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# **Dieux et déesses d'Arabie**

## **Images et représentations**

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# South Arabian Religious Iconography: The Language of Symbols and the Representation of Deities

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## The discovery of the Temple of the Banāt 'Ād at Nashshān provides the occasion for a reappraisal of the problem

The recent discovery of the *intra-moenia* temple at as-Sawdā' / *Nashshān* (in the Jawf region) reawakened an interest in the divine iconography of South Arabia. The temple presents carved bas-relief scenes depicting an assembly of standing or seated figures accompanied by the names of the deities belonging to the local pantheon. In the panels decorating the *propylaeum* of the Yatha'ān temple, male figures are portrayed in pairs, facing each other, and are represented with various attributes and postures that have meaningful significance (fig. 1).

According to French researchers who first published these representations<sup>1</sup>, each figure represents a deity, whose name appears beside or above it. In the first panel, we can recognize 'Athtar and probably ʾĪl followed by deities specific to the city-state of the Jawf. These are: Aranyada' and Wadd, principal deities of Nashshān; Almaqah, official deity of the kingdom of Saba' and probably worshipped in the city of Al-Bayḍā' / *Nashq*, accompanied by Aranyada'; Hiwār, deity of Inabba'; Nakraḥ, deity of Ma'īn; Nab'al, deity of Kaminahū, and Yada'ismū deity of Haram. The gods are thought to be represented in a hierarchic sequence and no female deities appear with the exception of the Banāt ʾĪl (fig. 2), interpreted by Chr. Robin as semi-goddesses. The presence of tutelary deities of different kingdoms seems to point towards a confederation of kingdoms, led by Nashshān, the ally of Saba'. The presence of Almaqah, the official deity of the Sabaeans, among the deities of the Jawf, may be indicative of an alliance of convenience between Nashshān and Saba' during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.

1. Arbach and Audouin 2004; Arbach, Audouin, Robin 2004.



Fig. 1 – *Yada'sum with two small antelopes and Nab'al holding the ritual vase and the palm leaf. Intra-moenia temple at as-Sawdā'* (Arbach, Audouin 2004, pillar 1B, fig. v).



Fig. 2 – “Dancing *Banāt 'Ād*”. Intra-moenia temple at as-Sawdā' (detail: Arbach, Audouin 2004, pillar 1B, fig. vii).

Most probably, the deities' names in the free spaces near the figures have been added at a later time and there are questions as to their interpretation. Instead, the inscription within the foundations is smoothly included within the sequence of representations<sup>2</sup>, and therefore were likely to have been part of the temple from its very inception.

2. The inscription on the foundations bears the name of Alamnaba, Amar, son of Labu'ān, who built the temple. The latter was one of the kings of as-Sawdā' / *Nashshān*, mentioned in this temple for the first time. His father was already known from other inscriptions, which enabled the scholars to date the reign of Alamnaba, Amar at around the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.



Fig. 3 – Female figure resembling the “dancing Banāt ‘Ad”, carved on the miniature limestone temple from Kamna (detail; Ṣan‘ā’ Military Museum, n° 3630).



Fig. 4 – Goddess seated on a chair in the alabaster stela of the hunter, from Tan‘im (National Museum, Ṣan‘ā’; YM 386).

The addition of the deities’ names near to the male figures may have two different explanations. They may have been carved relatively soon after the sculpting of the figures, and indeed the script is of the same type of the foundations inscription. Conversely, carving of inscriptions at a later time might have been the customary procedure adopted by South Arabian stone carvers when they were required to provide images with inscriptions. This latter hypothesis seems the most likely and the case of as-Sawdā’ does not appear to be isolated. In fact, the inscription on the miniature limestone temple (8<sup>th</sup> c. BC), shown in **fig. 3**, has been carved on the sides of the figure and also extends above the frame of the panel, as well as the inscription on the alabaster stela shown in **fig. 4** (AD 1<sup>st</sup> c.) is incised in the free spaces around the scene.<sup>3</sup>

However, in either case, the identification of the figures is certain. The question arises as to whether these deities were recognizable from their *appearance*, from the position they occupied in the general context of composition, i.e. from their *hierarchy*, and from their *attributes* and *symbols*. If this was the case, one might question why it was necessary to place the deities’ names beside the corresponding images.

3. I wish to express my thanks to the President of GOAM, Mr Abdallāh Bawazir, and to the Director of the National Museum of Ṣan‘ā’, Mr ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Jandārī, for the permission to publish the photographs of the pieces kept in the Museum. My thanks also to Alexander Sedov for the picture of idols from Wādī ‘Idim (fig. 16), and to Iris Gerlach for the picture of the bronze bust of Athena from Jabal Al-‘Awd (fig. 6).

### Connotative elements for the iconographic identification of the deity: limitation of the research.

#### *The epigraphic documentation*

The positioning of the deity's name close to the human figure, which appears for the first time in the *intra-moenia* temple at as-Sawdā', is exceptional. Prior to the discovery of these extraordinary carvings, researchers struggled to find a defined iconography for the South Arabian deities without reaching any definitive conclusions. With the exception of Almaqah, it was commonly accepted that either the South Arabian deities had no identity of their own and were represented in human forms not identifiable by a specific name, or they were recognizable solely through specific attributes and symbolic animals.

Gonzague Ryckmans<sup>4</sup> had suggested the impossibility of identifying the form in which the South Arabian deities were worshipped in the temples and had postulated that they were represented by means of anthropomorphic or animal statues. This researcher cited a dedication in which a tunic was offered to clothe 'Athtar, suggesting the existence of statues of this deity. In another inscription, 'Athtar bore the title of *hajar*; suggesting that the deities could reside in stones. In a previous study Adolf Grohmann<sup>5</sup> analyzed South Arabian divine symbols and symbolic animals and emphasized the link with similar imagery of the Mesopotamian civilization.

Let us review the characteristics of the available documentation and see to what extent it can shed light on the iconography of South Arabian deities.

- 1/ The inscriptions – the only source of direct documentation – allow us to create a long list of deities (a hundred of names), but do not provide any information concerning their nature and appearance.
- 2/ In South Arabia the deities are normally mentioned in epigraphic texts of dedicatory or commemorative nature referring to various events and describing the nature of the offerings, requests and rituals. The South Arabian populations were well aware of the differences between the deities, which obviously were not reflected in their aesthetic-formal appearance, but in their intrinsic nature. The inscriptions do not always reveal the special aspects of the deity. Among the exceptions, we can cite Nakrah, which appears as a Minaean healing deity, and Nakrah and dhū-Samāwī as confessor deities. 'Athtar Shāriqān is invoked in the inscriptions referring to construction.
- 3/ Each deity has its own name, which may also have a meaning (for example, 'Amm, 'paternal uncle', Wadd, 'love'), also followed by an epithet ('Athtar Shāriqān 'the one that rises in the East', namely Venus, which is visible in the morning, before the sun rises). However, these details do not inform us about the physical representation of the deity itself.
- 4/ The male and female South Arabian deities mostly have designations associated with animals or are sometimes accompanied by animal images. However, there is not a univocal link between the deity invoked in the inscription and the animal to which it refers. A deity may be linked to more than one animal and, conversely, an animal may refer to more than one deity. Below are a few examples:

4. G. Ryckmans 1942, pp. 169-170.

5. Grohmann 1914.

a/ Almaqah, Sabaeen national deity, was called 'lord of the ibexes', but also Ta'lab, the tutelary deity of the Hamdan tribe is associated with the ibex;  
 b/ the epithet *ṭwr b'lm*, 'lord bull' probably referred to Almaqah, but also the god Sami' bore the epithet *ṭwr 'bq'm*, which means 'bull of the rural districts'<sup>6</sup>.  
 c/ the lion is associated with dhāt Ba'dān, a sun goddess, although it also represented the Central Arabian sun god Yaghouth<sup>7</sup>. Further, dhāt Ba'dān was also associated with the horse;

d/ some names of deities correspond to animal names, such as Naḥastāb, 'good snake'<sup>8</sup>. However, there are many cases in which the same animal represents other gods. For example, the snake is associated with Saḥar, dawn<sup>9</sup>; at Ma'm, the snake is the symbol of Wadd; entwined snakes are found in the temples of Banāt 'Ād in the Jawf, dedicated to 'Athtar and Matabnaṭiyān. Similarly, the deity Nasr, which means eagle, or falcon, had this bird as its symbol and the god Sayyin is represented both in the form of an eagle on Hadramite coins as well as a bull. With the exception of a few cases, this high degree of overlap prevents a specific connotation for each deity.

- 5/ The sun represents the heavenly nature of the South Arabian female deities. Many of the names of these deities refer to this celestial body: in Ḥaḍramawt and in Qatabān the goddess Shams, 'sun',<sup>10</sup> is worshipped, as well as dhāt Ba'dān ('the distant one'), and also dhāt Ḥimyām, which means 'the incandescent'. However, 'shams' is sometimes used as a common noun to refer to a protective deity and not to the sun-goddess Shams.<sup>11</sup> Sun worship is the only aspect of the ancient South Arabian religion that has been passed on to the Quran and the Islamic Arabic tradition.
- 6/ Some deities are common to the entire Semitic world ('Athtar / Ishtar, Shams / Shamash, Sayyin / Sīn), although the South Arabian pantheon comprises primarily tribal and local and even household deities. Regularly, the list of invocations is headed by 'Athtar, followed by Hawbas and Almaqah for the Sabaeans, 'Athtar dhu-Qabḍ for the Minaeans, 'Amm for the Qatabanians and Sayyin for the Hadramites. Contrary to Mesopotamian tradition, in South Arabia 'Athtar is a male and Shams a female deity.
- 7/ Votive or commemorative inscriptions mention the name of the dedicator and the deity to which the invocation or the dedication is addressed, often accompanied by symbols. The earliest and most complete compendium of divine symbols emerges from the Banāt 'Ād temples (8<sup>th</sup> c. BC)<sup>12</sup> and from a 7<sup>th</sup> century votive tablet in terracotta found in a private home in Yalā / Ḥafarī (fig. 5).<sup>13</sup> The symbology is made up of celestial bodies, plant and animal elements and divine attributes. However, the wide range of expressive typologies prevents a direct relationship between the reference object and the deity.

6. G. Ryckmans 1960, p. 223.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

11. Calvet, Robin 1997, p. 65.

12. Antonini 2004.

13. *Ead.* 1996.



Fig. 5 – Terracotta votive tablet from Yalā / Ḥafarī. The symbology is made up of celestial bodies, plant and animal elements and divine attributes (Italian Archaeological Mission in Yemen, Y.87.Y/1).

- 8/ Yemen does not provide South Arabian texts referring explicitly to local myths and legends which could have helped us identify the deities. The epithets 'Mother of 'Athtar', 'Mother of Goddesses', 'Daughters of ʾĪl', 'Daughters of Hawbas' allude to a theogonic myth, that is still obscure.<sup>14</sup> The *mukarrib* of Qatabān had the title of 'first-born of 'Anbay and of Ḥawkum', showing a close relationship between the sovereigns and the divinity, and perhaps the divinization of the sovereigns themselves.<sup>15</sup>
- 9/ In South Arabia, there are no demons or genies of local origin and their representation rely on foreign influences. A bronze androcephalous winged ibex discovered in al-Jūba<sup>16</sup> certainly recalls the local ibexes with large curved horns depicted in South Arabian reliefs. However, the wings and the human head, with thick locks and long beard, are typical of the androcephalous winged bulls, i.e. the tutelary genies (*lamassu*), of the neo-Assyrian palaces, or of the guardian animals of the monumental doorway of the palace of Xerxes I at Persepolis. On a stele from Maʿīn,<sup>17</sup> the figure of a winged genie is sculpted on the panels and bears some resemblance to several reliefs in Nimrud.
- 10/ The objects with dedications to the deities have different forms. Besides the anthropomorphic and animal bronze statues, we have steles, amulets, bronze vases, altars, incense burners, architectural blocks, seals, etc. It is still unclear whether statues with human features accompanied by dedications to the deities

14. J. Ryckmans 1992, p. 117.

15. G. Ryckmans 1942, p. 174.

16. Antonini 2003, pl. 5e.

17. Antonini de Maigret, Robin, Bron 2005-2006, fig. 171.



Fig. 6 – The bronze bust of Athena, discovered in the site of Jabal Al-‘Awd, bears a dedication with the name of the deity Shams (Courtesy, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Şan‘ā’).

represent the very deities invoked in the inscription. The statues might have been a representation of offerings made by the worshipper to the deity and therefore represented the devotee himself.

11/ Greek deities began to be introduced in South Arabia during the late-Hellenistic period. Excavations have yielded statuettes of Aphrodite, Athena, Isis-Fortuna, Dionysus Sabazius, beardless Dionysus, Harpocrates, Herakles and Demetra. The presence of statuettes of foreign deities is evidence of the introduction of new forms of worship into South Arabia or of their assimilation with local deities. A bronze bust of Athena (fig. 6), discovered in the site of Jabal Al-‘Awd, bears a dedication with the name of the deity Shams.<sup>18</sup> However, it is not clear whether Athena was identified with the local deity or whether the statue was a precious votive offering to the South Arabian goddess Shams.

12/ From the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, Arab nomads began to settle in South Arabia, bringing with them their deities, among which the goddesses al-‘Uzzā, al-Lāt and Manāt. Of interest, these deities are mentioned in texts written in the first four centuries AD. However, only al-‘Uzzā was included in the South Arabian pantheon. Therefore, together with Hellenic paganism, Arab paganism began to spread as well. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether the representation of the Arab deities was anthropomorphic or aniconic. The betyles, either aniconic or depicted with eyes, are characteristic of Arab idols or funeral steles. It is confirmed that in the Minaean and Qatabanian areas, steles with eyes or schematized faces, or even aniconic steles, find a regular correspondence at Taymā’, Madā’ in Şāliḥ and at Petra. Here, on the rock walls, there are carvings of rectangular shapes, either single or in pairs or multiple forms, inside *naiskoi* that are accompanied by inscriptions. Researchers have identified these betyles as deities of the Nabataean pantheon.

18. *Rome Catalogue* 2000, p. 404.



*The divine symbols*

In Southern Arabia, as in Mesopotamia, from the period of the *mukarrib* (8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. BC) the most characteristic element for expressing religious feelings is the *symbol*. The symbol, as a form of immediate expression aimed at grasping the essence of the intangible and given as a truth of a higher order, is a direct means for identifying the god. Could the symbol be a substitute for the god and play the same role as the anthropomorphic representation of the deity? In Mesopotamia this would seem to be the case. In Babylon, for example, the divine symbols carved into the *kudurru* (boundary stones placed in the temples in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. BC) identify the deities, the names of which sometimes accompany the corresponding symbols. In other examples, the inscriptions refer explicitly to the divine symbols even though the latter are not represented.<sup>19</sup>

In South Arabia, the relationship between the deity and its symbol is, as we have seen, anything but straightforward. For example, the lunar crescent with the celestial disk is found on objects, mostly incense burners, with dedications to Shams, to 'Athtar, to Wadd and to Amm.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, it might symbolize either a sun deity or a lunar deity. However, it does not seem to be linked to any specific deity and it might therefore be considered a talisman. This symbol appears in the crown on a female bronze statuette that might be identified with a goddess (fig. 7). The symbol is documented as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and persists into the first few centuries AD. The heavenly disk might represent either the Sun or the planet Venus, while the crescent is a clear reference to the crescent moon. In some incense burners, the crescent symbol with the disk rests on a triangular base, forming a figure of the dancing Banāt 'Ād type (fig. 8). In some reliefs, the same symbol is associated with a bull accompanied by the inscription "Wadd is the father" (*Wadd'ab*, a magic formula against the jinx). It seems likely that the bull represented a lunar deity, probably Wadd (in addition to Almaqah) with the shape of the horns recalling the lunar crescent (cf. p. 373).

In Mesopotamia the lunar crescent associated with the disk is the symbol of the moon god Sīn, while the isolated disk is identified with Shamash and it is often confused with the star, the symbol of Ishtar.<sup>21</sup>

The inscriptions referring to the construction of buildings dedicated to 'Athtar dhu-Qabḍ are often accompanied by a Minaean symbol that is defined as a 'door'. This is sometimes substituted by the monogram of 'Athtar. The symbol might represent access to the divine presence or to the afterlife. Indeed 'Athtar is often invoked against the profanation of tombs.

Other symbols, whose relationship to a specific South Arabian deity remains unknown, are also present. An arrow-like form with a transverse bar is found in the Jawf reliefs of Banāt 'Ād, on the Sabaean inscriptions and coins, and is interpreted as the symbol of a spade for its similarities to the *marru*, a farm tool of the god Marduk.

The rhombus, similar to the Mesopotamian lozenge, may have various interpretations: as a vulva, symbol of fertility, as an eye with an apotropaic function, as a corn seed, referring to agriculture. The cross, documented in Qatabanian inscriptions and on Sabaean seals and coins, interpreted as a divine symbol, has precise Babylonian

19. Black, Green 1992, pp. 18-19.

20. Calvet, Robin 1997, p. 71.

21. Green 1995, p. 1838.



Fig. 7 – Female bronze statuette identified with a goddess. The symbol of the lunar crescent with the celestial disk appears in the crown (private collection; 'Ali 'Aqil, Antonini 2007, p. 127).



Fig. 8 – In the incense-burner the crescent symbol with the disk rests on a triangular base, forming a figure of the dancing Banāt 'Ad type (National Museum, Ṣan'ā'; YM 2019).

parallels where it is depicted on seals or around the neck of kings as amulets. The so-called 'lightning rod', and the 'double stylus', are often paired in inscriptions from the period of the Sabaeen *mukarrib* associated with Almaqah's 'staff'. The 'lightning rod' also appears in the Minaean inscriptions near the monogram of 'Athtar, the snake and the 'door'. Adolf Grohmann linked it to the Babylonian bunch of thunderbolts appearing on seals and reliefs. The two- or three-pointed symbol is attributed to Adad, both as a beneficial rain-bearing deity and as a malevolent god of tempests. Also the 'double stylus' is believed to have a Babylonian equivalent. These last four symbols actually also correspond to letters of the South Arabian alphabet, respectively, the rhombus (◊) to the *f*; the cross (⋈) to the *t*; the lightning rod (⚡) to the *h* and *h*; the double stylus (≡) to the *ḡ*.

The extended hand is a symbol often found on Southern Arabia monuments as well as on rock art, and it is also associated with the crescent moon and heavenly disk motif. Grohmann attributes this symbol to 'Athtar and ascribes to it an apotropaic significance, due to the protective nature of the god against all forms of profanation of tombs or temples. The open hand can also mean a gesture of benediction and adoration. In Mesopotamia, the hand appears in several Babylonian seals.

Akkadian period, the sun's rays designate different deities, suggesting that there were several sun-gods or that a single sun-god had very close affiliates. Further, the transfer of some attributes from the original deity to another deity renders the identification more difficult. However, in general, Mesopotamian gods are easily recognized from the context of their mythological tales.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, in South Arabia, the iconographic identification of the deities is indeterminate. The new as-Sawdā' carvings might indicate that the deities were also represented with an anthropomorphic appearance. However, if this were the case, they should be directly recognizable from their appearance, their position and their attributes, with no need to place the name of a deity next to each figure. In the *intra-moenia* temple of as-Sawdā', the deity-figures are depicted in pairs, facing each other, with a long pointed beard, short hair held by a band, standing or seated at a table of worship, beneath a thick pergola of plants and fruits and surrounded by ibexes and ostriches. These deities have stereotypical forms, although several of them may be distinguished by their attributes, or by the ritual symbols used – Yada' sum and Hawar are shown with two small antelopes, and Nab'al is holding the ritual vase and the palm leaf used in purification rites that are also depicted in a procession scene from the Banāt 'Ād temple at Ma'in.<sup>27</sup> Several of them are clad in a long tunic decorated with rectangular elements recalling terracotta (see fig. 5) or bronze worship tablets while others wear an ordinary short robe coiled around the waist as in bronze and stone statues.

Giovanni Garbini claimed that South Arabian deities were represented in human form as in all Semitic religions. However, he denied the existence of any South Arabian figurative tradition earlier than the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Garbini probably supported the theory claiming that South Arabians adopted Greek models for the divine representation – a theory that helped him identify the three bronze statues found in the Awwām temple at Ma'rib (fig. 9),



Fig. 9 – The bronze statues, found in Awwām temple at Ma'rib, are identified with the god Almaqah; the first statue is dedicated by Ma'dikarib (National Museum, Ṣan'ā'; a: YM 262; b: YM 263; c: YM 264).

26. Green 1995, p. 1842.

27. Antonini 2004, pl. 29a.

in particular the identification of Ma'đikarib (fig. 9a) with Herakles / Almaqah;<sup>28</sup> but, the identification of the deity represented by the bronze statues of Awwām remains uncertain to the present day. J. Pirenne<sup>29</sup> and G. Garbini<sup>30</sup> identified these figures as related to the god Almaqah, claiming that the statues were offerings to the temple dedicated to him. J. Pirenne's argument was also based on the similarities observed on an alabaster relief from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC in the Museum of Şan'ā' (fig. 10), depicting a man with the right hand raised, a sign interpreted as a gesture of divine benediction. However, both in the bronze statues and the relief, the figure has an appearance that is quite different from that in the as-Sawda' temple. Probably with the intent of justifying the lack of any precise characterization of a South Arabian deity, Garbini believes that the various cultural influences exerted in ancient Yemen (by Iran, Mesopotamia, Syria, Hellenized Phoenicia, etc.) resulted in different representations of the South Arabian deity. This deity maintained distinctive features that never exactly coincided with those of a foreign deity.<sup>31</sup> Garbini claims that the iconography of the 'young god' persisted during the entire South Arabian civilization. However, as far as the representations of female deities were concerned, he questions why the fertility goddess dhāt Ḥimyām (fig. 11, stela from the 1<sup>st</sup> c. BC) (corresponding to the Greek Demetra)<sup>32</sup> should be depicted only from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC on, while the adolescent god Almaqah was represented as early as the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.

Fig. 10 – Alabaster stela from al-Jūba; the man with the right hand raised (a gesture of divine benediction) is identified with the Sabaean god Almaqah (National Museum, Şan'ā'; YM 69).



Fig. 11 – Alabaster stela from al-Jūba with the representation probably of the goddess dhāt Ḥimyām (National Museum, Şan'ā'; YM 71).



28. Garbini 1984.

29. Pirenne 1972.

30. Garbini 1974.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

32. The sheaves of wheat and the gesture of raising the hand as a sign of benediction are specific features of the fertility goddess.

In the new *as-Sawdā'* reliefs, the figure corresponding to the Sabaean god Almaqah is depicted seated with the 'staff' in his left hand (fig. 12). It is worth noting the presence at his feet of a female figure holding a child, which might represent the 'Mother goddess' or 'Goddess of birth', suggesting that all deities are direct descendants of Almaqah. This reading legitimizes Almaqah's complete authority over the other gods, and by extrapolation of Saba over the Jawf states.<sup>33</sup>

Seated in front of Almaqah is a god named Aranyada<sup>6</sup>, who is recognizable solely by the attribute he holds in his left hand, a sort of scepter with the double entwined snake motif.

At the head of the divine representations is 'Athtar, depicted as a standing figure dressed in a long tunic as Almaqah and with a pole in his left hand. The god is facing another deity, probably ʾĪl, whose attributes are not easily identifiable. The god Wadd is dressed as a hunter with the lunar crescent or bull's horns on his head and armed with bow and arrows. The human figure corresponding to Nakrah, the confessor and healing god, grasps a long rod while both Yada<sup>7</sup>sum and Hawar are holding up a pair of oryxes which could be considered as ritual offerings rather than attributes.

As far as the female images are concerned, in addition to the Banāt 'Ād represented as statues standing on a podium with the conventional attributes, the temple of Nashshān houses dancing female figures (fig. 2), also covered with symbolic objects (worshipping tablets, necklaces). These figures could be interpreted as images of priestesses, or as undefined female deities, or even semi-goddesses believed to be intermediaries between the higher deities and the lesser gods or the human beings. In the alabaster stela of the hunter (fig. 4), the female figure seated on a chair and characterized by long hair as the dancing Banāt 'Ād, probably corresponds to a goddess, perhaps Shams mentioned in the accompanying dedication.

Fig. 12 – Intra-moenia temple at *as-Sawdā'*. The Sabaean god Almaqah is depicted seated with the 'staff' in his left hand; at his feet a female figure is holding a child (detail; Arbach, Audouin 2004, pillar 1B, fig. iv).



33. Epigraphic texts speak of a deity as 'first born'; however, a boustrophedon inscription dating to the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC shows that in Qatabān the title of 'first born' was also given to kings and people linked to service in the temple (Arbach 1999).

The female figure in bas-relief on the inscribed miniature temple found in Kamna (in the Jawf; **fig. 3**)<sup>34</sup> strongly resembles the Banāt 'Ād and probably has the same function. The figure wears a double necklace with a round pendant in the shape of a rising sun. However, there is no mention in the inscription of a female deity but rather of Nab'al, 'Athtar *hajar* and Madahwū.

These female figures are all characterized by abundant hair and striking necklaces, as those found in a bronze statue in the Ṣan'ā' National Museum (**fig. 13**). The figure's gesture of offering incense is commonly depicted in other bronze female statues, therefore the interpretation as to whether the figure is a deity or a devotee or a priestess remains uncertain.

The interpretation of the other numerous anthropomorphic and animal statues dedicated to deities in the temples is also uncertain. As we have seen, they could be interpreted as images of worship or votive offerings, with the form of the dedicators or of animals sacred to the deities.

If the hypothesis of the identification of the figures depicted in the temple of Nashshān is rejected, another possible interpretation remains. Is it not possible that these figures represent the kings of the various cities, 'symbolically' indicated by the names of the deities of which they were the patrons? In this case, there would not yet have been a divine anthropomorphism, at least in this pre-Hellenistic phase of South Arabian figurative production.

In conclusion, the general idea emerging from the analysis of South Arabian divine iconography is that the representation of the divine was obtained essentially by means of a complex symbolic system in which the links between symbols, their meanings and the gods to which they refer are not always direct. We believe that the South Arabians expressed the divine through heterogeneous forms including the human form and, although possessing specific attributes and arranged in a hieratic position, they are presented in an impersonal form.



Fig. 13 – Female figure offering incense (National Museum, Ṣan'ā'; YM 289).

34. Antonini 1997, pp. 16-17.

The deities can be recognized by characteristic elements (appearance, attributes, symbols), but not unequivocally identified. Even when traditional figurative production has clearly been influenced by Oriental or Classical cultures, the deities still cannot be absolutely identified. Is the case, for example, of the female image engraved on a small alabaster stela found at Baynūn (fig. 14; 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD). The long plaits, the crown on the head, a dove in the left hand, a twig in the right one, and the variegated garment make to think of a South Arabian goddess (dhāt Ḥimyām?), inspired perhaps by a Syrian iconography of Atargatis.

The introduction of statues of foreign deities (see fig. 6) demonstrates the adoption of new cults, but it does not imply that these deities were assimilated to the local gods.

Fig. 14 – Goddess with crown holding a sprig and a bird, from Baynūn (Radt 1973, pl. 36, n° 99).

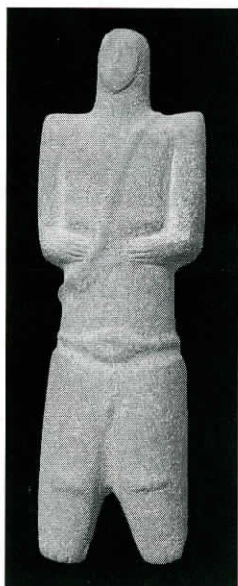


Fig. 15 – Divine idol represented as a hunter or warrior with a belt and a band running across the chest; from al-Jawf (National Museum, Ṣan‘ā’; YM 8983).



Fig. 16 – The female idol (in the middle) is characterised by ample forms with soft folds of fat; she probably represents a fertility goddess; from Wādī ‘Idim (inner Ḥaḍramawt) (Sayūn Museum, SM 2644-2646; Courtesy Alexander Sedov).

The elusiveness of the concept of the divine in South Arabia is demonstrated not only by the multiplicity of representations, but also by the variety of places of worship. The South Arabian deities were worshiped not only in the temples, but also in specific spaces dedicated to this purpose: in the open air, in the necropolises or inside dwellings. The so-called 'ancestors' could be worshipped as household or sepulchral tutelary deities. Sacred rocks, or betyles, the antecedents of which are to be found in proto-historic and prehistoric monuments, were worshipped in mountain sanctuaries<sup>35</sup> (Jabal al-Lawdh,<sup>36</sup> Darb aṣ-Ṣabī,<sup>37</sup> Shi'b al-ʿAql)<sup>38</sup> or in private homes. In the Ṣabr excavations, the presence of private sanctuaries between the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, is documented by the discovery in a small square room with mud brick walls of several sacred stones erected vertically on the earthen floor together with incense burners and pottery used in ritual offerings.<sup>39</sup> Lines of stones such as those in the Tihāma<sup>40</sup> or the circular structures of the Bronze Age al-ʿArūsh (3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC)<sup>41</sup> suggest the use of natural places considered sacred and suitable for worshipping the gods. In the same period, throughout Yemen, from Ḥaḍramawt to Jawf, to Khawlān aṭ-Ṭiyāl, idols obtained from wādī pebbles showing male and female features (fig. 15-16)<sup>42</sup> with attributes linked to the cult of fertility gods, were object of worship.

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35. Robin 1981.

36. Robin, Breton 1982.

37. Robin, Ryckmans 1988.

38. De Maigret 1988, pp. 2-4.

39. Vogt, Sedov 2000, p. 68; pp. 300, 302, n<sup>os</sup> 95-109.

40. Benardelli, Parrinello 1971; Khalidi 2005.

41. De Maigret 2002, pp. 290-291.

42. Sedov, As-Saqqāf 1992; cf. also Audouin 2005.



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