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► **To cite this version:**

Jérémie Schiettecatte. Ma^cīn (site) [ancient Qarnā]. Thematic Dictionary of Ancient Arabia, 2024, <https://ancientarabia.huma-num.fr/dictionary/definition/main-site-ancient-qarna>. 10.60667/tdaa-0081 . hal-04860717

HAL Id: hal-04860717

<https://hal.science/hal-04860717v1>

Submitted on 8 Jan 2025

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Investigating and mapping Ancient Arabia

[DICTIONARY](#)[SCOPE](#)[USER
GUIDE](#)[EDITORIAL
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[Home](#) / [Projects](#) / [Thematic Dictionary of Ancient Arabia](#) / [Table of contents](#) / [Ma'īn \(site\) \[ancient Qarnā\]](#)

MA'ĪN (SITE) [ANCIENT QARNĀ]

Ancient city-state and the former capital city of the kingdom of Ma'īn, located in the central part of the Jawf valley, in modern Yemen. Despite the absence of archaeological excavations, the remains of a city-wall and several temples have been identified. A corpus of more than 110 inscriptions from the site provides information on its social, political, and religious background.

Location

The site is located in the lower part of the [Jawf](#) region, ca. 100 km northwest of [Ma'rib](#). It is an 8-m-high mound in the centre of the alluvial plain, on the left bank of the Wādī Madhāb.

Place name in ancient sources

The modern name of the site, Ma'īn, derives from that of the homonymous kingdom of which the site was the capital. In antiquity, the distinctive name of the city was known from [ancient South Arabian](#) inscriptions, Qarnā (*Qrnw*). Several toponyms cited in classical sources are identified with this site: *Kápvα*/*Kápvava* (Eratosth. quoted by Strabo *Geogr.*, 16, 4, 2), Carnus (Plin, *HN*, 6.154) and *Kάρμαν* (Ptol., *Geog.* 6.7.34).

Discovery and exploration

Rediscovered by J. Halévy at the end of the 19th century, the site was visited and surveyed several times between the 1940s and 2000s without any official archaeological excavations (Halévy 1872; Fakhry 1951; Tawfik 1951; Nami 1952; Robin 1979; Breton et al. 1981; Schmidt 1982: 143–55; Breton 1994: 105–8). However, intense clandestine excavations have been conducted there since the early 2000s.

Archaeological remains

The rectangular site measures 320 m from north to south, 310 m from east to west, with a perimeter of 1150 m.

A rampart

It is surrounded by a [rampart](#) with four gates in the middle of each side of the site (**Fig. 1**). The western gate is larger in size than the others with a more complex plan. The palaeography of the inscriptions commemorating its construction identifies two phases: one between the late 7th and late 6th centuries BCE, the second during the reign of [Abiyada' Yatha'](#) king of Ma'īn, in the 5th century BCE.

The temples

The remains of four temples were recognised during the survey; two *intra muros* and two *extra muros* (Breton 1998; Schmidt 1982a, 1982b). Inside the city walls, the two temples were built in the same area; the first one has been levelled and only the stone base and the base of a hexastyle portico remain, while the second is a

TABLE OF CONTENTS

◀	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
–	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q
R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	

[SHOW ALL CONTENT](#)

Search



SECTIONS IN THIS ENTRY

[Location](#)

[Place name in ancient sources](#)

[Discovery and exploration](#)

[Archaeological remains](#)

[History](#)

[References and suggested reading](#)

CREATION DATE

28/06/2023

LAST UPDATE

08/08/2023

CITATION

Schiettecatte, Jérémie, 2023. "Ma'īn (site) [ancient Qarnā]". Thematic Dictionary of Ancient Arabia. Online edition 2023. Available online at <https://ancientarabia.humanum.fr/dictionary/definition/main-site-ancient-qarna> (accessed online on 07 January 2025), doi: <https://doi.org/10.60667/tdaa-0081>

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.60667/tdaa-0081>

small hypostyle building. Frequent looting of the latter has yielded numerous dedications to the god Nakraḥ ([Maʿīn 102](#), [103](#), [104](#), [105](#), [106](#), [107](#), [108](#), [109](#), [110](#), Arbach 2011).

Among the *extra muros* temples, one has been identified as the temple Riṣaf^{um} (*Rṣf^m*), from the 8th cent. BCE (e.g., [Maʿīn 99](#)). This temple was the shrine of a major deity of the kingdom of Maʿīn, ʿAthtar dhu-Qabḍ. It is located outside the walls, 800 m from Maʿīn, in a place called al-Miḥyar. On account of its decoration, it belongs to a category called the [Banāt ʿĀd](#) temples. The temple is small, with a central court surrounded by porticoes and preceded by a monumental tetrastyle portal. The pillars are decorated with female figures to which geometric and zoomorphic friezes were added. The date of its foundation is unknown. Major renovation work was undertaken during the reign of Khālīkarib Ṣadiq (ca. late 7th-early 6th cent. BCE) (Schmidt 1982a: 151; Breton 1998: 66; Arbach & Darles 2019).

Other remains

Close to the site, to the southwest of the rampart, a 1.6-ha-wide area is now studded with looting pits. This may have been the site of an ancient necropolis.

Furthermore, Maʿīn was surrounded by a large irrigated area characterised by the accumulation of alluvium of anthropic origin. This area is interspersed with [canals](#) and [wells](#), which are also referred to in some inscriptions (e.g., [Maʿīn 1](#), [Maʿīn 44](#), [Maʿīn 87](#), [Maʿīn 88](#)).

History

The city of Qarnā certainly flourished as early as the 8th cent. BCE, in conjunction with the rise of the kingdom of Maʿīn. At that time, the Minaean tutelary deity may have been Nakraḥ, who symbolises Maʿīn in the temple of [Aranyadaʿ](#) at [as-Sawdāʿ](#). Maʿīn was then a small federation of clans, with a territory bounded by those of [Inabbaʿ](#) to the east, [Haram](#) to the west and [Sabaʿ](#) to the south, centred around Qarnā. The city was then only a small unfortified governmental and political centre.

The city developed in line with the growing importance of the kingdom of Maʿīn, in the 6th-5th cent. BCE, while the neighbouring kingdoms of [Nashshān](#), [Kaminahū](#) and Sabaʿ declined. The strong involvement of the kingdom's population in the [caravan trade](#) was a source of income and led to the monumentalisation of the city. At that time, the site was surrounded by a finely crafted wall, the federal sanctuary outside the walls was rebuilt, and its inhabitants also participated in the maintenance of the rampart of the neighbouring town of [Barāqish](#). The territory around the city was shared between the different clans.

None of the inscriptions found on the site are later than the turn of the Christian era. The city is mentioned one last time, in [CIH 609](#) (ca. 60-70 CE). The disappearance of Qarnā is probably due to a combination of different factors: an unfavourable environmental context (Schiettecatte 2007), the weakening of the city as a result of Arab incursions (Bron 1998: 30), and the decline of caravan trade in favour of [maritime trade](#). The site is not mentioned in the account of the [Roman](#) expedition of [Aelius Gallus](#) (ca. 25 BCE), which necessarily passed near Qarnā. We can thus assume that the city was of minor importance at that time. [Strabo](#)'s mention of the site (*Geogr.*, 16, 4, 2) is based on the account of Eratosthenes of Cyrene (3rd cent. BCE); [Pliny](#)'s mention of it (*HN*, 6.154) is also based on earlier sources. It can be assumed that the same is true of [Claudius Ptolemy](#) (*Geog.* 6.7.34).

Jérémie Schiettecatte

See also [Maʿīn \(kingdom\)](#)

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IMAGES / TABLES



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Alternate spellings: Maʿīn, Maʿīn, Maʿīn, Mʿīn, Qarna, Qarnaw, Qrnw, Qarnā

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