

ARABIA

Volume 1 - 2003

Revue de sabéologie

Rivista di Sabeologia

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DE BOCCARD
11 rue de Médicis, 75006 Paris
2003

Sculpture of Southern Arabia:

autochthony and autonomy of an artistic expression (pl. 1-5)

SABINA ANTONINI

The relationships between the two regions separated by the Red Sea, presented by Dr Vogt, can also be found in a later period, that is, between Ethiopia of pre-Axumite era and Southern Arabia of ancient Sabaean period. Numerous correspondences are evident between these cultures with respect to epigraphy, religious architecture and sculpture. However, as far as this latter aspect is concerned, it should be noted that Ethiopian statues such as those of Hauile-Assaraw and of Haulti (pl. 1, a, b) have a definite local, rather than South-Arabian character¹. Moreover we cannot find similar examples in South Arabia in this comparatively ancient period. This conclusion is based on the results of my Ph. D. research that I would like to present here in detail².

For the most part, the material collected for my research is based on collections displayed at the Museum of Şan'ā' and specific literature and pieces originating from private collections. As might be expected, in certain cases the material presented uncertainties with respect to origin or regarding the accuracy of illustration or sources. Certainly, these disadvantages have at times constituted a limiting factor in providing a precise contextual and chronologic evaluation of the material. Nevertheless, the collection not only constitutes a wide representation of the figurative art of ancient Yemen, but has also provided a broad basis for its critical and typological evaluation. Indeed, both the general and distinctive characteristics of figurative production in the southern region of Arabia, underlines the abundance and variety of the iconographic repertoire and, in particular, the originality and independence of its expression.

The material could be classified into several categories on the basis of descriptive and comparative analyses. The collection has been subdivided according to a purely typological criterion, without stylistic impressions and chronological definitions which may be subjective and controversial. Thus, each category pools exemplars having in common similar function, gestures, techniques of execution, and other attributes (symbols, objects, etc.) Therefore, the uniqueness of each category is guaranteed by the recurrence of spe-

1. The first statue represents a defunct woman sitting at a banquet, dressed in a long fringed tunic decorated with incised rosettes. She has her arms bent lying on her legs and carries two cylindrical vases in her hands. The second statue represents a sitting figure with the arms lying along the legs and the hands open on the knees. The iconographic model of the sitting figure is widely diffused, both in the Syrio-Palestinian region and in Asia Minor (with the statues of Branchidi of Miletus, in the first half of the 6th century B. C.). However, the ancient origin of this genre of sculpture is located in Egypt, according to Garbini; but the Syro-Palestinian area should be the first source of this kind of South-Arabian sculpture (Garbini 1977). Nonetheless, the figure of the defunct sitting at a banquet is widespread in oriental Syria and Anatolia from the 13th century.

2. Ph.D. program at the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples.

cific characteristics although the entire collection is not fragmented by gross structural dissimilarities³.

The chronological determination was based primarily on stratigraphic data from the digging site (a few cases only). Paleographic criteria were also used when the sculpture was accompanied by an epigraph. Otherwise, we made use of other chronological indicators such as the evolution of costumes and hairstyles.

Instead of detailing our typological groups, we would like to now focus on the striking originality, i.e. the autochthony, and the local stylistic homogeneity, i.e. the autonomy, of the South-Arabian sculptural production of the first millennium B. C.. The principal identifying characteristics of the sculpture are : a) reduced dimensions, b) geometrical organization of volumes, c) disproportionate corporeal masses, d) full frontality of the figures and flattening of the posterior side, e) perfect symmetry of the position of arms and legs, f) fixedness of the facial expression.

All stone sculptures are on average 30 cm tall, except for the statues of Awsān, that reach up to 70-90 cm (pl. 1, c). The attention is focused on the superior half of the body, particularly the head, which is the sole structure represented with depth and with physical traits accurately sculpted. The body, without any anatomical proportion, is conceived as a simple support for the head, represented with striking plasticity and intensity. The lower part of the body is about a third of the total height of the figure. The obvious misrepresentation of the proportions between the trunk and the legs is evident in all the statues, and often extends to disproportionate relation of the head and trunk. The figure is conceived as formed by two or more distinct parts, sculpted in such a way to attain a geometric shape : either the cube or the parallelepiped. The passages between the geometric planes are abrupt, particularly in the sitting figure, in which the square angles of the shoulders, elbows, waist line and knees are greatly emphasized. The main purpose is to obtain a geometric unity instead of a harmonic one.

In the sculptures, only the arms are kept free from the body and as such, they are often found broken. The massive legs are generally separated and their anchoring to the stand of the statue confers stability, but not grace to the figure.

The homogeneity and reiteration of these characteristics in South-Arabian sculpture epitomizes the very regional "artistic sentiment". In fact similar sentiments are found in architecture, typified by a distinct sense of symmetry and stability (dams, temples, fortifications, etc.), and in the monumental epigraphs. Such a penetrating expressive tradition, combined with a mastery of both sculptural and architectural techniques, presumes a multiseular experience. Its origins have to be searched far beyond the period of origin of the South-Arabian culture, as held by the proponents of the "low chronology". Furthermore the nearest parallels seem to be found in the limitrophe civilizations of the 2nd and even the 3rd millennium B. C.

Moreover, inspirations and influences of Mesopotamian origin can be found in the "mature", middle phase of the South-Arabian culture. The reliefs with standing figures of this period, for example, offer the same traditional presentation of the South-Arabian sculpture (pl. 1, d, e) ; but as far as the iconography is concerned, the nearest comparisons can be drawn to the art of Mesopotamia of the Sumeric period (3rd millennium B. C.), such as the praying statues of the temple of Abu in Tell Asmar and the oval temple of Khafāja or Mari, in spite of the chronological differences. Here the figures are erected, with the arms flexed and the joint hands kept close to the body (the divinities and some worshippers bear a cup in their hands). The expressive center of the figure resides in the

3. The sculptures have been grouped in the two main categories of "free standing figures" and "reliefs". Sub-classes are : heads, half figures, standing figures, sitting figures and celebratif reliefs.

large and wide-open eyes. However, in spite of the iconographical similarities, the style of our reliefs is typically South-Arabian.

Almost all the material I examined is ascribable to the so-called period of the Kings of Saba' ("middle" or "mature", 4th-1st century B. C.)⁴. Indeed, the site that has provided the greatest number of archaeological findings is Hayd ibn 'Aqil, the necropolis of Tamna', partly excavated by the Americans in the '50s, and unfortunately submitted to continuous clandestine looting as proved by the conspicuous presence of artifacts in antique markets. Its comparative study has allowed not only a rather complete assessment of Qatabānian production, but also an appreciation of the copious splendor of the Kingdom during the last centuries of the 1st millennium. Indeed, in the 3rd century B. C., Qatabān, which spanned from the Wādī Ḥarīb in the West and to the Wādī Markha in the East, achieved its political and economical apogee, as a result of its control of caravan commerce along the peninsula.

There are statues which come from other great archaeological centers, as well, such as Ma'rib and the Jawf area. Here the artistic documentation is less complete than that of Ḥayd ibn 'Aqil since the excavations are limited. Nonetheless, the analysis of the "heads with long necks", for instance, that represent one of the richest categories of our typology, has allowed the distinction between figures with "Jawfian" characteristics, and figures typically Qatabānian, or more precisely of Tamna'. In the heads from Jawf, of which Rathjens offers numerous examples (Rathjens 1955), the facial traits are more schematic and the contours are rougher (pl. 2, a). The inlay technique is also less used, since often the eyes are not hollow, but barely incised or in relief. In particular, the T-shape formed by the nose and the marked arch of the eyebrows and the small, static shape of the mouth with thick lips, are distinguishing features of this Jawfian type. These same characteristics are found in some small statues representing sitting figures ("ancestors") that are typically of Jawf (pl. 2, b, c).

The even plasticity of the shapes and a refined expressiveness are the distinguishing features of the Qatabānian sculptures (pl. 2, d, e, f). These features are accomplished with a distinctive delicacy having both soft contours and genuine naturalism, even though one can recognize the conformance with a South-Arabian artistic *koinè*.

A certain evolution seems to be seen in this "mature" period. In some exemplars the geometrical structures tend to become softer, without brisk interruptions between the different planes. Further, the strictly frontal and symmetric structure is abandoned in favor of movements and torsions of the body and hints of portraiture are added to the face. Finally, the costumes and hairstyles acquire mobility and articulation (pl. 3, a, b, d). These elements are innovative and exotic to the local culture and appear to enter the figurative art following the increasingly frequent contacts with the Mediterranean world since the Hellenistic period. However, the South-Arabian culture of this period remains extremely traditional: the sculpture simply adapts the new elements to its own expressive canons.

Only in the following period, the so called period of the "Kings of Saba' and dhu-Raydān" ("late" or "decadent", 1st-4th century A. D.), did the South-Arabian figurative production start to abandon its typically local character and begin to adopt the iconographic and stylistic themes of classical or oriental (Indian, Parthian) origins (pl. 3, c). Suffice it to consider the ample diffusion of grapevine motifs, acanth leaves, and exotic animals whose bodies coalesce in floral elements (Pirenne 1957). Another famous exam-

4. Prof. A. de Maigret has subdivided the history of South-Arabian art in three periods: "ancient" or "formative" (South-Arabian proto-history, 13th-7th century B. C., and period of the *mukarribs* (8th-5th century B. C.); "middle" or "mature" period (period of the Kings of Saba', 4th-1st century B. C.); "late" or "decadent" period (period of the Kings of Saba' and dhu-Raydān, 1st-4th century A. D., and period of the Himyarite Empire, 4th-7th century A. D.) (de Maigret 1995).

ple is the relief of Hombrechtikon, in which the feminine figure is clearly influenced by the coeval Indian art (2nd century A. D.) (Honeyman 1954). New themes and categories start to develop, such as the funerary reliefs representing the defuncts in their activity in life (camel drivers, farmers, warriors), and scenes of everyday life represented on panels (2nd century A. D.)⁵.

Historically, this artistic transformation corresponds to the political stabilization of the Ḥimyar tribe that attained independence from the kingdom of Qatabān and dominated the entire southern Arabia during the following centuries, until the advent of Islam. The traditional caravan routes that bordered the desert of Ṣayhad (Ramlat al-Sab'atayn), were then abandoned in favor of the maritime routes. Southern Arabia, which had for centuries turned towards the autonomous silence of its deserts, now looked towards the sea and opened itself to new and exotic, cultural, artistic and religious concepts.

We can suppose a "formative" or "antique" period of this South Arabian art, in the so-called "*mukarribs* period" (8th-5th centuries B. C.). From the most ancient evidence, it appears that the figurative culture of this phase is not exempt from some influences of the limitrophe civilizations. This aspect is particularly well demonstrated in the art of incision of Jawf, and specifically in the representations incised onto blocks from Ma'in, al-Bayḏā' al-Sawḏā', Haram (the so-called *Banāt 'Ād*) (pl. 4, a).

In these representations the iconographic motifs and their composition recall the Sumerian reliefs and inlays of the Protodynastic period. The *horror vacui* in the Jawf collection compares to the Brocade style of the Mesopotamian glyptic. The processional scenes in two panels from Ma'in (pl. 4, b, c) recall those of the famous standard from Ur (Frankfort 1970, figs. 64-65).

Even without going back to the art of the Mesopotamian period, the *Banāt 'Ād* represent one of the most ancient expressions of the South-Arabian figurative production⁶. Indeed, the French archaeological excavation of the temple of 'Athtar of al-Sawḏā', brought to light one interesting inscription engraved between the *Banāt 'Ād* panels carved on the entrance portal. The characters of the inscription are archaic and were employed in a period preceding the first documented Sabaean *mukarrib*. Since the temple was constructed with decorated blocks that belonged to a more ancient phase, it is likely that these particular representations had an even more ancient origin (Breton 1990, 1992).

Berta Segall has pointed out that South-Arabian sculpture could not have developed from the Greek art of the 7th century (as proposed by J. Pirenne), but had to be inspired by more ancient prototypes, culturally and geographically closer to southern Arabia. For example, Segall recognized a Syro-Hittite influence on two reliefs, both representing a standing feminine figure (pl. 5, a, b). In terms of structure, attributes and style these reliefs recall a relief of Carchemish and also the representation of a goddess from Zinçirli, both of which are most likely dated from the end of the 7th century B. C. (Segall 1956).

Syrian influences are also appreciable in another relief, found at Hajar ibn Ḥumayd (pl. 5, c). This piece represents the side view of a standing man, with thick hair and a pointed beard, holding a long pole in his hands. The similarities with this and other analogous reliefs discovered in Yemen (pl. 5, d), are to be found on Syrian monuments of the 7th century B. C. (Segall 1957).

5. This type of funerary stele is common in Greco-Roman world, but the style and the subject are adapted to typically local exigencies. We cannot ascertain whether the pieces are works of artisans coming from the oriental provinces of the Roman empire, or coming from South Arabia, nor which is the country of origin of the models that served as inspiration (Syria or Egypt) (Will 1989).

6. Contemporary to these works is a cultic tablet in clay, found during the excavations of a house in the ancient Sabaean city of Yalā/al-Durayb. The tablet displays a series of religious symbols and a personage in hunting attitude (Cf. Antonini 1996).

If the comparisons are correct and the chronologies correspond, even a peculiar statue in bronze, representing an androcephalic winged ibex, could belong to this period (pl. 5, e). The well preserved statue (31.5 cm in height), recovered from an antique market, was found in the zone of al-Jūba⁷. The piece recalls the winged androcephalic bulls, with long beards and curly hair (the guardianship genies), sculpted in relief in the Palace of Sargon II in Khorsabad (721-705 B. C.). It is worth noting that the element of foreign origin is adapted here to an iconographic subject characteristic of southern Arabia, i. e. the ibex, the divine animal-symbol of the Sabaeans.

In conclusion, the figurative production of southern Arabia originated around the period of the first *mukarribs* of Saba', Yatha'amar Bayān and Karib'il Watār, who are probably to be identified with Ita'amar and Karibilu in the Annals of the Assyrian Kings Sargon II and Sennacherib. It is worth mentioning, however, that contacts between the Arabs of the North and the Assyrians (Salmanassar III, Tiglathpileser III) existed in even earlier times (9th-8th centuries B. C.), and we cannot exclude the possibility of even more remote influences on figurative productions. Even the small statues, representing sitting figures ("ancestors"), should be ascribed to this "antique" or "formative" period, whose tradition, with small stylistic variations, would persist in Southern Arabia during the following centuries.

We should emphasize that even the most recent archaeological evidence indicates that the Southern Arabian production originated in the cultural context of the Near East, in agreement with the "long chronology" hypothesis. As such, the extrinsic, exotic influences, can be considered as elements of a process of internal assimilation and elaboration. This view can help us understand the basis of the South-Arabian art in its formative (proto-historic) phase. These external influences appear to gradually weaken as the cultural integration of the South-Arabian culture acquired a clear identity. This was particularly evident as its political and social aspects evolved toward a sense of a Nation-State. Later, this strong expressive characterization, typically representative of this part of the ancient Near East, began to weaken with further assimilation of external influences. The political and economic decline of the caravan Kingdoms, also contributed to this.

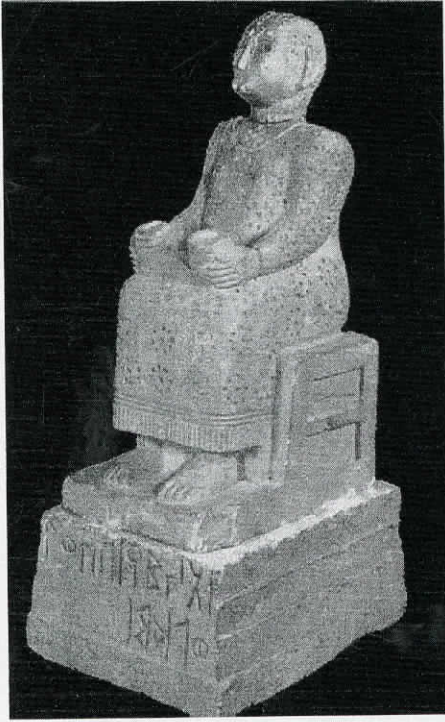
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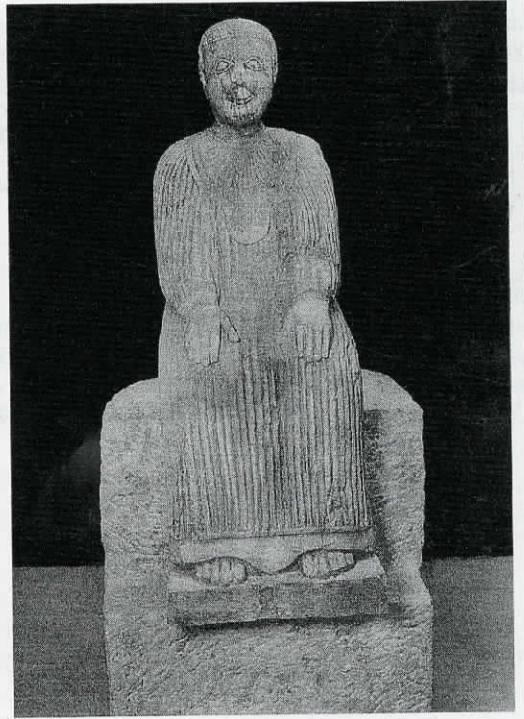
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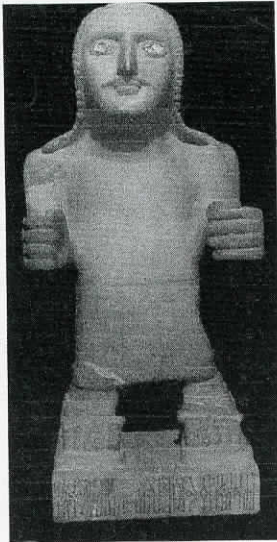
Pl. 1



a



b



c



d



e

a : Statue from Hauile-Hassaraw (Leclant 1962, pl. VII).

b : Statue from Haulti (de Contenson 1962, pl. Va).

c : Statue of the king of Awsân, Yaşduq'îl Fari'um, son of Ma'ad'îl (Pirenne 1986, p. 307).

d : Standing human figure in relief from Ḥayd ibn 'Aqîl (Sotheby's, November 14, 1966, lot 28, p. 16).

e : Standing human figure in relief (Sotheby's, July 9, 1973, lot 25, p. 10).

Pl. 2



a : Sabaeen head on long neck (Rathjens 1955, p. 232, phot. 303-304).

b : Limestone sitting figure, so-called "ancestor" (courtesy of National Museum of Şan'ā').

c : Limestone sitting figure, so-called "ancestor" (courtesy National Museum of Şan'ā').

d : Female alabaster head (Sotheby's, December 7, 1976, lot 184, p. 31).

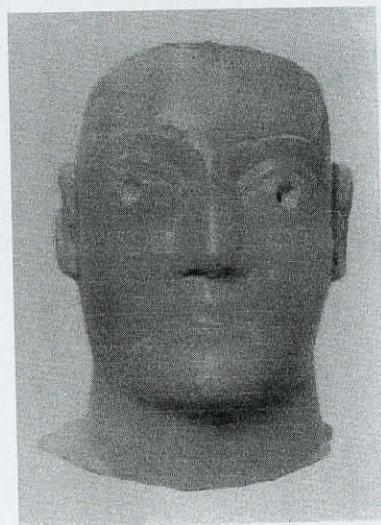
e : Male alabaster head (Sotheby's, July 9, 1973, lot 26, p. 10).

f : The alabaster head of "Miriam", from Tamna' cemetery (Phillips 1955, p. 98 ; retouched phot.).

Pl. 3



a



b



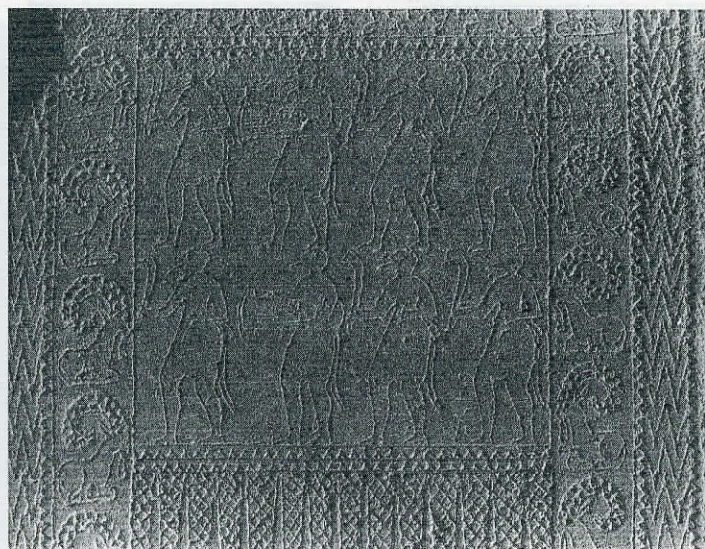
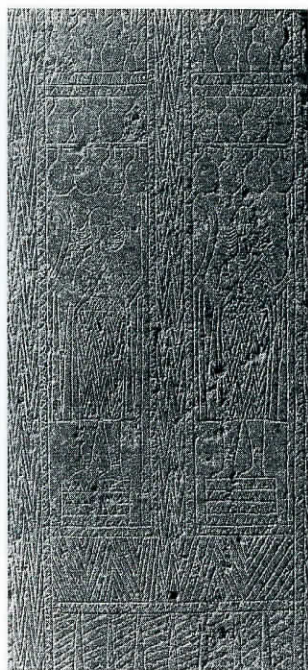
c



d

- a : Head of a male standing statue (Sotheby's, July 12, 1971, lot 26 p. 13).
 b : Alabaster head of a standing statue (Sotheby's, December 3, 1973, lot 22, p. 16, pl. IV).
 c : Alabaster male head from Yāfi' al-'Ulyā (A. de Maigret).
 d : Qatabānian female statue in alabaster (Sotheby's December 3, 1973, lot 28, p. 22).

Pl. 4



b

a



c

a-c : Incised panels (*Banāt ʿĀd*) from a Jawf temple (courtesy Ch. Robin).

Pl. 5



a



b



c



d



e

a : Female figure in relief from Hayd ibn 'Aqīl (Cleveland, pl. 43)

b : Female offerer in relief (courtesy of National Museum of Ṣan'ā').

c : Man in flat relief, grasping a staff (Van Beek 1969, pl. 47e).

d : Man with a staff, sitting on a throne (Radt 1973, pl. 20, no. 52)

e : Androcephalic winged ibex from al-Jūba (Sotheby's, November 17, 1977, lot 74, p. 31, pl. XXV).