

Late Antique Arabia - Zafar, Capital of Himyar: Rehabilitation of a 'Decadent' Society

Excavations of the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg 1998-2010 in the Highlands of Yemen

Bearbeitet von
Paul Yule

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Edited by Paul Yule
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Zafār, Capital of Ḥimyar

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The DAI in Ṣan‘ā’, represented first by Burkhard Vogt and later Iris Gerlach, facilitated our visits to the Yemen and provided hospitality for our crew at the research station. Over the years,

the German embassy in Ṣan‘ā’ was a source of support and encouragement. The discussion of the place-names in Ẓafār developed out of discussions with Cornelia Ruppert.

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It is fitting, an honour and a complement to be able to publish our expedition report in the *Abhandlungen* of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, which helps me reach my goal of integrating our Arabia research into the main body of ancient Near Eastern archaeology.

Felix Blocher kindly took on the arduous task of reading the manuscript and made numerous suggestions.

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Finally, over the years the Ẓafārīs ceaselessly aided and abetted our work. We could always

count on their endless generosity and good will. When I ask previous participants what aspect of the project they liked best, they usually choose the Ẓafārīs.

Heidelberg, January 2012
Paul Yule

Foreword

Asking the author which of his archaeological projects he considers his best is like asking a mother to name her favourite child. The *Zafār* project is arguably my most successful one in terms of recognition: To judge from my colleagues' reactions, it had a greater impact than my projects in India and Oman. In the case of all three subject areas, I was in the fortunate position of treading thematically on *terra incognita*. Obviously, if only a handful of experts are familiar with the sources relating to a given subject and it is peripheral to a university curriculum, this in itself limits the reception of such work. A degree of financial continuity and significant finds enabled me to continually refine and correct iteratively from season to season my documentation of *Zafār* and its history.

What compelled me to work on *Zafār* for 12 years? I was dissatisfied with the state of archaeological research for this period in Arabia, which has long been the domain of research mostly of excellent Qur'ānic scholars from J. Wellhausen (1897) to F. Donner (1981, 1998) as well as epigraphers such as W. Müller (2001) and C. Robin (2006) – not archaeologists. In our sub-discipline interdisciplinary archaeological studies can and do rectify our written sources. Another reason is that there have been few detailed archaeological studies regarding the end of the pre-Islamic period. Instead there have been excellent learned ones about the *ḡahalīyah*, *ridda* and conquests of the new Islamic state which leave the material culture completely obscure – as if it did not exist or were unimportant.

In addition, from the very beginning of my Arabia research I wanted a structural change in the research so that the newness of our work there be recognised internationally *vis à vis* main stream Near Eastern and Classical archaeology. A second goal was sustained, responsible site study and monitoring complemented by open access data dissemination and project transparency. However, in 2010 political instability in our host

country ended our project. The internet enabled the dissemination of my studies and images alternative to Eurocentric conventional publication, which is available to most of our colleagues in the host country, but only in a limited way. Now much of our documentation is available to all, gratis and free from the extraneous pressures of interest groups within the field of Arabian archaeology. 'Real-time dissemination' means that results appear in the internet weeks after the conclusion of the work instead of manifest waiting queues up to eight years with my conventional publications.

Until now there has been little articulate art historical method; for better and for worse, the main emphasis in our subdiscipline has dwelt on the cataloguing of finds. Texts, ancient and modern studies which channelled can characterise our period as decadent require explanation. It is hoped that the newly excavated finds will influence such old-fashioned value prejudice. No contemporary excavated site lies in the area near *Zafār* except *Qāni*' (Sedov 1992) some 500 km away in Ḥaḍramawt. Situated 60 km to the north, *Maṣna'at Māriya* has been surveyed, but not yet excavated. The *Ġabal al-ʿAwd*, a scant 25 air km to the south-east, dates to the early Ḥimyarite period. These sites are known from a few reports and tell us little about *Zafār* or its cultural context. All of these factors affected my site choice.

Significantly, the Ḥimyarite tribal confederacy carried out the first political-military unification of Arabia. Their regnal calendar begins in 110 BC (de Blois 1990) with the commencement of the early period. From 270 to 525 the empire follows (Yule 2007a: 10). Thereafter, we refer to the late/post period (525 to the 2nd ¼ of the 7th cent. CE). The present study accents the last segments of Old South Arabian (OSA) or Ḥimyarite period archaeology and history. Only rarely does our subject require me to delve into the pre-Ḥimyarite regional history, because at *Zafār* for these periods archaeological sources still remain unknown.

If not otherwise specified, the dates cited below are CE formulations. “?200” and “c. 200” reflect respectively lesser and greater certainty.

Three emphases formed our project strategy: mapping, development of museum resources and excavation. Cases in which we did not reach our cultural resource management and research objectives stem from the lack of success of our research group in attracting more funding and the instability of the infrastructure in the Yemen which hosts the project. We underestimated the amount of time required for most field operations: The mapping of more than 140 ha took far more time than we ever imagined: nine seasons of survey and evaluation. During the course of the project new and important aspects emerged, such as the mapping of al-Šugāg and Ma’ğil al-Ša’bānī. The underestimating holds also for reading the data for publication. Initial lack of a clear and simple relational database format resulted in frequent redesigning of the database and slowed down the evaluation which nourished final publication. These data encompass the archaeological contexts, operations, artefacts, photos, pottery raw drawings, final drawings and other aspects which we publish, for example in the image bank HeidICON (see below). Particularly time-consuming were the verification of all aspects of the documentation of the campaigns 2004, 2006 and 2007. Our campaigns were characterised by a lack of time and manpower resources, despite a generous financing.

Although we were allowed to export human and animal bones, a few metallic and pottery specimens, such requests proved time-consuming, nerve-wracking, bureaucratic and expensive. Thus, analyses of glass or other interesting materials which are standard in today’s archaeological reports are lacking in this one. When GOAM mistakenly sent us radiocarbon samples from other expeditions instead of ours’, we had a nice opportunity to chat with our colleagues and attempt exchange.

The visibly declining state of preservation of the ruins at Zafār as a result of the elements and anthropogenic influence before our eyes conditioned our field strategy: We first mapped and registered its sites in order to recognise shape, po-

sition and size of the antique cityscape. From the start, surface sampling of individual finds proved a strategy likely to be of little use. We turned to topographic mapping, analysis by means of a QuickBird satellite image and excavation. After our preliminary reports appeared, we changed a few of the site designations and added others. The conservation of the Stone Building site dominated the final campaign consuming precious resources.

Fortunately, the Zafār project followed my research of the 1980s and early 1990s devoted to late pre-Islamic central Oman, which provided a relevant historical perspective with the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula beginning a few centuries earlier. Zafār confronted me with a disturbed stratigraphy and sources other than those that the historian would prefer.

The following chapters themselves can be quickly previewed. After describing the textual and visual resources available to the reader regarding Zafār, Chap. 1 of this excavation report begins with a sketch of the environment of the Highlands which influences the development of the Himyarite epoch. A number of projects dealing with this age require comment. Without these the net newness of the present study cannot be ascertained. This state of research also catalogues diachronically the main operations at our site. Chap. 2 goes into greater detail on smaller Himyarite contexts which we investigated. Chap. 3 articulates the diachronic development of the Stone Building Site – our main excavation. The city defences are described in Chap. 4. Chap. 5 summarises the Himyarite graves and tombs which complements the discussion on architecture. The discussion of the pottery in Chap. 6 appears provides the basic data (see below). Two and three-dimensional sculpture come to bear in Chap. 7. The better dated context of the eastern courtyard wall of the Stone Building forms the basis of this discussion. Time and space allow discussion of only the most significant examples, the rest being simply reproduced in the image base HeidICON. Chap. 8 summarises the small finds, that is, glass, metal, stone and other materials. In Chap. 9 a Greek inscription of the Roman period from the site museum forms an ex-

ception to the rule of publishing only finds from the excavation. Surface and excavated *musnad* inscriptions appear in Chap. 10. Chap. 11 and 12 summarise the botanical and zoological remains mostly from the Stone Building site. This leads up to the absolute chronology which now can appear in Chap. 13, building on the explanation of the stratigraphy set down in the discussion of the Stone Building in Chap. 3. At the beginning of

our work, no-one had written much about the local place-names, which gave impetus to Chap. 14.

The text is rounded off in Chap. 15 with a discussion of the conservation measures which we undertook at the site and brief mention of the stone identifications. The net result of the excavation is synthesized in brief fashion in Chap. 16. The remaining bibliography and indices support the documentation.

<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Sabaic</i>	<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Sabaic</i>	<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Sabaic</i>
' (except when initial) '		ز z	z	ف f	f
ب b	b	س s	s ¹	ق q (g)	q
ت t	t	ش š	s ²	ك k	k
ث ṭ	ṭ	-	s ³	ل l	l
ج ġ	g	ص š	š	م m	m
ح ḥ	ḥ	ض ḍ	ḍ	ن n	n
ح ḥ	ḥ	ط ṭ	ṭ	ه h	h
د d	d	ظ ṣ	ṣ	و w	w
ذ ḏ (ḏ)	ḏ	ع ʿ	ʿ	ي y	y
ر r	r	غ ġ	ġ		

Vowels diphthongs

ā, ī, ū, a, i, u aw, ay

Arabic ʾ a; at (construct state)

ال (Arabic article), al- and 'l- (even before the antero-palatals)

Table 0.1. System of Transliteration of Semitic Characters.

Editor's Foreword

With great pleasure the *Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft* presents hereby a volume from the pen of Paul Yule. Like hardly any other, Paul worked archaeologically in the most diverse areas of the Near East, in addition to the Indian Subcontinent. For years he devoted himself to the Persian-Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. More than 15 years ago he turned his attention to Zafar, capital of the Himyarite Empire. This centre dominated Arabia from the late 3rd to the 6th centuries and is one of the last expressions of Old South Arabian Culture just prior to the coming of Islam.

The fieldwork had three emphases: topographic recording and mapping, development of a site museum and excavations. The most elaborate and difficult contribution was the mapping conceived as the basis for further research. The intention was to document the preservation of the ruins which worsened continuously over the years. Numerous surface finds found their way into museums in the Yemen and elsewhere. They remain, however, strays in need of a context. Excavation was to remedy this problem.

By means of twelve field seasons, financed by different financial sources Paul and his teams succeeded in illuminating many aspects of old Zafar and assembling them into a greater whole. Typically, Paul made use of state of the art investigative methods so that natural science, epigraphic and other aspects came to fruition.

Happily, an established philological institution, namely the chair for Semitics of the Seminar for the Languages and Cultures of the Near East of Heidelberg University, has been Paul's long-term academic base.

Today not only has the chronology become far more secure – the years of difficult debates regarding Old South Arabian chronology have lapsed – but also stylistic attributions of sculpture, information regarding historical geography and a ceramic sequence have taken on a clearer profile.

The Board of Directors of the DOG unanimously agreed that a publication of the Zafar project in book form would motivate others and awaken interest in ancient Yemen to enable an overview at least one of the most important archaeological sites and serve as a scale for future research in this difficult milieu.

We thank the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* not only for its support over several years, but also for subvention for the production of this elaborate volume. We also thank the Harrassowitz Verlag for their professional support of the printing.

Halle (Saale), 21 January 2013

Felix Blocher

Secretary of the *Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft*

Abbreviations

DSP	Damar Survey Project, Chicago University Oriental Institute
GOAM	General Organisation for Archaeology and Museums
LS	lower surface
lz	<i>Laufzettel</i> , i.e. serial find slips of the Heidelberg expedition
op	excavation activity
pz	excavation photo number in HeidICON
prof.	profile drawing in HeidICON
sf	small finds
us	upper surface
UTM	universal transverse mercator
z	Ẓafār project number
zm	Ẓafār Museum inventory number
ZVM	Ẓafār Virtual Museum http://zafar.iwr.uni-heidelberg.de

Period names:

late/post Ḥimyarite period	525 – 2 nd ¼ 7 th cent. CE
empire period	c. 270 – 525 CE
early Ḥimyarite period	110 BCE – c. 270 CE

The Image Base HeidICON and Text Server Propyleum-DOK

The images published herein suffice to illustrate the text, but are a mere fraction of the total of 25,000 drawings, and photos (52 GB) which arose during the course of our work. Opening any excavation report on Arabia, one has the impression that there cannot be enough photos to document the many aspects of the fieldwork. By mid 2010 3000 selected images in the internet image-base became available. At the time of publication this lies at c. 4700. Once you have entered the HeidICON pool (<http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/pool/zafar>) SKVO “Zafar/Yemen”) the images can be searched by means of key words. These can be viewed and downloaded gratis from the HeidICON project of the Heidelberg University Library. These resources complement selected writings of the author regarding Arabia stored in the document server (<http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/propylaeumdok/yule>) which contains the preliminary reports in searchable digital form.

Table 0.1 shows the sorting principles and key words. If a photo number is known, one can search by means of it or just by a key word. Whatever is to be searched you enter into the search window in the upper left in the HeidICON mask. Examples in Table 0.1 include for instance, jewellery, small find, sculpture, or team. Some objects are listed in a special sense: Museum refers to the on-site museum at Zafār. ‘Lot’ is a group of objects that are photographed together, most often sculpture or glass fragments.

Commonplace abbreviations which we use include these for photos of the excavation and its artefacts:

lz04~001 in op400~024

lz=*Laufzettel*, artefacts or artefact lots are cited by the year and number of their serialised find slips

op400~025a

An excavation operation is cited by its operation number.

pz400~091

An excavated context is cited in a photo by its pz number.

z097

A house, building, wall or floor is cited by its context number.

z400~401

excavation z400, context 401 in the main excavation landscapes may include several contexts: Marib

A particular category of find, a place, period, material etc. can be retrieved.

z_asabi3	Zafār, al-‘Aṣabī, image 3
z_e01	Zafār, east side, image 1
z_s01	Zafār, south side, image 1
z_w01	Zafār, west side, image 1

title/ object	detail/ element	artist/ author	location/ building	inventory number/ shelf mark	description	material/technique	size/ measure- ments	site of discovery	context of discovery	epoch	locale systematic	comment
script	pier pivot stone plan pyramidal block				king kyma leaf-cross leaf-shrub leaves leopard lion lionine man man with crown miniature column monster moulding ornament panel pomegranate quadruped queen of Himyar rosette running spiral sheep shield sphinxes unidentifiable vines vulture well nymph relief wing winged anthropomorph winged figure woman woman with baby zodiac			Girbat al-Gim Girbat al-U'war Hadaman Hirran Wadi al-Haf Huda Dhahab Husn Raydan Jabal Uthrob Maqari' Mawah Mawkal Medinat' Ubi Qabr al-Yahudi Qism al-Dayir Qitat al-Magil Ra's al-Sillah Sedd al- Ghalighah Sedd al-Madhla Sedd al- Sha'hani Sedd dhi Argah Sedd dhi Musa Sehereh Sha'haf'in Sh'abat al- Sh'abat dhi Merfad Sh'abat dhi Merfad/Gusr Sh'abat Qabr, al-Yahudi'ah Stone Building unknown				
	inscription mason mark											
context	dendrogram magnetometer overview plan profile											
landscape	map overview reconstruction											
charcoal	plant remains											
museum	plan poster sign overview											
village	House villager											
team	name											
cemetery	overview plan profile											

Table 0.2 Sorting system of HeidICON-Zafar/Yemen.

List of figures

Frontispiece Zafār/al-Ğaḥw in 1970 (above) and in 2010 (below) viewed to the north.

- 1.1 Natural space divisions of South Arabia.
- 1.2 Precipitation in South Arabia.
- 1.3 Geology of the area around Zafār, 1:250.000.
- 1.4 False-colour QuickBird satellite image of Zafār and its area (the rectangle shows the general site plan, Folio 1), recorded 01.04.2004.
- 1.5 Map of Arabia, 4th–5th centuries CE.
- 1.6 Map of the main Old South Arabian towns.
- 1.7 Map of places cited (Tactical Pilotage Chart, sheet K-6A, edition 3-GSGS).
- 1.8 2000, view of the magazine of the site museum with the finds dumped on the floor in places to a depth of 1 m.
- 2.1 Schematic map of present-day Zafār.
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Participants

1998

Celia Bergoffen
Şalih ud-Dīn
‘Ali ‘Abdul Kawī
Manfred Klein
Rainer Krahe
‘Abdul Razaik
Tawfīq Tağud-Dīn
Paul Yule

2000

Charlotte Bank
Şalih ud-Dīn
Bettina Hamm
Thomas Hamm
Manuel Hofmann
‘Ali Abdul Kawī
Matthias Lang
‘Amīn al-Mawrī
Katherin Sachsenberg
Thomas Schupp
Karsten Thiele
Carsten Witzel
Paul Yule

2002

Ḥālīd al-‘Ansī
Pascal Garn
Jens Gutperle
‘Alī Abdul Kawī
Mechthild Kolb
Petra Krebs
Markus Roth
‘Isa ‘Alī al-Ša’bani
Aḥmed Šugar
Alexander Sima
Paul Yule

2003

Ḥālīd al-‘Ansī
Şalih ud-Dīn
Frank Krämer
Martin Mayer

Simone Mühl
Renate Rechmann
Bašīr al-Samī
Markus Schicht
Christian Weides
Paul Yule

2004

Ḥālīd al-‘Ansī
Corinna Borchert
Michel Blumenroth
Burkart Dähne
Anja Dreiser
Kristina Franke
Cornelius Meyer
‘Alī al-Naqīb
Şalih al-Numayrī
Elke Schmidgen-Hager
Paul Yule

2005

Ḥālīd al-‘Ansī
Nils Carstensen
‘Alī ‘Abdul-Karīm al-Ḥakīm
Mechthild Kolb
Christoph Rusch
Holger Schwarzer
‘Isa ‘Alī al-Ša’bani
Paul Yule

2006

Ḥālīd al-‘Ansī
Rafīq Mḥd al-‘Arāmī
Alexander Darus
Kristina Franke
Michaela Fritz
Julia Glag
‘Alī ‘Abdul-Karīm al-Ḥakīm
Manfred Rösch
Cornelia Ruppert
Regina Uhl
Paul Yule

2007

Ḥālīd al-‘Ansī
 Nabīl Ṣalīḥ al-Aṣwal
 Kristina Franke
 Martin Gruber
 ‘Alī ‘Abdul-Karīm al-Ḥakīm
 Jonas Hohenadel
 Joel Orrin
 Cornelia Ruppert
 ‘Isa ‘Alī al-Ṣa‘bani
 Irene Steuer-Siegmund
 Anna-Maria Ungelenk
 Hans-Jürgen Welz
 Paul Yule

2008

Ḥālīd al-‘Ansī
 Rafīq Mḥd al-‘Arāmī
 Ingo Buchmann
 Johanna Greska
 Elske Fischer
 Martin Gruber
 Jens Gutperle
 ‘Alī ‘Abdul-Karīm al-Ḥakīm
 Curt Hilbrig
 Sharlyn Huillier
 Fath ‘Alī al-Ḡulob
 ‘Abdu Tawāb Mišraqī
 Tobias Schröder

Stella Tomasi
 Carmen Wiener-Steiner
 Paul Yule

2009

Rafīq Mḥd al-Arāmī
 Dorothea Blome
 Naṣwan Hussain Ḍaban
 ‘Alī ‘Abdul-Karīm al-Ḥakīm
 Curt Hilbrig
 Kathryn Kelley
 Elisabeth Monamy
 Michael Pfanner
 Fuād Mḥd al-Qašim
 Irene Steuer-Siegmund
 Christine Veidt
 Hans-Jürgen Welz
 David Wenge
 Paul Yule

2010

Martine Brucker
 ‘Alī ‘Abdul-Karīm al-Ḥakīm
 Curt Hilbrig
 Jörg Lindenbeck
 Rašīd Ṭabīt al-Nagar
 Fuād Mḥd al-Qašim
 David Wenge
 Paul Yule