

WHAT EVIDENCE FOR THE 6TH CENTURY CONFLICT IN THE FARASĀN ISLANDS?

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Résumé

Les îles ont de tous temps représenté des avantages en périodes de conflit, dans le sens où elles offrent une base éloignée qui s'avère utile pendant la préparation d'un conflit. L'archipel des îles Farasān, dans le sud de la mer Rouge, ne fait pas exception : il a joué un rôle stratégique pendant plusieurs des conflits qu'a traversés la région (la guerre opposant Himyar à Aksum au VI^es. de l'ère chrétienne et aussi récemment que pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale). Cette contribution se propose de présenter le dossier historique et archéologique qui documente les événements du VI^es. (l'intervention aksumite en Arabie du Sud) ainsi que des découvertes récentes de la mission archéologique franco-saoudienne des îles Farasān.

Abstract

Islands have always represented an asset in times of war in the sense that they offer a remote base useful when it comes to preparing a conflict. The Farasān islands, in the Southern Red Sea, are no exception: they have played a strategic role during several of the historical conflicts the region has been through (the Aksum – Himyar conflict in the 6th century and as recently as the First World War). This paper offers to present the historical and archaeological traces that document the role of the archipelago in the context of war as an introduction. Focus will then more specifically be given to the 6th century events that opposed Himyar to Aksum and on the recent discoveries of the Saudi-French Mission in the Farasān Islands.

Introduction

The Farasān islands in the southern Red Sea (Saudi Arabia) are mostly known through the two Latin inscriptions¹ that have made them famous. Following this discovery, additional archaeological surveys to the ones realised in the 1980's² have been carried out, revealing a rich archaeological heritage of a hundred sites recorded so far ranging from early historical periods to the 19th cent.³

¹ PHILLIPS, VILLENEUVE and FACEY, 2004

² ZARINS 1981, COOPER and ZAZZARO, 2014, MARION DE PROCÉ, 2017.

³ The prehistorical periods are studied by a Saudi-British team from the University of York and King Saud University (dir. G. Bailey and A. al-Sharekh).

During the long history that the islands have been through, some sites date to periods marked by conflict in the Southern Red Sea. The first centuries AD and the Roman military occupation of the islands – probably as a result of the annexation of the provinces of Egypt (29 B.C.) and Arabia (106 A.D.) and motivated by the will to secure trade in that part of the Red Sea – are illustrated by the two Latin texts⁴. The first one, dated 144, mentions a detachment of the 2nd *Legio Trajana Fortis* stationed in Egypt in Nicopolis⁵. The second text reflects the presence of another legion, the *Legio VI Ferrata*, that had its main legion at Boşra (Syria). The strategic advantages of the archipelago, drove them to take advantage of it. Regarding this occupation however, the Farasan remains (inscriptions and isolated architectural blocks) are the only sources that we have so far: no external sources gives a broader context to the military presence in Farasān.

The second period of political tension known in the Red Sea, which we will focus on in this paper, dates to the 6th cent. when the kingdoms of Aksum and Ḥimyar waged war against each other in Southern Arabia following the persecution of Christian communities, in Najrān and in the coastal regions⁶. Epigraphical and literary sources mention Farasān in that context. Glimpses of archaeological traces can now be added to the documentation.

After a general outline of the 6th cent. Southern Red Sea conflict, the various sources documenting this episode will be presented ; finally new archaeological evidence from the Farasān archipelago will be presented.

The 6th cent. Southern Red Sea conflict

The powers considered here are Aksum on the Western shore of the Red Sea and Ḥimyar on its Eastern shore. The archipelago is located right in the middle, between the two regional powers. The tensions opposing the Aksumite leaders to the kings of Ḥimyar start as early as the third century AD⁷ a time when the former occupied the Tihāma coastal plain. In 523, the Christian communities of Southern Arabia

⁴ See VILLENEUVE, 2007 and SPEIDEL, 2015

⁵ The Roman presence is evidenced by architectural blocks identical to examples found in Marina al-Alamein, but in local stone, see MARION DE PROCÉ, 2017.

⁶ GAJDA, 2002; ROBIN, 2010, 2012.

⁷ Regarding this period, see ROBIN, 1995.

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underwent a violent campaign by the Jewish king of Himyar Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar. The massacre of the Christian population of Najrān, had a loud echo as we know from sources like the *Guidi Letter* likely authored by Symeon of Beth Arsham and the *Martyrdom of Saint Arethas*⁸. Aksumite king Kaleb retaliated by sending a fleet to attack Himyar from the port of Aksum, Gabaza. The fact that communities on the coastal plain and on the neighboring islands were sensible to the Christian faith facilitated the Aksumite maneuver that led to 50 years occupation of South Arabia by Aksum⁹.

Literary sources

The literary evidence documenting the 6th cent. AD events and situation, briefly presented below, provides the historical frame of the archaeological remains found in Farasān. In the *Martyrdom of Saint Arethas*¹⁰, when describing the fleet that Aksum put together before setting off to South Arabia, it is written that « Farasān », most likely referring to the islands, contributed with seven ships.

Another source is the travel account of a Byzantine ambassador named Nonnosos preserved in the works of Photius. Around the years 540, an embassy led by Nonnosos is sent by Justinian (527-565) to Arabia and Ethiopia (Photius, *Bibliothèque*, t. I, cod. 3). Apart from the diplomatic mission itself, a short paragraph is of particular interest to us since it mentions *Pharsan*, the islands, and the people he met there on the last island (Disān?) before setting off to Africa: “human-like creatures, of very small size, that were covered in hair, living naked, and speaking a human language, not understood by their neighbors, they collect shells and fishes for food and are not aggressive at all”. The description hints at a desire to emphasize the “exotic” aspect of this community living a modest life on a remote island. We do know however, from literary and archaeological sources that at the same time, the main island of Farasān was home to communities living in important sites with monumental architecture and necropolises.

Finally, in Bi'r Hima, north of Najrān along the caravan trail, three inscriptions commemorate the same event, the very year it happened. The texts are ordered by a himyarite qayl Shara'hil ḡhu-Yaz'an. Ja 1028 is a Late Sabaic inscription dated 633 Him / 523 AD which

⁸ See the volume edited by BEAUCAMP, BRIQUEL-CHATONNET and ROBIN, 2010.

⁹ See HATKE, 2012.

¹⁰ BAUSI and GORI 2006; DETORAKI, 2007.

describes military actions taken by Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar against Christians in several locations. Among the listed tribes, the texts mentions **Frs¹n**, and its inhabitants the **Frs¹nytm**. All mentioned locations are known to have hosted Christian communities, hence the campaigns led against them by the Ḥimyarite power. They are mostly from Najrān, Zafar and the coastal region. The military campaign is said to have concerned Farasān, whether it was actually led also on the archipelago isn't explicit. It could also have been in the mainland on a territory occupied by Farasānis.

Later, in the 10th cent, yemeni geographer al-Ḥamdāni mentions Farasān, the tribe of the Taḡlib, settled around Mocha, that would have given their name to the islands, where there were ruined churches and “communities that still carried out trade with Ethiopia”¹¹. This could indicate a survival of the community up until that time, given that a bishop of Yemen and Ṣan'ā' is mentioned in the 9th cent. and that in the early 10th, a Yemeni priest is mentioned in the literature. Finally, a Christian community is still living in Najrān in the 13th and in Soqoṭra in the 16th¹².

Literary sources and archaeological sources don't always count the same history : what is the situation in Farasān ? Are the events mentioned in the sources confirmed by archaeology ?

New archæological data from Farasān

The surveys of the islands have revealed several sites most likely ascribable to Late Antiquity (4th-7th cent. AD)¹³. The campaigns of the French-Saudi mission have so far concentrated on the eastern part of the main island, closest the mainland; all the sites mentioned below are therefore located in this area (fig.1).

¹¹ BECKINGHAM, 1965.

¹² See the recent account on Christianity in the Arabian peninsula: ROBIN, 2017 and BOWERSOCK, 2012, 2014.

¹³ See COOPER and ZAZZARO, 2014.

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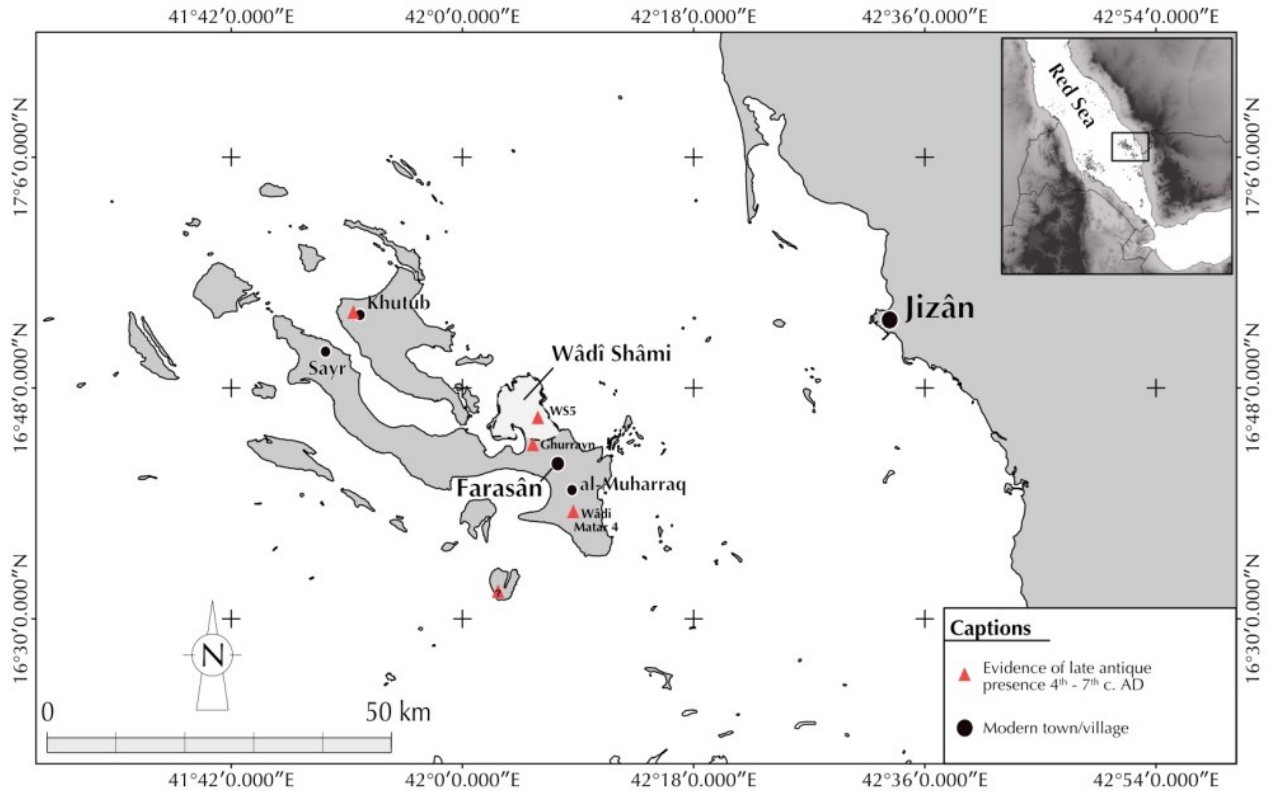


Fig. 1 - General map of the Farasān Islands with location of the Late Antique material identified, ©MIFA

The evidence consists of blocks (funerary or architectural) bearing engraved crosses in Ġurrayn and Wādī Shāmi or in the shape of crosses (figs. 2 and 3). They are of various shapes, from simple crosses to crosses *fourchées* and crosses *pattées*. Similar examples are known in Soqatra Island¹⁴ and the Eastern Arabian Peninsula¹⁵. Some pottery finds on different sites also point to the 4th-7th centuries AD, they mainly consist of Ayla-Aqaba amphorae sherds known to date from that chronological span¹⁶. At least one sherd, found at al-Quşar, is most likely a piece of Adulitan ware, dated to the 6th century. Toponymy also yields some hints of the Christian past of Farasan: a small natural relief north of Farasān city is called Jabal al-Kniseh but surveys have failed to evidence any remains there.

¹⁴ DOE, 1970: fig. 30.

¹⁵ LANGFELDT, 1994: fig. 24; POTTS, 1994.

¹⁶ MELKAWY *et al*, 1994.

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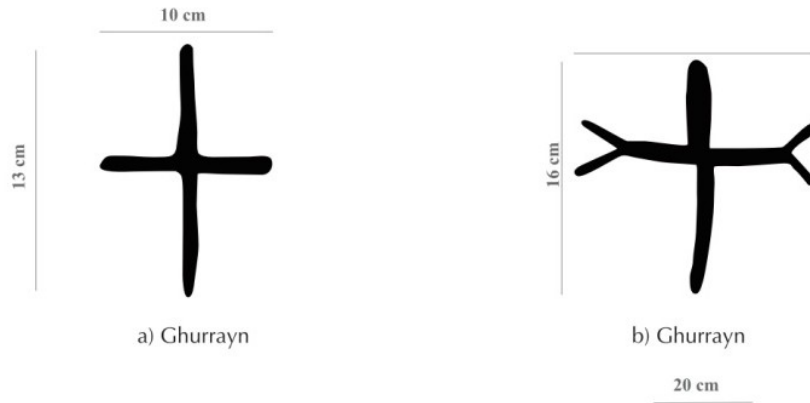


Fig. 2 - Engraved crosses from Ghurrayn ©MIFA

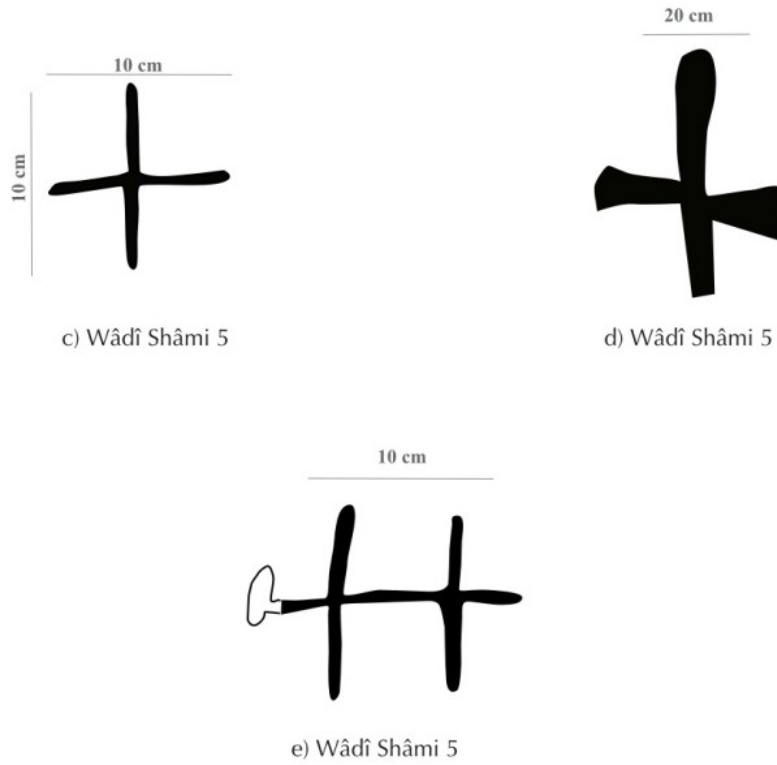


Fig. 3 - Stelae and crosses from the site Wādī Shāmi 5, cemeteries 1 and 3, ©MIFA

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The site of Wādī Shāmi 5

The site of Wādī Shāmi 5, first visited in 2011, is located in the northern part of the island. The Wādī Shāmi is a broad rocky difficult to access area with small reliefs, roughly covering the northeastern part of the main island. It is now mostly uninhabited, apart from seasonal farming activities. Several sites have been recorded there so far, from Prehistory (aceramic shell middens and tombs) to deserted islamic villages. Despite the desolated and desert aspect of the area, surveys revealed a high concentration of archaeological remains.

Wādī Shāmi 5 (fig. 4), locally designated as the “Christian cemetery”, is located at the northern tip of a small plain, at the eastern foot of a rocky outcrop (*ca.* 10 m high), from which one can see the sea, some 3 km to the east. The entire site covers an area of about 1,7 ha, and is composed of the following elements (fig. 5):



Fig. 4 - General view of Wādī Shāmi 5, cemetery 1, to the east, ©MIFA

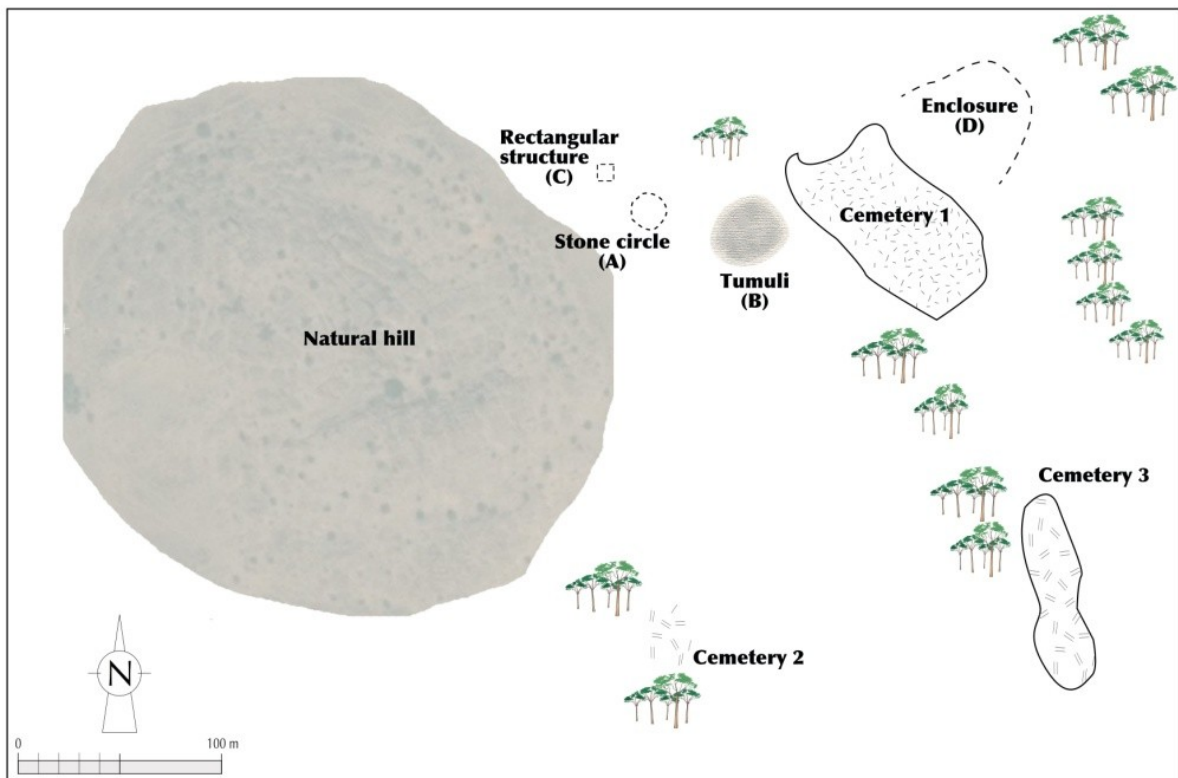


Fig. 5 - Schematic plan of Wādī Shāmi 5, ©MIFA

- a discontinued circle of unhewn standing stones (A), 10 m in diameter, made of high irregular monolithic stones planted in the ground. A *ca.* 0,80 m entrance was recorded to the south, being composed of two monolithic standing doorjambs.
- a large tumular area (B), some 10 m to the east of the stone circle, which has a diameter of 20 m and reaches a height of 1,20 m.
- a small rectangular building (4 x 2,5 m) made of single facing walls built with quite large slabs roughly hewn (0,40 x 0,30 x 0,20 m), preserved to a height of two courses maximum. In this area, a small monolithic stone basin is visible (L. 80 cm, l. 40 cm, depth:0,20 cm);
- a big enclosure delimited by small blocks deeply inserted in the ground (only 30 cm is emerging) (D), roughly pentagonal with rounded angles. The maximum length is 35 m, inside the soil is flat and sandy without any visible structures.

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- **cemetery 1** (see below), immediately east of (B), extending to the east and mostly to the south, measuring 40 m east-west and about 70 m north-south;
- **cemetery 2**, about 150 m to the south of cemetery 1, contains about 25 tombs oriented east-west arranged in lines and rows. The tombs are delimited by small rocks marking an oval measuring 1,90 m maximum, some are shorter and some are most likely children's tombs. Several are characterized by a stone inserted in the soil in the center, marking a woman's tomb, following a regional tradition. In some cases, one can observe on the eastern side or on both sides, a higher stone placed standing but without particular mark. The general organization and tombs orientation could indicate that these are muslim tombs but this remains uncertain at this point.
- **cemetery 3**, about 100 m to the east of cemetery 2 and 50 m south of cemetery 1 covers an area of 95 m (NNW/SSE) by 25 m (WSW/ENE). There are about 35 tombs here roughly organized in lines and rows. Similarly to cemetery 2, the tombs are oval in shape and delimited by unhewn rocks, sometimes marked by a small standing slab at the extremities. Their overall dimensions are 1,60 m to 2 m maximum, they are separated by 30 to 60 cm spaces at most. Women's tombs are also marked by a stone placed in the center, and children's tombs seem absent. Some tombs are bordered with standing stones on the side, that appear to have been taken from cemetery 1, leading us to believe that this cemetery is of more recent date than cemetery 1 and is probably an early Islamic necropolis.
- two wells, to the north-east of the cemeteries.

Cemetery 1, the largest one, is oriented NNW/SSE and on a west-east slope. It is composed of a vast tumulus (600 m²) and of over two hundred west-east oriented smaller tumuli (over 2000 m²) separated by one meter at most. The tombs repartition seems to be quincunxed rather than following a line and rows organization. The small tumuli have an oval general shape (L. 2,50 m, l. 1,50 m) made of medium-sized unhewn rocks (30 x 20 x 20 cm) (fig. 6).



Fig. 6 - Tombs of Wādī Shāmi 5 in the eastern part of cemetery 1, to the south-east, ©MIFA

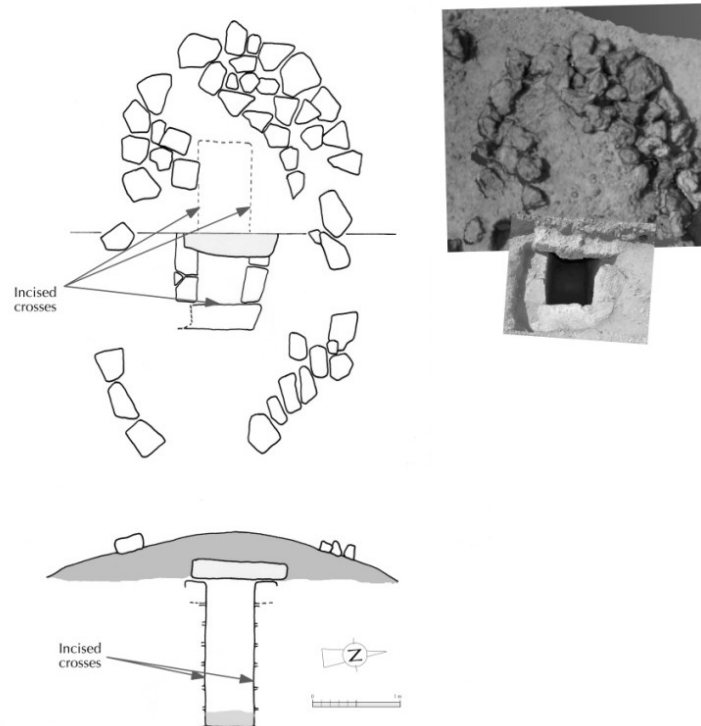


Fig. 7 - Top plan and section of the plundered tomb, ©MIFA/ C.S. Phillips and S. Marion de Procé

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On and next to several tombs, stelae have been broken recently. The base of some of these is still inserted in the soil in the center of the tumulus. Some seem anthropomorphic in shape, while others are clearly cruciform (see figs. 2 and 3). The tombs of this cemetery were marked in different ways: some with a block or slab with an engraved cross at the western end of the small tumuli (with the cross facing west), others with a slab placed in the center of the tumulus and displaying a cross or carved as an anthropomorphic figure. The signification of these different markings is still obscure for now but as most of the tombs appear undisturbed, there is hope that excavation will shed some light on the variety of practices.

One of the tombs located close to tumular area (B) was left wide open after it was robbed. The plunderers, while completely disturbing the tomb, have revealed how the interior was built under this tumulus (fig. 7), bigger than the common ones (interior dimensions: 1,95 m x 60 cm). Under the oval mound of stones, three 20 cm thick slabs cover a nicely built pit-tomb, two of which are still sealed in place. They are resting on seven courses of finely carved blocks measuring roughly 30 cm in height. Little holes and protruding stones have been intentionally left there in order to climb out of the tomb. Other than that, no protrusion was observed, indicating the absence of different floors to lay the bodies. They could have been buried in coffins, of which we have seen no evidence in the plundering rubble. The fine masonry was covered with a thin coat of plaster, on which we could observe three little incised crosses (fig. 8), a few centimeters above the level of the bones, on the north, east and south sides. These fortuitous observations could indicate that part of or all tumuli in the cemetery cover similar pit-tombs; or that this is a particular tomb (it is bigger than most of the tumuli) or area of the cemetery: it could belong the tumular area (B) being an eastern extension of it, either anterior or of different status than the majority of the cemetery.

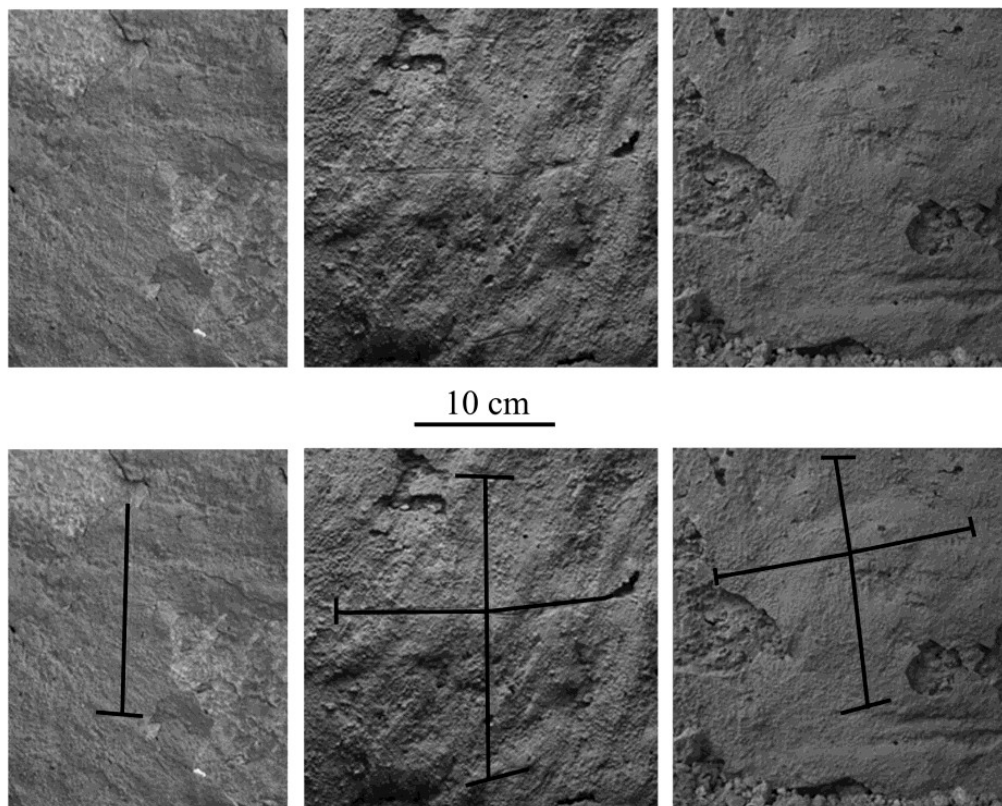


Fig. 8 - Crosses incised on the plaster inside the plundered tomb, North, East and South respectively, ©MIFA/ C.S. Phillips

The pottery finds, four undiagnostic sherds in total (fig. 9/c), from the superficial cleaning we carried out in 2014 may or may not come from the tomb. A proper excavation of another tomb will be necessary to date the necropolis accurately. The disturbed human remains were collected, the ensemble seem to be a multiple inhumation and await further study. Work was stopped as seemingly undisturbed levels were reached. The western part of the tomb has been completely damaged by the plundering, as well as the northern part as a tunnel was dug inside the tomb from the side.

The pottery collected on the surface of the necropolis appears late antique and Islamic: green ribbed ware, possibly from Ayla-Aqaba amphorae or Late Roman Amphora 1. The survey yielded a large *sgraffiato* (?) sherd as well as some glazed fragments that are yet to be studied (fig. 9/a-b, d).

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In 2017, a new site, Wādī Shāmi 10 was recorded 200 m north west of the necropolis, likely to be associated with the Wādī Shāmī 5 necropolises. The visible remains cover 100 x 150 m, bordered in the south by a very ashy area. The buildings are mostly rectangular with an entrance often located in the middle of a long wall. In at least one building, a large storage jar rim is showing on the surface close to an area with basalt fragments and evidence of heating.

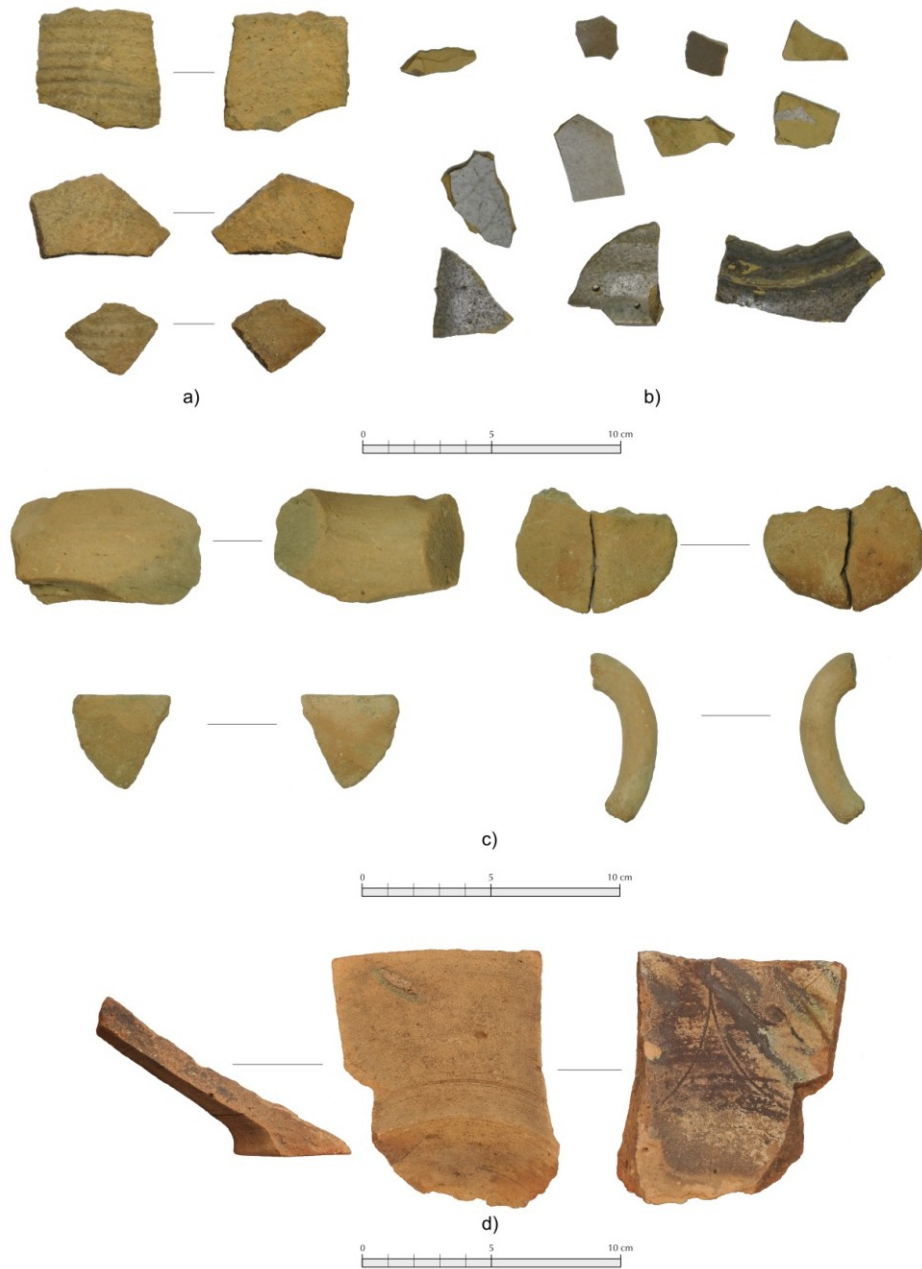


Fig. 9 - Pottery collected on the surface of Wādī Shāmī 5, ©MIFA

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The surface is scattered in pottery sherds. As far as we can tell for now, this material points mainly to an Early Islamic occupation of the site in the 9th-10th cent.(fig. 10/a, c-d, possibly e and f) as parallels have been established with the early phases of the site of Zabid¹⁷. So far, no Aksumite sherd has been identified.



Fig. 10 - Pottery collected on the surface of Wādī Shāmi 10, ©MIFA

¹⁷ The identification was confirmed by E. Keall upon photographs, see CIUK and KEALL, 1996: pl.95/24.g; pl.95/22d; pl.95/30a, b; pl.95/31c; KEALL, 2008: fig. 4/1-2.

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Apart from the pottery, several objects were collected: glass bracelet fragments, a clay weight, a copper alloy plaque (mirror ?), fragments of incense burners (fig. 10/g), also characteristic of the 9th-10th cent.. Similar objects are known in the Zabid region and as far east as the port of Sharma¹⁸. The material of this site clearly dates the last occupation of the area. The question remains to know whether there is an earlier settlement underneath the Early Islamic phase, which will only be solved after excavations are carried out. So far, the 4th -7th cent. period is only hinted at by a few ribbed sherds possibly dating to Late Antiquity (fig. 10/b). The crosses make it clear that a Christian community was living in the area. The date however can only be proposed by external literary sources so far. To say that this is a 6th cent. site, however tempting, is a leap we must wait to take.

The archaeological traces that we have on the archipelago could be contemporary to the 6th cent. conflict opposing Aksum and Ḥimyar, therefore providing an archaeological evidence of the Farasāni community involved in it, otherwise only documented through external sources. As this is still a hypothetical assumption awaiting archaeological confirmation, we must also note the possibility of the persistence of a Christian community until the 9th-10th centuries, as examples are known in the region as seen above, but this has yet to be clarified in the case of Farasān.

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¹⁸ ROUGEULLE, 2007: fig. 3/23. We would like to thank S. Le Maguer-Gillon for her help in identifying the incense-burners based upon photographs.

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