

Zafār/Yemen – a Brief Summary¹

Zafār (Greek: Tapharon, Latin: Saphar, Arabic: ظفار) refers to the capital of the ancient Ḥimyarite empire (110 BCE – 525/c. 570 CE). The Ḥimyar are a tribal confederation which coalesce in Old South Arabia. One reads Ḥmyr-m in the inscriptions. The geographical coordinates of Zafār are 14° 12' 40"N; 44° 24' 10.3"E. Today it is a village with a population of some 450 located 8 air km south-south-east of Yarīm, the next city. Rupestrian Zafār lies at 2800 m altitude some 7 km west adjacent the fertile Qā' al-Ḥaql plain, nearer the present-day capital, Ṣan'ā' (130 km) than coastal 'Adan (230 km).

Traditionally, the name Ḥimyar refers to the Old South Arabian kingdom but not a tribe. In their texts, the constituent tribesmen refer to themselves not as members of a Ḥimyarite state, but with rare exceptions to their different tribal names.

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1 Sources

Numerous texts written in Sabaic form the main source for Zfr. These mention the title "king of Saba⁹ and Dhū Raydān". Raydān is the name of the castle and its ruins on the mountain 500 m north of the present-day village of Zafār, which identifies the site – once the seat of Ḥimyarite kings (Fig. 1). Zafār finds first outside mention by Pliny in his *Natural History* toward the middle of the 1st century CE as a royal residence. The anonymous Egyptian-Roman author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (§22) of the same century, writes that Saphar lies nine days' further inland from the Red Sea, the capital and residence of Charibael, the king of two nations: of the Homerites and the Sabaeans. In the following century, C. Ptolemy notes Saphar as a metropolis in his monumental *Geography* (vi, 7, 41). There is an east-west coordinate error of 88° instead of 78° between the table of coordinates and all 17 of the Renaissance period copies (Humbach/Ziegler 1998; letter F. Mittenhuber 13.12.2004). In other words, as depicted in the maps, the metropolis lies not in the Yemen but in south-eastern part of Arabia corresponding perhaps to al-Balīd in today's Sultanate of Oman. The Zafār in the Yemen predates that in Oman by some 1000 years (Smith 2001). The two place-names are identical despite erratic latter-day transliterations.

The royal Danish expedition which set out in 1761 to explore the orient was perhaps the first known, but unfortunately unsuccessful attempt a visit to Zafār. W. Glaser visited Zafār in one of his study campaigns in 1885 and collected important Sabaic texts there and in the surrounding area. With the opening of the Yemen to western scholars, several visits occurred. Highlights include R. Tindel of the University of Chicago, who researched in Zafār

¹ This summary is written from an archaeological point of view to complement the note of W. W. Müller 2001 which is based on epigraphic and historic sources. I heartily thank him for correcting my text in numerous points prior to publication. A final report on the excavations is in preparation. This note was written under tenure of a grant from the DFG to the University of Heidelberg made to Werner Arnold. I thank Roswitha Stiegner and Stephan Prochazká for inviting me to speak in the University of Vienna on 14 May 2009 in the framework of re-establishing Old South Arabian studies in Austria.

in 1978 and 1980 (1997). A team from Heidelberg University mapped, excavated and otherwise investigated Ṣafār annually from 1998 to 2010.

2 Environment/Topography

Ṣafār (c. 500 mm/year) lies on the edge of the highest precipitation zone in all of Arabia (1000 mm/year in Ibb). The depletion of finite fragile environmental resources probably chronically exceeded the point of replenishment during the empire phase. Over-population, over-grazing, complete deforestation and chronic soil erosion destroyed the productivity of this rupestrian environment (cf. Brunner 1999). Advanced erosion is presumed to have been in full progress in the Ḥimyarite age. The present desolation of the rocky highlands result from uncontrolled exploitation during and after the Ḥimyarite period.

Nestled in the Yemen's southern mountains, ancient Ṣafār lies out of the way of other large sites, main trading routes or ports, despite numerous pottery imports found there. It is best accessible from the plains immediately to the west. During antiquity, unpaved roads enabled this communication through the circuitous valleys and highland plains.

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Like all early cities, Ṣafār had city defences – towers strung between curtain walls. Inner and outer rings of city defences around the core can be partially traced and much interpolated. One text may possibly mention defensive trenching (translation A. Sima 2004). Extensive fortification inside of the Ḥuṣn Raydān fort is clearly visible. A large segment of the population lived extra muros, to judge from ruins in the southern, eastern and western periphery.

Especially to the west, barren flanking mountainous slopes harbour numerous rock-cut tombs, outside of the city defences. 1000 m east of Ṣafār South, a cemetery in al-'Aṣabī for Ḥimyarite citizens of average income/status has been investigated (Yule et al. 2004: 486–505). 300 m to the north-east, outside the city defences in the valley known as al-'Uwār, a group of four large rock-cut tombs have long been known. Size and elaborateness suggest that they are the final resting place for kings and their wives or co-regents (ibid. Pl. 23).

Müller notes five Ḥimyarite palaces (Hargab, Kallānum, Kawkabān, Raydān, Shawḥaṭān) inscriptionally mentioned (2001). To judge from the position of the lengthy building inscription, ZM1, found upslope on the western flank of the Ḥuṣn Raydān, the Hargab palace which it mentions is to be sought on top of that plateau. The spacious excavated courtyard Stone Building at the south-western base of the mountain may be a temple; but for this identification lacking are dedicatory inscriptions. Raydān palace may have stood atop the mountain and seems thoroughly destroyed in large part as a result of squatter occupation, on the strength of a test trench excavated in 1998. According to Tindel, Shawḥaṭān was located on al-Guṣr and the name survived into the 19th century (1997, no source except RES 3383). Here we recorded a large ruin about 100 m in length. At the south-western base of the Ḥuṣn Raydān lies a dense concentration of tombs. In it, a mosque stands

upon what seems to be a rebuilt previous religious structure, which local informants call a church. Numerous other ruins surround the base of the mountain.

The main entrance complex to the city lies in the south, to judge from archaeological vestiges. In the 8th volume of his *al-Iklīl*, the 10th century CE Arab historian H. al-Hamdānī provides a brief description of the city defences, based on sources which were old at the time he wrote. Eight archaeologically suspected gates identifiable in the ruins correlate partly with nine names which Hamdānī mentions for them. He also mentions local then old 'dams' (field retention walls) by name, some of which are locatable even today (e.g. Sadd al-Ša'bānī).

The largest excavated building in Zafār, the Stone Building, has three chambers at the northern end of the 20 x 20 m stone-paved courtyard. Unfortunately, its southern end is not preserved. By virtue of radiocarbon dating, the foundation is believed to arise around the time of Christ. Possibly it fell completely to ruin just after 525 CE. There is no proof for a destruction of it or the city during the Axumite war.

3 Periodisation

Aside from stray prehistoric lithics, evidence relating to the beginnings of Zafār itself are lacking. The Ḥimyar reckon time mainly by means of a calendar of the regnal years of their kings, presumably beginning from the overthrow of their Qatabānian overlords. Counting back reign for reign, this calendar begins in 110 BC. The last native sovereign disappears in 525. The latest Sabaic inscription is dated to 669 of the Ḥimyarite era, which is to the year 559 CE.

Zafār comes historically to the fore at the end of pre-Islamic South Arabian civilisation. Local epigraphic and archaeological sources do not suffice to provide its own periodisation, which can be extracted from the framework of the broader Ḥimyarite political history. The early phase of Ḥimyarite history begins with the first dates of the above-mentioned calendar and continues to the Ḥimyarite defeat and subjugation of the famed neighbouring kingdom of Saba^o. Ḥimyarite power was launched largely by means of local agricultural surpluses.

Around 270–280, to judge from the king's titles, the hegemony of the Ḥimyarite confederacy expands dramatically. The kings of these tribes and their allies unite to expand the borders of the empire to the north of Riyāḍ, as attested to by rock inscriptions. Raids, especially conducted by the powerful Kinda, wreak havoc as far away as al-Ḥīra, the capital of the opposing Banū Lakhm Lakhm tribe, located on the distant lower Euphrates. As an imperial power, Ḥimyar continues until crushed between the Sāsānian and Byzantine fronts in their world war. This empire phase, characterised by military and commercial expansion (despite at least five hypothetical interregna), continues until the Aksumite victory over Ḥimyar in 525. The last Ḥimyarite king (from Ḥaḍramawt) to rule in his own right is Yūsuf 'As'ar Yath'ar, known from traditional Arabic history as Dhū Nuwās, the so-called Lord of the Curls. This is a play of words with the Sabaic/archaic Arabic relative pronoun *dhu* (the one of) and *nuwās*, the Arabic word for curls – a reference to the characteristic side-locks of Jews. The apogee of Ḥimyarite political power corresponds in the Roman world to the late antique period (mid 3rd century to c. 500).

Representatives of the great Dhū Yaz'an tribe induce the Sāsānian king to expunge South Arabia of Aksumite rulers. Around 570 Sāsānian colonists replace them who remain in power in Ṣanā^o and probably elsewhere until Islam establishes itself broadly. But for the fact that local kings no longer rule, one might term the entire phase from 525 until 630 in South Arabia as the late/post phase. During the 560s, highlights include the redoubtable Aksumite rebel king of 'Ḥimyar', Abraha, who quells an insurrection, rebuilds the Ma'rib

dam, builds a large Byzantine-inspired cathedral in Ṣanā', and ignores, evacuates or perhaps even destroys the eclipsed capital. This periodisation jibes poorly with the developmental rhythm of the visual arts and architecture.

On present evidence, the city seems more likely to have succumbed during the revolt of the last native governor, Sumūyafa' Ašwa' in the mid 6th century. By 540, Ghumdān/Ṣanā' are clearly established as the capital, to the north of the Ḥimyarite core area. Squatter occupation on the site of the Stone Building may date to the 13th – 17th century, to judge from a coin found in these ruins. Aside from the subrecent – recent cemetery in Qaryat Ṣafār, evidence of the Islamic age is all but absent. It arose centuries after the demise of the Ḥimyarite city. During the late pre-Islamic-early Islamic age, the entire region appears to have undergone a de-population, a thinning of sites (Schieffele 2006: 494, figs. 101D & E), possibly as a result of depletion of natural resources, epidemic, cyclical drought and/or political factors. Evidence of this is that the sub-recent Muslim cemetery is located in the middle of the present-day village, which indicates that its population lived somewhere else and moved in around it. The several place-names and building structures which survived from the Ḥimyarite period, were transmitted over time by a presumably small local population.

4 'Ḥimyarite Decadence'

The majority of the research on Old South Arabia deals with the older kingdoms, especially Saba'. Representations of Old South Arabia inevitably mention the Koranic and Biblical recounting of king Solomon's famous wooing of the mythical Queen of Sheba. But in reality such isolated tales stand in the shadow of some 500 years of rich Ḥimyarite history and culture, during which for the first time Arabia is unified, militarily and politically. Moreover, in the Koran the celebrated break (actually maintenance and majors repairs recurred severally) of the famous Ma'rib dam is merely a moralising metaphor which refers to the fall of 'godless non-believers' as a result of their hubris. This tradition ignores the real causes of economic decline in the 6th century CE. Medieval Arab historians know only Ḥimyar and its kings – the so-called tabābi'a, not previous ones.

Arch conservative historians and common opinion cast the Ḥimyarite period in the light of decadence, and view it as an aged remainder of what buds earlier with kingdoms such as Saba'. The occupation by Aksumite and Sāsānian powers as well as the conquest of Islam over Ḥimyar suggests to many not simply political, but general degradation (for example, Schmidt 1997). On the other hand, archaeological research regarding Ḥimyar only began since around 1995. It re-dates part of the blossoming which hitherto has been considered to be Sabaeen, to the subsequent period: Recently, field research brought to light numerous reliefs and architecture which enable a rehabilitation of the cultural and historical reputation of the Ḥimyar and their capital. This also holds for the preserved building substance of the Ma'rib dam, despite its earlier onset. The term decadence is a chameleon which changes colour according with vantage point of the observer.

Thus changes in art industries are difficult to correlate with political events for a lack of concrete cause and effect links.

5 Religion

Indications of a trend toward monotheism derive clearly in local Sabaic texts of the mid-late 4th century which invoke the 'Lord of Heaven' (rḥmnⁿ). Other early texts refer to this deity as 'the merciful'. Years later, overtly Jewish texts refer respectively to the "people of Israel" and Christian ones to the "holy trinity". Robin (2006) maintains that around 380 the

main tribes distance themselves from polytheism. By about 390 in Ṣafār and other centres, the polytheistic cults bow to Christianity and Judaism, at least as an official religion for the ruling class. Christianity vies with Judaism for control of Ṣafār and the entire region. In the grips of a debilitating Christological controversy, the competing Arian, later Nestorian and Monophysite churches compete in South Arabia. In a Sabaic text dated 509, Ethiopian and Christian dedicators refer to themselves as ambassadors and build a house in Ṣafār. King Yūsuf 'As'ar Yath'ar, according to Arabic sources converts to Mosaic confession, kills the Christian-Aksumite garrison in Ṣafār and burns a church there (523). The 'Vita of Gregentius', which mentions that the Aksumite king Caleb built three churches in Ṣafār, seems a Byzantine later compilation (Berger 2006).

6 Ethnicity/language

The Ḥimyar of Ṣafār do not write their own language or dialect, but favour Sabaic. Foreign – especially Arab – influence and immigration increase in the entire region. To judge from texts, in the empire and late phases the number especially of Arab immigrants and their influence increases. Arabic vocabulary and syntax establish themselves. To judge from surviving words and place-names, Ḥimyarite language survives the fall of the empire, denaturing gradually especially in remote mountainous areas including Ṣafār itself until Arabic gains strength regionally in the medieval period (Behnstedt 2002; Stein 2008). Imported finds and inscriptions in foreign languages suggest Ṣafār to be metropolis with a mixed population.

7 Art

Especially Ḥimyarite period stone reliefs have survived in quantity at Ṣafār. Reliefs are the most common and typical find at the site. By volume, these outnumber excavated pottery sherds 4:1, perhaps unique for any archaeological site. They show mostly plant decoration and ornament. These combine often with animal and anthropomorphic motives such as so-called inhabited vines. Ḥimyarite Ṣafār is a centre for artistic patronage. Artefacts in precious materials including metal seldom survive, except for numerous coins, but rarely in archaeological context. Greco-Roman, local and other artistic influences are manifest. In the early phase, bull heads figure prominently (Fig. 3). In sculpture, a palette of different styles manifests itself, from naturalistic to linear and abstract. A unique relief which depicts a royal lion hunt belongs to the empire phase (Fig. 4), and shows clear late Roman influence in style and iconography. Its high relief is rare in the art of Arabia. Stylistically linear reliefs, such as Fig. 5, represent late/post phase style, at a time when sculpture becomes rare.

8 Other Settlements

Nearby sites of Ḥimyarite date were located in the survey of a team from the Chicago University team. Nearby lies the large Ḥimyarite settlement of Maṣna'at Māriya (escarpment: 42 ha), some 12 km south of the centre of Dhamār with demonstrable inscriptions and ruins of the empire and late/post periods (Lewis/Khalidi 2008). 60 air km south-east of Ṣafār lies the Jabal al-^cAwd where a large hoard of metallic artefacts was plundered around 1997. The German Institute of Archaeology has carried out extensive excavations there (Vogt/Gerlach/Hitgen 1998). In the 6th century, settlements in South Arabia decline dramatically in number.

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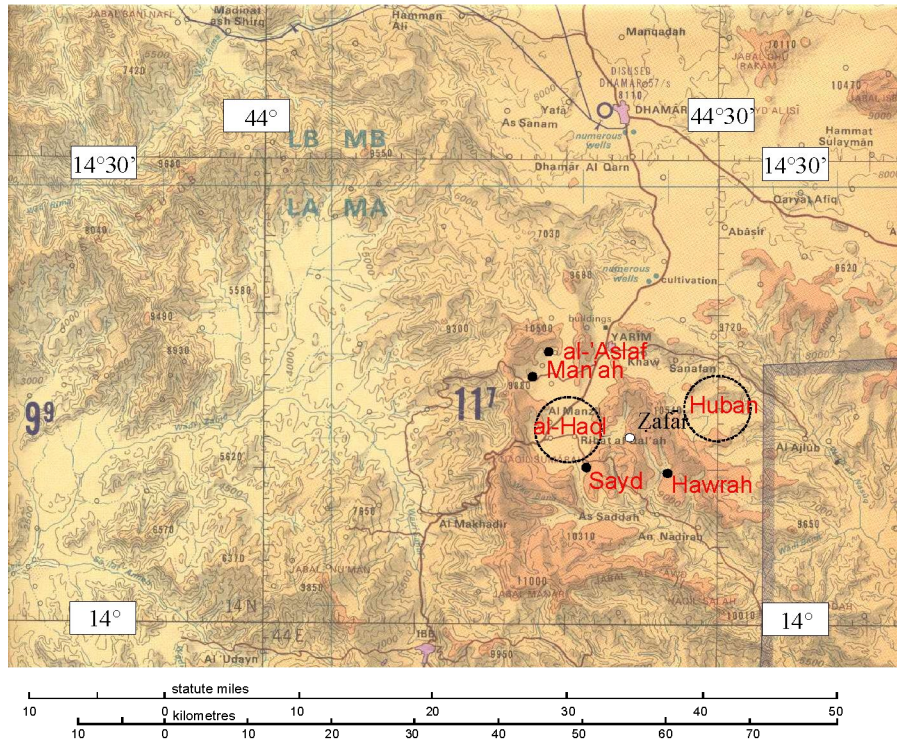


Fig. 1. Area surrounding Zafar. TPC K-6A, original scale 1:500.000, London 1983.

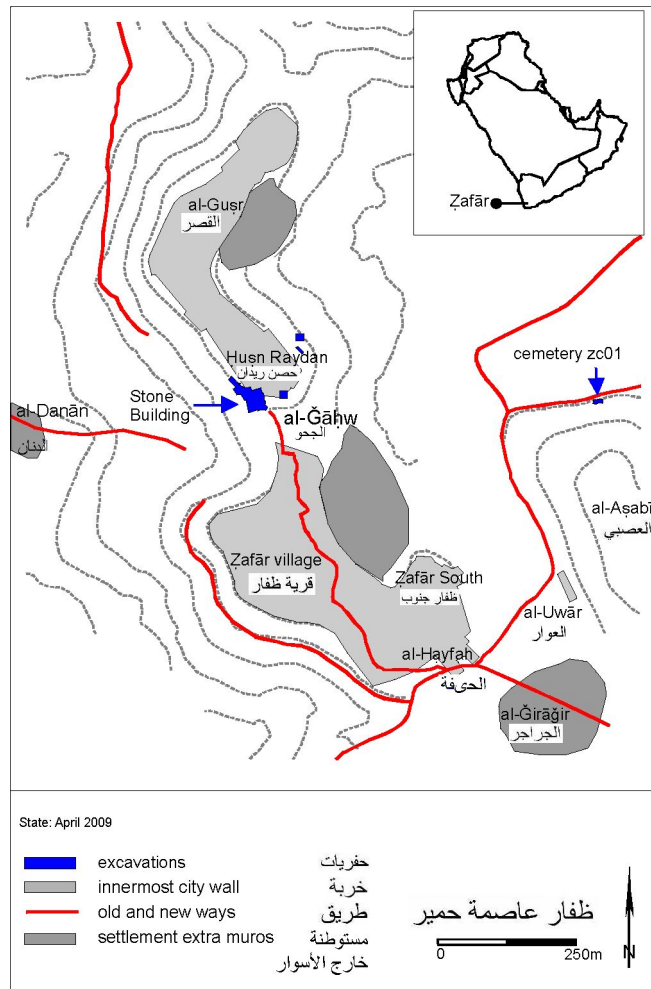


Fig. 2 Simple plan of Zafar showing excavations.

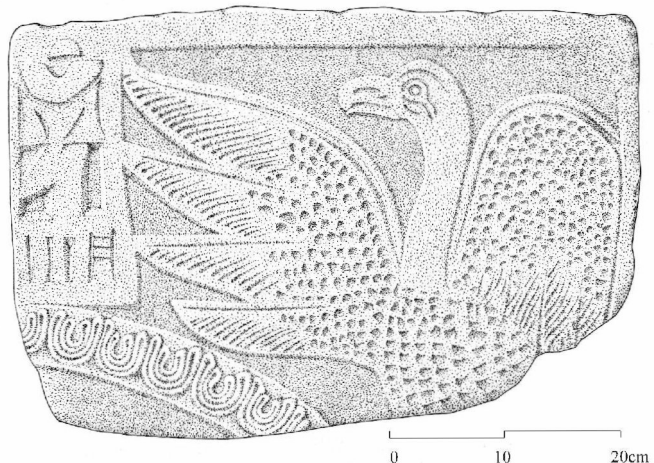
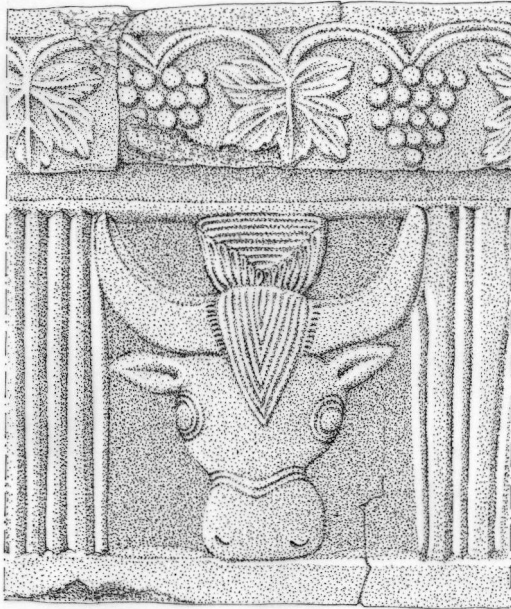


Fig. 3. Early Himyarite relief from the Stone Building. Photo: pz500~416, in situ.
 Fig. 5. Eagle relief of the late/post phase lodged in a house façade at neighbouring Ḥaddat Ġulays.



Fig. 4 Empire phase relief of a royal lion hunt showing the royal Himyarite monogram.
 Inv. no. ZM4.