The Museum of Baynun

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The museum

The museum of Baynun houses a great collection of antiquities, most of which come from the village and its surroundings. During the pre-Islamic times, Baynun was in fact an important city and the tenth century AD Arab scholar, Hasan ibn Ahmad al-Hamdani, celebrated it as one of the most beautiful sites of Arabia.

Fig. 1
View of Baynun and its valley

Fig. 2
View of the height of Baynun with the ancient site

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To this day traces of its glorious past still remain in the ancient site, with its streets, paved with large slabs, the walls that surrounded the city, a temple and what some think was a royal palace.

Fig. 3 - *Remains of walls in the ancient site*

Baynun and its surroundings have always been renowned for the terraced fields which still exist and are tilled to this day thanks to a complex system of irrigation. The two enormous tunnels dug into the mountain to allow the water to drain off are still able to impress by their size.

Fig. 4
The ancient tunnel near Baynun

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 an 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 of Baynun is the largest museum of the Dhamar governorate in terms of number of objects and their artistic and historical importance.

Fig. 13 - *The museum*

It houses more than 70 inscriptions along with many anepigraphic objects, the majority of which are found in Baynun and the surrounding areas and thus witness to the history and culture of those great people who built up the ancient city of Baynun.

Fig. 14
Exhibition room

The great many unpublished inscriptions conserved in the museum give us the first direct epigraphic evidence of these tribes dating back from the early centuries of the first millennium BC to the sixth century AD, the last period of the history of South Arabia.

Fig. 15
Archaic inscription mention-ing Baynun and its tribe

Fig. 16 - *Late inscription mentioning Baynun and its tribe*

Examples of the religious belief of Baynun's ancient inhabitants are votive objects such as altars, offering tables, incense burners decorated with crescent moon and disc and stelae with the symbolic motif of the bull's head or with ritual scenes.

Figs. 17, 18
*Incense burners with decoration
of crescent moon and disc*

Figs. 19, 20
*Alabaster stelae with figure in
relief: bull head and woman*

Fig. 21 - *Stela with seated woman and symbols*

A remarkable artefact dating back to the Himyarite times is a plaque in the shape of an arch, bearing a monogram and two griffins at its sides.

The Baynun collection is enriched with a valuable group of 20 bronze objects, comprising animal and human statues, lamps, jewels, utensils.

Fig. 22
Plaque in the shape of an arch with monogram and griffins

Fig. 23
Statuette of ibex

Fig. 24 - *Detail of lion statue*

Fig. 25 - *Group of lamps*

Among the biggest pieces there are a fragmentary inscribed statue of human figure with long dress and belt, a weight with the Himyarite royal symbols and a fragment of leopard statue.

Fig. 26 - *Inscribed human statue with long dress and belt*

Fig. 27 - *Inscribed weight with symbols*
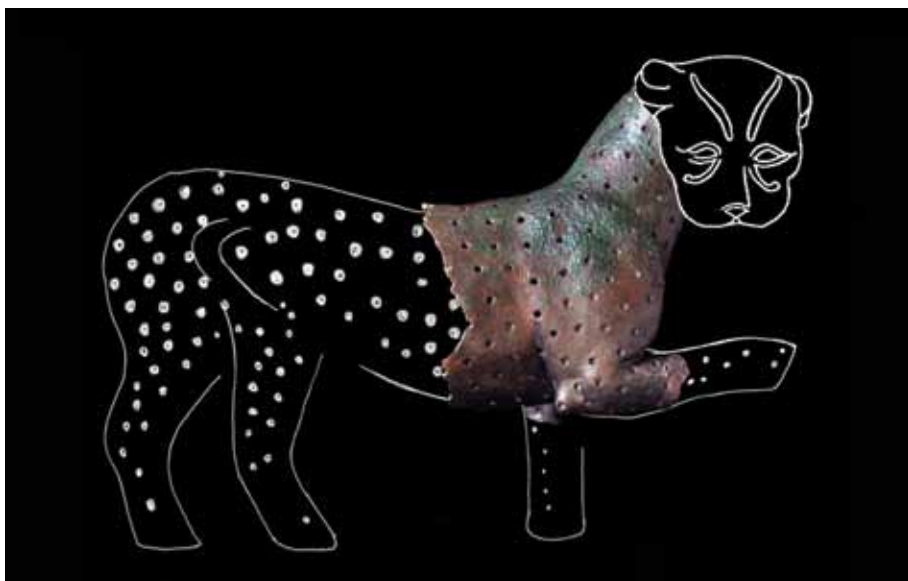
The museum has acquired recently a bizarre statue of naked figure only wearing a sort of loincloth.

Some of the artefacts housed in the museum come from other regions of Yemen, especially from the Jawf. These are a large collection of Minaean funerary stelae with the face of the deceased and one long inscription from Nashq dedicated to the god Almaqah.

Fig. 28
Fragment of leopard statue with reconstruction of the original figure

Fig. 29
Statue of human figure with strange cloth
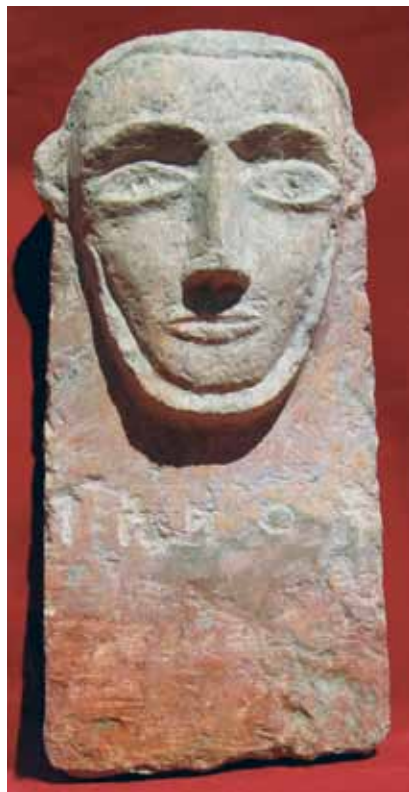
Figs. 30, 31, 32
Minaean stelae with human face in relief

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Fig. 33 - *Inscription from Nashq dedicated to Almaqah*

The work of CASIS in the museum of Baynun

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.

Fig. 34 - *Home page of CASIS on Arabia Antica*
(http://arabiantica.humnet.unipi.it)

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Fig. 35 - *Home page of the Baynun Museum on Arabia Felix*
(http://arabiafelix.humnet.unipi.it)

Fig. 36 - *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".

The museums of Baynun and Dhamar city were the first to be catalogued within CASIS, in November 2007. The project team, coordinated by the Italian researchers, was made of 6 among Yemeni students, archaeologists and museum staff who had previously followed a training course in epigraphic cataloguing at Pisa.

In 2008 the collection of bronze artefacts of the Museum of Baynun was given as loan to the University of Pisa and restored at the university laboratories.
In May 2009 an exhibition of the bronzes was organized at Pisa and subsequently replied at Sana the next July.

Fig. 37 - *Entrance of the exhibition hall at the National Museum of Sana*

Fig. 38 - *Objects displayed at the exhibition of Sana*

CASIS worked again at Baynun in November 2009, in order to register a handful of new objects acquired by the museum.

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