South Arabian antiquities in a private collection in Ar-Riyaḍ (Saudi Arabia)

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With a note by G. Mazzini

A Saudi Arabian private collection of South Arabian antiquities is presented
here. The material includes an incense-burner, two funerary stele, four funerary
human faces and four inscriptions all probably from the Ma'rib area.

During my stay in Saudi Arabia I had the opportunity to study a small, yet interesting private collection of South Arabian, pre-Islamic objects. The owner, Shaykh Mu'ammal al-'Ubaykān, inherited the collection from his father who was the Saudi Arabian ambassador in Ṣan'ā', at the time of Imām Yaḥya. When his father returned to Riyaḍ, he donated several objects to the National Museum. The pieces that remained in the family are the object of the present study. The collection comprises inscriptions, heads in relief and sculpture, funerary stele, an incense-burner, figurative scenes in relief and coins. These objects were executed in different materials including limestone, sandstone, alabaster and bronze. Although the authenticity of some of the objects is indisputable, it should be noted that certain pieces of the collection belong to particular types that are often forged. I review here only those pieces that are unequivocally authentic.

1. Fragmentary incense-burner in sandstone, with figures in relief (Figs 1a-b). Di-

mensions: total height: 12 cm; width of border: 2 cm; pedestal: 5×3×5 cm.
Portions of the two sculpted sides and one cubic pedestal foot are preserved. One of the two sides contains a representation of two ibexes with large, curved horns. Both animals face the centre which is occupied by a male figure with the head and legs facing to the right, and the bust in frontal view. The man's knees are bent, as if running, and he extends his arms laterally while holding a long pole in his left hand (Fig. 1a).

The scene of the other side of the incense-burner, only partly preserved, is composed of a beast with open jaws, standing on a hillside, and an ibex, of which only the curvature of the horns and the posterior part of the body are visible (Fig. 1b). The lower part of the sculpted panels is bordered by zigzag relief.

It is worth noting the presence of naturalistic elements such as the hillside on which the beast (probably a lion) is standing and the running posture of the man. These elements render the scenes
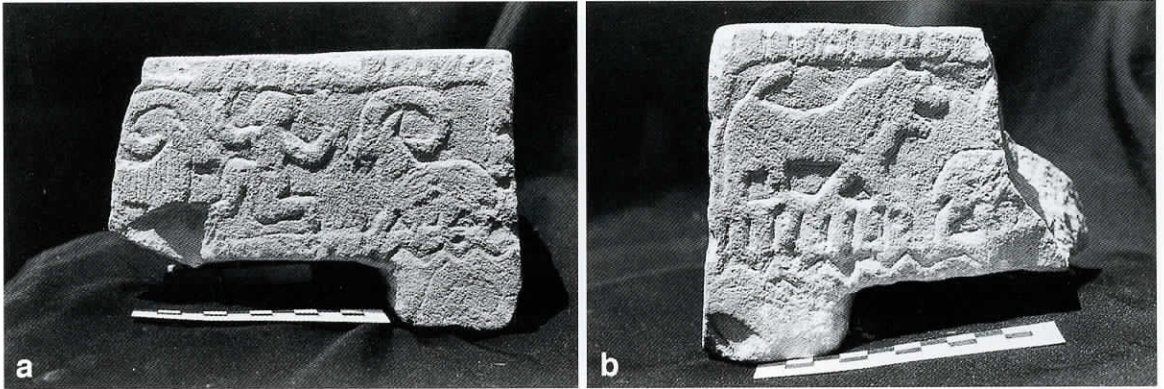
Fig. 1.

more realistic. The representation of a hunting scene is unusual and unparalleled for this type of object. Incense-burners are more usually characterised by markings for the different types of incense, or by the motif of the crescent moon accompanied by the astral symbol of 'Athtar (1). The incense-burner is possibly from the region of Ma'rib or from Jawf, where the theme of the sacred hunt and the motif of the ibex are frequently represented (2). The subject matter, the archaic manner of representing the man and the overall style suggest a date of around the seventh century BC.

2. Funerary stele in limestone with a face in relief (Fig. 2). Dimensions: 40×18×4 cm; height of inscribed letters: 4 cm.
The upper right and lower left corners are broken and the nose is chipped. In the upper half this rectangular stele shows, in relief, the head of a male with a collar beard. The face is oval with large, hollow eyes and eyebrows in relief. The ears are represented as concentric semi-circles, the mouth as a short, horizontal incision. Traces of black dye still remain on the hair, eyebrows and beard and inside the carved letters. A dedication to the Minaean god Wadd is carved below the face.

The date of this sculpture is uncertain since its archaeological context is unknown. Based on the palaeography of the
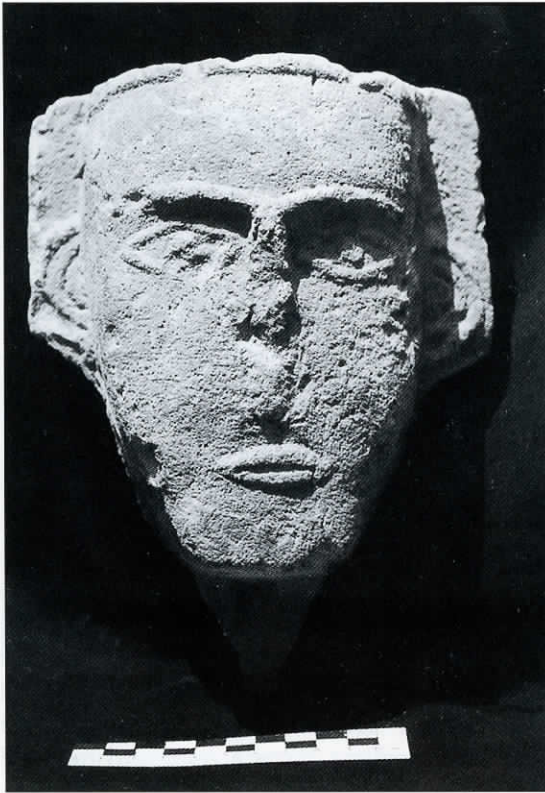

Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.

human face (*Gesicht Stelen*) that Prof. Garbini has subdivided into two groups. The first group comprises all those Minaean stele, including those of the present collection, the variations of which demonstrate the gradual development from figural representations which are schematically carved to those which are more three-dimensional. It is worth noting that this evolution is not chronological but stylistic. Indeed, 'some typologically archaic stele can be dated from a more recent age while
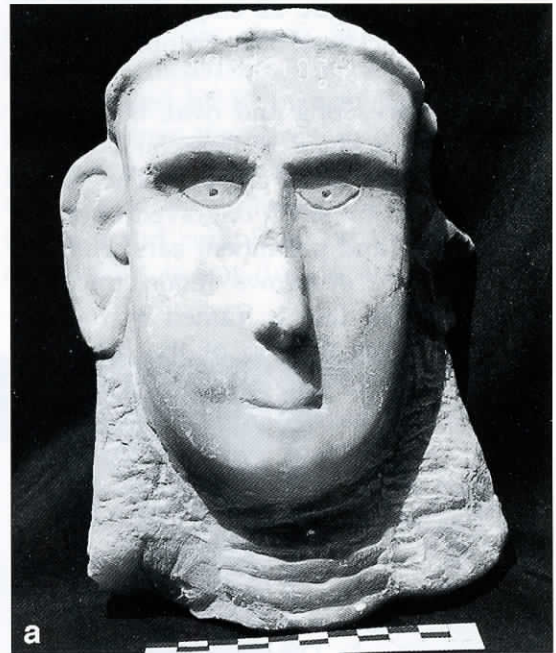

Fig. 4.

inscription, however, the stele could be dated to around the third century BC.

3. Funerary stele in limestone, with a face in relief (Fig. 3). Dimensions: preserved height: 22 cm; width: 17 cm; thickness: 4 cm.
The stele is fragmented. Only the face is well preserved, although the nose and the cheekbones are chipped. The stele, bearing a masculine head, is analogous to the previous piece (Fig. 2). The oval face is characterised by marked eyebrows, rhomboid eyes with eyelids and iris in relief, and a mouth with protruding lips. The beard, slightly visible, frames the face. The stele should be contemporary to the one previously described. This type of funerary monument belongs to a type of stele with

typologically more evolved stele are also found in a relatively more ancient period' (3). The second group comprises flat stele, square or rectangular in shape, framed by a border, the upper portion of which is usually inscribed. A human face is schematically carved in bas-relief inside the frame. These stele are typically Qatabanian. In fact, numerous pieces, some of which are very simple, come from the excavation of Tamna' (4).

4. Female head in relief, in pale yellow alabaster with rose-orange veins (Figs 4a-b). Dimensions: height: 22 cm; width: 15 cm; maximum thickness: 5 cm; minimum thickness: 2.5 cm.

A female face, long and oval, is sculpted in relief on a small rectangular alabaster block. The left ear is chipped. The face is characterised by small engraved eyes and large plastic and prominent ears. Both the eyes and the eyebrows retain traces of black dye. The face is framed by the hair that rises from the top of the head and flows down like a pyramid to the base of the neck. The back of the block is flat and slightly rough-hewn. A short inscription is carved on the forehead, below the hair line (Fig. 4b; cf. note below by G. Mazzini).

5. Female head in relief, in pale yellow alabaster (Fig. 5). Dimensions: height: 14.5 cm; maximum width: 10.5 cm; maximum thickness: 3 cm; minimum thickness: 2 cm.

The piece is intact although the entire surface is covered with numerous chip marks. Although stylistically very different, this female head belongs to the same category as the previous piece. The features of the face are marked and very irregular. The eyes are large and oblong with thick eyebrows in relief and hollow irises. The forehead is shallow, the cheek
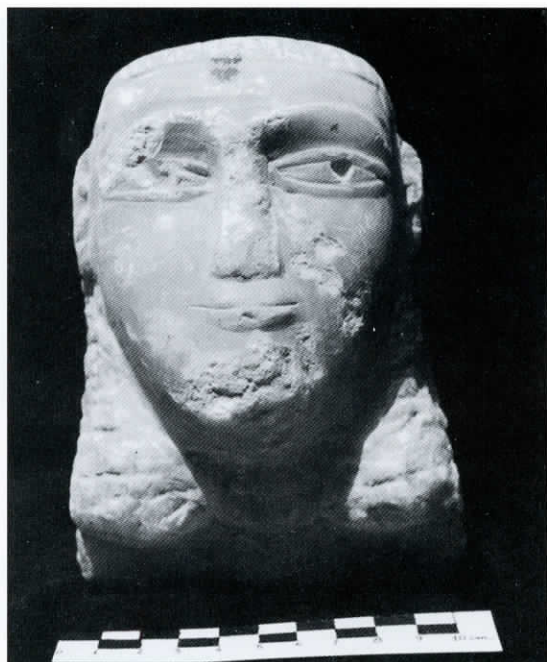

Fig. 5.

bones prominent and the mouth characterised by a prominent lower lip. The ears are fleshy and close to the face. The hair consists of two compact plaits divided in horizontal planes, descending on either side of the face. The hair on top of the head is indicated by crossed lines. This type of relief, called 'masque-bloc' (5) by J. Pirenne, would have been inserted in a niche excavated in the upper half of long limestone stele or in the walls of funerary monuments. Masculine and feminine faces have been found both in Sabaean (Ma'rib) and Qatabanian (Ḥayd Ibn 'Aqīl, the necropolis of Hajar Kuḥlān/Tamna') areas (6). On the basis of comparisons with two inscribed reliefs (CIH 793 and 802), J. Pirenne concluded that this type of monument originated in the third century BC (7). However, recent German excavations around the temple of Awwām in Ma'rib demonstrate that they were already in use as early as the fifth century BC.

6. Masculine head, in pale yellow alabaster (Figs 6a-b). Dimensions: height: 13 cm; maximum width: 10 cm.

The piece is intact. The head is oval and regular in shape, with a flat, smooth posterior surface. The eyes are not carved, but traces of black dye in the eyebrow arch suggest that they were originally painted. The refined carving of the planes renders the face elegant and delicate.

These square, alabaster faces carved in relief with a flat, posterior surface could have been inserted into niches carved in the pillar stele, or embedded in the walls of funerary monuments. In my opinion, such representations with the appearance of funerary masks depict (as the heads on a long neck) 'intentional' or 'symbolic' portraits 'because they are often connected with a rite, the aim of which is to fix and bind to the site the vital power of the person through his/her image' (8). Men and women appear ageless since the sculptures lack those external features that would differentiate a juvenile from an adult. Furthermore, children are never represented. People can be recognised only from gender-specific attributes such as beards and moustaches for men and long hair for women. The image of the deceased is simple and generic. Rarely are there any distinguishing features and there are never any attributes that would suggest their affiliation to a social group. The figures, subjected to rigid stylistic conventions, are stereotypical and lack any emotional expression. On occasion, the deceased is recognisable from the inscription of his name as the physiognomic characteristics are of little value. As discussed by R. Bianchi Bandinelli, in some cultures the adoption of a symbolic portrait instead of a physiognomic one (i.e. a portrait imitating the individual's features and completed by the emotional expression) is not due to an inability to
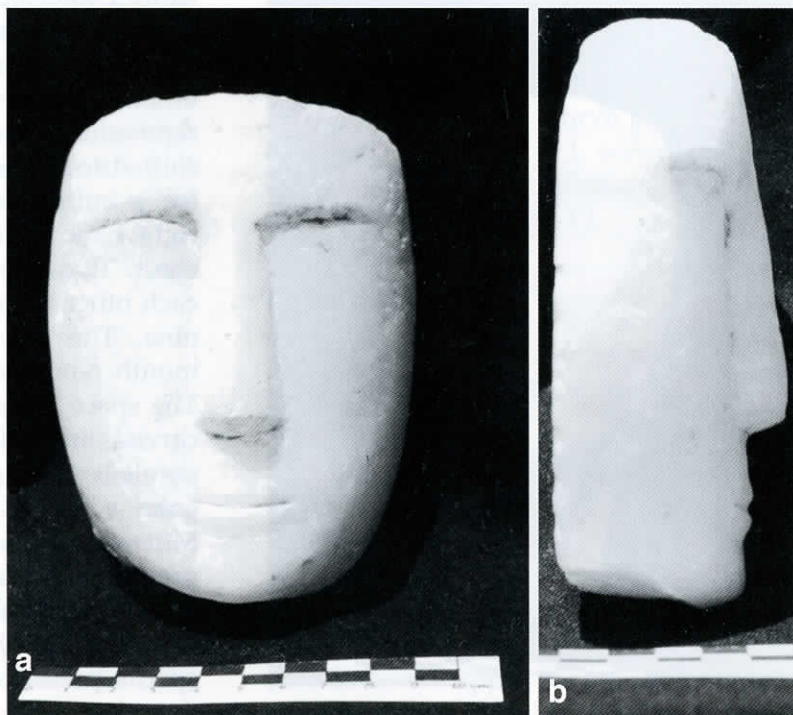

Fig. 6.

represent reality. Indeed, this artistic style depends on the ideological disposition of the culture in which it develops. The portrait of the individual is thus linked to a ritual significance that can magically inspire and connect people belonging to that particular society.

It is worth noting that, with the exception of the funerary statues of the kings of Awsān (recognised as such from inscriptions and on the basis of epigraphic and iconographic elements dating them between the second and first centuries BC and the first century AD), we are not aware of any other representations of royalty during the 'Ancient South Arabian' period (700–110 BC). Furthermore, we are uncertain as to the identification of divine images which seem to be represented as symbolic animals (bull, ibex, snake).

Fig. 7.

7. Masculine head, in yellow alabaster with rose-orange veins (Fig. 7). Dimensions: height 18 cm; mean width: 10 cm.
A large chip has damaged the left cheek and the nose. The piece belongs to the class of funerary heads on a long neck that were inserted in the square niches carved in the upper portions of a pilaster stele (9), or were fixed in small, almost cubic, stone bases (10). On occasion the name of the deceased is carved both on the stele and on its base. The heads on a long neck which, like the one described here, present the top of the head cut flat, were probably finished with the application of hair in plaster. On this face, as on the previous one, the eyes must have been painted. The style of this head lends a resolute, yet delicate, expression to the face. The category of heads on a long neck should be dated to within the last three centuries BC.

8. Small plaque, with figure in relief (Figs 8a-b). Dimensions: 13×9×3 cm.
This rectangular sandstone slab bears, on one surface, an inscription and on the other a figure, carved in relief. The relief represents a human figure, with the legs shifted to one side in order to make room for a cultic container, supported by the right hand. The left hand lies across the chest. Two small breasts, placed close to each other, suggest that the figure is feminine. The face is round, the eyes and mouth rendered by small, deep incisions. The space around the figure is filled with carved lines. The subject has numerous parallels to forgeries published by J. Pirenne (11), J. H. Mordtmann and E. Mittwoch (12). What distinguishes the present piece from the others is its style. Indeed, several known counterfeits are executed in the same fashion with a special predilection for square shapes. Although the composition is formed by two

Fig. 8.

or three figures, the typology is the same with a small rectangular plaque, bordered by a flat and inscribed frame. As the inscription of the present piece is undoubtedly authentic, it is difficult to establish whether the relief is a fake. It is certainly true that many of the counterfeits that saturated the markets of Ṣanʿāʾ and Aden, particularly at the beginning of this century, must have been copies of original pieces, and the present piece could be one of those originals.

Acknowledgements

A note on the inscriptions
G. Mazzini

9. Inscription (Fig. 9).

1 ...] *lḥrynhm.w* [...
2 *wmngt . s¹wʾm . w .* [*lḥryn* || *lhʾnn*
3 *hmw . bn . nḍʾ . ws¹yb* [*. ws²ṣy*
4 *s² nʾm . wl . s¹ ʿdhmw* [*. nʾmt*
5 *m . wmngt . ṣdqm . b*[*.Tʾl*
6 *b . Rymm*

1 ...]that may protect them and [...
2 the evil and [that may preserve
3 them from misfortune and wickedness [and harm
4 of any enemy and that may grant them [prosperi-
5 ty and good; by [Tʾl
6 b Rymm

This is a fragment from a Sabaean votive inscription whose provenance is unknown (13). Since the upper part of the text is totally lost, it is impossible to know either the
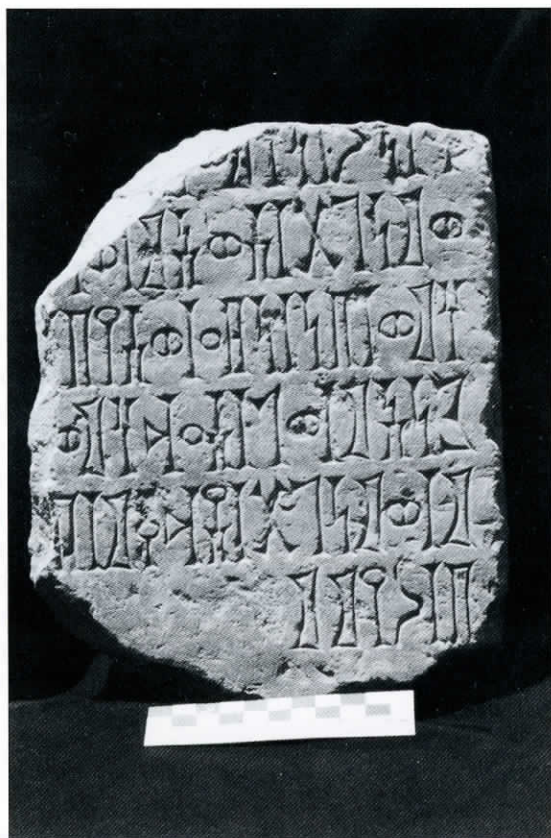
Fig. 9.

name of the person who dedicated the inscription, or the cause of the dedication. This fragment preserves the close of the inscription which contains the apotropaic formula against misfortune brought by enemies. The presence of this kind of formula, frequently attested in inscriptions from the temple of Awwām (Maḥram Bilqīs), might be construed as evidence for the provenance of this inscription from that site. The restoration of line 2 leaves a choice between *lḥ'nn* and *lhryn*. These expressions are used in the same context as synonyms. Therefore it remains uncertain which one occurred here.

From the philological point of view one should note the word *s¹yb*, whose interpretation is unclear. This rare word is only attested in Sabaic (e.g. Ja 567: 28 and in NNAG 15: 30) where *s¹yb* appears in contexts very close to that of the present inscription. The expression *bn nḍ' ws²ṣy s²n'm* is a fixed formula which was used at the end of votive texts (with the apotropaic function mentioned above). Since this formula could be enriched with other terms like *s¹yb* (or *tt't* and others) the meaning of *s¹yb* might be the same or, at least, very close to that of the other terms of this formula. The interpretation 'wickedness', suggested here, remains conjectural (14).

I am in doubt about the final invocation (lines 5–6) because the interpretation of this portion of the text involves a larger historical question.

The extension of the lacunae in the previous lines (generally about 4–5 letters) excludes the possibility that lines 5 and 6 might contain the name of the god Almaqah, normally present in the final invocation of the inscriptions from Maḥram Bilqīs. Given this, the fact that in the final invocation of the inscription the god *T'lb Rymm* appears alone seems to me strange and unusual. This deity, whenever attested at Maḥram Bilqīs (e.g. in JA 561bis: 24; 562: 19–20; 601: 20; 602: 20) never appears alone but always at the end of a list of gods and accompanied by the epithet *s¹ymhmw* (this list always contains the god Almaqah, very often with the epithet *Ṯhwn b'l 'wm*).

In this context the inscription is a little puzzling. Indeed, on the one hand *T'lb Rymm* is an exclusive divinity of the tribe *S¹m'y* of the plateau, and only in certain inscriptions which come from this place is the final invocation addressed to that deity alone (15). This may point to a provenance on the plateau (or at least exclude its coming from Maḥram Bilqīs). On the other hand, the typology of the formulaic language and the vocabulary (as well as the kind of writing) used in this inscription are

distinctive features of the votive inscriptions from Maḥram Bilqīs.

At the moment I am inclined to attach more importance to the formulaic and linguistic aspects of the text, but I think it necessary to investigate the issue of the cultural presence of *T'lb Rymm* at Maḥram Bilqīs and outside this god's specific environment on the plateau.

10. Inscription (Fig. 10).
1 SYM...] *tb 'm*[......
2 BOL hqn]y . *'lmqh . Ṯhwn* [. b
3 'l . 'wm . ṣl]mn . hmdm . *bḏt*
4 hwfyhw]. *b'ml' . s¹tml' . b*['mhw
5 w]. *bḏt . wkb . 'bdhw . Ḏ*[? b
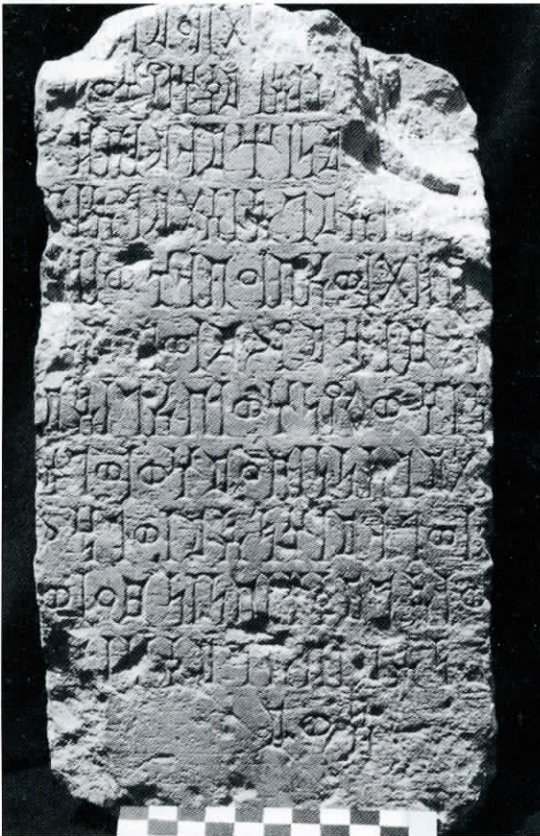6 'r]ḍ . Ḥmyrm . wl[wz' . 'lm
7 q]h . hwfynhw . bkl . 'm[l' . y

8 s¹]tml'nn . b'mhw . wlḥ[mrh
9 w]. wldm . hn'm . wlḥr[yn
10 h]w. 'lmqh . bn . nḏ' . w[s² ṣy
11 s²]n'm . b'lmqh[. B'l
12 'wm

1 SYM...] *tb 'm*[......
2 BOL has dedicat]ed to Almaqah Ṯhwn [lord
3 of 'wm this sta]tue in gratitude because
4 He granted to him] his favours he had besought [Him
5 and] because carried out a mission (?) his worshipper Ḏ[? in
6 the lan]d of Ḥimyar and that m[ay continue Almaq-
7 qa]h to grant to him all the fav[ours he shall
8 be]seech Him and that He may vouchsafe
9 to him] a healthy child and th[at may preserve
10 hi]m Almaqah from misfortune and [harm
11 of any e]nemy; by Almaqah [lord
12 of 'wm

Fig. 10.

This text is a votive inscription in Sabaic. The first line is almost totally lost and it is therefore impossible to read the name of the dedicator. Furthermore, the stone has been damaged at the beginning and end of every line. However, the well-known typology of this text makes it clear that it comes from the temple of Maḥram Bilqīs, thus enabling us to restore all of the lacunae by comparison with the strongly stereotypical formulary of the votive inscriptions found there. The only lacuna which cannot be entirely restored is that at the end of line 5 where the proper name of the dedicator is mentioned.

From the point of view of vocabulary and content this inscription does not contain any features which might enrich our knowledge of the epigraphic materials of

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Maḥram Bilqīs. The language and formulary correspond to the general outline of votive texts from the site, whereas the main reason for the dedication is presented as an elusive hint (...*wkb 'bdw [b'r]d Ḥmyrm*) and does not provide enough information for reconstructing the real event regarding 'a mission (?) in the country of Ḥimyar'.

11. Inscription (Fig. 11).
1 ?]*nwyhw* [
2]*nw . d'nbr . br'w*[
3]*r . ḫlf . hwt . mḥ*[

1 ?]*nwyhw* [
2]*nw* of *'nbr* have built up[
3]*r* in the vicinity of this *mḥ*[

This fragment seems to be written in Sabaic (pronominal form *hwt* and the personal name *'nbr*, in Ja 623:4; R 4994: 1). It is extremely difficult to recognise the provenance and typology of this inscription from such a small portion of text. Judging by the use of the verb *br'w*, meaning the action of building (according to the plural form one might conjecture more than one dedicator), it might be part of a construction text. Given the lack

of a secure context I prefer to interpret the term *ḫlf* in an indefinite manner (in the vicinity of...) rather than as 'door, gate' which would indicate a more specific and defined architectonic structure (e.g. the city gate or the gate of a temple, but the very fragmentary context does not allow us to infer the presence of such a structure) (16). Note the old relic in ASA regarding the inflection of the demonstrative pronoun, *hwt* being the indirect case masc. sing., in comparison with the direct one *h'/hw* (17).

12. Inscription (Fig. 8b).
wqh'l?
This is a personal name widely attested in southern Arabia. It is a theophoric name composed of the verbal root WQH and the word indicating the god 'L. Other personal names containing the verbal root WQH (widely used in ASA), include *yqhmlk*, *wqh'b* and *mlkwqh*.

13. Inscription on the forehead of a female head (Fig. 4b).
ḥtm ḏt ṯn
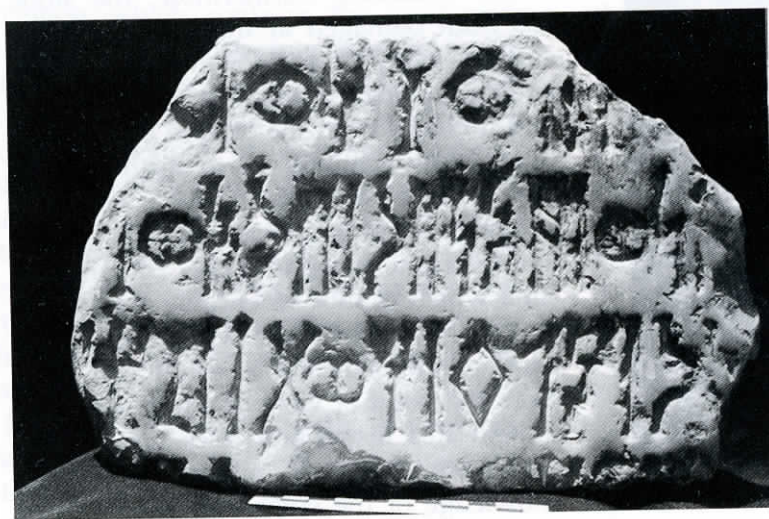This inscription is incomprehensible. The structure of the syntagma as well as the

Fig. 11.

monumental context suggest that it consists of the personal and family name of the dedicator (who should be represented on the relief itself). It is easy to identify the pronoun *ḏt* which is normally used in the following South Arabian onomastic scheme: X, of the family of, he who belongs to the family of (in this case we would have a woman's name, since the pronoun *ḏt* is feminine) Y. In fact, the exact meaning of this short inscription is not at all clear. The difficulties come from the otherwise unattested words *ḥṯm* and *ṯn*, which should correspond to the personal and family names of the dedicator. However, these terms find no comparison within the South Arabian onomasticon and, what is even more striking, they do not recall any Semitic root. One might conjecture that these words could be abbreviated names used as code names (or code words), but I am unaware of any South Arabian personal or family names beginning with these radicals (*ḥṯm-*..., *ṯn-*...). At the moment, therefore, it seems that this inscription cannot be adequately interpreted on a philological basis.

It is also possible that the inscription is a fake, not only because of the above-mentioned linguistic difficulties but because of graphic inconsistencies. One should note, for example, the presence of the word divider at the beginning of the text, before the word *ḥṯm*, which is unusual in South Arabian epigraphy. Furthermore, it is possible to note, on the whole, some uncertainty in the engraving of the signs (the *m* is too round, the *n* has a strange little stroke on top). Nevertheless, these graphic peculiarities could also reflect the limitations of the scribe or a particular style, while the presence of a South Arabian linguistic feature like *ḏt* would suggest some linguistic awareness on the part of the forger. Thus, the forgery hypothesis must also remain in question.

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2. Cf. the incised figures of the so-called Banāt 'Ād from Haram and Qarnāw.
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9. Phillips W. *Qataban and Sheba – Exploring the Ancient Kingdoms on the Biblical Spice Routes of Arabia*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1955: 239.
10. Cleveland, *An Ancient South Arabian Necropolis*: Pls 24–25, TC 1884.
11. Pirenne J. Fausses plaques à un personnage offrant. Louvain: *Corpus des inscriptions et Antiquités sud-Arabes*, AIBL, II/2: 1986: 451–52.
12. Mordtmann JH & Mittwoch E. *Sabäische Inschriften*. Hamburg: Friederichsen, de Gruyter & Co. [=Rathjens-v. Wissmannsche Südarabien-Reise, Band 1], 1931: 243–51.
13. I am very grateful to Prof. de Maigret for having given me the opportunity to publish this epigraphic material.
14. With regard to this term, Jamme A. *Sabaean Inscriptions from Mahram Bilqís (Mârib)*. Baltimore: PAFSM, 3: 1962: 130 emphasised in his commentary to Ja 567: 28: '"irruption" on the Arabic *sāba*, "to walk, move forward rapidly"; here with a hostile meaning'. Since the term s^1yb in Ja 567/28 is present in the apotropaic formula mentioned above, I find the sense 'irruption' totally meaning-

less. It is also important to recall the meaning 'gift' obtained by W.W. Müller (CIH 140. Eine Neuinterpretation auf der Grundlage eines gesicherten Textes. *AION* 34: 1974: 413–420). If there is any relationship with the term s^1yb of the apotropaic formula the word might be a *vox media* which assumes a more precise connotation on the basis of the context. It is also possible that we might be dealing with two homographic roots.

15. On this matter cf. Robin C. *Les hautes terres du Nord-Yemen avant l'Islam*. Istanbul: Uitgaven van het Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 50: 1982: 51–53.

16. By restoring the end of line 3 in the following manner: *mḫ[rmn* one could obtain the word 'temple'. In this way one makes the text yield a reference to the gate of a temple which could have been built (or at least, in the vicinity of which something would have been built). However, this is an assumption which, at the moment, is impossible to verify.

17. Beeston AFL. *Sabaic Grammar*. Manchester: JSS Monograph, 6: 1984: 40–41.

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