

Mapping Ḥimyarite Ṣafār

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These notes are dedicated to a field archaeologist and scholar whose broad interests span an area which ranges from Iran to South Arabia. They are a tribute to his influence on me as my mentor. (excerpted from E. Ehrenberg (ed.), *Leaving no Stones Unturned: Essays on the Ancient Near East and Egypt in Honor of Donald P. Hansen*, Winona Lake, 2002, 313–23, ISDN 1-57506-055-8)

Introduction

Roman, Byzantine, and medieval Arab authors mention Ṣafār (Safar, *regia* Sapphar, and Tapharon), the royal capital of the Old South Arabian Ḥimyar tribe, the famous early historic Yemenite city which lies 130 km south of Ṣanʿāʾ (Fig.1). Ṣafār is one of the Yemen's most prominent ruins. Despite the conventional transliteration, in the Yemen nowadays the name is pronounced dtho'-far. The geographic identification with the ancient capital is confirmed by monumental texts cut into stone, and now in the Ṣafār museum which derive from here. The extensive ruins lie 10 km east of Kitāb at some 2900 m altitude. Situated on the eastern edge of an intermontane valley, near the head of the Wādī Bana, Ṣafār is located in Yemen's best-watered region.

This large royal city emerges to us by as reflected in Pliny's *Historia naturalis* (VI, 104) and by the anonymous author of the *Periplus maris erythraei* (§23), both of the first century AD. The official founding of Ṣafār may coincide with the beginning of the Ḥimyarite calendar in 115 BC.¹ By this time the Ḥimyarites had vanquished their political and military rivals, most notably the Sabaean power to the north. Known only in bare outline, Ṣafār's history reflects a turbulent succession of Pre-Christian, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religions. Historical highlights include Theophilus Indus' commissioning of churches through local rulers in "Tapharon of the Homerites", Aden, and Hormūz at the behest of the Byzantine Constantius II (337–61). Subsequent to its commercial and military apex, the city suffered political and sectarian disturbances and subsequently faded from historical sight following, but not as a result of the Muslim conquest in 628. Surprisingly little is known generally or specifically about the local cultures in the Yemen during the Ḥimyarite Period. The influence of Ḥimyarite culture on neighbouring areas, including the Ṣafār (same pronunciation nowadays as its Yemenite namesake) in the Sultanate of Oman, also is a topic still at an early stage of research.

Despite its great wealth, political, and historical influence, tantalizing mentions of the city in medieval texts reveal little about its dimensions, topography, and former importance.² As a result of P. Costa's and R. Tindel's catalogues, more is known about Ḥimyarite sculpture.³ Three recently published maps purport to illuminate our understanding of the city. But they deviate greatly from each other in appearance, vary in their accuracy, intention, and possess little insight into the history and topography of this once-splendid place (Figs. 2–4). A fourth map in R. Tindel's unpublished dissertation is unavailable for study.

1 R. D. Tindel, „Ṣafār“, in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 386.

2 J. Tkatsch, „Ṣafār“, in *Encyclopedia of Islam* 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1934), pp. 1283–89; Tindel „Ṣafār“, pp. 386–7.

3 P. M. Costa, „Antiquities from Ṣafār (Yemen)“, *AION* 33 (1973), p. 185–206; P. M. Costa, „Antiquities from Ṣafār (Yemen)“, *AION* 36 (1976), p. 445–56; and R. D. Tindel, „Ṣafār. Archaeology in the Land of Frankincense and Myrrh“, *Archaeology* 37 (1984), pp. 40–5.

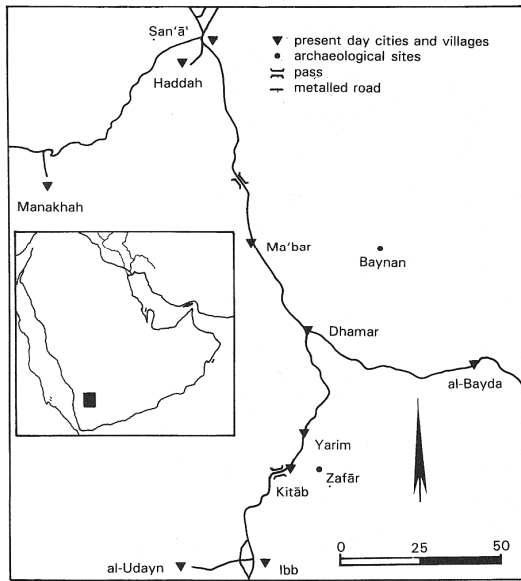


Fig. 1. Towns and places mentioned.

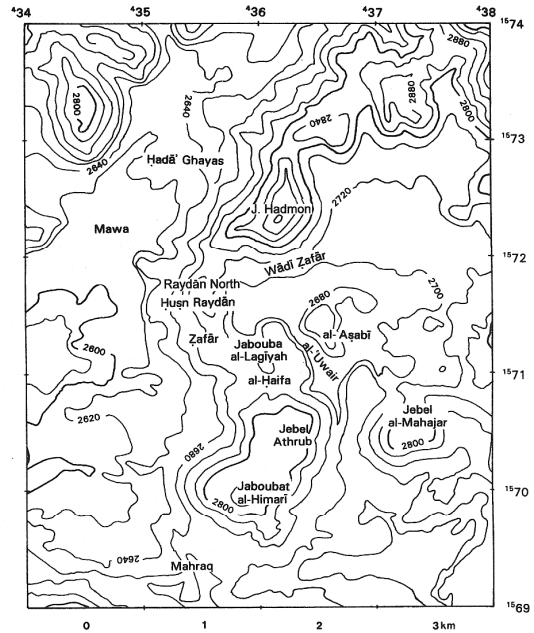


Fig. 2. Attempt at rendering the place-names around Zafār, after Survey Authority San'a'. 1:50.000 map, Series YAR 50 (A), Sheet 1444 C4 "al-Ṣaddah," edition 2-OSD 1986. The coordinates are of the UTM system.

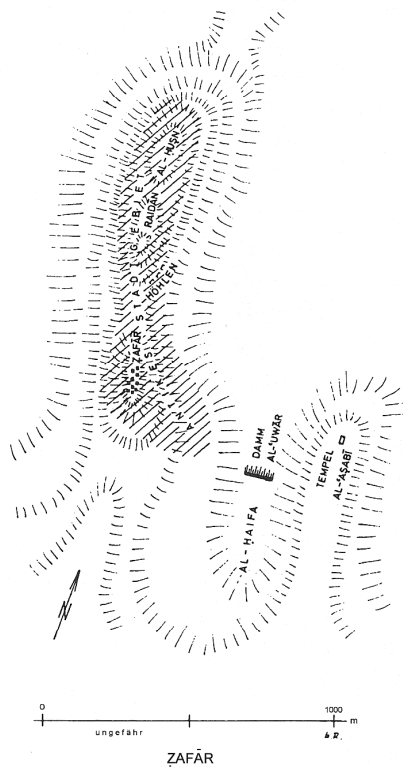


Fig. 3. Sketch map of Zafār, after Radt, "Forschungsreise," p. 268 fig. 23.

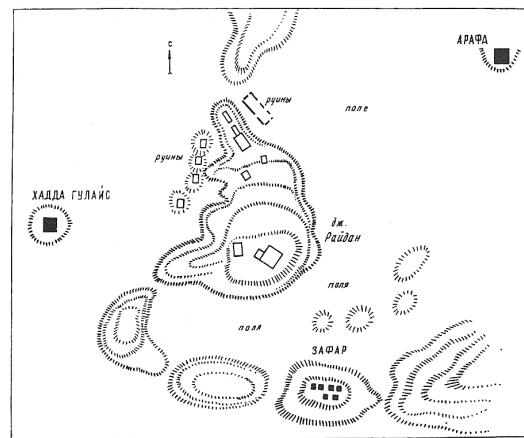


Fig. 4. Sketch map of Zafār, after P. A. Grjaznevič, Istorkio-archeologiceskie pamyatniki drevnego i srednevekovogo Jemena. polevyje issledovanija 1970–1971 (St. Petersburg: Rossijskaya Akad. Nauk, Inst. Vostokovednijak, 1994), fig. 2.



Fig. 5. Ḥuṣn Raydān viewed from the south.

Local Place Names

The local place-names have been rendered in different ways. Authoritative is the official map of the Survey Authority which gives the name “Jebel Hadmān”, where Ḥuṣn Raydān is located (corrected in Fig. 2). In part based on and/or corroborating W. Radt (Fig. 3), P. Costa reports the mountains Ṣafār, al-Qasr (Raydān), al-Ḥuṣn, and al-‘Aṣābī.⁴ Collectively, the three mountains which form the core are today known as Raydān. The appellatives which locals named us in during our first season for two of the mountains are inconsistent with all of this: The north-easterly mountain sometimes is referred to as “al-Gusr”, the central mountain Ḥuṣn Raydān, and the southernmost is Ṣafār. In order to avoid confusion, from south to north respectively, these we designate as Ṣafār, Ḥuṣn Raydān, and “Raydān north”. In addition, belonging to the settlement but outside the antique walls are al-‘Aṣābī to the south-east and Jebel Athrub to the south of Ṣafār.⁵ Local and government sources concur that up to 30 years ago Ḥuṣn Raydān (Fig. 5) and Raydān north were inhabited. But since then with varying degrees of success, settlement and gardening have been prohibited. While the two main mountains are now devoid of habitation, in Ṣafār-town an estimated 370 individuals dwell. If little is known of the antique architecture of Ḥuṣn Raydān, then even less is known about its neighbour directly to the south, which presumably also was a source of stone for the present-day house architecture on that same mountain. Virtually all

⁴ Costa, „Antiquities from Ṣafār,“ (1973), p. 185.

⁵ W. Radt, „Forschungsreise in die arabische Republik Jemen,“ AA (1971), figs. 23, 30, 31.



Fig. 6. Right: southwest corner of Ḥuṣn Raydān; background center; Raydān north.



Fig. 7. Southwest side of Ṣafār.

of the houses here are built of antique dressed stone.

Zafār as a Quarry

Owing to their excellent dressed stone, the mighty Ḥimyarite fortification walls and the finer ones of the royal buildings have been an attractive source of building material for subsequent populations. 2000 years of weathering, erosion, and other natural factors in this rainy area also have taken their toll. Residents with whom we spoke relate that Ḥuṣn Raydān and Raydān north (Fig. 6) have served as a stone quarry for virtually all of the towns in the vicinity. These include Bait al-Aṣwal, al-Ḥadā', Kitāb, Mankāt, Yarīm, Zafār (Fig. 7), and others. We took the opportunity to photograph reliefs and inscriptions built into the houses in Bait al-Aṣwal and Mankāt. Some of those who participated in the previous quarrying served as our workmen this year. They say that 30 years ago the buildings on top of and on the sides of the main mountain site were still partly intact.

Even prior to the widespread use of mechanized transport, years of quarrying on an industrial scale had a decidedly destructive effect on the stone architecture. For different reasons, that crafted of wood and clay, similar to many built centuries thereafter, has long since disappeared without a trace. The recent dramatic expansion of the population generates a need for housing. What centuries of natural and human forces failed to accomplish has taken place within a few generations. Be this as it may, a significant difference in the preservation is not clear by comparison with the photos published by W. Radt in 1971.⁶ The best-preserved dwelling on Ḥuṣn Raydān is located on its north-north-west side, and allegedly represents an attempt to build at that time using antique *spolia*. Although on Raydān north the recent settlement is said to have been more substantial, today from the scrappy foundation remains this cannot be confirmed.

A first step in our cultural resource management project for the settlement is the mapping, the purpose of this year's campaign (25.07. – 25.08.1998). In this way the city's present condition can be registered, and this map readily can be modified in future seasons. Some 20 years ago, in order to hinder further stone robbing on the south side of Ḥuṣn Raydān, local villagers and authorities recount the burying of surviving antique walls under two metres of stone. This well-intended measure effectively hindered our mapping of a key part of the city. The main palace may well lie here, since few of the structures atop the mountain seem either large enough or are of the right period to be recognisable as the Ḥimyarite palace which is known to have been called Raydān. The new mapping confirmed the large dimensions of the settlement and the elaborate defensive architecture of its three mountains. A first season's efforts yielded a rich harvest of information about the place.

Our original plan to map photogrammetrically with the help of aerial surveillance was discarded owing to the difficulty involved in procuring suitable photos of the area. At the outset of our first season, the size and shape of the settlement were unclear. Four km² were to be mapped at 1:2500 scale with Ḥuṣn Raydān in the centre. This would document the core area. But during the survey and after some deliberation, we altered our strategy: First, the area was too large and the scale too small and small building features would not be readily visible in the map. We decided to map at 1:1000. Second, the entire area originally envisaged could not be mapped in a single brief season, particularly because of the heavy daily rain and cloud cover at this time of year. Third, since many of the structural features lay beneath a heavy layer of stone rubble, one could map, but conceivably still glean only a misleading picture of the layout of the city. The positions of palaces, main dwelling quarter, city gates, defense system, churches, synagogues, and temples could hardly be deduced.

6 Radt, „Forschungsreise,“ figs. 24–31.

The Features

Today, the architectural remnants are recognizably early historic (the centuries immediately at the time of Christ) owing to their excellent masonry. But the site is a ruin, and according to one specialist no major Ḥimyarite architectural features survive,⁷ a description which is only partly true. Close cooperation between the archaeologists and surveyors, as well as a limited cleaning of the site, enabled the mapping of the archaeological features partially buried and difficult to recognize. In the first season 174 walls, caves, houses, cisterns, terraces and other features were registered in and around the three mountains. Pre-Ḥimyarite contexts have not yet been identified. In general, few architectural features exist which are unequivocally early Ḥimyarite in date. To these belong several fragmentary walls with finely cut masonry, especially on Raydān north. A deterioration of architectural and artistic achievement mark late and post Ḥimyarite times, to which belong most of the stone walls visible atop Ḥuṣn Raydān and Raydān north. During the course of recent deep road grading a few hundred metres south of Ẓafār in al-Ḥaifa, extensive deep settlement ruins came to light which we unexpectedly became aware of. These seem less disturbed than the others on the site, to judge from the profiles left by the bulldozer. In comparison, especially the terraced fields at the foot of Ḥuṣn Raydān contain the stones of completely ruined antique and medieval features. The mapping is to continue, complemented by limited excavation to clarify specific structures.

At the highest point atop Ḥuṣn Raydān, a likely spot for construction under royal patronage, we partly cleared and then refilled a late/post Ḥimyarite building designated Z028. The dating derives from the mixture of well-dressed Ḥimyarite stones and presumably later coarsely dressed ones which occurred in the foundations. On arrival, we noticed stones piled up on or near this structure by robbers for transportation to other places. Grass still grew beneath the stones. Our cleaning of Z028 was never conceived to be a full-scale excavation. Our goal was mapping and we did not intend to reach bedrock at all points, but rather simply to determine the preservation and character of this part of the site with a minimum of destruction as a first documentary step. Hardly a handful of finds, mostly pottery sherds, occurred. The original floor was no longer intact. Best preserved were the north and east foundation walls. Within a few metres east of this building a large, finely fashioned, fragmentary, octagonal column of white marble came to light which may have belonged to it. Just north of the structure, fragments of sculpture occurred in the debris. During the course of the cleaning some 100 m³ of stone debris were removed from the immediate vicinity before our season came to an end. The building measured a scant 18 x 11 m. Could this be what 'Alqamah in *al-Iklīl* is quoted as referring to as the "mighty castle Raydān"?⁸ Was this Ḥimyarite palace already by then completely dismantled, or was it located elsewhere?

In *al-Iklīl*, the 10th century Yemenite historian al-Ḥamdānī mentions eight palaces in Ẓafār including Raydān (the state palace of Dū-Yazan), Shawḥaṭān, and Kawkabān,⁹ and names the nine city gates. These are the Walā' (friendship), Aslāf (ancestors), Karaqah, Ma'nah (navel), Hadwān, Khubān, Ḥawrah, Ṣayd, also called Sumārah, and Ḥaql.¹⁰ Some gates may be named after places in the direction of which they face.¹¹ The gates are located

7 Tindel, „Ẓafār“, (1997), p. 386.

8 N. A. Faris, *The Antiquities of South Arabia being a Translation... of the Eighth Book of Al-Ḥamdānī al-Iklīl* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), p. 20.

9 Faris *The Antiquities of South Arabia*, p. 22.

10 Faris *The Antiquities of South Arabia*, p. 22-3.

11 Oral information, N. Nebes.

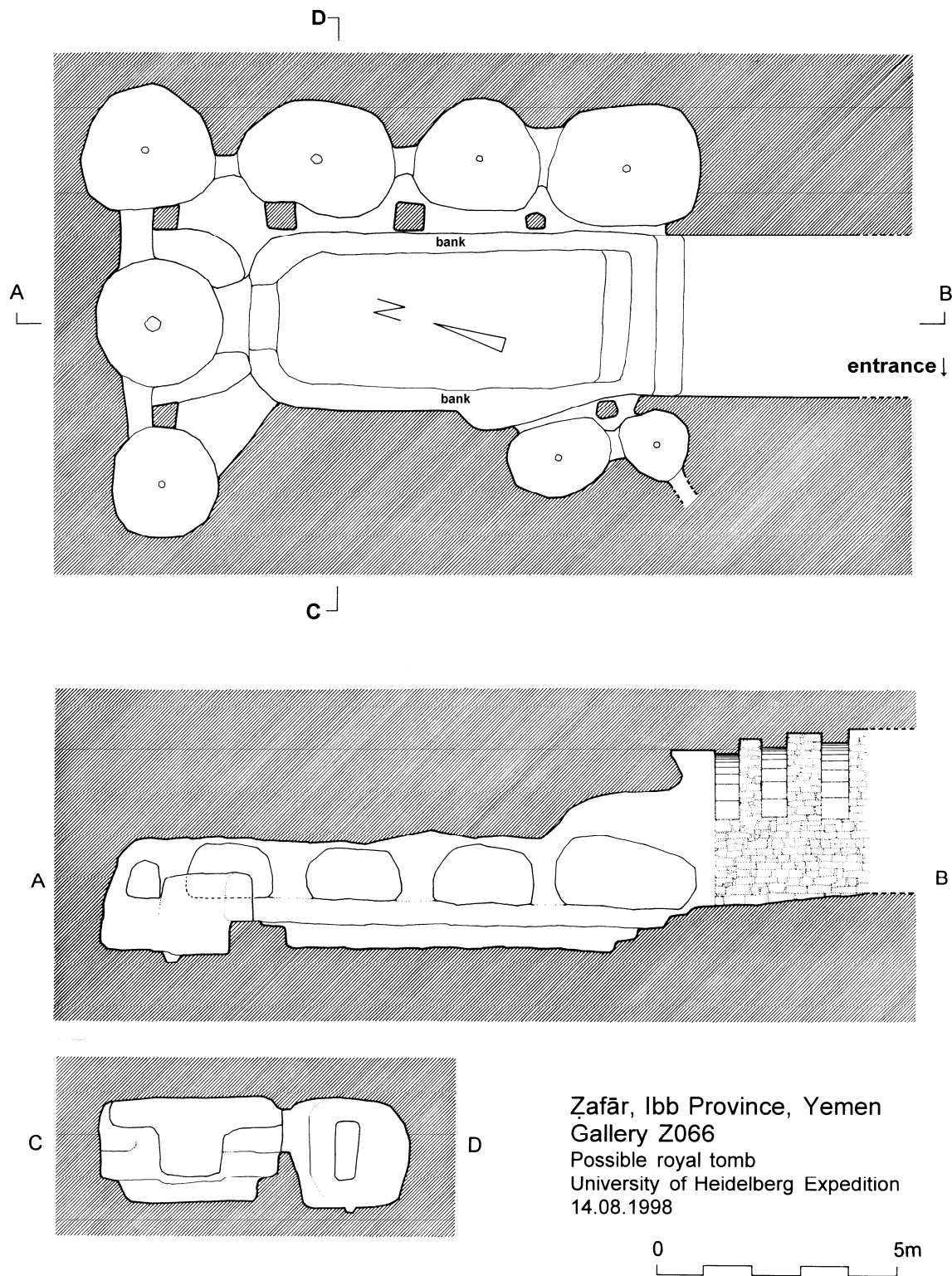


Fig. 8. Sketch of the gallery Z066 at Ẓafār.

“on top of a mountain”, a description which fits the topography. The main entrance structure of the settlement was built in the saddle between Ḥuṣn Raydān and Raydān north. Here and on the west side of Ḥuṣn Raydān the stone rubble is the heaviest on the entire site. Enough is visible to determine that the fortification opened to the east and west. A third main antique entrance is the one presently used for access to Ṣafār town.

The fortification system uses the natural slope and cut rock-faces combined with walls. Even in their ruined state the defensive walls of the three mountains are impressive. Where the southern-most mountain, Ṣafār, is not as steep as the other two, its defensive system has suffered less from erosion. To the south-east of the museum in Ṣafār casemate walls made of massive stones are partly intact and lend an idea of how other parts of the fortification would have appeared. The eastern side of Ṣafār was the weak part of the defensive system of the three mountains because here the slope outside the walls is not steep. The chronological development of the fortifications in relation to other structures is unknown.

Numerous tunnels and chambers were cut into the soft tuff. One tunnel which the locals claim to connect the eastern and western sides of Ḥuṣn Raydān in fact does not. Undoubtedly some are originally Ḥimyarite, or were expanded at that time. But at this stage of research their dating is unclear. Several chambers have been fitted secondarily with exterior walls and turned into dwellings and/or stalls. Others now are empty ruins, are baths with descending steps cut into the bedrock, are full to the roof with water, or serve as latrines. Large cylindrical or conical underground chambers served for water and fodder storage. Nowadays locally others are considered originally to have been stables because they have a central access and flanking box-like chambers. Conceivably they would have been large enough to house donkeys or small horses. Indeed, nowadays some are used for livestock. But the regular arrangement of otherwise blind chambers straddling a central corridor suggests catacombs rather than stalls, despite their secondary use as such. Others, as at al-‘Uwair, are far larger, of better than average workmanship, and elaborate to an extent that royal patronage seems plausible or even likely. Walls are relatively straight and corners geometrically regular. Some of the galleries in and around Ṣafār probably once were tombs, located inside or near the city walls where they could be defended.

Unresolved is the whereabouts of the royal tombs. Pre-Islamic graves occur at different points around the site, but a closer dating for them is not as yet possible. Moreover, cremation is a most unlikely early historic custom in this part of the world.¹² In the hope of locating a royal tomb, in 1980 representatives of the General Organisation of Antiquities excavated one of the largest subterranean chambers, which is located on the north-east side of Ṣafār. At about the same time royal tombs they also sought in Ṣirha near Yarīm.

12 J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums gesammelt und erläutert* (2nd ed.; Berlin/Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1927), p. 127.



Fig. 9a and 9b. East relief at the north end of the chamber (height of the figure ca. 37 cm).



Fig. 10a and 10b. West relief at the north end of the chamber (height of the figure ca. 41 cm).

A Royal Tomb?

Between Ẓafār and Ḥuṣn Raydān near the old stone-built mosque we designated one of the very largest of the chambers Z066. Pending proper surveying, time allowed its sketching (Fig. 8). Foundation-cuts into the bedrock and monumental Ḥimyarite walls in the immediate area bear witness to this having been an area of royal building activity. The subterranean antique structure consists of a main gallery surrounded by chambers which are subcircular in plan. The lower sides of the main chamber are formed by a “bench”. Flanked by chest-high walls and by two piers cut out of the bedrock at the north end, a step leads into the northern-most central chamber. On the east side the chambers communicate with each other and from chest height upwards with the central hall by means of an arcade which separates them. The chambers on the north and east sides are approximately as deep as is the main gallery. During the rainy summer monsoon season water seeps into the subsurface structure through rock fissures. At the bottom of each a cylindrical depression measuring some 20 x 20 cm is cut, evidently for drainage. Access into the main gallery is provided by now-worn steps at the south end. In its present state, this area is enclosed by a stone structure with barrel-vaults. This edifice, of no great antiquity (three reused Ḥimyarite reliefs decorate the exterior), belongs to Ḥamūd Atam al-Ẓafār. Dung paddies used for heating and cooking are stored and dried in the antique gallery and added-on house. Aside from the addition of the stone building, there is no evidence for different building phases. The gallery bears no inscribed name of a Ḥimyarite king or other personage. It is remarkable owing to its large size, elaborateness, and unique shape. Among the features which are difficult to explain is the stone „bench“ surrounding the central chamber. The identification for Z066 as a royal tomb is inferred by its size and elaborate construction.

Z066 is the only known anthropogenic underground chamber in which reliefs are preserved. Two reliefs were cut onto the south face of the two columns at the north end of the chamber. The worn relief to the west (Fig. 9a and 9b) shows a rampant goat, its head turned back and with upwardly pointed horns. The caprid to the east (Fig. 10a and 10b) differs from it in its style, preservation, and general appearance. These two figures show little modelling but are striking in their form. Since nearly all of the relief sculptures from the area are only chance-finds, these two are the only ones for which the exact provenance within the city is certain. Presumably they are Ḥimyarite in date, and fit into the iconography of this period.

In the immediate surrounding area graves penetrate into the soft bedrock. The largest number of graves seem to be located on the north slope of the hill al-‘Asābi to the south of the Wādī Ẓafār a few hundred metres south-east of Z066. On the north side of Ẓafār several nearby caves once may have been tombs. In recent years, and no doubt earlier, treasure seekers have robbed here. Natural and man-made subterranean galleries of unknown original function lie scattered in the immediate surrounding area. The investigation of the cemeteries lay outside the scope of this year's project. Although the mapping is not yet finished, Ẓafār emerges as a mighty fortress corresponding to that in the early sources.

Acknowledgments

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