

'Decadence', 'Decline' and Persistence: Zafar and Himyar¹

Introduction

On the strength of sparse historical data of unequal value, the historical outlines have emerged of Himyar's early period from 110 BCE to c. 270 CE, the empire from c. 270 to 525 and her late or post period of foreign domination from 525 to 570/630. From an overall external historic perspective, one can speak of an Old South Arabian (OSA) late/post period, but from an internal one, this is actually a period of foreign domination. Thematically, the relevant sources range from OSA inscriptions, over church history, archaeological artefacts as well as sites, Arabic traditions, and Arabic historic writings (synthesis: Müller 1991). Despite the recently assembled collection (124 typed pages) of *musnad* texts relating to the monotheistic history of OSA (Robin 2006), the textual sources for the 2nd to 3rd centuries appear to outweigh those in number for the late/post period. As in the case of Late Roman antiquity, much of what is written about contemporary Himyar is irrelevant for a cultural history, the visual arts of which below are discussed. But today, writers can exceed a mere political/military chronicle for Himyar, and are in a better position to sketch a cultural history. The term 'Late Antiquity' reoccurs frequently below and describes the interval between high classical antiquity and the middle ages in Europe and the Mediterranean world, as well as in Arabia, where it is virtually never applied.

Despite close chronological proximity to actual OSA events, early Arab historians are of little help in order to illuminate Himyar, and are annoyingly inarticulate about pre-Islamic history in general. The author cannot offer here an exhaustive survey of such writings, instead only two telling examples: Even the 10th century CE historian 'Abu Muhammad al-Hasan bin Ahmad bin Ya'qub al-Hamdani (the so-called tongue of South Arabia), who champions Himyar in his writings, in fact cannot read *musnad* inscriptions, perhaps only individual letters. Few of his thoughts penetrate the shroud surrounding Himyarite history. A second major historian and politician, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), in the enormous 'Introduction' (*al-Muqaddima*) to his *History*, distances himself from the entire Arabic recounting of OSA as the "silly utterances of a few historians". Paradoxically, whilst traditional Islamic religious thought considers pre-Islamic culture *par tout* to be decadent, increasingly, western scholars treat it as a valuable idiom in its own right (Robin 2005).

State of Research on OSA Art

Although examples of OSA sculpture appeared in the specialist literature as early as in the mid 19th century, until relatively recently the art historian could do little more than identify them as of Arabian origin, leaving aside the question of chronology, our subject here. Milestones in the study of OSA sculpture include Rathjen's ordering of the relief faces in the Hamburg Museum for Ethnography (1955: 86-94) into form groups, which A. Hauptmann-von Gladiss (1979: 179) points out does not provide a developmental history. Her own study, however, provides at least some chronological points of orientation. Another major attempt at a history is A. Grohmann's *Arabien* (1963: 186-242) for which the same comment might be

¹ An earlier version of this paper was held at the Institut d'Études Sémitiques, Collège de France, 26.-28.08.2006, Colloquium: Arabia on the Eve of Islam State of the Art (DATI research project) and at the Rencontre Sabéenne 9, 25-27.05.2005 held in Jena. The text has been simplified and edited to minimise repetition with other publications. Thus, the all-important reliefs referred to have been reduced to a few key published examples so as not to anticipate the forthcoming catalogue of finds in the site museum (Japp/Yule in preparation). The evidence for a Sabaeen period stylistic development for sculpture and that of early 'imyar (to c. 270 CE) lies outside of the scope of this note. The place-names are written in *fusha* and occasionally in the dialect of Zafar. The term 'late pre-Islamic' includes the last 500 years prior to 630 CE. I thank Martin Brandtner for pointing out the works of Hayden White for my analysis. I thank the DFG for bearing the costs of the research campaigns of 2006 and 2007, the subject of this paper. The paper profited from Yusuf Abdullah's suggestions. Walter Müller kindly went over the text, saving the author some embarrassment. No diacritics are possible owing to the mode of publication. This article is in press in the papers of the Heidelberg meeting of June 2007 in the periodical *Arabia*.

added. J. Pirenne's (1957: fig. 1) dating of OSA floral ornament, while occasionally still cited, is disputed (Costa 1992: 23). In a detailed study of Late Antique art in Arabia (1996) B. Finster ignores it altogether. A main problem is that Pirenne's characterisation of ornament rests on three stylistically undifferentiated and somewhat atypical examples. A further serious art historical work is volume I.2 of her *Corpus des inscriptions et antiquités sud-arabes* of 1977. But despite diverse chronological references, the reasoning for her datings lack transparency. The question arises, whether a given sculpture is dated by her inoperable palaeographic chronology or by an art historical interpretation. In another brief treatment of OSA art history, Schippmann (1998: 113-118) cited only a handful of potentially sculptural works and made no serious attempt to date any of them. This holds for other authors as well (e.g. Will 1998).

Pioneer publications of Himyarite sculpture in particular derive from the quill of P. Costa (1973 and 1976) and are comprised first of photos and catalogue information unfortunately without an evaluation, including a chronological one. Cautiously, Costa never identifies any of the sculptures as 'Himyarite' although their find-spots in and around Zafar, the capital of the Himyar and their allies, leads one to this assumption. One must simply assume the dating on general stylistic grounds and provenance. A further publication of his (1992: 19) points out the obvious difficulty in distinguishing between OSA sculpture and that of the succeeding period, for a lack of dated sources. As early as my student days, I often wondered about the basis for the dating of OSA sculptures in the various publications, especially since dated contexts and works were so rare. The several catalogues of that great series of travelling exhibitions regarding the archaeology and history of OSA between 1997 and 2007, reflect current scholarship on art historical development. But in these publications only rarely do authors date artefacts in terms of their find-contexts or inscriptions. The reason is that the research basis is insufficient to enable broad descriptive generalisations. For example, S. Antonini is one of the most active writers in regard to the history of OSA sculpture. Her catalogue study of stone sculpture (2001) profits from the experience of previous authors. Of 144 stone sculptures which she publishes, individual datings only rarely occur (as for 'E66'), referring instead on general tendencies (2001: 175-178). A second study (in press) treats the sculpture in a differentiated way and by means of local provenances has the effect of emphasizing local stylistic variation. The heterogeneous nature of the sculptures impedes any identification of specific broad stylistic horizons. In end effect, most discussions of Greco-Roman influence suffice to simply cite the one or the other Roman parallel, but do not address the development of OSA or Himyarite art in a piece-for-piece manner.

What is wrong with modern diachronic characterisations of Himyarite OSA and its arts? Although this period has been cultivated especially in the writings of Y. 'Abdullah (1993), P. Piotrovskii (1985) and C. Robin (e.g. 2003), prior to the aforementioned series of travelling exhibitions, certain historians tended to minimize the Himyars' historic role in different ways². In some relevant publications the name itself, Himyar, is avoided. Moreover, historiographically speaking, this tribal confederation and period stand squarely in the shadow of the earlier kingdoms, which receive the lion's share of research and publication in our subaltern field of Near Eastern archaeology. Because few historically ordered sculptures were available at that time, few of the articles contained in the travelling Yemen exhibitions mentioned above come to grips with Himyar. One recently published book passes through all of OSA history light-heartedly omitting 250 years of Himyarite supremacy in Arabia (Fontaine et al. 2006). Despite a lack of substantive research on Himyarite sites at that time, not to mention a chronology for the sculpture, conservative experts cast aspersions at some length on this so-called decadent phase of OSA.

² An exception is Schippmann 1998: 60-73.

The most zealous advocate of the developmental scheme in OSA visual arts, J. Schmidt, contrasts 'good', linear, early art with 'bad', organic, late that is, Himyarite art. He refers to the latter as, "...sinnentleerte Bastelei", that is, mindless pottering (1997: 34-37). This plausibly reflects that author's roots in 20th century aesthetics including Cubism, Purism, Constructivism, not to omit a grounding in architectural history, with a corresponding appreciation of linearity. Whilst at first glance, in light of the biological or Darwinian model of the bud, flower, and withering, that Schmidt uses, his historical method may appeal to some, recently unearthed Himyarite artefacts datable to early and late phases contradict it, and do not necessarily show a qualitative surge followed by one of decline. In his art historical scheme, 'early' indicates the early kingdoms, 'middle' (if indeed intended) is not definable and 'late' by default refers to the Himyarite empire as well as the late/post periods. Moreover, if OSA were a cogent chronological continuous unit, it also would have to be a historically cohesive one. But in reality, it is merely a loose succession of cultural-political units strung together in roughly the same geographic area with ethnic, military and religious incursions from outside.

Fortunately, in the field of OSA archaeology 'decadence' loses ground, as being overly simplified, in light of recent research. Holger Hitgen's excavation of the Himyarite Gebel al-'Awd site since 1999 (2003), Sarah Japp's research projects on Himyarite sculpture (lectures in St Petersburg 2006 and Heidelberg 2007, as well as publication in preparation) have the effect of an appreciation of Himyarite culture and history. In addition, K. Lewis (2005) and J. Schiettecatte (2006) treat the fortunes of Himyar in some detail in their dissertations. Literature generated from the author's own excavations at Zafar ancient capital of the tribal confederation complement the art historical picture of the 1970s (despite exasperating printing delays), and shows that the more information gathers, the less one can speak about 'decadence'. Nor should we forget that some monuments previously held to be Sabaean, in fact, now prove to be Himyarite: The famous dam at Marib, despite its origins, reflects largely a late/post Himyarite rebuilding conducted by king Abraha (Vogt 2007). In the year 2007 archaeologists are better informed about Himyar than J. Schmidt was 10 years previously at the time when he wrote.

Ontological History Writing à la Hayden White

Regarding Himyarite 'decadence', glaring methodological problems bring to mind Hayden White's weighty historiographic recasting in his post-modern *Metahistory* (1973). The conception of the historian's task obscures the extent to which invention plays a role in his writing. Because a historian takes events that have happened and makes a story out of them (as opposed to a chronicle which may begin and end haphazardly), using the tools of literary research White treats history as a form of poetry or story-telling, which satisfies not only the question of 'what happened?' but also 'what is the point?' In order to tell his story, the historian chooses a mode of 'emplotment' (a narrative mode, such as the 'comedy' or 'tragedy'), an argumentative structure (e.g. 'formalist') as well as a means of ideological implication (e.g. 'liberal'). Although White developed his analytical categories with regard to major 19th century historians and philosophers, methods current among them such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony are eternal. In the discussion of decadence for late OSA, most significantly one recognises that a historic body of information being forced into a dating scheme in a 'mechanistic' way, so that a law is wilfully interpreted to explain art historical development.

In terms of writings on 'decline', at first glance the emplotment regarding OSA arts might seem tragic, whereby a good art is subverted into a bad one. Looking analogously into the writings of a famous ontological historian, Edward Gibbon, in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, one also might be inclined to classify his work as 'tragic'.

But instead, White considers it 'ironic' (White 1973: 53-55), a mode in which all of the *great* historical works of the age were cast. This has the effect that such tend toward the form of satire, the supreme achievement of the literary sensibility of that age. The manner of history-writing which suggests a development from good to bad is for OSA art, however, clearly is also moralising, 'tragic' in form, glossing over major obstacles in order to make the desired point.

'Late', 'Decadence'?

The term 'late' evokes expectations of approaching the end of a diachronic continuum. Birth and development lie in the past, the spectre of decline, weakness and incipient obscurity seems near of a day, of a life, of an epoch (Brandt 2004: 7). Based on moralising authors of the 4th and 5th centuries as well the ontological thinking of the Enlightenment, Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as mentioned above, casts Late Rome in this light, and as a paradigm of the universal dilemma of empires (Brown 1985: 26). Influential works such as Gibbon's and in effect of the Enlightenment itself set the tone for subsequent historic writings. To deconstruct the issue of 'decadence' and 'decline' for OSA art, one must examine existing thought and literature on the chronology of Arabian visual arts.

Turning more closely to 'decadence', in the general sense this term refers to the supposed decline of a society because of moral weakness. The favourite example of this is ancient Rome. As the story has it, a great empire succumbed to wicked dissolute emperors such as Caligula and Nero. Unfortunately for this overly simple thesis, both able and unable emperors ruled during the early and late empire. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines decadence as, "the falling away or declining (from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.); decay; impaired or deteriorated condition". Modern usage points to a loss of excellence that obstructs the pursuit of ideals. While one normally assumes a youthful budding, a maturity and a decline in a given branch of art, in the context of the Himyar, this notion in itself does not lead to a chronology for the corpus of sculptures that are rarely otherwise dated, and thus can be moved back and forth over centuries, lacking firm evidence (cf. Costa 1992: 19), for example the famous, Himyarite, large bronze horse of Hawfathat Yuha'dhin in the Dumbarton Oaks collection (Yule 2007: 147 Fig. 108).

Is 'decadence' in OSA visual arts more apparent than real? Moreover, do old teaching opinions possibly differ from new and still hardly published excavation results and opinions of latter-day experts on this matter? The concept of 'decadence', which semantically is linked inextricably to the concepts 'decline' and 'late', has different facets and may find differential acceptance by different colleagues. For example, Machiavelli's attribution of the decadence of Rome to the rise of Christianity (in *Discorsi*) is not likely to awaken much enthusiasm amongst Christians, or anyone else today. Nowadays, the turn toward monotheism in the late 4th century OSA generally is taken as a sign of progress and not decadence. Islamacist and Marxist-Leninist definitions of 'decadence' also derive from special ideologies, and essentially are mere theses, narrow in scope and appeal.

Not surprisingly, late pre-Islamic Arab architecture also is usually negatively characterised. B. Finster (1996: 287-290) uses J. Allan's revised edition of K.A.C. Creswell's *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* as a point of departure in her article on Arabian architecture during Late Antiquity: Allan first characterised pre-Islamic Arabian architecture as consisting largely of mud huts, a point that he later revoked. Other colleagues were quick to join the criticism of this controversial, wide-spread but obsolete teaching opinion. Clearly, the masonry of the early Himyarite buildings is of a higher quality than that of late Himyarite ones, as we know from the so-called Stone Building, currently being excavated in Zafar (Yule et al. in press). The early Himyarite ashlar are more precisely cut than the later ones.

Nonetheless, are we to consider all later works and their associated industries to be decadent?

Although chronologies for Greek sculpture, vase painting and the study of other artefactual categories are difficult to imagine without some kind of linear developmental scheme, in reality, the conservative so-called art historical method rarely needs to function without the help of other kinds of substantiating dating evidence. Be this as it may, this dating method may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thereby, unattractive artefacts can be assigned to a late period, ignoring other dating attributes. In the case of Himyarite visual arts, except for a few inscribed works, this dating method is essentially operational by the few historians who aspire to dating given works. The notions of 'good' and 'bad' art vary semantically in terms of subjective quality and verisimilitude to nature. Scholars can approach them from any angle of analysis, and do just this. 'Quality' is equally ill-defined.

Another technical problem is that while Himyarite art may at first glance appear to form a logical or historic unity, different traditions include, for example, the works of then still intact Monophysite and Nestorian Christian as well as Jewish congregations. These remained major forces in early medieval Arabia (Finster 1996: 290). A pre-Islamic rock-cut structure just south-west of the Husn Raydan may represent a Jewish ritual bath (a *mikwe*, Yule, *Galor in press*), or as easily a Christian baptistery. The question arises, how much if any of what one can designate as Himyarite art is essentially Jewish, early monotheist or Christian art? Moreover, if Jewish, how is this anchored in mainstream Jewish thought and custom as reflected in the Talmud? One must add that at their inception, lacking well-defined paths to follow, the art of Christians and Jews use Late Antique artistic models generally available to them. Himyarite art is generally universalist and composite, less a product of an isolated development.

Until now, Himyarite cultural attributes have been little treated: Vocabulary, grammatical forms and cultural goods form the fabric of the culture from which Islamic period culture grows. The organisers of our conference attempted to gather different speakers on the topic of the rhythm of cultural development from the late pre-Islamic period into the early Islamic period. Space allows here for two examples of carry-overs into Islamic times. First, a stone niche that is said to come from Zafar (Fig. 1) and is of Himyarite type and style can be compared to torah shrine images, or as easily to *mihhrabs*. This is all the more so, as C.



Fig. 1 .Arch on deposit in the Zafar Site Museum (height c. 1 m).

Robin has pointed out at a recent meeting in Paris, since the Sabaic word *mihrrab* has the same meaning in Arabic (citing Serjeant 1959). Second, Y. 'Abdullah has articulated in his dissertation that personal names in the Yemen are uniquely conservative (1975: 13). Third, place-names are even more conservative in their development in the Yemen. As many as 5% in and around Zafar may survive from Pre-Arabic times (see below). This same conservatism might also apply to Himyarite art forms, which continue after the arrival of Islam.

In questioning whether the Himyarite empire and late/post periods as well as their arts are decadent, most importantly one must concede that historiography analogously has long since redeemed the honour of Late Antique Roman art, despite its use of isoccephaly (the heads of a figural row all are shown at one height), the reuse of spolia in architecture as well as other related phenomena. Beginning in the early 20th century, in the context of his vague term "*Kunstwollen*", A.

Riegl articulated positive aspects of then little-appreciated periods including Late Antiquity, the Early Medieval and the Baroque, although various points in any evaluation (for example, the appreciation of the individual works) remain controversial. Riegl's ideas regarding development were widely received in academic circles especially in the 1920s. In more recent years, experts have reaffirmed the positive role played by Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval culture, for example, P. Brown (1971) and J. Elsner (1998). Late Antique art does not emphasise beauty and bodily movement, but rather reduces the image to the spiritual aspect of the figure. Both classical and Late Antique art forms may on occasion be aesthetically unpleasing. But there has been a readiness for over a century by archaeologists to acknowledge the positive characteristics of such works. This is embedded in a general acceptance of non-naturalistic art forms during the 20th century. Another characteristic of Late Antiquity is the use of luxury materials including precious metals, glass, gold-glass, ivory, and vellum or parchment. Unfortunately, few of these materials have survived in OSA contexts.

Unfortunately, the perceived 'decadent' aesthetic quality of Late Antique art is commonly lumped together with the fortunes and misfortunes of the later Roman empire in a most unfortunate liaison. Her political fate most certainly influenced historians to characterise Late Antiquity as decadent, even if the military and political developments as opposed to those in the visual arts are categorically unrelated topics. A comparison of the historical parallelisms of Late Antique Rome and Himyar is not only possible, it is essential in order to understand the cultural history of the latter for parallel developments in art are identifiable in the two regions (see below). P. Brown also pointed out an overall trend between Arabia and the West that a 'Holy Man' arises as a *Leitmotiv* during the religious revolution of Late Antiquity (1985: 148). Analogously, with the fall of the great temple religions in Egypt, men had nothing more to fall back on than other men and saints. For the monotheistic religions of OSA a similar scenario is likely.

Not all of the archaeological data pertaining to the Himyar are new, known ones simply have not been included in the discussion of development. One can take such works and place them in a developmental series in order to see how they fit. A few important dated works, such as the frontal little images of Yasduq'il Far' Sharah'at, king of 'Ausan of the 1st century CE (Vienna 1998: 382-384 nos. 447 and 449) are early, and of royal patronage. Again, these pieces show the difficulty in using stylistic evolution as a dating method because they differ from each other in style, while being contemporary. One may also turn to an early Himyarite coin bearing the ruler name 'Amdan Bayan Yuhaqbid (?100-120?) and the palace name, Raydan, that with similar issues date roughly perhaps within the first two centuries CE (Fig. 2, Munro-Hay 2003: 53), although this series may continue later. These and a few rare Qatabanian coins that spawned them show a development toward an aesthetically high-quality coinage of autogenous and no longer direct foreign inspiration. While the question of aesthetic quality is in no small way a matter of personal taste, the naturalistic rendering of the effigy and precise lettering of the exergue of such coins is superior to those, for example, of the imitation new style Athenian issues also of the 1st century BCE-CE (Fig. 3, cf. Munro-Hay 2003: 132-139, types 1.111.16), based on Greco-Roman models. Raydan series coins arise during a period of political and cultural exuberance and obviously are not the decadent artistic products that, despite their Himyarite origin some authors write about. Their dating, overlapping that of the new style Athenian Imitations, also contradicts evolutionary thinking. Technically and aesthetically, the two coin images contrast completely, although being largely contemporaneous. Nonetheless, that no local issues can be proven during the late period and perhaps the empire period can only be taken as a sign of Himyarite economic debility.



Fig. 2 Silver coin of the Himyarite Raydan series, obverse and reverse (ø 1.58 cm).



Fig. 3 Silver coin of the Imitation New Style Athenian series (ø 1.86 cm).



Fig. 4 Detail of the bronze of Dhamar 'Ali Yuhabirr from Nakhlat al-Hamra' (entire height 2.37 m).



Fig. 5 Detail of the bronze of Tha'ran Ya'ub from Nakhlat al-Hamra' (entire height 2.30 m).

Regarding this same topic, one must consider the excellent over-life size bronze pair of kings Dhamar'ali Yuhabirr (Fig. 4, ?180-200?) and his son Tha'ran Ya'ub Yuhan'im (Fig. 5, ?200-220?) dedicated to their *qayls* of ancient Yakla' as potentially decadent works (an older version of the kings list: Robin 2005).³ These are, however, again clearly conceived in a classical Greco-Roman idiom and pre-date Late Antiquity. Stylistically speaking, their excellence is one foreign to OSA, even if one of the responsible artist pair named was Greek and the other Arab. While according to Robin's king list (received 02.2006) two early pairs of kings come into question bearing the names Dhamar'ali Yuhabirr and Tha'ran Ya'ub Yuhan'im (not always cited in a complete form) a third such pair in the fourth century does not. The titularies of the royal pairs offer a means to distinguish the earlier and later kings and their statues. The titularies on the bronze statues bear short royal titles (mlk sb' w dh-rydn). In contrast, the royal pair from the 4th century added to their titularies, hdmwt w ymnt which were conquered by that time

(Müller 1981). Moreover, during the 4th century heroic nude sculptures no longer were in production in the Roman world (Parlasca 1989: 284). The stylistic evidence fits particularly for the treatment of the eyes and lips of Tha'ran Ya'ub Yuhan'im for the nearest time-slot ?200-220? (oral communication M. Bergmann), according to Robin's chronology for the rulers. Unfortunately, the conventional and severe Dhamar'ali Yuhabirr is not stylistically datable and offers no information in this matter. Nonetheless, this statue pair form a major anchoring point for a stylistic development in OSA.

Selected Evidence from Zafar

In order to build a case for or against the decadent nature of Himyarite art and culture, finds excavated from archaeological contexts are useful. New information for a sculptural chronology comes from the rupestrian Himyarite capital where regular excavation began in 2000 (regarding the topography, Yule et al. 2007). Local inhabitants designate the central mountain there Husn Raydan. Immediately south lies Qaryat Zafar, the ancient southern part of the city. The mountain to the north of Husn Raydan is the fortified al-Gusr (al-Qasr). Excavations have probed different questions with regard to the nature of the city and its history.

An understanding of the diachronic development of Zafar and of the Himyarite visual arts is difficult because few of the newly excavated artefacts find close outside parallels in what is essentially still a pioneer specialty in the Yemen and surrounding region. The pottery in Zafar differs from published finds from the highlands, as T. Wilkinson kindly confirmed (oral communication), not to mention that from neighbouring Axum, in East Africa. The reason is probably a matter of chronology, those from Zafar being later in date than the comparisons just mentioned. Pottery parallels with the key sites of Qani'/Bir 'Ali or from Nagran cannot be discussed since too few finds have yet been published from them. Due to the fewness of available sources, any developmental interpretation is bound to be highly theoretical and likely to change. Significantly, at Zafar few or no identifiable Islamic period finds occur, that provide an approximate terminus for the development. More happily, at the time of writing, the arch-



Fig. 6 Stone Building in 2006 viewed toward the south.



Fig. 7 Eastern interior wall z507 of the Stone Building at the end of the season of 2007.

aeological sources regarding the end of the capital interface evenly with the textual evidence. To date, in Zafar the Heidelberg-Yemeni team have partly unearthed a Himyarite courtyard structure. The so-called Stone Building (Fig. 6) appears to date initially to the 1st century CE on textual and ¹⁴C evidence (Franke et al. in press). Important for the dating are some of the marginally drafted and pecked ashlar of Van Beek type 6 that appear to date to the centuries around the time of Christ. For such reasons, our initial attribution of this building as the Har-gab palace of Shurahbi'il Yaf'ur and his predecessors now has proven unlikely. Its plan neither decidedly identifies the building as a temple nor a palace, because examples of both are known to use the same basic plan. But the subject matter of relief bands uncovered in 2007 on one wall (Yule, Franke in preparation), suggest a temple: These include a row of large bucrania and alternating heraldic depictions of animals mythical and real. Two more finds help us to complete our brief overview of Himyarite relief art: A first key find consists of five intact bands of relief in a wall, which is associated with the first building phase of the structure (Fig. 7). Its stylistic dating without the help of the context could as easily be interpreted early or late. Second, a find of reliefs was made in what seems to be a furnace in the north-eastern corner of the Stone Building courtyard (Yule, Franke in preparation). Therein, some eight reliefs and bucranon plaques came to light together. These show the style, iconography and types expected of the art of early or, more broadly viewed, polytheistic Himyar and of the first part of the empire period. Their associated ¹⁴C samples date from the 2nd to 4th centuries CE.

The Stone Building yielded other stratified sculptures. Until the dating of its contexts are more clearly established, we can do little more than introduce a few artefacts which shed light on Himyarite 'decadence'. Interestingly enough, by volume at least three quarters of the finds excavated are reliefs and only one quarter, pottery rare by any standard. Sculptures that appeared in the debris in the Stone Building may range maximally in date from the 2nd to mid 6th century CE. On the other hand, the ¹⁴C assays from the debris which are available cluster in the 3rd and 4th centuries (ibid.). Unfortunately, the only definitive stratigraphic criterion is that defined by the existing stone paving of the courtyard.

Turning now to the topic of style, the often elaborate hairdos and heavy bodily proportions of the sculptures encountered ultimately reflect Sasanian origin or reflect a general stylistic international trend, evidently transmitted through mediators such as Palmyra. In what is essentially an empire or late Himyarite context, documents of polytheistic faith commonly persist. Either their contexts are stratigraphically mixed, bucranon plaques still were in circulation in the 3rd to early 6th century, or both. Late Himyarite 'stick' texts in miniscule script reveal the prolonged existence of polytheistic deities (P. Stein oral communication). If the capital of Himyar was destroyed in the 6th century, then one can expect little patronage of the arts in the succeeding century. Thus, the artistic style of the 7th century is particularly difficult to deal with at present.

Excavated parallels suggest that those deposited in the site museum and without clear provenance characterise the art from the 3rd to 6th century: However, the most important of these give only a general idea of the development since they elude individual dating. Major examples bear on the decadent or non-decadent nature of the empire and late periods:

One relief excavated from the Stone Building (Fig. 8, Yule in press) is identical to another *spolium* sold and immured in a wall of the house of Muhammad 'Ali 'Abdullah 'Ashwal in neighbouring Bait al-'Ashwal. This piece shows corpulent ladies, each of which holds a pomegranate with two hands (Fig. 9). Since this relief once was sketched showing praying figures with folded hands, let there be no doubt about what the figures really are holding. The pomegranate attribute indicates a fertility meaning for the figures which once decorated the front of a door lintel. The underside shows large birds of prey ('eagles') with outspread wings.



Fig. 8 Relief of ladies excavated from the Stone Building (33.5 x 26.0 x 23.0 cm).



Fig. 9a and b Above, relief of ladies holding pomegranates, Bait al-'Ashwal (length c. 60 cm); below, underside of the same relief showing the wings of large predators.



Usually the depictions of the women or eagles of these reliefs have been partially planed off so that the stone could be reused for building. Prior to the discovery of the excavated example, datings ranging from the 4th to 8th century all seemed equally possible to judge from diverse Byzantine, late antique, early Christian and Umayyad parallels. Typically Late Antique in type are figures of the same height posed in an arcade. For the contemporary stubby bodily proportions of the eagles and ladies, any number of Late Antique representations come to mind, including the famous tetrarch groups in Rome and Venice of the later 3rd century. The excavated relief derives from the subsurface debris above stratified layers that yielded calibrated ¹⁴C dates mostly in the 3rd to 4th centuries in the context. But the quarrying of the villagers churned up other early reliefs into the mixed layers. Further such relief fragments came to light in the Stone Building. The ladies with pomegranates may date as early as the 3rd to 5th century (empire period), and not later.

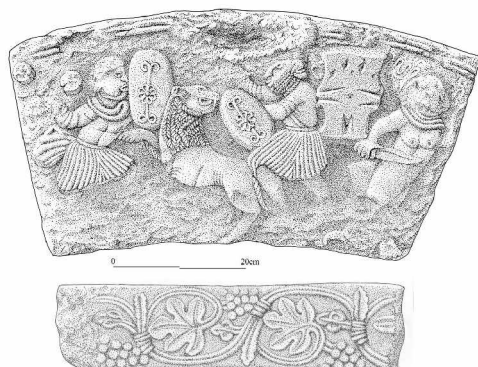


Fig. 10 1. Voussoir showing an empire period Himyarite lion hunt (height c. 33 cm).

A second battered but key empire period monument shows a heroic royal lion hunt in high relief. Idealized fictive heroes wearing Roman garb are identified by the monogram *bhlḥ* (Sima 2000, 113) as Himyarite royals (Fig. 10). A dating to the late 3rd early 4th century CE rests on the flat figural style in high relief. Stubby perspectival and animated representations provide general grounds for a dating comparable to Roman works such as the monumental Galerius arch of similar date (Laubscher 1975). Owing to its developed form, this neglected relief belongs to the most interesting Himyarite examples. This is one of the rare Himyarite depictions of a military operation or a hunt, unlike Roman art, which has many.

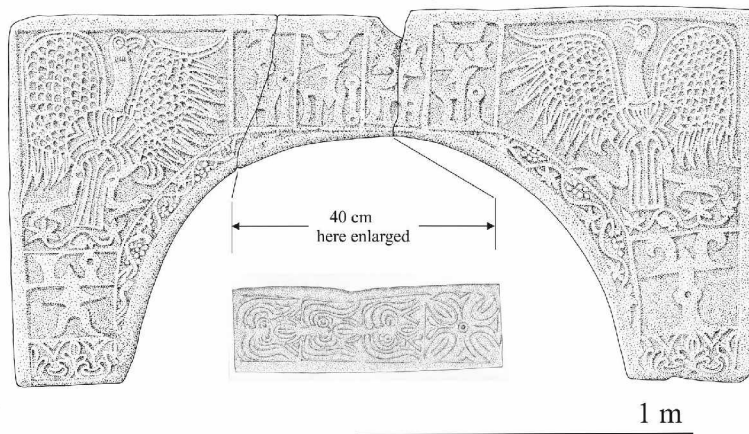


Fig. 11 Late Himyarite relief from Masna'at Mariya, presently in the house of Saleh Bughashah, in that same village (length 2.25 m).



Fig. 12 Late Himyarite ring-stone, coll. W. Daum (1.8 x 2.4 cm).

A third major work that police reportedly recovered from thieves, who in 2004 removed it from Masna'at Mariya, 12 km west of Dhamar, provides a still later stepping stone through the uncertain terrain of connoisseurship (Fig. 11)⁴. This rare relief helps pin down the elusive style of the Himyarite late period, for which as yet there is little chronological evidence. Reassembled, the relief fragments measure over 2 m in width. At both extremities a vulture spreads its wings asymmetrically (Yule in press 2). Elsewhere, the author has argued for a dating for the relief by virtue of a curious stylistic and typological resemblance to a pair of large splendid Gothic fibulae, for example from a grave in Domagnano (San Marino, Italy), that date to the early 6th century, and show the interregional style of the age. Please note the precise linear manner of representation. The radiating medallions in the birds' breasts, the cloisonné-like rendering of the feathers and the narrow channelled edges of the wings are completely new in OSA art. The vultures' swan-like serpentine necks are also typical late Himyarite stylisations. Without unduly belabouring the comparison, since two different media are compared from different continents, a dating in the 6th century is suggested also for the relief. This relief shows conclusively that verisimilitude to nature is not the highest value in art.

The same stylisation of the long neck of the bird occurs in a published Himyarite gem with that it is roughly contemporary (Fig. 12). The letters *whb* and a star are also visible. For stylistic reasons, Pirenne dated it to the 6th century (1977: I.601). Today, its dating perhaps can be derived from the relief from Mariya, that is, for reasons other than those that she used.

⁴ The date of the recovery provided to me by the watchman Salih Bughashah, is disputed by Y. 'Abdullah as being a few years earlier.



Fig. 13 Ornamented column in the Musa mosque in San'a (height 2.2 m).

An excellent relief column from the Musa mosque in San'a also belongs in the catalogue of late Himyarite art (Fig. 13), that juxtaposes three different kinds of elaborate ornament. B. Finster assigns the column to a group of reliefs that she dates to the 6th century (personal communication). Here she squares off with P. Costa, who points out the lack of criteria for definite dating (1992: 26, 29-30). Parallels for this particular ornament are few and undated examples range potentially over centuries. In terms of late Himyarite art, two operating principles come to mind: With the fall of Himyar, one associates a decline in the population and urban centres, quantitatively speaking also in art industries (Schiettecatte 2006 and 2007). In doing so, the column decoration becomes one of the best examples of Himyarite ornament and syntax that evidently carries over into the 7th and 8th centuries. The art of that age is hardly possible without late Himyarite inspiration. Other late Himyarite works are known (Fig. 11; Yule in press 2), but these are few, an important point in itself, a sign of decline, as also paralleled with late Himyarite texts. Placing these few selected works in a series shows an uneven development over time during the empire and late periods.⁵



Fig. 13 Ring-stone that bears the image of a torah shrine and the inscription Yishaq bar Hanina (1.0 x 1.7 cm).

New Historical Ideas and the Persistence of Himyar

Potentially important is the discovery in Zafar/al-'Asabi/al-Salm of a ring-stone (Fig. 14) of 'Ali 'Abdullah al-Zafari, that bears the image of a torah shrine and the Aramaic name Yishaq bar Hanina. This seems to be the earliest sign of Jewish presence (W. Nebe in Yule et al. 2007), perhaps in advance of the generally assumed main wave of their arrival in the 4th century. While a Diaspora at this time was suspected at least as early as Gibbon ([1788] 1900 vol. 5: 331), archaeological evidence it was lacking. This ring-stone dates somewhere in the time-frame 330 BCE-300 CE.

How sudden was the fall of the pre-Islamic culture and social structures with the coming of Islam? Names are particularly conservative in South Arabia. The names of pre-Islamic tribes persist to the present day: Bakil, Hashid, 'aulan, Murad, Radman and Saiban ('Abdullah 1975: 13). This also holds even more so for place-names. Thus, the tempo of Old South Arabian cultural development may be far more conservative than expected.

⁵ I am aware of the weakness of this argument, since few well-dated comparable works exist during the 7th to 10th centuries in the Arabia.

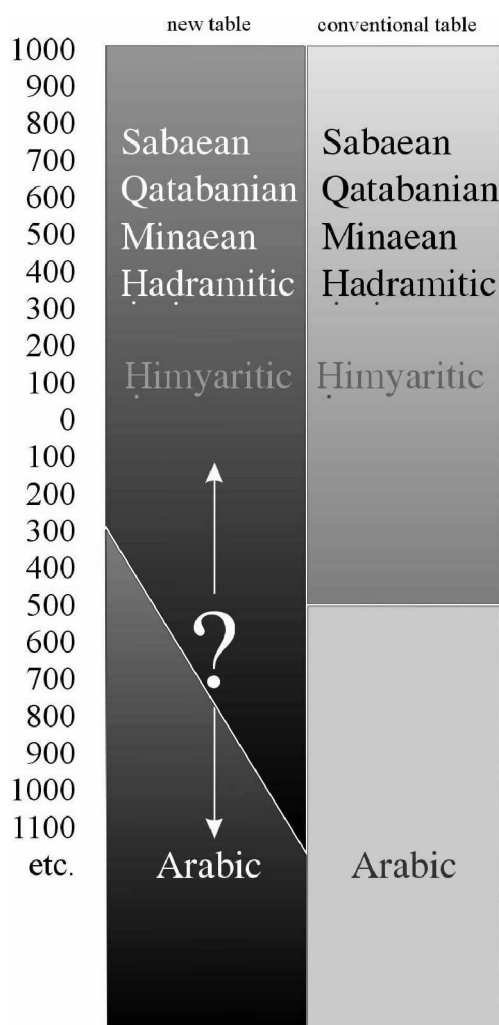


Fig. 15 1. Schematic of the chronology of Semitic languages in South Arabia.

A redating of the development of language influences this question. An inscription from Qaryat al-Faw written with some Arabic names in epigraphic South Arabian script deserves mention in this context. It dates historically and palaeographically to the 3rd century CE (not earlier, as some would have it), the first of its kind (al-Ansary 1982: 146). While C. Robin has observed that just after the mid 6th century Sabaic is no longer written, at our conference P. Stein discussed texts that lower the terminal date for the active use of late Sabaic so that a death of Sabaic in the 6th-7th century is no longer a suitable option. Janet Watson goes even further in her paper that the survival continued even into recent times. If one turns to a handbook on Semitics, the common impression is that around 500 Arabic succeeds Old South Arabian which must be adjusted. The common opinion is that Sabaic-Himyarite language was already dead, but evidence is gathering to identify a continuation, particularly in the stick texts. Thus, the conventional dating table on the right might give way to that shown in Fig. 15.

Conclusions

In light of modern aesthetic thought, the idea of a linear development in OSA from good to bad in terms of artistic merit can and must be seen in a far more differentiated way than previously. During the Enlightenment, in fact the main ontological model consisted of birth, maturity and decline. Nowadays, however, biological 'decline' is

ameliorated analogously by means of a variety of options including further education, accumulation of wisdom, modern medicine, better nutrition, higher life expectancy, and in many respects has lost its old stigma. Moreover, the post-modern historiographic movement inveighs against primitive evolutionary schemes in history.

Internal and external cultural and political pressure and the arrival of foreign powers in OSA, ends with a political caesura that begins some 50 years later than the conventional one assigned to Roman Late Antiquity (300-600). Thus the nomenclature regarding the empire and late Himyar in Arabia corresponds rather well with those of Late Roman Antiquity. Rare parallels with Late Antique Early Medieval Roman artefacts provide important anchor points for the chronology of OSA art. This is the case with the lion hunt relief (Fig. 10) and the vulture relief from Mariya (Fig. 11). The probable destruction of Zafar, during the mid 6th century, provides a *terminus post quem* for our topic. At about this time, the patronage and production of reliefs appears to decline, and the style becomes more abstract. Sasanian and Palmyrene influences appear more clearly in the relief art at Zafar (Yule 2007), but there is no evidence for actual foreign control of the city. One might raise the question, whether Sasanians ever existed here. Abraha's building of the cathedral at San'a marks the end of Himyarite traditions and royalty at Zafar, that no longer formed sufficient reason to retain the capital here. Few artistic works are datable with certainty to the 7th century CE.

The demise of Himyar is signalled in different ways. Zafar no longer plays a role in the texts. In addition, only in Zafar/al-'Uwar do building remains vaguely suggest a post-Himyarite rebuilding of fortifications into a retaining wall. Unfortunately, this activity cannot be dated exactly (Yule et al. 2007). Certain ruins in and around Zafar cannot be dated, and thus conceivably belong to different times, including late/post Himyarite ones. Given the fewness of the sources, one can neither prove nor disprove an Islamic period occupation of the site except of course for a lack of recognisable such finds. One probably existed, however, that had two effects for historians: The place-names were carried on over centuries even to the present day, and the irrigation walls were maintained in several cases, and are still identifiable. Cultural-political changes in rapid succession can only have weakened the late Himyarite social fabric, possibly in conjunction with epidemics and droughts, as interpreted from OSA texts. But Himyarite cultural elements may well be more persistent than hitherto believed.

Abbreviations:

ABADY *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen*, Mainz.

JSAL *Jerusalem Studies on Arabic and Islam*.

Vienna 1998: W. Seipel (ed.), *Jemen Kunst und Archäologie im Land der Königin von Saba?*. *Ausstellungskatalog Wien*, Vienna.

ZOrAr *Zeitschrift für Orient-Archäologie*.

Sources cited:

'Abdullah, Y.

1975 *Die Personennamen in al-Hamdani's al-Iklil und ihre Parallel in den altsüdarabischen Inschriften*, Tübingen.

1993 Himyar bayna l-habar wal-athar, *Dirasat Yamaniya* (Oct/Dec): 2848.

al-Ansary, A.R.T.

1982 *Qaryat al-Fau, A Portrait of Pre-Islamic Civilisation in Saudi Arabia*, Riyadh

Antonini, S.

2001 *La statuarie sudarabica in pietra*. Repertorio iconografico sudarabico. Vol. 1. Rome.

In press *La sculpture architecturale en Arabie Méridionale du iie au viie siècle après Jésus-Christ. Étude préliminaire*.

Brandt, H.

2004 *Das Ende der Antike Geschichte des spätrömischen Reiches*, Munich.

Brown, P.

1971 *The World of Late Antiquity*, London.

1982 *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity. The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity*. Berkeley.

Costa, P.

1973 Antiquities from Zafar (Yemen). I. *Istituto Universitario orientale di Napoli*. ns 33: 185-206.

1976 Antiquities from Zafar (Yemen) II. *Istituto Universitario orientale di Napoli* ns 36: 445-452.

1992 Problems of Style and Iconography in the South-Arabian Sculpture, in: *Yemen Studi archaologici, storici e filologici sull Arabia meridionale* 1: 1939.

Creswell, K.A.C. Allan, J.W.

1989 *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, Cairo.

de Blois, F.

1990 The Date of the 'Martyrs of Najran', in: *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 1: 110-128.

Elsner, J.

1998 *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, Oxford.

Finster, B.

1996 Arabien in der Spätantike, AA: 287-319.

Fontaine, H., Arbach, M., David, H.

2006 *Yémen cités d'écritures*, Manosque.

Franke, K., Kromer, B., Yule, P.

in press Radiocarbon Studies: Zafar, Capital of Himyar, Highland Yemen.

Gibbon, E.

[1776-1788] 1896-1900

ed. J.B. Bury, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 7 vols. London.

Grohman, A.

1963 *Arabien*. Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaften iii/iv. Munich.

Hauptmann-v. Gladiss, A.

1979 Probleme altsüdarabischer Plastik, *BaghMitt* 10: 145167

Hitgen, H.

2003 Eine frühhimyarische Bergsiedlung auf dem Dschabal al-'Awd. An Early Himyarite Mountain Settlement on Jabal al-'Awd, in: I. Gerlach (ed.), *25 Jahre Ausgrabungen und Forschungen im Jemen 1978-2003*. Hefte zur Kulturgeschichte des Jemen I, Sana'a: 106-115 (English-German part), 39-41 (Arabic text).

Japp, S.

in preparation *Sculpture of the Himyarite Age* (working title).

Japp, S./Yule, P.

in preparation *Sculpture of the Zafar Museum*.

Laubscher, H.P.

1975 *Der Reliefschmuck des Galeriusbogens in Thessaloniki*, Berlin.

Lewis, K.

2005 *Space and the Spice of Life: Food, Landscape, and Politics in Ancient Yemen*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Chicago.

Müller, W.

1981 Das Ende des antiken Königreichs Hadramaut. Die sabäische Inschrift Schreyer-Geukins=Iryani 32, in *Al-Mudhud. Festschrift Maria Höfner zum 80. Geburtstag*. Graz: 225-258.

1991. Himyar, in: *Reallexikon für Antike und christliches Altertum* vol. 15, Stuttgart, 303-331.

2001 Zafar. In: *EI*. vol. xi, fasc. 185186, Leiden: 379-380.

Munro-Hay, S.

2003 *Coinage of Arabia Felix*. Mare Erythraeum, vol. 6, Munich.

Parlasca, K.

1989 Bemerkungen zu den archäologischen Beziehungen zwischen Südarabien und dem griechisch-römischen Kulturkreis, in: T. Fahd (ed.), *L'Arabie préislamique et son environnement historique et culturel, Actes du colloque de Strasbourg 24-27 juin 1987*: 281-292.

Piotrovskii, M.

1985 *Južnaja Aravija v rannee srednevekov'e. Stanovlenie srednevekovogo obščestva*. Moscow.

Pirenne, J. et al.

1977 *Corpus des inscriptions de antiquités Sud-Arabes. vol. I.2. Antiquités*. Louvain.

Rathjens, C.

1955 *Sabaeica 2. Die unlokalisierten Funde. Mitt. Aus dem Museum für Völkerkunde in Hamburg*, 24. Hamburg.

Riegl, A.

1901 *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, Vienna.

Robin, C.

2003 *Le judaïsme de Himyar, Arabia Revue de sabéologie* 1: 97172.

2005 Vieilles theses et nouveaux documents le judaïsme en Arabie, des origines a l'aube de l'Islam. Privately circulated announcement for a conference in Jerusalem.

2006 *Himyar juif et chretien (c. 380-560) Inventaire et analyse des inscriptions locales les plus significatives pour les évolutions politiques et religieuses*. Privately circulated text corpus.

Schiettecatte, J.

2006 *Villes et urbanisation de l'Arabie du Sud à l'époque préislamique Formation, fonctions et territorialités urbaines dans la dynamique de peuplement régionale*. Unpublished dissertation, Paris.

2007 Did the South Arabian Settlement Pattern Shrink at the End of the pre-Islamic Times, lecture held at the conference, Yemen - Bridging the Gap between Past and Present, (Heidelberg, 11-12.06.2007).

Schippmann, K.

1998 *Geschichte der alt-südarabischen Reiche*. Darmstadt.

Schmidt, J.

1997 Tempel und Heiligtümer zu den materiellen und formalen Strukturen der Sakralbaukunst. In: *Nürnberger Blätter zur Archäologie* 14: 10-40.

Serjeant, R.B.

1959 Mihrab, in *BSOAS* 22: 439-453.

Sima, A.

2000 *Tiere, Pflanzen, Steine und Metalle in den altsüdarabischen Inschriften*. Wiesbaden.

in press *Vorislamische Inschriften vom Zafar-Museum*.

Van Beek, G.

1958 Marginally Drafted, Pecked Masonry, in: R. LeBaron Bowen/F.P. Albright (eds.), *Archaeological Discoveries in South Arabia II*: 287-295.

Vogt, B.

2007Abraha's Great Dam at Marib. Lecture, at the meeting Yemen: Bridging the Gap between the Past and Present. Heidelberg 11.06.2007.

White, H.

1973 (1987) *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. London.

Will, E.

1998Die Kunst Südarabiens unter dem Einfluß Griechenlands und Roms, in: *Vienna*: 281-283.

Yule, P.

2007*Himyar Spätantike im Jemen/Late Antique Yemen*. Aichwald.

in press 1 Zafar, Capital of Himyar, Fifth Preliminary Report, February-March 2005, *Kommission für die Archäologie aussereuropäischer Kulturen, Beiträge*.

in press 2 Late Himyarite Eagle Reliefs, in: *Gedenkschrift für Alexander Sima*.

Yule, P., Franke, K.

in prep.Zafar, Capital of Himyar, Seventh Preliminary Report, February-March 2007,

Yule, P., Franke, K., Meyer, C., Nebe, G., Robin, C.

2007 Zafar, Capital of Himyar, Fourth Preliminary Report, February-March 2004, *ABADY* 13: 530-547.

Yule, P., Franke, K., Rösch, M., Ruppert, C.

in press Zafar, Capital of Himyar, Sixth Preliminary Report, February-March 2006, *ZOrAr*.

Yule, P., Galor, K.

in press Zafar, Watershed of Late Pre-Islamic Culture.

Credits:

1. photo: B. Finster, inv. no. Zm4; 2. Photo: author, State Ethnological Museum Munich, inv. no. 92-316 751 220; 3. photo: author, Cabinet des Médailles Paris, inv. no. K.3273; 4. photo: Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz, National Museum San'a; 5. photo: Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz, National Museum San'a; 6. Author; 7. Author; 8. author, seq. no. 04~173; 9. author; 10. I. Steuer-Siegmund after photo, B. Finster, inv. no. zm3; 11. I. Steuer-Siegmund after photo; 12. I. Steuer-Siegmund after photo; 13. author; 14. author; 15. Author.