FIELD-STUDIES IN SOUTHERN ARABIA

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Abstract

A joint Soviet-Yemeni expedition began work in 1983 on a range of interdisciplinary studies aiming to fill systematically the lacunae in our knowledge of the history and culture of ancient Yemen. For 8 seasons the archaeological excavations were carried out on fixed sites: at the Palaeolithic cave al-Quza, at the city and necropolis of Raybūn (11th-1st c. B.C.), at Qana', the ancient seaport of Hadramaut (1st-7th c. A.D.) and at the site of Hajrya on the island of Socotra (2nd-10th c. B.C.).

Surveys of the Hadramaut allow us to date the establishment of irrigation and permanent agriculture in the region to the end of the 2nd mill. B.C., while excavations at Raybūn show the development in the same period of a literate urban culture by a people who spoke a Hadramaut dialect and used the monumental S. Arabian script, provide evidence for the arrival in the region of the Sabaeans in the 8th-7th c. B.C. and allow the first reconstruction of the complete structure of an ancient Hadramaut temple complex. Excavations at Qana' shed light on the history and structure of ancient Yemeni trade, particularly in frankincense. Study by members of the expedition of many thousands of inscriptions and graffiti, on rock, stone, palm-grafts and pottery, and found throughout the area, provides evidence for the development of a literate culture and of handwriting styles, verify chronologies, allow the identification of sites, and reveal a wealth of information about the everyday life and religious practices of the ancient Yemenis.

The Soviet-Yemeni expedition started its work in 1983. It was formed by the decision of the Council of Ministers of the USSR as a joint historical and cultural expedition of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and the Centre of Cultural Researches of Yemen (now included in the Department of Antiquities of the Republic of Yemen). The main task of the expedition is to carry all kinds of investigations connected with the history and culture of Yemen, the land of unique and exceptional cultural heritage, of which only a small part has been explored by modern science.

The scientific supervisor of the expedition was (from 1983 to 1990) Academician B.B. Piotrovskij, its directors P.A. Gryaznevitch (from 1983 to 1989) and M.B. Piotrovskij (from 1989 to 1991), and assistant director A.V. Sedov (from 1984). The expedition includes three teams: a team for historico-cultural investigations (at different times headed by P.A. Gryaznevitch and M.B. Piotrovskij), an archaeological team (directed by G.A. Koshelenko, H.A. Amirkhanov, A.V. Sedov), and a team for ethno-linguistic studies (directed by V.V. Naumkin).

The expedition has set itself the task of a complex study of the history of human society in Southern Arabia, first of all in the districts of Hadramaut.
and Mahra and on Socotra Island. The complex character of its studies is embodied in the joint efforts of archaeologists, historians, epigraphists, palaeographers, students of ethnography, linguists and sociologists. For several seasons the expedition has explored the valleys and uplands of Inner Hadramaut and Mahra. Unique Lower Palaeolithic, Upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic sites, numerous monuments of the ancient Yemeni civilization: cities, settlements, temples and irrigation systems have been discovered, surveyed and marked on the archaeological map. Many ancient rock-inscriptions have been found, many mediaeval cities and caravan routes investigated.

The expedition is carrying out archaeological excavations on fixed sites at the Palaeolithic cave al-Quza in the Wadi al-Gabr (Inner Hadramaut), in the city and necropolis of Raybun in the Wadi Dau'an (2nd-1st c. B.C.), at Qana, the ancient sea-port of Hadramaut (1st-4th c. A.D.), at the site of Hajrya on Socotra Island (2nd-10th c. A.D.), and at the mediaeval city of Maduda in the Wadi al-Kasr. Several hundred inscriptions as well as many other finds made by the expedition are exhibited in the city-museums of Seyun and Atak.

Along with its archaeological investigations the expedition is conducting a systematic ethnological survey in the valleys of the western part of Inner Hadramaut, in the Western Highlands and on the coast. It has continued its ethnographic studies on Socotra Island, and has undertaken ethno-linguistic investigations in Mahra. Palaeogeographical and palaeobotanical research work was carried out in Inner and Coastal Hadramaut. A general physico-anthropological survey of the modern population of the southern regions of Yemen has been made, vast materials collected on the language of the Socotrians and the Arabic dialects of Hadramaut.


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1 "Mathaf athar Hadramaut, taarifat". Seyun, 1985 (in arabic).