

Shibam

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According to tradition, Shibam (or Shibam Aqyan as it appears in Himyaritic inscriptions) was named after a local notable, and its original name of Yabblis was thus changed. In the third century A.H., Shibam was the seat of the Yu'firids, the first local dynasty in Yemen that eventually extended its hegemony all the way to al-Janad, near Ta'izz. Tradition has it that the Great Mosque was built in this period by Muhammad ibn-Yafur on the site of and with material from a Himyaritic palace. The well-preserved mosque is the only testimony to the past grandeur of the town which was then walled with four gates and had a strong fortress. Owing to its control over the surrounding populous and fertile valley, and over the mining of silver and semi-precious stones there, it boasted of large markets.

The fortress is situated on a small elevation, the Lubakha, whose slopes are perforated by man-adapted or man-made caves traditionally attributed to the Himyarites. They may have been tombs or granaries, but many have remained in use as temporary or semi-permanent shelters. Their last massive occupation was during the civil war as a refuge from bombings.

The architecture of Shibam appears plainer than that of its neighbours, Kawkab and Thula. Many houses have pre-Islamic stones incorporated in their con-

struction. The major characteristics of their facades are inlays and fan-lights made of alabaster and set in stone frames that are round, double round, or round with two arches. The latter motif also appears in the Great Mosque, but with different proportions. The majority of the windows seen today, however, have fan-lights with a single arch and *takhrim* (gypsum fretwork with coloured glass), following a trend wide-spread throughout the country.

While it has been at the centre of Yemen's history for most of its history, whatever importance Shibam has today comes from its position as a regional market. The heritage of the various rural markets that were once enclosed within the town's limits.

Today, the town is divided into two parts. The older part, within the perimeter of the walls (which are now broken here and there and with much encroachment from houses) starts at the market, branches from the main gate to the side streets, and narrows toward the Great

Mosque. The new part continues from the same gate to the outside of the walls along the road where can be found a flourishing market. The "interior" market is characterised by rustic colonnades made of thick stone disques evoking the archetypal forms of the columns of the Great Mosque. In the "exterior" market, besides the commercial stalls, there are a growing number of workshops that cater to the needs of builders: a *takhrim* maker, a carpenter and the like. The fringes of the market are quickly being filled with houses spreading along the walls; these houses are made of lava stone and in a style that is becoming wide-spread throughout the country. The major decorative feature is the fan-light made of a single arch with *takhrim*.

Major new construction in the new part of Shibam consists of public buildings: schools, a hospital, local administration headquarters and the new power plant. Electricity and piped water are the most recent improvements.



Wadi Dahr, adjacent to Shibam.

Photo: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.