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### THE SABIR CULTURAL SEQUENCE IN THE FRAME OF THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF COASTAL YEMEN AND NORTHEAST AFRICA BRONZE AGE: A PROVISIONAL VIEW

#### INTRODUCTION

Since the early 80ies, when mainly through the work of Alessandro de Maigret and the Italian Archaeological Mission in the Yemen Khawlan district, South East of Sanaa, the late prehistory of Southwest Arabia began to be known, the researches of many Archaeological Missions focused on this period. A complex picture is emerging, with strong regional differences and chronological articulations that need further definition, in order to understand the developments that took place in the period that preceded the rise of the South Arabian kingdoms.

Recent field work in the hinterland of Aden by the Joint Mission of the German Institute of Archaeology in Sanaa and the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, directed by Burkhard Vogt and Alexander Sedov, has yielded important results in this respect.

#### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEQUENCE IN SABIR AND MA'LAYBA\*

The site of Sabir lies, some 25 km north of Aden, in the fertile oasis of Lahj, fed by Wadi Tuban, a large river system, catching an area on the southern Yemeni mountains of little more than 5.000 square kilometres. The site, first mentioned by Hamilton in 1943<sup>1</sup> and then surveyed by Harding<sup>2</sup> and Doe<sup>3</sup> in the 60s, has been the object of excavations by the Joint German-Russian Mission since 1994<sup>4</sup>.

Excavation in Sabir concern an extensive settlement with mud brick architecture, monumental buildings, small dwelling areas, huts and industrial areas. Soundings have provided evidence that the cultural deposit is at least 5 meters deep. The site has been abandoned and

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\* I am grateful to Burkhard Vogt and Alexander Sedov for having entrusted me with the direction of the Ma'layba excavation.

<sup>1</sup> Hamilton R.A.B. Archaeological Sites in the Western Aden Protectorate // *Geographical Journal*. 1943. V. 101. P. 110–117.

<sup>2</sup> Harding G.L. Archaeology in the Aden Protectorates. L., 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Doe B. Notes on Pottery Found in the Vicinity of Aden // Appendix to the Department of Antiquities Annual Report, 1960–61. Aden. P. 3–41; *idem*. Pottery Sites Near Aden // Department of Antiquities Publication Bulletin no. 5. Aden. 1965; *idem*. Southern Arabia. L., 1971.

<sup>4</sup> For an extensive account of results of Sabir excavations see: Vogt B., Sedov A. The Sabir Culture and Coastal Yemen during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC – Present State of Discussion // PSAS. V. 28. L., 1998 (with bibliography).

covered with a thick layer of sand. Pits and large vessels sunken in the sand covering the abandonment layer, along with the shards scattered on the deflated surface, is evidence of a later occupation of the area, of which no architectural traces remain.

Two deep soundings carried out in different areas of the Sabir Settlement provided the first archaeological sequence for the site. In 1994 at Sabir 8A the sounding stopped at the depth of around 5 meters in correspondence of a layer of very fine greyish sediment. No structures were found, but a well-stratified pottery sequence was recovered.

While the pottery from the first *strata* in the sounding can be assigned to the phase represented by Sabir mudbrick architecture, shards from deeper *strata* show formal and technological differences. In particular deep tronconical bowls and jars with slightly inverted rim have a internally thickened and obliquely flattened rim, unknown in the upper layers; pithoi of very fine manufacture are decorated with a series of ridges on the shoulder; handles and ridges on jars bear incised and impressed decorations, internal and external surfaces of open vessels are very often completely burnished, so to appear almost polished.

During the 1996 campaign a second sounding was carried out in area 2C. Its purpose was to investigate the nature of a small mound, whose surface was scattered with shards; many of them overfired or vitrified. Excavation proved that the small tell was made up of a series of open kilns and their debris; the lowest kilns were at the level of the plain. The sounding went deeper than the plain level for about two meters without reaching sterile soil. Here hearths, bones and pottery down to the bottom were signs of human activities. A confirmation of the pottery sequence observed in Sabir 8A was found here: pottery of Sabir top layers in relation to the kilns and shards matching the ones from the deep layers in Sabir 8A, in the *strata* underneath.

Although the study of pottery is still in its preliminary stage, two archaeological phases can be recognised in the Sabir assemblage: an early phase – Sabir Phase 1 – in the deep layers of the deep soundings and a late phase – Sabir Phase 2 – associated with mudbrick architecture. Three new sites were discovered in 1996 during a short survey carried out to the east and south of Sabir, in a range of few kilometres. Pottery collected on the surfaces of the three sites proved to be a mixture of types assigned to Sabir Phase 1, and types characteristic of Sabir Phase 2.

A sounding was carried out in 1997 in one of the three sites, Ma'layba, 6 kilometres Southeast of Sabir. The settlement consists of two small tells, raising from the plain for a height of little more than 3 meters, 50 meters above sea level. The area lies in the oasis formed by Wadi Saghir, the eastern branch of Wadi Tuban that forms the oasis of Lahj. The plain is cultivated, mainly with cotton fields, nowadays irrigated from canals fed by pumped weels, while the tells appear scattered with shards lying on sand.

Excavation in one the two tells totalled about 140 square meters (fig. 1). Under the surface covered by a great quantity of pottery, clearly the effect of a long process of deflation, a layer of sand, up to more than 2 meters thick at the top, covered a complex stratigraphy, which, with some exceptions, could be identified in the entire trench.

Four floors laid one on top of the other in the next 2.30 meters of deposit. Layers, from 10 to 20 cm thick, of hard packed soil with round postholes, sometimes with the burned pole in situ, are the traces of sub-oval huts, with smaller postholes for outside fences. The area for a period of time was intensely dwelt, as can also be inferred from the presence of many grinding stones, as well as animal bones, and bone and bronze tools. No mud brick structures have been found during excavation.

Very clear traces of an irrigation system, with several canals, associated with the dwelling area, have also been found. Excavation reached in a restricted area the depth of 6.30 meters; Alexander Sedov has carried out a further deepening of this sounding in November 1998, to reach the depth of 7.50 meters from the top of the mound. Under the deepest floor a sequence of 1.90 meters of archaeologically sterile *strata* of very fine compact soil up to 20 cm thick, blackish sand and very thin layers of sand alternated with very thin layers of fine sediment, stopped on a first dark brown paleosol, 15 cm thick; a second paleosol, 90 cm thick, was separated by the first one by 20 cm of sediment.

A great quantity of pottery has been recovered from all levels of the stratigraphic sequence. In the Ma'layba main phase, the one related to the four floors with hut foundations, vessels have

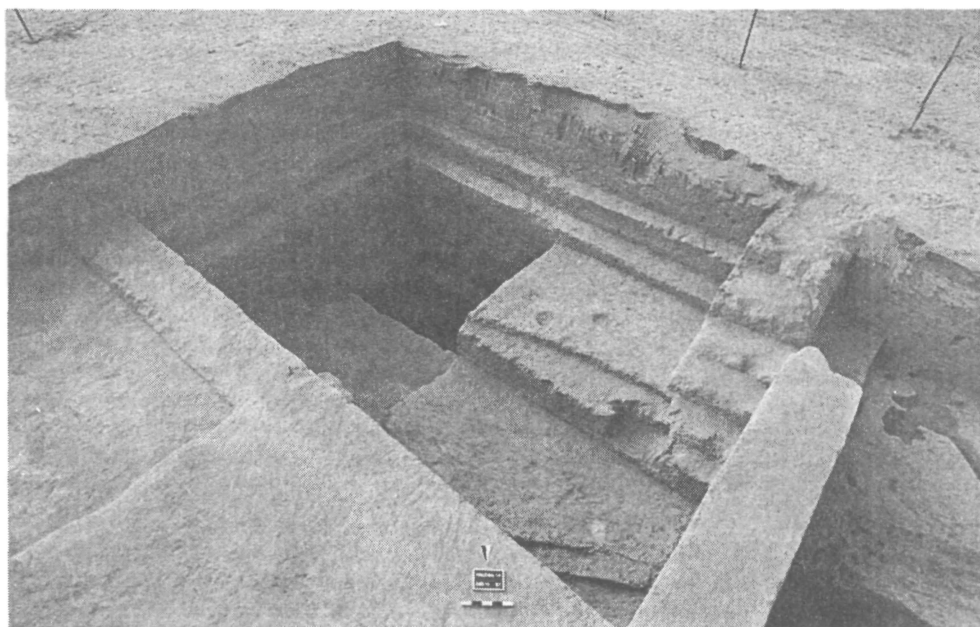


Fig. 1. Ma'layba. View of excavation and deep sounding

features matching the ones known from Sabir Phase 1, with the addition of several new types. On the other hand the most characteristic shapes and decorations of the Phase 2 are absent; painted vessels are almost absent, like terracotta figurines.

In term of absolute chronology, the Sabir layers associated with the mudbrick architecture gave radiocarbon-calibrated dates between the 13th and the 9th centuries BC. Sabir Phase 1, represented in Ma'layba by over 2.50 meters of cultural deposit, is radiocarbon-dated roughly between 2000 and the 13th century BC<sup>5</sup>.

#### SABIR CULTURE PHASE 1

The corpus of vessels from Phase 1 is formed by very simple shapes; among them: platters, shallow bowls, deep tronconical bowls and cylindrical jars with obliquely flattened inner rim, globular jars and ovoid jars with curved, everted rims. Decorations include single or multiple vertical incised short lines, knobs, vertical and horizontal plain ridges, elaborate ridges with impressed lines or dots (fig. 2, 3).

Phase 1 pottery finds very few parallels in published Bronze Age assemblages from the Tihama coastal plain. A tronconical bowl with convex base has a parallel in the Sihi shell midden, the site excavated by the American Archaeological Mission in the Saudi Tihama<sup>6</sup>. No parallels can be found in sites surveyed by Harding<sup>7</sup> and Doe<sup>8</sup> and in site STN near Zabid, surveyed and excavated by the Canadian Archaeological Mission of the Royal Ontario Museum<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Vogt B., Sedov A., Buffa V. Zur datierung der Sabir Culture, Yemen // ABADY. Bd IX. Mainz, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Zarins J., Murad A., Al-Yaish Kh. The Second Preliminary Report on the Southwestern Province // *Atlat*. V. 5. Riyadh, 1981. P. 9–42; Zarins J., Zaharani A. Recent Archaeological Investigations in the Southern Tihama Plain // *Atlat*. V. 9. 1985. P. 65–107; Zarins J., Al-Badr H. Archaeological Investigations in the Southern Tihama Plain II // *Atlat*. V. 10. 1986. P. 36–57. For the bowl see: Zarins, Zaharani. Southern Tihama Plain. Pl. 81, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Harding. Archaeology...

<sup>8</sup> Doe. Notes...; *idem*. Pottery...

<sup>9</sup> Ciuk Ch., Keall E. Zabid Project Pottery Manual 1995. Preislamic and Islamic Ceramics from the Zabid Area, North Yemen. L., 1996 (BAR International Series. V. 655).

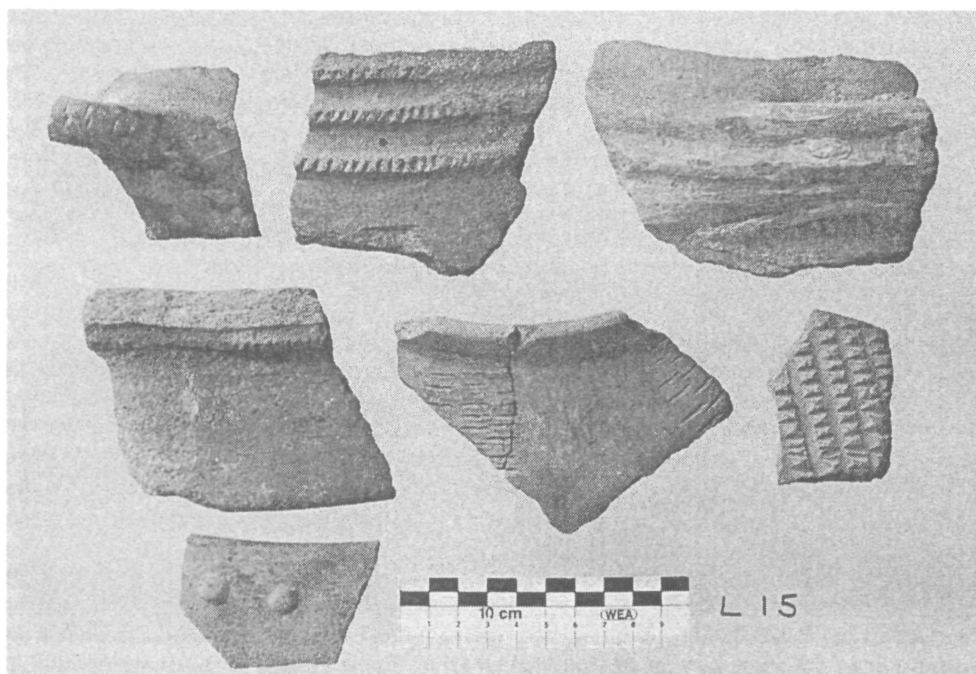


Fig. 2. Ma'layba. Pottery of Sabir Early Phase

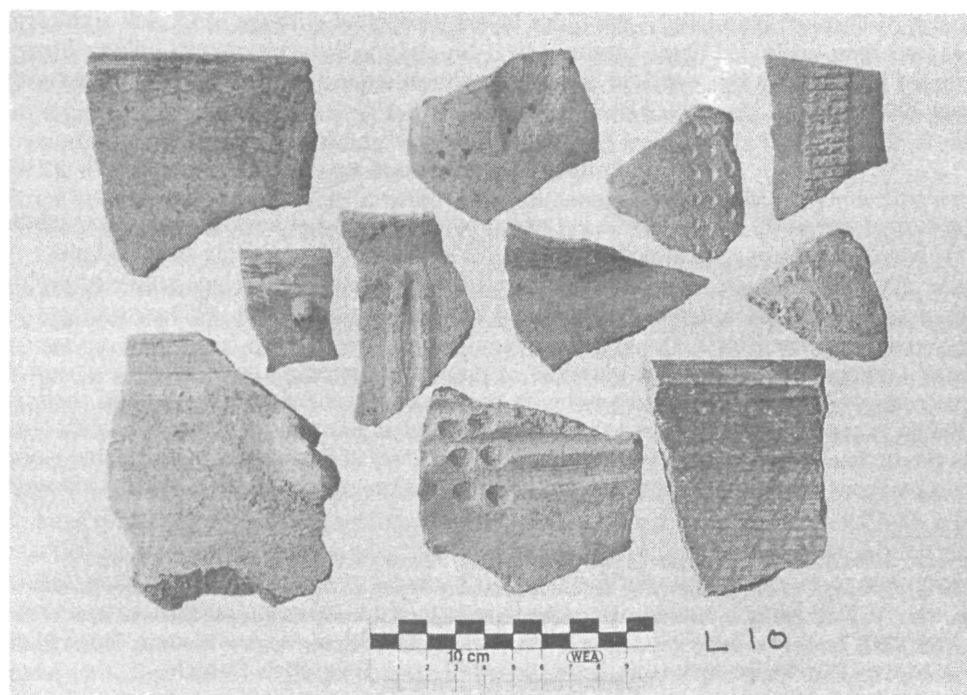


Fig. 3. Ma'layba. Pottery of Sabir Early Phase

Unfortunately the pottery from sites surveyed by M. Tosi in the frame of the Italian Mission remains unpublished; presumably, as he mentioned several sites with "Sabir" pottery, he was referring to the pottery of Phase 2, known from Harding's survey<sup>10</sup>. We can say that the Phase 1 of Sabir Culture is up to now unknown in coastal Yemen, north of the Gulf of Aden and of the Lahj area.

It seems that some similarities can be found in the pottery assemblages of sites surveyed and excavated in Hawlan at-Tiyal and the Dhamar plain by the Italian Archaeological Mission<sup>11</sup>, and the Mission of the Chicago University Oriental Institute<sup>12</sup> respectively, in particular in two groups of forms well represented both in Hawlan and in Dhamar during the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium; they are platters and shallow bowls of very large dimensions<sup>13</sup> and globular jars with everted rims<sup>14</sup>. A carinated shallow bowl from Ma'layba recalls also types present in the High Plains<sup>15</sup>. It has to be noted nevertheless that the treatment of the surfaces of vessels of the two areas are quite different, with burnishing well spread in vessels of the Sabir Culture and scarce in the High Plains. Overall the pottery of the Early Bronze Age in the High Plains seems less refined. On the other hand some peculiar features of Sabir Phase 1, like obliquely flattened inner rims on deep bowls and jars and incised and impressed decorations, mainly on ridges and handles, do not seem to appear in Bronze Age assemblages of the High Plains.

## SABIR CULTURE PHASE 2

The pottery assemblage of Phase 2 is much richer in shapes than that of Phase 1<sup>16</sup>. A great variety of shapes, both simple and elaborate, form a very distinctive collection that has some affinities with the repertoire of Phase 1 in the range of simple forms. Large shallow bowls are still present, but bear usually different rims; deep bowls and jars are now lacking the very distinctive thickened, obliquely flattened inner rim. Within these simple forms are to be found the only very generic parallels with the 2nd millennium al-Sibal assemblage in the High Plains, from where a deep bowl with slightly everted rim recalls a specimen from Sabir<sup>17</sup>.

The whole range of forms is innovative in respect to Phase 1; they include: carinated bowls, footed bowls with incised vertical comb lines pending from rims, holemouth jars with curved ridges with impressed vertical strokes, necklace jars with vertical rim and horizontal ridges and handles, necked jars, pithoi with multiple vertical comb lines pending from rim, fenestrated vessels<sup>18</sup>.

Decorations include series of incised vertical lines below rim, ridges with vertical strokes or fingernail impressions, comb-impressed vertical set of small dots pending from rims and on vertical handles. Painting is present on many vessels in the form of simple geometric patterns. Decorations of Phase 2 bear a generic resemblance with Phase 1, and seem derived from them.

<sup>10</sup> Tosi M. Archaeological Activities in the Yemen Arab Republic, 1985: Tihama Coastal Archaeology Survey // East and West. 1985. V. 35/4. P. 363–369; *idem*. Archaeological Activities in the Yemen Arab Republic, 1986: Neolithic and Protohistoric Cultures, Survey and Excavations on the Coastal Plain (Tihama). Preliminary Report for the Italian Archaeological Mission in the Y.A.R. // East and West. 1986. V. 36/4. P. 440–415; *idem*. The Emerging Picture of Prehistoric Arabia // Annual Review of Anthropology. 1986. V. 15. P. 461–490.

<sup>11</sup> Maigret A. de. The Bronze Age Culture of Hawlan at-Tiyal and al-Hada (Republic of Yemen) A 1<sup>st</sup> General Report. Rome, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson T.J., Edens C., Gibson M. The Archaeology of the Yemen High Plains: a Preliminary Chronology // Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy. 1997. V. 8. P. 99–142; Edens Ch., Wilkinson T.J. Southwest Arabia during the Holocene: Recent Archaeological Developments // Journal of World Prehistory. 1998. V. 12 (1). P. 55–119; Wilkinson T.J., Edens Ch. Survey and Excavation in the Central Highlands of Yemen: Results of the Dhamar Survey Project, 1996 and 1998 // Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy. 1999. V. 10. P. 1–33.

<sup>13</sup> Wilkinson, Edens, Gibson, Yemen High Plains. Fig. 7, 10; Maigret de. Hawlan at-Tiyal. Figs. 44, 1: 46, 14; 50, 1; 56, 2, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Maigret de. Hawlan at-Tiyal. Figs. 39, 2; 51, 12; 68, 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Fig. 52, 2; Wilkinson, Edens, Gibson. Yemen High Plains. Fig. 12, 13.

<sup>16</sup> For a description of Sabir late phase pottery see: Vogt, Sedov. The Sabir Culture...

<sup>17</sup> Wilkinson, Edens, Gibson. Yemen High Plains. Fig. 13, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Vogt, Sedov. The Sabir Culture... Figs. 2, 3.

As it has been pointed out by Vogt and Sedov<sup>19</sup>, sites carrying trains of Sabir Culture Phase 2 have been recognised all along the Yemeni Tihama plain, the Saudi Tihama up to north of Jizan, and along the Eastern Gulf of Aden to Zinjibar. The Sihi shell midden yielded a corpus of pottery types comparable with the Sabir Phase 2 one and also a consistent set of vessels with incised and impressed decorations, both simple and elaborate. In the range of simple patterns, some generic similarities with Sabir Phase 2 decorations can be found<sup>20</sup>, but the elaborate decorations are unknown in Sabir. In site STN near Zabid, a number of vessels closely match the Sabir Phase 2 assemblage. M. Tosi reported from his extensive surveys in the Yemeni Tihama several sites with Sabir pottery.

It is hard to find parallels for the Phase 2 corpus of vessels outside coastal Yemen. Vogt and Sedov have reported two fragments, one from the cemetery of the Ilmaqah Temple of Awam in Marib and one from Hajar Yahir in Wadi Marha<sup>21</sup>.

Three fragments with horizontal grooves belonging to necks of jars from Sabir remind similar types from Yala, the protosabaeen town excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission<sup>22</sup>. This direction of contacts is also inferred by a carinated bowl of a Yala type (of smaller size and of a different fabric than specimens from Yala) in site STN, as Keall and Ciuk have pointed out<sup>23</sup>. A single fragment of Early Raybun painted pottery from Sabir points to Wadi Hadramawt<sup>24</sup>.

#### THE SABIR CULTURE AND NORTHEAST AFRICA

In recent years scholars have drawn attention to the subject of contacts between culture of Bronze Age Yemen and of Northeast Africa.

Excavations by the Italian Archaeological Mission directed by R. Fattovich in the Gash Delta (Kassala, Sudan) and by the Joint Mission of the University of Khartoum and of the Southern Methodist University directed by A. Mohammed-Ali and A.E. Marks in the Middle Atbara valley (Atbara, Sudan) have led to the identification of a previously unknown culture and a ceramic tradition, the Atbai Ceramic Tradition that spans about 5000 years (from the 5th to the 1st millennium BC)<sup>25</sup>.

Within the Atbai Tradition, the Kassala phase is dated to the 4th – 2nd millennia BC with three Groups: the Butana, the Gash and the Jebel Mokram Group. The cultural sequence is best illustrated by the work on the site of Mahal Teglinos, excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission since 1984. This is the major site of all the area and the only one where systematic excavations have been carried out<sup>26</sup>.

The chronological span assigned to each phase is determined by the combination of radiocarbon dates<sup>27</sup> from excavation and parallels with Kerma and C-Group like pottery found in the different levels.

Five phases of the Gash Group have been identified: Proto Gash dates at the end of the 4th millennium BC, Early Gash from 3000 to 2300 BC, Middle Gash from 2300 to 1900 BC,

<sup>19</sup> Vogt, Sedov. *The Sabir Culture...*

<sup>20</sup> Patterns that bear a resemblance with Sabir are in: *Zarins, Zuharani*. Southern Tihama Plain. Pl. 85, 3–8.

<sup>21</sup> Vogt, Sedov. *The Sabir Culture...*

<sup>22</sup> *Maigret A.de*. La ceramica sabea. Specificità e sviluppi da uno studio delle forme // *Arabia Felix*. V. 1. Fig. 8, 1, 4 (in press).

<sup>23</sup> *Ciuk, Keall*. Zabid Project Pottery Manual. Pl. 95/1; *Maigret de*. La ceramica sabea. Fig. 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Vogt, Sedov*. The Sabir Culture.

<sup>25</sup> *Fattovich R., Marks A.E., Mohammed-Ali A*. The Archaeology of Eastern Sahel, Sudan: Preliminary Results // *The African Archaeological Review*. 1984. V. 2. P. 173–188.

<sup>26</sup> *Fattovich R., Sadr K. and Vitaliano S*. Società e territorio nel Delta del Gash (Kassala, Sudan Orientale), 3000 a. Cr. – 300/400 d. Cr. *Africa*. V. 43. Settembre 1988. P. 394–453; *Fattovich R*. Indagini archeologiche sul popolamento antico della zona di confine settentrionale Etiopico-Sudanese // *Rivista di Antropologia*. 1988. V. 66. P. 113–136; *idem*. Il sito protostorico di Mahal Teglinos, presso Kassala (Sudan Orientale) // *Rivista di Antropologia*. 1989. V. 67. P. 221–238; *idem*. Excavation at Mahal Teglinos (Kassala), 1984–1988, a Preliminary Report // *Kush*. 1993. V. 16. P. 225–287.

<sup>27</sup> *Fattovich R., Vitaliano S*. Radiocarbon Dates from Mahal Teglinos, Kassala // *Nyame Akuma*. V. 31. 1989. P. 39–40.

Classic Gash from 1900 to 1700 BC, Late Gash from 1700 to 1500 BC. Jebel Mokram Group is dated from 1500 to 500 BC<sup>28</sup>.

Overall, ceramics from Gash Group and Jebel Mokram Group form two ceramic assemblages that bear no resemblance with pottery of Yemeni High Plains sites of the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC. Still R. Fattovich has drawn attention to a fragment of a deep bowl from Mahal Teglinos, level IV<sup>29</sup>, dated from 2500 to 2300 BC, decorated with a wavy line motif. A similar motif is found on a bowl from Wadi Yana'im in Hawlan, a settlement in the Yemeni High Plains, dated to the end of the 3rd millennium or to the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC<sup>30</sup>. Wavy line motifs are also present in a 3rd millennium site in Dhamar area, in site DS150, belonging to the 3rd millennium BC<sup>31</sup>.

Considering possible contacts between the Sabir Culture and the culture of the Gash Delta, since the Gash Group lowest date is fixed to the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, comparisons for the Group should be looked for mainly in the Sabir Phase 1. According to the set of published vessels from Kassala, no precise parallels can be found at present in terms of shapes and, particularly, decorations. The only point of contact between the two repertoires is the presence of burnishing on the Gash Group and Sabir Phase I assemblages.

Comparisons for Sabir Phase 2 pottery should be looked for in the Jebel Mokram Group, a Pan-Grave culture related assemblage, dated 1500–500 B. C.<sup>32</sup> No systematic parallels in the two pottery assemblages seem to exist<sup>33</sup>. A single Pan-Grave like decoration has been found on a shard of Sabir Phase 2 whose profile does not recall vessels of Sabir Culture, leading to the hypothesis of an import<sup>34</sup>. Once the study of the enormous quantity of Sabir pottery will be completed, some other *foreign* element will be probably identified. Furthermore a large collection of terracotta zoomorphic (and anthropomorphic) figurines comes from Sabir Phase 2; zoomorphic figurines are also present in a site of Jebel Mokram Group<sup>35</sup>.

At Sihi excavators have compared the very specific set of impressed and incised decorations with Kerma and C-Group pottery from Nubia<sup>36</sup>. Some motifs remind also the repertoire of decorations of the Pan-Grave culture and that of the related Jebel Mokram Group from Gash Delta<sup>37</sup>.

In recent years R. Fattovich has drawn attention to contacts between the Tihama and the Horn of Africa in the second half of the 2nd millennium BC. On one hand parallels in pottery between Sabir, Sihi, Wadi Urk (Hodeida, Yemeni Tihama) and Adulis (Gulf of Zula, Eritrea) have led the scholar to speak of a Tihama Cultural Complex, sharing «enough ceramic

<sup>28</sup> Fattovich R. At the Periphery of the Empire: The Gash Delta (Eastern Sudan) // Egypt and Africa. Nubia from Prehistory to Islam. / Ed. W. V. Davies. L., 1991. P. 40–47.

<sup>29</sup> Fattovich. Il sito protostorico di Mahal Teglinos. P. 233. The shard is published in Fattovich. Excavation at Mahal Teglinos. Fig. 19, top; and in Fattovich. At the Periphery of the Empire. Fig. 5, 1.

<sup>30</sup> de Maigret. Hawlan at-Tiyal. Fig. 78, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Wilkinson, Edens, Gibson. Yemen High Plains. Fig. 10, 1–3.

<sup>32</sup> Sadr K. The Territorial Expanse of the Pan-Grave Culture // Archéologie du Nil Moyen. V. 2. 1987. P. 265–291.

<sup>33</sup> The same zigzag pattern appears on several fragments from Agordat (a group of multicomponent sites in Central Eritrea with Gash Group and Jebel Mokram Group elements) and on two shards from Harding surface collection in Sabir. This evidence cannot be taken into consideration, because in Agordat the motif is impressed, while in Sabir it is painted. Arkell A. J. Four Occupational Sites at Agordat // Kush. 1954. V. 2. Pl. VI, 6; Harding. Archaeology in the Aden Protectorates. P. 21. Pl. VII, 76, 77; Fattovich R. The Contribution of the Recent Field Work at Kassala (Eastern Sudan) to Ethiopian Archaeology // Etudes éthiopiennes / Ed. C. Lapage. V. I. P., 1994. P. 47.

<sup>34</sup> Vogt, Sedov. The Sabir Culture... Not. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.; Fattovich R. The Late Prehistory of the Gash Delta (Eastern Sudan) / Ed. Krzyżaniak L., Kobusiewicz A. // Late Prehistory of the Nile Basin and the Sahara. Poznań, 1989. Fig. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Zarins, Zahrani. Southern Tihama Plain; Zarins, Al-Badr. Southern Tihama Plain, II.

<sup>37</sup> Zarins, Zahrani. Southern Tihama Plain. Pl. 88, 10, 14 remind a version of the typical net pattern Pan-Grave decoration. See: Bietak M. Ausgrabungen in Sayala–Nubien 1961–1965. Wien, 1966. Taf. 26, 76003/b; Taf. 33, 76069 a, b, c; Zarins; Zahrani. Southern Tihama Plain. Pl. 88, 12 recalls a Jebel Mokram motif that Sadr links to some C-Group ceramics: Sadr. The Territorial Expanse of the Pan-Grave Culture. P. 273. Fig. 5.

features to be regarded as regional variants of one cultural tradition»<sup>38</sup>. On the other hand he has pointed out parallels between the pottery from sites of the Tihama Complex and those from Pre-Axumite sites<sup>39</sup>. The evidence from the excavated corpus of ceramics from Sabir can bring some new data in this respect and in part confirm this view.

Regarding the «Tihama Complex», it has already been mentioned that Sihi and Sabir share a consistent number of vessel shapes. In Adulis, on the other side of the Red Sea, bowls with convex sides, carinated bowls with straight sides, and carinated bowls with concave sides find a good parallel in Sabir and Sihi; Paribeni describes also a fragment of a vessel that could tentatively be ascribed to a fenestrated vessel of Sabir form<sup>40</sup>. On the contrary decorations on vessels from Sihi and Adulis seem quite different, and it has already been mentioned that Sabir and Sihi decorations are also different.

Sabir excavations confirm the existence of contacts with the Pre-Axumite culture.

The Pre-Axumite culture is defined as a complex of pottery types common to a group of sites in Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea during the 1st millennium BC<sup>41</sup>. Mainly in the stratigraphic sequences of Yeha and Matara sites, Fattovich has recognised three phases during this period. The Early Pre-Axumite Phase precedes the construction of the temple in Yeha; the Middle Phase is contemporary with the construction of the temple; the Late Phase is associated with the late occupation of the temple. The same phases are recognised also in Matara, where the settlement seems to have started earlier than in Yeha. In absence of C14 dating, the Pre-Axumite chronology is based on cross dating with cultural sequences from South Arabia and the Nile Valley. According to Fattovich, it can, with a certain amount of certainty, be stated that the end of the Early Pre-Axumite Phase is dated to the 9th/8th century BC, the date of its beginning being unknown; the Middle Phase is dated from the 8th/7th to the 4th/3rd centuries BC, and the Late Phase from the 3rd/2nd BC to the 1st/2nd centuries AD. Recent excavations at Yeha temple by a French Mission, directed by Christian Robin and Alessandro de Maigret, have confirmed the date of its construction to the 8th – 7th century BC<sup>42</sup>.

Related to the Pre-Axumite culture is the Onâ culture, in the Hamasien plateau in Eritrea which early phase Fattovich dates to the second half of the 2nd millennium BC<sup>43</sup>.

As Fattovich<sup>44</sup>, Vogt and Sedov<sup>45</sup> have stated, some parallels can be drawn between Sabir Phase 2 pottery assemblage, that of the Pre-Axumite culture and that of the related Onâ culture, in term of vessel shapes. It is now clear, from the set of excavated vessels from Sabir, that carinated bowls with convex base, tronconical bowls with convex base, shallow bowls of large size with horizontal handle, goblets (or tulip-like pots, according to Fattovich), jars with thickened rim and horizontal handle on a ridge are specific Sabir Phase 2 types; the resemblance with Pre-Axumite vessels<sup>46</sup> is rather precise. Notwithstanding it must be noted that

<sup>38</sup> Fattovich R. The Contacts Between Southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa in Late Prehistory and Early Historical Times: a View from Africa // Profumi d'Arabia. Roma, 1997. P. 278–279.

<sup>39</sup> Fattovich R. Remarks on the Pre-Axumite Period in Northern Ethiopia // Journal of Ethiopian Studies. 1990. V. 23. P. 22–23.

<sup>40</sup> Paribeni P. Ricerche nel luogo dell'antica Adulis // Monumenti Antichi. 1907. V. 18. P. 450. Tav. III, 22, 25, 32; tav. IV, 22; tav. V. 7; Zarins, Zahran. Southern Tihama Plain. Pl. 81, 11, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Fattovich. Remarks on the Pre-Axumite Period. P. 1–33.

<sup>42</sup> Maigret A. de. The Temple of Nakrah at Baraqish and its Relation toward Vehâ/Ethiopia // Paper Delivered at the Fourth International Conference on the Civilisations of Ancient Yemen, Sanaa 10th–13th March 1998.

<sup>43</sup> Tringali G. Cenni sulle ono di Asmara e dintorni // Annales d'Ethiopie. 1965. T. 6. P. 143–162; *idem*. Necropoli di Cascassé e oggetti sudarabici (?) dalla regione di Asmara (Eritrea) // Rassegna di Studi Etiopici. 1978. V. 26. P. 47–97; *idem*. Note su ritrovamenti archeologici in Eritrea // Ibid. 1981. V. 28. P. 99–113.

<sup>44</sup> Fattovich. Remarks on the Pre-Axumite Period. P. 22–23.

<sup>45</sup> Vogt, Sedov. The Sabir Culture...

<sup>46</sup> See: Anfray F. Une campagne de fouilles à Yeha (Février – Mars 1960) // Annales d'Ethiopie. 1963. T. 5. Pl. 134 c, d; 140, 6; *idem*. La Poterie de Matara, Esquisse Typologique // Rassegna di Studi Etiopici. 1966. V. 22. Pl. 47; 48, 1, 2; *idem*. Matara // Annales d'Ethiopie. 1967. T. 7. P. 38; Tringali. Necropoli di Cascassé. Fig. 4; Fattovich R. Materiali per lo studio della ceramica pre-axumite etiopica // AION. 1980. V. 40. Suppl. 25. Fasc. 4. Tav. 16. top; P. 39; Leclant J., Miquel A. Reconnaissances dans l'Agammé: Goulo-Makeda et Sabea (Octobre 1955 et Avril 1956) // Annales d'Ethiopie. 1959. T. 3. Pl. 62d.



not the totality of forms from Sabir and Pre-Axumite sites is comparable; instead each assemblage is characterised also by several exclusive shapes.

All vessels from Sabir that match specimens from the Pre-Axumite culture come from Sabir Phase 2. The Pre-Axumite vessels come, following Fattovich chronological sequence, some from Early Pre-Axumite Phase, but some even from the Middle and some from the Late Phase.

The Pre-Axumite culture is distinguished by a set of rather elaborated impressed and incised decorations<sup>47</sup>. Decoration patterns from Adulis match the Pre-Axumite ones only in some simple motifs. Both sets of decorations seem to be rather far from motifs from Sihi. In this picture Sabir assemblage is the one that shows less similarities with Pre-Axumite patterns.

The origin of an hypothetical common denominator for the development of these decorations remains unclear, also taking into account the uncertain chronology of Adulis deep layers and, in part, of the Pre-Axumite sequence.

#### COMMENTS

By the end the 3rd millennium Sabir Culture people were well established in several settlements in the Lahj oasis and were practising agriculture, exploiting the permanent water of Wadi Tuban and the occasional flood waters. No traces of the same culture in its early phase (Sabir Phase 1) are presently known outside the Gulf of Aden and its hinterland. Contacts probably existed with populations living in the High Plains, but this aspect needs further investigation.

During this period possible loose contacts existed between Yemeni High Plains and the Gash Delta (Sudan).

From the second half of the 2nd millennium the Sabir Culture is known in the South Saudi Tihama, the Yemeni Tihama, along the coast of the Gulf of Aden from Khor Umeirah to Zinjibar. It is worth noting that we consider as belonging to the Sabir Culture sites sharing very close parallels in the pottery assemblages. Nevertheless the variability within this culture looks rather large. In a common cultural background the presence of *foreign* elements seems to imply a privileged direction of contacts of some areal of the Sabir Culture with specific areas across the Red Sea. This could explain the presence in the Sihi assemblage of a consistent number of vessels decorated with motifs that remind the Pan-Grave Culture and the related Jebel Mokram Group, implying closer contacts with Nubia and Northeast Africa.

These motifs are very scarce in Sabir, where there is instead evidence of contacts with the Pre-Axumite culture. It is nevertheless difficult to assess the meaning of the parallels of a selected group of vessels shapes shared by Sabir and Pre-Axumite sites due to the still rather imprecise Pre-Axumite chronology, based mainly on cross-dating with cultural sequences from eastern Sudan, the Nile Valley and South Arabia.

Vittoria Buffa

#### КУЛЬТУРА САБИР И ЕЕ МЕСТО СРЕДИ КУЛЬТУР БРОНЗОВОГО ВЕКА ПРИБРЕЖНОГО ЙЕМЕНА И СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АФРИКИ: ПРЕДВАРИТЕЛЬНЫЕ ЗАМЕЧАНИЯ

В. Буффа

Археологические культуры эпохи бронзы в Юго-Западной Аравии стали известны только в 80-е годы XX века, в основном благодаря работам Итальянской археологической миссии в Йемене в области Хаулан к юго-востоку от Саны. Последующие открытия синхронных культур американскими археологами в области Замар и, особенно, изучение памятников в прибрежных районах Йемена совместной экспедицией Российской Академии наук и Германского

<sup>47</sup> Fattovich R. Introduzione alla ceramica preaksumita di Grat Be'al Guerti (Yehā) // Annales d'Éthiopie. Tome II. 1978. Pl. 26–28.

археологического института, позволяют более четко охарактеризовать эти культуры в контексте синхронных памятников Аравии и северо-восточной Африки. Культура Сабир, выделенная на западном и южном побережье Аравии, относится к концу III – началу I тыс. до н.э. Ее носителями являлись племена, практиковавшие поливное земледелие. В материальной культуре памятников, оставленных этими племенами, прослеживаются определенные черты сходства с синхронными культурами Северо-Восточной Африки, что свидетельствует о существовании регулярных контактов.

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## THE FIRST EXCAVATION CAMPAIGN IN «TEMPLE I» AT YEHA (TIGRAI, ETHIOPIA)

French archaeological mission led by Christian J. Robin, between 22 January and 7 February 1998, successfully carried out a first excavation campaign of the best-known and most conspicuous monument of Pre-Aksumite Tigrai, the so-called «Temple I» of Yeha<sup>1</sup>. The decision to begin investigations from this typically South Arabian monument<sup>2</sup> reflects the main aim of the Mission, namely to make a systematic study of the South Arabian culture of Ethiopia. The following persons participated in the work, which was led by the author: Iwona Gajda (epigraphist), Philippe Aycard (site manager), Patrick Neury (architect), and Mario Mascellani (topographer-surveyor).

Anyone arriving at Yeha from the south-east, that is, along the road that shortly after leaving Inticho brings off to the north from the Adigrat-Adwa road, sees Temple I loom into view with its peculiar yellow limestone colour and great height from the dominant position it occupies on a dark hill that hides the view of the village on the south side. Contained within a double circuit of modern walls, it is flanked by the church of Enda Abba Afse, which, about 25 metres further north, rises on the higher portion of the rocky hillside. On entering the sacred enclosure from the west, one observes on the stairs and in the buildings of the two gates a large number of reused limestone blocks removed from the Sabaean sanctuary.

Visited by the Portuguese Alvares in 1520<sup>3</sup> and by the Britons H. Salt in 1810<sup>4</sup> and Th. Bent in 1893<sup>5</sup>, Temple I of Yeha was studied and surveyed for the first time by the German mission of E. Littmann in 1906<sup>6</sup>. In 1955 the Frenchman J. Doresse discovered an ancient baptismal font in the southeast corner of the Temple's interior<sup>7</sup>. Since then the ruins have not been subjected to any further investigation. The material originating from collapses of the walls and roof, which had risen to a height of about one third of the large room<sup>8</sup> of the end of the '40s

<sup>1</sup> Both the name of the temple and the divinity to which it was dedicated are unknown. For the time being the name «Temple I» will be used to distinguish it (as the Germans did in their 1913 report) from «Temple II», which is situated slightly further north on the Great Be'al Gebri hill. For the archaeological topography of Yeha cf. the map recently published by Anfray F. Yeha. Les ruines de Grat Be'al Gebri. Recherches archéologiques // Survey of Ethiopian Studies. 1995 [1997]. 39. P. 5–24. Plan 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Conti Rossini C. Sugli Habašāt // Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei. 1906. 15. P. 56; Rathens C., Wissmann H. von. Vorislamische Altertümer. II. Hamburg, 1932. S. 68–70; Grohmann A. Arabien, München, 1963. S. 170 ff.; Anfray F. Les anciens Ethiopiens. P., 1990. P. 18 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Alvares Fr. Verdadeira informação das terras do Presto João das Índias. Lisboa, 1889. P. 35 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Salt H. A Voyage to Abyssinia. P., 1814.

<sup>5</sup> Bent Th. The Sacred City of the Ethiopians. L., 1896.

<sup>6</sup> Krencker D. Deutsche Aksum-Expedition. II. B., 1913. S. 78–89.

<sup>7</sup> Doresse J. Les premiers monuments chrétiens de l'Éthiopie et l'église archaïque de Yéha // Novum Testamentum. 1956. I. P. 209–224.

<sup>8</sup> Krencker. Op. cit. S. 81. Abb. 168.