



SOLOMON AND THE QUEEN

JERUSALEM MEETS SHEBA



MEETING OF MONARCHS

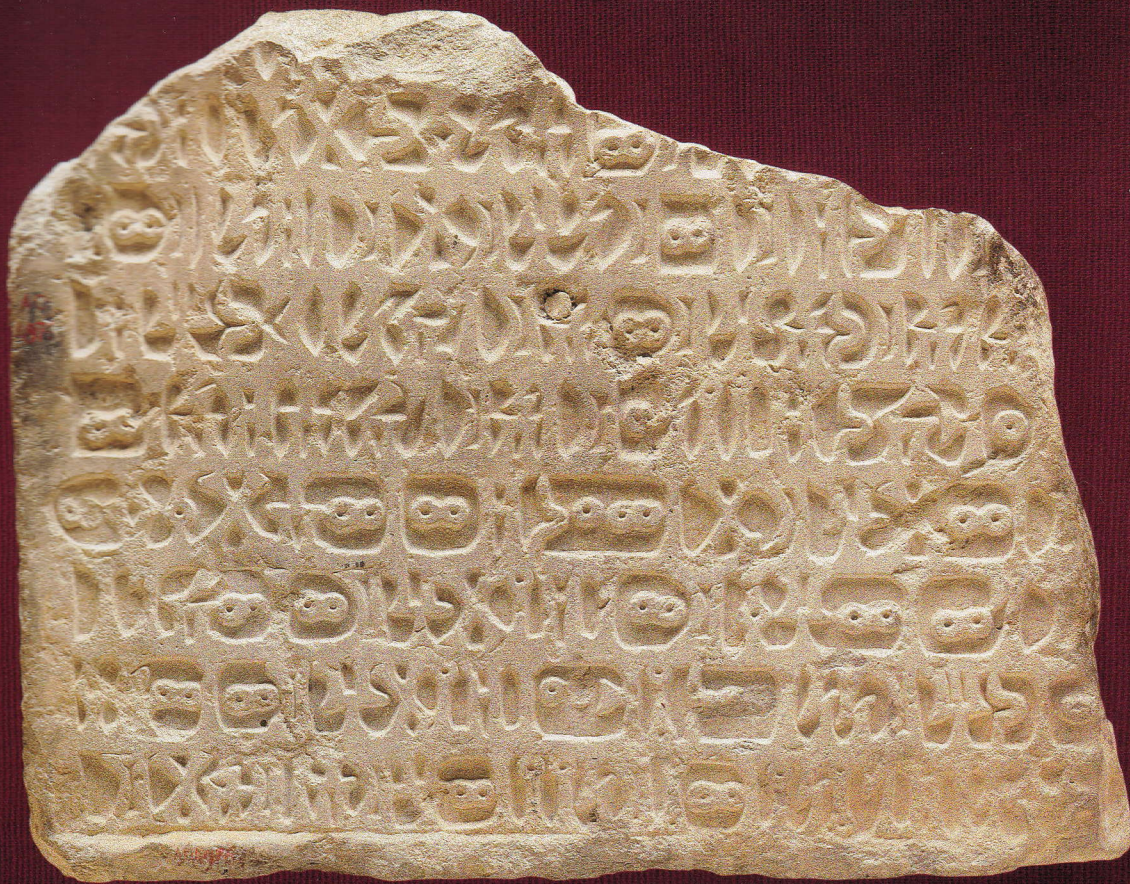
King Solomon meets the Queen of Sheba in this 16th-century painting by Lambert Sustris. National Gallery, London. Below, a third-century A.D. incense burner offered to a Sabaeen deity. British Museum, London

PICTURE: THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON/RMN-GRAND PALAIS
BURNER: RMN-GRAND PALAIS

The story of King Solomon meeting the Queen of Sheba inspired a rich literary tradition across Jewish, Christian, and Islamic texts. The geographic origins of the story still puzzle scholars to this day.

FRANCISCO DEL RÍO SÁNCHEZ





SABAEAN SCRIPT

A fifth-century A.D. tablet (left) bears an inscription in the Sabaean language, which like Hebrew and Arabic, is of Semitic origin. Louvre Museum, Paris

FRANCK RAUX/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

The story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba appears in the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles: An unnamed queen from Sheba travels to Jerusalem bearing gold, jewels, and spices. A seeker of knowledge, the queen has a special interest in the reputedly wise Solomon and tests him with some “hard questions.” Solomon meets the challenge and lavishes hospitality on the queen, who reciprocates with gifts.

“Never again were so many spices brought in as those the Queen of Sheba gave to Solomon.” Later, she tells him: “In wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard” (1 Kings 10:7).

This biblical encounter has had an enormous impact on the popular imagination, projecting themes of beauty, wealth, power, exoticism, intrigue, magic, and love. The queen has inspired Turkish and Persian miniatures, European painting and music, and the 1959 Hollywood epic *Solomon and Sheba*, with Yul Brynner as the wise king and Gina Lollobrigida as his match.

These works had plenty of material to work with since a rich literary tradition grew out of the original biblical story. An account of the encounter is tantalizingly referenced by the Roman Jewish author Flavius Josephus in the first century A.D. Composed in the seventh century, the Quran features a more elaborate



TALES OF KINGS AND QUEENS

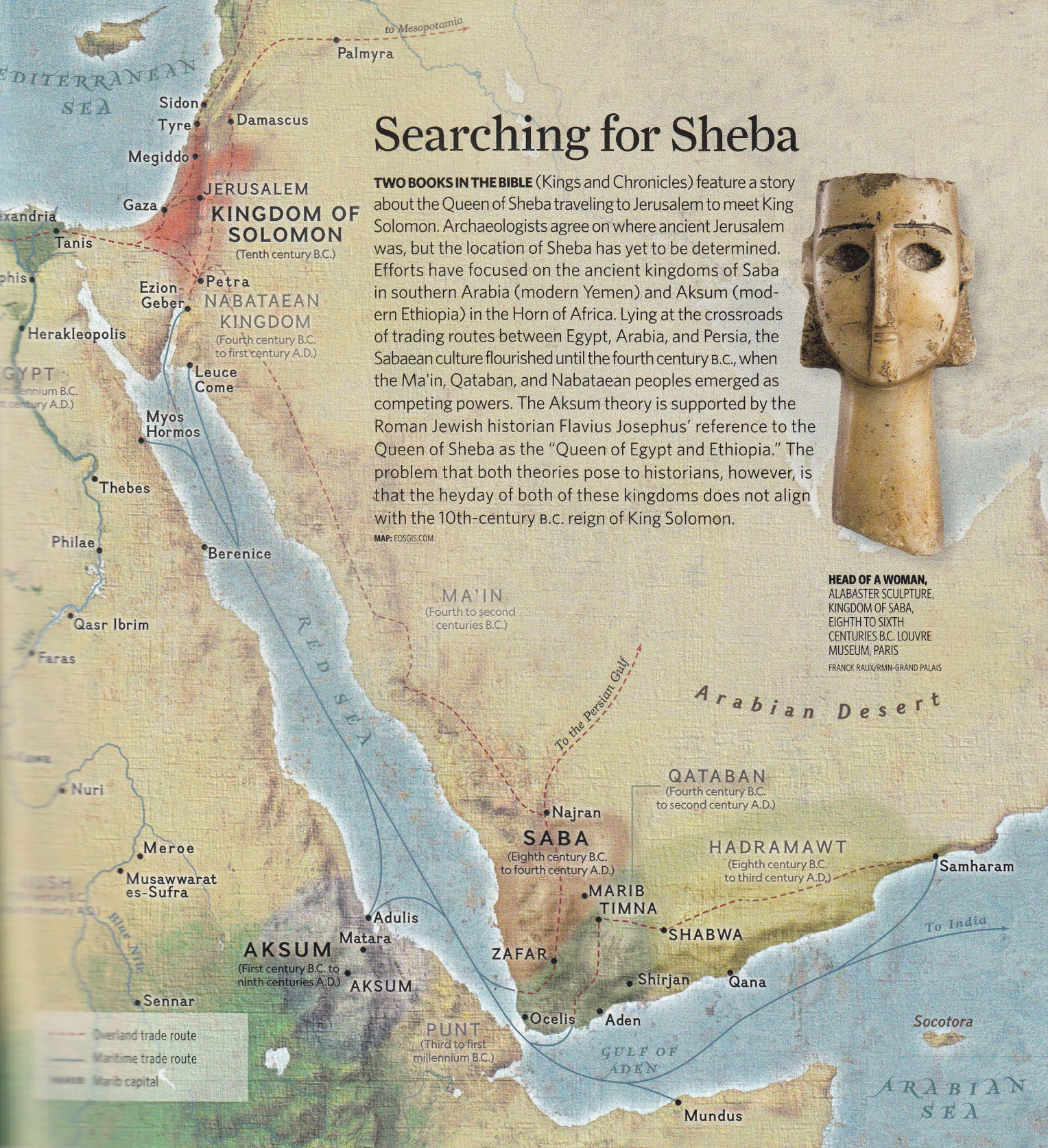
BOOK OF KINGS

The earliest source for the meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is the Book of Kings, which took its final form in the sixth century B.C.

BOOK OF CHRONICLES

Biblical scholars date Chronicles to the fourth century B.C. Many details of the reign of Solomon, including his meeting with the queen, are copied from Kings.

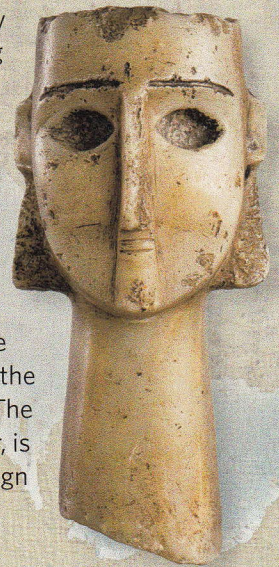
SOLOMON AND SHEBA (CENTER FRAME), ETHIOPIAN ICON, 18TH CENTURY
DEA/SCALA, FLORENCE



Searching for Sheba

TWO BOOKS IN THE BIBLE (Kings and Chronicles) feature a story about the Queen of Sheba traveling to Jerusalem to meet King Solomon. Archaeologists agree on where ancient Jerusalem was, but the location of Sheba has yet to be determined. Efforts have focused on the ancient kingdoms of Saba in southern Arabia (modern Yemen) and Aksum (modern Ethiopia) in the Horn of Africa. Lying at the crossroads of trading routes between Egypt, Arabia, and Persia, the Sabaeen culture flourished until the fourth century B.C., when the Ma'in, Qataban, and Nabataean peoples emerged as competing powers. The Aksum theory is supported by the Roman Jewish historian Flavius Josephus' reference to the Queen of Sheba as the "Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia." The problem that both theories pose to historians, however, is that the heyday of both of these kingdoms does not align with the 10th-century B.C. reign of King Solomon.

MAP: EOSGIS.COM



HEAD OF A WOMAN, ALABASTER SCULPTURE, KINGDOM OF SABA, EIGHTH TO SIXTH CENTURIES B.C. LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS

FRANCK RAUX/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

THE ANTIQUITIES

The *Antiquities of the Jews* by Flavius Josephus was written in A.D. 93. It refers to the queen as a ruler with Ethiopian origins.

QURAN

Composed in the seventh century, Islam's sacred scripture incorporates new elements into the meeting of Solomon and the queen.

TARGUM SHENI

The seventh- to eighth-century Jewish account of the meeting is similar to the Quran. Scholars are unsure which influenced which.

KEBRA NAGAST

The 14th-century text recounts how the queen is Ethiopian. Her son with Solomon founds Ethiopia's Solomonic dynasty.



The Kingdom of Solomon

UNLIKE THE KINGDOMS of Saba and Aksum, archaeological evidence is scant in attesting to the dates of Solomon's reign or the size of his kingdom. Most of what is understood comes from the Book of Kings, which was written in the sixth century B.C., hundreds of years after the events it describes. According to tradition, around 1174 B.C., the Hebrews in Israel united under the leadership of King Saul who ruled them until around 1025 B.C. Saul was succeeded by David, and David's son, Solomon, followed. His reign lasted until circa 930 B.C., after which the kingdom then splits into Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Archaeologists have found structures dating to the 10th century B.C. in the region, but none, as of yet, that bear inscriptions of Solomon's name.

ALABASTER ARTISTRY

The Sabaeans were masters of alabaster carvings, like this female figure found in modern-day Yemen, which dates to around the third century B.C.

AKG/ALBUM



version of the story, as does Jewish rabbinic literature. The *Kebra Nagast*, a 14th-century Ethiopian Christian epic, connects the Queen of Sheba with the founding of Ethiopia itself. According to this text, ancient Sheba is in Ethiopia. The queen and Solomon have a son who founds a dynasty that would rule Ethiopia until its last descendant, Haile Selassie, died in 1975.

To date no archaeological evidence has been found to indicate definitively who the queen was and from where she came. She could be a composite of historical figures or entirely legendary. Even the location of Sheba itself is hotly debated among scholars. Some place it in Ethiopia, while others place it in the ancient kingdom of Saba in present-day Yemen.

Riches and Riddles

In the Bible, the Queen of Sheba is depicted as smart, independent, challenging, and respectful. Flavius Josephus, author of the first-century A.D. history *The Antiquities of the Jews*, described Sheba as "inquisitive into philosophy and on that and on other accounts also was to be admired."

By the time the story was retold in the Targum Sheni, a seventh- to eighth-century A.D. Jewish text, the story had amassed more details. The details of the meeting are similar, but the story begins with a talking hoopoe, a crested bird native to the region. The bird informs Solomon that the land of Sheba is the only one on Earth not subject to his power.

Solomon sends the hoopoe to Sheba with a letter urging the queen to submit to him. She responds by sending back a fleet "with all the ships of the sea" loaded with precious gifts, including 6,000 young men—all the same height, all dressed in purple, and all born at the same time on the same day. They deliver a message from the queen announcing that she will travel to Jerusalem. On arrival, the queen presents Solomon with three riddles, which he promptly solves. This exchange reveals her knowledge and diplomatic skill as the riddles are more than a game to her. They are a way for her to size up Solomon.

Some scholars argue the Quran's version of the story borrows from the Targum Sheni. However, there is historical uncertainty as to exactly when the Targum Sheni was written.



VIEW FROM ABOVE

Jerusalem has expanded beyond the city limits of King David's era (highlighted area, right). To the north is Temple Mount, where an Islamic shrine, the Dome of the Rock, sits today. This site is believed to be where Solomon's Temple stood.

MARCELLO BERTINETTI

THE TEMPLES OF JERUSALEM

MUCH OF THE BIBLICAL Book of Kings celebrates the ways in which Solomon serves the god of Israel. Perhaps the best known is his construction of the First Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. In the Bible, Solomon says: "[B]ecause of the wars waged against my father David . . . he could not build a temple for the name of the Lord his God until the Lord put his enemies under his feet" (1 Kings 5:3). Solomon begins work on the temple in the fourth year of his reign. Passages in the Book of Kings go into great detail about the structure's design and dimensions, as well as its building materials: cedar and cypress

timber from Lebanon, quarried stone from the hills surrounding Jerusalem, and gold to adorn the inner sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant would rest. To date, no convincing archaeological evidence has been found of Solomon's Temple, sacked and then destroyed by the Babylonians around 587 B.C. The Second Temple, built circa 515 B.C. after the Hebrews returned from exile in Babylon, was a modest structure, but more than four centuries later, Judaeen king Herod the Great would entirely rebuild and enlarge the temple. It stood until 70 B.C., when it was destroyed during the Roman siege of Jerusalem.



DAVID AND SOLOMON, CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA ASSUNTA, TORCELLO, VENICE, 11TH CENTURY

MONDADORI/ALBUM

BRONZE PILLARS FLANK THE ENTRANCE TO SOLOMON'S TEMPLE. 20TH-CENTURY ILLUSTRATION, BALAGE BALOGH

BALAGE BALOGH/RMN-GRAND PALAIS



LUNAR GOD

A bull's head centers this seventh-century B.C. Sabaeen altar (below), which features two sets of ibex heads on either side. The bull was sacred to Almaqah, the Sabaeen god of the moon. Louvre Museum, Paris

G. BLOT/RMN-GRAND PALAIS



It may, in fact, postdate the seventh-century composition of the Quran, in which case the Islamic text could have influenced the Jewish text, and not the other way around.

In the Quran, the queen is unnamed, but contemporary Arabic sources call her Bilqis. In the Islamic version, Suleiman (Solomon) believes in Allah, is known for his wisdom, and can understand the language of the trees and animals. Suleiman also controls an army of “jinn (magical spirits) and men and birds.” Like the Jewish text, the story begins with a bird, which brings news to Suleiman from the far off land of Sheba, where the powerful Bilqis rules and people worship the sun. The bird says: “I found her and her people prostrating to the sun instead of Allah,” prompting Suleiman to send a letter in which he urges the queen to convert to Islam. In this version of the story, Suleiman rejects the queen’s emissaries and rich gifts. In contrast to the Bible and the Targum Sheni, it is Suleiman who

tests the queen’s intellect. While she is traveling to visit him, the king sends a jinn to steal her throne and bring it to Jerusalem. There he disguises the throne in order to see if the queen will realize it is hers. She does, so Suleiman welcomes her to his impressive palace.

Suleiman shows the queen a floor made of glass. When she sees it, she thinks it is a pool of water, so she lifts her skirts to avoid getting them wet. Her legs are revealed, and she does not shave them. Modern feminist commentators have interpreted this attribute as a sign that power has made her unfeminine. This episode also appears in the Targum Sheni: “Your beauty is the beauty of women, but your hair is the hair of men,” Solomon tells her.

In Jewish literature, the Queen of Sheba is also identified with Lilith, an ancient demonic figure. Likewise, in the Quranic text, a jinn warns Suleiman about the queen’s demonic side, fearing the king might be tempted by her beauty. Instead, the queen submits to Solomon and commits herself to “Allah, the Lord of all worlds.”

Mother of a Nation

In the 14th century, in the northern highlands of the Horn of Africa—present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti—the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba took on a new meaning. In this version of the tale, the queen has a name: Makeda. This new version melded a wealth of literary and Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions to create something new.

Christianity became the religion of the kingdom of Aksum (located in modern Ethiopia) in the mid-500s A.D. It arrived, along with Jewish influences, by way of migration and trade with northern people, including the Coptic Christians of Egypt. The story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba emerged in writing in 1321 in the *Kebrā Nagast*, or *Glory of the Kings*, of Ethiopia. Attributed to Is’haq Neburā -Id, the work is divided into 117 chapters, described by Ethiopian scholar Edward Ullendorff as “a gigantic conflation of legendary cycles.” It would be the text that unified Ethiopian culture for centuries.

The *Kebrā Nagast* cites references to the Queen of Sheba in the New Testament, notably the Gospel of Matthew: “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon



TEL MEGIDDO

Many ancient empires, including Egypt and Assyria, battled over Megiddo, a strategic enclave in northern Israel.

DUBY TAL/ALBATROSS/AGE FOTOSTOCK

SEEKING SOLOMON

ARCHAEOLOGY has been searching for evidence to complement the descriptions of King Solomon's building campaigns as described in the Book of Kings. One place scholars have looked is in northern Israel. Tel Megiddo's age makes it a good candidate. It is an ancient site whose earliest levels date to the the Bronze Age (ca 3300-1200 B.C.) when Megiddo was an important city-state well positioned on trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia. A passage in the Book of Kings refers to Solomon accumulating "fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him

in Jerusalem" (1 Kings 10:26). In 1924 British archaeologist P.L.O. Guy found evidence of stables at Tel Megiddo and telegraphed: "Believe have found Solomon's stables." More recent analysis puts the stables about a century after Solomon, most likely during the reign of Ahab, ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel in the ninth century B.C. Megiddo is at the center of many traditions: In the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, it is called "Armageddon," the place where the apocalypse will begin.

A TUNNEL (RIGHT) BUILT IN THE NINTH CENTURY B.C. LEADS FROM INSIDE MEGIDDO TO A SPRING OUTSIDE THE CITY WALLS.



WALTER BIBIKOW/GETES



FIT FOR A QUEEN?

The circa 6th-century A.D. ruins of Dongar Palace, located within the lands of the ancient kingdom of Aksum in northern Ethiopia, are known popularly as the Queen of Sheba's Palace.

YOKO AZIZ/AGE FOTOSTOCK



THE QUEEN OF SHEBA IS DEPICTED INSIDE A TEMPLE SURROUNDED BY WATER. 17TH-CENTURY ETHIOPIAN MANUSCRIPT
SCALA, FLORENCE



The Queen's Descendants

THE FIGURE of the Queen of Sheba and the historical veracity of her visit to Solomon occupy such an important place in Ethiopian identity that Ethiopia's first constitution, promulgated in 1931, declared this principle in article 3: "The law determines that the imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line of his majesty Haile Selassie I, descendant of King Sahle Selassie, whose line descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of King Solomon of Jerusalem and the Queen of Ethiopia, known as the Queen of Sheba." The article was repeated in the revised constitution promulgated by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1955, which remained in force until the overthrow of the monarchy after the 1974 revolution.

OFFERING A HAND

A bronze hand (below) is inscribed with a prayer mentioning the Sabaeen city of Zafar (in modern-day Yemen). Bronze, second-third centuries A.D. British Museum, London
RMN-GRAND PALAIS



is here" (Matthew 12:42). The epic goes on to relate how a wealthy merchant called Tamrin returns to Ethiopia having met King Solomon in Jerusalem. Tamrin tells Queen Makeda in great detail of Solomon's prodigious wisdom and wealth. Intrigued by the merchant's tale, Makeda travels to Jerusalem to meet the king herself. There, she discovers "how perfect he was in composure, and wise in understanding, and pleasant in graciousness, and commanding in stature."

In turn, Solomon is captivated by Makeda's beauty and tries to make her stay. He serves her a sumptuous banquet and swears not to make advances on her as long as she takes nothing from his house. When a thirsty Makeda wakes in the night and drinks some water, Solomon declares the oath broken and seduces her. Makeda returns to Ethiopia pregnant with Solomon's child, a boy she names Menelik, meaning "son of the wise." At age 20, he travels to Jerusalem to meet his father, who anoints him king of Ethiopia. This origin story became the foundation for the ruling Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia, which was founded around 1270 and ruled for more than seven centuries.

The author of the *Kebra Nagast*, according to Ullendorff, was the "redactor and interpreter of material which had long been known, but had not until then found a coordinating hand, an expository mind, and a great national need." The result, he added, is "one of the most powerful and influential national sagas anywhere in the world."

The *Kebra Nagast* offers a more positive portrayal of the queen than in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts. No mention is made of her demonic nature or hairy legs. The epic also claims that Menelik returned to Ethiopia with the Ark of the Covenant, which Ethiopian tradition claims is stored in the Church of St. Mary of Zion in Aksum.

Searching for Sheba

The realm of Sheba remains lost to history. The two leading locations are the kingdom of Saba in modern Yemen and the ancient kingdom of Aksum in Ethiopia. After more than a century of excavations by a host of archaeologists to find physical evidence of the existence of the queen, none yet has been found. One of the complicating factors is that the chronology

DESERT RICHES

In the Yemeni desert rise the remains of ancient Marib, the site of the capital of the ancient kingdom of Saba. Flourishing in the eighth century B.C., Saba is believed by some to be the homeland of the Queen of Sheba.

ALAMY/ACI





SABAEAN FUNERARY STELA DEPICTING A MAN PLOWING. FIRST-THIRD CENTURIES A.D. LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS

A WHIFF OF WEALTH

Straddling the spice and incense trade routes, Saba grew wealthy and produced magnificent objects such as this fourth-century B.C. incense burner. British Museum, London

ALBUM



attributed to Solomon, which most place around the 10th century B.C., does not line up with the prime of either Saba or Aksum.

Most Jewish sources and the Quran mention sites that clearly associate Sheba with Saba. The ancient city's existence is amply supported by evidence. Assyrian texts speak about Arabian queens from the period of Saba's greatness. The Sabaeans also sent ambassadors and gifts to the Assyrian court on diplomatic and commercial missions.

The kingdom grew rich off successful water management and trade in frankincense and myrrh, but it emerged as an international power only in the eighth century B.C., long after Solomon's reign. Although the Book of Kings was written in the sixth century B.C., after the decline of Assyria, the Solomon story may represent an older story that reflects the geopolitical realities of the centuries before. With this in mind, the biblical archaeologist Israel Finkelstein, of Tel Aviv University, interprets the Solomon and Queen of Sheba story as support for

Judah's participation in Assyrian trade, against those who viewed it as a rash undertaking that would lead to idolatry. By inflating Solomon's status as a great merchant blessed by God who is sought out by a powerful Arabian queen in the 10th century, the story's authors wanted to legitimize "the participation of Judah as a vassal in the Assyrian economy."

The Ethiopian theory has strong support in the form of first-century A.D. historian Flavius Josephus. He described Solomon's guest as the "Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia," which suggests an African origin. Historical links have been established between Ethiopia and Saba—the two kingdoms are just across the Red Sea from each other. In ancient times, southern Arabian traders, including those from Saba, made the short trip across the Red Sea to set up small settlements in the Ethiopian highlands. Intriguing though this association is, it does not resolve the chronology problem. Aksum was a flourishing Ethiopian kingdom from 100 B.C. to A.D. 700, many years after Solomon's reign.

New scholarship about the queen and her origins are still emerging. Wendy Laura Belcher, professor of African literature at Princeton University, proposed that the queen might be from another culture entirely: the pre-Aksumite Ethiopian culture of Punt. Mentioned in Egyptian sources as early as the 15th century B.C., Punt provided Egypt with incense, spices, and gold—all commodities associated with the queen and her visit with Solomon.

Historians are divided as to the exact location of Punt but generally place it southeast of Egypt and north of the Horn of Africa. Finds of Egyptian goods in northern Ethiopia confirm the long-standing trade relationship between them, which would have provided Punt with considerable wealth—enough to attract the attention of a king like Solomon. As Belcher wrote, "if any queen was going to travel north to Israel in the tenth century, it would have been an African queen." ■

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Learn more

From Eden to Exile: Unraveling Mysteries of the Bible
Eric Cline, National Geographic Books, 2008.

Archaeology of the Bible: The Greatest Discoveries From Genesis to the Roman Era
Jean-Pierre Isbouts, National Geographic Books, 2016.



ARTISTIC SUBJECTS

Toward the end of his life, 19th-century French painter James Tissot painted numerous works on biblical themes, including the meeting of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

ALAMY/AGI

SEARCHING IN SABA

In 1950 explorer Wendell Phillips led one of the first American expeditions to the lands of ancient Saba, that were then called the Aden Protectorate and are now Yemen. Searching for signs of the Queen of Sheba, Phillips's team first excavated sites around the ancient city of Timna. They found exquisite alabaster objects and stelae but no sign of Sheba. Next Phillips negotiated access to the site of Marib, the capital of ancient Saba and its glorious Awwam Temple, a complex dedicated to the Sabaeen moon god, Almaqah, but found no evidence of the elusive queen.



A VOTIVE BRONZE STATUE FROM THE SIXTH TO FOURTH ► CENTURIES B.C., PLACED AS AN OFFERING TO THE GOD ALMAQAH IN THE TEMPLE OF AWWAM. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF YEMEN, SANAA
AKG/ALBUM



Lions and Bulls

Wendell Phillips (far left) poses with his most important discovery at Awwam, a votive bronze statue honoring the Sabaeen lunar god, Almaqah. The figure is dressed in an animal skin (perhaps a lion), whose paws are visible here draped around the shoulders and hips. Other votive offerings found at the site were in the form of animals, including bulls, which were sacred to the moon god.

AFSM/GETTY IMAGES

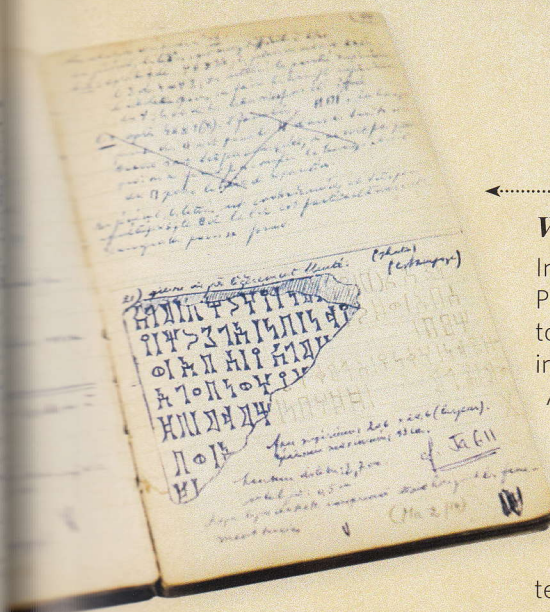
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828
[Handwritten notes and sketches on a page, partially visible on the right edge of the page.]



THE TEMPLE OF AWWAM
PHOTOGRAPHED DURING
WENDELL PHILLIPS'S
EXCAVATIONS, 1951-52
AFSM/GETTY IMAGES

SABAEAN VOTIVE STELA, CARVED IN
ALABASTER AND ADDRESSED TO THE GOD
ALMAQAH. THE EDGES ARE DECORATED
WITH CARVED IBEX. CA 700 B.C.

AKG/ALBUM



Words and Images

In his journal (left), Wendell Phillips made careful sketches and took detailed notes on Sabaean inscriptions found in the Temple of Awwam. Phillips's dig added hugely to historians' understanding of pre-Islamic Yemen. Subsequent digs at Awwam have yielded hundreds of inscriptions in what is now known to be the earliest, and largest, temple in Arabia.

SAUL LOEB/GETTY IMAGES

