

The National Museum of Aden



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The museum

The National Museum of Aden is located in the wonderful colonial building of "Qasr al-Sultan", in the Crater. The tones of the sea blue are dominant on the exterior facades, on the capitals partially discoloured by the sun, and on the interior museum walls.



Fig. 1 - *The National Museum of Aden*

The collection of South Arabian antiquities is displayed in two main exhibition rooms and in the corridors of the building wings.



Figs. 2-4 - *Museum main exhibition room and corridors*

A third room displays a smaller collection of Islamic antiquities. At the upper floor, the museum also hosts "The Ethnographic Museum".

The Ancient South Arabian kingdoms

A culture that was to prove long-lasting began to develop in South Arabia (today's Yemen) in the early first millennium BC and it continued until the sixth century AD.

Classical authors referred to the kingdoms of South Arabia as Arabia Felix, because it was the place of origin of incense and other precious substances.



Fig. 5 - *Map of ancient Yemen*

In the early stages of their history, the main kingdoms, Saba, Main, Qataban and Hadramawt, were all located inland on the high plateau bordering the desert.

In the third century AD, the kingdom of Himyar, with its capital Zafar, overran South Arabia ruling it until the mid sixth century AD.

Paganism dominated until the mid-fourth century AD when the Himyarite kings converted to the monotheistic religion.

Fertile oases could develop thanks to large stone dams built with a sophisticated technique, that oriented the floodwater coming with the abundant monsoon rains and channelled it straight to the fields.



Fig. 6 - Marib (Saba), dam

Monumentality is the most striking feature of the South Arabian architecture. Cities were surrounded by impressive walls, houses and temples were built on high basements with courts, huge entrances, monolithic pillars and columns.



Fig. 7 - Baraqish (Main), city walls



Fig. 8 - *Timna (Qataban), market square*



Fig. 9 - *Shabwa (Hadramawt), royal palace*

The written sources of South Arabia are made up of a extremely rich epigraphic corpus containing more than ten thousand inscriptions.

South Arabian culture developed great skill in producing splendid texts carved in stone, engraved on city walls or on mountainsides and cast in bronze. The regular geometric monumental alphabetic writing became itself an element of decoration.

There is also a minuscule writing on sticks attested from the early first millennium BC. Letters and private contracts were carved on sticks.



Fig. 10 - *Inscription on city walls*



Fig. 11
Bronze inscribed bowl



Fig. 12
Texts on wooden sticks

The collection

The museum is one of the greatest Yemeni museums for number of pieces, prestige and the long history of cooperation with foreign missions and researchers.

Its huge collection of antiquities had to comprise some 500 objects, even though some of them got lost or stolen after the war in 1994.

There are some splendid, well known artefacts housed in the museum, especially coming from the kingdoms of Qataban, Awsan and Hadramawt: statues, alabaster stelae with figures in relief, incense burners, and also a collection of bronze objects, including plaques, statuettes, lamps and small vessels.



Fig. 13
Incense burner decorated with disc and false windows



Fig. 14
Inscribed block with bucrania in relief



Fig. 15
Alabaster head on inscribed base



Fig. 16 - *The Qatabanian statue of "Lady Barat"*



Fig. 17 - Bronze plaque with Qatabanic inscription



Fig. 18 - Bronze box in the shape of a bull from Awsan

The museum has also a great number of inscriptions on statue bases from the temple of Mahram Bilqis at Marib. These long, carefully engraved texts testify the devotion of the Sabaeans towards their God Almaqah.



Fig. 19 - Sabaic inscription engraved on a statue base

Since the early 60's of the last century, the National Museum of Aden owns the entire famous Muncherjee's collection. This is the greatest and most fabulous collection of South Arabian antiquities a private ever held.



Figs. 20-21 - Statues of Awsanite kings. The second king wears a toga

Kaiky Muncherjee was a Parsi merchant who settled in Aden at the beginning of 1900 and was able to collect hundreds of precious artefacts and inscriptions, mostly coming from the Sultanate of Lahej or bought at the Aden antiquarian market.

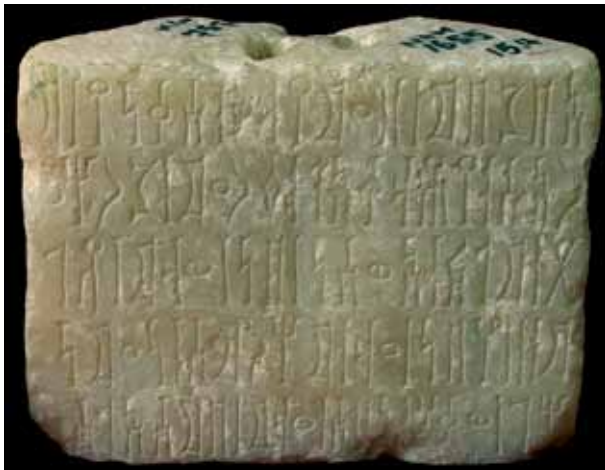


Fig. 22 - Base of statue with inscription from Awsan



Figs. 23-25 - Examples of inscribed stelae in alabaster

The work of CASIS in the National Museum of Aden

CASIS - "Cataloguing and Fruition of South Arabian Inscriptions through an Informatic Support" is an Italian-Yemeni project which was set up in 2007 to disseminate knowledge about the culture of ancient Yemen, particularly the collections of inscriptions in the Yemeni museums, by electronic means.

In the project, the University of Pisa cooperates with GOAM (Ministry of Culture) and the Universities of Sana, Dhamar and Aden (Ministry of Higher Education and Research). The computerrelated part of the project is conducted by the SIGNUM Computer Research Centre of the Pisa Scuola Normale Superiore.



The screenshot shows the home page of the 'Arabia Antica' website. The header features the site's logo, a stylized trident, and the title 'Arabia Antica' in a serif font, with the subtitle 'Pre-Islamic Arabia: Art, Culture and Archaeology' below it. A search bar is located in the top right corner. A navigation menu in the top center lists 'Home | Projects | News | Activities | Publications | Newsletter | Credits'. The main content area is divided into several sections. On the left, there is a map of the Arabian Peninsula and a 'Publications' section with a book cover. The central section is titled 'CASIS - Cataloguing and Fruition of South Arabian Inscriptions through an Informatic Support' and includes a sub-header 'The Project | Objectives | Activities | Consortium and Participants | The Yemeni Museums | The Dhamar Governorate'. Below this is a large image of a stone inscription. To the right of the inscription is a text block titled 'The Project' which describes the project's goals and funding. Further right is a 'Gallery' section with two images: 'The National Museum (Sana)' and 'Plaque with figure (The National Museum, Sana)'. At the bottom left, there is a section for 'Arabia Antica Series'.

Fig. 26 - Home page of CASIS on Arabia Antica (<http://arabiantica.humnet.unipi.it>)



Fig. 27 - Home page of the Aden National Museum on Arabia Felix (<http://arabiafelix.humnet.unipi.it>)



Fig. 28 - Home page of the Corpus of Inscriptions from the Yemeni Museums on CSAI (<http://csai.humnet.unipi.it>)

The objective of CASIS is to get the inscriptions housed in museums in Yemen catalogued on the CSAI website, within the section "Corpus of Inscriptions from the Yemeni Museums".

CASIS worked in the city of Aden for the first time in October and November 2008. As the project attaches great importance to the preparation and training of Yemeni personnel, a course was organized at the University of Aden, focused on the digital cataloguing of epigraphic texts.

Twenty students and researchers from different provinces of Yemen participated to the course. At the end, six of them were selected to work with CASIS in the museums of Aden.



Fig. 29 - Participants and teachers of the training course, Aden University, 2008

In November 2008 about 200 inscriptions of the National Museum were registered, photographed and digitized, the ones displayed in the main hall and corridors as well as the pieces kept in the storerooms.



Fig. 30
Stela with bull head in relief



Fig. 31
Woman with bunch of grapes

In July 2009 a delegation of the project together with the Italian Ambassador in Yemen visited the National Museum and set up a computer laboratory for the museum staff.

A new initiative launched by CASIS in 2009 for the promotion of the Yemeni cultural heritage is to make a documentary on the museums, as privileged places to tell the public the rich and fascinating culture of Ancient South Arabia. In July the project team also made the video shooting for the documentary "Arabia Felix". A promo of the video was presented to the Governor of Aden during his official visit in Tuscany, in October 2009.



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