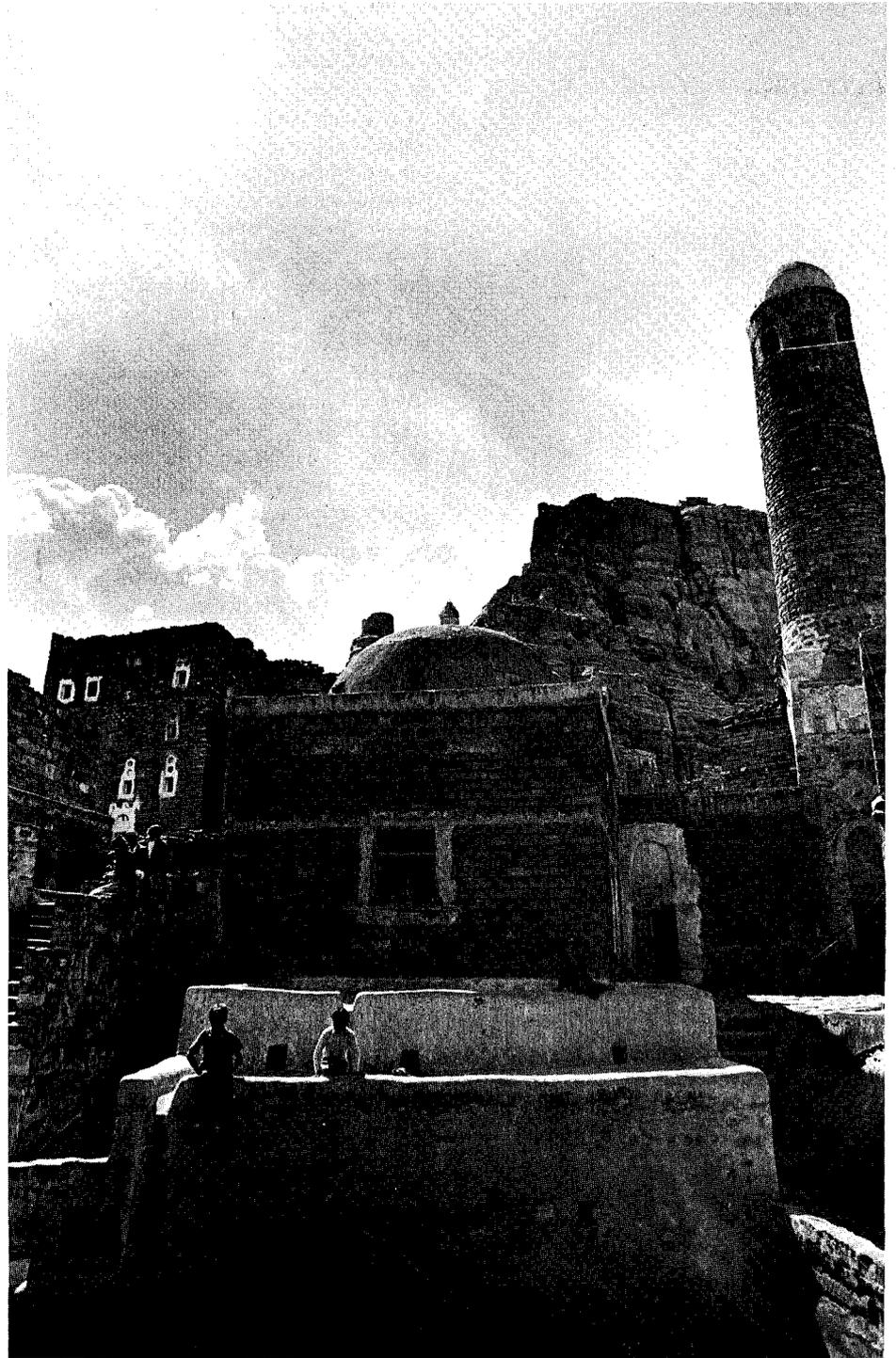


## Thula

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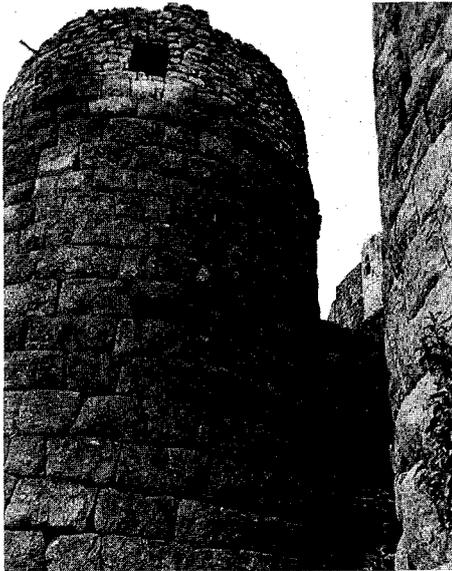
Of the triad of towns called Kawkaban, Shibam and Thula, the latter is the largest and is the one that has survived relatively intact. Thula lies at the bottom of a cliff and is circumscribed by a stone wall with bastions and four gates, one of which still displays a “labyrinth” for entrance control. On the top of the cliff was the citadel — fort, palace, mosque, granary pits and cisterns — and a cemetery containing the tomb of a holy man (*wali*). The citadel, once known as the “Castle of the Raven”, was considered one of the finest in Yemen until the Turks destroyed all the outer works. The town is linked to the citadel by a path carved in the side of the cliff, similar to, but shorter and easier than, the path between Shibam and Kawkaban. The mountain side and the top of the cliff have many caves, some of which are still used by the local garrison and are elaborately adapted for permanent use, having plastered walls, niches, wood-framed openings and so forth.

According to the eighteenth-century traveller Niebuhr, Thula had control over 300 villages in an area extending to the mountains north of al-Bawn and reaching the slopes of Shahara. The town actively participated in the struggles for power that have been characteristic in Yemen’s history. It engaged in local feuds as well as standing up to challenges from outside forces. In the seventh century A.H. a Zaydi Imam became the ruler, fought the



Thula.

Photo: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.



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Rasulid power in Sana'a, and temporarily gained control over Sana'a and Dhamar. In the tenth century A.H. Thula was included in the defence belt to contain the Ottoman invasion. If Kawkaban might be described as the sentinel of the region and Shibam the market place, then Thula is certainly the "bourg", an oasis of wealth that managed to ride the crest of the wave of wars that swept its neighbours. The town maintains relative importance today as the seat of an administrative district (*nahiya*) under Sana'a, whereas Shibam and Kawkaban have been incorporated in the *nahiya* under al-Tawila in the province of al-Mahwit.

The architecture of Thula boasts some of the most refined examples of stonework in the country. This is due not to smooth finishing but to the wide use of a variety of stone decorative elements. The stone used is a yellow flagstone cut into blocks smaller than the usual size in Yemen, having a face size of 10 x 25 cm. The tall buildings of four to five storeys often do not have a regular shape, but seem to

adapt themselves to the flow of alleys and streets. Projecting upper floors are common and offer clever solutions to the articulation of the facades at different levels. There are also houses with roof courts and light wells, similar to those in Kawkaban and other areas of the country.

The most characteristic features of external decoration are friezes along the floor and roof lines, vertical inlays around the openings, and fan-lights in various combinations of circles, arches and inverted drops. There are also buildings that display the severe design of fan-lights associated with archaic provincial traditions found elsewhere (e.g., in Shahara). Houses with roof courts and light wells are associated, in the local tradition, with the oldest styles. As for interior decoration, it is the carpentry of windows and doors that is most sophisticated, with carvings and mother-of-pearl inlays.

The homogenous building style of Thula had already begun to disappear in the 1970s. New buildings — such as the second outside the walls or the houses within the walled perimeter — were being erected according to techniques common to stone construction throughout the country and influenced by the major urban centres and by itinerant labour which identified with new entrepreneurial systems. The use of coloured glass *takhrim*, however, is found with fretwork of minute designs and strong colours similar to the oldest types in Sana'a and al-Tawila.

The construction that has taken place outside the walls is limited to 40 or 50 scattered houses and a row of workshops on either side of the road from Sana'a to the main gate. A major road, however, is planned and will contour the town close to the walls, connecting Thula with al-Miswar and, eventually, Amran. Consequent development is expected to occur, and the Secondary Cities Section of the Ministry of the Municipalities is preparing development plans with policies of conservation for the walled town and

controlled expansion to the plateau north-east of the town and the flats toward the south, but protecting the agricultural fields in the adjoining valleys. Public utilities have been recently introduced.