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+ Zafar (230019)

**ZAFAR**, capital of the South Arabian kingdom of Ḥimyar, located approximately 8 km (5 mi.) south-south-east of the modern Yemeni town of Yarim and approximately 8 km east of the San'a-Taiz-Aden highway (14°13' N, 44°24' E). It sits at the eastern edge of an extensive intermontane valley near the head of Wadi Bana. Its identity has been known locally since antiquity and is confirmed by Ḥimyarite inscriptions found at the site.

Zafar, the Sapphar or Tapharon of classical authors, may have been founded as early as about 115 BCE, the beginning of the Ḥimyarite dating system. It was certainly in existence by the mid-first century CE, when it was mentioned by Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 6.26.104 and by the unknown author of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (22-23). The earliest inscriptional evidence for Zafar consists of the Ḥimyarite royal titulary, "king of Saba and lord of Raydan," which occurs as early as the mid-first century. Raydan is generally understood to be the royal palace at Zafar.

Early explorers of the area include the Carsten Niebuhr expedition, which passed nearby in 1763, and Ulrich J. Seetzen, in about 1810. The Austrian South Arabist Eduard Glaser visited the site in the late nineteenth century. Interest in the site increased again in the 1960s and 1970s, with research surveys by Giovanni Garbini, Wolfgang Radt, Walter W. Müller, Paolo Costa, and Raymond Tindel.

Today the site of Zafar is a ruin. No major Ḥimyarite features survive. Its condition is the result of war, earthquake, and the heavy reuse of its building stones. The site is situated on a somewhat elongated hilltop whose lower,

broader, southern end is occupied by a small village and a museum. A rubble-strewn acropolis rises above the village. Foundations and retaining walls can be traced at some points, and various chambers and tunnels have been cut into the soft rock of the hillside. The valley to the west of Zafar is fertile and receives sufficient rainfall to support agriculture. Remains of Ḥimyarite dams, aqueducts, and terrace walls are found throughout the vicinity.

The most comprehensive description of the site is preserved in the *Al-Iklil* by the tenth-century Yemeni historian al-Hamdani. He listed three palaces: Raydan, Shawhatan, and Kawkaban, and named nine city gates. Raydan, the oldest known Ḥimyarite royal palace, probably occupied the acropolis; it is often attested in Ḥimyarite inscriptions and the acropolis at Zafar is still known locally by that name. Shawhatan, which is also mentioned in an inscription (*RES* 3383), probably occupied the northernmost extension of the acropolis, which was still known in the nineteenth century as the Fortress Shawhat. A dedicatory inscription (*ZM* [Zafar Museum] 1; published by Garbini, 1969) mentions a fourth palace, *HRGB* (vocalization uncertain). A church was built at Zafar as the result of the mission of Theophilus Indus, in about 350; three other churches may have been built there during an Ethiopian intervention in the sixth century. The names of other, nonroyal buildings are also known from various dedicatory inscriptions. In one instance the dedicant was clearly Jewish and included a brief Hebrew formula in his otherwise South Arabic inscription. Nothing survives of the churches at Zafar except, perhaps, for a small cross in relief built into a house in a nearby village.

It is the anonymous building rubble covering the site that provides the best cultural profile of Ḥimyarite Zafar: fragmentary architectural elements, bas-reliefs, inscriptions, and sculpture. Stylistically, its motifs can be grouped into two broad categories. The first is the geometric style indigenous to South Arabia. Its elements include rectilinear stepped recess panels and polygonal columns with layered rectilinear capitals. It includes only a few naturalistic motifs such as ibex and bull heads. The motifs of the second are drawn from the orientalized Hellenism of Late Antiquity. Its elaborate vine scrolls, staring frontal busts, winged Victories, griffons, sphinxes, and fantastic hybrid creatures are well attested at Zafar. A considerable range of skill both in composition and execution is found in this second category. There is very little mingling of elements from the two categories.

These remains probably date primarily from the fourth and fifth centuries, during the period that Zafar was the undisputed capital of Ḥimyar, and Ḥimyar the overlord of all of South Arabia. Unfortunately, historical sources for this period are very sparse. The less scrupulous execution of the few inscriptions that survive from this period suggest a general cultural decline. Sectarian rivalry between Christians and Jews exploded into violence during the early sixth cen-

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