

# Statuettes from the excavations of the temple of Nakrah (Temple A) at Barāqish (Republic of Yemen)

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This paper focuses on the study of a collection found in Temple A at Barāqish which, according to inscriptions found therein, was dedicated to the cult of the god Nakrah (1).

The collection, brought to light in 1990 and 1992 by the Italian Archaeological Mission, is composed of fourteen human figures (including two small fragments). These figures are either made in terracotta and covered by a thin layer of stucco or else composed entirely of stucco. The pieces were discovered in a two-floored edifice contiguous to the temple and in the zone between the wall of the temple and the town walls (Fig. 1). Most certainly, the statuettes, along with other cult objects, such as a few incense burners, were kept on the first floor of the 'sacristy' that later collapsed (Fig. 2) (2). The discovery is particularly important both for the material and the techniques used and for the style of the heads which prompts us to consider similarities with finds made outside southern Arabia.

With the exception of one piece which is 16 cm tall (Fig. 3), these small heads are 7 to 11 cm in height. All but one represent females. A headless terracotta statuette duplicates the famous Jawfite 'ancestor' statuettes made of sandstone (Fig. 4). In the following sections, I will describe the techniques used in the manufacture of these pieces.

The clay used for the statuettes was very fine, although less compact than that used for manufacturing vases. It was pressed in

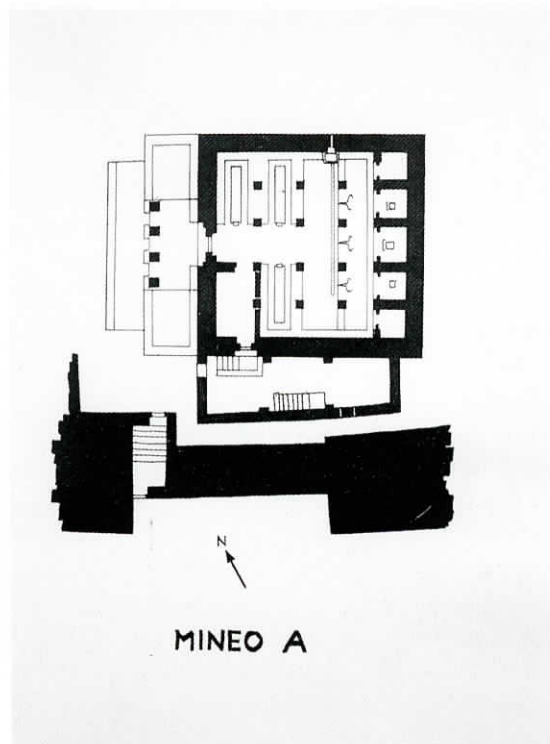


Fig. 1.

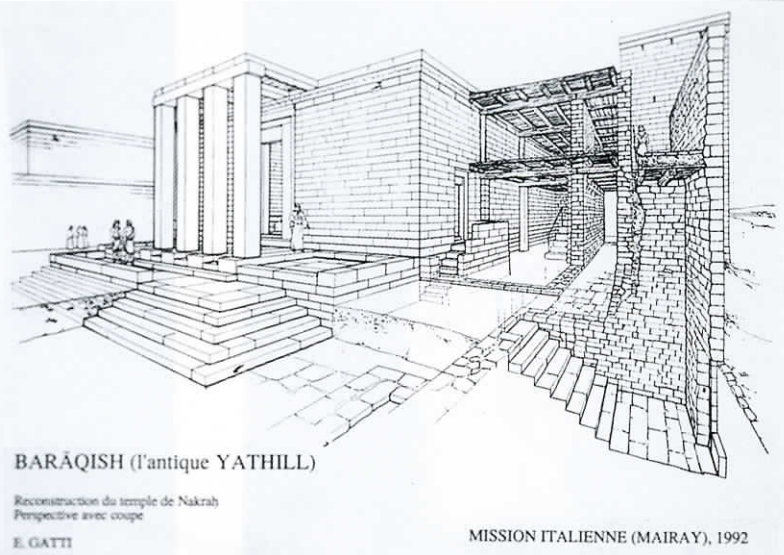


Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

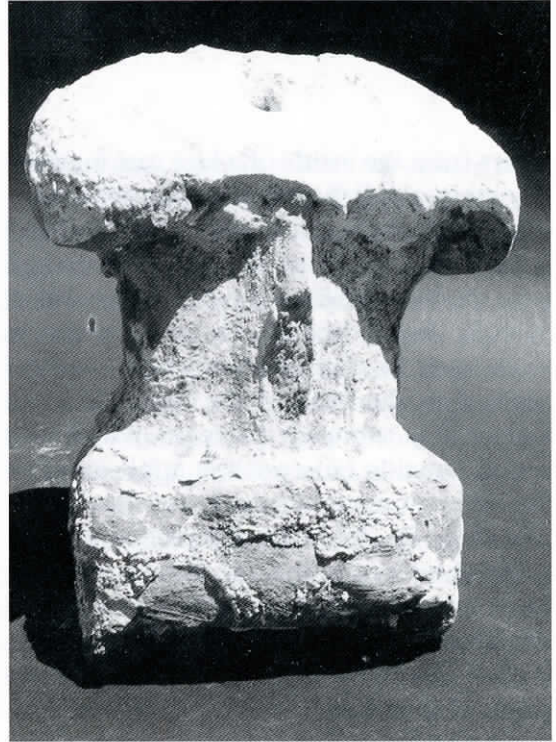


Fig. 4.

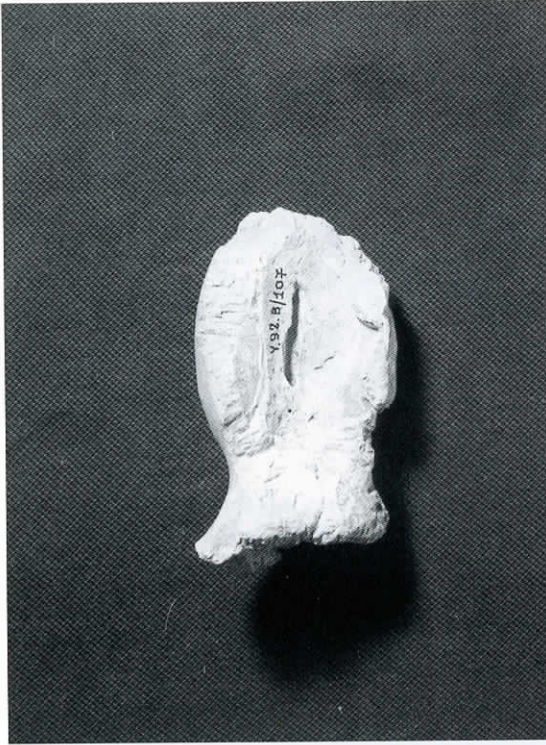


Fig. 5.

layers from the inside of a face cast in order to obtain a full figure (3). Clay was used sparingly on the back surface of the head which may be either flat or concave, and was modelled either by hand or with a spatula (Figs 5 and 6). On some pieces a thick layer of clay or stucco was coarsely applied to the back of the head. This resulted in a compact piece in which the rough junction between the application of the different materials used was clearly visible (Fig. 7). As in traditional South Arabian stone sculptures (4), the back of the head was completely ignored in favour of the frontal view of the object. In one case (Fig. 8) the excess stucco was left along the edge of the head, so that it almost resembles a bas-relief (5).

Once the statuettes were modelled, but prior to firing, they were usually immersed in a thin wash or slip. A layer of 'lime milk'



Fig. 6.

was then applied after firing. In the statuettes described here, a gypsum plaster coating was added over the clay. Then, the objects were left in the open air to dry before firing. Finally, the completed figures were painted, elevating these objects created with humble materials, to the level of sculptures carved from alabaster or other stone which were also painted. The colour black was used for the hair and the contour of the eyes, while red was used for the lips, the line along the forehead and the strap around the neck (Figs 9–11). A small fragment of a head retains a very bright yellow-ochre colour, suggestive of gold jewellery (Fig. 12). Feminine faces are white, while a reddish colour suggests the complexion of the male head, in the tradition of Greco-Roman paintings (Fig. 13). The colours, which in the best-preserved pieces are still very bright, may have been



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

applied after firing, as in Greek and Greek-like figurines of the Hellenistic period, since it seems that some colours, new in that period, did not tolerate high firing temperatures.

The angular contours of the eyes and mouth, as well as the carved lines bordering the hair of the largest head in the collection, all seem to suggest that modelling was performed by means of a pointed tool. In the case of the masculine head, the ears were added later, as was often done in classical coroplastic art where, for technical reasons, the hair, beard and some particular features of the clothes were applied separately (6).

A wooden rod, vertically inserted and protruding from the base of the neck, might have functioned to support the head (Fig. 14). The head might, in fact, have been placed onto a terracotta base, as revealed

by one small head in which the square base was well preserved (Fig. 15). Alternatively, the head may have been attached to a figure, as suggested by the presence of a hole in the appropriate position of the neck of the statuette of a seated figure (Fig. 4). In some heads, the wooden rod inserted at its base is still well preserved, suggesting that it was applied after firing, blocked with raw clay or stucco and allowed to dry in the sun.

Most of the pieces from the temple were made of cast stucco, and the procedure for their manufacture appears to have been similar to that followed for the terracotta statuettes (7).

Typologically speaking, the statuettes from Temple A of Nakrah constitute a homogeneous group, all of which represent human heads. However, iconographically speaking, one can distinguish at least two



Fig. 9.

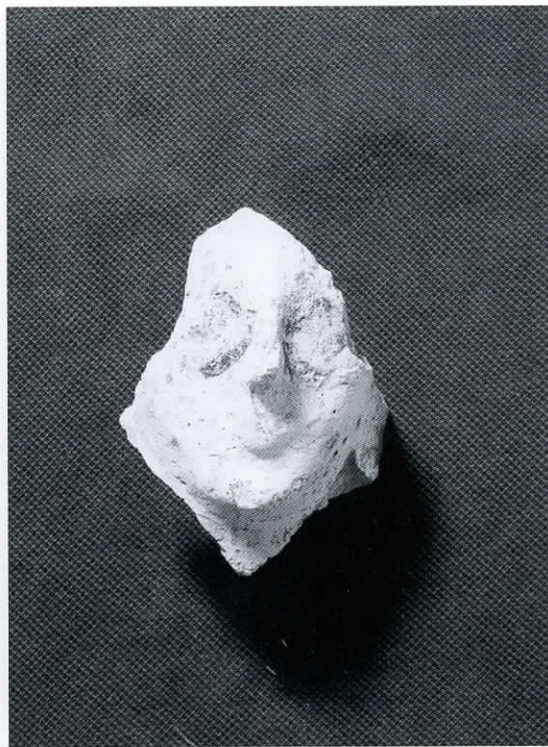


Fig. 10.

broad groups. One particular type of head, recognisable by its hairstyle (hair parted in the middle in two locks gathered behind the head), is based on a Greek model (Figs 3, 16). Since the back surface of the head is not fully modelled, it is not clear whether the hair was collected in a knot at the nape of the neck, similar to Greco-Roman prototypes, or left loose on the shoulders. Therefore, the crescent-shaped protrusion crowning the head, which at first glance seems to resemble a diadem, is more likely the schematic representation of a braid collected in a large chignon. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the protrusion is as black as the rest of the hair.

The hairstyle of the rest of the female heads appears to conform to local fashion, with the hair lifted on the forehead, held behind the ears and left loose on the neck, a style also attested in stone sculpture. It is

worth noting that the hairstyle is rendered by a combination of both modelled and painted elements. Thus the hair framing the forehead is shown in relief, whereas the loose hair on the neck is painted (Fig. 17).

The technical, typological and stylistic analysis of the small heads of Barāqish permit us to understand better some aspects of South Arabian artistic production. Furthermore, it allows for a more precise dating of other material found in the temple and the definition of a *terminus post quem* for the last phase of the Minaean temple. It is well known that the materials of choice of South Arabian artisans were the locally available stones (limestone, sandstone and alabaster). The use of both stucco and terracotta in the figural representation, on the other hand, most certainly reflects foreign influences which most likely originated in Egypt. Of all the



Fig. 9.

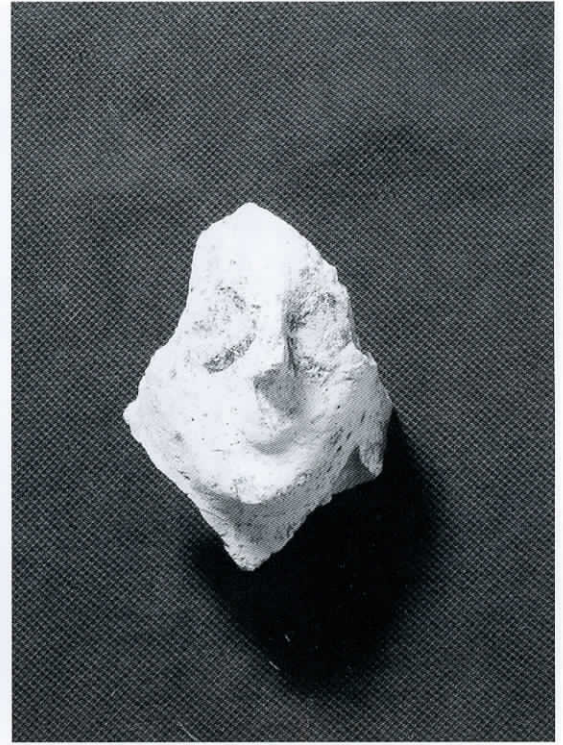


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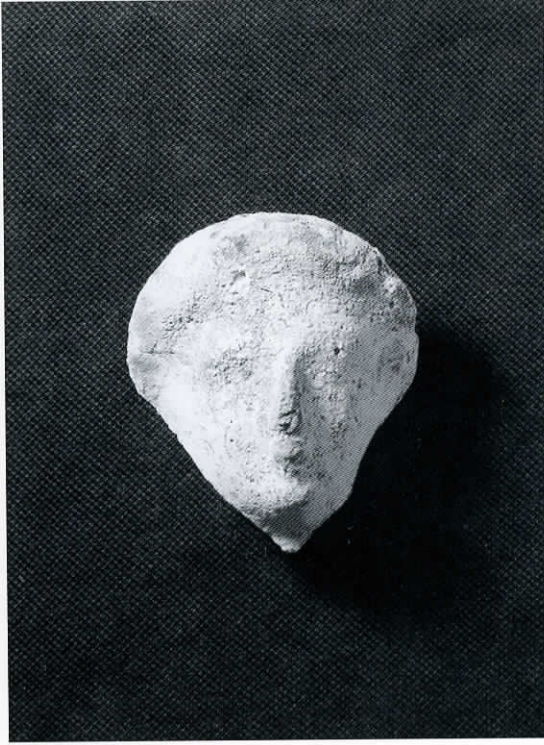


Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.

eastern and western Greco-Roman cities, Alexandria is widely considered to have been the most important centre specialising in the manufacture of stucco and plaster, both for functional and artistic purposes (8). It is conceivable that the use of these materials in Yemen and the associated manufacturing techniques were introduced as a by-product of commercial contacts between the South Arabian kingdoms and Ptolemaic Egypt (9). It is worth remembering that the Egyptians used stucco to complete some missing parts of sculptures such as the backs of heads. Furthermore, on most sculpted South Arabian heads in alabaster, such as the famous 'Myriam' of Tamna', the hairstyle was rendered in stucco.

Finally, the masks applied to the wooden sarcophagi of mummies in Lower Egypt were also manufactured in stucco and fin-

ished in bright colours, very similar in style to some of the small heads from Barāqish. In particular, on one of the Barāqish heads (Fig. 18) the contour of the eyes is extended in a straight line toward the temples with a broad and flat ending, according to ancient Egyptian tradition. The same practice can be found on the masks and faces of painted sarcophagi between 50 BC and 50 AD (10). The style of outlining in red the foreheads and faces of the figures painted on sarcophagi, which can be seen on the male head from Barāqish, dates to the same period (11).

In the small fragment of a feminine head, the artistic rendering of the eyelashes and eyebrows by hatching (Fig. 12) corresponds exactly to that found on the Fayum portraits and Egyptian masks from the first to the third centuries AD (12). The gold ornaments on this piece, such as the spherical



Fig. 13.

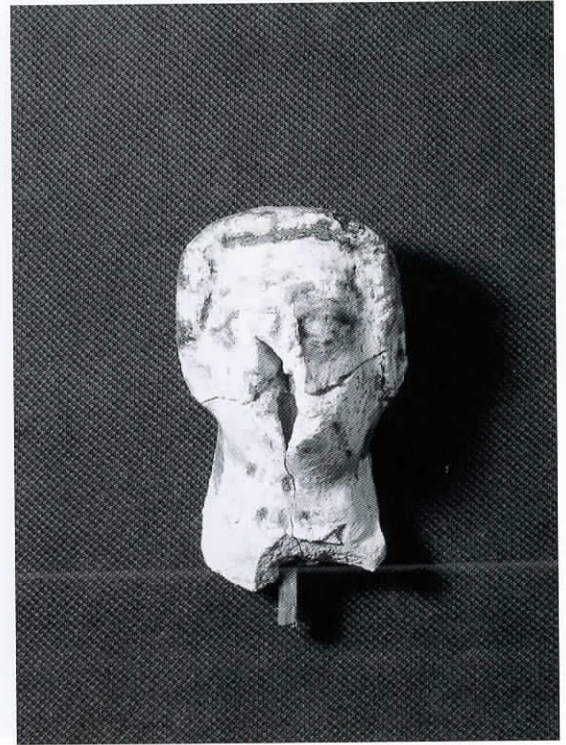


Fig. 14.

earring, stand out strikingly. This type of ornament is characteristic of numerous encaustic or tempera female portraits from Hawara and in other sites in the Fayum which are dated from the middle to the latter part of the first century AD (c.50–80 AD) (13). Small circles of ochre colouring on the hair of the same female head also appear to suggest a wreath or a small golden crown, as on some of the Egyptian portraits.

We do not have a precise comparison for the small bands (presumably representing leather) with pendants painted around the necks of the Barāqish statuettes, although these might be related to the necklaces in gold and precious stones painted on all portraits of Egyptian women. The hairstyle on two of the Barāqish heads, with the hair parted in the middle over the forehead and a chignon on the top of the head, appears

in Egyptian female portraits of the mid-first century AD and continues into the next century (14). The curly hairstyle on one small head from Barāqish, rendered by painted hatching around the forehead (Fig. 18), exactly parallels the small face represented on a glass bead made in the *millefiori* technique and excavated in the same layer as the statuettes (Fig. 19). The *millefiori* technique applied to the representation of human faces in miniature was developed in Alexandria and diffused throughout the Empire between the years 100 BC and 100 AD (15).

Another piece of evidence lends support to our hypothesis of Egyptian influence, namely a small red circle painted on the forehead of three feminine figures (Figs 9, 14, 20) although well preserved on only one. I have suggested in a previous article that the red circle was a sign used to





Fig. 15.

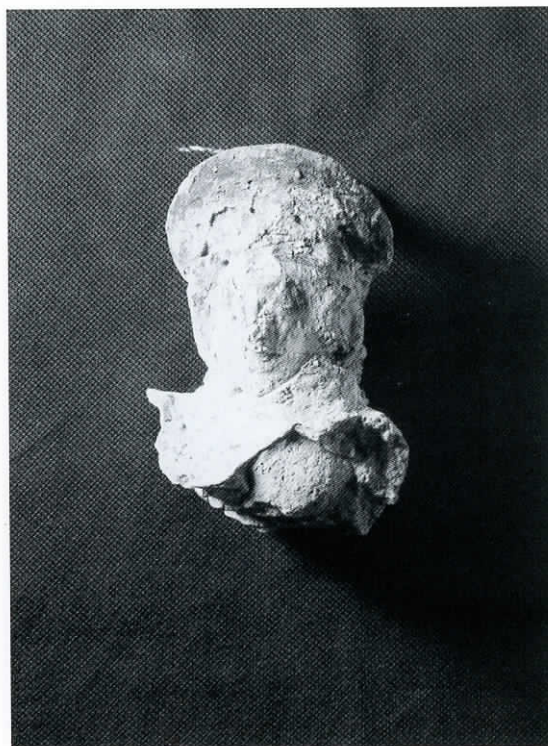


Fig. 16.

identify a woman who was not South Arabian (16). Such facial marks are found not only on the statuettes of Barāqish, a prominent Minaean commercial centre, but also in Qatabān, and particularly at Tamna', the site of a Minaean colony. Based on this evidence one might speculate that these marks were used to distinguish foreign women married to Minaean citizens who had been brought into the country of their husbands and then presented at the temple to legalise the union, a practice reflected in the so-called 'hierodule lists', those Minaean inscriptions citing all women coming from non-Minaean regions (e.g. in southern Arabia, northwestern Arabia, Egypt, the Levant and Asia Minor). Such foreign women originated at sites touched by Minaean caravan routes where, in some cases, the Minaeans had built colonies of great commercial importance. It is worth

noting that certain marks painted in red, such as a dot and a diamond in between the eyebrows, three dotted lines between the nose and the mouth, and two dots on the chin ('tatoos' or 'ritual paint'), all appear together on one painted mask from Egypt and now in the Fitzwilliam Museum (c.40–60 AD; Fig. 21) (17).

Due to the paucity of archaeological excavations in Yemen, and in particular the small number of pieces in terracotta and stucco that have been found to date, it is uncertain whether such statues were mass-produced and widely distributed, as was the case in the major centres of coroplastic production in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, one can suggest that the statuettes excavated at Barāqish were not imported from Egypt, but were manufactured locally, since they generally resemble contemporary South Arabian sculpture. The poor



Fig. 17.



Fig. 18.

artistic value of some of the statuettes from Barāqish, reflected in both the coarseness of their execution and the poor quality of the material used for their manufacture, suggests that they were produced for buyers with limited economic means who required relatively inexpensive figurines. As far as their function goes, I tend to consider them as objects of *pietas* or devotion, that would serve as a temple offering or a burial object. Indeed the Qatabanian heads, manufactured in stone, also originate from funerary monuments in the necropolis of Hayd bin 'Aqīl.

The role of Nakrah as healer god (also confessor god) (18) suggests that the statuettes were *ex-voto*, i.e. objects offered by devotees to the temple to ingratiate themselves with or to thank the divinity. Like the Greco-Roman god Aesculapius, Nakrah also had the function of protecting

health, and the fact that all but one of the statuettes represent females suggests that the god protected or ensured fertility.



Fig. 19.



Fig. 20.

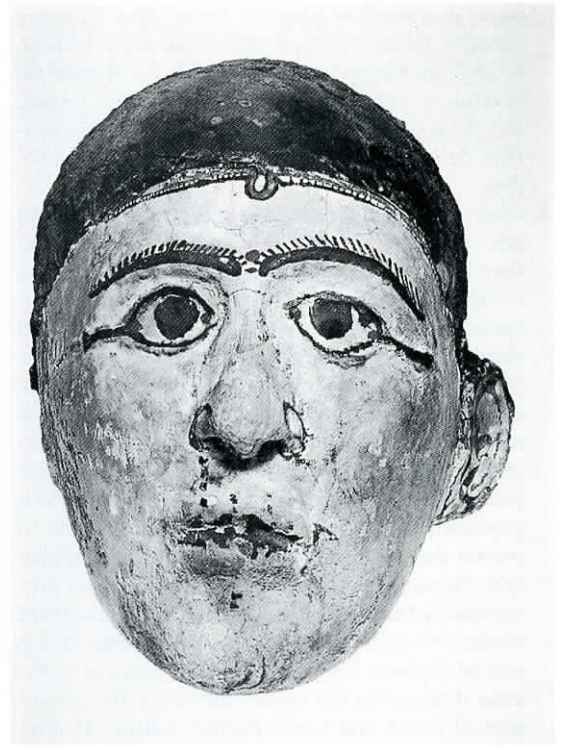


Fig. 21.

(Photo from Walker & Bierbrier, *Fayum*: 1998: 158, no. 115).

In conclusion, the material found in the temple annexe originates from the third and last phase of the Minaean era (Minaean level A), a period which on both stratigraphic and radiocarbon grounds dates to the third–second centuries BC. However, the analysis of some charcoal samples attests to a continuity of settlement during the first century BC and the first half of the first century AD. The stylistic and technical correlations between the figural production of Egypt during the Roman era and the sculptures of Barāqish leads us to date the latter to the turn of the first century BC and the first century AD.

The statuette collection of Barāqish bears witness to the survival of Temple A of Nakrah through the first century AD, in spite of the fact that, towards the end of the second

century BC, the Kingdom of Maʿīn was in decline caused by the encroachment of the Arab nomads of the Amīr tribe.

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2. de Maigret A. *Gli scavi della Missione archeologica nella città minea di Barāqish*. Rome: Conferenze IsMEO, 3: 1991; de Maigret A. The Excavations of the Temple of Nakrah at Barāqish /Yemen). *PSAS* 21: 1991: 159–171; de Maigret A. *La seconda cam-*

- pagna di scavo della Missione Archeologica italiana a Barāqish, (Yemen) 1992. Rome: Conferenze IsMEO, 6: 1993; de Maigret A. & Robin Ch. Le Temple de Nakrah à Yathill (aujourd'hui Barāqish), Yemen, Résultats des deux premières campagnes de fouilles de la Mission Italienne. CRAIBL: 1993: 427–496.*
3. Only two small heads in the Barāqish collection are very similar, leading to the conclusion that they originate from the same cast (Figs 9, 20). It is worth mentioning, however, that statuettes obtained from the same cast are never identical and display intentional and unintentional differences in execution by the artist who retouches the piece once it is removed from the cast. Besides the manufacture of solid statuettes one can distinguish a more common technique, used in large production centres, based on a double cast which produced hollow statues bearing a vent hole to permit the escape of steam during the firing process. During the Hellenistic period, the major production centres were Mirina (in Asia Minor, 40 km south of Pergamo) and Tanagra (in Boeotia, 18 km east of Thebes). Various styles and types of statuettes diffused in the region following the expansion of Greek and Greco-Roman culture, as a result of trade in terracottas and the migration of artists and artisans. Thus, new centres of production evolved where terracotta artefacts were adapted to varied religious customs and local needs. This technique was also known in Egypt during the Ptolemaic period.
  4. Antonini S. The anthropomorphic sculptures of Southern Arabia: autochthony and autonomy of an artistic expression. *Troisièmes rencontres sabéennes, Civilisations de l'Arabie préislamique, Atelier de la Fondation européenne de la science. Aix-en-Provence, 1–3 February 1996, in press.*
  5. A very beautiful example of a terracotta and stucco 'mask' in relief is in the Ṣana'ā' National Museum (Costa P. *The Pre-Islamic Antiquities at the Yemen national Museum*. Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1978: 38, no. 72, Pl. XIII). The male figure with a collar beard reproduces exactly the contemporary 'masque-bloc' executed in stone, found in the Sabaeen and Qatabanian territories.
  6. For information on ancient terracottas cf. Andrén A. Terracotta. *EAA 7: 1966: 732–743*, and related references; Breccia E. *Terracotte figurative greche e greco-romane egizie del museo di Alessandria*, i–ii. Bergamo, 1930, 1934; Van Ingen W. *Figurines from Seleucia on the Tigris*. London-Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 1939; Dunand F. *Catalogue des terres cuites gréco-romaines d'Égypte*. Paris: Musée du Louvre, 1990.
  7. Stucco is a mixture of plaster and water, sometimes combined with other materials. In the temple of Barāqish stucco was used as a finish on the walls and to fill gaps between stone blocks. Moreover, stucco was also used for jar sealings, with engraved inscriptions, in the temple of Nakrah. See Costa P. South Arabian Jar Sealings. *PSAS 21: 1991: 41–48, Fig. 10.*
  8. Since antiquity, stucco and plaster have been extensively used in Egypt not only for sculpture, but also in homes, tombs, lids of sarcophagi etc. The use of stucco during the Ptolemaic period can be explained by the ready availability of the material. It continued to be used even when Egypt started to import marble for sculptures during the Greco-Roman period. The geological composition of the Mediterranean coast of Egypt is largely limestone, and this explains the use of this material since the Pharaonic era; Bonacasa N. Stucco. *EAA 7: 1966: 524–526*, and related references.
  9. On this topic cf. Robin Ch. L'Égypte dans les inscriptions de l'Arabie méridionale préislamique. In: Berger C, Clerc G & Grimal N, eds. *Hommages à Jean Leclant*. 4, Cairo: Bibliothèque d'Étude, 106/4: 1994: 285–301.
  10. Walker S & Bierbrier M. *Fayum. Misteriosi volti dell'Egitto*. Rome: Fondazione Memmo, 1998: 62–65, nos 32–35; 158, no. 115.
  11. Walker & Bierbrier, *Fayum*: 61–63, nos. 30–34.
  12. Numerous examples of this feature can be found in Walker & Bierbrier, *Fayum*.
  13. Walker & Bierbrier, *Fayum*: 71–73, nos 41–43; 102–103: nos 73–74; 200–201, nos 147–150.
  14. Walker & Bierbrier, *Fayum*: 72, no. 42; 85, nos 57–58.
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  17. Walker & Bierbrier, *Fayum*: 158, no. 115.
  18. Robin Ch, Breton J-F & Ryckmans J. Le sanctuaire minéen de *Nkrh* à Darb aṣ-Ṣabī (environs de Barāqish). Rapport préliminaire (seconde partie). Étude des inscriptions. *Raydan 5: 1988: 91–158, in particular 92–95.*

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