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## Al-Asha'ir excavations January-February 2007

### The al-Asha'ir mosque

The al-Asha'ir mosque is, through the tradition of historical texts, one of only three mosques built in Yemen during the lifetime of the Prophet. Although the texts do sometimes give confusing reports about the mosques built in Zabid, there is a clear statement that the first Zabid mosque was one built after Abu Musa al-Asha'iri came back to Yemen to convert his fellow tribesmen in the year 8 Hijri, in other words, around 1300 years ago. It is almost impossible to find this mosque through excavation, because it will be located very deep below ground. Our research in Zabid has shown that the surface of the city rises on average at a rate of one meter per century. This means that a building 1300 years old will be 13 meters below the surface. In the narrow area of the Zabid suq, this is a dangerous quest, and very expensive because of the need to remove and then replace all of the excavated dirt.

### 2005 Excavation Probe

In 2005, the Canadian Mission responded to a request from the Social Fund to help the Zabid Water and Sewerage Project find appropriate ways to install a new drain through the mosque, to stop the damage that had occurred because of water leaks from the old drain. In order to give this advice, it was necessary to conduct a probe inside the mosque, to test for the strength of the walls. The area chosen for the probe was next to the minaret, under the cover of the portico roof, in order to avoid the chance of damage from falling rain. The area excavated is marked [A] on the plan. This Project was funded through a research grant from the Royal Ontario Museum.

The probe was dug down from the portico floor from a height of 108 metres above sea level, to a depth of 98.60 metres (in other words, about 9.5 metres). The evidence was unearthed that the mosque had been rebuilt many times, along the same alignment as before, but rising gradually over the centuries. At the bottom of the probe trench, at around 99 metres above sea level, the wall exposed had a different alignment, suggesting that this was not part of the

mosque. Unfortunately, the trench was too deep to make it safe for digging further, and the excavation was terminated.

The authorities of the Social Fund were grateful for the contribution to the study of the mosque, because the work had demonstrated that the building was very stable below ground. The damages that had occurred were clearly the result of bad maintenance of the roofs and the mosque and the adjacent Hadrami family library. The invitation to the Canadian Mission to conduct another probe was offered because this was a unique opportunity to provide historical information on one of Yemen's most famous mosques.

## 2006 Excavation

Because of the dangers of digging down to great depths, and because of the need to find a place to dump the excavated dirt, the decision was made to propose excavation for the 2006 season inside the old *birkat*, to the east of the mosque. The local people knew that the old *birkat* had last been used about 40 years ago when it was closed down because of re-occurring water leaks. This was probably due to the fact that after the Revolution, in the 1970s, a modern motor pump was installed in the mosque's well to deliver water to the whole city of Zabid. It is likely that the vibrations of the pump caused the cracks to *occur that could not be repaired successfully. The birkat was filled up and a concrete water holding tank installed.* Unfortunately, bad maintenance of the water taps and careless use meant that hundreds of liters of more water were flowing into the old drain. It is said that a shop in the sugjust outside the mosque disappeared one day when it fell into a sink-hole that had formed from the water flowing underground.

The Canadian Mission exposed a small part of the old *birkat*, to establish a reference point in time, and this verbal history could be confirmed. What was not known was when

*the birkat was first built. Everyone asserted that it was very old, but since there was no mention of it in the historical texts, this was up to the archaeologists to ascertain.*

*After breaking through the floor of the birkat, it was noticeable that no pottery of Ottoman date was found, meaning that the structure was built before around 1520, when the Turks first appeared in Yemen. Rather, the*

pottery was generally of the type we recognize for the Rasulid and Tahirid periods in Zabid (around 1220-1450). There is an important reference in the texts to the fact that the Wazir of the Treasury, Sayf al-Din Barquq, began major reconstruction work in the mosque in the year 832 Hijri. This was because of the growing number of students using the mosque, especially females. The work involved an extension of the prayer hall to the west, east and south sides, resulting *in the creation of a shamasi, or open courtyard, just as there is today.*

The next building activity in the mosque before the coming of the Ottomans was the commission by the Tahirid Sultan Taq al-Din Abdul Wahhab, who demolished the building in order to raise to a higher level because of the dampness and bad air inside. He also provided some installations on the east side, though we are not told what exactly

*these were. But there is a good chance that the birkat was the work of this sultan in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century Hijri (late 14<sup>th</sup> century).*

### **Below the birkat**

*Immediately below the birkat, the type of activity changed. For the previous four centuries, the area was entirely given over to kitchen production work, involving bread oven (maqbazah) and cooking activity, and water space (maqsalah). Many animal bones were recovered from the debris. It is proposed that these be studies in order to understand better the food prepared in the kitchen. Interestingly there were no fish bones found, only meat. It is conceivable that these kitchens served the students who studied in the mosque.*

Back in time, towards the year 1000 AD, there was a different kind of structure exposed. Unfortunately, again it was impossible to expose enough to determine its function. But it was a well made building of brick, and possibly to be associated with the time of Ibn Salamah who is famous for having introduced a lot of infrastructure changes to the Zabid area at the end of the Ziyadid era.

## **Zabid's beginnings**

History records that the city of Zabid was founded by the military officer Ibn Ziyad who was sent by the Caliph al-Ma'mun in the year 204 Hijri / AD 820, in order to settle the problems with the tribes in the area. He decided to stay in Yemen, creating a new city as the capital of his own independent dynasty. Before the work of the Canadian Mission started in Zabid, commentators always assumed that the city of Ibn Ziyad lay buried below ground. So far we have never found substantial building activity dating to the time of Ibn Ziyad. Certainly there is a Ziyadid presence, with Chinese pottery indicating contact with China, Iraq and Egypt. But the city must have been a very ephemeral one, just in the same way that during the conquest of al-Iraq, the new capital of al-Kufas was built using palm branches for both the houses and the grand mosque. It was only much later that the city of Baghdad was built with baked brick as the new Abbasid capital. We must imagine the "city" of Ziyadid Zabid, not as a built-up place with lofty mansions. Rather, it was the home of al-Asha'iri tribesmen with their animals. Two centuries later, under the management of the state by Ibn Salamah, Zabid grew in the way we have come to understand it did in Rasulid times. The opportunity to excavate inside the confines of the al-Asha'ir mosque has given us a priceless look into the city's past.

## **2-Study of irrigation device at Mahal al-Shaykh in the Wadi Zabid**

In February 2006, one of the workmen who have been part of the CAMROM excavations for many years showed Dr Keall a well-built canal, which was exposed in section near the village of Mahal al-Shaykh in the Wadi Zabid. The feature was excavated during this year's field season.

It turned out to be a stepped sluiceway, which led water from Sharij al-Bagar, one of the main canals distributing [say] water from the Wadi Zabid, to lower-lying fields. The canal was tunneled through the bank of Sharij al-Baqar. An arch built with baked brick laid in lime mortar covered the canal. The arch is pointed, and the bricks are laid in splays with increasing verticality and a brick cut to a wedge-shape inserted at the apex of the arch (see canal section, figure I). The total height of the canal (inside) measures 2.20 m. In order to strengthen the arch, it was covered with baked brick fragments laid in mud mortar. A 2 cm-thick layer of noura (lime plaster) covers the outside.

A 12-cm inset on either side narrows the canal before it reaches the first of three steps. The insert has three pairs of sockets (at a height of 44 cm, 87 cm and 128 cm above the canal bottom) to hold three bars for sluice gates that allowed controlling the water flow. The water dropped down three steps, 1.40 m in total. Traces of the springing of the arch are visible in the brickwork above the first step. The entire faces of the inner walls of the unit are coated with *noura*. The *noura* on the steps has a pebble-rich matrix.

On its outside, the sluiceway was exposed down to its footings which start 3.30 m below the top of the arch. The rather irregular footings consist of baked brick in mud mortar. A later repair on the western side of the unit was carried out in brick laid in mud mortar and covered with pebble-rich *noura*. The bricks have a for Zabid rather unusual rectangular shape (ca. 22-24 cm x 11-12 cm x 6 cm) and are crudely made; some are partly melted from over-firing.

The pottery recovered from the lower layers of dirt on the outside of the unit contained sherds with a cream fabric and a dark leaf-green glaze inside. This pottery is made in Hays, but the rather uneven quality suggests an 18<sup>th</sup>-century date. Given the fact that the cemetery of Mahal al-Shaykh contained no pottery with an earlier date than the 16<sup>15</sup> century (fine-quality Haysi sherds, including smokers' pipes) and that the mosque of Mahal al-Shaykh also belongs to the post-16<sup>th</sup> century period (its six domes are supported by pendentives), the stepped sluiceway is an example of investment in the Wadi Zabid in the post-Ottoman era.

### **3. Stabilization of the Excavation Trench in the Zabid Citadel**

Due to the recent heavy rain in Zabid it was necessary to repair some of the damage. This was done using the traditional building technique with mud and mud-plaster as before. This will be adequate to protect the features for some time. But next year it will be necessary to make the stabilization more long-lasting by using lime mortar (*noura*). Since it takes a long time to cure the *noura*, this work must start immediately at the beginning of the next season.

#### **4- Zabid Citadel Botanical Garden**

Good progress has been made with introducing different plant species into the garden from outside, though this takes a long time because of the expense of water. It is expected that we will be successful in getting money to install our own water supply system in the old well by digging it deeper. This year has been a good time for the garden because of the rain.

#### **5- Car and Truck parking area**

The government officials park their cars inside the Citadel for safety, as do the garbage trucks that clean the streets of Zabid. This is a necessary role in the life of a city. But because the Citadel is a historical place, we have tried to hide the vehicles behind a wall so that the visitors can enjoy the view of the old buildings better. A roofed canopy (*saqifah*) was constructed to provide shade for two cars of the government officials. This was a gesture to ensure good co-operation with the local officials.

Reported from Zabid by Dr. Edward Keall, Canadian Archaeological Mission Director. February 28th 2007

Al Ashair Mosque, Zabid



