

## The Gates of Ḥimyarite Ṣafār<sup>1</sup>

Paul YULE  
Universität de Heidelberg

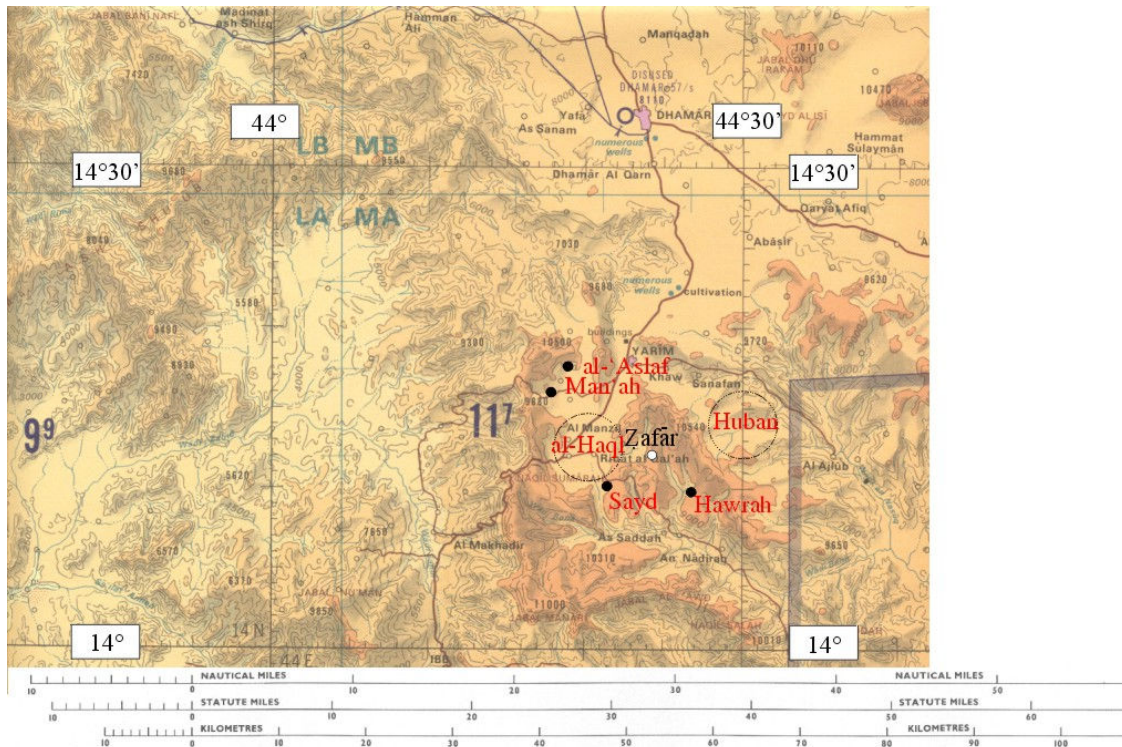
Historiographically speaking, a main problem of Ḥimyarite history and architectural history (110 BCE –570/630 CE) is that no descriptions of the appearance of centres have survived. The capital Ṣafār is such a case – with 110 hectares for the core area, one of the largest archaeological sites in Arabia. The few recorded building structures and finds from this rupestrian site require time, study and patience to place them in a larger historical context. It would be presumptuous to declare the known cultural remains there as wholly representative of specific definable time horizons, although in recent years the dramatically increase in excavated material gives a surer impression of its overall character. The lack of ancient written sources is partly attributable to preservation, but presumably also to the Ḥimyar's lack of interest in describing art and architecture, compared to contemporaries, the Greeks and Romans as well as others coming to mind, with their voluminous writings. To speculate about the relative amount of the Greco-Roman as opposed to Ḥimyarite period descriptive literature in general, is to compare two unequal historic entities, conditioned in terms of time span and area. In any case, the former outclass the latter (OSA =Old South Arabian) in quantity and in the amount of information which illuminate ancient life and social thought. OSA texts which correspond in detailed scope, length and intensity to the rich and nuanced descriptions and anecdotes of Pliny, Pausanios or Vitruvius are simply lacking. In terms of the social context of the buildings and patrons, terse OSA texts render little more than a mere shadow of the real architectural situation relative to contemporary Greco-Roman texts. Even OSA church records are largely silent regarding their own architecture, preferring to dwell on church history and hagiography (CAMERON 1982: 279). Although the *Vita of Gregentios* mentions the building of three churches in Ṣafār following the end of the war with Aksum, this source seems to be a later compilation (oral information, A. BERGER, Munich).

The OSA renowned Ġumdān palace ('ABDULLAH 1990, 103–125; Lewcock 2005, 74–75) and the cathedral both in Ṣan'ā are exceptions, the former known exclusively from diverse, imaginative Arabic sources, for example al-Hamdānī (MÜLLER 1986 : 141–143). The latter is known from a few OSA epigraphic texts (*Ir 11, Ir 18, CIH 429, Ja*

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<sup>1</sup> The author thanks Yūsuf 'Abdullāh (DFG Mercator Professor at the University of Heidelberg), who during the course of several discussions, illuminated the Arabic part of what follows. The author is responsible for the interpretations given below. He also thanks the DFG for their support of our project and the referees of the *Chroniques Yéménites* for numerous corrections and suggestions. Where not otherwise cited, the writer furnished the figures. Finally, Albrecht Berger (Munich University) generously shared his research on the *Vita of Gregentios*. I thank Cornelia Ruppert for providing information with regard to the present-day topography of the area. Basic introduction to Ṣafār: Müller 1991.

577) and the latter from early medieval Arabic descriptions. Owing to the sketchy content of Himyarite sources, in terms of architectural history, the main task of the archaeologist amounts to little more than to venture guesses on the size and date of a given monument, or turn to buildings of earlier or later periods as points of comparison regarding the possible appearance. Recent research again raises the question of the development of the ancient city. Did it grow in size and elaboration up to the late period (c. 523–570/630 CE) or, following the Aksumite conquest, did the victors simply occupy what was erected in the centuries before?



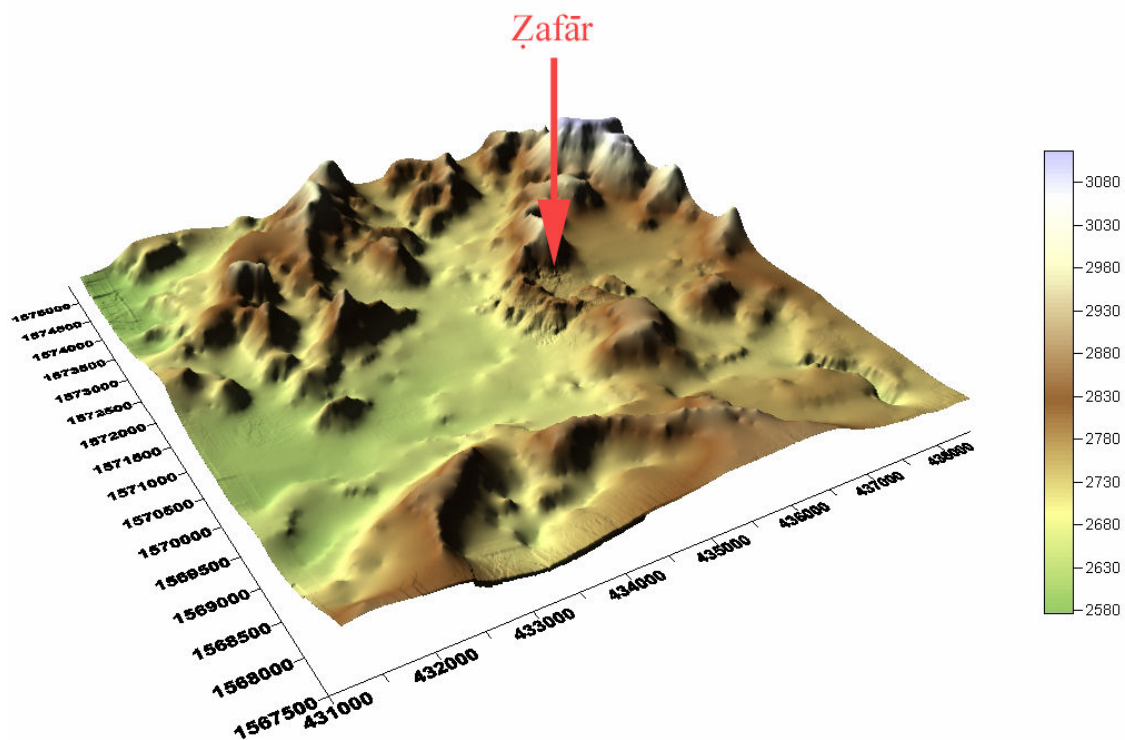
1. Map of places cited (Tactical Pilotage Chart, sheet K-6A, edition 3-GSGS).

The work of a research team based at Heidelberg University illuminates Zafar's history and more particularly its architectural history. Inscriptions of the 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries recount the refurbishing of the city defences, and mention "bastions and the city wall, which on the entry to the city Zafar were located... Zafar with the recovery of houses which...and the *ṣwbt* and the gate and the city trench, and the bastions of the entry of the city Zafar..." (excerpted from zm2263+zm2262+zm2264, Sima 2002). The urban area measures some 1200 x 800 m, the inner third of which lies inside the inner city wall. Magnetometer investigations of the remains of the southern gate area show images of building structures, but these are difficult to interpret (Franke et al. in press).

Regarding the topography of Zafar, one notes first its high altitude, rising to more than 2800 m above the surrounding valleys and plains. Except for trails, this centre is largely blocked off from all directions by mountains except to the agriculturally rich al-Ḥaql plain a few kilometres to the west (Fig. 1). In place of a dirt road used in antiquity, today, a fine tarmac road, which the Spanish government financed in 2002, links Zafar to the towns al-Ribaf and Kitāb in that

plain. Paradoxically, Ṣafār does not lie along the assumed antique north-south trade routes which lie further east on the zone between desert and highlands.

Other texts give further information about the fate of the city. In 523 Yūsuf 'As'ar Yaṭ'ar reports burning the church and killing the Abyssinians in Ṣafār, but clearly does not mention destroying the city (Ry 507/4, Ry 508/3, Ja 1028/3). Since in Ry 507 he explicitly discusses the destruction of other fortifications aside from the ones in Ṣafār, one can assume that the latter he left intact. A main question remains whether the Aksumite king, Abraha, chooses to move the capital as a result of the stamping out of Sumuyafa Ashwa's revolt in 535, as a result of the insurrection of 547, or as a general reorientation in the 560s. A possible later destruction of the capital makes more sense than one assumed prior to this during the Aksumite-Ḥimyarite war, after which, the traditional capital is at least partly still in use. In any case, in the 560s Ṣan'ā' undisputedly superseded Ṣafār as the capital.



## 2. Ṣafār in the surrounding landscape (N. Carstensen 2005).

Subsequently, in light of 1500 years of war, weathering and finally stone robbing, the preservation of the once proud gates of Ṣafār, not surprisingly, is hardly worth mention. Until recently there was no archaeological evidence for building activity in the late period (523–630 CE), the emphasis period of a research project currently being carried out by the Heidelberg team. Despite Ḥimyar's great size, military power and economic influence, after losing the war in 525 to Aksum and an insurrection in the 6<sup>th</sup> century against those rulers, its power definitely is spent and in 630 officially succumbs to a new power – Islam.

Al-Hamdānī's 10<sup>th</sup> century brief description in '*al-Iklīl*', is one of the few to discuss Zafar's cityscape: "Zafar lies on the top of a mountain in the north of Qitab, close to the city of the Suhtiyīn which is Mankat. According to 'Abū Naṣr al-Yahārī (same source): Zafār had nine gates: as listed, the Walā' (a place known as 'friendship'), Aslāf, Kharaqah, the Manah (navel), the Hadwān, the Khubān, the Ḥawrāh, the Ṣayd also called Sumārah, and the Ḥaql gate. It is said that the waters of Ḥaql are drawn from a distant place." (FARIS 1938, 22–23). Even if N.A. Faris did not recognise them in the 1930s, at a time when few maps and no gazetteers of place names for the Yemen were yet available for study, today these place-names are well-known in the area surrounding Zafār. Contradictions in the correct rendering of the names lies in that in the three Arabic manuscripts which contain the text, the pointing is erratic. It has been long suspected that the gates of Zafār face toward other outlying places, but an update on this matter seems appropriate in light of new information. M. al-Akwa's edition of '*al-Iklīl*' (2004) proposes some names for the gates and their name-sakes.

### Historic-geographical notes on the names of the gates

- a. Walā': First of the gates of Zafār which Abu Naṣr mentions, is probably the main gate. For the position of this gate there is no external corresponding place-name. The term means perhaps the 'first gate'.
- b. al-'Aslāf (Salāf): In the direction of Iryān (14°16'N; 44°12'E) lies a place called Na<sup>TM</sup>d al-'Aslāf (14°18'N; 44°17'E).
- c. Haraqah, mentioned with other areas near Ibb. In the census of Yemen cf. al-Yesah. Akwa' reads this name as 'Harafah' (AKWA' 2004: 53). The village al-Halaqah, lies nearby, however (14°25'N; 44°28'E). The liquid r could conceivably be replaced by the liquid l.
- d. Man'ah: al-Akwa' reads this name Mābah (14°17'N; 44°16'E), a village on a mountain in al-Ḥārith in the direction of Ba'dān district (sic). Another possibility is the town of Māwah (14°14'N; 44°20'E), 2 km north-west of Zafār.
- e. Hadwān: al-Akwa': town in the mountains of Iryāb (14°09'N; 44°19'E).
- f. Khubān area lie between the al-Raḥmah landscape (centre: 14°12'N; 44°27'E) and al-Saddah (14°07'N; 44°25'E). It is one of the easiest names to localise. Khubān occurs in Sabaic texts (ROBIN/BRUNNER 1997).
- g. Ḥawrāh means the 'settlement', and lies south-west from Zafār. Not unexpectedly, a number of settlements in the Yemen bear this name.
- h. Ṣayd (14°11'N; 44°16'E) pass (old name: Sumārah pass), toward Ibb (14°12'N; 44°16'E). Sa'idam occurs in Sabaic sources (ROBIN/BRUNNER 1997). A Turkish fort is preserved nearby.
- i. Qa'a al-Ḥaql (wadi of al-Ḥaql). Today a major agricultural area centring on Kitāb and al-Rubāt (60 000 tons of agricultural produce per year). It does not simply mean 'field' in Arabic, but from other sources it is known to refer to a particular area.

Turning closer to the gate-names, Table 1 localises some of them on the basis of nearby present-day places (cf. also [Fig. 2 and 3](#)).

gate name after Faris	gate name after al-Aqwa'	description of place	direction of place	km from Zafār	coordinates, centre	other sources
a. Walā'	Wilā	no similar place-name	-	-	-	-
b. Aslāf	al-'Aslāf	near Yarīm	NW	14	14°18'N; 44°17'E	-
c. Kharāqah	Kharafah	near Ibb	SSW	15	Halaqah: 14°25'N; 44°28'E	K, M, B <sup>2</sup> <i>Şifah</i> p. 68 line 4
d. the Man'ah	Mābah	Mābah?	WNW	8	14°17'N; 44°16'E	K, M, B
e. the Hadwān	Hadwān	in mountains of Iryāb	SW	11	-	K, B
f. the Khubān	Khubān	area	ENE	9	c 14°15'N; 44°30'E	K & M, <i>Buldān</i> ii, p. 397, 373/4, al-Shamāri 2004
g. the Hawrah	Hawrah	place	SSW	6	14°09'N; 44°21'E	cf. <i>Buldān</i> ii, p. 359
h. the Şayd =Sumārah	Şayyid (Şa'ad) =Sumārah	area	WSW	13	14°11'N; 44°16'E	Şayd: K & B, see <i>Buldān</i> ii, p. 441; <i>Şifah</i> , p. 125; Sumārah: see <i>Buldān</i> iii, p. 441;
i. Haql	al-Haql	area	W	5-10	14°12'N; 44°20'E	see <i>Buldān</i> ii, p. 299, line 11

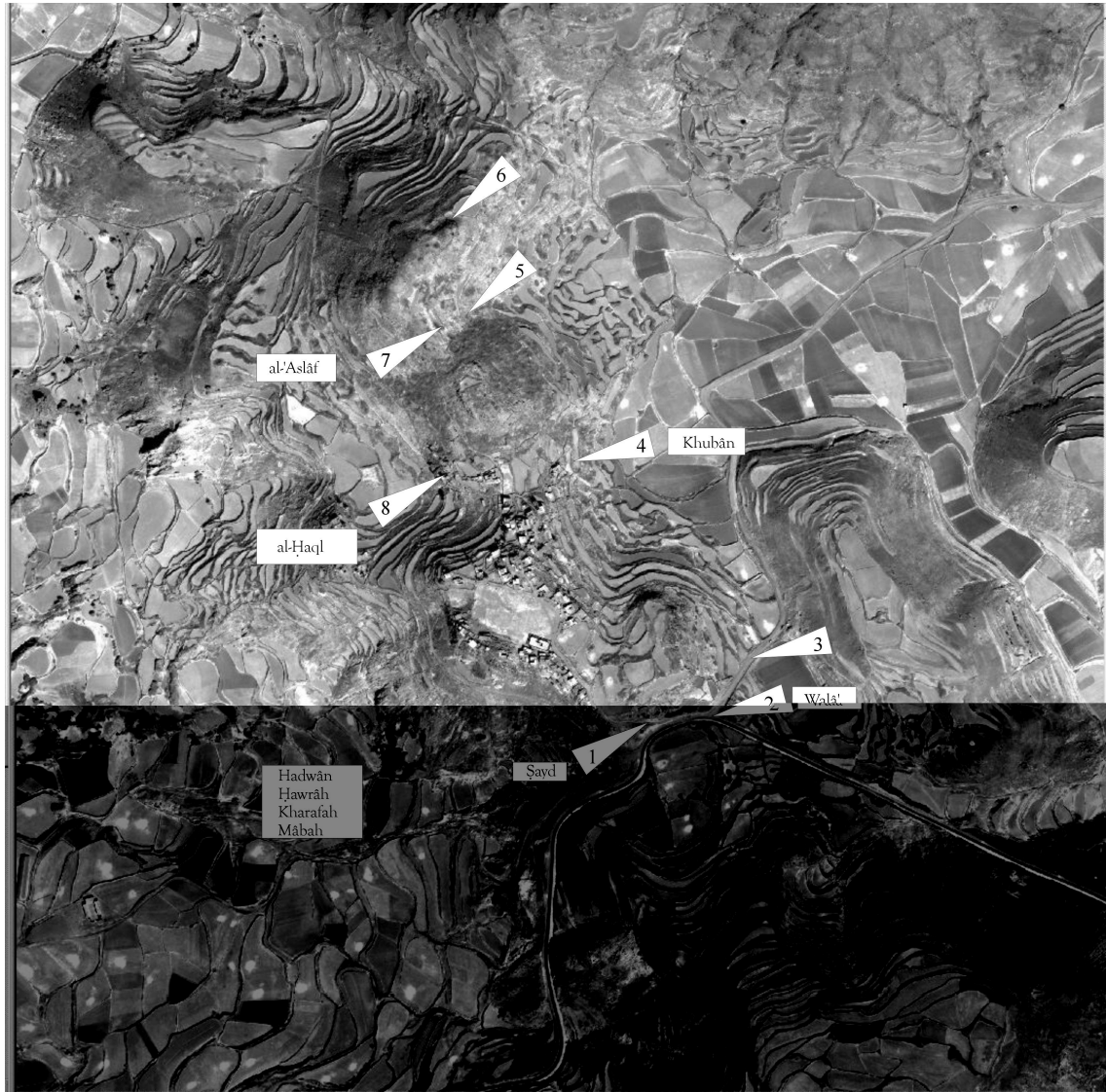
Table 1. Summary of the names of the gates of Zafār (14°12'N; 44°24'E) listed in al-Iklīl giving the name of orientation for the gates.

## Archaeological evidence for gates at Zafār

### South

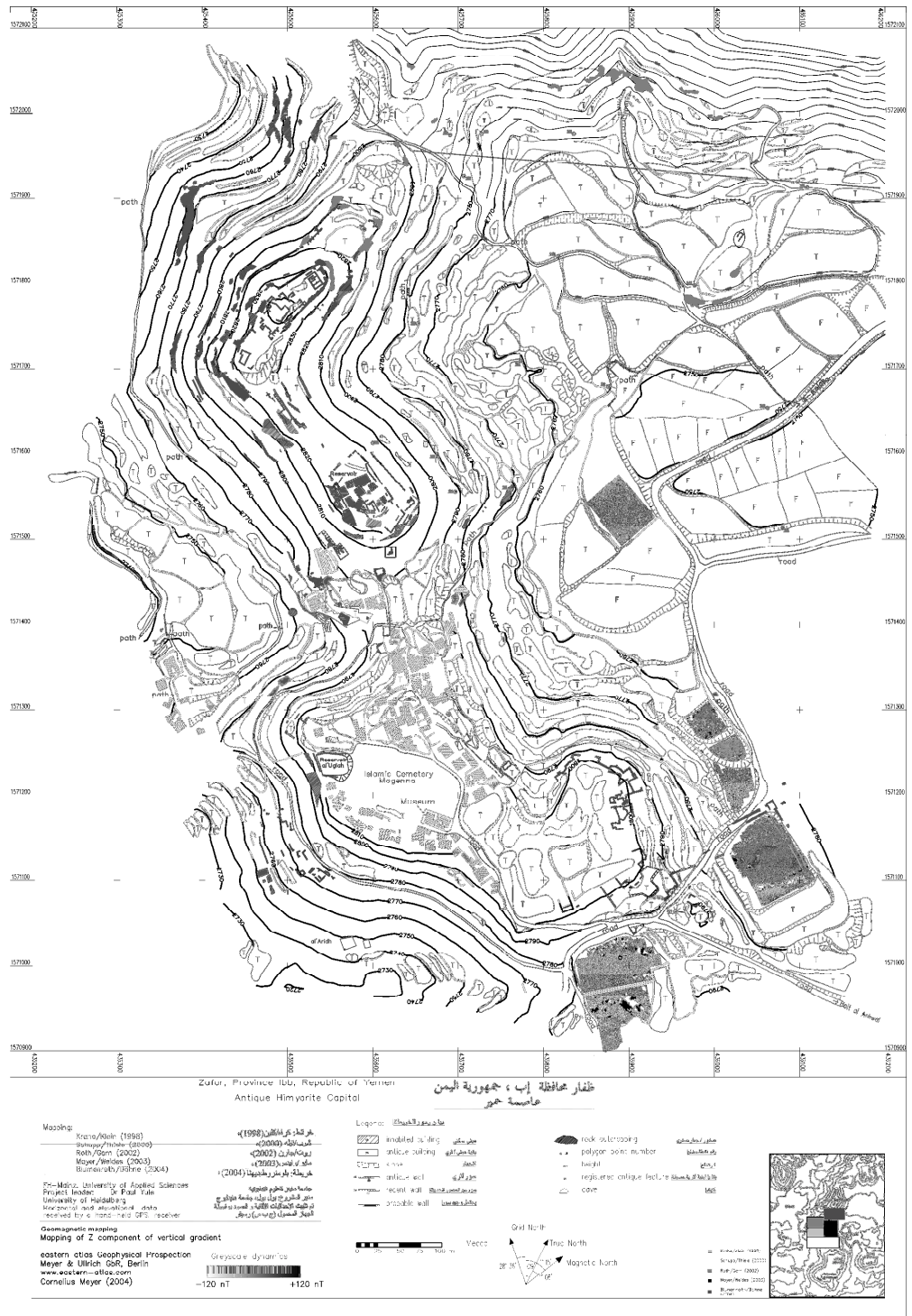
Although none of the city gates are intact, remains of the fortification walls shed some light on where these once lay. The main entry complex to the city lay to the south and remained in service, although in a very much changed and reduced form, until recently. In Zafār South on the slopes known as al-Ḥayfah and al-'Uwār, present-day roads communicate with the west, the north-east and south-east (Fig. 5). Other potential access points for the main gate make less sense in terms of the rough topography. Roads follow topographically defined ways to communicate with the outlying settlements. In Zafār South, a stone-paved sloping corridor (Fig. 5) which leads to the present-day village was widened in February 2004 and in February 2006 and its archaeological vestiges thereby denatured. Its pavement stones seem to have been antique (Fig. 6). Other road widening activities in 2000 and 2005 here took place where the main entrance complex is expected. Although no gates as such exist anymore, ancient walls and inscriptions still do, partly not yet excavated. In the '200 m distance from the slope from al-Ḥayfah into the valley of al-'Uwār, where the roads to the north, east and south come together, is the most likely place for the main gate complex.

<sup>2</sup> K, M, and B refer to the three manuscripts which N.A. FARIS consulted for his study of 'al-Iklīl'.



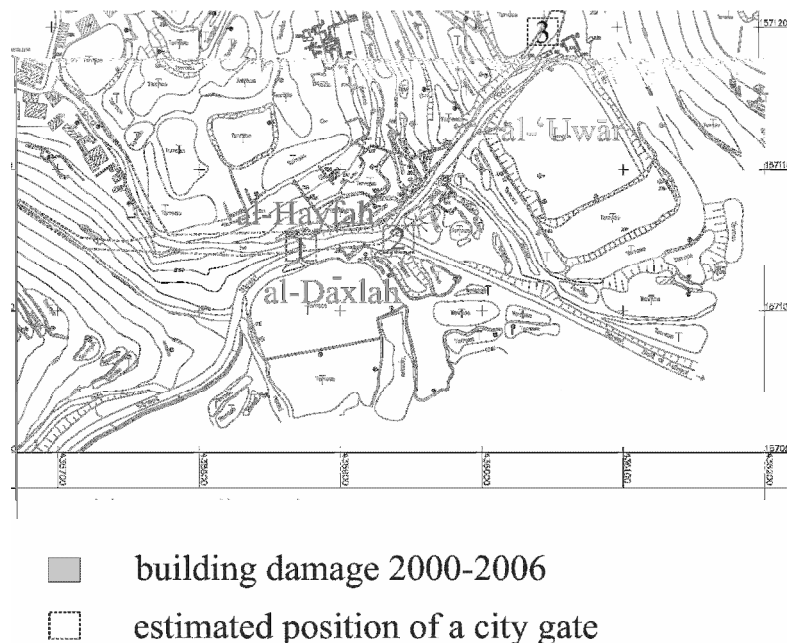
3 Quickbird satellite image 01.01.2004 of Zafār showing the suspected positions of the city gates. The four names in the lower left (Hadwan, Hawrah, Kharafah, Mābah)

Building inscriptions came to light here (ZM 2263+2262+2264, SIMA 2002, Sima in press), which describe the reinvesting of the city defences (see above), "...in the year 347 of the era of mbḥš bn 'bḥš (=237 CE)... (in) the two months dmdr'n". This text came to light in al-'Uwār, 200 m south of Qaryat Zafār around 1980 (personal communication C. ROBIN). What archaeologists dub "Zafār South", contains the main entry complex described in the inscriptions. Enormous stones in the southern slope of al-Ḥayfah bear witness to the once-great casemate walls. Underneath one of these, wall z189 (Fig. 5), a 14C determination (1596±37 BP) of cal 392–550 CE at 95.3% probability (lab. no.: Hd-25322) suggests major expansion of the southern city defences toward the end of the empire period (270–523 CE).



#### 4. Geomagnetic prospection at Zafar.

In 2004 geomagnetic survey (Fig. 4) was conducted in al-'Uwār in the hope of elucidating the position of the city defenses (FRANKE et al. in press). Unfortunately, these yielded no concrete data to corroborate the visible negative patterns of growth of the vegetation here. Gates probably pierced the heavy walls which flank both sides of the E-W road in al-Hayfah. Fig. 5 shows the situation as mapped in 2002, since then the entrance to the village and the downward slope toward the east was widened in 2003 and 2006. Recognisable are three ruined fortifications, two above in al-Hayfah (context z184 and z185) and one below in al-'Uwār (z179). ENE-oriented walls connected these tower-like structures, which were still barely visible in 2002 before the first bulldozing took place. In 2006 the road was paved, the ruins covered and destroyed. In the valley, the ENE-WSW walls have been considered a dam, which they seem to have become once their original function was lost. This fortification/dam is the only part of Ṣafār which seems plausibly immediately post-Ḥimyarite, to judge from the interpretation of the architecture (Yule et al. 2007). Three of the gates must have been located here in order to communicate with the nearest settlements (gate nos. 1-3).



5. Plan of Ṣafār South, state: 2000 (M. SCHUPP & K. THIELE).

#### East

Ṣafār South includes the anciently fortified Ḡabūbat al-Lagīyah slope (Fig. 3), which would not require a major gate of its own. In the saddle between Ṣafār South and the Ḥuṣn Raydān would be a logical place for a gate which leads to the east (gate no. 4). At mid length of the north-south oriented settlement a way is visible here which may correspond with a Ḥimyarite one. Glaser noted this "*chaussée*" in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Just below the eastern slope, fields have been built. But the road proceeds east directly to the neighbouring al-'Arāfah. Just where the gate lay is debatable. But a well cut from the living rock just at this place where it is expected is probably Ḥimyarite work (Fig. 7). Wells are a common feature beside roads and gates near cities.





6 Entrance to Qarīyat Ẓafār (context z190) to the north-west before its destruction as a result of road-widening in February 2004.

Further north, between the Ḥuṣn Raydān and Raydān North (al-Gusr) lies another saddle which appears to contain the remains of a large gate structure (Fig. 3).

While the western access appears to lead to roadways, in the other direction no trace of such can be found. If a gate existed here, then it was a small one (gate no. 5).

#### *North*

At the north-eastern end of the al-Gusr defences two stone abutments have been fashioned into a gate post some 4 m in width (Fig. 3). Again here, unfortunately there are no obvious traces of a large road either to the settlements to the north and north-west, nor to those to the north-east (gate no. 6).

#### *West*

Gate no. 7 (Fig. 3) is not excavated but appears on the surface to be a gate. It faces to the west and leads to a way which zig-zagged down the hill. Traces of this are visible, mostly stone debris (YULE et al. 2007).



7. Well z057, on the eastern part of Zafar.

Opposite the proposed gate on Zafar eastern flank lies an area with the name Bāb Sūq al-Layl (gate no. 8, Fig. 9) which means the gate of the night market. Today a stairs winds up the slope into what is taken to be the main part of the ancient city, al-Ġaḥ, a common place-name in the Yemen. Given the long distance between the gates

which more clearly existed (especially gates 1–3, 6 and 7), this seems a likely place for a gate. Extensive cultivation has removed all traces of an east–west access until about 500 m to the west in al-Danān. Here scraps of a paving associated with water troughs and graves suggest traces an access point.

There are no other obvious sites at Zafār where one might expect a gate. Over long distances the walls are steep and unsuited for an entrance. A small entrance (z015) is preserved on the eastern flank of the Ḥuṣn Raydān, but it is hardly a major entrance (Franke in press) mentioned in the description.

### Synthesis

To reconstruct the positions of Zafār's city gates, one must reconcile textual and archaeological evidence which do not concur at all points. A first difficulty is that nine city gates named in the text but only seven or eight are archaeologically manifest at the present stage of research. While none of these are excavated, those especially in the south are partly visible on the surface. The clearest, least difficult gate name equates with the al-Ḥaql plain, which lies a few kilometre directly to the west. It might correspond to the gates 1, 7 or 8, but for one consideration: Since the Walā' gate is mentioned first, this is probably the most important one. It probably lies in a part of site today known as al-Ḥayfah, which itself is a well-known place-name in the Yemen, for example the present-day seat of the district of Arḥab to the north of Ṣan'ā'. The Sabaic place-name ḤYFN (AL-SHEIBA 1987, 26) shows the root. Also today, Ḥayfān is a village name in Ta'iz governorate. Thus, this is a potentially early name for the area in which the main gate complex is located. Partial confirmation of the position of the ancient main gate complex comes from the position of the main road and main access to present-day Zafār which proceeds from the south gate toward the west, to judge from the preserved road remains. The other directions of the southern gate complex lead to lesser settlements and correspondingly are less suited for this gate attribution.



8 Zafār/al-Ṣa'ūb on the left and Bāb Sūq al-Layl on the right, view to the NE.

The Khubān area lies to the east of Zafār and could correspond with the gates 2–6 on this side of the settlement. Since the appearance of the inconspicuous and unexcavated 'gate' 5 is essentially unknown, this structure is questionable, and we can discount it as a possibility. Gates 3 and 4 also face in this general direction are more likely candidates for the Khuban gate.

Gate 7 faces al-'Aslāf, which lies to the NW.

The gate names Mabah, Hadwan, Hawrah and Harafah are names which can be found in the vicinity, but which do not correspond with the positions of the city gates. The reasons for the contradictions are unknown. It is clear from different contexts that place-names and different language fossils are uniquely conservative in the Yemen. At least several of the gate names can be clearly identified.

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