

The Queen of Sheba:

Treasures from Ancient Yemen



لوحة إيرانية تُظهر ملكة سبأ مع الهدهد، سنة 1590.

Persian Miniature showing The Queen of Sheba and the Hoopoe, 1590. © British Museum.

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By: Ms Hannah Boulton, Press Officer, British Museum
Photographs: Ms Hannah Boulton

The pre-Islamic civilization of southern Arabia (present-day Yemen) is one of the least understood cultures of the Ancient Near East. Many myths abound about the riches of this land and the famous Queen of Sheba (who

is thought to have ruled the Arabian trading kingdom of Saba' / Sheba), but it is only very recently that archaeologists and historians have been able to begin to separate fact from fantasy.

The earliest reference to the Queen of Sheba is in the Old Testament Book of Kings, in which she arrives in Jerusalem "with a very great caravan" and presents Solomon with "120 talents [4 tonnes] of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones". The Biblical story has undergone extensive Islamic and Ethiopian elaborations and has become one of the world's most enduring myths. The Qur'an focuses on a particular episode during the visit of Sheba to Solomon. In order to admire the queen's legs, Solomon welcomes her in a pavilion with a glass floor. She believes the floor is covered in water and raises the hem of her dress to prevent it from getting wet. It is at this point that Solomon realises her legs are much too hairy and taunts the queen saying, 'Madam, your beauty is feminine, but the hair on your legs is masculine. Well, hairy legs are fine for a man but revolting on a woman'. Sheba's pride is hurt and she reacts by testing Solomon with a series of riddles, though, to her astonishment, he is able to solve all of them. So she praises and worships on the One God and after receiving all she most desired from Solomon she leaves. In the Ethiopian account, Sheba is seduced by Solomon and on the journey home she gives birth to a child, Menelik, destined to be the founder of the Solomonic dynasty. But what is the truth behind these stories? At present there is no archaeological evidence to prove

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محرقه بخور من حجر الكالسيت، القرن الثالث بعد الميلاد.

Calcite incense burner. 3rd century AD. © British Museum.

that the meeting of Solomon and Sheba took place, or that the queen actually existed. But, recent excavations have found that some aspects of the story can be verified. This exhibition investigates these aspects and aims to shed light upon the mysterious but magnificent civilization of ancient Yemen, the land of Sheba.

Some scholars have disputed the Old Testament passage on the basis that the Queen of Sheba's gifts - spices, gold and precious stones - are inconsistent with her homeland in southern Arabia. However these are not as incongruous as it may at first seem. The 'spices' mentioned are likely to be a reference to aromatics principally burnt in religious rituals in the temple and the home. Foremost among these were frankincense and myrrh, both natural gums which exuded from their trees after the bark was scraped away. A number of ancient incense burners found in Yemen are even inscribed with the names of different aromatics. In terms of the 'gold', geo-

logical surveys (most recently in the Maraziq area of the Jawf region of northern Yemen) have uncovered the remains of ancient camps and ore-crushing and grinding equipment. These have been found close to ancient test pits and mines running along quartz veins exposed on the surface. In addition, a small collection in the British Museum of high-quality gold beads, earrings, bracelets and appliques suggest these are the work of a previously unrecognized high-quality goldworking tradition. Examples of this goldwork can be seen in the show. Detailed depictions on funerary sculptures of necklaces, earrings, armlets and finger rings offer a further glimpse of the types of high-status jewellery worn by men and women alike. Certain 'precious stones' such as coloured chalcedonies occur naturally in Yemen; other types were probably imported from India and Somaliland. These stones were popular across the Near East for carving beads and seals. High quality stone beads placed in graves appear to have been recycled after the graves were robbed, yet ➤

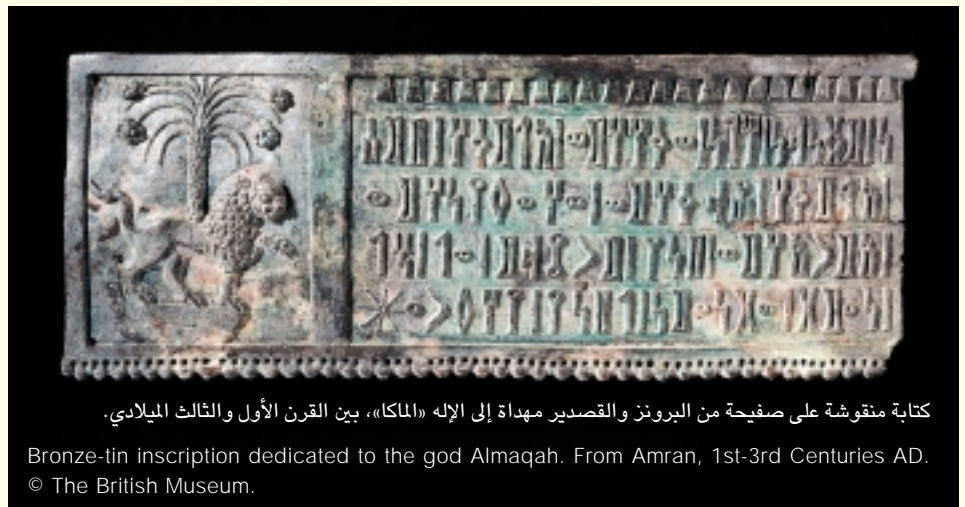
Incense burners, temple altars, stunning alabaster statues of the kings of Awsan, important historical inscriptions and a wonderfully preserved bronze statue of Ma'dikarib, an early ruler of Saba, all indicate the richness and sophistication of early Yemeni culture.

the 10th century Yemeni writer and historian, al-Hamdani, refers to the discovery of South Arabian tombs containing bodies, "heavily sown with jewels".

Moreover, Saba' was flourishing at the time when the Solomon episode was believed to have been written down (Solomon was thought to have ruled during the 10th century BC, but *The Book of Kings* is thought to have been written in the 6th century BC). The domestication of the camel enabled the bridging of the deserts which separated southern Arabia from its Near Eastern neighbours. Links between South Arabia and the Levant are confirmed archaeologically by occasional stray finds of South Arabian seals and graffiti at sites in Palestine. Excavated finds of cuboid incense burners, almost identical in form with a wide distribution from Yemen to Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia, confirmed the widespread consumption of Arabian aromatics. The wealth generated by this trade helped create a boom in building and the arts and crafts of southern Arabia. Although there is clear influence from the Near East and Classical world, the styles nevertheless remain distinctively local and inscriptions even confirm the antiquity of the tower-houses which are such a distinctive feature of traditional Yemeni architecture.

Archaeological research has enabled us to suggest the factual elements contained within the story of the Queen of Sheba. The exhibition contains artefacts that support these suggestions, the core of which have been generously loaned from the Yemeni General Organization for Antiquities and Museums. Incense burners, temple altars, stunning alabaster statues of the kings of Awsan, important historical inscriptions and a wonderfully preserved bronze statue of Ma'dikarib, an early ruler of Saba, all indicate the richness and sophistication of early Yemeni culture. Significant pieces from the ground-breaking excavations at Marib and Tamna by the American Foundation for the Study of Man in 1951/2 are also included.

The exhibition also features a selection of artworks relating to the myth of the Queen of Sheba, including a previously unpublished watercolour by Sir Edward John Poynter (1836-1919), a version of his own later masterpiece, *The Queen of Sheba's Visit to King Solomon*. Poynter studied Sir Austen Henry



Layard's archaeological discoveries in Assyria to help create a new vision of how Solomon's palace might have looked. Layard himself owned a painting of the same subject by the Dutch artist Lambert Sustris (c 1515/20 - 1570) which has been kindly loaned to the exhibition by the National Gallery. Renaissance and later paintings, prints and minor arts are also represented in the exhibition by pieces from the British

Museum's own collection and additional loans by the Ashmolean Museum; the Barber Institute; the Royal Scottish Academy and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

A full programme of educational events, sponsored by Barclays PLC will accompany the exhibition. This will include an open air concert, study days, handling sessions and gallery talks. ■