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Şirwāḥ (Khawlān)

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Investigating and mapping Ancient Arabia

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ŞIRWĀḤ (KHAWLĀN)

Ancient fortified Sabaean city located in modern Yemen, west of Ma'rib. In the central courtyard of its main temple, dedicated to Almaqah, two Sabaean royal accounts of the late 8th – early 7th cent. BCE were displayed, illustrating the highly symbolic nature of this monument.

Location

Şirwāḥ is located 90 km east of Sana'a and 34 km west of [Ma'rib](#), in a cultivated plain watered by the Wādī al-Malaḥ, a tributary of the Wādī Dhana, and by run-off from the surrounding reliefs. The plain is bounded by basaltic flows to the south and the west, and by the limestone reliefs of the Jabal al-Makhdara and the Jabal Marthad to the northeast. The ancient site of Şirwāḥ was built on an 8-to-18-m-high rocky outcrop. The *intra muros* area is 3 ha wide (**Figs 1-2**).

Şirwāḥ, also known as Şirwāḥ-Khawlān, after the tribal territory of Khawlān al-Āliya on which the site is located, should not be confused with the homonymous archaeological site of Şirwāḥ, known as Şirwāḥ-Arḥab, situated some thirty kilometres north of Sana'a.

Discovery and exploration

The site was discovered by the Frenchman Thomas Arnaud in 1843. It was visited and surveyed by J. Halévy in 1870, and by the envoys of E. Glaser in the 1880s.

In 1947, the Egyptian A. Fakhry carried out the first archaeological observations (Fakhry 1951: 195). In 1975, a French epigraphic survey was conducted by Ch. Robin (Robin 1976).

A German archaeological mission investigated the site from 1977 onwards: survey and documentation of the site; archaeological excavation of the [temple of Almaqah](#) (1991-94) (Schmidt 2007). The German Archaeological Institute carried out annual campaigns between 2001 and 2009, focusing on several temples, an administrative building and the [rampart](#) (Gerlach & Heckes 2003; Gerlach 2004; 2005).

Ancient name

The toponymic permanence regularly observed in Yemen applies to the site of Şirwāḥ, whose modern name is inherited from its ancient name. [Sabaic](#) inscriptions from the 5th cent. BCE to the 3rd cent. CE often mention the 'city of Şirwāḥ' (*hgrn Şrwh*, e.g., [CIH 601](#)). It was also the name of the [tribe](#) of its inhabitants (*s²bn Şrwh*, e.g., [RÉS 3951](#), see [Şirwāḥ \(tribe\)](#)).

Archaeological remains

The *intra muros* area covers 3 ha and comprises the main monuments (**Fig. 2**). At least three of these are temples. Dwellings are visible outside the walls. A

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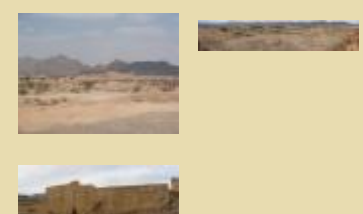
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[necropolis](#) is located to the south of the site.

A rampart

A 730-m-long, 8-m-high rampart encloses the monumental area. In some places, it includes the foundations and curtain walls of civil buildings (Temple of Almaqah, administrative building). Gates were identified near the temple of Almaqah, in the southeast of the site, and at the northern corner of the site. The earliest mention of a fortification dates from the end of the 8th cent. BCE ([MAFRAY-Şirwāh 1](#)). Then, works were carried out in the 7th–6th cent. BCE (e.g., [RÉS 3386](#); [Ja 2853](#)) and in the 1st cent. BCE ([Şirwāh-Müller 4](#)). All these works were initiated by Sabaean kings.

The temples

Three temples have been identified:

The temple of Almaqah Lord of *w'l* of Şirwāḥ (*'lmqh b'l 'w'l Şrwḥ* — *w'l* could stand for the name of the temple or could mean [ibexes](#)) is the largest. Its unique shape consists of a courtyard surrounded by an 8-m-high oval wall (**Figs 3-4**), accessible via two propylons (**Fig. 5**). The oldest texts of the temple are dated to the end of the 8th cent. BCE. The royal inscriptions [DAI-Şirwāh 2005-50](#) (ca. 715 BCE) and [RÉS 3945](#) (ca. 680 BCE) are displayed at the centre of the courtyard (**fig. 4**). The oval wall was built by Yada'īl Dhariḥ son of Sumhū'alī, mukarrib of [Saba'](#), in the mid-7th cent. BCE ([CIH 366](#)). The temple remained in use until the early 4th cent. CE ([CIH 397](#)).

A second temple, “Temple C” (Fakhry 1951: 31–32) is a thick mound from which the pillars of a propylon emerge. An inscription from this temple dates to the 8th–7th cent. BCE ([Fa 27](#)).

A third temple, “Temple D” (Fakhry 1951: 31–32) is characterized by pillars outcropping on the surface. It is located north of the Almaqah temple.

The administrative building (*Verwaltungsbau*)

A large building was successively called “Temple B”, “Dār Bilqeis” (Fakhry 1951: 31–32), and “temple dhū-Ḥabib” (Doe 1983: 165). It was excavated by the German Archaeological Institute, and considered as an administrative building and/or a [palace](#) (Japp 2012) due to the presence of inscriptions with secular content and the architectural form of the building. It is a large building on a high podium preceded by a courtyard with a portico. This plan is similar to that of the royal palace of [Shabwa](#) and the TT1 building at [Tamna'](#). It was occupied from the 2nd cent. BCE to the 4th cent. AD (Japp 2012).

The hydraulic works

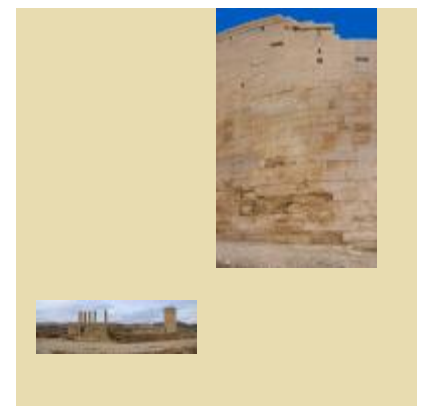
In the surrounding agricultural plain, dykes, [dams](#) and sluices are the remains of an ancient [irrigated area](#). Inscriptions mention [palm](#) groves and [vineyards](#) in the neighbourhood (e.g., [Fa 32](#), [RÉS 4626](#)).

An alabaster quarry

An ancient [alabaster](#) quarry was discovered 15 km northwest of the site, on the Jabal al-Makhdara. A paved road laid out between Şirwāḥ and Jabal al-Makhdara connected the quarry to the ancient city.

History

Şirwāḥ became a full-fledged city no later than the reign of Yada'īl Dhariḥ son of Sumhū'alī, mukarrib of Saba', in the mid-7th cent. BCE: fortification of the site, enlargement and enclosure of the temple of Almaqah ([CIH 366](#)). Prior to this period, only two sanctuaries and monumental inscriptions of [Yatha'amar Watār](#) son of Yakrubmalik and [Karib'īl Watār](#) son of Dhamār'alī are currently known. The hypothesis that Şirwāḥ was the earliest Sabaean capital, before Ma'rib replaced it in the 7th cent. BCE (Fakhry 1951: 29; Von Wissmann & Höfner 1953: 22) is not based on any tangible data from excavations or epigraphy (Gerlach & Heckes 2003: 174–75).



Local tribal institutions are attested from the 7th-6th cent. BCE onwards ([RÉS 3951](#), [GI 1533](#), [DAI Širwāḥ 2002-103](#)): a chief of Širwāḥ (*kbr Šrwḥ*), the six ministers of Širwāḥ (*sʿt qyn Šrwḥ*) and a tribal council (*msʿwd Šrwḥ*). The Sabaeen kings retained direct authority over this administration. They were the main builders of the major monuments.

At the turn of the Christian Era, the tribe merged into the confederation of Širwāḥ, [Khawlān](#) Khādīl and Haynān. It was ruled by a prince (*qyl*) of the lineage of the banū dhu-*Hbb*, with authority over a vast territory ([Fa 3](#), [CIH 398](#)), but still subordinate to the kings of [Saba'](#) and [dhu-Raydān](#). The so-called administrative building may have been the abode of these princes (Japp 2012).

The reasons for the abandonment of the site are unknown. In the first half of the 4th cent. CE, the princes of Širwāḥ are still attested ([Ir 28](#)), the administrative building was reorganized and dedications were still performed in the temple of Almaqah ([CIH 397](#)). In 547 CE, the inscription mentioning the achievements of king [Abrahā](#) at Ma'rib ([CIH 541](#)) refers to an expedition passing north of Širwāḥ. The toponym is no longer referred to as a city (*hgr*), but as a simple landmark. The site was reoccupied in the Islamic period, at least in the 10th century. [Al-Hamdānī](#) repeatedly refers to it as the best of the Yemeni fortresses (Hamdānī, *Šifa* 102, 25; 110, 25; 203, 4).

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Alternative spellings: Sirwah; Sirwâh; Şirwâḥ

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