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A BURIAL GROUND IN AL-KHARJ

GERALD DE GAURY

MR. PHILBY has described the pools of al-Kharj, near Riyadh in central Arabia, including the 'Ain al Dhila' and 'Ain Mukhisa. These two pools are close to the slope leading upwards to the Qusai'a downs, which, as Mr. Philby points out, here bulge westwards. There is an extensive flat-topped hill, which is part of the downs, jutting out towards Dilam and Sulaimiya. From it Yamama, "former capital of a great Kingdom," is easily visible, a little to the east of Sulaimiya. In the 'Heart of Arabia' Mr. Philby does not mention the many mounds, or graves, on the ridge near the great pools of Kharj, therefore it seems worth drawing attention to them.

On the summit of this flat-topped hill above 'Ain al Dhila' there are many mounds of rather large stones, each mound is about 6 feet across and 4 feet 6 inches high. The graves, if such they are, were here dotted along the edge of the hill, and many of them were visible from the plain below. A little farther westwards, on the slopes above Umm Mukhsira the mounds were more numerous and extended down the slope, which is gentle on that side. Continuing round the edge of the hill, in the direction of Dilam, the mounds are not quite so frequent and are nearly all on the very edge of the plateau-like hill. Occasionally there were little collections of twenty or so mounds, but these were on the top of the hill. Among these groups I noticed two other types of mound. One was round, but considerably higher with larger stones and a flat earth-covered top. The average height of these graves was also 6 feet. The other, or third, type was 12 yards long, ran roughly north and south, and had an erect stone at the southern end in one case and at the northern end in the others. These long mounds or walls were only about 3 feet 6 inches high.

The most numerous type, the ordinary round mounds of stones, continued along and near the edge of the hill right round to the southern side. The eastern side was the only part of the edge where there were no mounds. Here the hill joins with the main Qusai'a downs, from which it is almost separated by a wadi rising near its northern edge which runs first southwards and then, when clear of the plateau, westwards. All the mounds, except a few on the southern edge, have a view to Sulaimiya. The hill-top is perhaps 2 miles from north to south and 1½ miles from east to west. The number of mounds of the first type is perhaps 1500, and of the second type only a very few, perhaps under fifteen. There were even fewer of the third type, I saw only three; they were however close to the others and had every appearance of being part of the cemetery. All the stones were unhewn: on the higher mounds a little more trouble seemed to have been taken as the stones were better packed.

The Arabs with me said, "This was a battlefield. They are buried as they fell. The soldiers where they were posted, on the edge of the hill, the sheikhs and standard-bearers where they too fell." This fanciful solution gives a good idea of the disposition of the different types of mounds.
Looking north-east from the Shimit pass with tombs on either side of the road

Some of the tombs on ridge, dark streak marking lake of Mukhisa

Lake of Mukhisa (or Umm Khisa) from north-east
Mr. H. Stf. B. Philby sends the following comments on Col. de Gaury’s note and has allowed us to reproduce three of his photographs.

I dealt in full with one group of such tombs at Firzan in the same Kharj district in the ‘Heart of Arabia’ (vol. 2, pp. 26 et seq.) and in my lecture to the Society on Southern Najd in 1919 (Geogr. J. 55 (1920) 161), on which Hogarth made some useful comments.

The tombs de Gaury speaks of in his very interesting note are of an entirely different group bordering the Kharj district on the south. I have visited and studied these on several occasions in the years up to 1940 inclusive, but, beyond a reference to them, for the purposes of comparison with the Sheban tombs of the south, in ‘Sheba’s daughter’ (pp. 377, 379, 380), I have not yet had time or occasion to write up my notes on them, though all the tomb areas in Kharj, visited by me, are marked on my still unpublished map of the district, the original of which is to be found in the Society’s Map Room.

There is yet a third group of such tombs (of bigger masonry and more elaborately constructed than the ones de Gaury mentions) on each side of the Shimit pass road leading into Kharj from the north, which I examined some years ago, I think in 1938.

There are probably other groups of tombs in the same area which still remain to be discovered. The whole subject should certainly be written up and published for the information of those likely to be interested or to have the opportunities of probing beneath the surface of these quite intriguing remains.