

The Museums of Dhamar



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The museums of the Governorate of Dhamar

The Dhamar Governorate is a populated region of the central Yemen. This splendid territory, with a very long history of human occupation, is characterized by beautiful landscapes and several ancient towns and ruins.

The governorate has three main museums which house the remains of the culture of pre-Islamic South Arabia: two in Dhamar city, one in the village of Baynun.



Fig. 1
View of Dhamar

Fig. 2
Village of the uplands near Dhamar

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. 3 - Map of ancient Yemen

In the early stages of their history, the main kingdoms, Saba, Ma'in, 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. 4 - *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. 5 - *Baraqish (Main), city walls*



Fig. 6 - *Timna (Qataban), market square*



Fig. 7 - *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. 8 - *Inscription on city walls*



Fig. 9
Bronze inscribed bowl



Fig. 10
Texts on wooden sticks

The collection of the Regional Museum

The main museum in the governorate is the Regional Museum. It was built at Hirran, north of Dhamar city, in 2002. It has several exhibition halls, a lecture hall, a computer laboratory and storerooms.



Fig. 11 - *The Regional Museum*



Fig. 12 - *Exhibition room of the pre-Islamic section*



Fig. 13 - *Exhibition room of the Islamic section*

Its pre-Islamic collection comprises over hundred inscriptions of various provenance and periods.

The museum has also a section dedicated to the Islamic archaeology, which contains some decorated artefacts bearing Arabic inscriptions, in addition to jewels and other products of traditional handicraft in Dhamar.

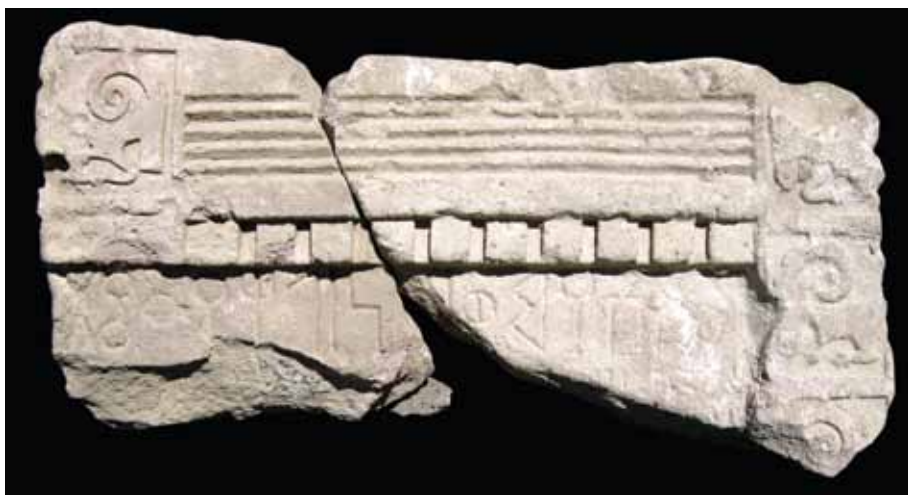
The most important object is the wooden *minbar* (pulpit) from the Great Mosque of Dhamar city, which is dated to the fourth century Hegira.

The hall of pre-Islamic antiquities exhibits examples of Ancient South Arabian inscriptions carved on stone, along with artefacts such as stelae, altars, incense burners and statue bases, decorated with geometric, floral and animal designs. Particularly important from the historical point of view are a number of stelae, with the typical South Arabian decoration of



crouching ibexes, as well as the geometric motifs of dentils and horizontal grooves. These artefacts come from the neighbourhood of Dhamar and are a very archaic expression of the local inhabitants, who dedicated the stelae to their god Athtar. They are the most ancient epigraphic evidence from the Yemeni uplands.

There are two Sabaic inscriptions written on statue bases from the city of Nashq, in the Jawf. These long, carefully engraved texts testify the devotion of the Sabaeans towards their god Almaqah.



Figs. 14, 15 - Stelae decorated with geometric motifs and crouching ibexes



Fig. 16 - *Inscription from Nashq with dedication to Almaqah*



Fig. 17
Slab from al-Jawf

The museum has acquired recently an important collection of 24 artefacts coming from the region of al-Jawf, written in Minaic and in Sabaic. The majority are dedications to the god Nakrah, so that an origin from the city of Baraqish must be assumed. The texts are engraved on perfectly polished slabs, with traces of red painting on the surface.

Apart from the inscriptions written on slabs, four texts are engraved on artefacts such as beautifully shaped offering tables, either with bull's head as gutter or with ibex frieze.



Figs. 18, 19 - *Altars from al-Jawf*

The museum also owns a remarkable collection of small inscribed objects on bronze, like amulets in the shape of pendants and situlae. They are dedicated to the god Wadd, who is often associated to a snake as his symbolic animal.



Fig. 20 - *Bronze pendant*



Fig. 21 - *Bronze situla with dedication to Wadd*

The collection of the University Museum

This is one of the most modern museums in the governorate, built in 2006 to fulfil the educational and training needs of students of archaeology within the Faculty of Arts of the University of Dhamar.



Figs. 22, 23 - *The University Museum and the exhibition room*

The museum contains a small collection of objects which however stand out for their variety: prehistoric arrowheads and stone blades along with several artefacts of pre-Islamic culture, like funerary stelae, sculptures, incense burners, fragments of capitals, pottery.



Fig. 24 - *Fragment of plaque with man and bunch of grapes*



Fig. 25 - *Foot of human statue in bronze*

There is a number of funerary stelae with stylized face from al-Jawf, bearing the name of the deceased.

Two small stelae are mainly interesting for the represented subject: the first bears the figure of a mythical animal with plumed wings, a raised forepaw, upright tail, thick mane and long ear (perhaps a horn). The second stela is quite mysterious: it represents a human face on the top of a palm tree as if it were part of the vegetal element.



Figs. 26, 27 - Stelae with human face from al-Jawf



Fig. 28
Stela with mythical animal



Fig. 29
*Stela with human face
inserted in vegetal element*



Fig. 30 - *Slab with inscription and symbol*



Fig. 31 - *Fragment with cross*

The University Museum also houses a few objects from Zafar dating back to the Himyarite period: among those, a slab with the symbol of the Himyarite royal dynasty and a fragment of alabaster with the Christian cross.

Finally, it must be mentioned the text written in minuscule script, which strangely is engraved on a stone instead of the usual wooden sticks.



Fig. 32 - *Text in minuscule script on stone*

The work of CASIS in the museums of Dhamar

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



Fig. 34 - Home page of Dhamar Governorate on Arabia Felix (<http://arabiafelix.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 Dhamar 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 the Regional Museum about 150 inscriptions were transcribed, photographed and digitally catalogued, the ones displayed in the main hall as well as the several fragments kept in the storerooms.

During the two days’ inventory of the University Museum, the 25 inscribed objects were documented.



Fig. 35 - Home page of the *Corpus of Inscriptions from the Yemeni Museums* on CSAI (<http://csai.humnet.unipi.it>)

CASIS worked again in these museums in July 2009, in order to register the recently acquired collection of objects from al-Jawf in the Regional Museum and two new objects in the University Museum.

Other activities connected to CASIS in 2009 were the preparation of a computer laboratory in the Regional Museum, as well as the video shooting for the documentary "Arabia Felix", on the Yemeni museums.



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