A PROPOSED FUNCTION FOR LATE PREHISTORIC INCISED ARROWHEADS IN SOUTHEASTERN ARABIA

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1. INTRODUCTION[1]

In this paper I will elucidate a potentially important aspect of symbolic and ritual life for the inhabitants of ancient southeastern Arabia. Incised bronze arrowheads are commonly recovered on sites dating between 1500 and c. 600 BC. To date, well over fifty of these have been found at sites stretching from Oman to the eastern province of Saudi Arabia (Figs 1-2). In a paper published in 1998 I drew attention to the distribution and chronology of these artefacts[2]. Their function, however, has remained unaddressed. Here I detail a possible link between these artefacts and a series of historically-attested divination rituals which were practised in pre-Islamic southern Arabia.

2. FORMAL CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTEXT

A detailed analysis of the form and decoration of incised arrowheads was presented in 1998[3] and an up-dated list is seen in Table 1. Although I have not had the chance to physically examine all the arrowheads, judging by the published examples, there are several decorative and morphological aspects of the corpus as a whole that may bear directly on the issue of their function.

Firstly, the decoration consists of a limited number of elements, in particular a chevron and "x" or star motif. Three distinct schemes are apparent. The first is characterised by a "xIxI>" scheme running from the tang of the arrowhead to the tip. The second scheme consists of a "xI>" pattern running towards the tip of the arrowhead while the third consists of two chevrons. These schemes are not geographically differentiated and are, in fact, found in the same graves at a number of sites. The decorative uniformity and geographical distribution suggest that whatever behaviour is associated with the arrowheads was widespread and commonly understood. Secondly, the balance of evidence suggests that they are more commonly found in graves than settlements suggesting that aspects of their use were connected with either the ritual of burial or the afterlife. Against this one must

[1] I would like to take the opportunity to thank several scholars for their comments on this paper. While I was a Visiting Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Gent in Belgium, Prof. Ernie Haerinck and Mr. Bruno Overlaet made many useful suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. In Sydney, versions of this paper were commented upon by Prof. DT. Potts, Mrs. Lloyd Weeks and Ms. Emma Thompson. Dr. Soren Blau (Australian National University) and Dr. Derek Kennet (Durham) also provided many useful suggestions. Any mistakes remain the responsibility of the author who would rather that there wasn't any mistakes but accepts that not even he is perfect.

[2] P Magee, The chronology and regional context of late prehistoric incised arrowheads in southeastern Arabia, *AAE* 9:1998: 1-12.

[3] Magee, The chronology and regional context, 1-12.

note, however, that many more graves than settlements of the period dating after 1500 BC have been excavated.

3. FUNCTION

Despite the fact that they have been widely recovered, little has been written on the possible function of these artefacts. Vogt has drawn attention to the existence of similar incised arrowheads in the rest of western Asia and in doing so opened the possibility that the southeast Arabian examples are copies of foreign models that carried no indigenous function[4]. There are, in fact, many more examples of incised arrowheads in ancient Western Asia than those listed by Vogt and two broad groups of incised arrowheads can be isolated[5]. These two groups have no common function. Furthermore, the chronological disparity between the southeast Arabian and other west Asian examples makes it unlikely that the latter had anything to do with the former in terms of function and inspiration.

Vogt has also flagged the possibility that the incisions are tribal designations or *wasms*[6]. Given the existence of at least three groups of motifs, it is extremely unlikely that the marks denoted personal ownership or tribal designation. The incisions are not geographically differentiated (as one would expect with tribal marks) and different schemes are recovered in a single grave. A tribal-designation function is, therefore, also unlikely.

4. BELOMANCY AND CHANCE

In an article published in 1961, Iwry drew attention to the evidence for belomancy (divination with incised arrows) in the ancient Levant[7]. In it he suggested an interpretation for inscribed Phoenician arrowheads that had been published from several sites. Iwry drew upon Biblical texts and some of the then recently published Nuzi texts to suggest that the practice of tossing or throwing inscribed arrows for divination purposes was common in that region in the second and first millennia B.C. His interpretation of the Phoenician arrowheads was rebutted by Sass on chronological and epigraphic grounds[8]. Although Iwry's arguments may not provide a viable interpretation for Levantine incised arrowheads, literary evidence from Arabia suggests that similar rituals occurred in pre-Islamic south and west Arabia.

Fahd provides the most complete analysis of these rituals[9]. Two rituals, both involving incising the arrowshaft, are attested: one a belomancy ritual for divination and the other a means of dividing a slaughtered camel[10]. The fullest description of the belomancy ritual comes from Ibn Ishaq. His account (written in the 9th century AD)[11] and translated by Fahd, deserves quoting in full: "*Il y avait, devant Hubal, sept flèches marquées chacune*

4 Vogt and Franke-Vogt, *Shimal 1984/5*: 35. Vogt, *Asimah*: 94.

5 Magee, The chronology and regional context of late prehistoric incised arrowheads, Table 1.

6 Vogt, *Asimah*: caption for Fig. 62.26.

7 S Iwry. New evidence for belomancy in ancient Palestine and Phoenicia, *JAOS* 81: 1961: 27-34.

8 B Sass, Inscribed Babylonian arrowheads of the turn of the second millennium BC and their Phoenician counterparts. *Ugarit-Forschungen* 21: 1989: 355.

9 T Fahd, *La divination Arabe. Etudes religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l'Islam*. Leiden: 1966: 180-184; T Fahd, Une pratique cléromantique a la Ka'ba preislamique. *Semetica* VIII: 1958: 55-79.

10 Fahd, *La divination Arabe:* 181.

11 Fahd, *La divination Arabe:* 188.

d'une inscription: une flèche portait le mot 'le prix de sang' quand on voulait établir à qui revenait de payer le sang versé, on secouait les sept flèches; une (deuxième) portait le mot 'oui' pour toute décision à prendre; on la mettait en exécution, quand cette flèche sortait; une (troisième) flèche portait le mot 'non'; on s'abstenait d'agir chaque fois que le 'non' sortait. Une (quatrième) portait la mention 'il est des vôtres'; une (cinquième) portait le mot 'adjoint'; une (sixième) portait la mention 'il n'est pas des vôtres'; une (septième) portait le mot 'l'eau'; quand on voulait creuser pour chercher de l'eau, on consultait les flèches, parmi lesquelles se trouvait la flèche de l'eau; là où elle sortait, on creusait"[12]. Ibn Ishaq records that this ritual was practiced in several different situations. These included circumcising an infant, concluding a marriage, burying the dead or ascertaining someone's genealogy. In each case, arrows were drawn; each containing a possible response to the individual's question[13].

As to the geographical spread of this practice in Arabia, Ibn Ishaq's description is based on the ritual that was practised at the Ka'ba in the century before the coming of Islam[14]. Further evidence that the practice occurred in pre-Islamic southern Arabia is provided by Yâqût, who, writing in the 13th century AD, records that pre-Islamic belomancy rituals took place in the sanctuary of Halaca in al-Abla in the region between the Hijaz and Yemen and perhaps also in the sanctuary of al-Galsad in the Kinda region of the Hadramawt[15].

The other ritual involving incised arrows is purely a game of chance and has no religious connotation. One game, known as *al-Maysir*, involved choosing incised arrowshafts as a means of dividing up a slaughtered camel[16]. Different arrows had inscribed on them a different number of notches which signified the different quantity of portions the drawer received. Upon receiving the portion the player either consumed it or donated it to the poor. Fahd has dealt in detail with the chronology and geographical distribution of this ritual and it seems, for most part, to echo that of the belomancy rituals[17].

5. DISCUSSION

There are many behavioural, chronological and geographical factors that, *prima facie*, separate these historically-attested rituals from the cultural context of incised arrowheads found in southeastern Arabia. These include the nature of the incision; the

12 Fahd, Une pratique cléromantique: 56-57.

13 Fahd, Une pratique cléromantique: 57.

14 Fahd, Une pratique cléromantique: 56.

15 Fahd, Une pratique cléromantique: 59. It is not our intention to review here the evidence for all such practices throughout the pre-Islamic Middle East. However, the practice of inscribing arrowheads for good luck is also found in Iran in the pre-Islamic period. The *asbaran* while fighting the Arabs in the late 6th century AD would write the name of the Great King and his family members on their arrows for good luck, see M Zakeri *Sasanid Soldiers in early Muslim society. The Origins of the 'Ayyaran and Futuwwa.* Wiesbaden:1995: 66. In this context it is also worth noting a bronze sword from Luristan carrying a proto-Arabic inscription wishing the owner (?) good luck: H Lassen, Buchwald VF & Müller WW. A bronze sword from Luristan with a proto-Arabic inscription. *AfO* XXXV: 1988: 136-152. The sword, a standard Luristan flang-hilted type, dates from to the last two centuries of the second millennium BC. It is worth perhaps noting the existence of an inscribed chevron and zig-zag lines on the sword in addition to the epigraphic inscription.

16 Encyclopaedia of Islam, Maysir. AFL. Beeston. The game of Maysir and some modern parallels. In: RB Serjeant RB and Bidwell RL (eds.) *Arabian Studies*, II: Leiden:1975: 1-7.

17 Fahd, *La divination Arabe*: 204-213.

different geographical foci of the historical and archaeological evidence and the chronological gap. I will examine each of these in turn.

Ibn Ishaq records that words were written on the arrowshafts while our examples contain only geometric patterns[18]. It is worth nothing, however, the reservation of Fahd in reference to Ibn Ishaq's text: *"Ces mots étaint-ils entièrement écrits, ou étaint-ils simplement représentés par des abréviations conventionnelles?"*. Even if not written words, the cohesion and uniformity of the incisions suggest some commonality of understanding. It is arguable that the existence of two discreet "signs" and their juxtaposition into several sign-groups might reflect the sort of positive/negative/neutral responses in which the historically described belomantric rituals resulted. Alternatively, they might be viewed in connection with the "notches" which were incised in arrows used in *al-Maysir*[19]. Therefore, the absence of recognisable 'words' on the southeast Arabian examples should not be seen as a major point of difference between these texts and the archaeological evidence. Clearly, the inscribed signs carried with them meaning, even if that meaning is not obvious to us.

The textual sources uniformly indicate that the arrowshaft was incised while the archaeological examples consist of incised arrowheads. Two issues are relevant in this regard. The first and most important consideration is that the arrowshafts of the archaeological examples do not survive so it is impossible to assess whether or not they were also incised. Secondly, it is worth noting that the historical sources quoted above refer to a time when iron was used for making arrowheads. Given the strength of iron it would be very difficult to incise any sign on the arrowhead so it is possible that the shaft was used instead. The practice of incising the shaft might therefore, be an adaptation of an ancient practice of incising the arrowhead, which in earlier times had been made in a copper alloy and was, therefore, much easier to incise.

The textual sources provide good evidence for the geographical location of these rituals. They are concentrated solely in southern and western Arabia. The texts make no reference to southeastern Arabia although it must be noted that few textual sources do. The absence of any textual reference to this part of Arabia serves to accentuate the common belief that southeastern Arabia was isolated from southern and western Arabia until a series of migrations took place in the last few centuries B.C. Were this belief accurate it would be a serious impediment to linking the accounts of belomancy and divination to the artefacts under discussion. As fieldwork continues in southeastern Arabia it is becoming evident, however, that that part of Arabia was not isolated from developments in the south and south-west. The most recent evidence for this is the discovery at the Iron Age II (1100-600 B.C) site of Muweilah in the United Arab Emirates, of a south Arabian inscription[20]. The inscription is most likely a personal name. It provides the clearest evidence that southeastern Arabia was not isolated from the south of the Arabian peninsula and nullifies the argument that sources on rituals practised in southern and western Arabia are not relevant to the Arabian southeast.

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18 Fahd, Une pratique cléromantique: 59, footnote 1.

19 In addition to the passage from Ibn Ishaq reproduced in the text see the testimony of An-Nuwairi in which is provided a summary of the responses marked on arrowshafts: Fahd, Une pratique cléromantique: 69. According to this author the inscriptions consist of opposing words: eg. yes/no; good/bad; quickly/slowly.

20 Magee, P Writing in the Iron Age: the earliest South Arabian inscription from southeastern Arabia. AAE: 1999: 10: 43-50. Müller W.W. Zur Inschrift auf einem Krugfragment aus Muweilah, AAE 1999: 10: 51-53.

The most serious objection to seeing any relevance of the textual sources to the archaeological evidence is the chronological gap that separates the two bodies of evidence. The former is significantly later than the latter. There is evidence, however, that the practice of incising arrowheads for ritual purposes is older than the relevant Arabian texts. Attention has already been drawn to the references in the Book of Ezekial that Iwry used to support his arguments. Archaeological evidence for the antiquity of this practice can be found at the site of Timna in the Wadi Arabah. In the Midianite Temple to Hathor dating from the 13 to 11th centuries BC many bronze tools and weapons were recovered in a context that suggested they were votive offerings[21]. Several of these (Fig. 3) were incised with a series of geometric patterns and chevrons which mirror those on the contemporary arrowheads from southeastern Arabia. Rothenberg suggested that some of these incisions may have had "magic" power[22]. Given their ritual context, these artefacts further the suggestion that using incised weapons in divination or religious rituals was a pan-Arabia tradition[23] that stretches back at least until the beginning of the Iron Age.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Archaeologists can use various techniques to examine the utilitarian function of ancient artefacts and objects such as arrowheads are readily interpretable as weapons for the hunt or war based simply on our recognition of their form. This level of interpretation is valid, but when we move into the symbolic meaning of artefacts the parameters of interpretation shift for few prehistoric societies provide any direct evidence for their belief systems or the meanings that they attached to material goods. In this paper I have presented evidence for the ritual importance of incising arrowshafts in pre-Islamic Arabia according to several historical texts. I have also detailed a corpus of incised arrowheads from southeastern Arabia that use what appears to be a commonly understood set of symbols. Given this information, one must consider as plausible the suggestion that incised arrowheads in southeastern Arabia carried with them a symbolic and/or ritual significance.

21 B. Rothenburg. *Timna. Valley of the Biblical copper mines*. 1972: London: 173.

22 Rothenberg, *Timna*, 172.

23 A link in ritual practices between southeastern Arabia and the northwestern Arabia can be adduced in the bronze snake recovered from the Hathor temple at Timna (Rothenberg, *Timna*, Pl. XIX). Bronze snakes were also found at the Iron Age site of al-Qusais in Dubai in the excavation of what has been described as 'The Mound of the Serpents' – the only known prehistoric temple yet excavated in southeastern Arabia (MY al-Taha, The archaeology of the Arabian Gulf during the first millennium BC, *al-Rafidan*, 1982-3: 3-4: 75-87).

Site	Reference
Al-Qusais	P. Lombard. *L'Arabie orientale à l'Âge du Fer*, Phd thesis University of Paris 1985: 364-365. MA Nayeem. *Prehistory and Protohistory of the Arabian Peninsula. Vol. 3. The United Arab Emirates*. Hyderabad, 1994: Fig. 18.
Asimah	B Vogt, Asimah. *An account of a two months rescue excavation in the mountains of Ras al-Khaimah, United Arab Emirates*. Dubai, 1994: Fig. 62.26.
Bat	K Frifelt, Evidence of a third millennium BC town in Oman, *Journal of Oman Studies* 2: 1976: Fig. 4.
Bint Saud	K Stevens, Surface finds from Qarn Bint Saud (Abu Dhabi Emirate – UAE), *Mesopotamia* 29: 1989: Fig. 23.151.
Bithna	P Courboud, Castella A.-C., Hapka R and im-Obersteg P, *Les tombes protohistoriques de Bithna, Fujairah*, United Arab Emirates. Mainz, 1996: 79.
Dibba	B Vogt, *Zur Chronologie und Entwicklung der Gräber des späten 4.-2 Jtsd.v.Chr auf der Halbinsel Oman:Analyse und Würdigung publizierter wie auch unveröffentlicher Grabungsergebnisse*. Phd thesis University of Göttingen 1985: 257.
Fashgha	CS Phillips, Wadi al-Qawr, Fashgha . *The excavation of a prehistoric burial structure in Ras al-Khaimah, UAE, 1986*, Edinburgh, 1987: Fig. 38.11-13.
Ghalilah	P Donaldson, Prehistoric tombs of Ras al-Khaimah, *OrAnt* 23:1984: Fig. 124.2, 5 and 6.
Jebel al-Emalah	JN Benton and DT Potts, *Jabal al-Emalah 1993/4*. Unpublished report University of Sydney: 1994: Fig. 9.6, 10.
Jebel Buhais	On display in Sharjah Archaeological Museum
Jebel Kenzan	DT Potts, *Miscellanea Hasaitica*, Copengahen: 1989: Fig. 24.
Khudra	G Weisgerber, Archäologisches fundgut des 2. Jahrtausends v. chr. in Oman Möglichkeiten zur chronologischen gliederung? In: Schippmann K, Herling A & Salles J.-F, eds. *Golf Archäologie. Mesopotamien, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, Vereinigte Arabische Emirate und Oman*, Göttingen and Lyon: 1990: Abb.2,3.
Maysar 34	G Weisgerber, Aspects of late Iron Age archaeology in Oman: The Samad culture. *PSAS* 12: 1982: Fig. 4.2.
Nizwa	MA Nayeem, *Prehistory and Protohistory of the Arabian Peninsula. Volume 4: The Sultanate of Oman*. Riyadh: Techno Printing Press, 1996: Fig. 15 top right. See also AAB. al-Shanfari and Weisgerber G. A late Bronze Age warrior burial from Nizwa (Oman). In Costa PM & Tosi M eds, *Oman Studies. Papers on the archaeology and history of Oman*. Rome: Serie Orientale Roma, 63: 1989:17-30.
Rumeilah	P Lombard, *Aspects culturels de la Péninsule d'Oman au début de 1er millénaire*. Masters thesis submitted to the University of Paris I, 1979: Pl. XLVIII; 10.

Selme	Weisgerber, Archäologisches Fundgut: Abb. 2,2. Vogt, *Zur Chronologie:* 257.
Sharm	LR Weeks, Metal artefacts from the Sharm tomb, *AAE*, in press.
Shimal	B Vogt B and Franke-Vogt U, *Shimal 1985/1986: Excavations of the German Archaeological Mission in Ras al-Khaimah, U.A.E., Preliminary report*. Berlin: 1987: Figs. 19-20.
Tell Abraq	to be published in P Magee *The Iron Age settlement at Tell Abraq*. Turnhuot: Abiel, IV: forthcoming.
Wa'ab	Ras al-Khaimah Museum, unpublished

Table 1.

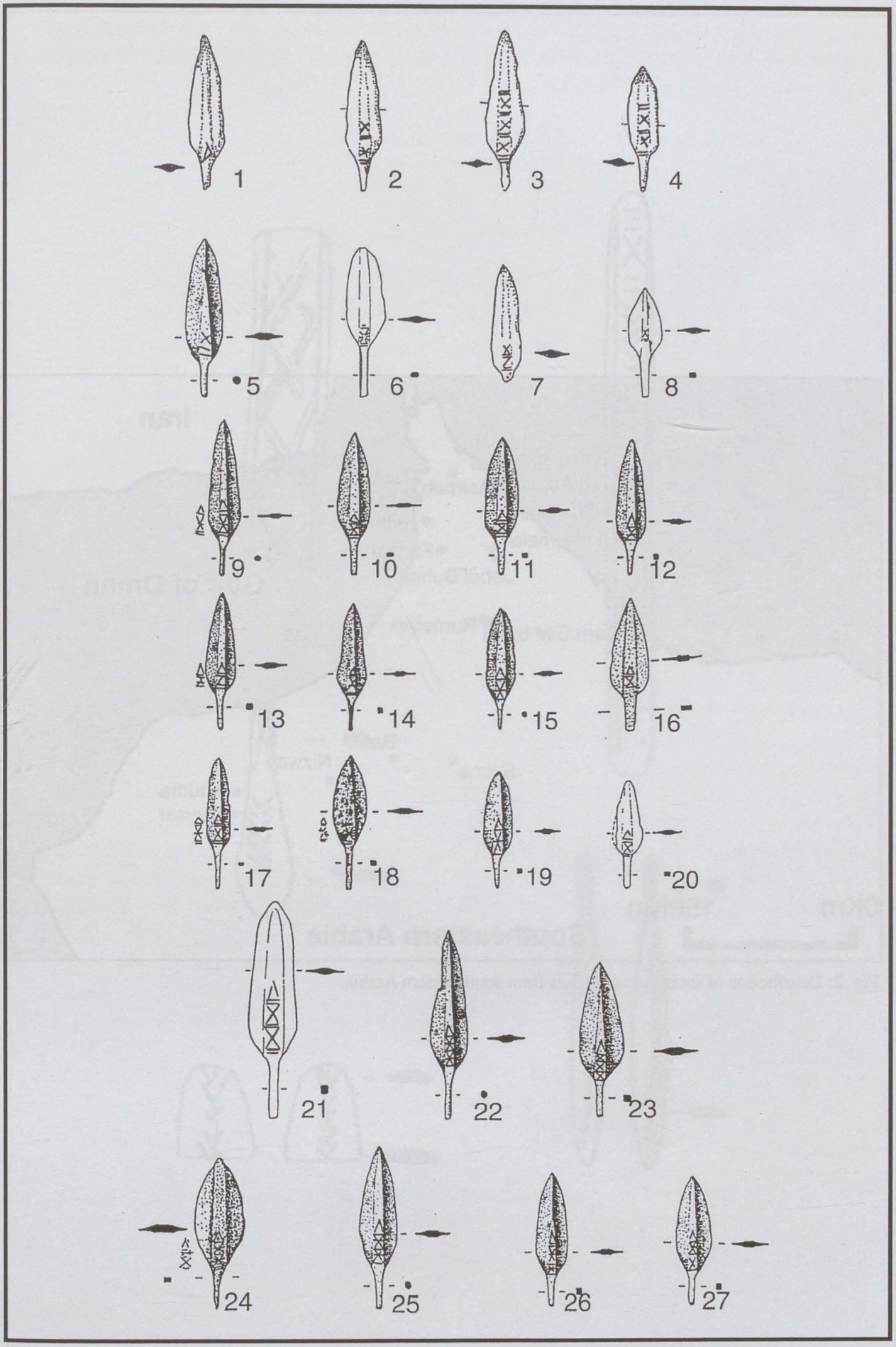


Fig. 1: Incised bronze arrowheads from southeastern Arabia. Al-Qusais: 1-4, 7; Asimha: 24; Fashgha: 16; Ghalilah: 6, 8, 20, 21; Shimal: 5, 9-15, 17-19, 22-23, 25-27.

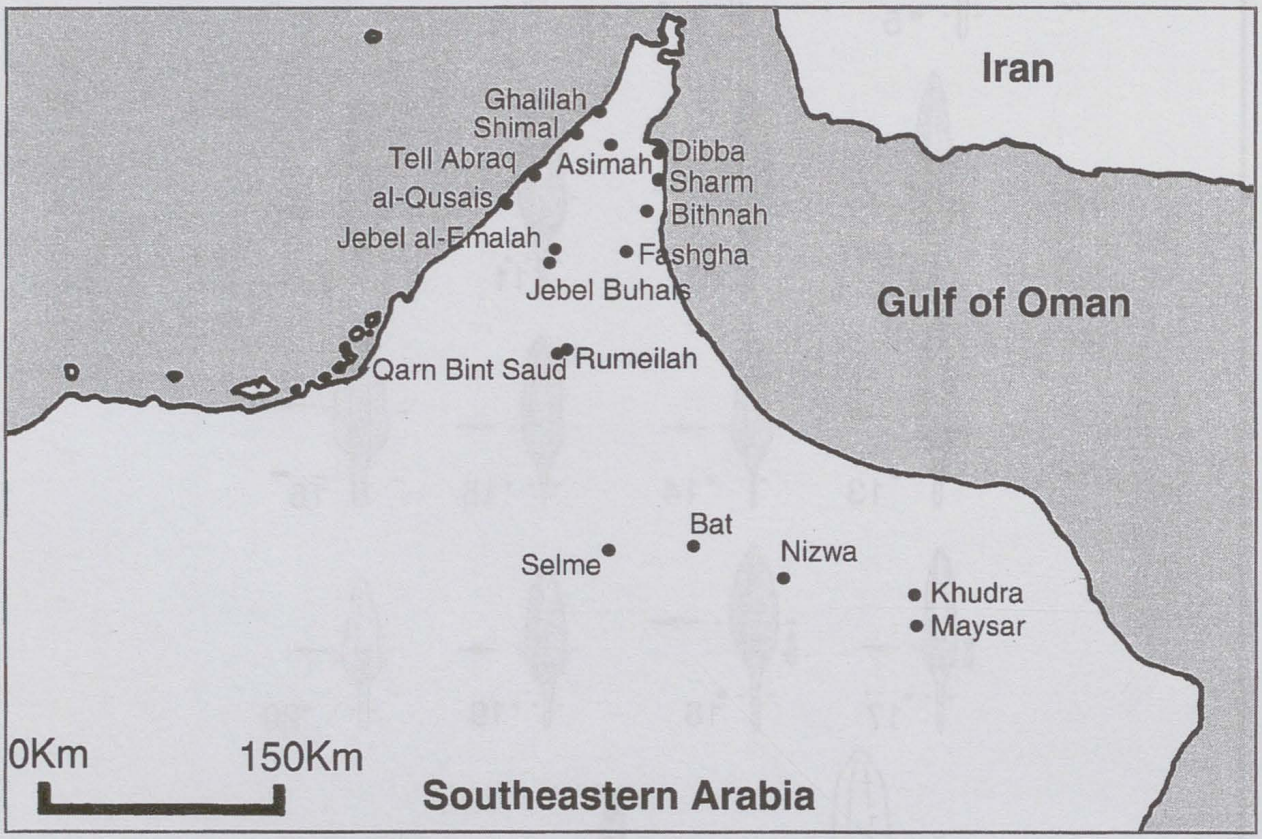


Fig. 2: Distribution of incised arrowheads from southeastern Arabia.

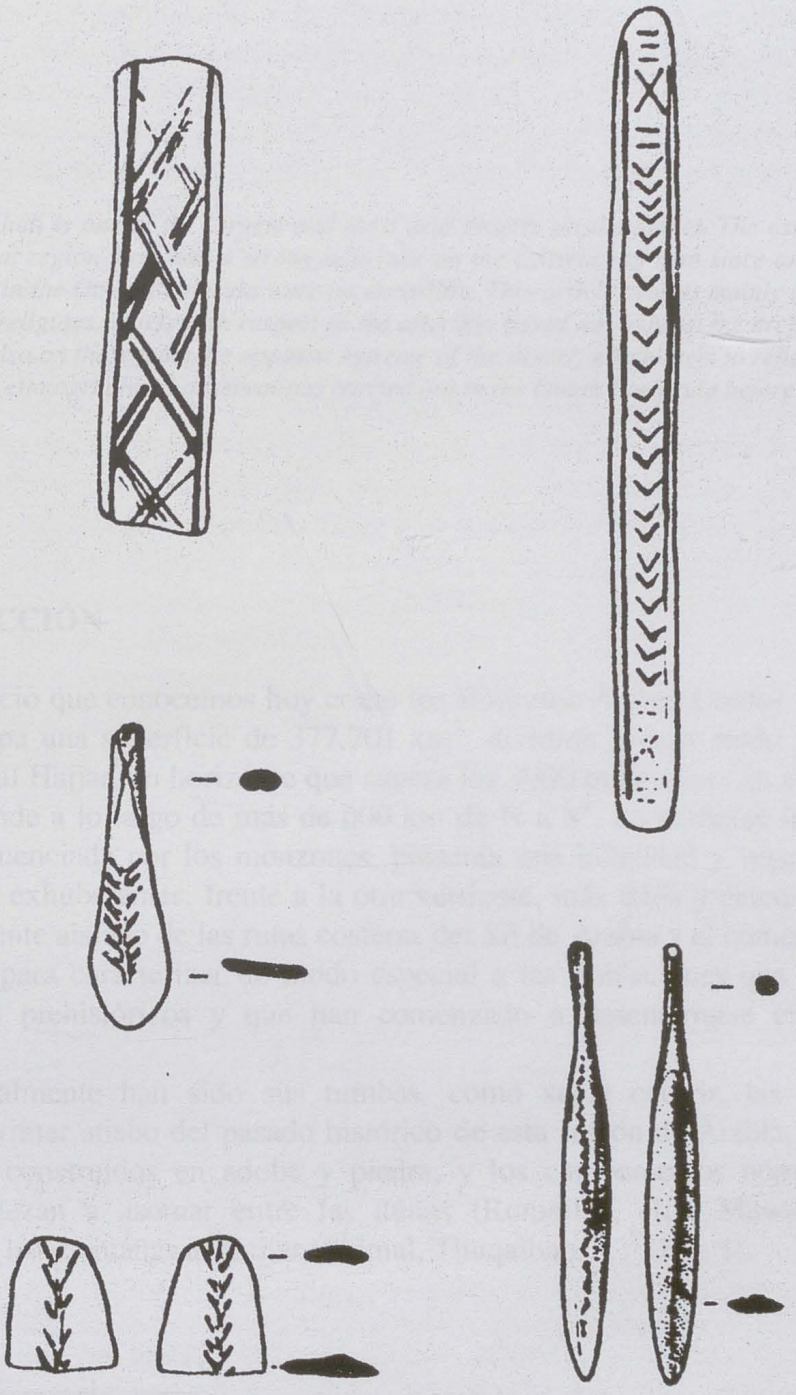
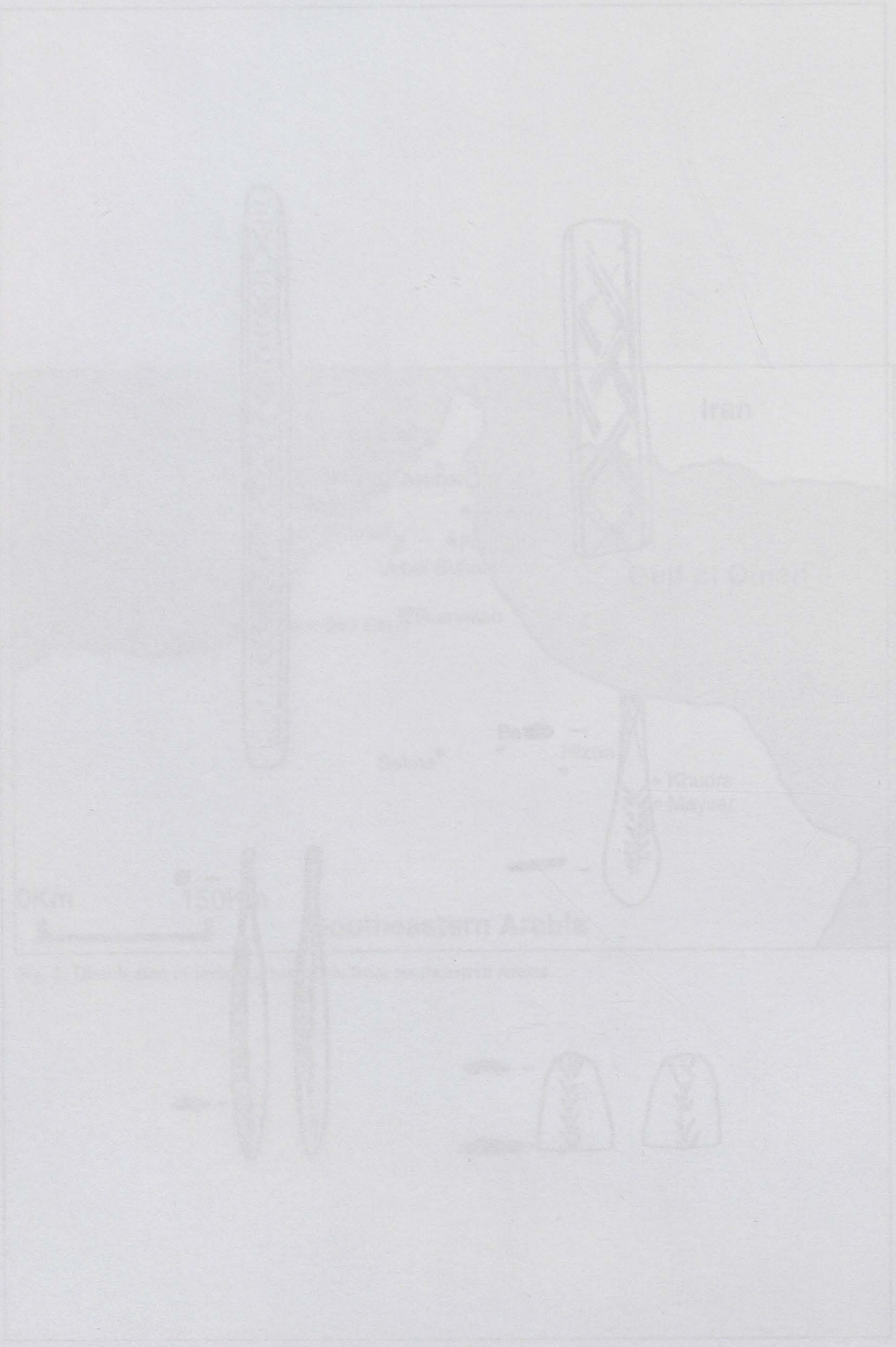


Fig. 3: Incised bronzes from the Midianite temple at Timna (After Rothenberg 1972).


Iran
Persian Gulf
Qatar
Bahrain
Kuwait
Saudi Arabia
0Km
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