

**An Inscription in Ancient Sabaic
on a Bronze Kettle from Färäs May, Tigray**
by Norbert NEBES¹

The bronze kettle discussed in this article has been found many years ago during the reign of Emperor Häylä Šəllase by a peasant during ploughing in Guldām nearby Yäha.² The kettle was found intact. It was therefore used for cooking at festive events, such as marriage ceremonies, and also rented out for such purposes, by the discoverer of the kettle. Since the kettle base, however, finally became perforated due to its extensive heating, it cannot be used anymore and is now kept in the owner's house in Färäs May. The present author only has a few photos at his disposal, such as the one published here (fig. 1), and has not seen the kettle itself. According to the information given by *Ato* Häylä Šəllase and Dr Wolbert Smidt who made an autopsy of the kettle, it measures 64.8 to 66 cm in width, and 34 cm in height. The kettle bears an inscription on one side, with the characters being ca. 6.3 cm in height, and to the right of it we find a monogram (fig. 2) – composed of several letters – which is also found in reversed form on the right handle of the kettle (fig. 3).

HG Färäs May 2010

Transliteration

[monogram] *tb'krb / d-yšrn*

Translation

„Tubba‘karib, (member) of (the clan) Yasrān“.

Comment

The name, which is usually vocalized as Tubba‘karib, is quite well-known in the ancient South Arabian onomasticon (see Tairan 1992:88 and Hayajneh 1998:103). In the Abyssinian highlands it is also known from a dedication from Mätära in Eritrea, as a father's name (RIÉ 55): In that inscription a Sabaean who originated from the central Yemeni highlands dedicates an altar to the deity ‘Attar.

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² I thank Mr. Häylä Šəllase Gäbräkidan from Färäs May, Mekelle University, for his information on the subject and for his permission to publish the inscription found by him; his initials HG are used for the inscription's *siglum*. He was so kind to contact me after the conclusion of an agreement of cooperation between Mekelle University and Jena University, and shared this finding with me, suggesting me to translate the inscription, which he treats briefly in his BA thesis (Häylä Šəllase Gäbräkidan 2011). I thank the German Archaeological Institute for making it possible to get additional information on this kettle. – For the *sigla* of other inscriptions mentioned in this article see Stein 2003:274-90.



Fig. 1: Photo courtesy by Häylä Šəllase Gäbrəkidan (from: Häylä Šəllase Gäbrəkidan 2011)

Much more revealing is, however, the part of the name starting with the determinative pronoun *d-*, which can be identified as a clan name. Moreover, this name clearly indicates its South-Arabian origin. Yasrān is the ancient name of the southern oasis of Mārib³. In addition, the name – its basic meaning being „prosperous, lucky“ – is also used to designate houses⁴ and constructions linked with hydrology⁵. More rarely, it also appears as a second name added to the main name⁶. However, in our context the most important observation is that this name also appears as the name of a clan – and this clan can be precisely located at a place, which seems quite significant. Located approximately 18 km south of Mārib is the massif called Ġabal al-‘Amūd. The rocks are covered by numerous inscriptions. Many of them only consist of personal names, sometimes, however, constitute full phrases⁷. As we can deduce from the profession *grbyn* (J 2927b, J 2928a), which is sometimes mentioned together with the names, and also from the longer inscriptions, the

³ The earliest sources are the reports on their deeds by Yīṭa‘amar (DAI Širwāh 2005-50/1), and by Karīb‘il (R 3946/6); the youngest source is the inscribed stela of Šuraḥbī‘il Ya‘fur (C 540/26f).

⁴ For example *bytn ysrn* (MQ-al-Jifjif 1/3) „the house Yasrān“.

⁵ For example *m’ ḥd-bmy ysrn* (R 4626/1) „their cistern Yasrān“.

⁶ For example as part of the name Sumuhūyafa‘ Yasrān (z.B. as-Sawdā’ 4), an early king of Naššān.

⁷ Many of these inscriptions have been published by Jamme (1980).

named persons were stonemasons. These stonemasons had evidently used the Ġabal al-‘Amūd massif as a quarry. Among the great number of names found inscribed in the rocks, we also find several names of members of the Yasrān clan (*d-ystrn*). In the following several examples of names (as published by Jamme 1980) shall be listed⁸:

- J 2949 (boustr.): (1) *'mkyrb⁹ bn* (2) *'bkrb* (3) *d-ystrn* (4) *šl' zftm* „‘Ammkarib, son (2) of ‘Abkarib, (3) from the Yasrān clan (4) has cut stone benches out of the rock¹⁰“
- J 2906b: (1) *'myt' b* (2) *n tb'krb* (3) *d-ystrn* „‘Ammyita‘, son (2) of Tubba‘karib, (3) from the Yasrān clan“
- J 2934: (1) *blk'mr* (2) *bn dmr'(m)* (3) *r d-ystrn* „Halak‘amar, (2) son of Damar‘amar, (3) from the Yasrān clan“
- J 2935a: (1) *'bkrb bn* (2) *'m' mr d-y(3)strn* „‘Abkarib, son (2) of ‘Amm‘amar, from the clan (3) Yasrān“
- J 2936a: (1) *nbtyf' b* (2) *n 'mkrb* (3) *d-ystrn* „Nabaṭyafa‘, son (2) of ‘Ammkarib (3) from the Yasrān clan“.

Our current record of inscriptions consists of approximately two hundred Ethio-Sabaic ones and a large corpus of a remarkable ten thousand inscriptions on the South-Arabian side. This already allows one definite interpretation: The Yasrān clan can be identified in quite a number of cases of the Epigraphic-South-Arabian inscription corpus. All known examples can be linked with the Mārib region, and all of them stem from a place where the stonemasons have inscribed their names or even added a short description of their work. Due to the good number of examples from the South-Arabian side, we can exclude with a high degree of certainty that there may be another explanation for the name of the Yasrān clan, from which the owner of the bronze kettle of Fārās May descends. This is further supported by the monogram composed of letters, found to the right of the inscription, and repeated (in a mirrored form) on the right-hand side handle. The same monogram is found identically under the two name inscriptions J 2934 and J 2936a of the Ġabal al-‘Amūd, which had been set up by members of the Yasrān clan (see above). Even if at this stage we cannot decipher the monogram yet, this observation shows that it was linked with this specific clan. Thus, we can conclude that Tubba‘karib belongs to the same clan as those who have inscribed their names at the Ġabal al-‘Amūd. A further argument in favor of the interpretation that Tubba‘karib may

⁸ The author could witness himself in March 2001 that by far not all inscriptions are included in Jamme’s (1980) publication. Among the yet unpublished inscriptions there are also a few which have been set up by members of the Yasrān clan.

⁹ Probably mistaken for *'mkrb*.

¹⁰ Stone benches and stone tables, placed in a specific areal within the temple’s courtyard (as for example in Širwāḥ), were used for ritual meals.

himself have belonged to the occupational group of stone masons (even if he does not explicitly define himself as a *grbyn*), are the records on the Ethiopian side. Indeed, they point to a presence of Sabaean stone masons in the Ethio-Sabaean sphere, coming especially from Mārib (see below).



Fig. 2: The monogramme below and on the right handle, photo by Wolbert Smidt

One should not exclude even the possibility, that the Tubba‘karib of the bronze kettle was the father of the ‘Ammyita‘ mentioned above (J 2906b). However, this must at the moment remain open to question, as ‘Ammyita‘ is known as a name of quite a number of different persons in Ancient Sabaic (see the lemmata in Tairan 1992:172-74). The original home of the Yasrān clan shall, finally, rather be located in the oasis of Mārib and not at the Ĝabal al-‘Amūd. Indeed, we can hypothesize that there is a connection with the name of the southern oasis of Mārib.

Significance of the finding

Such an exceptionally fine piece of South-Arabian bronzework is, to my knowledge, known from only one more example: In 1950/1 the *American Foundation for the Study of Men* found a bronze kettle in Timna‘ during the first excavations of the capital of Qatabān under Wendell Phillips. During the restauration carried out at the *Bavarian Regional Authority for Heritage*

*Conservation*¹¹ the Qatabānian inscription was completely uncovered and finally fully discussed by Müller (2002)¹². According to the restaurateur of the kettle, Lehr (1999:235), the slightly oval kettle measures between 97 and 105 cm in width and 48 cm in height, so that the kettle of Tubba‘karib is considerably smaller if we judge from the information we received from *Ato Häylä Šəllase* and Dr Wolbert Smidt. Even if we evidently have to wait for the restauration and the metallurgical and other analyses¹³, we can now already state that the kettle of Fārās May is several centuries older than the one of Timna‘. This observation is based on the evidence of the palaeographical comparative analysis, which shows that the lettering on the kettle of Fārās May points to a date from about the 7th century BC or even earlier.



Fig. 3: The monogram on the right handle, photo by Wolbert Smidt

Another distinctive feature can be found in the different function of each kettle: The bronze kettle of Timna‘ is clearly an object of dedication, as its inscription shows – while the inscription of Tubba‘karib does not lead to the same conclusion. The kettle of Tubba‘karib is an object of high quality and its production involves a lot of work; therefore, one would expect, also in comparison to similar cases, at least the key word *hḡny* - „has dedicated“ - after the name of the donator, if not the name of the god to whom the dedication is

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¹² Cp. also Jändl 2009:176f.

¹³ Only these can answer a number of questions. For example only the analysis of the composition of the metal can clarify where the kettle has been produced, i.e. in Tigray or in Mārib, from where his owner would have brought it.

addressed. Given that any dedication is, however, missing, it seems that the name inscription together with the monogramme (figs. 2-3) is rather intended to document the ownership of Tubba‘karib and his clan, even if it cannot be totally excluded that the kettle had been a votive object¹⁴.

The inscription of Tubba‘karib is one more indication for the presence of Sabaean stonemasons on the other side of the Bāb al-Mandab, whose involvement is by now documented from different places of the Ethio-Sabaean realm. We shall refer, for example, to the recent discovery in ‘Addi ‘Akawəḥ in southeastern Tigray of an inscription of a Sabaean stonemason, who seems to have originated from the northern part of the Central-Yemeni highlands¹⁵. We also know, since some time, the stonemasons’ inscriptions from the ‘Almaqah temple of Mälazo / Gobočəlla ca. 10 km east of Aksum¹⁶, whose dedicators say about themselves that they came from Mārib (*d-myb*)¹⁷. The same stonemason clan is also present in Yäḥa¹⁸. Furthermore, the dedications of Mätära seem to have been set up by Sabaean stonemasons¹⁹.

This occupational group, which is known from southern Arabia since earliest times, was above all responsible for works on stone, i.e. stonemasonry. To this refers the Sabaic expression *grb*, which means ‚dressed stones‘²⁰. However, the tasks of a *grbyn* are not fully understood, if we think of the Sabaean stonemason as a craftsman responsible solely for stone carving and other kinds of stone work. It is probable that these stonemasons were also responsible for the planning and architectural realisation of whole temples. As we understand from the recently discovered ‘Almaqah temple of ‘Addi ‘Akawəḥ, the king Wa‘rān gave the Sabaean stone mason Ḥayrhumū the task to work on the temple, which shall be interpreted as a responsibility of planning and realizing the complete construction of the temple²¹. Therefore it is evident, that the Ethio-Sabaean rulers had brought Sabaean stone masons into the country for the construction of temples and probably also of other buildings²².

¹⁴ The stylized bull heads which form the ends of the handle hint to the emblematic animal of the main Sabaean god ‘Almaqah, which suggests that it had been dedicated to this god, but I believe that this is not enough to definitely deduct that the kettle had been a votive object.

¹⁵ On DAI ‘Addi ‘Akawəḥ 2008-2 see Nebes 2010:226f. for a detailed analysis. First information is given by Gajda – Yohannes Gebre Selassie – Hiluf Berhe 2009:40f.

¹⁶ On the location see Curtis 2007:694f.

¹⁷ For example RIÉ 26, 27.

¹⁸ RIÉ 39.

¹⁹ RIÉ 53, 55, 56.

²⁰ This word is also used by the Yemenite authors of the Arabic medieval period and is known until today in the Yemenite dialects (s. Al-Selwi 1987:59f. and Behnstedt 1992:180 below). The lemma in *Sab. Dict.* s.r. GRB II has to be corrected accordingly.

²¹ It is probable that he erected it together with several colleagues whose inscriptions are not extant any more.

²² They may have settled there permanently afterwards, or returned to southern Arabia after the finalisation of their work. From a later period we know a case where stone masons had returned to their home town after the finalisation of their task: Ḥaḍramitic stonemasons

This points to a close relationship with the Sabaean realm. However, this observation should definitely not lead us to the conclusion that the kingdom of Di‘amat was a „colonial“ offspring of the Sabaeans. On the contrary, the epigraphic record points to a number of linguistic, and other features, which confirm the well founded hypothesis that Di‘amat was a differentiated ancient entity, which was on the one hand coined by Sabaean cultural elements, and, on the other hand, had also integrated, from the beginning, significant autochthonous features²³.

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erected the city of Samārum at the Indian Ocean, and then (as we can conclude from KR 4/5, an inscription which was set up in this context) they returned to the capital Šabwa, which was 800 km far; cp. on this Stein 2011:178f.

²³ This question is discussed from an epigraphic point of view in Nebes 2010:230-33.

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