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Recent Discoveries in the “Market Square” of Tamna‘

During the latest excavation campaign at Tamna‘ (12 October – 2 December 2004) the Italian Archaeological Mission in Yemen completed excavations in the eastern sector of the so-called “Market Square”. The investigations, begun in this area in 2000 and pursued for five campaigns, have brought to light the foundations of the Square’s urban layout, giving a better picture of the stratigraphic and chronological details of the phases of its construction.

Following the work carried out in the city in the previous campaigns (which, besides the Market Square, also concerned a large sanctuary on the north-western edge of the site [Temple of Athirat] and some tombs in the nearby necropolis of Hayd Ibn ‘Aqīl)¹, the following stratigraphic succession was established for the site: earliest period (“Early Tamna‘ ” [8th – 7th century BC]), followed by a gap (or marked diminution) in occupation (“Intermediate Early Tamna‘ – Middle Tamna‘ ” [6th-5th century BC]), then the period of the city’s greatest prosperity (“Middle Tamna‘ ” [4th century BC – 1st century AD]), followed by a period of final decline (“Late Tamna‘ ” [2nd century AD])².

The excavations of the 2004 campaign not only confirmed this overall chronological succession but helped to be more precise about the phases of construction in the Middle Tamna‘ period, when the largest and most impressive buildings in the city were put up (city gates, temples, palaces, private houses). For the Market Square represents in fact the most authoritative and complete evidence available to us concerning the ancient capital of Qatabān.

Following the 2003 campaign, stratigraphic analysis of the foundations of the ten private houses brought to light round the Market Square (taking into account the palaeography of the inscriptions found in some of them), suggested a chronological succession we can summarise thus³:

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¹ A. de Maigret, “Tamna‘, ancient capital of the Yemeni desert. Information about the first two excavation campaigns (1999, 2000)”, in M. Liverani (ed.), *Arid Lands in Roman Times. Papers from the International Conference (Rome, July, 9th-10th 2002), Rome 2003*, pp. 135–140. Id., “Ricerche italo-francesi nell’antico Qataban (Arabia del Sud). Risultati delle prime quattro campagne di scavo a Tamna‘ (1999–2002)”, in M.V. Fontana & B. Genito (edd.), *Studi in onore di Umberto Scerrato in occasione del suo settantacinquesimo compleanno* (=Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici, *Series Minor* LXV), Napoli 2003, pp. 259–270.

² A. de Maigret, “New Stratigraphical Data for the Ancient Chronology of Tamna‘ ”, in A. SEDOV (ed.), *Scripta Yemenica. South Arabian Studies in Honour of Prof. Mikhail Borisovich Piotrovskij*. Moskva, 2004 (“Vostochnaja literature” Publishing House), pp. 242–256.

³ A. de Maigret, “Some considerations on the chronology of Tamna‘ ”, in S. Weninger (ed.), *Festschrift Walter. W. Müller zum 70. Geburtstag*, Marburg, (in press).

- a) late 5th – early 4th century BC: erection of stela of Shahr Hilāl;
- b) 4th century BC: construction of house B/B (*Bayt Ya'ūd*) and the other houses to the south (B/A, B/C, B/D, B/E);
- c) 3rd century BC: construction of house B/H;
- d) 2nd – 1st century BC: construction of houses B/G and B/J;
- e) 1st century AD: construction of house B/I.

On the basis of the latest excavations, we now know that this chronological hypothesis needs to be modified, at least in the final part.

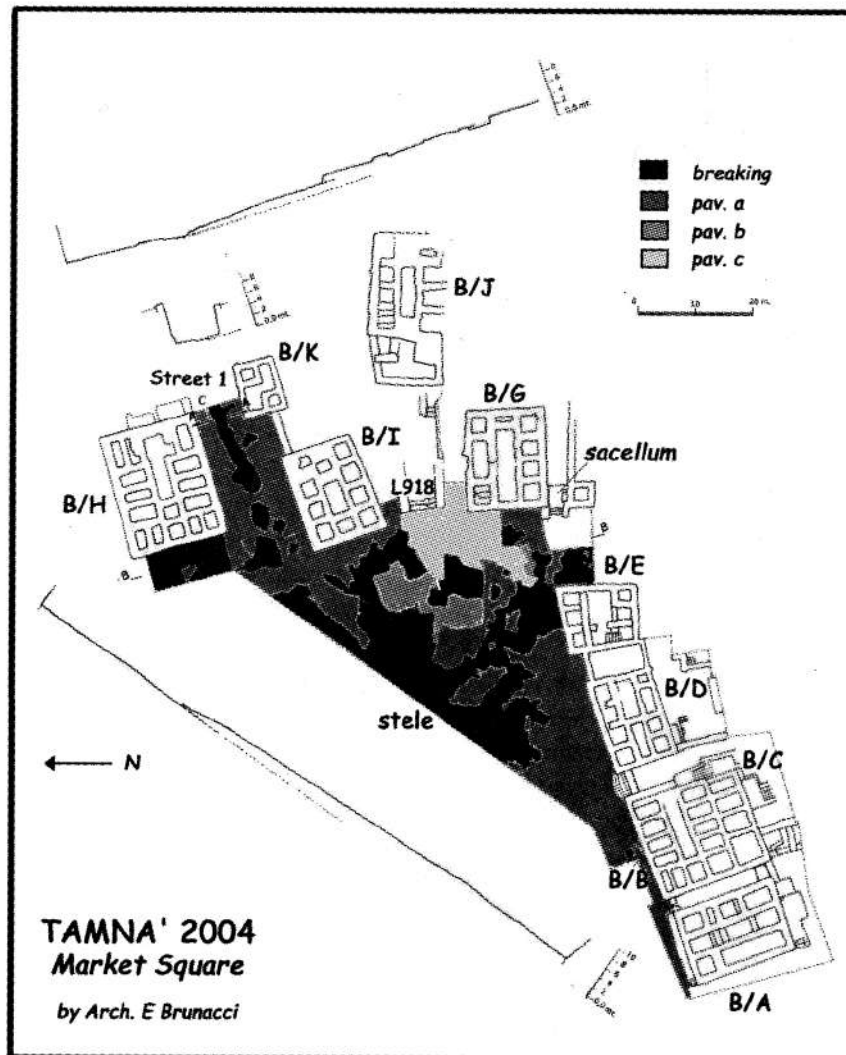


Fig. 1. Tamna'. Plan of the Market Square with the discovered ancient walking levels.

The main aim of the investigations carried out in 2004 was to find the ancient walking level of the Market Square⁴. In the previous campaign (2003), a certain amount of the wind-blown sand which covered the eastern sector of the square had been removed with the aid of a bulldozer to a depth of about 1,50 m. Taking as our reference point the level of the inscribed stela (“Market Obelisk”), sand to a depth of about 1 m had been left in place. We now set about removing the remaining sand by hand, gradually uncovering the square’s ancient ground level. The edge of the excavated area was represented by the line of the house fronts exposed during the previous campaigns and by a straight line running between house B/B and house B/H (*Fig. 1*). This triangular area, which includes the Obelisk engraved by king Shahr Hilāl, extends eastwards as far as Street 1, or the space lying between houses B/H and B/I+B/K (*Pl. 1*).



Pl. 1. Tamna'. A view of the Market Square from South.

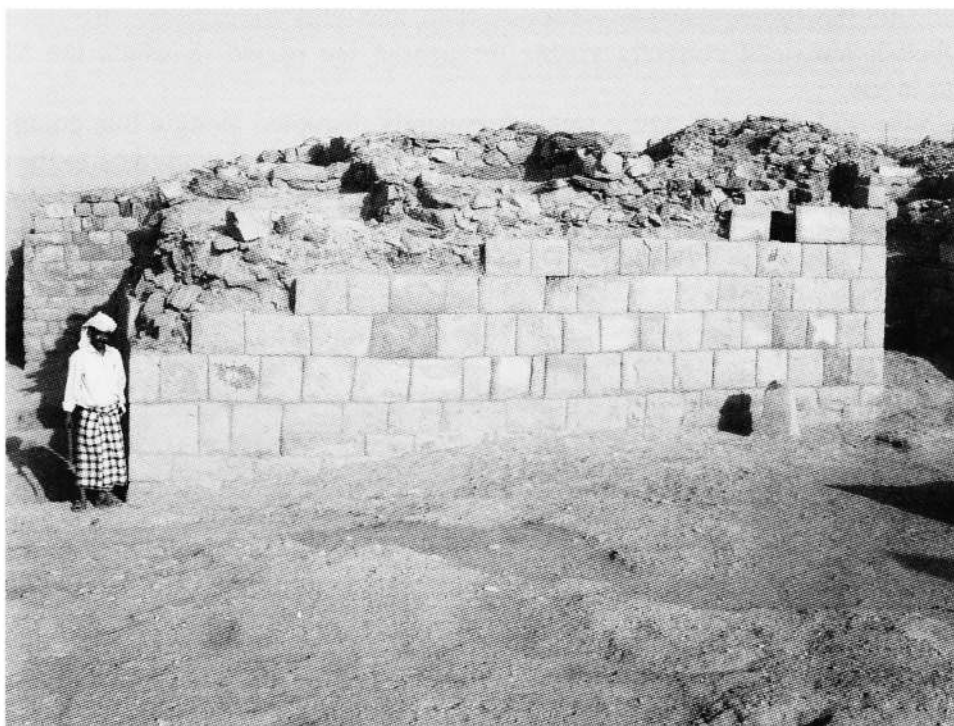
The ancient walking level of the square was made up of a layer of very compact beaten earth of a light beige colour. It now appears disrupted in numerous points and for lengthy stretches. There are various likely causes for this: digging carried out in different periods by the inhabitants of the nearby village of Hajar Kuhlān in search of building materials, the presence long ago of trees in the square, and the assays of the American mission (AFSM) in the early 1950s (we have in mind in particular the rectangular trench found surrounding

⁴ In the campaign, which also investigated the necropolis of Hayd Ibn ‘Aqil, participated together with the author, the aehaeologists Sabina Antonioni, Romolo Loreto, Alessio Agostini, Vittoria Buffa and the arhitect Emanuela Brunacci. The Yemeni inspectors were Kharan al-Zubaydi, ‘Abd al-Tawab al Mashraqi, Jamal Thabit and ‘Adil Sa’id.

the Obelisk). However, even though the trenches are quite large, they do not prevent us forming a clear idea of the ancient ground level in its overall extension and stratigraphic situation.

It is evident first of all that the ground level is not flat (as one would have supposed from the upper level of sand overlying the square), but slopes appreciably to the north from the row of houses to the south (B/A–B/E), until, descending further to the east, it joins Street 1. From house B/B to the foot of house B/K at the bottom of Street 1, the drop in height is about 3 m; looking at the square from the level of Street 1, the Market Obelisk and the houses on the south side stand significantly higher. We can imagine that this greater height of the southern sector of the square was due to the presence of underlying structures relating to the earliest phase of occupation of Tamna' (Early Tamna' period). This hypothesis seems moreover to be borne out by the assays carried out in 2000 beneath the floors of houses B/B and B/C, which yielded structures and ceramic ware from that period⁵.

Evidence for the slope of the square is provided not only by the ground level of beaten earth but also by the foundation courses of the houses on the eastern side. As can be seen from the front of house B/I, for example, the unhewn blocks of the foundations descend evenly from south to north following the slope of the ground level (*Pl. 2*). This proves that house B/I was built on a sloping plot.



Pl. 2. Tamna'. House B/I from West. The blocks of its foundations are assembled so as to follow the slope of the square's original level toward North ('pav. a').

⁵ A. de Maigret, "New Stratigraphical Data for the Ancient Chronology of Tamna'", *op.cit.*, 249 ff.

The walking level brought to light in the square is not of course all of a piece. It is only natural that, over the long period in which the square remained in use (from circa 400 BC to circa 50 AD), it would have been refurbished, perhaps in connection with the construction of new houses (*Fig. 1*). In fact we find, at a depth ranging from 10 to 40 cm above the oldest level (*pav. a*), a second level (*pav. b*) and, above this, a third – more recent – ground level (*pav. c*) which, starting from the southern houses at more or less the same depth as the other two, extends on the level northwards until it is lost, on account of a definitive rupture running east-west, corresponding to the monumental entrance to house B/J (L918).

The stratigraphic relationship between the latter, most recent, level (*pav. c*) and the surrounding buildings gives us important information about subsequent house building in Market Square. In view of the fact that it corresponds to the foundation course of house B/G and the monumental entrance L918 (*Pl. 3*), and that it abuts the southern front of house B/I at a point circa 70 cm higher than the floor level of the latter (*pav. a*), we can state that both house B/G (with the adjacent structure L918) and its floor level (*pav. c*) were constructed at a later period than house B/I (*Pl. 4*).

We can further observe that all three ground levels are at about the same height where they border on the southern houses: this means that these houses already existed when the oldest ground level was laid down. The granite stela must also have been in place in this early period, for its base is surrounded by a single plane which served as a point of reference for all the subsequent ground levels. This also goes to show that the important Market Obelisk remained perfectly visible throughout the period in which the Market Square was in use.

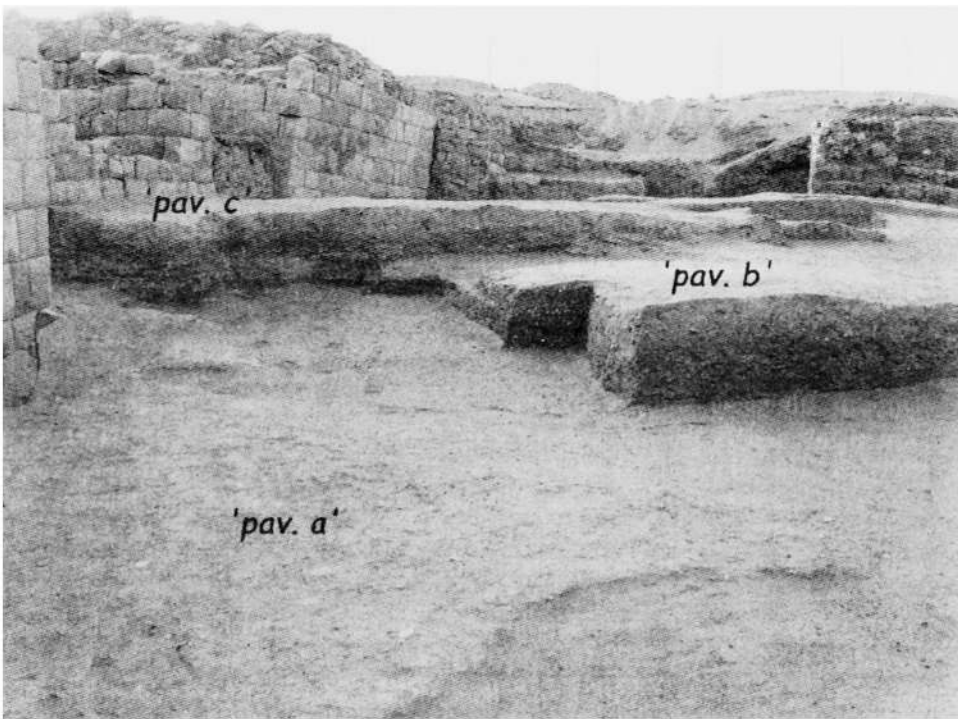
As we have said, the level *pav. c* was subsequently disrupted along a line going from structure L918 to the Obelisk. It is thus impossible to know how it continued to the north and in Street 1. We can suppose, nonetheless, that it followed the original contour of the square, eventually descending to the same level as *pav. a*. This hypothesis appears to be confirmed by the discovery in Street 1 of a ground level which, being in relationship with the foundations of house B/I, can only be *pav. a*. Since this is the only one to have been found, it must have continued in use even when the subsequent levels, *pav. b* and *pav. c*., already existed in the square.

Our excavations enabled us to reach the ancient walking level not only in the square but also in Street 1, the broad street (circa 7 m wide) which led towards the royal palace in Tamna ("TT1" for the American team). The surface has been exposed for a stretch of about 20 m, where the street passed in front of house B/H to the north and houses B/I and B/K to the south (*Pl. 5*). Here the collapse of the houses had been dramatic, especially for house B/H which, being particularly large, had obstructed more than half the width of the street with bricks, charred timbers, rectangular granite slabs, decorative architectonic features, ash, and soil of a grey-dark hazel colour.

The collapse of house B/H has been excavated and carefully studied both along Street 1 and along the western façade of the building fronting the square. We can conclude that this building (*bayt* Khamrān) comprised two floors above a powerful base built out of mammoth blocks. Rising to a height of some 10 m, it must have belonged to a high-ranking personage. This is borne out by the inscription on the façade which proclaims his name to have been Yahmāl son of Samharam of the Dharān family, a well known and important family in Tamna'.



Pl. 3. Tamna'. House B/G (right) and the gate L918 (left) from West.



Pl. 4. Tamna'. The stratigraphy of the three ancient walking levels near house B/I (from North).



Pl. 5. Tamna'. Street 1 and the huge stone basement of house B/H (from West).



Pl. 6. Tamna'. The inscribed granite basin found in the shrine near house B/G.

Thus the long and complex excavation of the ground level of the Market Square has revealed some significant elements which lead us to revise our hypotheses concerning the succession of its building phases, as they had been formulated at the end of the 2003 campaign. We now know, in fact, that house B/I was not the last to have been built⁶. The clear evidence of "work in progress" when it was destroyed in the conflagration that engulfed the city need not necessarily indicate a late date in absolute terms. House B/I was clearly already standing when house B/G and the monumental entrance L918 (and possibly also house B/H) were built. The work in progress at the moment of the catastrophe must have involved restructuring rather than its construction.

Thus we can summarise the correct succession of building phases of the Market Square as follows:

- a) late 5th – early 4th century BC: erection of the Obelisk of king Shahr Hilāl;
- b) 4th century BC: construction of house B/B (*Bayt Ya'ūd*) and the other houses to the south (B/A, B/C, B/D, B/E);
- c) 3rd century BC: construction of houses B/H and B/I;
- d) 2nd – 1st century BC: construction of house B/G and monumental entrance to house B/J (L918);
- e) 1st century AD: restructuring of house B/I.

I cannot conclude this brief account of the excavations of the 2004 campaign without referring to the discovery of a shrine for making sacrifices in the south-eastern corner of the Market Square. The hypothesis of a sanctuary in this zone had already been formulated in 2002: while bringing to light houses B/E and B/G, some cult objects were found along Street 5, including sacrificial tables, statuettes of bulls, etc. Our recent excavations carried out immediately to the south of house B/G revealed the presence of a sort of shrine located between house B/G and a wall enclosing another house to the south (house B/F). The relatively high level of the base of this shrine suggests that it was built quite late on (1st – 2nd century AD). Its destruction was violent, as can be seen from the traces of fire and the fragmentary state of some important cult objects, including notably a large stone basin bearing a relief inscription (*tb'm*) on the front (*Pl. 6*).

⁶ A. de Maigret, "Some considerations on the chronology of Tamna'", op. cit.