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NEW RESEARCH IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND EPIGRAPHY OF SOUTH ARABIA AND ITS NEIGHBORS

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SMALL FEMALE FUNERARY STELAE

The typology of South Arabian funerary stelae is rich and multifaceted, varying in relation to different contexts and in the course of different historical periods. I will limit my analysis to a particular series of small stelae depicting a feminine figure, some of which also bear an inscription. Four stelae are unpublished, while the others four are already known from the literature, but will be analyzed in view of a possible re-interpretation of their significance. Although these stelae present a rather stereotyped iconography, they diverge on the basis of the different attributes the figures hold in their hands.

The most critical issue for revealing the significance of these artworks is the identification of the feminine figure. In presenting each individual stela, I will discuss possible interpretations of the portrayed figure.

The first unpublished artwork, in white alabaster (20.5x15.5x5.8 cm; fig. 1), displays a feminine figure sculpted in bas-relief inside a niche. The woman is seated, in a frontal position. She is dressed in a short-sleeves tunic with uniform dense, vertical folds extending to her sandaled feet. The facial features are executed in relief, including a short lock of hair on her forehead, while her ears are incised. The left hand lies on her left knee, the right arm is bent and extended in front and the hand holds a spherical object, probably a fruit. The lower frame of the niche bears an incised dedication: *Memorial of Yawmna'am, daughter of the Yakhram dhū-Haẓtān's lineage*. Epigraphic analysis dates the stela at about the 4th century AD.¹

An alabaster stele (21x20.5x3.2 cm; fig. 2) similarly depicting a woman in frontal pose seated on a low bench was previously published by Jacqueline Pirenne (1986: 347-348). She has short hair, wears an ample cloak and her wrists are adorned with jewelry. Her left hand rests on her left thigh; her right hand is lifted and holds a round object with a handle decorated with concentric circles, resembling a mirror. According to Pirenne, the object could be a spindle, which

¹ I wish to thank Mounir Arbach for dating and interpreting the epigraphic inscriptions of this contribution.

would suggest the woman's identity as a deity similar to the Roman *Parca*, symbol of the Fate. The iconography dates back to the first three centuries AD. In spite of its wide outer frame, the stela lacks an inscription, but it is conceivable that an inscription/dedication was incised on a separate base onto which the stela was inserted.

The third artwork in alabaster (2x14.5/12.1x3.5 cm; fig. 3), also published by Pirenne (1977: 451-452) and dated close to the first centuries AD, has the characteristics of a proper stele – rectangular in shape, wider in the upper portion and with an inscription on the base. Again, the feminine subject, depicted almost in profile, sits on the thick pillow of a sort of curule seat. She wears a short-sleeved, ample tunic ending in rich pleats. The left hand is raised and opens, while the left arm is extended laterally and the hand holds a conic object, probably a fruit. Pirenne interpreted the object as a pinecone, and the raised arm with an open hand as a typical gesture of benediction that, according to the author, is both characteristic signs of divinity. It is worth mentioning that in South Arabian iconography, this meaning is carried out with the same gesture, but performed with the right arm. The inscription mentions the feminine name of *Haywat Damrān*.

The unpublished alabaster artwork (15x11x3.5cm; fig. 4) is roughly manufactured and the female figure is sculpted in a cursory manner. The typology of the stela is analogous to the previous examples – a frontally seated woman with a long, pleated skirt – but with gestural variants. The left arm is bent and the hand rests on the waist. The right arm is also bent and the hand reaches toward the face. The object held by the woman is not recognizable, but her gesture bears similarities with the gesture in the Figure 5 to be described below. The inscription is incised vertically and laterally on the frame, instead of on the conventional location at the base of the stele. The inscription reads: *Memorial of Abītab* (or *Abītabat*, variant of the name *Abīlawbat*). Paleographic analysis sets this inscription to around the 4th century AD.

The limestone stele (unpublished; fig. 5) presents, inside a frame, the bas-relief of a woman cloaked in an ample robe enriched by deep folds. She raises her right hand to bring a small cup toward the mouth, while the left hand holds a long and thin branch carrying large leaves. The face, triangular and with deeply incised features, is framed by thick hair divided in two long and compact braids that fall onto her shoulders.

The small alabaster stela from Baynūn (14.5 cm high; fig. 6), previously published by Pirenne (1977: 445), presents the bust of a female figure in frontal view. Two long braids frame the face. This figure, presents variants in her clothing as she wears a vest with linear embroideries, jewelry and a crown on her head. The right hand holds a thin branch and the left hand a bird.

The other stele (unpublished; fig. 7) dates from the 3rd century AD and depicts the torso of a woman, her hands resting on the waist. The left hand holds a stylized object that recalls a bunch of wheat a common iconographic element in Sabaeen and Qatabānian cultures that symbolizes, according to Pirenne, the South Arabian goddess dhāt-Ḥimyam (Pirenne 1977: 415-439). Three slightly slanted incisions follow the folds of her robe. The base is inscribed with the name of *Shan'at Khara'*.

Finally, the last object is a small alabaster stele from Baynūn (7 cm high; fig. 8) with a similar, yet simplified, iconography (Radt 1971: 19, Pl. 36, No. 100). The woman holds in her right hand a slender branch, and in her left hand, a bird.

Two of the abovementioned objects (fig. 1, 4) are called *m'mr*; a term encountered in Qatabānian funerary contexts. According to epigraphist Jacques Ryckmans (1953), *m'mr* stands

for “funerary monument or memorial” – an object that symbolizes the constant presence of the deceased devotee in the temple, or perpetuates his/her memory before the divinity. For philologist Giovanni Garbini (1980: 57), *m’mr* refers to a devotional object, strictly Qatabānian, related to the cult of the deceased who is remembered in the necropolis’ temple. To paraphrase Garbini’s definition – it is a monument that would allow the living to perceive the deceased as existing and being present. In a few cases, the term is used to identify a place of cult or a funerary chapel inside a temple (Robin 2012: 37).

Pirenne attributes to this term a purely cultic meaning and therefore identifies as votive, and not funerary, the stelae that contain *m’mr*. Obviously, Pirenne refers to the class of Qatabānian stelae identified in her numerous works as “stèles à la déesse dhāt-Ḥimyam” (Pirenne 1960; 1962; 1965). This author interprets the stereotyped woman figure as a fertility goddess on the basis of symbols such as the bunch of wheat and the raised hand in a blessing gesture, as well as the feminine figure’s formal characteristics, including the fleshy abdomen and the pronounced breasts (Pirenne 1960: 333). Pirenne extends the identification of the woman as a goddess to similar depictions on stelae, as shown on fig. 2 (“déesse en parque (?)”; Pirenne 1986; 347), fig. 3 (“Plaque à la déesse assise”; Pirenne 1977: 451), fig. 6 (“plaque à la déesse en Atargatis à la colombe”; Pirenne 1977: 445) – and to the figurative stelae with a depiction of a woman on a throne assisted by maids (“la déesse sur des reliefs sabéennes”; Pirenne 1965).

One fundamental question relates to the identity of the feminine image – whether it is the portrait of the devotee, albeit symbolic or stereotyped, or the portrait of the divinity implored by the devotee. The identification of the feminine figure with a deity is not always definitive in view of uncertainties regarding divine iconography in South Arabian cultures, where divine attributes are never specific and unvarying. The only certainty regarding these funerary stelae is provided by the inscriptions that, when present, indicate that the stelae bearing the image of a woman were commissioned exclusively by women.

As a first step at answering this question, I will analyze the significance of the women’s gestures and the objects that they hold and draw a comparison with similar iconographies in coeval and surrounding cultures, specifically in funerary reliefs from Palmyra.

A gesture of long Near Eastern tradition is the raised right arm and open hand presenting the palm to the viewer. This is an apotropaic gesture with a mixed divine/human symbolism. It symbolizes protection and blessing when performed by a divinity, or adoration by a supplicant when performed by humans.

Only the feminine character of the funerary stele shown on fig. 3 performs this gesture, and she raises the left and not the right arm. The woman holds in her right hand, according to Pirenne’s interpretation, the funerary pinecone, symbol of immortality.

Similar to the woman on fig. 3, figures seated on stools are represented on both the most ancient South Arabian reliefs, such as that on a pillar of the *propylaeum* of the *intra-muros* Banāt ‘Ād temple of al-Sawdā’/Nashshān (Jawf, 8th century BC), and on the most recent sculptures (2nd century AD), such as, for example on an alabaster stele (found in Tan‘im and presently in the National Museum of Ṣan‘ā’, YM 386), representing a hunter in the presence of the goddess Shams. However, the identification of these figures as divinities is far from being certain. Similarly, there are no elements that conclusively sustain an interpretation of the woman on fig. 3 as the image of a goddess. I suggest that the image is the representation of the deceased named in the inscription. As the pinecone, similarly the apple and the pomegranate are funerary symbols of immortality. One such fruit could be the attribute held by the woman on fig. 1.

In the reliefs from Palmyra, many attributes are specific to the gods, but others are shared between gods and humans, including for example, the containers used during ceremonial banquets. In the stelae presented here, the women depicted on fig. 4 and fig. 5 lift a small cup to their mouth. The woman on fig. 5 also holds a slender branch that in Oriental iconographic studies is at times interpreted as a branch of a palm tree. The small branch is an attribute of divinities of both genders, but also of priests and common people as a funerary symbol. In fact, the palm tree branch is held by both female and male divinities, offered to them by eagles or Victories (as in Syria and Parthia from the end of the 1st century BC), and the deceased also holds it in funerary contexts. In this case, it symbolizes victory over death, a concept of possible Middle Eastern origin and also diffused in Roman culture (Colledge 1976: 209). Occasionally, a flower or a fruit substitutes for the funerary branch. In conclusion, even for these two reliefs, it can be debated whether these images represent goddesses, rather than the deceased women.

Only the woman on fig. 6 has a distinctive crown on her head. Jacqueline Pirenne identified this figure as the Syrian goddess Atargatis based on the iconographic presence of the dove. Lucian of Samosata (2nd century AD) provides an accurate description of the cult of this divinity that was identified with Hera in the Syrian city of Hierapolis during the Roman period (Cf. Dirven 1997). The cult of Atargatis was associated with rivers and springs. The goddess appears as a tutelary deity within urban centers and is often represented on coins with a mural crown whose crenellations represent the town for which she served as protector. Iconographically, she is depicted seated on a throne, flanked by sphinxes or lions, with a variety of attributes, including sheaves of grain, a plate or cup, a scepter or staff. More often, she holds a spindle or a mirror. Also associated with this deity are doves or fish, represented close to her or actually on her. In certain communities Atargatis was associated with dolphins while in others the iconography of the eight-pointed star emphasized her association with the planet Venus. She may also be represented with her consort Hadad-Zeus who is accompanied by two bulls. Clearly, the iconography of Atargatis is complex, particularly as the goddess became identified with a number of Greek divinities, including Rhea (Cybele), Athena, Artemis and Aphrodite.

Current studies have not conclusively determined the presence of the cult of Atargatis in South Arabia or her assimilation with local divinities. As such, it would be premature to assume that the female subjects described in Figure 6 represent deities.

The women depicted on fig. 6 and fig. 8 hold a bird in their left hand and a slender branch in their right hand. A comparison with reliefs from Palmyra reveals children and adolescents holding a bird in their hand, together with a bunch of grapes, both symbols of childhood. The iconography has Greek antecedents, but it is also common in the Roman Empire. The bird does not belong to a defined species – it could refer to the protective dove of Atargatis, or simply a domestic pigeon (Colledge 1976: 158).

Other typically feminine attributes in Palmyrene funerary reliefs are the spindle and the distaff, both brandished in the left hand; the ball of threads, caskets and baskets – all reference to their terrestrial origin. It is worth mentioning other symbols, such as musical instruments for ceremonies and banquets that are depicted in a number of South Arabian figurative stelae, and toiletry objects such as the mirror shown on fig. 2.

In conclusion, there are no conclusive proofs on the association of these feminine images with divinities, as suggested in the past by Pirenne, especially if the identity of a specific goddess is not determined.

In the first century of the Christian era, Greco-Roman influences extended to South Arabia, as evident from the analysis of South Arabian iconographies and imagery in reliefs and the bronze objects. In what terms can we talk of religious syncretism in South Arabia? With what intent and in what context the Greco-Roman iconographies were transmitted to, and absorbed by the Arabian environment? The external influences could be restricted to a simple borrowing of images, to appropriation, *interpretatio* (equating foreign divinities to gods of the local pantheon) or parallelism, or assimilation of the identity of a foreign deity by a local divinity – i.e. syncretism in its various forms and expressions, as described and interpreted at length by Motte and Pirenne-Delforge (1994). Unfortunately it is difficult to give a definite answer regarding syncretic influences in South Arabia, since there are no literary sources and the inscriptions are not explicit or informative in this regard.

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Fig. 1. YM 1643, National Museum of Şan'a', from Ma'rib area.



Fig. 2. NAM 1267, National Museum of Aden (Pirenne 1986: 347-348).



*Fig. 3. Foster Collection No. 6 (Baltimore).
Probably from Hayd Ibn 'Aqīl (Pirenne 1977: 451-452).*



Fig. 4. YM 2493, National Museum of Ṣan'ā' (unknown provenance).



Fig. 5. YM 1700, National Museum of Şan'ā' (unknown provenance).



Fig. 6. National Museum of Şan'ā', from Baynūn (Radt 1971: 19, No. 99, Pl. 36; Pirenne 1977: 445-446).



Fig. 7. YM 11423, National Museum of Ṣan'ā' (unknown provenance).



Fig. 8. National Museum of Ṣan'ā', from Baynūn (Radt 1971: 19, No. 100, Pl. 36).