

РОССИЙСКАЯ АКАДЕМИЯ НАУК
ИНСТИТУТ ВОСТОКОВЕДЕНИЯ

Scripta Yemenica

Исследования
по Южной Аравии

Сборник научных статей
в честь 60-летия
М.Б.ПИОТРОВСКОГО



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Сборник научных статей посвящен эпиграфическим, археологическим, этнологическим, историческим исследованиям по Южной Аравии. Авторами статей являются ведущие отечественные и зарубежные сабеисты, археологи, историки, лингвисты и этнологи, специалисты по истории культуры Южной Аравии. Статьи сборника содержат публикации уникальных, ранее неизвестных южноаравийских надписей и иных письменных документов, монетных находок, обобщения и анализ новейшего археологического, этнологического, лингвистического и фольклорного материала. Некоторые статьи зарубежных авторов публикуются в переводе на русский язык, остальные — на языке оригинала.

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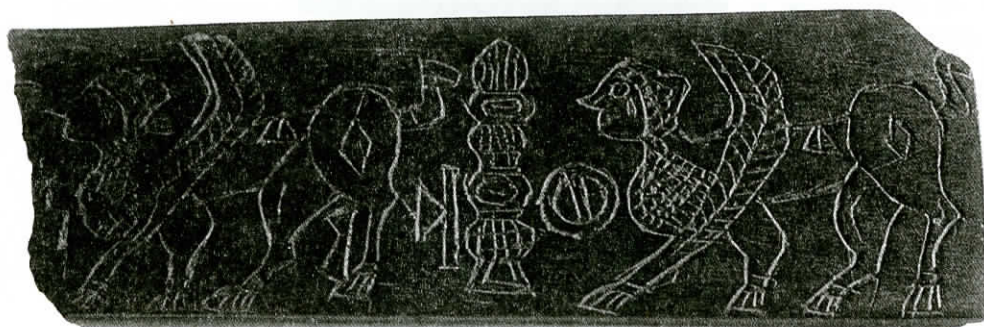
New South Arabian amulets

I am pleased to have the opportunity to present in this compendium in honor of Prof. Mikhail Borisovich Piotrovskij several plaquettes considered amulets both for the represented subject and for the propitiatory formula that appears in one of them. Two of the four amulets (of a type not much known till now) that I will present have been found during the excavations of private houses that the Italian-French Archaeological Mission, directed by prof. A. de Maigret, has excavated during the second campaign in Tamna', capital of Qatabān (September–October 2000) in the so-called "Market Place" (figs 1–2; pl. 1b, 2a). A third specimen was found during clandestine excavations near Bayḥan al-Qaşab (pl. 1a). The fourth amulet (pl. 2b) is preserved in the Museum of the Faculty of Art of the University of Şan'ā' and comes from an unspecified site of the Jawf region.

Both the plaquette from Bayḥan (MIFT.00/40; pl. 1a) and the one found in House D in Tamna' (T.00.B.O/17; fig. 1; pl. 1b) represent the same subject. The engraved figures of the first plaquette are still visible, in spite of the damage due to large fractures. This, as well as the other plaquettes, is made of bone, or perhaps ivory. It has a rectangular shape with a squared protrusion on the short right side, with a central hole (cm 12,4×5,4×0,5). The subject consists of two winged sphinxes in procession toward the left, preceded and followed by a design that seems to represent a stylized palm tree; each palm tree is separated by two or three small filling circles. The sphinxes have the body of a winged animal with a human (female) head and leonine paws rendered through incised lines. The profile of the face is characterized by a straight line that marks the forehead and the nose. The cheeks are rounded, the mouth is fleshy and the eye is indicated by a circle with a central hole. The hair is represented by a compact mass falling onto the neck, with incised locks. A motif with crossed lines decorates both the chest (representing plumage) and the tip of the tail, folded up toward the back of the figure. A circular hole in the center of the curved tail was presumably used to fix the plaquette on a support (wooden perhaps). The wings appear to grow from the left leg and have the shape of a reversed 'S'. The vexillum of the feathers, departing from the sides of the central axis, is drawn rather geometrically. A sign incised on the left hip could be a sort of brand of property, shown by an alphabetic letter (in this case $\Psi = h$). A similar sign occurs also on a winged creature's hip of the bronze relief found in Shabwa (Audouin 1992:177, fig. 13). The figures are framed by small circles, each with a central hole (perhaps made with a drill), numbering 24 along the top border of the plaquette, 25 along the made edge and 11 on the short left side. The right side is clearly cut with a squared protrusion at the level of leafy element that separates



a) Amulet with sphinxes from Bayḥān al-Qaṣab



b) Amulet with sphinxes from Tamna', "Market Place", House D

Plate 2



a) Amulet with goddess figure from Tamna', "Market Place"



b) Plaquette fragments with dogs from the Şan'ā' University Museum

the sphinxes. In this protrusion a hole has been drilled probably for utilization of the object as a pendant. It can be noticed, in fact, that the composition continues: more circles and another sphinx, of which part of the chest and the tip of the nose survive, are visible.

The second plaquette has been found *in situ* during the archaeological excavations, in the layer corresponding to the last dwelling (50 AD), of a private house (House D) in the "Market Place" of Tamna'. The plaquette, burnt and broken on the short left side (11.7×3.9×0.1 cm in size), represents two sphinxes moving toward the left, separated by a stylized palm tree and the first word of the propitiatory formula *Wdm 'bm*, that would have continued to the left, where, probably, two others sphinxes were depicted. Lines engraved on the legs suggest a powerful musculature, and a sign incised on the sphinx's hip seems to represent an alphabetic letter ($\hat{\nu} = f$), that could be a sort of owner's mark.

The subjects of the two plaquettes, although of the same nature, show substantial differences, both formal and stylistic. On the first plaquette the hair of the sphinxes falls on the shoulders, the wings are sinuous, the tail is turned toward the back and the bodies of these fantastic creatures appear rounder and thicker. In contrast, the sphinxes of the second specimen are slender, with elongated contours.

The theme of the sphinx is present in Southern Arabia since the 7th–6th centuries BC, as demonstrated by the bronze altars preserved in the British Museum, decorated by a series of standing, frontal sphinxes (AA.VV. 2000:320–321; Simpson 2002:168–169). However, the winged female sphinx in profile (as a variant, with one foreleg raised, or rampant on both sides of the sacred tree) recurs in some South Arabian reliefs of a later period. Similar examples can be cited from the 'Awsān region, that are kept in the Louvre Museum (AO 4098; Pirenne 1977:461–462), or the relief preserved in the Museum of Aden (NAM 2514) originating from Bayḥan (Doe 1971:fig. 11), or even some fragments of a frieze representing in low relief two rampant winged sphinxes on the sides of a palm tree, discovered in the great Temple of 'Athtar in Tamna' ("early Parthian period", Cleveland 1963:57–59). Other examples are a plate in bronze from Amrān showing two sphinxes on the sides of the tree of life and a palm tree on the lateral sides (the roses with four points that decorate the inferior frieze are of Persian inspiration). All these works can be dated from a period between the 2nd century BC and the 1st century AD (Antonini, Arbach, Sedov 2002:48). We can recall other reliefs of male bearded winged sphinxes, attributable also to the first centuries of the Christian Era (Pirenne 1977:462, 465, 467).

The fragmented plaquette found in a room outlined between House A and House B (*Locus* 227) of the "Market Place" of Tamna' has two images incised vertically (pl. 2a): a female bust in frontal view with the head in left profile (flattened on the top) and, above, a snake (6.3×3.4×0.3 cm in size). The figures are framed by a series of circles with a central hole. The decoration would have continued on the upper side, now broken. The female figure is characterized by tiedup hair, partly wavy and partly straight. A necklace (or perhaps the neckline of the dress) is visible around the neck. Two oblique dashed lines decorating the dress recall the style of the figure on the "plaque à la déesse" of the Museum in Bombay (Pirenne 1977:443), or the style of the "plaque à la déesse" of Baynūn (Pirenne 1977:445). These two works are dated to 100 AD. The snake represented in South Arabian works has often a propitiatory function and, because of its chthonic character, may represent the symbol of immortality and fertility.

The fragments of bone plaquette kept in the Museum of the University of Ṣan'ā' show a series of three dogs in profile, in procession toward the left (pl. 2b). The bodies are slender,

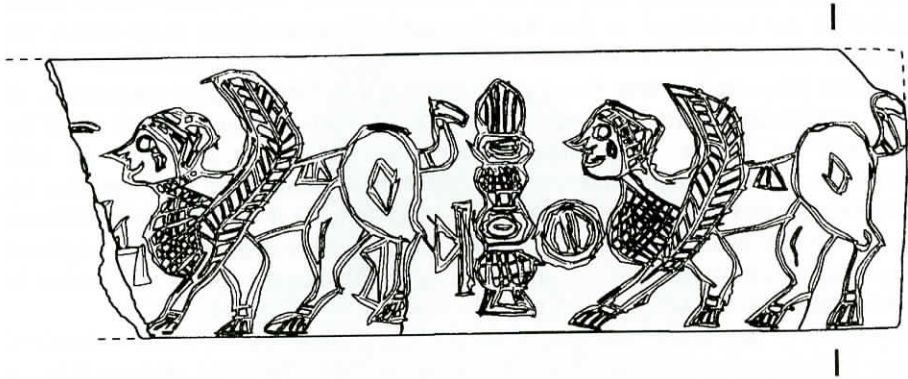


Fig. 1. Amulet from Tamna', House D, "Market Place"



Fig. 2. Plaquette with snake and female figure from Tamna', "Market Place"

the forelegs are paired and raised, the hind legs are bent close to the body, and the tail is raised on the back. The snouts have an elongated profile, very similar to the faces of the sphinxes (pl. 1b), both formally and stylistically. As for the sphinxes of pl. 1a, the eyes are rendered by a circle with a central hole, and lines engraved on the back indicate maybe the musculature, or an alphabetic letter (⊙ = w?). Two dashed lines incised around the neck and the body suggest a sort of leash. The upper side is still decorated with a portion of the frame with upright triangles. The apotropaic function of the dogs is underlined by both their posture and the bared teeth. The image of the dog is not frequent in the South Arabian iconography and is usually found in hunting scenes, as in the stela at the National Museum of Yemen, where a dog assaults an ibex (AA.VV. 2000:358, no. 272).

The apotropaic character of sphinxes and dogs (that is defense against adversities) and the propitiatory function of the snake and the female figure (probably a goddess with protective virtues) lead us to interpret these plaquettes as having the function of amulets. The archaeological context in which two of the plaquettes have been found allows their dating to the second half of the 1st century AD.

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