

An archaeological investigation on decorated shell bosses from Sumhuram – Sultanate of Oman

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Introduction

During the archaeological excavations were unearthed a large number of findings indispensable for understanding the activities of the pre-Islamic cities along the coast of Arabia, such as Sumhuram. Among these, of particular interest are a group composed by fifteen ornamental objects made by big shells that show particulars decorative motifs. These objects have had controversial interpretation, they were initially interpreted as lids, after the discovery of several complete pieces, where the holes were visible inside, it became clear that they were used as ornamental elements, probably for rich clothes (boss, brooch or belt buckle). The decorative motif not found comparison, for this reason in order to understand whether these objects were imported or were a local production, it are analytically studied.

Materials and Distribution



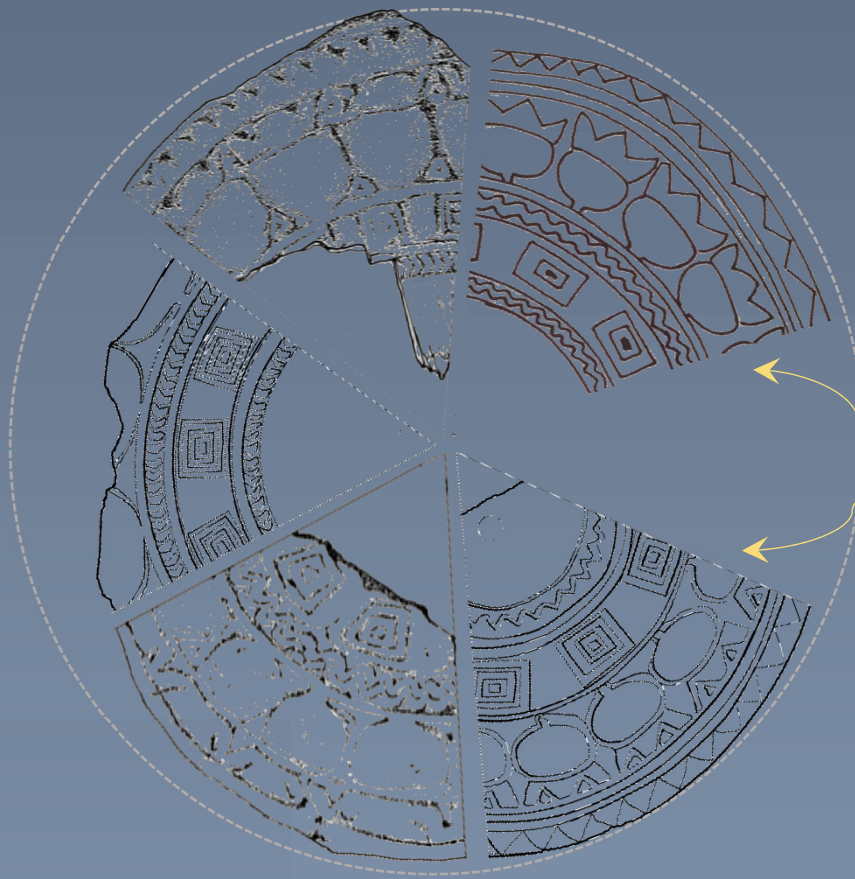
Detail of shell boss with some traces of black colour inside the engravings.

These objects are finely processed and products by big marine shells. It's still uncertain the attribution of the shell used because the working process is so accurate that remain few evidence of the characteristics of the raw material. It is probable that the engravings were filled with a dark substance, perhaps bitumen, with the intention to bring out the decoration than the white surface of the shell.

Looking at the distribution of these objects inside the city it records the most of these are found in Area F. Two of these were found in a building where there are evident traces of structures connected with production activities. This data with the two bosses found in Area H, and some unfinished bosses (without the internal holes) seems to be confirm the idea which these objects to be products inside the city.

Hypothesis and Conclusions

The shell bosses seem to be unique, especially as regards the decoration. Their peculiarity and lack of comparisons from excavation contexts, emphasizes the uniqueness of the artistic production of the city due to its role as a trading and cultural crossroads between East and West. The discovery of the boss conserved at the MET, carried out by the undersigned, allowed us to ask new questions. It is known that the pomegranate decorative element is completely absent, in the present state of research, in the South Arabian iconography. However, it is extremely common in Iran, where it was purchased this product. This doesn't allow us to understand if these objects were produced at Sumhuram and exported to Iran, or if it happened the opposite. Certainly, the presence of several shell bosses with different decoration and processing steps be inclined toward the idea that it existed in the city a production centre. The discovery of bosses with pomegranate finely worked and others with pomegranate extremely sketchy suggest that, the first, they have been of inspiration (imported? Products on site by foreign craftsmen?) for the local craftsmen who then began to produce them, without completely understand the pomegranate decorative motif. Later, the craftsmen of Sumhuram, seem to have moved away from this ideal model, reinterpreting it according to a taste completely local. In support of this hypothesis is the relative sequence of the layers in which they were found some of these objects. We find some pieces with pomegranate finely worked in previous phases than those sketchy worked, this is probably due to this reinterpretation of the primary decorative system.



On the picture some of the bosses with pomegranate are compared. As show the decoration and the sequence of stripes weren't standardized.



In the pictures on the left we can see the two types of pomegranate decoration: on the left side, the finest decoration and on the right, the sketchy decoration. This could indicate that those with finest decoration have been imported or produced by foreign craftsmen at Sumhuram, while the others have been produced by local craftsmen.

