

CONTACTS BETWEEN CULTURES

West Asia and North Africa
Volume 1

Edited by
A. Harrak



The Edwin Mellen Press
Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter

New Inscriptions from the Bar^ʿān Temple (al-^ʿAmā^ʿid) in the Oasis of Mārib¹

Norbert Nebes

Seminar für Semitistik der Philipps-Universität
Republic of Germany

In the oasis of the ancient capital town of Mārib, a number of sanctuaries dedicated to various Sabaic deities were situated. Of these sanctuaries, the most famous one is the temple of ʿAwām, or Maḥram Bilqīs, in which the imperial god of the Sabaeans, ʿAlmaqah, was worshipped.

At the beginning of the fifties this sanctuary was partially excavated by the American Foundation for the Study of Man during a brief campaign in which hundreds of Sabaic inscriptions were discovered. Walking directly west from the Maḥram Bilqīs for just over a mile one comes upon five very high monolithic pillars belonging to another significant sanctuary.

We know from the few inscriptions copied by Eduard Glaser in the last century and Ahmed Fakhry in the late forties of this century from the area of these ruins that this temple was dedicated to the imperial god ʿAlmaqah and that its name in Sabaic is Bar^ʿān.

In the autumn of 1988 and in the spring of 1990, the first two campaigns in the area of the Bar^ʿān temple were conducted by the German Archaeological Institute under the direction of Professor Jürgen Schmidt. During these two campaigns, about a dozen Sabaic inscriptions were brought to light.

In my lecture, I would like to give a short survey of the recently found inscriptions. After reviewing these inscriptions I will then discuss in more detail two texts which deserve our special consideration. Apart from these two texts, the recently discovered inscriptions contain dedications to the deity ʿAlmaqah. These dedications are written according to different formulas and must be dated to the early and middle Sabaic periods.

The votive texts of the early period, the palaeography of which points to the 5th or 6th century B.C., are inscribed on altars, ibex friezes and blocks of sandstone. These texts are formulated very concisely. In general, they consist of one sentence often followed by the closing invocation of the deities ʿAṭtar, ʿAlmaqah and qāt Ḥamyim.

When we look more closely at the structure of each of the inscriptions, we find that they all start with the name of the dedicator and his filiation, that is "so and so, son of so and so," and are then followed by the name of the clan

1. An in-depth treatment of the inscriptions discussed in this paper will be published in the upcoming volumes of the *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen*.

or tribe. After the full name of the dedicator is given, the key words are introduced in the form of *hqny/ʔlmqh* or—the plural—*hqnyw/ʔlmqh*, meaning “he or they dedicated to ʔAlmaqah.”

What is particularly striking about the texts from the early period is that no epithet for ʔAlmaqah is given. In other words, only ʔAlmaqah and not “ʔAlmaqah the lord of Barʔān” is addressed, as we usually find in votive inscriptions of the later period.

The phrase *hqny/ʔlmqh* or *hqnyw/ʔlmqh* is then followed by the object of dedication. A variety of objects can be distinguished in these votive texts. For instance, two of the inscriptions record a piece of land being dedicated to ʔAlmaqah and thereby also to the temple. Dedications of persons, common for the early period, are also attested. In one instance, a woman named Farʿat (*frʿt*), is dedicated to ʔAlmaqah. This quite probably indicates that the person had been enlisted for various services to the temple.

In addition, in a fragment of two lines inscribed in boustrophedon, a votive phallus, in Sabaic *bultān* (*bhṭn*), is mentioned as the object of the dedication. And finally, in one other text inscribed on an ibex frieze a votive object following the phrase *hqny/ʔlmqh* is missed out.

As we know from a number of comparable inscriptions, however, whenever the object of dedication is omitted in the text, it is understood to be the same object as the one in which it is inscribed. In our case that means that the ibex frieze bearing the inscription is the object of dedication.

Furthermore, this inscription provides us with a point of reference as to approximately when it must be dated. The dedicator is designated as the *qayn* (*qyn*) or the “administrator” of Yadaʿʔil and Yiṭaʿʔamar and Karibʔil. The names Yadaʿʔil, Yiṭaʿʔamar and Karibʔil, most certainly referring to rulers of the early period, repeatedly occur in exactly the same order in several early Sabaic inscriptions.

Having evaluated these inscriptions in his chronological studies of the early Sabaic period, Hermann von Wissmann came to the conclusion that the rulers in question must be dated—carefully calculated—to the 5th century B.C. We therefore have good reason to assume that our inscription on the ibex frieze likewise originated in the 5th century B.C.

During these two campaigns, votive texts of the middle Sabaic period, encompassing the first four centuries A.D., have also been discovered. The specific characteristic of these texts is that the object of dedication is generally represented by a statuette. Also, compared with the votive inscriptions of the early period, the texts from the later period are more lengthy and more elaborate. For instance, one votive inscription of nine lines discovered in the 1990 campaign reports that a statuette, in Sabaic *ṣalamān* (*ṣlmn*), was dedicated to ʔAlmaqah because he had saved the dedicator, one Wahabšamsun, from a controversy (*ṭqlʔ*) he had had in the sanctuary with a man from Ḥawlān.

In a fragment of a votive inscription from the same period, we read the phrase *sbʔ/wd rʔdn*, which certainly belongs to the title “(king of kings of) Sabaʔ

and *dū Raydān*." This title gives us an indication that the inscription must have been written sometime between the first and the third century A.D., the period when large regions of Yemen were ruled by the kings of Saba² and *dū Raydān*.

Having concluded my short summary of the votive inscriptions I would now like to turn to two more difficult texts which deserve closer examination.

The first text is represented by a boustrophedon inscription of four lines found on a wall. It contains a decree given by the administrators of the Bar²ān temple. The transcription of the text, *DAI Bar²ān 1990-1*, reads:

- (1) *kn/qwmw/wftll/fm²nr/kbr/qyn/br²m/w²qyn/ ←*
- (2) *br²m/bklytlunw/btltty/²lmql/bbr²m/lkd/²y →*
- (3) *t/fnz/ltlwkb/wrdt/br²t/br²m/lr^cy/wl/t ←*
- (4) *grd/wdmhm/sm^ch/blg/fltlnuw/ →*

I translate as follows:

Thus is decreed and ordained unanimously by ^cAnun²amar the magistrate of the administrators of Bar²um and by the administrators of Bar²um on the authority of ²Almaqah in Bar²um: 'If a goat is found to have approached the wall of Bar²um in order to graze let it be slaughtered. And blood is a testimony for it according to their ordinance'.

This is not the appropriate place to discuss my translation in detail. I would, however, like to deal with a few particular aspects of some of the passages.

The term *qayn* (*qyn*) which occurs in the plural as *qiyān* and ²*aqyān* in the first line is attested in a number of early Sabaic inscriptions. This term is most appropriately translated as "administrator." As is evident from the first two lines, the Bar²ān temple was administrated by these ²*aqyān* and even had a magistrate, in Sabaic *kabīr* (*kbr*), in charge of these administrators.

These functional titles illustrate that the temple should not be regarded as an abstract entity but rather as a small, well organized community. As we have seen, the votive inscriptions also provide evidence for this fact since persons as well as property were dedicated and—in this sense—given over to the deity and thereby to the temple.

The name of the temple as attested in our inscriptions is a further remarkable point. In the inscriptions from the later period the name of the temple appears as Bar²ān (*br²n*), that is to say the name ends with the letter Nūn. In our text, however, the name of the temple shows the letter Mīm at the end (*br²m*). Therefore we must assume that in the early period to which our decree must be dated the form Bar²um was used for the name of the temple. Without a doubt, the last two lines contain the core of the decree. Simply summarized, they state that any goat found grazing by the temple wall should be slaughtered. From a syntactical point of view this passage is expressed by a conditional sentence, its protasis beginning with ²*yt/^cnz* and the apodosis with *wl/tgrd*.

The last sentence beginning with *w-dmlm*, however, proves more difficult. Since *-lm* in *w-dmlm* cannot be interpreted as the suffix of the third person plural, the only convincing possibility is that the consonant *h* be considered as an extension of the root *dm*, meaning "blood." If this suggestion is accepted,

dmḥ- should be recorded as a plural-stem of *dm*, to which the Mīm, the morpheme of the status indeterminatus, is attached.

I understand the sentence which I translate as "and blood is a testimony for it according to their ordinance" to mean that blood from the goat must be painted on a visible place in order to demonstrate that the slaughtering actually took place, and this place would probably be the temple wall itself.

In closing, I would like to discuss briefly a second inscription which does not belong to the sacral context found in the other inscriptions from the Barʿān temple. This particular inscription is built into the facade of a southern stone structure situated in front of the Temenos wall. What is especially striking about this inscription is that the letters originally chiselled out of the stone in relief are almost completely destroyed.

In bright sunlight it is possible to make out the individual letters and therefore the entire text can be reconstructed. The transcription reads as follows (DAI Barʿān 1990-φ2):

- (1) [...] / ʔkbrw/š^cbn/ḏtrqy/ ʔdm/ḏšhr/b
 (2) [rʔ or ny]w/wḥw/rn/wlšqrn/šrlḥmw/rḥb/šrlḥ/byḥmw/š^cbn/bwst/
 hgrḥmw/mrd^cm/b^ct
 (3) r/w [...] /wʔlmqḥ/wḏt/ḥmyym/wḏt/b^cdnm/wbšhr/wb/mqymt/ʔnr ʔḥmw/
 wddʔl/wfb^ckrb/bny/ḏšhr

Translating the text is hardly the problem. . The first line on the polished surface of the stone must certainly start with the names of the builders. The readable text begins as follows:

... the magistrates of the tribe ḏTRQY, the clients of the (clan) dū Saḥar, built, founded and completed their upper storey (called) Raḥab, the upper storey of their house (called) Ša^cbān in the middle of their town Marda^cum with the help of ʔAḏtar and ...—in the lacuna the name of a further deity must be assumed—and (with the help of) ʔAlmaqah and ḏāt Hanyim and ḏāt Ba^cdānim and with the help of Saḥar and with the assistance of their lords Wada^cʔil and Tubba^c karib of the Banū dū Saḥar.

It is now evident from my translation why the letters were destroyed. The reason is that the inscription records the construction of a completely different building, specifically, the upper storey of a certain house in a town called Marda^cum. If the stone with this particular inscription had been used for our building at the Barʿān temple, the content would not have corresponded to the actual situation. In other words, the stone was used, but the letters were obliterated since the text was formulated for an entirely different occasion.

The content of the inscription is directly related to another more difficult question: The house Ša^cbān, the upper storey of which was completed, is situated, according to the end of line 2, "in the middle of their town Marda^cum." Up to now a town called Marda^cum only occurs in one other inscription, dated to the 7th century B.C. This inscription records that the Sabaic ruler Yada^cʔil ʔarīḥ bin Sumuhu^calī, who was known for building temples, fortified Marda^cum. According to the place where this inscription

was found, Marda^{um} has been associated with a small area of ruins situated in the oasis of al-Ğūba south of Mārib and over 30 km. away from the Bar^{an} temple. With regard to our destroyed inscription the following question is immediately raised: How can we explain the existence of an inscription at Mārib-Bar^{an} which actually belonged to a building in a town over 30 km. away? Without a doubt, the Banū dū Saḥar mentioned in lines 1 and 3 refer to Mārib, since this clan was settled there.

As is evident from the text, the inhabitants of the town Marda^{um}, representing the tribe dTRQY, were clients of the Banū dū Saḥar. It is also evident that the Banū dū Saḥar gave assistance to them for the construction of their house. Although a connection between Mārib and the town Marda^{um} can thus be established, I must confess that I can only speculate as to why the stone bearing the inscription was reused in a building at the Bar^{an} temple. I would at least like to offer two suggestions: First of all, the inscription could have been abducted from Marda^{um} in the middle of the Sabaic period for unknown reasons, possibly during a war. I myself prefer a second possibility which suggests that the inscription was prepared in Mārib, perhaps as the Banū dū Saḥar's contribution to the house, but for whatever reasons was not delivered to the town Marda^{um}. At any rate, it is evident from the palaeography that the inscription dates to the post-Christian period, more precisely to the 3rd or 4th century A.D.

By turning to a rather general conclusion from the epigraphic material brought to light during the two campaigns we can establish that it consists of inscriptions representing various types of formulas from different periods. As we have seen, apart from one text, all inscriptions refer to the god ʔAlmaqah and must be dated approximately from the 6th or 5th century B.C. up to the 3rd or 4th century A.D. In other words, as far as can be determined from the inscriptions known up to this point, we may conclude that over a period of about one thousand years the Bar^{an} temple existed as a sacred place dedicated to one and the same deity, the imperial god ʔAlmaqah.