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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE SOUTH ARABIAN BAYT

During the second excavation campaign of the Italian-French mission to Tamnaʿ (September–October 2000), among other things we excavated several private dwellings in the so-called Market Place (Sector B), more or less in the centre of the extensive ruins of Hajar Kuḥlān[1]. In particular, complete maps were made of House B/A (9.80 m × 7.20 m) with its N-S alignment, and of House B/B (9.60 m × 7.80 m) with its E-W alignment (Fig. 1). The latter, to which was subsequently added an annex on the South-side (House B/C), was identified from an inscription found on the North-side, as »Bayt Yaʿūd«.

The remains of the two buildings consist of the lower stone floors (the walls of the upper storeys, as can be seen in the collapsed portions, must have been made of mud brick with wooden skeleton), having no openings and respectively, 1.80 m and 2.10 m tall. They consist: a) of a powerful outer wall with foundations jutting inwards and double curtain vertical walls with isodomic rows of rough hewn granite blocks; and b) an inner grid of walls at right angles to the former arranged according to a ground plan in which the area of the house is divided longitudinally into three parts so as to delimit a regular and symmetrical series of small rooms in the lateral aisles and at the rear. The fact that the inside walls do not abut the outer wall shows that the latter were subsequent to the former but also, if we consider the slight overall inward slope of the whole construction, they had the function of buttressing the outer wall.

Access to the house (at least in the case of House B/B) was by a staircase that, built on one of the short sides, led up to the top of the base stone floor. From here, a (no longer conserved) doorway led to a central passage, the paved floor of which was brought up to level by the filling of the central lon-gitudinal room on the base stone floor of the building. The passage led to a staircase at the back which, mounted on the filling of the middle room at the back, provided access to the upper floor.

The plastered walls and the filling produced by the collapse of the upper floors, together with a number of everyday objects, indicate that the small rooms in the side aisles, at Tamnaʿ were mainly left empty, probably to be used as storehouses. Access to the lower levels of the pavements must have been provided by the central passage, apparently by means of a wooden staircase. The structures separating the central passage and the side aisles acted as supports for the upper floor lofts and may have consisted either of walls (with openings for the side aisles) or even of pillars, presumably supported by the points of intersection of the underlying walls[2].

The architectonic typology of these houses had already been observed at Tamnaʿ by the Mission of the American Foundation for the Study of Man in the early '50s (Fig. 2 c)[3] and by the Englishman Brian Doe in the mid '60s[4], although it is extremely

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[1] The excavation of the Sector B was directed by S. Antonini; other participants were also Ph. Aycard, K. al-ʿAnsī and E. Pisa; surveys by P. Neury and V. Samson.

[2] See, for instance, the pillars in the house adjacent to the Bayt Yafash (House B) and in House D, excavated at the beginning of the '50s by the Americans in the quarter around the ›South Gate‹ of Tamnaʿ, visible in the plan view recently published by J.-F. Breton, Les villes du Yémen antique, Dossiers d'archéologie 263 (2001) 25.

[3] G. W. Van Beek, Recovering the Ancient Civilization of Arabia, Biblical Archaeologist 15, 1952, 2–18; W. Phillips, Qataban and Sheba. Exploring Ancient Kingdoms on the Biblical Spice Routes of Arabia (1955) 90 ff.

[4] About 100 m West of the large building TT1: cf. B. Doe, Southern Arabia (1971) 220 fig. 37; idem, Monuments of South Arabia (1983) 131 ff.

Fig. 1   Ground plan of private houses excavated in 2000 by the Italian-French Mission in the Market Place of Tamnaʿ

widespread and is related to many other cities, from Wādī Ḥarīb (Ḥinū az-Zurayr, Hajar Dhahbā, Hajar Kuḥayla)[5] to Wādī Markha (Hajar Yahirr, Hajar Khamūma [Fig. 2 d], Hajar Ṭālib)[6], from Shabwa (Fig. 2 e)[7] to Wādī Ḥaḍramawt (Mashgha, Sūna [Fig. 2 b], Qārat Kibda)[8]. Also the time span is quite wide, ranging from 1st–2nd century A.D. (Tamnaʿ) to at least the 8–7th century B.C., as is shown by the plan of the private house excavated by our Italian Mission in 1987 at Yalā, in eastern Khawlān (Fig. 2 a)[9].

Disregarding for the moment the specific functional reasons leading up to the conception and construction of these tall masonry ground floors[10], we must point out at this stage that their ground plan and structural layout do not seem to be restricted to private houses alone and actually seem to apply also to other architectural categories, such as temples and perhaps tombs.

This notation could prove important because, if it is true, it would indicate a possible original conceptual unity in South Arabian architecture, allowing us to appreciate more fully the logic behind its historical-artistic development and, in the present case, to seek out its possible underlying motives.

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Comparison with the temples can begin with the temple of Nakraḥ in Barāqish (Fig. 3 a). My excavation of the latter in 1990–92 perhaps gave me a more direct opportunity to highlight the above-mentioned analogies with private houses that, as we shall see, are not only related to ground plan but are also structural in nature[11].

This temple, probably built in the 7–6th century B.C. and used until 1st century B.C., is built on a base that, although lower, seem to exactly reproduce the masonry ground floors of the private houses described above. About 1.30 m above external ground level, it is composed of a thick double curtain outer wall, with a slightly sloping outer face, containing a grid of large monolithic beams arranged at right angles to each other so as to act as a support for the four rows of the three pillars forming the five aisles of the cell and the posts of the doors leading to the five rear sacelli.

As can be seen, both the structures of the specific architectural layout and the general ground plan of the building are the same as in the private houses. The number of analogies increases if we take into consideration the main entrance, aligned with the central aisle (corridor), the staircase allowing access to it and the vertical rise of the inhabitable portions over the upper surface of the base.

The differences between the temple of Nakraḥ at Barāqish and, for instance, the Bayt Yaʿūd of Tamnaʿ (Fig. 1, house B/A) consist rather than in the presence/absence of precise architectonic elements, in the existence in the former of embellishments and the emphasis of several specific attributes in the latter. We thus observe in the temple a particular monumental aspect of the staircase and of the entrance in general, the elevation of the outer wall made of dressed stone instead of wood and brick, the monolithic internal pillars instead of mud brick partitions, the central rear sacellum replacing the staircase leading up to the upper floor, etc. These variants merely represent a ritualization of the normal elements of a private house and do not alter the primary dwelling function of the house itself. It is just that in this case the occupant was not an ordinary mortal but the god Nakraḥ, and his house was the sublimation of a normal private house.

The same construction model may be found in the great temple of Yeḥa in Ethiopia, which I excavated in 1998 as part of the research of the French

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[5] J.-F. Breton, Les fortifications d'Arabie méridionale du 7ᵉ au 1ᵉʳ siècle avant notre ère, ABADY 8 (1994) 142 ff. fig. 53; J.-F. Breton et al., Une vallée aride du Yémen antique. Le wâdî Bayhân (1998) 170 ff. figs. 1. 2. 13.

[6] Ibidem 171 ff. figs. 4. 10. 14.

[7] In particular, houses 52, 72 and the building of site XIV outside the walls (J.-F. Breton [ed.], Fouilles de Shabwa III. Architecture et techniques de construction, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 154, 1998, 27 ff. 39 ff. 86 ff.), although it is easy to appreciate the frequency of the construction motif simply by observing the general city plan (ibidem 4 fig. 1).

[8] J.-F. Breton, Rapport sur une mission archéologique dans le Wādī Ḥaḍramawt (Yémen du Sud), CRAIBL 1980, 75 ff. figs. 8–10; J.-F. Breton et al., Wādī Ḥaḍramawt. Prospections 1978–1979 (1982) 79 ff.

[9] A. de Maigret – Ch. Robin, Les fouilles italiennes de Yalā (Yémen du Nord): nouvelles données sur la chronologie de l'Arabie préislamique, CRAIBL 1989, 255–291 fig. 2.

[10] In this connection see the hypotheses put forward by Breton (Shabwa III op. cit. 67 ff.) and my related observations in the review of the same book in AION 60, 2000.

[11] A. de Maigret – Ch. Robin, Le temple de Nakraḥ à Yathill (aujourd'hui Barāqish), Yemen. Résultats des deux premiers campagnes de fouilles de la Mission italienne, CRAIBL 1993, 427–496 fig. 2.
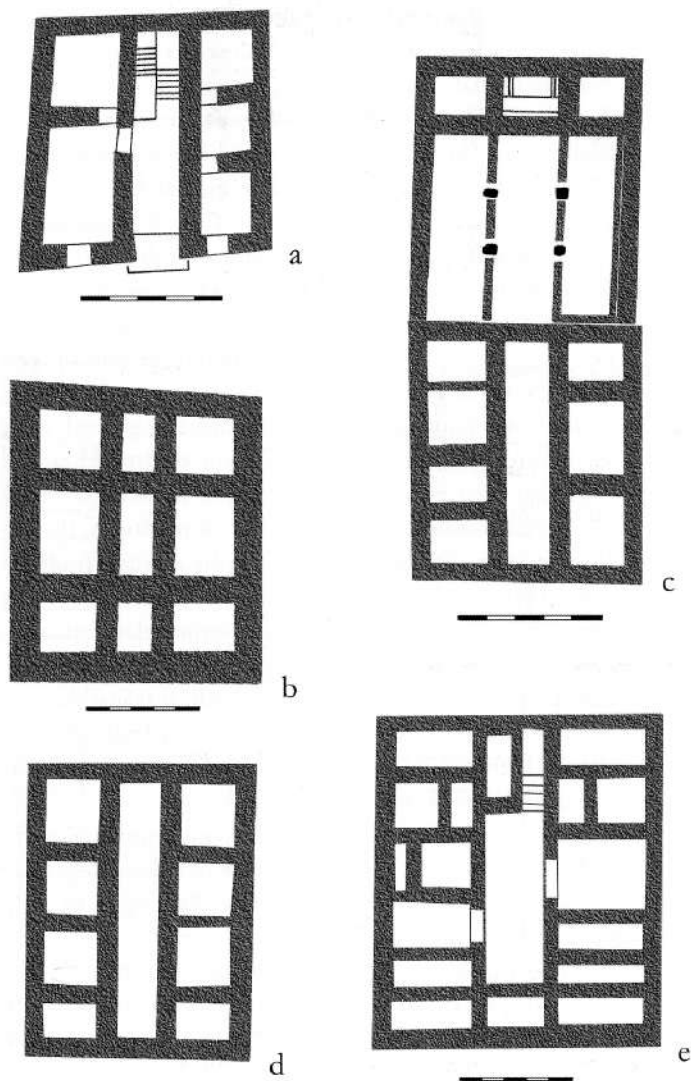
Fig. 2 Ground plans of several South Arabian private houses.
a. Yalā (Khawlān aṭ-Ṭiyāl). – b. Sūna (Ḥaḍramawt). – c. Tamnaʿ (quarter near the South Gate). –
d. Hajar Khamūma (Wādī Markha). – e. Shabwa (Bâtiment 72)

Mission directed by Ch. Robin[12]. Even though here there is no grid of orthogonal internal structures, as the twelve pillars are directly supported by the outcropping rock, the architectural univocalness is suggested by the ground plan of the hypostyle room, by the presence of a base underlined on the outside by sloping rows and even by the existence (which brings it even closer to a private house) of a second floor.

This apparent relationship with private houses seems to be related above all to the so-called hypostyle temples, widespread in Ḥaḍramawt (at Raybūn [Fig. 3 b][13], Ḥuṣn al-Qays [Fig. 3 c][14],

Ḥurayḍa [Fig. 3 d][15], Makaynūn [Fig. 3 e][16], but also at Sūna, Mashgha, al-Hajra, Bā Quṭfa[17]), as

[12] Ch. Robin–A. de Maigret, Le grand temple de Yéha (Tigray), Éthiopie. Apres la première campagne de fouilles de la Mission Française (1998), CRAIBL 1998, 737–798 fig. 7.

[13] A. Sedov, I templi di Raybûn, in: Yemen. Nel paese della regina di Saba, exhibition cat. Rome (2000) 179 ff. fig. on p. 180.

[14] Breton et al., Wādī Ḥaḍramawt op. cit. fig. on p. 69.

[15] G. Caton Thompson, The Tombs and Moon Temple of Hureidha (Hadramaut), Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London 13 (1944) 19 ff. pl. 73.

[16] Breton et al., Wādī Ḥaḍramawt op. cit. fig. on p. 68.

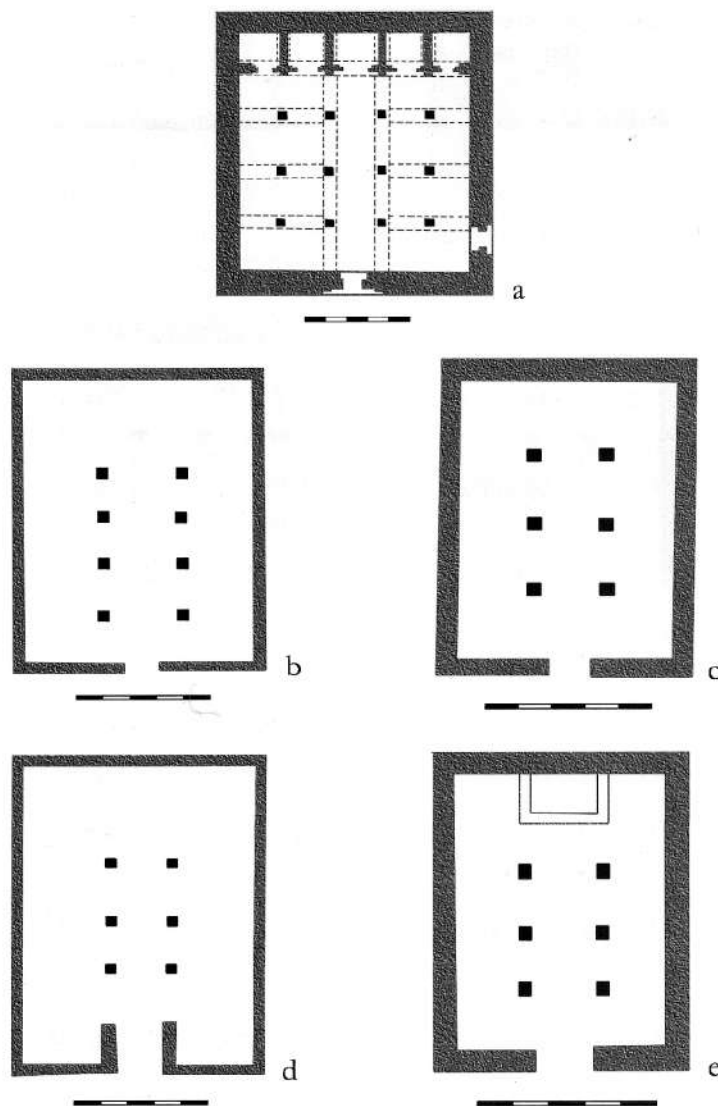[17] Ibidem, figs. on pp. 64. 65. 66. 72.

Fig. 3   Ground plans of several Yemeni hypostyle temples. – a. Barāqish (temple of Nakraḥ). – b. Raybūn (temple of Sayīn dhū-Mayfaʿān). – c. Ḥuṣn al-Qays. – d. Ḥurayḍa (Moon Temple). – e. Makaynūn

well as in the Jawf (Maʿīn[18], Shaqab al-Manaṣṣa[19], Darb aṣ-Ṣabī[20]). In the latter we actually find, as well as the sloping bases, also the same internal sub-division into an odd number of aisles, the same alignment according to a central axis of the entrance and the rear podium. However, it also seems possible to attempt a comparison with the well-known large temple (or palace) buildings of Marib (Barʾān temple), Shabwa (›Palais royal‹) and in Tamnaʿ itself (building TT1). Indeed, if we exclude the U-shaped porticoed courtyards (probably later additions), these buildings display a module that (even if doubled in TT1) is essentially the same as

that of the private houses, with a high rectangular base on which traces of small rooms divided into three aisles are still visible.

[18] J. Schmidt, Der Stadttempel von Maʿīn, ABADY 1 (1982) 153 ff. fig. 42.

[19] Ch. Robin – J.-F. Breton – R. Audouin, Prospection archéologique et épigraphique de la Mission Archéologique Française au Yémen du Nord (octobre–décembre 1978), Syria 56, 1979, fig. on p. 426.

[20] Ch. Robin – J.-F. Breton – J. Ryckmans, Le sanctuaire minéen de NKRḤ à Darb aṣ-Ṣabī (environs de Barāqish), Raydān 4, 1981 249 ff. pl. 4.
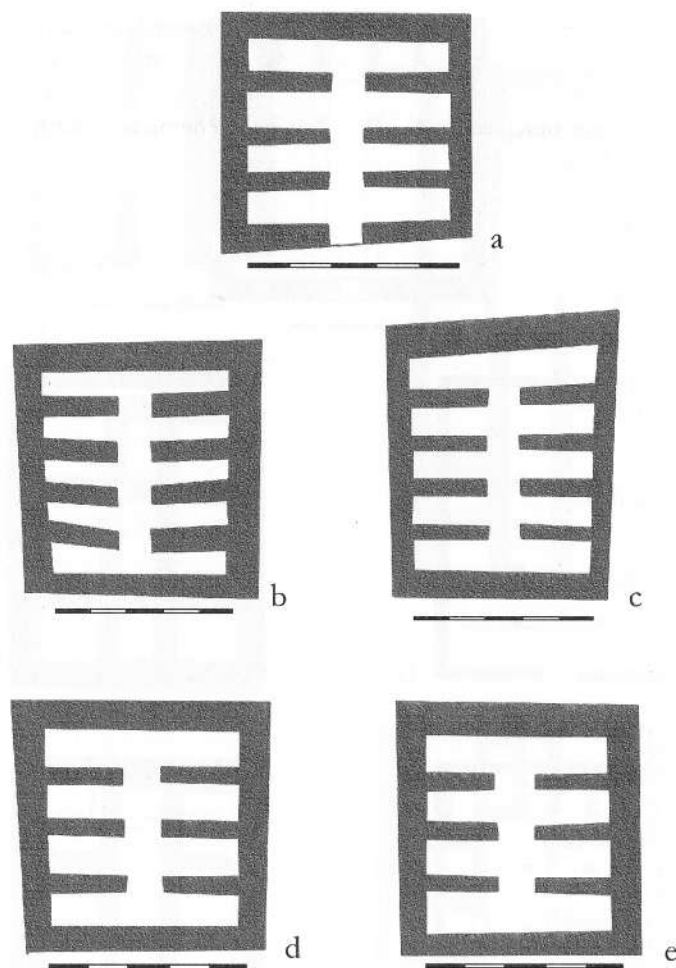
Fig. 4   Ground plans of tombs from the necropolis of Ḥayd ibn ʿAqīl

With reference to these latter three monuments, we recall – for at least two of them (TT1 in Tamnaʿ, ›Palais royal‹ in Shabwa) – the lively debate concerning their function, that is, whether they were religious buildings (temples) or civil buildings (palaces). We realize that our hypothesis, namely, of a formal identity between private houses and temple, merely adds further uncertainty to the debate. However, if valid, I think it may be of use in shifting the problem further upstream, that is, it will mean asking whether it is actually legitimate to seek functional distinctions where in fact they implicitly did not exist. In the first instance, the *bayt* was a house, and the fact that the occupant was a king or a god was only of secondary importance. This observation seems to us to be perhaps more important than any other as it brings us closer to the very significance of South Arabian religious feeling. However, acknowledging that our need to make a historical reconstruction has every right to raise the issue of ›palace or temple‹, it must be admitted that the solution of this secondary functional level, precisely because of its original indeterminate nature, actually remains a problem. As the solution to this problem does not depend, as we have seen, on purely architectonic considerations, it will have to be sought on the exclusive and more contingent basis of the archaeological-epigraphic contexts.

Lastly, it may be added that the South Arabian schema of the tripartite private house seems to be reflected, as well as in religious architecture, also in funeral architecture. The tombs of Ḥayd ibn ʿAqīl, the Tamnaʿ necropolis, for example, with their central corridor and two rows of niches on the sides actually seem to suggest the basic model of the

houses of the living (in this case limited to the stone base floor alone). The comparison remains hypothetical of course also because the examples shown in our Figure 4, as they were obtained from a schematic ground plan incidentally published by R. Cleveland[21], are lacking in any further archaeological detail. It cannot be ruled out, however, that the previously planned extension of our research to the Tamna' necropolis will perhaps in future provide us with further data with which to test this hypothetical link between civil architecture and funeral architecture.

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From the above remarks it may thus be hypothetically acknowledged that in Southern Arabia a model ground plan existed – that of the private house – which was extended to other fields of architecture such as religious and funeral architecture[22]. It is true of course that this module could not have an exclusive nature in Southern Arabia as we find different ground plans both in the houses (see, for example, the completely different plan views of the so-called farms of al-Jafna, near Yalā)[23], and in the temples (see, for example, the so-called courtyard temples of Waddum dhū-Masma'im, al-Masājid and the *extra moenia* ones of as-Sawdā' and Ma'īn)[24] and in the tombs (see, for example, the tombs of the necropolis near the Awām of Marib)[25]. However, the fact that, precisely in this variety of possible patterns, the canonical scheme of the tripartite house recurs so widely and frequently until relatively recent times, merely confirms its distinctive and deep-rooted nature.

Moreover, if to its formal persistence we add the fact of its wide range of applications (which, as we have seen, extends beyond the functional limits of the various architectonic categories), we can understand how the tripartite schema reflects the profound traditional values of a building model that is probably extremely ancient (the house of Yalā would seem, moreover, to confirm this) and, in all probability, originally designed to have a single function.

Starting from the assumption that the hypostyle temples and the Ḥayd ibn 'Aqīl type tombs were based on the ground plan and structure of private houses, and not vice-versa, that is, that man built the houses of gods and the dead following the

model of his own ordinary dwellings, the search for parallels for such private houses univocally leads us to Palestine alone. We actually find here a rigorous comparison with the so-called Israelite house (Fig. 5 a–d), a rectangular construction with three aisles and a back room (for this reason also known as the »four room house«), which has had a distinctive and widespread distribution in the region since the Early Iron Age (ca. 11th century B.C.)[26]. The proportions between building length and width (Fig. 5 e. f) which, fixed at a ratio of 5 : 4, coincides with those of the South Arabian *bayt*, as well as the separations between aisles, often achieved by using monolithic pillars, not only strengthen the comparison, but appear also to confirm the hypothesis of a similarity between South Arabian private houses and hypostyle temples.

The debate concerning the origin of the »four room house« is controversial, with some claiming that it originated from the nomadic tents of the Israelites[27] while others see a connection with specific, albeit sporadic, ground plan motifs of the Late and Middle Bronze Age civil architecture in Canaan[28]. The fact however that its generalized use suddenly appears in Palestine with the arrival of the Israelites and that it is observed to be their typical dwelling type throughout the period of the

[21] R. L. Cleveland, An Ancient South Arabian Necropolis. Objects from the Second Campaign (1951) in the Timna' Cemetery, PAFSM IV (1965) plan 2.

[22] The *bayt* model seems to involve also urban defensive architecture, which arises out of the juxtaposition of peripheral private houses.

[23] A. de Maigret, Archaeological Survey on the Wādī Yalā Antiquities, in: idem (ed.), The Sabaean Archaeological Complex in the Wādī Yalā (Eastern Khawlān aṭ Ṭiyāl, Yemen Arab Republic), IsMEO Reports and Memoirs 21 (1988) 5 ff. fig. 9–13.

[24] Cf. M. Jung, The Religious Monuments of Ancient Southern Arabia. A Preliminary Typological Classification, AION 48, 1988, 186 ff.

[25] I. Gerlach, Die Grabungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Sana'a im sabäischen Friedhof des Awām-Tempels in Marib, in: Im Land der Königin von Saba. Kunstschätze aus dem antiken Jemen, exhibition cat. Munich (2000) 113 ff. figs. 2–6.

[26] G. R. H. Wright, Ancient Building in South Syria and Palestine (1985) 293 ff.

[27] V. Fritz, Die Kulturhistorische Bedeutung der Früheisenzeitlichen Siedlung auf der Ḫirbet el Mešas, ZDPV 96, 1980, 122.
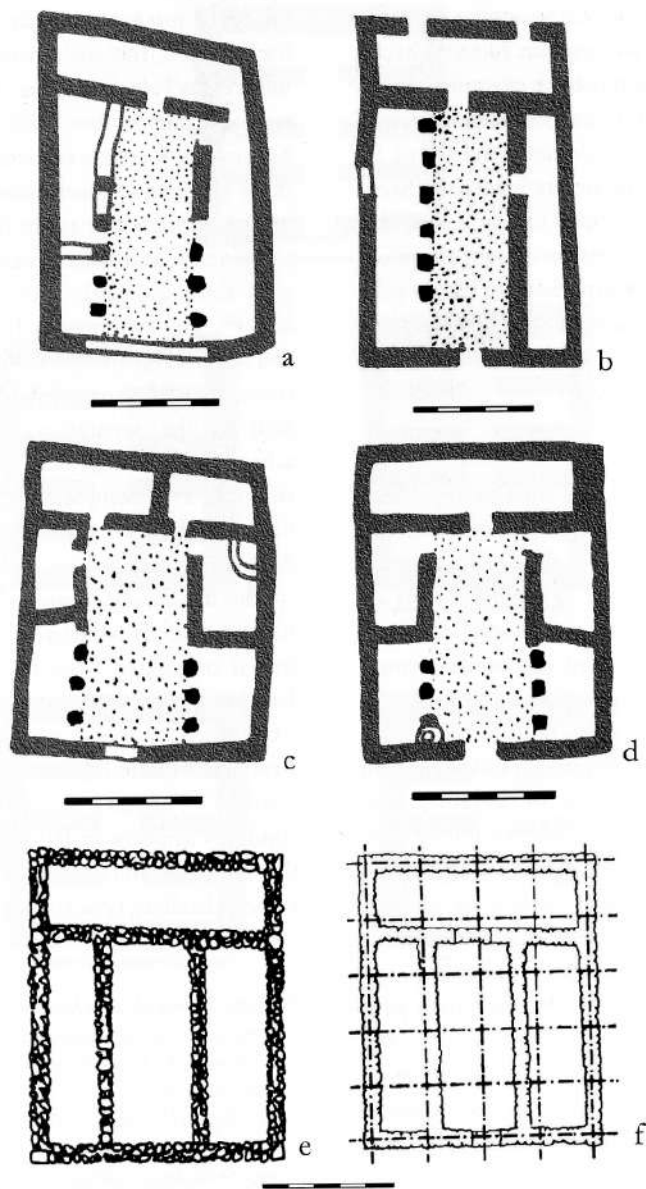
[28] Wright op. cit. 295 f.

Fig. 5 Ground plans of Palestine private houses.
a and b. Tell Masos. – c and d. Tell el-Far'ah. – e and f. Tell en-Nasbeh

monarchy, seems to underline, in our opinion, that this house model was an intrinsic part of the architectonic tradition of this population. In this sense, taking into consideration the nomadic origin of the Israelites, the hypothesis of the tent as an inspirational motif, although still not verifiable, seems at least to be plausible.

If we consider that, in all likelihood, also the Southern Arabians had nomadic origins and that their civilisation is the result of a sedentarization that took place among the Yemeni mountains in the closing centuries of the second millennium B.C., we see that the parallels observed between the South Arabian *bayt* and the Israelite house are apparently accompanied by another, more general and more profound one, regarding the historical-cultural path followed by the two populations. We could consequently claim that, since both the Israelites and the South Arabians built houses of the same type when, at the same time (Early Iron Age) they settled respectively in the north-western and south-western regions of the Arabian Penin-

sula, the origins of this dwelling model must be rooted in a common tradition shared by the two populations. This brings us back to a stage prior to their separation, that is, to the nomadic phase of their existence.

The South Arabian *bayt* and its apparent planimetric similarities with such distant dwelling models as those of the Israelite houses, highlights the role played by the Arabian desert in defining the cultural identity of the peoples who flourished along its borders. Sedentarization physically separated, but did not change, what nomadism had created and kept together. To be able to come back and understand more fully this original conceptual unity would yield deeper insights into the ensuing cultural outcomes. As the specific case in point shows, it is possible to trace back as far as a ›common proto-architecture‹ that obviously inspired the Semitic peoples that settled in the Near East with the opening of the Iron Age.

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