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Review

ALESSIA Prioletta, Inscriptions from the Southern Highlands of Yemen: The Epigraphic Collections of the Museums of Baynūn and Dhamār

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Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

CSCO  Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.
EMML  Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
OrChr  Oriens Christianus, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.
PO  Patrologia Orientalis, 1903ff.
RRALm  Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche, Roma, 1892ff.
SAe  Scriptores Aethiopici.

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Reviews

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Among the projects conducted at the University of Pisa, which led to the realization of the online Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions,1 was the cataloguing and digitization of inscriptions housed in a number of Yemenite museums (project CASIS2). Thanks to this operation, some important epigraphic collections, very difficult to access and often including virtually unpublished pieces, have been brought to general attention.

The book under review is the result of the work carried out by Alessia Prioletta on the collections stored at the Museum of Baynūn, the Regional Museum of Dhamār and the University Museum of Dhamār. All catalogued inscriptions and artefacts have, in the meantime, been uploaded to the online database. However, the present study offers an occasion to review the present state of knowledge regarding the history of this part of Yemen’s southern highland, corresponding to the present-day governorate of Dhamār (south of Ṣan‘ā‘), where the above-mentioned museums are located.

1 CSAI, which has now been merged in the broader Digital Archive for the Study of pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions (DASI, supervision by A. Avanzini).
2 ‘Cataloguing and fruition of South Arabian inscriptions through an informatic support’. 
This part of South Arabia is known thanks to a textual corpus that is very significant as far as the first millennium CE is concerned, but relatively scant for the archaic period. Such a documentary gap is now starting to be redressed thanks to this work and to dozens of newly-discovered rock inscriptions in the territory of Dhamār—the content of which is also discussed by Prioletta in the first part of the volume.3

The book comprises four parts: an ample introduction, followed by specific parts devoted to the three collections. In total, 235 inscriptions are analysed: 116 from the Regional Museum of Dhamār (DhM siglum), 89 from Baynūn (BynM) and 30 from the University Museum of Dhamār (ThUM). Each collection is organized in chapters according to the textual typology of the inscriptions. The most significant, also in terms of content, are the construction and dedicatory inscriptions. As often happens in museum collections, the exact provenance of these pieces is, in most cases, uncertain and can only be surmised by analysing the cultural and linguistic traits of the texts themselves. Recent acquisitions of pieces originating from the Jawf valley were made by the Regional Museum of Dhamār, which explains why the collection includes some important Jawfite pieces written in early Sabaic (e.g. DhM 383), some of which clearly come from al-Baydāʾ (e.g. DhM 208), as well as a conspicuous number of inscriptions written in Minaic (among the most notable are DhM 387 and DhM 399). A Minaic collection (mainly funerary stelae) is also present in the Baynūn Museum, together with some Qatabanic texts (surprisingly, only five pieces in the whole corpus).

Those inscriptions that can be linked with any certainty to this region help to pinpoint some features and crucial moments in the region’s history—first of all, the tribal geography of the area. One of the most prominent tribes was the Muha’ānifūm tribe, which, in antiquity, occupied the north-western part of the present-day Dhamār governorate. We now know that they were already settled here in the early phase of South Arabian history, as they produced inscriptions in a very refined archaic style. Another important ancient tribe was Shaddādūm, located in the north-eastern part of al-Ḥadāʾ, around the prominent sites of Baynūn and al-Aqmār. Other important clans included the Muhaqra’um (at the southernmost limit of the Dhamār governorate), the Maytamūm, around Hakir (an area particularly involved during the raids between Sabaʾ and Ḥimyar in the first and second centuries CE) and, finally, the Yuhabshir tribe.

The archaic inscriptions from the first millennium BCE already reveal much competence in the writing of the Sabaic language—a fact that, accord-

3 These rock inscriptions were discovered by Kh. Nu’mān, and were the object of ‘A Study of South Arabian Inscriptions from the Region of Dhamār (Yemen)’, PhD thesis at the University of Pisa, 2012 (unpublished).
ing to Prioletta, suggests that the common linguistic Sabaic substratum was not limited to the core of the Sabaean territories, such as Ma’rib, Širwâh and lower Jawf, but also included part of the central and southern plateau. It is implied that only such linguistic homogeneity could explain what the available documentation seems to indicate and, furthermore, that a strong cultural influence emanating from the political and cultural Sabaean supremacy can be assumed. However, it is very likely that such hypothetical linguistic homogeneity may have been secondary and influenced by a strong cultural Sabaean supremacy. The linguistic situation of the region should have been, in fact, more complex, also given that such Sabaen influence would have been limited to the upper class, the only group able to commission such refined and expensive epigraphic documents from a properly-trained scribal school. It also seems to suggest that, in the archaic phase, Saba’ exerted some form of political control, at least over the northern portion of this region, as is suggested by invocation of Sabaean rulers in some archaic texts (i.e. Sumhû’âlî in DhM 298 and Yâdà’îl in DhM 344). What is more, as Prioletta recalls, no tribe from the Dhamâr region is mentioned as a target of the military operations of the earliest mukarrib, which might indicate that most of them were already gravitating toward the Sabaean sphere.

The second half of the first millennium BCE is less represented in the inscriptions found in this region, which might be explained by the fact that Sabaean power was already declining, as was its cultural stimulus.

The following period of the kings of Saba’ and dhu-Raydân is, in contrast, the most represented in these collections. The region of Dhamâr started gravitating towards the Himyarite political sphere at the end of the first century BCE and then found itself in the harshest period of conflict between Saba’ and Himyar. Around 275 CE, Saba’ was annexed by Himyar, so that a period of relative stability began. The central role of the tribes of this region is again confirmed by a text in the Baynûn collection (BynM 4—also known as Av. Bûsân 4), in which the king conqueror of Shabwa, Shammar Yuvarîsh (around 300 CE), already with the long title (king of Saba’, dhu-Raydân, Ḥadramawt and Yamnät) recalls several construction works in the area.

In terms of linguistic geography, the situation is quite complex in the Middle Central Sabaic phase.4 The typical innovations of this period, which began spreading around the third–second century BCE, are in fact not regu-

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larly found in this region. A similar situation can be observed with the lin-
guistic traits originating from Radmān (in the east). The area north of
Dhamār, despite being closer to the central Sabaean centres, was less influ-
enced by Sabaic innovations than the area around Hakīr, closer to Radmān,
which, in turn, had been expected to share more innovations with the
Radmanic dialect. Qatabanic influences, in lexicon, phraseology and graphic
style, are now sometimes more noticeable (e.g. BynM 6 and BynM 88).

Epigraphic documents which can be assigned to the Late Sabaic linguistic
phase are limited in number, but it is worth noting that they do not seem to
adhere perfectly to the linguistic innovations documented in the Central Sabaic
milieu for the same time (e.g. the -n augmented infinitive of the derived verbal
stems, which continues to be irregular until the end of the fourth century CE).

Far from being marginal within ancient Yemen, Dhamār was often in-
volved in the most crucial turning points in the pre-Islamic history of South-
ern Arabia, and the region is now characterized by a documentary continuity,
spanning from the beginning of the first millennium BCE to the sixth century
CE. From a social point of view, the relative stability of tribal groups is also
worth noting, and can be observed until the sixth–tenth centuries CE.

The book includes a number of maps, and the inscriptions are ac-
compained by very good and readable photos. The study concludes with several
detailed and helpful indices (index of proper names: individuals, royal
names, toponyms, divine names, buildings, months; index of words orga-
nized under roots; index of sigla of other inscriptions cited with related
bibliography). This study is a clear demonstration that an online textual
database, while very useful for research involving a large and multifaceted
epigraphic corpus such as the one from ancient Yemen, cannot replace more
comprehensive and insightful analyses in traditional formats.

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Jitse H.F. Dijkstra and Greg Fisher, eds, Inside and Out. Interac-
tions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian
Frontiers in Late Antiquity, Late Antique History and Religion, 8

This rich book is the result of a well organised workshop held at the Uni-
versity of Ottawa on October 11–13, 2012, elaborating on the theme of
‘peoples on the frontier of the Roman Empire’ in Late Antiquity. It is a
deliberate attempt at extending an approach fruitfully employed in recent