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In memoriam Alessandro de Maigret

Alessandro de Maigret died on 14 February 2011 at his home in Pierantonio, near Perugia, after a long and courageous battle with cancer. He was 67 and leaves Sabina, his second wife, herself a noted archaeologist of ancient South Arabia, and their son, Jacopo. He had recently retired from his post of Professor of Archaeology and Art History of the Ancient Near East at the University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’ (formerly Istituto Universitario Orientale), his base throughout his academic career and a beneficiary of his passionate, generous engagement with educational and organizational issues.

The last thirty years of his professional, and indeed personal life, were devoted to Yemen and its archaeology, a choice he had made in 1980 on taking up his associate professorship at Naples. After graduating from Rome University, he had worked in Syria, notably at Tell Mardikh/Ebla and Tell Afiss (1970–1976). But when work on that mission came to an end he felt a need to broaden his intellectual and theoretical horizons by becoming acquainted with other approaches, such as the American ‘New’ Archaeology. Perhaps more significant in finding his own direction was environmental archaeology as developed in Britain, of which he gained first-hand experience during a fellowship at London University’s Institute of Archaeology in 1978–1979. He would often say in his later years that, had he not pursued archaeology with some success, he would have liked to have become a natural scientist — an attitude I could perceive in him when we first met in London at that time. There he also acquired an awareness of the importance of immediately obtaining radiocarbon determinations where critical historical issues were concerned. Claudio Vita-Finzi was among the people he would single out as the most inspirational.

In Yemen he found almost virgin territory. In 1980–1981, he obtained support from Sabatino Moscati and Rome’s Istituto per l’Oriente to set up a budding Italian mission to the then Yemen Arab Republic (north Yemen). Two years later it developed into a major expedition thanks to a long-term agreement between the YAR and Italy, under the aegis of the Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO, later IsIAO), chaired by Gherardo Gnoli. Crucial to that outcome were the groundbreaking results of the first two field seasons, 1981 and 1982. Reconnaissance of the concession area in the archaeologically unknown eastern Highlands — the Khawḷān al-Ṭiyāl region in particular — led de Maigret to the discovery of more than fifty sites and several phases of prehistoric occupation. These notably included a culture suggesting pottery affinities to the Early Bronze Age of the Levant, preceded by aceramic ‘Neolithic’ manifestations and Palaeolithic traces. The vigour and vision by which this uninviting and sometimes dangerous territory was transformed into a key archaeological landscape testify to de Maigret’s qualities as a person and scholar.

From survey and subsequent excavations at four of the main settlements in 1984–1985 de Maigret retrieved a first, fairly complete picture of what he defined as the Yemeni Bronze Age culture, speedily dated by radiocarbon to the third and early second millennia BC. The two-volume, multi-authored monograph *The Bronze Age Culture of Khawḷān al-Ṭiyāl and Al-Ḥadā* (1990) represented a landmark for a much broader region than highland north Yemen. In fact, a parallel and lasting merit of de Maigret was to promote pioneering, broad-spectrum work on Yemen’s prehistory, an effort that led the Italian Mission well beyond traditional cultural history. He was industrious in arranging studies of numerous subjects, from lithic industries to plant residue and animal bones, and ancient irrigation systems through air-photo interpretation to Islamic religious architecture. I consider myself very fortunate to have been part of such a wide-ranging mission. De Maigret also strived to obtain permission to conduct work outside the Highlands, so as to embrace in a comparative perspective the coast (with Maurizio Tosi) and the desert (Francesco Di Mario). Among the new subjects investigated in the late 1980s were burial types, both in the desert (‘turret tombs’) and on the uplands (hypogean tombs). When a major monograph appeared in 2005, *South Arabian Necropolises: Italian Excavations at Al-Makhdarah and Kharibat al-Ahjur (Yemen)* (co-authored with Sabina Antonini), de Maigret highlighted with some pride how particularly the desert nomads — ‘voiceless actors in South Arabian history’ (p. 149) — had begun to speak through this work.

However, those of us who were part of the Mission in those days knew that de Maigret’s most cherished goal was an investigation of the emergence of the state polities in the desert lowlands (the Sayḥad), especially the Sabaeans. His

ultimate aim was to understand how and when the legacy of the plateau's Bronze Age predecessors was passed on to these complex formations. In 1985, initial surveys in the previously unexplored Banī Ḍabyan territory of the lower Wādī Ḍanah drainage resulted in the discovery of a large group of archaic Sabaeen ruins on Wādī Yalā, south-west of Ma'rib. A monograph was promptly published entitled *The New Sabaeen Archaeological Complex in the Wādī Yalā* (1988). Prominent among the ruins was a walled Sabaeen city, Ḥajar al-Durayb ('Yalā'), where an excavation conducted in 1987 under severe constraints provided essential evidence for establishing the 'long chronology' of the South Arabic script, as well as a beginning of the Sabaeen state by 1200 BC, at the latest. It was in this context that Alessandro met Sabina Antonini, then an undergraduate student of classical archaeology at Perugia, who used to visit her sister in Ṣan'ā'. They were married a few years later.

At the end of the 1980s, in recognition of its significant contributions to Yemen's archaeology, the Italian Mission was offered a chance to work at the remarkable Minaean city of Yathill, today Barāqish, in the difficult region of al-Jawf. There in two large-scale campaigns between 1989 and 1992, de Maigret brought to light Temple A, dedicated to the tutelary god Nakraḥ (c. sixth–first century BC). Barāqish was a prize site, destined to remain his personal favourite project over the years, as S. Antonini recalls in her tribute page in *Sabaeen Studies*, the 2005 volume honouring de Maigret's sixtieth birthday (along with Y.M. 'Abdallāh's and C. Robin's). However, after becoming full professor in 1990 and being elected president of the newly formed 'Arabia Antiqua' Association in 1991, de Maigret was appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as archaeological counsellor to the Italian Embassy in Riyadh (1992). This brought to a halt that long and — to the participants — unforgettable period of fieldwork in Yemen. During his stay in Saudi Arabia between 1993 and 1997, de Maigret established contacts with most of the universities and cultural institutes in the Arabian Peninsula and was able to gain direct experience of many important archaeological sites.

A new period of active fieldwork began in 1998 with the launching of a joint programme with the French Archaeological Mission to Yemen, directed by Christian Robin. This collaboration saw de Maigret at the head of a temple excavation at Yeha (Ethiopia), after which he was involved for a long period as co-director of excavations at Tamna^c, the ancient Qataban capital (eight intense campaigns between 1999–2006, followed by study seasons). Work at Tamna^c resulted in unearthing a series of private houses in the famous 'Market Square', a large temple dedicated to the goddess Athirat, and several tombs in the city's necropolis, this latter a particular responsibility of Sabina Antonini. The Tamna^c excavations also provided a training ground for one of de Maigret's most promising students, Romolo Loreto.

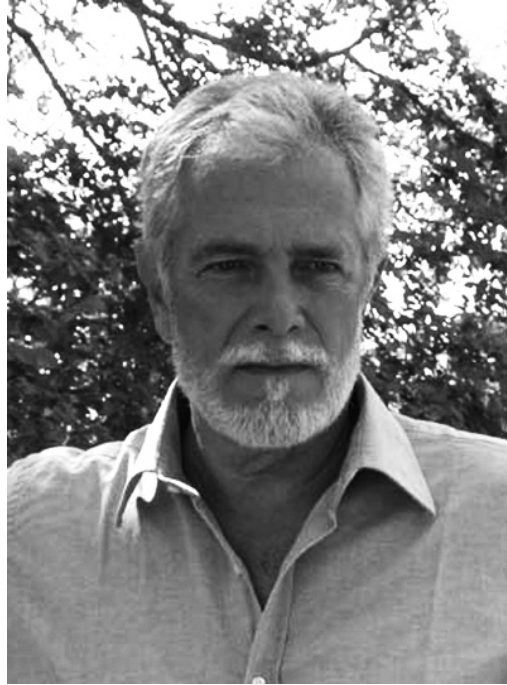
Research work was resumed at Barāqish in 2003. A new agreement with the government of Yemen had allowed the construction of living and storage facilities near the ancient city, under military protection. Thus in 2003 a state-of-the-art restoration of the temple of Nakraḥ was completed, and between 2004 and 2007 a range of new excavations were undertaken by de Maigret and his colleagues: the temple of 'Athtar dhū-Qabḍ, a deep sounding outside the temple of Nakraḥ, a first Minaean cemetery, and large extramural testing accompanied by geoarchaeological and bioarchaeological studies. Once again de Maigret typically immersed himself in the programme with vision, tireless energy, and personal kindness. But in 2007 he was diagnosed with cancer and underwent major surgery. These events forcibly prevented him from returning to Barāqish: the excavation plans were changed to a study season, sad though fruitful, which was to be our last in the Jawf. Coincidentally, political tensions were mounting in the province, which are continuing to this day.

In 2008, at the suggestion of the Saudi Arabian government, de Maigret was invited to work in Saudi Arabia at Dūmat al-Jandal. This task is now left to an Italian-French mission guided by C. Robin and R. Loreto. At Barāqish, after our great season of 2006, de Maigret was looking forward eagerly to pursuing investigations of the large Sabaeen settlement lying beneath the Minaean city, including its expected cemeteries, as he himself mentioned in one of his last writings, the foreword to *A Minaean necropolis at Barāqish* by S. Antonini & A. Agostini (2010: 8). Whether the site will keep its promise 'Only time will tell', he concluded: this, again, is now transferred to researchers in the future. Comparative stratigraphy was another vital need he felt strongly about: he particularly wanted Volume 4 (2010) of *Arabia* — the journal he created and co-edited with C. Robin — to be entirely devoted to major stratigraphic projects in Yemen, two of which featured Barāqish.

Alessandro de Maigret will be greatly missed, but he has left us his outstanding scientific legacy: interested readers are referred to his book, *Arabia Felix*, and Tony Wilkinson's rich and sympathetic foreword to the 2009 reissue (London: Stacey International). Above all he wanted to understand: he would ask his collaborators and colleagues illuminating

questions. He greatly liked meaning and context, clarity in writing as well as loyalty in personal relationships. And we have, and will keep with us, the best human memories of a simple but remarkable man. We count ourselves fortunate to have shared in the professional endeavours he proposed, and to have enjoyed his unfailing friendship.

F.G. Fedele



Alessandro de Maigret
1943–2011



Alessandro de Maigret directing excavations of the temple of
'Athtar dhū-Qabḍ at Barāqish, January 2005

