The pottery of Lima, Musandam, Sultanate of Oman

by Geoffrey King

Lima on the east coast of the Musandam territory of the Sultanate of Oman, north of the UAE-Omani town of Dibba, is the centre of one of the last surviving pottery production traditions of the region. However, it has received relatively little attention as a consequence of Musandam's inaccessibility until recent times.

The production of pottery in Musandam seems first to have been recorded as a result of the Royal Geographical Society expedition of 1971-72 (1). Subsequently, the Musandam pottery traditions of Lima and al-Alama were described in some detail by members of an expedition to the area led by Professor Paolo Costa in the 1980s (2).

The present writer visited the hinterland of Lima in March 2003 (3) and talked to a number of working potters. These potters, like the other inhabitants of the area, are Shihuh and they describe themselves as *badu*. They reside at a series of small homesteads scattered along the wadi system running inland from Lima but in the past, for security, people also used houses built into the face of the steep cliffs above the wadi. These cliff houses are now abandoned and the people live instead in the valley below. Some buildings still in use along the wadi are traditional stone structures but the majority of residences are of concrete and have been built in recent decades.

The people maintain small plantations close to their homesteads where there is easy access to water wells. They keep goats and sheep and produce pottery which is exported to the rest of Oman and to the UAE. Some people also work metal: steel knives termed *bîshala* (or *bayshala*) are made, as is the traditional Shihuh axe, the *jirz*, also of steel, and inlaid with copper or brass. Pottery and metal alike are worked in the courtyards of houses.

As far as I could establish, the pottery produced in the neighbourhood of Lima is not wheel-made. It is always unglazed, with a red slip used for decoration. In this respect it contrasts with the al-Alama glazed pottery tradition described by the Costa expedition. The clay currently used at Lima turns light ochre after firing but the varied sources of the clay and the firing method used must contribute to differences in vessel body colour.

The pottery makers at the homesteads which I visited around Lima all said that the clay they used is brought from several sources, some coming from in the mountains near to Lima while other sources are located further afield. Harf al-Ghabi (or al-Qabi), to the north-west of Khasab, was specifically mentioned as a clay source used now by the Lima potters, although it was emphasised that ceramics are not manufactured at Harf al-Ghabi itself. The clay from Harf al-Ghabi is currently brought to Lima by boat from Khasab, the main port of northern Musandam. However, I could not establish how long this process has been going on. The Lima potters also knew of Wadi Haqil near Ra's al-Khaimah as a clay source and of its pottery making tradition (4). Costa et al. (1991) record that clay was collected for use at al-Alama from a nearby mountain. They also report that clay for Lima came from Qabal in Musandam (5).

Plate 1. A wadi behind Lima, with firewood stacks

Lima pottery is made only to order. The time of firing is determined by the full completion of the order made for a given consignment. I was told the same of the Wadi Haqil production by the last surviving potter who had worked there until 1973. The pottery made around Lima is fired on open hearths and the kindling in the main is the local sidr (*Zizyphus spina-christi*). Stacked logs of sidr are seen outside every house and are used both for cooking and for firing pottery (*Plate 1*). There are no kilns at the pottery manufacturing houses that I visited outside Lima and I was told emphatically that kilns are never used there for making pottery. Instead, a very shallow pit is dug: the pottery for firing is placed in the pit, much of it being left above ground level. Firewood is then laid over the pottery and the wood is lit and left to burn until a temperature is reached adequate to make vessels of moderate strength. I was told that the firing takes an hour or so, but this point needs confirming: unfortunately, I did not see a firing take place. The method of firing used provides a very variable temperature and a characteristic of Lima pottery is the dark grey to black surface marking caused by scorching **(6)**.

The decoration of Lima pottery with red slip is done with a colouring agent which I was told came from Hurmuz (Hormuz) on the Iranian side of the Gulf. I was shown the deep red-brown powder used for the Lima slip in dry form and also after it had been wettened (*Plate 3*). It has been suggested by Crocker Jones that the colouring agent, termed *mshak*, may be of vegetal origin, coming from the native plant *Fagonia indica* **(7)**. However, it should be borne in mind that the colouring agent for the very similar red slip used at the Wadi Haqil kilns was an iron-rich ore from seams in the hills nearby, suggesting that the slip used at Lima may also be iron-based.

Both men and women make pottery in the Lima area. This contrasts with matters in the past at Wadi Haqîl where I was informed that only men used to make pottery while women did the final slip painting. This was explained at Wadi Haqil as being related to the strength required to make large vessels. However, the types of pottery now made at Lima are all quite small, and it requires no great strength to form them. It was pointed out rather emphatically by one of the Shihuh women to whom I spoke near Lima that she was much faster at making pottery than her husband.

The vessels that are made at Lima include a variety of large and small incense burners. The largest incense burners have four handles (*Plate 2*) whereas the smaller ones have only one or two handles. Some types of incense burner also have ash-trays added to them. Cooking bowls (*qadr*) made at Lima have conical lids. Coffee pots (*dalla*) follow a conventional shape similar to that usually used for metal dallas. Coffee cups are also produced. Large storage vessels are manufactured and are called *khars*. The biggest ceramic items made are *tannurs* for bread and these are a standard feature of each household. They are set in cement and placed in the open air.

The pottery made around Lima (*Plate 4*) is exported to neighbouring towns. I was told that it is sent to other parts of the Sultanate of Oman and to the UAE cities of Dubai and Fujairah. I have seen Lima incense burners at the revered grave of Shaikh Mas'ud near Khasab in north-west Musandam and also at very recent burials at Qirath, near Qidfa in Fujairah Emirate. Beatrice de Cardi informed me that she had found sherds from Lima

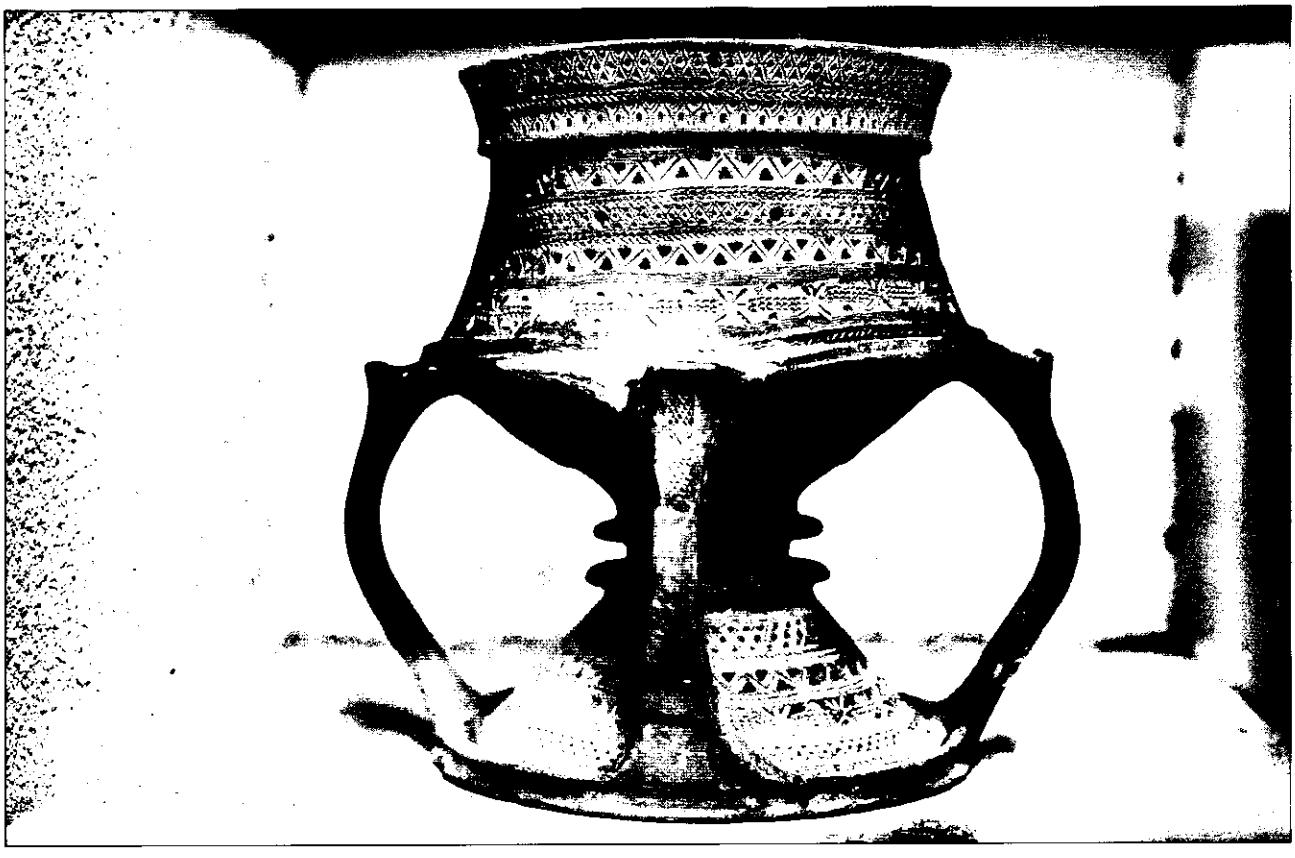

Plate 2. Four-handled incense burner

incense burners in 2002 near al-Rawda, along a track that runs inland to the Musandam highlands from Khasab. She suggested that these sherds represented breakage in transit of cargoes of ceramics being carried on pack animals **(8)**.

The antiquity of the Lima pottery tradition is hard to estimate at present, although both slip-painted and non-slip-painted unglazed pottery is found across Lima's best preserved archaeological surfaces, its very extensive graveyards. Unfortunately, the lack of kilns and the preference for firing pottery on open hearths may well have the effect of leaving little or no archaeological evidence. The potters to whom I spoke at Lima were insistent that pottery had been made there for many years, but were unable to be more specific on the age of the tradition.

There are interesting issues to consider regarding the relationship of the Lima tradition of pottery production to the better-known pottery tradition associated with Wadi Haqil. Did the Lima pottery manufacture fill the market gap created when the Wadi Haqil kilns closed in ca 1973? How long had the Lima production been in operation before that? Lima pottery certainly resembles the Wadi Haqil production in terms of ware and the use of slip painting. The Lima potters regard their industry as being old, and at some point there was probably an overlap between the Musandam production and that in Ra's al-Khaimah, but the length of the overlap and its significance have yet to be addressed. In short, Lima's pottery industry offers interesting directions for further research.

Notes

1. B. de Cardi, with sections by C. Vita-Finzi, and A. Coles, "Archaeological Survey in Northern Oman, 1972", **East and West 25** (1972), pp. 9-75

2. P.M. Costa, **Musandam**, London (1991), pp. 151-2; pp. 183-5; pp. 211-2. Ms Marcia Durr kindly showed me her collection of Lima pottery in Muscat in 2002 before I began my own research. There are now examples of Lima pottery at Bait al-Zubair Museum in Muscat.

3. I am indebted for the help given me by Mr Muhammad Khadim of Lima in arranging for me to meet local potters.

Plate 3. Colouring agent used as slip on Lima pottery

I am also extremely grateful to Mr Mark Forrest and Mr Harry Jayawardene of W.S. Atkins International, Ruwi, Oman and Mr C.H. Surya of Gulfa Engineering Contracting LLC, Muscat and their colleagues for their generous hospitality and assistance.

4. Pottery production in Wadi Haqil ended in about 1973. The Wadi has many kilns and probably was the pottery main supplier for Julfar, the trading port that is the predecessor of modern Ra's al-Khaimah. See R. Stocks, "Wâdî Haqîl Survey: November 1992", **Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 26** (1996), pp. 145-163.

5. Costa, Musandam, p. **151**.

6. This effect also occurs in pottery fired in much the same manner in Dhofar in southern Oman (Communication, Sarah White, Bait al-Zubair Museum, Muscat, March, 2003). Pottery is fired in the same manner in Socotra.

7. Costa, Musandam, p. 152.

8. Personal communication, October, 2002.

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Plate 4. A Lima potter