

The decline of eastern Arabia in the Sasanian period

This paper lists and reviews the archaeological evidence for the Sasanian period in eastern Arabia (third–seventh centuries AD). Much of the published evidence is shown to be either erroneous or highly doubtful, leaving very little evidence that is reliable. It is argued that the paucity of evidence in comparison to the Hellenistic/Parthian period indicates that this was a time of marked and continuing decline in the number and size of settlements, the number of tombs and the amount of coinage in circulation, all of which probably result from a population that was both declining in size and participating less in the types of production and consumption that leave discoverable traces in the archaeological record. This is in contrast to the historical evidence, which, although patchy, is stronger for the Sasanian period than it is for the Hellenistic/Parthian period. The argument for decline challenges some generally accepted historical views of eastern Arabia at this time, which see the region as undergoing a notable period of growth. In conclusion, some brief consideration is given to the possible causes of the decline.

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Introduction

It is really with the Islamic conquests of the seventh century AD that the Arabian Peninsula bursts on to the scene of world history, but the region is worthy of study in the preceding centuries. This is not only in the hope that a better understanding might be gained of the origins of Islam and the causes of the Islamic conquests, but also because Arabia — located as it is between the two greatest powers of the late antique world and on the key trade routes between Europe and Asia — is key to an understanding of many aspects of late antiquity.

For the purposes of this paper eastern Arabia will be divided into two areas that will be referred to as Bahrayn and ‘Uman (see Fig. 1) (2). Following historical usage, Bahrayn will refer roughly to the area between Kuwait and Qatar, and ‘Uman to the northern part of the modern Sultanate of Oman and

the Musandam peninsula north of Abu Dhabi. The names “Bahrain” and “Oman” will be used to refer to the modern states.

Historical framework

The relationship between eastern Arabia and the Persian empire in the pre-Sasanian period is not well understood. There is some evidence that the region may have been under some form of formal Parthian control, but debate continues on this issue (3). Part of the problem is that the historical record for this period is so poor. There is notably less historical evidence for the Hellenistic and Parthian periods in this region than there is for the Sasanian period, which itself is covered only by an incomplete and patchy record. A full and detailed history of eastern Arabia in the Sasanian period based on critical use of