

Archeological-Environmental Survey of The Yarim-Dhamar Region, Yemen Arab Republic

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In September 1978 the Oriental Institute initiated an archeological program in North Yemen. As project director, McGuire Gibson had secured a grant from the National Geographic Society for a one-month reconnaissance to evaluate the logistical problems, make personal contacts, and begin location of sites and collection of data in the Yarim-Dhamar area, midway between San'a and Ta'izz. The actual field work was carried out by me as field director, Stephen Lintner as environmental specialist, and Dennis Collins as archeologist and epigrapher.

Having previously acquired the necessary permissions, the expedition entered Yemen with air photographs, maps, and technical reports in hand. It was the existence and availability of this material that made the Yarim-Dhamar region most attractive for survey. For no other area of North Yemen are there research aids of comparable quality.

There are numerous areas of Yemen that would be interesting for archeological research. Ancient Sheba is the most obvious. Its capital, Marib, on the fringes of the Arabian Desert to the northeast, was excavated for a few weeks in 1952. Since then, a few scholars have done informal investigations in Yemen, but until our survey, sustained programmatic work had not been permitted. Now, with the encouragement of the Director of Antiquities, Qadi Ismail al Akwaa, not only our team, but also German, French, and British groups are beginning to work.

The country as a whole is virtually untouched archeologically, with hundreds of stone-built ruins standing meters high. Now, with development of the country, many of the sites are being destroyed for building material and it becomes a race against time to locate, record,

map, and photograph sites before they disappear. Most of the sites are in the rugged mountains that run up the country between the humid, desert Red Sea coast, which has some impressive ruins and irrigation works, and the Arabian Desert. The frankincense and myrrh trade ran through these mountains and at least two routes join in the Yarim-Dhamar region.

In antiquity, as today, the Yarim-Dhamar area was the most important agricultural region of Yemen. Although it is mountainous, there are high, wide valleys that yield good crops. At about the center of the region are the ruins of ancient Zafar, the capital of Himyar, which was the last great pre-Islamic kingdom in Yemen (ca. 250–600 A.D.). Sited on top of a rugged, easily defended mountain that rises from a lush, green valley floor, Zafar dominated the entire area, including the trade routes. Clearly, a survey of the region ought to start with Zafar.

By coincidence, the survey occurred at the same time that a small museum, which had been built last year on top of the mountain, was being set up. Selma al-Radi and Rosalind Wade, special consultants to the Department of Antiquities, went to the site with the field team

Inscription of Sharih-bizl Yasfur, son of Abukarib As'ad, dated 572 of the Himyarite era (= 457 A.D.).





Bas-relief fragment of nude male astride winged leopard, from the ruins of Zafar.

to choose pieces from storerooms and to organize the displays. The field team, settling at and around the museum for the period of the survey, began to help in extracting antiquities, including stone architectural fragments, from the stores and from the houses in the modern village on the site. Meanwhile, the team began collecting surface material and surveying the remains of buildings, cisterns, tombs, and other features. It soon became clear that for the purposes of an initial season, Zafar itself presented an opportunity for substantial results far exceeding the usual yield of archeological survey in unknown and rugged country. Given some problems with obtaining a vehicle and the consequent limit on mobility, it seemed best to make as much sense as possible out of the ruins at Zafar. Location and collection of other sites were limited to the valley around the capital, including dams or water control devices that the city depended upon.

The city of Zafar has been greatly damaged by Islamic and modern builders taking stones for construction. The mapping of the site was, therefore, difficult, but more than half of the site was mapped.

The artifacts in the museum and in storage, numbering about two thousand, include architectural details that show Hellenistic, Roman, Parthian, and Sassanian influence as well as local South Arabian features. There are bas reliefs, fragmentary statues, and ninety inscribed

or monogrammed pieces. Most of the inscriptions are unpublished. Almost all are in Epigraphic South Arabic, but two are in Ethiopic. The longest South Arabic inscription, dated to 457 A.D., mentions the king Shariḥ-bi'il Ya'fur, who is known to have repaired the famous dam at Marib.

The Director of Antiquities has given us permission to publish the objects at Zafar and I wish to thank him for that as well as for his encouragement to carry out the survey. The sherds from the survey have been brought to Chicago for analysis and will be published in the near future.

I must also thank Selma al-Radi and Rosalind Wade for their help, and Tony Besse for the loan of a vehicle. The American embassy staff was extraordinarily generous with its aid. We were allowed to stay in the embassy guest house and received much assistance from David Ransom, acting head of mission. Marjorie Ransom was instrumental in gaining us permission to work and to purchase maps and other necessary material. James Callaghan, John Egan McAteer, and others helped in numerous ways. I should also mention the former ambassador, Thomas Scotes, whose enthusiasm for both Yemen and archeology gave the impetus for creating this project.

Efforts are now being made to obtain further funding for the survey, which hopes to resume on a larger scale in the winter or spring of 1980.



View of Zafar from the southeast, showing the ancient approach, still in use.