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Ṣan^cā^ṣ

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Investigating and mapping Ancient Arabia

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ŞAN‘Ā’

Now the capital of the Republic of Yemen, the city of Şan‘ā’ appears in textual sources around the 1st cent. CE. It gradually emerged as one of the centres of power of the kingdom of Saba’ before becoming one of the main cities of the Yemeni highlands in late antiquity and early Islam.

Location

The city of Şan‘ā’, ancient Şan‘ā (Sab. *Ṣn‘w*), is located on the western highlands of Yemen, at an altitude of 2250 m, on a north-south trending rift plain bordered by volcanic escarpments to the east and the west. The plain is covered by Quaternary alluvial sediments. Combined with frequent rainfall (over 600 mm/yr), this soil cover allows for dry agriculture.

History of research

The ancient city of Şan‘ā’ is covered by the modern city, and has only been archaeologically excavated through a single test pit in the courtyard of the Great Mosque (Warburton 1998).

The most significant research has focused on Ghumdān’s palace and the church through the analysis of the texts of Arab historiographers, South Arabian inscriptions and the identification of reemployed ancient architectural elements (Lewcock 1979, 2005; King 1980; Beeston 1983; Serjeant & Lewcock 1983; Piotrovsky 1988; Finster & Schmidt 1994; Keall 2005; Robin 2015; Daum 2021).

History

The first textual mentions of the city of Şan‘ā’ date from the 1st century (GI A 452, [Ja 644](#)).

At the beginning of the 3rd century, the establishment of a royal palace in the city of Şan‘ā’ transformed it into the second capital of [Saba’](#), along with [Ma’rib](#). In the early 3rd cent., the king of [Kinda](#) was captured during a Sabaean military campaign and held prisoner in the city ([DAI Bar‘ān 2000-1](#)). The establishment of this new political capital may be explained by the growing power of Ḥimyar in the southern part of the highlands and the need to establish a political and military Sabaean presence to oppose Ḥimyarite power. It was also a consequence of the growing strength of highland tribal aristocracy within the Sabaean elite from the beginning of the Christian era onwards (Arbach *et al.* 2021).

The location of Şan‘ā’ is strategic: the city controls an area at the junction of the northern and central highlands, through the Yakār Pass. The city also controls the axis of communication from the [Jawf](#) and Ma’rib regions to the [Tihāma](#) and the Red Sea.

After the annexation of Saba’ by [Ḥimyar](#) (c. 275 CE), the city lost its status as a

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political capital. We have no records of the city during the period between the end of the Sabaean kings and the middle of the 6th cent. Only an inscription from Ṣan‘ā’ ([CIH 6](#)) mentions the construction of a building in the year 463.

In the mid-sixth century, Abraha transferred the seat of power from Ṣafār to Ṣan‘ā’, which became the political centre of the various successive governments, including the Persian satraps who settled in Ṣan‘ā’. According to [al-Hamdānī](#), the city continued to develop during the first two centuries of the Hegira. The pre-Islamic walls probably no longer existed, as traditionalists describe a city with no fortifications before Ibn Yu‘fir’s rebellion in the 9th century (Lewcock 2005). It remained an administrative centre hosting the headquarters of Umayyad and Abbasid governors.

The monuments of ancient Ṣan‘ā’

The rampart

Several clues suggest the presence of a [rampart](#) during antiquity. Firstly, the toponym Ṣan‘ā’ may derive from the Sabaean root ṢN‘, ‘fortified’ (Beeston 1983). Secondly, according to ‘Amr b. Ishāq al-Ḥaḍramī, quoted by al-Hamdānī, the Sabaean king Sha‘r Awtar (early 3rd cent.) had a rampart built around Ṣan‘ā’. Lewcock (1986, 2005) proposes to identify its base in two bastions of the medieval citadel and in the lower part of Bāb al-Sitrān.

The Ghumdān palace

In the early 3rd cent., South Arabian texts recall the presence of the royal palace Ghumdān. The first mention dates from the reign of Sha‘r Awtar ([lr 11](#)). Al-Hamdānī provides a description of the palace in the 10th cent., where he refers to the presence of remains in front of the western entrance of the great mosque, the looting of building stones and its destruction under Caliph ‘Uthmān (Piotrovsky 1988).

In the late 3rd cent., after the annexation of the Sabaean kingdom, Ṣan‘ā’ lost its status as the seat of royal power. Nevertheless, the city probably remained an administrative centre for some time. At the end of the 3rd cent., [Ja 655](#) indicates the presence of a governor at the head of the [Ma’dhin](#) tribe. Ṣan‘ā’ appears to have been one of the main urban centres in the territory of this tribe; it could therefore have been a residence of the governor. Ṣan‘ā’ again became the seat of royal power from the reign of Abrahā (mid-6th cent.) onwards.

The church

During the second half of the 3rd cent., a [temple](#) Awwām, in the vicinity of the city ([CIAS 39.11/o 3 no 6](#)), was consecrated to the Sabaean god [Almaqah](#) and bore the same name as his great temple in the Sabaean capital Ma‘rib. However, the place of worship that made a lasting impression on Arab-Muslim traditionists was the church of Ṣan‘ā’ (Gajda 2009: 123-126, Robin 2015).

It is said to have been built (or embellished) during the reign of Abraha to fulfil his wish to divert Arab pilgrims to it (al-Ṭabarī/Bosworth, 217). The magnificence of the church described by al-Azraqī (al-Azraqī/Malḥas, I, 138) is indicative of its splendour and the attraction it certainly held for the surrounding populations. The church was destroyed between 753 and 755 CE. Several hypotheses have been formulated for its location. Lewcock (1979, 2005) locates it south of the old town of Ṣan‘ā’, equating the polygonal depression Ghurqat al-Qalīs with the *martyrion* of the church. On the contrary, Robin proposed to situate it at the site of the Great Mosque (Robin 2015). The presence of a [Christian](#) community is last attested in Ṣan‘ā’ in the 9th century, through the mention of Bishop Peter (Robin 1991: 148).

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Alternate spellings: Ṣn'w, San'ā, Sana'a, Sanaa, San'a', Ṣan'āw, San'ā, Qalis, al-Qalīs, al-Qalīs, Ghumdan, Ghumdān, Ghumdān

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