The Organization of Middle Islamic Copper Exploitation at Khirbat Nqeib Aseimer, Faynan, Jordan

Ian W. N. Jones*, Thomas E. Levy*, Mohammad Najjar**

* Department of Anthropology & Center of Interdisciplinary Science for Art, Architecture, and Archaeology (CISA3), University of California – San Diego; ** UC San Diego Levantine Archaeology Laboratory, La Jolla, CA

Introduction

In 2002, the UCSD-Department of Antiquities of Jordan Jebel Hamrat Fidan Project began surveys of the Wadi al-Ghuwayb and Wadi al-Jariya in the Faynan region of southern Jordan. These surveys were conducted in 2007, as part of the fieldwork conducted by JHF’s successor, the Edom Lowlands Regional Archaeology Project (ELRAP). Although primarily Iron Age in focus (Levy et al. 2003), in 2002 special attention was also given to mapping sites from all periods, including the Middle Islamic copper production site of Khirbat Nqeib Aseimer (KNA), first reported on by N. Glueck (1935).

Questions

The 2002 survey initially had two goals related to KNA:

1) Map the structures at the site
2) Locate potential sources of ore for KNA in the Wadis al-Ghuwayb and al-Jariya.

Our current work adds three additional goals/questions:

1) Refine the dating of the site.
2) How was copper production at KNA organized?
3) What were the historical factors involved in the revival of the copper industry in Faynan during the Middle Islamic period?

Pottery

Although any conclusions are preliminary, owing to the nature of survey assemblages, the ceramics from the site point to a late 12th or early 13th century date. This largely agrees with the early 13th century date proposed by Kind et al. (2005) based on numismatic evidence.

Motivation and organization

Two models have previously been proposed for the proposed for the revival of the Faynan copper industry in the Middle Islamic period: 1) copper from Faynan was used in Cairo to mint fals, with exploitation being organized by the state (Newson et al. 2007) and 2) the revival of copper production was short-lived, based mostly on trial-and-error with little government involvement (Weisgerber 2006). We suggest, as an alternative to these two, that perhaps the reason copper production in Faynan was revived was, in part, to satisfy the growing demand of the sugar industry in Transjordan for copper to produce boilers.

Conclusions

Currently, we can make several preliminary conclusions regarding the site. 1) The primary occupation was probably in the early 13th century, although we cannot rule out earlier or later dates. 2) The presence of imported glazed wares suggests the presence of elites at the site, who were probably responsible for organizing production activities. Of course, the models outlined above required more testing.

Future Goals

1) Excavation at KNA to further establish the occupation history of the site and determine how production was organized.
2) Lead isotope analysis of copper artifacts used in sugar production as well as Middle Islamic fals to determine where Faynan copper was used.
3) Investigate the socioeconomic foundation of KNA.

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