

*Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...*

*Sana'a, Ta'izz, Thila in Yemen, February 15–19, 1999*

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שמעתי מפאתי תימן

... a verse of Hafiz (≈1325–1389) and another by Shalem Shabazi of Ta'izz (died after 1681), 'Solomon's hudhud (hoopoe) carrying a message there' and the Yemenite-Jewish poet's line, 'from the far reaches of Yemen I have heard ...', may serve as a caption and may illustrate three millennia of Yemenite-Sabaeian history or legend and the innumerable interpretations which have been made since. 'Ma da dove deriva il nome con cui la regina è divenuta celebre, Bilqis?' *Bilqis*, semantically consists of b-l and q-s, bi-l qiyas, because she reigned after her father. This name Bilqis is common in Islamic parlance. She is everything, queen, sage, Venus, sorceress, ginniyah (female ginn), mentioned, if not by name, in: I Kings X, 1–13; II Chronicles IX, 1–12, and Quran XXVII, 20–44. In all sources, in legends as much as in the Scriptures, the central event is the encounter between her and Solomon, mediated by hudhud, the hoopoe. The bird discovered the queen's land, brought the news to King Solomon (in Islam apostrophied as prophet Sulayman), who in turn summoned her by sending a message with this bird. She poses three questions (riddles) to Solomon: (i) an unperforated pearl he should bore a hole into, (ii) to obtain sweet water which must neither drop from heaven nor come from the earth, (iii) the color of the Lord (this one she discards because Solomon fell unconscious from his throne upon being asked this question). The devils, aware of the ginniyah ancestry of Bilqis, build a palace with green marble floor, shiny and translucent, to deceive her when approaching Solomon. She thinks this is water, lifts her clothes and thereby exposes her hairy legs (of which Solomon had heard). Solomon is undeterred, depilation is carried out. Eventually she is married to him and stays 7 years and 7 months. Their son was Rehoboam; she was buried in Palmyra. So far one of the versions of the legend.

My trip to Yemen was based on my acquaintance with Dr. Yasin Al-Qubati from the National Leprosy Service and Skin Department in Tai'zz, Yemen's second city and sometime capital. He was extremely hospitable and kind enough to take care to

advise me on travel schedules and/or arrange those for me. Sana'a, the capital, is a sight of its own. Only in Jiddah, 500 miles north, have I seen similarly impressive ancient 'skyscrapers'. Staying in such a traditional old house, a hotel today, is a unique and comfortable experience. No noise, no television or radio, but all amenities, tea with kardamom, traditional food. The great mosque of Sana'a is one of the oldest, its fundamentals going back to the time of Mohammed himself. The Dar al Hajjar (literally 'House of the Rock') the former Imams' summer retreat outside the city, a fortress on a single rock towering over an oasis, is a smashing sight. The Yemeni Tourist Organization uses this castle for most of its posters to be displayed abroad. My desired goal, Ma'rib, 200 km to the east, proved to be inaccessible for the moment due to the risk of being kidnapped. This was my coveted goal, the legendary seat of the Queen of Sheba. With great reluctance did I give up on that and turned south to meet my acquaintance and see his department and the Leprosy Service (leprosy, a familiar topic to me since my time in Jerusalem more than 15 years ago). The Skin Department of the National Leprosy Service is a 100-bed facility about to be expanded and transformed into a university department in this city. For such a purpose basic amenities are necessary, e.g. a dermato- and immunopathology unit regardless of free-of-charge access to such services in the USA. A university department must have these services of its own to train residents and accumulate expertise. The interesting patients I could see will provide ample material for such training, especially the cases of bullous dermatoses, lupus vulgaris, leprosy. International help will be needed in any case.

Eventually several more touristic sights concluded my visit. I want to mention the al Janad mosque near Ta'izz, Yemen's oldest, founded still during the lifetime of Mohammed, the Ashrafiya in the city itself and, eventually the spectacular ride back north to Sana'a, through the highlands of central Yemen with its century-old terraces up to almost 3,000 m. There is an overabundance of all crops and fruits in the markets; the people, notwithstanding, are utterly poor. The last day brought me to the city and fortress of Thila which is entirely built of volcanic stonewalls and from some distance is almost invisible against the background of the rocky peak towering the settlement. I hope the future may have a second visit in store to see the temple of Bilqis and Shibam, the 'Manhattan in the desert'.

*à bientôt,*

*K.H., Vienna*