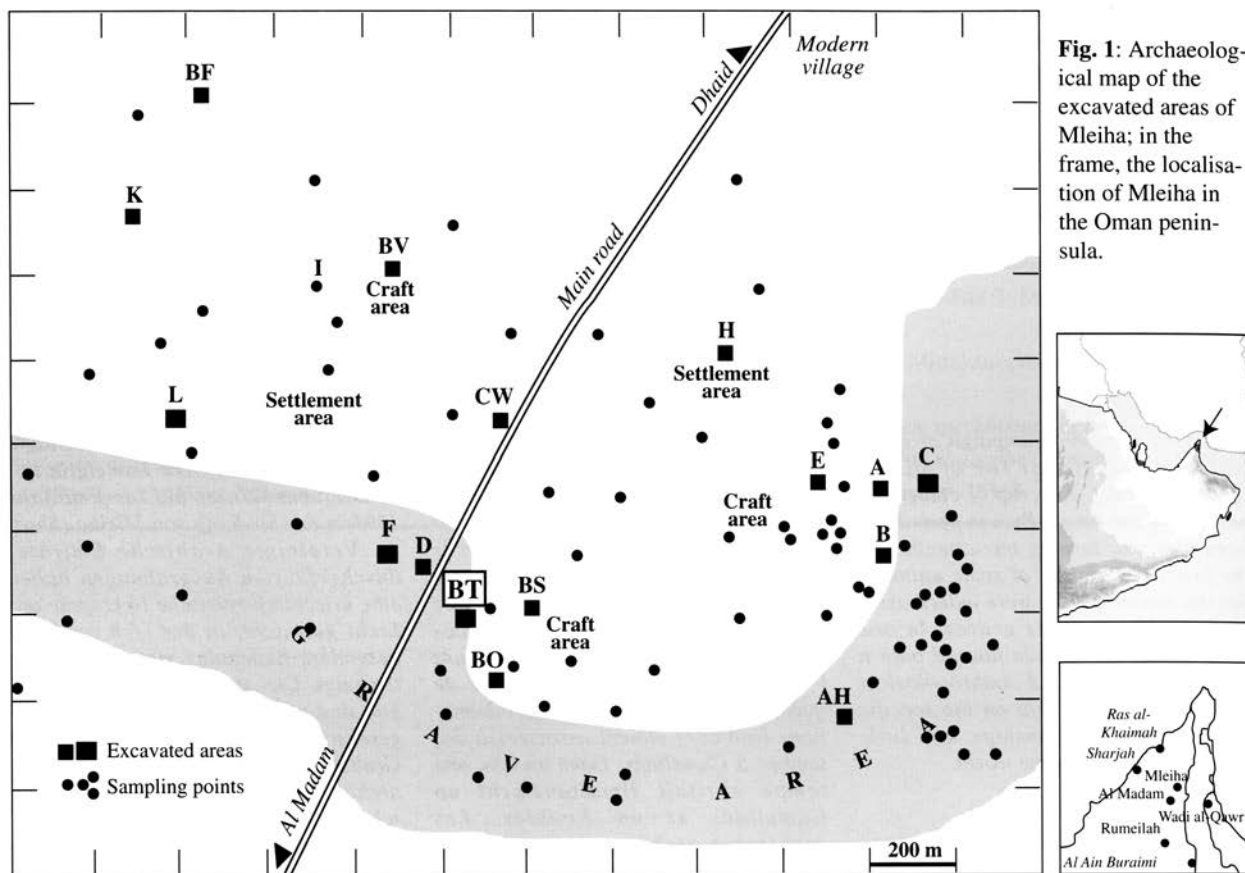


Fig. 1: Archaeological map of the excavated areas of Mleiha; in the frame, the localisation of Mleiha in the Oman peninsula.

indicates that the site was potentially not isolated from other urban centers of the Peninsula.

The occupation period of Mleiha extends from the 3rd century BC to the 1st-2nd centuries AD (Mouton, 1992; Potts, 1992; Boucharlat and Mouton, 1993a, 1993b). The adopted term of Late Pre-Islamic⁽¹⁾, almost contemporary to the Greco-Roman period, stresses the cultural identity of these inner sites of the Peninsula, permitting to distinguish them from the Iron Age (Boucharlat and Mouton, 1993b). This Late Pre-Islamic period covers some six hundred years of occupation in the Oman peninsula, precisely from 250 BC to 350 AD and is divided in four phases labeled A, B, C and D (Mouton, 1992). Until 1993 only the first three matched the levels found in Mleiha. The following lines summarize the chronological position of Mleiha.

PIR A = Level II = 3rd - 1st half of the 2nd century BC

PIR B = Level IIIA = 2nd half of the 2nd century - 1st century BC

PIR C = Level IIIB and Ed-Dur's major occupation = 1st - 2nd centuries AD

PIR D = Ed-Dur Area F = ca. 225 - 1st quarter of the 4th century AD (Lecomte, 1993).

Different type of architectural remains, such as domestic buildings, manufacturing areas, fort with square towers and necropoles located in the east and south borders of the site have been discovered (Mouton, 1992; Boucharlat and Mouton, 1994; Mouton and Boucharlat, in press). This last season of excavation in Mleiha brought another necropole to light⁽²⁾ located in the Area BT⁽³⁾, or Mleiha 2⁽⁴⁾ (fig. 1).

⁽¹⁾ The French term for this period is "Pré-Islamique Récent" or "PIR" (Mouton, 1992) and will be used for further reference.

⁽²⁾ This area has been excavated by the Department of Antiquities and Heritage of Sharjah under the direction of Dr. Sabah al-Jasem.

⁽³⁾ Registered by this term after the survey conducted by the French mission.

⁽⁴⁾ Codes given to this area by Dr. al-Jasem.

It revealed a few constructed graves, supposedly human ones, associated with those of animals; unfortunately most of the graves have been looted in the past and the human skeletal material was lacking in all the cases⁽⁵⁾. Although some of the animal graves have not been left untouched either, the faunal material was partially or totally present in each of them.

Several graves had been already unearthed when this archaeozoological study began. Obviously the excavator had faced difficulties in trying to dig up the objects in good condition. Five of the graves contained animal skeletons associated with adjacent human inhumations. The latter were delimited with mud bricks but the animal pits were less sophisticatedly built and the bodies were lying at different depths. In three cases, they were adja-

cent to the human graves, in the north part of the excavated area (tab. 1).

Grave E/13 (fig. 2)

In square E, the first grave quoted 13, on the east side of the necropole, yielded an incomplete skeleton of a camelid⁽⁶⁾ oriented north/eastwards. No associated human grave has been found next to it nor any associated objects recorded by the archaeologists.

Only few stones delimited its rectangular shape and it was practically at the same level as the present day floor. The animal is represented only by few remains of posterior and anterior limb bones. The conservation conditions have actually corrupted quite badly these few remains, as if having been crashed under some weight.

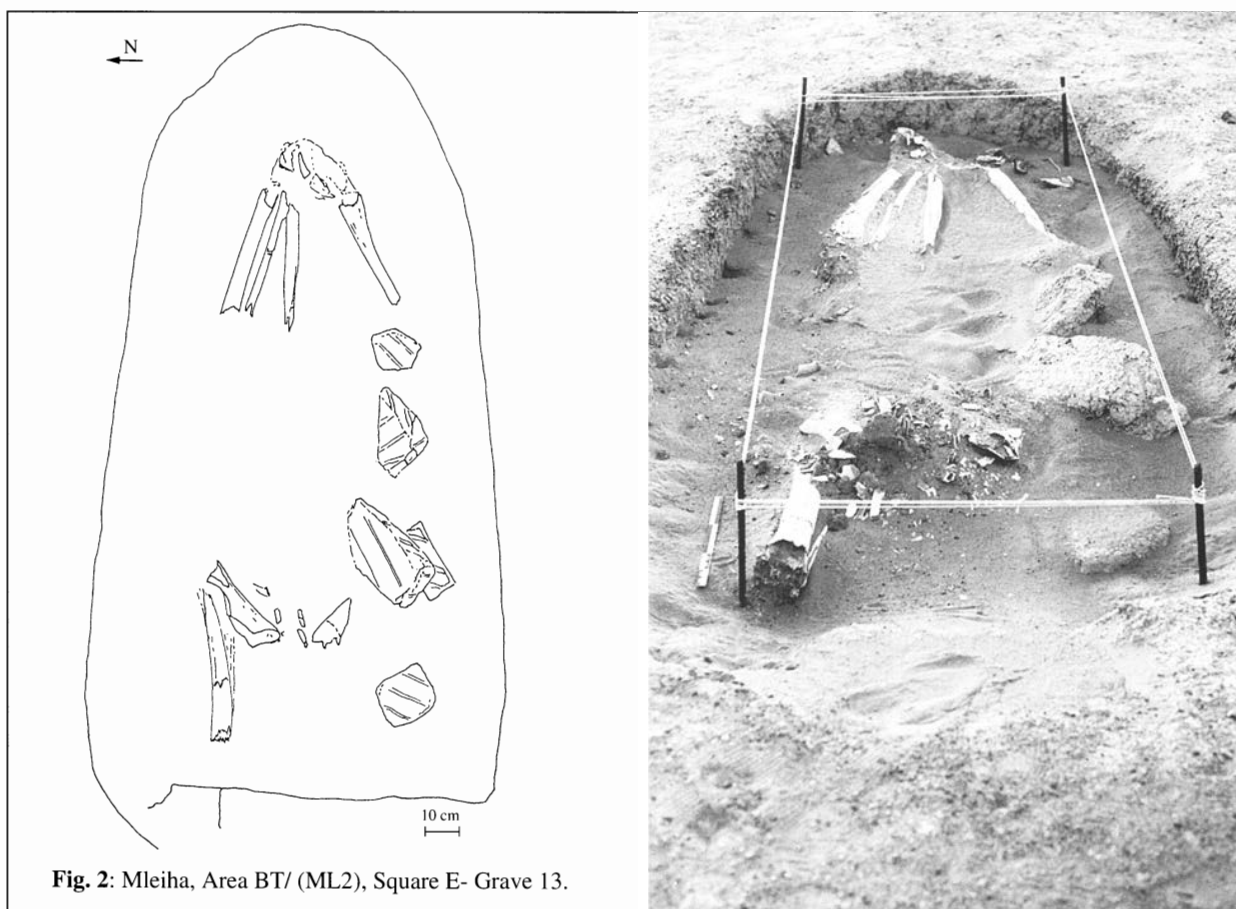






















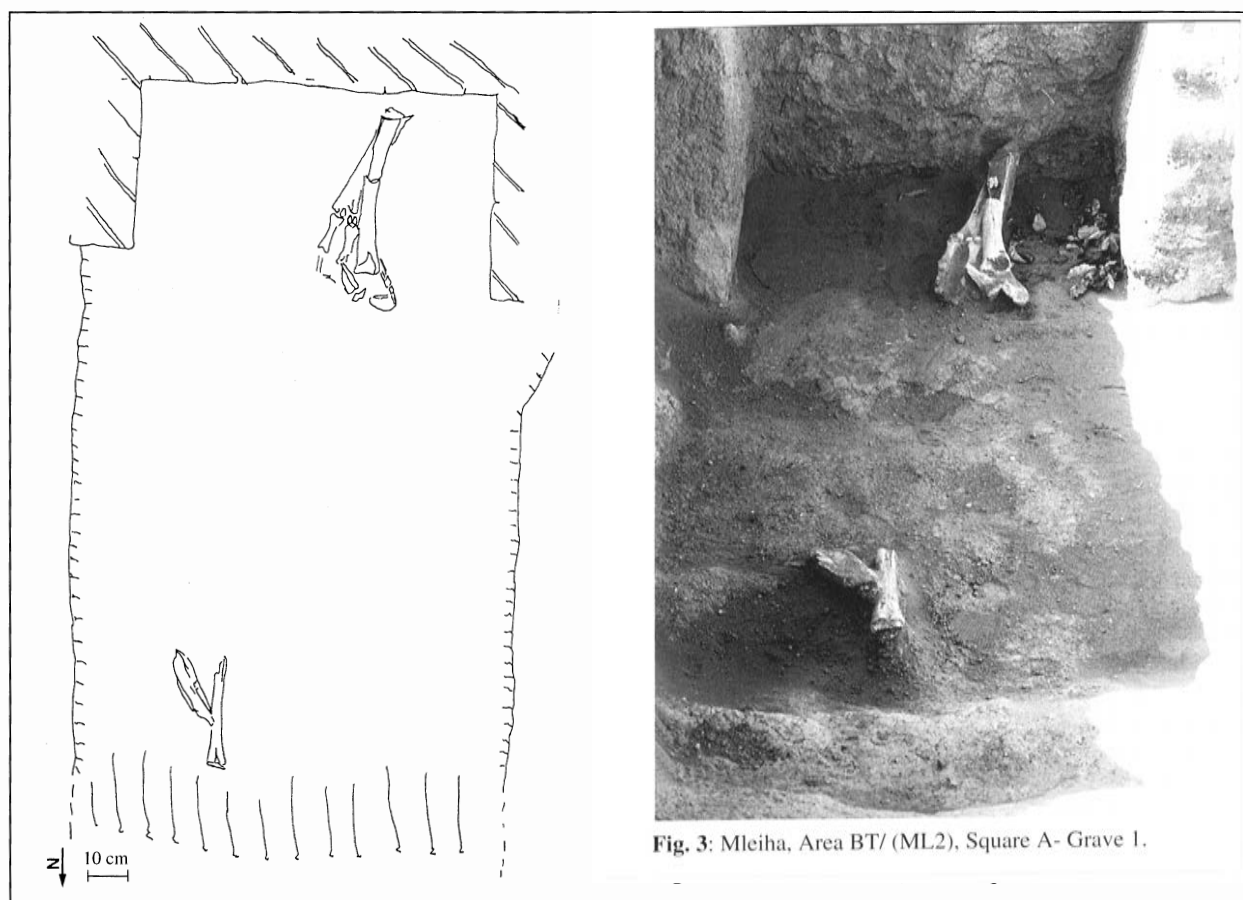
Fig. 2: Mleiha, Area BT/ (ML2), Square E- Grave 13.

⁽⁵⁾ But the funeral objects such as beads and fragments of teeth confirm their attribution to human inhumations. The same phenomenon has been observed elsewhere on the site when it began to be excavated for the first time by the French Archaeological Mission in 1986 (Boucharlat and Mouton, 1986).

⁽⁶⁾ At the present time, only dromedaries are found in the region, but since the poor conservation of the bones prevented us from making osteometrically the distinction between the camel and the dromedary, except in one case, we shall therefore use the generic term of camelid.

Table 1: Mleiha; characteristics of the animal graves. Drawings by E. Pellé.

Code	Orientation	Animal	Grave Goods	Position	Sk. Inventory	Association
E13	E/W	Camelid				
A1	S/N	Camelid				
B11	S/N	Camelid				
B/C4	S/N	Camelid & Equid				
M12	E/W	Camelid				
M14	E/W	Camelid				

**Fig. 3:** Mleiha, Area BT/ (ML2), Square A- Grave 1.

Grave A/1 (fig. 3)

In square A, the animal grave number 1, adjacent to a human grave, is on the contrary, deep enough (approximately 1,60 cm/70 cm) to cover all the body of the camelid. This time, the grave was oriented south/north, the head towards the south. Here again the pit has been visibly looted and only the anterior and the posterior bones of the adult animal were in place, but less damaged than in the first grave; nothing was left from the trunk. While being excavated, the head has got unfortunately displaced and put aside into pieces. According to the archaeologists, many sherds were also found in this grave.

The anatomical position of the camelid verified that it was in a kneeling position. Due to the poor conservation of the bones and also to the displaced head as well as the vertebrae in general, it is impossible to depict how the animal died. The only possible observation is that it was at the moment of death in its natural anatomical kneeling position.

Grave B/11 (fig. 4)

The next grave located in square B is also associated with a human grave, similar in shape, orientation and depth to the last one. Here the skeleton was entirely in place but again the head was dissociated from the body during excavation and belonged to an adult animal. The archaeologists asserted that they have found along the animal body an empty blue green glazed pilgrim flask, two bronze pins, one depicting a gazelle's head and the other a simple disc. According to Dr. al-Jasem, a dagger and its scabbard were also associated with those other grave goods. We can then consider on the basis of all this observations that this grave had not been disturbed.

The metrical data obtained on a metatarsal permits to confirm the allocation of this specimen to a dromedary (tab. 3 and fig. 5).

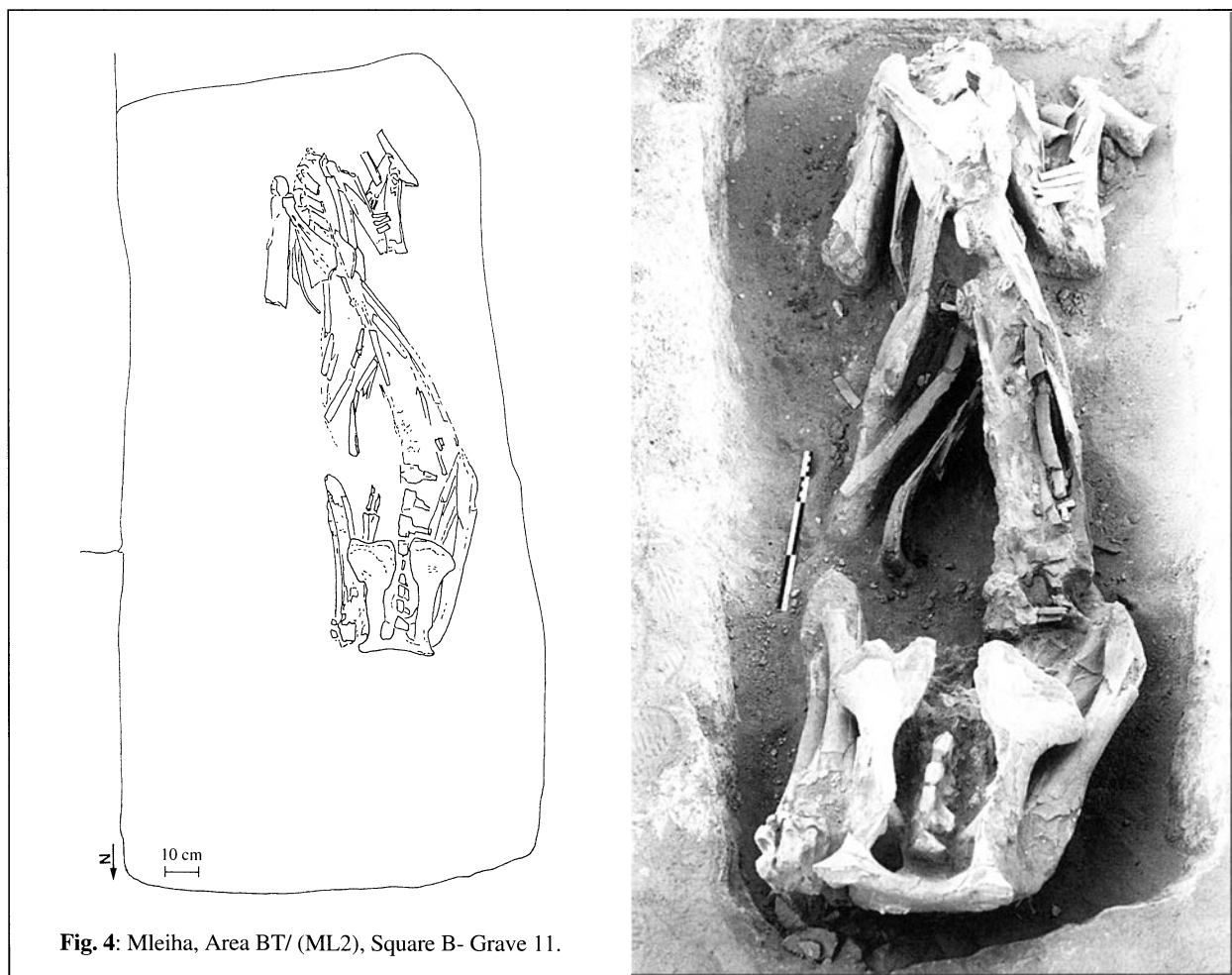
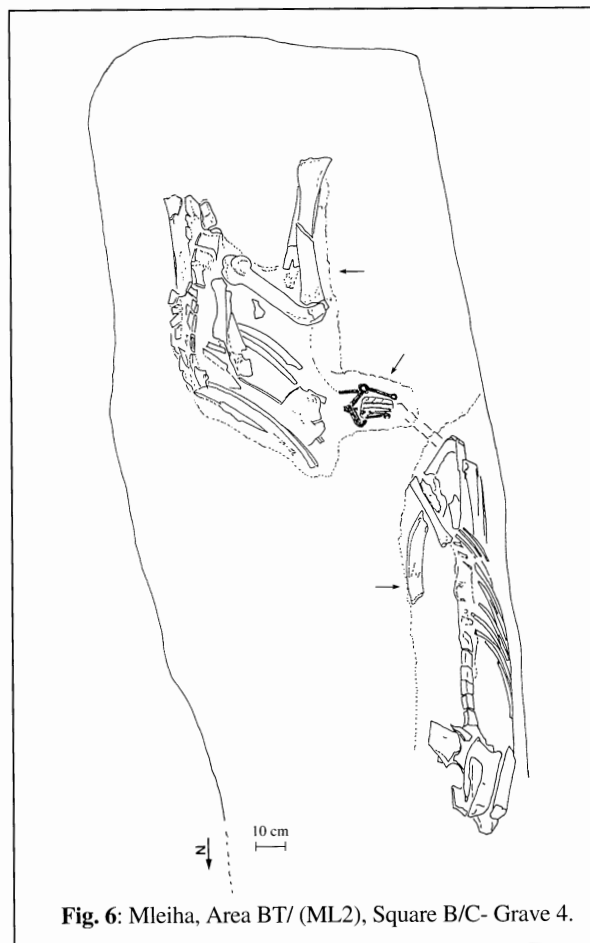
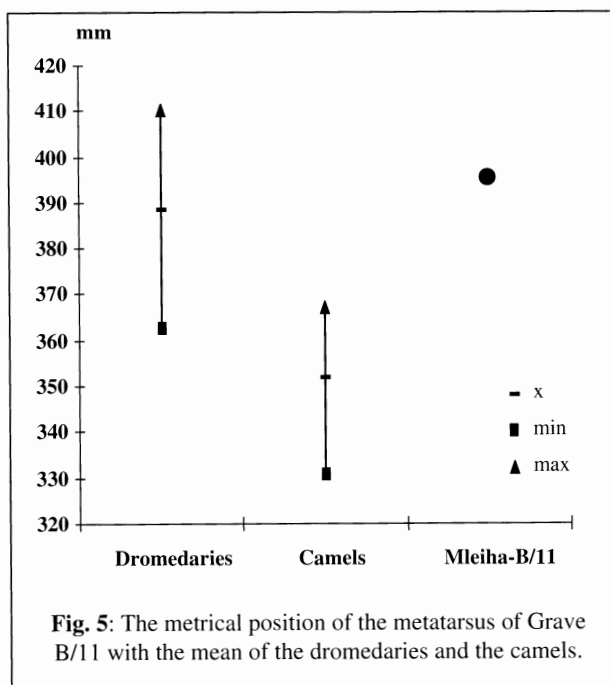


Fig. 4: Mleiha, Area BT/ (ML2), Square B- Grave 11.



Grave B/C4 (fig. 6)

The very interesting next grave, located in the intersection of squares B and C, contained two skeletons, one camelid and one equid, leaning parallel to each other. The heads were again positioned southwards similar to the animals of the two previous graves. Unfortunately during the excavation, for providing circumference, almost all the posterior half of the camelid skeleton has been removed prior to recording (fig. 6). This lacking part was kept on the side. The study of the remains of this removed block in the field laboratory confirmed the originally intactness of the animal. As far as the equid is concerned, a part of the skull and the neck has been removed for exposition purposes, since, according to the archaeologists, the head was decorated with golden objects.

One part of the head was still remaining in the grave in its original position, leaning on the thoracic cage of the camelid and one could still guess elements of an iron bridle. According to the anatomical position of the two animals, we can suppose that the camelid was slaughtered



first, followed by the equid. This latter was lying slightly on its right flank and towards the western wall of the grave, as was, in a less degree, the dromedary towards the eastern wall; one had the impression that under each other's pressure, the bodies had been wedged towards the pitwalls.

The metrical comparison of a third metatarsal of the equid with the osteometrical reference data (Eisenmann, 1986; Eisenmann and Beckouche, 1986) allows the specific attribution of this equid to a small size horse (fig. 7 and tab. 2).

Grave M/12 (fig. 8a, c)

Again oblong east/west oriented, this pit is located at the extreme west of the excavation area and it is, among all the unearthed graves, the one which houses the best documented camelid, specially for having the skull in place. According to anatomical observations, it refers to a juvenile female⁽⁷⁾. The animal was in its natural kneeling position, the head was bent back, resulting in its twisted posture with lower jaw up, at the same level as the left scapula. One can observe that, curiously, the head is at the same height as the upper parts of the body, resting on the sand underneath and making quite a right angle with the rest of the body. This asks the question of understanding the filling procedures of the pit. Worth mentioning also is the absence of the cervical vertebrae, despite the intactness of the body at first sight, presumably undisturbed.

Grave M/14 (fig. 8 b)

In the same square, grave 14, parallel and similar in shape to the former, contained less than a semi-skeleton of a camelid, yielding only the forelegs of the animal, strangely linked to the eastern pit wall. Even assuming that the animal was originally intact when slaughtered and left in the pit, it seems anatomically quite difficult for a living camelid to be this close to the pit wall. As no visible built elements surrounded the pit, one may question the validity of the location of the eastern excavated pit wall; could the grave be further to the east? This can be one assumption; the other is the possibility of a partial burial which is also doubtful, since the remaining parts show a natural kneeling position. Unfortunately the point remains unresolved.

Discussion

Following this descriptive introduction to the animal graves of Mleiha, we shall sum up and try to discuss some basic points.

The first important problem about these graves is the chronological attribution. Dr. al-Jasem suggests that the cemetery has been in use for a considerable length of time, ranging between the 2nd century BC and the 1st century AD (al-Jasem, pers. comm.). On the other hand, Dr. Mouton prefers, on the basis of spatial organization and architectural features of the graves, a more recent and restricted

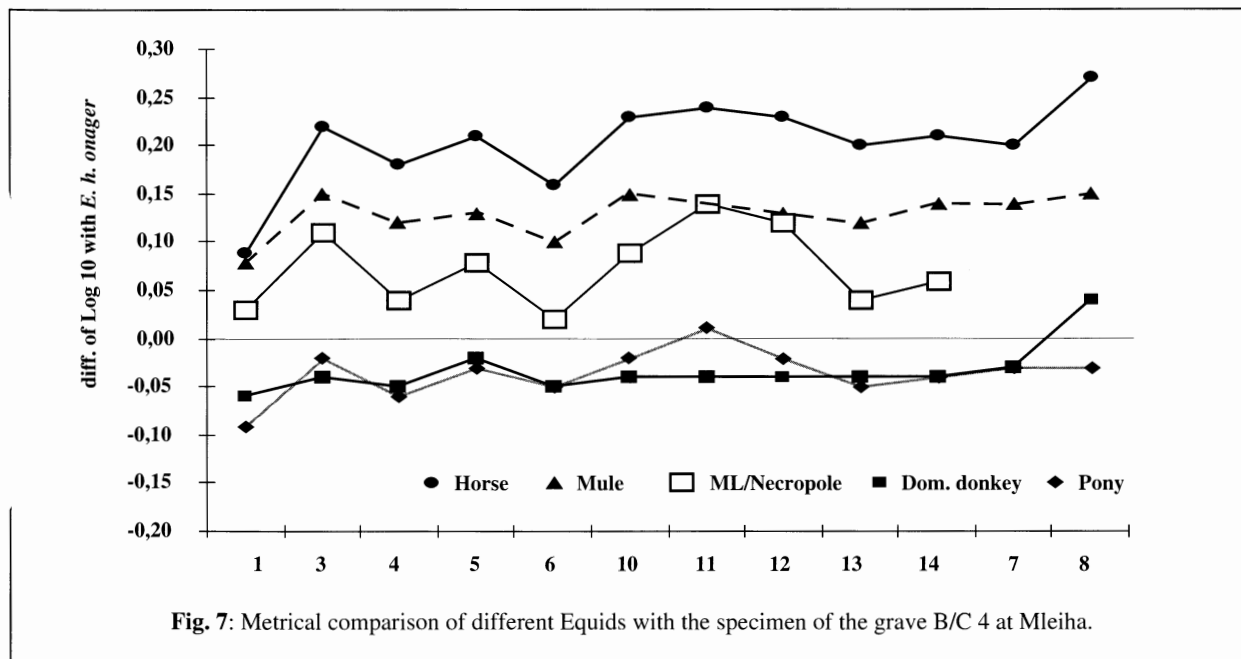


Fig. 7: Metrical comparison of different Equids with the specimen of the grave B/C 4 at Mleiha.

⁽⁷⁾ The M₃ was still present and the M₂ had erupted but still unworn ; according to Silver (1969) the animal should be 3 years old.

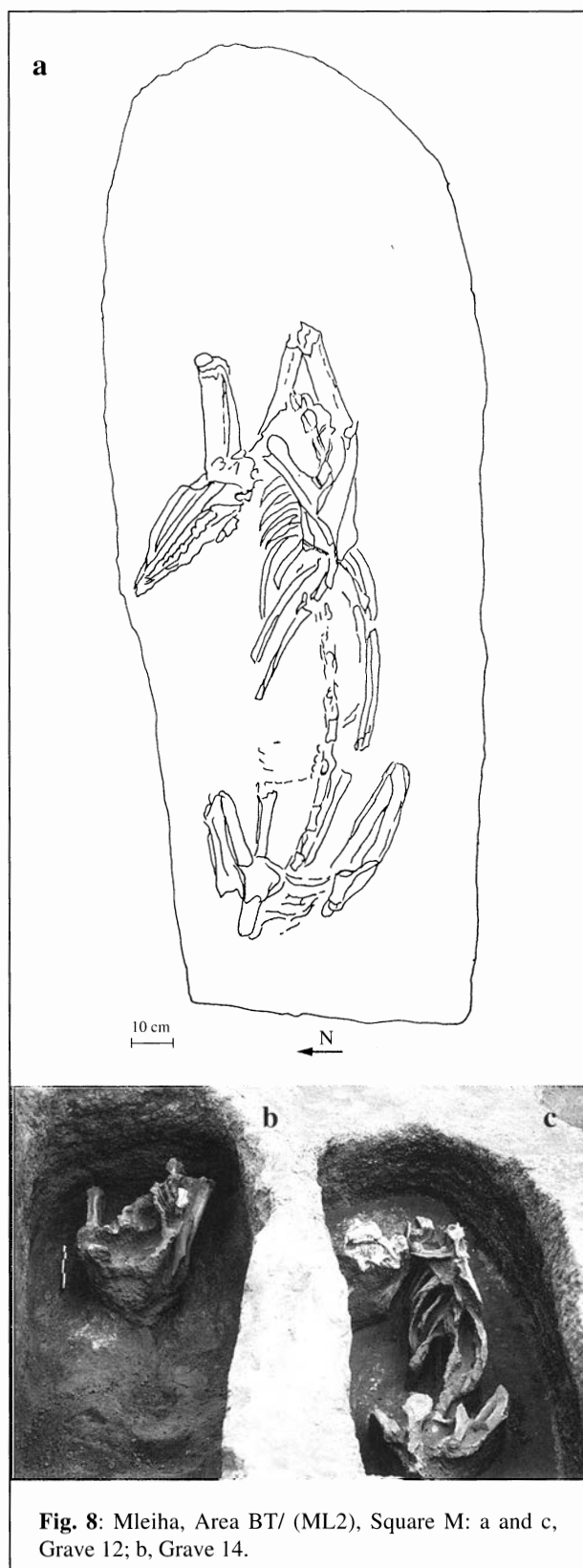


Fig. 8: Mleiha, Area BT/ (ML2), Square M: a and c, Grave 12; b, Grave 14.

Table 2 : Mleiha; metrical data of a third metatarsal of the Equid of grave B/C 4.

Code	MT III (mm)
1	264
3	32
4	28
5	48.2
6	37
10	46.8
11	51.8
12	39.5
13	26
14	30
7	—
8	—

For measurement codes, see Eisenmann (1986).

date, referring to PIR C, which ranges between the 1st and the 2nd centuries AD. This argument is also based on the similarities observed in the contemporary site of Ed-Dur where camel graves appear only at PIR C period (Lecomte *et al.*, 1989; Van Neer and Gautier, 1993).

To summarize the excavation of the necropole area, six animal pits have been unearthed⁽⁸⁾, and among them three were definitely associated with human graves with two systematic orientations, east/west and south/north. Within the undisturbed graves, we obviously have no partial burial.

Several points of discussion could be developed here. One of the basic and essential questions from the anthropological point of view is to understand the modalities by which the animals were slaughtered. Some elements can help us to attempt a partial reconstruction.

The rather important depth of at least three graves, the kneeling position of the animals and also the lack of the northern pit walls of the three deepest graves (A1, B11, B/C 4) suggest that the animals were driven alive into the pits, very likely forced while tied and perhaps helped by steps or an inclined surface at the entrance of the grave. Then what happened once the animals were in the graves?

We can emphasize on some indications leading us perhaps to resolve the problem, for instance the lack of the cervical vertebrae observed on almost all the camelid skeletons. This coincides with the observations made by Vogt (1994) and Lecomte (1993). Vogt has made a rather complete survey of all the finds of camel skeletons through the Arabian Peninsula and the southern part of

(8) After my departure from Sharja, another pit has been discovered (Mouton, pers. comm), which has been unfortunately left unstudied.

Table 3: Metrical data for the greatest length (mm) of the metatarsal of camels and dromedaries.

CAMELS	GL	DROMEDARIES	GL	MT	Mleiha-B/11
IPM/5/F	356.00	IPM 1/F	362.50	GL	395
IPM/8/F	361.00	CA1/F	395.00	Bp	63.5
NMB/5918/F	340.00	CA2/F	398.50	Dp	45.5
NMB/10390/F	350.00	ZSM/1953/159/F	391.50	Bd	(69.4)
ZSM/1950/2/F	344.00	ZSM/1959/231/F	391.50	Dd	36.4
ZSM/1950/3/F	359.00	IUT/CA4/M	399.00	Sd	33.2
ZSM/1953/125/F	362.00	LPG/P3711A	407.00		
LAC1876-259F	335.60	LPG/P3711B	376.00		
IPM/3/M	339.00	LAC1925-205	411.00		
IPM/11/M	357.00	NMNH-SI/13228	373.00		
NRS/18859/M	331.00	NMNH-SI/256777	375.00		
ZSM/1951/281/M	340.00	IAUT/ASI6	380.00		
ZSM/1954/150/M	344.00	n x min max σ variance	12.00		
ZSM1956/191/M	367.00		388.33		
ZSM1975/30/M	358.00		362.50		
IPM/6/M	353.00		411.00		
LPG/2273	348.00		14.91		
NMNH-SI/22467	338.00		222.33		
LPG/P2140	358.50				
IAUT/ASI7	365.00				
FVUT/1374-15	360.00	NMNH : Natural Museum of Natural History/Smithsonian Institution-Washington FVUT : Faculté Vétérinaire de l'Université de Téhéran IAUT : Institut d'Archéologie de l'Université de Téhéran LAC : Laboratoire d'Anatomie Comparée du Muséum de Paris For the other references, see Steiger, 1990. For code measurements, see Driesch (1976).			
FVUT/1374-16	358.00				
FVUT/1374-18	366.00				
FVUT/1374-19	355.00				
FVUT/1374-20	356.00				
n	25.00				
x	352.04				
min	331.00				
max	367.00				
σ	10.36				
variance	107.34				

the Persian Gulf and has analysed more than 27 cases⁽⁹⁾ where osteological data were available. Within these references, 24 articulated camels have been registered in the excavated sites all over the area under consideration, and within them 11 depict camels with necks lacking, i.e. almost 50% of the definitely burial cases. If not a constant, this fact remains nevertheless quite a frequent phenomenon, but as stated also by Vogt (*op. cit.*), it is difficult to attribute these missing parts for purposes of consumption since no osteological evidence allows us to prove it. He then proposes a more attractive hypothesis based on ethno-anthropological observations on the

Bedouin societies of Arabia quoted by Pellat (Vogt, 1994: p. 285 and note 44). These people consider the neck of the camel as the essential part of the body for serving as balance. Then "Cutting the throat and/or removing certain parts could have been targeted basically at mutilating the camel. Thus it could have prevented the camel from rising from its grave and leaving its proprietor" (*idem*). If this belief was spread at Mleiha at that time, it could be the explanation for all these lacking necks; the dagger found along the camelid skeletal in grave B/11 may also be related to this fact⁽¹⁰⁾. On the other hand one should be aware of another well known ante-Islamic tradition,

(9) These cases occur in the Republic of Yemen, Saudia Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman (for more details cf. Vogt, 1994). He has omitted to quote Diana Kirkbride-Helbaek's important discovery in Wadi Ramm in southern Jordan, announced at the Fourth International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan held in Lyon in 1989 (M. Macdonald, pers. comm).

(10) A similar case has been observed at Ed Dur (Lecomte *et al*, 1989).

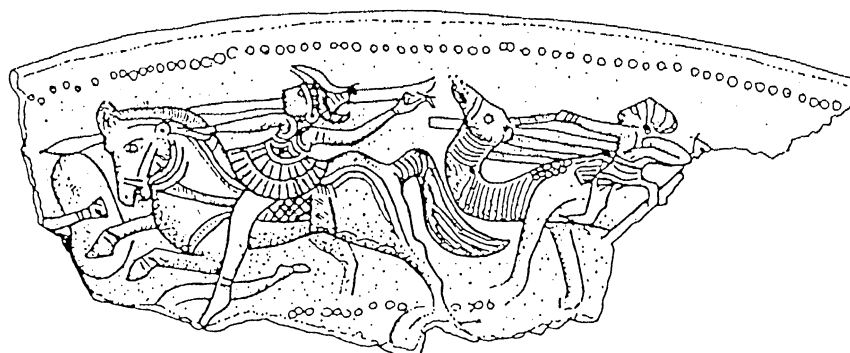


Fig. 9: Bronze bowl from Mleiha, Area C and F (end 3rd-1st centuries BC).

which is specified by the term of *baliyya* and refers to a tied female camel left to die with the neck bent back in a pit, unfed, near or on the grave of its master (Chelhod, 1955; Hell [Ch. Pellat], 1960). In any case one needs more investigations in order to be able to choose between these different alternatives⁽¹¹⁾, but this symbolic act of sacrifice is visibly related to the belief of resurrection, for, on that day, the camel would be the mount of the dead (Chelhod, 1955).

From a chronological point of view, considering all the registered cases of these camel burials, one can observe that they occurred between the 6th-5th centuries BC and the 1st-2nd centuries AD, the earliest case occurring in the Yemen Republic at Ghaybun (Vogt, 1994)⁽¹²⁾. Except this last site, all the others date to the last centuries BC - first centuries AD, one of the most dynamic periods in terms of trade and mobility (Boucharlat and Mouton, 1991; Mouton, 1992). Apart from archaeological and historical evidence of this cultural exchange (Potts, 1992), the existence of such supplementary data indicates a well-evolved traditional spiritual entity, spread in regions as far as Yemen and the Oman Peninsula, as well as a cultural identity, even though each region reveals its own specific socio-cultural features.

Maybe the case of the double burial of grave B/C 4 is the proof of a micro-regional specificity since this is the first case, to my knowledge⁽¹³⁾, of a mixed burial associating a camelid and an equid in the Arabian Peninsula. The symbolic dimension of this association and the mental representation of these two animals is of great interest for the understanding of the role of these animals in the pre-Islamic societies. Ethnographic parallels show that among the nomads, camel is an animal for which they have great affection and deep relationships, as attested by the poetry and also the economic life of these traditional societies. The horse, on the other hand, is used in Bedouin life only as a mount for hunting or fighting. Several graphical data from Mleiha (fig. 9) and few other sites of the Arabian Peninsula (cf. Macdonald, 1990) depict camels pursued by horsemen with spears. References to ethnographic descriptions of Bedouin life in 19th and early 20th centuries suggest that this type of association refers probably to scenes of raiding rather than hunting. Even if it is difficult at present to perceive the reasons of the associated camelid and horse burials, it is sure that both animals had a great importance in the Arabian Peninsula: the dromedary being the economic unit, but also an animal of prestige as object

⁽¹¹⁾ One possible way of determining the killing procedure of the animal, at least concerning its immediate or slow death, is through archaeo-parasitological analyses of the sediments around the animal body (Bouchet, 1994 and pers. comm.). But of course in Mleiha, since this archaeozoological study began after the graves were excavated, no significant deduction was possible anymore.

⁽¹²⁾ The chronological attribution of this site has been criticized by H.-P. Uerpmann (pers. comm.).

⁽¹³⁾ Van Neer and Gautier (1993) do not specify whether the equid remains of a small horse were associated or not to the dromedary burials.

of raiding and/or hunting⁽¹⁴⁾ and the horse an animal of value, since associated with battle and war. Both were companions of man in life and even after death as suggested by these archaeological evidences which throw a light on the privileged relationships between man and these two animals in the pre-Islamic society of Mleiha.

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⁽¹⁴⁾ For this particular aspect, see the very interesting analysis of L. E. Sweet (1965).

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