Where Did the Queen of Sheba Rule—Arabia or Africa?

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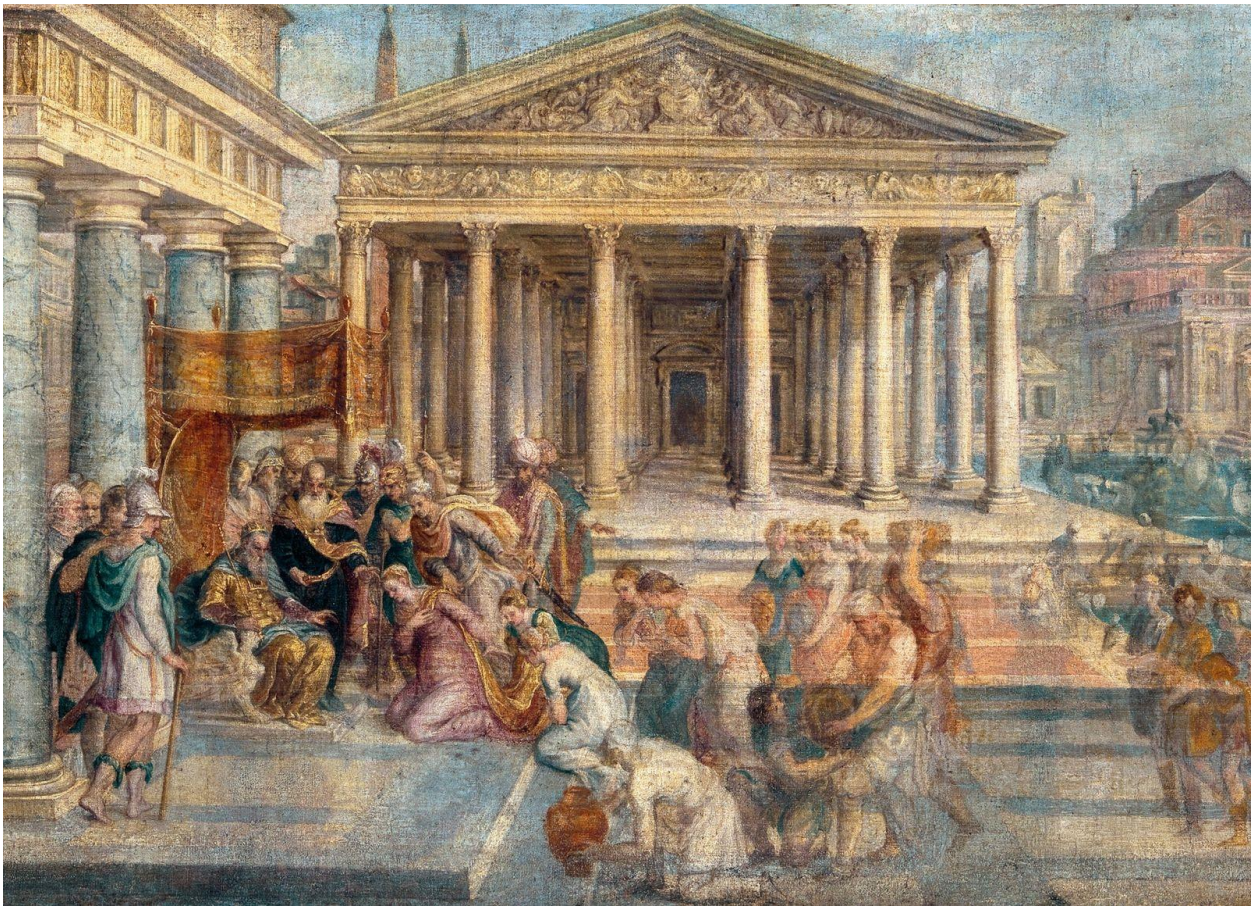
There is little debate about the location of King Solomon's Jerusalem, but scholars are still searching for the land of gold and spices that the Queen of Sheba called home.



King Solomon meets the Queen of Sheba in this 16th-century painting by Lambert Sustris. National Gallery, London.
(PHOTOGRAPH BY THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON, 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).

Solomon and Sheba (center frame). Ethiopian icon, 18th century.
PHOTOGRAPH BY DEA, SCALA, FLORENCE

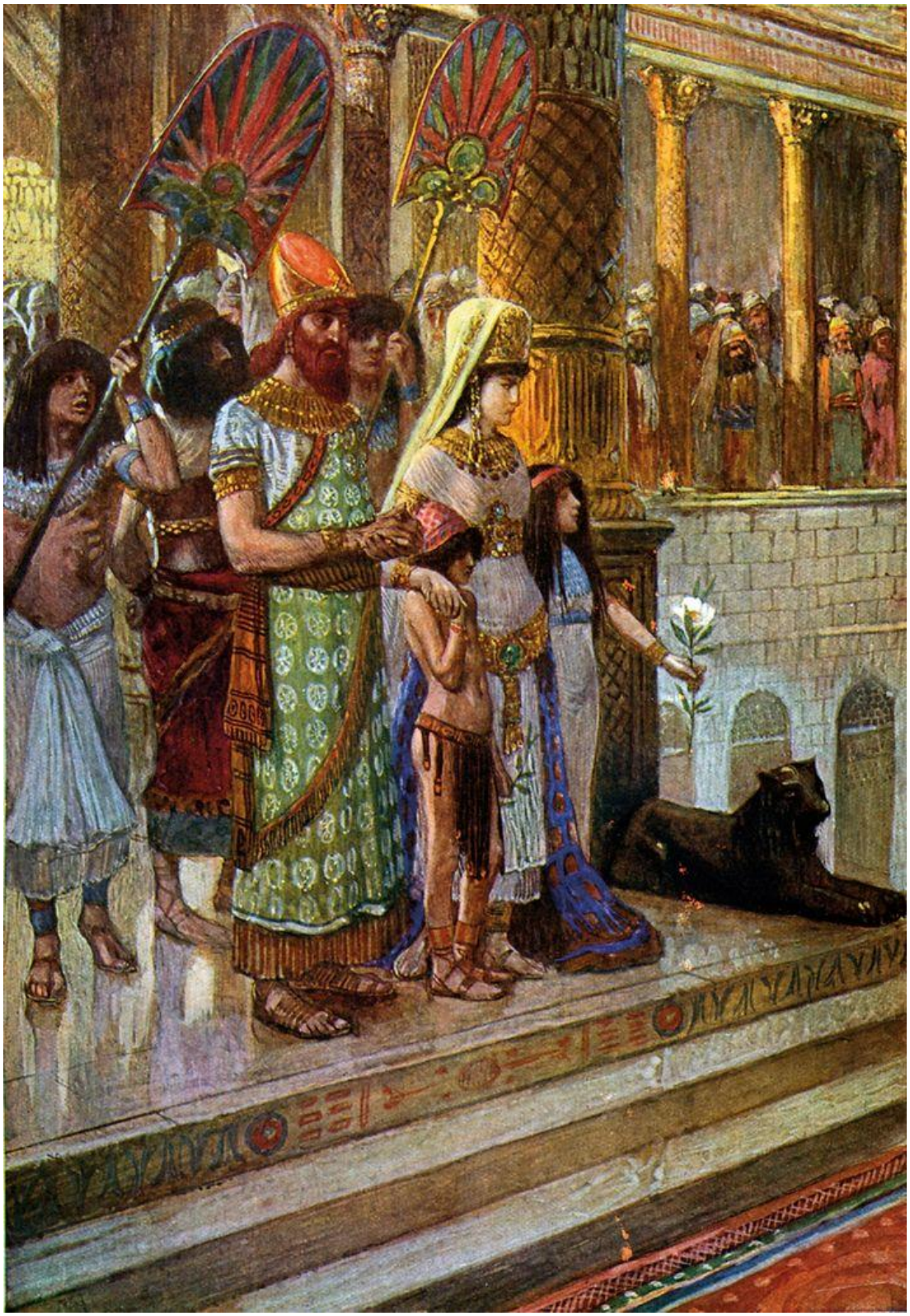
This biblical encounter has had an enormous impact on the popular imagination, projecting themes of beauty, wealth, power, exoticism, intrigue, magic, and love. The queen has inspired Turkish and Persian miniatures, European painting and music, and the 1959 Hollywood epic *Solomon and Sheba,* with Yul 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 tantalisingly 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 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. (*Here's what archaeology is telling us about King Solomon's mines.*)

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

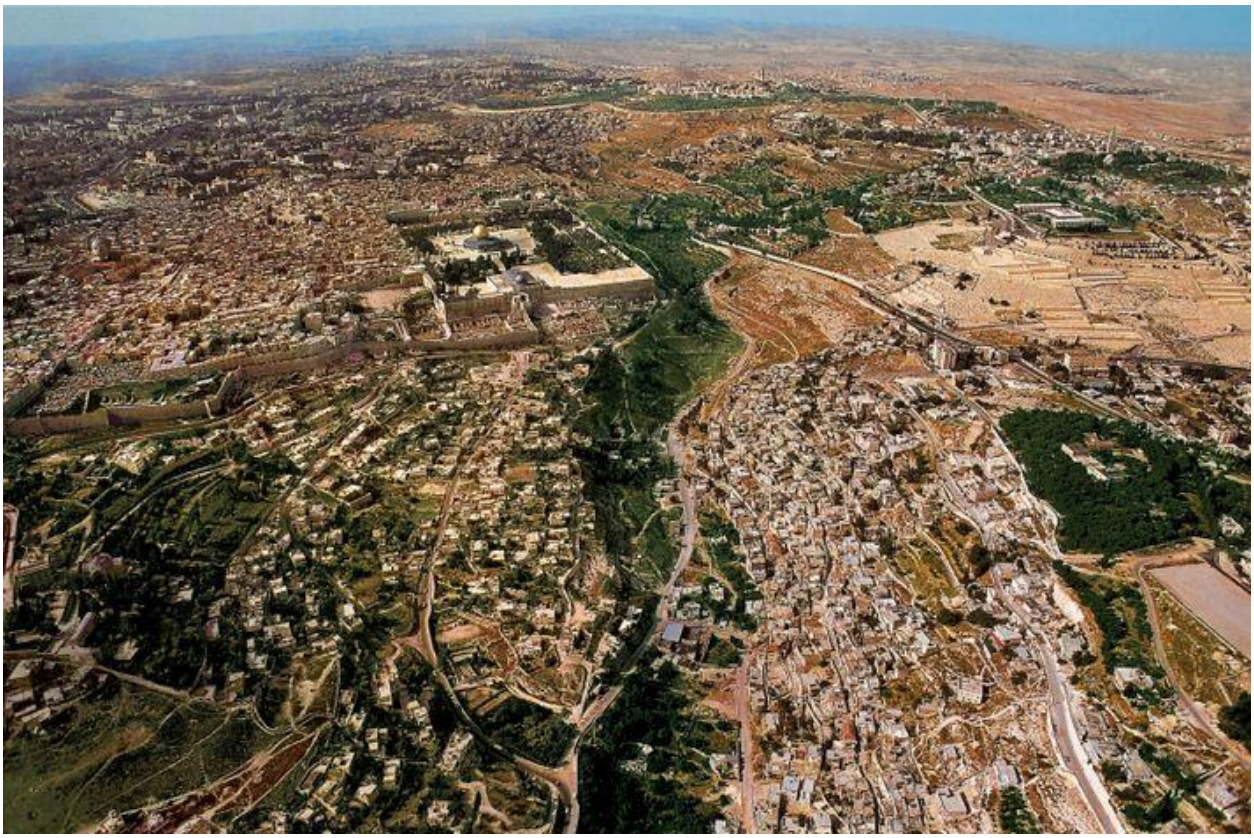
In the Bible, the Queen of Sheba is depicted as smart, independent, challenging, and respectful. Flavius Josephus, author of the first-century A.D. history *The Antiquities of the Jews*, described Sheba as "inquisitive into philosophy and on that and on other accounts also was to be admired."



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.
PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAMY, ACI

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.



Jerusalem has expanded beyond the city limits of King David's era. 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.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARCELLO BERTINETTI

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. (*Selflessness inspired love in the Book of Ruth.*)

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. 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.

A bull's head centers this seventh-century B.C. Sabaean altar, which features two sets of ibex heads on either side. The bull was sacred to Almaqah, the Sabaean god of the moon. Louvre Museum, Paris.
PHOTOGRAPH BY G. BLOT, RMN GRAND PALAIS

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.

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.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AKG, ALBUM

A third-century A.D. incense burner offered to a Sabaean deity. British Museum, London. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON/RMN-GRAND PALAIS BURNER: RMN-GRAND PALAIS

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 *Kebra Nagast*, or *Glory of the Kings*, of Ethiopia. Attributed to Is'haq Neburä -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 *Kebra 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 is here" (Matthew 12:42).

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.
PHOTOGRAPH BY **YOKO AZIZ**, AGE FOTOSTOCK

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. (*Discover the Bible's original love triangle between Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.*)

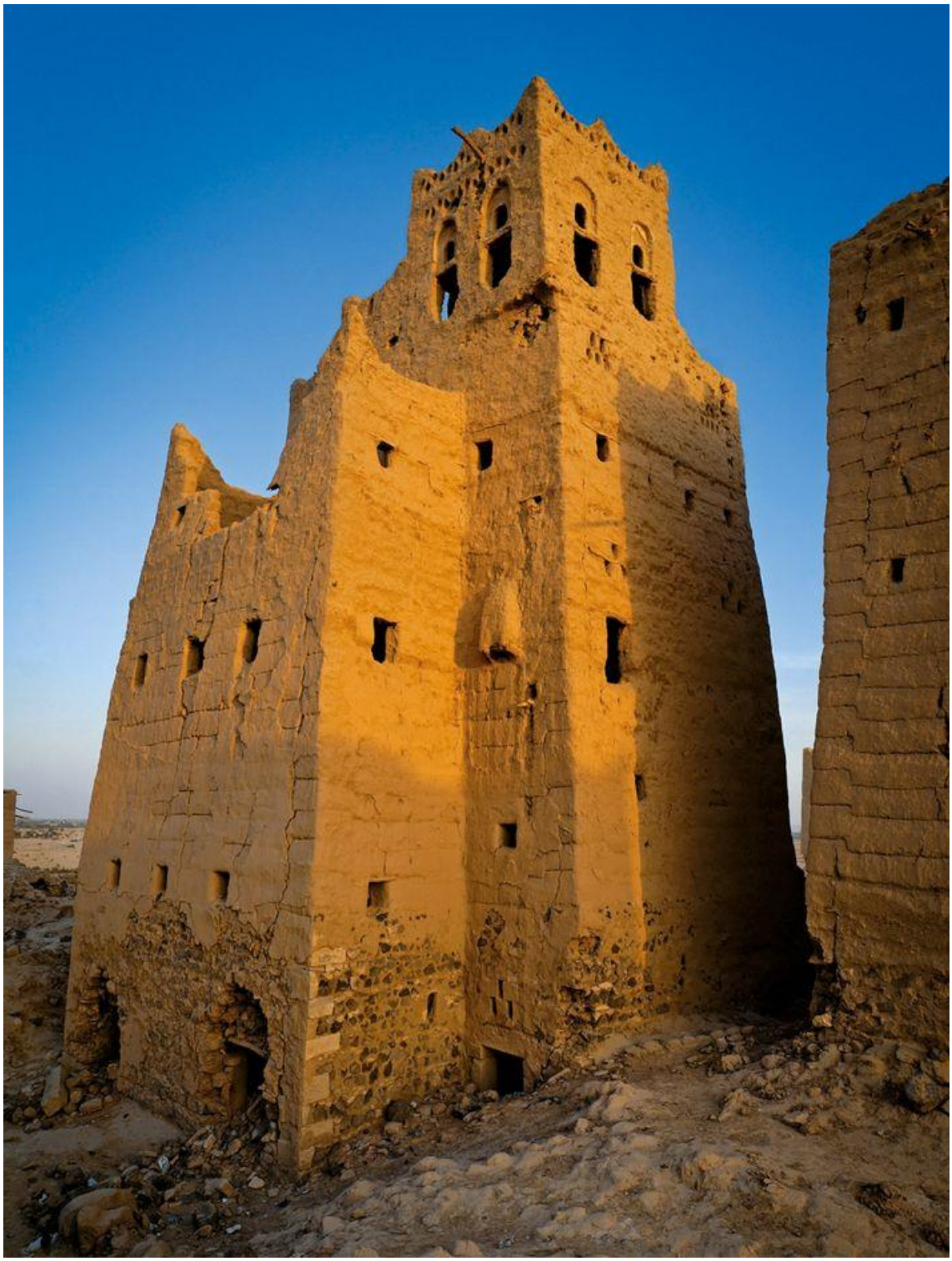
A bronze hand is inscribed with a prayer mentioning the Sabaean city of Zafar (in modern-day Yemen). Bronze, second-third centuries A.D. British Museum, London.
PHOTOGRAPH BY RMN GRAND PALAIS

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 attributed to Solomon, which most place around the 10th century B.C., does not line up with the prime of either Saba or Aksum. (*Here are nine ancient kingdoms you've probably never heard of.*)



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.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAMY, ACI

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 legitimise "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. (*Follow a quest through Ethiopia's sacred sites in search of the real Queen of Sheba.*)

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."