

SHEBA@SABA-TRADING.COM: A YEMENI TRADING LINK THREE THOUSAND YEARS OLD

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The following is a summary of lecture delivered by Diana Pickworth on 10/16/2002 at Stanford University

Three kings of Assyria and King Solomon of ancient Israel placed orders with the traders of Saba, and none were disappointed. Delivery by camel and later by ship continued, despite political change in both the southwestern Arabian Peninsula and in the northern areas of the coastal east Mediterranean lands and inland Mesopotamia, modern Iraq.

As one aspect of the ancient Silk Route involved in the movement of Far Eastern, Indian and Indian Ocean island products, the traders of Sheba were secretive about the origins of the desired items. Gold, frankincense, myrrh and a vast variety of medicinal herbs from the Indian subcontinent increased in price as they passed through controlled warehouses and checkpoints moving to their destinations in the north. However, many of the items came from further east than their purchasers realized. The fabled land of great wealth, Saba, responded to a market economy and was often a middle man in the process.

I will discuss the early inland cities of Marib, the Sabaean capital, Tumna, the capital of Qataban, and Shabwa in the Hadramawt; all of these were sited around the edge of the Ramlat Sabatayn desert, and were part of a chain of small kingdom cities in what is modern day Yemen. We will also visit the site of Qana, a port on the Indian Ocean whence the Romans later received their myrrh and frankincense.

The Silk Road is a 19th century name created by a visionary European scholar who labeled, and thus created an image for an ancient trading system of the first millennium AD. He certainly would be hired by any top level advertising agency of the 21st century. From Xian in China, to the eastern Mediterranean coast by a single route is to

understate the case and is too narrow a definition. This name described a vast trading complex which was more intricate both in the number of commodities it carried and the routes it followed than is implied in the name. Today's Superhighway of the internet would be a closer parallel.

Where does the modern Republic of Yemen, and my title "Sheba@Saba-Trading.com" fit into the ancient map of a Silk Superhighway? The southwest Arabian Peninsula was a transshipment point from the early first millennium BC for items from India and Ceylon via the long, north-south camel caravan route traversing the Arabian Peninsula. Saba, as the main federation was called, sent to the Mediterranean kingdoms and inland Mesopotamian cities of the royal courts of Assyria and Babylon the fragrances they used to burn for their gods; these included frankincense and myrrh. Indigo-dyed cloth, pepper, cardamon, and precious stones all passed through the fabled land.

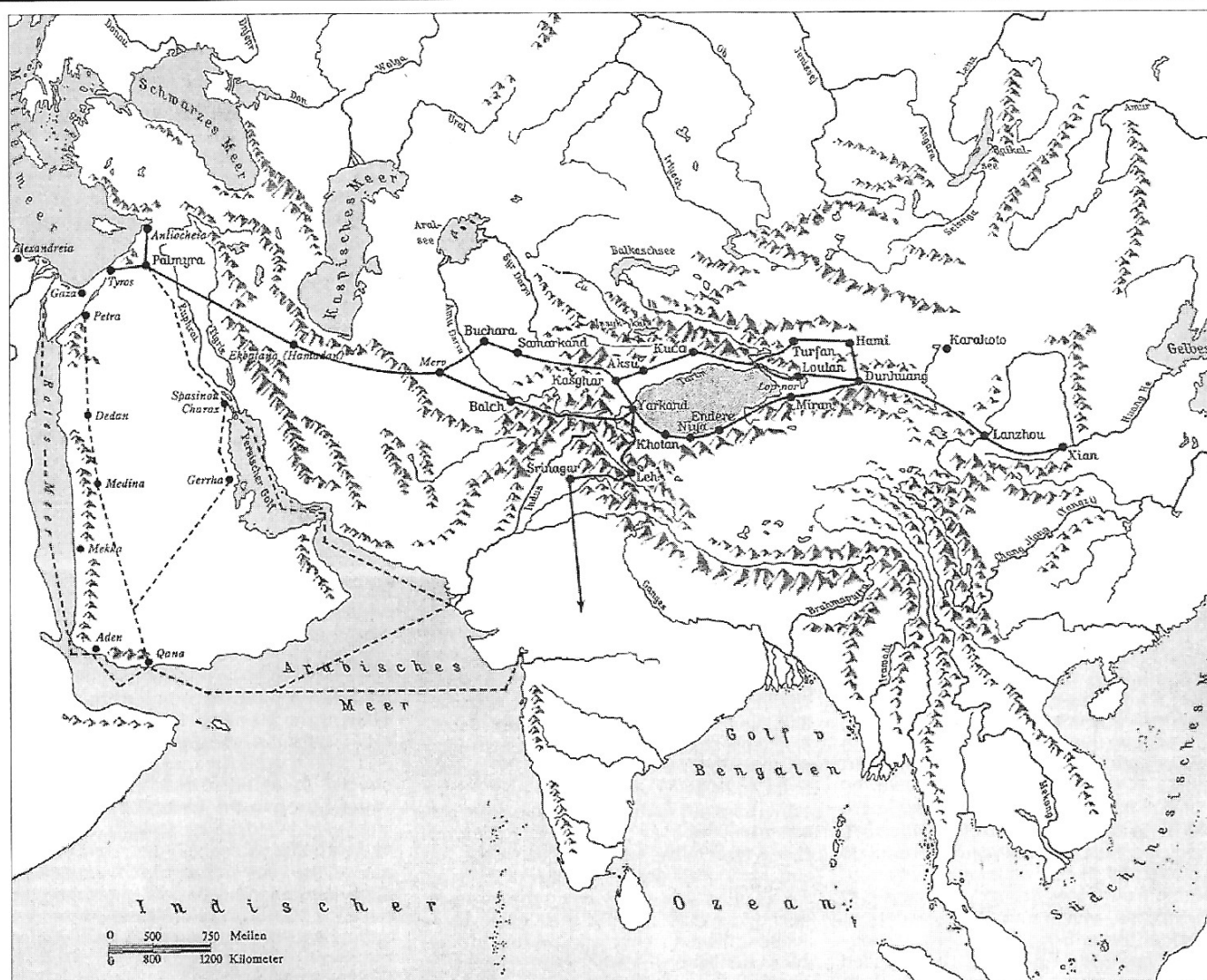
Yemen is not attested as a country name until the beginning of the first century AD; it means simply the south or the right hand side. The almost unbelievable longevity, and affection of the people of the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula for their country and its past is so strong that any number of companies reflect the ancient name in their modern trading name. There are Saba or Sheba gas stations, hotels, barber shops, juice stands, and groceries, and in all of them the name embodies a history of trading which goes back to the early first millennium BC. No anonymity here, no abstract Silk Route which names neither the beginning nor the end, nor the rulers of the countries involved. We hear from the angry vassal of the King of Assyria, situated at a trading post on the middle Euphrates, of the aggressive tactics and tax avoiding habits of the traders of Sheba as early as 850 BC. The caravan was skirting around the town to avoid paying the tax on goods they were taking back to Yemen.

However, until the sea routes through the Red Sea and a fast open sea passage to India using the monsoon, superceded the long overland camel caravans it is probably fair to say that any Chinese-Yemen connections were nebulous. The critical shift took place in the first century BC. That silk was esteemed, we know from a retrospective description by the 10th century Arab historian al-Hamdani. Where he describes the windows of Ghumdan, the last Sabaean royal palace in Sanaa thus; "of teak wood hung with silk curtains," this description provides a clear demonstration of both an eastern connection for trade, and a pleasure in luxurious and prestigious items.

To understand the distribution pattern of the traded items, through and out of Yemen, it is necessary to understand both the geography of the country, and its political structure throughout the first millennium BC and for the early part of the first millennium AD. One must remember that many traded goods were thought by Mediterranean purchasers to have originated in Yemen; this was an error of omission since many came originally from India and Ceylon, or from the African coast.

The physical map of Yemen shows the uplifted north-south range of mountains; these form a barrier between the inland areas and the coastal strip on the Red Sea. The narrow Tihama is home to fisher people. Today all memories of its former coffee glory, in the Rasulid period, at the small port of Mokha are forgotten. A *mocha* at Starbucks is more alive. This was not always the case and very early occupation of the land along the coast dates from between 8,000 BC and 6,000 BC, when fish eating Neolithic communities subsisted on the wealth of natural marine resources and flourished. This culture spread from the north at Sihi in modern Saudi Arabia all the way around the Bab al Mandeb to Aden, developing into a Bronze Age coastal culture. Recent research suggests that in the eighth century BC a connection was established across the Red Sea by the Sabaeans, who set up a colony settlement in Ethiopia at Axum. Our early traders did not sleep. The Red Sea was difficult to navigate for early vessels and a strong wind pattern can only be used to advantage up until the 20 degrees north; beyond this latitude, sailing can only be accomplished in the winter season when a southerly wind aids shipping and the strong north wind abates. The ports of Qusair and Jedda reflect this need to have an overland option, and a land transshipment port at this point of the Red Sea; it was this physical constraint which allowed the Nabateans to gain such power on the Arabian side, as they controlled the northern end of the trade route in the early first millennium AD.

The uplifted mountains of the coastal range reach 9,000 feet and it was on the upland



plateaus created by these mountains that the early Bronze Age farming communities settled and created their wealth during the second millennium BC. Upon this base, later, technologically superior kingdoms developed to the west on the edges of the Ramlat Sabat'ayn, which desert rarely reaches 900 feet. The interaction between the resource-rich higher settlements and the resource-poor, lower desiccating desert-edge settlements catalyzed development in the lower areas whose income ultimately derived from the control and exploitation of trade caravans. There the sub-desert climate is associated with steppe vegetation; it was control and advanced water technology that enabled the cities to feed large populations and thus survive. Research in Yemen has lagged far behind that of other near eastern countries and the mountain settlements have only been documented in the last ten years. Early excavators were surveying in the wrong areas, sure that earlier occupation should be associated with deeper levels of the cities associated with the mid-first millennium incense route.

Certainly, deep sediment deposits were documented at Timna and at Marib, and the growth of these cities was not precipitous.

The origin of our caravans transporting their wealth to the Mediterranean was coincidental with the domestication of the camel as a beast of burden. A short east-west copper transportation route across Sinai was the first experimental route in 1500 BC. Only the camel—in Arabia the one humped dromedary—could sustain long dry spells between the wells at the oases. We find, therefore, that the route from the source of the frankincense and myrrh to the destination at Gaza on the Mediterranean is predetermined by spaced watering wells for the camels. These had to be associated with strongly guarded and armed storage areas controlled at each stop by powerful leaders. Shifts in power were constant and the route moved accordingly.

To understand the role Yemen was destined to play in the Silk Route it is necessary to understand its role in both space and time.

The relationship of Iran, India, and Ceylon trading east to China and also west to Yemen is critical. They were early pivot points. In the first millennium BC, Yemen is trading alone, carrying the products from these three by overland camel trade to Gaza. The shift to maritime transportation was essentially the point when a more fluid China to Gaza operation began, and the long Yemeni coastline profited the homeland in the second phase of the route in the first millennium AD.

To follow the overland route, we must start at the area of its greatest resource wealth. The southeastern region of Yemen in modern Shihr and Hadramawt was the prime growing area for frankincense resin producing trees. While it appears that the trees were farmed in earlier times the range of suitable habitat is primarily but by no means only in this area. Earlier explorers report frankincense trees in all of the main river valleys as far north as the Asir highlands of modern Saudi Arabia.

The gum was gathered in spring and autumn when the tree trunks were tapped. The resin was gathered and transported to the first station at Shabwa. This is located inland, on the southwestern edge of the desert. The Royal Palace of the king of Hadramawt was excavated by the French, and an associated deep sounding made. Today, it is a ruin and only occasional tourists make a visit. We have no documentation from this site of the trade policies. A sealing and seal from the deep sounding date to the late first millennium BC. The documentation of commodities in this case appears to have been made on parchment, with the document rolled and held by a string, the knot sealed and stamped. This is the only example I know of this technique in Yemen. Close to Shabwa is an old salt mine, called Ayadime, and this must certainly have been a strategic resource in the ancient period for the preservation of fish. Today, chunks of salty dried shark are carried north and held in high esteem as an aphrodisiac. The salt is excellent and still used today.

The next stop is Tumna, the capital city of ancient Qataban. Excavated from this site is a market decree dating to the fifth century BC. This text was published by Beeston¹, and it can be compared to the rules of the Sanaa Suq today. The text was inscribed on a stone column, and was set up in the middle of a central clearing for all to see. Those who could trade were named, and taxation and payment rules rigorously stipulated. A rasifum building, possibly a raised platform associated with a temple, was probably the area of the ancient market.

This building and a temple was excavated in the fifties by W.F. Albright, again by the French in the nineties, and today by the Italians. The nearby necropolis of Tumna has been a source of illegal antiquities. Many of the carved alabaster statues of bulls' heads and memorial plaques originated there. The necropolis is unusual, in that the design of the tombs, which are ossuaries with narrow central passages, is not duplicated elsewhere in Yemen. A continual tension between the small kingdoms existed, and in the fourth century BC the Qatabanians succumbed to become part of the Sabaean Federation.

The route from Tumna to Marib, the capital of the Sabaean Federation, lies in a north-westerly direction. The Nagd Marqad path lies around the edge of the desert, a longer, flatter route. There seem to have been political reasons at certain periods to use the steeper and possibly shorter Mablaqah Pass. This pass is a dizzying track up and over a low mountain which leads into the Wadi Harib. The modern town of Henu es-Zureir, the location of ancient Haribat, was another watering point. A memorial inscription carved at the top of the pass was sadly destroyed by road improvements in the last

ten years; it was dynamited and lost after 2,000 years. The fortified ancient town of Haribat was built with the outer house walls as part of the city defensive wall system.

Marib, ancient Mariaba, and its fabled gardens and dam is so large that even today it is difficult to read the ancient topography. The medieval city sits on top of the ancient palace and scattered throughout the valley are ancient temples and mounds. The dam, which tamed the Wadi Dhana, is a sample of the fine stone working techniques and engineering sophistication available to the inhabitants. Today reevaluation of the Mahram Bilquis is ongoing by the American Foundation for the Study of Man, while the German Archaeological Institute teams are working in the cemetery and also on the citadel. The Baran temple, recently restored by the German Institute, was reopened for visitors after a 1,500 year pause.

From Marib, the caravans wend their way north to Qarnu and on to Najran, now in Saudi Arabia, but Yemeni until quite recently. A border delineation between the two countries was signed in 2000 AD. It is still a further 1,200 miles to Gaza, having already traversed 430 miles from Shabwa to Najran. Today, desert dwelling bedu drive around in Toyotas and know every outcrop of rock; the topography is dangerous and unforgiving, and one cannot move without a guide. The VHF radio, Toyota, and satellite dish reign supreme there today. They are in touch with the world.

By the end of the first millennium BC, a significant shift in transportation methods led to the beginning of a slow demise of these desert kingdoms. The discovery by Greek sailors that they could sail directly to India on the monsoon and transship through Qana, via Aden and the Red Sea to and from Gaza, created a new power base and a shift in trading practices.

Qana was excavated by a Russian team from the Oriental Institute of Moscow over a period of eighteen years. The elite houses, temples, warehouses, and burials portray a busy port. Large, 15-inch round, cakes of frankincense were excavated in the storage areas and from one of the houses a woman's hoard of jewelry and bottles demonstrate how a lady of means lived in the first century AD, in a remote outpost.

From Qana the ships sailed to Aden, known to the classical world as Eudymon Arabia, where the safe deep water harbor—a part of the ancient volcano—was nestled next to Sirah Island. In the area close to the ancient port in modern Crater—called Aden by the locals—the old, original settlement was, and remains today, inside the volcano's caldera. Here, I was fortunate enough to excavate a well as a rescue archaeology exercise, before an apartment house was built over it, sealing it forever. It was in the

Haflah al Qadi area, on al-Mari Street where three ancient wells are documented.

The Silk Road did indeed pass through Aden, and below the Rasulid level there were discarded Chinese ceramics. These have been discussed with Li He of the Asian Art Museum; noteworthy were a blue cup from Fujian, celadon ware, and early 11th century AD grey-white, fine-paste ware pieces. While the Portuguese forts further along the coast contained 17th and 18th century Chinese porcelains, the well held earlier samples representing continued contact with the Far East. Yemen was without question a part of the Silk Road.

References

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About The Author

Dr. Diana Pickworth was educated at UCB and received her doctorate from the Department of Near Eastern Studies, in Ancient Art and Archaeology. She is a National Fellow of the Explorers Club of New York. She was Assistant Professor at the University of Aden in the Republic of Yemen and Field Director at the site of Kadimat as-Saff in the Lahej Protectorate, a new site theoretically the capital city of the ancient kingdom of Tubanu. She has excavated in Iraq at the site of Nineveh with the UCB team led by David Stronach, and at the site of Tel Dor in Israel for Professor Andy Stewart. Most recently in the Yemen she has excavated at Qana, Timna, Kadimat as-Saff, and Bintayn Methul. Survey work has been carried out extensively in Yemen by Dr. Pickworth, most recently on the Island of Socotra in the Indian ocean, and southeast of the Rub ar-Khali in the Yemeni Jawf.

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