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An Inscribed Sabaean Bronze Altar from The British Museum

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In July 1994 the authors of the present paper during their visit to the British Museum noted a fragmentary South Arabian bronze altar which bore a very interesting Sabaic text, and were surprised to discover that this inscribed artifact remained practically unknown to specialists on ancient Yemen. Only two rather short descriptions of this altar with some remarks on the contents of the inscription cast on it have appeared until now¹. The permit for its publication kindly granted by the British Museum gave an opportunity to introduce a new iconographic and epigraphic source on early Sabaean religion into the field of South Arabian studies². Though the exact provenance of this bronze altar has not been ascertained, it seems to come from Mārib³, capital of the Sabaean state mentioned in the epigraphy under the names of *MRYB* and *MRB*⁴. In 1970 both fragments of the altar were auctioned at Christies and were purchased by the British Museum in rather poor condition because of strong oxidation (pl. I). By 1973, however, they had been cleaned in the Museum's Research Laboratory «with most excellent results»⁵.

The Sabaean bronze altar or rather offering table exhibited now in the British Museum was assembled from two separate parts. The larger part (WA 135323: height — 66 cm, width — 110 cm, depth — 34,5 cm) includes the so-called front panel⁶ preserved almost entirely and decorated with three rows of sphinxes shown frontally (pl. II a), the upper section of one of the lateral panels (pl. II b) and a corner of the back panel (pl. II c). The smaller part (WA 135324: height — 20 cm, width — 75 cm, depth — 20 cm) represents a considerable piece of the upper section of the back panel flanked on every side

¹ Christies 07.07.1970, p. 152, no. 159; Barnett, Curtis 1973, p. 130, pl. LXII, LXIII a.

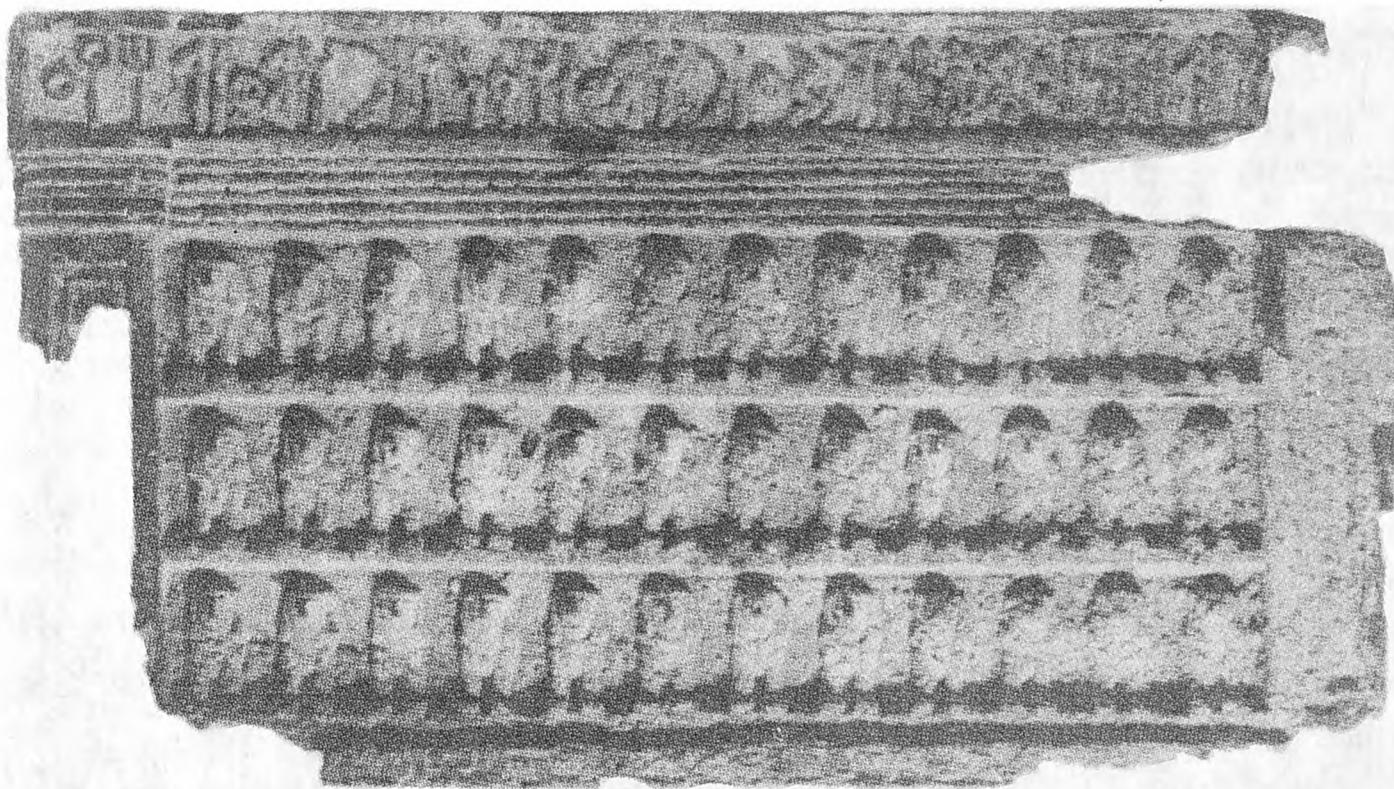
² Profound gratitude should be expressed in this connection to Dr. St. J. Simpson, Curator of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities of the British Museum, who encouraged the authors in their research on this object and did his best to facilitate the appearance of the present article.

³ Barnett, Curtis 1973, p. 130.

⁴ Cf. Robin 1996, col. 1106.

⁵ Barnett, Curtis 1973, p. 130, pl. LXII.

⁶ This panel is considered to be the front one, since it bears the beginning of the inscription.



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Pl. I. The front panel of the altar before the restoration.

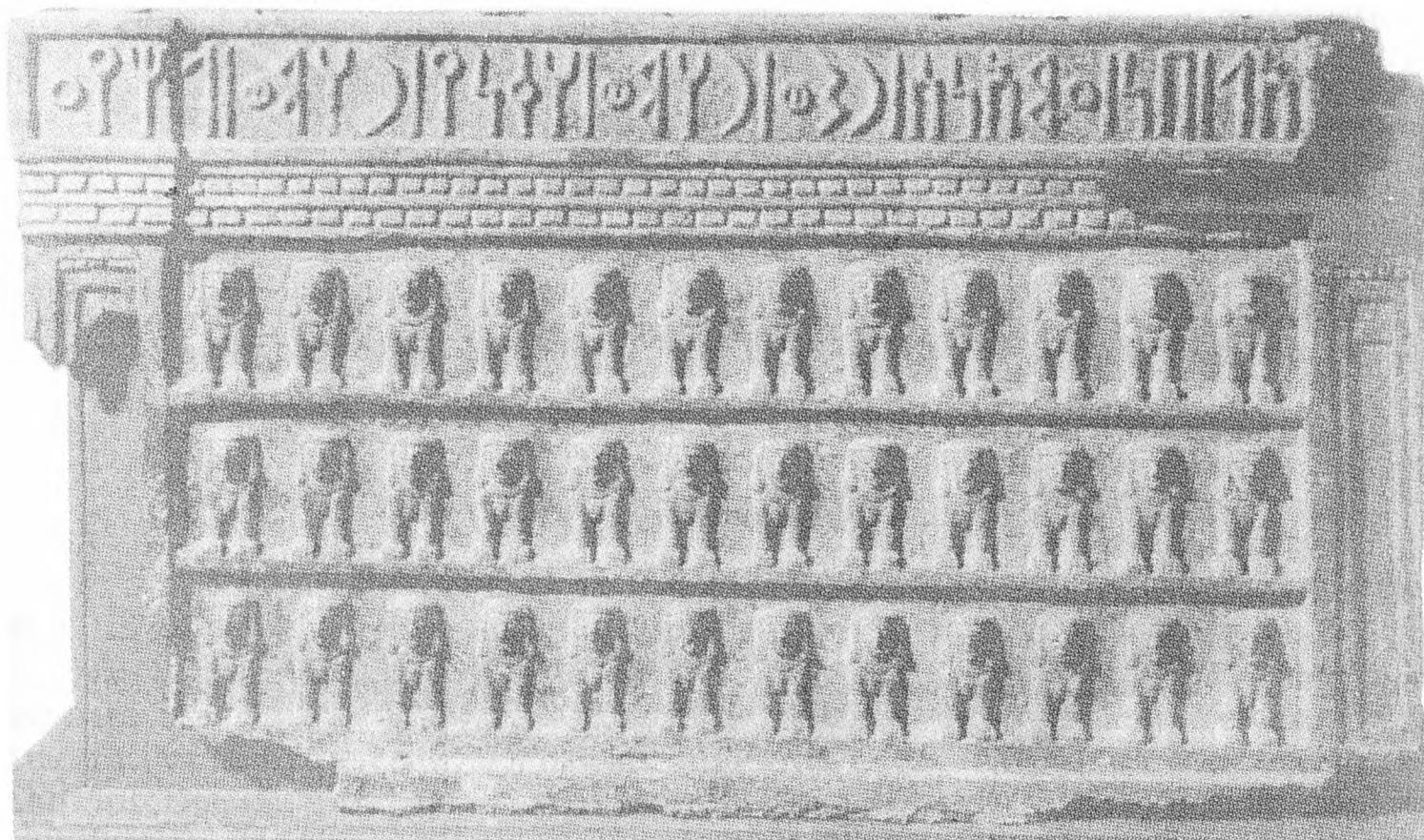
by a projecting bull's head (pl. II c)⁷. These two fragments⁸ seem to be remnants of the bronze revetment which originally covered a wooden offering table. It is well-known that the bull's head is one of the most wide-spread motifs in South Arabian art⁹. The representation of a sphinx, on the contrary, occurs very rarely among the artifacts of ancient Yemenite civilization. The sphinx' images already attested in Southern Arabia, namely different varieties of winged sphinxes hewn on the limestone reliefs R 71/o1/96.51, R 71//95.41, R 71//96.91 (CIAS, I/2, p. 461—462, 465—468; Bossert 1951, no. 1286 & 1301 (erroneously discribed as CIH 73)) as well as cast on the bronze plate above the text CIH 73 (Pirenne 1955, p. 145, pl. V d; CIAS, I/2, p. 469, fig. 2 a), apparently followed Hellenistic patterns¹⁰. In contrast to them the figures of these fantastic creatures skilfully depicted full-faced on the altar from the British Museum were influenced by another, more archaic, prototype. They bear a strong resemblance to a sphinx' statue discovered in 1942 near the Ethiopian village of Addi Keramaten and kept now in the

⁷ From a purely iconographic point of view this richly decorated panel may also be interpreted as the front one. It seems that this altar was set up in the centre of the deity's sanctuary so that the worshippers could contemplate all its sides.

⁸ In the same show-case one more fragment of the bronze panel is exhibited (WA 135756), but it obviously belonged to another artifact, since it is decorated with four (not three) rows of sphinxes, very similar, however, to those of WA 135323, and differs in its height from the above-mentioned front panel. The detailed analysis and publication of this object would go beyond the limits of the present paper.

⁹ The bull as well as the ibex proved to be largely venerated in South Arabian religion. In all probability these sacred animals were not connected with any concrete deity (cf. Ryckmans 1976, p. 262; Robin 1996, col. 1168—1169).

¹⁰ Cf. CIAS, I/2, p. 469, fig. 2 a & b.



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Pl. II a. The inscription LuBM 1 A (on the front panel).

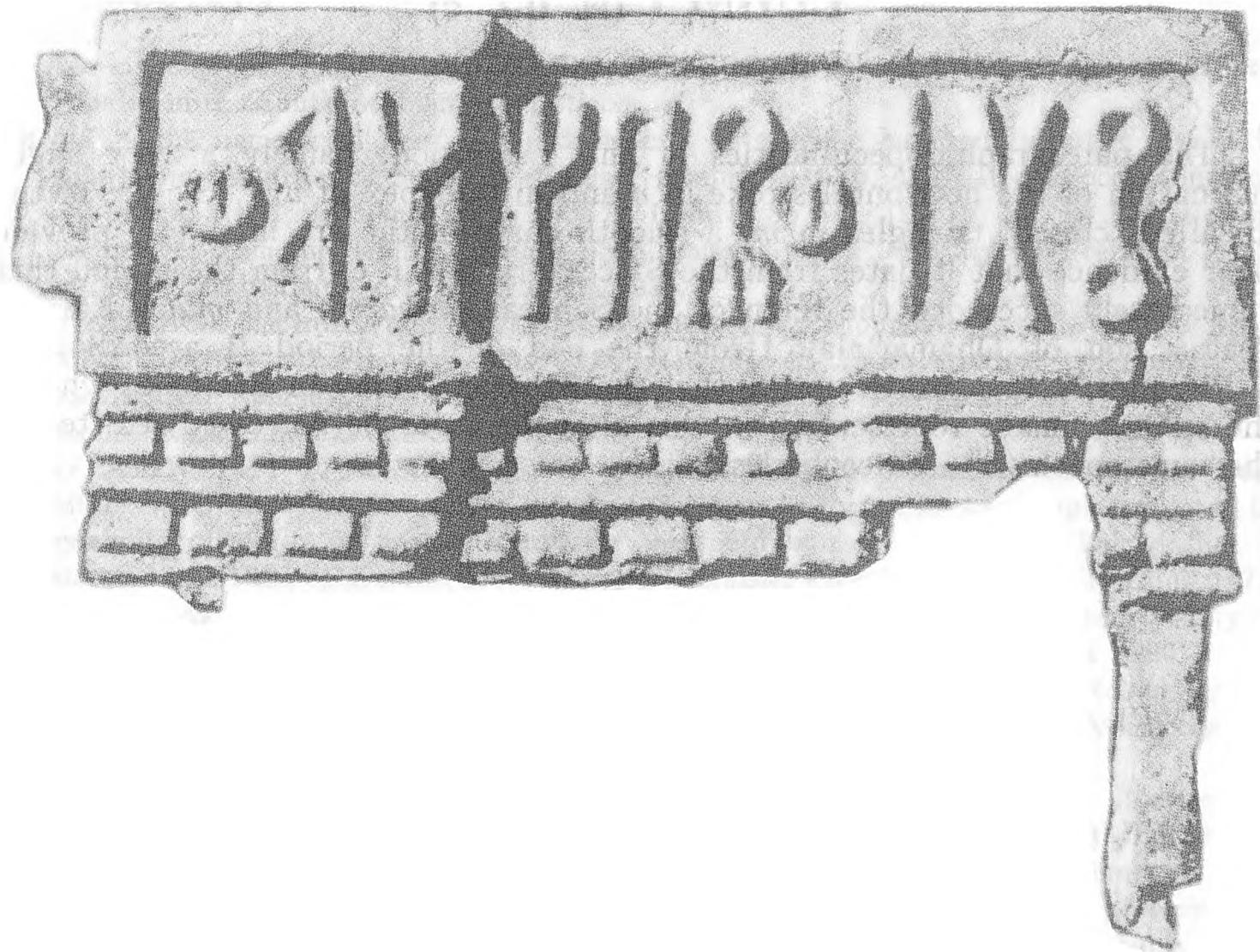
Museum of Asmara¹¹. Thanks to a fragment of the early South Arabian inscription hewn on its pedestal (RIE 54) this object was attributed to the sculptors of the Sabaean colony in Ethiopia who had imitated a Cushitic or even Egyptian model¹². Thus the sphinx' image probably came to early Saba' from Cush or Egypt through Sabaeo-Ethiopian culture.

The three panels of the altar are surmounted by a single line of the inscription marked here with the siglum **LuBM 1**¹³. Perhaps the fourth panel, which is not extant now, bore its final part. Unfortunately the authors had no possibility to determine the exact dimensions of the inscription and of its signs.

¹¹ See the short description and the bibliography of this artifact in: RIE, I, p. 45, 136. Good photographs of it have been published in: RIE, II, pl. 44 (full-faced); CIAS, I/2, p. 469, fig. 1 (half-faced).

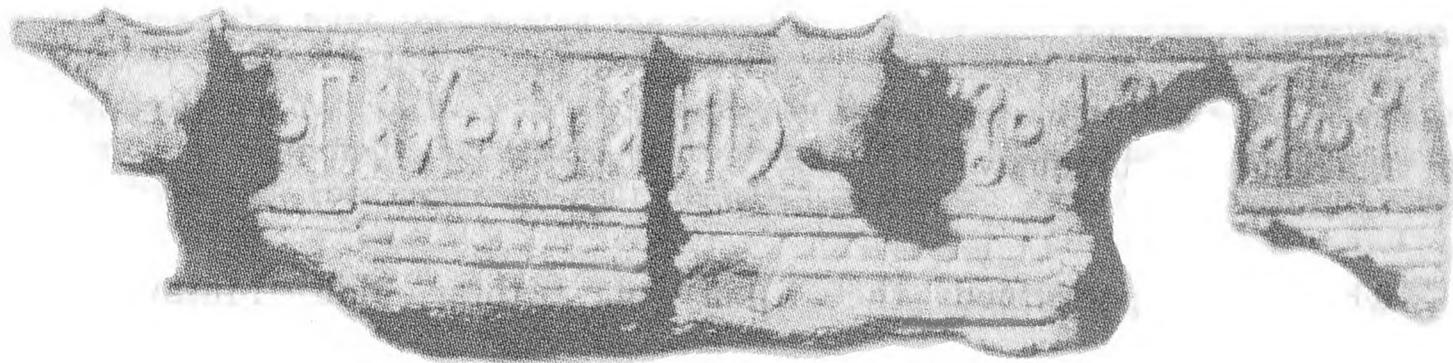
¹² It is not the unique representation of this creature originated in Ethiopia. One more sphinx, also inscribed (RIE 70), was discovered at Dibdib in the same region, but it is too roughly carved to be compared with masterpieces of South Arabian art (RIE, I, p. 148; II, pl. 54).

¹³ In commemoration of A. G. Lundin's merits his disciple S. A. Frantsouzoff proposes to designate the two inscriptions of the British Museum, which this famous scholar identified as unpublished, with the sigla LuBM 1–2. The text LuBM 2 will appear later on.



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Pl. II b. The inscription LuBM 1 B (on the lateral panel).



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Pl. II c. The inscription LuBM 1 C (on the back panel).

LUBM 1 (PL. II A—C)**PALEOGRAPHY AND DATING**

The paleographic peculiarities of the inscription, namely a very slight inclination of the horizontal stroke in *n* and in the apex of *alif*, the use of the so-called 'closed' triangles in *m*, a smooth curve of the arc in *r*, etc. provide clear evidence that it dates from the 6th century BC, i. e. from the period that immediately succeeded the reign of the Sabaean *mukarrib* and *malik* Karib'il Watar, son of Dhamar'alay (from the end of the period B according to J. Pirenne)¹⁴. It is worth noting that the Sabaean colony in Ethiopia, whence the sphinx' image represented on this altar seems to be borrowed, existed in the same epoch (8th—6th centuries BC)¹⁵.

Text**A**

[...]L/bn/'M'NS¹/rs²w/RHMW/hqny/RHMW/LHY'

B

TT/w-SBH¹HMW

C

ywm[/s]y^od TT#R/d-MS¹W'T-m b-T#[TR]¹⁶...

Translation**A**

[...]il, son of 'Amm'anas, priest of Rahmaw, dedicated to Rahmaw Laḥay'a-

B

that and Saḥaḥumaw

C

when [he performed the h]unt of 'Athtar dhū Musawwa'at^{im}.
By 'Ath[tar] ...

¹⁴ The chronological conception of J. Pirenne, who traced the starting-point of South Arabian civilization back to the 5th century BC, is now completely rejected. Exhaustive arguments in favour of the so-called 'long' chronology have recently been presented in concise form by Chr. J. Robin (Robin 1996, col. 1111—1117).

¹⁵ Frantsouzoff 1995; Robin 1996, col. 1123—1124.

¹⁶ Unfortunately in that word the character *t*, which is perfectly discernible after 'ayn, has been completely overshadowed on the photograph by the bull's head (pl. II c).

Commentary

[...]’*L* – the proper name of the dedicant can’t be restored, since the element ’*L* is very popular in the South Arabian onomasticon.

’*M’NS’* – the name used here as the dedicant’s patronymic has been attested in all the epigraphic languages of Southern Arabia (Harding 1971, p. 435). It also occurs in some old Sabaic inscriptions such as Ja 2905 c/1 and Y.85.AQ/10 = Er 62. Its first element ’*M* derives from the Semitic common noun ‘paternal uncle’ and bears no relation to the supreme Qatabanian god ‘Amm (Lundin 1979).

rs²w/RHMW – the interpretation of *rs²w* as ‘priest’ is well-founded (Lundin 1971, p. 139). It is the first occurrence of the deity Rahmaw in South Arabian epigraphy. The vocalization Rahmaw is, of course, purely hypothetical. The gender of this deity too cannot be determined with certainty.

hqny/RHMW/LHY’T/ w-ŞBHMMW – the dedications of persons to deities had been rather wide-spread in the early period of Sabaean history and were replaced later by symbolic offerings of bronze statues of men and women. The name Laḥay’athat is attested in all the epigraphic South Arabian languages except Hadramitic (Harding 1971, p. 513). As for Şabaḥhumaw, this proper name had been found until recently only in Sabaic, for the most part in early texts (Harding 1971, p. 366), but in 1990 it was discovered at Raybūn in Western Ḥaḍramawt during excavations undertaken by the Soviet Yemenite Joint Complex Expedition (SOYCE) in two fragmentary inscriptions SOYCE 2433, 2601 which remain still unpublished.

ywm[/s]yḏ ’*TTR* – the restoration *ywm/hy’/’TTR* ‘when he poured out libation for ‘Athtar’ proposed at first sight by A.G. Lundin proved to be unreliable (cf. pl. II c). In principle among the verbs used in the old Sabaic formulae after the conjunction *ywm* only *s’qy* ‘to irrigate’, *s’y* ‘to make, to erect, to offer (a sacrifice), to take possession of ...’¹⁷ and *bny* ‘to build, to construct’ may be inserted in this lacuna. However, all of them require direct objects (cf. Lundin 1971, p. 146, 153 & pl. 26, p. 173 & pl. 33). On the other hand, it is possible to assume that the damaged vertical line after *y* is not a dividing stroke, but appertains to a character¹⁸. In that case the verb *[s]yḏ* ‘to hunt’ seems to be the most suitable restoration for such a context¹⁹, since it has already been attested in different versions of the formula of the ritual hunt introduced with *ywm*: *ywm/şd şyd/’TTR/w-KRWM* (RES 4177/3–4), *ywm/şd/şd/’TTR/w-KRWM* (Y.85.AQ 7 = Er 41/2–3), *ywm/şyd/şyd/’TTR/w-KRWM* (Ry 544/3–4) ‘when he performed the hunt (or: hunted the game) of ‘Athtar and Karwam’, *ywm/şd/şyd/KRWM* (RES 3946/7), *ywm/şyd/KRWM* (Schmidt/Mārib 23/2) ‘when he performed the hunt of Karwam’²⁰. The text on the altar is close to the last ‘shortened’ version of the formula, but instead of the deity Karwam it mentions the first member of this divine pair (not necessarily matrimonial), i. e. the god ‘Athtar. The verb *şyd* is used

¹⁷ An exhaustive semantic analysis of this verb has been made in: Lundin 1965.

¹⁸ Moreover, the dividing stroke just on the edge of the altar’s projection is not necessary. It is lacking, for example, in the same position between *MS’W’T-m* and *b-’T[TR]*.

¹⁹ Some traces of a triangle of *d* can be discerned on the photograph.

²⁰ Cf. Lundin 1971, p. 169 & pl. 32, p. 170; Ryckmans 1976, p. 269–271, 276; Beeston 1991, p. 51–54. The interpretation of *KRWM* as a deity’s name has been perfectly argued in: Müller 1989.

in that version in the infinitive, not in the perfect²¹ and the whole passage may be literally translated «at the time of performing the hunt of 'Athtar»²².

The ritual hunt described by the above-mentioned formula has been attested up to now only as a prerogative of supreme rulers of the Sabaeen state. If our restoration is correct, it would be the first reference to this game hunted by some religious official in early Saba'.

d-MS'W'T-m — this epithet of 'Athtar obviously derives from the name of a sanctuary or locality. The toponym *MS'W'T-m*, however, has not been attested in pre-Islamic Arabian epigraphy.

b-Ṭ#[TR]... — this final invocation was probably continued on the other side of the altar. In that case some other principal deities of Saba' (Hawbas, Almaqah, Dhāt Ḥimyam or Dhāt Ba'dān) as well as Rahmaw may be enumerated in it²³.

The inscription **LuBM 1** published here clearly demonstrates that the scope of our knowledge about South Arabian religion is extremely limited. Even the discovery of a new Sabaeen god or goddess remains still possible. According to this text the cult of Rahmaw was highly developed: the deity had its own priesthood. The splendid appearance of the bronze altar implies the existence of a rich sanctuary of Rahmaw. But the contents of this short inscription are insufficient to ascertain how the dedication of persons to Rahmaw was connected with the ritual hunt of 'Athtar.

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²¹ In the 'complete' version of this formula the first *ṣ(y)d* is the finite verb, while the second *ṣ(y)d* is an infinitive form employed as *maf'ul muṭlaq* (Beeston 1991, p. 54).

²² From the stylistic point of view, however, it seems preferable to translate *ṣ(y)d* in the 'shortened' formula by means of the finite verb in the past after W.W. Müller's example (Müller 1989, p. 95).

²³ But not all of them, since the width of the lacuna is sufficient for three names only.

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