

Researching Yemen stamps provide insight to modern era



I came across this Yemen set a few weeks ago on eBay auctions and felt it would make a good story for our newsletter. I used for a reference *Ancient Ruins, The Past Uncovered* by L. Sprague de Camp and Catherine C. de Camp. But after a few hours of study in the Mar'ib and the Queen of Sheba chapter I became aware that the real story for us is the multitude of barriers, both political and religious, that early archaeologists encountered . . . and that some of the same barriers are still in place. So here's the story:

"In the nineteenth century, South Arabia (except for a British protectorate at Aden) formed part of the decaying Turkish Empire. Local rulers, paying tribute to the Sultan, carried on pretty much as they pleased. One of these rulers was the Imâm of Yemen. The title means that the ruler is the spiritual as well as the temporal successor to Muhammad, since the Imâm is the head of the Zaydi sect of Islam. These priest-kings had ruled Yemen since 897.

Of all these living fossils of kingdoms, Yemen was the most secluded. On being told that a foreign infidel might enter the country, the ordinary Yemenite would instantly answer: 'By God, we'll slay him!' He meant it, too.

Nevertheless, in the 1830s a few Europeans began to brave Yemeni hospitality. In 1843, the Frenchman Joseph Thomas Arnaud made the first notes on Yemeni archaeology. Getting into the country as the private physician of a Turkish general, he made an unauthorized caravan trip to Ma'rib — then a village rising amidst ancient ruins — where his medical skill persuaded the Emir of Ma'rib to protect him. He copied some inscriptions but had to quit when mobs threatened him.

In 1869 another intrepid Frenchman, Joseph Halévy, not only invaded Yemen but traveled widely about the country and brought back copies of 686 inscriptions. Being a Jew, he disguised himself as an oriental Jew and carried letters of recommendation to all the Jewish communities. In early 1900s, there were about 45,000 scorned and segregated Jews living in Yemen.

Halévy was followed by an Austrian, Eduard Glaser, who made three visits to Yemen in the 1880s and 90s. Glaser not only garnered a treasure of inscriptions, manuscripts, and notes, but even trained a number of Yemenites to collect materials for him. Nevertheless, despite his skill at

passing himself off as a Muslim, he had several narrow escapes.

Since Glaser's time, many foreigners have gained access to Yemen on one pretext or other, but few, however, have gotten to Ma'rib. One who did was the Egyptian archaeologist Ahmed Fakhry.

In 1947, Fakhry went to Yemen in hope of visiting Ma'rib. The Yemenites told him it was hopeless because the Imâm, Yahya ibn-Muhammad, was a tough old tyrant who did not allow anyone to travel there. He once said: 'I and my people would rather live in poverty and eat grass than allow foreigners to enter the country.'

Despite the Imâm's suspiciousness, Fakhry unexpectedly got permission to go to Ma'rib. He set out quickly before the Imâm changed his mind.

At Bilqis' capital, Fakhry had to endure the threats and insults that were the lot of the foreigner in Yemen, even when the stranger was a Muslim and a fellow Arab. He found to his horror that the Yemenites were demolishing the ruins of a dozen structures of ancient Ma'rib in order to cut up the stones and use them in a large, fortresslike governmental building. The local governor said: 'He was very proud of his work, and boasted that he was ruining the remains of dead pagans for the welfare of the living Moslems.'

When Fakhry protested, the royal officials 'could not understand my enthusiasm for the preservation of the remains of the ancient heathen inhabitants, and they told me that they could never explain such an attitude from a Moslem like myself. All such remains, they maintain, are the work of non-believers who adored idols, and their memory must be destroyed wherever it occurs. Arguing with people of such a mentality can only complicate matters'."

To Be Continued Next Issue



Yemen Scott 113-120, C20-21, issued Oct. 14, 1961, perf and imperf. Top to bottom:

- 1i, Woman with grapes;
- 1b, Alabaster funerary mask;
- 2b, Horned animal's head, symbolizing Moon God;
- 4b, Bronze head of an emperor 1st or 2nd century;
- 8b, Statue of Emperor Dhamar Ali.

- 10b, Statue of a child, 2nd or 3rd century;
 - 12b, Stairs in court of Temple of the Moon God;
 - 20b, Alabaster relief, boy riding monster;
 - 6b, (C20) Columns, Temple of the Moon God;
 - 16b, (C21) Control tower and spillway of 2,700-year-old dam of Mar'ib.
- Overprints also were issued for the whole set.