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Muhammad 'Abd al-Qâdir Bâfaqih  
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## NEW SCULPTURES OF THE “LADY OF AḌ-ḌÂLI” STYLE

SABINA ANTONINI

Between March 15<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> 2001, I had the opportunity to examine the antiquities in the territory of aḌ-Ḍâli‘, about 250 km South of Ṣan‘â‘ (fig. 1).



*Fig. 1: General map of Yemen with the localization of aḌ-Ḍâli‘.*

I was accompanied by the General Director of the Antiquities of aḌ-Ḍâli‘, Mr Muḥammad al-Manqûsh and by an official of the Antiquities of al-Maḥwîṭ region, Mr Muḥammad al-Rajâ.

During the survey, first conducted in the wâḍî Akrâm and in the wâḍî Shuka‘ (fig. 2), and then on the Jabal Akrâm and on the jabal Jamîma, I had the chance to see the immense Ḥymiarite necropolis of Shuka‘ (1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD) (fig. 3), in which the graves, hardly recognizable to unskilled eye, extended along the rocky slope of the mountains. The cist graves are cut into the volcanic rock. From the presence of flat, square stone slabs found around the graves by a Russian Archaeological Mission in the 1980’s, and by similar slabs found around graves violated by grave robbers, we suppose that the cist graves were sealed by slabs, just as the pits of the contemporary hypogean graves at Kharibat al-Ahjur, near

Waraqah (Dhamâr) (de Maigret 1985 and 1986; Antonini in press) and those of the necropolis of Bab Shu'ûb (North of Şan'â') (Vogt-Gerlach 2002)<sup>1</sup>.



Fig. 2: Map on a 1: 250.000 of ad-Dâli' area.



Fig. 3: The necropolis of Shuka' and its surrounded territory.

<sup>1</sup> Similar burials are found in the contemporary necropolis of Matarâ, in Eritrea (Francis Anfray, « La première campagne de fouilles à Matarâ, près de Sénafé (Novembre 1959-Janvier 1960), in *Annales d'Éthiopie*, tome 5ème, 1963, pgs 87-112, pls LXI-CXII, in particular pgs 98-99, pls LXXVI-LXXIX), and the Meroitic cemetery of Nag-Shayeg, in Sudan (M. Pellicer Catalan, *La necropolis meroitica de Nag-Shayeg. Argin (Sudan)*, Comité Español de la Unesco para Nubia. Memorias de la Mision Arqueologica, II, Madrid 1963, p. 55 pl. II.



*Fig. 4: The stepped way that from the necropolis climbs toward the top of Jabal Akrâm.*

The survey has been extended up to the top of Jabal Akrâm (3000 m), where exists a short stepped path climbing from the cemetery to the top of the mountain (*fig. 4*). In spite of the presence of this path, no traces of walls or pottery are evident, that would suggest an ancient settlement. Due to the strong inclination of the terrain, the remnants of this ancient site have most likely been washed away along the rocky slope.

The stone sculptures (figurines, funeral stele and containers), preserved in the local Museum aḏ-Ḍâli', originate from this necropolis. Among the artistic pieces that I have been able to photograph in private houses, some are from illegal excavations, while others have been found following farm works for field terracing along the mountainous slopes. Such objects, including jewels (earrings, rings, bracelets in bronze and beads), shells, obsidian pieces and ceramics, belonged to the funeral goods of the graves of Shuka' necropolis.

The dominant characteristics of these sculptures are flat bodies, with engraved details, and oblong, shallow-carved eyes with pin-point pupils and thin arched eyebrows. Among the sculptures, the so-called Lady of

aḍ-Ḍâli' (preserved at the Museum of Aden, NAM 616; V.A. 1997: 168) excels for its style and finesse of execution. The statue is unique for the hairstyle, high and flat on the head, enriched by ornaments and jewels. Obviously the style of representing heads as flat on the top is typical of classic South Arabian sculptures and these from the aḍ-Ḍâli' area maintain the style of earlier traditional alabaster sculptures.

The majority of these sculptures belong to the typology of South Arabian artistic production: heads, busts, sitting figures, standing figures with the elbows close to the waist and the distal portion of the arms projecting forward in offering position.

Most of these statues from this site are undoubtedly of feminine nature which is also supported by the presence of an object in the form of a breast (V.A. 1997: 169), presumably an ex-voto, that was found in the same site. It is possible that the statues represent the cult of a divinity related to fertility and reproduction. Two feminine statues accompanied by smaller figures (V.A.1997: 169; Antonini 2001: 110, C105, pl. 61) stand out from an iconographic perspective. This type of sculpture, composed of two or three figures, is completely unknown within the typical South Arabian iconography.

We present now a description of previously unpublished works found in private collections.

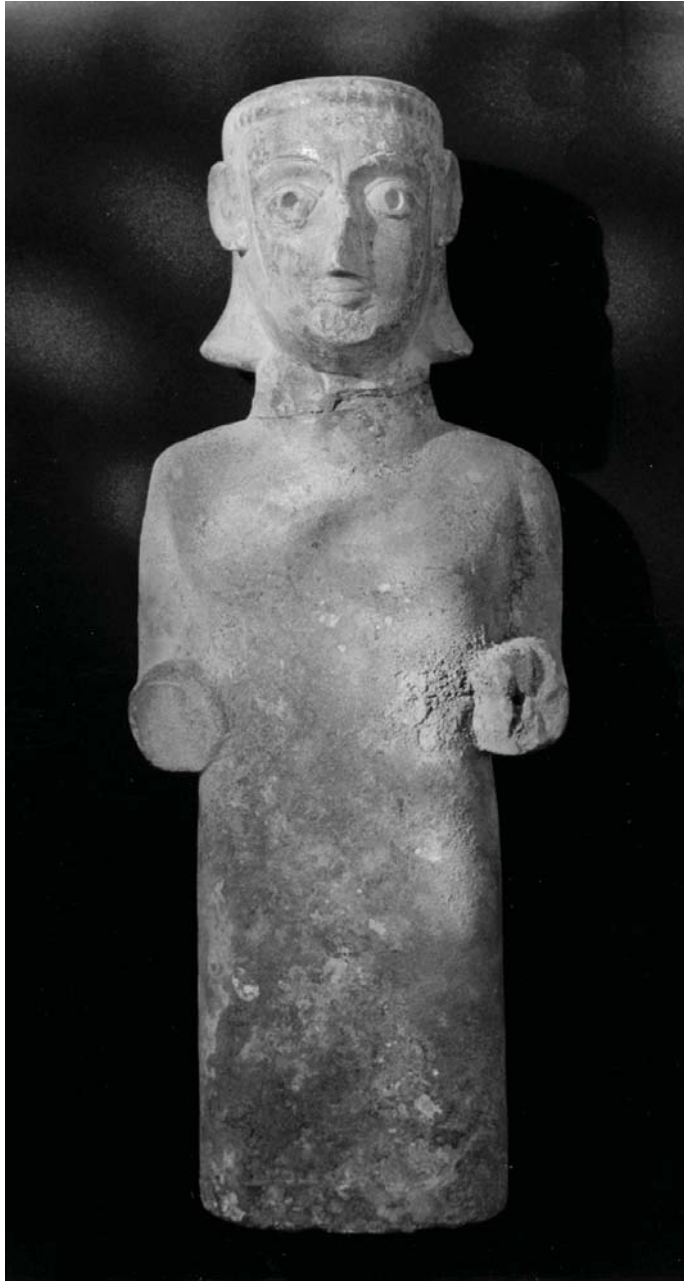
From the stylistic and iconographic point of view, the first statue (*fig. 5*) is a standing female figure similar to the so-called Lady of aḍ-Ḍâli'. The hands, originally outstretched in an attitude of offering, were broken off in antiquity, as indicated by the patina that covers the broken section and by the hole in the fracture of the left arm, evidence of an ancient restoration. The big head on a powerful neck is characterized both by large eyes in relief, carved for inlay, and by a facial mark between the eyebrows (and perhaps on the temples). The hair, slightly protruding from the forehead, is flat on top and falls over the neck. The body is rather flat and the engraved signs on the chest recall the pectoral collar worn by the Lady of aḍ-Ḍâli'.

Another similar statue originates from the antiquarian market (*figs 6-7*)<sup>2</sup>, but differs from the previous one in the inscription of a 6-line engraving on the gown below the arms. The letters are incised within the space delimited by parallel horizontal lines. The face is triangular, with engraved eyes and facial marks; the hair, flat on the top of the head, falls on the neck and the locks have superficial incisions. The forehead is adorned with a band of small pendants in relief. A large engraved necklace covers the breast of the woman.

The head represented in *fig. 8* appears to belong to a female figurine

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Kamâl al-Rubayḥ for the *pictures 5-7 and 15-16*.

with loose hair at the sides of her face. The fragmentary protuberance on the head recalls the rectangular object described in the statue from Antonini 2001 (pl. 61.c102,c103). The face is characterized by large, triangularly-shaped eyes and long grooves, or facial signs, on the temples and in the center of the forehead.



*Fig. 5: Statue of a standing female figure.*



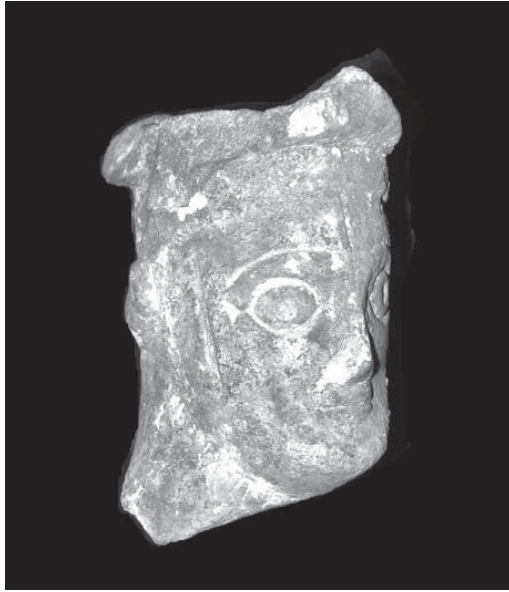


*Fig. 6: The body of a female statue.*



*Fig. 7: The head of the female statue.*





*Fig. 8: Female head.*



*Fig. 9: Male statue on a stepped base.*

The fourth statue represents a male figure recognizable by having on the left side a long sword transversally thrust under the belt (*fig. 9*), and by the belt with 4 vertical lines ending with a tassel or nap. The statue is acephalous. A dedication is engraved on the gown. The neckline of the tunic dress has a small square inlet. The figure is standing on a rectangular stepped base.

The oval human head (*fig. 10*) differs from the previous works by the presence of full cheeks, engraved rhomboid eyes, small, fleshy lips and ample chin. An ancient split is visible on the chin and a recent graze on the forehead has removed the grey patina that covers the surface, exposing the natural pearly white color of the stone.

The elongate head depicted in *fig. 11* probably belongs to a bull's statue. It is worth noticing the large rhomboid eye with carved iris, typical of this figurative production. The horns are broken.

The type of stela depicted in *fig. 12* is known based on two examples coming from the necropolis of Shuka' (V.A. 1997: 170). It is a square slab decorated by a large crescent moon with central hole in which a human or animal head was probably inserted with a tenon. The dedication is engraved along the lower edge of the stela. The upper side is broken, but it was likely finished with a frame with dentils.



*Fig. 10: Human head with incised eyes.*



*Fig. 11: Fragment of animal head, perhaps a bull.*



*Fig. 12: Inscribed funerary stela with crescent moon and a hole to insert a human or animal head.*



*Fig. 13: Base with thirteen steps.*

The following object (*fig. 13*) does not fit within a strict typology and therefore we ignore its function. The stone block is parallelepipedal, decorated on one side with a series of 12 ridges, a common feature on South Arabian building façades, together with the motif of recessed panels. The lower band of the slab is plain and smooth and at the top three central small holes are evident.

Among the findings of the private collection there are two flat bracelets (*fig. 14*) and a shallow rectangular vessel (*fig. 15*) with two circular basins. These vessels are familiar South Arabian artifacts, although mainly produced in alabaster. We believe that these vessels were used for cosmetic substances and therefore belonged to female funeral goods. Similar miniature objects have been found in the necropolises of Marib (V.A. 2000: 365, no. 306) and Ḥayd Ibn ‘Aqîl (Cleveland 1965).

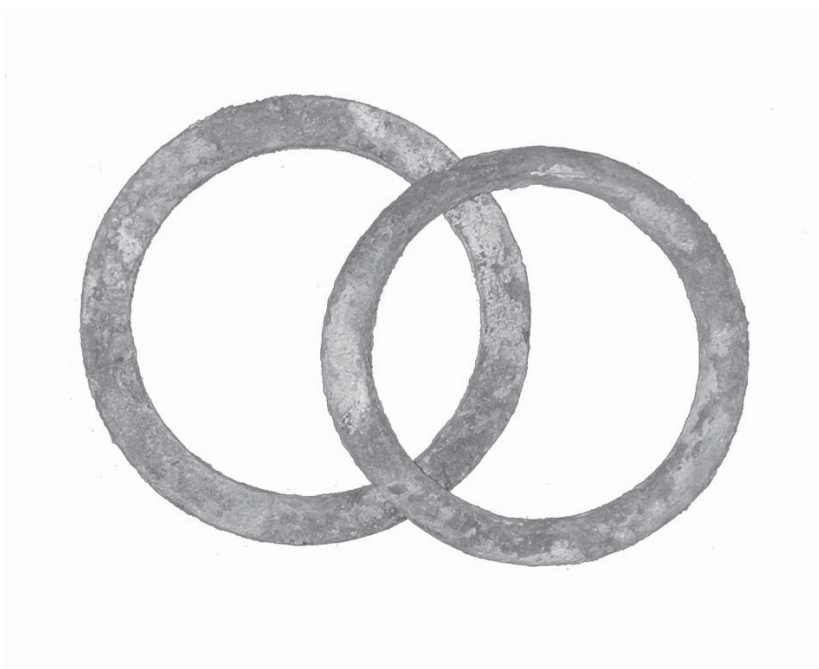
Finally, we show two works that differ stylistically from the previous ones. The first statue presumably originates from aḏ-Ḍâli’ (*fig. 16*), since it is preserved in a private house in a village near Shuka’. The second one (*figs 17-18*) could have been found either in aḏ-Ḍâli’ or in the site of Jabal al-‘Awd.

Regarding the first work (*fig. 16*), only the fragmentary head is preserved with noticeable large, protruding eyes. On the top of the head there is a kind of turban.

The second statue, nearly complete, represents a seated female figure, wrapped in a full mantle (*fig. 17*). The veiled head is bent and gently turned toward the right side. The right arm is covered and the hand emerges from the mantle; the left arm lies along the side and the hand is rested on the leg. The dress forms superficial oblique pleats on the legs. The feet rest on the base. The seat has a high back, made up of two vertical studs with apical knobs, joined by two horizontal bars alternated by other perpendicular bars (*fig. 18*). The low arms of the seat are similarly built.



*Fig. 14: Compartmented vessel.*



*Fig. 15: Bracelets.*





*Fig. 16: Fragmentary head of a statue.*



*Fig. 17: Statue of seated female in an abundant drapery.*



*Fig. 18: Posterior view of the seated female statue.*

In South Arabian sculpture we have other examples of female figures with loose-fitting pleated dresses (Antonini 2001: 61, B50, pl. 26; Hitgen 2002: 171-2, pl. 2, no. 2), but quite different from this statue. In those statuettes the dress follows a local fashion with a clinging gown and rigid vertical dense pleats. We observe this costume also in a funerary stela representing the bust of a female in high relief, the so-called Dhât Ḥimyam (Pirenne 1977: 439, 451, 453). The example in these private collections, on the contrary, follows models of classical art. It is difficult to date this work with certainty, due to its poor state of conservation, particularly of the face whose features are completely abraded. The majestic seated posture, the fullness and arrangement of the drapery flung back over the left shoulder, the covered right arm exposing only the hand, the side inclination of the veiled head are characteristics of Hellenistic prototypes of the fourth century BC, as the Demeter of Cnidus, kept in the British Museum. It is possible that the local artist drew inspiration from copies of the Roman period.



For the most part, the examples we have described come from the necropolis of Shuka', albeit from illegal excavations. Thankfully we know of several pieces, with close stylistic analogies with those of Shuka', that are found in Jabal al-'Awd excavation (district of Ibb) (Hitgen 2002). Based on archaeological evidence, the German archaeologist Holger Hitgen argues that around the second half of the 3rd century AD the settlement was destroyed by a fire, and that period constitutes the *terminus ante quem* to date this figurative production (Hitgen 2002: 177-9).

Chemical analyses performed on stone samples of certain statuettes show that these pieces are sculpted in a mineral called brucite, a white stone (with shades of gray, blue and green) with a vitreous or waxy luster (cleavage surfaces have a pearly luster), which is visible along fractures when the brownish patina that covers the sculptures is exfoliated<sup>3</sup>. The Italian geologist Bruno Marcolongo has determined that this mineral occurs in metamorphic rocks as "ophiolites" or "green rocks", "dolomitic schists" and "crystalline limestones", present in the area around Ta'izz and in the central part of the Yemeni highland. From the chemical analyses, it is suggested that these statuettes have been carved on rock with a base of brucite. Traces of red pigment in the chemical analyses suggest that accessories, figural details and inscriptions may have been painted on the surface with red soil made up of silicate and iron oxides. Over the centuries, a natural covering of calcite occurs.

These results are in contrast to the theory of Holger Hitgen, who first published a description of several pieces coming from the archaeological site of Jabal al-'Awd. According to Hitgen, the white covering (magnesium hydroxidecarbonate) is produced through the pulverization of the magnesite mixed with water. This paste is modeled by hand, or in special moulds (made of soft stone such as steatite) and allowed to dry to the sun. The anatomical details were subsequently engraved on the solidified surface. According to Hitgen, because of this manufacturing technique, the resulting figure tend to be strongly stylized and deprived of plasticity.

Sporadic recoveries sculpted in this same material have been found in Mârib, Ḥarīb, Tamna' and in the wâdî Ḍura'. Hitgen suggests that these pieces were transported from the territory of aḍ-Ḍâli', and therefore he refers to a "style of Shuka'", for those pieces originating from the homonymous necropolis close to aḍ-Ḍâli'.

Although preliminary, these results are of great value for a reconsideration of this homogeneous figurative production,

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the kind collaboration of the geologist Dr Bruno Marcolongo, a sample has been submitted to chemical analysis by dr Umberto Casellato at the Laboratory of Italian National Council for Researches, in Padua (Institute of Inorganic Chemistry and Surfaces).

developed around the epoch of Christ in an area rather circumscribed of the highland, and exported in peripheral areas, where the current production was primarily in alabaster. It is hoped that these findings will promote a careful study of the archeological site of aḏ-Ḍâli‘ along with the systematic excavation of the tombs, the study of the pottery and the analysis of inscriptions incised on some of these statues, and, of course a specific geological survey in the area<sup>4</sup>, that would be definitive for the validation of our studies.

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<sup>4</sup> The chemical analyses should be expanded to include on-the-spot investigations in the areas in question for a wider and more accurate sampling.

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