Proceedings of the Twenty Fourth
SEMINAR FOR ARABIAN STUDIES
held at Oxford
on
24th - 26th July 1990

Seminar for Arabian Studies
1991
Reprinted by Archaeopress in 2004

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THE EXCAVATIONS OF THE TEMPLE OF NAKRAJH
AT BARAQISH (YEMEN)

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The Italian Archaeological Mission of the IsMEO of Rome carried out the first excavation campaign at Baraqish (ancient Yathil) between December 30 1989 and January 25 1990.

Baraqish which was attained and captured by the general of Augustus Aelius Gallus in 24 B.C., was the second largest city in the kingdom of Ma'in, after the capital Qarnaw. The numerous inscriptions discovered on the huge stone walls surrounding the city tell us that it prospered for a long time (between the 6th and the 1st century B.C.) as one of the main incense trading centres.

The good state of preservation of the walls (due also to the reoccupation of the city in Islamic times) and the majestically isolated positions of its ruins in the desert make this city one of the archaeological wonders not only of Yemen but of the entire Middle East. A programme of excavations at such an important site could not fail to include also a project for the city's preservation and enhancement involving the recovery of the ruins and the rebuilding of the walls (de Maigret 1990). This vast and arduous task is however lightened by the historic opportunity provided for the first time to carry out a continuous regular survey of one of the main South Arabian cities.

As confirmed by radiocarbon datings, Yathil was destroyed at about the time of Christ. After a long period of abandon, it was reoccupied during the Islamic period, and its walls rebuilt in order to enclose an active and long-lasting settlement. The city was then definitively abandoned in the 17th century (Robin 1979: 102). The Islamic occupation has left a 3-4 m. thick archaeological layer which has concealed and sealed the underlying Minaean occupation layer. Although hindering the discovery of the classic period structures, the Islamic layer has nevertheless had the merit of protecting them and preserving them intact.

Anyone walking around inside the large oval area formed by the city can thus actually see very little of the ancient Yathil. In the sea of stones and mud which remains of the mediaeval occupation the only available evidence consists of the many decorated and inscribed stones that have been reused, the powerful and perfect base of the walls and the pillars of three temples which, because of their considerable heigh, manage still to emerge above the latter additions (de Maigret 1986: 384). The excavations, carried out in collaboration with the General Organisation of Antiquities and Libraries of San'a, are located in the southeast sector of the city where in fact a group of square pillars (the so-called "Temple A") emerged from the ground (Schmidt 1982: 123 ff., fig. 33). The results are important as they have shed light for the first time on a substantial and complete Minaean monument.
First of all, after recording it by photos and drawings, we removed the surviving structure of a late Islamic house resting on the roof of Temple A. The covering structure of the latter consisted of a complex stone traberation supporting at the top a series of slabs cemented by gypsum. The slabs rested on monolithic limestone squared beams (about 2 m long and 35 cm thick), which were set orthogonally to the axis of the temple. This traberation was supported at regular intervals by similar, but more massive beams (2.50 or 4.50 m long and 45 cm thick), laid parallel to the axis of the construction. The intervals between the smaller monoliths were occupied by rectangular metopes decorated with the well known 'dentil band' motif. The main beams rested on twelve pillars (about 4 m high), which have the same thickness as the beams themselves, as well as on the piers of the main door of the temple (in the NW side) and on the heads of two short walls, which divide the interior part of the construction into three parts.

A double curtain wall, 85 cm thick, delimits the temple, giving it a total length of about 12 m and a width of about 11 m. The 12 pillars divide the inside area longitudinally into 5 parts: in a sort of nave (abt 1.70 m wide) and double aisles (abt 1.50 m wide). We did not find any covering beams in place over the external aisles, but as the perimetrical wall reached (at least in its more preserved southern part) the same height as the main longitudinal beams, we can easily suppose that the same kind of traberation was present over the whole area of the construction. Several construction features seem to indicate that the traberation was lower in the tripartite area at the bottom of the building. It could be assumed that the gap in the level between the two planes of the roof was exploited to provide light and air to the interior of the large hypostyle room. All the blocks appear perfectly hewn and are decorated with smooth, drafted margins and coarse, pecked centers.

The external wall is made up of two parallel ashlar curtains. The blocks are perfectly squared and joined, the visible sides displaying the 'marginally drafted and pecked' decoration. The space between the two curtains (with an average width of 15/20 cm) is filled with a sort of conglomeration made up of gypsum and small ground stones. This wall is almost completely preserved in the southern part of the building; but on the other sides (E, W, N) only the lowest rows are left. Here it is surmounted by a thinner and much more less refined wall, which seems to have ensured that the inside of the building was inhabitable also in the Islamic period.

The excavation failed to expose the interior completely, because the pillars appeared to be in a quite precarious condition. They all visibly lean toward NE, i.e. toward the centre of the city. The slant of the structure is probably due to the pressure of the Islamic occupation of Barqish, which was concentrated mainly along the circumference of the city platform, i.e. where the Minaean city walls were situated. The extent of the lean (abt 3'20' on the pillars) was even more perceptible in the central part of the double ashlar wall. In the excavation strategy priority was thus given to deepening the more massive and heavy levels on the south-western side.

Consequently a trench 15 m long and 4 m wide was dug first, delimited to the NE by the double ashlar wall (M1). At least three different levels of Islamic period where found, having a total thickness of about 3-4 m. Mud plastered mud-brick, or thin stone walls exploit the fine wall M1 to build up against it a row of small rooms, probably used as stores. They were closed into the SW side by a wall (M2) which, running NW, tends to depart from M1 and take a direction parallel to the general alignment of the city wall structure. The doors to enter the small store rooms open onto this wall. Other rooms lie in a row SW. All these rooms, longer than those near M1 and delimited to the SW by other stone and mud structures, which penetrate into the trench section. All these structures probably belong to a large house which was located in the space between the temple and the Barqish city walls.

This Islamic house probably extended up to the external curtain of the city wall. The mud brick core and the internal stone revetment of the wall of
the Minaean period was in fact not well enough preserved, as we will see, to constitute an obstacle to the extension of this house toward NW.

The Yemeni pottery of the Islamic period has not so far been studied extensively, although some glazed pot-sherds found in this house seem to attribute the whole production to the Rasulid-Tahirid period (1350-1550 A.D.) (personal communication of Dr Edward Keall).

Some of the walls (mainly the mud ones) of this building terminated at the level of the earthen pavements, but others (the stone ones) continued under the level of the house, sinking down in a dark layer of ashes, where we collected some green glazed pottery, ascribable to an earlier Islamic period, probably to the time of the Imam Mansur Abdullah Ibn-Hamza (1189-1218 A.D.), who lived here when the Ayyubid dynasty ruled over Yemen.

The ruin of the two superimposed houses built between the Minaean temple and the city walls forms a small hill with its top rising between the enceinte buttresses no. 43 and no. 44. The stone structures of a later house are implanted on the top surface of the rise and, starting from the outside limit of the city wall, extend toward NE as far as the area of the temple. It is quite probable that the late Islamic house resting on the temple roofing is part of this house. The small yellowish glazed pottery cups and the tiny tobacco pipes seem to assign this latest house to the period of the first Turkish occupation of Yemen (1538-1636 A.D.).

If we had to label the three Islamic period levels found in this area, we could call "Stratum A" that pertaining to the top house, "Stratum B" that relative to the large house leaning against the temple wall ML, and "Stratum C" the one in which we found some stone structures deeply embedded in the dark ashes.

Therefore, the superimposition of at least three different phases of Islamic occupation in this area created an approximately 3.5/4 m thick stratigraphic deposit resulting in a prominence in the terrain SW of the temple. This accumulation has its base at about one half of the elevation of ML and the strong pressure it exerted over a long period against this wall and the entire temple structure caused both ML and the pillars to lean toward NE, i. e. toward the center of the city. As we have seen, the structure's lean averages 3°20' or more. That would be a limiting value for the static nature of the thin monoliths of the temple, especially if their height exceeded 4 m. Consequently it would have been rather hazardous to excavate the inside of the temple completely.

We decided, in any case, to open a trench inside the temple. As it was orientated along the lines of pressure, this trench would not compromise the building's statics and at the same time, would enable us to bring to light an entire transversal portion of the temple pavement. The place chosen lies between the first and the second cross row of pillars (coming from the NW entrance).

The pillars had a total height of about 3.90 m when we reached the pavement of the temple. The pavement was made of large, perfectly squared stone slabs, which respected the 90° alignment of the temple structures but, as it has different sizes, does not form a definite pattern. The pavement is about 20 cm lower at the nave. In the aisles it is limited to a total width of 1.30 m by a 50 cm high bench, which, embodying the lower part of the pillars and running adjacent to the perimetrical walls, symmetrically borders the whole transversal space on the two double aisles. The banquette was absent toward the central corridor of the temple. The central space of these two symmetric benching rooms is occupied by two heavy monolithic offering tables (c. 3.00 x 0.60 x 0.30 m) bearing a sculptured ibex decoration, on the sides facing the central corridor. The table of the SW room is missing and its original presence can be easily inferred from three squared slabs which as in the case of the NE room (here one bears an inscription), still stand up to sustain it. The table in the NE room is decorated and its front half was displaced and has been reused as part of a small
Islamic structure joining the two pillars nearer to the NE wall of the temple. The offering tables surrounded on the three sides by the benches give the rooms the appearance of two symmetrical cultual "cenacles".

The excavation of this trench brought to light the complete faces of 8 of the 12 pillars of the building, and it was found that 6 had been broken by the pressure of the Islamic levels accumulated in the area lying at the SW of the temple. The archaeological filling inside the building is fairly uniform, and can be ascribed to the Islamic period alone.

The Islamic pottery continued down as far as the pavement of the cella. Not a single Minaean pot sherd was found here, which convinced us that the inside of the temple was utilized in the Islamic period.

An excavation carried out along the SE side of the building (rear side of the temple) revealed a strong Islamic wall resting on the original rows (here preserved at a very low level) of the perimetrical wall of the temple. A wide door opens in the wall near the eastern corner of the temple. Its threshold was found buried in the ash-grey Islamic level, which we have already denoted as "Stratum C". It seems reasonable to conclude that during the Middle Age (Ayyubid period?) the ruin of the Minaean temple was (totally or in part?) brought back into use. What its new function (mosque?) will emerge only as the excavations continue. As the Islamic door seems to suggest, also the original pavement of the temple we discovered on this eastern side was reused. It lies at the same level as the threshold and the pottery collected on it was not Minaean.

We have some other evidence about this late occupation of the temple: the reutilization of the broken offering table of the north-eastern cenacle, erected on an Islamic structure built on the temple pavement (which probably bounded the re-occupied temple area on the NE side), and some Islamic re-arrangements found on the floor near the western corner of the temple (L2) seem to prove that.

A 30 cm thick wall joining M1 and the two pillars which are embodied in the north-western banquette of the south-western cenacle, delimits a room (3.5 x 2 m) with a fine floor paved with large square slabs (L2). The excavation was not extended toward the central corridor of the temple, so it is not possible to know at the moment if a wall existed on that side as well. A 2.5 m high monumental door gave access to this room from the south-western side of the temple. The door (opening: cm 65) is preserved up to the lintel and its squared monolithic piers (side: c. cm 30) are seated in the middle of the thickness of the double ashlar wall in such a way as to shield the conglomerate filling between the two ashlar curtains. Some holes in the door jambs indicate that a strong wooden wing closed the entrance from the inside. A small stone platform (1.50 x 0.80 m) leads to the door from the outside. Some steps descended from the door toward the western corner of the temple and the external ground level, which in fact was c. m 1.30 lower than the temple floor.

The difference between the two levels is marked on the exterior face of the temple wall by a progressive jutting out of the masonry rows (abt 1 cm each). The beginning of this jutting out corresponds approximately to the temple pavement level. This seems to indicate that the temple stood on a massive platform abt 1.30 m high, which acted in fact as the foundations of the building.

On this south-western side of the trench the excavations went down as far as the ancient ground level around the temple. However, no certain traces have yet been found of its original (more ancient) layout. The plane at which we stopped the digging refers only to a later phase, according to a stratigraphy of the Minaean occupation, which can be reconstructed on the basis of the structures found in the surrounding area.

When the excavations of the overlying Islamic levels reached the base of the ash-grey stratum C, a yellowish silty level began to appear. The pottery, now decidedly more abundant, was solely of the Minaean type here. The first
structure to emerge at this level was a strong wall, which ran almost parallel to the temple wall M1 along the SW border of the excavation trench and, after turning NW, disappeared into the section.

This structure (MB) runs perfectly parallel to the Baraqish city walls and forms its ancient interior face. As we know, the city walls, if seen from outside, show a characteristic perimeter, in which 56 buttresses (or bastions) alternate regularly with as many recesses. The stone wall face found in our excavations corresponds to the inner side of bastion no. 44. Shortly after it encountered the trench section, it was seen to bend at right angles to form the northern corner of the bastion. We know now that whereas the outside curtain of the Minean city walls was made with an ashlar masonry, highly refined by the typical marginal drafted and pecked decoration, the inside one was built simply using smaller blocks (abt 12 cm thick) regularly hewn but neither polished nor decorated. The dimensions of the tower are: width 6.5 m, thickness 5.7 m.

For the moment the excavation cannot be continued for static reasons and we have not been able to explore the inner side of the city walls in the recess joining bastion no. 44 and bastion no. 45. Parallel to the latter and at an abt 90 cm away from it we found a stone wall (50 cm thick) which, together with MB, formed a narrow long room (probably a passage-way). This structure (M5), which disappears westward under the unexcavated layers, comes to an end in its eastern part and bends at a lightly obtuse angle, ultimately abutting the temple wall M1. The lower part of a door is visible in the upper part of its elevation, abt 2.5 m from its eastern end (although it seems to have been made in a later period by removing the original blocks of its structure). This structure (which shows the same architectonic technique as well used in MB), together with M1, delimits an elongated room (L3) which tapers breadthwise toward E-SE, where it is abt 2.2 m wide. Its W-NW limit is not reconstructable at the moment. A 7 step stone staircase (2.8 m long), ascending eastward, is found in L3 and abuts and runs parallel to M5. It is seated between two pilaster strips which jut out from M5. Its steep rear side is roughly aligned with the north-western side of the bastion no. 44, and we can hypothesize that the stairs must lead to the upper part of the tower, passing through the door still visible in the upper part of the elevation of M5.

A 3.5 m high, 0.45 m wide and 0.25 m thick monolith abuts M1 just in front of the eastern pilaster strip in M5. It bears two Minean inscriptions. The one with an incised eastern face displays the characters laying down, which means that the monolith was originally used in another place and in a horizontal position. The second brief inscription on its western face was probably incised on the stone when it was lifted up in L3. The position of the monolith fronting the pilaster strip at the end of the staircase would not exclude its possible architectonic function (pillar?) for delimiting (and closing?) the eastern part of L3.

The staircase and the monolith seem to have been placed in the room at a later period (when also an inscribed stele was placed near the monolith). Their foundations, in fact, are higher than those of M5. The M5 foundations were not actually reached, but on approaching its elevation, we could see the end of both the staircase and the monolith. An earthen pavement fitted in with these later structures representing the level at which we left the excavation in L3.

Working down through the silty filling of L3, at the level of the high door in M5, we found another earthen pavement, which was more clearly evidenced by a sort of rough paving near M1, representing the last Minean occupation of this area. If we denote for the time being as "Stratum D" the archaeological level associated with the Minean occupation in this sector of Baraqish, we can thus distinguish at least 4 phases of rebuilding in it:

*Stratum D1*, relative to the later opening in M5 and to the paving near M1.

*Stratum D2*, relative to the construction of the staircase and to the lifting up of the monolith:
Stratum D3, relative to the construction of M5, which ultimately abuts the temple wall M1:

Stratum D4, relative to the temple building (we have still not reached the corresponding exterior pavement).

Excavation of the Minean levels of this sector has, as we have seen, produced abundant pottery, which will serve as the basis for a detailed study of a hitherto unknown production. However, it is important to mention also several other objects that will perhaps be even more useful to us in providing a qualitative, functional and chronological definition of the structures so far brought to light. Layer D1 has provided us with: a small gold cone-shape pendant, a 'mosaic glass' bead figured with a human face, numerous beads made of semi-precious stones, etc; layer D2 has given us: a fine female plaster head, two inscribed stone incense-burners, several clay and plaster figurines, 7 fragments of inscribed stones slabs, an inscribed plaster bulla, etc. Analysis of the numerous charcoal fragments discovered in the latter layer will allow us to obtain a precise absolute dating for all these objects and the relative construction phases of these buildings annexed to the temple.

Overall comparison of the pottery with that excavated by us at Yathil south of Ma‘rib in 1987 (de Mairgret 1988) as well as with that of the American excavations of Hajar Bin Humayd in Qataban (van Beek 1969: 79 ff.), has revealed that it refers to an advanced period of the 1st millennium B.C. The style of the plaster female face also displays a distinct Hellenistic influence and the palaeography of the related inscriptions seems to indicate that our phase D2 cannot be dated to a period earlier than the 3rd century B.C. The phase D1 should arrive at the 1st century B.C. or even later as it is demonstrated by the figured 'mosaic glass' beads of obvious Alexandrine origin ('millefiori') (Dubin 1987: 60). Moreover, we know from the carbon dating of the charcoal extracted from Baraqish in 1986 by means of core drillings that the final destruction of Yathil must have occurred during the 1st century B.C. or the 1st century A.D.

The problem remains of known how much older phases D3 and D4 are; i.e. to know the starting date of the temple's construction. Also this date probably lies in a period some two to three centuries earlier, i.e. around 500 or 400 B.C.

However, it is clear that the temple was, as the inscriptions tell us, dedicated to the god Nakrah, the patron of Baraqish, and that it remained in use for a long time, at least throughout all four of the archaeological phases we have defined (and probably also later, although of course with another function, if it is true that it was used also during the Islamic period). The more than 1 m thick aeolian sediments deposited on top of the phase D1 level (i.e. that of the last Minean occupation) in any case attests to the long period of abandon between the end of the Minean Yathil and the beginning of the Arab Baraqish, a gap of about 1200 years.

However, the history of Yathil is even longer than indicated by the excavations of this campaign. Two core drillings carried out on the exterior in the vicinity of the temple have in fact shown that the Minean level (layer D) rests on some earlier archaeological layers, more than 7.5 m thick. Several pottery fragments from these drillings clearly show that almost all these preceding levels can be ascribed to the Sabaeen period. The great thickness of these deeper levels, which moreover reveals the archaeological nature of the Baraqish 'tell', is indicative of the importance of Yathil during the Sabaeen period. In any case, this is perfectly in keeping with the information we glean from southern Arabian epigraphic documents (Robin 1987: 165 ff.).

The typology of the hypostyle temple is known in southern Arabia, as well as in Jawf, in Hadramawt, where the specimens already excavated (Hura'idah) (Caton Thompson 1944) or being excavated (Raybun) (Sedov 1988), seem to be several centuries older. In all cases, however, it is difficult to find exact stylistic
equivalents, and thus precise cultural precedents, in other parts of the ancient Near East (Egypt?) (Jung 1988: 196 ff.).

The temple of Nakrah, which is without doubt the most spectacular of all those discovered so far, seems however to display a high degree of basic artistic autonomy. The excavation has allowed us to record clearly the various structural characters and the individual constructive modules used. The exceptional good state of preservation and the type of architecture, consisting exclusively of squared elements skilfully assembled and joined together, result in this monument providing us with an excellent example of the great creative capacity of the Minean civilization. Here we have an important concrete testimony of an artistic potential that, in our opinion, is certainly on a par with the contemporary productions of the other Near Eastern civilizations. For this reason it must be saved and returned to Yemen as a first, significant jewel in its great, and largely undiscovered, cultural heritage.

NOTES

(1) The radiocarbon datings have been obtained in August 1987 during an Italian Mission's drillings survey on the site.

(2) A preliminary study on the inscriptions has been conducted by Prof. Gherardo Gnoli.

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Fig. 1 - Baraqish. 'Temple A': plan of the excavated area.
Fig. 2 - Baraqish. 'Temple A': plan of the building.
**Fig. 3** - Barqish. 'Temple A': reconstruction of the western side of the building.
Fig. 4 - Baraqish. 'Temple A': a) general view from north, after excavations; b) general view from west, after excavations; c) a view toward M1 from the trench dug inside the temple; d) the western corner of the building and the door in M1.
Fig. 5 - Baraqish. 'Temple A': a) the pavement of the cela with the squared slabs once supporting the offering tables. In the foreground the still preserved north-eastern broken offering table bearing a sculptured ibex decoration; b) the pavement of the cela with the north-eastern 'cenacle'; c) the pavement of the temple near its eastern corner. On the left is the Islamic wall resting on the original rows of the eastern perimeter wall of the temple.
Fig. 6 - Baraqish. 'Temple A': a) the structures discovered in the trench dug between the temple's wall M1 (left) and the city wall interior face (top right); b) the door of L2 from outside; c) L2 from north-east; d) the stone slabs paving L2, from south-west.
Fig. 7 - Baraqish. 'Temple A': a) female stucco head from layer D2; b) 'mosaic glass' bead figured with a human face from layer D1; c) inscribed plaster bulla from layer D2; d) inscribed stone incense-burner from layer D2.