



*Muhammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī in 2016 in Jena  
(photo: A. Günther).*

محمد علي السلامي سنة ٢٠١٦ في جينا (الصورة: أ. غُنْثَر).

# In memoriam Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Salāmī

June 6, 1971 – April 27, 2017

*Norbert Nebes*

On April 27 last year Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Salāmī died in Jena after having taken seriously ill. With his passing, the studies of Ancient South Arabian lose 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 ‘Alī 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 Ḥaulān, a longstanding and extensive tribal confederation, whose precise geographical designation is Ḥaulān at-Ṭiyāl (as opposed to Ḥaulān Quḍā’a further north). Today the territory spreads over more than 7000 km<sup>2</sup> in a mountainous region between Sanaa in the west and Marib in the east, and Nihm in the northern Ḡauf and al-Ḥadā’ 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 ‘Alī al-Salāmī, being himself from Ḡabal al-Lauz, a highland district in central Ḥaulān 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 *Ṣifat Ḡazīrat*

al-‘Arab, or resolving the endless genealogical chains specified in his *Iklīl*. Muḥammad ‘Alī 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 Ḥaulān, 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 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC and the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. By naming the clans and tribes, he among other succeeded in determining that the original settlement area of the Ḥaulān tribe was not identical with the one today in Ḥaulān at-Ṭiyāl. The latter had been inhabited by other tribes, whilst the Ḥaulān had moved to the areas around Marib and Sanaa from the south and southeast in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> 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 ‘Alī 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 ‘Alī 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 Ḡabal al-Lauz, we visited the rock paintings at

Ġarf al-Yahūdī, 50 km east of Sanaa and displaying multi-storey buildings and isolated battle scenes. In an article published in 2013 in the *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen*, Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī drew attention to the arresting similarities between the depicted buildings and the Palace of Ġumdān described by al-Hamdānī. As from February 2009 he moreover was the team epigraphist at the excavations in the ancient town of Tanʿim, 25 km east of Sanaa. It was ultimately to his credit that Dr. Iris Gerlach from the Sanaa branch office of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut was able to carry out three campaigns there until 2011, in spite of the deteriorating conditions in the country. Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Salāmī was further assigned as guest lecturer abroad; such at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum and at the Institut für Orientalistik in Vienna. His research took him regularly to Berlin at the Oriental Department of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, where he was elected to corresponding member in 2013. During his regular presence at the Seminar für Orientalistik at Jena, he contributed to the Sabaean Online Dictionary together with other colleagues, and he also translated miniscule inscriptions in partnership with Peter Stein. Sponsored by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, but already much marked by his failing health, he arrived at Jena in September 2016, where he began his editing work on the inscriptions from Tanʿim. He continued to attend the dictionary meetings for as long as possible,

while checking the readings of personal, tribal, and clan names in text samples. He also wrote a paper on the Islamic history of Yemen, which soon will be available in an online-version of the “Handbook of Best Practices in Dealing with Cultural Heritage in Yemen”.

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 Ḥaulān 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.

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