**The Kingdom of Saba and the Queen of Sheba**

The myth of the Queen of Sheba can be traced to ancient sacred texts. She is mentioned in the Qur'an and many Arab and Persian tales, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament, as well as in the Ethiopian Holy book, known as *Kebra Negast*. All her stories narrate the encounter between the Queen of Sheba and wise Solomon of Jerusalem, King of Israel, whose reign is generally dated to the 10th century BCE. Common to all the stories, the Queen of Sheba arrives in Jerusalem with a great entourage carrying spices, gold, and precious stones.

The Queen in the Islamic Tradition

"Behold! The country is ruled by a Queen who has been given everything and she has a tremendous throne." (Qur'an 27:23)

The story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is elaborated in much more detail in the Qur'an, *Sûra of the Ants (27, 15-44)*. Although she is unnamed in the Qur'an, in other Islamic stories she is known as Bilqîs and her kingdom is identified as the Kingdom of Saba.

In the Islamic tales, Solomon is told by his hoopoe bird about the Kingdom of Saba and a queen who, like her people, worships the sun. Solomon sends to the queen a letter brought by the hoopoe, commanding her obedience. When the Queen decides to go personally to Solomon to pay respects, Solomon asks that her throne be transported and disguised to see if she will recognize it. The sûra also narrates an episode where the Queen mistakes a glass floor for a pool of water. When she raises the hem of her gown to avoid getting wet, she reveals a hairy foot of a goat, a symbol of her pagan origins.
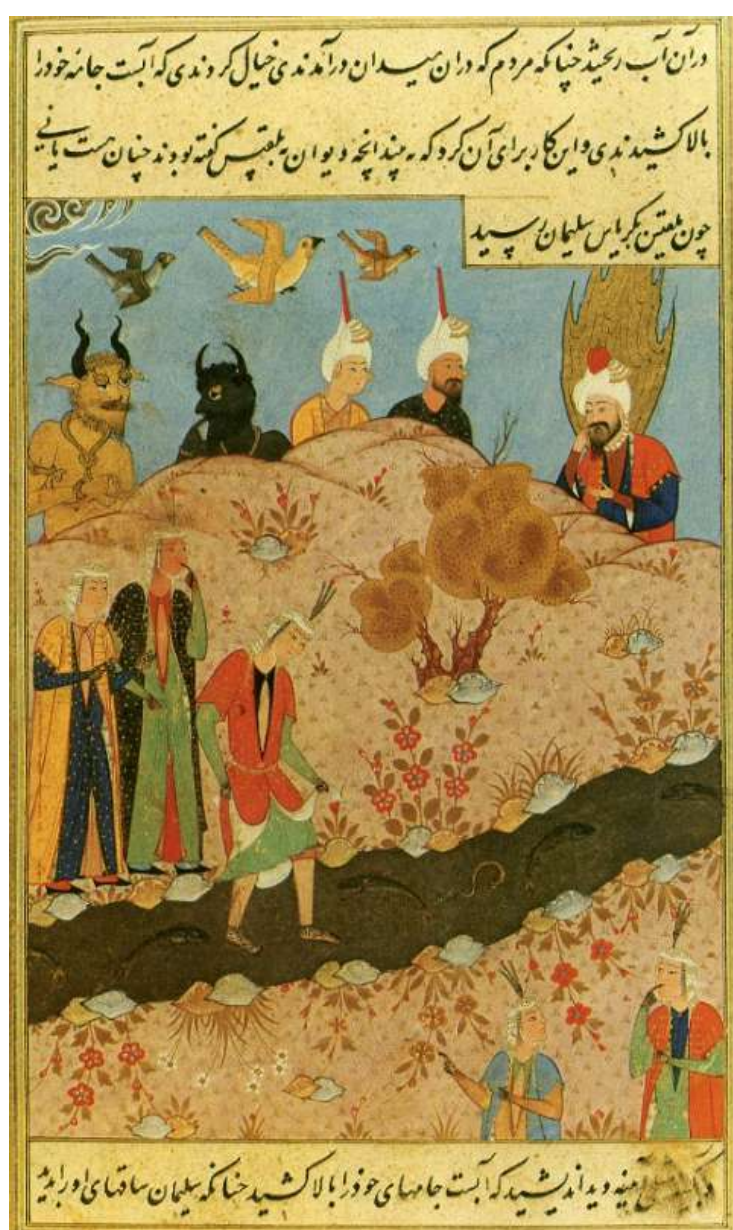
Queen Bilqîs seeing the fish under the crystal floor instinctively lifts her dress. Above Solomon is surrounded by dignitaries, birds and jinn (Philby 1981).

The Arabian Camel

Thanks to its extraordinary physical characteristics, perfectly adapted to the desert environment, the Arabian camel or dromedary plays a key role in the caravan route for long distance trade.

Camel graves have been found on the eastern and southern fringes of the Arabian desert, especially in Hadhramawt, where they are either isolated or grouped together so as to form actual cemeteries. Some are built in the same way as human tombs; others are simple pits edged and covered with stone slabs. Usually, a grave contains a single skeleton. In only one case, a man and a camel were found in the same tomb. These graves date to the centuries immediately before and after the beginning of the Common Era.

Merchants often dedicated stone, bronze or terracotta camel figurines to the gods who protected themselves and their precious animals during their long journeys.

The *safīnat al-barr,* or 'ship of the desert' was not only a beast of burden and mount, but also a provider of milk, meat, wool and leather.

The al-Sabah Collection
LNS 395 S

Examples of dromedary figurines in stone and bronze
The al-Sabah Collection.
LNS 1715 M

Resins

The frankincense is produced by plant species belonging to the *Burseraceae* family, the most prized of which, the *Boswellia* sacra, grew in ancient Southern Arabia, specifically in the Yemeni and Omani regions known as Dhofar. The trees or shrubs require such a precise balance of monsoon rains, temperature and soil composition that their natural habitat is limited to areas in South Arabia, and Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea across the Red Sea.

The resins produced by trees or shrubs protect the leaves and buds from heat and wind. The plants are 'tapped' by making short, deep cuts into the trunk with a special tool to stimulate the production and excretion of the resins. The secretions eventually harden into drops ('tears') that are harvested by hand.

Incense was burned as part of rituals, temple offerings and funerary ceremonies, and to scent and purify the houses, as still today.

The al-Sabah Collection.
LNS 396 Sa

The al-Sabah Collection.
LNS 427 S

Modern Yemeni incense burners.
Courtesy G. Canova

The horse in Arabia Felix

Several sources can be relied upon to date the introduction of the horse to South Arabia. These are external sources, such as Greek and Roman authors, and internal sources, i.e. inscriptions and material culture (statues, objects, and petroglyphs).

South Arabian epigraphic sources suggest that the use of the horse begins to become widespread towards the end of the 1st century CE, and this hypothesis is corroborated by the Classic historical sources, specifically the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a handbook (mid-1st century CE) for sailors and traders who sailed between Egypt and India. In the *Periplus* **horses** are mentioned among the merchandise that were unloaded from ships in the ports of Mawzaʿ (Mouza), and Kanē (Qaniʾ, Biʾr ʿAlī), for princes and kings respectively of Sabaʾ and dhu-Raydān, and of Hadhramawt.

Although the depiction of the horse in South Arabian artworks is rare, its presence and purpose fall within two main categories, votive and celebratory, and both categories are expressions of prestige and wealth.

As for the votive offering to gods, it was traditional to offer images of animals whose offering is recorded in the texts are wild and domestic animals: the ibex, the bull, and the camel mainly, but there are also cases of offerings of bronze statues of horses, with or without horsemen.

All the bronze horses, both in a rearing or standing stance, have a common characteristic, namely, the presence of the harness.

Najrān (al-Ukhdūd)
photo S. Antonini 2014

Reconstruction of thea horsman on the bronze horse from Ghaymān.
Dumbarton Oaks Museum, Washington DC
S. Antonini 2021, p. 26, fig. 8

Courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, National Archeological Museum of Naples. Photo Georgio Albano
Mosaic: MANN Napoli, inv. no. 10020;
Bronze statue: MANN Napoli, inv. no. 4996

The Ghaymān (15 km South-East of Ṣanʿāʾ) equestrian horse in bronze (Dumbarton Oaks Museum, Washington DC) (h ca 1 m), is presented in a rearing stance (*Levade* position), and this iconography could be based on the heroic image of Alexander the Great. The mosaic of the Casa del Fauno and the bronze statue, both kept at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (Italy), show Alexander wearing the armour of Hellenistic type, with cuirass and cloak (1st century BCE). The most meaningful location of the Ghaymān horse (in pairs) could have been within the public place, for examples a palace, or perhaps a temple, as suggested by the dedication to the divinity dhāt Baʿdān.

A fragmentary South Arabian stela showing a horseman with a spear and an oval shield, followed by an infantryman with a small round shield and an axe.
S. Antonini and Ch. J. Robin 2017, p. 33, fig. 9

A bronze plaque with silver inlay depicting, on both sides of monograms, a combat scene between two horsemen (Zafār, Yemen).
Photo S. Antonini

In South Arabia, the horse was certainly the exclusive property of high-ranking people, as suggested by the author of the *Periplus* who testified that horses were gifted to the kings of the region. As in other cultures, it is likely that the horse changed the nature and rules of warfare. The use of the horse in battle is confirmed by South Arabian inscriptions reporting a progressive increase in the number of horses from the 1st to the 4th century CE.

During the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, the iconography of the horse underwent a process of adaptation and familiarization. It was also incorporated as votive imagery, on ritual objects and funerary stelae depicting the life of the deceased. To date there is no evidence that in Yemen the horse, considered a valuable asset such as camels, was sacrificed and buried with the owner.

The hunter on horseback in this alabaster stela is represented as he spears a dromedary (Louvre Museum in Paris). AO 1029 ; LOUVRE 9 ; CIH 445; RES 635, ADD.3195 ; CALVET 1997, 18
© RMN/Musée du Louvre

A lion hunt on horseback sculpted on a side of the limestone capital from Huṣn al-ʿUrr, Hadhramawt (National Museum of Yemen in ʿAdan).
S. Antonini 2012, p. 146. Fig. 160

In Southern Arabia, both the hunt and the combat themes involving horses are expressions of the political power of the nobility, as well as social prestige. These iconographies provide the opportunity to create not only heroic images for public display, but also decorative objects of value and elegance. The expression of these themes in South Arabian artworks demonstrates not only the great resonance of the military and cultural achievements of the rulers in the South Arabian collective imaginary, but also speaks about the appropriation of symbols and possibly values by the Himyarite aristocratic class.

The First Roman Emperor, Octavianus Caesar Augustus

Gaius Iulius Caesar Octavianus was the first emperor of Rome (63 BCE – CE 14). When his great-uncle Julius Caesar was assassinated, Octavianus, 18 years old, forged an alliance with Marcus Antonius, famed general under Caesar, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, and they eliminated political opponents. Later, however, relations between Octavianus and Marcus Antonius began to deteriorate. Octavianus denounced Antonius, and the Senate and people of Rome proclaimed him 'enemy of the Fatherland' because he had allied himself closely with Cleopatra VII, the queen of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt.

After the naval battle of Actium (Greece, 31 BCE), in which Antonius and Cleopatra were defeated, in 27 BCE Octavianus gets the title of Augustus, which means Venerable, Magestic. Augustus expanded the Roman empire, annexing Egypt, part of Spain, areas of central Europe, and even lands in the Middle East, such as Judaea in CE 6.

Augustus Caesar is best known for initiating the *Pax Romana* (Roman peace) or *Pax Augusta*, a largely peaceful period identified as a golden age for two centuries. From 27 BCE and 180 CE (death of Marcus Aurelius, the last of the 'Five Good Emperors'), Rome imposed order and prosperous stability on a world long convulsed by conflict.

The first Roman Emperor,Octavianus CaesarAugustus (Inv. 2290 Musei Vaticani Augusto di Prima Porta)
© Musei Vaticani Augusto di Prima Porta

The Roman Empire under Augustus. Yellow represents the extent of the Republic in 31 BCE, while green represents gradually conquered territories under the reign of Augustus, and pink areas represent client states.

The Evolution of Customs

The changes affecting the cultural and artistic environment that took place in the East following Alexander the Great's conquests gradually began to be felt indirectly even in South Arabia, where traditional costumes underwent various transformations, apparent across all art forms.

During the 1st century CE, contacts with the Greco-Roman world thus changed the figurative idiom that was used for portraying South Arabian rulers, sovereigns, and princes. They brought about a radical change breaking with local tradition, on the one hand by adopting the Hellenistic **cuirass**, and on the other wearing a **toga** (a long piece of cloth wrapped around the body and hanging loosely from the shoulders worn by ancient Roman citizens in public), showing both military duties and virtues in public contexts.
This transformation can be seen in the last of the three statues of the kings of Awsān (ancient South Arabian kingdom in the Wādī Markha, Yemen), who shows clear Greco-Roman influence in the clothing. His two predecessors maintain the traditional blouse and a kilt (*fūṭa*).

Over the course of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE South Arabian sovereigns chose to be also depicted with the **equestrian statue**, as evidenced by the find of a bronze horse in Ghaymān, Yemen (now in the Dumbarton Oaks Museum, Washington D.C.). This format celebrates their athletic and martial abilities.

Alongside this new and charismatic self-image, the Himyarite princes also embraced the idea of the statue as a heroic model of **armed nudity**. This was borrowed from the Hellenistic tradition and transmitted by the Roman civilization. Examples include the two colossal statues of the Himyarite kings Dhamarʿalī Yuhabirr and his son Thaʾrān, coregents of Sabaʾ and dhu-Raydān, discovered at al-Nakhla al-Ḥamrāʾ (Yemen).

The alabaster statues of three kings of
Awsān represented in chronological
succession (father, son and grandson;
1st BCE – 1st CE).
Aden, National Museum, NAM 661, 609, 612
S. Antonini 2012, p. 91, fgs. 96-98

'Treasures'

Maritime trade with the Mediterranean and specifically with the Roman world after the Aelius Gallus expedition to Arabia Felix, brought radical lifestyle changes in Southern Arabia. The various silverwares found in funerary contexts of the Wādī Ḍuraʾ in Yemen, as well as these of The al-Sabah Collection, can be considered in all respects as 'treasures', even if the circumstances and contexts are different.

The artistic component of the Romans reached very high levels of prestige not only in the ornamental arts, such as sculpture, painting and architecture, but also in the art of silversmithing. The 'treasures' found in Italy and in the Roman provinces are shining and famous examples:

> The 'treasure of Boscoreale' (near Pompei, southern Italy), composed of 108 of exquisite pieces of silverware, as well as gold coins and jewels (1st century CE), now mostly kept at the Louvre Museum in Paris;

> The 'Kaiseraugst treasure', found in the late Roman fortress (*Castrum Rauracense*) of Kaiseraugst (Caesar Augustus, the Roman Augusta Raurica) near Basel (Switzerland) at the border of the Roman Empire along the Rhine. This silver hoard is considered the largest Roman banqueting set to date (4th century CE);

In the imperial period, both within and beyond the Roman Empire, these, as other 'treasures', composed of toiletries as well as silver tableware, were widely produced, and were viewed as luxury products. They were popular vehicles for iconographic motifs – heroes, deities and mythological scenes – extremely varied, with many themes centering on Dionysus' Bacchic retinue (thiasus), with satyrs and bacchants, elements of sacred scenery, altars and other accessories. There are also pastoral and hunting scenes, whose subject matter is derived from mosaic cycles depicting life on large rural estates. All subjects depicted in accordance with a tradition that relied on the earliest models. The growing predilection for luxury goods, typical of the Roman imperial period, also involves the rich South Arabian aristocracies.

The Boscoreale treasure.
Musée du Louvre – Q178624
© RMN/Musée du Louvre

The Kaiseraugst treasure.
Photo © Augusta Raurica

The Temple

The oldest South Arabian temples, such as those of Awam in Marib and Aw'alan in Sirwah, present an oval layout, reminiscent of sacred enclosures surrounded by nature. Later temples from the 7th – 6th century BCE, have a quadrangular layout, and are divided into two categories: hypostyle temples and temples with a courtyard. The first type, characteristic of the Hadramawt and Jawf regions, is comprised of a single room with the ceiling supported by two or more rows of pillars. This layout remained unchanged over time and was used in several medieval mosques. The other type of temple is more common, particularly in Sabaean territory, and presents a large courtyard, at times with porches, in front of the building's rectangular space, while the posterior third is occupied by cells.

The temple's furniture consists of statues, thrones, altars, offering and sacrifice tables, enriched with friezes of sculpted ibexes. The temple was the residence of the god and could serve as a refuge for the devotees. The temple, in the name of the god, also possessed wealth, such as land and herds of animals, resulting from donations and the proceeds from taxation on resins and first produce of the season. The priests of the temple administered the property and safeguarded the religious practices.
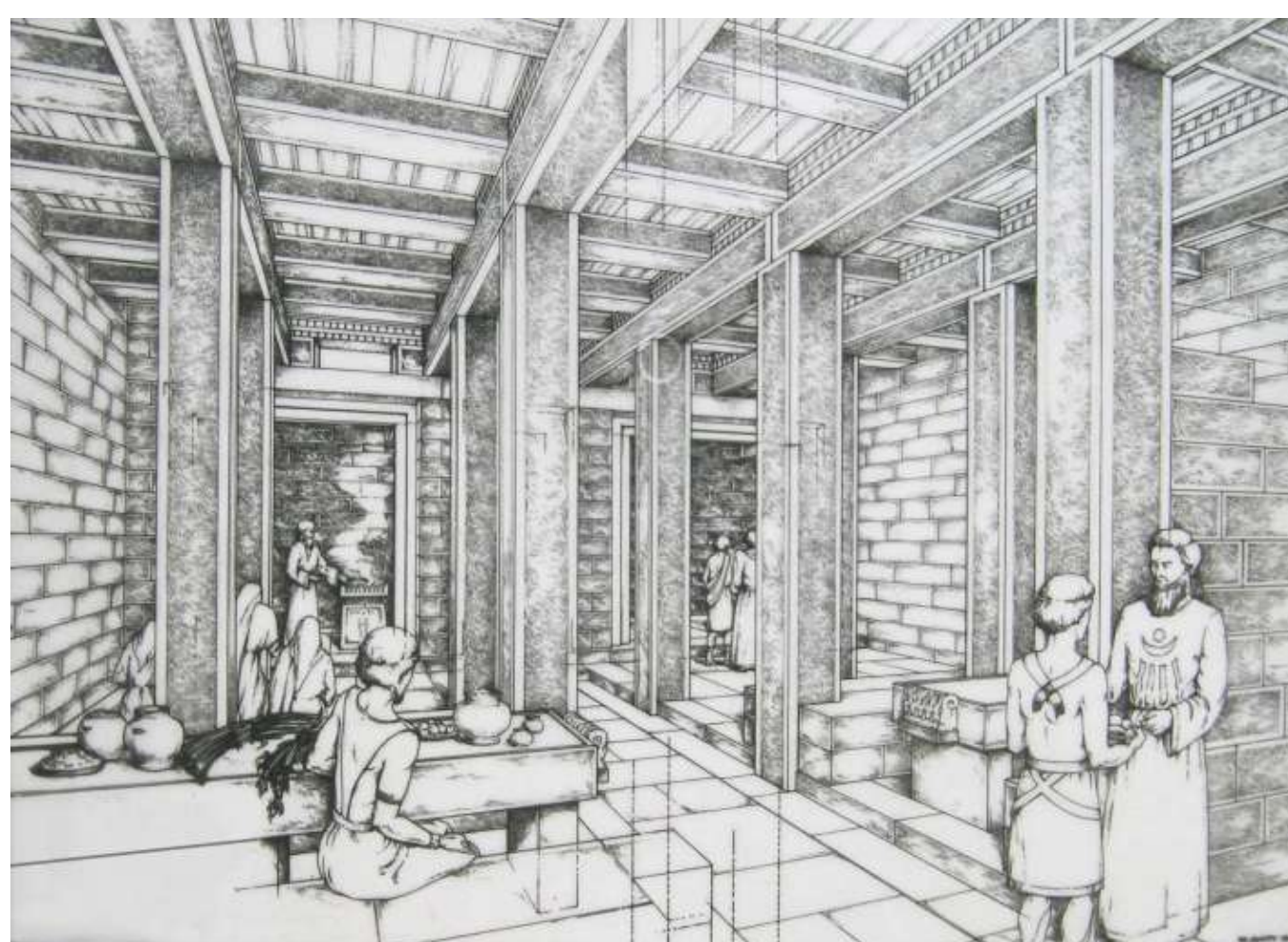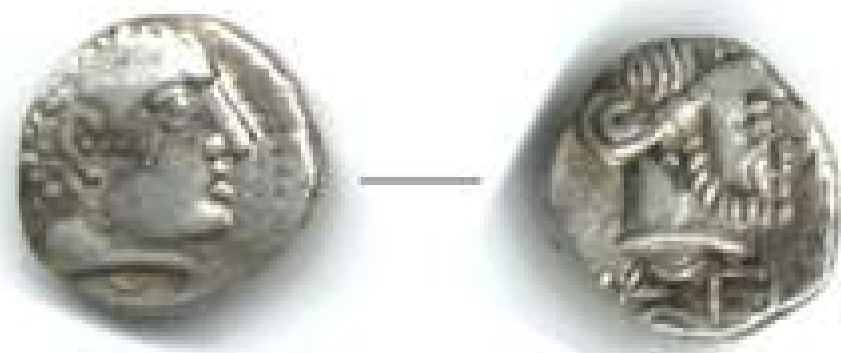

The hypostyle temple dedicated to the confessor-healer god Nakrah, Barāqish, ancient Yathill (Yemeni Jawf). Courtesy of MAIRY

Coinage

Examples of South Arabian Coins

A. Qatabanian silver coins in imitation of Athenian coins. The obverse bears the head of Athena and the reverse the owl, with wide, round eyes (4th – 3rd century BCE).

B. Qatabanian silver coin of the 'series with two heads' (2nd century BCE).

C. The observe bears the head of Emperor Augustus. The reverse features Athena's owl (1st century CE).

D. Himyarite silver coin of the 'series with two heads' (1st – 2nd century CE).

E. Sabaean silver coin of the "series with *bucranium*" (early 2nd – mid-3rd centuries CE).

Courtesy of Antonini 2012, p. 127-129, fgs. 131-136

Inscriptions

There are several categories of epigraphic texts. It is important to distinguish between them because each category, which represents a specific use of writing, casts light on a different facet of society.

The inscriptions are so called **'monumental'** because they were often carved in temples, palaces, or city walls, on a grand scale. They only give us information about the ruling classes. Most commemorate the performance of religious ceremonies or the completion of building works. A very few acted as a kind of chronicle, summarizing the events of a life.

The **'documents of record'** are carved into wooden sticks with a stylus. The alphabet takes a cursive form which complicates reading and interpretation. The content of documents of record is always practical, covering a small range of concerns: contracts, correspondence, oracles, lists of people and sometimes a scribe's writing exercises. They differ from the monumental inscriptions in that their substance is much closer to daily. These texts are particularly useful for providing information about economic activity (especially trading), contractual law and certain aspects of family life.

'Graffiti' are short texts carved by non-professionals. They can be found in large numbers on rocks near sanctuaries in the countryside, in areas where shepherds grazed their flocks and along some cross country routes. These are generally very short inscriptions, giving the identity of the pilgrim, shepherd, or traveller, indicating both his own name and the name of his father, as well as his lineage in the case of the upper classes.

The chronology of the inscriptions is largely based on **palaeography**, that is the study of the evolution of script, which in principle allows us to determine whether one document is earlier or later than another.

The main **evolutions** concern the shapes of the letters (which only vary in their detail, for example by inclined segments that had previously been horizontal); the relationship between the width and the height of the rectangle in which the letters fit; the treatment of segments, rectilinear to begin with and later curved; the treatment of segment extremities, initially unadorned, later widening into a triangle and finally given a small pointed triangle (apex); and the addition of decorative elements on some letters, typical of the last centuries (4th to 6th centuries CE).