

**Identification**

<u>Nomination</u>	The historic town (medina) of Zabid
<u>Location</u>	Province of al-Hudayda
<u>State Party</u>	Republic of Yemen
<u>Date</u>	27 March 1991

**Justification by State Party**

Zabid is of outstanding archaeological and historical interest for its domestic and military architecture and for its urban plan.

It was of great importance in the Arab and Moslem world for many centuries because of its Islamic university, which received students from as far away as East Africa, Madagascar and the Comoro Islands, Moslem India, and Indonesia. In the 13th-15th centuries it was also the capital of Yemen during the Rasulid period. Its architecture profoundly influenced that of the Yemeni coastal plain (criterion ii).

The domestic architecture of Zabid is the most characteristic example of the Tihama style of courtyard house, which is to be found over a wide area of the southern part of the Arabian peninsula (criterion iv).

Domestic vernacular architecture in Yemen, and in much of Arabia, is threatened by two opposing tendencies - economic decline and prosperity. The impact of economic decline is vividly illustrated by the ports of Mokha and Al-Luhayya: the former is in ruins and the latter sadly degenerated. By contrast, economic prosperity can result in destruction of the urban fabric with the insertion of unsympathetic buildings in modern style and materials (criterion v).

**History and Description**History

It is not certain when Zabid was founded, but it was large enough to become the centre of a province (mihlaf) when Moslem power was established in this fertile region in AD 631; it was originally called al-Husayb, but it is not certain when the name was changed. Its development is due to the founder of the Ziyadite dynasty, Ibn Ziyad, who was sent to the region by the Caliph al-Mamun in 820 to quell a rebellion. He gave it its circular plan, built the fortifications, and brought water to it through a network of canals. The Great Mosque was built and the earlier al-Asa'ir mosque enlarged by later Ziyadids, who ruled

the Tihama until 1012. It was sacked on two occasions during this period by religious revolutionaries, but rebuilt.

Like the rest of Yemen, Zabid under its successive Banu Nagah and Mahdid rulers suffered during the troubled period between 1021 and 1159. The palace and part of the fortifications were destroyed and the town contracted in size. Following the pacification of the region by Turansah, brother of Salah ad-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin), Yemen became the centre of one of the leading powers in the east under the Rasulids, first as governors and then as rulers of the region. From 1216 until 1429, Rasulid rulers encouraged learning and built schools for teaching the Koran and the sciences (madrasas), along with the necessary hostels for students, all over the region: of the 62 madrasas recorded in Zabid, 22 still survive. They also built residences for themselves and restored and enlarged existing public buildings.

Zabid lost its political and economic importance under the Tahirid dynasty (1454-1538), but retained its role as a university. With the establishment of Ottoman rule, Zabid was completely neglected in favour of the capital city, Sana'a.

### Description

Zabid is situated on a flat clay area sloping gently towards the north. It is roughly oval in plan and covers some 135 ha. The core of the town is its first mosque, the Mosque of Asa'ir, which probably stands on the site of an earlier place of worship. The Great Mosque lies to the west of the town, possibly on the site of the ancient musalla, an open place for prayer used for meetings. The souk (market) spread from the Asa'ir Mosque towards the Great Mosque.

A network of streets and alleys, some as little as 2 m wide, spreads over the town, occasionally opening out into small squares. The only large open space is that in front of the citadel. Each of the "blocks" formed by the streets has a passage allowing access to the houses. Certain circuits of slightly wider streets are interpreted as evidence of earlier defensive ramparts.

The town is not densely built up: the blocks are made up of a relatively open system of rooms and courtyards. The basic unit of each house is a rectangular room (murabba), opening on one of its longer sides on to an irregularly shaped courtyard, which is surrounded by high blank walls on the street side. The corners of these courtyards are occupied by wells, latrines, washing places, and kitchens.

This basic unit becomes more complex and more highly decorated, according to the wealth and number of its occupants. It may be composed of a number of room plus courtyard units, and may also extend upwards, with two or even three storeys. The richest have elaborate carved facades or panels over their entrances or on their walls. The interiors of the murabbas of such houses are also elaborately decorated, with carved walls, niches, and ceilings. The wealthiest also have large murabbas

used as reception rooms (halwas) which are lavishly decorated and furnished.

This type of structure, built in baked brick, predominates in Zabid, but there are small areas of humbler huts made of unbaked clay and roofed with straw or constructed of re-used wooden planks. They nonetheless conform with the basic room plus courtyard module.

There are areas of new buildings, either outside or just inside the ramparts: these are located near the west and north gates and along the road to Ta'izz. In addition, a number of official buildings (schools, dispensary, post office, police station, etc) have been erected in the last twenty years. They are for the most part single-storey concrete buildings, enclosed by high walls, and stand apart from the urban fabric of Zabid.

Mention should also be made of the cemeteries, especially the large one to the northwest of the town, which includes a mosque and a well, with trees.

With the exception of Sana'a, Zabid has the highest concentration of mosques in any Yemeni city, 86 in all. These were surveyed by the Canadian Archaeological Mission between 1982 and 1991. Most are simple brick structures covered with stucco (which is periodically whitewashed) and interior carved brick and stucco decoration. Several have distinctive architectural and decorative features, including minarets, monumental portals, intricate geometric patterns, calligraphy bands, and painted wall motifs.

These fall into four groups - hypostyle buildings (the two earliest, the Mosque of al-Asa'ir and the Great Mosque); the Madrasa al-Fatiniyah with long transversal barrel vault parallel to the north wall; domed mosques; and flat-roofed mosques. Fourteen of these have historical names dating to the Rasulid period, all of them madrasas, and as such are the largest group of buildings from this period in Yemen.

## **Management and Protection**

### Legal status

General protection derives from Laws Nos 13 of 1970 and 12 of 1972 on the moveable and immovable cultural heritage. The competent national authorities and the General Organization for the Protection of Historic Towns in Yemen (an autonomous body based in Sana'a) are currently engaged in integrating Zabid into a comprehensive programme for protecting historic towns. The Ministries of Religious Affairs (Awqaf), Agriculture, Justice, Construction, and Planning are collaborating in this project.

### Management

The town of Zabid has a Plan in which the preservation of the urban ensemble is considered to be a basic imperative and

where modern insertions must be integrated harmoniously into the traditional environment.

The General Organization has as its first priority the preparation of works programmes, the definition of architectural standards, and control over urban planning, based on its experience of the international campaign for safeguarding the ancient town of Sana'a. However, their success is dependent upon the existence of adequate administrative structures to ensure their implementation.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### Conservation history

Up to the present, the preservation and maintenance of the religious buildings in Zabid has been the responsibility of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. However, in 1990 the whole town came under the guardianship of the General Organization, which set up a local office in 1992.

### Authenticity

The town plan and general urban fabric of Zabid are wholly authentic, as are most of the buildings. However, the recent insertion of concrete public buildings, the unsympathetic installation of an electricity system, with unsightly overhead cables, and the increasing use of modern materials such as concrete and corrugated steel sheeting are seriously eroding that authenticity.

## **Evaluation**

### Qualities

Zabid has outstanding visual qualities as a traditional settlement with much well preserved domestic vernacular architecture, some good religious buildings, and an original town layout. Those qualities are, however, being eroded by the lack of proper management or conservation policies.

It is arguable whether the claim of outstanding universal value can be sustained in this case. The influence of the architectural style is limited to a relatively small area of the southern Arabian peninsula and the overall townscape is one that is not uncommon in this region.

### Comparative analysis

No comparative analysis has been carried out for the towns of this region. Since there are already two Yemeni historic towns (Sana'a and Shibam) on the World Heritage List, further consideration of the nomination of Zabid should be deferred to await the completion of a comparative study of the historic towns of the region.

### Additional comments

The lack of proper conservation and management programmes for Zabid is a cause for alarm, since the town is clearly menaced severely at the present time.

### **Recommendation**

That consideration of this nomination be deferred pending the completion of a comparative study of historic towns in the region.

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