

Book review of: Yule, P. A. & Mauro, F. (2025). At the dawn of history. The late pre-Islamic age in south-eastern Arabia. (The Archaeological Heritage of Oman, 14). Oxford: Archaeopress. – 368 pages, 175 figures, 34 tables. ISBN 978-1-80327-993-0

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Within Near Eastern archaeology – increasingly referred to as Western Asian archaeology – the southeastern Arabian Peninsula (the territories of the UAE and the northeastern Sultanate of Oman) has long been a neglected frontier. This is a striking omission given its position at the crossroads of three ancient powerhouses: Egypt, Iran, and the Greater Indus Valley (CLEUZIOU & MÉRY, 2002). Despite the region's strategic importance, systematic research only began in the second half of the 20th century (BIBBY, 1969) and persisted as a minor sub-discipline for several decades. However, the last twenty years or so have changed the picture through a considerable boost in international research and collaboration.

Of all the pre- and proto-historic periods defined by archaeologists, arguably the least investigated one is the Late Pre-Islamic period, conventionally bracketed between 300 BC and 300 AD (cf. HAERINCK, OVERLAET, DE WAELE & DELRUE, 2021). A misbalance in the magnitude of archaeological research has made this even more evident in Oman than in the UAE (YULE, 2016).

For these reasons, one approaches the book by Yule and Mauro with great curiosity and high expectations. The book is published as part of the 'Archaeological Heritage of Oman' series, meritoriously established by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and recently transitioned to Archaeopress, ensuring meticulous editorial care and wide accessibility.

After an introduction explaining that the volume focuses on the "Samad Late Iron Age" (SLIA), the book opens with a chapter (CHAPTER 1) that provides a series of coordinates to frame the subsequent discussion. This is not merely a presentation of the geographic and climatic characteristics of the area under examination, including notes on fauna and flora, but also covers other aspects with a breadth of themes that requires certain attention from the reader. In addition to a brief excursus on the camel and horse and their domestication, this chapter includes a discussion of the region's historical geography and a summary of the history of research on the period in question, through which Yule's dominant role in this field of research emerges clearly.

Chapters 2 and 3 present overviews and typologies of indubitable importance for scholars in the sector, but are probably less suited to a wider audience. CHAPTER 2, dedicated to sites and architecture, includes a gazetteer organised according to the four late pre-Islamic assemblages defined by the authors: the Pre-Islamic Recent (PIR, essentially confined to the territory of the UAE), the SLIA mentioned above, the SLIAN (SLIA near sites), and sites that "can be assigned neither to the SLIA nor a contemporary assemblage" (p. 103), termed nSLIA. The publication of 39 excavated SLIAN graves at Salut will strengthen the proposed assemblage definition, which is based on relatively few finds.

The numerical imbalance between the number of PIR sites and SLIA sites is evident, as is the fact that the former includes sites with much more marked proto-urban characteristics and evidence of broader and richer external contacts. Overcoming this dichotomy, often adopted for convenience by scholars of the region who do not delve into discussions of this specific period, constitutes one of the primary objectives of this volume.

CHAPTER 3 provides an updated synthesis of the essential artefact classification developed by Yule over several decades (e.g., AL-JAHWARI ET AL., 2021; YULE, 2001; 2018). Featuring comprehensive typological plates, detailed tables, and an extensive bibliography, this chapter serves as an indispensable reference for archaeologists active in the region.

Following the definitions of the SLIA, PIR, and SLIAN assemblages, CHAPTER 4 somehow synthesises the findings of the two preceding chapters to establish the period's chronological boundaries in both relative and absolute terms. By providing a comprehensive table of absolute dates – from both radiocarbon and thermoluminescence – alongside an illustration of the 'chronological milestones' for the SLIA and PIR (pp. 209–211), the authors offer another essential contribution to the study of late pre-Islamic southeastern Arabia. CHAPTER 5 offers a series of "Special topics" discussions that are concise yet rich in bibliographic references for further study. Arguably, the most compelling section addresses the physical anthropology of the SLIA population, drawing on earlier studies that have been largely overlooked by the scholarly community. Another critical focus is the dearth of writing, a key diagnostic difference between the PIR (which possesses written records) and the SLIA (which remains essentially anepigraphic, barring isolated characters on pottery and tentatively dated rock inscriptions). Furthermore, by synthesising anthropological data

with artefact associations, the authors explore correlations among burial practices, social rank, and gender—a socio-political analysis rarely undertaken in southeast Arabian archaeology.

The two final chapters concisely introduce a period and a region on the margins of the volume's main theme. CHAPTER 6 draws a sketch of Sasanian influence in the region, again with a gazetteer of sites and useful bibliographic references for further study. CHAPTER 7, instead, proposes some notes related to Dhofar, in southwest Oman. Although loosely related to the book's theme, it finds its rationale in considerations regarding the spread of the Mahra tribe and language, considered by some to be the possible carriers of the SLIA culture.

The volume concludes with an extensive bibliography (pp. 275–315) and two highly functional appendices. The first provides a comprehensive table of sites, their associated assemblages, and relevant bibliographic references, while the second offers a systematic breakdown of artefact classes alongside their respective dating.

Overall, the book by Yule and Mauro is a work of significant scholarly interest and utility. It offers an extensive overview of the late pre-Islamic period in Southeast Arabia, specifically highlighting the critical archaeological record of northeast Oman. The sheer breadth of themes, paired with a rich illustrative apparatus and exhaustive bibliography, establishes this book as an indispensable resource. Whether researchers are seeking reliable comparanda for their own finds or a foundational starting point for specialised study, this volume provides the necessary framework and bibliographic depth to support future inquiry.

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