
محمد علي السلاّمي سنة 2016 في يينا (الصورة: أ. غنثر).
In memoriam Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī
June 6, 1971 – April 27, 2017

Norbert Nebes

On April 27 last year Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī died in Jena after having taken seriously ill. With his passing, the studies of Ancient South Arabian loose one of its foremost Yemeni scholars of the younger generation, who with much expertise and commitment stood up for the country’s cultural heritage, language, and history.

Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī was born on June 6, 1971. After secondary school graduation and a subsequent compulsory period of teaching and military service, he began to study Semitic languages and archaeology at the University of Sanaa under the mentorship of Professor Yusuf Abdallah.

His master’s thesis from 2002 covered the geography and the relations of the Ḫaulān, a longstanding and extensive tribal confederation, whose precise geographical designation is Ḫaulān aṭ-Ṭiyāl (as opposed to Ḫaulān Quḍāʿa further north). Today the territory spreads over more than 7000 km² in a mountainous region between Sanaa in the west and Marib in the east, and Nihm in the northern Ǧauf and al-Ḥadāʾ in the south. The region’s fertile high plains and plentiful wadis had already been praised by medieval Yemeni geographers and historians as the major purveyors of the country’s agricultural wealth. Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī, being himself from Ǧabal al-Lauz, a highland district in central Ḫaulān famous for its almond orchards, already as a student began to systematically collect and document the area’s pre-Islamic inscriptions. His subsequent intention of editing these consistently Sabaean texts was awarded with a Ph.D. scholarship at the University of Jena by the DAAD in 2003.

After several months at the Goethe Institute in Dresden, he soon adapted to everyday academic life at Jena. The seminars on the Frankincense Road that were held together with Ricardo Eichmann over several years greatly benefited from his expertise. Any scholar experienced in Arabian studies is well-aware of what it means to be confronted with the tedium of identifying the frequently uncommented topographical information listed in al-Hamdānī’s Ǧīfāt Ǧazīrāt al-ʿArab, or resolving the endless genealogical chains specified in his Ikīl. Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī did not only understand how to report in detail about the individual sites and tribes, their ancient, medieval, and actual settlement areas, but he also was watchful of the fundamental connections within this complex tribal amalgam.

His extensive knowledge is reflected by his much acclaimed dissertation on the Sabaean inscriptions from the Ḫaulān, which he submitted to the faculty of philosophy in 2007 and eventually published in volume 7 of the Jenaer Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient in 2011. His work contributed with the edition and reconstruction of the historical and geographical contexts of more than 160 inscriptions discovered by himself, all dating between the second quarter of the 1st millennium BC and the 5th century AD. By naming the clans and tribes, he among other succeeded in determining that the original settlement area of the Ḫaulān tribe was not identical with the one today in Ḫaulān at-Ṭiyāl. The latter had been inhabited by other tribes, whilst the Ḫaulān had moved to the areas around Marib and Sanaa from the south and southeast in the 3rd and 5th centuries AD. This shift had apparently been motivated by the more expedient hydrology at the wadi headwaters and hence the improved settlement conditions there. Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī also saw this as one of the possible causes behind the Sabaean-Himyarite wars in the three first centuries AD, a highly stimulating hypothesis that requires more investigation in a broader outlook.

Shortly after his return to Yemen, Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī was appointed assistant professor at the University of Sanaa and then associate professor of the epigraphy, archaeology, history, and geography of Yemen and Arabia in pre-Islamic times.

In December 2013 he was elected dean of the department of archaeology. In addition to teaching, he also was the mentor to eight master and two doctoral students, while keeping up an intense involvement in hosts of research programs. During a survey on Ǧabal al-Lauz, we visited the rock paintings at
Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī was a person of high scholarly standards and had a developed sense of conscientiousness and responsibility. He was well-aware that his vocation was unlike any other. Considering his academic qualifications and his influential backgrounds, the idea of pursuing a more lucrative career wouldn’t have been impossible, but to him nonetheless anathema. Those who knew him well could feel his humble commitment to his family and tribe, to the exploration of the history of the Ḫaulān and the other Yemeni tribes all the way back their origins transmitted by the pre-Islamic inscriptions. His untimely passing is not only an irreplaceable loss for his family, his wife, Fatima, his children Sara and Asʿad, but it also opens a large void inside our discipline, which in foreseeable future is likely to remain. With him we lose a highly supportive colleague and a very dear friend.

[German version of the present obituary appeared in the Jemen-Report, Mitteilungen der Deutsch-Jemenitischen Gesellschaft e.V. 49 Heft 1/2, 2018, 76–77]