THE MARTYRS OF NAJRĀN AND THE END OF THE ḤIMYAR: 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 Cosmas[2] 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 Ḥimyarite 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, "Märtyrer" 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"[4] 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,[5] 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.[6] The other text, also in Greek, can be found on the marble throne itself and dates from a later, post-Christian period.[7] 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.[8]

Both of the copies Cosmas made for the governor of Adulis were intended for Ellatzbáas (Ἐλλατζβάας) whose residence was nearby in Aksum and who, as we are told in passing, was just preparing for war with the Homerites.[9] This directs our attention to the other side

[4] Cosmas, *Christian Topography* 2.54–55; Wolska-Conus translates εἰκών as "stela", which obviously is part of the throne, see Phillipson, *Monuments of Aksum*, 123–154. For the significance these thrones had for Aksumite rule, see Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 110, and Brakmann, "Axomis," 748.

[5] RIE I, no. 276 (with bibliographic notes) and RIE III.A 26–32 (translation).

[6] Cf. in general Hölbl, *Geschichte*, 56–57.

[7] RIE I, no. 277 (with the relevant bibliographic notes); translated in Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 222–223 and RIE III.A 32-45; the most recent review is given by Fiaccadori, "Monumentum Adulitanum," 1010–1012.

[8] See the discussion in Brakmann, "Axomis," 726–727. Since the Adulitana secunda mentions the Sabeans and not the Ḥimyar, Robin ("Première intervention," 155) has conjectured that the author may have been the Abessinian king Gadūrat mentioned in C 308 (or one of his immediate predecessors), with whom the Sabean king 'Alhān Nahfān concluded an alliance around the year 190 CE. An alternative king has recently been suggested by Fiaccadori "Monumentum Adulitanum," 1012.

[9] Cosmas, *Christian Topography*, 2, 56: μέλλων ἐξιέναι εἰς πόλεμον πρὸς τοὺς Ὁμηρίτας τοὺς πέραν, "because he intended to campaign against the neighbouring Homerites." If we follow Simeon of Bēth Arsham's two Syriac letters and assume a date of 523 for the events in Najrān and the death of Arethas (see below), which were followed by the great Ethiopian counteroffensive of the year 525, while Cosmas claims to have witnessed the Ethiopian king's mobilization in Adulis "at the beginning (of the rule) of Emperor Justin," which took place in 518, then he cannot have been an eyewitness of the great (second) invasion but only of the first one. The latter is also mentioned in the *Book of the Himyarites* (see below), and its command was entrusted by Ella Aṣbeḥa to one Ḥayyān, whose official function is not specified; see RIE I, no. 191/34–35, as against de Blois, "Date," 126, n. 55, according to whom this first invasion took place in the time of Ella Aṣbeḥa's predecessor.

of the Bāb al-Mandab, to South Arabia. Although Cosmas mentions them in the margin, Ellatzbáas' 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 Aṣbeḥa,[10] 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 Ḥimyar 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 Ḥimyarite royal titles, compose his political self-depictions in Sabean, and distance himself quite clearly from the Negus in Aksum.[11] 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.[12] 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 Ḥimyar and Aksum reached its culmination.[13] In addition to the information given by Procopios[14] and a short

[10] That is the reading of Ellatzbáas' full name, according to the Aksumite Source, RIE I, no. 191/7f.: *klb l ' (8) l l 'ṣbḥ*.

[11] For the historical figure, see Sima, "Abraha," 42. A further inscription by Abraha has recently been uncovered on the northern sluice of the great dam of Mārib; see Nebes, "New 'Abraha Inscription."

[12] Al-Mad'aj, *Yemen*, 53–55.

[13] For a systematic overview of the Syriac, Greek, and Ethiopian sources, see Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 19–41.

[14] 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 Najrān" that has been transmitted in three different Syriac versions, namely, the first and second letters of Simeon of Bēth 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 Negran.*[15] Located in the southwest of modern Saudi Arabia, at the junction of the former frankincense roads to northwestern and eastern Arabia, Najrān was home to the largest Ḥimyarite Christian community. Najrān was also the Abyssinians' bridgehead in northern Yemen[16]—as it had been at the time of the first Aksumite intervention in South Arabia[17]—and it was against Najrān that the Ḥimyarite king Yūsuf and the Yaz'anid tribal leaders allied with him directed their most decisive blow.

Yet, the conflicts in Najrān 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 Najrān by Ḥimyarite troops.[18] 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', Ḥimyar, and Ḥaḍramawt as the main protagonists but also involving the Abyssinians, who dominated the western lowlands and the western

[15] Several centuries later the *Martyrium Sancti Arethae* was translated into Arabic, with the Arabic version in turn serving as the basis for a Ge'ez translation. Both texts have recently been edited by Bausi and Gori, *Tradizioni Orientali*.

[16] As early as the first quarter of the third century, Najrān and the Abyssinian forces stationed there were the target of a campaign by the Sabean king Shā'irum Awtar; see J 635/23f.

[17] The first Abyssinian intervention in South Arabia has to be distinguished from that which took place during the period we are concerned with here; it lasted for less than a century and is believed to have taken place between 190 and 280 CE; for details, see Robin, "Première intervention."

[18] As to the inscriptions of Bi'r Ḥimā and Kawkab, see below.

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 Ḥimyar of Ẓafār. Whereas the regional wars of the mid-Sabean period would appear to have reflected purely regional interests,[19] the conflict between Ḥimyar 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;[20] 'Ezana's conversion to Christianity in the second half of the 340s hence was to place the relationship on a new footing.[21]

Numerous features of Aksumite coinage clearly show that Roman influence was present already several decades earlier.[22] It is also known that the Byzantine Emperor Justin I (518–527) gave more than ideological assistance to the Aksumite king Ella Aṣbeḥa's plans for invasion.[23] 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,[24] which the Ethiopian force of the second invasion in 525, then under the personal leadership of Ella Aṣbeḥa, used to transfer to the Arab mainland.

[19] The three dozen or so campaign accounts of the Sabean kings and their officers that were found at the great Awām temple in Mārib 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 Aksums," 412, is more cautious ("Alles spricht freilich dafür, daß 'Ēzānā unter dem Pontifikat des Frumentios getauft wurde, vermutlich um die Mitte des 4. Jh., bald nach Frumentios' Ordination in Alexandreia 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 Ḥimyarite court in Ẓafār is far sketchier. We know that diplomatic ties between the Sasanians and the Ḥimyar began relatively early on, soon after the Ḥimyar had expanded and consolidated their rule over all of South Arabia. From a dedication at the great Awām temple in the Mārib oasis (Sh 31) we know that around the beginning of the fourth century, a Ḥimyarite delegation returned from a successful diplomatic mission to the royal cities on the Tigris, Seleucia, and Ctesiphon.[25] Sasanian influence in Ẓafār would appear to have extended to the field of art as well.[26]

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.[27]

The Ḥimyar'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 Ḥimyar of the southern highlands, who were centered around their capital Ẓafār,

[25] Müller, "Gesandtschaft," has dealt with this inscription in detail and reports that the delegation also visited the Azd in Oman and the Tanūkh on the lower Euphrates, two tribal groups which at the time were allies of the Sasanians. In a recent contribution, Potts, "Sasanian relationship," returns to the question of the motive underlying this delegation. He has suggested that it may have been connected to the birth of Shapur II, and that it took place around 310/311, being "a direct response of the South Arabian monarch's having recieved word of this important event in Sasanian history" (id. 203).—The epigraphic sources currently available allow us to trace relations between Persia and South Arabia back to the Arsacids. On a bronze plaque from the Wadd temple in Qaryat al-Faw, depicted on a poster of the King Saud University Press from the year 1407 AH, Minean merchants from Qarnāw report having traveled up the Tigris as far as Seleucia (the third from last line: *k-nhr / ʿd / slky*).

[26] Verbal information, P. Yule; see now Antonini, "Un manufatto ḥimyarita."

[27] The majority of the sources reporting on the Sasanian occupation of Yemen are works by Yemenite Arabic authors and medieval Arabic historians and which exhibit certain retrospective distortions and legendary elements. The beginning of Sasanian rule in Yemen has been placed between 570 and 585; see the details given in Potts, "Sasanian relationship," 206–211.

began to assert themselves against the northern highland tribes, from amongst whom had been the successors to the kings of Saba' from the second century CE on.[28] Slightly more than twenty years later, the Ḥimyarites had also gained control over the great Wadi Ḥaḍramawt and the South Arabian coast.[29] Towards the beginning of the fourth century, Shammar Yuharʿish was the sole ruler of Yemen, as expressed in the titles used by him. The kings of the Ḥimyar no longer styled themselves just as the kings of Saba' and of Raydān (meaning their royal palace in Ẓafār) but also of the newly conquered territories.[30] The period of warring kingdoms had been brought to an end, and South Arabia had been reunited.[31]

The beginnings of the Ḥimyar 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 Bāb al-Mandab were part of the area held by the Qatabanian kings, ruling from their capital Timnaʿ in the Wādī Bayḥān; this is also confirmed by the third-century BCE Alexandrine librarian Eratosthenes.[32]

[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 Ḥaḍramawt had been considerably weakened by the Sabean king Shāʿirum Awtar, who plundered and destroyed the capital city, Shabwa, around the year 230 before it eventually succumbed to Ḥimyarite domination under Shammar Yuharʿish. On the other hand, the Ḥimyarites engaged in a number of campaigns into the Wadi Ḥaḍramawt even after their realm had been united, namely, during the joint reign of the kings Dhamarʿalī Yuhabirr and his son Thaʾrān Yuhanʿim (cf. Nebes, "Kriegszug" and recently Robin, "Ḥimyar au IVe siècle," 136–145.). Similarly, the great rock inscription from the Wadi ʿAbadān—which dates to 360 CE and contains an account of the acts of three generations of Yaz'anid tribal leaders who explicitly recognized the suzerainty of the Ḥimyar of Ẓafār—mentions that Ḥaḍramawt had burned down their city of ʿAbadān (ʿAbadān 1/32). It would thus appear that individual cities of the Wadi Ḥaḍramawt were able to maintain their independence from the Ḥimyar of Ẓafār until at least the first half of the fourth century.

[30] For instance YMN 13/11–13: *šmr / yhrʿš / mlk / sbʾ / w-ḏ-rydn / w-ḥḍrmwt / w-ymnt*, "Shammar Yuharʿish, the king of Saba' and dhū Raydān and Ḥaḍramawt and Yamnat," where Yamnat probably refers to the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula and the southern coastline between Aden and Ḥaḍramawt; 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 ruler of Mārib, Mukarrib Karibʾil Watar, had succeeded in subjecting all of Yemen; see Nebes, "Tatenbericht," and id., "Itaʾamar."

[32] Reported by Strabo, *Geography* 16.4.2; this external account can now be confirmed by indigenous 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 Ḥimyarite 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 Ḥimyarite 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 Ẓafār 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 Sawā' in Ma'āfir (in today's al-Ḥujarīya).[35] From the main road today leading south towards Aden, one turns off eastwards after Yarīm, reaching the fertile Ẓafār 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 Ẓafār 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 area[37] and on excavating a monumental stone building.[38]

Yet even from the evidence of surface finds one can say that Ẓafār shows markedly fewer inscriptions than Mārib, and that future excavations are likely to bear this out. On closer examination, this

[33] For more details see Nebes, „Märtyrer," 14 n. 37.

[34] Pliny, *Natural History* 6.104.

[35] *Periplus*, par. 23.

[36] Ulrich Jasper Seetzen briefly visited Ẓafār in July 1810 and made drawings of a fragmentary Ḥimyarite building inscription in the village of Mankath at the foot of the mountain, as well as of the monograms of the Ḥimyarite kings incorporated into the local mosque. For more on this see Nebes, "Ulrich Jasper Seetzen."

[37] These dimensions are similar to those of the city of Mārib.

[38] See the provisional excavation reports in Yule, "Mapping," and id. et al., "Ẓafār."

circumstance allows us to draw some significant conclusions. The known inscriptions from Ẓafār 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 Yāsirum Yuhan'im and his son Shammar Yuhar'ish,[39] we know of three similar inscriptions from the palaces named Shawḥaṭān, Kallānum, and Hargab, all built in the years 383 and 462 by the Ḥimyarite kings Malkīkarib Yuha'min and his sons,[40] and by Shuraḥbi'il Ya'fur.[41]

What is significant about these findings is the almost total absence in Ẓafār of any dedicatory inscriptions of the kind found in such abundance elsewhere in South Arabia. We know that even after Shammar Yuhar'ish unified the kingdom, the Ḥimyarite kings continued to record their political self-portrayals not only in building inscriptions but also in the form of dedications. In Ẓafār, however, they would appear to have done so only to the extent of honoring the locally venerated gods, such as Wagal, and Simyada' 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 Ḥimyarite kings were seeking to place themselves within this tradition and thereby to endow their rule with the necessary legitimacy.

Ḥimyarite Monotheism

The Awām temple contains Ḥimyarite 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 Ẓafār but also throughout South Arabia. Within a relatively short

[39] E 14, par. 1, relates that the two kings set out for Mārib (*hgrn / myrb*) from their palace of Raydān (*bytn / rydn*) in Ẓafār.

[40] R 3383/3 (Shawḥaṭān) and Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 2/1f. (Kall[ān]um; this addition was suggested by A. Sima at the *Orient-Symposium* held at Bamberg in 2002).

[41] Gar ŠYa/A3=ZM 1/3 (Hargab).

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 Awām temple, to have been abandoned. The inscriptions were no longer addressed to the ancient astral gods such as Almaqah, ʿAthtar, or Shams, but to a single deity, called the "Lord of Heaven" or the "Lord of Heaven and Earth," who is also called *Raḥmānān*.[42]

Debate amongst scholars continues as to whether this Ḥimyarite 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 Ḥimyarite Raḥmānism.[43] The fact that a Christian background has been assumed for at least the first years after the Ḥimyarite 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 Ḥimyarite court at Ẓafār, 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 Ḥimyarite 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]

[42] Other descriptions are "God, the Lord of Heaven" as well as Raḥmānān with the attributes given above. See also the tables given by Gajda, "Débuts," 625–628, and Robin, "Judaïsme," 170–173.—The first of the royal inscriptions containing a monotheistic credo are the two building inscriptions of Malkīkarib Yuha'min 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, "Débuts," 612, and has been translated and commented upon in id., "Inscription." It dates to the year [37]3 or [36]3 and was made by tribal leaders from Sum'ay, who refer to Tha'rān Yuhan'im and his sons as their lords.—Recently, Robin "Ḥimyar 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, "Märtyrer", 17 n. 45.

[43] See for example Müller, "Religion und Kult," 191, and Gajda, "Débuts," 620–621. For a synopsis with detailed interpretation of the sources, see Robin, "Judaïsme," 170–172.

[44] Müller, "Theophilos," 1473.

[45] Philostorgios, *Church History* 3.4–5.

[46] The findings from the Awām temple in Mārib show that Dhamar'alī Yuhabirr and Tha'rān Yuhan'im, the kings ruling at the time, still placed their dedications to Almaqah there, and even several years after Theophilos' visit to the Ḥimyarite court dedications to Almaqah continued to be placed there, as the (unpublished) inscription MQ Maḥram Bilqis 1 shows, which is dated to 351 (461 of the Ḥimyarite era). It may very well be that the conversion of the Ḥimyar king described by Philostorgios, probably Tha'rān Yuhan'im, was of short duration and, if it extended to others at all, only included the king's immediate entourage.

Contrastingly, a number of factors do exist which support the view that Ḥimyarite monotheism was oriented towards Judaism from the outset. The first indication can be found in the name Raḥmānān itself. Although *raḥmānā* 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 Ḥimyar adopted Raḥmānān 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 Raḥmānān 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 Ḥimyarite king Yūsuf. Thus we find the inscriptions of the Ethiopian king in Yemen, Abraha, beginning with the formula, "with the help of Raḥmānān and his Christ," which is sometimes extended to a trinity: "with the help of Raḥmānān and his Christ and the Holy Spirit."[49] The fact that Raḥmānān was used to refer to the Christian God at the time of

[47] Rightly pointed out by Gajda, "Débuts," 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 chaldäisches 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 *raḥmānā* as a synonym for the trinitarian god except in the writings of Afrem—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 *raḥmānā* is used not even once. Instead, Syriac employs the term *mraḥḥmānā* to describe the merciful god, cf. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, vol. 2, 3884, and Rom 9:16 (*alāhā mraḥḥmānā*). Further examples can be found in Kiraz, *Concordance*, vol. 4, 2716, and in the second letter of Simeon of Bēth Arsham, in which Christian women are described as replying to Yūsuf's demand that they abjure Christ and convert to Judaism: (*da-*)*mšīḥā alāhaw wa-ḇrehū da-mraḥḥmānā*, "Christ is God and the Son of the Merciful" (Shahid, *Martyrs*, XVII, 20). The occurrences of *raḥmānā* 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, 417b), where it is used in place of the Hebrew *raḥūm*, correspond to the use of *mraḥḥmānā*, *mraḥḥmān* and *raḥmṭān* in the Pshīttā.

[49] See Ry 506/1, DAI GDN 2002–20/2–3, or C 541/1–3, and, just as clearly Christian, the inscriptions Ist 7608bis and Wellcome A 103664b, which were composed a few years earlier, after the Ethiopian victory over Yūsuf.

Abraha does make it probable, though, that the name was familiar to South Arabian Christians already before the Ethiopian invasion.[50]

Now, upon a systematic examination of the monotheistic credos 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 Raḥmānān and/or terms such as "Lord of Heaven (and Earth)." It is noticeable that all the proclamations by Ḥimyarite kings stemming from the period under discussion fall into this category.[51] The second group, which is considerably smaller, includes those inscriptions that were made by South Arabians professing the Jewish faith. Thus an inscription from Ẓafār, dating from the last quarter of the fourth century, describes how a "private citizen" named Yehūdā Yakkaf 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.[52]

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 Christian diction is lacking. Thus, at the end of the fourth century, South Arabia became home to Jewish communities[53] and South

[50] To date this has not been proven by inscriptions from Christian circles in the Tihāma and Najrān. One possible clue is given by the building inscription of an Ethiopian delegation in Ẓafār made at the time of Marthad'ilān Yanūf (Gar AY 9d), whose introductory formula calls upon Raḥmānān, Lord of Heaven. Robin's assumption that *raḥmānā*, as used in the first epistle of Simeon of Bēth Arsham (Guidi, "Lettera di Simeone," 3, 13) and in the *Book of the Himyarites* (Moberg, *Book of the Himyarites*, 13a, 23), also refers to the Christian God (see Robin, "Judaïsme," 114–115) cannot be upheld because the passages mentioned refer to Yusuf's words stating that the Christians believed Jesus to be the "son of the Merciful." As shown by the passage from Simeon's second epistle quoted in n. 48, Christian Syriac expresses the merciful God with the term *mraḥḥmānā*.

[51] See, for example, Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 2, R 3383, C 540. In this context, Robin, "Judaïsme," 105 and 153–154, speaks of a monotheism "sans parti pris explicite," which was only declared to be part of Judaism under the reign of Yūsuf.

[52] Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 1/3: *w-b-ṣlt s'bhw / yśr'l*, "and with the prayers of his tribe of Israel"; see also Müller, "Religion und Kult," 190 and Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël," 848, for more details. Further inscriptions containing credos that are unambiguously Jewish or exhibit a Jewish background are mentioned in Gajda, "Débuts," 619, nn. 18 and 19 and Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël," 843–844 and 882–890.

[53] Ahroni, *Yemenite Jewry*, 47–48, claims that the strong influence which Judaism had on the Ḥimyarites' conversion is evidence that the Yemenite Jews of the time were not "judaized Arabs" but rather members of "those Jewish communities in Yemen that had been populated by the descendants of Jewish exiles" (ibid.).

Arabian clans professing Judaism.[54] If we go by the testimony of Philostorgios' church history, Judaism had become established even at an earlier date.[55] On the basis of these findings, then, it seems very likely (and this is the currently prevailing view) that the Ḥimyarite monotheism evidenced by the rulers' inscriptions was in the beginning influenced by Judaism rather than by Christianity.[56]

This supposition is supported by a number of political factors that can be located on the opposite side of the Bāb al-Mandab, in Africa. King 'Ezana of Aksum, whose titles bear witness to his claim to the South Arabian territories of Saba' and Ḥimyar, 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,"[57] and his coins display Christian symbols.[58] It is thus quite understandable to find the Ḥimyar joining the other form of monotheism a short time later, if only as an ideological countermeasure against their

[54] In the context of a recently published bilingual Hebrew/Aramaic-Sabean funerary inscription from Israel, Sima has stressed that Ḥimyarite 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 Ḥimyarites, which has recently been extensively discussed by Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël," 836–841 and 890–892.

[55] 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.

[56] This raises the question of why Jewish tradition, and especially the Mishnah and the Talmud, makes no mention of Ḥimyarite kings who had converted to Judaism or of Yūsuf, who clearly professed the Jewish faith. Two possible answers have been proposed by Robin, "Judaïsme," 152–153, and Robin "Ḥimyar et Israël," 855. For the "new" religious political concept resulting from the king's conversion to Judaism that has been ascribed to the Ḥimyarite kings by Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël," 861 and *passim*, see the comments given by Nebes, "Märtyrer," 20 n. 60.

[57] RIE I, no. 271/10; for details on 'Ezana's pagan and Christian inscriptions, see Brakmann, "Axomis," 747–751.

[58] 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, "Axomis," 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.[59] According to this source, at the time of the Ḥimyarite king Shuraḥbi'il Yakkaf (mentioned in a building inscription in Ẓafār dated to 472[60]) a Christian priest called Azqīr attempted to proselytize in Najrān, upon which he was seized by the local Ḥimyarite nobility and sent to the royal court for sentencing. In Ẓafār he is said to have engaged in debate with Jewish scholars as well as with the king, who subsequently had him sent back to Najrān to be executed.

The Ḥimyarite 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: Yūsuf systematically repressed the Christians and their Ethiopian supporters in Ẓafār, Najrān, Mārib, the Tihāma, the western lowlands, and in Ḥaḍramawt. 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 Shuraḥbi'il Yakkaf.

Ma'dīkarib'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 Ḥimyar of Ẓafār 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'dīkarib Ya'fur, Yūsuf's immediate predecessor on the Ḥimyarite throne,[61] in particular were

[59] Müller, "Himyar," 311, and id., "Religion und Kult,"191–192. The Ethiopian text has been published by Conti Rossini ("Documento," 728–738). More literature is given by Fiaccadori, "Homerites," 58 n. 69.

[60] C537 + R 4719.

[61] Ca. 519–522; see Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 75.

quite noticeably pro-Byzantine. Authentic evidence of this comes from a rock inscription found well over one thousand kilometers to the north of Ẓafār in central Arabia, which states that Ma'dīkarib Ya'fur fought a campaign against rebellious Bedouin tribes.[62] In itself this information is not especially surprising, given that such campaigns had been part of Ḥimyarite policy since the beginning of the fifth century.[63] What is of particular interest for our context, however, is the fact that the Ḥimyarite 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 Bēth Arsham, which describes the persecution and martyrdom of the Christians of Najrān a few years later, makes mention of a Christian woman from one of Najrān's foremost families called Ruhm; she is said to have lent Ma'dīkarib Ya'fur, Yūsuf'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.[64]

Such a clearly pro-Byzantine attitude on the part of the last Ḥimyarite king before Yūsuf cannot be coincidental.[65] The sources

[62] The inscription at hand is Ry 510 at Ma'sal al-Jumḥ, which is 240 km to the west of Riyadh; see Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 75.

[63] Thus the rock inscription that Abūkarib As'ad had made one hundred years before at the same place (Ry 509) tells of the Ḥimyarites' first great campaign in central Arabia against the Ma'add, through which the Kinda monarchs of the house Ākil al-murār were set up as client kings; for details on this, see Robin, "Royaume ḥujride." Islamic tradition has it that in the course of his campaigns, Abūkarib As'ad also besieged Yathrib and was converted to Judaism by the rabbis of the local Jewish tribes; see Müller, "Himyar," 308, and Newby, *History*, 38.

[64] Shahid, *Martyrs*, XXVII, 6–10. The Syriac text misspells the Ḥimyarite 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.

[65] Indications of a rapprochement can be found as early as the time of Marthad'ilān Yanūf, who probably reigned between 500 and 518 (see Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 73–75). If we are to follow Robin, "Royaume ḥujride," 696, in identifying the Arethas mentioned by Photios with the Kindite Ḥārith b. 'Amr b. Ḥujr, 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 Ḥimyar and their king, Marthad'ilān Yanūf, during whose reign we know there to have been an Ethiopian presence in Ẓafār. There exists a building inscription dating from 509 (Gar AY 9d) made by an Ethiopian delegation which erected a house in Ẓafār 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 Ḥimyar 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 Yūsuf, Maʿdīkarib Yaʿfur, 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.[66]

We can, however, be fairly certain that it was around this time that the first Ethiopian intervention in South Arabia took place,[67] and that it was this intervention which was to lead Maʿdīkarib Yaʿfur to pursue a decidedly pro-Byzantine political course. We also know that this pro-Byzantine policy of the Ḥimyarite court in Ẓafār 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 Ḥimyarite court in Ẓafār nor by the tribes from the central Yemeni highlands but rather by the Yaz'anids, a tribe located far to the southeast of the Ḥimyarite heartland,[68] whose territorial sway extended from the central highlands in the west to the western fringes of the Ḥaḍramawt 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

[66] This is maintained by Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 75–76. Details of the first invasion are still unknown. If indeed there was a rapprochement between the Ḥimyar and Ethiopia and the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Marthad'ilān Yanūf (see the previous footnote), the latter can hardly have been the object of an Ethiopian invasion.

[67] This has already been clearly shown by de Blois, "Date," 118, with references to the *Book of the Ḥimyarites* (Moberg, *Book of the Himyarites*, 3b, 19), which reads *mēṭīṯhōn qaḏmāytā*, "their [i.e., Ḥaywānā's and the Ethiopians'] first coming."

[68] The three large inscriptions summarizing Yūsuf's military endeavors—Ry 507, Ry 508, and J 1028—show that Yūsuf was supported by the Yaz'an tribal federation and that Yaz'anid tribal leaders were heavily involved in his campaigns. The *Book of the Himyarites*, too, identifies one of Yūsuf's commanders (*ḥaḏ men rabbay ḥaylawwāṭeh*) as *dwyzn*, a clear reference to the clan name dhū Yaz'an; see Moberg, *Book of the Himyarites*, 25b, 28, and the glossary thereof, LXXXVIIf.

words, by formerly powerful Sabean clans and tribal federations who had long ceased to play an important role under Ḥimyarite rule.[69]

Yūsuf dhū Nuwās and the Anti-Christian Backlash

The central figure in this conflict who was to lead the Yaz'anid counter-movement was King Yūsuf, known in Arabic tradition as Dhū Nuwās.[70] With regard to Yūsuf 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.[71] Later Arabic writers portray Yūsuf 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.[72] Genuine information about Yūsuf as an historical figure may be found in the three large rock inscriptions

[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. Saʿīd al-Ḥimyarī, *Shams al-ʿulūm*, vol. 10, 6797). According to Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī, the true (South Arabian) name was Zurʿa b. Ḥassān (see Caskel, *Ǧamharat an-nasab*, vol. 2, 612). The name Zurʿa appears in a fragmentary Sabean building inscription from Ḍāff (Ist 7608bis/12: *zrʿt / ḏ-mrḥbm*) which must have been made very shortly after Ella Aṣbeḥa's victory, since it names both the Ethiopian king and the client king he installed, Simyafaʿ Ashwaʿ (see below), together with introductory and concluding Christian formulae. This Zurʿa must, however, have been a completely different person.

[71] Both versions avoid the biblical name, Yōsēp. In the *Martyrium Sancti Arethae*, par. 1, Yūsuf is called by his clan name Δουναας (see below), while in both of Simeon of Bēth Arsham's epistles he is addressed neutrally as *malkā* and *malkā ḏa-Ḥmīrāyē* (see, for example, Guidi, "Lettera di Simeone," 7, 12 of the Syriac text) or pejoratively as *raššīʿā Yūḏāyā* (Shahid, *Martyrs*, III, 5, among others). The *Book of the Himyarites* gives his name as Masrūq, although with the orthographic peculiarity that it is written upside down (see Moberg, *Book of the Himyarites*, pl. 5, XIXr, l. 4, XXr, –2), which may be indicative of a later emendation. Masrūq is also the form given in the introductory passage of the Syriac translation of a hymn by Johannes Psaltes in praise of the Ḥimyarite martyrs (Schröter, "Trostschreiben," 403, l. 3 of the Syriac text) and by the eleventh-century *Chronicle of Seʿert* (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,[73] which one of his commanders had made during the blockade of Najrān.

Already Yūsuf's name and titles express a political agenda: "King Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar, king of all the tribes."[74] 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 Yūsuf and his followers and the Ethiopians during their first invasion.[75] The name Yūsuf itself has similarly clear connotations; it was uncommon in ancient South Arabia[76] and must have been borrowed from the Hebrew;[77] it therefore amounted to a definite political signal in support of a Jewish type of monotheism.[78] The royal titles by which the inscriptions refer to Yūsuf

[73] See n. 68 above.

[74] Thus J 1028/1: *mlkn / ywsf / 's'r / yṯ'r / mlk / kl / 'ś'bn*. See also Ry 507/1 which contains the spelling *ysf*, and Ry 508/2 which shortens the title by omitting *yṯ'r / mlk / kl / 'ś'bn*.

[75] This may be what is referred to in the second epistle of Simeon of Bēth Arsham (Shahid, *Martyrs*, XXI, 3–6) by the words ascribed to Māḥiya, one of the maids of Arethas/Ḥārith b. Ka'b, shortly before her execution, according to which the Ethiopians vanquished the Ḥimyar or their (rebellious) tribal allies while Yūsuf managed to avoid certain death through the help of a merchant from Ḥīra (see also *Martyrium Sancti Arethae*, par. 2).

[76] With respect to *yśf* used as a name of buildings, Sima in Nebe/Sima, "Grabinschrift," 83, n. 52, argues for a Sabean derivation of the name from the root *wśf*. The morphology alone is against this argument, since among the frequent occurrences of the imperfect *yśfn-*, 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 0_1, which is difficult to reconcile with *ywśf* as a basis. As regards the prefix conjugation of I 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 Yōsif, 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 Yūsuf came from the clan of the Yaz'an (see, for instance, Müller, "Himyar," 313, and Fiaccadori, "Homerites," 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 Muḥammad 'Alī as-Salāmī (Sanaa) for first drawing my attention to the possibility that the cognomen dhū Nuwās could possibly derive from the Sabean clan name *ḏ-n'sm*. This clan, mentioned in the mid-Sabean 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 Sanaa. This interpretation would shed light on the (accusative!) form Δουναν found in the *Martyrium Sancti Arethae* (e.g., in par. 1) which would thus not be a misreading of the Syriac *dwyzn* (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 Ḥimyarite kings since the days of Abūkarib As'ad, "king of Saba' and dhū Raydān, of Ḥaḍramawt and Yamnat, and of the Arabs of the highlands and lowlands," Yūsuf's title is given simply as "king of all the tribes."[79] 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'dīkarib,[80] is a question that cannot be answered with certainty given the available source material.[81]

Yūsuf's first campaigns were directed against the Ethiopians in Ẓafār, 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 Tihāma, engaging the Ethiopian units stationed there and the Christian tribes allied with them. He burned down the church of the coastal town of al-Mukhā' (Sab. *mḫwn*), and continued to move along the coast as far as Maddabān (*mdbn*), the fortress which was to give the straits the name by which they are known today, the Bāb al-Mandab. There, he blocked the entrance to the harbor with chains so as to thwart the Ethopians' imminent landing. While he himself stayed in Maddabān to await the invasion fleet under Kaleb Ella Aṣbeḥa, he dispatched one of his generals, Sharaḥ'il Yaqbul, to Najrān, where he was to blockade 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 Sharaḥ'il Yaqbul placed at a prominent spot on the caravan route to eastern Arabia, some 90 to 130 km northeast of Najrān.[82]

[79] From the end of line 1 of Ist 7608bis we can deduce that Simyafa' Ashwa', the client king installed by Ella Aṣbeḥa, revived the use of the traditional titles.

[80] See the extract from aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh ar-rusul*, vol. 1, 918–920. (in Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 174–176).

[81] Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 76.

[82] Their contents are summarized in Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 34–36.

The Events in Najrān

These are the last Ḥimyarite 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 Najrān. Besides the Greek version of the *Martyrium Sancti Arethae* and the surviving fragments of the Syriac *Book of the Himyarites*,[83] the most important of these are the two Syriac letters of Simeon of Bēth Arsham, a Monophysite bishop from Mesopotamia.[84] 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 Najrān took place.[85] 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 Najrān as well as those preceding them.[86] The persecution and killing of the Christians in Najrān

[83] This title was first introduced by Moberg, although a title along the lines of "The Book of the Ḥimyarite Martyrs" would be more in keeping with the work's contents.

[84] Died in Constantinople in 548 (see Bruns, "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 Lakhmid ruler Mundhir at Ramla near Ḥīra when a messenger arrived with a letter from Yūsuf describing the persecution of Christians in Najrān 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 Gbīṭā on the Yarmuk. It was written just a few months later (for the date, see the following note) and contains new information from Najrān as well as that known from the first letter. As Ryckmans' thorough analysis 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 Ḥīra 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 Yūsuf's letter describing his actions against the Christians in Najrān was read out. This information agrees with the date the Greek Acts of the Martyrs give for Arethas' execution in Najrān several months earlier, in October 523; it also corresponds to the information in Simeon's second letter (Shahid, *Martyrs*, XVIII, 10f.), according to which a number of women were martyred in Najrān 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 Najrān should be dated to 523 or 518 and thus also whether the Ḥimyarite 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 *tlāṯmā wa-ṯlāṯīn* instead of *tlāṯmā wa-ṯlāṯīn w-ḥammeš* (Shahid, *Martyrs*, ibid.).

[87] Ry 508 from Kawkab is dated to the month of dhū Qiyāẓān (June) 633 of the Ḥimyarite period; Ry 507 and Ja 1028 from Bi'r Ḥimā are dated to the month of dhū Madhra'ān (July) 633 of the Ḥimyarite period.

[88] Shahid, *Martyrs*, V, 6ff./45–47.

[89] Müller, Review, 182–185, gives a number of examples.

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.[87]

As far as events taking place in Najrān are concerned, we learn from the second letter that the king himself eventually arrived after a protracted siege and offered to guarantee 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 Najrān surrendered to him, but Yūsuf failed to keep his oath. After overpowering some three hundred leading Christians, he ordered the bones of the bishops who were buried in Najrān to be exhumed and collected in the church, where he had them burned together with the laity and clerics.[88] 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,[89] so that its authenticity cannot be ruled out in advance.

The description of the aged Arethas, or Ḥārith ibn Ka'b in Arabic, being led before Yūsuf and boasting of having always stood his ground like a man and of having killed one of Yūsuf's relatives in single combat is hardly that of a pious Christian eagerly awaiting martyrdom and asking God to forgive his persecutors. The same Ḥārith then continues in this vein, saying that he would have preferred to face the Ḥimyar 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 sheikh whose ideal of honor in such situations was to die in battle.

Ḥārith's words, which we have summarized from the account given in the second Syriac letter of Simeon,[90] 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;[91] 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 Pawlos, the first bishop, had lost his life in an earlier wave of persecution in Ẓafār and was buried in Najrān; the second bishop, of the same name, was already dead when Najrān surrendered.[92] One revealing marginal detail is that both bishops had been consecrated by Philoxenos of Mabbūg, a leading figure of the Syrian Orthodox Church,[93] which makes it likely that Christianity in Najrān was of a markedly anti-Chalcedonian bent.[94]

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 85:4 mentions the *aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*, i.e., the "companions of the

[90] Shahid, *Martyrs*, XII, 11ff./50–51.

[91] Shahid, *Martyrs*, VII, 11/47; XXXII, 15/64; other figures are given in Müller, "Himyar," 314, and Fiaccadori, "Homerites," 78.

[92] Shahid, *Martyrs*, VI, 17ff./46.

[93] Bruns, "Philoxenus," 577–578.

[94] For further information about Christianity in Najrān, see Müller, "Himyar," 310–312.

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.[95]

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 Aṣbeḥa, 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",[96] who was sent as bishop to Ẓafār 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 Ẓafār alone.[97] The South Arabian sources can also be supplemented with information given by Procopios. In accordance with the custom of Aksumite rulers, Ella Aṣbeḥa instated a local client king, called Esimiphaios (Εσιμιφαίος).[98] We hear of him by the name of Simyafaʿ Ashwaʿ in the fragmentary building inscription mentioned above, which also contains both the Christian formula of the Trinity and the name of king Ella Aṣbeḥa.[99] The inscription erected at Mārib, composed in vocalized Ancient Ethiopic and of which only three fragments are preserved, probably originates from Ella Aṣbeḥa himself;[100] from it we learn that he had burned down Mārib's old royal palace, known as Salḥīn.[101]

[95] Paret, "Aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd," and, for instance, aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh ar-rusul*, vol. 1, 920,1.

[96] Pollmann, "Gregentius," 289, and Fiaccadori, "Gregentius," 889–891; See the new edition and translation given by Berger, *Saint Gregentios*, 187–410.

[97] Shahid, "Byzantium," 38 and 43, Fiaccadori, "Homerites," 51, and Berger, *Saint Gregentios*, 394–395 = Bios 9.146–155.

[98] Procopios, *Wars* 1.20.

[99] Ist 7608bis (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 that has been known since the beginnings of Sabean studies, located on the rock of Ḥuṣn al-Ghurāb, the "castle of the ravens," many hundreds of kilometers away from Ẓafār on the shores of the Indian Ocean.[102] 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.[103] The inscription itself dates from 530, i.e., five years after the great Ethiopian invasion. It describes the restoration of the castle, detailing the reconstruction of the wall, gate, cisterns, and approach route. What is most revealing, however, is the context within which this work is said to have taken place. The improvements are said to have been performed after the persons who had commissioned the inscription—as I understand the text—had returned from Tihāma [= the territory of Ḥabashat, i.e., of the Abyssinians][104] and the Ethiopians had occupied the country, at

[102] C 621: (1) *smyf / 'šw' / w-bnyhw / šrḥb'l / ykml / w-m'dkrb / y'fr / bny / lḥy't* (2) *yrḥm / 'lht / kl'n / w-ḏ-yz'n / w-gdnm* ... (6) ... *ṣtrw / ḏn / mśndn / b-'* (7) *rn / mwyt / k-ṯwbhw / gn'thw / w-ḥlfhw / w-m'glthw / w-mnqlthw* (8) *k-stṣn'w / bhw / k-gb'w / bn / 'rḍ / ḥbšt / w-'syw / 'ḥbšn / zrf* (9) *tn / b-'rḍ / ḥmyrm / k-hrgw / mlk / ḥmyrm / w-'qwlhw / 'ḥmrn / w-'rḥbn* (10) *wrḥhw / ḏ-ḥltn / ḏ-l-'rb'y / w-sṭ / m'tm / ḥrftm*. "(1) Simyafa' Ashwa' and his sons Shuraḥbi'il Yakmul and Ma'dīkarib Ya'fur, [all of them] sons of Luḥayy'att (2) Yurkhim, of [the clans] Kal'ān, Yaz'an, Gadanum [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 Ḥimyar, after they [i.e., the Abyssinians] had killed the king of the Ḥimyar and his tribal leaders from Ḥimyar and Raḥbatān [the region north of Sanaa]. (10) Its [i.e., the inscription's] date of writing is [the month of] dhū Ḥillatān of the year 640."

[103] For information on the archeology of Qana', see Sedov, "Qana."

[104] Admittedly, any historical understanding of this inscription will depend significantly on how the expression *'rḍ / ḥbšt* is understood. The generally accepted opinion today is that *'rḍ / ḥbšt* refers to Ethiopia (see, most recently, Beaucamp et al., "Persécution," 37, and Müller, "Ḥabašāt," 949). Beeston ("Ḥabashat," 6) and, before him, v. Wissmann (*Geschichte und Landeskunde*, 66–67) have suggested that *'rḍ / ḥbšt* (the "territory of / of the Ḥabashat") does not necessarily refer to the Ethiopian heartland on the opposite side of the Bāb al-Mandab but might equally well refer to the western coast of South Arabia (or at least parts thereof), which the Ethiopians had occupied (the evidence adduced by v. Wissmann does not, however, corroborate his thesis). Müller ("Abessinier," 159) mentions the problem but does not pursue it any further. E 19/7 clearly shows that *ḥbšt* does not mean the Ethiopian heartland in geographical terms, but has to be understood as a political ethnic entity, referring to the Abyssinian troops in the Tihāma. This inscription contains an account of a campaign fought under 'Ilsharaḥ Yaḥḍib around the middle of the third century "against the Ḥabashat, the 'Akkum and the inhabitants of Sāhiratum" (*b'ly / ḥbšt / w-'km / w-ḏ-shrtm*).

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

Questions as to why this inscription was to be found where it was and, above all, why it was made when it was made have been the subject of much speculation. Even though it is generally agreed today that Simyafa' Ashwa', 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 monotheistic 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 Yaz'an, they include the Gadanum of Mārib, various tribes from the southern highlands around Ẓafār and from the Tihāma, as well as numerous families from various parts of Ḥaḍramawt. 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 rallied round Yūsuf 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 Ethiopian king's victory, Yūsuf's vanquished supporters withdrew at least from the western part of the country and sought refuge in the Yaz'anid core territory, the hinterlands around Qana'.[105] The work on the fortifications was undertaken because the Yaz'anids 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

[105] The obvious assumption is that the founders and his sons were followers of Yūsuf 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' Ashwa' mentioned in C 621 could therefore have been the person of the same name (and the same patronymic) who, as his brother Sharaḥ'il Yaqbul reports in the three rock inscriptions around Najrān (Ry 508/9, 1028/2 [instead of *šrḥ'l / 'šw'*, according to A. Jamme, *šrḥ'l / yqbl* 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 'Abadān, for example—which was made some 170 years earlier by Yaz'anid tribal leaders as well—records the acts of three generations.

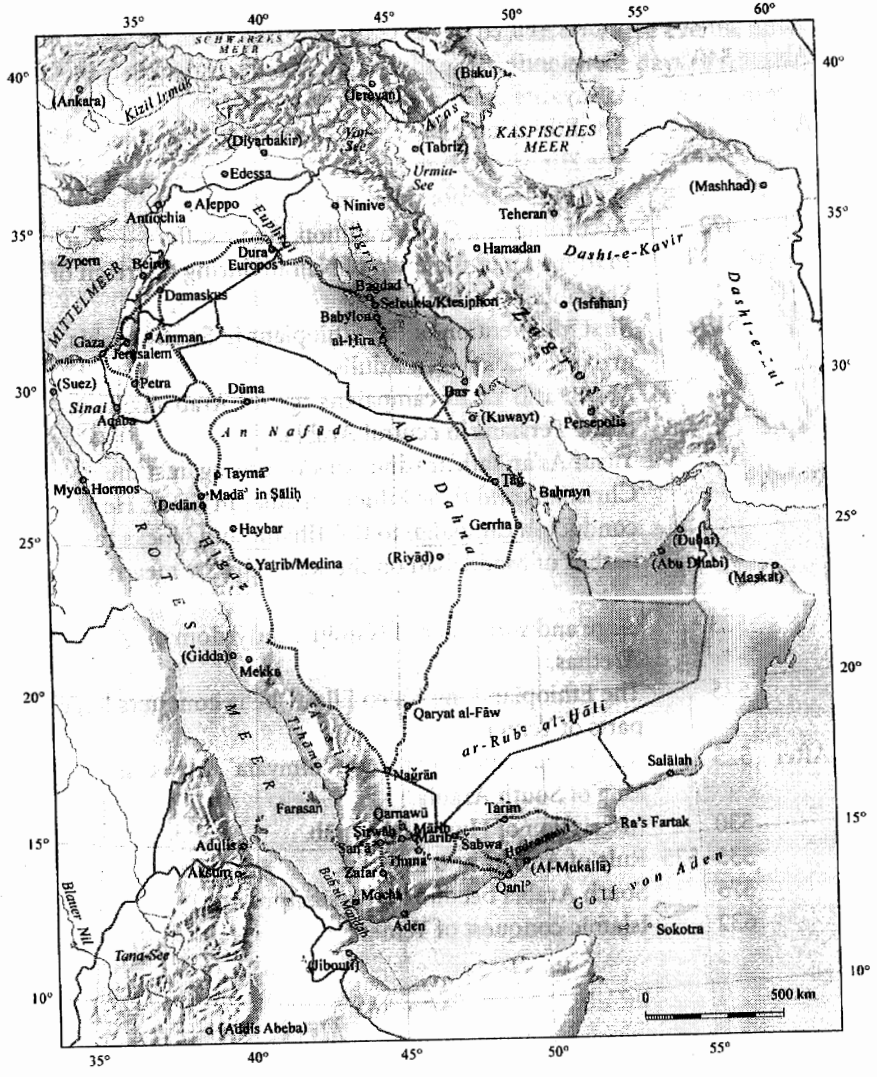
never took place. On the contrary, thirteen years later, the Yaz'an and several other influential clans from Ma'ārib were to return to the political stage, when they joined the Kinda, led by Yazīd b. Kabshat, in their rebellion against the Ethiopian occupiers.[106] These events, however, postdate the age of the Ḥimyar and belong to the days of Abraha, under whom Yemen was to witness fifty years of Christian domination.

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

Appendix 1. Timeline of the Late Sabean Period

About 280	Shammar Yuhar'ish residing at his capital Ẓafār unites Yemen under his rule.
About 340	Constantius II sends Theophilus the Indian to the Ḥimyarite court.
About 345	The Ethiopian king 'Ezana converts to Christianity.
383	The Ḥimyarite king Malkīkarib Yuha'min and his sons embrace monotheism.
472	According to a Ge'ez tradition, Azqīr suffers martyrdom in the town of Najrān during the reign of Shuraḥbi'il Yakkaf.
519	First intervention of the Ethiopians in South Arabia, arrival of Cosmas in Adulis.
521	Ma'dīkarib Ya'fur campaigns against Arab auxiliaries of the Persians in central Arabia.
522	Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar (dhū Nuwās) acts against the Christians and their Ethiopian allies in Ẓafār. He conducts a campaign to the Tihāma and blocks the harbor of Maddabān on the west coast by means of a chain.
523	Siege and surrender of Najrān, martyrdom of Arethas.
525	The Ethiopian king Kaleb Ella Aṣbeḥa conquers large parts of Yemen.
After 525	Kaleb Ella Aṣbeḥa 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.

Appendix 2. Map of the Arabian Peninsula



Source: Nebes, "Märtyrer," 35.

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