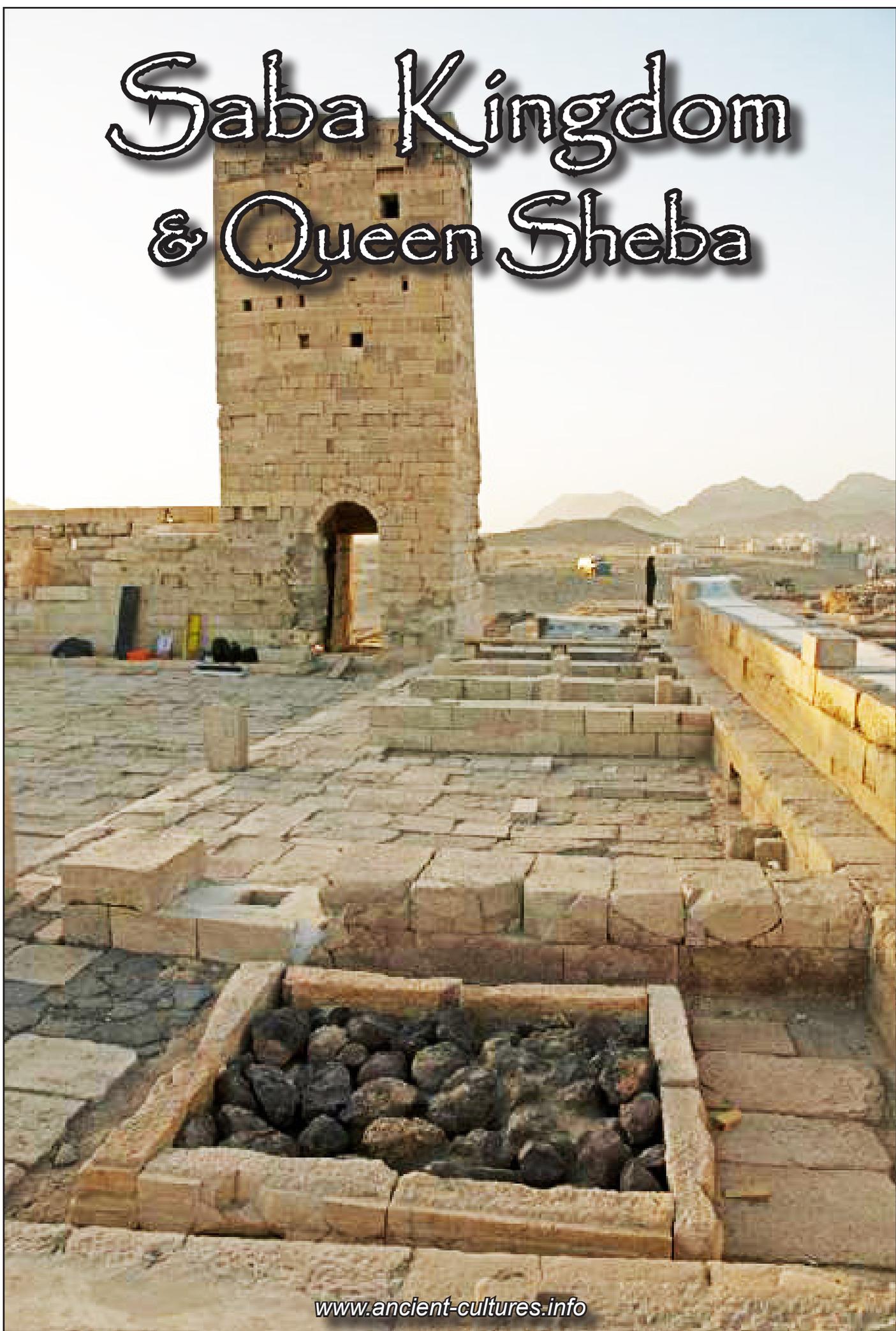


Saba Kingdom & Queen Sheba





Introduction

The Saba Kingdom lasted for over 1,000 years starting about 2,800 years ago. Nevertheless, there is so little information available that archaeologists call the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula terra incognita from a prehistorical perspective. This mysterious empire is the most ancient kingdom in today's Yemen.

The area was also called Arabia Felix by Romans because of its wealth from incense trade. During its heydays the Saba Empire extended from the Indian Ocean to the southern part of the Red Sea and far north into modern day Saudi Arabia.

Its wealth was based on trade with high value goods such as incense and their caravans traveled 2,000 kilometers north up to Mesopotamia. But their armies never moved further north than to the famous oasis city of al-Faw a few hundred kilometers north of ancient fort of al-Ukhdoud today called Najran.

Until 525 BC Sabaeans were called Mukarrib meaning priest king. That indicates they exercised a dual role. Later the Saba state structure was based on a trinity power balance with kings, gods represented by priests and tribes headed by sheikhs. Saba created their unique pantheon, own calendar and dating system. This was adopted by surrounding kingdoms as most did not have their own.

Sabaeans History

Based on archaeological findings Saba

emerged so to speak out of the blue with a fully developed culture and ability to erect major buildings. Little is known about Sabaeans origin and activities at their new home area during the 400 and more years before 800 BC. Experts assume that a well developed city state like culture immigrated from the north and founded Saba with its first capital Sirwah.

History on the Arabian Peninsula was governed by military power driven by economic resources and wealth from trade. In various military campaigns Saba subdued other smaller kingdoms. In 450 BC Saba conquered Awsan, which became part of its vassal Qataban. Only a few years later Saba experienced internal power struggles. So Qataban and Ma'in became independent and formed a liaison with growing Hadramaut. They created a new trade route cutting out Saba from the profitable incense trade.

But Saba gained strength again and reconquered Qataban. Over the decades it was an ongoing fight for dominance between these two powers. Saba later lost again, but regained strength to take back Qataban plus other regional kingdoms. This winning and losing of territories went on for about four hundred years. Finally by 300 AD Saba lost importance and was fully controlled by new super power Himyar based at Zafar.

Part of this volatile history was also the famous Roman expedition into Arabia Felix in 24 BC to conquer the golden city of Marib. Officially this

campaign happened with Nabataean help, but they did everything to cleverly sabotage this Roman expedition. An interesting story, for more information please see my article about it on this website.

Famous Queen Sheba

From 1,200 BC unknown high priests were ruling for 400 years the emerging Saba Empire. But as the most intriguing ruler emerged Queen Sheba. She came to historical fame by visiting King Solomon in Jerusalem 950 BC and making him a huge present of 50 tons of gold. Sheba spent some years at Solomons palace and possibly they also had one child together, which later became the first king of Ethiopia.

Queen Sheba was also called Bilqis in Arabic, or Makeda in Ethiopian, or Nicaula in Latin. So far, her palace has not been found yet. It is not certain if it was situated in Yemen or in Ethiopia or even further south in Somalia as the Saba Empire extended on both sides of the Red Sea. Experts assume a possible alternative palace location in Axum. Because evidence of a palace building was found under an ancient church there.

Oldest Inscriptions

Archaeologists excavated at the main temple in Sirwah the oldest inscription dated 715 BC and created by ruler Yithar'amar Watar bin Yakrub Malik. This first Sabaic inscription with seven lines and 500 words was neatly engraved in eight centimeter let-

ters on a seven meter long monolithic stone block weighing 30 tons. The text is naming this king and his various war activities conquering neighboring kingdoms. A second inscription of similar size was found at the same temple created by King Karib'il Watar proclaiming Saba as a kingdom about 25 years later. Both kings were already mentioned in Assyrian annals which underlines their importance.

First Excavations

You have to know that excavations in Yemen are a difficult undertaking, because archaeologists need the consent of the local tribesmen and not central government. Regular local unrest poses a risk and Yemen is well known for kidnappings against ransom. First excavations took place from 1991 for three years and were interrupted by local power struggles. They were taken up again from 2001 to 2009 when the recent outbreak of war stopped them again.

First Sabaean Capital

About 700 BC the first mentioned Sabaean capital was Sirwah lying 40 kilometers west of Marib at an altitude of 1,500 meters. About 10,000 years ago the valley was covered by a large 50 square kilometer lake. But after 6,000 years it dried out. First settlement traces at Sirwah go back to that period.

The first Saba capital was erected on a natural plateau measuring only two hundred meters square. This acropolis housed a big temple and four other cult buildings plus a palace.





The temple was attributed for moon god Almaqah and turned into an important regional religious center. The oval city walls were over ten meters high with a portion still in situ today and had only one entry with tower. The first building phase goes back to 1,000 BC and the final extension is about 800 meters long.

The city also included outside its walls living quarters, workshops, cemetery and traces of extensive water management structures. The important alabaster quarry of al-Mahdarah about 15 kilometers away was supplying artisans with the precious material for sculptures. Interestingly Sirwah did not lie on the important incense route, but nevertheless benefitted from it. The capital existed contemporary to Old Marib, which later became the new capital of Saba.

Important Temple

It was erected about 800 BC on the ruins of three previous buildings possibly temples the first being built around 200 years earlier. At the time its size measuring 62 by 75 meters was huge. It consisted of an outer courtyard, ante court and a monumental staircase leading up to the propylon with six square columns with a height of eight meters. With a total height of 15 meters it was an impressive temple dedicated to main god Almaqah or Ilimquh.

Huge Dining Rooms

When excavations started only the top of the

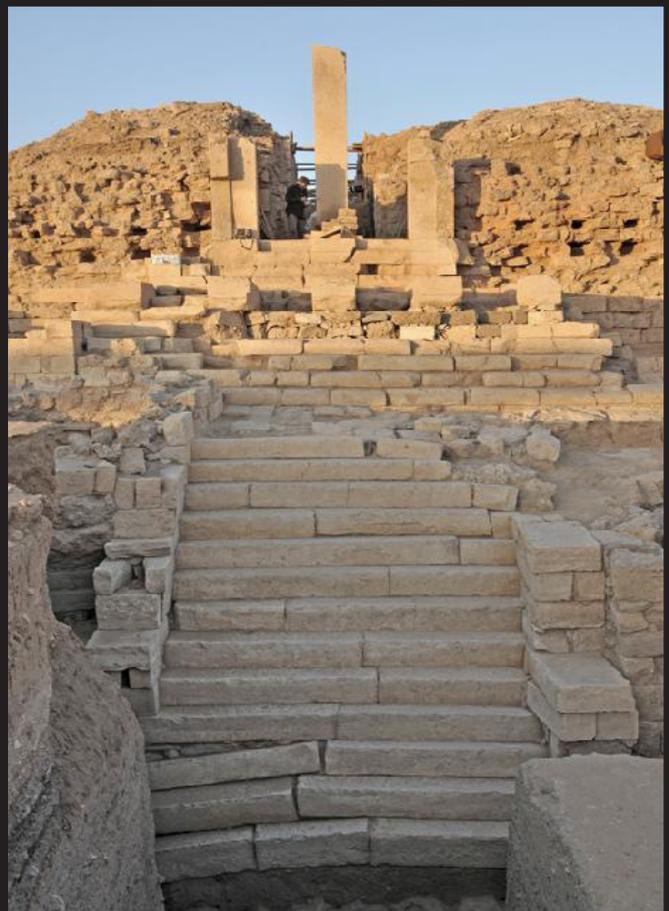
columns were visible above the sand. Excavations took 12 years and experts found rests of color pigments, so the temple must have been painted in bright colors. But excavations revealed many other surprises. One was the existence of dining rooms. They found eight stone tables with benches for 130 persons and in another room 14 tables for 230 diners.

The ruins of a second temple were known and also excavated. This was called the Athtar or Mahliyum temple. It was erected on an artificial platform, but the reason for this is not yet known.

But another surprise was the so called five column building. Five is an uneven number and unique for ancient buildings. Experts established it is the oldest timber stone combined structure in the whole region erected already 900 BC. Various altars were found and this indicates the use for sacrifices and other ceremonies.

New Capital Marib

Later Marib became the new capital. Its position was ideal situated on a single standing hill. Here as well a city wall was erected for protection of the many monumental buildings. Today





the old town remains lie below the modern city of Matrib. Only its temple was erected outside and was not overbuilt.

Temple & Necropolis

The Awwam temple was also dedicated to moon god Almaqah and was possibly built by Queen Sheba about 800 BC. In a half circle around the temple a huge necropolis was built over time. Its structure was city like with small passages and Buildings with various floor. The facades were decorated with portraits of the deceased and votive inscriptions.

It existed a system of rental of portions of these burial houses. I remember having seen similar text at Nabataean temple tombs in Mada'in Saleh. This necropolis even had its quarters for nobles with richly decorated mausoleums. In total over 20,000 persons were buried here. I assume that the poor buried their death covered in linen in the sand away from the city like Bedouins.



Close to the Awwam temple a second temple was discovered. The huge oval layout is similar to south Babylonian temples. The temple precinct was surrounded by a wall nine meters high. We already reported of the skilled Saba builders. Here they used specific building blocks measuring 30 by 30 and a length of 150 centimeters. The stone structure was topped by a wooden roof. The columned portico was decorated with typical carved panel walls.

This religious building impressed with a monumental entrance with huge pillars weighing six tons. It offered various rooms with several altars, including a banquet area for cultural meals and a treasure chamber. The main hall had three entrance doors and 32 square columns on each side. Eight columns flanked the temple sanctuary door at the head wall.

Sabaeen Architecture

Major building activities started from 800 BC. Sabaeen builders were able to complete ma-





for structures following well thought through plans. They used round and pointed arched windows with wooden and stone beams, doors frames and vaulted ceilings. Their skills allowed them to use well hewn limestone blocks without mortar for major structures, temple and palaces. Columns were made in one piece and not in the piled up drum technique. They could handle the logistics of transport and erection of columns weighing up to six tons.

Carved panels were the typical wall decorations. This included bull heads representing the moon god Almaqah as well as bull head water spouts for roof rain water off flows. Other animals used for decoration purposes were mountain buck, snakes, goats, birds, lions, camels, horses, fish and panther. In addition, vines with grape bunches were added to the artistic repertoire.

Sabaeen Trade

Long distance trade was the most important economic basis of Saba. About 600 BC four main trading partners were mentioned Dhakr an unknown state or transshipment center, Li-hyan was a famous trading oasis later called Dedan at today's al'Ula, Abi'aws possibly was biblical Buz and Hanak possibly the Kinda Kingdom oasis city al-Faw once the northern border of the Saba Empire. Hundred years later African colonies grew in importance for resources, as well as a close liaison with Aksum in Ethiopia.

Experts in Water Management

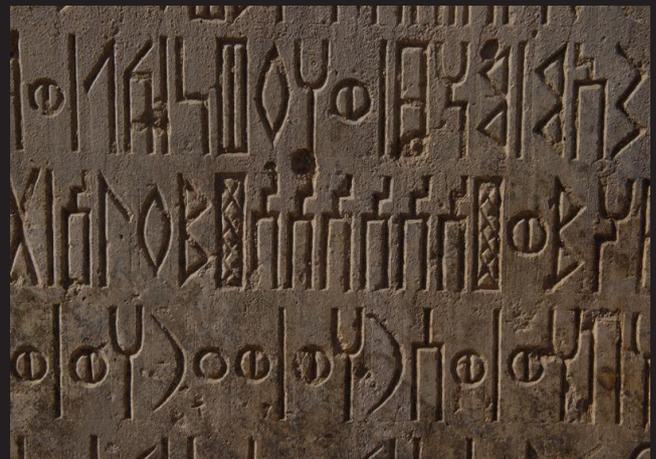
The famous Marib dam was built about 800 BC and often after monsoon floods repaired. The dam wall blocked the entire Wadi Adhannah also called the Wadi as Sadd valley

and stretched over 650 meters and reached a height of 20 meters. This size dam could irrigate the over 150 square kilometers huge Marib oasis able to feed up to 50,000 inhabitants.

Very special for a dam at the time were the two overflow sluice gates and various canals. The northern gate opened into a long canal leading water into a distribution cistern. The southern gate was even larger and better preserved. As already explained Saba builders were experienced engineers. Stone blocks were well hewn with very flat surfaces to leave minimum space in between and they were hold together with internal copper and lead pins to withstand the water pressure. A surprise were recent discoveries a few hundred meters away. There an older dam and irrigation traces were found and dated even 2,000 years older.

Sabaeen Art

About 3,000 years ago Sabaeen art was well developed and artists able to create very fine sculptures made from alabaster. In the first phase art objects were of pure local Arabian



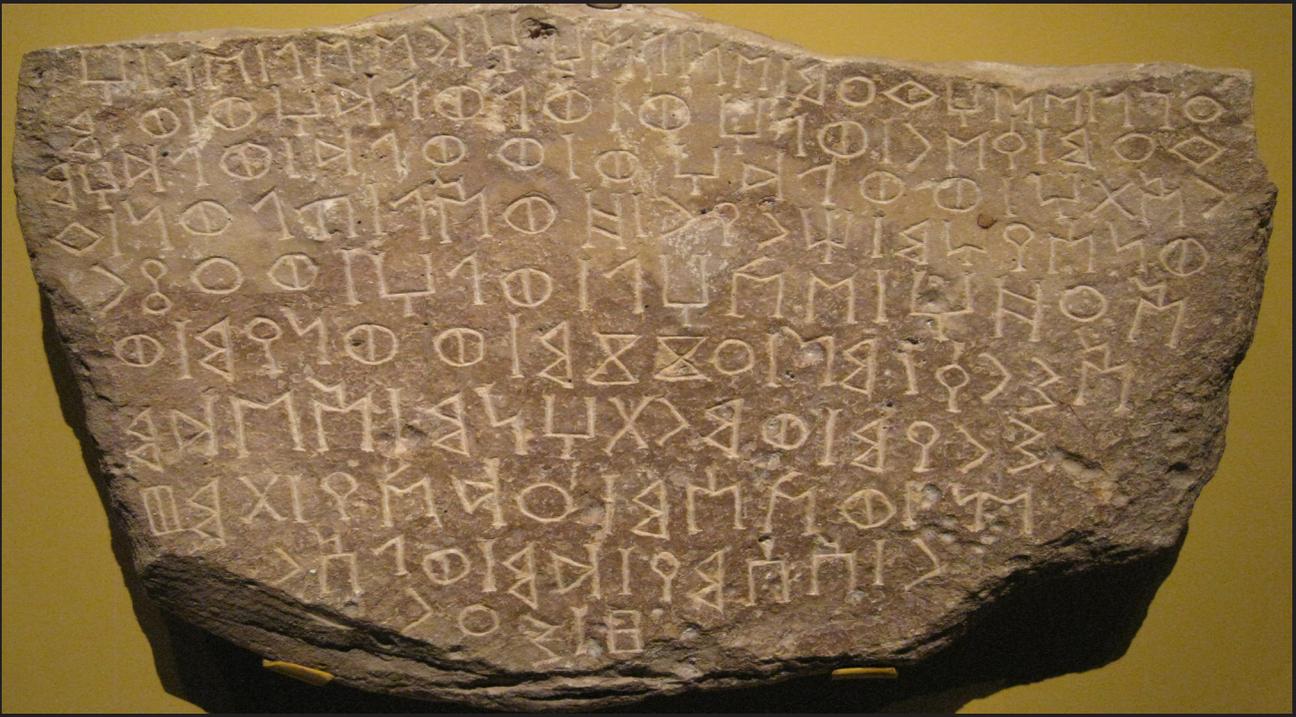
style. Later possibly due to long distance trade foreign cultural influences were seen such as Assyrian, Egyptian, Phoenician and Greco-Roman. Sculptors followed a strict set format. All statues were the same size and showed simple human depictions with no expression of artistic freedom. At temples copies of heads of important persons were kept possibly those of deceased. Stelea were created in half relief for Sabaean death cult.

A good example is a votive stele made of alabaster dated about 700 BC with an inscription addressed to the moon god Almaqah, mentioning five other South Arabian gods, two reigning sovereigns and two governors: "Ammî'amar son of Ma'dîkarib dedicated to Almaqah Ra'suhumû. With 'Athtar, with Almaqah, with dhât-Himyam, with dhât-Ba'dân, with Waddum, with Karib'îl, with Sumhu'alî, with 'Ammîrayam and with Yadhrahmalik."

Sabaic Script

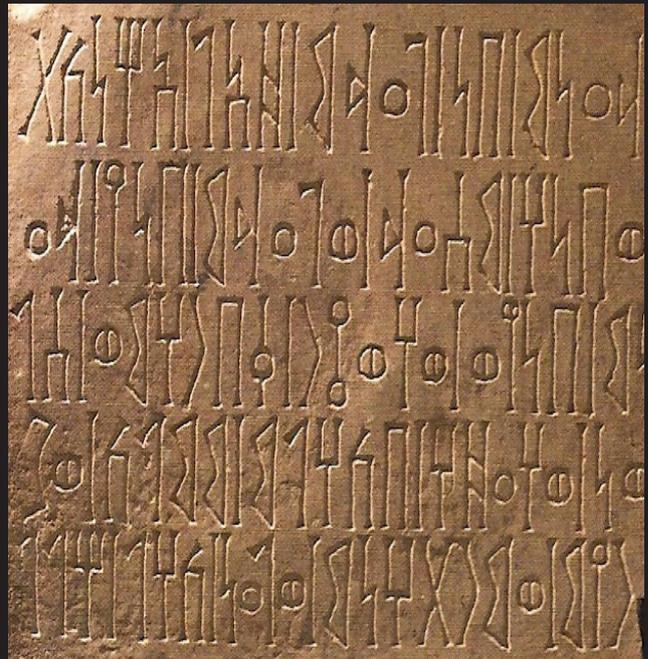
The earliest letters were dated 900 BC. This was one of the first scripts and used in Yemen and across the Arabian Peninsula up north to the Levant region for over 1,200 years. So, it was the most ancient and widest used script at the time. Sabaic was not a language, but a script using single letters or signs of specific meanings. The script had only consonants no vowels. It was later called South Arabian. But Sabaic did not innovate over time like other script such as Dedanic.





Because of its importance, numerous examples of over 4,500 texts and wide spread, it is the best studied and known script. Therefore, Sabaic is related to Ancient Arabic with similar morphology and lexicon. But Sabaic differs in phonetics from Arabic. It also has 29 consonants, one more than Arabic. In addition, it has six numeric symbols for 1,000, 100, 50, 10, 5 plus a unique division between numbers and words.

Plus, it has a different place and form of definite article. Further vertical lines are used to separate words. How do we know this? The discovery of Sabaic alphabet primers helped to decipher it. About 700 BC texts were written boustrophedon that means in serpentine style changing direction with every line. Hundred years later the writing pattern changed



only from right to left. A cursive variant was also discovered, but this came into use much later. Some private texts were even written on wooden sticks.

Sabaic influenced very much other cultures and their development of own script. This included similar composition and phraseology of those scripts. As well as the use of script as a decorative motif. Also common were parallels in iconographic repertoire, same geometric figures and patterns such as dentils, striation and empty rectangles. Some emblematic animals were used such as oryx, ibex, bull, bucrane, ostrich and same symbols like hand, crescent, circle signs.

Scripts such as Qatabanic, Hadramitic and Himyaric used the same alphabet. Sabaic was later pushed back by Qatabanic, Minaic and Hadramitic. From 700 until 400 BC Sabaean script started to be used in Ethiopia, where later vowels were added. Here also some consonants were dropped and not used in local dialects any longer. Sabaic was basis of new emerging Amharic language still used today in Ethiopia.

Now if we look at the possible initial home area of Sabaeans before they moved south importing a well developed state system and architectural knowhow a language and script research might help. The latest research is not certain if Dedanic developed from Sabaic or vice versa. More interesting is that the Sabaic letter order is the same as Ugaritic, but Ugaritic disappeared 1185 BC already. We know long distance trade moved not only goods but also people. Might the search for



the source of valuable incense made people move on this axis – Ugarit – Dedan to create the powerful Saba Empire?

Summary

Saba was the most important kingdom during the heydays of kilometer long camel caravans loaded with tons of incense heading north and east. Unfortunately there is no proof if legendary Queen Sheba existed.

Picture credits

We thank Dainst and their excavators for using some of their pictures and graphs.

