The Queen of Saba in History and Art

Lecture By: Werner Daum
Presented in English
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The Queen of Saba - Malika Bilqis as she is called in the Arab tradition, Sheba in English, and Saba in Arabic, Latin, French, Italian and German - seems to come straight from the mysteries of long forgotten fairytales. While she is mentioned in the holy books, both the Bible and the Qur'an, mystery still surrounds this beautiful Queen of long ago. Legends from ancient Yemen credit her with overthrowing a tyrant. For Ethiopians, she is the ancestor of their state and their religion, charmingly honoured in thousands of magnificent manuscripts and wall-paintings. Archaeology has revealed the existence of a mighty Kingdom of Saba in the south of the Arabian Peninsula - but in spite of so many historical hints the legendary queen remains an elusive figure.

This has not deterred artists of course. Both in the West and in art from the Islamic world, many of the great masters have used this enigmatic figure - as great art always does - to transport and express the philosophical, intellectual, aesthetic and political ideas of their own time; often at critical junctures in political and intellectual history. I will explore some of these works.

The Queen of Saba in the Bible and in the Qur'an

In the Bible, the Queen hears of King Solomon's wisdom. She decides to see this mighty ruler in person and to test him with riddles. She travels to Jerusalem with a very large retinue and camels laden with gold, incense and spices. On seeing Solomon's court, his riches, wisdom and faith, she is overwhelmed and submits to the one God.

The passage in the Qur'an (Sura 27, verses 17 - 44) tells the same story, with one additional element in verse 44: the floor in Solomon's palace is made of shimmering glass, which the Queen takes for water as she approaches. Nothing more is said about this. Nor is there any explanation for such a strange architectural detail. Surprisingly, we encounter this image - the Queen crossing over water - not only in medieval Islamic miniatures but also in Western/Christian art.

3000 Years ago: The Kingdom of Saba in Southern Arabia (Yemen)

Over the last thirty years or so, archaeology has made great discoveries in the Arabian Peninsula. In Yemen, majestic temples have been unearthed, more than 10,000 monumental inscriptions found, thousands of everyday and commercial letters, as well as wonderful statues in alabaster and bronze have been discovered. As a result, we now have a rather good picture of the ancient civilizations of Southern Arabia.

Saba was the oldest of the various kingdoms there. It flourished for about a millennium and a half. It was established around the end of the second millennium BC, with Marib as its capital. In the first century BC, the Sabaeans founded Sana'a (the name means "fortress"), the capital of modern Yemen, to secure the Yemeni highlands against the rising power.

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of the new state of Himyar (with its capital Zafar, near modern Yariim). However, Himyar would soon turn the tables and incorporate Saba. Thus it was Himyar that dominated most of Yemen and the region's se-trade in Roman times. The name 'Red Sea' was coined at that time and is simply a translation of the "Sea of Himyar" ('Himyar' means red).

The historical Queen of Saba?

Not one of the inscriptions in southern Arabia mentions a queen. However, we do have several texts from Assyria that shed some light on the riddle. In his Annals for the year 738 BC, King Tiglat-Pileser III mentions a certain Zababa, Queen of the Arabs, who brought him tribute. In another inscription, from Nimrud, dated 733 BC, Tiglat-Pileser III gives the following account of his victory over Samsi (Shamsi), "Queen of the Arabs": "and at Mount Saqurri I killed 9400 of the warriors of Samsi, the Queen of the Arabs. Men ... thousands, 30,000 camels, 20,000 cattle, 5,000 sacks of spicas of all kinds ... I took as booty ... And she, to save her life ... towards the desert, the dry land, like a wild she-ass, she directed her face, fleeing ..."

While both these queens were actually from north-eastern Arabia, to the people of Mesopotamia the idea of queens ruling over the Arabs seems to have been strange and shocking. Eventually the stories merged with the fabled riches of southern Arabia to become the legend of "The Queen of Saba."

The Queen of Saba in the arts of Europe

The first known work of art depicting the Queen of Saba is a miniature in the famous "Bible of Roda" (figure 1). It is the first in a line that shaped medieval illuminated Bibles for about 200 years, it was written and illuminated in the monastery of Roda, near Barcelona, around the year 1000.

At that time, Roda was one of the two great seats of learning in Catalonia, the other being the monastery of Ripoll. Both were devoted to worship, as well as scholarship and the arts. From 967 to 970 AD, Gerbert, who would soon become Pope Sylvester II, studied in Ripoll, and also (and this is the clue to the understanding of our miniature) with Arab teachers in Cordoba and Seville.

This very intensive relationship with Arab civilization extended to the arts as well; the capitals of the columns in Ripoll are the work of a master who had been formed during his apprenticeship in Cordoba and the nearby palace of Madina al-Zahra. There can be no doubt therefore that it was this double influence, both in learning and in the arts that prompted the illuminator of the Roda Bible to paint the visit of the Queen of Saba to Solomon the way it is related in the Qur'anic story.

In the miniature, the Queen of Saba walks over a stream as she approaches Solomon on his throne - the stream referred to in Sura 27, verse 44. Her entourage includes not only two horsemen, as it befits a queen, but also a camel. Thus the imagery used in the Roda miniature is clearly taken from the Qur'an. It may be said en passant that the water motif dates even further back to very ancient mythological traditions, but this can not be explored here.

It is rather surprising, too, that this striking example of the migration of a pictorial convention from Islam to Europe had remained unnoticed by art historians until the publication of my book on the subject in 1988. Even since the Queen of Saba motif made its first appearance in the Roda Bible, every great medieval master employed it to display his talents and his ideas. Here I will focus on just a few examples where the artist has used the Queen to explore and express something beyond art itself, namely the intellectual and political challenges of his time.

The statues of Chartres

Let me begin, with one of the turning points in the history of European sculpture: the statues adorning the North Portal of Chartres Cathedral (figure 2), which date from around 1220. Much has been written about these revolutionary works of art. For the first time since the classical era, the statues are no longer an expression of religious or secular majesty. For the first time real individuals, their sentiments and their aspirations are portrayed.

This new era was launched at Chartres and its earliest example is the statue of the Queen of Saba. No longer is she portrayed statically and frontally. Her body appears gently curved and she is leaning slightly to the left. The hand holding her robe adds a further powerful yet at the same time restrained eloquence to this movement. Clearly, the Chartres statues are not just masterpieces of sculpture, they also palpably embody Europe's new discovery: the individual.

The Klosterneuburg Altar

Nicolaus of Verdun, who created the altar at Klosterneuburg (figure 3) near Vienna, is the greatest goldsmith of the Middle Ages (his other major work is the shrine of the Three Kings in Cologne Cathedral). One of the panels depicts the Queen of Saba visiting King Solomon.

The Queen is portrayed as the epitome of elegance. Both her flowing robe and her posture underline her physical beauty. Her face is black. She obviously comes from a faraway land where people are dark-skinned. Her bearing as she approaches Solomon reveals no hint of admiration or imminent submission. On the contrary, she towers over the seated old man and is shown passionately gesticulating at a rather passive Solomon. Clearly, she wants him to do something. Her two retainers both carry boxes that, in this context (the physical superiority, the gestures), represent not so much gifts as merchandise. Therefore, the scene does not portray a religious encounter; it evokes Europe's trade with the Orient. This was the time when Frederick II of Hohenstaufen - the "Sultan of Lucera" as he was called - reigned as Holy Roman Emperor. It was the time of the famous emporium in Cairo, established by Venice, Pisa and Genoa, the time also of the Crusades, which we should see not primarily in terms of religious strife but of rivalry for political and economic power.
1437: The Baptistry of Florence Cathedral

Together with Donatello, Ghiberti is the major sculptor of the Early Renaissance. His most important works are the gilded bronze doors of the Baptistry of Florence Cathedral.

The encounter between Solomon and the Queen of Saba is again presented on those doors (figure 4) in a totally novel way, its impact on the sculptor’s contemporaries can hardly be overstated. The man and the woman are clearly portrayed as equals - same height, same symmetrical architectural background, same symmetrical groups of onlookers. They are shaking hands in a grave and solemn mood. This is not the biblical story, nor does it refer to a commercial venture or a model from the ancient world. What is depicted here is a contemporary political event of the highest order.

Ghiberti created the doors at a time when the Turks had conquered almost all of Asia Minor and most of the Balkans and it was obvious that the fall of Constantinople was just a few years away. Christianity was deeply split between the Church of Rome and the Orthodox Church. Given its extremely reduced territory and resources, Byzantium could clearly not resist the Turks on its own. Between Rome and Constantinople, embassies were therefore being exchanged and preparations made to convene a great council with the aim of reuniting Eastern and Western Christianity.

The Council finally took place in 1438 and 1439 and was attended not only by the Pope and the Patriarch, but also by Emperor Sigismund, and the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Paleologos. It was to no avail though, unity was not achieved and in 1453 Constantinople was conquered.

Ghiberti chose to depict the encounter between the two emperors using the age-old code of the Queen of Saba, as a marriage (or rather betrothal) between two equals. What we see is a summit meeting between East and West, Rome and Constantinople with all the hopes which that inspired.

Hans Holbein and Henry VIII

We associate the beginning of the Modern Age with four events: the Renaissance in art and thought, the invention of printing, the discovery of America, and the Reformation. One of the key pictorial translations of the latter again makes use of the image of the Queen of Saba.

In 1535 Hans Holbein the Younger planned to present a drawing to Henry VIII which he hoped would earn him an appointment as court painter to the King of England. As his subject he chose the visit of the Queen of Saba to Solomon. The scene (figure 5), as Holbein portrays it, is dominated by the King: a mighty and brutally self-confident figure, gazing down on the procession of the devout Queen and her maiden. Of course, this is not the biblical or Qur’anic Solomon, and the Queen of Saba too, is not what she seems. What is depicted here is the powerful King of England (Solomon even sports his facial features) graciously accepting the submission of the Church of Rome, which had refused to sanction his first divorce - a refusal which led to the Reformation being proclaimed in England.

Of course, history tells a different story. Rome had not bowed before the English King, but Henry VIII preferred Holbein’s version - and rewarded his unashamed flattery by appointing him as court painter.

The Queen of Saba in the 20th century

We could continue writing a history of Western art exemplified in the figure of the Queen of Saba. For reasons of space, however, I will leap forward some 400 years to focus on an icon of the 20th century. The watercolour of the Queen of Saba by Erte (1927) clearly belongs to the Art Deco period (figure 6). What is the essence of Art Deco? The exaltation of clear mechanical lines, the cold, almost frozen gaze: a sense of the separation of mind and body, a rejection of the flourishing scrolls and the voluptuous volutes of the preceding Art Nouveau era.

It may be mentioned en passant that Art Deco’s stylization and its de-humanising perspective, its preference for exalted sculptural grandeur at the expense of sentiment and warmth are intrinsically connected with the spirit of the age of dictatorship and the so-called international style. It is this style which has dominated the arts in the 1920s and the 1930s, particularly in architecture, from New York to Moscow, via Paris, Geneva, Rome and Berlin.

But there is more to it than that in our watercolour: There is nothing regal about Erte’s Queen of Saba. This is just an extremely self-confident young woman, very much belonging to the Roaring Twenties. It is she who chooses her life: she will not allow others to make choices on her behalf. She finds fulfilment in herself - she does not need a man or anyone else for that matter. Her hair-style is short and practical: the garconne-cut, invented in the early 20s, was not just a fashion but a token of the new status that the new woman, the working girl, had gained during the war, in the ammunition-factories in the US, Germany, France, England, Italy and Russia. This was the greatest revolution of the 20th century and one our societies have yet to come fully to terms with.
Islamic Currency and the Economic State of Affairs in Islamic History

Lecture by Habib Jenhani
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The strength of currency and the role it plays in international economic relations is well associated with the economic circumstances in any society, past or present. Therefore I find it necessary, before discussing currency and its economic and social role, to approach the economic state of affairs in the Arab-Islamic society from the 7th century to the 11th century AD. It might not be an exaggeration if we state that the Islamic Arab society then was the heart of world economic cycle, with the result that Islamic Arab cities evolved into cosmopolitan cities.

One might be astonished at the idea that Islamic Arab society was an urban society. With the foundation of Islamic provinces in the 1st century AH through the 5th century AH (7th – 11th centuries AD), a great urban evolution took place and the most important phase of which was the establishing of capitals in Kufa Basra, Fustat and Qairawan. Some of these became great world metropolises.

Such urban development relied mainly on economic prosperity, focused on commercial activity and world trade. This activity motivated the evolution of cities and the extension of trade routes, including naval routes. In his prelogomena Abdel Rahaman bin Khalun says: “The economic prosperity of the state has impact on the prosperity of the people, similarly, the prosperity and the number of population affects the income of the state. This is all related to urban growth and its density”. Earlier in his book he pointed to the importance of urban development and its direct influence on the population and economic prosperity. “If there is an increase in income and an expansion in taxation (collected from subordinate provinces), this will lead to the improvement of economic circumstances and the growth of the province”.

At this period the Islamic world represented an urban and an economic unit well-connected with active trade routes extending from south-west Sudan to “Bild al-Ifriqi”, i.e. Western Europe of today. From the East, it extended from the eastern African coasts to China, the land of Turkoman, Aral and the Caspian Sea. From the West it extended from the Atlantic Ocean to Baghdad and the Gulf region, then to the Pacific Ocean.

In this respect I would like to point out the following: I have mentioned that Islamic Arab world represented then an urban economic unit. The question here is: how was this unity achieved in spite of different political and religious ideologies. Whoever observes such phenomenon will realize that the differences in political ideologies did not impede the strong and persisting relationship between economic centres. Alternatively there was an attempt to secure trade routes in order to consolidate political and economic sovereignty.

Two examples can be cited here: first, the cooperation between the state of Ibadh Khawarij in Tabert (in north African area now Algeria) and the Sunni Umayyads in Cordoba, second, the approval of Ismaili Fatimids to keep the reign of the Safarid Bani Madras in Sijilmasa in return for the sovereignty of the Fatimid state newly established in Mahdiya (on the coast of Tunisia), over the route of gold trade with Sudan.

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About the journal

The journal Hadeeth ad-Dar of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is intended to share the wealth and beauty of Islamic culture contained within the extensive and comprehensive Al-Sabah Collection of Islamic art and the variety of scholarly and artistic activities associated with the collection. The collection itself, ranging from early Islam to the 18th century, is organized according to both historical period and geographical region. The reference library and the publications of DAI are closely related to the collection. DAI has sponsored archaeological excavations in Bahshas, Upper Egypt that date to the Fatimid period. We are also involved in the Raja excavation at al-Tur in Sina Peninsula in Egypt. At present, our annual lecture series has been revived and is a focal point for historians and other specialists in the field. It features talks by prominent international scholars on various topics of Islamic art, history and architecture.

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In Volume 24 we ran the wrong photo of Dr. Bin Jenaid. Here is his picture and we apologise for any inconvenience created by the error.
المحتويات

حتويات المدار

يتبين دورية محتوى المدار التي تصدر عن دار الأكاديمية الإسلامية. إلى معرفة محتوى المدار بالطريقة الإسلامية كما تميز بها من فن معرفة وفق وجمال أخلاق يتجاوز مجموعة الصبح الواسعة والشاملة لكثير من التأثير من أذواق الفن الإسلامي. كما تهدف إلي إشارات جهوان العراق والهيئة العلمية والدينية بجعل الأليغة التاريخية والفنية مفيدة لل группа المجموئة.

وتضم مجموعة الصبح مسئيات تعود تاريخها إلى الفترة الواقعة من صورة الإسلام وحتى القرن الثاني عشر الهجري. وقد خلقت تونوها وصمتها إل أثر القوة التاريخية التي تعود إلى المواقع الجغرافية التي تنتمي إليها. أما مكة المكرمة فهي تضم محاولات وثوابت ذات مخلة في المجموعة.

تعتبر دار الأكاديمية الإسلامية بمثابة تطبيقية في منازل العرب بصفة مبسطة، ومن الأدوار، التي تعود إلى نعماء العصري. كما تتوج بها مدار من مكتبة، بإنتاج دار الأكاديمية الإسلامية بجمعية تاريخية بمدينة بغداد، برسبيل، برسبيل، برسبيل.

لذا نذكر في إعداد الصورة غير صحيحة للدكتور حيي ببعض الأمثل كله، من المحتويات والأعمال مع شرارة الصورة الصحيحة للدكتور حيي ببعض الأمثل.

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