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Alessandro de Maigret (†)

## Some new Considerations on the Great Temple of Yeha\*

I first went to Yeha with Christian J. Robin and his French Archaeological Mission in January 1998, and I clearly remember being astonished by the sheer size of the celebrated "Great Temple". Used to working in Yemen, I had never seen a monument with such massive structures and such a large cella. The stone blocks of the walls were so massive that they had withstood the elements and ensured an exceptional state of conservation, which certainly contributed to the monument's spectacular aspect. The building's South Arabian matrix was clear, but I recall the doubts which assailed me at the thought of the contrast between the fame of the Sabaeen origins of the kingdom of Da'amat and the evident Minaean character of this temple in Tigray.

The temple's existence had been known ever since the 1500s (Alvarez 1889: 35 ff.). There are descriptions of it by two 19<sup>th</sup> century British travellers (Salt 1814; Bent 1896); it was photographed and a plan of it was drawn early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by members of the *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition* (DAE) led by Enno Littmann (Krencker 1913: 81 ff.); and we have another account of it – in the glowing terms used by all his predecessors – by the Frenchman Francis Anfray. He was the only person who, in 1960, had been able to excavate the well tombs on the eastern side of the hill of Daaro-Michael (Anfray 1990: 22–26) and in the "Ruine II", 250 m north-east of the temple on the knoll of Grat-Beal-Gebri (Anfray 1995). These accounts, however, had in no way prepared me for the dramatic impression one gets on seeing the monument at first hand. What is more, nobody up until then had been able to carry out systematic excavations on the site.

The opportunity of excavating in the Great Temple of Yeha was bound to increase the gratitude and admiration I feel for Christian Robin, who had invited me to participate in

his Mission and had managed to secure the concession for excavating from the Ethiopian authorities. My good fortune did not stop here, for we found that the large cella now stood unencumbered by the medieval constructions which had prevented the DAE from carrying out excavations in 1906.

### THE MEDIEVAL ADDITIONS IN NEW PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE DAE

Some photographs taken by Enno Littmann's Mission and never published, which Professor Steffen Wenig was kind enough to send me, give a clearer idea of the state of the temple in 1906. Although the account of the German excavations published by D. Krencker in 1913 was amply illustrated, it only featured three photographs.

There are four interesting pictures (DAE 375, 381, 377, 380 = MBA 2252.01, 02, 03, 07, Figs. A1, A7, A3, A6) of the medieval annex which extended the original building on the side of the entrance. They reveal details of the structure which, with a large frontal gateway on the same alignment as the temple, obviously served as a sort of narthex. On the evidence of the regular blocks reused (DAE 381 = MBA 2252.02, Fig. A7), we can infer that the structure was built using materials taken from inside the temple (probably the internal facing of the upper storey of the perimeter walls, since these are seen to be almost entirely missing even at that date).

The photographs (particularly DAE 377 = MBA 2252.03, Fig. A3, showing the southern aspect) reveal that the state of conservation of this structure was fairly precarious at that

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time, reinforcing the hypothesis that it dates back a long way. It is likely, as F. Anfray (1990: 19) has also argued, that it dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D., when the temple was taken over by Christians. At the time Yeha was the place of residence of the saint Abba-Afsé, still the titular of the nearby church.

The existence of this annexe prevented the DAE carrying out excavations in the area in front of the South Arabian temple. The German archaeologists could do no more than make conjectures about its original entrance. They presumed, for instance, that since the ground was significantly lower to the west of the structure, there must have been steps leading up to the temple (Krencker 1913: 80, Abb. 165, 171). As will be seen below, the excavations we carried out in 1998 brought to light at this spot (which had been freed from the medieval structure in the 1940s, when the local inhabitants removed all the blocks of stone to build the nearby church) an elaborate monumental platform (pronaos) designed to support the six massive pillars of the entrance prostyle (Robin / de Maigret 1998: figs. 37–43).

We can observe (photograph DAE 381 = MBA 2252.02, Fig. A7) that there was an inscription (part of no. 36 in Bernand *et al.* 1991: 114, plate 33) set into the wall in the right hand half of this annexe, seen in detail in photograph DAE 388 = MBA 2252.14, Fig. A14. The block bearing this inscription was conserved when the structure was dismantled, and can be seen standing on its own in a picture published by F. Anfray (1990: photograph p. 20). Today it is conserved in the small *antiquarium* to the north of the church, where we found and photographed it.

Another construction, probably dating from the same period as the annexe, stood inside the temple. It is also clearly documented in the DAE photographs (DAE 385, 384 = MBA 2252.09, 10, Figs. A11 and A10), although not in its entirety. It was quite a small building comprising two rooms, with solid walls in stone and squared blocks, which occupied the central part of the temple's hypostyle hall (Krencker 1913: Abb. 167). This must have been the original church of Abba-Afsé. The photographs suggest (*viz.* the caved-in roof in DAE 385 = 2252.09, Fig. A11) that the church had already fallen into disuse at the time of the DAE mission.

It is likely that the baptismal font standing in the south-eastern corner of the temple

dated from the same period as the church. This relic was still buried at the time of the German mission, and was brought to light by the Frenchman Jean Doresse in 1955 (Doresse 1956).

As can be seen in a north-south cross-section published in the report of the DAE mission (Krencker 1913: Abb. 168), there was a substantial mound of earth and stones (above all to the north) between the small church and the perimeter walls of the temple, which did not stop the German archaeologists reaching the floor of the cella and the *adyton* at the foot of the south wall (Krencker 1913: 82, Abb. 172).

This construction was also removed in the 1940s, enabling us in 1998 to complete excavation of the whole of the temple interior and bring to light the fine flooring slabs and monolithic bases for the twelve massive pillars of the hypostyle hall (Robin / de Maigret 1998: figs. 23–28).

The DAE photographs provided an invaluable record not only of the later constructions but also of the way in which the temple structures have stood up to the passage of time. If, for example, you compare the photograph of the external face of the east wall (DAE 378 = MBA 2252.05, Fig. A4), or that showing the northern jamb of the entrance (DAE 382 = MBA 2252.08, Fig. A8 [also published in D. Krencker's report]), with the similar shots we took in 1998 (Robin / de Maigret 1998: figs. 3, 18), it is clear that practically nothing has changed over a century: all the blocks, including the ones which appeared most dilapidated in 1906, are still in place. This is due to the excellent quality of the used limestone and the perfection with which the blocks were hewn and mounted. The greatest damage to the construction has been caused by human actions. In some of the DAE photographs we can still see traces of the internal facing of the upper storey walls (DAE 382, 384, 386, 387 = MBA 2252.08, 10, 12, 13, Figs. A8, A10, A12, A13), which are no longer extant, presumably because they collapsed or were removed.

#### THE RESULTS OF THE FRENCH EXCAVATION IN 1998

Thus the excavations we were able to carry out in the temple in January-February 1998 with the French Mission were made possible in part by fact that the cella and area in front of the entrance had been freed of later constructions. We shall give here a brief summary of



the findings (published that year by Robin / de Maigret 1998), since they crown a lengthy research itinerary in which our predecessors in the DAE played a major part.

Our excavations brought to light all the flooring inside the temple, and revealed the large entrance platform (pronaos) almost entirely. The data obtained from these excavations and the painstaking cleansing of the walls give quite a clear idea of the temple architecture, enabling us to draw important conclusions concerning the place of this impressive monument in the history of Ethiopia and in South Arabian art (Fig. 1).

#### The temple

The temple is a large structure measuring 15.20 m wide, 18.80 m deep and about 13 m high externally, originally on two storeys, with the entrance occupying the central third of the western façade (Fig. 2). The dry perimeter wall, with an average thickness of 1.40 m, consists of a double curtain of limestone blocks arranged in level courses of equivalent height with an in-filling of stones and compacted earth. The blocks, some of which measure 3 m in length, were cut and laid with great care. They feature the classic South Arabian smooth border and central dressing. The two curtains are bound together by transverse quoins laid end to end, sometimes vertically.

The building is erected on a base in which the courses can be seen from the outside to expand slightly. Prior to excavation work the largest number of these expanded courses (seven) was visible on the outer face of the rear (east) wall, where the lowest one was grounded on the bedrock. In a trial trench dug between the pronaos and the southwest corner of the temple it was possible to count up to 13 such courses (without encountering the bedrock). The uneven height of the base obviously depends on the need to counteract the unevenness of the underlying plateau.

The fact that the temple was originally on two storeys is borne out by



Fig. 1 The Great Temple from the east.



Fig. 2 Axonometric reconstruction of the Great Temple.





Fig. 3 The ledge running round the interior of the temple at the height of the second storey.

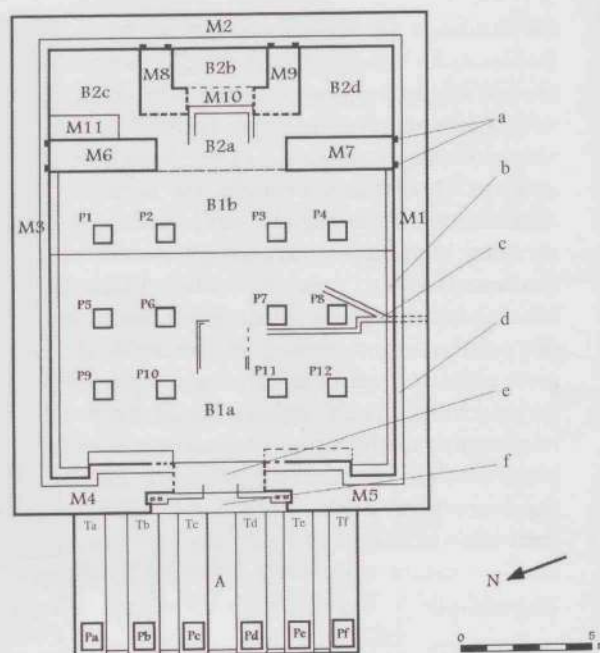


Fig. 4 Plan of the temple showing the various structures. A) pronaos; B) temple; B1) cella (or hypostyle hall); B1a) lower section, B1b) upper section; B2) adyton; B2a) access, B2b) shrine, B2c) left annexe, B2d) right annexe; M1-M11) walls; P1-P12) pillars of the cella; Pa-Pf) pillars of the pronaos; Ta-Tf) plinths of pronaos base; a) mortises; b) bench; c) runnel; d) ledge; e) threshold; f) outer threshold.



Fig. 5 View of the hypostyle hall after excavation.

the inner faces of the perimeter walls. The walls taper off about 6.30 m above floor level, where a level ledge runs right round the hall (Fig. 3). This ledge (as shown by mortises cut into the blocks) supported the stone (or

wooden) beams supporting the upper storey. The internal facing of this storey's walls (5.70 m high) has been lost, but the occasional blocks still in situ show that the walls here were no more than 1 metre thick.



Fig. 6 One of the bases for the pillars in the hypostyle hall.



#### The interior

The excavation, which brought to light the entire extent of the flooring in basalt slabs, enabled us to understand how the temple was structured (Figs. 4–5). The area included a large square cella (B1) from which access was to the *ádyton* at the far end of the temple (B2). The eastern third of the cella floor (B1b) was raised by a step across its whole width. The whole cella was divided up by four rows of three pillars (P1–P12). The central nave, aligned with the temple gate and with the entrance of the *ádyton*, is the widest. The pillars have not been found on place, but eleven monolithic bases in volcanic rock set into the floor show where they could have stood. These bases, grounded on the uneven bedrock, show different thickness and bear the chiselled forms of the rectangular sections of the pillars they originally supported (63 cm × 75 cm) (Fig. 6). The pillars were designed to take the weight of the upper storey, and must have had other pillars or columns above them supporting the temple roof.

A bench of oblong blocks runs round the base of the perimeter walls of the cella (or hypostyle hall). Two runnels which meet south of pillar P8 drained off waste water through an aperture in the southern wall. Nearby, there are grooves in the slabs in the central nave to take a rectangular insertion (placed centrally between pillars P6, P7, P10 and P11), possibly an altar for sacrifices Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 The slabs from the central part of the cella contained a groove probably used to hold an altar.

Only the light-coloured volcanic rock bases of the front walls of the *ádyton* (M6, M7) remain. Their thickness (about 1.20 m), delim-





Fig. 8 Fragments of an ancient well-head used in the in-filling in wall M6.

ited by a double course of blocks packed with stones and earth, corresponds to that revealed by the mortises in the north and south walls of the temple (Fig. 4:a). The in-filling contains fragments of a well-head, which must have stood on the site prior to the building of the temple (Fig. 8).

Access to the *adyton* was through the wide passageway lying between the ends of walls M6 and M7. This zone (B2a), only fragments of which have been conserved, was originally higher than the upper part of the hypostyle hall (B1b). The floor level is indicated by several abutting, well dressed slabs that lie cross-wise against the shrine B2b (Fig. 9). The slabs bear rectangular grooves indicating fixtures to close off (or give access to) the shrine.

In order to level off the bedrock, the floor of the hypostyle hall rests on earth, but the *adyton* required greater construction efforts. As many as three layers of thick volcanic slabs underlie the well-dressed slabs of the flooring. The lower bed, with courses on the same longitudinal alignment as the temple,

has slabs of varying thickness to counteract the unevenness of the rock. A second layer of large slabs is laid cross-wise and, over it, a third has the same slab alignment of the first. The uppermost layer corresponds to the floor of this passageway to the *adyton*. The slabs of the two upper layers are broken as you go towards the hypostyle hall. It is thus impossible to determine exactly where the step marking the raised portion of the *adyton* lay. However, it may well have corresponded to the alignment of the western faces of walls M6 and M7.

On the east side these layers of slabs laid in alternate directions come to an end against the wall base (M10) which previously delimited the small shrine area. This wall, which was clearly visible from the east (since we found the shrine area devoid of flooring and excavated down to the bedrock), is composed of oblong blocks which had obviously been reused (Robin / de Maigret 1998: 672, fig. 36). Together with the well fragments found in M6, these indicate that, prior to this temple, there must have been what was probably a smaller temple at Yeha, located in the vicinity if not actually on the same site.

In the room to the right of the shrine (B2d) a baptismal font was hollowed out in mediaeval times (Fig. 10). In the one to the left (B2c), a large foundation layer of stones and earth was found which, as shown by a slab still in situ in the northeast corner, must have supported a relatively high floor level. It seems likely that access from B2a to these side rooms meant mounting a step.

The structure M11 could indicate the existence in room B2c of a ladder leading up to the first floor of the temple.

#### The *pronaos*

Once the internal structures had been completely exposed, excavation work continued on the temple's exterior, opposite the entrance wall. Here, despite the existence of several recent graves, it was possible to open a number of trial trenches that confirmed the existence of a large platform (A) forming the base of the temple's monumental *pronaos*.

The upper face of this platform (which has deep and carefully constructed foundations) measures 10.40 m (north-south) by 5.10 m (east-west). Its surface is made up of six massive girders in volcanic stone averaging 1.10 m in width and 65 cm in thickness (Ta-Tf), laid



Fig. 9 View of the *adyton* (B2) from the south.



Fig. 10 The baptismal font found in B2d.



parallel at intervals of approximately 60 cm and running the entire surface of the building (Figs. 4 and 11). The flooring was obtained by introducing rubble in-fill and laying slabs in the gaps between the girders. Rectangular recesses (75 cm wide and 90 cm long) carved into the distal portion of each girder would have taken six large pillars (Pa-Pf) standing in front of the temple entrance. The fact that the north and south ends of the pronaos cor-

respond to two overhead openings in the temple wall indicates that the six pillars were joined to the temple by horizontal beams, so that the pronaos would have had a monumental entrance porch. This hypothesis corresponds to what can be observed in many pre-Islamic Yemenite temples.

In view of the fact that the foundations had not been trimmed and squared off, the base of the pronaos must have been below ground





*Fig. 11* View of the pronaos and temple entrance (from the west).



*Fig. 12* The foundation courses along the western side of the pronaos.

in ancient times (Fig. 12). Thus there was no need for steps to get up onto the podium, and the ground level can only have been slightly below the present one. The bases of the massive girders Ta–Tf were in the soil, and the gap of approximately 60 cm was overcome by two steps inserted between them at the front.

In trial trench dug in front of the pronaos (and thus in a context which preceded the temple) we found a fragment of a calcareous block bearing an engraved decoration featuring two entwined snakes (Robin / de Maigret 1998: fig. 51). In terms of style and iconography this decoration recalls those known as “Banāt ‘Ād”, recurrent in the temples of the Yemeni Jawf.

Access from the pronaos to the cella was through a monumental gateway of which regrettably only fragments remain (Fig. 13). The raised threshold (Fig. 4: e) comprised a double row of blocks, with in-filling, occupying all the space between walls M4 and M5. This double row would probably have been covered over by a layer of slabs. In correspondence with this threshold the ends of walls M4 and M5 are not clear-cut. Their final blocks, which formed the jambs, are missing, and it is difficult to establish the exact size of the entrance, although in view of the dimensions of the blocks in the threshold it cannot have been much less than what we see today (about 3.80 m). Some



Fig. 13 View of the western part of the cella.



Fig. 14 Some of the grooves visible below the jambs of the entrance, to take a wooden frame for the door.



hollows visible in the jambs and the step in front of the threshold (Fig. 4: f) suggest that removable partitions could be used to close the entrance (Fig. 14).

#### FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF NEW DISCOVERIES IN THE YEMEN

The striking affinity between this temple and temple A (phase C) at Yathill/Barāqish (also known as the “temple of Nakrah”, excavated

by the Italian Mission in the early 1990s in the Yemeni Jawf) (Fig. 15) was duly noted in the report published by Ch. Robin and myself immediately after the excavations at Yeha (Robin / de Maigret 1998). I pointed out the close similarities in groundplan, orientation, building technique and the nature of the furnishing and decoration. I also mentioned the articulation on two storeys of the temple at Yeha as one of the differences between the two sites, but this element too now has to feature among the similarities. Recent excavations at Barāqish



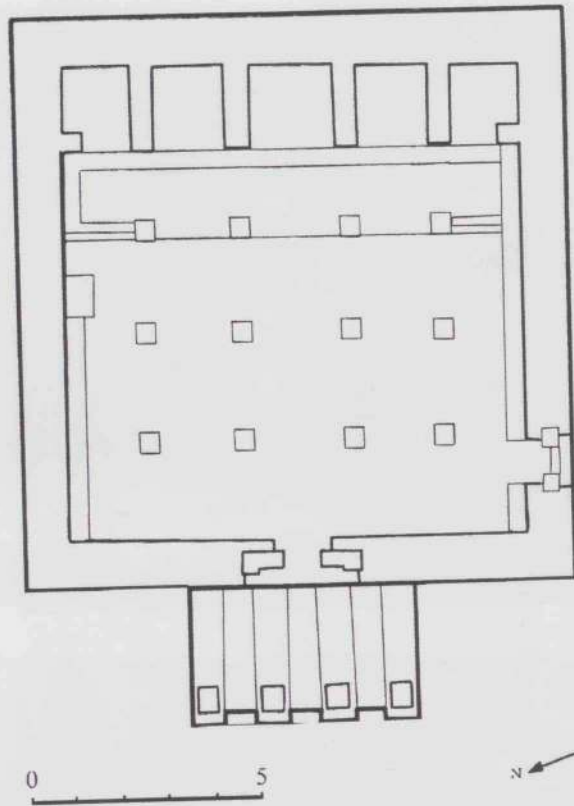


Fig. 15 Plan of the Temple of Nakrah, Barāqish (phase C).

(2004–5) of a second monument (temple B), quite similar to temple A, have proved to have exactly the same structure on two storeys (de Maigret 2009:78, figs. 35,36). Apart from the larger dimensions of Yeha, we can in fact speak of monuments which are almost identical, and by focusing on the temples at Yathill it should be possible to establish the chronology of the one at Yeha.

In my account of excavations at Yathill I dated “phase C” of the temple of Nakrah to the 7<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (de Maigret / Robin 1993), but some new considerations, in part prompted by our investigation of the adjacent temple B, suggest that this dating should be brought forward. One of the most significant factors is the total absence in both temples of the so-called “carinated pottery”, a typology of vases found in all Yemeni sites in strata pre-dating the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Such levels (represented in exemplary fashion, up until the conclusive phase, in the Sabaeen site of Yalā (de Maigret 2003) are also present at Barāqish, where they have been located well *below* the strata corresponding to the two Minaean temples. I believe this carinated pottery can be

called “Sabaeen”, since it appears to belong (at least in its most advanced phase) to the period in which Southern Arabia was under the hegemony of the so-called “Sabaeen Empire”, with its most prestigious ruler Karib’il Watar the Great, around 700 B.C.

In view of the substantial difference between the two repertoires of ceramic ware (the carinated vases preceding vases which do not feature this technique), found in virtually all the sites where both occur, we must conclude that a lengthy period of time elapsed between the two phases. There is confirmation for this in some recent stratigraphical studies comparing Yemeni sites which reveal a generalised gap in occupation between the strata containing carinated pottery and the later ware (de Maigret 2004); this interruption seems to have gone on for the best part of two centuries (6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.).

We do not know at present whether there was such an interruption in occupation at Barāqish too, but we can say that the first phase of the temple of Nakrah (phase C) does not pre-date the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., on account of the absence of both carinated pottery and Sabaeen inscriptions (which are found at Barāqish, but clearly belong to the older settlement, together with carinated pottery). And if this is the case for the temple of Nakrah at Barāqish (and naturally also for the twin temple B), this must also, in view of the extraordinary architectonic affinities, hold good for the Great Temple of Yeha. In fact the South Arabian ceramic ware we found on the slabs of the cella of this temple (Robin / de Maigret 1998: 773, fig. 47) is *not* of the carinated type.

The temple of Yeha has always been dated, by myself among others, to the 8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., simply on the grounds that the inscriptions found in Yeha are Sabaeen; virtually all of them can be attributed to these centuries on the basis of their script. However, we have to remember that *not one* of these inscriptions was found inside the Great Temple. Indeed, we did not find a single inscription during our excavations, whether on walls or benches or slabs. This was quite remarkable, for it is in stark contrast with the numerous epigraphs found in the two temples at Barāqish.

Where then did the inscriptions of Yeha come from? As we have seen, various cases of reused material were found in the Great Temple, suggesting that there had been an older structure here, possibly on the same site and



also probably a temple. One telling piece of evidence is the fragment of a slab with figurative decoration of the *Banāt 'Ād* type, common in temples throughout the Jawf in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (Antonini 2004). Perhaps these inscriptions should be ascribed to this hypothetical earlier temple. It would then be this first, lost temple (rather than the Great Temple) which is to be identified with the *Mtry* inaugurated by the king *Wer Hywt* (?) and dedicated to the god Almaqah recorded in the inscriptions (Robin / de Maigret 1998: 796ff.).

This leaves the question of why no inscriptions were found in the Great Temple. The most likely explanation is that *it was never in fact finished*.

This hypothesis – advanced in our report on the excavations (Robin / de Maigret 1998: 780) – derives from the total absence of any trace whatsoever (whether in the temple or nearby or in the village) of the twelve massive pillars from its hypostyle hall, the six enormous pillars from the pronaos, the numerous cross-beams supporting the second storey or anything constituting the temple roofing. It is true that the material that had collapsed was reused in the nearby church, but the debris recorded in the DAE photographs was not very voluminous, and certainly not enough to account for all the material we have just mentioned. Besides, the pillars would have been too large either to be reused in the church of Abba-Afsé or to have been made of a perishable material such as wood.

Something must have happened, either at Yeha or in the temple builders' homeland which caused building work to be broken off and never subsequently resumed. When did this come about? And above all, when and by whom was the Great Temple built?

We said above that from the point of view of archaeology and the history of architecture, the temple postdates the Sabaeen Empire. The close affinities linking it to the earlier construction phase of the temple of Nakrah at Barāqish seem to date its construction to after

the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. However, the chronology of phase C of the temple of Nakrah is still under discussion, and we cannot exclude the possibility that, if Barāqish too experienced a gap in its occupation (or at least a marked reduction in building work) during the 6<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., this dating may have to be brought forward, even to the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. In any case, whether 6<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., we are talking about the time when work on the building was broken off, for as we have said the great monument was never completed.

Such a chronology is decidedly late, and goes against the well established theory of the contemporary flourishing of South Arabian culture in Ethiopia and the Sabaeen Empire in the Yemen. It has to be said, however, that this theory has only ever been based on epigraphic evidence. The extension of archaeological investigations is providing new data, bringing forward the period in which Southern Arabia maintained dealings with Africa. In fact current archaeological findings affirm that a first phase of relationships between the Tigray and the empire of Karib'il Watar the Great was followed by a second phase of contacts with the kingdom of Ma'in. These contacts presumably flourished when the fortunes of Karib'il Watar had already declined, once Ma'in had acquired full political and economic autonomy (a further reason, in my opinion, for preferring a period later than the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.).

The grand scale of the temple the Minaeans began to build at Yeha well illustrates their ambitions in this region, as if keen to show that they were in no way inferior to the great ruler Karib'il Watar. But shortly afterwards something happened which forced them to leave. We still do not know what this was, but it caused building work on the great temple to be brusquely interrupted. The temple, in fact, was never inaugurated, which is why we lack the epigraphic documentation that has so far given us only a partial view of the reality known as the "South Arabian period of Ethiopia".



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