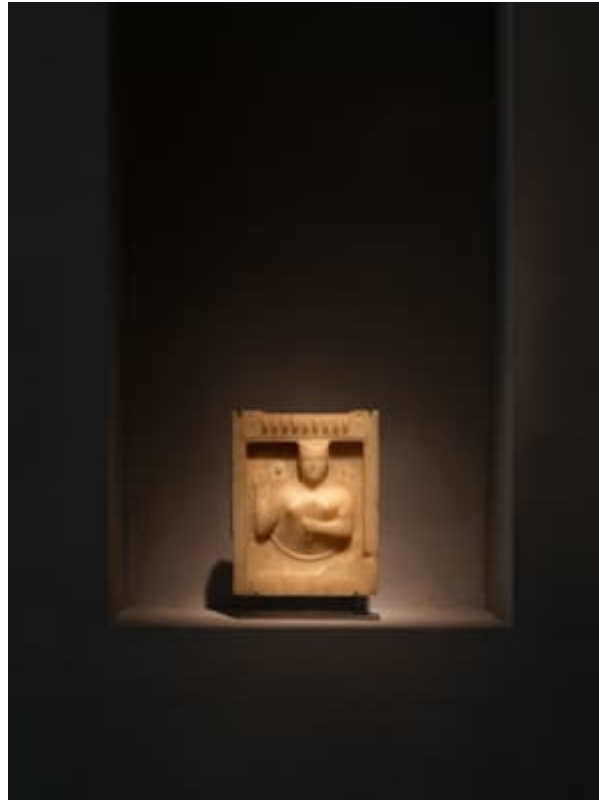


DAVID AARON



Dedicatory Stele of Fayšat

42.7 x 29.5 cm (16 ³/₄ x 11 ⁵/₈ inches)

Calcite-Alabaster

Qataban

Circa Late 1st Century BC

A calcite-alabaster funerary stele carved in high relief, featuring the bust of a woman surrounded by a projecting border on all sides. The figure emerges from a semi-circle around her midriff, appearing from the torso upwards. Two subtly modelled breasts make clear the gender of the figure. The true left arm is folded over the centre of the chest and holds some ears of grain, which may suggest fertility, while the right hand is raised to the side, with palm facing forwards in a gesture of veneration and adoration. Each of the wrists is adorned with bracelets. A broad neck sits between the rounded shoulders, with the head carved in even deeper relief and projecting forwards to meet the lower edge of the top border. The facial features are incised in detail, with full cheeks, small yet full lips, and large expressive almond-shaped eyes below slender eyebrows. The pupils would originally have been inlaid with precious materials. The top border is adorned with nine frontally oriented ibex heads set between two false windows of concentric recessed rectangles. The lower border is inscribed with nine letters in Qatabanian, reading from right to left: Fys2t Nḏḥn (“Fayšat [of the family of] Nadhān”). This identifies the deceased woman honoured and represented by the stele as Fayšat; as it is carved from a single block of creamy yellow calcite-alabaster with a roughly hewn reverse, this suggests it would have originally been positioned against the wall of her tomb. The family name Nadhān is recorded on other stelae found at Dayd bin’Aqīl, the necropolis of the Qatabanian capital of Timna.

This stele forms part of a group of funerary monuments, of which around thirty exist today (both fragmentary and intact). Based on epigraphic and palaeographic evidence, these stelae were all carved between 100 BC and 100 AD. Timna served as an important hub of the Incense Route, the

camel caravan that transported incense from Arabia and India to ports on the Mediterranean Sea. Roman author and philosopher Pliny the Elder (23/24-79 AD) described Timna as a busy city with around 65 temples. Excavations in 1950 and 1951 by Wendell Phillips and his team unearthed several sites in the city, including the South Gate, private residences, a structure identified as a temple complex, and the necropolis. The alabaster heads and stelae were found in the vicinity of the necropolis, known as Ḥayd ibn 'Aqīl. A further head was discovered in 1962 by a British officer stationed in Aden. The finds are all roughly carved on the reverse and often squared off at the top and back, suggesting that they were designed to be placed within niches in a shrine; several of the sculptures were found together within the antechamber of a crypt.

The boundaries of Ancient South Arabia fall within modern Yemen, parts of Oman, and Saudi Arabia. South Arabia was famous in the ancient world as the main producer of incense and perfume. Due to its ritualistic and traditional uses, there was great demand for incense in the ancient cities of Greece, Rome, Byzantium and Persia. Enormous caravans made up of hundreds of camels snaked through the desert carrying this precious commodity, along with other goods brought to the ports of the South from India and East Africa. The gold the caravans returned with made the Southern tribes of the peninsular very wealthy. Classical writers described the region as 'Arabia Felix' (Fortunate Arabia), due to its fertile lands. In the first century BC, South Arabia included five kingdoms: Saba, Qataban, Ma'in, Awsan and Hadramawt. Saba (referred to in the Bible as Sheba) was the oldest and most important of these kingdoms. Timna, the capital of the kingdom of Qataban, was a key hub in the Incense Route. The profusion of inscriptions that have been discovered in the area suggests the Qatabanians were a highly literate society.

Exhibitions

Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, County Durham, May-October 1960. Birmingham City Art Gallery and Museum, 1960-1970.

In Celebration: Works of Art from the Collections of Princeton Alumni and Friends of the Art Museum, Princeton University, 22 February-8 June 1997, no. 5.

Literature:

Egyptian, Western Asiatic, Irish Bronze Age, Greek, Etruscan, Roman, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Byzantine Antiquities, Islamic Pottery and Metalwork, Sotheby's, London, 13 July 1970, Lot 16, pp. 12-13.

In Celebration: Works of Art from the Collections of Princeton Alumni and Friends of the Art Museum, Princeton University, 22 February-8 June 1997, exhibition catalogue, no. 5, pp. 1-2, 9.

Alessandra Avanzini, *Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions I-III: Qatabanic, marginal Qatabanic, Awsanite inscriptions* (Pisa, c2004), p. 328, CSAI I, 270. Alessandra Avanzini, 'An introduction to their history', in *Art and Technique in Yemen: The Bronzes from the Museum of Baynun*, La Limonaia, Pisa, 27 May-10 June 2009, p. 49, fig. 33.

Ancient Sculpture and Works of Art, Sotheby's, London, 29 November 2017, Lot 73, pp. 94-95.

Digital Archive for the Study of pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions, CSAI I 270:

https://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=dasi_prj_obj&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=183276078&recId=4347

Mnamon: Ancient writing systems in the Mediterranean Database: <https://mnamon.sns.it/index.php?page=Immagini&id=27&img=875&lang=en#>