

THE EXCAVATIONS OF THE ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION AT BARÂQISH (REPUBLIC OF YEMEN)

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After seven excavation campaigns in the ruins of Barâqish (Yemeni Jawf), we are resuming here the main results of the researches carried on by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Yemen (1989-1990, 2003-2007). The Jawf is one of the most impenetrable regions of Yemen, but it is also one of the richest in pre-Islamic antiquities: more than a dozen of Sabaeen, Minaean and Madhabite walled cities are scattered there, but none has been excavated up to now, except Barâqish. The two beautiful temples, the necropolis, the two stratigraphical probes and the many object, ceramics and inscriptions we found give us a first direct picture of the Minaeans, a commercial people who lived in the Arabia Felix and was well known in the classical world.

Barâqish: a gem of Yemeni archaeology

The ancient Yathill, known today as Barâqish, was the major city in the kingdom of Ma'în after the capital Qarnâw (present day Ma'în, situated about 20 km north of Barâqish)(Fig. 1).

It is mentioned by Strabo among the places conquered by Augustus's general Aelius Gallus during his expedition in Arabia Felix (25-24 BC). By then Yathill was already in decline, and apparently under the control of nomadic Arabs. Its golden age had probably begun in the 7th-6th century BC, and was over by the time the Romans arrived (Figs. 2-3).

The origins of Yathill go back a long way. Two stratigraphic probes carried out by the Italian Archaeological Mission inside and outside the city walls have retrieved pottery of the archaic Sabaeen type which may go back as far as the 12th-10th century BC. These finds came to light in the lowest levels of the city, at least 8 metres beneath the Minaean levels. Stratigraphic analysis shows that the pre-Islamic city of Yathill was occupied for about a thousand years.

Two temples (in the nearby localities of Darb as-Sabî and Al-Manassa in the Wâdî ash-Shaqab), numerous hydraulic features (dams, deflectors, canals) and the remains of ancient fields dotted along the Wâdî Majzîr, which passes by the city to the east, reveal the extent of the ancient cultural and productive oasis of Yathill.

The excellent state of conservation of its circuit of walls, provided with 56 towers, and its location in majestic isolation in the desert of the Jawf, makes this one of the archaeological masterpieces not only of the Yemen but of the entire Near East (Fig. 4).

Beneath its walls the caravans carrying precious perfumes and spices, with camel trains running into thousands, rested on their way from the ports on the Indian Ocean to Syria and Egypt. This was the last important stage in the Yemen, following Shabwa, Tamna' and Mârib (respectively the capitals of Hadramawt, Qatabân and Saba). After Yathill the "Frankincense Road" embarked on the long and hazardous trek north (involving 65 stages between Tamna' and Gaza, as Pliny the Elder reported).

The walls extend for 766 metres, enclosing a semicircular area of some 4 hectares, measuring 276 metres across at its widest point and a maximum of 188 metres from top to bottom. Access to the city was through a single large gateway, situated at the western corner of the walls. The upper courses of the walls were repaired, with rather inferior workmanship, in the Islamic era. The

original city gate was blocked up and substituted by a postern providing well-guarded access from the east. The ashlar masonry of the Minaean walls can still be identified practically all the way round the circuit (Fig. 5).

With its large blocks of limestone scrupulously hewn, marginally drafted and pecked, it stands testimony to the exceptional quality of the Minaeans' building technique. The average height of the circuit of walls was approximately 14 metres, as can be seen from one of the southern towers (T 48), which has been miraculously conserved right up to the denticular decoration of the coping). There are about 280 inscriptions set into the towers and curtain walls, some in their original position in the Minaean masonry, but most in blocks which were recollocated during the Islamic refurbishment. Recent excavations by the Italian Archaeological Mission (2003-4) have revealed a squat counterfort in mud-bricks outside the circuit of walls, which probably ran right round the perimeter. Designed to strengthen the walls, it also ensured their remarkable preservation.

Radiocarbon dating has shown that Yathill was destroyed and abandoned around the 1st century AD. In about 1200 AD its walls were rebuilt, on the ancient circuit, to protect a large Yemenite community which had settled here and remained until the 18th century. Thereafter Barâqish was definitively abandoned. A substantial anthropic deposition laid down during the Islamic occupation completely buried the levels dating back to antiquity. The Islamic strata (going down between 4 and 6 metres) undoubtedly made it more difficult for archaeologists to recover specific South Arabian contexts. However, these deposits sealed off the precious remains of the Minaean era, preserving them for us today.

As you wander round inside the great oval of the city, you do not see much of the ancient Yathill (Fig. 6).

Amidst the ruins of mud walls and stone structures left by the medieval occupation, the only pre-Islamic features visible are numerous well hewn blocks (often bearing decoration and inscriptions) incorporated in the later fabric, and the pillars of some temples which, on account of their height, emerge above ground. The excavations of the Italian Archaeological Mission, sponsored by the IsIAO of Rome and the University "L'Orientale" of Naples and directed by Alessandro de Maigret, investigated an area (the so-called "sacred area") where two groups of these pillars had not been entirely covered up by subsequent accumulations (Fig. 7).

The magnificent temples that came to light, dedicated to Nakrah (the city's patron god) and 'Athtar dhû-Qabd (the main Mainaeen divinity), bear witness to the peculiar concept the Minaeans had for their architecture.

The temple of Nakrah

This is a typical Minaean sanctuary of the so-called "hypostyle" type, meaning that it is essentially a large hall with a roof supported by a series of pillars (Figs. 8, 8bis).

The type is also known to us in Hadramawt (Raybûn, Makaynûn, etc.) and pre-Axumite Ethiopia (Yehâ), but this is a particularly fine specimen on account of the exceptional conservation of the roof, which is almost complete. To the excavations (1989-1990) took part the archaeologists Alessandro de Maigret, Mario Liverani, Sabina Antonini, Vittoria Buffa and Patrizia De Socio; the architects Edoardo Gatti and Giuseppe Tilia.

The hall is roofed with a double trabeation comprising long, perfectly hewn decorated beams covered over with stone slabs still partially conserved (Fig. 9).

These slabs, held in position by a sort of mortar, are laid on calcareous beams approximately 2 m. long and 35 cm. wide which, lying perpendicular to the axis of the temple, are in turn supported at regular intervals by broader girders as long as 4.40 m. and 42 cm. wide, parallel to the building's

axis. The gaps between the smaller beams are filled with rectangular metopes decorated with a double row of dentils. The trabeation, which also rested on the external walls of the hall, is supported in the middle by twelve pillars measuring 4 m. in height and about 40 cm. wide. Both the pillars and the beams are decorated with the characteristic marginally drafted and pecked motif.

The external wall encloses a rectangular space measuring 12 metres by 11. Measuring 90 cm in width, it is made up of a double facing of perfectly jointed, decorated blocks held together by a central core of compounded plaster and gravel (Fig. 10). It is almost entirely conserved on the south side, but fragmentary around the entrance doorway (west) and on the north side (where it had been incorporated into an Islamic wall). Only the foundations remain of the east side, and a narrower less substantial wall was erected above them in the Islamic era. These later rebuildings, together with other details that came to light during the excavations, indicate that the hypostyle hall was partly reused during medieval times.

The twelve pillars, disposed in three rows four abreast, divide the hall lengthwise into five naves, the central nave measuring about 1.70 m. across and those on either side of it about 1.50 m (Fig. 11). The main doorway is flanked by two large monolithic jambs which must have supported a complex architrave. Inside on the right there is a room with a side door opening onto the exterior. The central nave of the temple leads to the raised cella at the far end (Fig. 12).

On the left of the nave there are two sectors separated off by stone benches ("cenacles") arranged round two large monolithic offerings tables (3.10 m. long), sculpted at either end with a row of recumbent ibexes (Fig. 13).

Each table rests on three limestone plinths, the first bearing the dedication of the cenacles on the part of one Bâsil Ibn Ma's. Beneath the ibexes you can make out the words Dth' (first table) and Hrf (second table), meaning respectively "Spring" and "Autumn" (Fig. 14).

It thus appears that the two tables were used in the sanctification of the produce of these two seasons, which may have involved the celebration of ritual meals. Another such cenacle is located on the right of the central nave: here, beneath the ibexes, we find the word Dyth, whose meaning is uncertain.

Beyond the area of the cenacles you come to an open space that terminates in a step up onto a new floorlevel stretching right across the hypostyle hall and leading to the raised area at the eastern end. A small runnel cut into the large flagstones runs beneath this step and out into the open by means of a conduit through the northern wall of the hall. At this point of the wall there is no bench, while the rest of the interior has benches all the way round. In its place there is a rectangular base with a dedication to the god Nakrah, again in the name of Bâsil Ibn Mas.

Three secondary runnels, cut into the step, drained into the main one. They lead from the antecella (or "area of sacrifices") where three shallow oval depressions are hollowed out of the flagstones. This is where the sacrificial victims were immolated to the divinity, directly in front of the temple's three main cellae (Fig. 15).

The depressions and runnels allowed the blood to run off towards the exterior, and also facilitated the cleansing of the area of sacrifices. On the bench standing along the northern wall, Bâsil Ibn Ma's had another dedication to Nakrah set up. To the left, on a plinth joining this bench to the adjacent pillar, there is a large engraved slab, decorated along the top with a "louvered panel" motif between rows of dentils (Fig. 16). This is yet another dedication to the god Nakrah. A similar slab (but with no inscription) stood symmetrically at the southern end of the area of sacrifices.

These two slabs acted as screens for the two outermost cellae in the corners. This may confirm the secondary function of these rooms, which had already been indicated by the absence of depressions and runnels for the performance of sacrifices. However this may be, the five cellae occupy the highest part of the hall, and this is a sure sign of the importance of all five. This part of

the hall stands two steps (about 40 cm.) higher than the area of sacrifices, and three steps (about 60 cm.) higher than the main area of the hall with the offering tables.

The five cellae are the focal points of the five naves, and in fact they have the same dimensions, with the central cella being broader than the side ones. Only the central cella conserves its walls intact. From the others we only have blocks belonging to the foundations and traces of where they joined the rear wall. The entrances to the cellae, across their whole width, were embellished with moulded door-frames in white limestone. The architrave, still conserved in the central cella, contained a door measuring 3.40 m. in height (Fig. 17).

In the middle of each of the three central cellae there are rectangular hollows in the flagstones which is presumably where the divine simulacra (removed in former times) stood. In front of these hollows, other shallower depressions were used to lodge slabs of alabaster concealing the supports of the simulacra.

The floor lay buried beneath about a metre of earth deposited by the wind, testifying to the long period of disuse which followed on the temple's abandonment. The numerous broken beams, and the presence of metopes and slabs encountered during the excavations, point to the hypostyle hall's violent destruction. There must originally have been objects of value here, to judge from the holes and the remains of bronze fastenings on the surfaces of walls and pillars. Our failure to find any is a sure indication that the temple furnishings were thoroughly pillaged.

The temple of Nakrah did not consist merely of the hypostyle hall. This was preceded by an impressive entrance *avant-corps*, on a scale to match the temple itself. Built in stone across the full width of the façade, it comprises a platform with steps round three sides and a central area with large flagstones aligned on the axis of the temple entrance. This platform gave access to a sort of dais with two side terraces and a central stylobate with a row of four pillars, which led to the entrance doorway of the hypostyle hall (Fig. 18). The stylobate is made out of long well hewn blocks, in alignment with the entrance, and four large pillars are mounted along its western edge (Fig. 19).

It stands some 60 cm. higher than the top of the platform and is reached by means of three pairs of steps carved into the dais between the pillars. The broader central passage leads into the central nave of the temple. Part of the southernmost pillar is still in situ, while all that remains of the other pillars are the rectangular sockets (52 x 48 cm.) sunk into the stylobate. The missing section of the southern pillar was found nearby and proves that the pillars originally stood 5.60 m. high. A square tenon on top of the pillar shows that the pillars were joined by an architrave. By analogy with the *extra muros* temple at nearby Ma'în (ancient Qarnâw), for example, beams must have linked the prostyle to the temple wall and the architrave of the temple doorway.

The stratigraphic evidence shows that the stylobate with the pillars was an integral part of the temple right from earliest times, while the side terraces and flight of steps were added subsequently.

A rectangular annexe was put up alongside the southern wall of the hypostyle hall in the irregular space between the temple and the city walls (Fig. 20). It was reached from the hall through a small side door opening onto a stairhead and down a short flight of steps (Fig. 21). It appears to have been a sort of "sacristy", and had an upper floor reached by stairs against its southern wall. The upper storey rested on beams whose supports are still visible round the walls of the chamber. (One of the supports, resting against the temple wall, was originally a bench in use elsewhere, as we can tell from the dedicatory inscription, now turned through 90 degrees). The upper floor probably jutted out as far as the inner façade of the curtain walls. Some interesting objects used in the cult of the divinity, which had fallen through to the ground floor, came to light both in the sacristy and in the passage separating it from the walls. They include small human heads in plaster (Fig. 22), fragments of ritual vases decorated with animals, incense burners, inscriptions and many items of pottery. The stratigraphy shows that the annexe was added on to the temple at a later date. A door in

the west wall of the sacristy opened onto a small courtyard leading into the open space in front of the temple and hence out of the city.

Investigations carried out on the nearby segment of the city walls (T 44, T 45, T 46 and the curtain walls linking them) have clarified the structure of the walls in the Minaean period (Fig. 23).

A thick, compact core of crude bricks was clad on the inside with level courses of stone that had been hewn but not dressed, and on the outside (as we see right round the circuit) with larger blocks, skilfully mounted and dressed and finely decorated. As we mentioned above, a squat counterfort in mud-bricks with a stone containing wall buttressed the foundations on the outside.

The substantial outer façade of this section of the walls was largely demolished at the end of the Minaean period, perhaps at the same time as the spoliation of the temple of Nakrah. It was rebuilt when the city was reoccupied by Islamic settlers, but using smaller blocks of stone and less proficient building techniques. From this time onwards numerous dwellings were put up inside the walls, often on top of one another. This gradually weakened the external façades, leading to the collapse of towers and the curtain wall in various places round the circuit. In Minaean times a parapet walkway ran round the top of the brick core, protected by the external façade (see tower T 48, still standing).

The excavations revealed a passageway (the only one known to us to date, apart from the original city gateway) which traverses the walls immediately to the east of tower T 45. From outside the walls access to it is via a small doorway (just 62 cm. wide) opened in the external curtain wall (Fig. 24). Since this doorway stands some 2 metres above ground level, it must have been reached by climbing onto the brick counterfort and from there onto a stone platform specially constructed in the corner between the tower and the wall. The passageway, about 2 metres wide, led down a flight of steps to a second doorway, similar to the first, which gave onto the courtyard beside the temple (Fig. 25).

The strictly limited dimensions of the two doors, together with the traces of sturdy bolting on the jambs (clearly visible beside the outer doorway), show just how crucial this access point was for the inhabitants of the city. The importance of the cult of Nakrah, which involved public confessions of sinful behaviour in order to invoke the god's healing intervention, extended beyond the city (and in fact there is a temple dedicated to Nakrah at Darb as-Sabî). Thus the authorities in Yathill were obliged to grant access to the temple, so that inhabitants of the region around could participate in the cult of the city's patron, but they certainly kept a close watch over who came in. Remains of some objects, including bronze fragments and a wooden arm from a statue, found along the stairs in the passage seem to show that this was the route by which the last predators of the temple made their getaway.

The Italian excavations have made it possible to identify various phases in the construction of the temple and its associated buildings. This is hardly surprising when one considers that the monument remained in use for a good five hundred years. Nearly 100 inscriptions were uncovered during the excavations, and the stratigraphic hypotheses find confirmation in the findings of our epigraphists (Gherardo Gnoli and Christian Robin).

If we start from the most ancient phase of the site, we can group the Minaean structures in three stratigraphic phases, with the following relative chronology (Fig. 26):

- Level "Minaean C" (6th-5th century BC). In this phase the temple only comprised the hypostyle hall (without as yet the cenacles and offering tables), with the four-pillared stylobate as a propylaeum.
- Level "Minaean B" (4th-3rd century BC). In this second phase the cenacles were built inside the hypostyle hall together with the large offertory tables (Basil Ibn Ma's claims merit for the work in the inscription on the frontal plinth of the "Table of Autumn").

- Level "Minaean A" (2nd century BC - 1st century AD). The ground level of the external courtyard rose on account of sedimentation by some 90 cm., so that the steps leading up to the temple propylaeum were covered up.

Some objects showing Alexandrine influence found in the sacristy confirm that the temple was destroyed in the 1st century AD. C14 dating carried out on charcoal collected outside the side door of the hypostyle hall seems to confirm that date. This probably involved nomads who, following the fall of the Ma'in dynasty, could live unhindered in the valley of the Jawf.

During excavations, the floor of the hypostyle hall was found to slope downwards by 5° on account of subsidence of the northern corner of the base of the temple. This appears to have been caused by unevenness in the oldest archaeological strata on top of which the temple was built, and/or by a violent earthquake which we know from stratigraphic evidence to have affected the Jawf in medieval times.

As the floor moved all the superstructures also tilted, causing the least robust to fracture, which was the case for several of the twelve pillars supporting the roof.

During a lengthy restoration campaign (July 2003 - January 2004), the Italian Archaeological Mission was able to dismantle, restore and replace in its original position the whole structure of pillars and roof beams (Fig. 27). Stainless steel bars were used to pin the broken section of the monoliths (Fig. 28), and epoxy resins reinforced with quartzite were used both to seal the joins and to construct new level plinths for the pillars (Fig. 29). The walls of the cellae were dismantled and remounted in the perpendicular, as were the benches in the cenacles. The two monolithic door jambs framing the main entrance, measuring 5 metres in height, which had splits and serious damage from top to bottom, were also the object of lengthy and complex restoration work (Fig. 30).

Following the necessary pinning and sealing, all the components of the trabeation were reassembled in their original position (Fig. 31). With the pillars now in true, all the beams, decorated metopes and covering slabs sit horizontally in a perfectly stable and secure state (Fig. 33). The large paving slabs, which were seriously damaged or missing, were also restored, involving intensive consolidation and integration (Fig. 32). All the restoration work was carried out by Saverio Scigliano and Alessandra Paladino.

The Temple of 'Athtar dhû-Qabd

This second temple of Barâqish, which - as the the inscriptions say - was dedicated to the god 'Athtar dhû-Qabd, lies immediately to the north of the temple of Nakrah. Its existence was revealed by four large aligned pillars visible above ground and the two jambs of a large entrance doorway (Fig. 34). To the excavations, which started in 2004 and are still going on, participated the archaeologists Alessandro de Maigret, Romolo Loreto, Alessio Agostini, Rosario Valentini, the epigraphist Christian Robin, the architect Ghislain Richoux and the topographer Mario Mascellani.

The ruins of this second Minaean temple lay (as had been the case for the nearby temple of Nakrah) beneath strata from Islamic occupation, and we had to begin by studying and removing these strata. Although of little or no interest from the monumental point of view, they did provide indications for the stratigraphic and ceramic sequence concerning a late archaeological period in inland Yemen (ranging from approximately 1200 to 1800 AD). Little is known as yet about this period, but it is of considerable historical importance for this nation.

The Islamic structures brought to light can be assigned to three periods in the context of the stratigraphy of the Barâqish site, which follow each other without any clear interruption. Starting from the top we first found a level denominated Recent Islamic comprising poor dwellings in mud with small irregular rooms, many of them used to lodge sheep and camels; there was little ceramic ware here, but plentiful remains (especially in rubbish tips) of clothing and tools in everyday use

made of wood, cord, leather and material. It was surprising, in such a late stratum, to find numerous documents on paper written in Arabic and some in Hebrew: dates on some of the Arabic manuscripts showed they were from the 18th century. In both the Recent Islamic and the underlying Middle Islamic levels, the dwellings were clearly oriented in correspondence with the massive, deep-seated structures of the Minaean temple).

Although still quite small, the constructions of the Middle Islamic level are more robust: stone courses lie at the base of mud brick walls, often faced with plaster, and stone stairs covered by mud indicate houses with two storeys. Rather than lodging animals, rooms tended to be used as storerooms, as we infer from the way the floor space was divided up by low partition walls to create compartments and recipients for cereals or other produce. It is not possible to achieve a single precise reconstruction of the houses in this strata on account of the continuous refurbishments and modifications legible in the walls and flooring. This made it difficult to identify the subsidiary phases in this intermediate level, although these must have existed in the history of the single dwellings and, all the more so, in the individual rooms. What we can say for sure is that this Middle Islamic strata was in use over quite a long period (perhaps several centuries) and undoubtedly continuously, without interruption. Analysis of the imported ceramic ware (even though there is not much of it) will help us to be more specific about this period.

The structures dating from the underlying strata, denominated Ancient Islamic, are larger and better defined. This level is separated from the one above by a dense layer of dark ash, suggesting that this epoch had culminated in a fire. We had found the same evidence of fire during our excavations of the nearby temple of Nakrah. Of particular interest are some large rooms (approximately 7 x 5m) whose thick walls (with tall stone bases surmounted by brickwork) were built on top of the external walls of both temples (which lie nearly parallel at a distance of abt 7 m.). The Ancient Islamic level was characterized by abundant ceramic ware featuring distinctive shapes (bowls and jars in compact clay with large button bases and painted decorations with intersecting oblique lines), which can be attributed probably to a period subsequent to 1200 AD when, as we know, Barâqish was occupied by the famous imâm 'Abd Allâh ibn Hamza.

The campaigns of 2004, 2005 and 2006 got down to the major infrastructure of temple of 'Athtar dhû-Qabd and, even if not completed, we have now a complete picture of its ground plan, its dimensions and state of conservation (Fig. 35). Its plan reveals larger dimensions than those of the temple of Nakrah: here there are six pillars in the prostyle (rather than four) measuring 6.13 m in height (as against 5.60); the sides of the hall, which is practically square, measure 13 m (as compared with approx. 11 x 12 m for temple of Nakrah); the entrance door jambs are taller and more massive; the pillars of the hypostyle hall (resting on the floor) are approx. 5.50 m in height (as against 4 m).

The ground plan is in fact quite similar to temple of Nakrah (Fig. 36): here too six huge longitudinal plinths (L 101) support the pillars of the prostyle (Fig. 37); the hypostyle hall is once again divided into five naves by means of four rows of pillars, with three pillars to a row (Fig. 38); here too there are large offertory tables (here four, particularly well conserved, with a decoration on the front featuring recumbent ibexes with inscriptions (Fig. 39) surrounded by benches, which occupy some transepts in the side naves; here too the external walls are quite thick, with a double curtain of blocks which are well squared and trimmed; and once again all the visible surfaces bear the typical marginally drafted, pecked decoration. The rear (eastern end) of the temple terminated with a central cella (with the same width of the central nave of the temple)(Fig.40) flanked by two rooms (each one wide as the two lateral naves). The central cella has no door: it is simply open toward the hypostyle hall. Two fallen large slabs found inside lets us hypothesize the original existence here of a large bench to support the symbols of the god (Fig. 41). The two doors who gave access to the lateral rooms were originally decorated with moulded door-frames. Just in front of the

central cella the accurate paving of the transept L121 appeared having been removed in ancient times, perhaps in an attempt to recover some valuables.

Already, however, there is a clear structural difference between this temple and that of Nakrah, namely the level of the flooring in the hypostyle hall. While in the first temple (and, to the best of my knowledge, in all other South Arabian temples) the floor of the hall is at the same level as the external stylobate (separated from it only by the large raised threshold supporting the entrance door jambs), here, after mounting the entrance threshold, there are six steps (M 105) leading down to the floor of the hypostyle hall (L104) (Fig. 42). In other words the internal ground level is approximately 1 m below the level of the plinths of the external stylobate (L101). This is the case for the central nave of the hall, while the base supporting the offertory tables stands some 20 cm higher (it also supports the 12 pillars of the hall). Nonetheless one is struck by the overall sense of the hypostyle hall lying considerably lower than the surrounding ground level.

Another important element which distinguishes this temple is the presence of a narrow flight of steps (M 104) built against the west wall of the hall and leading off the right hand side of the steps down from the entrance (Fig. 43). This flight of steps leads steeply up towards the south external wall. Only the first five steps survive, but its rake suggests that it led up to a stairhead in the top south-west corner of the hall which must presumably have given access to a second storey (Fig. 44). This too would constitute another major difference vis à vis the temple of Nakrah, although if we think of the two storeys of the South Arabian temple of Yeha in Ethiopia, which we excavated in 1998, it is without precedent in Yemen.

Three important inscriptions came to light, the first quite long (Y.04.B.B/5, running to seven lines) at the back of the steps M 104 (facing into the hall), the second longer still (Y.04.B.B/6, sixteen lines) on the south external wall of the hall (M 102) and the third in a large "screen slab" standing at the end of southern nave, just in front of the southern part of the transept L121 (Fig. 45). In addition to the name of the god Nakrah we also find that of 'Athtar dhû-Qabd, and this second temple may in fact have been dedicated to this supreme deity. Two other long inscriptions (Y.04.B.B/8, Y.04.B.B/9) were found on blocks which were not in situ but formed part of the copious debris of the hypostyle hall. These documents - and many others -, which are certainly of considerable significance for Minaean history, are currently being studied by Christian Robin at the Collège de France in Paris.

The temple of 'Athtar dhû-Qabd is well conserved in the part comprising the prostyle and entrance, but less so in the hypostyle hall (just the contrary of the situation for the temple of Nakrah). Of the six pillars brought to light in the southern half of the hall, four were still standing, although fractured; the other two had lost their upper sections. Of the six pillars in the northern half of the hall we found only their lower parts. Only the south external wall of the temple is reasonably well conserved (to a height of about 2 m above the bench which runs round the bottom of the wall inside), whereas the west wall, representing the temple façade, had been razed to the level of the entrance threshold. The northern and eastern walls as well are reduced to their basal rows.

As far as the prostyle is concerned (Fig. 46), to the south of the four great pillars still intact and standing (although they lean to the west), a fifth pillar was found, broken off about half way up (the upper section was found lying horizontal), while to the north we found the rectangular hollow intended to take the sixth pillar, which could well be in the area remaining to be excavated to the north (or west).

During the last excavation campaign (2006) we put on light, to the West of the prostyle, the front side of the sanctuary. We discovered there a monumental stair case (5.5m large), oriented in the same axis with the main entrance of the temple (Fig. 47). It gave access to a large paved terrace (12.8m wide and 2.5m long) where the six stylobates of the temple prostyle were implanted. As in the nearby temple of Nakrah, also here the prostyle is flanked with two small squared terraces (3m

wide). The excavation has to be completed in the NW part of this complex; at the moment it is not possible to know the total number of steps (8 up to now) and the full length of the stair case. The terraces (which have the same width of the temple, i.e. m12.8) and the stair case were contained by a stone wall, whose upper row of blocks was decorated with the well known dentil motive.

The entrance architectonic apparatus of the temple of Athtar is similar to that of the temple of Nakrah (Fig. 48), but it is larger and differs in the model of the monumental stair case, which in the former is in the form of a single flight of stairs and in the latter is in the form of a platform stair on three sides.

Apart from a considerable quantity of inscriptions and ceramic ware, no objects of particular value have been found in the temple to date. All the evidence, here as in temple of Nakrah, is that the edifice was systematically pillaged prior to its radical destruction in the 1st century AD.

The excavations interested also the area between the two temples (Fig. 49). This wide zone (about 7m large and 12m long) was still occupied by the foundations of four strong Islamic walls which divided it into four long rooms oriented North-South perhaps store rooms). We removed the whole Islamic structures and we found a Minaean stone paving which occupied the whole inter-templar area.

Two stratigraphical probes

While the excavations on the temples of the “sacred area”, produced important information on Yathill in the Minaean period (and consequently on the Barâqish of the Islamic period that overlay it), we know very little (even in terms of chronology) about the underlying Yathill, dating back to Sabaeen times. That scant knowledge, however - based on sample drillings made in 1992 in the flooring of the temple of Nakrah and a distributional study of the Sabaeen pottery found outside the Minaean walls - is actually rather surprising, for it suggests that the city of the Sabaeen period, although the oldest (and in all likelihood the first), was not only the largest settlement throughout the city's history, since it extended in every direction beyond the area contained within the circuit of city walls in the Minaean period, but it also flourished for the longest period, at least to judge from the remarkable height of the archaeological deposits.

It thus seemed vital to us to begin a series of stratigraphic explorations in the levels dating back to the Sabaeen period. Following the inauguration of a stratigraphic probe outside and adjacent to the western sector of the walls during the 2005 campaign, a second one was undertaken during the next campaign (2006) in the city's “sacred area”. The results of the first probe (B.C/S1), which was completed by F.G. Fedele in the 2006 campaign, and the second one, directed by A. de Maigret (B.A/S1), will be published soon in the fourth issue of the journal *Arabia*.

The probe B.C/S1

Excavations, directed by Francesco Fedele, were carried out in 2005 and 2006 outside the Minaean wall of Barâqish in its northwest sector. The aim was to explore and understand the overall stratigraphy and environmental relationships of the settlement through time, with the additional hope of casting some light on the local conditions for its origins. A complete stratigraphic section (coded Section W05) was obtained by digging a stepped trench across the debris slope or 'talus' that surrounds the town wall. The imposing trench eventually reached 50 m in length and about 13 m in height (Fig. 50). The Section W05 was completed with a sounding at the base of wall tower T7, 8 m deep, which for the first time reached the base of the Minaean wall. An additional, 2 by 2 m sounding was made in the plain in new sector F, about 30 m west of the pre-existing trench.

The main stratigraphic results of the probe are presented in Fig. 51, with an emphasis on cultural phases. It was shown that Barâqish had its origins in a substantial Sabaean occupation, in which several subphases can already be seen. This occupation extended horizontally well outside the place occupied by the subsequent Minaean town. The Minaean wall itself, at least in the area of tower T7, was later built – rather surprisingly - on the top of the Sabaean deposits. No bedrock has so far been detected beneath the walls, although the existence of a low rocky outcrop on the place of Barâqish has been hypothesized. In 2006 it was shown that important Minaean activities took place along the base of the western wall, most of them, it seems, concerned with trading, as well as ephemeral occupation of a rural nature. In addition to pottery and other artifacts the 2005-06 excavations have produced a wealth of environmental and economic information, as represented by sediments and remains of animals and plants.

The probe B.A/S1

A 3m x 3m sounding has been opened in the area between the Temple of Nakrah and the Minaean house (perhaps a storehouse) which lies west of the sanctuary (Fig. 52). The aim was to ascertain the identity, entity, and chronology of the pre-Minaean occupation of Yathil. The diggings were directed by Alessandro de Maigret.

The following is, in synthesis, the stratigraphical sequence we discovered (Fig. 53):

- Level 1 (from 0m to 1.65m): foundations of the Minaean buildings (4th-1st Cent. BC);
- Level 2 (from 1.65m to 2.15m): period of abandon (6th-5th Cent. BC);
- Level 3 (from 2.15m to 2.40m): Sabaean earthen floor, with wooden posts (7th Cent. BC);
- Level 4 (from 2.40m to 4.70m): heavy deposits of Sabaean period (7th- 8th Cent. BC);
- Level 5 (from 4.70m to 5.25m): beautiful Sabaean paved way flanked by wooden posts (L1000) (8th Cent. BC) (Fig. 54);
- Level 6 (from 5.25m to 5.70m): depurated earth levels to support the stone floor L1000 (8th Cent. BC);
- Level 7 (from 5.70m to 5.95m): a second Sabaean paved way (L1001) (9th Cent. BC);
- Level 8 (from 5.95m to 6.40m): Sabaean deposits (9th-10th Cent. BC);
- Level 9 (from 6.40m to 6.50m): a third Sabaean lighter paved way (L1002) (10th Cent. BC);
- Level 10 (from 6.50m to 7.40m): early Sabaean deposits (11th-12th Cent. BC).

As we can see, this stratigraphy shows that Yathil, before being a Minaean city, was an important Sabaean centre for a very long span of time. Due to the small extension of the probe, it was not possible to reach the virgin soil, but the analysis of the pottery sequence seems to indicate that Sabaean people settled in Yathil from the first moment they came to Yemen in the 12th century BC. This hypothesis is now confirmed by the C14 analyses at the CIRCE laboratories of the University of Naples “Federico II”, directed by Filippo Terrasi.

A profitable comparison will be done with the stratigraphy we are obtaining in the probe outside the western sector of the city wall (B.C/S1), where a parallel evidence of an intense and particularly long Sabaean occupation of Yathil is coming to light.

A first Minaean necropolis

The identification of a small hill, partially the object of clandestine digging in the past, about 200 metres to the west of the city gates of Barâqish, enabled us to locate a small necropolis during the 2005 campaign in which many funerary stelae were in situ inside the tombs (Fig. 55). These excavations, conducted by Sabina Antonini in two brief campaigns (2005, 2006), brought to light a

necropolis in the Jawf for the first time, enabling us to see the famous stelae – the antiquarian market is plenty of them - in their original archaeological context. An area measuring in total 11 x 8 m was uncovered on the south-eastern side of the hill where, beneath a thick late Minaean level of waste material, we found the tombs (Fig. 56).

At first sight the structures appeared to be simple pit tombs, bordered by a row of stones and each marked with a stela adorned with a human face fixed upright in the earth. However, as we uncovered the structures, removing the stones that had not been positioned, we came across quite small loci, mostly square with sides measuring circa 50/70 cm, but also round and oval, enclosed by little walls in mud brick and blocks of hewn stone, some quite large. The short lines of stones bore traces of clayey mortar, used to level off the base for a course of ashlar and sometimes in the form of a mud brick in walls. The rows of tombs lay in small terraces retained by low stone walls set across the sloping hill.

The stelae, which bear the face of the dead and his name (Figs. 57-59), were found in situ although not in their original positions. Of the 26 stelae that have come down to us either complete or in fragments, 18 came from this stratum but only 3 were found round the southern wall of locus L2, either standing beside it or lying against it.

The others were scattered, mainly on top of or next to retaining walls M1 and M4, which enclose the necropolis to the south-west. Once the burial area had been abandoned, the tombs were desecrated and some were completely destroyed, probably so as to find out what lay below them. This hypothesis is borne out by the presence of ample spoliation trenches identified on the eastern side of the excavation area.

The architectonic and stratigraphic study of the tombs and the typological study of the grave goods, together with the epigraphic and onomastic research carried out by Alessio Agostini, provide us with essential, ground-breaking (and at times quite unexpected) information concerning the chronology (3rd cent. BC - 1st cent. AD) and funerary practice (cenotaphs?), as well as, more tentatively, the ethnic identity (Minaeans) and social condition (caravaneers) of the people using the necropolis. The fact that these tombs were found in a site where work has been on-going for a considerable time, able to offer well grounded stratigraphies and archaeological repertoires, has made it possible to present a report (under press with the IsIAO at the moment), which is very advanced in terms of the elaboration of the data and, I would say, sufficiently trustworthy in terms of its chronological and historical conclusions.

This report shows that this necropolis dating from the Minaean (or Middle Southern Arabian) period must have catered only for a specific sector of the society of Yathill, a group of people who were certainly not wealthy, and who seem to have had more to do with the conduct than the management of commercial activity. A small necropolis, in fact, which does not tell us anything about the Minaean upper classes in the city. We can suppose that the rulers, leading merchants, ministers of the cult and other notables had their own tombs, quite different in quality to the modest tombs found in this necropolis (I am thinking, for example, of the very fine tombs brought to light by the Deutsche Archeologische Institut at the Mahram Bilqis of Marib).

It is to be hoped that in pursuing our investigations, we shall one day come across not only the more sumptuous necropolises of the Minaean elite but also those – which should also be quite extensive, given the size of the settlement lying beneath the Minaean city – of the more ancient Sabaeen period (also known as the Ancient Southern Arabian period).

The Museum

During the 2005 campaign we built near the camp a construction to serve as a small museum. The building, made by cement blocks, is composed by 6 rooms and has a total area of about 130

square meters. Three of the rooms will be used as exhibition areas, two as museum stores and one as an office. In 2006, with the help of a local builder, we covered the whole external cement walls of the building with a 50cm thick earthen layer, in order to give the construction the aspect of a traditional jawfi formal house. The elevation is embellished by the characteristic horizontal lines which mark the phases of the mud posing in the region, and the roof line is adorned by the traditional crenellation.

The Museum will supply the many tourists who every year come to visit Barâqish from all around the world, with the necessary scientific information about the site and the reserches the Italian Archaeological Mission is conducting on it.

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Acknowledgements:

Republic of Yemen:

- Ministry of Planning and International Co-operation
- Ministry of Culture and Tourism
- General Organization of Antiquities and Museums

Republic of Italy:

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGCS & DGPCC)
- Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient
- University of Naples "L'Orientale"
- Italian Embassy at San'a

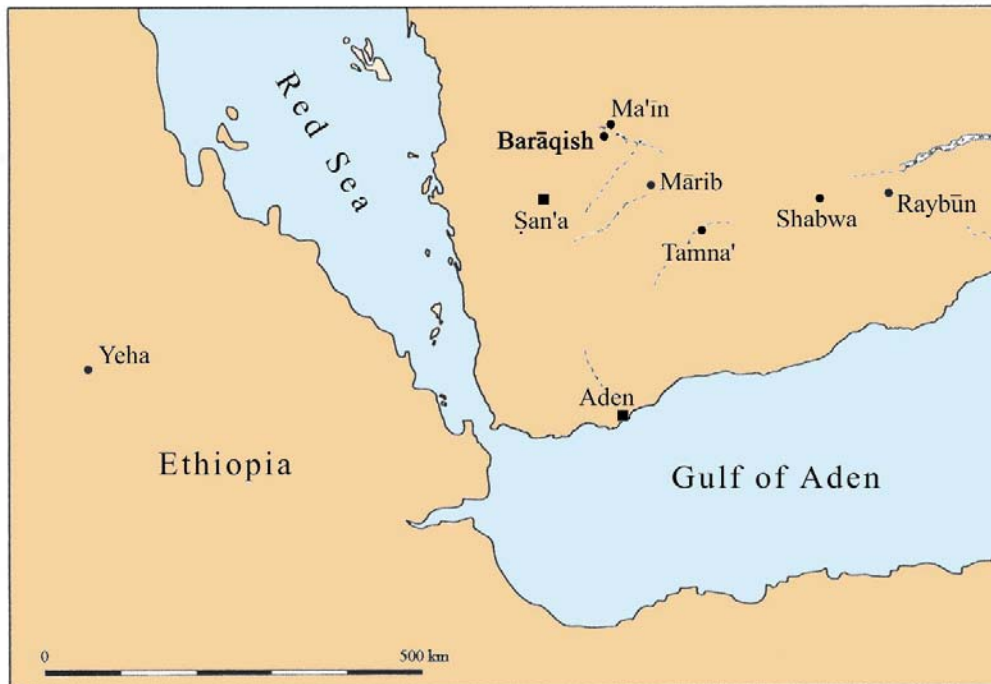


Fig. 1 The site of Barāqish in Yemen



Fig. 2 A Barāqish view from north



Fig. 3 A view of Barâqish from south-west



Fig. 4 The Barâqish walls from south



Fig. 5 The south-eastern corner of the Barâqish walls



Fig. 6 A view of the inside of the city



Fig. 7 The temple of Nakrah before the excavations



Fig. 8 The excavations of the Italian mission at Barâqish

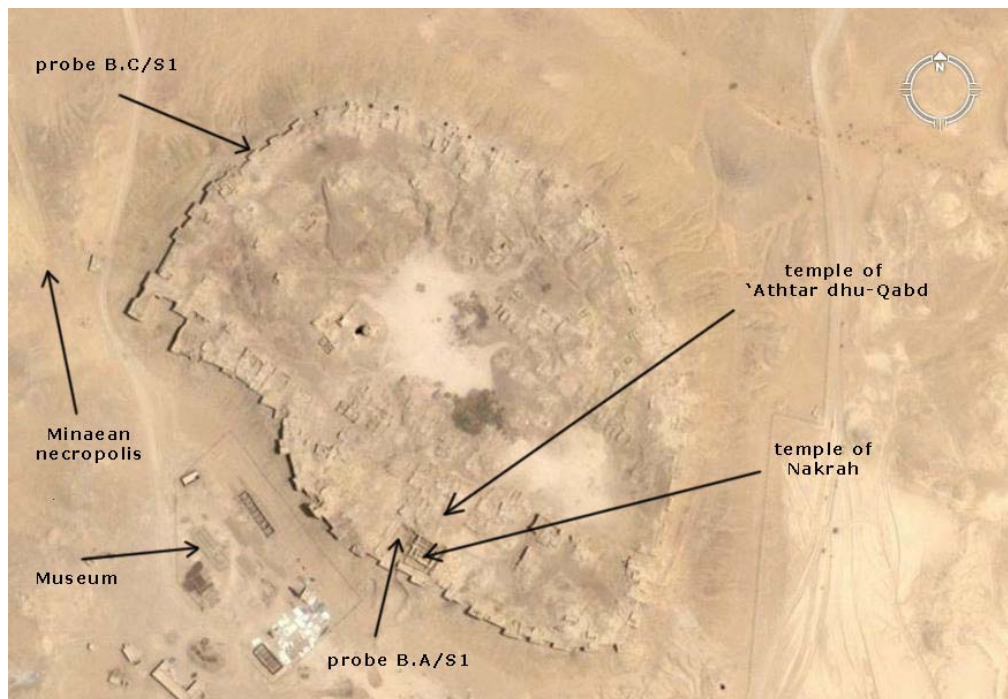


Fig. 8bis Baraqish from Google Earth



Fig. 9 A detail of the roof of the temple



Fig. 10 The southern wall of the hypostyle hall

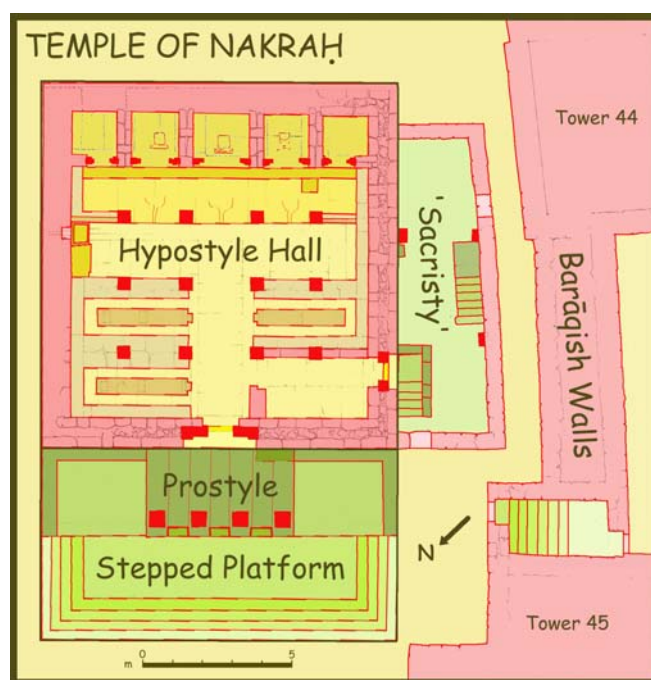


Fig. 11 A plan of the temple of Nakrah and adjacent walls

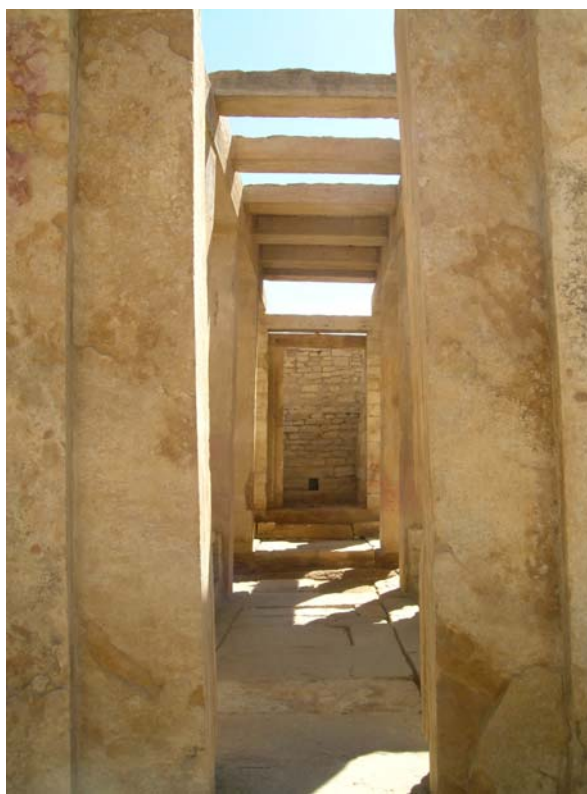


Fig. 12 A view of the main entrance and central nave



Fig. 13 A view of the “cenacles” area, from north



Fig. 14 The “Autumn” cenacle



Fig. 15 A view of the hall from north-east. In the low foreground is the “sacrifices area”



Fig. 16 The inscribed screen-slab Y.92.B.21+30



Fig. 17 A view of the central cella



Fig. 18 The monumental avant-corps of the temple



Fig. 19 An aerial view of the entrance stylobate



Fig. 20 The "sacristy", from north-west



Fig. 21 The small side door of the hypostyle hall

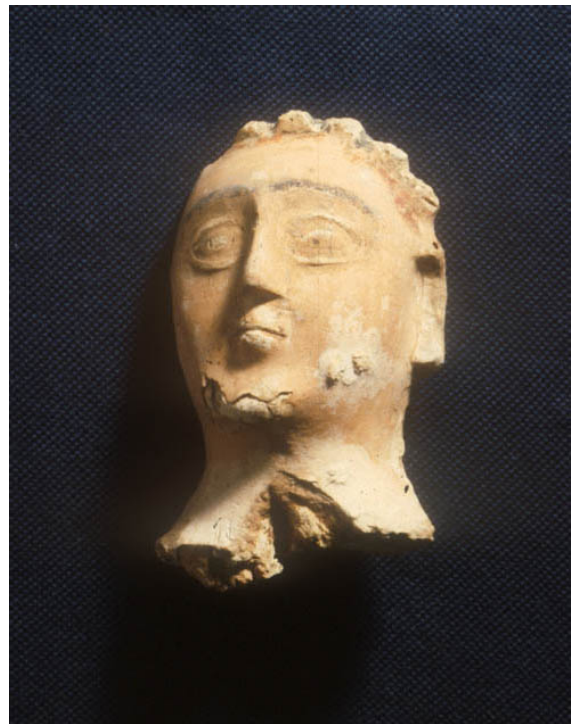


Fig. 22 A human heads in plaster from the "sacristy"



Fig. 23 The stretch of walls near the temple of Nakrah



Fig. 24 The small doorway near tower T45



Fig. 25 The passageway to the temple of Nakrah

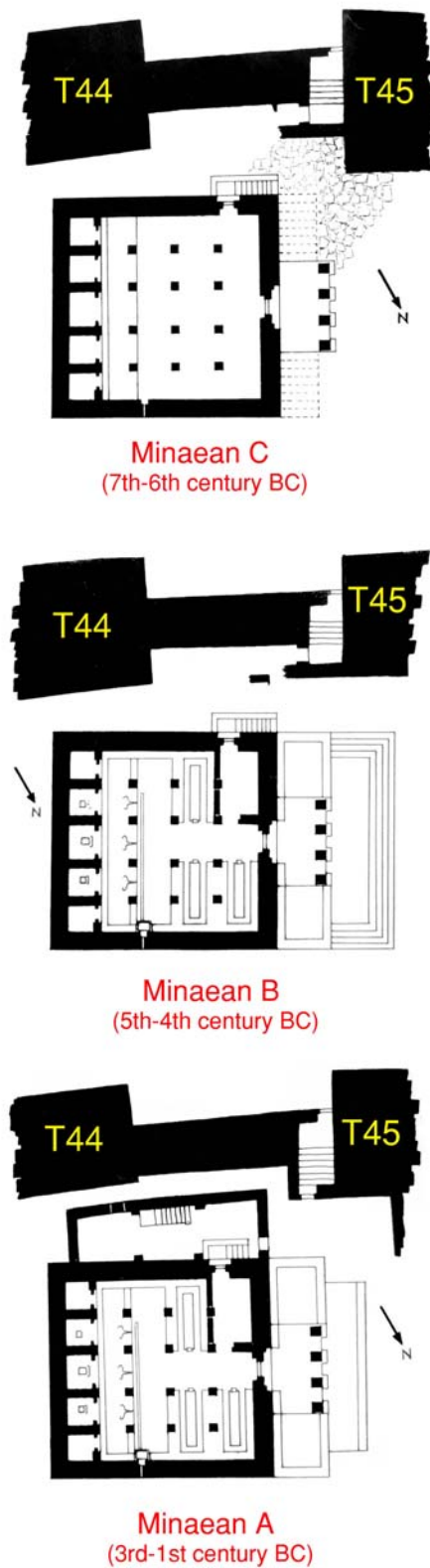


Fig. 26 The three building phases of the temple of Nakrah



Fig. 27 The disassembly of one of the 12 pillars



Fig. 28 Preliminary work for pinning the broken section of the monoliths



Fig. 29 Epoxy resins reinforced with quartzite were to construct new level plinths for the pillars



Fig. 30 Stainless steel bars were used to restore the two monolithic door jambs of the temple main entrance



Fig. 31 One of the broader girders being reassembled in its original position



Fig. 32 Consolidation works regarded the paving slabs as well



Fig. 33 A frontal view of the temple of Nakrah after its restoration



Fig. 34 Beginning of excavations at the temple of 'Athtar dhû- Qabd (14th December 2004)

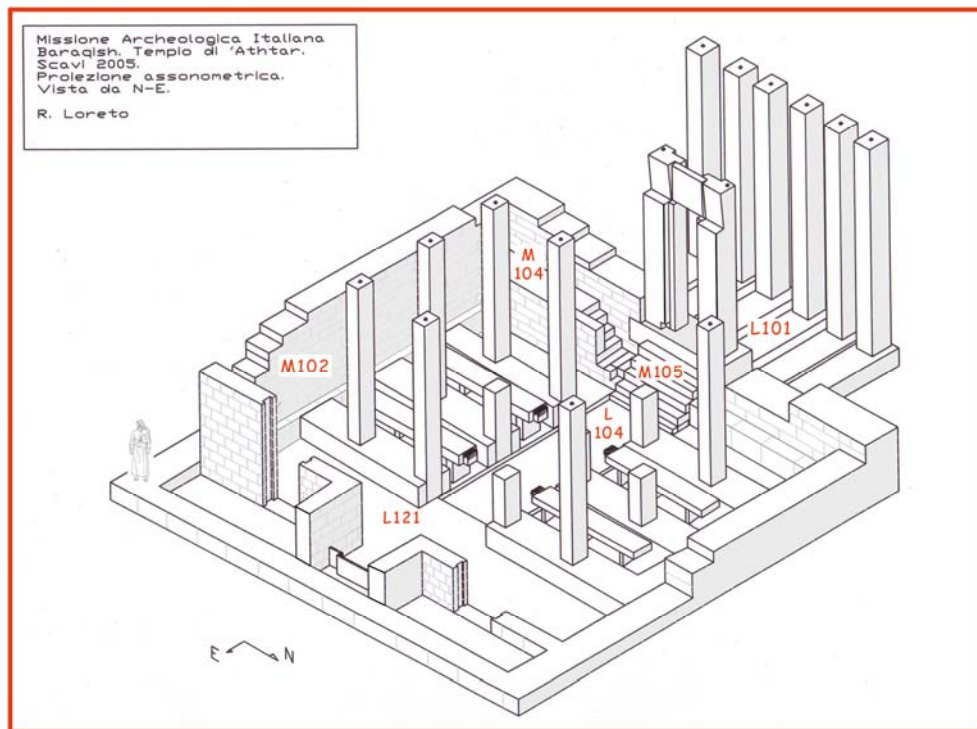


Fig. 35 An axonometric view of the temple of 'Athtar dhû-Qabd (by R. Loreto)

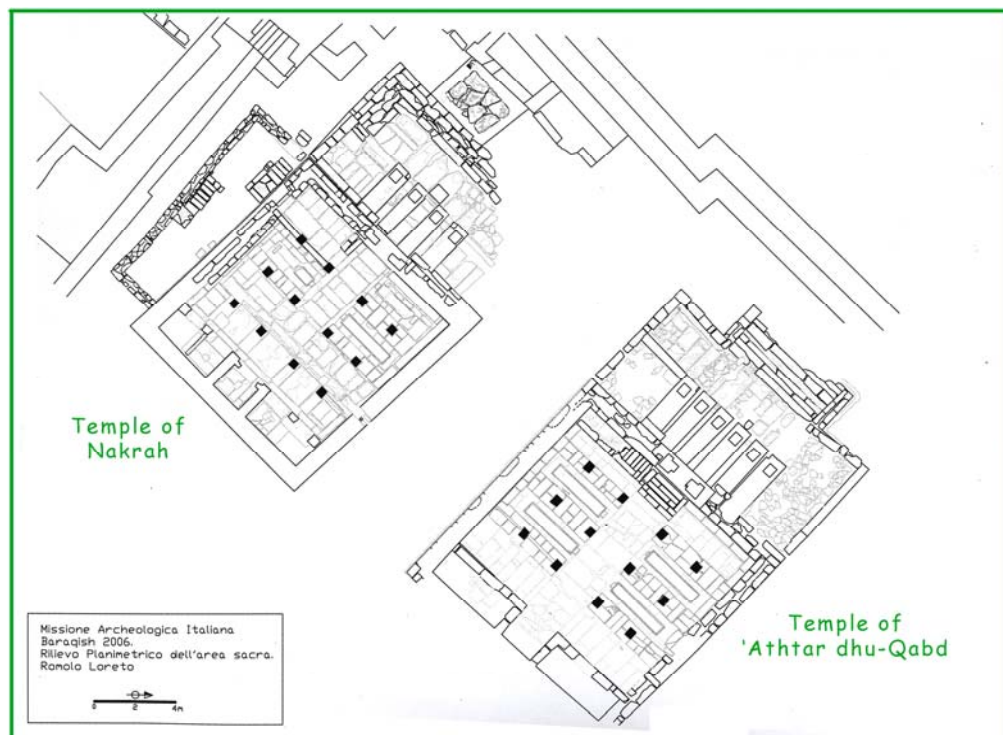


Fig. 36 Plans of the two temples excavated in the sacred area" (by R. Loreto)



Fig. 37 Temple of 'Athtar dhû-Qabd: the huge plinths supporting the pillars of the prostyle



Fig. 38 A view of the hypostyle hall from north-west



Fig. 39 One of the offertory tables decorated with recumbent ibexes and inscriptions



Fig. 40 The three cellae at the eastern end of the temple



Fig. 41 Some large slabs found inside the central cella let us suppose the existence



Fig. 42 The flight of steps leading down to the floor of the hypostyle hall



Fig. 43 Western end of the hypostyle hall: in the background is the narrow flight of steps which gave access to a second storey of the temple

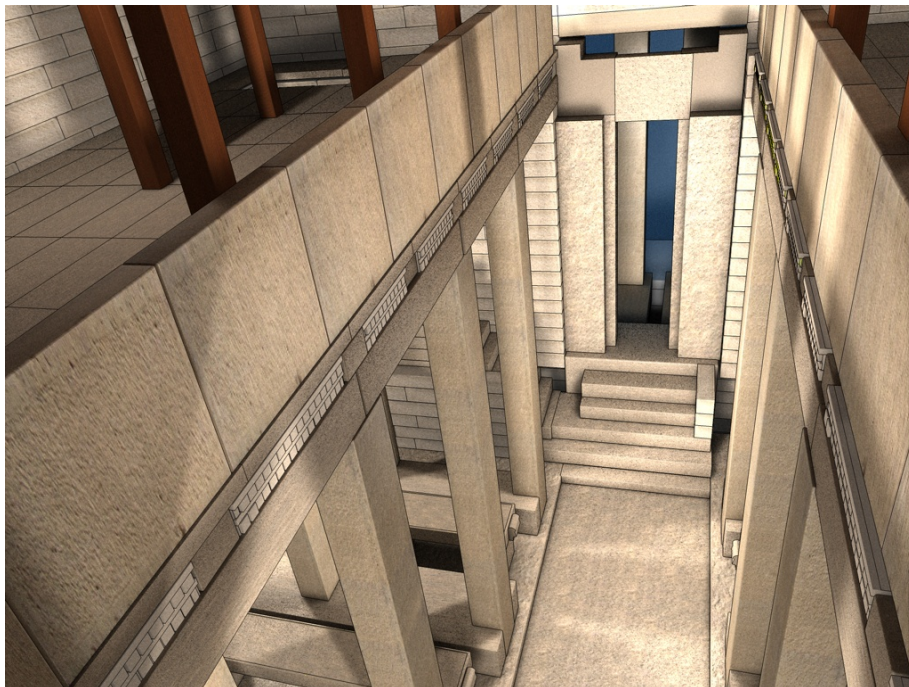


Fig. 44 A hypothetical reconstruction of the two-storey temple hall (drawn by Gh. Richoux)



Fig. 45 The “screen slabs” at the end of the southern naves; an inscription with the name of the god ‘Athtar dhû-Qabd is on that to the left



Fig. 46 A general view of the prostyle of the temple of ‘Athtar dhû-Qabd



Fig. 47 A view of the front side of the temple of 'Athtar dhû-Qabd

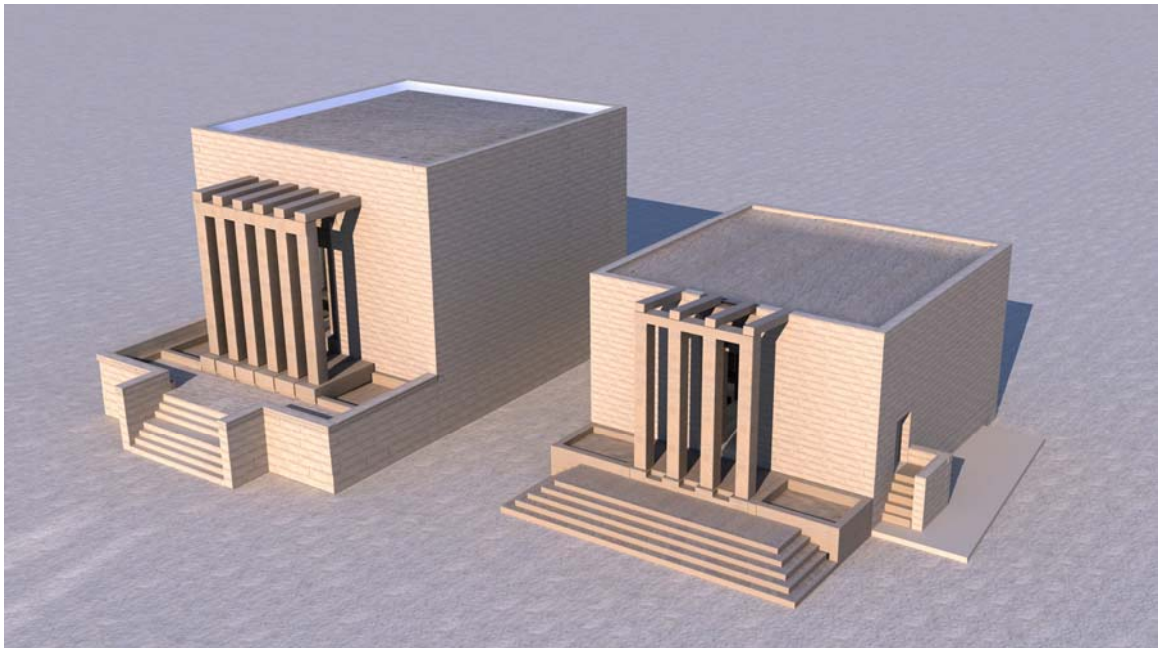


Fig. 48 A hypothetical reconstruction of the two temples of Barâqish (drawn by Gh. Richoux)



Fig. 49 The excavated area between the two temples



Fig. 50 Probe B.C/S1: a view of the sounding at the base of the Minaean wall (tower T7)

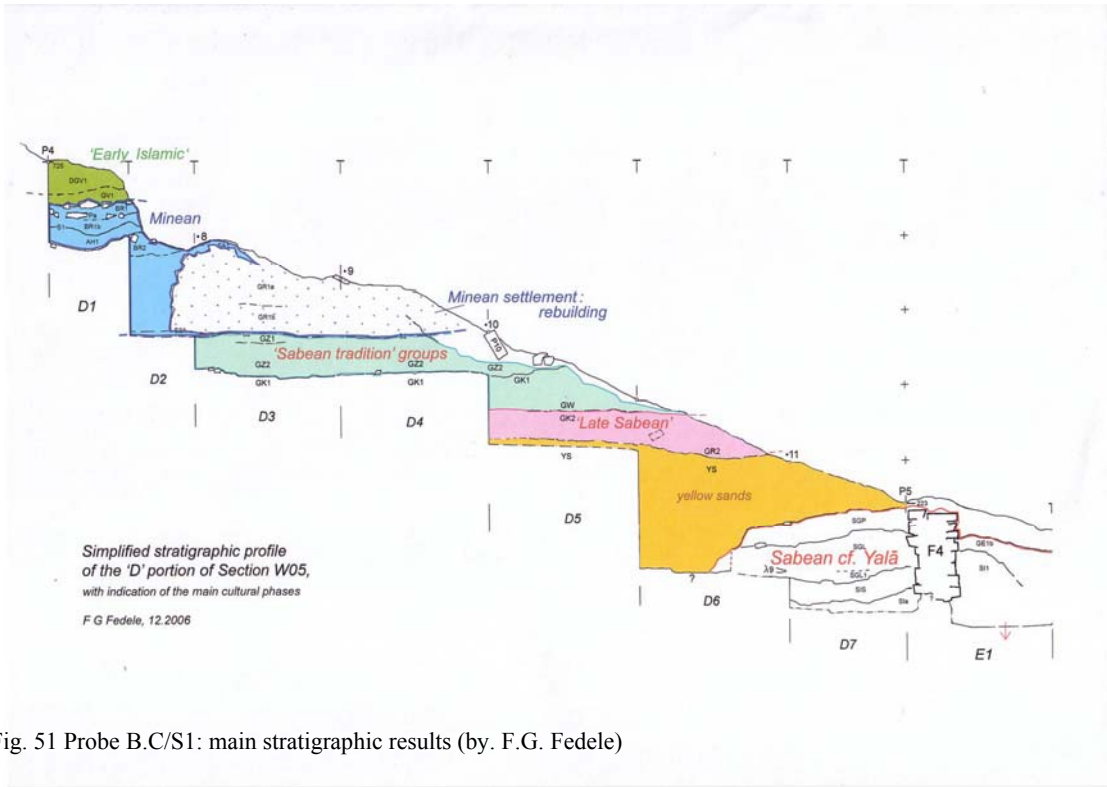




Fig. 53 The eastern and southern sections of the probe B.A/S1



Fig. 54 The Sabaean paved way found in the probe B.A/S1



Fig. 55 The Minaean necropolis is located about 200m to the west of the city gates of Barâqish



Fig. 56 A view of the necropolis after excavations



Fig. 57 One of the inscribed stelae found in the necropolis: over the limestone surface a painted level of stucco was applied



Fig. 58 Another stele from the Minaean necropolis: the face of the dead is accurately executed on high relief and his name is incised in perfect letters

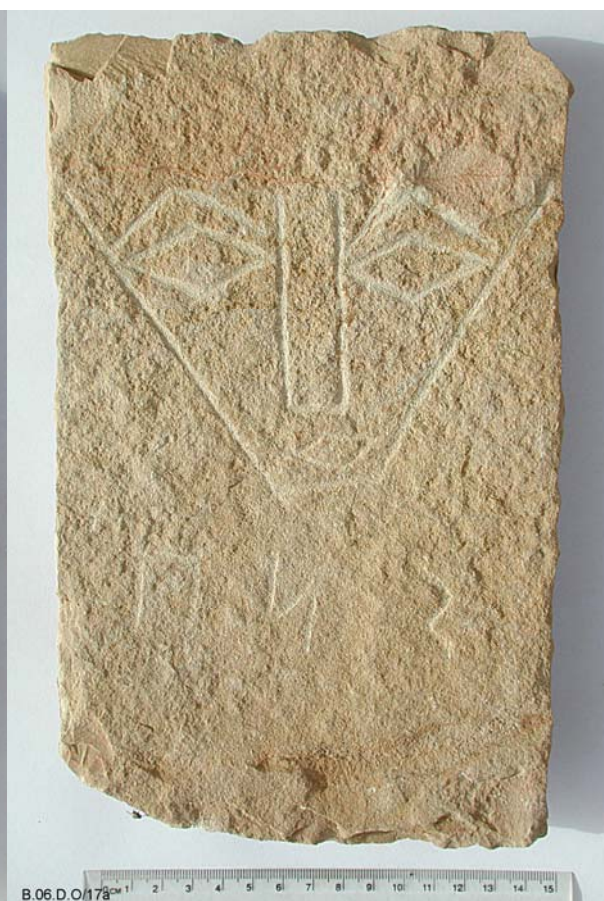


Fig. 59 In this stele the somatic/onomastic characters of the dead are only hastily incised