

Chapter Thirteen

Tamna', ancient capital of the Yemeni desert. Information about the first two excavation campaigns (1999, 2000)

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After Marib, the capital of the Sabaean, Tamna' was without doubt the largest and most famous city in Arabia Felix. The capital of the Qatabanites (ca. 700 BC-2nd century AD) was renowned above all as an important trading centre, as it was the departure point for the so-called incense caravan route along which the numerous precious resources of the Indian Ocean (the ancient Eritrean Sea) reached the Mediterranean. It certainly owed its fortune to its position which, lying at the mouth of the Wādī Bayḥān, is situated in the middle of the only corridor protected by the mountains and the desert of Ramlat as-Sab'atayn that is accessible to anyone coming from the southern coasts of Arabia, but also to the political hegemony enjoyed by the Kingdom of Qatabān in Southern Arabia between the 4th and the 1st centuries BC.

Its ruins, called Hajar Kuḥlān after the small village overlooking it, are huge and form an oval-shaped plateau covering an area of about 26 ha, rising 10-15 m above the surrounding countryside. Second in size only to Marib, it has already attracted the interest of archaeologists in the past. In 1950-1952 a U.S. Archaeological Mission led by W. Phillips carried out a series of excavations at the site, during which several private houses near the 'South Gate' were discovered, together with a large temple building at the centre of the city (TT1) and numerous graves in the nearby necropolis of Hayd ibn 'Aqīl (Phillips 1955). The scale of the finds is evidence of the greatness of Tamna' and of this kingdom, which played such an important role in the history of ancient Arabia Felix and that recurs so often in local inscriptions and classical sources. However, because of its large size, the excavations, which among other things were never published, barely scratched the surface and failed to give us a clear idea of the stratigraphy and chronology of the site.

In 1998, Ch. Robin, who for a number of years, together with A. Avanzini, had been engaged in research on the Qatabanite inscriptions of Wādī Bayḥān, suggested that I reopen the Tamna' excavations. I accepted and, after an 'Italian-French Research Project in Qatabān' had been set up, I was able to make a start on a first excavation campaign at Tamna' in December 1999¹. The results were extremely promising, and a second campaign followed in September-October 2000².

It is my pleasure to present here a brief outline of the scientific results produced by these two campaigns regarding two sectors of the city: 1) a hilltop covered with ruins on the north-west boundary of the plateau, immediately south of the so-called 'NW Gate' (Sector A), 2) the so-called 'Market Place', located in the centre of the plateau (Sector B).

SECTOR A (FIG. 13. 1)

This site yielded a large rectangular earth platform supported by an outer wall of large granite blocks arranged in pseudo-isodomic rows. This huge structure (22.70 m long, 19. 40 m wide and 1.80 m high) served as the base of a temple structure denoted in the inscriptions discovered as Yašhal and ascribed to the goddess Athirat (Fig. 13.1). Little remains of the temple itself: except for a row of rooms lining the northern, western and southern sides, nothing remains of the central part (courtyard?, cella?), due also to the trenches and military positions recently dug in the area. The majestic nature of the sanctuary is nevertheless attested by the ruins of its outer vertical walls, made of splendid blocks of dressed stone with their slightly rusticated visible surfaces, and by the complex, well-structured entrance system built up

¹ The first archaeological campaign was financed by the *Italian Ministry of University, Scientific Research and Technology* (MURST), the *Oriental University Institute* of Naples (IUO) and the IREMAM of Aix-en-Provence. The team, led by the Author, was composed of S. Antonini archaeologist, M. Arbach philologist, M. Mascellani topographer, N. Ferault de Falandre architect, R. Valentini and B. Donati students. On the Yemeni side the following participated: Mr. Khayrān az-Zubaydi, director general of the Department of Antiquities of Shabwa, Dr. Aḥmad Bāṭayā of the University of Aden, Mr. Khālid al-'Ansī of the General Organization for Antiquities, Manuscripts and Museums.

² Besides MURST, IUO and IREMAM, sponsors of the second campaign were the *Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (MAE/DGPCC) and the *IsIAO* of Rome. The team included A. de Maigret, S. Antonini and Ph. Aycard archaeologists, Ch. Robin and M. Arbach epigraphers, P. Néury, J.-M. Gassend and V. Samson architects, H. David draftswoman, L. D'Erme photographer, E. Pisa and A. Schettino students. Three Yemeni officials participated: Dr Khālid al-'Ansī of the General Organization of Antiquities, Manuscripts and Museums, Prof. Aḥmad Bāṭayā of Aden University, Mr. 'Alī M. Nāṣir of the 'Ataq Museum.

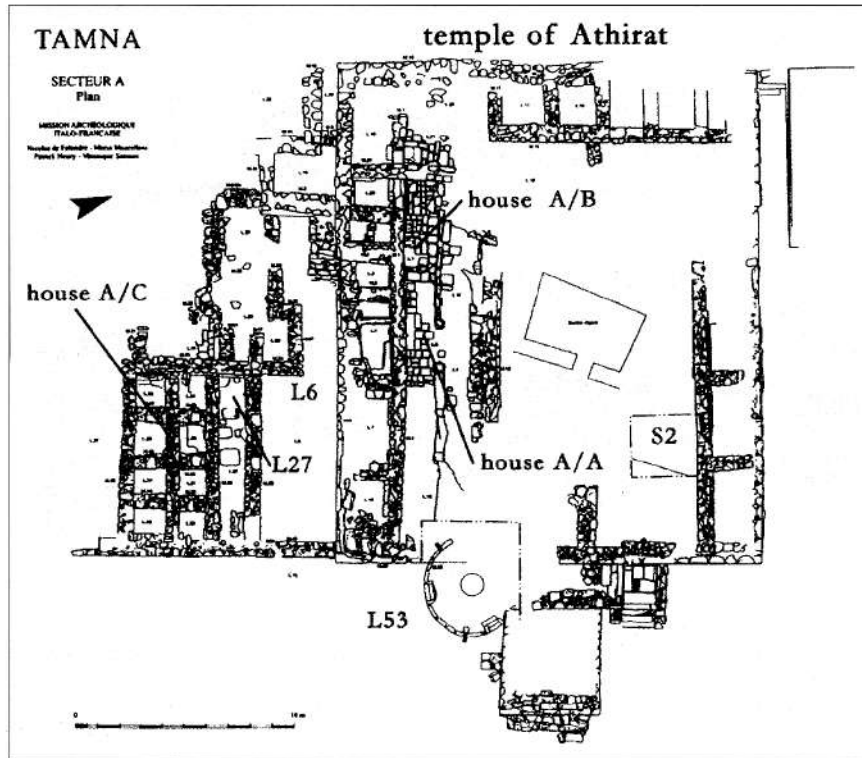


Figure 13.1 – Plan of buildings found in Sector A.

against the eastern side of the platform, i.e. towards the city centre. Here, a stepped ramp, 8 m long and 4.50 m wide, provided direct access from the city ground level to the temple door. Two smaller lateral staircases enclosed this central ramp and, turning symmetrically at right angles, led to the rectangular landing in front of the entrance, a landing that was probably originally delimited by a monumental prostyle consisting of 6 (or 8) yellow limestone pillars.

Beneath the collapsed ruins of the left-hand lateral staircase and the temple wall in front of it, a semicircular structure (L53) was found which, abutting a wall with its own orientation, was built in the area before the temple platform was constructed (Fig. 13.3). It consists of an elegant white limestone fountain and contains the mouth of a deep well, to which access is provided by two short staircases. Three pools, at the side of the staircases, were contained by the small circular façade wall. The water flowing into these from the well ran out through refined bull-head shaped spouts. An inscription mentions the 'Yašhal temple well', which may perhaps be identified as this ancient fountain. Moreover, its importance seems to be underlined by its exceptional state of conservation under the enormous blocks of the temple: clearly, when the temple was built, the fountain was spared and it was precisely the empty area of the well that caused instability and thus led to the collapse of the overlying structures.

Palaeographic examination of several of the char-

acters incised in a re-used block in L53 seems to indicate the 5th century BC as the *terminus post-quem* for the construction of the fountain.

A sondage (S2) performed in the temple courtyard under the platform filling revealed the presence of a mud brick wall that is believed to be older even than the fountain L53. Indeed, the pottery found in this context, which is very similar to that which we found in 1987 in the Sabaean city of Yalā, probably dates to between the 8th and the 6th centuries BC. This is the earliest level so far found in the city, and was reached, probably in about the 4th-3rd centuries BC, by levelling work for the construction of the great Yašhal temple.

The many inscriptions found near its eastern wall seem to prove that the temple remained functional until at least the 1st century AD when it suffered severe destruction, judging by the extensive collapse of the vertical parts and the fragmentary nature of the finds we were able to make. At this stage, however, there was a partial reoccupation of the southern area of the temple, and some of the temple rooms were incorporated into a private house (House A/A) which had a central paved corridor, pillars and plastered walls. Access was ensured by a staircase that climbed the southern wall of the temple from an embankment (L6) which, enclosed by a terrace wall to the E, rose about 1.5 m above the original city ground level (Fig. 13.2). While House A/A was in use, several different structures were constructed on this embank-



Figure 13.2 – A view of the Athirat temple from east.

ment (the nature of which is not always clear owing to their fragmentary nature). These included a kind of hall (L27) scattered with numerous plaster-covered standing bases and benches.

Shortly after, probably also in the 1st century AD, House A/A on the temple was rebuilt and extended (House A/B). On the southern part of the embankment, another house (House A/C) was built from scratch, which ultimately sealed off the room (L27) with the plastered bases. Even though this must have been a dwelling of some standing, as is shown by the six column stone bases found inside, it must be said that the building technique used during this phase was not of the best, and created a comparatively summary and imprecise appearance. This is the last occupation to be found in Sector A. The fire that led to its destruction probably occurred, according to ¹⁴C dating, in the 2nd century AD or even later.

Summarising the above data, at the moment the following stratigraphy can be reconstructed for Sector A at Tamna' (from top to bottom):

- Level 1: recent military positions and trenches;
- Level 2: House A/B and House A/C (1st-2nd centuries AD);
- Level 3: House A/A and room L27 with plastered bases (1st century AD);
- Level 4: Yašhal Temple of Athirat (3rd BC-1st centuries AD);
- Level 5: monumental fountain L53, with well (5th-4th centuries BC);
- Level 6: mud brick wall in sondage S2 (8th-6th centuries BC).

SECTOR B (FIG. 13.4)

The second dig, that of the private houses surrounding the 'Market Place', yielded equally satisfactory results (Fig. 13.5). Three houses were unearthed com-

pletely demonstrating the care and workmanship used in this type of architecture. The first structure (House B/A), rectangular in shape, is characterised by thick outer walls that must have supported one or two mud brick storeys. The ground plan consisted of 8 elongated rooms, which later became 11 as a result of internal partitioning. Access to the upper floor was provided by a staircase built along the South wall. In one of the rooms a small set of female grave goods was found, which included a bronze Roman style spoon, dated to the 1st-2nd centuries AD. On the East side a second house was excavated (House B/B), which an inscription, walled up in the north-east corner, denoted as '*bayt* Ya'ūd', or 'house of Ya'ūd'. The access staircase, which is extremely well preserved, on the eastern side, led to a paved central corridor providing access to 12 small doorless and windowless store-rooms. A large quantity of pottery and several grindstones were found in these stores.

The actual dwelling area must have been situated on the first floor, which was built of mud brick and wood. Found up against the southern wall of the *bayt* Ya'ūd was another house (House B/C). This house consisted of 4 rather deep rooms lacking doors and windows, which should also be considered as store-houses. Here the pottery was extremely abundant, as were animal bones. An external staircase built along the south wall led to the first floor. Lastly, a fourth structure was delimited even further east (House B/D), although its excavation was postponed until the next campaign.

All the houses were destroyed and burned: the date should be fixed at some point in the 1st or 2nd centuries AD, if we take into consideration the bronze findings of House B/A. Some charcoal fragments of wall beams, subjected to ¹⁴C analysis, date the construction of the houses to between the 4th and 1st centuries BC. The actual date should lie within the range of the 2nd-1st centuries BC, taking into consideration the



Figure 13.3 – The monumental fountain L53 near the Temple Yašhal.

palaeography of the inscription in House B/B (*bayt Ya'ūd*). A sondage carried out in one of the floors of the store-rooms revealed structures preceding the construction of House B/C which, on the basis of the pottery (very similar to that found in sounding S2 of Sector A), may be dated to the 8-6th centuries BC. If our chronological hypotheses were true, a comparison with the stratigraphy examined for Sector A would seem to suggest that these houses in the Market Place were contemporary with the Temple of Athirat.

The excavation of Sector B also involved the well-known 'Market Obelisk', located in the centre of the square overlooked by the houses described (Fig. 13.6). The inscriptions, which this huge monolithic granite stele bears on its four sides, refer to a very important code of laws that, promulgated by the king, regulated the international market of Tamna'. The obelisk was photographed and partially studied more than forty years ago and it should now be possible to overcome the difficulties of interpretation encountered at the time with the help of the more complete documentation we have gathered (Ch. Robin).

In addition to the excavations in Sectors A and B, progress has been made also on other important work, for instance: 1) the detailed topographic survey of the north-west sector of the city (M. Mascellani); 2) the planimetric and architectonic reappraisal of the South Gate (J.-M. Gassend); 3) the complete epigraphic prospecting of the ruins and the village of Hajar Kuḥlān (M. Arbach).

The documentary importance of Tamna' is exceptional enough to already have yielded several interesting and hitherto unsuspected insights at the end of these two first campaigns.

The complete excavation of the Temple of Athirat has yielded up the plan of a new sanctuary, which is important for both its architecture and its history.

The unusual plan further enriches our knowledge of South Arabian temple architecture, revealing to us the influence exerted in this field by the classical Mediterranean world.

The rear wall of the temple was also part of a section of the city's defensive walls, which shows that at Tamna' the city walls did not consist of a separate work but were the result of the juxtaposition of the external walls of its outer buildings.

The temple, as the numerous inscriptions found on the site tell us, was dedicated to the goddess Athirat, the patron divinity of the Qatabanite city of Haribat, lying not far away in the Wādī Hārīb. The impressive size of the building is indicative of the consideration enjoyed by the goddess at Tamna' and, consequently, the important role played there by the provincial community of Haribat.

All this confirms the role of Tamna' as a large South Arabian trading centre, in particular starting in from the 4th-3rd centuries BC and until the 1st century AD, a role already confirmed by Roman and local sources referring to the presence in Tamna' of Minaean, Sabaeen and Hadramite merchants, as well as of peoples from Gaza and Egypt.

The excavations confirm that the city remained vital (even if less flourishing, after the destruction of the temple and houses, which probably took place towards the middle of the 1st century AD) until the 2nd century AD, when it suffered its ultimate destruction at the hands of a coalition led by the Ḥaḍramawt kingdom. However, the excavations also proved that the city was very ancient. Several charcoal fragments collected from the bottom of our sondage in the Temple of Athirat (S2) gave dates lying between 930 and 770 BC, and there are still several metres to go before the sondage reaches the original ground level and thus virgin soil.

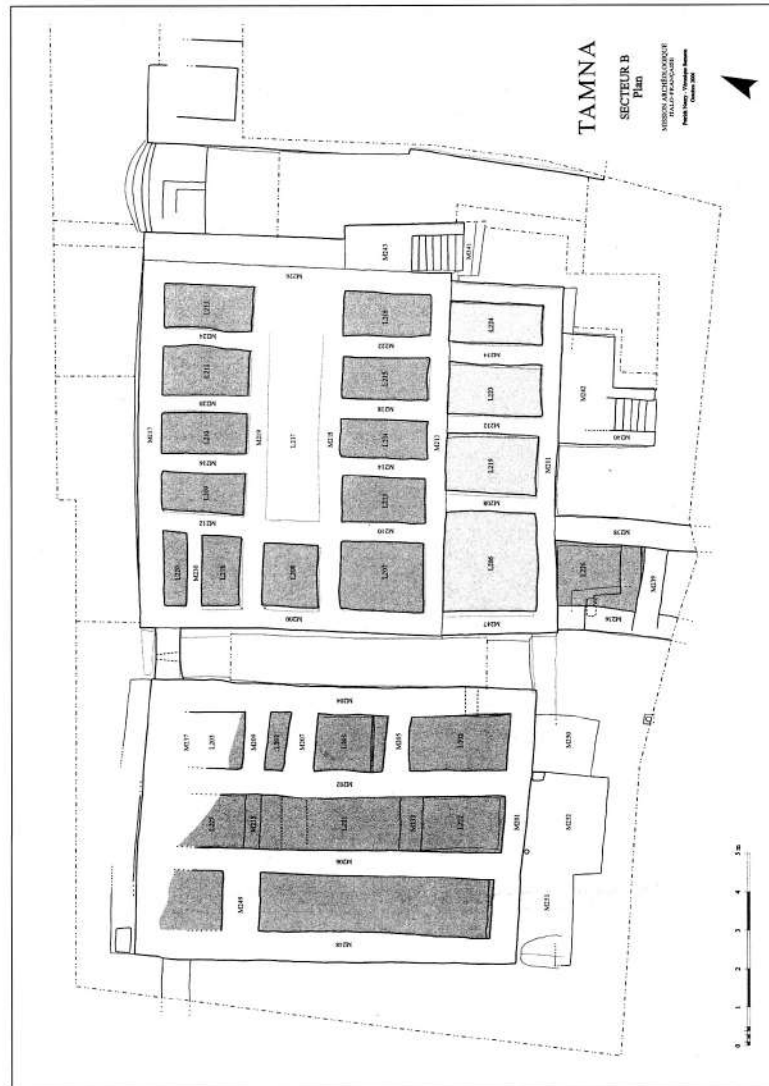


Figure 13.4 – Sector B: plan of private houses unearthed in the ‘Market Place’.



Figure 13.5 – A view of the excavations of the ‘Market Place’ from north.

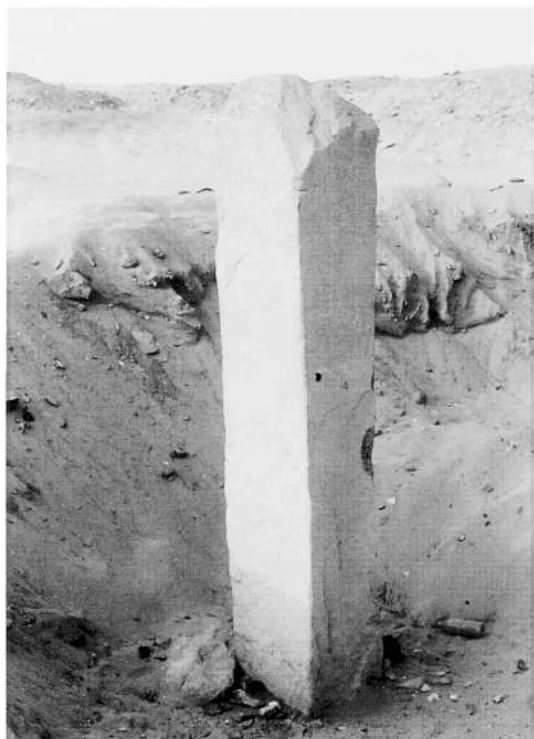


Figure 13.6 – The monolithic inscription in the ‘Market Place’.

The private houses excavated in the Market Place area not only provide some insights into the daily routine of the Qatabanites and their merchant guests but also, because of their modular plans and peculiar structure, arouse our curiosity concerning the possible evidence they can provide regarding the history of architecture and of Semitic culture during the Iron Age. We now possess more technical data about the well-known and canonical (and enigmatic) model of the South Arabian *bayt* (De Maigret in press). This should enable us to discuss the role it had in the history of pre-Islamic Yemeni architecture and, in a broader framework, to advance new ideas about its origin and spread on the western boundaries of the Arabian desert.

The lengthwise tripartite plan of the South Arabian house with a wide room at the bottom and an exterior staircase which reaches the entrance over a high, slightly tapering blind stone basement, has a long history (an example from Yalā dates back to the 8th-7th centuries BC: De Maigret and Ch. Robin 1989) and shows a close analogy with the architectural schema of the hypostyle temples in Jawf and Ḥaḍramawt, as well as the multi-chamber tombs of Ḥayd ibn ‘Aqīl near Tamna’. This would seem to show that the houses of the gods and the houses of the dead in ancient South Arabia derived their shape mainly from normal human habitations. A substantially unitary building concept was thus found underlying the different classes of South Arabian archi-

tecture, and this must be borne in mind when studying its history and development. This, in another sense, should demonstrate the strong tradition and early origin of the original house model.

This stereotyped architectural plan is not exclusive to South Arabia. We can find the same planimetric schema in the well-known ‘four room house’ (or ‘Israelite house’) which was widespread in Palestine during the first half of the 1st millennium BC (Wright 1985). The comparison is quite striking considering the identical internal subdivision, general measurements, ratio of length to width (5:4) and details like rows of monolithic pillars separating the aisles. Moreover, the parallel does not seem accidental if we consider their global contemporaneity and some generic relationships in other areas of material culture (e.g. pottery). Considering the strong and exclusive value the model had in civil architecture (both of South Arabia and Palestine), I would prefer to speak of a common origin for the two phenomena instead of imagining a derivation of one from the other. In other words, the South Arabian *bayt* and the Israelite house could represent separate outcomes of a cultural pattern which was originally common to the two populations before their sedentarisation in South Arabia and Palestine (in this sense the hypothesis of a derivation of the Israelite house model from the nomad’s tent should be confirmed). And this could shed new light on the proto-historic Early Iron Age peopling of the ancient Near East.

We have mentioned only a few of the more immediate issues arising from the architectonic documentation which has recently emerged from Tamna’. Clearly, however, many others will emerge from the huge quantity of objects (pottery, sculptures, bronzes, etc.) that have come to light, and above all from the 75 new inscriptions discovered. According to our epigraphers, even on preliminary interpretation the latter are seen to contain novelties concerning the dynasties of the local kings that are so significant as to perhaps illuminate the darkest period in the history of Qatabān, namely the two centuries straddling the time of Christ.

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