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Archaeological Survey of Yemen:
The First Season

by Raymond D. Tindel

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Until recently, the southern corner of Arabia, modern Yemen, has been one of the world’s most inaccessible regions. A difficult terrain, hostile tribes, and the xenophobic government of the imams discouraged all but the most determined explorers, and even these often found it difficult to return with their records, samples, and copies of inscriptions intact. As a result, our knowledge of South Arabia, called al-Yemen—"The South"—by the Arab world, is sparse and sketchy, based primarily on epigraphic material supplemented by the accounts of classical authors and later Moslem tradition.

While Solomon’s contemporary, the Queen of Sheba—South Arabian Saba—may be dated to the 10th century B.C., a connected history of the area cannot yet be traced farther back than the 7th century B.C. at the earliest. It is the story of a Balkan-like collection of warring states—Saba, Ma’in, Qataban, Ausan, Hadhramaut, Himyar, and others. For over 1,000 years they struggled among themselves, worshipped astral deities, suffered occasional invasions from Rome, Sassanid Persia, and Ethiopia, and grew wealthy from their trade in spices, frankincense, and myrrh. As Arabia Felix it was the envy of the classical world. With the decay of the Roman Empire there was a decline in the demand for incense, and the spice trade shifted away from the area. South Arabian civilization collapsed and blended with the new and more vigorous culture of Islam. As one of the earliest areas to submit, Yemen has some of the oldest mosques and large collections of early Islamic manuscripts. Thereafter, Yemen has often been subject to outside regimes, including Umayyad, Abbasid, Egyptian Mamluk, and Turkish, but it has also enjoyed periods of independence under native dynasties, often those of the Zaidi imams. Turkey’s tenuous control collapsed with the downfall of the Ottomans, and there followed the rather reclusive line of Mutawakkilite imams, which lasted until its overthrow in 1962 by a republican revolt.

Following the consolidation of its control in the early 1970s, the government of what is now the Yemen Arab Republic has adopted a much more open policy toward outsiders in general and toward foreign scholars in particular. Research is now possible in a wide variety of fields. McGuire Gibson of the University of Chicago saw in this a unique opportunity to organize a scientific, multidisciplinary investigation of an ancient culture and its modern counterpart in an area hitherto relatively untouched by scholarship. He visited Sana in 1977 and found the Department of Antiquities receptive to the idea of a regional archaeological and environmental survey. A section of the intermontane plain south of Sana around Dhamar and Yarim offered particular advantages: It is coherent and accessible. It is today a primary agricultural area with good communications with the rest of the country. A number of important routes cross it, including, in ancient times, a section of the spice and incense route, and it has connections with the Red Sea coast via the Wadi Zabid. It contains a number of important ancient and Islamic remains, most prominent being Zafar, the capital of Himyar, one of the last and most important pre-Islamic kingdoms. Finally, it is slated for agricultural development, which means first that much will be irretrievably lost if it is not recorded soon and second that, as a consequence of the development project, detailed maps have already been prepared and basic environmental data collected the likes of which are not available for anywhere else in the country.

It was decided to do first a comprehensive study of the area, combining the collection of environmental, anthropological, and economic data with an archaeological survey. Specific priorities include the location, mapping, and description of ancient sites, especially settlements and hydraulic features, the location and recording of inscriptions, and the definition of ecozones. Later, an effort will be made to establish a pottery sequence.

A one-month reconnaissance expedition was sent out in September 1978, financed by a National Geographic Society grant, with Raymond Tindel as field director, Dennis Collins as archaeologist and epigrapher, and Stephen Lintner as environmental expert. Its immediate purpose was to identify the practical problems of doing fieldwork in the area and to establish the necessary rapport with the YAR Department of Antiquities. The focus for this first effort was the site of Zafar and its environs. It is located about 15 km south of Yarim and is reached by a difficult, unimproved track which leaves the main Sana-Ta‘izz highway at Kitab. The site itself occupies a low, elongated mountaintop running southeast to northwest. The southwestern slopes are very steep, nearly sheer in places, while the northeastern are less steep and extensively terraced. There is a small village at the southeastern end and a small, recently constructed provincial museum. The remainder of the site is covered with building rubble marked by occasional foundation walls. Al-Hamadi (1938:20, 22), writing in the 10th century, records that there were four castles and nine city gates. At present, only one ancient approach can be identified with certainty, and it is not possible to trace a continuous city wall. A stratum of compacted volcanic ash underlies much of the site, and where it is exposed along the slopes tombs, tunnels, and cisterns, some still in use, have been cut into it. Modern terrace retaining walls sometimes incorporate Himyarite foundation walls and are generally built of stone scavenged from the site. Houses in the village are also often built from scavenged stone; the site generally has been heavily plundered for building material.

The local economy is primarily subsistence agriculture based on the growing of wheat, sorghum, and corn and the keeping of cattle, sheep, and goats. Slopes and valleys are extensively terraced, and the terraces are engineered to take maximum advantage of rainfall runoff. In general, the valley terraces appear to be older than terraces on the slopes. The terrace walls are dry-laid stone and rather irregular in height, thickness, and quality of masonry. The soil is rocky and usually very thin. Because of overgrazing by livestock, there is very little natural vegetation left. The only trees seen were eucalyptus, a species imported in recent years from Australia. As a consequence, the area is particularly vulnerable to erosion, though its effects have not been too severe because of careful management of the runoff. In the last few years remittances sent back by Yemenis working in Saudi Arabia have fueled a nationwide boom (with attendant inflation) which is evidenced in the Zafar area by larger numbers of automobiles and other consumer goods and by an increase in building activity and consequent site destruction.

Upon our arrival, we were offered the unexpected but welcome opportunity to help organize the collection of the Zafar Museum, in return for which we received access and publication rights to the collection. This project, under the direction of Selma al-Radi and Rosalind Wade, two technical advisors to the Department of Antiquities, consisted primarily of gathering some 2,000 objects which the villagers had picked up over the years from the site. Of these 674 were registered, catalogued, and photographed; the remainder were grouped into uncatalogued study collections.

This body of material is one of the largest from any South Arabian site, the only one of consequence from the Himyar area, and of prime importance for understanding cultural developments in South Arabia during the period immediately prior to the advent of Islam. It consists largely of fragments of bas-relief and architectural decor with some sculpture in the round. The workmanship and composition range from skillful
and elegant to crude. The motifs include the traditional South Arabian rectangular-recessed panels, bucrania, and ibex-head borders. There are, in addition, a number of Orientalized classical motifs reminiscent of Parthian and Palmyrene, most common being the grapevine in many variations. Particularly intriguing are some of the fantastic creatures, such as the winged leopard with human rider (fig. 1). Without parallel are what appear to be plant-animal hybrids whose foreparts are those of a quadruped and whose hindparts are, apparently, a leaf (fig. 2).

Fig. 1. Nude male riding winged leopard (ZM 433), 15.5 cm high, 13 cm wide.

Fig. 2. Detail from horoscopic plaque of apparent plant-animal hybrid.

A total of 90 inscriptions and monograms, many fragmentary, were also catalogued, including one probably of Sharibbi'il Ya'fur, King of Saba and Dhu Raydan, one of the restorers of the great Marib dam. It bears the date 572, Himyarite Era, probably A.D. 457.

The paucity of sherds on the surface at this site is rather surprising to one more familiar with Syro-Palestinian and Mesopotamian sites. The majority of rim sherds come from what must have been a type of large jar with a small carination just below the rim. It and its variations do not fit in the Hajar Bin Humaid sequence, nor do they have parallels with Hureidha or any other published ceramic material from South Arabia. The common lug handle with one, two, or three thumbprints underneath likewise has no published South Arabian parallels. There are a few pieces of blue-green glaze characteristic of Sassanian–Early Islamic sites in Iraq. There is also some ribbed ware with parallels from late 7th-century levels at Fustat (Bianquis, Scanlon, and Watson 1974: 164, 168–70).

A major portion of our work consisted of recording the site itself and a number of nearby features. A detailed map at a scale of 1:50 was prepared for the southeastern end of the site, with both ancient and modern features included. A particular effort was made to record the incorporation of Himyarite elements into modern terrace walls and to record those areas particularly vulnerable to disturbance by modern construction and land reclamation. Two dams were mapped; one was once used for water storage, though its catchment basin is now silted up, and the other was a water control dam for agricultural use. Both dams are faced with cut stone and have rubble cores. Neither is of recent construction. The agricultural dam now serves as a roadbed.

We were not able to cover as large an area around Zafar as we had originally planned; the terrain is extremely rugged, which makes travel difficult. The continuing archaeological and environmental survey of the region will obviously require several seasons and offers opportunities for what should prove a very fruitful collaboration among scholars from a variety of fields.

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Bantu-Cushitic Relations in Northeastern Kenya

by N. A. Townsend

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Research was carried out during the summer of 1978 into the nature and history of contacts between the Pokomo of northeastern Kenya and the neighboring Orma.1 The Pokomo live by flood farming on the banks of the Tana River. They are divided into four sections, three of which are Bantu-speaking.

1 This fieldwork was made possible through a grant from the Canada Council. I am grateful to C. Ehret for help in providing the specialized word lists and in some of the interpretation of the data.

The Orma are Cushitic-speaking pastoralists, living in the semi-desert country west of the Tana. They used to live on both banks, but the Somali drove them from the east side a century ago.

During earlier fieldwork (1971–73; cf. Townsend 1976), I was struck by the strong degree of Cushitic influence among the Pokomo. For example, the northernmost section (the Korokoro) speaks Orma only, and the lexicons of the other three sections contain a high proportion of words of Cushitic origin. This proportion rises as one passes upriver, from the Lower Pokomo to the Upper Pokomo to the Elwana and finally to the Korokoro. Moreover, the songs and secret language of the traditional ruling elders, the personal names, clan names, dress, house style, and other features of Pokomo life show evidence of heavy borrowing from the Orma. On the other hand, the Orma appear to be pure pastoralists, with minimal reliance on cultivated foods.