

Ẓafar, Capital of Ḥimyar, Eighth Preliminary Report, February–March 2009

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Abstract/Kurzfassung

Work begun in 2004 continued on the spacious Ḥimyarite so-called Stone Building, on the south-western flank of the Ḥuṣṣ Raydān mountain. In the ruined city, this is the first fairly intact building to come to light, an ashlar structure surrounding a stone-paved courtyard. Goals included locating the exterior walls, the investigation immediately to the north and the clearing of the courtyard. This year, we cleared the south-eastern part of the courtyard. Our project emphasizes the little-known latter part of late antiquity in a field of study but one hardly developed in South Arabia.

Die Grabungsmannschaft setzte ihre Tätigkeit im geräumigen ḥimyarischen sog. Steingebäude fort. 2004 begann diese Untersuchung an der südwestlichen Flanke des Bergs Ḥuṣṣ Raydān. Es handelt sich um das erste teilweise intakte Gebäude, das in der Ruinenstadt freigelegt wurde. Quadermauern rahmen eine mit Steinen gepflasterten Hof um. Ziele waren es die Außenmauern zu lokalisieren, den Bereich unmittelbar zum Norden hin und den Hof von Schutt zu befreien. Diese Grabungssaison wir räumten die südöstliche Partie des Hofes. Das wenig bekannte Spätantike bildet den Schwerpunkt unseres Projektes. Das Thema ist alt aber in Südarabien kaum entwickelt.

Introduction

During this year's campaign we continued excavation and study of the Ḥimyarite Stone Building in Ẓafār – nestled in the Yemen's highlands (Najd al-Yaman). The Stone Building and some stone architecture on the Jebel al-Awd are the first Ḥimyarite stone architecture to come to light in the Yemen (Vogt/Gerlach/Hitgen 1998-9, 144-150 Abb. 17-21). We hoped to illuminate the questions surrounding the purpose and date of this splendidly built antique stone structure and shed light on the little-known late pre-Islamic history of the Ḥimyarite confederacy and that of Ẓafār. In the stone-paved courtyard structure, we extended our trench toward the south (Fig. 1, plan). This season's excavation surfaces were small inside and outside of the structure (360 m²) of the total of 465 m² for the

1 A generous grant from the DFG enabled this campaign. Thanks go to the General Organisation of Antiquities and Museums in Sanaa. In 2009, following arrival on 02.02, we cleared formalities and began work on the 11.02. at Ẓafār, before departing on 31.03.2009 for Ṣan'ā'. There we worked for a further ten days. There our team enjoyed the generous hospitality of the German Institute of Archaeology in Ṣan'ā' at the beginning and end of the season, which allowed recovery from our Spartan field conditions. Participants of the tenth field season included 1 Dr Paul Yule (expedition leader), 2 Curt Hilbrig, 3 Katheryn Kelley, 4 Elisabeth Monamy (excavators) 5 Irene Steuer, 6 Dorothea Blome, 7 Christine Veidt, 8 Hans-Jürgen Welz, 9 David Wenge (small finds specialists), 10 Fuad Abdullah al-Qashim (GOAM inspector, ex officio), 11 Nashwan Hussain Dhaban, 12 Rafiq Mhd al-Arami, 13 Ali Abdulkarim al-Hakim, 14 Rashid Thabit al-Najjah (GOAM inspectors). We employed maximally 35 local labourers. Previous annual reports: for the seasons 1998-2004: Yule et al. 2007; 2005: Yule 2009; 2006: Franke et al. 2009; 2007- & 08: in press. Some of these are digitally available by means of the University of Heidelberg Library. The excavation photos and field drawings are publicly available online: <http://heidicon.uni-heidelberg.de/module/extlinks.php/pool/zafar>. This report is brief, omitting aspects such as radiocarbon and inscriptions because these are to be treated in detail in the final report.

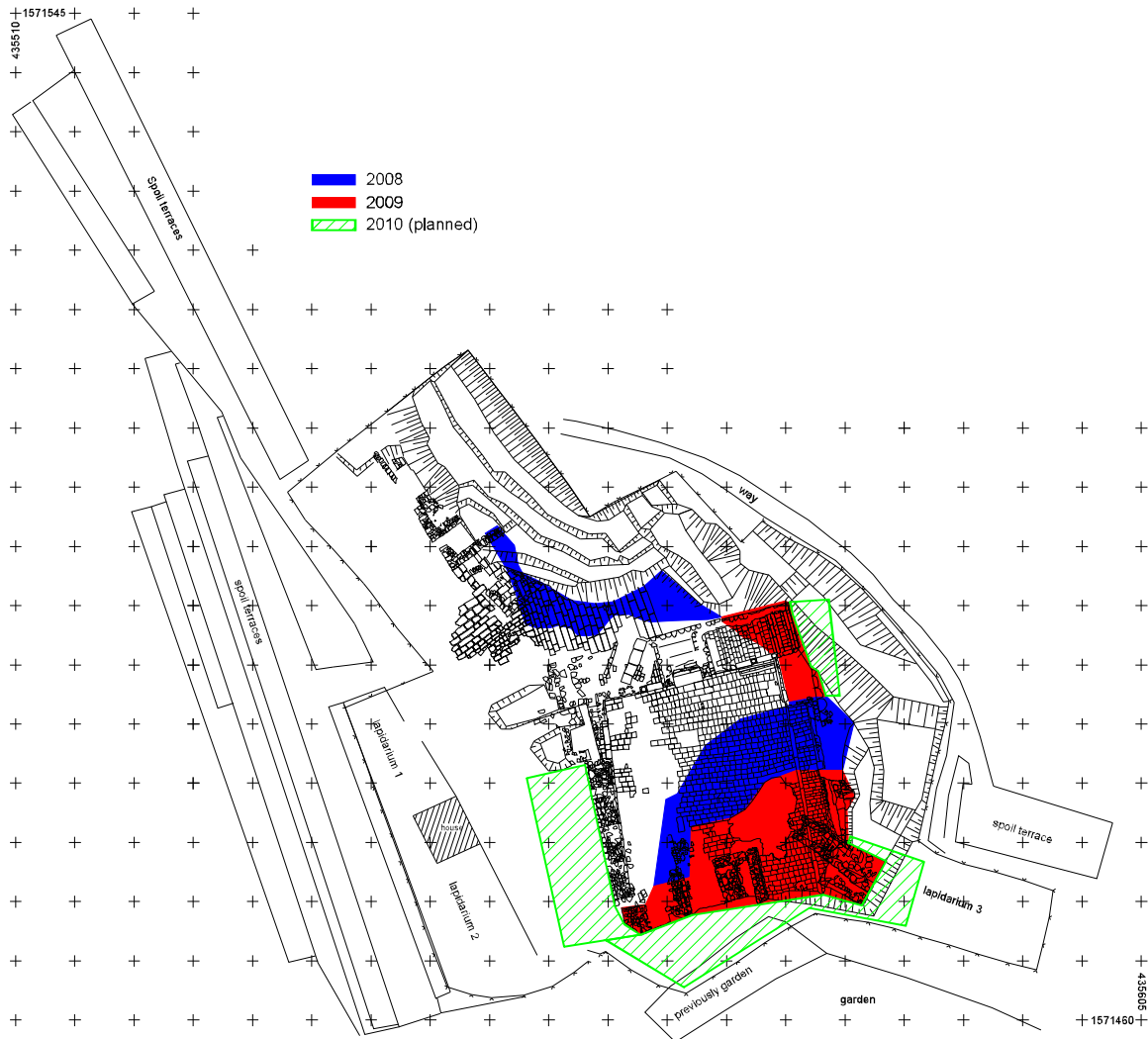


Fig. 1. Plan of the area excavated during the season 2009.

Stone Building itself, as it is incompletely known to us. We cleared the eastern interior wall of the courtyard. During the course of these measures Ḥimyarite and post-Ḥimyarite period building activity and debris came to light complementing that first observed during our first season in 2004. A number of Ḥimyarite reliefs also came to light which comprise the highlights of the season.

Our documentation system distinguishes features (walls and rooms) from technical operations. The latter are defined both in terms of time and spatially. First, the list of the main features excavated include (Fig. 2,

plan):

z413: We extended this stone pavement toward the south and recorded numerous 'mason marks'.

z438: We cleaned again this pavement fragment located on the SW corner of the excavation. It connects with the extension of room z702 on the W side of the latter.

z504: In the NE corner of the Stone Building this context consists of a small 16 m² pavement made of rectangular slabs. It extends toward the E where it joins the stair, z706.

z506: This N border wall of the Stone Building consists of heavy black rock known locally as ḥabāsh. This wall extends from the corner,

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Fig. 2. Plan of this season's features.

z423 to the NE corner of the excavation trench, that is 6 m.

z507: This feature consists of two parallel trenches cut into the bedrock in the room at the N end of the Stone Building. Together, they measure N-S 2 m and E-W c. 3 m in plan and are 0.2 to 0.4 m in depth. They appear to be foundation trenches which belong to the corner z423 and the wall z608. The N one consists of the E extension of the wall z423, which has no connection with hitherto excavated contexts and seems thus to belong to a predecessor building.

z603: This N-S oriented wall fragment is located on the SW excavation border. We cleared its S extent this season. It appears

to belong to the building z702.

z606: This stone platform of some 2 m width abuts the relief wall, z502 to the E, which it clear postdates. To the W the pavement z413 is built up against it. The well-masoned stones of the latter have been trimmed to size.

z608: This wall consists of ḥabāsh stones which form the E border of the Stone Building.

z701: This wall of broken stone, oriented NNW–SSE, is 1.60 m wide and 7 m long. It breaks into the excavation trench at its SE corner.

z702: E-W oriented 10 m wide structure built of ḥabāsh stones and broken stone on the S edge of the trench. An 2.2 m opening lies on



Fig. 3. Plan of this season's excavation operations.

the N side.

z703: Heap of stones at the N edge of structure z702, 1.4 m in width.

z704: Three pyramidal limestone blocks (together 1.6 x 0.3 m) form a part of the foundation of wall z502.

z705: This wall fragment is located in the NE corner of the Stone Building, E of wall z506. It measures NE-SW 1.3 m and in thickness 0.45 m. It lies on top of wall z506, is either built on it or joined to it. This wall is built of clay and small stones. The reddish brown colour indicates burning. Its S side is smoothed.

z706: Six E-W oriented limestone steps

which border to the W on the pavement z504 ascend toward the E. They measure E-W 7 m and N-S 3.4 m. Between the upper three and lower three steps there is a narrow landing.

z707: This NW-SE oriented 4 m long wall is positioned in parallel fashion to wall z701 on its E. Only its W face is preserved. Wall z707 appears to cut into z701 and is later in date. 'Excavation operations' did not reveal substantive building remains. They include the following trenches (Fig. 3):

op400-25: The removal of the S face of this mixture of burnt stone, charcoal, ash and

stone

op700-01: This represents the S extension of the excavation of 2008 on the E side of the courtyard of the Stone Building. It encompasses 160 m² and contains part of the wall z701. An Islamic period coin came to light 2.5 m W of the N edge of z701, 35 cm below its upper surface. The excavation went down to the surface of pavement z606. This operation also included the excavation of terraces to the S and SE in order to prevent subsidence.

op700-02: This trench was intended to illuminate the find situation in the NE corner of the Stone Building, particularly the situation surrounding the wall z608. A row of three further ḥabāsh stones came to light. It also included a plan which we excavated to the E of wall z502, the E wall of the Stone Building.

op700-03: This sandstone bedrock settlement surface was further excavated, being already begun in 2008. It lies E of pavement z422.

op700-04: Op700-04 freed the NE corner of the Stone Building of colluvium and rock debris. Excavation followed z506 along a 2 m wide trench to the N of pavement z504 and revealed four layers of wall z506. It includes the excavation and building of two terraces in the slope. The excavated surface includes pavement z504 and the steps z706.

op700-05: This 2 x 5 m N-S oriented terrace lies outside to the E of the Stone Building. It was intended to shed light on the E side of the structure and hinder subsidence of the loose colluvium.

op700-06: Located immediately S of op700-05 and E of op700-04, this 7 x 2 m trench also hinders avalanches of stones into the excavation 6 m below it.

op700-07: This surface clearance sheds light on the feature z702 in the SW corner of the Stone Building.

op700-08: This surface clearance is located S of structure z702 on the S edge of this year's trench. It lies above that structure.

op700-09: Terrace op700-09 is N-S oriented, 7 x 2 m long and lies farther E than our other trenches. It is located on a find concentration which it investigates. It also provides some protection from subsidence.

The Finds

Some 190 sculptures and such lots came to light during the course of this season. The most interesting of these includes the two large fragments of a relief figure which is depicted holding a branch bouquet in its left hand (Fig. 4). This limestone figure is identical in style, type and size with that found 5 m to the north in the season 2008 (Yule 2009; idem. in press; Michel 2009). The lowermost portion was positioned a few centimetres from its presumed original position. More exactly, it stood 5 m south of the crowned figure which was set into the E wall (z502) of



Fig. 4. Fragments of a relief figure which is depicted holding a branch bouquet in its left hand, a staff in the right one. It is shown with an undulating diaphanous garment (Iz09-376 and -398) rendered on a drawing of the crowned figure discovered in 2008.

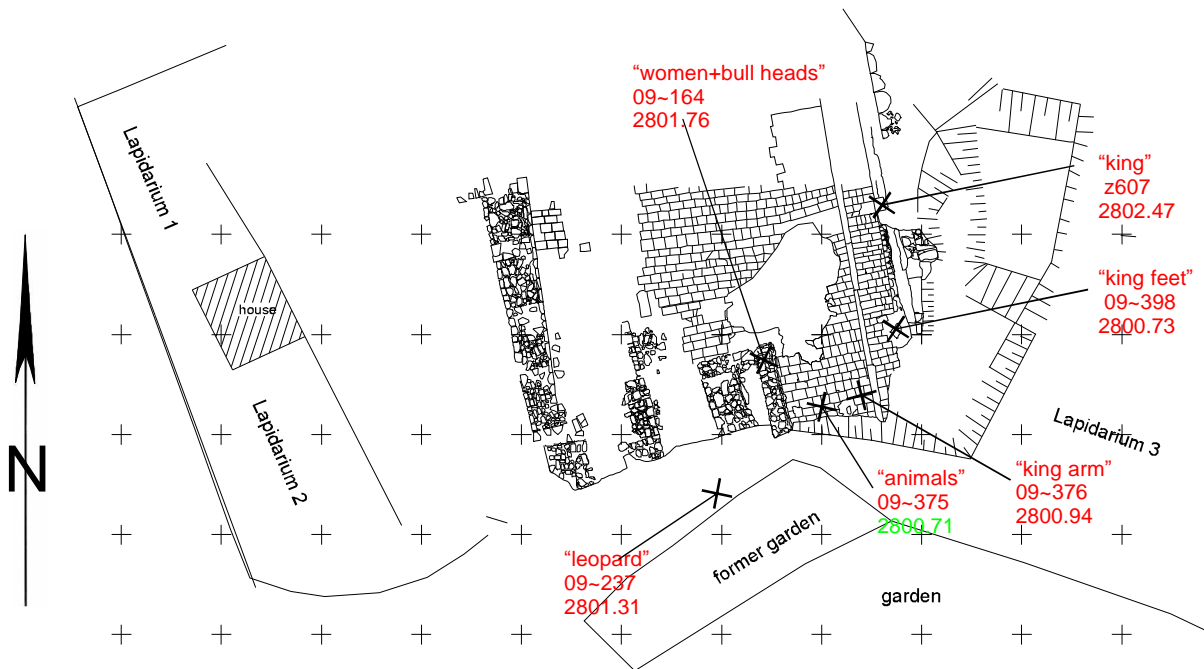


Fig. 5. Plan of the major sculptures found during the course of the 2009 season.

the courtyard (Fig. 5). Two large relief fragments came to their final secondary resting places during the quarrying of the structure, before GOAM began to hinder such activities in the 1970s. Given the scope of this preliminary report, only selected reliefs are shown.

The two large relief figures are important but elude dating attempts. Clearly they fit nicely into late antiquity. In terms of the crowned figure, a large head with enormous eyes is clumsily propped on a conical neck. Composition, treatment of the hair curls, corporality of the figure (or lack of same), gesture and use of leaf-cross motif all fit well in the late antique context. The staff which both figures hold with the left hand brings to mind those depicted in mosaics at 6th century Madaba in the eastern hall outside the border of the Hypolytus hall (Piccirillo 1993, 23–26, 57 Pl. 10). The basket which Gregoria bears in her left hand resembles curiously the branch bouquet of both relief figures. Other early medieval staffs with Christian crosses are known in Central Asia (Klimkeit 1990, 84

Abb. 39). Although the staffs of the Madaba images may not necessarily be Christian, their 6th century historical context suggests this. Moreover, the inscription wd'b at the top of the crowned figure can be taken at first glance as indication of an early date, oriented on the old polytheistic religion. As C. Robin would have it (2006), these cults were renounced around 380 by the main Ḥimyarite tribes. But the formulaic wd'b appears to have survived anachronistically after this terminus in context with the deity Rḥmn (oral communication A. Multhof; cf. Robin 2006, 117–8, RES 5064). It occurs in numerous contexts which cannot be dated, for example at Najrān. Thus, it cannot be used to raise the date of the crowned figure to <380. The two reliefs under discussion resemble significantly the early Byzantine ivory diptych of Boethius (Kitzinger 1977, ill. 81) which dates by virtue of inscription to 487. The writer assigns them a date in the 2nd ½ of the 5th century.

While some of the reliefs excavated this year are of familiar type, others are rare. Fig. 6 depicts a relief in which two women alternate

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Fig. 6. Relief which depicts bucrania and women holding their hands upon their breasts (Iz09-164).



Fig. 7. Stone niche (Iz09-078.001).



Fig. 8. Relief which depicts a woman holding a branch bouquet in her left hand (Iz09-130.001).



Fig. 9. Relief which depicts a paradisiacal garden with a sphinx and two bilaterally symmetrical caprids (Iz09-375).

with two bucrania, such as came to light in the Stone Building in 2007 (in press). The women hold their hands upon their breast in praying gesture. The hands of that on the left are closed and those of that on the right are open. The nimbus-like hairdo resembles that of the crowned figure, but is not close enough to be suitable for dating purposes. Fig. 7 depicts a stone miḥrab-like stone niche which came to light while building the spoil terraces. Fig. 8 shows a broken relief image of a woman who holds a bouquet of branches in her hand, bringing to mind the branch bouquet of the crowned figure and that shown in Fig. 4. She wears a shirt which is draped over her trousers and a shawl is draped over her arm. Finally, several reliefs derive from the relief register of the E interior wall of the Stone Building, z502. Fig. 9 shows one of the larger of these fragments. Dozens of fragments from this register and those adjacent it in the same types, size and composition have come to light during excavation over the years². The majority of our man-hours went to completing and checking the accuracy of the find documentation of previous years, especially that for the pottery. Numerous pottery drawings are ready for publication and many more at various stages of completion. This cataloguing includes not only the graphic rendering but also the records the wares. The team also made a first reference collection of the five main ware categories. Examples mounted on a 3 m long board and are displayed in the site museum. The ware categories include coarse ware, table ware, storage vessels, imported vessels, and non-ceramic vessels. A major result is that about a tenth of the pottery are Coptic-like imports from the upper Red Sea/Mediterranean area (Franke et al. 2008, Pl. 4.4; cf. Gempeler 1992, Abb. 120.3-4, 122.5; Malkawi et al. 1994)³, which R. Tomber refers to as Gaza ware (oral communication). This is a wheel-turned ribbed the fabric of which contains a high percentage of silica. Presumably much of this pottery in Zafār derives from the Red Sea littoral itself. Despite Zafār's considerable distance from the sea (150 km to the port at Ḥudayda), there must have been an impressive transport in

antiquity, perhaps also with wagons to judge from the volume. Olive oil was probably the main import.

One of the important contexts is a pottery kiln in Aqaba/Aila at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba in Jordan. My colleague D. Whitcomb designates the amphorae from Zafār as of Ayla-Axum type. "It has a distribution throughout the Red Sea and is found at Qana and at Axum. The most important characteristic is the form of the rim, which has an internal ridge to hold the lid. Otherwise there is a long series of ridged forms from Egypt" (letter 30.09.2008). He dates the kiln context from the early to mid 7th century, but informs me that this by no means dates the different kinds of ribbed ware narrowly to this time window.

In 2009 it became necessary to expand the museum magazine by means of a concrete temporary structure in order to further store finds. These amount to about ¼ pottery sherds and ¾ relief fragments.

Other categories of finds comprise stone lamps, glass and metal fragments (Yule in press).

The excavation photos were edited and ordered for the years 1998 to 2009. All of the photos of the excavation and the sites at Zafār have been systematically made available. In the framework of the DFG Propylaeum Project at the University Library the first 850 images have already appeared (<http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de>). These include the excavation plan and profile drawings of 2008 and 2009, photos of sites at Zafār, posters, pottery and the site plan. Over 2800 further images of the excavation from 1998 to 2009 will be online by the time that this article appears. This relieves the project of its obligation to document 10 years of excavation and study and makes the images available in perpetuity. Up to 42 Gigabyte of photos and drawings are being placed online

² Sarah Japp concluded last corrections on the reliefs for the catalogue of the ancient reliefs of the site museum.

³ In particular Gempeler's forms K 703 („1.-3. Jh.“), K 704 („wahrscheinlich 4. Jh.“) and K 715 („6.-7. Jh.“).

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as time and energy allow. These form a framework for the new subfield of Old South Arabian and bring us closer to historic reality with regard to the topic of Ḥimyar. Several photographed monuments have disappeared since 1998.

During this season a generous grant from the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany enabled the bringing of a conservationist to the site (Prof Dr Michael Pfanner, Munich) who developed a conservation plan for the Stone Building. In light of the decay of the building as a result of the elements, conservation measures must be carried out as soon as possible.

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