

SOUTH ARABIA REVISITED

THE WORK OF THE ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION IN YEMEN

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The Italian Archaeological Mission in Yemen was launched in 1980 with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Coordinated by **Professor Alessandro de Maigret** (1943-2011), the Mission initiated a series of archaeological fieldwork projects with the foremost goal to establish a reliable historical chronology for the past cultures of Southern Arabia.

Yemen's vast number of archaeological sites and beautiful heritage is world heritage, which is cared for by many people around the world. Assisted initially by the Istituto per l'Oriente in Rome and a number of affiliated academic institutions, the Italian Archaeological Mission carried out a large number of fieldwork and restoration projects. In peaceful times, scholars have produced a considerable wealth of information based on field projects and were able to recreate some of the marvelous architectural wonders. This exhibition highlights collaborative Yemeni-Italian efforts and the continuing legacies of the fieldwork of the Italian Archaeological Mission on the sites of Barāqish and Tamna'.



SOUTH ARABIAN CULTURES: A HISTORY

Since prehistoric times, South Arabian cultures flourished in the striking southern landscape of the Arabian Peninsula, today known as Yemen. Confined geographically by the Red Sea in the West and the Indian Ocean in the South, as well as by the ar-Rub‘ al-Khālī (The Empty Quarter), the large central Arabian desert, South Arabian cultures have had a generally isolated development, not only politically and socially, but also in terms of religion and the arts. There are, however, striking similarities with political, social and artistic developments among Semitic peoples in other regions of the Middle East, from Mesopotamia to Syria and Palestine.

The famous Caravan Route which created Southern Arabia’s wealth and prosperity by conveying incense and spices from this region to the Mediterranean Sea, represented the only real link of this civilization with the outside world, and was the basis for the fame of *Arabia Felix* (Prosperous Arabia) in the ancient world. Through this trade window, open since the 9th century BC, cultural influences penetrated from the North, and even more so since the Christian Era, when internal cohesion and local traditionalism began to falter.

Archaeological studies have proven that Yemen had an important prehistoric period and that South Arabian people arrived from the desert at the beginning of the Iron Age (c. 1200 BC). Settling at the foot of the high Yemeni mountains, South Arabian people prospered due to their great skill in managing the monsoon rains for agricultural purposes and, shortly after, by taking advantage of the flow of trading caravans that passed in their territories.

The Kingdom of Saba, the first kingdom to flourish in the area beside Ḥadramawt, was powerful and celebrated throughout the ancient world. The Kingdom expanded to become a true empire and its authority extended to Eastern territories along the border with Oman and to the West across the Red Sea to Eritrea and Ethiopian Tigray. The Kingdom of Saba experienced a decline around the 6th century BC, when smaller, independent Kingdoms appeared in Yemen — Ma‘īn, Qatabān — each with distinct dialects.

In the last centuries of the first millennium BC, all South Arabian Kingdoms suffered a period of political weakness, probably due to the invasion of nomadic

tribes from the north. In c. 110 BC, a new Kingdom emerged — Ḥimyar — which from c. 300 AD, after various military campaigns, acquired an undisputed hegemony over all the other Kingdoms. In this period, their prime enemies were the Abyssinians who, in the 3rd and later in 6th century AD, immigrated into Yemen from Africa under the pretext of establishing or restoring Christianity. Over time, the Abyssinians substantially limited the power of the Ḥimyar Kingdom. It is during this period that monotheism was introduced in Southern Arabia and, for the first time, the ancestral creeds that had for so long shaped architecture, literature and the arts were rejected. The advent of Islam in Yemen in 628 AD put a definitive end to the ancient civilization of *Arabia Felix*.



THE ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION IN YEMEN

The archaeological study of ancient South Arabia is a quite recent endeavor. It has received a particularly enthusiastic reception for both the unprecedented wealth of Yemeni archaeological sites and monuments, and for the many sites which have been identified so far. The fame that *Arabia Felix* and the Queen of Sheba had in antiquity, not only in the East, but also in Europe, is well-justified by the unique cultural and artistic patrimony of this ancient civilization.

The Italian Archaeological Mission has been working in Yemen since 1980. From its inception the Mission has been generously supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Yemeni colleagues. The first focus of the Mission was to investigate previously unknown aspects of South Arabia's prehistory through archaeological excavations on the plateau, the desert and the Red Sea coastal plain (Tihāma). The Mission focused on the Yemeni Bronze Age (3rd - 2nd millennium BC) and discovered more than fifty sites from this period in the mountainous, western part of the Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl. Data from these sites have now provided a comprehensive picture of a culture, which can be compared to the Palestinian Early Bronze Age and which represents the direct antecedent to the early Sabaean civilization.

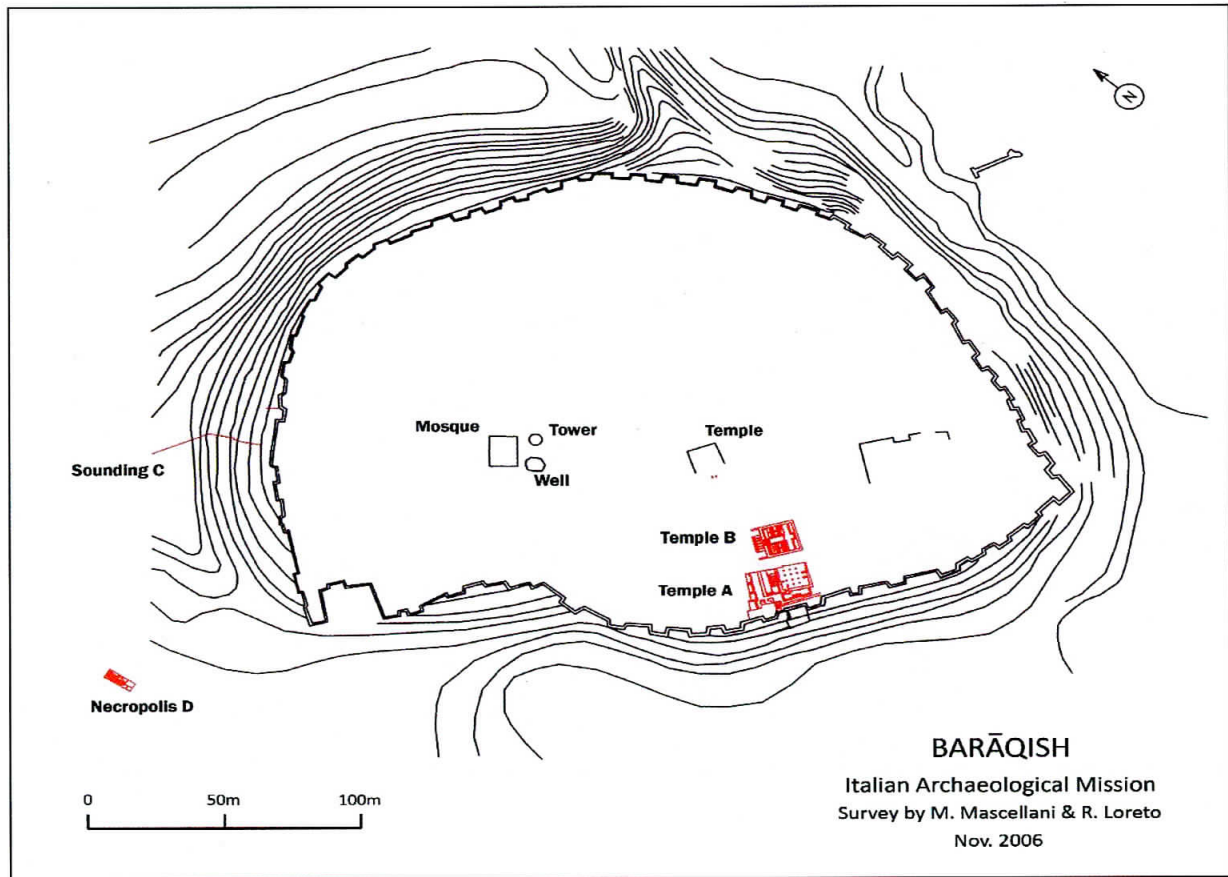
Research on the Sabaean period led to the discovery of a large group of ruins in the Wādī Yalā, on the Eastern border of the desert. This ancient site (c. 1100 - 600 BC) consisted of a large fortified town, the ancient *Hafari*, an agricultural centre with farms, dams and military camps, and a rocky gorge where the Sabaean rulers (*mukarrib*) celebrated the rite of the "Sacred Hunt", as documented in many royal inscriptions. Archaeological excavations conducted within the city clarified the much-debated South Arabian chronology and conclusively demonstrated that the proto-Sabaean culture originated during the 2nd millennium BC. A number of inscribed potsherds found at ancient levels of the excavation demonstrate that Sabaean writing already existed in the 10th - 9th century BC.

In 1989, the Italian Archaeological Mission began working on the Minaean city of Barāqish (ancient *Yathill*). They brought to light two temples. The first temple was dedicated to Nakrah, the healer God and judge of souls. The second

temple — a two-storey structure — was dedicated to ‘Athtar dhu-Qabḏ, the primary Minaean God. The earliest foundation of these buildings dates back to the beginning of the Minaean Kingdom (7th - 6th century BCE). These temples operated until the 1st - 2nd century AD. A third temple was identified in more recent years.

Starting in 1999, the Mission conducted systematic excavations at Tamna‘, the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Qatabān. Pliny the Elder mentioned Tamna‘ as the Arabian city that was the starting point for the “incense caravan route” to the Mediterranean. The Italian Mission excavated an imposing temple dedicated to the Goddess Athirat (4th century BCE – 2nd century CE), and ten tower-houses around a central area named the “Market Square”. A stele carved with the laws regulating Tamna‘’s commercial activities stood at the centre of the Market Square. Eight monumental family tombs were also excavated in the nearby cemetery of Ḥayd ibn ‘Aqīl.





BARĀQISH

Originally an important center of the ancient incense trade and of major strategic importance in the region, ancient Yathill is one of the best preserved ancient cities in Yemen. In some parts, the impressive city walls with the remains of 56 ancient wall towers are exceptionally well preserved and stand up to 14 meters high.

The city was inhabited since the 10th century BC. It was in decline when a Roman expedition was sent under Augustus, but reoccupied under the Imam al-Mansur ibn-Hamza in the 12th century, when many of her monuments were rebuilt. Despite her isolated position, the site became known to European travelers again in the 19th century. Between 1989 and 2008 the Italian Archaeological Mission conducted a series of archaeological fieldwork projects, providing training and conservation on the site.



THE HOUSES OF TAMNA'

Ancient Tamna' in the mountainous and fertile valley of the Wadi Bayhan was the capital of the Qatabān Kingdom. The 52-acre city was known and visited by European scholars since the nineteenth century. It was explored by Austrian, French and American archaeologists. Between 1999 and 2008, the Italian Mission, in collaboration with French and Yemeni colleagues began a comprehensive program of fieldwork and research.

In the heart of the city was the large and once busy thriving market. Craftsmen and traders from the region and abroad offered their work while considerable wealth was accumulated. A granite obelisk in the center of the market refers to the establishing of regulations for the marketing of goods and imposing of taxes under King Shahr Hilal (c. 400 BCE). Multi-storey houses with massive basements of granite stone and access on the shorter side preserve construction inscriptions in the foundation basements, providing the name of the owner. Before being destroyed in the first century CE, Tamna' was one of the wealthiest cities in the entire Southern Arabian Peninsula.





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BETWEEN PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The ongoing difficult situation has a negative impact on Yemen's archaeological and cultural heritage. Archaeological fieldwork and restoration projects have been halted, and a large number of museums and archaeological sites have been destroyed.

Distressed by the recent attacks against cultural heritage in Yemen, an international team gathered in Paris in July 2015 for a discussion on timely responses to the crisis and future transition processes. An Emergency Response Plan was agreed upon. Taskforces were created ensuring that documentation of sites and cultural heritage is shared among those who care for Yemen's past.

Italian archaeologists, in collaboration with UNESCO and Yemeni partners will continue to safeguard the cultural and historic heritage of South Arabia. Protecting the heritage and fostering creativity among world citizens is of key importance for future generations and Yemen's development and peace.



ALESSANDRO DE MAIGRET

(1943-2011)

Alessandro de Maigret was born in Perugia. He studied Archaeology of the Near East at the Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente at the University of Rome. After graduating in classical Archaeology in 1971 and specializing in Oriental Archaeology in 1973, he spent several years excavating at Tell Mardikh/Ebla in Syria (1970–1976). In 1978–1979 he completed a one-year fellowship at the Institute of Archaeology at the University of London. In London, he broadened his theoretical horizons by studying archaeological methodologies developed in the US ('New' Archaeology) and the UK (Environmental Archaeology).

Alessandro first arrived in Yemen in 1980, when he set out to investigate the ancient peoples and cultures of South Arabia prior to the first millennium BC, and to establish a reliable archaeological chronology for this historical period. One of Alessandro's early achievements was the discovery of the first Bronze Age settlement to be found in Yemen. During a survey in Khawlan at-Tiyal in 1981, he discovered a settlement with evidence of circular dwellings as well as pottery and stone artefacts that were unlike anything then known regarding the South Arabian culture. This discovery was followed by thorough excavations of these Yemeni Bronze Age sites in 1984 and 1985. Excavations of the ancient city Bani Dabyan, to the south of Marib, initiated in 1987, provided a precise stratigraphy for this archaic Sabaean period, and



established with certainty the 'long term view' for the historical chronology of Southern Arabia.

Over the years, he led the Italian Archeological Mission to numerous archaeological sites throughout Yemen, including al-Makhdarah (Sirwah) and Waraqah (Dhamar) (1985–1987), the Minean city of Baraqish in the Jawf region — his personal 'favourite' — (1990–1992 and 2003–2007), Tamna' in the Wadi Bayhan (1999–2009) and Ghayman, Sanaa (2010). In 1998 he directed excavations in the Sabaean temple at Yeha (Ethiopia), launching a long-lasting collaboration with the French Archaeological Mission. Alessandro's interest extended to ancient cultures in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, and in 2008 he began the archaeological investigation at Dumat al-Jandal in Saudi Arabia.

His original work and extensive contributions to the field are recognized within the archaeological community. He left an outstanding scientific legacy and his *Arabia Felix: an exploration of the archaeological history of Yemen* (2009 new edition) is one of the best written introductions to the archaeology of South Arabia.

This exhibition is presented in collaboration with



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