Some thoughts on ibex on plinths in early South Arabian art

Ibex are an important iconographic element in the art of South Arabia. The origins, geographical distribution, chronology and divine affinities of ibex are considered, drawing on both archaeological and epigraphic sources.

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**Introduction**

One of the best known iconographic elements of South Arabia is undoubtedly the ibex. The frequency with which this animal appeared is due both to the highly symbolic value it enjoyed with respect to the pantheon of South Arabian divinities (1), and to its inherent qualities—lithe body, lightness of movement and curved horns—which made it particularly suited to artistic reproduction. Representations of ibex were obviously not exclusive to South Arabia; there are numerous examples of them in Iranian art throughout all periods, and elsewhere in the Near East, particularly in the Bronze Age.

Interest thus focuses not so much on the fact that ibex are depicted in South Arabia but rather on identifying an artistic language which is ‘codified’ differently in South Arabia to neighbouring cultures.

**Ibex representations in South Arabia**

Elena Scigliuzzo (2) has ably identified a number of codified stylistic traits in ibex representation during the archaic period in South Arabia. For example, the horns of the ibex (3) were the main decorative element while the animal’s body was merely sketched out and depicted as immobile. Representations of ibex continued to appear in later periods, but their style changed and the entire animal became a decorative element. No longer leadenly earthbound, it was portrayed as if flying upwards into the void with its agility depicted realistically. Examples where this was the case include the ibex on the Nashshan (4) throne and the lamp from Shabwa (5) (Figs 1–2).

The existence of an artistic language in South Arabia in the early centuries of the first millennium BC is obviously a matter of great historical significance. Since there is a style and artistic language which is already consolidated and no longer in evolution in the eighth century BC, the inescapable conclusion is that there must already have been a long process of gestation prior to the earliest South Arabian documentation. In other words, the eighth century marks the culmination, not the beginning, of a process of iconographic development.

Another interesting historical perspective that seems to emerge from our documentation concerns the geographical loci where this style of ibex representation may have been codified, namely Jawf and the region of Marib, where (6) the first state structures were starting to take shape in the early first millennium BC. Some fairly small ibex sculptures in the round, set on a plinth, are typical of the archaic period and illustrate well the artistic language in this area. As such, they deserve special
The ibex and its support comprise a structurally distinct, geometrically rectangular shape — in effect, a separate block ‘attached’ to the object. Particular care has been taken in depicting the horns, which are abnormally large and decorative, as well as the animal’s profile, while there is a lack of anatomical precision in the rest of its body. Sometimes these sculptures are set in series following the taste of the epoch, e.g. in the case of the ibex that embellish the throne-backs of Nashshan (Fig. 3) or the series of ibex from Marib which crown the inscription at the Louvre (7) (Fig. 4).

The similarities between these pieces are striking. The upper part of the décor is identical, with horizontal, denticulated lines on two levels. The portrayal of the animal, too, is very similar, namely in a static position on a support. The thrones bear the names of two kings of Nashshan, one of whom was Lb’n, the father of Karibil’s enemy (8). The Marib inscription mentions Karibil and S’mh’ly, who probably succeeded him and has been dated by Robin, in his edition of the text, to the end of the eighth century or the beginning of the seventh century BC. Here, the geographical origins and the dates of the thrones and the inscription from Marib are certain.

Sabaean and ‘Madhabaean’ (9) cultures blended with each other in Jawf. In the religious, linguistic and other spheres each was easily recognizable, but the two shared many common cultural characteristics. In the eighth century, the Sabaean

Fig. 1.
Detail of the carved ibex on the Nashshan throne.

Fig. 2.
Bronze lamp from Shabwa.
and Madhabaean combined presence in Jawf (10) marked an important stage in the standardisation of some of the principal elements of the culture of southern Arabia, including writing, textual patterns and artistic and aesthetic norms. Such a process, as mentioned above, must have begun much earlier than the eighth century.

It is difficult to say whether the characteristics typical of early first millennium South Arabian culture emerged from a Sabaean-Madhabaean cultural continuum in Jawf at the end of the second millennium, or were developed earlier by one of the two groups and then passed to the other. Only by increasing our archaeological knowledge of the region will it be possible to assess the material culture of the earlier periods. Recent discoveries at Nashshan (11) might suggest a ‘Madhabaean’ origin for some of those elements of South Arabian culture which appeared at the beginning of the first millennium, and extended to Saba’ before spreading all over Yemen. It is well known that after the eighth century there was an increase in the cultural, if not military, hegemony of ancient Yemen by Saba’, something Karibil himself would have desired. My
own view is that this is a ‘late’, secondary phenomenon which, on its own, certainly does not account for all of the common cultural traits one sees in South Arabian culture (12). On the other hand, the ‘Sabaeanization’ of South Arabian culture undoubtedly played a very important role in the history of Yemen in the first half of the first millennium BC.

Another example of the archaic kind of ibex representation in Jawf and Saba’ is found on the frames surrounding some dedicatory inscriptions. The vertical sides of the frame show a series of crouching ibex, while the horizontal side at the top of the frame has a bucranium frieze (or perhaps the frontal heads of ibex?). Examples include two strikingly similar inscribed slabs, one from Nashshan (13) (Fig. 5) and the other from Jebel al-Lawd (14) (Fig. 6). Although one text is in Madhabic and the other in Sabaic, and the pantheon mentioned in each case is different, the style of representation is absolutely the same and the letter shapes of this period testify to an identical approach to epigraphic masonry across South Arabia. The two stelae thus provide evidence of a powerful cultural continuum.

Sequences of crouching ibex reflect the artistic taste of that particular period and show a preference for the regular repetition of a single element, such as geometric rectangles. A classic example of this is the décor of Banat ‘Ad. The profiles of the animal, whether standing or crouching, and the frontal representations of the head are set in a rectangular
frame which is repeated, creating a marked decorative style. Some sequences of ibex or their heads are almost abstract, deviating from a naturalistic depiction of the animal and tending towards the mere repetition of the horns in profile or of the face.

The frame of ibex that decorates the sides of a dedicatory inscription in Saba (reign of Karibil, but within the period of the Sabean mukarribs, for example on a beautiful stele from Baran (15) (Fig. 7) and on LPC 5 (16) (Fig. 8).

The style of ibex representation on a plinth can thus serve as an indication of both chronology (eighth-seventh centuries BC) and geographical provenance (west-central Yemen), characteristics which are useful when objects of this type lack either palaeographic or archaeological indications of their place of origin. There is, for example, a type of ibex with the same formal criteria as those mentioned here on a number of bronze incense burners. One in the British Museum (17) (Fig. 9) takes the form of a bowl with a splayed foot, one side of which is surmounted by spikes. Although the catalogues of the Yemen exhibition in which it was published date it to the third century BC — perhaps imagining Hellenistic influence (which, frankly, is rather bizarre since there is nothing Hellenistic about the object), or perhaps a carry-over from a time when the short chronology was accepted by most scholars — the bronze incense burner in the British Museum should be dated to the eighth-seventh centuries and attributed to the Sabaeo-Madhabaean culture of this period.

In this regard it is interesting to recall that forty years ago R.D. Barnett suggested a ninth-century BC ivory cup from Hama with ibex protome was South Arabian (Fig. 10) (18). Although a third-century BC date for the bronze incense burner in the British Museum raised doubts about this hypothesis, the redating of that piece suggested above adds credibleness to Barnett’s suggestion, as does a second South Arabian bronze incense burner in the Metropolitan Museum (19) (Fig. 11) with which Barnett made a comparison for the Hama cup. In my view, the latter also comes from the same place and cultural period, since the serpents on it represent another typical decorative form of Banat ‘Ad. Interestingly, the points on the highest side of the bronze incense burner in the British Museum (Fig. 9) are reminiscent of decoration found in Banat ‘Ad as well.

If an archaic date and west-central South Arabian provenance are correct for this type of incense burner, then it may also be necessary to rethink the origin and age of an incense burner in Philadelphia which was considered Qatabanian and published as such in the first volume of the CSAI (20) (Fig. 12). Quite probably this piece was considered Qatabanian only because it arrived in Philadelphia together with a largely Qatabanian collection of objects. Here the incense burner has the same shape as those described above. Although an ibex protome is obviously absent, Jamme (21) has pointed out that traces of a broken protome are visible on the back of the object. Moreover, the object’s inscription (22) contains a name (‘ḥkrb ʾGrn) which is not typically Qatabanic. We have no proof, therefore, that the Philadelphia incense burner is Qatabanian (23).
Further confirmation for the redating of these three bronze incense burners and for the identification of their geographical origin is provided by a stone incense burner from Jawf, recently published by I. Gajda (24) (Fig. 13). Although made of a different material, the stylistic parallels with the bronze incense burners described above are striking, particularly the style of the ibex and the splayed foot. Based on the stylistic principles articulated above, the Jawf incense burner can be dated to the eighth-seventh centuries BC. Another iconographic element shared by the Jawf incense burner and those in the Metropolitan Museum and Philadelphia (25) is the serpent noted by Gajda (26).

The date of the Jawf incense burner, however, is not based merely on a stylistic analysis of the ibex and the burner. Rather, the incense burner has an inscription on the foot which reads \( H\_ywm \_ Tny \Mrd \_ s\_ l \Bs\_ m \_ M\_ l\_yf \_ Rym \), which I translate as: \( H\_ywm \_ son \_ of \_ Tny \_ of \_ Mrd \_ dedicated \_ (this \_ incense \_ burner) \_ to \_ Bs\_ m \_ as \_ a \_ vow \_ that \_ has \_ been \_ fulfilled, \_ by \_ Ilifam \_ Riyam \_ (27). \) This short text has some interesting points. The name of the goddess \( B\_s\_ m \), easily referable to the Semitic root BŠM ‘balsam’, has been attested sporadically in South Arabia. \( B\_s\_ m \) is also found in another archaic boustrophedon inscription presently in the Louvre (29) which reads: \( Ys\_ m \_ I\_ bn \_ I\_ z \_ B\_ any \_ Bs\_ m \_ w\_ Wdm \_ b\_ dm \_ w\_ Hw\_ m \_ b\_ l\_ mgh \). Quite rightly, Robin sought a cultural setting outside Saba’ for this inscription, hypothesizing that it lay in Awsan — based on the presence of the goddess \( B\_s\_ m \) in CSAI II, 14 = R 4336 — but the Louvre inscription more probably comes from Jawf during the Madhabaean-Sabaean cultural continuum.

These divinities are interesting. Attested in the archaic sources, they then disappear before cropping up again much later in the texts from the high plateau. As with many other cultural features, we could suggest that a number of the divinities were common to the entire South Arabian area, disappearing from the sources when states became established and an official, codified pantheon linked to individual dynasties emerged. Such deities may, however, have remained current in marginal areas, eventually coming back into view when states arose in these areas.
The inscription, published by Gajda, names a king of Ma‘in, Ilifam Riyam. I feel that we must consider the possibility of the existence of at least two kings of Ma‘in named Ilifam Riyam, one attested in the inscriptions on the wall of Ma‘in (30) and another, older one, attested on the stone incense burner being treated here and in Shaqab 6 (31) (Figs 14–15). The problem is to decide whether there were two Minaean kings by this name (32) or even three (33). Gajda, on the other hand, using argumentation which is not altogether clear, seems
to maintain that there was only one Minaean king named Ilifam Riyam, and she dates the incense burner to the fifth century. Palaeographically, the text on the incense burner recalls that of Shaqab 6 and, in my view, a Minaean king named Ilifam Riyam who reigned in the eighth-seventh centuries must be hypothesised. In sum, palaeography, textual features (absence of a royal title, typical of
archaic documents) and the visual language used in representing the ibex all argue for a date in the eighth-seventh centuries.

Conclusion
A particular style of representing the ibex, one of the animals most strongly linked to the scared imagery and aesthetic tastes of the ancient inhabitants of South Arabia, is typical of the archaic period and of the west-central area of Yemen. In these representations, sometimes isolated, sometimes repeated, the animal is static. The horns perform an important decorative function while the animal and the plinth on which it stands are inserted into a rectangular, geometric frame which either actually exists or can easily be imagined around it. The artistic vocabulary of such iconography presupposes a long period of gestation which must have begun by the late second millennium, even if our knowledge of this period is still very poor.

The study of iconography is one of the many fields of research in South Arabian studies which urgently deserves to be developed. The history of South Arabian art still remains to be written. The identification of those iconographic elements which appear exclusively on objects from a single region in certain periods of South Arabian history can support the use of other historical data, including the palaeography and content of texts which may be present, and thereby help to pinpoint the date of an object and identify the regions and periods in which the iconographic element was created. The future development of south Arabian studies will depend very much on extensive collaboration between philologists, art historians and archaeologists.

References
3. For the symbolism of the horns bound up with divine protection, see Potts DT. Notes on some horned buildings in Iran, Mesopotamia and Arabia. RA 84: 1990: 33–40.
6. We know all too little of the other political and cultural pole that was probably very important, namely the pre-Karibil kingdom of Awsan.
15. YM 14329, photo in de Maigret, Yemen.
13. YM 11126 and YM 11192, photo in de Maigret, Yemen: cat. 215.
12. Compared to some years ago (for example, compared to what I maintained in my communication in Aix in early 1996, recently published in Arabia) I am increasingly convinced of the significance of a phase of cultural homogeneity at the end of the second millennium, which changed when the South Arabian states began to be formed. By itself, Sabaean cultural hegemony cannot account for the striking similarities amongst the various South Arabian kingdoms.
8. On the alabaster throne can be read: Lb‘n Yd‘ bn Yd‘ b. The lower half is free, but was originally occupied by a small ibex’. The writing is very similar to that of the inscription on the bronze statue of Madikarib in Marib. For example, compared to what I maintained in my communication in Aix in early 1996, recently published in Arabia I am increasingly convinced of the significance of a phase of cultural homogeneity at the end of the second millennium, which changed when the South Arabian states began to be formed. By itself, Sabaean cultural hegemony cannot account for the striking similarities amongst the various South Arabian kingdoms.
7. de Maigret Yemen: cat. 31.
3. As, inter alia, does Gnoli, Inventaire: 26–27, despite what Gajda maintains.
2. Barnett, South Arabian ivory vessel: Pl. 2.1.
1. Against this hypothesis see Riis PJ & Buhl ML. Hama. Fouilles et recherches de la fondation Carlsberg 1931–1938 II.2. Les objets de la période dite syro-hittite (Âge du Fer). Copenhagen: Nationalmuseets Skrifter, Større Beretninger, 12: 1990: 224 and Fig. 105.