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Lee, Richard (2023) *Crossing the Red Sea:A Yemen and Ethiopian Interchange Circuit*.
The British Yemeni Society Journal. pp. 18-26. ISSN 1363-0229

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CROSSING THE RED SEA: A YEMEN AND ETHIOPIAN INTERCHANGE CIRCUIT

RICHARD LEE

It is a bright clear morning here in Stonetown, Zanzibar, where I am attending the 2022 Pan African Archaeology conference, a large five-day international event with over three hundred papers being presented on every aspect of African archaeology, this year's location being an especially attractive one. I'm here partly through the generosity of the British Yemeni Society to give a paper on part of my PhD that I am currently conducting at the Department of Archaeology, University of York, which explores the relationship between the Yemen Tihamah and the Ethiopian Tigray region c. 800 BC. Both of these places have suffered a calamitous civil war in recent years, Yemen's, of course, still ongoing. In Tigray, regional ethnic conflicts re-erupted in late 2020 and continued for eighteen months until a shaky ceasefire was agreed in spring 2022 although bringing little peace to the region.

When I designed my project in 2019 I had chosen to focus my PhD research on the Tigray region, as archaeological fieldwork was obviously not possible in Yemen. At the time Tigray had been politically stable for the past twenty years, and so once hostilities erupted in the region I had to rethink my project and redesign it as a desk-based rather than field-based study. As I investigated the relationship between the two areas over the ensuing months I realised that, in fact, there was a fascinating story to tell about the Afro-Arabian connection via the medium of obsidian trade. At the conference I was one of a very few people presenting research extending beyond African boundaries and the only person to bring Yemen into the discussion. Yemen and the African coastline is separated by only 26km at the Bab al-Mandab strait hence they are relatively close neighbours.



Map 1 - The Red Sea Region Discussed in this Article (© Esri, HERE, Garmin, NGA, USGS)

Obsidian is an igneous, hard, glass-like substance produced by volcanic eruptions. It is razor sharp, often used for making lithic tools, like arrowheads and hand axes, which have been found as early as 5000 BC on Yemen's al-Salif peninsula indicating that trade and movement throughout the region was occurring at this early date. The same type of obsidian has also been found in Egypt, as lithic tools, in high-status burials dating to the transitional phase between the Predynastic and Pharaonic Periods (3100 BC). It had initially been assumed that the source of the obsidian used in the two regions differed — that the Arabian obsidian came from the Dhamar-Rada' volcanic field on the Yemen plateau and the African source was the Porc-Epic cave in southern Ethiopia. However, in 2019 a team led by Clive Oppenheimer, from the University of Cambridge, used geochemical fingerprinting of obsidian sources identifying the Nabro Volcano in the Danakil Depression, part of the Afar desert, as the source of the obsidian found not only in Yemen and Egypt but also at many archaeological sites throughout Ethiopia and Eritrea (see map 1).¹ So, from a very early date a specific source of obsidian was being procured and traded on a regional scale. My PhD research suggests that obsidian was a key ingredient in the social and economic de-

velopment on both sides of the Red Sea right up to the late first millennium BC.

The Yemen Tihama

My research is investigating two primary regions where this relationship is being enacted, the Ethiopian Tigray highlands, and the Yemen Tihama coastal plain separated, or potentially conjoined, depending on one's view, by the Red Sea. Chronologically I am interested in the people living during the first millennium BC, known in Tigray as the pre-Aksumite phase (800–400 BC). In the Yemen Tihama during the same chronological period the inhabitants are described as South Arabian or Sabaean after the Kingdom of Saba located some 300km to the north. But, significantly, they are part of a unique Tihama culture. To provide a little context, the historical/mythical figure that links Yemen and Ethiopia is the Queen of Sheba. Sheba is directly linked to Marib in Yemen, capital of the Kingdom of Saba, but also to the Temple of Yeha in the Tigray highlands. Yemenis consider Sheba to be their ancient Queen, whilst Tigrayans also consider Sheba to be their Queen and to have resided at the Temple of Yeha. As will be discussed here, the Temple of Yeha links these two countries in more ways than one.

The focus of Yemeni archaeology had for many decades been the ancient city of Marib. Here, archaeologists studied the city's impressive dam and

¹ Clive Oppenheimer et al., "Risk and Reward: Explosive Eruptions and Obsidian Lithic Resource at Nabro Volcano (Eritrea), *Quaternary Science Reviews* 226 (Nov 2019): 105995



Map 2 - The Archaeological Sites on the Yemen Tihama (right), Eritrea, and Ethiopia Tigray (left) (© Earthstar Geographics)



Fig. 1 - The remaining walls of the Temple at the site of al-Hamid (© 1999 Richard Lee)

temples which appeared to be the apex of southern Arabian history. Beginning in the 1980s, archaeologists from the UK, Canada, and Italy gradually began to investigate what was considered to be the archaeologically barren Tihama coastal plain. The UK team was led by Carl Phillips, then of the Institute of Archaeology at University College London, and a member of this Society, who began investigating sites in the northern Tihama between Hudayda and the mountainous escarpment to the east.² Awareness of archaeological remains in this area was initially raised by an anthropological and archaeological survey of the Tihama undertaken by another Society member, Francine Stone in 1982.³

Phillips' archaeological work, under the auspices of the British Archaeological Mission to Yemen (BAMY) in the years 1994–2006 eventually established that the Tihama was far from being a remote backwater on the periphery of the Sabaean Kingdom. Instead, it was at the forefront of both local and regional interactivity with a unique chronological footprint establishing its identity. The site of al-Hamid, with its Sabaean temple (see fig. 1) is located south-east of Bajil and south-west of Jabal al-Dhamir, along the Wadi Siham, the east-west route through the Tihama mountains.⁴ The Temple is the largest structure at the site and is surrounded by clusters of buildings and rooms that appear to represent a way station or administrative and agricultural centre strategically placed to facilitate the trade route linking the Red Sea coastline with the Tihama and the Yemen plateau.

² Carl S. Phillips, "Al-Hāmid: A Route to the Red Sea?" in *Profumi d'Arabia: Atti del Convegno*, ed. Alessandra Avanzini (Rome: «L'Erma» di Bretschneider, 1997), 287–295

³ Francine Stone (ed.), *Studies on the Tihāmah: The Report of the Tihāmah Expedition of 1982 and Related Papers* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1985)

⁴ Carl S. Phillips, "The Tihama c. 5000 – 500 BC," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 28 (1998): 233–237

Further south on the Tihama, is the site of al-Kashawba, one of a myriad of names for a site also known as 'the Gas Station' as it is near a fuel station 10km north of Zabid in central Tihama.⁵ Extensive archaeological survey has also been undertaken across the Tihama by a French team led by Lamya Khalidi. So far however the only excavation at al-Kashawba was undertaken by Carl Phillips and a team including myself in April 2006. Visual evidence for this site was, shall we say, an unprepossessing flat barren landscape. But the archaeological survey revealed significant scatters of ceramics that suggested that there may be more below the ground surface than was immediately apparent. Excavation at al-Kashawba revealed large mud brick walls at three metres depth indicating the significant build-up of deposits at the site. The ceramics found during the excavation indicated a date of 1500–500 BC spanning the Arabian late Bronze Age and early Iron Age. This thousand-year period is of great significance as not only does it expand the Tihama chronology, but it also complements data that has been found at archaeological sites in Ethiopian Tigray. In Tigray this has necessitated a revised pre-Aksumite chronology,⁶ which retains the same terminology, but extends its origins by 800 years to 1600 BC (1600–400 BC). Archaeological excavation in both Tihama and Tigray indicates a close relationship established between the two areas as demonstrated by the presence of ceramics, stone inscriptions, and obsidian.

Further south along the Tihama coast the archaeological site of al-Mohandid (see fig. 2), near the town of Hays, has a sequence, almost an avenue, of upright standing stones unique to this region. Whilst archaeological survey has taken place here to record the stones, little if any actual excavation has been undertaken. Over the last fifty years numerous attempts have been made to record the many upright standing stones here, the most recent being carried out by Carl Phillips and a team including myself in 2001. Archaeological investigations here suggest potential comparisons with the site of Sabir located north of the city of Aden, with both sites having potential links with Asa Koma in southern Eritrea. Whilst this might seem like an extended area to be linked with cultural antecedents, each site has indications of second millennium BC date alluding to, I suggest, a more active second millennium interconnectivity than has hitherto been recognised.

Al-Midaman, located 2km inland from the Red Sea shoreline, is a settlement site with a completely different type of standing stone, dating to the second millennium BC. This site was investigated by Ed Keall of the Canadian Archaeological Mission of the Royal Ontario Museum and is one of the most important sites to be discovered, for both the presence of obsidian and Tihama information.⁷ Large quantities of obsidian were retrieved during Keall's excavations representing the biggest collection of obsidian so far found on the Tihama. The site was almost certainly the coastal landing place for obsidian being transported across the Red Sea from Nabro Volcano. From al-Midaman the volcanic glass and exotic trade item would then have been transported to other sites throughout the Tihama, including al-Hamid, al-Kashawba, and al-Mohandid. Gradually these sites and their chronology are developing a picture of first millennium BC trading routes between the Yemen Red Sea coast and Ethiopian Tigray. This illustrates that whilst obsidian was being moved east to Yemen, culture, language and material artefacts were exchanged with the pre-Aksumite Tigray region, with a consequent economic and social boost to both areas.



Fig. 2 - The standing stones at the site of al-Mohandid (© 2000 Richard Lee)

⁵ Carl S. Phillips, "Preliminary Excavations at Al-Kashawba, 2006," *The Society for Arabian Studies Bulletin* 12 (2007)

⁶ A. Catherine D'Andrea, et al., "A Pre-Aksumite Culinary Practice at the Mezber Site, Northern Ethiopia," in *Plants and People in the African Past: Progress in African Archaeobotany*, ed. Anna Maria Mercuri, et al. (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2018), 453–478

⁷ Edward J. Keall, "Possible Connections in Antiquity Between the Red Sea Coast of Yemen and the Horn of Africa," in *Trade and Travel in the Red Sea Region*, ed. Paul Lunde and Alexandra Porter (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004), 43–55

Coast to Coast

All of the aforementioned sites and their archaeological evidence indicate occupation and regional interconnectivity occurring during the first millennium BC along Yemen's Tihama coastal plain. Through obsidian from the Nabro Volcano these sites can also be linked to the Afar desert, Eritrea, in the Horn of Africa. The Danakil Depression, where Nabro Volcano is located, and which is also known from the writings of William Thesiger, and Henry de Monfreid, is one of the lowest and hottest places on earth. In summer, the ground heat can melt rubber shoe soles, so it is not an easy place to travel through. How is the obsidian being moved from Nabro Volcano to the Tihama, 175km away? And perhaps more significantly, why do the inhabitants of the Tihama value this exotic overseas commodity so highly? Closer sources of obsidian exist in Yemen, in the Dhamar-Rada' region, yet these are not being exploited.⁸

In Egypt, at the sites of Abydos, Naqada, and Hierakonpolis, Nabro-sourced obsidian is found specifically in high-status burial contexts (3100 BC). This is a further indicator of the extent of the huge regional trade, movement, and the value, of obsidian predating the first millennium BC. The difference between the archaeological contexts in which obsidian is found in Egypt and the later Arabian first millennium BC sites is one of ubiquity. The obsidian found in Tihama and Tigray is almost utilitarian in its frequency, an almost common occurrence in contrast to the high-status burials in Egypt. What is absent at present, is Afro-Arabian archaeological evidence for



Fig. 4 - The Temple of Yeha, Tigray highlands, Ethiopia (© 2018 Richard Lee)

the period that links Egypt in 3100 BC to the Tihama and Tigray in 800 BC, a huge gap in the archaeological record of the region. Whilst we are extremely well informed about the Egyptian pharaonic period at this time, we are less knowledgeable about what was taking place in the lower Red Sea.

Ethiopian Tigray Highland

Far to the north-west of Nabro Volcano are the highlands of Ethiopian Tigray where a significant number of archaeological sites can be linked to the South Arabian Tihama culture via artefacts and even language. Whilst Nabro-sourced obsidian was being transported across the Red Sea to Arabia, language, culture, incense, and building expertise was brought back to Tigray and so we have abundant evidence for Yemen Sabaeen culture in northern Tigray in the very early first millennium BC. The incense trail was well established in the Kingdom of Saba by the second millennium BC with its capital Marib representing the exchange hub. At the Ethiopian temple of Yeha, the western-most extent of pre-Aksumite culture in Tigray, there is distinctive evidence in the earliest archaeological phase for Sabaeen ceramics. It appears that these ceramics are actually from an archaeological deposit that predates the current temple and is suggested as being a 'shrine'.⁹ Inscriptions of Sabaeen language engraved on stone, probably predating the temple, have also been found (see fig. 3). Given that the Yeha temple is the oldest, and only standing structure, known in this area, it is my hypothesis that the visiting Sabaeen merchants or traders were also involved in the temple's construction, possibly as architects, with local people actually building the temple. Research indicates that the style of the Yeha temple (see fig. 4) is probably based on that at Sirwah, in northern Yemen,¹⁰ and other temples in the Kingdom of Saba. As a result, Yeha evidences abundant Sabaeen influence moving west, whilst Nabro obsidian moves eastwards, distinctive exchanges of cultures and values in both directions across the Red Sea.



Fig. 3 - Sabaeen inscriptions on stone at the Temple of Yeha museum (© 2018 Richard Lee)

⁸ T. Wilkinson and C. Edens, "Survey and Excavation in the Central Highlands of Yemen: Results of the Dhamar Survey Project, 1996 and 1998," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 10 (1999): 1-33

⁹ Rodolfo Fattovich, "The Pre-Aksumite State in Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea Reconsidered," in *Trade and Travel in the Red Sea Region*, ed. Paul Lunde and Alexandra Porter (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2004), 71-78

¹⁰ Iris Gerlach, "Sirwah: New Research at the Sabaeen City and Oasis," in *Caravan Kingdoms: Yemen and the Ancient Incense Trade*, ed. Ann C. Gunter (Washington DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2005), 34-41

There are numerous other archaeological sites in Ethiopian Tigray that bear evidence of Sabaean influence. Usually, Sabaean contact is visible through ceramics, particularly the highly characteristic Sabaean incense burners.¹¹ The eastern Tigray sites — Ona Adi, Mezber, Seglamen, Adi Ba'ekel amongst them — appear to be part of the trade route that linked the Yeha temple with Nabro Volcano and the Red Sea coast, as evidenced by the exchange of obsidian, ceramics, and inscriptions. Excavation at the site of Meqaber Ge'awa close to the modern city of Mekelle, revealed the remains of a further Sabaean influenced temple, not dissimilar to the Yeha temple.¹² This appears to confirm that the trade route passes from Yeha to Meqaber, then over the escarpment and down into the Danakil Depression towards Nabro Volcano.

Parallel to the pre-Aksumite phase in Ethiopian Tigray (800–400 BC) is the ancient Ona culture of northern Eritrea. Parallel because although there are close trade links between the two areas they are clearly separate entities defined by their distinctive material culture. Significantly, the ancient Ona culture extends over a longer period of time (1400–300 BC), than its Tigray counterpart. There is less obsidian at the Ona sites, which is surprising, considering the proximity of both cultures to the obsidian source.

¹¹ Carl S. Phillips, "A Preliminary Description of the Pottery from al-Hamid and its Significance in Relation to Other Pre-Islamic Sites on the Tihama," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 35 (2005): 177–193

¹² Pawel Wolf and Ulrike Nowotnick, "The Almaqah temple of Meqaber Ga'ewa Near Wuqro (Tigray, Ethiopia)," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 40 (2010): 367–380



Fig. 5 - The façade of the Great Be'al Gebri, Yeha. (© 2018 Richard Lee)



Fig. 6 - Danakil depression landscape
(© 2018 Richard Lee)

At the time the ancient Ona culture was likely to have been a significant partner in regional trade and power, yet today we know little about it, lost as it now is below the modern Eritrean capital of Asmara. One of the Ona sites, Mai Chiot, has a second millennium BC date which is, I suggest, a significant factor in establishing regional activity during the second millennium BC. To the west of the ancient Ona lands are two significant sites — Mahal Teglinos, located in the Gash Delta in Sudan, and the Agordat Kokan rock shelter site in Eritrea, both of which date to the second millennium BC and probably formed part of a trade route linked to the Nile valley. Much discussion over the last fifty years has evolved around the character of the pre-Aksumite identity and its proposed regional polity known from inscriptions as D'mt. Now, the revised pre-Aksumite chronology finally extends this narrative.¹³

Some characteristics of the obsidian from Nabro Volcano must have represented a specific value in Tihama, to be given preference over the nearby Yemeni source in Dhamar-Rada'. Both sources of obsidian look similar, so it must then have been more than just its physical appearance. Obsidian first appears on the al-Salif peninsula of the Tihama coast in the fifth millennium BC, four thousand years prior to the core of this discussion. It is possible that obsidian is intertwined with notions of ancestry for those living on the Tihama. Perhaps it was known that the source of obsidian was overseas, a landscape that was very different to the Tihama, a landscape of even more intense heat and altitudes.

Further, the obsidian itself had to be retrieved from the slopes of a volcano, the topography around which may have been covered in black tephra deposits from earlier lava expulsions. The volcano may have been active with dense clouds of toxic sulphur dioxide billowing from its caldera and broiling red hot lava swirling around inside. To see this now in 2022 is awe-inspiring, intimidating perhaps, yet we

can scientifically rationalise it. We don't know how ancient peoples understood what they saw or how they interpreted it, but perhaps with a sense of awe that was attached to the obsidian, it being a product of this intense natural phenomenon. Hence, to those living overseas in the Tihama, this was a commodity of potential mystical significance originating in difficult to reach, dangerous environs. It could be used practically, as a tool, in everyday use, but it also possessed a physical beauty that was unlike anything else they would know. Flint lithic tools are practical and attractive but not, it has to be said, in quite the same league as shiny jet-black glass-like obsidian. This was a pinnacle of aesthetic value, to be desired, to be aspired to, valued, perhaps enhancing one's social status.

The Archaeology of Natural Landscapes

I think of the movement of obsidian, ceramics, and language as a Temple-to-Temple trade route (see map 3). That is to say, we have two geographic poles of Sabaeen culture, one at the Yemen temple site of al-Hamid in eastern Tihama. Then, 300km to the west there is the Ethiopian Temple of Yeha with its early chronological identity with Sabaeen culture. In between is a challenging landscape of mountains, hills, harsh deserts, and sea, that was being navigated. From Nabro Volcano there must have been a route that linked the volcano with the Red Sea coast. Brief archaeological reconnaissance survey along the Eritrean coastline has identified ancient settlements including deposits of worked obsidian at the villages of Beilul and Assab.¹⁴ This location would make an advantageous crossing point to reach the Tihama at the coastal landing site of al-Midaman. Although not the narrowest place between the two coastlines, it does have the added advantage of sailing via the Hanish Islands, which could be used as a safe haven in case of difficulties in crossing the Red Sea. One might assume a crossing point at the Bab al-Mandab strait being the shortest point between the two coasts, but very strong tidal currents are known to make this a difficult place to cross.

Moving from Nabro to Tigray the routes are perhaps easier to identify in part because we know which archaeological sites are possessing obsidian. The mountainous escarpment dividing the Danakil Depression from Tigray has a number of passes through it, notably at the village of Desi'a, a junction on the modern-day salt trail. From there, circuitous routes lead upwards towards the Tigray plateau with archaeological sites indicating probable avenues of movement. The route leads west towards the modern town of Mekelle, where the Sabaeen influenced temple of Meqaber Ge'awa is located. From here trade routes would likely extend northwards to the sites of Ona Adi and Mezber, and from there connecting west to the Temple of Yeha. It is probable that trade routes from Yeha crossed north-west to

¹³ A. Catherine D'Andrea, et al., "A Pre-Aksumite Culinary Practice."

¹⁴ Clive Oppenheimer et al., "Risk and Reward."

Mahal Teglinos in Sudan and then connected with the Nile valley.

Routeways across the Tihama can be suggested with relative ease given the topography. From the coastal site of al-Midaman a route leads directly east following the Wadi Zabid. This leads to central Tihama, the modern city of Zabid, and then divides into a northern or southern route. The northern route leads 10km to al-Kashawba before zigzagging through the sand dunes towards the Wadi Siham. Once here the wadi can be followed until it reaches the site of Waqir and shortly afterwards the temple site of al-Hamid then through the escarpment and eventually passing on to the Yemen plateau. Travelling south from Zabid is a similar tale as one moves towards the escarpment, near modern Hays, to encounter the site of al-Mohandid. From here the route may lead south along the Tihama and onto the Gulf of Aden before turning east towards Sabir, close to Aden, although that discussion extends beyond the limits of this article.

The routes between Nabro Volcano, Beilul, and Assab on the African coast, are more difficult to identify. The landscape around Nabro is a challenging one and routes through it were limited and would have been carefully chosen. A part of my future research is to identify these routes via remote sensing using Google Earth and mapping with ArcGIS. The resolution of Google Earth is surprisingly good here, and combined with personal experience of desert landscapes, makes identification of potential routes a real possibility. By mapping these routes, a picture can be created of the ingredients for the interconnectivity of these two cultures on either side of the Red Sea.



Map 3 - Regional Routes Between Yemen and Ethiopia as Proposed in this Article. (© National Geographic, Esri, Garmin, HERE, UNP-WCMC, USGS, NASA, ESA, METY, NRCAN, GEBCO, NOAA)

Conclusion

The term 'Afro-Arabian interchange,' proposed by Rodolfo Fattovich in 2004, met with a lukewarm response at the time, but is wholly appropriate, I suggest, for what we see taking place across the region. It places the interaction of the first millennium BC into a recognisable broader context and, based on the evidence of obsidian from Yemen and Ethiopia found thus far, suggests that Fattovich was correct. Whilst obsidian is only one part of the large scale inter-regional, Afro-Arabian interchange circuit, it is a tangible component of it. Investigating the role of incense in this interchange presents more of a challenge that still awaits research. But the procurement and trade of obsidian is a singular resource that links both shores of the Red Sea during the first millennium BC. Although there are other volcanoes in the Danakil Depression, current research indicates that Nabro Volcano, specifically, was chosen for its obsidian source. It is still unclear however, why there is such a strong early Sabaeen presence at Yeha temple when it is so far west of Nabro. The Sabaeans arriving at Nabro did not then need to travel a further 120km west in the opposite direction. Hence it might be that Yeha is on the trade route to the Nile valley, via Sudan, and perhaps a popular route for the incense trade.

Archaeological research indicates, I suggest, that although less investigated so far, a strong second millennium BC presence could be found in the Ethiopian Tigray region perhaps linked to Yemen. D'Andrea's revised chronology extends the Tigrayan pre-Aksumite period back a further 800 years to begin at 1600 BC. The Tihama has a unique indigenous culture within Arabia that differentiates it from the Sabaeen culture, but a second millennium BC pres-

ence is also possible here. It is partly Yemen's interconnectivity that has contributed to the development of this characteristic culture. Further fieldwork in both areas may extend that connection across the Red Sea to an earlier date than we currently understand. Archaeological fieldwork is required in the vicinity of Nabro Volcano to identify sites and their Sabaeen and/or pre-Aksumite characteristics, as no work of this type has yet been undertaken there. Likewise in Yemen, once the conflict subsides, further excavation is required throughout Tihama as we really are only still at the beginning of understanding what was taking place there. As part of this future work, ideally in identifying the trade routes that were being used, there is no substitute for walking through the landscape and physically observing what remote sensing can only hint at. This is easier said than done of course but must be an aim for future archaeological research in this region. Whilst the answers retrieved will be from specific sites, the information that they provide will be of regional value, informative of both the Yemen Tihama and Ethiopian Tigray and the routeways between them. The PhD research that I am currently undertaking will shed new light on areas that will be highly informative to our understanding for the Yemeni and Ethiopian relationship.

Richard Lee is a field archaeologist working in Arabia, the Middle East and Africa and is currently undertaking his PhD research at the University of York. He is the Society's 2022 Academic Award recipient.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the Department of Archaeology Research Fund at the University of York, the University of York YGRS Conference Fund, and the British Yemeni Society for funding my trip to the PANAF conference in Zanzibar. Thanks to Dr Daryl Stump, University of York, for his continued support of my PhD research. Thanks to Carl Phillips for the opportunity of being involved in Tihama fieldwork. The expenses for my part in the Yemen fieldwork (1999–2006) that I refer to here were partly funded by the Seven Pillars of Wisdom Trust. Thanks to Dr Cathy D'Andrea for her generosity and invite to work in Tigray. This paper has been significantly improved thanks to critical reviews by Dr Daryl Stump, Dr Aubrey Steingraber, Daria Lynch, and Tim Chapman.

The British Yemeni Society Journal



Vol. 30 - 2022



THE BRITISH YEMENI SOCIETY

Registered Charity No. 1027531

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The British Yemeni Society Journal

Vol. 30 (2022)

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Published by

THE BRITISH YEMENI SOCIETY

The Gateway | 85–101 Sankey Street | Warrington | WA1 1SR
Telephone: 01925 246800 | E-mail: sec@b-ys.org.uk

ISSN: 1363–0229

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