



Yemen has a long and rich history, stretching back millennia, but it is still *terra incognita* to most people. There is no other part of the Arabian Peninsula as rich in heritage, including architecture, irrigation works, inscriptions and a vital tradition of poetry, proverbs, music, dance and intellectual writing.

Yemen Update Redux is dedicated to providing a variety of past writing and images about Yemen's heritage. This includes selections from the earlier print edition of *Yemen Update* and other brief writings on Yemen and its people. Yemen's past lives on no matter the turmoil of the present.



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The Queen of Sheba as You Never Knew Her



While attending the MESA conference in Portland in 1992, I wandered into a downtown bookstore which was holding a reception for MESA members. I was browsing through the Middle Eastern books, thinking something new or significant might turn up. All of a sudden I noticed a title (*The Queen of Sheba: Her Life and Times*) by Phinneas A. Crutch, B.A., M.A., F.P.A., S.O.S. Interesting degrees, but S.O.S.? I should have gathered something was amiss from the start. This particular book was published by G. P. Putnam's Sons (New York and London) in 1922. I was unfamiliar with the work of Mr. Crutch; the more I became familiar with it, the more I found myself laughing convulsively. As it turns out, this is a farce, a tongue-in-cheek swipe at the dry archaeological fare of the time.

There is a one page bibliography at the end of the book which at first seemed to test my Yemen trivia penchant to the limit. How many of you have heard of the following: An Autobiography of Balkis of Sheba, translated from the original manuscript by the Pan-Arabian Society in 1886; Filbert's *Marib Old and New*, published in Boston in 1911; Hornblower's *The Enigma of Sheba*, also published in Boston in 1886; Outhouse's *With Shush in Africa*, published in Philadelphia in 1894; Tortoni's *Ma'in la Bella*, printed in Florence in 1908; Trouthook's *Street Cries and Epithets of old Ma'in*, London, 1806. Never heard of these before? Well, that's because you never read anything by Phinneas A. Crutch before.

I have no idea who the author behind Phinneas A. Crutch is, but he or possibly she was not entirely ignorant of the Queen of Sheba story. Was this a disgruntled student of Oriental Studies at a time when it was still chic to be an orientalist? Was it a well-known Assyriologist, who needed something to do in between translating biblical parallel annals? What, by the way, did Sir Leonard Woolley do for fun on those long, electricity-lacking nights on the dig at Ur? We can hardly blame Mac Gibson, because he wasn't even born at the time. If you have any ideas about the origin of this marvelous book, please send them along.

Though tempted, I cannot reproduce the entire book. I provide you with a few excerpts, to be continued next issue. In the meantime, no S.O.S. is needed, just sit back in your favorite easy chair and H.A.G.T. [D. Varisco]

The Queen of Sheba: Her Life and Times

by Phinneas A. Crutch

(New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922)

Foreward

Countless volumes, incunabula, brochures and miscellany, with which every student of history is intimately acquainted, have been issued concerning the more salient incidents of the life and reign of Balkis, Queen of Sheba.

One has only to speculate, as indeed one can scarcely abstain from doing in moments of fascinated leisure, upon this richly controversial subject, to call to mind at once such authoritative works as Professor Hornblower's *The Enigma of Sheba*, with its masterly discussions based on contemporary sources, in which he conclusively disposes of the distorted reports touching upon the Queen's accession; Gorton's *Secret Memoirs of the Court of Sheba*, which, in spite of a deplorable tendency on the author's part to accept canard for chronicle, nevertheless remains a monumental contribution of its kind to the bibliography of the period; Heimweh's scholarly monograph, *Zeitgenossen der Konigin Balkis*, an admirable study of the social and literary movements of her time; and Gaston Poteau's delightful *Voyages de la Reine de Saba*, which needs no recommendation other than its own charm and whimsicality of comment, even in less purely Sheban circles of research.

If, at so late a date, one presumes to offer an additional treatise supplementing the foregoing, chosen at random from amid the mass of printed material inspired by this

extraordinary reign, it is from a conviction, fathered by hope, that a wider survey of the time than is set forth in any of the more specialized existing documents will be indulgently received — and particularly by that great reading body of the public which is ever more deeply concerned with the human frailties of a career than with its stagecraft, more warmly stirred by a glimpse of unrecorded impulse than by the graven monuments of staid deliberation, more closely sympathetic to the personal record of advancing years than to the cold chronology of edicts.



The Queen of Sheba (from the frontispiece)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

It is in this spirit, therefore, a spirit of lenient toleration, of mild reserve in the face of temptatious criticism, of restrained veracity untouched by any gossipry, claver, or reportage, that one approached the life and age of Balkis, Queen of Sheba— she who was born before her time and remained to outlive her day, in whom the East and the West were met and the lioness couchant with the ewe, whose way was paved with well-intentioned errancy, for whom no reticence was too forbidding, no curiosity too shameless, no new departure too prodigal of candlelight. She, who was but a child, and yet who stood alone in the midst of bearded men, and, with many innocent

questions, brought them to their separate ends,

La petite Balkis, as Gaston Poteau so quaintly puts it...

Chapter I: East of Suez

The first millennium, old style, dawned lugubriously for Sheba.

For more than three centuries she had seen the glory of the coming of a hundred lords. When it was not Rameses II it was Mernepthah. When it was not Mernepthah it was the Children of Israel. In Assyria, no sooner was Shalmaneser laid with his uncles and his aunts than Tiglathpileser I was afoot. And after him Ashurnazirpal. And after them both, Merdukzer and Eulmashshakinshum, the Babylonians. Nearer home, the Kings of Ma'in were a thorn in the flesh, a pebble in the shoe, a mote in the eye. More recently, too, the power of Tyre was risen to be a nightmare on the face of the waters.

Sheba was become the cockpit of Arabia...

Chapter II: Baby Balkis

1

At a very early age the little Queen-to-be gave evidence of two pronounced peculiarities. She was ambidextrous, and double-jointed throughout. In addition it had become apparent, as the light burden of her young years began to accumulate, that she was destined to be deliriously beautiful, in the fatal Scythian style every characteristic of which — alabaster skin, jade colored eyes, fiery red or "salamander" hair, tiny hands and feet — she possessed to a bewildering degree. Aside from that she was a romp, a hoyden, a madcap, a hotspur and a tomrig of the first water. So much so that when it came time to furnish a name for her, to supplement her royal cryptonym which might of course never be uttered above a whisper, the caconym of Balkis was chosen, meaning Tomboy.

If any evidence of her vagarious nature other than the testimony of eye-witnesses were needed Balkis herself furnishes it in striking fashion. Perhaps more than any ruler in history, certainly with infinitely greater prolixity than other contemporary sovereigns, she rushed into script on all occasions and on all topics in a passion for self-revelation which provides a veritable cranberry bog for her biographers, embarrassing though it may have been for her relatives, friends and associates whom she does not spare in her autobiography.

Of her extraordinary diaries there are four hundred and sixty-two volumes extant, half of which must be read with the aid of a mirror since, on account of her ambidextrousness, it was her practice to write two volumes at a time, one forward and the other backwards. And on the subject of her youthful



escapades she is very explicit, and disarmingly shameless.

"Salhin Palace," she says once, "was designed in what is called the Sheban manorial style, with roofs and turrets, and tin camels on top of them. Such a beautiful structure.

I was a child of the sand dunes and quite untamable.

I rode my camel-foal up the front stairs and tried to teach the Governor's high stepping Bactrians to jump, which they, poor knock-kneed creatures, were not in the least prepared to do now that I look back on it. I climbed our perilously inclined roof and slid down off it into the dunes sitting on a slaver, by moonlight in my nightdress. Already in my earliest youth I had scrambled up every monkey tree, walked on my hands on top of every wall, and sat astride of every tin camel in my childhood home. I was, I suppose, utterly fearless. I thought absolutely nothing of running along the narrow ridges of the roof at breakneck speed, shod only in my gum sandals. This alarmed people so much, however, that I was reluctantly obliged to abandon this pastime."

In another chapter she states that:

"I very soon showed a remarkable proficiency in dancing and contortionism, and could lift both my feet to the level of my finely penciled eyebrows and then clasp them behind my neck with disconcerting ease. This harmless amusement, or so I found it, seemed to shock a great number of people who went around saying, 'Look at Balkis with her Scythified airs.' A remark the full import of which I only appreciated later, but then I was never one to care what people said about me."

Again elsewhere she observes:

"I was the life, and very often nearly the death, of the palace, and what my nurse described as 'a perfect hell of a child.' Our camel driver's wife called me a little microbe. Bumptious, excessively passionate, disagreeably plainspoken, impertinent as well as foolhardy, and always scornful of etiquette I was, no doubt, almost impossible to tolerate."

So Balkis fearlessly describes herself. It seems only fitting to add Talmud's famous characterization.

"Balkis," he admits in his own diaries, "was not a plaster saint, nor even a plaster cast. She was a

calamitous, clackety, combustive little imp of creation, full of furore, improvisation, high temperatures, and the common or garden bean."

2

In the meantime her education, as befitting a little Sheban Princess, was not being entirely neglected, in spite of the great handicap under which her governesses and tutors labored as a result of her well known habit of disappearing into the dunes for days and nights at a time, accompanied only by her faithful Tyrian trundetails.

It was upon her return from one of these absences, which had been even more prolonged than usual, that she made her famous entrance into the audience hall of the palace where her guardians were assembled, discussing whether after all it were not their duty, irrespective of their personal feelings, to cause at least a nominal search to be made for her. The debate was at its hottest, many being of the opinion that it was a hopeless and entirely unnecessary task to look for a Princess in a sand dune, when the door suddenly flew open and Balkis came caracoling into the room, to the mingled relief and disappointment of the council.

"Here's me!" she announced in her shrill treble.

It is almost exclusively owing to the efforts of her devoted nurse, Sophonisba, that any results whatever in the matter of proper upbringing and breeding were achieved with the wayward child who defied correction and spurned instruction. This Sophonisba seems to have been an extraordinary woman in many ways, that she should have been able to remain in close contact with her little charge for so long without losing either her mind or the child is proof of that; and, while in the company of her other governesses and teachers Balkis was forever giving way to tantrums and miffs—often putting their eyes out with her thumbs and otherwise annoying them—with her nurse she never resorted to any bodily violence.

3

Notwithstanding the many interruptions in her schooling, Balkis was rigorously drilled in the fundamentals of learning essential to a Sheban young lady of her station.

Besides her own native Sheban, she spoke