Iranian pottery

Softstone vessel

Local Umm an-Nar pottery

Location of the Umm an-Nar Tomb

Government of Ras al-Khaimah
Department of Antiquities and Museums
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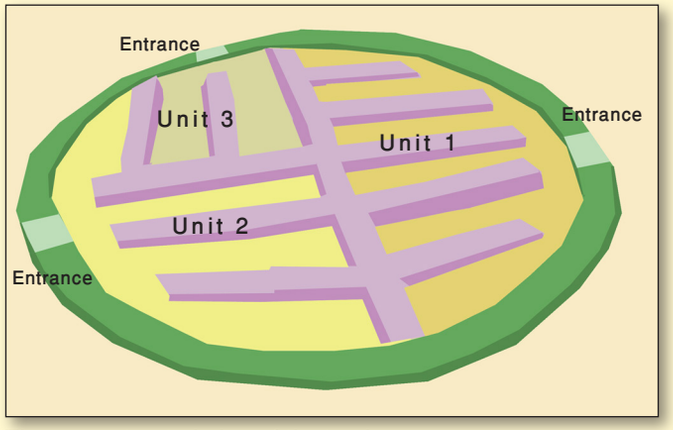
Ras al-Khaimah Heritage

Umm an-Nar Tomb

Umm an-Nar tomb



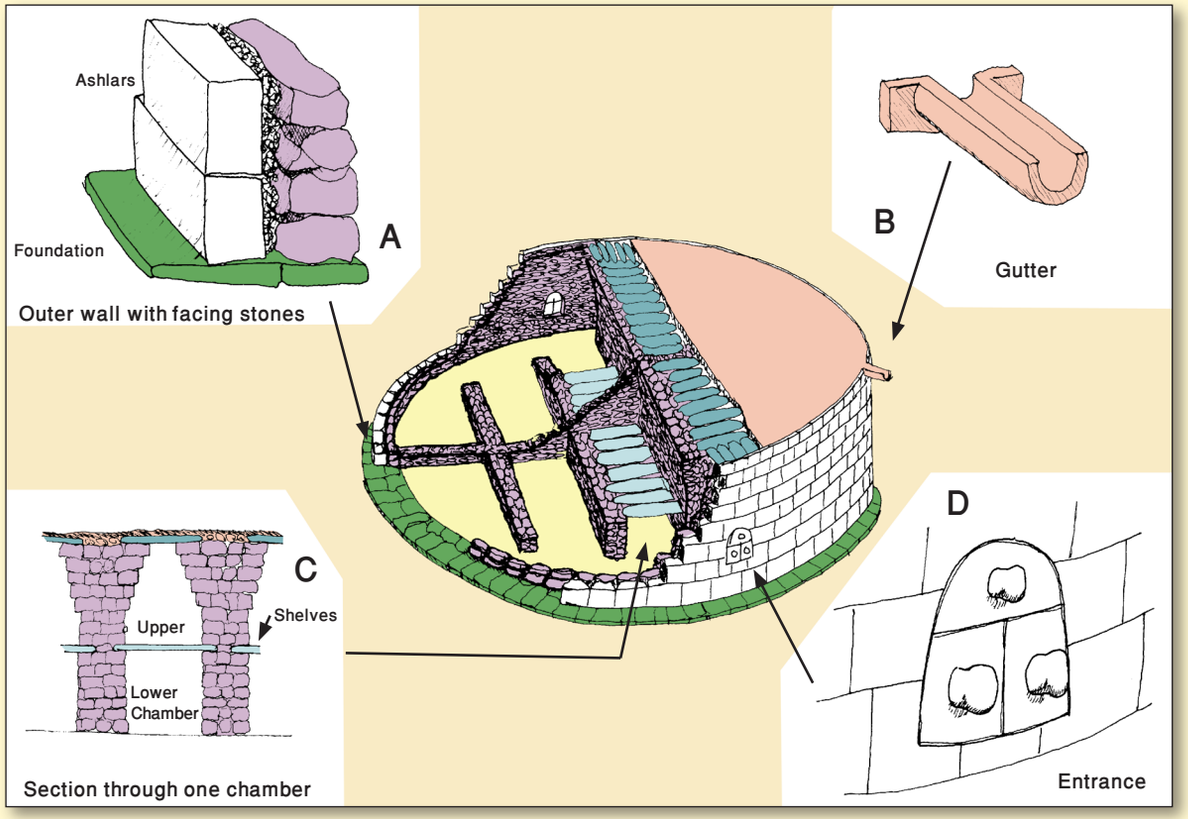
The reconstructed plan of the tomb

This impressive prehistoric tomb (15m in diameter) is the largest of its kind known in the UAE and Oman. It is situated at the edge of the fertile palm gardens of Shimal and belongs to the “Umm an-Nar” period (2600-2000 BC). Meaning “Mother of Fire”, it has been named after an Abu Dhabi island where the first tombs of this type were excavated by Danish archaeologists in the 1950s.

The second half of the 3rd millennium BC was a flourishing period in the history of this area. Like oil today, copper from the Hajar mountains was an important natural resource, urgently needed in other regions. It was shipped in large quantities into the cities of Mesopotamia (today’s Iraq) and the Indus Valley (today’s Pakistan), two empires rich in cultural achievements but lacking in raw materials like copper, vital for the production of weapons..

Built with enormous physical effort and wealth, this circular Umm an-Nar tomb was used as a communal family or tribal grave. For more than 100 years the dead were buried in three family vaults, divided by internal walls into several burial chambers. Although the majority of stones were reused after this period, we know from other tombs that its original height must have been between two to three meters.

Carefully placed slabs served as a foundation on which the outer wall of the tomb was erected. Two different faces, a layer of roughly hewn stones on the inside and



A possible reconstruction with some details

ashlar masonry on the outside, form the circular wall (A). The ashlars were cut from white limestone and accurately shaped to match the curve of the round tomb. This bright and perfectly smooth facing extended up to the roof, giving the impression of a large white tower. All entrances were closed with specially shaped stones, whose carved out handles simplified the opening and closing whenever a new body had to be buried (D). The inner walls of the various chambers were built from rough stones without any foundations. Straight at the bottom, they were corbelled towards the roof to reduce the gap (C). The flat roof was closed with slabs and equipped with stone gutters to collect and drain off rain water (B).

Archaeological excavations revealed a complex arrangement of the interior, as well as burial practices. Three grave units with matching entrances consisted of six, four and two chambers each. When space was fully occupied, bodies were cremated outside the tomb and later reburied in the upper story of the tomb. Here, stone slabs served as shelves (C) where the cremated remains were kept, leaving space for new burials at ground level. Due to these complex burial rites, the tomb could be used for a period of more than 100 years, which also explains the large number of burials, 430 altogether.

The dead were originally buried in a flexed position together with their personal belongings, such as pottery, jewellery, weapons and stone vessels. Most of these artefacts were of local origin while imported goods from as far away as Mesopotamia, Iran, Bahrain and the Indus Valley demonstrate the extensive maritime trade of the 3rd millennium BC. An exceptional find was the burial of a woman together with her pet dog.