

A reassessment of the chronology of the first millennium BC

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[Recently discovered archaeological and iconographic data have led to revising the chronology of the kingdoms of South Arabia in the first millennium BC. In particular, the period when the kingdom of Qatabān enjoyed political importance for the last time, and the demise of the Minaean kingdom are to be backdated to the second century BC. The chronology suggested here entails certain general historic data; the palaeographic evolution unfolded differently throughout the kingdoms while the hypothesis that the title of *mukarrib* was taken on by the various South Arabian kings on reaching their moment of greatest power, pursuant to an agreement between the kingdoms, is proved false. In general, the obvious cultural homogeneity of the South Arabian kingdoms, even from the most ancient phase of their history, took shape during a long endogenous process inside Yemen in the proto-historic period and is not the result of a cultural dissemination phenomenon emanating from a single centre of great prestige.]

Keywords: South-Arabian chronology, Qatabān, Minaean kingdom, *mukarrib*.

One of the most difficult problems we face when classifying and examining Ancient South Arabian (ASA) inscriptions for publication on the CSAI website¹ is, without a doubt, that of proposing a date for the majority of inscriptions of the first millennium BC.

For the time being, the inscriptions have been grouped together in chronological order in very broad periods. Together with the research group working in Pisa, we have identified certain characteristics of style (not only merely palaeographic but also linguistic, cultural and iconographic), which are helpful for grouping the inscriptions chronologically².

While the decision to label each of these broad periods using an upper-case letter was certainly not an inspired one (they can easily be mistaken for the periods indicated by Pirenne in her palaeography), it has made this stage of the research easier.

Up to now the shift from relative to absolute chronology accepted by archaeologists and philologists of this field has been based on the general outline of ASA history from the first millennium BC to the second Century AD proposed by Robin and others.

Robin synthesized it in his works and I used it in the *Corpus*³ and in CSAI:

1. <http://csai.humnet.unipi.it>

2. Avanzini 2008b. Qatabanic (QAT) is well suited to this operation; this is not insignificant because it points to a marked centrality of the QAT writing school. The same operation of identifying groups with stylistic connotations that are homogeneous turned out to be more problematic for the Hadramitic (HAD) corpus, where the geographic differences are greater. It is simpler to recognize a text that comes from Raybān than to attribute a text to a given chronological period.

3. Avanzini 2004, 26-33.

Period A Early first millennium BC. Supremacy of Saba'

Period B Second half of the first millennium. Supremacy of Qatabān and Ḥaḍramawt; economic importance of Ma'īn

Period C First Century BC-second Century AD. Formation of states on the high plateau, their alliance with Saba' and Qatabān

Period D Second-third Century AD. Ḥimyar war against Saba' and the Ḥaḍramawt

This chronological subdivision led to certain significant historical conclusions palaeographic evolution seemed similar in all ASA kingdoms throughout the first millennium and the title of *mukarrib* did not normally appear to be taken by ASA kings in the same period.

One of the premises of Pirenne's palaeographic study, which so far had never seriously been called into question, is the application of the criteria of palaeographic evolution to ASA epigraphic documentation overall; palaeographic changes were taken as having occurred in the same period in the whole of south Arabia.

One of the most manifest phenomena was for example boustrophedon script. Boustrophedon script is attested in Sabaic (SAB) up till the end of the fifth Century – the scarcity of boustrophedon script in QAT and in HAD was therefore taken as evidence of the development of these kingdoms and of their documentation after the end of boustrophedon script in SAB.

Although partly different, the situation regarding epigraphic documentation in Jawf does have certain similarities. The documentation at the beginning of the first millennium in this region is clearly in an archaic style of writing. But the Minaean kingdom in the strict sense, the kingdom founded on the alliance between two cities which left the great inscriptions on the walls of Baraqish and Ma'īn shows a different style of writing, so, again, it has to be set chronologically after the end of boustrophedon writing in SAB.

The second historical datum on which the absolute chronology hypothesis was based, was linked to the title of *mukarrib* which was borne by certain sovereigns of south Arabia in the first millennium BC. Whatever was involved in the role of a sovereign who bore the title of *mukarrib*, or whatever the etymology of that title, documentation seemed uniform in showing that the title of *mukarrib* itself was normally taken in turn and never contemporarily by sovereigns of ASA kingdoms when they achieved political hegemony over other south Arabian kingdoms during the first millennium⁴.

However, this "rule" in taking on the title of *mukarrib* had repercussions which are not easy to explain.

The first troublesome issue could be called "psychological".

If the title of *mukarrib* indicated the king of the most prestigious and powerful kingdom, it would be logical to assume that most of the kings of ASA kingdoms would be called *mukarrib* to bolster their supremacy however hypothetical that supremacy may have been, just as in monumental inscriptions every king always declared that he had won every war he had ever waged. The fact that the title of king of Saba' and dhū-Raydān was borne contemporarily by the enemy kings of Saba' and Ḥimyar highlights how improbable the idea is of agreement between kingdoms on who was the most important at any given time.

If, on the other hand, the absolute chronology suggested were right, documentation would appear to confirm a rotation of the title among ASA kingdoms.

4. Robin 1996, 1151 "Il semblerait que le titre de mukarrib ne puisse pas être porté dans deux royaumes différentes au même moment, sauf pendant de brèves périodes conflictuelles. Si cette observation était exacte, on pourrait en déduire que le titre de mukarrib donne autorité sur l'ensemble de l'Arabie du sud".

I even attempted to tackle this problem some years ago. I thought that the title was meant to enshrine an alliance between kingdoms bordering the desert and those on the uplands⁵; I even thought that the title of *mukarrib* had a strong religious connotation, perhaps linked to rituals in honour of the god ʿAthtar who was venerated in all the ASA kingdoms. Frankly, though, today, these explanations seem highly fragile and of uncertain premise.

The interpretation of the title of *mukarrib* might also have had to do with the common interest that every ASA kingdom had in keeping the trade routes open between their capitals even during the ever-recurring times of war between them. The stele of Timna⁶, however, a fundamental document for tackling this issue, is typical of how documentation repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the trade rights of single kingdoms and not those of the ASA community in general.

Lines 14-17 of CSAI I, 205C=RES 4337C read: “each king of Qatabān has authority over the goods and assets that pass through the territory of Qatabān”.

The trade route, however, did not pass through one kingdom alone; whether the kings of Qatabān liked it or not their authority was only over a part of the way. An alliance with the cities of Jawf was always crucial for eastern ASA kingdoms for managing overland trade.

But the historic-cultural factor that fits least with the hypothesis of rotation of the title amongst the kingdoms is that it would require a common view among all the ASA states – requiring that all the peoples of south-western ASA accepted the supremacy of a single kingdom for a given period.

One of the characteristics of ASA kingdoms throughout the development of their history was the very big differences among them; no perception of an ASA identity ever crossed any kingdom’s frontier. Indeed, we are obliged to define ASA culture with the unfortunate name “Ancient South Arabian” precisely because throughout its one thousand five hundred years of history there was never a term coined or found in documentation to identify the individuals who shared this culture. They were all a Sabaeen, a Qatabanian, or a Minaean etc., not a “south Arabian”.

But, the evolution of palaeography, which was similar in all the kingdoms, seemed to point to a single centre of culture which was so influential that it spread innovation out in the documentation of all the ASA kingdoms, crossing the frontiers of the single kingdoms.

The homogeneity of ASA culture was therefore taken to be the result of dissemination; the highly evident common traits that distinguish it from other Near Eastern cultures was to have sprung from the strength of a single centre of culture which, somehow, must have “created” an ASA culture in its historical phase. Since this centre was probably Saba’, ASA culture was assumed to be the outcome of a “sabaeization” of the south Arabian kingdoms.

In this sense, Robin’s clear remarks come to mind. “Cette division est atténuée par une étonnante unité de culture, qui apparaît dans l’écriture (identique pour les quatre langues), l’architecture, le répertoire iconographique ou les techniques. Cette unité culturelle s’explique aisément par le fait que Saba’ a créé un modèle qui a été imité par les autres royaumes.”⁶

In linguistic terms, I had come to contrasting conclusions⁷; in my view ASA languages have a common past; a proto-ASA phase gave way in a proto-historic period to many different dialects some of which became fixed as the written languages of the ASA kingdoms⁸.

I had also debated and largely rejected the phenomenon of a “sabaeization” of the other ASA languages⁹.

5. Avanzini 2003.

6. Robin in de Maigret, Robin 2006, 10.

7. Avanzini 2009.

8. Mazzini 2007.

9. Avanzini 2006, 82.

Language is one element of ASA culture and it cannot follow a pattern of development different from the other elements of that culture. In order for it to be compatible with the linguistic model I had devised, “ASA culture” would have had to become formed upstream in a proto-historic phase within Yemen¹⁰, and not be the result of a process of dissemination from a single centre of culture.

Here, though, my intention is not to cast doubt over the models of how ASA was formed, despite the need for this issue to be faced seriously sooner or later, but to rethink the chronology of the first millennium.

My revision of the chronological phasing of ASA kingdoms does not stem from generalised motives of historic reconstruction or opposing models of development, but from two precise but very distinct and different data, namely the new dates of the foundation of Sumhuran and the lion published by M. Arbach¹¹.

The archaeological excavations in Sumhuran¹² show that maritime trade began in the third Century BC instead of the first Century AD. Deep-sea trade routes, therefore, began in the Ptolemaic period and not in Roman times.

Sea routes were often thought to be better suited for cultural exchange than overland ones¹³, and rightly so.

Port traffic is not mono-directional, and with the development of maritime trade, people of other cultures began to arrive to south Arabia, not only sailors and merchants but also craftsmen and thus new ideas – it was not only the departure point for ships –; vessels from far-off lands also moored there.

It has already been maintained that with the development of sea-trade ASA art began to feel the influence of new contacts. Certain Hellenistic elements began to appear on statuary, bas-reliefs and decorations.

Examples of how this new taste was beginning to catch on in the kingdom of Qatabān appear during the reign of King *S²hr Ygl Yhr gb* who, however is dated to the last years before the birth of Christ. How can such a late arrival of Hellenistic taste in south Arabia be accounted for if sea traffic had begun centuries earlier? Even allowing for some unavoidable delay in getting to a region far from the lands conquered by Alexander, four centuries are frankly too long a lapse not to require some explanation.

On a more general level, I feel convinced that the history of ASA must be more firmly tied in with the history of the Near East of which it was a part. The political structure of ASA kingdoms was too similar to that of the kingdoms of the Near East for it only to have been affected in its formative years and then have been forever self-referencing heedless of what was happening all around it. These were mercantile kingdoms and it would have been impossible for them not to have felt change if for no other reason than the natural evolution of the markets to which they sold their merchandise.

Hence, the mistaken assumption that ASA kingdoms were agricultural, forever at war with each other, busy building dams and sending their sons off to war, and capable only of entrusting their trade to nomad tribes.

Yet again Sumhuran proves how baseless this hypothesis is. The state, the kingdom of Ḥaḍramawt with its kings, its officials and its mint is mentioned in Sumhuran; trade was not delegated in the slightest degree but kept under tight control by the state.

10. This issue is linked to a problem I have dealt with elsewhere regarding the development mechanics of ASA culture which I deem to have been mainly endogenous without necessarily contemplating migrations of people from the north as the main cause of its development.

11. Arbach 2005.

12. Avanzini 2008a, 625-629.

13. Hitgen 2005, 62.

The lion of Arbach was a seemingly unsolvable for me. The lion (fig. 1), splendidly restored by the équipe of the Louvre, sits on a plinth bearing a QAT inscription. The lion and the plinth were cast as one and must be dated to the exact same time. Arbach suggests dating the lion to the first Century BC.

Now, we either consider iconographic elements as a basis for the chronology or reject any premise for future iconographic studies and date this lion, with its manifest Achaeminid stylistic traits, in the first Century BC.

The date that Arbach suggested, however, had a solid basis. In the text – a dedication by a Minaean woman, who was obviously part of the Minaean community in Qatabān – there is mention of a Minaean king and of a Qatabanian king with his son:

Ll. 4-5: *Wqh'l Yl' mlk M'nm w-S'hr Hll w-bn-hw Hwfm Yhn'm mlkw Qtbn*

The Minaean king, together with his son 'lyf' *Ys'r* in the well-known inscription from Baraqish (M 222) together with the Qatabanian king *S'hr Ygl Yhr gb*:

M 222 3-4: *Wqh'l Yl' w-bn-s' mlky M'n w-b mr'-s' S'hr Ygl Yhr gb mlk Qtbn.*

S'hr Ygl Yhr gb was the son of *Hwfm Yhn'm*, so the two texts could mention the same Minaean king who appeared to cherish links with Qatabān and was a contemporary of the grandfather and father of *S'hr Ygl Yhr gb* as well as of *S'hr Ygl Yhr gb* himself.

The royal lineage of Qatabān would therefore be:

S'hr Hll

Hwfm Yhn'm

S'hr Ygl Yhr gb.

As we well know, M 222 is a text crucial to establishing the end of independence of the Minaean kingdom. Taking the presumed date of the last Century BC for the reign of *S'hr Ygl Yhr gb* which is presently universally accepted, Robin¹⁴ proposed setting the end of the Minaean kingdom in the same period, linking it to the undoubtedly traumatic arrival on the scene of the powerful Roman army led by Elius Gallus.

But why is *S'hr Ygl Yhr gb* to be dated with such certainty in the first Century BC?

I thought I had found substantiation for this in the *Corpus*. *Wrw'l Ġyln Yhn'm*, the son of *S'hr Ygl Yhr gb* is mentioned in two inscriptions in the wadi Ḥarīb – CSAI I, 59=RES 4329 and CSAI I, 61=Ry 497 - which have a similar text typology.

The inscriptions are construction texts commissioned by a tribe some members of which lived far from the centre of the Qatabanian kingdom – in *S'wn* (CSAI I, 59=RES 4329) and in *Zafār* (CSAI I, 61=Ry 497). There is a third inscription from the w. Ḥarīb – CSAI II, 6=Ja 2898 - the text typology of which is highly similar. This inscription mentions the Ḥimyarite king *Krb'l Wtr Yhn'm*, probably the king mentioned in the *Periplus*¹⁵.

I had therefore considered the Qatabanian and Ḥimyarite kings contemporaries.

As long as there were no doubts on the dates of the two Qatabanian kings this could have been another piece in the mosaic confirming the chronology, but if doubts exist in the chronology, the piece in the mosaic alone is fragile evidence.

We know well how the same textual typology itself is resumed even centuries later in south Arabia; suffice it to consider the documentation of J al-Lawdh.

14. Robin 1998.

15. Robin 1991.

On the contrary, the small but meaningful differences between CSAI II, 6=Ja 2898 and the other two inscriptions (different tribe, different God...), could become proof of a completely different historic background.

The iconography completely at odds with the content of the text raised too many doubts in my mind and I felt obliged to rethink the chronology of the Qatabanian kings.

Of course there was always the easy answer: there were two Minaean kings *Wqh'l Yl'* with the same names, one at the beginning of the third Century BC, and the other in the first Century BC; but regal homonyms – names + epithets – which are so frequent in other ASA kingdoms are relatively rare in Ma^cīn.

Furthermore, the QAT text on the lion published by Arbach has the typical stylistic traits of the period I have called B2. It seemed wrong to set it chronologically some centuries distant from the *S²hr Ygl Yhr gb* texts of the C style.

The iconography of the representation of the lion of Arbach made it necessary to raise the date of *S²hr Ygl Yhr gb* by at least a couple of centuries to the end of the third Century in order to explain the iconography with Achaeminid characteristics, in his grandfather's period. The last Qatabanian golden age, which assuredly was during the reign of *S²hr Ygl Yhr gb* and his son *Wrw'l Ġyln Yhn^cm*, would therefore have been between the end of the third Century and the first half of the second Century BC.

In fact, I deem it improbable that Qatabān was a great economic power in the period immediately preceding Christ and that immediately afterwards.

The long title borne by the Qatabanian *mukarribs*: *mkrb Qtbn w-kl wld^cm w-'ws'n w-Kḥd w-Dhs'^lm w-Tbnw* was proof that Qatabanian power stemmed from an alliance with the tribes of the uplands as far as the regions near the sea.

The crisis that befell Qatabān in the second Century BC is, I feel, in line with the general history of south Arabia of that time, confirmed also by new data from Sumhuram.

Aden could have been a Qatabanian harbour, initially perhaps even with links to Sumhuram itself, but from the second half of the second Century BC when Ḥimyar was formed and entered into an alliance with Saba', it seems unlikely that Qatabān would have been strong as far as the coast¹⁶.

The problem had clearly been felt – suffice it to think of the incoherence between de Maigret ("Ceci [the 14C dates of the temple of Athirat] onfirme le rôle de Tamna^c comme grand centre commercial de l'Arabie méridionale pendant le deux siècles qui précède et suit le début de l'ère chrétienne") and Robin ("la première étape de la crise est l'éclatement de Qatabān en plusieurs entités vers la fin du II^e s. av. è. chr.")¹⁷.

It was necessary to attempt to put back the date of *S²hr Ygl Yhr gb*, the end of the period of Qatabanian prestige and, *à propos*, also the end of Ma^cīn.

16. Furthermore, the content of the text of *S²hr Ygl Yhr gb* CSAI I, 208=RES 3566 cannot be underestimated. This is an atypical legal text which clearly mentions the danger of collapse of Qatabān which the king seeks to prevent. The text is on the gate in Timna' where other legal texts are carved. While in more ancient legal texts (e.g. the law against murder) the decree is clearly meant for the complex Qatabanian community, and that the king in his capital city imposes a law on all the communities that go to make up the kingdom of Qatabān, CSAI I, 208=RES 3566 is the proof of a very difficult situation in the uplands postulating authentic civil war on the part of the upland tribes and also on the part of members of the very senate of Qatabān; decrees and laws were promulgated without regal approval. *S²hr Ygl Yhr gb* took the title of *mukarrib* obliging laws to have royal approval. His attempt to re-impose Qatabanian hegemony on the upland tribes and in wādī Bayḥān was successful but short-lived.

17. De Maigret 2006, 34, Robin in de Maigret, Robin 2006, 34, Robin 2006, 14.

The main players of ASA history in the last two centuries BC were probably the same as in the early centuries AD namely Ḥaḍramawt and Saba' who, by fortuitous intuition, had forged alliances with a number of tribes of the uplands to exploit Red Sea ports.

This was the period of development of maritime trade which excluded Ma'īn and Qatabān. The overall historical picture is coherent.

Once again, a better understanding of ASA history emerges from the overland and maritime trade. Perhaps, though, it is not enough to shift the reign of a Qatabanian king and the demise of Ma'īn by a couple of centuries or so. Other data of the chronology of the first millennium have to be rethought. My aim is not to establish a complete chronological framework to contain the thousands of pertinent inscriptions. It is difficult to suggest absolute dates, I, personally, have increasingly more doubts than certainties and I am sometimes amazed by the ease with which they are attributed. A hypothetical date given to a text has often affected the dates of other texts in our studies producing a damaging domino effect. I shall therefore be happy merely to trace a general outline, present some hypotheses.

I have therefore begun reconsidering QAT documentation and it emerged clearly that documentation that I had classified as B1 in the Corpus contained certain texts with peculiar stylistic traits.

Beginning with the documentation of the king *Yd'ḅ Dbyn Yhn'ḥm* (fig. 2)¹⁸ the palaeographic style takes on some marked characteristics such as elegance in style, slender letters with little space between them. This coherent evolution can be traced through to the C style.

Yd'ḅ Dbyn Yhn'ḥm is a king who was of fundamental importance in the history of Qatabān. He left construction and legal texts carved on the city gate of Timna^c, texts regarding the construction of road passes near the capital or far away, in the southern uplands and texts which commemorate wars against Saba' and Ḥaḍramawt.

Giving due importance to the archaeological attestation of a hiatus in the settlement of the Qatabanian capital in the fifth Century¹⁹, this documentation could be considered as being from the period immediately afterwards.

But other texts have another style. The typical "Qatabanian style" has not yet become affirmed and the texts seem older in palaeographic terms (fig. 3-4).

Here, I refer, for instance, to the documentation of the *mukarrib Ḥwḥ'ḥm Yhn'ḥm* the son of *S'ḥmwtr*.

Ḥwḥ'ḥm Yhn'ḥm conquered the wādī Juba at the border of the Sabaeen kingdom. The wars with Qatabān mentioned in RES 3943 (fig. 5) are to be set, in my opinion, in this period²⁰.

RES 3943 (fig. 5) is undoubtedly a text of great interest and merits in-depth study. Typologically it is too similar to the major inscriptions of Širwāḥ, the inscriptions of *Yē'ḥmr Wtr* and *Krb'l Wtr* and it absolutely rules out the end of the fifth-early fourth centuries BC (as e.g. Kitchen suggests); a credible dating proposal for the inscription would be late seventh-early sixth Century²¹.

The beginning of the text is missing so the name of the Sabaeen *mukarrib* who commissioned it is not known, but the wars against Ma'īn and against Baraqish in particular and against the Qatabanian king

18. *Yd'ḅ Dbyn* and *Yd'ḅ Dbyn Yhn'ḥm* were they two kings or one ? (Gajda *et alii* 2009, 170-172). My preference in the *Corpus* (Avanzini 2004, 44) was for a single king. Perhaps the quest (often thwarted for scholars of south Arabia) for outstanding royal personalities who made history makes me continue to think that a single outstanding sovereign did in fact carry out the exploits commemorated in his inscriptions. This, naturally, has nothing to do with historical reality.

19. de Maigret 2004.

20. In my opinion, more than the presence of the name of the Qatabanian king, enemy of Saba': *S'ḥmwtr* (for the name of the king's father in the first half of the first millennium, see Avanzini 2006, 81), the general historic situation attested in RES 3943 is a strong proof of its contemporaneity with a Qatabanian power expanding towards the Sabaeen borders.

21. Wissmann 1982, 269-274 dates the text in the end of the sixth- beginning fifth Century BC Kitchen 2000, 509 in 480 or 360 BC. Yet again, the premise that the power of Qatabān and the development of Minaean trade are to be dated in the second half of the millennium has affected the dating of the SAB text.

S^lmwtr, clearly point to an attempt on the part of Saba' to divide an alliance that was dangerous for Sabaeen trade.

The Sabaeen king waged his war against Baraqish in order to prevent the ancient Sabaeen city from forming an alliance with the Minaean kingdom – seemingly without much success.

If the date of RES 3943 proposed here is correct the consequences would be many including the contemporariness of a Qatabanian and a Sabaeen *mukarrib* and also of a boustrophedon *ductus* in Saba' contemporaneous with a no-more boustrophedon *ductus* in Qatabān²².

Hwf^cm Yhn^cm son of *S^lmhwt^r* is attested in the legal text CSAI I, 196=Ja 2361 together with *Yd^cb Ygl* son of *Dmr^cly*, (in absolute chronology the early sixth Century).

As I mentioned above, I do not set out to resolve every problem or to set all the Qatabanian kings in chronological order. Homonymy in regal onomastics is too insidious a trap to fall into.

For example, with the account of the war between Qatabān and Saba' also mentioning *Yd^cb Ygl* son of *Dmr^cly*, the obvious date for CSAI I, 203=RES 3858, would be early in the sixth Century.

If the war between Saba' and Qatabān mentioned in CSAI I, 203=RES 3858 were the same one that is commemorated in certain inscriptions on the outside wall of the temple of Maḥrām Bilqīs in Mārib²³, the hypothesis for dating CSAI I, 203=RES 3858 to the sixth Century BC put forward here would have weighty consequences on the date of those SAB inscriptions..

But a war mentioned in SAB and QAT texts does not necessarily mean that it is the same war – there must have been several wars between the two kingdoms.

The documentation of what could be defined as the oldest B1 period of Qatabān could certainly include the market stele of King *S²hr Hll* son of *Yd^cb* (CSAI I, 205=RES 4337), which mentions the presence of a Minaean community in Timna^c.

The Minaeans were setting up their own trading posts far from Jawf both inside and outside Yemen as early as the sixth Century. Since its formation, the Minaean kingdom seemed to prefer forging alliances with the eastern kingdoms of Qatabān and Ḥaḍramawt rather than with its neighbour Saba'. In my opinion there was a definite reason for this. Ma'īn never fully dominated the whole of Jawf; certain cities again crucial in overland trade²⁴ and perhaps most of the north remained in the sphere of influence of Saba'. For internal reasons pertaining to Jawf and in order to maintain trading autonomy, Ma'īn could certainly not ally itself with its overpowering neighbour²⁵ who continued to hold sway over part of the territory but preferred to establish close links with Qatabān and Ḥaḍramawt.

The end of the Minaean kingdom and its alliance with the eastern kingdoms, and of the Qatabanian hegemony could be dated, as mentioned, to the beginning of the second Century BC.

If my new chronological reconstruction of the kingdom of Qatabān is correct there is a further problem to be solved.

There is a known late QAT documentation which, luckily for us and thanks to the historical studies by Robin on the earliest centuries AD, we are able to date with certainty to the second Century AD²⁶. So

22. The existence of a Minaean kingdom as early as the sixth century is proved, furthermore, by the recently published B-L Nashq inscription (Bron, Lemaire 2009).

23. CSAI I, 203=RES 3858 mentions the Sabaeen *mukarribs* *Yd^c'l Byn w-S^lmh^cly Ynf w-Yt^c'mr Wtr*; Ja 550 mentions *Yd^c'l Byn* but together with other *mukarribs* (*Ykrbmlk Wtr Yt^c'mr Byn Krb'l Wtr*) not mentioned in CSAI I, 203=RES 3858) In Ja 555 the *mukarrib* *Yd^c'l* is mentioned without an epithet. For the inscriptions on the wall of Maḥrām Bilqīs see Stein 2005.

24. For instance the ancient *Ns²qm* (al-Bayḍā').

25. Even though it is certain that periods of alliance with Saba' are proved in a number of MIN inscriptions (e.g. M 203: *w-kl 'l'lt M^cn w-Ytl w-(k)l 'l'lt w-s²ymhy w-'mlk w-'s²c b S^lb* "and all the gods of Ma'īn and Yathill, and all the gods, the patrons, the kings and the tribes of Saba").

26. The end of Qatabān: 170 AD can be pinned down to the decade. Robin in de Maigret, Robin 2006, 15.

what happens in Qatabān between the late second half of the second Century BC and the early second Century AD?

Archaeology gives no indication of clear hiatuses in Timna^c in this period, the city undoubtedly continued to be inhabited and a phase of abandonment only emerges at the end the first Century AD; I feel that the quest for an answer will lead us to re-think how the ASA state was organized and the dynamics by which it legitimized power.

In this sense, the demise of Ma^cīn sheds some light. The end of the kingdom is not traumatic, the tribe of Ma^cīn continue to be attested, the Minaean cities are not overrun or destroyed by enemy invaders but continue to be lived in by the same people who lived there before, but the sense of the Minaean state vanishes with its kings, institutions, its monumental inscriptions and its language²⁷.

The lack of epigraphic texts in certain periods of ASA history is without a doubt due to the element of chance in their discovery, but not only that.

Monumental, epigraphic documentation vanished from when the structure of the state had collapsed or, perhaps more simply and certainly more frequently than we think when it lost its ideological drive.

The last phase of Qatabanian history in the second Century AD is significant in this sense.

As long as the Sabaean Himyarite alliance held, the state of equilibrium between Saba'-Himyar and Ḥaḍramawt remained stable; the two powers who accumulated enormous wealth through maritime trade and the opening up of the immense new market of the Roman Empire, lived in a period of peace. In the second Century, however, another war broke out which was to last a long time in south Arabia.

Qatabān recreates the simulacrum of a state that was short lived with a new capital and epigraphic documentation endowing it with new legitimacy.

South Arabian epigraphic documentation provides us with one of the most interesting examples of close links between monumental texts and state in the Near East and more in general in the ancient world.

If my hypothesis for reassessing the chronology of the first millennium is correct then, assuredly, a number of criteria that have been taken so far will undoubtedly prove to be mostly false.

First and foremost, the title of *mukarrib* was taken by more ASA sovereigns contemporaneously than hypothesized by Robin; there was no "common" decision as to who had the right to bear it.

Mukarrib indicated a regal function. It is true that sovereigns who took this title were important in first millennium ASA history. The *mukarrib* declared wars, executed major public works and had a special relationship with the god by rituals only he could perform. In other words he performed the typical functions of ancient Near East sovereigns. Robin was perfectly right, therefore, in stating that the *mukarrib* was the sovereign of a kingdom which at that point was organized, well-managed and possessing a central power, but I fail to see proof in the documentation of the rule by which we must wait for all the Sabaean *mukarribs* to end in order to date the first Qatabanian *mukarribs*.

Suffice it to consider RES 3943, in which a Sabaean *mukarrib* waged war against a Qatabanian *mukarrib*.

In addition, the new dates of the Ḥaḍrami *mukarribs* *S^lmh^{rm}* and *Ys²hr^l* in the third-second Century BC make them contemporaneous with certain Qatabanian *mukarribs*.

This, in my view at least, proves the falsity of the hypothesis of a rotation of the title through a general agreement within the ASA community.

There is one interesting element in Robin's hypothesis on the function of the *mukarrib*, namely many *mukarribs* are attested in the documentation of the cities of the Jawf. The alliance between the other ASA kingdoms and the cities of the Jawf was crucial for the development of overland trade. The title of

27. Avanzini 2010, 10.

mukarrib can be linked to overland trade which is the reason for it disappearing in the second Century BC with the development of maritime trade.

On closer examination, the only element that supports dating the first Qatabanian *mukarribs* and the supremacy of the Minaean kingdom to the end of the fifth Century is palaeography. Pirenne would have been happy.

It is not until the end of style A (again following the classification I suggested in the Corpus) of Saba', and the end of the boustrophedon texts, that the QAT documentation can be set that was no longer in style A.

It goes without saying that in general terms this hypothesis is highly unlikely. In the epigraphic documentation of the ancient world, geographic differences and stylistic lags in certain regions are the rule²⁸.

The documentation which, according to my hypothesis, is to be set in the sixth Century BC clearly shows the difference in palaeographic styles among the various ASA kingdoms.

Conclusions

If the hypothesis of chronology proposed here is correct, the chronology of the Qatabanian kingdom is to be revised, and the end of its period of major development and wealth in particular backdated to around the first half of the second Century BC.

The trade links among ASA kingdoms appear clearer in the light of this new scenario. There is no doubt that the Sabaeans were the first great merchants in ASA which is why they were the only people of south Arabia to be mentioned in indirect sources in the early first millennium.

The history of Jawf is fundamental for understanding how overland trade was run. Since earliest times, the cities of Jawf, authentic ports not of the sea but towards the desert, chose to forge alliances (or more believably were forced into alliances) with the other ASA kingdoms. Saba' always made its presence felt in Jawf, and it ran overland trade from *Ns²qm* in particular. Ma'īn, by contrast seldom forged an alliance with Saba' preferring to counter Sabaean interference in close proximity to its territory by forging links with Qatabān and Ḥaḍramawt.

On a more general level, what emerges as fundamental in this new chronological perspective of the first millennium is that it points to a diversification in the evolution in palaeography among the single ASA kingdoms – as in any case was to be expected in the light of previous epigraphic corpora of the ancient world.

By and large, the documentation of each single kingdom underwent its own palaeographic evolution and therefore must be studied individually and only subsequently combined with documentation of other kingdoms within a general historical framework.

That which is being proposed here detracts substantial force from the hypothesis of homogeneity of ASA culture with a single Sabaean centre of cultural dissemination.

I obviously do not deny that there was continual contact among ASA kingdoms nor that centres of culture did exist and that they did disseminate culture beyond the frontiers of a single kingdom. These, however, were "centres" of culture and not a single centre "creator" of ASA culture.

28. We have already seen examples of geographic differences inside the HAD corpus (see footnote 2). Surely, there is no point in listing the examples since geographic differences are well-known in Latin and Greek documentation. Here I only mention the early difficulties in dating the Aramaic inscription of Tell Fekherye which in palaeographic terms was very archaic. The study of the content of the text, however led to its being dated later than its palaeography suggested. The writing style is a geographic phenomenon not a chronological one.

ASA culture, a distinctive component of which is a distinctive, splendid geometric and regular form of writing, emerged from a common proto-historic phase and then began to split up into different styles while maintaining contacts and exchanges with the specific cultures of the single kingdoms.

In other words the model of development of ASA culture was identical to that of its linguistic development, and the linguistics and culture attested at the beginning of ASA history mark the conclusion of a long process which mostly took place within Yemen.

ASA culture entered the international circuit of the Near East, participating in the innovations of the Iron Age there and in the newly acquired power of mobility and decentralisation (hence population migrations) which happened at this time²⁹.

This brand new scenario opening up, and contacts with the Near East make Nebes's hypothesis³⁰, which postulates strong links between the Near East and south Arabia as a reason why ASA culture blossomed, partly right. As it stands, however, I do not find the hypothesis itself fully acceptable.

Nebes imagined a major migration of Sabaeans from the North to have arrived at some point in history, who then proceeded to "create" the ASA culture, strongly imposing their new cultural traits to the ancient inhabitants of Yemen.

Yet again, Nebes presupposes a significant process of dissemination of Sabaean cultural traits which I challenge.

I do not believe that scholars of south Arabia are on the point of agreeing with this point. ASA culture seen as the result of a process of "sabaization" in a period of history is something which many colleagues are too fond of – but I feel that it has to be seriously re-examined.

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29. See recently Mazzoni 2010.

30. Nebes 2001.

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TABLES/figures

[to Alessandra Avanzini's article: "Reassessment of the chronology of the first millennium BC"]



Fig. 1. Arbach Lion 1

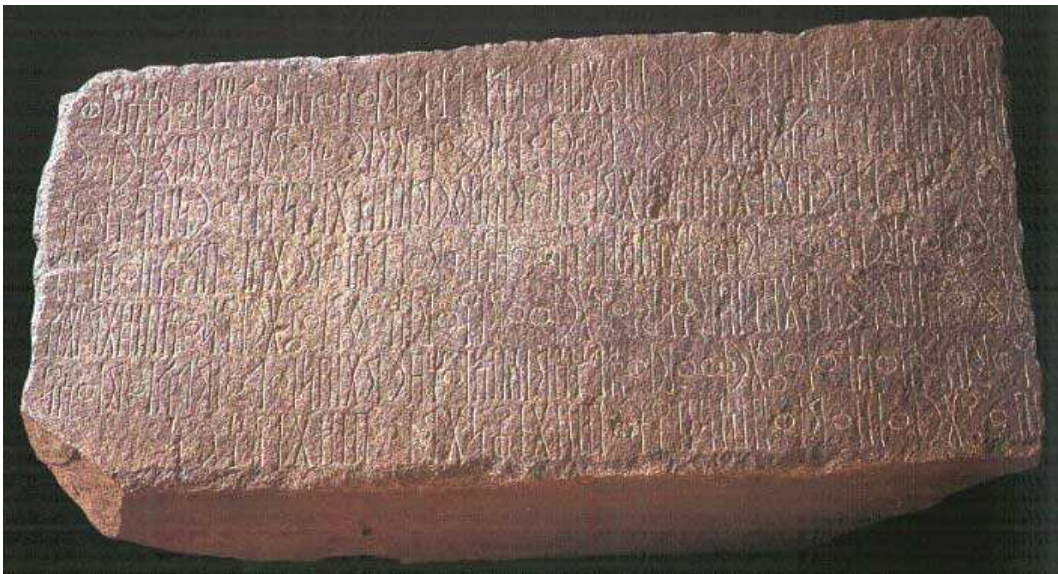


Fig. 2. CSAI I, 18 = MuB 673

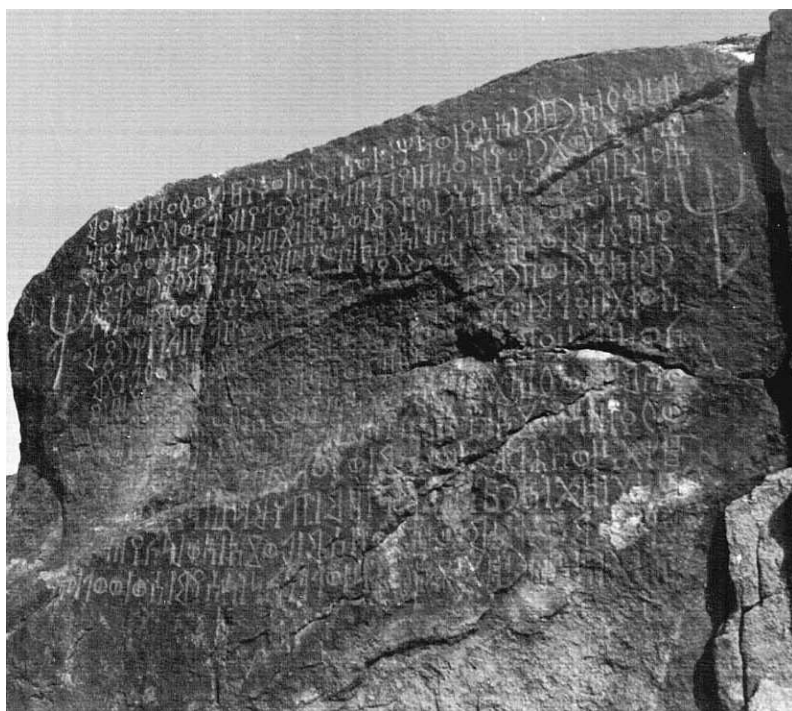


Fig. 3. CSAI I, 196 = Ja 2361



Fig. 4. CSAI I, 205 = R 4337 A

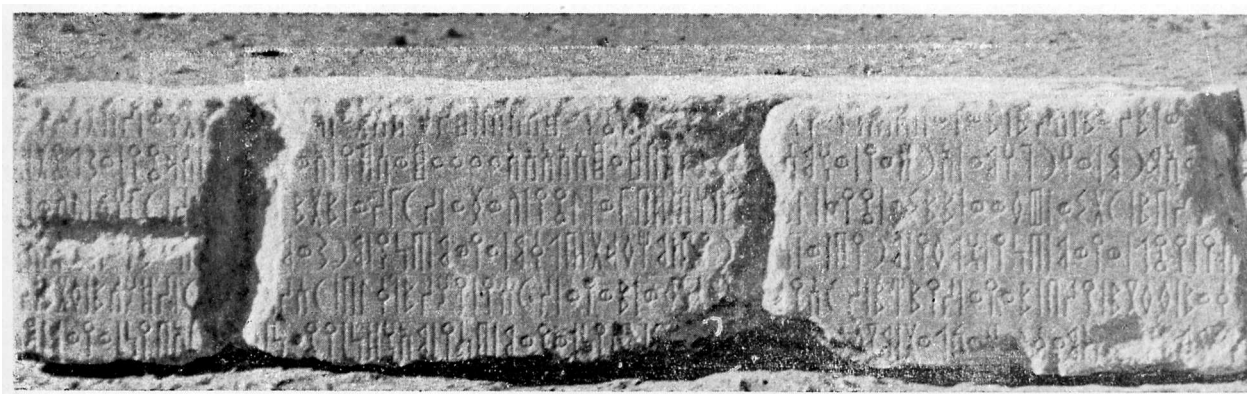


Fig. 5. RES 3943