

Dargi / Khap  
Kathaphanada Maveattar

# Kawkabān

## Some of its History

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### Introduction

I seize every opportunity to go to Kawkabān. I first spent my language break there from the Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies in Lebanon in April 1973, and have been back many times, perhaps more times than my good friends there care to remember! It enjoys a remarkable site - virtually impregnable, standing 1,000 feet above the surrounding countryside to east, west and south, and is separated from the northern massif by a narrow chasm which has been filled in to provide easy means of access. It forms a strategic gateway for San'a' to the mountain ranges that stretch north and west, containing those of the Hāshid and Bakil tribal confederations that, for well over three hundred years, acknowledged Kawkabān as the capital of their principality of 'al-Kawkabāniyyah'. It is blessed with abundant sandstone building rock nearby that mellows with time to gold in the early morning light. This stone is, unfortunately, not very durable and the black rock (*habashī*) is imported in its stead. Moreover, during its history, stores, catchments and tanks for supplies of water have been constructed to withstand the long sieges to which the town has been subjected. If Kawkabān did not exist it would have to be created.

### Himyarite times

There is no doubt that the site carried an important fortress in Himyarite times, for al-Hamdānī, writing in the tenth century, describes how it was named Kawkabān 'because it was externally girdled with a silver band above which were white stones. Its interior was panelled with aloes wood, mosaic, onyx and different kinds of precious stone. It is said that the Jinn have built it'.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, however, in detailing the descendants of the Himyarite Dhū Aqyān, he attributes the name to Kawkabān b. Sabāl b. Aqyān.<sup>2</sup> Lubākhah, said also to be a son of Dhū Aqyān, is the name given to the hill, riddled with Himyaritic caves, overlooking Shibām. Shibām itself is often referred to as Shibām Aqyān. It is possible therefore to accept the ascription of its foundation to Kawkabān whose name allowed a later metaphorical attribution possible from its riches and remarkable site overlooking Shibām. With the installation of electricity in September 1976 it looks more than ever like a

- 153 R20/A4E/Letters vol. iv & PIS No. 386 w.e. 5.6.1934 in F0371/17804 f. 190.
- 154 PIS No. 386, op. cit.
- 155 R20/A4E/Letters vol. iv.
- 156 De Monfreid op. cit., 82, 111, 115.
- 157 R20/A4D/15 PIS No. 387 w.e. 12.6.1934 in F0371/17804 f. 193a.
- 158 F0371/17922 f. 44.
- 159 R20/A4E/Letters vol. iv.
- 160 R20/A4D/15.
- 161 Ibid and SNO Red Sea Sloops to Admiralty on 18.6.1934 in F0371/17928 f. 160.
- 162 R20/A4D/15 & PIS No. 390 w.e. 3.7.1934 in F0371/17804 f. 204.
- 163 Ibid.
- 164 R20/A4E/Letters vol. iv.
- 165 F0371/17928/00252.
- 166 F0905/7.
- 167 PIS No. 395 w.e. 8.8.1934 in F0371/17804 f. 229.
- 168 R20/A4E/Letters 5/4.
- 169 PIS No. 396 w.e. 15.8.1934 in F0371/17804 f. 224.
- 170 PIS No. 397 w.e. 27.8.1934 in F0371/17804 f. 228.
- 171 PIS No. 398 w.e. 29.8.1934 in F0371/17804 f. 233.
- 172 R20/A4E/Letters vol. iv.
- 173 Report by A. Besse on the situation in al-Hudaydah in F0371/23186.
- 174 R20/A4E/Letters vol. iv.
- 175 F0905/8.
- 176 R20/A4E/Letter vol. iv.
- 177 R20/A2B/1202.
- 178 Kuwait Summary No. 10 in F0905/8.

death of his brother Ma'bad at the hand of 'Āmir after he had been captured at the *yawm* of Rahrahān during the preceding year. Lakīṭ was able to muster against 'Āmir a large tribal host, consisting of almost the whole of Tamīm, Asad, Dhubyān and al-Ribāb. In addition to these tribes that belonged to Muḍar, the large tribal group, Lakīṭ invoked and received the assistance of the Lakhmid king of al-Hīra [*q.v.*], al-Munḍhir b. al-Nu'mān, who sent to him his brother Ḥassān, and of the Kindī king in Ḥaḍjar (Yamāma), al-Djawn, who sent to him two of his sons, according to one account Mu'āwiya and 'Amr. The confederate tribal host advanced against 'Āmir, 'Abs and other tribal contingents, which had fortified themselves in the ravine or *shi'b* in the mountain called Djabala in Naǧd; hence the name of the *yawm* as Shi'b Djabala. A stratagem, conceived by the 'Absī chief Kays b. Zuhayr that sent the ferociously thirsty camels out of the ravine, followed by the infantry, and then the cavalry of 'Āmir and 'Abs, carried the day. Lakīṭ fought heroically but was killed, as was one of the two Kindī chiefs, while the other was captured.

The *yawm* was remarkable for the participation of the prestigious Kinda [*q.v.*]; the battle is sometimes referred to as Yawm al-Djawnayn after the two Kindī chiefs; and one of them, Mu'āwiya, assigned the banners to the various tribal detachments before the battle was joined. But the *yawm* also contributed to the further decline of Kinda's power among the Northern Arabs and to its ultimate departure to Ḥaḍramawt, whence it had originally emigrated to central and northern Arabia.

*Bibliography:* Iṣfahānī, *Aghānī*, Beirut 1957, xi, 125-52; Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, *Ikḍ*, Beirut 1982, v, 141-6; Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, Beirut 1965, i, 583-7. Better than Yāḳūt and Bakrī on the topography of Shi'b Djabala is the Saudi traveller M. b. Bulayhid al Naǧdī, in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-akhbār*, 1972, iii, 216. The best discussion of Yawm Shi'b Djabala remains the one by G. Olinder, who analysed the sources and the various accounts in *Āl al-Ḡaun of the family of Ākil Al-Murār*, in *MO* xxv (1931), 208-29.

(IRFAN SHAHĪD)

**SHIBĀM**, the name of three fortified places, whose first mentions go back to Antiquity, and of a mountain, all in Southwest Arabia. They have been distinguished, from the times of Hamdānī and Yāḳūt onwards, by suffixing the name of a neighbouring settlement or the local region.

1. Shibām Ḥaḍramawt, in lower Ḥaḍramawt, in the wadi of the same name, famed for its lofty houses in sun-dried brick, warranting its designation as a UNESCO site of world significance.

In South Arabian inscriptions, it appears as *S<sup>2</sup>bm* from the end of the 3rd century A.D. and in the 4th century, the time of the conquest of Ḥaḍramawt by Ḥimyar. Islamic Shibām was known above all as a centre for the Ibāḍiyya [*q.v.*] after their defeats in the 120s/740s, and for three centuries it seems to have been part of an Ibāḍī principality. According to Hamdānī, the western part of the region belonged to Kinda; it was an important town at this time, with 30 mosques (*Sifā*, 86). Its history then merges into that of the dynasties of western Yemen (Ṣulayhids, Ayyūbids, Rasūlids, etc.), until a local power of Ḥaḍramawt established its authority in the 9th/15th century, that of the Kathīrīd sultan 'Alī b. 'Umar, consolidated by his great-grandson Abū Ṭuwayriḳ Badr (d. 977/1570). After him, Ḥaḍramawt became again fragmented, but the main Kathīrīd line persisted till the end of the 18th century, until another Kathīrīd came from Indo-

nesia and divided power there with the Yafi'is. Then the whole area passed to the Ka'ātīs in 1858 until their removal in 1967.

Shibām is a fortress town, with walls and towers which made it impregnable. The houses rise to eight storeys, utilising the cramped defensive site, a height unusual in Ḥaḍramawt. Water is gained by a sophisticated system for storing up rainwater and by wells. Shibām has enjoyed a prosperity not easily explicable by the modest agricultural resources of the surrounding territory, but stemming from commercial revenues drawn by its people, situated as it has been on the caravan route from the ports of al-Shihṛ and al-Mukallā towards the direction of Ṣan'ā'. Before the decline of caravan traffic in the 1930s, each month the town received 400 to 1,000 camels. There were also, until after the Second World War, important remittances from male members of the population who had emigrated to India, Singapore and Indonesia. The village of al-Saḥīl has grown up *extra muros*, and today, with 15,000 inhabitants, is more populous than Shibām itself with 8,000.

(A. ROUAUD and CH. ROBIN)

2. Shibām Kawkabān (also Sh. Akyān or Sh. Himyar in ms. sources), a large settlement, with 2,000 inhabitants at the time of the 1975 census, 37 km/20 miles to the northwest of Ṣan'ā' and on the plain of Ṣan'ā', dominated by the vertical wall of the Djabal al-Dulā' (3,140 m/10,300 feet).

It is mentioned in inscriptions from the 3rd century A.D. onwards (*S<sup>2</sup>bm* or *S<sup>2</sup>bm<sup>m</sup>*) as centre of the Dhu Hagarān Shibām tribe. The name Sh. Akyān preserves the name of the *ḳays* or lords of the local principality, the Banū Dhū Kabīr Akyān. In early Islamic times, Sh. Kawkabān was the birthplace of the local Yu'firid dynasty (232-387/847-998), founded in High Yemen, and contributing to the disappearance of 'Abbāsīd caliphal authority in Yemen. The Great Mosque of the town may date from the Yu'firids or earlier. At this time, according to al-Hamdānī, the local population were still considered 'Himyarite', including in language; this presumably implied a claim to continuity with the old South Arabian culture and a local language close to Arabic but with some unusual features. From the 10th/16th century, Sh. Kawkabān was a bastion of the 'Alid Sharaf al-Dīn family, who provided two Zaydī Imāms of Yemen; today, it comes within the area of the tribe of Hamdān. At all times it has played a notable role in Yemeni affairs, as frequent references in the chronicles attest, arising from the agricultural richness of the region around it, the strength of the fortress of Kawkabān and its proximity to Ṣan'ā'.

3. Shibām al-Ghirās (also Sh. Sukhaym in ms. sources), a small village and archaeological site 24 km/15 miles northeast of Ṣan'ā', and near the western slope of the Djabal Dhū Marmar. In old inscriptions, it appears as *S<sup>2</sup>bm<sup>m</sup>* (1st-2nd century A.D.), and was the chief centre of the tribe of Yursam (*Yrs'm*). The name of the village of Ghirās (population 500 in 1975) serves to distinguish it from the other Shibāms. Its main claim to fame is its vast mosque containing the tomb of the Imām al-Mahdī Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 1092/1681), whose reign was marked by the expulsion of the Jews of Ṣan'ā' and their exile to the region of al-Mawzā' in 1090/1679 in the aftermath of the messianic movement of Shabbatay Ṣwī [*q.v.*]. At present, there are alabaster quarries in the neighbourhood of the village.

4. Shibām Ḥarāz, a peak of 2,940m/9,643 feet in the Ḥarāz massif west-south-west of Ṣan'ā', with a

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the Jordan and guarded the fords into Galilee, notably below the confluence of the Yarmūk, the *Djīr al-Madjami* (Bridge of the Confluence).

The castle presents a plan of Byzantine type; it "consisted of a rectangular keep enclosed in a surrounding wall 160 m by 120 m flanked by square towers, with a salient and door let into it in the midst of each front" (Deschamps, 121-3), and there are ramps at the base of the openings. The northern front dominates perpendicularly the Wādī'l-Bira, the three other fronts are bordered by ditches cut twenty metres into the rock.

It was reinforced in 534/1140 by the King Fulk. The Hospitallers acquired it in 563/1168 and added to the defences. In 578/1182, the troops of Saladin were repelled by the Franks on the neighbouring plateau of Kawkab, but after his success at Hītīn [q.v.], the Kurdish prince contemplated the conquest of Galilee, and on the 15th *Dhu'l-Ka'da* 584/5th January 1189, aided by the contingents of his brother al-'Adil, he approached to seize Kawkab, bastion of the Crusaders' resistance in the Holy Land.

In the reign of al-'Adil, Kawkab was occupied by the *amir* Šārim al-Dīn Kaymaz al-Nadīmī; then 'Izz al-Dīn Usāma received it as an *ikhā'*. He kept the castle until the day when al-Mu'azzam 'Isā, younger brother of al-Kāmil and prince of Damascus, took it from him (609/1212). In 616/1219, the Franks occupied Damietta, and al-Mu'azzam gave the order to dismantle Kawkab; the work was suspended during the diplomatic discussions between the Sultan al-Kāmil and the Legate Pelagos, then resumed, and al-Mu'azzam completed the dismantling of the place in *Dhu'l-Ka'da* 624/October 1227, so that the Franks of Frederick II might not eventually take advantage of it. At the beginning of 638/end of 1240, the Hospitallers recaptured the castle from the Ayyūbids. At the end of 638/beginning of 1241, with peace restored, Kawkab was confirmed as Frankish territory, but at the beginning of 645/summer of 1247, when al-Sālih Ayyūb resumed operations, the Franks, who had not been strong enough to defend the place, had to surrender it. Under the Mamlūks, Kal'at Kawkab was part of the province of Šafad. In our time there is a village near the ruins of the castle which bears its name.

**Bibliography:** G. Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems*, London 1890, 483; Ibn Šhaddād, *al-A'lāh al-Khatira*, ed. S. Dahan, Damascus 1963, 161, 223; Ibn al-Furāt, *Ayyubids, Mamelouks and Crusaders, Selections from the Ta'rikh*, by M. Lyons and J. Riley Smith, Cambridge 1971, ii, 61; Yāqūt, iv, 328; 'Imād al-Dīn, *al-Fath al-kussī*..., tr. H. Massé, Paris 1972, index; M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *La Syrie à l'époque des Mamelouks*, BAH iii, Paris 1925, 124; T. E. Lawrence, *Crusader Castles*, London 1936, 40, fig. 47; P. Deschamps, *La défense du royaume de Jérusalem*, BAH xxxiv, Paris 1939, 14, 121-3, 236; S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, Cambridge 1954, iii, 218, 229, 370-1; K. M. Setton, *A History of the Crusades*, Philadelphia 1955-62, i, 586-7, 619, ii, 415, 564, 789; J. Prawer, *Histoire du royaume latin de Jérusalem*, Paris 1969-70, i, 334, 557, 663, pl. xv, ii, 39, 155-6, 286.

(N. ELISSÉEFF)

**KAWKABĀN**, the name of several places in south Arabia.

1. The name of a sanctuary mentioned in the inscription Halévy No. 686, 3-4, copied from a building in 'Aden by J. Halévy (*mihrābān Kaw-*

*kabān*). Cf. also F. Hommel, *Grundriss der Geographie und Geschichte des alten Orients*, ii, Leipzig 1925, 707.

2. The name of a castle near Zafār north of Nā'aṭ. It was called Kawkabān, "the two stars," i.e. star-castle, because it was adorned with silver stripes outside, the roof was covered with white slabs of stone, the interior panelled with cypress wood and paved with mosaic, different gems, onyx and corundum, which shone like stars at night. This marvellous building was naturally ascribed to the *Djinn*. This castle is perhaps also mentioned in the inscription Glaser No. 238, 3 (*Bayt wa-Kawkabān*), which comes from Bayt Ghufr in the vicinity. The castle is said to be still standing.

3. A little village on a great cliff on the right side of the Wādī Salāma, N. E. of Ḥadja and called Kawkabān-Ḥadja to distinguish it from other places of the same name.

4. Capital of the province of the same name, N.W. of Šan'a'. The town of Kawkabān lies at a height of 8,750 feet above sea-level in 15° 31' 42" N. Lat. on the southern part of the ridge which begins about half a mile S.E. of the town of Kawkabān at the left towards Ṭawīla and runs S.E. to N.W. for several hours' journey. It is part of the great Mašāna'a plateau and is called *Djabal Dulā'*. The south-eastern part of the range, the especially precipitous part, is separated from the main massif by an almost straight ravine, the Wādī Nabhān, which runs from *Shibām* past the one gate of the town of Kawkabān (Bāb al-Ḥadīd) to the Wādī Na'im west of the *Djabal Kawkabān*. Two roads run over this mountain, cut off only by the ravine of the Wādī Nabhān, the one through the town of *Shibām*, following the very deep ravine of Nabhān which is bridged over, an old winding narrow path of steps hewn out of the rock, and the second, an easier one, running in the Kā'a Dulā' and crossing a bridge over the Wādī Nabhān just before reaching the Bāb al-Ḥadīd. The town of Kawkabān stretches from the Bāb al-Ḥadīd to the S.E. and runs quite close to the eastern slope of the cliff all along that side. This part seems to be the oldest. Not very far from the gate on the great open square in the centre of the town (in the northern part) is a double wall for the most part now in ruins. Between the two walls a great number of skilfully walled pits have been cut out of the ground, which served as granaries for the old inhabitants. Similar granaries, but of more recent date, are to be found in the southern part and outside the town. The town itself consists of a large number of excellently built houses of red stone the architectural effect of which is often striking; the doors of the houses are often ornamented with fine iron work. The houses of the former Imāms now for the most part decayed or shot to pieces are particularly striking with their splendid façades. Besides the principal mosque with minaret, the only one in the town, there are seven small mosques. The water supply is provided from two huge and finely built reservoirs; the one, called Muṣallā, lies in the south, exceedingly deep and enclosed on the west side by a wall 60 to 80 feet high. The second, to the east of it, begun but not quite finished by Sayyid 'Abd al-Karīm about 1840, is called Barīk al-Ziyādi. There are also four smaller cisterns. This water-supply would suffice for a town three times the size of Kawkabān. The Jewish quarter lay E. S. E. outside the town but consisted almost entirely of low stone houses with little windows and doors.