THE MARTYRS OF NAJRÂN AND THE END OF THE HIMYAR: ON THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF SOUTH ARABIA IN THE EARLY SIXTH CENTURY*

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Introduction

In the spring of the year 519, or perhaps even as early as the preceding autumn,1 an Alexandrian spice trader named Cosmas2 traveling to Taprobane (known today as Sri Lanka) arrived at the ancient port city of Adulis on the African side of the Red Sea, where he made a short stay.3 In Cosmas’ day, Adulis controlled the Bāb al-Mandab and maintained close ties with the commercial centers along the South Arabian coast; it attracted merchants from Alexandria and Ailat, and it was from them that Cosmas hoped to obtain valuable information for his journey onward to India. Yet at this point in his account of the journey, Cosmas makes no mention of spices or other commodities. His attention is focused on matters of classical philology.

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* The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the political history of the events which took place in the period under discussion. It makes no claim to be a complete review of all the sources available or to consider the current discussion exhaustively. For such a synopsis, see the recent contribution by Beaucamp et al., “Persécution,” which emphasizes the chronology of events, and which I shall follow in placing the start of the Himyarite era in the year 110 BCE. Müller, “Himyar,” gives a thorough evaluation of the source material then available and remains a fundamental work.—The sigla of inscriptions cited follow Stein, Untersuchungen, 274–290. For a first draft of this paper, see Nebes, “Martyrer” who gives more detailed annotations and also lists the sigla not used in Stein, Untersuchungen. The new edition of the Martyrium Sancti Arethae by M. Detorakis (Paris 2007), which in the most recent secondary literature is cited e. g. by Bausi “Review,” 265–266, was not available to the author.

1 For this date, see Beaucamp et al., “Persécution,” 71. Cosmas’ stay in Adulis is usually dated to the year 525 (cf. for instance Müller, “Himyar,” 316); see n. 9.

2 For the most recent contribution, cf. Sima, “Cosmas”; for information concerning Cosmas’ life and work, see Schneider, “Cosmas,” with further references.

3 Adulis, which is located 40 km to the south of Massawa and ca. 4 km inland from the coast, was the main port of Aksum through which Byzantine—and, in an earlier period, Roman—trade with India was conducted; see Fattovich, “Adulis.”
At the request of the governor of Adulis he made copies of two Greek inscriptions which have since become known as the Monumentum Adulitanum. The two inscriptions are found on a marble throne with an attached "stela" situated at the town's western entrance on the caravan road leading to the Ethiopian plateau and Aksum. The first of these inscriptions, located on the stela, is the report of a campaign by Ptolemaios III Euergetes (246–222 BCE) that sheds light on the Ptolemies' maritime undertakings on the African side of the Red Sea during the second half of the third century BCE. The other text, also in Greek, can be found on the marble throne itself and dates from a later, post-Christian period. It contains an account of the deeds of an unnamed Aksumite ruler and remains to this day the only written evidence we have for the rise of Aksum and her territorial ambitions before the time of Ezana, i.e., the middle of the fourth century.

Both of the copies Cosmas made for the governor of Adulis were intended for Ellatzbas' (Ἐλαζτζβάς) whose residence was nearby in Aksum and who, as we are told in passing, was just preparing for war with the Homerites. This directs our attention to the other side of the Bāb al-Mandab, to South Arabia. Although Cosmas mentions them in the margin, Ellatzbas' preparations for war mark the beginning of a chain of events which was to change the political landscape of Southwest Arabia fundamentally and in very short time. They were to see Yemen subjugated by Kaleb Ella Aṣbeba, his adversary, the South Arabian King Yūsuf defeated and killed, and Aksumite rule established over large parts of Southwest Arabia. Thus, the power of the Homerites, the Himyar of the Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, who had ruled Yemen and dominated large parts of central Arabia for two and a half centuries, was finally brought to an end. It is true that in the person of Abraha there would arise an Ethiopian king in Yemen who would keep up the traditional Himyarite royal titles, compose his political self-depictions in Sabean, and distance himself quite clearly from the Negus in Aksum. Yet the days of South Arabian independence were over for good. The native tribal elites were no longer able to shake off Abraha's rule. For the next fifty years, Yemen was to remain under Christian rule, and in the following decades was to be subject to the hegemony of Sasanian Persia. Finally, in the year 632, the troops of the first caliph Abū Bakr put an end to the Yemeni tribes' revived attempts to achieve independence. Yemen became part of the Islamic world and joined in the young Islamic community's campaigns of conquest issuing from Medina.

A Survey of the Available Sources

For no other period of the pre-Islamic history of the Arabian Peninsula do we have so extensive and diverse a range of literary and epigraphic source texts composed so soon after events as we do for the 520s, when the conflict between Himyar and Aksum reached its culmination. In addition to the information given by Procopios and a short

191/34–35; as against de Blois, "Date," 126, n. 55, according to whom this first invasion took place in the time of Ella Aṣbeba's predecessor. 
10 That is the reading of Ellatzbas' full name, according to the Aksumite Source, RIE I, no. 191/71: klb (8) 1ubb.
11 Al-Mad'aj, Yemen, 53-55.
12 For a systematic overview of the Syriac, Greek, and Ethiopian sources, see Beau-camp et al., "Persecution," 19-41.
13 Procopios, Wars 1.20.
remark by Cosmas Indicopleustes, the principal documents are texts of varying genre composed in Syriac, Sabean, and ancient Ethiopic. Above all, mention must be made of the account of the "Martyrs of Najrán" that has been transmitted in three different Syriac versions, namely, the first and second letters of Simeon of Beth Arsham and the Book of the Himyarites, the first of which was the source for the Greek hagiographic text Martyrium Sancti Arethae et sociorum in civitate Negrant. Located in the southwest of modern Saudi Arabia, at the junction of the former frankincense roads to northwestern and eastern Arabia, Najrán was home to the largest Himyarite Christian community. Najrán was also the Abyssinians' bridgehead in northern Yemen—as it had been at the time of the first Aksumite intervention in South Arabia—and it was against Najrán that the Himyarite king Yusuf and the Yazanid tribal leaders allied with him directed their most decisive blow.

Yet, the conflicts in Najrán are reflected not only in texts belonging to the acts of the martyrs genre. The authenticity of the hagiographic account is supported by the epigraphic texts of the opposite side, more specifically in the form of several prominently situated Sabean rock inscriptions that high-ranking officers of the king caused to be made during the blockade of Najrán by Himyarite troops. Even if one were to consider only the most important of these sources, the messages are completely heterogeneous—they were composed by differing parties, point to a variety of interests and refer to different scenarios—yet they reflect the fundamentally new dimension of the struggle taking place in southwestern Arabia during the first third of the sixth century. While the conflicts of the warring kingdoms of the second and third centuries had been at regional level—between Saba', Himyar, and Hadramawt as the main protagonists but also involving the Abyssinians, who dominated the western lowlands and the western edges of the highlands of central Yemen—the political situation two centuries later was far more straightforward, being marked by a confrontation between two main adversaries, the Ethiopians of Aksum and the Himyar of Zafar. Whereas the regional wars of the mid-Sabean period would appear to have reflected purely regional interests, the conflict between Himyar and Aksum had a new, global dimension. The struggle was quite evidently also one which directly involved the interests of the great powers of the time, Persia and the Byzantine Empire. The close ties between Aksum and the Eastern Roman Empire are well known: the first recorded contacts took place in the time of Diocletian, and it may be assumed that relations began well before then; Ezana's conversion to Christianity in the second half of the 340s hence was to place the relationship on a new footing.

Numerous features of Aksumite coinage clearly show that Roman influence was present already several decades earlier. It is also known that the Byzantine Emperor Justin I (518–527) gave more than ideological assistance to the Aksumite king Ella Ašēba's plans for invasion. It may be assumed that it was with Justin's permission that the Ethiopians requisitioned the Byzantine trading vessels anchored in the Red Sea ports, which the Ethiopian force of the second invasion in 525, then under the personal leadership of Ella Ašēba, used to transfer to the Arab mainland.

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19 The three dozen or so campaign accounts of the Sabean kings and their officers that were found at the great Amâm temple in Mârib provide a good impression of the military situation of the times; they have been compiled and translated in Beeston, Warfare, selected translations are given in Nebes, "Herrscherinschriften." 20 See Munro-Hay, Aksum, 56. 21 Thus Hahn, "Symbols," 437; Brakmann, "Religionsgeschichte Aksumus," 412, is more cautious ("Alles spricht freilich dafür, daß Ezänà unter dem Pontifikat des Frumentios getauft wurde, vermutlich um die Mitte des 4. Jh., bald nach Frumentios' Ordination in Alexandria und seiner zweiten Ankunft in Aksum"); for the problem of dates, see id., "Axomis," 751, and, more recently, Hahn, "Ezana", 479. What does appear to have been established with relative certainty is that the letter which Constantius II sent to 'Ezana and his brother no later than 358 must have been preceded by their conversion to Christianity. 22 Hahn, Münzen, 4–5; cf. also Brakmann, "Axomis," 724–725, on the coinage of the Aksumite kings since 290. 23 For instance in the shape of a letter in which Justin calls on the Ethiopian king to intervene on behalf of the threatened Christians of South Arabia; see Martyrium Sancti Arethae, par. 27. 24 Martyrium Sancti Arethae, par. 29, gives a figure of sixty ships originating from various, mainly Red Sea, ports that the Ethiopian king had assembled in Gabaz/Adulis.
The picture we have of Sasanian influence at the Himyarite court in Zafrar is far sketchier. We know that diplomatic ties between the Sasanians and the Himyar began relatively early on, soon after the Himyar had expanded and consolidated their rule over all of South Arabia. From a dedication at the great Awam temple in the M'rib oasis (Sh 31) we know that around the beginning of the fourth century, a Himyarite delegation returned from a successful diplomatic mission to the royal cities of the Tigris, Seleucia, and Ctesiphon. Sasanian influence in Zafrar would appear to have extended to the field of art as well.

We do not know how intensive and long-lasting political contact may have been; in particular for the period here dealt with, the sources remain silent. The fact that the Sasanians had a considerable interest in the Arabian coast and the entrance to the Red Sea is, however, beyond doubt. This is confirmed by the actual course of events, when, in the last quarter of the sixth century, they assumed control over Yemen from the sons of Abraha.

The Himyar's Accession to Supremacy

Before turning our attention to what the sources have to say concerning the most important stages of the conflict, let us examine the history of events preceding them. Around the year 275, the Himyar of the southern highlands, who were centered around their capital Zafrar, began to assert themselves against the northern highland tribes, from amongst whom had been the successors to the kings of 'Abadän from the second century BCE on. Slightly more than twenty years later, the Himyarites had also gained control over the great Wadi Haḍramawt and the South Arabian coast. Towards the beginning of the fourth century, Shammar Yuhar'ish was the sole ruler of Yemen, as expressed in the titles used by him. The kings of the Himyar no longer styled themselves just as the kings of 'Abadän and of Raydän (meaning their royal palace in Zafrar) but also of the newly conquered territories. The period of warring kingdoms had been brought to an end, and South Arabia had been reunited.

The beginnings of the Himyar are still obscure and go back to the second century BCE. At that time, the fertile plateaus in the south of the central Yemenite Highlands right down to the coast at the Bab al-Mandab were part of the area held by the Qatabanian kings, ruling from their capital Timma in the Wadi Baybän; this is also confirmed by the third-century BCE Alexandria librarian Eratosthenes.

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28 Information on the relevant sources and further secondary literature concerning the following may be found in the outline given by Robin, "Sheba," 1130–1140.

29 The kingdom of Hadramawt had been considerably weakened by the Sabean king Sh'irum Awtar, who plundered and destroyed the capital city, Shabwa, around the year 230 before it eventually succumbed to Himyarite domination under Shammar Yuhar'ish. On the other hand, the Himyarites engaged in a number of campaigns into the Wadi Haḍramawt even after their realm had been united, namely, during the joint reign of the kings Dhamar'al-Yuhahir and his son Thân Yuhâ'im (cf. Nebes, "Kriegszug" and recently Robin, "Himyar au IVe siècle," 136–145). Similarly, the great rock inscription from the Wadi 'Abadän—which dates to 360 CE and contains an account of the three generations of Ya'azid tribal leaders who explicitly recognized the suzerainty of the Himyar of Zafrar—mentions that Haḍramawt had burned down their city of 'Abadän ('Abadän 1/32). It would thus appear that individual cities of the Wadi Haḍramawt were able to maintain their independence from the Himyar of Zafrar until at least the first half of the fourth century.

30 For instance YMN 13/11–13: smr / yhr / al / mkh / sbl / w-d-rydtn / w-hdramwtn / w-ymnt, "Shammar Yuhar'ish, the king of 'Abadän and dhu Raydän and Haḍramawt and Yammat," where Yammat probably refers to the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula and the southern coastline between Aden and Haḍramawt; see Robin, "Sheba," 1140.

31 Throughout the 1400 years of its pre-Islamic history documented by written sources, this had only once been the case, at the beginning of the seventh century BCE, when the Sabean monarch of Mârib, Mukarrab Ka'bîn Watar, had succeeded in subjecting all of Yemen; see Nebes, "Tatenbericht," and id., "Ita'amar."

32 Reported by Strabo, Geography 16.4.2; this external account can now be confirmed by independent epigraphic sources, see Nebes, "Feldzugsbericht," 282–283, and Nebes "Märtyrer," 14 n. 35.
Towards the end of the second century BCE, the southern highland tribes began to shake off control by the Qatabanian motherland, coming together to form the Himyarite confederation which, from the middle of the first century CE, was to become an important factor in the ever-shifting struggle for power in South Arabia. The only written evidence of them we have are stone inscriptions, not in the Qatabanian dialect, as one might expect, but in slightly modified Sabean.33 These inscriptions reveal an important innovation, which is of great assistance for reconstructing the chronology of the following period. Unlike those inscriptions written in other South Arabian dialects, above all the Sabean ones, the years mentioned by the Himyarite epigraphs are always stated in absolute terms. The Syriac accounts of the martyrs of Najrān (to which we shall return later) play a decisive part in dating these years in terms of the Christian calendar.

The capital Zafār appears for the first time in Pliny's *Natural History*,34 and it is also mentioned by the anonymous author of the *Periplus maris Erythraei*, a maritime handbook from the middle of the first century CE, as being a metropolis lying at a distance of a nine-day journey from the city of Sāwā' in Māφār (in today's al-Hujariyya).35 From the main road today leading south towards Aden, one turns eastwards after Yārim, reaching the fertile Zafār plateau after just a few kilometers to find the city itself, built on three volcanic outcrops and at an altitude of 2830 m. Despite the fact that it was in Zafār that European travelers first recorded ancient South Arabian inscriptions,36 archeological research there has only recently begun. Since 1998, nine seasons of excavations directed by the archeologist Paul Yule have so far concentrated on establishing the topography of the 110 hectare urban area37 and on excavating a monumental stone building.38 Yet even from the evidence of surface finds one can say that Zafār shows markedly fewer inscriptions than Mārib, and that future excavations are likely to bear this out. On closer examination, this circumstance allows us to draw some significant conclusions. The known inscriptions from Zafār are mostly building inscriptions and date from the post-Christian period. They describe the construction of defenses and houses as well as the erection of royal buildings. In addition to the palace of Raydān, first mentioned in a dedication by Yāsīrum Yūhan'īm and his son Shammar Yuhar'īsh,39 we know of three similar inscriptions from the palaces named Shawḥatān, Kallānum, and Hargab, all built in the years 383 and 462 by the Himyarite kings Malkikarib Yuha'min and his sons,40 and by Shuraḥbīl Yafūr.41

What is significant about these findings is the almost total absence in Zafār of any dedicatory inscriptions of the kind found in such abundance elsewhere in South Arabia. We know that even after Shammar Yuhar'īsh unified the kingdom, the Himyarite kings continued to record their political self-portrayals not only in building inscriptions but also in the form of dedications. In Zafār, however, they would appear to have done so only to the extent of honoring the locally venerated gods, such as Wagal, and Sīmyādā' and others. In Mārib, on the other hand, they continued the practice of placing their dedications in the central shrine of the main Sabean god Almaqah, to whom they were also addressed.

The explanation for this is quite simply that Mārib had lost nothing of its significance as a political center symbolizing the centuries of Sabean rule. By placing their dedications at the Awām temple in Mārib, the Himyarite kings were seeking to place themselves within this tradition and thereby to endow their rule with the necessary legitimacy.

**Himyarite Monotheism**

The Awām temple contains Himyarite dedications from a period of several decades. Then, in the 380s, the form of worship appears to have undergone a fundamental change, observable not only in Mārib and Zafār but also throughout South Arabia. Within a relatively short
period of time, the rich pantheon of South Arabian gods disappeared; dedications to its gods appear to have ceased, and their shrines, including the huge Awâm temple, have to be abandoned. The inscriptions were no longer addressed to the ancient astral gods such as Almâqâh, Athtar, or Shams, but to a single deity, called the “Lord of Heaven” or the “Lord of Heaven and Earth,” who is also called Rahmânân. 42

Debate amongst scholars continues as to whether this Himyarite monotheism was, at least in the initial decades, influenced more by Christianity or by Judaism, or whether it may have rested on an independent political and even theological foundation in the form of some kind of Himyarite Rahmânism. 43 The fact that a Christian background has been assumed for at least the first years after the Himyarite kings' conversion to monotheism is due largely to an account given in Philostorgios' church history, according to which Theophilos the Indian 44 was sent by Constantius II (337–361) to the Himyarite court at Zafâr, where he spent some time at the beginning of the 340s, succeeding not only in achieving the king's conversion but also in gaining his permission to build churches in three separate locations in Yemen. 45 The account does not, however, identify the Himyarite king, nor do we have any monotheistic inscriptions from this early period which could provide some form of evidence for the king's conversion to Christianity. 46

Contrastingly, a number of factors do exist which support the view that Himyarite monotheism was oriented towards Judaism from the outset. The first indication can be found in the name Rahmânân itself. Although rahmânân means “merciful” both in (Christian) Syro-Aramaic and in Judeo-Aramaic, it is only in the latter that it is commonly used as a divine epithet, 47 so that it is not unreasonable to assume that the Himyar adopted Rahmânân and the conceptual theological background associated with him from Jewish Aramaic and not from Christian Syriac. 48 It is true that in South Arabian usage, the name Rahmânân was also used to refer to the Christian God. All of the conclusive evidence for this, however, comes from the time after the Ethiopian invasion and the defeat of the Himyarite king Yûsûf. Thus we find the inscriptions of the Ethiopian king in Yemen, Abraha, beginning with the formula, “with the help of Rahmânân and his Christ,” which is sometimes extended to a trinity: “with the help of Rahmânân and his Christ and the Holy Spirit.” 49 The fact that Rahmânân was used to refer to the Christian God at the time of

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42 Other descriptions are “God, the Lord of Heaven” as well as Rahmânân with the attributes given above. See also the tables given by Gajda, "Débuta," 625–628, and Robin, "Judaïsme," 170–173. — The first of the royal inscriptions containing a monotheistic credo are the two building inscriptions of Malik Karîb Yuhamîn and his sons, dated to the year 383; see Müller, "Religion und Kult," 190–191. The first monotheistic inscription (YM 1950) was presented by Gajda, "Débuta," 612, and has been translated and commented upon in id., "Inscription." It dates to the year 373 or 363 and was made by tribal leaders from Sumâ'y, who refer to Thâ-rân Yuhamîn and his sons as their lords. — Recently, Robin "Hîmyâr et Israël," 837 n. 35, has reported on a recently discovered inscription containing a monotheistic credo that has to be dated before the year of 355, see Nebes, "Martyrer," 17 n. 45. — See for example Müller, "Religion und Kult," 191, and Gajda, "Débuta," 620–621. For a synopsis with detailed interpretation of the sources, see Robin, "Judaïsme," 170–172.

43 Müller, "Theophilos," 1473.

44 Philostorgios, Church History 3.4–5.

45 The findings from the Awâm temple in Marîb show that Dhamâr all Yuhamîn and Thâ-rân Yuhamîn, the kings ruling at the time, still placed their dedications to Almâqâh there, and even several years after Theophilos' visit to the Himyarite court dedications to Almâqâh continued to be placed there, as the (unpublished) inscription MQ Mahram Biliqis I shows, which is dated to 351 (461 of the Himyarite era). It may

very well be that the conversion of the Himyar king described by Philostorgios, probably Thâ-rân Yuhamîn, was of short duration and, if it extended to others at all, only included the king's immediate entourage.

47 Rightly pointed out by Gajda, "Débuta," 613, with n. 7, where she refers to Sokoloff, Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, 522; further examples for Babylonian Jewish-Aramaic may be found in Levy, Neuhebräisches und chaldisches Wörterbuch, vol. 4, 440, and more recently in Sokoloff, Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, 1069–1070.

48 According to Geiger, "Jüdische Begriffe," 488–489, Syriac does not use rahmânân as a synonym for the trinitarian god except in the writings of Afram—an observation which is borne out not only by the (few) entries in Payne Smith, Thesaurus Syriacus, vol. 2, 3883, and Brockelmann, Lexicon Syriacum, 724a, but is also confirmed by the Syriac New Testament, in which the term rahmânân is used not even once. Instead, Syriac employs the term mrâh mânân to describe the merciful god, cf. Payne Smith, Thesaurus Syriacus, vol. 2, 3884, and Rom 9:16 (alâh mrâh mânân). Further examples can be found in Kiraz, Concordance, vol. 4, 2716, and in the second letter of Simeon of Bêth Arsham, in which Christian women are described as replying to Yûsûf's demand that they abjure Christ and convert to Judaism: (da-)mitthâ alâhaw wa-brâhî da-mrâh mânân, "Christ is God and the Son of the Merciful" (Shahid, Martyrs, XVIII, 20). The occurrences of rahmânân in the Aramaic Bible in Ex 34:6, Ps 111:4, and 2 Chr 30:9 (see Levy, Chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Targumim, vol. 2, 4176), where it is used in place of the Hebrew rahmîm, correspond to the use of mrâh mânân, mrâh mânân and rahmânân in the Peshîtta.

49 See Ry 5061, DAI GDN 2002–202–3, or C 5411–1–3, and, just as clearly Christian, the inscriptions Ist 7608bis and Wellcome A 10366b, which were composed a few years earlier, after the Ethiopian victory over Yûsûf.
Abraha does make it probable, though, that the name was familiar to South Arabian Christians already before the Ethiopian invasion. Now, upon a systematic examination of the monotheistic creeds found in inscriptions of the fourth and fifth centuries, two main groups of texts can be distinguished. The first group includes all those inscriptions that cannot be clearly identified with either one of the two great religions and contain no specifically Jewish or Christian connotations other than the name Rahmânân and/or terms such as “Lord of Heaven (and Earth).” It is noticeable that inscriptions that cannot be clearly identified with either one of the two groups of texts can be found by Himyarite kings stemming from the period under discussion fall into this category. The second group, which is considerably smaller, includes those inscriptions that were made by South Arabs professing the Jewish faith. Thus an inscription from Zafâr, dating from the last quarter of the fourth century, describes how a “private citizen” named Yeḥûdâ Yakrâ had built his house with the help of the Lord of Heaven and Earth. It is not just the name of the founder which shows that this expression can only refer to the Jewish God but also the fact that the invocation includes the people of Israel.

As the above example demonstrates, Sabean texts with an unambiguously Jewish background can be shown to have existed from a relatively early date, whereas evidence of texts exhibiting a clearly Christianistic background is lacking. Thus, at the end of the fourth century, South Arabia became home to Jewish communities and South Arabian clans professing Judaism.

If we go by the testimony of Philostorgios’ church history, Judaism had become established even at an earlier date. On the basis of these findings, then, it seems very likely (and this is the currently prevailing view) that the Himyarite monotheism evidenced by the rule of inscriptions was in the beginning influenced by Judaism rather than by Christianity.

This supposition is supported by a number of political factors that can be located on the opposite side of the Bâb al-Mandab, in Africa. King ‘Ezana of Aksum, whose titles bear witness to his claim to the South Arabian territories of Saba’ and Himyar, converted to Christianity in the late 340s. He did so quite openly, as may be seen from his epigraphic and numismatic self-portrayals. One of his post-conversion inscriptions describes him as a “servant of Christ,” and his coins display Christian symbols. It is thus quite understandable to find the Himyar joining the other form of monotheism a short time later, if only as an ideological countermeasure against their not “Judaized Arabs” but rather members of “those Jewish communities in Yemen that had been populated by the descendants of Jewish exiles” (ibid.).

In the context of a recently published bilingual Hebrew/Aramaic-Sabean funerary inscription from Saba’, Sima has stressed that Himyarite Judaism was in no way an isolated phenomenon, but one which formed an integral part of the Jewish world; see Nebe/Sima, “Grabinschrift,” esp. the reference to the better known Greek funerary inscription from Beth She’arim on p. 80–81 (details are given in Ahroni, Yemenite Jewry, 40–41), and the Aramaic funerary inscription from Zoar, both of which document the burial in Palestine of Jewish Himyarites, which has recently been extensively discussed by Robin, “Himyar et Israel,” 836–841 and 880–892.

According to Pilostorgius, Church History 3.4, “amongst them [i.e., those known in former times as Sabeans, but now known as Homerites] there was a substantial number of Jews.” For information concerning the tradition according to which Jewish communities had immigrated to South Arabia before the destruction of the Temple in 587 BCE, see Ahroni, Yemenite Jewry, 25–27.

This raises the question of why Jewish tradition, and especially the Mishnah and the Talmud, makes no mention of Himyarite kings who had converted to Judaism or of Yûsf, who clearly professed the Jewish faith. Two possible answers have been proposed by Robin, “Judaïsme,” 152–153, and Robin “Himyar et Israel,” 855. For the “new” religious political concept resulting from the king’s conversion to Judaism that has been ascribed to the Himyarite kings by Robin, “Himyar et Israel,” 861 and passim, see the comments given by Nebes, “Martyryer,” 20 n. 60.

R.E. I, no. 271110; for details on ‘Ezana’s pagan and Christian inscriptions, see Brakmann, “‘Azomis,” 747–751.

Thus ‘Ezana replaced the pagan crescent moon with the Christian cross on his gold coinage, while apparently being more conservative when it came to the silver coinage used domestically. For details see Brakmann, “‘Azomis,” 750–751, with further references.
traditional Aksumite rivals and in order to stem the growing influence of the Byzantine Empire in the region.

We only have indirect information about another event belonging in this context, from a source composed in Old Ethiopic and displaying profound familiarity with the situation in South Arabia, which implies that it derives from local South Arabian tradition. According to this source, at the time of the Himyarite king Shurabbi’il Yakkaf (mentioned in a building inscription in Zafar dated to 472⁶⁹) a Christian priest called Azqir attempted to proselytize in Najran, upon which he was seized by the local Himyarite nobility and sent to the royal court for sentencing. In Zafar he is said to have engaged in debate with Jewish scholars as well as with the king, who subsequently had him sent back to Najran to be executed.

The Himyarite king’s actions can hardly be regarded as exhibiting any particular sympathy towards Christians. It would be wrong, however, to speak of a full-scale persecution of Christians taking place at this time. Without a doubt, the conflicts twenty years later, in the 520s, were of a quite different order: Yusuf systematically repressed the Christians and their Ethiopian supporters in Zafar, Najran, Marib, the Tihama, the western lowlands, and in Hadramawt. Nevertheless, the conflict cannot be explained merely in terms of the rivalry between South Arabian Jews and Christians. One must also consider that the internal political situation at the beginning of the sixth century had changed fundamentally since the reign of Shurabbi’il Yakkaf.

Ma’dikarib’s Pro-Byzantine Orientation

Although the information provided by the sources is far from detailed, their message, when seen in the context of later developments, is relatively clear and points to a rapprochement between the Himyar of Zafar on the one hand, and Aksum and their Byzantine protectors on the other, a development that must have taken place at the beginning of the sixth century. The policies of Ma’dikarib Ya’fur, Yusuf’s immediate predecessor on the Himyarite throne, in particular were


⁷⁰ C537 + R 4719.

⁷¹ Ca. 519–522; see Beaucamp et al., “Persecution,” 75.

quite noticeably pro-Byzantine. Authentic evidence of this comes from a rock inscription found well over one thousand kilometers to the north of Zafar in central Arabia, which states that Ma’dikarib Ya’fur fought a campaign against rebellious Bedouin tribes.⁷² In itself this information is not especially surprising, given that such campaigns had been part of Himyarite policy since the beginning of the fifth century.⁷³ What is of particular interest for our context, however, is the fact that the Himyarite king is said to have fought against the Lakhmid ruler, Mundhir III, a Persian ally, and to have been supported by Bedouin auxiliaries who were usually found siding with the Byzantine empire.

A short passage from the Syriac acts of the martyrs is relevant to this point. The second epistle of Simeon of Beth Arsham, which describes the persecution and martyrdom of the Christians of Najran a few years later, makes mention of a Christian woman from one of Najran’s foremost families called Ruhm; she is said to have lent Ma’dikarib Ya’fur, Yusuf’s predecessor, the sum of 12,000 dinars when he was in difficulties, and to have cancelled the debt when he was later unable to repay her.⁷⁴

Such a clearly pro-Byzantine attitude on the part of the last Himyarite king before Yusuf cannot be coincidental.⁷⁵ The sources

⁷² The inscription at hand is Ry 510 at Ma’al al-Jumb, which is 240 km to the west of Riyadh; see Beaucamp et al., “Persecution,” 75.

⁷³ Thus the rock inscription that Abukarib As’ad had made one hundred years before at the same place (Ry 509) tells of the Himyarites’ first great campaign in central Arabia against the Ma’add, through which the Kinda monarchs of the house Ākīl al-murār were set up as client kings; for details on this, see Robin, “Royauine hujiilde,” and Müller, “Himyar,” 308, and Newby, History, 38.

⁷⁴ Shahid, Martyrs, XXVII, 6–10. The Syriac text misspells the Himyarite king’s name as m’dwkrm. The episode can also be found in the Book of the Himyarites; this is the report referred to by Müller, “Himyar,” 312. For the name Ruhm, see Müller, Review, 184.

⁷⁵ Indications of a rapprochement can be found as early as the time of Marthad il’an Yanuf, who probably reigned between 500 and 518 (see Beaucamp et al., “Persecution,” 73–75). If we are to follow Robin, “Royauine hujiilde,” 696, in identifying the Aheras mentioned by Photos with the Kindite Šahrīth b. Amr b. Huja, with whom the Byzantine Empire concluded a peace treaty in 502, then we may suppose this treaty to have been concluded, if not at the instigation, then at least with the express agreement of the Himyar and their king, Marthad il’an Yanuf, during whose reign we know there to have been an Ethiopian presence in Zafar. There exists a building inscription dating from 509 (Gar Ay 96) made by an Ethiopian delegation which erected a house in Zafar that names this king as their lord.
provide only indirect information as to the degree to which it may have been fostered by Byzantium and its Aksumite protégé and the means they may have used. It may be supposed that Byzantine interest in the Himyar was at that time centered less upon the South Arabian ports than on the tribes of Central Arabia under their protection, whom the Byzantine Empire sought to win over so as to counter the central and northeast Arabian tribes fighting on the Persian side. However, whether Byzantine influence extended so far as to mean that the king before Yüsuf, Ma’dikarib Ya’fur, was installed on the throne by them at the time of the first Ethiopian invasion—which took place probably around the year 519—can not be determined on the basis of the sources currently available.

We can, however, be fairly certain that it was around this time that the first Ethiopian intervention in South Arabia took place, and that it was this intervention which was to lead Ma’dikarib Ya’fur to pursue a decidedly pro-Byzantine political course. We also know that this pro-Byzantine policy of the Himyarite court in Zafār went much too far for a number of the powerful tribal federations in South Arabia, and indeed provoked a massive counter-reaction on their part. It is important to note that this counter-movement was supported not by factions at the Himyarite court in Zafār nor by the tribes from the central Yemeni highlands but rather by the Yaz’anids, a tribe located far to the southeast of the Himyarite heartland, whose territorial sway extended from the central highlands in the west to the western fringes of the Hadramawt plateau and the coast, including the ancient port city of Qana. The Yaz’anids were supported by the Banū Gadanim of Mārib and the Ghaymān from the region east of Sanaa, in other words, by formerly powerful Sabean clans and tribal federations that had long ceased to play an important role under Himyarite rule.

Yüsuf dhū Nuwās and the Anti-Christian Backlash

The central figure in this conflict who was to lead the Yaz’anid counter-movement was King Yüsuf, known in Arabic tradition as Dhū Nuwās. With regard to Yüsuf as a person, the literary sources tell us little of historical value. The Syriac and Greek acts of the martyrs understandably present him in a far from positive light. Later Arabic writers portray Yüsuf much more favorably. Since it was he who organized local resistance against the Ethiopian occupiers, his personality assumes a markedly national component that makes him acceptable to Arabic tradition. Genuine information about Yüsuf as an historical figure may be found in the three large rock inscriptions

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69 The Yaz’anides pursued a successful policy of alliances throughout the fifth century, establishing links with a number of formerly influential clans. The Yaz’anid inscriptions may still be found some hundred kilometers northeast of Sanaa in the upper part of the Jawf (Mafray Abū Thawr 4).

70 The name is probably a clan name (see below), which popular Arab tradition later transmuted to a cognomen meaning “the one with the curls” (cf. Nashwān b. Sa‘īd al-Himyari, Sharāf al-‘ulām, vol. 10, 6797). According to Hishām b. Mu‘āammad al-Kalbī, the true (South Arabian) name was Zu‘ā b. Ḥassān (see Cæscele, Gamharat an-nasab, vol. 2, 612). The name Zu‘ā appears in a fragmentary Sabean building inscription from Dāiff (ist 760b/12: zr‘ā‘ l-melhām) which must have been made very shortly after Ella Aṣhebā’s victory, since it names both the Ethiopian king and the client king he installed, Simyāfa Ashwa’ (see below), together with introductory and concluding Christian formulae. This Zu‘ā must, however, have been a completely different person.

71 Both versions avoid the biblical name, Yōsep. In the Martyrium Sancti Arethæ, par. 1, Yüsuf is called by his clan name Awwōwāsaw (see below), while in both of Simeon of Beth Arsham’s epistles he is addressed neutrally as malḥakā and malḥakā qa’Imrāyē (see, for example, Guidi, “Lettera di Simeone,” 7, 12 of the Syriac text) or pejoratively as al-rā‘īya Yāgōdā (Shahid, Martyrs, Ill. 5, among others). The Book of the Himyarites gives his name as Mārṣaq, although with the orthographic peculiarity that it is written upside down (see Moberg, Book of the Himyarites, pl. 5, XIX, l. 4, XX, l. 2), which may be indicative of a later emendation. Marṣaq is also the form given in the introductory passage of the Syriac translation of a hymn by Johannes Psaltes in praise of the Himyarite martyrs (Schröter, “Christliche Traktate,” 403, l. 3 of the Syriac text) and by the eleventh-century Chronicle of Scērt (Scher, “Histoire Nestorienne,” 331, 4). The name is definitely not Syriac and was presumably translated into Arabic; for a possible interpretation, see Shahid, Martyrs, 263. Further names may be found in Müller, “Himyar,” 313.

72 Thus already Nöldeke, Geschichte, 175 (continuation of n. 3).
mentioned above, which one of his commanders had made during the blockade of Najrän.

Already Yüsuf's name and titles express a political agenda: "King Yüsuf As'ar Yath'ar, king of all the tribes." His name is given without a patronymic, which is unusual, but includes two Sabean cognomens presumably meaning "he who takes vengeance" and "he who remains." Both terms evidently refer to earlier events, most probably the conflicts that took place between Yüsuf and his followers and the Ethiopians during their first invasion. The name Yüsuf itself has similarly clear connotations; it was uncommon in ancient South Arabia and must have been borrowed from the Hebrew; it therefore amounted to a definite political signal in support of a Jewish type of monotheism. The royal titles by which the inscriptions refer to Yüsuf

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73 See n. 68 above.
74 Thus J 1028/1: mlk"n / ywṣf / s'r / yṯr / mlk / kl / ṣbn. See also Ry 507/1 which contains the spelling yṣf, and Ry 508/2 which shortens the title by omitting yṯr / mlk / kl / ṣbn.
75 This may be what is referred to in the second epistle of Simeon of Bāth Arsham (Shahid, Martyrs, XXI, 3–6) by the words ascribed to Mābiya, one of the maids of Arethas/Hārith b. Ka'b, shortly before her execution, according to which the Ethiopians vanquished the Himyar or their (rebellious) tribal allies while Yüsuf managed to avoid certain death through the help of a merchant from Ḫira (see also Martyrium Sancti Arethae, par. 2).
76 With respect to yṯf used as a name of buildings, Sima in Nebe/Sima, "Grabenschrift," 83, n. 52, argues for a Sabean derivation of the name from the root wš. The morphology alone is against this argument, since among the frequent occurrences of the imperfect yṯfr, we find no examples in which the w survives in writing; this makes it likely that one must assume a two-radical basis for this root in yṯf, which is difficult to reconcile with ywṣf as a basis. As regards the prefix conjugation of 1 w in Sabean, which is formed just as in Arabic, see Stein, Untersuchungen, 189–190.
77 The Hebrew Yōsēf was either taken over into Sabean as Yōṣīf, or it remained in its original Hebrew form (cf. de Blois, "Date," 123, n. 2). The versions of the name used here follow the traditional Arabic reading.
78 The general consensus to date is that Yüsuf came from the clan of the Ya'ān (see, for instance, Müller, "Himyar," 313, and Fiaccadori, "Homeries," 61–62 n. 85), yet no clear epigraphic evidence for this exists, nor does Arab, and in particular Yemenite tradition ascribe such a provenance to him. I am indebted to Dr Muhammad 'Ali as-Salāmī (Sanā'ī) for first drawing my attention to the possibility that the cognomen dhu Nuwas could possibly derive from the Sabean clan name d-nšm. This clan, mentioned in the mid-Sabaean period as having been associated with the Ghaymān (see, for instance, J 626/2, NNAG 17/5, C 68/1), with whom it seems to have concluded an alliance, came from the region of today's Ghaymān, about fifteen kilometers east of Sanā'ī. This interpretation would shed light on the (accusative!) form Aowwāw found in the Martyrium Sancti Arethae (e.g., in par. 1) which would thus not be a misreading of the Syriac dwvzn (as suggested by Müller, "Himyar," 313) but rather a clan name like Na's.

Also depart from traditional nomenclature. In place of the lengthy title used by the Ḥimyārite kings since the days of Abū Lārīb Aṣ'ād, "king of Saba' and dhuRAYDĀN, of Ḥaḍramawt and Yamnāt, and of the Arabs of the highlands and lowlands," Yüsuf's title is given simply as "king of all the tribes." On account of this it has been suggested, probably not without some justification, that his accession to the throne was not legitimate. Whether Arab tradition is correct in maintaining that he used violence to remove his predecessor, Ma'dikعرب, is a question that cannot be answered with certainty given the available source material.

Yüsuf's first campaigns were directed against the Ethiopians in Zafār, where he burned down the church and killed the priests and presumably the military guarding them as well. He then turned his attention to the western coastal lowlands of the Ṭihāma, engaging the Ethiopian units stationed there and the Christian tribes allied with them. He burned down the church on the coastal town of al-Mukhā (Sab. mlḫm), and continued to move along the coast as far as Māddābān (mdnb), the fortress which was to give the straits the name by which they are known today, the Bāb al-Mandāb. There, he blocked the entrance to the harbor with chains so as to thwart the Ethiopians' imminent landing. While he himself stayed in Māddābān to await the invasion fleet under Kāleb Ella Aṣbaḥa, he dispatched one of his generals, Sharāḥ'ī Yaqūb, to Najrän, where he was to block the caravan route to the northeast of the town leading to Qaryat al-Faw and to eastern Arabia, so as to put economic pressure on the city. These hostilities took place between the years 522 and 523 and lasted some thirteen months. All this information is given by the three dated inscriptions which Sharāḥ'ī Yaqūb placed at a prominent spot on the caravan route to eastern Arabia, some 90 to 130 km northeast of Najrän.
These are the last Himyarite epigraphic sources we have for several years, so that we are forced to rely on Christian sources for information concerning the events subsequently taking place in and around Najran. Besides the Greek version of the Martyrium Sancti Arethae and the surviving fragments of the Syriac Book of the Himyarites, the most important of these are the two Syriac letters of Simoeon of Beth Arsham, a Monophysite bishop from Mesopotamia. Both these letters are of the utmost significance, not least because the accounts they contain were evidently written close to the time the events in Najran took place. Furthermore, both letters are dated, allowing us to determine absolute dates for the time-span involved and thus to establish a chronology of the events in Najran as well as those preceding them. The persecution and killing of the Christians in Najran took place in the autumn of 523, and, as we know from the dates given in the rock inscriptions, the blockade of the caravan routes to the northeast began a few months earlier, in June and July.

As far as events taking place in Najran are concerned, we learn from the second letter that the king himself eventually arrived after a protracted siege and offered to guaranty that the Christians would not be harmed if they surrendered the city to him; a particularly significant detail in this description is that the king made his oath in the presence of rabbis from Tiberias, swearing on the Torah, the Tables of the Law and the Ark of the Covenant. The citizens of Najran surrendered to him, but Yüsuf failed to keep his oath. After overpowering some three hundred leading Christians, he ordered the bones of the bishops who were buried in Najran to be exhumed and collected in the church, where he had them burned together with the laity and clerics. The letter goes on to describe a number of individual and collective martyrdoms of prominent believers from all classes and of all ages, among whom we find a noticeably high proportion of women. Although, given the literary genre, one has to critically examine the report's historical accuracy, it does show an astonishing degree of familiarity with the situation, topography, and onomastics of South Arabia, so that its authenticity cannot be ruled out in advance.

The description of the aged Arethas, or Hárit ibn Káb in Arabic, being led before Yüsuf and boasting of having always stood his ground like a man and of having killed one of Yüsuf's relatives in single combat is hardly that of a pious Christian eagerly awaiting martyrdom and asking God to forgive his persecutors. The same Hárit then continues in this vein, saying that he would have preferred to face the Himyar king together with his followers and with a sword in his hand, but that his fellow Christians had barred the gates and not let him out; the picture reveals an attitude more in keeping with an ancient Arabian tribal sheik whose ideal of honor in such situations was to die in battle.

Footnotes:

83 This title was first introduced by Moberg, although a title along the lines of "The Book of the Himyarite Martyrs" would be more in keeping with the work's contents.
84 Died in Constantinople in 548 (see Brun, "Simeon," 641–642).
85 At the time of the writing of his first letter, Simeon was a member of a Byzantine delegation staying at the camp of the lakhmd ruler Mundhir at Ramla near Hira when a messenger arrived with a letter from Yüsuf describing the persecution of Christians in Najran and more or less advising Mundhir to deal with the Christians under his rule in a similar fashion. The second letter, which is also ascribed to Simeon, was composed in the Ghassanid residence at Góthá on the Yarmuk. It was written just a few months later (for the date, see the following note) and contains new information from Najran as well as that known from the first letter. As Ryckmans has shown, Simeon's first epistle has to be regarded as the most important document, from which are derived not only major episodes contained in his second letter but also the first part of the Greek Martyrium Sancti Arethae (Ryckmans, "Confrontation").
86 The beginning of the first epistle (Guidi, "Lettera di Simeone," 1–2 of the Syriac text) states that Simeon and his companions left Hira on January 20 of the Seleucid year 835, which corresponds to January/February 524, and that they reached Mundhir's camp at Ramla some ten days later. There Simeon was present when Yüsuf's letter describing his actions against the Christians in Najran was read out. This information agrees with the date the Greek Acts of the Martyrs give for Arethas' execution in Najran several months earlier, in October 523; it also corresponds to the information in Simeon's second letter (Shahid, Martyrs, XVIII, 106), according to which a number of women were martyred in Najran in November 523. For the details of the argument, see de Blois, "Date," 111–114. The date given in the text of the second letter, the Seleucid year 830 (Shahid, Martyrs, XXXI, 24), differs from this information and has supported the debate as to whether the persecution of the Christian women in Najran should be dated to 523 or 528 and thus also whether the Himyarite period should be seen as having begun in 110 BCE or in 115 BCE. As de Blois, "Date," 114, has convincingly shown, the date in the text of the letter can be put down to a simple oversight on the part of the scribe who must have failed to notice the last digit in the number of the year and wrote štam ma šuṭin in place of štam ma šuṭin w-hammal (Shahid, Martyrs, ibid.).
87 Ry 508 from Kawkab is dated to the month of dhū Qiyāzān (June) 633 of the Himyarite period; Ry 507 and Ja 1028 from Bīr Himā are dated to the month of dhū Madhrān (July) 633 of the Himyarite period.
88 Shahid, Martyrs, V, 60/45–47.
89 Müller, Review, 182–185, gives a number of examples.
Hārith’s words, which we have summarized from the account given in the second Syriac letter of Simeon, allow us attempt a few cautious conclusions concerning the internal politics of Najrān and the situation of the Christians there. It would appear that Najrān was not entirely or even pre-dominantly Christian, but rather was home to merely a substantial Christian community. This is indicated by the number of martyrs, which Simeon gives as two thousand, even if Simeon’s figures are exaggerated, they amount only to part of the probable population of the city and the oasis at the time. An additional consideration is the fact that blockading the caravan routes to eastern Arabia, at a distance of some ninety kilometers or more, would have made no sense if the intention had really been to deal a death-blow to the oasis. A more likely explanation is that what was intended was a drastic demonstration to the leading citizens, both Christian and non-Christian, that they could be hit hard in economic terms at any time, simply by cutting the trade routes. The rationale behind the embargo might thus have been an attempt to stir up Najrān’s non-Christian inhabitants against the Christians.

If, in conclusion, we turn to the hold Christianity had established in Najrān, we find that it had a far shorter history than might be expected from the special place Najrān had always enjoyed amongst South Arabian oasis towns. There had been, so Simeon’s letter tells us, just two bishops in Najrān. Mār Pavlos, the first bishop, had lost his life in an earlier wave of persecution in Zafār and was buried in Najrān; the second bishop, of the same name, was already dead when Najrān surrendered. One revealing marginal detail is that both bishops had been consecrated by Philoxenos of Mabbūg, a leading figure of the Syrian Orthodox Church, which makes it likely that Christianity in Najrān was of a markedly anti-Chalcedonian bent.

The persecution and martyrdom of the Christians of South Arabia aroused strong feelings throughout Eastern Christianity—and not just there. We find an echo of the events of the time in the Qur’an, where Q 55:4 mentions the ašhāb al-ukhdūd, i.e., the “companions of the pit.” Commentators of the Qur’an have frequently seen this as being a reference to the Christian martyrs of Najrān burned alive by Dhū Nuwās.

The Second Aksumite Invasion

Not the least significant effect of the persecution of the South Arabian Christians was that it provided the Aksumite king, Kaleb Ella Asbeha, with the justification he needed to mount a large-scale offensive, supported logistically by the Byzantine Empire. This attack began in the year 525 and ended (as all the sources agree) with the overthrow and death of Yūsuf and the subsequent occupation of much of Yemen by Ethiopian troops. According to the “Life of Gregentius,” who was sent as bishop to Zafār immediately after the Ethiopian conquest, the Ethiopian king set about reorganizing both the political and the ecclesiastical state of affairs, beginning with the restoration of the damaged churches and the foundation of others; three new churches each were established in Najrān and Zafār alone. The South Arabian sources can also be supplemented with information given by Procopios. In accordance with the custom of Aksumite rulers, Ella Asbeha instated a local client king, called Esimphaios (Ἄσιμφαιός). We hear of him by the name of Simyafa’ Aswa’ in the fragmentary building inscription mentioned above, which also contains both the Christian formula of the Trinity and the name of king Ella Asbeha. The inscription erected at Mārib, composed in vocalized Ancient Ethiopic and of which only three fragments are preserved, probably originates from Ella Asbeha himself, from it we learn that he had burned down Mārib’s old royal palace, known as Sahlīn.

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90 Shahid, Martyrs, XII, 11ff./50–51.
91 Shahid, Martyrs, VII, 11/47; XXII, 25/64; other figures are given in Müller, “Himyar,” 314, and Fiaccadori, “Homenites,” 78.
92 Shahid, Martyrs, VI, 1/70:46.
93 Bruns, “Philoxenos,” 577–578.
94 For further information about Christianity in Najrān, see Müller, “Himyar,” 310–312.
98 Procopios, Wars 1.20.
99 Ist 760bis (see n. 79 above).
100 Müller, “Bruchstücke.” As emphasized in Müller, “Himyar,” 316, these fragments are of particular significance for literary history, since they contain a number of quotations from the psalms which confirm the great antiquity of the Ethiopic translation of the Bible.
101 DJE 1 + 2/18.
Towards the end of this turbulent decade, we find a text which was not composed by the victorious Christian side but by the losing side in this conflict. It is an epigraph which has been known since the beginnings of Sabean studies, located on the rock of Ḥusn al-Gharāb, the "castle of the ravens," many hundreds of kilometers away from Ṣafar on the shores of the Indian Ocean. The castle rock dominates the ancient port city of Qana', which once played a pivotal role in trading with India and in the incense trade of South Arabia. The inscription itself dates from 530, i.e., five years after the great Ethiopian invasion. It describes the restoration of the castle, detailing the improvements are said to have been performed after the king of the land of the Himyar and his tribal leaders. 

Questions as to why this inscription was to be found were raised, for it was made when it was made after the subject of much speculation. Even though it is generally agreed today that Simyafa Ḥaswata, mentioned as one of the founders of the inscription, is not identical with the client king of the same name instated by the Ethiopians, the text still raises a number of issues, not least because it neither ascribes any function to the persons it names nor does it contain any form of monothetic formula, whether Christian or Jewish. A solution may, I believe, be reached if one examines more closely the clans named as having been involved in restoring the castle. In addition to the local Yaza'an, they include the Gadanum of Marib, various tribes from the southern highlands around Ṣafar and from the Tihāma, as well as numerous families from various parts of Hadramawt. In short, the majority of the thirty-three names of tribes and clans contained in the inscription gives the impression of a who's who of the tribes and clans which had already rounded Yūsfū in his bid to overthrow the Ethiopians and their local Christian allies. This observation sheds some light on the historical context within which the text ought to be placed. After the Ethiopians king's victory, Yūsfū's vanquished supporters withdrew at least from the western part of the country and sought refuge in the Yaza'an core territory, the hinterland around Qana'. The work on the fortifications was undertaken because the Yaza'ānids and their remaining supporters must have expected that the Ethiopians would at some point mount an attack from the sea, making a fully functional defensive stronghold protecting the harbor a necessity. As we know from the sources, the attack

the time when they had killed the king of the Himyar and his tribal leaders.

C 621: (1) smiy /'wb/ w-bnyhw /rḥbw/ l’ykm / w-Md ḍhr /fr/ bnwy / l’yby’t (2) yrmn / ‘lbt / lwv / w-d-yz’n / w-gdm / (6) ṣtw / ḍn / mndn / b” (7) ṣtw / l’mt / k-wlbw / get/hw / w-bthw / w-md’tlw (8) k-ṣtw / bhw / k-ṣbd / bn / rd / ḍbd / w-syw / hbdn / z’n (9) bn / b’rd / hnyrn / k-hrwg / mlk / hnyrn / w-qtwlw / hmrn / w-rḥbn (10) ṣtw/hw / d-khm / ḍ-l’rb / w-s’q / m’tn / bnwm. *(1) Simyafa Ḥaswata and his sons Shuruḥbīlī Yakmul and Maidikarīī Yūfū, all of them sons of Luḥaybīī (2) Yurkhīm, of the clan Ya’fū, Yaz’ān, Gadanun [here follow the names of thirty more clans and tribes] (6) have made this inscription (7) at the mountain castle of Māwiyat, when they restored it, [in particular,] its wall, its gate, its cisterns, and its approach route, (8) when they barricaded themselves there after having returned from the territory of [or, of the] Ḥabashat, and had met multitudes of Abyssinians (9) in the land of the Himyar, after they [i.e., the Abyssinians] had killed the king of the Himyar and his tribal leaders from Himyar and Rāḥbātān [the region north of Sana’a]. (10) Its [i.e., the inscription’s] date of writing is [the month of] dhū Hilālāt of the year 640.*

The obvious assumption is that the founders and his sons were followers of Yūsfū who were waiting with him at the Bāb al-Mandab for the arrival of the Ethiopians and who may also have fortified other places in the Tihāma. In prosopographic terms, the Simyafa Ḥaswata mentioned in C 621 could therefore have been the person of the same name and who is, as his brother Sharahbīl Yaqub, reports in the three rock inscriptions around Ṣafar (Ry 508/9, 1028/2 [instead of bkt’ / ḍl’, according to A. Jannine, bkt’ / ḍl’ is to be read, see Nebes "Herrscherinschriften," 357 n. 176, Ry 507/10], was among those who accompanied the king to the fortress of Maddabān in the Tihāma. The circumstance that these events had happened seven years previously need not rule this out; the great rock inscription at Abadan, for example—which was made some 170 years earlier by Yaza’ān tribal leaders as well—records the acts of three generations.
never took place. On the contrary, thirteen years later, the Yaz'an and several other influential clans from M'arib were to return to the political stage, when they joined the Kinda, led by Yazid b. Kabshat, in their rebellion against the Ethiopian occupiers. These events, however, postdate the age of the Himyar and belong to the days of Abraha, under whom Yemen was to witness fifty years of Christian domination.

Appendix 1. Timeline of the Late Sabean Period

- About 280: Shammar Yuha'ish residing at his capital Zafar unites Yemen under his rule.
- About 340: Constantius II sends Theophilus the Indian to the Himyarite court.
- About 345: The Ethiopian king 'Ezana converts to Christianity.
- 383: The Himyarite king Malkikarib Yuha'min and his sons embrace monotheism.
- 472: According to a Ge'ez tradition, Azqir suffers martyrdom in the town of Najran during the reign of Shurahbi'il Yakaf.
- 519: First intervention of the Ethiopians in South Arabia, arrival of Cosmas in Adulis.
- 521: Ma'dikarib Ya'fur campaigns against Arab auxiliaries of the Persians in central Arabia.
- 522: Yusuf As'ar Yathar (dhū Nuwās) acts against the Christians and their Ethiopian allies in Zafar. He conducts a campaign to the Thāma and blocks the harbor of Maddabān on the west coast by means of a chain.
- 523: Siege and surrender of Najran, martyrdom of Arethas.
- 525: The Ethiopian king Kaleb Ella Ashbeha conquers large parts of Yemen.
- After 525: Kaleb Ella Ashbeha enthrones Simyafa' Ashwa' as king of South Arabia.
- 530: Inscription of Ḥuṣn al-Ghurāb.
- 535-575: Rule of Abraha and his sons.
- 575: South Arabia becomes a Persian province.
- 632: Islamic conquest of Yemen.

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106 C 541/14–17. See also the translation in Müller, "Stele," 268, and Nebes "Herrscherschriften," 362–367. It is obvious, that Ma'dikarib bin Simyafa', who, according to C 541/17, supports the Kinda-revolt of Yazid bin Kabshat against Abraha, is the same person as in C 621/1.


Sedov, A. V. "New archaeological and epigraphical material from Qina (South Arabia)." Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy 3 (1992): 110–137.


