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Review

ALEXANDER SIMA, *Die sabäischen Inschriften aus Zafār: Aus dem nachgelassenen Manuskript herausgegeben von Norbert Nebes und Walter W. Müller*

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ALEXANDER SIMA, *Die sabäischen Inschriften aus Zafār: Aus dem nachgelassenen Manuskript herausgegeben von Norbert Nebes und Walter W. Müller*, Jenaer Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient, 10 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020). viii, 202 pp. Price: €58.00. ISBN: 978-3-447-11441-7.

Prior to his tragic death, at only 35 in 2004, Alexander Sima, as one may gather from the preface, entrusted his manuscript of the Sabaean inscriptions from Zafār to the editors Norbert Nebes and Walter W. Müller in the hope of it being published. Almost twenty years later, the two editors have decided to publish the rough draft, which clearly reveals lacunae and misses a final redaction. There have been no changes made to the content with only a ‘formale Überarbeitung’ (‘formal revision’) having been carried out. In the Introduction the editors refer to a number of important publications since 2004.¹

Sima’s catalogue, which emerged during the inventorying of the objects in March 2002, lists 220 inscribed objects: 166 ‘Inschriften des Museum in Zafār’ (‘inscriptions from the museum in Zafār’), 42 ‘Spolien’ (‘spoils’, i.e. inscriptions reused for building purposes in and around Zafār), 4 ‘Objekte unbekanntem Verbleibs’ (‘objects of which the whereabouts are unknown’) and 8 ‘Objekte unklarer Herkunft’ (‘objects of unknown provenance’). On its homepage the publisher does, however, speak of only ‘161 größtenteils unveröffentlichten sabäischen Inschriften und Inschriftenfragmenten aus dem Museum von Zafār’ (‘161 mainly unpublished Sabaean inscriptions and fragmentary inscriptions from the museum of Zafār’). Most inscriptions are fragmentary and short, often comprising no more than one or two lines. Translations have only been possible and of any sense for approximately half of the inscriptions in the catalogue. Many of the lengthier inscriptions have since been published elsewhere.

In general, the lengthier inscriptions feature rich, line-for-line commentaries, whereas the shorter inscriptions are only occasionally accompanied by bibliographic references to older literature, historical matters, or linguistic detail.

The largest group of discernible inscriptions have been made up of building inscriptions (on page 13 Sima provides a list of thirty ‘clear’ cases of building inscriptions).² With this catalogue, this group of around seven hundred monu-

¹ However, Alexander Sima’s important article ‘Zur dialektologischen Einordnung des Spätsabäischen’ is absent, published by Müller in I. Gerlach, ed., *South Arabia and its Neighbours: Phenomena of Intercultural Contacts*, XIV: *Rencontres Sabéenes*, Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen, 14 (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015), 171–192. It comprises of long appendices and tables on late Sabaic inscriptions, mostly taken from Zafār.

² ZM 3 should be corrected to ZM 3bis. Missing from the list are, to my mind, ZM 7, ZM 227, ZM 236, ZM 417, ZM 700, ZM 704, Bayt al-’Ašwal 18 and Sirrīyah 1.

mental inscriptions and fragments, numerically inferior only to votive and dedicatory inscriptions, gains a substantial and important addition.

From a palaeographical point of view, most inscriptions date to the late Sabaean period. Nine inscriptions have been dated according to the so-called Himyarite era,³ all of which, however, were included in Müller's standard work *Sabäische Inschriften nach Ären datiert* (published in 2010). The readings of both corpora differ only slightly, nonetheless it will be necessary for future studies to consult both, due to the different aims and intents of the editors. The problematic conversion of dates leads Sima to offer two alternatives. Sima's catalogue also betrays the peculiar habit among scholars of Sabaean studies that ignores the non-existent year 0 and takes the year 110 BCE as the starting point of the Himyarite era, resulting in simply subtracting 110 from the year mentioned in an inscription. In so doing, they fail to add one year, necessitated by the leap year from 1 BCE to 1 CE. A difference of one year is by no means trivial, as in the case of the Christian massacre at Nağrān (which is usually dated to 518 or 523 CE).

Nine additional inscriptions include names of rulers from the second half of the third century CE to the beginning of the sixth century CE,⁴ enabling an approximate dating for them and an improvement on the Himyarite kings' list. A systematic appraisal of the remaining inscriptions from a palaeographical point of view, although possible, has not been attempted. Notes on palaeography, however, are found sporadically in the commentaries on a number of inscriptions indicating that Sima definitely had this subject in mind.

Approximately a third of the volume consists of colour and black-and-white photos of 188 objects. The photos made available by Paul Yule are largely of good quality, enabling better readings or confirmation of dubious ones (e.g. ZM 7 = Gar AY 8 = Gr 28, whereby Giovanni Garbini's reading compared to that of the Corpus of Old South Arabian Inscriptions is partially confirmed).⁵

The inscriptions have been enhanced by indices consisting of concordances, names (personal names; epithets; family, clan, and ethnic names; names of deities; theophoric elements in personal names, toponyms, names of property and estates; month names) as well as a complete index of words.

The Introduction, which would no doubt have been profoundly revised for publication, is somewhat short, comprising only twenty pages, particularly as

³ The securely legible šb'y ('seventy') in ZM 31 may also be part of a date, see also ZM 2001/2.

⁴ To Sima's list should be added ZM 581, in which the reading *lhy*(')[...] must almost certainly be emended to the proper name Luhayy'att (*lhy* [t / ...]) (see the other king's name in l. 2).

⁵ <http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=42&prjId=1&corId=29&colId=0&navId=292943677&rl=yes#>.

Sima concentrated on a general introduction to the history of Zafār rather than an analysis of the epigraphic material. In the meantime, recent studies (notably the works of Paul Yule and Iwona Gajda and articles of, among others, Walter W. Müller, Norbert Nebes, Peter Stein, Mounir Arbach, and Christian Robin) have shown that certain aspects require refining or even a complete reappraisal.

As this book does not represent the present state of research and for the fact that the majority of lengthy inscriptions have, in the meantime, been published elsewhere, the advantage of this book is not as great as that for which it was intended and hoped.⁶

A manuscript submitted only with feedback in mind cannot be judged by the same standards as a finalized publication. No doubt the significance of this edition lies in the Sabaeen inscriptions from the Himyarite epicentre Zafār being made available to scholars. In general, the readings are reliable. For the above-mentioned reason, however, this does not stand to the same extent regarding the translations and commentaries. Admittedly, this torso in its present state does not quite meet the standards one would expect from Alexander Sima but, as shown, the book has its own qualities. The editors should be lauded for taking the trouble of publishing this final work, to serve as a lasting monument to a most talented and versatile Semitist.

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⁶ Unfortunately, for scholars interested in Ethiopic matters, little is new. It should, however, be mentioned that Sima, in addition to the translation and discussion of some relevant inscriptions on the Axumitic–Himyaric disputes in the Introduction, includes the well-known inscription ZM 579 = Gar AY 9d in his catalogue, first edited in 1970 and treated several times since then (e.g. by W. W. Müller, *Sabäische Inschriften nach Ären datiert: Bibliographie, Texte und Glossar*, Veröffentlichungen der Orientalischen Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur zu Mainz, 53 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 92). Since Garbini, the inscription has correctly been referred to Ethiopian ambassadors on virtue of the names *šg'*, *wdfh*, and *šbhh*. Perhaps one can conclude from the verbs *hqšb* ('renovate') and *lwb* ('repair') that the diplomats were long-time residents in Zafār, in other words, that at least at the beginning of the sixth century CE there was a permanent Axumitic 'ambassy' (*tnblt* in l. 3–4) in the Himyaric capital.