



منظر عام للمدينة القديمة – تصوير محمد السمه
General aerial view of Sana'a

Sana'a

Yemen's Happy City

*Once fate sang in our diaspora,
Journey back to Sana'a, however long!*

The Republic of Yemen has been described by poets and explorers as the “happy Arabian country”, charmed for its fresh air, pure waters and magnificent attractions. The visitor to Sana'a, the “happy city”, will not be disappointed when they breathe the air that has been described as fresher than its waters, and water that is purer than its sky.

This remarkable country bursts with orchards of fruit and as many springs and wells. Its markets are full of the country's traditional crafts, illustrating a rich cultural her-

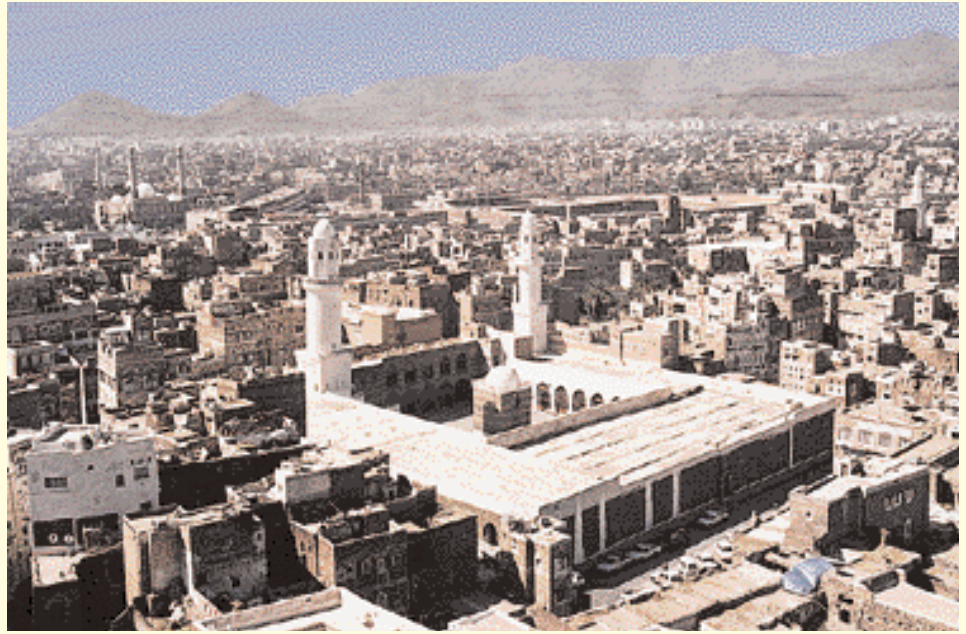
By: Nabil Saleh Almakaleh,
Architect

itage, both past and present. And Sana'a, its capital, is a city with its own unique musical style, known as the “Sana'ai melody”, famous for the beauty of its words and sonorous tunes, and above all for the enchanting voices of those who bring the music to life. This traditional melody involves songs that are sung by men, women as well as children on different social and religious occasions, such as marriages, festivals, the sending off and receiving of pilgrims, and even condolences. ➤

A City of Art

Amin al-Rayhani, in his book, *The Kings of Arabia*, has imaginatively said of Sana'a, "O Sana'a, you are an example of history as you were the queen of time; you are an example of science as you were the Goddess of knowledge; you were an example of myths as you were the mistress of *djinn* and human beings". He goes on: "History did not lie as these are your high houses and lofty palaces; poetry did not lie as this is your natural beauty and Arab pride; knowledge did not lie as your libraries are full of invaluable books and manuscripts; the myths did not lie as these are your treasures, fascinating palaces and real names which we thought were created by poets for brides of *djinn* and fancy".

Sana'a is distinguishable for its suitable climate that lasts throughout the year. The rainy season is normally in summer and autumn, often in the afternoon and evenings. In this regard, Ibn Isaac has written, "Sana'a does not rain except in June, July, August and, to a



المناظر الطبيعية الخلابة في المناطق المحيطة بأبها

General view showing the Great Mosque in Sana'a (Photograph by Mohammad al-Samah)



ساحة في المدينة القديمة

A Square in the Old City of Sana'a

certain extent, September. It rains only after sunset. People usually wonder when the sky is clear for half of the day without rain".

Some people have called Sana'a, the "Venice of the Arabs", or have described it as "Venice covered with sand". The Italian novelist, Alberto Moravia has said that, "The Venice of Sana'a is [made] from clay and straw instead of stones, and the dust of [its] narrow streets instead of water, and [it is] about 2,250 metres above sea level instead of [the] depth [of] a shallow lake. This Venice is gradually sinking in the dust. Instead of the great Venice channel, [Sana'a] has a stream river full of dust [that is] covered with water once a year during the rainy season. This Venice is neither touristic nor consuming, but gorgeous". He adds, "Among the attached houses that are like a wisp, I see here and there green and blue trees which might be willow or tamarind. The houses are sandy-coloured and white, the minarets are pink and the domes are glittering. Undoubtedly, this is the east described by explorers of the Eighteenth Century, who were interested in the eastern, Arab and Islamic arts with their amazing purity and mystery, their isolated environment ..".

Today, Sana'a is a modern city with all the amenities. It grew in size until it extended between the two mountains that flank it from east and west. From north to south it now encapsulates all the other towns and villages that were once its outskirts, including the areas of Bani al-Harith, Hamadan, Bani Hashish and Bilad Sanhan.

Sana'a is the most important city of ➤

Yemen, and still receives the economic immigration of people from the rest of the country. Many of the streets and squares found within its environs themselves beautify its constituent parts, and the city contains both state and private universities that include in their curriculums most of the fields of science that we know of, in addition to linguistic, literary, social and religious studies. It also contains technical institutes and private Arabic and foreign-language schools, as well as around three hundred mosques.

City Location

Sana'a is located on the middle hill within the eastern plain. It is thus situated on the surface of what is known as the green plain between the two mountains of Nuqum from the east and Ayban from the west. These extend to the south up to the two areas of Hadda and Haziz, and to the north up to al-Ruhbah (which is about 2,250 metres high), 30 kilometres to the east of Shuaib's Mountain – so named after the great Prophet - 10,800 feet (3,600 metres) above sea level. The city's summit is the highest in the Arabian Peninsula, in fact, and forms the Old City and its quarters, as well as the outskirts of the new city.

From this elevated location the city has watched the trading caravans come and go. Sana'a itself was for long Yemen's main market for the sale and export of coffee and raisins. It was also an important centre for trade exchanges and the exhibition of various goods that were brought there from all corners of the country, including handmade products and plants, grains as well as animal wealth such as sheep, cows, and camels – trades that have made the city what it is today.

Historical Background

Sana'a, it is argued, is perhaps the oldest city in the world and it is believed to be the first city to be built after the deluge known as Noah's Flood. It was called the city of Shem, attributed to the first son of the Prophet Noah who planned Sana'a as one of his Hamadani states within his Eighth Diadem. The inhabitants were of the Sabaeen creed, and it was located next to the city of Ma'rib. It was also named Uzal (Azal ibn Qahtan ibn Amir), after Uzal the son of Joktan, a descendant of Shem, the son of Noah. Some of the inscriptions found in the city refer to its founder the King of Saba', Qarb il-Witr Yuhan'im and Dhu Raydan.

Historians estimate its age at near three thousand years. It was the summer resort for

the Sabaeen kings (Ghumdan Palace) and the second capital of the Sabaeen state. The Greek historian, Agadir Geddes wrote, "There is no nation richer than Sabaeans and Jarhaeans who were agents of transportation between Asia and Europe. They made [the] Syria of Ptolemy wealthy with gold and eased the commercial means for the Phoenicians".

Dhu Nuwas, the last king of the Himyarites, made Sana'a the capital of his kingdom

where he led his campaigns against the Abyssinians who, in turn, made it their capital after their victory over him. The Abyssinian, Abrahah, constructed his legendary cathedral Sheba there, which at that time was the largest Christian building in the southern Mediterranean. Thereafter, Sayf ibn di-Yazen defeated the Abyssinians at Sana'a with the help of the Persians and took Ghumdan Palace as his office where he received his congratulators, among whom ➤



أحد أحياء المدينة القديمة

One of the quarters in the Old City of Sana'a

was Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim, the grandfather of the Holy Messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The Persians would rule Yemen until the emergence of Islam. Their ruler, Badhan, converted to Islam in 628 AD.

Islamic History

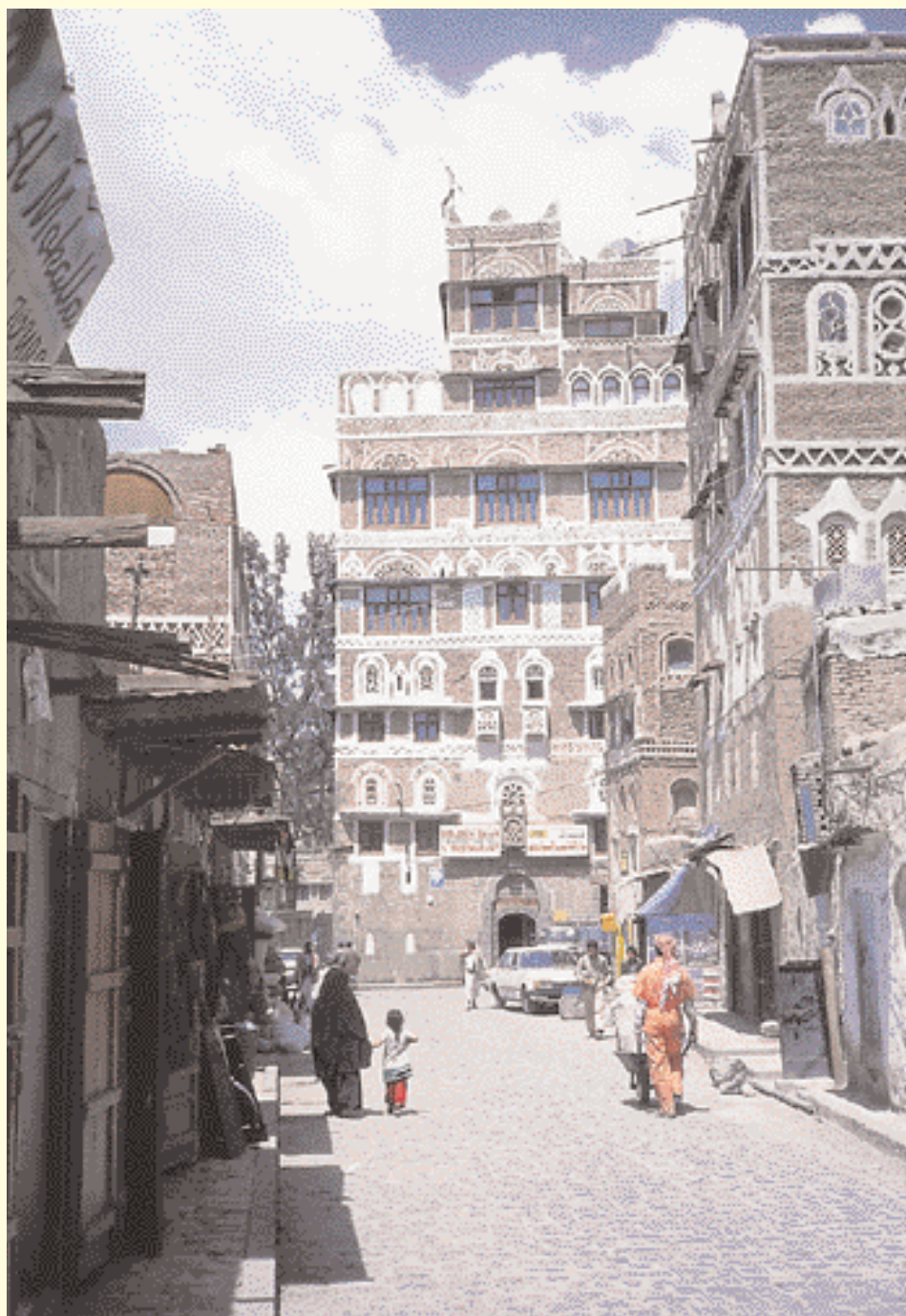
With the conversion of Yemen to Islam, the city of Sana'a became one of the main Islamic geographical constituents divided by the Messenger of God, in addition to Janad and Hadhramaut. Badhan was appointed Viceroy of Sana'a, until al-Aswad al-Ansi conquered it. A few of the Holy Prophet's companions were delegated to Yemen in order to try and solve the country's problems. Ma'adh ibn Jabal was appointed by the Holy Prophet as Governor of Yemen and was ordered to build the Great Mosque in a designated area. Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (May God honour him) was one of those who reached Sana'a and lived in a house in its market. Later on, a mosque was set up on the remains of that house, the Imam Ali Mosque, which exists to this day.

Sana'a then witnessed a period of calm and prosperity during the era of the Khalifa al-Rashidun (The Rightly-Guided Caliphs). After them, it was ruled by the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties respectively until the arrival of the Yu'firids. The latter successfully ruled Yemen but their administration was later marred by continued fighting with Imam al-Hadi al-Husayn who took Sa'dah as his office. After the increasing chaos and bad government of the Yu'firids, the Sulayhids conquered the city and made Dhu Jiblah their capital.

Queen Arwa ibn Ahmed ruled Yemen from her declared capital at Jiblah. Sana'a witnessed peace under her reign, and the city flourished during this period, increasing in development until Salah al-Din (Saladin) led an expedition to conquer the city and subsequently declare it the capital of his Ayyubid Empire in Yemen. Again, the situation experienced a period of great uncertainty and continual warfare. This was eventually resolved by the rise of the Rasulids who united from Jizan, Najran and Sahdah in the north to Tihamah, Ta'izz and Hadhramaut in the south and east, using Ta'izz as their capital.

The Rasulid Imams ruled Sana'a for two hundred years, a period characterised by fighting either among the Imams themselves or between them and the Tahirid Sultanate, or with the army of the Mamluk Sultan.

Sana'a witnessed periods of unrest and experienced fatal epidemics, most of which occurred during the rule of the Imams, until



شارع مرصوف بالحجارة في قلب المدينة القديمة
Cobbled Stone Street in the heart of the Old City of Sana'a



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the Turks conquered it. The latter could, to a certain extent, manage to rule the country more firmly. At last, however, the Imams successfully defeated the Turks and established a central government under the leadership

of Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din. In September, 1962, the Revolution proclaimed a republican regime and once again historical Sana'a was declared capital of a united Yemen in May, 1990. ➤